WEST COAST APOCALYPTIC: A SITE-SPECIFIC APPROACH TO GENRE

by

Ryan James Melsom

A thesis submitted to the Department of English
In conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
(January, 2011)

Copyright ©Ryan James Melsom, 2011
Abstract

Key studies of apocalypse in previous years have consciously and unconsciously understood the genre in terms of its paradigmatic consistency across examples. This emphasis points out valuable similarities among a wide range of texts, but also diminishes the significance of a text’s locally and historically rooted ways of depicting experience. This study reflects an effort to rebalance the meaning of apocalypse by looking at a specific locale – the North American West Coast. I examine popular, critical, and literary representations of the West Coast to trace out the unique ways that they configure regional identities. Ultimately, I make the case for site-specific criticism, which values provisional, locally rooted terminologies and tropes for analyzing cultural problems.
Acknowledgements

I must begin by thanking Doctors Sylvia Söderlind and Asha Varadharajan, two women whose combined intellectual horsepower could move mountains, including my occasional mountains of inertia. You have both been profoundly inspiring mentors, and I am humbled with gratitude in having had the opportunity to work with you.

I would also like to thank my parents Jim and Kathy, and my brothers Andrew and Steve, for being the most complicated, rag-tag, loving bunch of geniuses I’ve ever seen. How we haven’t just burst into flames many times over is somewhat of an apocalyptic miracle in itself. I want to thank Iris, Charles, Cindy and Vince, for being the hippest, greatest new family a guy could ask for. I also want to acknowledge Heather, Jason, Jordan, and all of my amazing graduate school friends for countless nights of debate and debauch. I can’t forget the disbanded but spectacular members of the Teakwood, especially you Lindsay, who put the mad idea in my head of getting a PhD in the first place.

And, finally, I must thank you Liz, my DCT! You have redefined happiness for me and I look forward to sharing every day I have left on earth with you.

None of this would have been remotely possible without all of you, so thank you, thank you, and thank you again.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................... ii  
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... iii  
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................. iv  
List of Figures .................................................................................................................. v  

Chapter 1  
Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 1  

Chapter 2  
“You Look Like Wise Men, and Talk Like Fools”: Early West Coast Explorers and the Evolution of Failure .................................................................................................................. 31  

Chapter 3  
What Lies Under Fire: The Search for New Grounds in West Coast Disaster Narratives 67  

Chapter 4  
Apocalyptic Ethics: Simulacra and Urban Legend in Timothy Taylor’s *Stanley Park*.. 103  

Chapter 5  
Nobody Walks in L.A.: The Ecstasy of Movement in *Volcano* and *Crash*................. 141  

Chapter 6  
"Zero Attrition Rate": Entropy and Revitalization at the End of the Western World .... 181  

Chapter 7  
West Coast Revelations .................................................................................................. 236  
Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 261  
Works Cited .................................................................................................................... 266
List of Figures

Figure 3.1 Image from photo essay accompanying “Under Fire” ........................................ 72
Figure 3.2 “American Progress” (1872) by John Gast ...................................................... 84
Figure 4.1 The Twin Sisters with North Vancouver in the background ............................... 107
Figure 4.2 The Lions’ Gate Bridge. .................................................................................... 107
Figures 6.1 and 6.2 Images from American Apparel’s website ............................................ 186
Chapter 1

Introduction

As far as geographic features go, mountains are pretty apocalyptic. Etymologically speaking, the word *apocalypse* itself is synonymous with *revelation*, the former deriving from the Greek root, the latter the Latin. Both carry, as Northrop Frye notes, “the metaphorical sense of an uncovering or taking a lid off” (135). So when you drive through the Rocky Mountains, the massive physical barrier that separates much of the North American West Coast from the rest of the continent, you can actually see millions of years of the earth’s history in the form of geological strata churning up from underneath the surface. The drive is literally a revelation of the earth’s secret history. Beyond this barrier, the immense volcanic range on the far side of the Rockies has earned the Pacific Slope region the nickname “the Pacific Rim of Fire.” Again, the unseen earth boils up from beneath one’s feet, into the light of day. These geological revelations can be spectacularly violent, as the eruption of Mt. St. Helens in 1980 demonstrated.

In many people’s understanding, apocalypse often has this sense of violence associated with it, but violence is not necessarily one of its requirements. To really understand what makes for apocalypse in a traditional sense, there are few better places to turn than the influential work of Northrop Frye and Frank Kermode. Their foundational work on the apocalypse has become indispensable for subsequent critical discussions of the topic and has generated the recent spate
of interest in millenarianism leading up to the year 2000. Despite all of my efforts to break new
ground here, their influence on this project must be acknowledged at the outset.

While Kermode’s seminal text *The Sense of an Ending* (1966) predates Frye’s *The Great
Code* (1982), Frye’s constitutes the more traditional reading of apocalypse. Frye proceeds from
the premise that the Bible, while not specifically literary in the sense that it does not appear to
have a unifying aesthetic principle, nonetheless has had immense, irrefutable literary influence.
He seeks to locate the Bible’s meaning as a work both outside of and “more” than a work of
literature, borrowing his title from Blake’s statement that “The Old and the New Testaments are
The Great Code of Art” (xiv). A key claim informing Frye’s stance throughout *Code* is that Man
lives “not directly or nakedly in nature like the animals, but within a mythological universe, a
body of assumptions and beliefs developed from his existential concerns” (xvi). His interest in
understanding the heritage of these concerns steers him away from a “specific culture” in search
of more universal truths (xvi), and this is precisely what leads to his interest in the Bible.

We can see how he structures his understanding of apocalypse through the lens of myth.
Myth and mythology for Frye are not mere stories but the powerful means by which people
navigate their sense of being. Apocalypse is a special myth unto itself, as it suggests the
“remarkably open-ended” moment where the entire typology of the Bible itself both culminates
and falls apart (137). According to Frye, the Bible involves seven phases from Genesis to
Apocalypse, each of which “is not an improvement on its predecessor but a wider perspective on
it” (106); each phase represents the revelatory expansion and fulfillment of the previous ones.
Apocalypse is special in Frye’s reading of the Bible, because it is the final revelation. He describes this with a tone verging on awe: “What is symbolized as the destruction of the order of nature is the destruction of the way of seeing that keeps man confined to the world of time and history as we know them. This destruction is what the Scripture is intended to achieve” (136). Here, finally, the explication of the Great Code crosses the boundary of literary analysis and sheds light on history itself, seeking an order beyond the finite, the human, and the knowable. If Man mediates his relationship to nature with mythology, then the destruction of nature absolves humans of the need for mediation. The subject-object duality causing desire ceases to exist: “[T]he reader completes the visionary operation of the Bible by throwing out the subjective fallacy along with the objective one. The apocalypse is the way the world looks after the ego has disappeared” (138).

The implications of Frye’s description of apocalypse are immense. The myth of apocalypse attempts to resolve all knowledge of history – all memory and apparent injustice and inequality:

That knowledge, we now see, was wholly within the framework of law: it is contained by a ‘final judgment,’ where the world disappears into its two unending constituents, a heaven and a hell, into one of which man automatically goes, depending on the relative strength of the cases of the prosecution and the defense. (136)
Thus, the typology of history is ultimately revealed to be illusory and incomplete by the antitype\(^1\) of apocalypse. Subjectivity itself is the result of the Fall, and must ultimately melt away during the Final Judgment to reveal a post-historical, post-apocalyptic paradise: “In this second life the creator-creature, divine-human antithetical tension has ceased to exist, and the sense of the transcendent person and the split of subject and object no longer limit our vision” (137).

Peter Duncan Wilkins, in his study of apocalypse in North America, *Finite Nations*, *Finite Selves* (1997), cites Frye’s explication of the apocalypse and post-apocalypse directly, and suggests how it is in fact complemented by a psychoanalytic understanding of subjectivity. In Wilkins’s reading, “The post-apocalyptic world is a seamless, undifferentiated totality” (4), much like in Frye’s. However, Wilkins uses the work of Lacan to emphasize that myth does not necessarily result in culmination: “The demand for apocalypse attempts to convert what Lacan calls the imaginary, the register of the subject’s delusional sense of plenitude and unity, into reality” (5). Without Frye’s mythic “destruction of the order of nature,” the apocalypse – the desire for revelation – remains only a “demand” rather than being something that can ever be fulfilled. Wilkins goes on to argue that the incompleteness of North American nations mirrors the incompleteness of the subject, and this is why apocalyptic novels in North America often offer incomplete, endlessly deferred revelations.

Marlene Goldman’s study *Rewriting Apocalypse in Canadian Fiction* (2005) also begins from several of Frye’s premises, but takes them in a significantly different direction:

---

\(^1\) Antitype is defined as “That which is shadowed forth or represented by the ‘type’ or symbol” (*OED Online*). An antitype is both anticipated by and fulfils an earlier symbol in a text, particularly the Bible.
In contrast to the traditional biblical apocalypse, contemporary Canadian fiction refuses to celebrate the destruction of evil and the creation of a new, heavenly world. Instead, these works highlight the devastation wrought by apocalyptic thinking on those accorded the role of non-elect. (5)

Goldman suggests that Canadian literature often casts doubt on the justice of the “two unending constituents” into which the final judgment casts people (Frye 136). She notes that while a few Canadian novels do finish with their protagonists as victors of the apocalypse, many others, including Obasan, Headhunter, and Green Grass, Running Water are told from the position of people who cannot necessarily celebrate the “disappearance of the ego.” This is where the difficulty of Frye’s search for universal truths in biblical narratives becomes painfully apparent. From the perspective of many non-elect groups, the Bible and its final resolution only emphasize the need for the continuation of subjectivity within history; many are in no position to do away with the subjective fallacy and must seek justice in the here and now. Interestingly, Goldman concludes with a synopsis of her texts resonant with Wilkins’s: “At bottom, they offer a cautionary warning to recognize the exclusionary foundations and ongoing limitations of nationalism informed by the apocalyptic paradigm” (168).

In both of these studies, the writers reach the conclusion that still-forming nations are mirrored by anti-apocalyptic nationalist texts, but this is where the work of Frank Kermode can be illuminating. The insights that Goldman and Wilkins attribute to North American nationalist narratives, as it turns out, are in fact not all that unique to North American versions of the apocalypse, and would be better classified as postmodern or postwar narratives. A strange benefit
of the coherent Western canon that persisted until a couple of decades ago is that it allowed critics to forego discussions of nation in favour of the human condition. Of course this condition never existed, but we can see from Kermode’s work in *Sense* that the deferral of apocalypse appears in fact to have very little to do with the construction of nation.

Kermode focuses on the idea of fiction, arguing that it fulfills “a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end” (4). He claims that to make existence tolerable, men emulate an envisioned divine creator who “make[s] objects in which everything is that exists in concord with everything else, and nothing else is” (4). Among these objects, for Kermode, apocalypse is a “radical instance,” afforded a special place in his larger interrogation of fiction because it is a “figure” for death itself and the end of all fictions (5-7).

Despite considerable similarities between Frye’s and Kermode’s description of apocalypse, however, there are some crucial differences. What Frye identifies as myth, Kermode calls “fiction.” Like Frye, he resists viewing the crises of particular ages as unique, arguing that while many view their current time as “uniquely terrible,” in the past people have always experienced a similar feeling (95). Without an awareness of this paradigmatic similarity among ages, people are left in a state of “eternal transition” and crisis (95), and he argues that “such a myth, uncritically accepted, tends like prophecy to shape a future to conform to it” (94). In people’s insistence on their uniqueness, they end up producing an obsession with novelty,

---

2 A point of possible confusion in reading these texts alongside one another is that Kermode is very dismissive of “myths” throughout his study. Kermode means “myth” in the sense of a falsity, rather than in the sense Frye uses it – as a fundamental, mediating story.
something about which Kermode is very blunt in his feelings: “Its ideological expression is fascism; its practical consequence is the Final Solution” (103).

Kermode is not strictly anti-apocalyptic, but he argues much more clearly than Frye that apocalypse must always be consciously held as a fiction. Writers may retain the sense of an ending – the desire to find previous patterns revealed in a culminating event – but a “clerkly skepticism” ideally keeps such desires in check (101). Clerkly skepticism, whose history is almost as lengthy as apocalypse itself, seeks to de-mythologize the apocalypse and literal-minded, naive apocalyptic predictions which seek out a particular date for the End Times. Clerkly skepticism acknowledges that “the end is immanent rather than imminent; it reflects our lack of confidence in ends, our mistrust of the apportioning of history to epochs of this and that” (101). At its core, an attitude of clerkly skepticism views apocalypse as a metaphor “heuristic and dispensable, ‘consciously false’” rather than a coming reality (104).

This sense of an immanent rather than imminent apocalypse is very similar to that of which both Goldman and Wilkins speak, yet Kermode does not read it at all in terms of a North American nation. He sees it rather as “the resistance of fact to fiction, human freedom and unpredictability against plot” (113). He analyzes Yeats’s and Pound’s apocalypticism, noting that each at his best avoids the kind of fantastic, celebratory “destruction of evil” against which, as Goldman also notes, Canadian fiction often works (104-08). Kermode is also vocal in his criticism of writers like Pound and Wyndham Lewis who envisioned precisely the kind of celebratory damning of the non-elect that Goldman condemns. Revelation and the Last Judgment, while paradigmatic of justice, are usually tempered with clerkly skepticism and an
attention to the ugly realities that necessarily defer visions of a perfected humanity. Notably, both Goldman and Wilkins are more directly aware of Frye’s vision of a post-historical, celebratory version of apocalypse as a launching point, and this may explain why they find new ground respectively in “the idea of the absence of an earthly paradise” (Goldman 9), and the idea that “apocalyptic identifications with plenitude always entail violence against others who interfere with those identifications” (Wilkins 235).

Indeed, the chief difference between Frye and Kermode is that Frye sees apocalypse as somehow verging on the extra-historical, while Kermode sees it as a pattern rooted deeply in historical and literary processes. This difference is crucial. While Kermode, like Frye, sees apocalypse as paradigmatic, his attitude towards this paradigm is much more cautionary and reserved. For Kermode, “the price of a formal eternity is inhumanity” (106). The Code of apocalypse must always be held in tension with Reality – what he identifies as “the world of dying generations” (106). Frye’s more enthusiastic visions of a perfect, ego-free, post-apocalyptic world do not always keep the reality of the present in sight. They are certainly not naively literal, but the desire to establish a Code that essentially frames history is bound to produce numerous exceptions for the abject places beyond the scope of history.

What is also remarkable about Kermode’s analysis of apocalypse is the not always consistent way it deals with the question of reality. He wants to acknowledge the “human dirt and disorder that underlie” and counterbalance paradigmatic impulses (106), yet he begins to hit limits as a result of his own historical moment. He writes Sense during the final throes of modernism, and as a result spends a great deal of time discussing the breakdown of fictions –
“kinds of radical thinking in the arts that go on in our time [1966]” (114). While he assimilates writers like Beckett to the canon by arguing that they do not suggest “a denial of paradigm in favour of reality in all its poverty” (115), Kermode does assert a considerable amount of suspicion towards “extremely novel, avant-garde writing” (116).

A passage on such “extremely novel” writing suggests the place where Kermode’s writing on apocalypse must be examined more closely:

Schism is meaningless without reference to some prior condition; the absolutely New is simply unintelligible. It may, of course, be asked: unintelligible to whom? – the inference being that a minority public perhaps very small – members of a circle in a square world – do understand the terms in which the new thing speaks. And certainly the minority public is a recognized feature of modern literature, and certainly conditions are such that there may be many small minorities instead of one large one; and certainly in itself this is schismatic. (116)

Kermode is trying to resolve a complicated tension, seeking to reconcile radically new, emergent forms of writing with “some prior condition.” His references to a “minority public,” while possibly referring to an elite readership, also resonate with the projects of postcolonial writing. He is aware that other critics and writers may actively be seeking to eradicate ties with the past, but he does not want to surrender the belief that this is reconcilable with the paradigmatic framework he has laid out for the emergence of apocalyptic fictions.

Fascinatingly, and most problematically, he goes on to lament “the fragmentation of the traditional language of criticism and aesthetics into private dialects notable rather for a reduction
than an increase of power and scope” (120). What he has done is impose a reductive, paradigmatic understanding of literature – precisely the kind of reading that he actively resists throughout Sense. It is as if he has identified a threshold but is unsure how to cross it – how to reconnect his reading with the reality he so adamantly argues must keep paradigms in check. He has located the very threshold of modernism. His lament for the loss of the “power and scope” of the “traditional language of criticism” sounds oddly similar to the kind of fascistic thinking he so explicitly rejects.

While Kermode’s writing hits these historical limits, his explication of apocalypse also consistently verges on the intriguing possibility of a move into something beyond modernism – not simply postmodernism, but something more replete and open-ended. Arguing against the stance of several earlier critics, Kermode rejects the possibility that apocalypse, and specifically the book of Revelation, involves a “strictly inexplicable set of myths that have been overlaid by later topical applications,” arguing instead that nothing could be “more profound than to humanize the common death” (7). Like Frye, Kermode favours the reading of apocalypse as not being associated with a specific culture – a “topical application” – and reads it instead in terms of a common humanity. He claims that, as a species, “we thrive on epochs” (7) – time frames with a distinct beginning and end – because, as mentioned, they render experience intelligible.

The intriguing aspect of apocalypse for me resides in a return to Kermode’s hasty dismissal of the word “topical” here, and Frye’s passing over “specific culture” in favour of universal myths. Topical is a word rooted in the Greek word for “local” – as in a particular topography – but it also gradually takes on the sense of something current, as in a topical
dissertation. It is full of a wonderful ambiguity, allowing room for the unfolding of events within time and space, within something like Kermode’s Reality. While all apocalypse cannot be reduced to the Book of Revelation, which Kermode discusses here, the biblical book’s status as “the most complete and the finest of traditional apocalyptic texts” (Parkinson 1) means that it often serves as a loose source for many later apocalyptic texts. Its paradigmatic influence is not to be underestimated. However, the topical elements of an apocalypse – the unique, non-paradigmatic elements of a particular rendering of the end – promise much in terms of how they can help understand the world at hand.

Kermode himself notes that “fictions are to be justified or verified by their practical effects” (109), and it is with attention to these effects that I construct the fictions of this dissertation. The practical effects of Kermode’s analysis of apocalypse have indeed been far-reaching, even if they are not always overt, and they provide fertile ground for my departures. I am not, as Kermode might say, seeking novelty. Instead, I am placing emphasis on the differences between paradigmatically similar fictions. West Coast apocalypse certainly borrows from other apocalypses, and yet I argue that the topical circumstances surrounding its production provide immense possibility for understanding the complexity, ambiguity, and chaos that fictions seek to arrange. These complexities include not only geographic but also cultural ones. In a sense, I am also using West Coast writing to open up the apocalyptic canon to other paradigms which can interfere with, rewrite, dispute, disrupt, and even disable an apocalyptic view of the world. There is simply no need to exclude or absorb that which does not fit into “the traditional language of criticism and aesthetics,” and there is no need to read one fiction at the expense of all
others. The limitation of Goldman’s and Wilkins’s work on nationalist apocalypses is that it lingers inadvertently in universals. Their readings are not entrenched enough in the novel elements of apocalypses, and I would argue that this has much to do with the way they are representing their respective topics. Wilkins’s psychoanalytic description of experience ultimately returns it to a fully paradigmatic understanding of apocalypse, and Goldman’s reading implies a rewriting of apocalypse that is not as unique as she contends. In both cases, the question remains how to address the demands of a unique topography.

In contradistinction to paradigmatic readings of the apocalypse such as Frye’s and Kermode’s, then, my approach to representing apocalypticism could be described as *topical and localized* (and heavily invested in a clerkly scepticism). Each chapter here opens up a dimension of the West Coast’s landscape and history, and these remain irreducible to a single, unifying explanation for the West Coast apocalyptic or any other. Apocalypticism, in my view, is as rich as the multitudinous experiences of a place, and each chapter here seeks to add to that richness rather than refine or streamline it. I proceed in this way because I believe that an inclusive, open-ended sense of a place emerges from the areas of resonance, contradiction, omission, overlap, and haunting that occur when variegated analyses are placed alongside one another rather than being wholly subsumed into an underlying, revelatory Truth. Indeed, I aim here to communicate a true sense of the spaciousness of a place and provide as much new room as I can for those who occupy it. I also implicitly position this critical activity as a bulwark against the conceptual and metaphorical reductiveness that so frequently occurs in imaginative
projections onto the Far West, though I obviously would be happy not to have the insights of my massive, soul-flaying doctoral project reduced to tools for understanding a single region.

Apocalypse’s paradigmatic reduction of all historical and spatial complexity into resolvable (or occasionally irresolvable) binary, Manichean terms ultimately effaces numerous other ways of locating oneself within his or her spatial and cultural contexts. While the experience of resolution can be satisfying, binary terms can also exclude a great deal when it comes to describing the chaotic narratives that interweave to form place as it is lived (Soja, *Postmodern 7*). Individual experience of this chaos involves at its core a paradoxical problem: “experience is something that one has completely alone but can fully have only to the extent that it escapes pure subjectivity and that others can also – I won’t say repeat it exactly, but at least encounter it – and go through it themselves” (Foucault, *Power* 245). While it is tempting to reduce this paradox to the platitude that experience is *always* expressed through/as shared language, I am interested in keeping as much tension as possible between the perceived uniqueness of an experience and its expression in a shared set of words and tropes. While people may, as Kermode says, “re-create the horizons we have abolished” (58), this observation should not be used to invalidate the catharsis that accompanies the personal nature of narration.

I would also like to maintain some sense of tension between perception and its paradigmatic expression, because I believe the rich sensory and intellectual complexities of experience cannot always be adequately understood using popular contemporary critical analyses that would reduce it to a determinant like nationality. The resistance to such limiting versions of experience extends in my work beyond a response to apocalypse and becomes a response
to conventional critical methods – indeed any strong theory that subsumes the vagaries of experience for the sake of “conceptual economy or elegance” (Sedgwick, *Touching* 34). I agree wholeheartedly with Eve Sedgwick’s claim that “Marxist, feminist, postcolonial, and other engagé critical projects have deepened understanding of a few crucial axes of difference, perhaps necessarily at the expense of more ephemeral or less global impulses of differential grouping,” and that these “sveltest of metatheoretical disciplines” (*Epistemology* 24), while useful as intellectual exercises and valuable for reconceptualizing an overly transparent view of the world, are not always helpful in addressing the nuanced and highly ephemeral actualities of experience.

In fact, my experience of discussing life with, say, resolutely Marxist colleagues (or first-year undergraduates, for that matter) has been at times profoundly alienating; nothing is more frustrating than having fragile new thoughts slide quickly into readily available terminologies. I argue that, in contrast to widespread contemporary tendencies towards information acceleration and friction-free existence, emergent modes of description need to be given a little space to breathe, to resist. Extrapolating from the work of Donna Haraway and Eve Sedgwick, I believe that in recent years the need has increasingly emerged for a mode of representing the chaotic interplay among numerous discursive and critical fields – a mode that refuses to interpret things through a single critical lens and shifts instead among interfaces with different theoretical models – but articulating such a mode can be exceedingly challenging. In this regard, one could describe my work here as protean, breathless, metaleptic – shifting rapidly among registers, boundaries, and temporalities as required by a particular situation. One could also describe it as gradual, methodical, and evolutionary – and contradictory. The collapse of all systems into a single
theoretical (or paradigmatic) one fails to acknowledge the rich and intrinsic contradictions of space and place as they are lived.

Given the rich complexity of spaces and the increasingly analogue-esque appearance of digital systems and technologies, I advocate introducing a formal and stylistic resistance towards critical models that mirror or deconstruct binary thinking. Terms of power shift too quickly these days, and so I position myself as a cyborg critic “resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity” (Haraway, “Cyborg” 151). A critic’s ability to cope with indeterminate and shifting waves of experience will be an asset as quantum computing is on the near horizon. The search for a mode of writing chaos and complexity itself becomes a crucial part of my argument, forming a field of discursive resistance to the spatiotemporal collapses of binary apocalyptic thinking and the scintillating temptations of rhetorically svelte theoretical descriptions of the world. One could position this project in relation to Vancouver poet Wayde Compton’s call for a West Coast *tidalectics*3: “history as a palimpsest where generations overlap generations, and eras wash over eras like a tide on a stretch of beach” (*Bluesprint* 17). One *could* position the project as a tidalectics, but it is not necessary.

Indeed, my project is one of articulating the unique experience of bodies within a space that appears to have solidified into a specific place, a region. How do the ceaseless, seamless infiltration of the senses and the interweaving of specific, recurrent sights into consciousness infiltrate one’s sense of an ending? If spaces are read as continually being produced, rather than as inert, opaque entities, then their meanings can be continually contested, modified, and used by

3 Compton borrows the term from Kamau Braithwaite’s “Caribbean Culture: Two Paradigms.”
any number of groups. In order to initialize such an open-ended conception of place, the need to attune to the frequencies of non-rationalized experience arises. To this end, the work of Henri Lefebvre is invaluable. I quote his work at length here because of its clear resonance with my project:

The way for physical space, for the practico-sensory realm, to restore or reconstitute itself is. . . by struggling against the *ex post facto* projections of an accomplished intellect, against the reduction to which knowledge is prone. Successfully waged, this struggle would overturn the Absolute Truth and the Realm of Sovereign Transparency and rehabilitate underground, lateral, labyrinthine – even uterine or feminine – realities. An uprising of the body, in short, against the signs of non-body: ‘The history of the body in the final phase of Western culture is that of its rebellions.’

Indeed, the fleshy (spatiotemporal) body is already in revolt. This revolt, however, must not be understood as a harking-back to the origins, to some archaic or anthropological past: it is firmly anchored in the here and now, and the body in question is ‘ours’ – our body, which is disdained, absorbed, and broken into pieces by images. Worse than disdained – ignored. This is not a political rebellion, a substitute for social revolution, nor is it a revolt of thought, a revolt of the individual or a revolt for freedom: it is an elemental and worldwide revolt which does not seek a theoretical foundation, but rather seeks by theoretical means to rediscover – and recognize – its own foundations. Above all it asks theory to stop barring its way in this, to stop helping conceal the underpinnings that it is at pains to uncover. . . . Its object is ‘lived experience’ – an
experience that has been drained of all content by the mechanisms of diversion, reduction/extrapolation, figures of speech, analogy, tautology, and so on. (201)

Much like Lefebvre, I am interested in introducing a highly mobile, suggestive series of metaphors and terminology to resist “ex post facto projections of an accomplished intellect.” When I discuss the term *apocalypse of abjection*, beginning in Chapter Three, for instance, I take it to refer to the spaces excluded by and exceeding the “Absolute Truth” sought out by paradigmatic treatment of apocalyptic representations and resolutions. I use the apocalypse of abjection as an antidote to explicit, rationalized revelations, which ultimately privilege image and theory over experience and reality. Indeed, an apocalypse of abjection is one that is experienced rather than envisioned; it is historical and actualized rather than mythical and perpetually deferred.

Lefebvre’s description here is also useful for its articulation of a *revolt of the senses*. He describes the uprising of sensory perception over image as that of “the body in the final phase of Western culture.” His formulation is particularly interesting in the context of the West Coast for several reasons. First, the West Coast is a place where physical colonial progress and the historical progress it symbolizes in North America ground to a halt; it is both physically and historically the end of the world – the final phase of Western culture – in that it signifies the place where colonial borders can no longer expand along a westward trajectory. Moreover, it is a place where multiple immigrant and Indigenous cultures, offering numerous conceptual systems, converge and disrupt one another. The West Coast is, in other words, inundated from the moment of its naming with too much meaning, too many conflicting systems of organization. This
combination of historical and spatial factors makes it a place ripe for the revolt of the senses against unifying visual and conceptual apparatuses, which I take to be very similar to Kermode’s word “paradigms.” The Coast is a far flung corner of the world, where visual and conceptual systems of organization are subjected to continual forces of erosion and entropy and collapse. It is the place where new possibilities persistently trickle through the interstices of conflicting Absolute Truths, even though they may do so in completely “elemental” ways (Lefebvre 201). Ideas of the elemental – especially that of the interplay among earth, fire, water, and the sensory realms – become particularly relevant as I proceed.

Lefebvre’s notion of scattered, disorganized revolts, as opposed to the possibility of a more panoramic notion of revolution, is an important one for this dissertation. Apocalypse can be, and has been, read as a model of full-scale revolution, in that it envisions the complete destruction of historical structures in favour of a new, finalized Truth. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately) power relations have become too nebulous and pervasive in contemporary Western society to really hold out the promise of some future glorious, total overthrow of power and establishment of equality; we must proceed by degrees. To what extent can facebook, organized sports, the Canadian parliament, university administration, highway systems, Tea Partiers, and canonical poetry be understood as operating according to the same ends, regardless of the fact that they can be assimilated into a term like superstructure? Models of sensory, gut-feeling revolt – perhaps even extensive ones forming into a paradoxically disorganized strategy – hold out for me the most promise as areas where life could become less alienating and more profoundly
meaningful. As Lefebvre implies, one cannot predict where such revolts will occur. One can only listen to them and work with their peculiar, provisional demands.

Michel Foucault offers valuable insight into the relationship between revolt and organized political revolution. He notes that “the man who rebels is finally inexplicable; it takes a wrenching away that interrupts the flow of history, and its long chains of reasons, for a man to be able, ‘really,’ to prefer the risk of death to the certainty of having to obey” (Power 449). The inexplicable motives of the man who rebels sound strikingly similar to the motives of revolting—or revolted—senses. Here man appears precisely as the site of resistance to discursive strategies of organization, as an indecipherable agent operating according to its own, unknown motives. If a political revolt is the risky act of the individual against “long chains of reasons,” then a revolt of the senses involves the senses risking annihilation against the reasonable self—“man”—as it is constructed within a culture. The death risked by the senses is the rationalization of the vague and potentially useful feelings that precede articulation as anxiety, frustration, vexation, infuriation, melancholia, etc. When no means for the acknowledgment of discomfort within an organizing system exist, then the only reactions available become intuitive, visceral, and physiological. Explanations may follow, but the revolt itself can only be identified by what feels right.

I am interested in articulating the West Coast in a way that feels right for the greatest possible number of people. This does not mean taking a pacifying approach to legitimate complaints about injustice; indeed, I intend just the opposite. When I say right I mean something that does not radically contradict experience or reduce a wide range of phenomena to a
theoretical, totalizing explanation. This is why I value things like the *perceived* uniqueness of experiences, even if they are always expressed through a supposedly shared language. While I do indulge in the occasional psychoanalytic reading, it is not at the expense or devaluation of other descriptive tools. At various times I also use terminologies of Buddhism, fractal and chaos/complexity theory, feminism, mythology, genre criticism, Canadian studies, New Western historicism, geography, ghostliness, spatial and urban studies, cultural studies, abjection, weak theory, bricolage, deconstruction, non-linearity, laterality, discourse analysis, and perception. While this may sound like a monstrous and unwieldy gamut of descriptive tools, one far too big to reconcile in a single project, my aim is to recapture some of the sensory richness – the literary “dirt and disorder” – that eludes critical projects focused through a single, unifying methodology. Even the combination of words like “monstrous” and “unwieldy” suggests points of overlap, dissonance, fusion, and separation. It seems prudent to keep at one’s disposal the widest possible array of methods for comprehending the world at hand, particularly when the project of comprehension is at such an undeveloped stage as that of critically describing the West Coast. In other words, I am trying to develop an anti-revelatory, non-paradigmatic mode of interpretation.

Beyond my resistance to theoretical, binarizing modes of describing space and experience, I take many of my cues for approaching apocalypticism from the work of Eve Sedgwick. What Lefebvre calls “lived experience” is mirrored for Sedgwick in the fact that “it seems absurdly impoverishing to surrender to theoretical trivialization or to ‘the sentimental’ one’s descriptive requirements that the piercing bouquet of a given friend’s particularity be done some justice” (*Epistemology* 23). In response to the numerous AIDS-related deaths of the
nineties and their complete reconfiguration of metanarratives of aging and generation, Sedgwick sought out descriptive modes that could account for the true differences that mark experiences with different people; put simply, she was seeking a way to avoid falling too quickly into the necessary reproducibility of experience on which Foucault comments. One of her chief strategies at the time was to introduce a “becoming amplitude” into her style of writing. Thus, her tendency to generate elaborate lists, play with connotation, format, punctuation and vocabulary, and indulge in rich phonetic assemblages, ultimately forms a strategy of temporal, textural resistance, much like the one I have been calling for, to theoretical and paradigmatic collapses. It is a way of hanging onto a person or an event just a little longer, before surrendering them to a community of interlocutors.

While her initial interests revolved around antihomophobic political projects of the 1980s and early 1990s, Sedgwick herself generalizes this project in later works, particularly Touching Feeling (2003), taking a further interest in, among many other things, the texture of language, the possibility of paratactic and lateral as opposed to hypotactic readings, weak as opposed to strong theory, and “reparative” readings. Broadly speaking, her project could be read as one of creating as much space as possible for those who historically have not felt comfortable with the fit afforded to experience by language and theory; in other words, she is interested in empowering people by helping provide some access to those experiences that would otherwise be “disdained, absorbed, and broken into pieces by images” (Lefebvre 201). In that regard, my project is similar: to assist in providing numerous, non-rationalized perspectives on the West Coast that others may make use of however they see fit. I wish to incur “the lightest possible burden of
platonic definitional stress” (Epistemology 27) on those aiming to understand the unique situation of living in the highly symbolically charged, identity-fracturing environment of the North American West Coast. This is the main reason that I have not precisely defined what I mean by West Coast or West Coasters; such a definition will always depend, as it does throughout this project, on the particular geographic and historic contexts from which it arises. It cannot be considered independently of its topical applications.

One of Sedgwick’s key ideas – “nonce taxonomies” – has been particularly useful for developing my approach. In one sense, each of my chapters offers a taxonomy of the West Coast, replete with its own coherent terminology and structure. On occasion, where there is a natural fit or it becomes useful for clarification, these taxonomies intersect and interfere with one another across chapters, but one should not expect to find them ultimately resolved into a single system or Truth for describing the West Coast. Indeed, I see no clear purpose in making a general, positive statement about a place. That is where the other half of Sedgwick’s term – “nonce” – comes in handy; it is defined as being “For the particular occasion; for the time being, temporarily; for once” (OED Online). Each chapter is provisional and open to “the making and unmaking and remaking and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world” (Sedgwick, Epistemology 23). This multifarious, multifaceted process of articulation culminates in my final chapter which shifts lexical registers much more rapidly than the previous ones.

Because experience cannot be strictly reduced to terms of gender, race, class, nationality, or sexuality, I agree with Sedgwick’s assessment that “probably everybody who has survived at
all” the discursive interpellations of society “has reasonably rich, unsystematic resources of nonce taxonomy for mapping out the possibilities, dangers, and stimulations of their human social landscape” (Epistemology 22-3). My project ends up being at least as much creative and literary as it is critical and theoretical, primarily because “the shifting interfacial resistance of ‘literature itself’ to ‘theory’ may mark, along with its other denotations, the surface tension of this reservoir of unrationalized nonce-taxonomic energies” (24). If one could mobilize even a fraction of the nonce-taxonomic energies afforded by non-theoretical, non-paradigmatic representations, this would enable a much greater range of tools, even if perverse or partial, for coping with a particular “human social landscape” like the West Coast. In terms of the force of nonce taxonomies, “while distinctively representational, these energies are in no sense peculiarly literary” (Sedgwick, Epistemology 24); indeed I believe it is as much the critic’s prerogative as it is the writer’s to make full use of the abundant linguistic and tropological resources available for describing one’s experience of place.

My interest in creating interfaces among nonce taxonomies and revolts of the senses has a clear political dimension to it. In combining the work of Sedgwick and Lefebvre, I am ultimately seeking to articulate and open up a Foucauldian politics of discomfort as defined by Edward Barratt:

To think in this way [informed by a politics of discomfort] is to be prepared to submit one’s convictions to close scrutiny and ongoing questioning, to be alert to their practical ramifications, dangers and limitations and to be prepared to re-think accordingly. The fashioning of a political identity is an always provisional practice and the test of history
and experience and what such sources may offer in critical insight or buried and
unrealized political possibilities are integral to that process of fashioning. (“Later” 526)
A politics of discomfort acknowledges the problematic and elusive nature of subjectivity and
consequently allows for consistent modifications of allegiance, self-description, and aims. This is
a particularly useful way of conceiving contemporary critical politics given the decomposition of
grand ideologies into rapidly shifting micro-ideologies.

As Foucault notes, following revelations during the 1960s about the inhumanity of social
engineering projects,

People sought less and less to situate themselves in relation to the great geodesics of
history: capitalism, bourgeoisie, imperialism, socialism, proletariat. They gradually gave
up following the ‘logical’ and ‘historical’ consequences of choices to the limits of the
inadmissible or unbearable. The heroism of political identity has had its day. One asks
what one is, moment by moment, of the problems with which one grapples: how to take
part and take sides without letting oneself be taken in. Experience with, rather than
engagement in. (Foucault, *Power* 445)

What constitutes “the inadmissible” and “the unbearable” if not a revolt of the senses against
being taken into the disembodied, paradigmatic sign? An uneasy approach to politics (and
apocalyptics) acknowledges that a person never fully knows the position and provenances of
politics, nor the broader categories and historical forces with which they will ultimately ally.
Because of its unstable foundations, a politics of discomfort is characterized by the need for
continual critical questioning of one’s assumptions; taking a side is not impossible, but knowing
that side completely is. Ideas that suffice to explain the state of society today may implode or be superseded by more potent or poignant ones tomorrow: “in order to give them [the ideas] the necessary mobility one must have a distant view, but also look at what is nearby and all around oneself” (*Power* 448).

Even given unlimited time and resources it would be impossible to non-violently rationalize the coexistence of all perspectives on a place, and yet they do somehow manage to coexist. I would like to explore the potential of non-rationalized perspectives to interfere with apparently self-evident truths about descriptions of place. Henri Lefebvre’s understanding of space is that of a field of mutually interfering pluralities which are not simply overlaid onto inert spaces but which continually *produce* spaces like the West Coast. “We are confronted not by one social space,” Lefebvre explains, “but by many – indeed, by an unlimited multiplicity or unaccountable set of social spaces which we refer to generically as ‘social space.’ No space disappears in the course of growth and development: *the worldwide does not abolish the local*” (italics in original, 86). Thus, what appears to be a single physical space is actually the social product of numerous discourses continually converging on a locale. In a single room, a person may, for instance, measure its dimensions, enumerate the objects it contains, read these objects for their symbolic meaning, group them together based on various physical characteristics, look at the room not as a closed system but as part of a larger set of spaces, etc. Space may be read through its topographical representation, topological aspects, or typological significance, by its geology or geography, but it can never be reduced to a satisfactory, single, neutral description. It
is always being produced by its use and representation: “(Social) space is a (social) product” (Lefebvre 26).

When I aim to understand the tropology of the West Coast, then, I am conscious of the way in which my tools will shape its conception. My reaction against binaristic models of theorization involves a resistance to the tools I was exposed to since my earliest days as a literary scholar. My use of nonce taxonomies is a response to my frequent inability to apply theoretical concepts on a personal scale. My project is performative of something new in that regard, and I am not particularly discouraged by the fact that at times my writing takes on a somewhat ghostly aspect, where terms and ideas haunt one another without necessarily collapsing into a single, crystalline statement. In a somewhat cryptic formulation, Henri Lefebvre suggests that “[S]pace is not only the space of ‘no,’ it is also the space of the body, and hence the space of ‘yes,’ of the affirmation of life” (201). The “affirmation of life” is opposed to a supposedly stable and abstract version of space in Lefebvre’s thinking, but I react viscerally even to this formulation. The “yes” of space is supposed to allow for all sorts of modifications and permutations of the experience of being in space, but the articulation of space through textual media seems to contradict the actualities of life as it is lived. In other words, the conceptual underpinning of life/death on which Lefebvre’s articulation relies is itself a reduction of space as it is experienced, even as it seeks to formulate a non-reductive model of space. As I experience numerous spaces of the West Coast in

---

4 Rather than examining the appearance of the West Coast Apocalyptic in a single medium such as the novel, I have aimed to demonstrate its pervasiveness throughout numerous media: journals, magazines, paintings, architecture, critical texts, novels, film, popular culture, advertisements, and poetry. Because this is the first, full-length study of this topic, I felt it was important not to immediately limit the scope of future scholarship. I employ texts that are emblematic of the West Coast Apocalyptic in various media, but in no way am I suggesting that future interest in this area of study be limited to these selections.

5 Larissa Lai describes her writing in a similar “ghostly” way in “Political Animals and the Body of History.”
the writing of this dissertation, I aim to stay as true as possible to the not always conceptual ways they are experienced and lived.

One could think of the issues of place and apocalypticism that I have been outlining in terms of a river delta – a formation that shapes many of the geographic intricacies of the West Coast. While a satellite photograph may reveal a beautifully interconnected set of waterways unfolding in an increasingly intricate series of rivulets, in daily life it is not always possible to perceive these grander interconnections. No method of creating a totalizing, objective snapshot of a literary landscape is available to literary scholars, and often enough as a result one cannot truly be sure if he or she is standing at the source or outlet of a particular phenomenon. Scales become confusing because a critic is always to some extent inhabiting and interacting with the landscape being described, and its features are the result of untold millennia of transformations and evolution. Naturally, one can attempt to trace a text back through earlier influences and project its future flows, and yet the number of factors at play in a given text is far too great to allow for a complete picture. Sometimes a source becomes untraceable, as with many of the Indigenous cultures of the early West Coast. Moreover, the discursive interweaving that occurs when describing a place adds dimension beyond the three we can perceive. By employing such a varied critical terminology, I hope simply to introduce as many perspectives as possible within the space of a dissertation. This is precisely why I have chosen such an eclectic methodology in approaching this project. Without a doubt, I have passed over many key texts, but this is not the result of a critical laziness. More than anything, my critical style reflects a desire to throw off sparks that may ignite the interest of others interested in further exploring this field.
The methodology I have been outlining, I believe, renders a text like Douglas Coupland’s description of Vancouver – a highly topical West Coast space – much more comprehensible:

Bridge traffic; mountains; tall trees; outdoor sports; the bodies to match those sports; outdoor clothing to cover those bodies; nude sunbathing; pot; sushi; dim sum; Chinatown; Sikh temples; multiethnic couples; First Nations culture; wildlife (especially whales); hostility toward smokers; ferries; a really good airport; cruise ships in summer; the film industry; green politics; empty glass towers; rhododendrons; Japanese maples; hydroponic agriculture; appalling real estate prices; interesting architecture from 1946 to 1970; vague earthquake jitters; a sense of disconnection from the rest of Canada; the US is close (but somehow far away, too); people from elsewhere who want to vanish; people from elsewhere who want the city to fix them; harbours, inlets and bridges; log booms, wheat pools and rail cars...

Some of these items are cliché yet they remain integral to the city’s character. Many of these traits are also shared by other cities, but with Vancouver it’s the amount and combination that make the place what it is. (emphasis added, Stories 3)

Within the nonce spatial framework I have been articulating, one is able to better understand the purpose of Coupland’s fragmented, non-narrative approach to describing a West Coast locale. Instead of an intrinsic essence, the “amount and combination” of things – the content rather than simply the asyndetonic form – become the terms by which a place is articulated. The list could easily be expanded to meet any new descriptive requirements (the 2010 Olympics; the outrageously expensive abandoned Olympic village), and move easily into features extending
beyond the particularities of the Vancouver cityscape. Coupland offers a non-rationalized West Coast locale, a place where things will resonate rather than be reconciled, and a similar mode of description characterizes many of the other literary writers I discuss in the following pages.

While numerous critics have arrived upon a non-rationalized approach to articulating the spaces of the coast, this study is the first to comment on this approach as a historically emergent form. By reading the apocalyptics of the West Coast, I hope to offer not only a record of a mode of representation that critics have only partly acknowledged but also a commentary on the fascinating and often problematic relationship between paradigm and place. As with Coupland’s description, in critical collections such as Many Wests (1997), Terra Pacifica (1998), Parallel Destinies (2002), One West, Two Myths (2004), and The Borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests (2006) editors have abandoned the hope of ever articulating one unifying, positive version of the West Coast – a desire exemplified by mid-twentieth-century critics J.M.S. Careless and Robert Duncan – in favour of constructing the Coast through a variety of critical perspectives. In each of these books, the Coast gets articulated as a collection of theses by different writers rather than a single, overarching one.

When attempts have been made at full-length studies, such as Jean Barman’s West Beyond the West (1991), Mike Davis’s City of Quartz (1992) and Ecology of Fear (1999), Edward Soja’s Thirdspace (1996) and Postmetropolis (2000), and Laurie Ricou’s The Arbutus/Madrone Files (2002) and Salal (2007), they have often been consciously constructed as fragmentary and multi-disciplinary texts. Jean Barman states the matter succinctly in her conclusion: “No one perspective, be it geographic, economic, political or social, is sufficient to
interpret this west beyond the west. Yet each contributes to an understanding of the whole, to why British Columbia remains a place unto itself” (353). While her focus is specifically on British Columbia, one among many possible West Coasts, the recent history of eclectic, interdisciplinary scholarship from the larger North American West Coast serves as evidence of her thesis on a broader scale. With my addition of Lefebvre’s spatial theory and Sedgwick’s descriptive tools to these other critical debates, an anti-revelatory, anti-totalizing approach for understanding the unique and complex representations of the West Coast, and of other places in turn, becomes possible. Such an approach promises to better equip people to deal directly with the historical and geographic contexts in which they find themselves.
Growing up in Kamloops in the 1990s involved for me a certain sense that something was missing. My friends and I tried to find it through our underground music scene, through angsty GenX cable access shows and minor acts of vandalism, but none of these ever seemed enough to alleviate our intangible discontent with the situation. Something inexplicable taunted us through the suburban daze, something that eventually compelled me to follow Horace Greely’s famous dictum from 1856: “Go West, young man!” Only one problem: when you go west in B.C. you are halted by the ocean. My arrested westering was not consciously part of a narrative at the time, and yet the blend of angst and frustrated movement did, I have come to recognize, mimic a frequently revisited historical narrative on the West Coast. The roots of this narrative can be in part traced back to the earliest written records of the Far West, the explorer journals that begin to conceive of the West Coast as a geographic region.

In the 1790s, two hundred years before my own West Coast wanderings, Captain George Vancouver spent several years drifting up and down the coast with the crews of the Discovery and the Chatham, seeking among other things the Northwest Passage. Its discovery would have brought him immense fame and fortune. He did not find it. His journals often evince a high degree of frustration with his royally mandated task. At their gloomiest he and his crew float
around projecting their moods onto the landscape through superbly dour names like Desolation Sound, Deception Pass, and Useless Bay. When they make it as far north as the coast of what would become British Columbia, they find themselves “attended with dark gloomy weather, that greatly added to the dreary prospect of the surrounding country” (Vancouver 195). Words such as uninteresting, dreary, forlorn, deserted, and desolate proliferate from this point onward. To understand the emergence of the West Coast Apocalyptic, it helps to inquire into the aesthetic standards by which Vancouver and his contemporaries mete out these judgments against the Coast, and the long-term effect that their descriptions have had on the conceptualization and construction of the region itself.

In this chapter, I trace several places where the incommensurability between scientific discourse and the landscape in British and American explorers’ representations of the Far West resulted in previously inconceivable modes of negotiating the cultural and physical geography at hand. The relationship between a perplexing geography, a complex of Indigenous cultures, and attempts to reconcile these things with “clear” goals like finding an unclaimed Northwest Passage on the Coast can be read as giving rise to the sense that the West Coast itself was, to borrow a choice word from both David Thompson and Mr. MacLauries,6 “crazy” – cracking or breaking apart (quoted in Henry 803; MacLauries 48; OED). “Craziness” in these early accounts refers to the irreparable shattering of physical objects (often canoes), and yet in historical hindsight the shattering of objects can itself be seen as merely the material effect of another, more familiar kind of craziness, the breaking open of one’s psyche. Indigenous interlocutors

---

6 Mr. MacLauries is the pseudonym under which Sir Alexander MacKenzie wrote A Journal or Narrative of Voyages and Travels.
frequently question what would motivate their European counterparts to risk all comfort and safety for the sake of reaching an end goal so disproportionate to their efforts – either the coast via the mainland, or the Northwest passage via the coast. While Mr. MacLauries repeatedly uses “great exertion to force a passage” to the Pacific Ocean, for instance, it is only under persistent “discouragements” by the natives that he and his group “should discontinue” their perilous journey (44; 34; 67), and a similar pattern of stubbornness marks the journals of legendary American explorers Lewis and Clark. Simon Fraser’s journey down the river that would eventually bear his name was only made after “The Indians of this place drew a chart of the riverbed which to our view represented it as a dreadful chain of difficulties apparently unsurmountable, and they blamed us for venturing so far with our canoes, & for not going by land as advised by the Old Chief on a former occasion” (Journals 76).

In contrast to the myths of the bold Western hero that would gradually emerge in the United States and to some extent Canada, these early exploration accounts are often marked with a tone of futility and disappointment, even after the explorers’ ostensible goals have been met. The return home after intensely arduous journeys is often brief and meaningless, such as in MacLauries’s account where one hundred pages of peril, danger, and upset are followed on the way back “without meeting any other remarkable event in the course of the voyage” (91). While one would expect fewer surprises on a return journey, the complete lack of reflection indicates a larger problem posited by the West Coast: it is the end of an unexplored continent for these men – the introduction of an irrefutable finitude into previously boundless notions of exploration.
The inextricable combination of success and failure in the search for riches and new lands produces a strange rhetorical tension that persistently haunts more heroic narratives of the West that developed later, and the following chapters will spend some time exploring these. In many later literary accounts, even when the promised land is found in places like British Columbia and California, it is frequently found not to be as wondrous as promised; it consistently comes into existence under the shadow of apocalyptic threat. The material technologies of travel in early explorer accounts symbolize this strangely contradictory pattern nicely, and indeed play a significant role in the later conceptualization of the region. Frequently explorers find themselves in a situation such as one where “Their canoe was now become so crazy, that it was a matter of absolute necessity to construct another” (MacLauries 48). As imported European modes of thinking and moving in the world are confronted with an “unsurmountable” landscape, they begin to be driven physically and epistemologically “crazy,” and they must in turn be reconstituted as something new.

Such explicit moments of “craziness” (and the narratives of frenzied exploration that produce and surround them) work their way directly into later literary representations of the Coast’s history. Examples include the actions of Tay John, who severs his own hand (rendering his own body crazed) to protest what he considers to be the injustices of modernity (O’Hagan 108), and the “crazed end-of-the-world curiosity” that compels the early West Coast explorers represented in George Bowering’s 1980 *Burning* Water (157); indeed, Bowering borrows heavily directly from Vancouver’s accounts. In a less direct way, however, the notion of broken, uncontainable encounters with the coastal geography also contributes to the development of West
Coast literature on a more formal level. The recurrent “breaking open” of vessels (and the pre-colonial enterprise they represented) translates over time into a breaking open of representation itself, a pattern that takes on apocalyptic significance in texts like Mark MacDonald’s novel *Flat* (2000), where the narrator seeks and fails to piece together the vertiginous Vancouver cityscape as it existed in the mind of a friend who has recently committed suicide. Ultimately the world appears to go “crazy” when the narrator tries to impose north-south right angles on the diagonally organized, geographically conforming city grid of Vancouver; bizarre, indecipherable maps and awkwardly angled photographs of concrete buildings serve to mirror the narrator’s fracturing mind. The protagonist begins to believe that “blocks of flats are sinking into the earth, and people are leaping from windows and balconies” (123). “Sinking into the earth” is a useful explanation for understanding what occurs when imported, conventional modes of description are imposed on an object that operates according to its own rules. The unknowable and invisible continually breaks into the tenuous narrative accounts of the Coast’s overwhelming geography. The urban landscape’s reaction to the narrator’s efforts in *Flat* looks strikingly similar to the easy infiltration of a stubborn and vigourous river into a fragile cedar canoe.

The infiltration of geography into structure, or the collapse of structure in the face of a resistant geography, can be seen as contributing to what Laurie Ricou playfully calls the West Coast’s “mistory” – “the filter of mist and mysticism [placed] into the formula of intrigue and mystery” (*Arbutus* 19). This blurring of narrative structures with “misty” coastal features can certainly take on a mystical, extra-linguistic significance, as it does in Emily Carr’s *Klee Wyck* where the speaker dreams of “no language even” (quoted in *Arbutus* 46-47), but it also has come
to represent for many a kind of panicked relationship with the land – a crisis in solidity, as if the earth itself were sometimes disappearing beneath people’s feet. As well-known television series like *Twin Peaks*, *The X-Files*, and *Millennium*, which make use of the West Coast’s haunting rainforests and misty climate, demonstrate, a haunting sense of mystery or intrigue is not nearly as distant from a sense of the apocalyptic as it might at first appear. In each of these series – with widely varying degrees of sincerity and campiness – what starts as an intrigue-driven search for the truth ends up in mysterious revelations that rip the fabric of culture and reality itself. In this regard perhaps West Coast “mistory” and apocalypse can be read along a continuum.

With regard to the Coast’s mistory, the degree to which a text is apocalyptic often represents the degree to which its players have been enfranchised by history and culture. If one is wedded strongly to a particular configuration of the world at hand, then there is also much more at stake in its loss and there is a threatening risk of this revelation. The excised, ignored dimensions of history (such as aboriginal perspectives and the unknowable land itself) become apocalyptic truths confronting the descendants of early European and American presences on the Coast. As the following chapters indicate, the resolution of these apocalyptic energies through myths of the noble savage, the American West, and the civilized Canadian Coast, among others, has only been partial and continually subject to the intrusion of obdurate material and historical realities.

To understand how an exploratory intrigue like Vancouver’s evolves into apocalyptic panic, one must first appreciate the fascination that characterizes early representations of the West Coast. Early in Vancouver’s voyages, *before* the months and eventual years of rain and his
encounters with the innumerable inlets, islands, and sounds of British Columbia, his writing is much calmer and more optimistic than it becomes as he progresses:

To describe the beauties of this region, will, on some future occasion, be a very grateful task to the pen of a skilful panegyrist. The serenity of the landscape, the innumerable pleasing landscapes, the abundant fertility that unassisted nature puts forth, require only to be enriched by the industry of man with villages, mansions, cottages, and other buildings, to render it the most lovely country that can be imagined; whilst the labour of the inhabitants would be amply rewarded, in the bounties which nature seems ready to bestow on cultivation. (117-18) (May 18th, 1792)

Vancouver’s version of the pleasing and abundant pastoral landscape being “enriched” by the imaginative importation of British industrial technologies indicates that early on in his exploration he has little difficulty assimilating the coastal geography to his preconceptions of civilization and meaning. Indeed, the technological development of a space is easily linked in this passage, by a rhetorical manoeuvre, to written and visual representation: the labour of the “skilful panegyrist” blends in the next sentence with “the industry of man.” Creating “villages, mansions, cottages and other buildings” will “render” the coast “the most lovely country that can be imagined.” The abundant fertility of the West Coast region, at least as it is portrayed by Vancouver, cannot be easily extricated from a project of colonial expansion and cultivation. Imagination itself is bound up in this ultimately economic project.
Vancouver’s written, imaginative narrative of material, technological transformation marks many early conceptualizations of the West Coast, and it is a representational strategy that generates at least as many problems as it solves with regard to the undeveloped landscape. Alexander McClung claims that Los Angeles’s imaginative history “is a record of efforts to improve upon Arcadia without acknowledging that to interfere with a found or given natural paradise is to introduce an element of dissatisfaction that can be eradicated only when the transformation to a Utopia is complete” (12). This statement acknowledges the relationship between desire and lack that marks colonial incursions into differently developed areas of the world. However, while McClung limits his focus to the history of Los Angeles – a city founded around the time that Vancouver was exploring the northern coast – Vancouver’s narrative of technological transformation here strongly suggests a consistent tendency throughout the Coast’s history to conceive of the region as a pastoral playground to be cultivated in accordance with American-European norms (or fantasies) of development.

Vancouver’s early representations suggest that narratives of Arcadia and Utopia preceded actual urban development on the Coast, and this would seem to be confirmed by the fact that nearly identical thinking can be seen in American explorers Lewis and Clark’s visits to parts of the proto-American Pacific slope:

I have no doubt but this tract of country if cultivated would produce in great abundance every article essentially necessary to the comfort and subsistence of civillized man. to it’s [sic] present inhabitants nature seems to have dealt with a liberal hand, for she has

38
distributed a great variety of esculent plants over the face of the country which furnish them a plentifull store of provision; these are acquired with but little toil, when prepared after the method of the natives afford not only a nutricious but an agreeable food. (403)

While Lewis’s description here is not as directly concerned with written representation of the “region” as Vancouver’s, it still involves projecting the present “tract of country” into a future, “civillized” state. It is also worth noting the language of abundance that pervades both Vancouver’s and Lewis’s descriptions; the Coast is a fecund paradise just waiting to offer up its endless resources.

This early projection and planning of the West Coast as a space demonstrates Henri Lefebvre’s assertion that “(Social) space is a (social) product” (26): Vancouver’s and Lewis’s visions of then non-existent industrial development actually begin to produce the West Coast as a place inextricable from processes of industrialization, one whose value is arranged according to British rather than already present Indigenous systems of valuation. Indeed, as Matthew Sparkes notes, many configurations of the West Coast are economic ones, which treat the region as a resource zone “sustained by Canadian and US think tanks” rather than some more intrinsic, culturally coherent entity (“Cascading” 213). In this regard, one can consider some of the contexts where the “West Coast” often appears: book jackets, national and international events, academic conferences, the ecotourism industry. Each of these, and perhaps even recent developments in West Coast literary studies, including this dissertation, seem bound up in notions of “selling” the Coast in various ways. Alternative attempts at articulation, such as Laurie
Ricou’s notion of the Coast as a bioregion, do not always engage with the region’s history as a locus of resource extraction and thereby circumvent the question of why anyone needs a “West Coast” at all. Jason Patrick Bennett draws attention to this often naive evasion of the Coast’s economic history, arguing that the notion of an innocent West, free of culture and limitation, “emerged precisely because colonizers encountered resistance and conflict, whether social, economic, or environmental” (223). In other words, the more Arcadian versions of the Coast such as Ricou’s may suppress problems that come with colonization; the fertile and malleable “West Coast” at its inception could be read as pre-empting other ways of existing with this particular tract of land.

In terms of the possibilities for inhabiting the West Coast, early accounts of the region may contain within them various seeds to undo the region’s function as a strictly economic entity. Some time after Vancouver describes the Coast’s potential as a space for technological development, he begins to encounter a conceptual problem. As he and his crew chart their way along the rainy mid- to northern British Columbian coast, and begin to recognize many constituent elements of the landscape and people as highly resistant to being cultivated according to Utopian fantasies, the project of conceptually producing the region as a useful space falters repeatedly. The inextricability of regional representation and technological development becomes overwhelmed by the improbability of the latter as the repetitiveness, inhospitality, and unnavigable complexity of the coastline set in; rather than being “enchantingly beautiful” as before, the land becomes “dull and uninteresting” and this leads Vancouver to make errors in his
cartography where he had previously been obsessively meticulous\(^7\) (62; 225). Faced with the fractal geography of the coastline, it is as if his desire for linear, “straightforward” description begins to buckle under its own conceptual straining. The geography appears crazy because he does not have an adequate paradigm to cope with its uniqueness.

Though many early European accounts of the Coast have a similar tone of determination to Vancouver’s, the heroic will stylistically present in their accounts is in most cases no match for the landscape. That is not to say that many of the explorers do not accomplish their stated tasks, but instead that these tasks rarely turn out to be as useful or meaningful as expected. One could think here of Simon Fraser’s attempt to open up the utterly non-navigable (and economically useless) river that would later bear his name, or Thompson’s final assessment of his expedition down the Columbia: “[h]ere we are left the sport of fortune, at the mercy of chance, on a barbarous coast, among natives more inclined to murder us for our property than to assist us, and during a war which any moment may strip us of our all” (877). Reaching the Coast marks not a glorious gain but the threat of total loss. Likewise, while Vancouver’s expectations are often stretched to the point of cataclysmic upset, Lewis and Clark’s journals are more thoroughly pervaded by descriptions of the “horrid,” “dangerous,” “intolerable,” and “emence” (immense) landscapes they encounter (304; 317; 227; 297). With the aid of historic hindsight, critics like Frank Bergon have been able to appropriate the “uneven, fragmented, and unpolished journals” of Lewis and Clark as “the equivalent of a national poem, a magnificent epic for an

---

\(^7\) The best and most frequently cited example of this is Vancouver’s incorrect identification of Burrard Inlet as “Burrard’s Channel” (193-97).
unfinished nation” (Bergon ix-x), but as evinced by ongoing geographic anxieties, there have been ongoing problems in neatly assimilating the western reaches of North America into ideas of the (Canadian or American) nation.

In addition to the tone of dismay that enters into Thompson’s, Fraser’s, and Lewis and Clark’s accounts of their expeditions, the introduction of factual error into Vancouver’s later journals and cartography resonates with Henri Lefebvre’s “revolt of the senses,” the moments when “our body, which is disdained, absorbed and broken into pieces by images” reacts viscerally to the conceptual fissures in its surroundings (201). Lefebvre’s term suggests that the production of space also entails a mutually causal production of identities within space; people’s perceived identities produce space, while the production of space in turn produces identities. This process finds no finalized form. Space revolts right along with the senses, and Vancouver’s boredom and its attendant failures can thus be read as more than a simple case of scientific laziness. They can be seen as the stubborn refusal of the senses to adhere to the organizing principles that representational conventions like the picturesque and the sublime – two predominant modes during the early period of West Coast exploration – attempt to impose onto a landscape.

Delving into the history of representing the Coast in English, Iain MacLaren has examined the distortions that had to occur to make imported European landscape conventions fit with the region’s unique geography. Overlaying Lefebvre’s “revolt of the senses” onto MacLaren’s work makes it possible to better understand the significance that these distortions had for the development of a West Coast identity. If, as Lefebvre argues, space and identity are
mutually productive, then the failure to articulate the coast according to European descriptive conventions simultaneously entails a failure of European identities on the West Coast, and something new emerges as a result. Over time, this cycle of trial and error begins to feed back into itself, and can be read into all sorts of counter-cultural movements in the present, from draft dodging to weed smuggling to the grunge I loved as a West Coast teenager; each posits a reaction, real or imagined, to dominant forces that exist, simply, *elsewhere*. George Vancouver’s gloom – an ultimately melancholic response, as I argue in chapter five – emerges exactly in the places where his technological tools expose their limitations, and so does the region itself in these early formulations. If by some absurd exertion of will the great explorer *could* navigate every complicated crevasse of the coastline using available technology and taxonomic conventions, his task would have taken far too long for a lifetime.

Whether Vancouver chose to be methodical or innovative he was confronted with an infinite regress: the fractal coastline. To navigate this, his options included the warping and uncontainable rupture of ill-suited scientific and literary modes or an overly methodical and impractical application of these descriptive tools. The former would mean a total re-evaluation of the way one navigated and participated in the coastal landscape (and the world), and the latter would entail a representational slowdown to the point of being almost completely inert. As it played out, he drifted somewhere in between. Although the question of how much detail to include is common enough when it comes to representation, the discrepancy between the descriptive tools and their object was, in the case of the early West Coast, profound, and Vancouver settled for a mode of half-hearted, almost defeatist description. To reintroduce a sense
of vitality to an ultimately gloomy and cataclysmic picture of the Coast, new modes, or some negotiated version of indigenous modes of representation, would need to emerge.

Setting this need aside for the moment, when Vancouver’s descriptive dependence on what “can be imagined” encounters its shadowy double – what cannot be easily negotiated with available European descriptive modes – the representation of the Coast as a place distinct from all others may strangely begin to emerge. The failure of imagination does not need to be read as a strictly negative process. Vancouver’s representations of coastal space are produced often enough through positive descriptions of what he sees, but in just as many cases he depicts spaces through descriptions of a perceived lack. This idea of a negative production of space complements Lefebvre’s largely positive understanding of the way space is produced, though he does give some attention to the value of interstices among spatial discourses (43). Breakdowns of positive description are not of course unique to the West Coast, and yet they occur frequently enough in early accounts to take on a special significance in later texts. Some prominent examples are Howard O’Hagan’s *Tay John*, Earle Birney’s “Vancouver Lights,” Daphne Marlatt’s *Ana Historic*, and Wayde Compton’s *49th Parallel Psalm*, each of which focuses – with strongly differing opinions as to its meaning – on the overwhelming nature of the West Coast landscape in relation to feeble human technology.

This point about negative representation is worth emphasizing: the breakdown of representation itself becomes an integral part of representing the Coast. One could speculate here that the more one attempts to adhere to a rigid, schematized representation of a landscape or of a people, the more the potential for an apocalyptic rupture – a revelation of the truth – may occur.
While, as Derrida argues, the apocalyptic moment is always reclaimed by language in the moment of its utterance (“Structure” 879-80), the sheer repetition of failed description on the Coast may be what produces the illusion of a totalizing apocalyptic – an apocalypse where no new history is allowed to accrue upon the severed past. Such totalizing apocalypses, where unspeakable things permanently break through the veil of daily life, have been a preoccupation of West Coast writers. Could it be that, as a result of the Coast’s long history of negative description, the very seams of representation have been stretched and strained to their limits? Could what started as a localized problem or series of problems have become a more generalized mode of description?

A poignant example of the negative production of the West Coast as a place comes from a description Vancouver fails to make of several Nuu-chah-nulth houses that had been “decorated with paintings and other ornaments, forming various figures.” With a characteristic hastiness, as soon as he mentions these, he quickly dismisses them as “the rude designs of fancy” (269). While he admits that “it is by no means improbable, they [the Nuu-chah-nulth] might annex some meaning to the figures they described,” he finally decides that these indigenous modes of visual representation are “too remote or hieroglyphical for our comprehension” (emphasis added, 269). The stated reasons for incomprehension here are worth examining. While “hieroglyphical” suggests that Vancouver is dealing with a linguistic or interpretive problem, it also insinuates that the simplest means for understanding his texts – conversation – is not readily available. His unwillingness to verbally communicate treats the art as something essentially cryptic, historically burying the voice of a culture. In this sense, his interpretation of the art as hieroglyphical
provides a ripe foundation for an apocalyptic moment: Vancouver figuratively *buries alive* the culture with which he is dealing, and the truth can always be revealed (and has been revealed) again (and again). One could even say that such revelations, in the form of ongoing cultural conflicts between aboriginal and European descended cultures on the Coast, are “by no means improbable.”

In addition to his eerily cryptic rendering of the aboriginal artistic text, Vancouver’s response raises a strange set of spatial problems. By what standard is art that is immediately present, along with its producers, “remote,” if not one that deems colonial centres (in this case England) as the only possible place from which one may comprehend the rest of the world? No consideration is given to the possibility of attempting to understand the art on its own grounds, and this in turn constructs a bizarrely fused dimensionality to the encounter. This is also the place where a melancholic tone creeps in. Throughout his *Voyage* Vancouver consistently distances himself from that which is immediately at hand by keeping both a literal and metaphorical foot in the boat; effectively, he is present in two locations at once, a paradox which distorts (or at least rewrites) all classical sense of a linearly unfolding time and space (even during a visit to Victoria, British Columbia, today – where one can have high tea at the Empress Hotel, or read the *Times Colonist* – one encounters a similar set of spatiotemporal paradoxes as those faced by Vancouver). In essence, Vancouver’s account becomes halted in its own gaze. An understanding of this type of dimensional paradox and its effects will become particularly important to my later chapters, and especially chapter five which deals with the effects of global instantaneity in relation to the Hollywood film industry.

46
In the case of Vancouver’s encounter with Nuu-chah-nulth houses, then, the limits of his comprehension are expressed as a problem of geography, as if being “too remote” from Britain stretches the limits of thought and inquiry itself. In actuality, however, perhaps the stretch occurs when one attempts to ignore or spin the point of contact between two differing epistemologies. The possibility for a future apocalyptic revelation is not necessarily produced in this case by the meeting of two cultures but by the desire of one for the other not to exist. Mary Louise Pratt acknowledges this desire – a pattern that is present in many early explorer accounts of the Coast – and suggests that to begin addressing it critics would ideally shift postcolonial critical discourses away from the idea of “frontiers” to the more sensitive term “contact zone.” The former implies a unidirectional thrust to colonial encounters, while the latter takes into account that, even under “conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict,” encounters between cultures still involve “ongoing relations” (6). The underlying attitude attending such a terminological shift could indeed do much to alleviate the accumulation of apocalyptic stresses.

Beyond Vancouver’s description of the Nuu-chah-nulth simply indicating a case of cultural arrogance, it is important to note the way that this arrogance constitutes and shapes the limits of his comprehension; a warping of perspective in both its literal and figurative senses begins to occur as a result of this self-distancing from phenomena right at hand. A similar limit marks the writing of Lewis: “I now prevailed upon the chief to instruct me with respect to the geography of his country. this he undertook very cheerfully, by delineating the rivers on the ground. but I soon found that his information fell far short of my expectation or wishes” (247, errors in original). In each of these cases, the limitations of representation and comprehension
can be read as a problem of creativity or as the result of misinformed expectations – an inability or refusal to engage epistemologies. This is precisely the place where Sedgwick’s nonce taxonomies – ephemeral, contingent and metaphorical systems of meaning, in opposition to rigid and reductive scientific taxonomies – could have been and can still be useful. As a result of their rigidity, both Vancouver and Lewis must resort to circumscription rather than conversation or translation, but in the process, the activity produces on the Coast an endless catalogue of unimaginable and ultimately threatening spaces.

Howard O’Hagan copes with a related problematic in *Tay John* (1939), a novel written nearly a century and a half after Vancouver’s explorations, which deals with the colonization of the Canadian Pacific slope. Looking out over a “new” land, sometimes narrator Jack Denham claims that it is “physically exhausting to look on unnamed country. A name is the magic to keep it within its horizons. Put a name to it, put it on a map, and you’ve got it” (80). While this attitude informs many of the characters’ perspectives in the novel, and it is one that resonates a great deal with Vancouver’s own attitude (Brealy, “Mapping” 140), the same country mysteriously swallows up the novel’s half-aboriginal protagonist Tête Jaune at its conclusion. O’Hagan, staying true to the modernist moment within which he writes, feels he must position aboriginality as tragic – noble, but ultimately doomed to disappear in the face of modernity – and yet he acknowledges that something always exceeds the desire to “get” a country and “keep it within its horizons.” Indeed, the fact that the country is initially “unnamed” suggests a likely point from which the (apocalyptic) problematic springs: names cannot quite stay put. The titles of the novel’s three sections, “Legend,” “Hearsay,” and “Evidence – Without a Finding,” affirm
O’Hagan’s main theme concerning the risks and limitations of circumscription, in that each leaves as much open as it attempts to “cover.”

The inability of names to stay put highlights a crucial problem that comes to define much West Coast writing, and particularly its apocalyptic strains. Vancouver never locates the Northwest passage, and he is dead within six years of writing his Voyage of Discovery, but he can hardly be blamed for those historical inevitabilities. On the other hand, what he represents as a passing interaction with the Nuu-Chah-Nulth, one among many to be quickly glossed over in pursuit of his true goals, is interesting precisely because of its hastiness and lack of comprehensiveness. The dismissive tone he and others use is integral to the production of the Far West as a place of desirous, angsty wanderings; by blatantly ignoring major and indelible aspects of the West Coast’s story – its long-rooted and manifold cultures and their unique, well-established ways of representing and living within the land – early explorer journals effectively obscure a good potential foundation for their Arcadian fantasies. The after-effects of this severing can be seen in much later representations taking the form of a middle-class malaise in West Coast texts ranging from Leonard Cohen’s “The End of My Life in Art” to Susan Musgrave’s The Charcoal Burners to Philip K. Dick’s The Divine Invasion. What appears to Vancouver’s flighty eyes as a hieroglyphic, solely visual representation, is actually only one aspect of a much larger signifying tradition, one that entailed a strong oral component that connects material symbols to a way of living. Without this connection, any attempts to represent end up unable to find their metaphorical footing.
The early dominance of visuality – of that which can be measured and recorded at a distance – plays a key role in the development of a West Coast malaise. In many explorer accounts, attention is focused on the panoramic rather than more proximal sensations such as sound and touch, and although this focus effectively draws together the region, it also scatters the local and leaves one feeling out of touch. Only much later, as early cultural mistakes begin to be acknowledged, have archaeologists and anthropologists of the Coast begun to piece together a much richer and localized patchwork of aboriginal cultures on the Coast. Vancouver’s representation of a “hieroglyphic” native culture as dead and untranslatable, and his subsequent sense of malaise directly relate to his early calls for “the pen of a skilful panegyrist”; unlike oral traditions which rely on living transmission, his is bound up in an entire history of dead representations. Written traditions produce, rather than simply observe, other cryptic phenomena. In its quest to organize vast tracts of land, the profound impatience of the visible is also key – its incessant desire is to obtain maximum knowledge with minimal resistance, to keep things moving along, to do exactly the kind of pacing and seeking gold rushers and rum runners would later do on the Coast. These early representational choices initiate a tradition of Coasters who would later fantasize they could find, by virtue of movement and money alone, what was referred to in early Canadian immigration literature as “the Last Best West” (Gagnon 1).

While the deleterious effects of these early representations can be traced into the present, accounts such as Vancouver’s may also simultaneously create a space to alleviate some of the

---

8 In the case of David Thompson’s journals, his observations have provided key archaeological and linguistic insights into the Mandan-Hidatsa and Salish peoples (Wood; Mattina and Taylor). I speculate as to some reasons why later in this chapter.
limitations of imagination. Quite by accident, a negative vocabulary to cope with the
immeasurable or intangible dimensions of the Far West develops from early written accounts of
the region, forming something like a scientific sublime. A term like this, which emphasizes a
fused understanding of the poetic and the scientific, seems useful for understanding precisely
how technological discourses could so easily evolve into literary and typological ones. To
Edmund Burke, that which was not yet known or still hazily defined by science produced in itself
a tantalizing kind of effect – the sublime – by virtue of its obscurity: “I think there are reasons in
nature why the obscure idea, when properly conveyed, should be more affecting than the clear. It
is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions” (1034).
While his observation seems to be aimed at articulating the necessity for scientific inquiry, the
place of “our passions” is suspect, occupying exactly the place of other cultures and their
representations of the world – the place of Vancouver’s “hieroglyphic.”

To be sure, both Burke and Vancouver participate in a kind of exoticizing which is
problematic in itself, but the obscure place of “passions” also entails a disconnection from the
object, which in turn produces a profound sense of emptiness in the heart of Coastal culture (it is
the neglected place of desire for the “other”). For many later writers, this feeling of emptiness
can only be eradicated by apocalyptic terms, terms which involve at their etymological and
epistemological roots an erotic mingling with the unknown. In modern and postmodern Los
Angeles – at least as it is represented by the likes of Nathanael West or Bret Easton Ellis –
attention is increasingly drawn to surfaces, and I am suggesting that this has much to do with the
elements of hastiness and obscurity in early West Coast representations.
The craving for smooth, visible, resistance-free surfaces on the Coast has not been limited to written representations. The *curtain wall façade*, a non-essential glass wall attached to the outside of a building, for instance, has been a favourite in architecture from California to Vancouver since the eighties. In the cultural context of the West Coast, the curtain wall may be preferred because it functions so well as a trope of flatness and nothingness; it entails a kind of *total* visuality, or total presence. Could it be, however, that the emphasis on visuality and presence unconsciously diverts attention away from the haunting absence of aboriginal others and their history on the contemporary Coast? There is something strangely skeletal about Vancouver architecture. Writers like Douglas Coupland draw attention to a related problem, describing the Coast as a place that lacks death, but they have difficulty discerning precisely from whence this lack springs. Instead, they remain insular in their attitude, resorting to the same self-centred epistemologies evident in the earliest accounts of the Coast. Coupland’s novels, for instance, often feature lost and lonely characters, and the sense of community he creates to alleviate this pressure always somehow implodes before the beginning of the next novel. While the curtain wall façade is supposed to refer to nothing but itself, I suggest that it may actually refer to the history of its production as a self-adoring object, a history intimately connected with neglected issues of race and aboriginality. In other words, for all their vacant posturing, the curtain wall façade and its literary counterparts are both entirely grounded (in that they require an unseen structure) and entirely dissociated from their grounds (in that they completely efface them with their totalizing visuality).
The longer-term effects of the Burkean sublime on the West Coast – the role it has played in producing a desire for apocalyptic resolution – can be partly explained by the way Burke physically situates the idea of obscurity. He states that in the past “Almost all the heathen temples were dark” and, more tellingly, that, “Even in the barbarous temples of the Americans at this day [1759], they keep their idol in a dark part of the hut, which is consecrated to his worship” (1032). The implicit response to darkness or obscurity or barbarity in Burke’s conceptual system is to enlighten, both through science and the light of true religion, but there is also a kind of fascination with the unknown and even an investment in its preservation. Enlightenment, in this sense, is not exactly the same as learning or internalizing: the light of science functions more to obliterate than to comprehend otherness. Or, put differently, the project of exploration, in the way Burke articulates it and Vancouver and other explorers enact it, is to repeatedly cast out already established modes of knowing, transforming others into “the darkness” as one goes. This casting of new light conveniently forces an infinite retreat of shadows, never allowing obscurity to be finally found, or understood as anything else. However, in the myriad fjords and inlets and forests and shores of the West Coast, the places where so-called exploration can push no further, this shadow-chasing is finally faced with itself. From a certain approach, the coast begins to look like the physical and even mythical end of the world (which is really just the end of a particular mode of describing it).

So, Vancouver moves ever forward, pushing forward as far as he can through astronomical measurements, detailed descriptions of flora and fauna, and the application of European monikers to anything worth noting, but when these taxonomic tools fail, he must resort
to something else – something more worrisome. At the many points in his journals when the drive towards positive scientific description fails, he employs words such as countless, innumerable, numberless, inhospitable and unfathomable; these negative terms are a key part of the scientific sublime. For every time Vancouver describes something like “the sandy cliffs that form the shores within the straits” (82) – a purely positive description – he also mentions things like “a country of a very moderate height that seemed to extend as far as the eye could reach” (87), a description that is marked by its own perceptual limitations. Although not unique to the West Coast, such descriptions of limitation frequently appear in the Coast’s literary and cultural history. In the way Vancouver uses them, they aim to circumscribe certain things as warranting future investigation, but they also indicate a kind of failure in the present; the frequency of such breakdowns can be useful for rendering visible not only the region but the epistemologies that have tried to make sense of it.

The scientific sublime is not just a characteristic of Vancouver’s writing; similar linguistic structures work their way into the journals of MacLauries, Fraser, Thompson, and Lewis and Clark. From a long-term literary perspective, the value of these terms does not reside in their utility; although explorers were seeking to count, number, inhabit, and literally fathom the coast, something imaginatively evocative emerges precisely in their failures. Because of the haste with which these explorers often must treat their descriptive objects, something escapes precisely where it should be contained. In a sense, Vancouver becomes one of the Coast’s first “skilful panegyrists” but largely in contravention to his stated or intended scientific purpose, and largely by virtue of what he fails to say and do. Similar to Vancouver, Simon Fraser, travelling
later through the Rockies, would note that “To describe everything as it is would be worthy of the greatest philosophers and would take up a considerable tome without anything else to attend to” (154). Perhaps Fraser’s interests are not as specifically literary as Vancouver’s, but they do indicate a similar awareness that strictly European descriptive conventions rang somehow false or incomplete when faced with the unique cultural and physical terrain of the West Coast. Tomes have been trying to deal with the aftermath ever since.

While the cultural insensitivity and epistemological difficulties in the accounts of both Vancouver and Fraser can be alternatively caustic and bumbling, it is worth noting that not all explorer accounts were written in the same way with regard to the limits of scientific thinking. The journals of David Thompson tell a different story (of the proto West Coast region and its people); while still subject to the hastiness of a visual economy, the explorer’s accounts are at least partly about the ears, and maybe a little bit less the eyes. Thompson, who was married to a Cree woman, was fluent in Nahathaway (Cree) and Déné (Chipewayan) (Hopwood, “Thompson” 323); Victor Hopwood has demonstrated that this had a direct effect on Thompson’s grammatical structures and generic repertoire (MacLulich 91-92). In addition to the “objective” cultural observations he was being paid to make by the Hudson’s Bay and Pacific Northwest companies, he also spent a great deal of time listening to and recounting stories from the people he met in his thirty-year career as an explorer and these oral exchanges often work their way into his journals as a sort of folksy picaresque. In fact, the picaresque dimensions to Thompson’s writing can be read in contrast to the apocalyptic, in that the former are not necessarily subject to some of the conceptual straining (and rupture) that must take place in order to sustain a linear, teleological
narrative. His accounts also resonate with the narrative of *Tay John*, in that both involve numerous episodes and anecdotes told as legend rather than strict fact.

While Thompson was still responsible for mapping a massive amount of the region west of the Rockies (some 3.9 million square kilometres), and this mapping indirectly contributed to later colonial expansion into the region, he also provides a significant record of more localized and respectful interactions with Indigenous peoples of the Far West. The long-term value of his records is inextricable from his writing style, because he offers a hybrid blend of First Nations and European representation of the West in terms of both content and form. Ian MacLaren, after recounting an incident where Thompson blends conventions of the picturesque with aboriginal mythologies, suggests that “Unlike the landscape viewer who is content to observe from the correct prospect the textures and surface character of the country, Thompson penetrates it…” (*Influence* 405). In terms of European descriptive conventions of the time, Thompson’s accounts might be said to offer a more *crazed* way of writing the Coast than a strictly teleological narrative. Although a similarly fragmentary and episodic style can be noted in Lewis and Clark’s journals, their stories have been subsequently appropriated by critics like Frank Bergon into a national narrative. No such efforts have been made in the Canadian context with Thompson.

Although he does, over time, move westward in search of opportunity, much like Vancouver and Fraser, Thompson does so in fits and starts, and when he cannot afford to stop and listen he records it as a loss: “It is with some regret that we proceed past several parties of the natives; they are all glad to smoke with us, and eager to learn the news; every trifle seemed to be of some importance to them…” (*Travels* 306-07). The focus and tone are very different in this
comment than in Vancouver’s description of “hieroglyphic” aboriginal culture; Thompson describes his encounters in terms of smoking and talking – two very tactile and proximal activities – and he is not nearly as interested in arranging and hierarchizing the interaction for future use. His descriptions are often factual and materially focused, and he even specifically mentions learning this method of using “plain language, sensible to the purpose” from several encounters with indigenous people “on both sides of the mountains” (Hopwood, “Thompson” 324).

This respect for aboriginal people and what he perceives to be their style of communication proves very rewarding both to Thompson and to later audiences, and in fact he sometimes comes to prefer indigenous explanations to those of natural science when approaching his subject material. One such example is a conversation on deer migration he records having with the Stoney Nakoda:

Then applying themselves to me, they said, You that look at the Stars tell us the cause of the regular march of this herd of Deer. I replied, “instinct.” What do you mean by that word. It’s meaning is “the free and voluntary actions of an animal for it’s self preservation” [sic]. Oh Oh, then you think this herd of Deer rushed forward over deep swamps, in which some perished, the others ran over them; down steep banks to break their necks; swam across large Rivers, where the strong drowned the weak; went a long way through woods where they had nothing to eat, merely to take care of themselves. You white people, you look like wise men, and talk like fools. . . (quoted in MacLulich Narrative 87)
Thompson then goes on to revise his own beliefs as a result of this interaction:

I had to give up my doctrine of Instinct, to that of their Manito. I have sometimes thought Instinct, to be a word invented by the learned to cover their ignorance of the ways and doings of animals for their self preservation; it is a learned word and shuts up all the reasoning powers. (quoted in MacLulich Narrative 88)

It is difficult to imagine the stodgy and rigid George Vancouver recording himself being called a fool by the people he encountered on his glorious Voyage of Discovery, as does Thompson. In fact, for Thompson, “reasoning powers” go hand in hand with the admission of mistakes, with backtracking, and with the internalization of new modes of thinking. He is much more comfortable than other explorers engaging and negotiating a number of epistemologies, and Iain MacLaren argues that Thompson frequently and comfortably strays from British descriptive conventions into “Indian mythology” (“Imaginative” 92).

While MacLaren focuses on the way Thompson combines epistemologies, for the purposes of my arguments it is also worth recognizing the way that this negotiation essentially treats scientific thinking as every bit as metaphorical as aboriginal thought. In this regard, Thompson can be read as a Sedgwickian nonce taxonomist, developing his perspective on the fly, based on context rather than abstract organizing principles. Unlike both Fraser and Vancouver, Thompson acknowledges the shortcomings of Enlightenment modes of knowing as systemic shortcomings rather than simply circumscribing his failures as problems to be solved later. In the case of the Manito, rather than seeing “instinct” as an enlightening tool to be cast out into the darkness, Thompson speaks of it as quite the opposite – something that “covers” and “shuts up.”
(We might note the pun here on “shuts up” – “instinct” both obscures and silences the oral narrative of the Manito). In fact, Thompson can even be said to represent obscurity as an unintentional by-product of scientific thinking, not an external object to be delimited and revealed. His focus is more on communication, then, than circumscription.

Now it may seem like this chapter has lost its direction a bit. That is exactly its point (and even the point of this dissertation). I am suggesting that apocalypse on the West Coast, in both material and imagined forms, results from a build-up of any number of interrelating pressures from the tectonic and racial to the economic and epistemological. Thompson, while incredibly precise throughout his accounts, was also constantly getting off track, and backtracking, and blundering, and to an extent I would like to emulate this movement throughout the following chapters. This does not necessarily need to be read as an exercise in disorganization or incompetence; instead it can be thought of as a fractal progression, much like the western coastline of North America itself, where small patterns spin off to mimic larger ones. Some early critics interpreted Thompson’s episodic accounts as a reflection of personal shortcomings, supposedly exemplified by a four-week absence of journal entries in 1810 following a retreat from the Piegan tribe (Jenish 163). A.S. Morton and Richard Glover, for instance, argue that Thompson spent this time cowering in shame, and their tone is strangely similar to Fraser’s frequent statements about his crew being “bent upon” (108) their enterprise and noting in the most daunting of situations that “our resolution did not forsake us” (110). A tone even more obsessed with heroism enters the accounts of MacLauries, who frequently depicts himself (via a pseudonym) as paying “no attention” to the cowardice of his crew (34) and issuing “peremptory
commands” to assuage their very sensible fears (45). In each of these instances, the posture of heroism supplants some very evocative other possibilities emanating from a potentially productive self-interrogation and more tactical attitude towards description.

More recently, anthropologists, linguists, and historians (and myself) have begun to appreciate the richly picaresque aspects of Thompson’s travels and writing. This is not to overly valorize Thompson’s work; although exploration was pre-colonial, it certainly blazed the conceptual and actual trails for later, more insidious actions (Brealy 140). Victor Hopwood also notes that at times Thompson could be a “monster of self-righteousness” (10), imposing Christian morality onto native customs, and, historically speaking, the companies for which he worked were instrumental in obliterating the beaver population almost to the point of extinction and significantly damaging the livelihood of certain Indigenous groups in the process. It is merely worth noting that some differentiation needs to take place among early representations of the Coast or one runs the risk of oversimplifying an abundant cache of historical documentation, in effect reproducing the kind of heroic (even if vilified) will that went crazy on the West Coast.9 Rather than depicting the West as a mere trajectory, like that deadening metanarrative “Go West, young man!” would have it, Thompson’s accounts represent a West that is very much alive; it is

9 David McNab’s review of From Maps To Metaphors, where he claims – without corroborating evidence – that David Thompson “saw the natives as ‘drunken savages’” is representative of a certain lack of nuance that can enter into contemporary representations of explorer literature (a similar tendency marks the self-admitted fabrications in George Bowering’s Burning Water). Although McNab’s claim is to an extent accurate, it is more a matter of interpretation; Thompson was strictly opposed to using alcohol to barter in general and was a teetotaller himself; the extrapolation that he believed natives were “drunken savages” seems to be McNab’s own.
not a simple site of commerce but instead a site where one can encounter cultures that cast the Western world into relief.\textsuperscript{10}

Indeed, it can be far more challenging to describe Thompson’s accounts in terms that are not strictly economical than to simply dismiss them, and this difficulty may (dizzingly) be the contemporary result of narratives of modern progress and obscurity that were taking root in Thompson’s time. Regardless of the bigger picture, or the larger narrative, Thompson’s West is not remote, nor is it hieroglyphical. I partly agree with Iain MacLaren’s assessment, then, that “unlike the landscape viewer who is content to observe from the correct prospect the textures and surface character of the country, Thompson penetrates the picture, so to speak” (95). To that picture, in a crazily stretched metaphorical contravention to interpretations based on the economics of gender, I would add a little sound: the land penetrates Thompson, through the ears, so to speak, as he engages in less remote activities, such as sharing news and listening to aboriginal stories.

So let us pause and listen for a moment longer. Vancouver and Fraser and even Lewis and Clark, in their flighty explorations of the Coast, are a lot like the deer, driven by the Manito, thinking in foolish terms like Instinct. Even though Vancouver was really going from South to North, his goal was to open up the West to trade: this westward drive, and the modern progress it has come to represent, is perhaps not an instinct of self-preservation but a kind of supernatural madness that ultimately leads to death, maiming, drowning, and a weeding out of the weak. Though angst-ridden wanderings in search of fame and fortune have been the leisure of European

\textsuperscript{10} Glenn Willmott, for example, has described some of the difficulties of negotiating exchange economies with gift economies in the context of aboriginal art.
men since the earliest days of their presence on the coast, the region has also seen forced
movements such as the internment of Canadians of Japanese descent during World War Two,
and the forcing of First Nations people into reservations and residential schools. While these
forced movements reveal the reverse side of the Burkean drive towards exploration – the pushing
back of shadows without attempts at acknowledgement or comprehension, for the sake of ideas
that shut things up – the hieroglyphic over time reveals itself to be something more like the
cryptic. There is a sense that death looms hauntingly over ideas like heroism and progress on the
Coast, and the next three chapters will explore this relationship in greater detail. I will suggest for
now that some important lessons can be learned from Thompson and the Indigenous peoples’
stories he recalls, lessons that cannot be heard if a critic positions himself as too distant or
dismissive or hasty.

When I gave an early form of this chapter at a conference in the town where I grew up, I
suggested that a certain “risk of closeness” could be fruitful in reinterpreting the early contact
period and its long term effects. The conference paper itself is an interesting form for negotiating
this risk, as it combines orature with the written word. Its ephemeral dimensions and the
necessary proximity of its delivery also suggested an ideal form for discussing its content. At the
same time, this chapter, much like Thompson’s journals, must be content with being a mere
written first pass at larger points for conversation – the economic dimensions to the development
of the West Coast, the negative byproducts of Enlightenment landscape conventions and
speculative geographies, the negotiation of rigid epistemologies with fluid ones, and the
apocalyptic silences that were produced during the earliest moments of a West Coast literature in English.

An important element of Thompson’s journals and even biography is that they do not follow a clear trajectory of progress. They can be read as directionless, an assertion that would seem to be confirmed by Thompson’s frequent representation as a wanderer. The benefit of writing in such a “directionless” or lateral mode is that it enables a parallel or at least proximal articulation of numerous phenomena as they arise; it circumvents many of the problems of melancholia and depression encountered by more straightforward thinking. This idea of ground-level, “side-by-side” or paratactic articulation is Sedgwickian in nature. It does not favour one narrative over another, and in being able to shift its grounds without notice it constantly releases “platonic stress” that would otherwise accrue (Touching 8; Epistemology 27).

In wrapping up this opening chapter, I would like to make a few cursory remarks about the long-term effects of early exploration narratives on later British Columbian literature. Several literary works, including Elizabeth Clutton-Brock’s Woman of the Paddle Song (1972), Marion Smith’s Koo-Koo-Sint (1976), and George Bowering’s Burning Water (1980), directly fictionalize the lives of early explorers and their companions, but the similarity of these with early explorer accounts is in truth more nominal than formal. What strikes me as far more interesting is the way that formal features of early accounts have been replicated and complicated, either consciously or not, by later “skilful panegyrists” of the Coast. In Douglas Coupland’s Shampoo Planet, for instance, the protagonist Tyler and his girlfriend Anna try to escape north to British Columbia from their toxic, industrial ghost town in Washington State.
What they find is not a pristine Last Best West (or North) but acres of clear-cuts that bring them both to tears. To me these seem like the tears of failure, arising from a seemingly hopeless confrontation with the inexplicable – the obscure – and this feeling of hopelessness occurs precisely because of its visual organization (which is in turn caught up in a whole historical nexus of West Coast geographic and racial representations). In much of Coupland’s writing the hopeless anxiety over white postmodern culture could begin to be addressed and even averted if he would only listen to other explanations, engaging more directly with the people and land that produce depression in so many of his characters.

The idea of a peculiar form of depression brings me back to where I began – a bored teen living in Kamloops, and whatever inexplicable thing that it was, Manito or metanarrative, that drove me away from that place. When I left, I might have pictured a glorious return home with wisdom and explanations and enlightenment, all garnered through my adventurous spirit or some such bunk. But things thankfully got off track. It became far more important to engage in a way “suitable to the purpose” with whatever arises from fleeting moments, to let experiences be as near and familiar, rather than remote and hieroglyphic, as possible. There still exist questions of how to reconcile orature with written literature – how not to let one dominate the other – and how to negotiate among indigenous and immigrant cultures, but it seems to me a step in the right direction to pose these questions rather than simply avoid them in the flight towards an ultimately unattainable Last Best West.

While the tone throughout this chapter may seem somewhat informal or even casual at times, it is worth noting in closing that I myself have been seeking to emulate a voice consistent
with ones I heard growing up in British Columbia. In some small way, I believe that what may appear flaky or hokey to a normative academic ear can actually reduce the kind of apocalyptic production that has occurred as a result of self-distancing throughout the West Coast’s history. Why not introduce as many voices as possible into a discussion of region? Vancouver, Fraser, MacLauries: each of these has problems reconciling what they know with what they hear and feel on the Coast, and a similar kind of issue has been discussed at great length with regard to other locales in Canadian literature (by Kroetsch, Bowering, and Mandel, for instance). As for the American West Coast context, I argue in the following chapters that the same regionalism has been misrecognized in American criticism concerning the West Coast, but it will take some time to explain why and it behoves us not to be hasty. As a provisional bridge, I will suggest here that in one formulation, the West Coast Apocalyptic occurs as the result of a schizophrenic split between the trappings of an imported descriptive language and a highly resistant geography and its indigenous peoples, and furthermore that it makes sense to explore currently indigenous languages of the Coast – language as you would hear it spoken on the street. When I first gave this paper at a conference in Kamloops, British Columbia, I was informed by Secwepemc elder Mike Arnoush both that my argument was a step in the right direction and that David Thompson didn’t listen well enough. At first I was resistant to the idea that my “better” explorer was in fact still regarded as not good enough, but now I read this incident as a micro-apocalypse, one that if exacerbated through two hundred years of history and racialized conflict would take on an aspect as grand as any of the West Coast Apocalyptic’s current configurations.

11 Here I am drawing a distinction between the general term “indigenous,” and the specific term “Indigenous” which I use throughout this dissertation to denote people of aboriginal descent.
In a sense, then, I have been making a structural argument in line with the content of this chapter. If the West Coast Apocalyptic arises in part from a breakdown of representational conventions, then speaking in a “West Coast way” can to some extent prevent the uncritical reproduction of the West Coast as an apocalyptic space. In the next chapter I will explain why this may be a desirable outcome by arguing that in parallel to the breakdown of landscape conventions expedited by the dismissing of aboriginal modes of representing the Coast, another early strand of the West Coast Apocalyptic emerged along an opposing trajectory: through the appropriation, deracination, and distortion of Indigenous prophetic traditions. Indeed the third chapter in some ways constitutes an apocalyptic rereading of this one. Underpinning it is the question of how a critical discourse of the West Coast can be allowed to develop when it reproduces so similarly the mode of academic inquiry that led to fantasies of an apocalyptically crazy world.
Chapter 3

What Lies Under Fire: The Search for New Grounds in West Coast Disaster Narratives

A 2008 article by *National Geographic* writer Neal Shea suggests an interesting and frequently occurring pattern of representation of the West Coast. While the article appears to discuss factual data concerning wildfires, firefighting policy and practice, and personal anecdotes about encounters with fire, “Under Fire” begins with a question that casts some strange shadows on the rest of its content: “From the Rocky Mountains to the coast of California, wildfires are burning bigger, hotter, and closer to home. Why is the West ablaze?” (1). By first evoking the complex but non-specific imaginative geographies of “the West” and then describing localized ecological forces in much broader apocalyptic terms, Shea effects with his question a problematic conflation of region and apocalypse. With a synecdochal flick of the wrist he inflates a specific issue to the level of a massive cultural crisis: the West is suddenly ablaze, not just parts of it, and this single word in turn evokes a whole range of images, from the Wild West to the West Coast to the Western World and so on.

Although apocalyptic rhetoric often packs a satisfying emotional punch insofar as it serves up justice to a group constructed as unworthy of continued existence, important questions remain as to how effective it is in actually influencing or promoting changes in policy and practice – the ostensible goal of writing like Shea’s. Does the commingling of apocalyptic and political rhetoric ultimately render the latter too banal or insignificant to be effective? Does the
teleological structure of apocalypse obviate or even foreclose any action extending beyond the confines of the narrative itself? These questions get at a broader concern of my dissertation: to what extent does the production of the West Coast as a zone of apocalypse hinder the possibility of policy makers, writers, filmmakers, and artists to work through the region’s histories of injustice and trauma?

The geographic terms Shea uses to frame his article provide a starting point for answering these questions. Much of the article deals with the “wildland-urban interface,” a zone particularly rich with symbolic possibilities. Shea is quick to mention, for instance, that “Some firefighters call it the stupid zone” (4). If the article’s world is one of “stupid” planning choices and their apocalyptic consequences within these zones, then California is positioned as the extreme of both foolishness and its “natural” purgation. The Golden State is the ultimate wildland-urban interface, not only because it is one of the most recently developed regions of the United States but also because it is the place where a westward path meets the untamable chaos of the sea. While Shea goes into detail about how the 2007 Jocko Lakes fire in Montana “burned some 36,000 acres and cost over $30 million,” he uses this example merely as a way to emphasize what he considers to be the real locus of disaster, the Golden State: “The region is . . . the extreme expression of the trend to place ourselves in fire’s way” (9).

In many apocalyptic narratives, natural disaster is a means to cleanse existing ills of society (Wojick 54; Song 1), and California’s frequent construction as “the microcosm of the West” (Baudrillard 55; Scott 1) – an “extreme expression” of “our” tendencies – makes it particularly susceptible to scenarios of cleansing like Shea’s. As Mike Davis puts it in a slightly
more specific context, “[t]he obliteration of Los Angeles... is often depicted as, or at least secretly experienced as, a victory for civilization” (Ecology 277). The state and its largest metropolis must repeatedly burn for the sins of the Western World. Although Shea reports many indisputable facts about the region’s history with fire and firefighting, he also implies that there is a certain symbolic justice to the fires. By positioning California in the dramatic way he does in relation to other wildfire zones, he simultaneously taps into the historical conception of the region as a place of dangerously unbridled progress and “Californication.” The Golden State plays a similar role as the extension of consumer culture in many Canadian representations as well. It is repeatedly positioned as “a stunningly bleak and foreign example of what unlimited growth gets you” and a place with a “collapsed vision of heaven” – one that must, as a result, be continuously resisted and imaginatively obliterated (Garreau 261; Coupland, Polaroids 59).

As “Under Fire” proceeds, Shea sets up a cast of players that reveals much about what is at stake in apocalyptic representations of the West Coast. Wildfire becomes an intelligent enemy to be defeated, the one natural disaster “we regularly treat as though it were alive and battle vigourously as if it were an invading host” (2). Moreover, it has “moods” (4); it makes “countermoves” (4), and one can even “exploit fire’s drowsiness in the early morning” (4). In general it is personified as a foe to be admired and feared and learned from and repeatedly battled. Under constant threat from this crafty foe are those who inhabit “the stupid zone” (4), people who unthinkingly “make a wager” (10) by building their homes at the wildland-urban interface. This group is depicted as comprising the hapless victims of fire, who “fumble through the calculations of disaster” after it is too late and who believe that the horrors of burning “won’t
really happen” to them, until they do (7; 10). These foolish inhabitants of the “stupid zone” would be utterly vanquished if not for the valiant efforts of a third group of players, a maverick posse of heroic, all-male firefighters and innovators who are constantly finding better ways to outwit the “invading host.” Although Shea begins by discussing the concerted, side-by-side efforts of firefighting teams, he increasingly focuses on the significance of individual figures and their contributions to firefighting. Beyond adding dramatic effect to the article’s main narrative, this tripartite schema posits an entire morality of the apocalyptic West: forces of unpredictability (Evil), constantly threaten an overly consumeristic daily life (the battleground), which must in turn be carefully guarded with an earthy ingenuity and wisdom (Good).

Having identified this schema, it is also important to recognize that the article’s rhetoric is not solely apocalyptic. Shea’s narrativization of wildfires as apocalyptic is only one possible way of organizing these events and the region. Running parallel to the article’s heroic apocalyptic battles are more practical suggestions that better policy making, better urban planning, and in some cases a better knowledge of how fire works could do much to prevent the kinds of personal tragedies being depicted. The difficulty with these inclusions is that Shea’s emphasis on hyper-masculine, hyper-individualist heroes fighting stark battles imaginatively dominates the calls for policy change and better governance. The firefighters’ rugged masculinity becomes the focus. They repeatedly refer to each other as “man” (1; 5); they are traced from a lineage of men dating back to the first U.S. forestry service director Gifford Pinchot (3); they scheme against fire while drinking coffee on the tailgates of their trucks (4); some are even lucky enough to have a last name like “Bone” (5). Because Shea goes to great lengths to valorize this individualistic,
masculinized type of heroism, his calls for more community-based or policy-based action are left in an unclear space in terms of where they would come into play. While self-proclaimed mavericks clearly have some sway in the American political landscape, the type of individualism valorized in “Under Fire” seems to suggest an undercurrent of contempt, or at least disdain, for civilization itself – for the America that it is supposed to be protecting.

This disdain comes through in Shea’s casual attitude towards thousands of people who have lost their homes due to poor development policies and casts doubt on the efficacy and purpose of the article’s apocalyptic rhetorical strategy. Depicting one couple sorting through the wreckage of their home in denial and disbelief and trying to identify a “crisped object” that was once their DVD player (7-8), Shea offers a vignette barely veiling its contempt for the docile modern consumer. The DVD serves as a convenient symbol for the site of ultimate postmodern corruption – Hollywood – which places its hazy “film” upon a supposedly truer form of existence. The tone of dramatic indulgence Shea uses in describing several other details – “Shattered plates. The refrigerator shrivelled and bowing toward the earth” (7) – suggests a kind of pleasure in the destruction and natural reclamation of domestic spaces. The apocalyptic intrusion of fire into these spaces brings home the realities of chaos and death that are covered over and denied by things like dishware and modern appliances. The bowing of these objects of civilization symbolizes the submission to what Shea depicts as a starker and more authentic version of the world where heroism still has meaning.

This rhetorical indulgence in destruction emphasizes the problem generated by the article’s apocalyptic threads. If fire is personified as an intelligent foe, then what, precisely, do
images of its domination over domesticity signify? Furthermore, how can one reconcile the figure of the individualistic hero-protector with the writer’s attitude of indulgence and admiration towards the cunning workings of a personified wildfire? Why does the writer take an attitude of quirky indulgence when it comes to both the firefighters and the fire, and emphasize characteristics of cluelessness and disbelief when it comes to those whose homes are destroyed? At one point Shea even notes firefighters describing one fire “as if they were speaking of a gifted child” (1); how is this fiery, gifted “child” reconcilable with the destruction of actual domestic spaces, including a set of dramatic images featuring the charred wreckage of children’s toys?

![Figure 3.1 Image from photo essay accompanying “Under Fire” (Mark Theissen)](image)

Linked to these questions of how to reconcile the article’s contradictory moments of empathetic commiseration and indulgence in apocalyptic rhetoric is a pervasive cynicism in Shea’s tone. Certain claims the writer makes suggest that there is no possible end in sight to the poor decisions that have led to construction of the “stupid zone.” According to one unnamed
scientist, for example, “‘The more money we spend, the worse it gets . . . If that’s not a condemnation of our fire policies, I don’t know what is’” (2). While the article does contain hopeful statements about the possibility of better policies in the future, a defeatism tempers any sense of resolve, to the point when Shea states that “no government or technical solution, no matter how well funded, or brilliant, can halt natural processes or remove their power to affect lives” (9). This is accurate enough, but instead of initiating self-examination or genuine empathy or a questioning of the cultural and symbolic meaning of fire, Shea merely uses the affective charge afforded by images of burning homes – “[r]ed walls of flame, leaden pillars of smoke” (2) – in an attempt to stir finally in its readers the same fears faced by the victims of fire.

The purpose of this incitement to fear is simple: the article’s apocalyptic moments are ultimately used to reiterate the valorization of masculinity and American self-reliance. Shea directly suggests that responsibility for fighting wildfires should “be placed largely on individuals,” a suggestion modelled after an evidently unsuccessful strategy for fire prevention that has been instituted in Australia (9). While he valorizes the position of the cool, cocky firefighter-hero, Shea simultaneously uses apocalyptic rhetoric to place an unwitting reader in a frightening confrontation with the ravages of wildfire and then offer what is a basically false choice: to become the individualist hero or helplessly watch it all burn down. In other words, Shea limits the possible identifications for readers by at once putting them in the “stupid

12 When I wrote this in 2009, wildfires in the state of Victoria, Australia, had just claimed the lives of over 100 people (“Australian” BBC). Although there has been a desire to locate arsonists responsible for the blazes, thus placing the blame on individuals, it could be argued that the real arsonists are those responsible for the hands-off policies.
consumer” category he consigns to flames and simultaneously offering what appears to be an appealing, intelligent alternative way of “living with the land.”

Shea’s heroes are consistently validated by a rhetoric of the Wild West and myths of self-reliance and ingenuity. The difficulty with this validation is that it imposes a rigid, binaristic vision of identity. No consideration is given to the value, for instance, of the division of labour within a culture. For all his glorification of wise, crafty firefighters, Shea never mentions that almost all of the article’s heroes are people dedicated solely to the battle against fire, as if the apocalyptic schema of the article constituted the entire range of possibilities for meaningful being in the world. The stupidity of those in the “stupid zone” is only articulated on the grounds of their relationship with fire. No parallel interrogation occurs with regard to the intriguing psychological and cultural motives of people who obsessively scheme against a personified fire. The binaristic, apocalyptic structure of Shea’s rhetoric assures that he is correct in his assessments of the West’s problems, but these assessments are only valid within a very limited allegorical construction of identity within the region.

While Shea’s schematic representation of wildfire expresses on some level a desire to simplify the contemporary Western world by connecting with the land in stark terms (man vs. nature), the dream of simplicity is problematized by the reductive way in which he must represent his players. In much the same way that early explorers inadvertently introduced an element of dissatisfaction into their accounts by using Utopian fantasies to try and recover Arcadia, Shea’s depictions of an authentic return to nature can only ironically occur by the introduction of new technologies. While he advocates a preventative strategy called “wildland
fire use,” which is represented as a return to the pre-contact past where “Native Americans burned forests and grasslands to create game habitat and clear fields,” his suggestion is complicated by the American and Western cultural contexts in which it appears (5). His claim that “Many plant species benefit from a periodic purging,” for example, resonates awkwardly with the fiery purgation of the brazen consumerist landscape he discusses elsewhere in the article (5). Even if wildland fire use was practised before contact between Europeans and Native Americans, its context within the settler-invader culture of the West Coast gives it an almost entirely new meaning (for starters, Native Americans were not protecting the suburbs).

Indeed, Shea’s calls to emulate “Native American” relationships with nature to defeat a personified fire ultimately cause more problems than they solve. Up to a point, the apocalyptic schema in the article appears very similar to all-too-familiar American narratives where the (Good) Cowboys defend civilization from the (Evil) Indians. The question is, where do the Indians go in a narrative like Shea’s? He is careful to avoid any allusion to more racist allegories of the West – except possibly in his mention of an “invading host” – and yet wildfire occupies precisely the place where the Indian used to be. It is the crafty other to be overcome through a process of emulation and embodiment (going Native). The difficulty is, of course, that the heroic figure in such a narrative really only ends up inhabiting an ahistorical stereotype of the Native American. It is crucial, then, to ask whether the “onslaught” Shea discusses may really gain its imaginative power from an obscene, elusive guilt arising from continually effaced historical realities with regard to Native Americans. Put in a slightly different way, the writer paradoxically posits a masculine American heroism in order to try and escape the historical aftermath of
masculine American heroism. The so-called “natural” process of fire – whatever its historical and symbolic meaning – is problematically intertwined with the cultural contexts within which it is articulated.

In the place of an explicit Cowboys and Indians scenario, Shea tries to reposition the heroism of firefighting as a totalizing and absolute battle between good and evil, a battle physically manifested but one whose articulation is supposedly divested of all historical significance. His representation of a heroic, trailblazing masculinity simply raises more questions, ones that get at a more general problem characterizing apocalyptic narratives like “Under Fire.” Do Shea and writers like him produce confused, rootless ghosts of colonialism by replaying the structure of the Western while eliminating the ethnic other? What room is left for identification if one does not wish to be a masculinist hero, or if one is not a man? By employing an absolute and totalizing apocalyptic narrative, Shea replaces chaotic material realities with a schematized, more controlled picture, one where each player moves according to an ultimately predictable set of rules. Shea’s final return to heroic individuality also suggests that the apocalyptic takes precedence over community planning or policy as a way of solving the problems of the West Coast.

The article’s totalizing apocalyptic structure renders all external forces crazy – that word that was so important to the previous chapter. Along with the phantasmic invocations of Indigenous otherness, the construction in the article of fire victims as consumers in denial (and policy makers as clueless) produces a different kind of apocalypse than the obvious one

---

13 See Leslie Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel* for more on the Western.
involving burning homes. The organizing structure of the article itself produces a secondary kind of apocalypse for people not fitting comfortably into its schema because it reduces their actual histories to dramatic apocalyptic terms. This is an apocalypse of abjection – an apocalypse that occurs as an unspoken byproduct of totalizing apocalyptic schemas. An apocalypse of abjection removes people’s ability to self-articulate, limiting their experience to the confines of a rigidly imposed narrative. In an apocalyptic narrative like Shea’s no space remains for other possibilities such as intelligent homeowners, easily quashed fires, and stupid or effeminate firefighters. All uncertainty must be excised in the quest for an apocalyptic truth, and everything that eludes this is thrust into a space of abjection.

Mary Carpenter argues that apocalyptic narratives often enact epistemological violence against real historical groups by treating them as metaphors (109). Her primary example is of the Whore of Babylon in the book of Revelation, whose overthrow, while supposedly a mere metaphor, organizes and excludes an entire range of possibilities of “good” and “evil” sexuality for women (111-17). Following the logic of Carpenter’s argument, one can see the way in which a metaphor like an “invading host” to be defeated is not necessarily a simple invocation of an unspecified figurative threat. It can just as easily slide into an implicit invocation of an entire colonial history and an exclusion of non-threatening possibilities for “hosts.” This invocation of an intelligent and unpredictable otherness, which occupies the absent place of a Native other, functions in a similar manner to Burke’s situation of the “obscure” within heathen temples: it eliminates other possible tenors for the metaphor’s vehicle. From the point of their conceptual and metaphorical intermingling, two objects cannot always be easily extricated. It can be difficult
to establish new metaphorical meanings and fully excise old ones once a word like (non-Christian) temple has been linked to a concept like “obscure.” Space is always being produced by its representations.

The location of new, non-apocalyptic possibilities for the West Coast is a primary aim of this project, and examining some of the queer implications of Shea’s style of apocalypticism can help destabilize the frequent elisions that occur between natural disaster and apocalypse in the region. As I have shown, “Under Fire” conveys the sense that in order to overcome the indefatigable and crafty other, the heroic individual players must somehow assimilate, joining forces with that which, though untrustworthy, will never cease its assault. For example, Mark Finney, a daring and rugged individual who annually torches his own acreage to diminish the accumulation of combustibles, states that “You can’t know fire unless you play with it” (italics removed, 10). Laughing in the face of his flaming nemesis, Finney will “sit back with a beer and watch” as it claims the homes of his neighbours, to whom “[h]e says no” when they ask for his help in practicing their own similar prevention techniques (10).

Coming to the seemingly selfish Finney’s defence, Shea makes clear that “[h]is approach is not for everyone; it requires an intimate knowledge of fire and the landscape” (10). Given the admiring fixation on a crafty other in the article, along with its all-male cast, the rhetoric of “intimate knowledge” is significant in that it alludes – intentionally or not – to the long history of American wilderness narratives focused on an implicit homoerotic bond. There is no mention of women in this primal setting, except, crucially, for the moment featuring the destruction of a domestic space. Indeed, according to Leslie Fiedler’s arguments about the form of the frontier
novel, the “sacred” dimension of an intimate knowledge of the land cannot be intruded upon by women because they are in the genre nothing more than symbols for civilization and civility (“Inventing” 97). By using “Native American” technologies as a surrogate for a connection with indigeneity itself, the heroic players in the article seek out a truer, more natural existence where individual talent would override all of the baggage that is civilization.

In contrast to the decadent technology of the DVD player and other domestic items, which are brought low by the crafty workings of fire, good technology is characterized by the egalitarian fusion of Man with his crafty foe. The article opens on two firefighters employing wildland fire use to “paint the landscape with flames” and grinning when they kill a tree, bowing it low much like the humbled refrigerator (1). Indeed, the revelation of wildland fire use involves the harmonization of the apparently opposite players that structure the article – the hero and the foe. For this harmonization to be successful, all domestic comforts and signs of civilization must be absent – the veils of history must be removed. Within the bounds of the narrative, wildland fire use involves “healing the wounds and gaps which render both subject and object incomplete and fragmented” (Wilkins vii). The artifice of “painting the landscape” mirrors the artifice of apocalyptic narrativization. Wildland fire use resolves the opposing forces that characterize the history of the West Coast itself. By the same token, the persistent need for reiteration and reinforcement of heroic masculinities in “Under Fire” and throughout West Coast representations suggests a deep anxiety over the authenticity of this mode of “contact” with the land. Shea and others cannot fully commit to the revelations they suggest, and this renders things

14 For further discussion of this authenticity within the context of environmentalism and ecotourism, see chapter 4 of Bruce Braun’s *The Intemperate Rainforest: Nature, Culture, and Power on Canada’s West Coast.*
once again “incomplete and fragmented” – caught up perpetually in the detrital churnings of history.

Obviously the battle against fire must go on, and yet the reasons why it must continue to be performed by men with a very particular set of characteristics are less clear. Where, for instance, are the openly gay firefighters in Shea’s schema – those who would massively complicate both homosocial frontier narratives and the heterosexual eroticism that often underpins apocalyptic narratives? The uneasy possibility that an all-masculine “intimate knowledge” with the land is actually just a form of narcissism would help explain the need for such heavy-handed repetition; while it may appear that using fire means truly working with rather than against natural forces, one can never truly reach the phantasmal other he is trying to control. The activity must be repeated, but always to only temporary avail. Fire becomes the enemy that can never be understood – the ultimate “natural” other into which all historical detritus is cast.

For those inclined to psychoanalytic terms, this pattern – the reiteration of this kind of apocalypse on the West Coast – could be read as a “compulsion to repeat,” a phenomenon associated with the homeostatic push to return to a moment prior to a moment of traumatization (minor or major) in order to neutralize it (Freud, “Beyond” 602). The reiteration of apocalyptic “cleansing” on the West Coast suggests that narratives like Shea’s may be trying to cope with something horrifically unapproachable in order to regain control over distantly past actions, ultimately those of invasion and colonialism (600). Rather than the death drive being a strictly personal narrative in this case, however, it occurs as a cumulative effect operating at the level of
culture; the West Coast apocalyptic itself expresses the operation of this compulsion on a cultural level. Much as Freud did with his patients, it is crucial in this reading to recognize that an unexamined repetition compulsion often only exacerbates and retraumatizes, suggesting a drive “beyond the pleasure principle.” This might begin to explain many writers’ infatuation with destroying the “enchanted cities” and “natural beauty” of the West Coast, what Richard Etulain describes as “the vitriolic anti-California and anti-Los Angeles myth that has emerged since the late 1930s” (“Inventing” 49). Over the next four chapters I focus on several literary and critical strategies aimed at revisiting (or re-grounding) the silences of history rather than reiterating the trauma. For now, I will simply suggest that the West Coast apocalyptic – the destruction of a supposed paradise – resonates very well with the notion of a death drive. In this formulation, an important question remains open: if colonialism has true victors, why are they compelled to repeat?

In a discussion about ecotourism on the British Columbian West Coast, Bruce Braun envisions the risky contact with nature as stemming from a desire to “penetrate into the veiled, secret interior” of natural settings, going so far as to describe this as a “thinly veiled rape fantasy” (133). Ultimately, he argues, the encounter with nature “stages a spatial encounter where the “non-West” [i.e. “nature”] becomes (yet again) the terrain for the remaking of Western subjects” (139). Within the representational schema of “Under Fire,” heroism and indeed all of the heroes themselves exist as such by virtue of fire, and this comprises a strange type of

---

15 On the relationship of allegory to cultural crisis, see Deborah Madsen, Appendix “Allegory and the Question of Cultural Value” in *Rereading Allegory*. On the relationship of allegory to repetition compulsion, see Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*.
relationship: from a certain perspective, the fighting of fire (and other apocalyptic disasters) seems marked with a largely unconscious desire for its endless continuation. To put the problem colloquially, one fights the battle over and over but no attempt is made to address the war – the representational war that pushes back and produces fears of the other as it tries to symbolically “cleanse” those fears. The translation of an older indigenity into an ongoing, ultimately inextinguishable native foe (fire) ensures the continuation of the cultural myths that found American heroism in the first place. Arguments like Braun’s extend the culpability for these fantasies, suggesting that similar colonial fantasies occur in the Canadian portion of the West Coast.

While in some respects the representational schema of “Under Fire” is remarkably clear and coherent, the reliance upon a constructed native other is also fraught with a near constant threat of total collapse into that otherness. At times the relationship of the article’s heroes to the forces that would destroy civilization is so precarious that, in cases such as Finney’s immolation of his own farm, the two become nearly inextricable; the hero begins, not surprisingly, to act suspiciously like the “invading host.” The loss of a subtle, appropriative control of otherness looms into the picture both to elicit the self/other boundary but also in the end to reinforce it. The hero figure may use the exact same tactics as his cunning enemy, but it is always ultimately in an effort to outwit, and thereby maintain one’s subjectivity. The problem is that within the article’s narcissistic schema, the only person who really ends up being outwitted by otherness is the writer himself. The “unsettled” boundary of the wildland-urban interface is supposed to facilitate a risky contact with true nature, but it serves as (yet another) new frontier, another unidirectionally
conceived place where firefighters really just encounter apocalyptic preconceptions about the world at hand. In this narcissistic schema, the firefighter is represented as a limit case for Western culture itself, a person who carefully navigates the dangerous boundary between the comfortable, colonized world and the horrific, uncivilized one. In this role he must constantly reinscribe the boundary and fight to maintain it, but in actuality there is no possibility of the revelation that the article seeks to elicit because the boundaries are situated entirely within the context of West Coast and American culture. The firefighter heroes and their others are one and the same.

Among other representations of the West, the idea that one must constantly reinforce and maintain a boundary between self and other recalls John Gast’s allegorical painting *American Progress* (1872), where an angelic female figure, Progress incarnate, leaves a wake of light and civilization (symbolized by the telegraph line she unrolls) as she shunts a gloomy and dejected bunch of stereotyped “Indians” and wild animals westward. For a modern critic the rendition of history presented here is so completely absurd as to appear a crazed parody of itself, and this parodic possibility can be valuable for exposing the larger fault lines in representations of the West, including Shea’s. With a serene expression, American Progress floats in place of historical violence (much like the historically divested wildland-urban interface). Her beautiful image and flowing robes themselves function like a veil draped over the locus of colonization. Here the narrative of Progress veils a narrative of violence, and yet the fact that Progress is floating helps deconstruct the painting’s message; put simply, the idea of progress is groundless – it lacks a
connection to the barbaric facts of history even as it tries to reveal them as part of a beautiful teleology.

While on one hand, the calm pose of American Progress and her aura of lightness could be meant to suggest that progress itself adds beauty and calm to the uncivilized world, on the other, the horrific byproducts of progress may begin to haunt notions of light and beauty in the West. Perhaps the obscene realities attending pleasant or heroic versions of history provide an explanation as to exactly why representations like Shea’s are invested so thoroughly in destroying the comfy world of DVD players and children’s toys. The Utopia of the West has been tainted by the ongoing silencing of the region’s non-Utopian, barbaric realities, and these repressed realities must return. The problem is that while a text like “Under Fire” appears to offer the apocalyptic mirror image of American Progress – the apocalypse that should re-establish meaning in a historically corrupted world – the production of its own self-serving vision of

Figure 3.2 “American Progress” (1872) by John Gast

While on one hand, the calm pose of American Progress and her aura of lightness could be meant to suggest that progress itself adds beauty and calm to the uncivilized world, on the other, the horrific byproducts of progress may begin to haunt notions of light and beauty in the West. Perhaps the obscene realities attending pleasant or heroic versions of history provide an explanation as to exactly why representations like Shea’s are invested so thoroughly in destroying the comfy world of DVD players and children’s toys. The Utopia of the West has been tainted by the ongoing silencing of the region’s non-Utopian, barbaric realities, and these repressed realities must return. The problem is that while a text like “Under Fire” appears to offer the apocalyptic mirror image of American Progress – the apocalypse that should re-establish meaning in a historically corrupted world – the production of its own self-serving vision of
otherness remains obscure. Shea and writers like him lose contact with the authentic reality they are trying to recover precisely because of the way they use apocalyptic narratives.

In this loss of contact, Shea’s version of history collapses into that of American Progress. Both are inextricably bound up in a history of simulacra (and a simulacrum of history) that characterizes visions of the Far West in American thinking and representation. They have a highly tenuous connection to reality, producing instead an image that precedes rather than recovers the authentic. Finney and his ilk simply cannot be the rugged individuals that Shea depicts, because, like groundless Progress, maverick heroes are as much products of Western civilization as stupid settlers and crafty fire. Braun might say of Gast’s painting that while Progress appears to be “pushing back” the savage other – similar to the Enlightening drive I discussed in the previous chapter – the painting is actually reproducing nothing but an arbitrarily totalizing picture of Western culture: “although adventure travel offers the promise of more ‘authentic’ encounters, and stands in opposition to mere tourism with its trade in stereotypes of the Other, adventure travel remains within the discursive economy of European modernities” (139). Representations like Shea’s provide much insight into the ways in which early depictions of the West Coast have, over time, grown into an entire apocalyptic mythology.

A key component of this apocalyptic mythology is the terrain of the West Coast itself – the land as well as the coastline that defines it. Neither Gast nor Shea features the Coast as his central subject matter, and yet it serves a crucial function in framing the imaginative limits of the North American continent and civilization. It becomes the place where all the horrific fires of history could supposedly be extinguished. The painting features a highly distorted version of
North America, with Canada fading into the mists, and the dejected Indians headed straight into the Pacific Ocean in the upper left corner; their place is in the darkest, farthest reaches of a savage wilderness beyond the Rockies (the place where I grew up), and presumably they, along with their historical grievances, will be pushed into the sea itself. While the long stretch of history between Gast’s and Shea’s representations (and my own) necessitates that the latter depict the Coast as a much more urban space, the West Coast continues to be conceived of as a place of limits and extremes in both American and Canadian writing. It remains the place of the ultimate wildland-urban interface, a phantasmic zone kept conveniently situated as the periphery and limit of Western thinking so that it may be revisited time and time again.

The question that has emerged through the preceding analysis is, what lies beyond the West Coast’s function as a frame for Western culture? What is the West Coast on its own terms, if anything? From its earliest representations in English as a coherent region, the Coast was always constructed through non-Indigenous perspectives, but has anything else emerged in the meantime? Does the crazed patchwork of Indigenous cultures that preceded the region exert its own kind of influence, even if it is not apparent in the most visible representations of the Coast?

In the final few paragraphs of “Under Fire,” likely as the result of the confusingly groundless elements of its heroism, the article’s meaning grows somewhat muddy, and this muddiness offers valuable clues to the above questions. Although technologies may be available to thwart the violent onslaught of the constructed “natural” foe, one must not allow others to

---

16 R.G. Matson, Gary Coupland, and Quentin Mackie note that Indigenous nations had no coherent notion of a larger West Coast region, and the only moments of pre-contact cultural coherence on the Coast were those rallied by particularly charismatic and politically inclined Native leaders.
interfere with the fight. Shea notes of Mark Finney that he “decided long ago he would not
depend on others to protect his home” (10). The “others” that Finney resists consist of the
government, neighbours, and other proponents of community, and Finney’s paranoid posture
subscribes thoroughly to a “dream of the West as an escape from culture, eternally renewed by
the unending flight from schoolmarms, mothers, wives, pastors, sod-busters, cops and courts, law
and order itself” (Fiedler “Canada” 97). Why is the West ablaze, then? For Shea it is because
others continually interfere with the actions of heroic individuals.

What does not add up is that, in conjunction with the schema of civilization and escape, “Under Fire” is ostensibly supposed to be about protecting people from fire. One fights fire to
protect homes and families and civilization, and while the article pays a token respect to this
goal, Shea’s rhetorical indulgence in the lurid details of destruction welcomes its failure. The
post-apocalyptic fantasy of one’s own space and livelihood surviving while houses all around are
reduced to “a smoking expanse, like something shelled by artillery” (5) exposes the
contradictions at the article’s symbolic core, but only if one truly believes that Shea’s goal is to
talk about fire and firefighting. If read in terms of the West Coast’s colonial history, the
indulgence in destruction in “Under Fire” echoes the type of negating conceptual thinking
practised by explorers like Vancouver. Why is the West ablaze? Because the “fire” one mistakes
as an other is actually just a projection flickering from false fires of Enlightenment. As these
symbolic flames push forward, their progress is haunted by a trail of their charred and smoking
(crazy) detritus, which becomes fuel for future blazes.
Shea misrecognizes the hollowness of the Western hero’s success, and thus dooms the West to a mechanistic repetition of apocalyptic narratives (the result is something like Vancouver’s “dull and uninteresting” view of the land that emerged as a result of his hasty, lofty movements). A final twist in the article gets at everything I have been saying thus far concerning the obscuring and veiling of traumatic histories on the Coast. “Under Fire” ends on a prophetic note, one that strongly recalls Indigenous traditions from the West Coast. Here appear some of the echoing voices from the West beyond the West, the place beyond the framing “savage wilderness” of Gast’s painting – the places of actual Indigenity and otherness that cannot be rendered completely visible through scientific taxonomies and the English language. By pausing on the final paragraph, one can gain an important clue as to why Shea ultimately cannot answer the question he begins with:

With every new house raised in the chaparral or slotted into the evergreen forests of the Rockies, a wager is placed. *It won’t happen to us.* In fire’s terms, it is the equivalent of rebuilding below sea level in New Orleans. The water, the flames, will return. They always do. (10)

If the flames will return, why fight fire in the first place? This conundrum is very similar to that faced by Thompson as he found himself at the end of his trek to the Pacific – the point at which all of his wandering and involvement with Indigenous peoples was supposed to meet its glorious conclusion, but where he instead found himself acknowledging that the Coast “may at any moment strip us of our all” (877). When he reaches his clear goal, his sense of purpose is actually more obscure and veiled than ever, and the same can be said of Shea’s article and its heroic
figures. They are “stripped of their all” when the West is not ablaze. Instead of there simply being forest fires to be fought, *the West needs to be ablaze* or a sense of masculine purpose comes under fire. The biggest question is how to avoid the seduction of an apocalyptically rendered Coast where all potential for non-apocalyptic experience must be destroyed or effaced in pursuit of some truer form of being?

The cyclical narrative involving accumulating threat and apocalyptic destruction can be traced back to the earliest contact between Indigenous and European cultures on the West Coast, and doing so can help clear the ground for the emergence of other, new narratives of the West. Elizabeth Vibert has argued, by reconstructing prophecies and prophet figures as they were recorded in the journals of David Thompson and others, that prophetic traditions arose and flourished in several Indigenous groups on the West Coast during the early contact period. Although some evidence of prophetic activity can be seen to have existed prior to contact, it gained a much greater cultural significance when smallpox epidemics introduced by Europeans began to decimate Indigenous populations.

These prophetic traditions are crucially important to understanding the “return” of the flames that Shea anticipates at the end of his article. Strictly speaking, prophecy is not apocalypse. Frank Kermode describes the relationship between the two genres: “there was no true apocalyptic until prophecy failed” in Jewish traditions (5). The two genres operate according to the same desire – to introduce a sense of justice to an otherwise cruel and meaningless history – but prophecy seeks out material rather than metaphysical, extra-historical justice. Marlene Goldman explains this idea succinctly when she states that “apocalyptic eschatology maintains
that the prophet no longer retains the faith that redemption can occur in this world” (15).

Prophecy is material; the apocalyptic is mythical.

In other words, while prophecy anticipates an immediate resolution through tangible, material means, the apocalyptic is a genre forced to defer consolation from “the terror of history” to a mythic and symbolic end time (Eliade 118). Apocalypse displaces justice to an atemporal eternity where it is meted out on a totalizing scale according to the sum of a person’s (or culture’s) actions. The distinction is worth drawing here for one key reason: the perception of the Native cultures Vibert examines was that the introduction of European cultures (and disease) was a passing phase to be followed by a rebirth. One can see this attitude residually in Francis Owen’s short story “The Prophetess,” one of the first short stories from British Columbia, which features a “mad” Native woman’s foretelling of the 1886 fire that would destroy Granville (later Vancouver). In this case, the “prophetic” is actually written fictionally after events that occurred, but the narrative provides a good rendering of the foretelling-actualizing structure that comprises Native prophecy on the Coast. There is a great deal of agency made available by such prophetic traditions, as evinced by the theme and title of Vibert’s article, “The Natives Were Strong to Live.”

To the extent that narratives of Native prophecy and the West Coast Apocalyptic can be put in contact with one another, the latter seems to have lost the sense of material hope intrinsic to the former. The Apocalyptic anticipates the victory of Good, but its sense of final justice is abstract rather than concrete and tangible. In the way I am formulating it, the lost materiality of Indigenous prophecy in the West Coast Apocalyptic has much to do with the shaky grounds of
American and Canadian progress on the Coast. No matter how much one attempts to construct a
Utopian West Coast, it will appear corrupt and decadent without a substantial acknowledgment
of past misdeeds. The mythic and deferred core of apocalypse in this cultural context reflects the
impossibility of inhabiting a native prophetic tradition, of “going native” in terms of narrative
form; apocalypse is a mythic narrative about justice, but prophecy comes to pass in the world.
The West is apocalyptically ablaze because there is no possibility of coming into contact with a
purging fire that has been divested of its historical realities.

The West Coast’s history as what Walter Nugent calls a “frontier of exploitation” helps
explain the deracination of apocalypse from prophecy and also harkens back to the hasty
visuality that marks accounts like George Vancouver’s. As opposed to a “frontier of settlement”
where pioneers settle on the land and build cultural institutions, a “frontier of exploitation” is
characterized by a focus on rapid resource extraction (Nugent 803-804). People abandon
whatever makeshift society has developed once the resources begin to run dry, leaving only a
few cities behind to centralize commerce. No intrinsic, rooted culture is able to emerge under this
paradigm. The Gold Rush, for instance, which left numerous boom towns abandoned and a few
larger ones intact on the Coast, is a perfect example of a frontier of exploitation in action. On
such a frontier, culture exists not as a set of consciously evolving representations or institutions,
but as a negative entity that accumulates through the repetition of search, plunder, lack, absence,
failure, and relocation.

Nugent’s economic arguments about the exploitative attitude towards the West Coast’s
resources are supplemented by the fact that European and American presences on the West Coast
have always been very clearly imported and identified as outside phenomena. European and American people on the Coast have been faced with and haunted by their lack of “indignity” – their lack of being “born or produced naturally in a land or region” (OED). This fact may partly explain the compulsion to repeat an apocalyptic “reconnection” – really a first connection – with the natural landscape and its native inhabitants. Attempts like Shea’s to appropriate indigenity face a kind of conceptual confusion rather than a mutually beneficial hybridity. They negate rather than promote a truly risky contact in which both parties must lose themselves to give birth to a new identity. Perhaps Shea’s ultimate confusion with regard to why the West is ablaze has something to do with the Coast’s history of Europeans and North Americans first uprooting all natural resources and subsequently pulling up their own roots. Cycles of exploitation and subsequent abandonment have become their own kind of unexamined blaze consuming the natural and cultural resources of the West Coast.

In fact, these cycles may have gradually formed into a whole culture of deracination, which would explain many clichés of the West Coast as the place for self-reinvention, as well as the pattern of angsty wandering that I outlined in the first chapter. The sense of emptiness produced by endless cycles of deracination would also help explain why no matter how many times one tries to mimic Indigenous “ways of living with the land,” the exercise always ends up repeating itself from scratch (i.e. it has no roots). Indigenity is, ironically, treated as yet another resource to be exploited and burned up. There is no time to truly listen to another narrative tradition like oral prophecy, which articulates a world of replenishing, vital, ceaseless abundance. Defining the West Coast as a culture of deracination helps explain how the prophetic relates to
the apocalyptic in the region: by removing Indigenous prophetic narratives from their material contexts, European, Canadian, and American writers fundamentally deracinate the genre itself.

But why is the West *ablate*, as opposed to being faced with a non-natural kind of apocalypse like war or disease? Perhaps the overwhelming size of natural disasters, and the frequency of their occurrence in the form of wildfires, earthquakes, and tidal waves on the Coast may explain why they provide a frequent rallying point for addressing the confusion of a perpetually deracinated history. To wit, the massive scale of these events, coupled with the relatively ephemeral and short-lived nature of human time, has worked its way into cultural memory as a ready-made metaphor for uncontrollable, sinister historical forces. Those forces which are too great to be controlled – the historical and the geological – begin to seep into one another in many representations of the Coast. As we will see in the next few chapters, the particular historical crisis being addressed through apocalyptic disaster has varied greatly, ranging from terrorist activity, through an Asian invasion, to a feared moral decline. However, in each case disasters too massive for direct and total perception provide an imaginative space to treat frightening historical events in a comfortably indirect way. Not all catastrophic threat on the coast is racialized, and yet it often occupies the same cryptic, unimagined space of the Indigenous other evident from the earliest accounts of the Coast.

For the remainder of this chapter, I turn to several critical and literary responses to the kind of apocalypticism I have been articulating thus far. Several studies have begun to address the relationship between ecological disaster and human time in the Far West, and these provide
useful first steps for critiquing the conflation of natural disaster with apocalypse – the idea that the West should be ablaze, amok, asea etc. Patricia Nelson Limerick discusses the relationship between nuclear waste and human history in the Hanford reactor in Washington State, arguing that the “true” legacy of American progress on the Coast will actually be radioactive waste, and this, as opposed to myths of the frontier, should be considered to be the region’s most noted contribution to history ("Hanford" 53). Her argument suggests that dramatic apocalypses are far less revealing than a discussion of the long term, actual ecological damage that has been done in the region. Indeed, whether the apocalypse occurs or not, radioactive contamination of the ground and water will impose a kind of permanent, inescapable history on the region.

In *Ecology of Fear* (1999) Mike Davis argues that the most significant problem in the discussion of disaster is a friction between manmade, managerial conceptions of time and natural cycles of immolation and regrowth in Southern California. The ultimate example of this problematic engagement of time-frames is the firefighting strategy of “total suppression” (101), which aims to put out all fires rather than allowing some to “burn off” excess fuel. Total suppression causes chaparral trees, which naturally burn every twenty years or so, to accumulate and cause fires far worse than would naturally occur (it happened again in the summer of 2008). In other words, Davis makes a similar argument to Shea’s, but by dissolving the bond between apocalypse and ecological disaster he provides room for a discussion of needed policy change. Both Limerick’s and Davis’s arguments demonstrate that apocalypse and natural disaster need not be connected, and they also suggest the value of avoiding such connections. Paying heed to the distinctions between apocalypse and ecology can also help destabilize the conflation of
spectacular disaster with an overwhelming and unimaginable otherness, which in turn can provide a first step towards living on the West Coast as if it were a contact zone rather than a frontier.

On the literary front, Douglas Coupland provides some possibilities for the extrication of disaster and its representation by having a chaparral-ignited fire loom throughout the opening pages of his Polaroids from the Dead, a largely overlooked collection featuring short fiction, cultural commentary, and sociological analysis. As in many of Coupland’s early books, Polaroids involves a cast of characters searching for some significance or purpose within a meaning-effacing postmodern world, and in this respect his work resonates with Shea’s. Where Coupland’s book diverges is in the way it branches out into a more objectively positioned, expository, non-fictional mode in its later sections. This documentary strategy serves to contextualize and analyze the cultural production of West Coast angst, rather than simply reiterating it. The shifts in narrative perspective throughout the book, which align with its narrators’ movements through different locales, mark moments where Coupland literally and figuratively reframes the directionless, aimless, apathetic all young white male cast of main characters from his earlier novels, resituating them as fully products of their own totalizing comfort and vision of the world at hand. Polaroids provides the salutary self-reflexivity that is lacking in the lurid pages of “Under Fire.”

Coupland initially sets the book in California, what is for him, Shea, and many others the symbolic extreme of the Western world of superficiality and meaninglessness. However, unlike other, less self-consciously critical representations of the West Coast, Coupland’s textual
movements through a variety of locations (Europe, Northern British Columbia) enable him to finally return to the Coast with an improved sense of the depth and absences that constitute its supposedly superficial locale. The “groundless” place of the West is ultimately grounded by its relation to other places with other histories. A shorter narrative nested in an early section of Polaroids entitled “How Clear is Your Vision of Heaven?” exemplifies Coupland’s strategy of adding dimension and introducing a sense of absence to one’s perspective. Like Shea’s article, Coupland’s narrative relies on the assumption that California and most of the West Coast is caught within a kind of emotional barrenness that must be purged. Throughout the opening sections of Polaroids, the desert dryness of mid-nineties California evokes Baudrillard’s “desert of the real” – the lifeless emptiness that remains when cultures shift all focus to the sprawling surface of things (Simulation 1) – and its world of total comfort sets the stage for total disruption.

The nested story, though brief, involves an apocalyptic schema similar to Shea’s, where the meaninglessness of culture is perpetually punctured by the intrusion of an apocalyptic otherness. The narrator Columbia, a hippie mother who travels to Grateful Dead concerts with her two children while her husband is off dropping acid, describes “an enchanted city next to the ocean whose citizens, favoured by God, lived with great abundance, and were blessed with lights and bridges and spires and horses that never tired” (57). The vision of fantastic abundance here resonates with the fecund world of endless DVD players and kids’ toys that Shea apocalyptically destroys in “Under Fire,” and much like in his article, there is bound to be trouble in paradise. Along with Columbia’s children, we learn that “the sky above them would not bring forth rain,”
and they are visited by the Skeleton King who reveals to them that “You pray for rain, but you are also praying for pictures in your heads that will renew your faith in an afterlife” (59).

The key difference between Coupland’s narrative and Shea’s version of the West Coast is that Coupland self-reflexively draws attention to his representation of the apocalyptic West as a narrative. He draws attention not to some true version of the Coast, but to the way in which representations of the region oscillate between images of over-abundance and apocalypse. Similar to the role played by the female figure in *American Progress* as the flipside of the earthy men in “Under Fire,” Columbia serves as a mythic substitute for the violent wildland-urban interface, the site of Man’s battles against Nature. Coupland’s modern version of American Progress is a spacey hippie mother. Columbia appears to float free of historical realities; she speaks of mythological “enchanted cities” and “horses that never tire,” much like Progress who mysteriously leaves these things in her trail (like a metaphorical catalyst rather than a violent, exploitative force). Coupland’s use of the name “Columbia” here is complicated by its echo of the river that has played such a pivotal role in West Coast “progress” (*Inland 3*), and this in turn suggests the way in which even counter-cultural movements on the Coast are ultimately a part of its troubled and troubling history of narcissistic progress. The fact that Columbia’s narrative is apocalyptic suggests that she is not as far from the Coast’s haunted histories as she would like to be.

Whereas Coupland draws attention to the fact of the West Coast apocalypse as a narrative, another key text from the Coast approaches the apocalyptic in a very different way. The type of revelation promised in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* is one ambiguously
situated in the space between actual historical events and a world of total disconnection and simulacra. It is not clear whether protagonist Oedipa Maas draws out a series of bizarre connections following her ex-lover’s death because they actually exist or because, as her doctor informs her, “he [Dr. Hilarius] was helping the community hospital run on effects of LSD-25, mescaline, psilocybin, and related drugs on a large sample of suburban housewives. The bridge inward” (8). ¹⁷ The idea of a “bridge inward” (as opposed to historical reality) involves a narcissistic, perceptual detachment of experience from actual events. This detachment operates in a similar way to (and possibly identically to) that of an apocalyptic deracinated from the prophetic on the West Coast. Like the narcissistic fantasies in Shea’s article, Oedipa Maas’s perceptual production is the result of forces moving beyond the protagonist’s control.

The crying of Lot 49, the final event that gives Pynchon’s book its title, has the potential to reveal once and for all the significance of the bizarrely interconnected series of occurrences that lead Oedipa on her circuitous exploration of alternative American history. Instead, revelation does not happen. This lack of resolution resonates with the mechanistic replaying of apocalypse without actual self-revelation in representations like “Under Fire” and the grimly mechanistic search Vancouver finds himself embarking on in his search for the Northwest Passage. No revelation of the truth occurs in Crying, and so the truth of whether Oedipa has actually witnessed or simply hallucinated the connections that propel the novel’s narrative (the same wedge can be driven into apocalyptic fantasies from the Coast) remains in abeyance. This

¹⁷ This experiment and Hilarius’s other actions in Crying clearly refer to revelations of Nazi experimentation during WW2. However, this does not preclude the reading that the quote and his actions also have several distinctly West Coast features.
deferral of meaning is significant in light of the relationship between prophecy and apocalypse. If prophecy is geared towards an overturning of the material order, and the apocalyptic is the oblation or, better still, unveiling of the truth that underlies that order, then what Pynchon offers is neither. He is eminently aware of the processes of exploitation and deracination that have occurred throughout the West Coast’s history and he refuses to perpetuate them, which would only replay (once again) the hope that this time the act of eradicating the unpredictable and unknowable will somehow finally negate its pesky persistence beyond what can be imagined.

The similarities between *The Crying of Lot 49* and Mark McDonald’s *Flat* are also worth briefly enumerating here because they provide some guidelines that become significant in later chapters. Both novels begin with mysterious deaths that lead their protagonists tracing through massive heaps of ultimately indecipherable data. Both also involve the possible uncertainty induced by mind-altering drugs. In both cases a reader is left wondering precisely what factually exists, and what is the product of a desperate, deluded invention. This place of uncertainty can be taken as a representation of the same space occupied and fixed by Progress and the heroic Mark Finney in Gast’s and Shea’s respective representations of the American West. The tangible clues available for revealing with certainty what lies within the West’s cryptic and “hieroglyphic” history only ultimately end up confusing and casting doubt on the process of searching. The message is clear, and it resonates back through the long history of European and American presence on the Coast: stop looking. You will never find the Truth you seek because it is a mirage created by the mode in which you frame things.
So instead of an apocalypse forcefully searching for certainty – one like Shea’s that will “always return” and thereby perpetuate the history it desires to eliminate – both MacDonald and Pynchon offer an apocalyptic confrontation with uncertainty. Douglas Coupland reiterates and parodies the futility of this search by including in *Polaroids* a character spiking on acid at a Grateful Dead concert, whose “head jitters back and forth, continually on the alert for either Masonic imagery or a glimpse of Thomas Pynchon” (*Polaroids* 29). While Columbia also tries to trace out apocalyptic patterns in the sand, Coupland’s framing of her narrative – including his frequently expressed disdain for hippies – casts a new light of uncertainty onto the West Coast Apocalyptic’s status as a narrative. Each of these texts provides a moment of confrontation with otherness without resolution or control.

Could it be that, in some way, California’s representation by theorists as a place of “total visuality” and “total surface” makes it function as a Lacanian mirror to Western Culture, and if this is the case then what, precisely, is being mirrored? The frequent desire for the Golden State’s destruction (and the destruction of the West Coast in general) could be read as stemming from that fundamental misrecognition – that the alternatively enchanting and terrifying other exists as something other than a projection of inner desire – but that formulation only gets us so far. While the idea of Lacanian projection is useful as a theoretical tool, it is too general to account for all of the specificities of experience on the Coast. The region’s material history as a frontier of exploitation, for instance, as a place where identity and events are consistently uprooted from their historical causes, often deflects and obscures any possibility of interpreting its meaning.
through a strictly psychoanalytic framework. For many writers – Nathanael West, F.R. Scott, Malcolm Lowry, Susan Musgrave, Alice Munro, Leonard Cohen, Margaret Atwood, and Audrey Thomas to name a few – the Coast is certainly a place where one can fantasize about running away from the past, and yet it should be reiterated at the end of this chapter that there is more to the picture. The Coast’s contemporary and historical inhabitants have a different, home-grown perspective on the region as a locus for “Western” and westward projection.

A key difficulty in interrogating the many configurations of West Coast apocalyptic also stems from the fact that that while they ostensibly destroy the seemingly shallow, spectacular world of the Coast, they may themselves be bound up in an economy of the spectacular that can be traced back to early mappings of the region. Such spectacular, visually oriented apocalypses have in many cases become a way of deferring any truly frightening analysis of the region’s historical trauma and injustice – events whose redress would involve an empathetic levelling out of racial, economic, and gender relations. While the rugged individual is treated as knowing the apocalyptic truth about the world, the deeper American and North American myths Shea reiterates efface more than they reveal. By using unexamined apocalyptic myths, Shea may end up actually producing a simulacrum, an image without referent, where no “Truth” remains to be known.

In the next chapter I focus on two Canadian cultural texts – The Lions’ Gate Bridge and Timothy Taylor’s novel Stanley Park – for their “haunting” responses to the concept of the simulacrum (and its intertwining relationship with Los Angeles and California). Taylor seeks to
“haunt” Baudrillard’s utterly flat and meaningless picture of the Western world by introducing an unspoken yet unmistakable element of doubt and rumour at the limits of his representation. While Shea indulges in falsely “puncturing” the superficiality of postmodern life with an apocalyptic narrative, it may be the case that his representation is ultimately itself too visually oriented to escape the absorption into the postmodern spectacle. Timothy Taylor is aware of the problems that occur when one tries using a spectacular image to overthrow a spectacle, and in response employs a “haunting,” largely invisible, politics of the forest. While he must still employ a visible narrative to accomplish this, he uses a brilliant formal strategy to imply an externality or otherness to the world of total visuality and total deracination. But first, I will take a look at a West Coast simulacrum par excellence – the Lions’ Gate Bridge – and argue that it adds surprising dimensions to Baudrillard’s precession of simulacra.
Chapter 4

Apocalyptic Ethics: Simulacra and Urban Legend in Timothy Taylor’s *Stanley Park*

The desert of the real may emerge at the tattered edges of the simulacrum in a Los Angelino setting, but over Vancouver loom mountains of the real. The last vestiges of meaning take a form much greener and more sloping:

I want you to imagine you are driving north, across Lions Gate Bridge, and the sky is steely grey and the sugar-dusted mountains loom blackly in the distance. Imagine what lies behind those mountains – realize that there are only more mountains – mountains until the North Pole, mountains until the end of the world, mountains taller than a thousand me’s, mountains taller than a thousand you’s.

*Here* is where civilization ends; here is where time ends and where eternity begins. Here is what Lions Gate Bridge is: one last grand gesture of beauty, of charm, and of grace before we enter the hinterlands, before the air becomes too brittle and too cold to breathe, before we enter that place where life becomes harsh, where we must become animals in order to survive. (Coupland, *Polaroids* 74-75)

As I suggest in the following pages, the Lions’ Gate bridge\(^\text{18}\) is caught up in a circular exchange of signs that resembles Baudrillard’s precession of simulacra – the reality-replacing phenomenon

\(^{18}\) The spelling of the bridge – particularly whether it should take some form of the possessive – has been the subject of some debate (See D’Acres and Luxton). I use the possessive here, as it was the original name and also makes
that occurs at the moment when images cease to refer to any underlying reality and instead become caught up in an endlessly self-absorbing cycle of reflexivity. However, I believe there are some key differences between simulacra that appear in a British Columbian setting and those that Baudrillard would argue are hypostasized in other parts of the West Coast, particularly L.A. By examining several of these localized differences, it becomes possible to reconsider the historical and spatial implications of the simulacrum. Such a reconsideration is important here because of the frequent representation of the precession of simulacra in California as a kind of postmodern apocalypse.

Historically, the Twin Lions in Vancouver – the two massive stone outcroppings to which “Lions’ Gate” is supposed to refer – were known to the Capilano Indians as the Two Sisters. They were named after two women who were said to have been immortalized in the mountains for bringing peace among the warring nations of the coast by requesting an elaborate potlatch to honour their entry into womanhood (Johnson, “Sisters” 9-10). As the Capilano legend is recorded by Pauline Johnson, the Two Sisters symbolically connect a set of values and customs to a people, and these become ingrained in the land itself. The action of replacing the Sisters with Twin Lions – a doubled dose of English heraldry – performatively obscures the women’s legendary anti-apocalyptic act. The imported English names (Twin Lions, Lions’ Gate) superimpose an animal that does not even exist on the West Coast (except later, in the simulated more sense in terms of what the bridge is actually representing. The Government of British Columbia officially calls it the Lions Gate.
environments of zoos) onto a terrain disconnected from the Old World settings in which lions, both the concept and the animal, evolved.

As symbols, they fail to traverse the gap between imported and Indigenous cultures; their naming carelessly cuts the image loose from earlier, local referents, and simultaneously denies First Nations peoples any say in the matter. The land beyond this simulacrum of the Lions, at least in Coupland’s representation of the region, is “where eternity begins” – the eternity of a nameless hinterland where the symbols of a world “civilized” by cityscapes and “grand gestures” threaten finally to end. As Pauline Johnson put it nearly a hundred years before Coupland, “the peaks fade into shadowy outlines, melting, melting, for ever melting into the distances” (“Sisters” 2). This place of “eternity” and “for ever” resonates with the obscure, darkened mists into which the natives fade in American Progress. Much as in that painting, the image of the mountains becomes the site of an attempted symbolic erasure – the locus for another apocalypse of abjection where identities not conforming to imported epistemologies persist only as ghostly echoes.

While the unseen, Indigenous stories of the mountains whisper uncannily beneath their colonized present, the history of the Twin Lions since their renaming appears increasingly disorienting and, in the sense I suggested in chapter one, crazy. The name of Vancouver film production company Lions Gate Films, for instance, refers to the bridge, which refers to the mountains, which are nothing but a history-effacing name of an imported symbolic animal. The company has even disentangled itself from the possessive dimension of the Lions’ Gate bridge by removing the name’s apostrophe, a move that turns its name into a strangely reference-less
screen of information: “Information devours its own content. It devours communication and the social” (Baudrillard, *Simulation* 80). The symbolic lions in this case stay true to their predatory heritage, devouring history itself and recycling it into a heap of meaningless, non-hierarchized signs. In a further move away from meaning, the film company has gradually changed its name to Lionsgate, a single word, reinforcing the absence of referent, and is well known for its talent for making Vancouver – Hollywood North – “into anything, anywhere, anytime” (Miller, “Grid” 283).

Beyond the “lion” mountains that lend their name to quasi-localized enterprises like Lionsgate exists the habitat of mountain lions – big cats also named according to an imported and adapted vocabulary. These big cats used to exist on the Coast as far south as California but were almost entirely eradicated from that area in the 1930s after people there began to panic about an increase in attacks (Davis, *Ecology* 240). These attacks occurred, significantly, because of suburban encroachment onto mountain lions’ natural habitats – another “gesture of beauty, of charm, and of grace” thrown up in the face of animalistic survival, and precisely the type that inspired Baudrillard’s visions of the simulacrum and an “achieved utopia” in Southern California (*America* 77). With the eradication of mountain lions, we again brush against the “wildland-urban interface,” which is not an interface at all but instead another projection on the uniform screen that constitutes and stupefies19 postmodern times.

---

19 I borrow this word from Baudrillard’s “The Masses: The Implosion of Social in the Media,” where he discusses the sense of stupefaction produced by media attempts to gauge cultural and moral values. He described these efforts as “a mixture of two heterogeneous systems whose data cannot be transferred from one to the other” (104).
Still, perhaps all is not lost in the retreat of Indigenous experiences of the Coast. While it is true that the mountain lion ceased to exist in California, and that it never really existed on the Coast beyond its status as a name gesturing at a limited cultural imagination, it serves as an index of the failure to engage with Indigenous perspectives, one worth pausing on. At this point in history, any connections of names to places and fauna would have to be described as stretched beyond repair, but something of the Coast’s pre-contact past remains alive. The Coast’s history as a frontier of exploitation, as it turns out, leaves a trail of simultaneously incomplete and irreparable erasures. An exemplary case of the long-term effects of these partial erasures comes from the realm of the completely bizarre: in an episode of the innovating, fix-all, American hero show *MacGyver* – an episode shot in Vancouver but simulating an Asian city – one of the “locals” points out to MacGyver that those strange stone outcroppings are called the “Twin Pumas.” Here the pseudo-exotic otherness of the Pumas sends the Vancouver landscape reeling into the realm of the crazed. *Information devours its own content*, and yet the haunting echoes of
the Indigenous in this context – the fact that the Twin Lions and Twin Pumas were and are the Two Sisters – suggest that the mountains are not yet completely devoid of meaning.

The effacement of the Indigenous landscape resembles the process of deracination I discussed in the previous chapter, but in the case of the Lions’ Gate bridge, the fact that there is no such thing as a clean break from the past becomes very visible. The sisterly referent of the peaks has been largely effaced but is not yet absent. This fact ironizes Coupland’s suggestion that we must “become animal” in order to survive beyond the reaches of Vancouver’s wildland-urban interface, because the animal (the Lions) stands precisely in the place where the Indigenous used to (the Two Sisters and the Indigenous customs they embody and immortalize). Layers of information can be seen piling up through history on this site, and yet by virtue of this visible piling, we can ask legitimately, *are these lion mountains/mountain lions actually a simulacrum or are they something else?* Do they only appear as a simulacrum from a certain vantage? If so, what sort of theoretical bridge can be constructed back across the moment when name or image is set adrift from all referents, the transcendent moment when the image becomes “its own pure simulacrum”? There is something odd going on here; it is as if the two peaks are an ongoing site of a murmuring, covert contestation, the stakes of which is the loss of reality itself.

All of this information about the mountains is here first to suggest that the crazed multiplication and corruption of organizing symbolic images on the West Coast does not simply stop at the borderline between the US and Canada, nor does it always take a form easily assimilated into previous theoretical descriptions. Los Angeles, “a city of incredible proportions but without space, without dimension” (Baudrillard, *Simulation* 13), is not necessarily a site of
postmodernity any richer than Vancouver, “a city where fault lines pile up against each other” (Delaney, “Vancouver” 19). Their postmodernisms, however – insofar as postmodernism is characterized by the precession of simulacra – may crucially take different forms. While both cities are subject to the collapse of time and space initiated by the screen of the film industry, and this produces a sense of “lost dimension,” of instantaneity, of universality (Virilio, *Lost* 26), a place “without space, without dimension” differs from a place where anything can be allowed to “pile up.” In other words, the theoretical geographies of Los Angeles and Vancouver geographically contrast one another and thereby introduce the spectre of dimension into the idea of the simulacrum.

Their theoretical differences can be used to pry them apart – to make some space, as it were, for new, non-apocalyptic readings of the West Coast. Even if experiences of the cities can be collapsed into a single theoretical explanation, as I have suggested there is value in keeping some sense of difference available. In a teleological reading like Baudrillard’s that positions Los Angeles as “the future of the city,” Vancouver merely appears to be lagging behind its big American sister. On the other hand, a spatialized, non-hierarchizing analysis renders them simply different and in the process makes ample room for alternative, non-teleological futures for different regions of the Coast. The big theoretical question that emerges from these contrasting theoretical geographies is one of how the screen of simulacra, which is supposed to have “no relation to any reality whatsoever” (6) and which “lends itself to all systems of equivalencies” (80) can appear to exhibit subtle, deep-seated differences when described in different locales. Could these identifiably different ways of describing the simulacrum have something to do with
the local, and if so, would this not involve precisely a relation – however obscured or contorted – to some kind of reality: to precisely that which the simulacrum is supposed to obviate?

I have already begun to suggest some strategies for approaching this question. The recollection and reconstruction of Indigenous peoples’ and other indigenous perspectives help ground, or at the very least haunt, the simulacrum like a bridge connecting past and present. Baudrillard paves the way for this connection in *Simulacra and Simulation*, when he discusses the dilemma posed when the Law of Christian settler-invaders encountered Indigenous religion: “There were two possible responses… either admit this Law was not universal, or exterminate the Indians to efface the evidence” (10). What Baudrillard does not account for is the traces that persist in spite of efforts at effacement. Given the floating image of Progress on the West Coast, and its embodiment in problematic ideas such as the rugged, heroic individuality I discussed in the previous chapter, critical efforts to represent the vestiges of the local can do much to remedy the perpetuation of historical injustices. The introduction of Indigenous perspectives, along with the inclusion of perspectives from other groups that have been historically effaced on the Coast, can effectively help root the groundless, dimensionless images produced by imported perspectives that are isolated by their sense of individualism and self-reliance. I have already begun to suggest here how Indigenous epistemologies disrupt the smooth circulation of the Lions’ Gate bridge within a system of cultural signs, and this piling up of locally rooted images can generate gravity that would help bring the floating signifiers of colonialism down to the solid ground of the earth.
For argument’s sake, then, here is a *West Coast apocalyptic* scenario: the *Tish* poets of the 1960s in Vancouver settled on the idea of “bridges” as their unifying symbol for the “tentative coastlines” of Vancouver’s fragmentary, fractal landscape, but this symbol (of settlement) could only come into being right before the magazine’s contributing membership imploded. It was as if the culmination of the magazine’s promise was also the destruction of its sense of purpose – a pattern that strangely mirrors the same type of frustrated progress experienced by explorers like Vancouver himself (notably *Tish* was also the place where George Bowering, who later wrote about George Vancouver’s explorations in *Burning Water*, would make his first major literary mark). It is as if the experiences of the local that were excluded by this poetic structuring symbol would not tolerate its imposition onto their reality, the mountains of it piled up over and beyond Vancouver’s civilized landscape. In what would, through a twist of historical irony, become *Tish*’s defining moment, Robert Duncan touted david dawson’s poem “tentative coastlines” as a “breakthru to a tutelary daimon of an other Vancouver” (253).

The idea of “breakthru” is instructive here; it is apocalyptic in terms of its imagery, and yet it is self-nullifying. Once the breakthrough occurs, poesis ceases. The writing of “tentative coastlines” marked the first literary culmination of a material history of failure, one that has since become instructional for understanding the history of representation on the Coast. The “other” Vancouver Duncan describes resonates with Coupland’s “hinterlands” – that which peeks through the tattered edges of the simulacrum. The “daimons” of otherness can be “tutelary” but only on their own terms; you might not like what you learn. Like the bridges in “tentative coastlines,” this chapter represents both a culmination and explosion. It here becomes clear that it
is impossible to organize a West Coast imaginary by instituting more structuring symbols. One must instead follow the fractal progression of the coast’s literary history, recording a few of the crazed contortions that have been exerted in the name of organization. Robert Kroetsch explains this process well when he says (of something completely different): “we have entered that postmodern condition where the gap tells us more than does the bridge. The icon itself” – the unifying poetic symbol – “can be read as a reciting of a gap” (35). The “tutelary daimon” of this chapter is one that renders Baudrillard’s simulacrum visible as another organizing symbol, one similar to that tenuous “bridge” that, like a civilizing lion imported into and imposed onto a wild landscape, begins to efface other possible realities. Here I begin to examine ways in which the local can respond to and undo the global, and globalizing concepts like the simulacrum. The postmodern apocalypse meets an ethically charged, localized version of apocalypse.

The “hinterlands” of mountains beyond the mountains described by Coupland and Johnson have special significance in terms of Canadian literary and cultural criticism. In the mid-fifties, J.M.S. Careless famously argued that Canada is often conceptually organized according to a metropolis-hinterland model, where colonial hinterlands are used to economically “feed” Canada’s thriving metropolitan core, primarily Montreal and Toronto (18-19). Careless’s highly successful dissemination of this thesis participated in and forwarded a centrist-nationalist agenda of Canada that dominated Canadian Studies during the mid-twentieth century, one that defined places such as Vancouver as of second-order importance to the nationalist core of the country. The long-term cultural effects of this initially economic theory can be seen residually in
observations like protagonist Elaine Riley’s mixed assessment of Vancouver in Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* that “It’s not real, it’s not drab, it’s not flat, not grubby enough” (17), or more generally in the slow shift of Canadian literary criticism away from texts written in the sixties and seventies when centrist nationalism was at its height.

In the long term, this form of internal national colonialism may have ended up alienating Canadian West Coasters to a large extent, raising their suspicion of nationalism and in the process strengthening bonds with their American counterparts. Suspicions about nationalism have also been exacerbated by the increasing ease with which information can flow among all regions of the Coast and world at large. The *Tish* poets exemplify the process of alienation and movement away from Canadian centrist nationalism: they aligned themselves formally with the American Black Mountain poets, directly attacking (in rather nasty ways\(^{20}\)) those in “Upper and Lower Canada” (Davey, *Tish* 127-28; 221-22; 273-74). Indeed, their goal was to describe what they felt was a more locally grounded, and therefore legitimate, experience of their surroundings than that offered by the hinterland thesis. The more recent emergence of Vancouver as a self-sustaining international urban space, along with a broader shifting of focus to international and global contexts in Canadian literary scholarship, has further begun to disarticulate and reconstruct the hinterlands thesis as something very distinct in the Coastal context.

The excerpt from *Polaroids from the Dead* with which I began this chapter repositions the notion of “hinterlands” altogether, seeking to place it in relation to the effects of globalization rather than national or colonial economic structures. In contemporary times, the hinterland no

---

\(^{20}\) After citing a poem found in the pages of Montreal poetry magazine *Cataract*, for instance, Frank Davey observes that “the syntax and diction make one curious as to what century it was written in” (273).
longer appears to be in reference to cities within Canada, but rather to “civilization” itself – Coupland’s problematic “we.” I say problematic because while he appears to be speaking in universal, globalizing terms, civilization for Coupland is almost entirely restricted to experiences of the West Coast; the eclectic collection of short stories and creative non-fiction in *Polaroids* very clearly follows a north-south line of exploration, moving from San Francisco to Vancouver and then (with a brief detour into Europe) back to Brentwood, California. This same pattern of wandering along the coastline can be seen in several of his other works including *Generation X* (1991), *Shampoo Planet* (1992), *Microserfs* (1995), and *Hey Nostradamus!* (2003). Some questions emerge here. Are these commentaries on contemporary culture, contemporary West Coast culture, or some indeterminate blend of the two, some zone analogous to the strangely “misterious” place where the Twin Lions and their Indigenous sisters coexist? Can the local interfere with the global even as it is absorbed, even as it becomes, as filmic Vancouver does, “anything, anywhere, anytime”?

Theses pertaining to increasingly instantaneous global communication have been challenged repeatedly by the rough, fractal physical and cultural geography on the West Coast throughout its history as a region. Communication may echo across distances, but echoes are defined by gaps and a kind of natural fading. Information is lost and distorted in the complicated geographies of the West. The “New Western Historians” in the US have argued that while “the global village and the World Wide Web promise exhilarating cosmopolitanism, they also stir up longing for more intimate loyalties” afforded by highly localized interactions with the geography at hand (Wroebel 8). In other words, many writers and denizens of the Coast may actively resist
experiences of global instantaneity in favour of the local. Interactions with the local become a strangely slowed process, where ideas and products are gradually home grown rather than being imported from elsewhere. While the British Columbian Coast appears to succumb to the precession of simulacra as everything does, various forms of local interference reveal that there is always more to the picture.

To get at this “more” I would like to explore a mode of hinterland resistance in Timothy Taylor’s Stanley Park, an ethical mode of apocalypse that speaks back to the global imposition of simulacra through highly localized methods of communication. Rather than offering a totalizing, all-absorbing theory of global capitalism and consumerism, Taylor unearths a local mythology and a local brand of invisible, unspoken, and even unspeakable resistance that would not necessarily work anywhere besides Vancouver, where the novel is set. He bases this resistance on the “amount and combination” of things present in the Vancouver region (Coupland, Stories 3) – the content of the local – and attempts to theorize and develop forms from this content rather than strictly importing them.

While the novel and my analysis of it in the following pages primarily involve a local “guerrilla” cuisine developed by its protagonist, Jeremy Papier, another more muted strand of the plot can be used to frame this discussion. Peripherally mentioned, yet crucial to decoding the novel, is an event that Papier comes to see as a “living theatre of rootedness” (223) and “the beginning of it all” (226) for Vancouver – the unsolved 1950s murder of two children known locally as the “Babes in the Woods.” The nickname refers to a tale of lost innocence, and, much like the Twin Lions and apocalypse itself on the West Coast, it transplants an external narrative
structure onto (or into) local soil. Given my discussion in the previous chapters, one might expect from such imported intertexts an impending moment where things crack open to reveal some horrific and abject truth.

What is unexpected in *Stanley Park* is the practically invisible and highly localized way that this abject truth comes into play. A small-scale apocalypse allows Taylor to move away from prior British versions of the Babes in the Woods narrative and create something more arguably indigenous – something born of the woods. Jeremy discovers that a man living in Stanley Park actually bore witness to the murder, and eventually learns that the murderer was likely the children’s mother (291). Much like the Coast itself, the murder of children symbolically and materially halts the progress of empire. The discontinuation of family lineage stops both the perpetuation of British subjects and the expansion of the Empire in the body of its subjects. At the same time, the fact that the children are buried in the park symbolically and materially connects their bodies to the local geography: the flora and fauna at the green core of Vancouver literally grow from the children’s bodies. They are babes in the woods. They blend with all of the unseen bones nourishing the local land, from those of the First Nations peoples to those of Chinese railroad labourers.

Thus an apocalyptic moment – the moment when family and narrative structures themselves are revealed to be frangible – is also, ultimately, the moment of the city’s symbolic rebirth as something else. Given Canadian literature’s intertwining historical involvement with the hinterlands thesis, Taylor’s local foundational myth can be seen to reject or at least fracture its various Canadian lineages. Robert Kroetsch exhorts Canadian critics to “not feed the
apocalypse,” maintaining the polite and gradual evolution of a Canadian literature – “Metamorphoses please” (8) – but Taylor implies that something has gone horribly amiss for those living on the West Coast and must be in some way apocalyptically rectified. It is as if the geography itself, in all its unspeakable glory, forces its inhabitants to confront the disturbing past that has led them into its presence. With ideas of halted progress, disturbance, and the emergence of the local in mind, we can return now to the precession (and procession) of simulacra.

For Jean Baudrillard, the endpoint of the mythologized American westward drive is the Santa Monica Pier in Los Angeles. In his crazed postmodern crisscrossing of the United States in *America*, Baudrillard ascribes a paradoxical significance to the pier: “the Western World ends on a shore devoid of all signification, like a journey that loses all meaning when it reaches its end” (*America* 31). What happens to the heroic figure when confronted with the culmination and annihilation of his journey? What are the political and social structures of the geographic and epistemological end of the world? As we would begin to suspect, given the anxieties articulated in the previous chapters, they are those of an angsty animal pacing in a too-small cage. Baudrillard describes the UC Santa Cruz campus as a place of,

> [t]otal decentering, total community. After the ideal city of the future, the ideal cosy nook. Nothing converges on a single point, neither the traffic, nor the architecture, nor authority. But by that very token, it also becomes impossible to hold a demonstration: where could you assemble? Demonstrations can only go round and round in the forest, where the participants alone can see them. (*America* 44)
Baudrillard represents the West Coast as a superficial, unfocused world of circulation where the political becomes impossible; it has no origin or end point, nothing to fight for and nowhere to fight from. What is more, there is nobody to witness and react ethically to political problems: one can only go “round and round in the forest.” While one might be inclined to pause and respond here by mentioning the international attention given to the Clayoquot Sound protests in the early nineties – where going “round and round in the forest” had a significant impact – either way this idea of marching in the forest is, to use the lingo, totally West Coast. The disorienting (one might say crazed) leap here is that Baudrillard temporally and spatially conflates this localized geography of “total decentering” with “the ideal city of the future” suggesting that what has happened in California will happen everywhere in time.

My own upbringing on the West Coast has led me to wonder precisely why the region is so frequently positioned as a place of superficiality and absence of history. It has also led me to question why critics so often opt for a strictly historical rather than partly spatial analysis of region; space and history rely upon one another, and spatial analysis has the advantage of being able to address the synchronic ways in which historical events emerge. Kamloops’s mountainous setting allows you to view the city’s history at all times. Situated on the mountains – depending on where you are standing – you can see the city’s various cultural strata as they have been built. Neighbourhoods appear as concentric circles radiating from the city’s old centre, with different building materials and architectural styles reflecting decade after decade of historical

In Edward Soja’s Postmodern Geographies and subsequent works, he argues that “an overdeveloped historical contextualization of social life and social theory… actively submerges and peripheralizes the geographical or spatial imagination” (15), and in turn claims that the “analysis of spatial structure is not derivative and secondary to the analysis of social structure, as the structuralist problematic would suggest: rather, each requires the other” (57).
growth. Although some effort is put into replacing the old, in a place with so much space as the West it is often more convenient to build out rather than up. The same visible layering of time can be seen in North Vancouver – the suburb connected by the Lions’ Gate to the rest of Vancouver; residential streets are carved into the mountains one row at a time. Perhaps in the mountainous northern reaches of the West Coast one simply does not have to rely so heavily upon the narrativization of a clearly absent history. Perhaps traces of the past are fresh enough and retain enough dimension to shift one’s critical eye to the ways that history visibly unfolds in space.

We must step back here. It is important to note that Baudrillard’s vision of the West Coast – embodiment and projection of the contemporary Western world – is decidedly Eurocentric. The trope of circulation, an endless pacing around at the edge of the Western world, is only appropriate when you have arrived from the East and are looking westward towards the clear goal of the Pacific Ocean. It also only works when you are talking about a portion of the region as a closed system. For Baudrillard, “every last vestige of a heroic sense of destiny has disappeared” (America 46), but how can he, critic of the image without origin – the simulacrum – not notice the unidirectional starting point and destination of this image? He comes from somewhere, but his historical focus has attenuated an awareness of his spatial metaphors. Baudrillard states that “The form that dominates the American West, and doubtless all of American culture, is a seismic form: a fractal, interstitial culture, born of a rift with the Old World, a tactile, fragile, mobile, superficial culture – you have to follow its own rules to grasp how it works: seismic shifting, soft technologies” (America 10). Again the collapse of the
“American West” and its uniquely “seismic” underpinnings into “all of American culture” recalls the shadowy vestiges of a spatiality that was presumed to be eliminated by the precession of simulacra. Baudrillard’s critical vocabulary matters. The discussion of a historical mo(ve)ment fails to efface all traces of the spatial it presumes dead. Something other is moving beyond the edge.

As relative as Baudrillard’s gestures to read (and write) America according to “its own rules” may appear, his continual awareness of the “Old World” ultimately imposes a set of metaphysical, and even physical, value judgements. America is shallow, shifting, and surface-oriented, while Europe is rooted in history, death, and politics:

If it is negativity, irony, and the sublime that govern European thinking, it is paradox which dominates that of America, the paradoxical humour of an achieved materiality, of an ever renewed self-evidence, of a bright new faith in the legality of the fait accompli which we always find amazing, the humour of a naive visibility of things, whilst we operate in the uncanny realm of the déjà vu and the glaucous transcendence of history.

Baudrillard can claim that there is “no way” a “revolution” can occur in the spatially collapsed zone “America” because it has become too disoriented by the simulacrum (57), and yet there is no serious consideration of a “spatial” revolution – a revolution according to the West Coast’s (or any other American regions’) “own rules.” This idea of a spatial revolution is precisely what I believe Taylor attempts to articulate in Stanley Park. Baudrillard sees no possibility of roots in the utterly image-obsessed culture of the West, only an accelerating exchange of signs, and thus
nothing from which a revolution may grow. He describes this situation as “the crisis of an achieved utopia, confronted with the problem of its duration and permanence” (77). However, the choice of “utopia” here – an impossible “no place” – is telling. It suggests the point where the broadly theoretical and symbolic may have to take into account something as banal as local or regional history.

I suggest in the next chapter, building on this one, that the West Coast apocalyptic involves precisely the persistent rupture of abject, unseen historical forces into what is believed to be an impossibly “achieved utopia” – a closed and complete society. To a certain point, Baudrillard’s analysis resonates with Shea’s apocalypticism; both involve the sense that the West Coast, presumed synecdoche for the Western World, has become both the extreme of worldly plenitude and a zone of irredeemable corruption. Unlike Shea, Baudrillard may see past fantasies that violently and apocalyptically resolve this corruption, and yet, for reasons I will outline, he can see no alternative to the world of simulacra the Coast for him symbolizes. This pessimistic vision in turn plays out another apocalypse of abjection but one that cannot even be fantastically resolved like Shea’s. All possibility of difference – the Manichean stuff of a violent apocalypse – is believed to have been eliminated by the simulacrum. Baudrillard argues that violence involves only a “redistribution” of simulacra (Simulation 20), yet he himself severs the image from the material contexts in which it is produced, enacting a different, more structural kind of violence: the ongoing effacement of the local and indigenous.

Baudrillard’s vision of the end of the Western world is frequently characterized by vertiginous leaps in scale: “If you believe the whole of the Western world is hypostasized in
America, the whole of America in California, and California in MGM and Disneyland, then this is the microcosm of the West” (55). Similarly, he elsewhere claims that “the whole of America has become Californian” (108). Each claim involves a massive-scale theorization from a limited picture. A key question relating to these vertiginous leaps is that of what is lost or distorted as each microcosm is scaled up to fit within the larger picture; the West Coast is definitely fractal, but is all of America? Baudrillard distances himself from the problematic proposition that the Western World is actually hypostasized, or embodied in Disneyland, by keeping his statement hypothetical, and yet he persistently seems to suggest that others could reasonably make such extrapolations.

Baudrillard seems to replay his own version of what I hope has by now become a familiar notion: that the West Coast embodies the most extreme version of a world of pure simulacra. Employing the same kind of dizzying extrapolation, one writer calls the Coast a “festering neon distraction” of superficiality and meaninglessness (Tool, “Ænema”). Could it simply be that such a vision of postmodernity is largely a seductive, self-fulfilling erasure of locally rooted history? This question gets at the problematic nature of an analysis that too fully favours history over geography and spatiality. A strict focus on history without a complementary analysis of spaces themselves produces the latter as shallow – “a challenge to meaning and profundity” (America 124). In other words, reading the West Coast as shallow or superficial inadvertently produces its depthlessness rather than simply describing the phenomenon. This process of critical flattening reinstates a meaningful dialectic between the Old and New Worlds but only through the effective
creation of what I would call a straw region, the “stupid zone” of Western projection that is the Golden State.

The problem, however, with forwarding a historical critique of the simulacrum is that once its theoretical and discursive force has taken hold, you cannot challenge its validity without reinforcing it. In terms of the precession of simulacra, every counterargument becomes nothing but the addition of information to a screen of meaninglessness. An ethics-based critique would seem impossible because a hyper-relative “system of signs” can only involve the addition of equivalences. This ethical crisis is precisely where the vestiges of the local can, and I believe should, be introduced. In a sense, “logical” analyses are themselves too thoroughly invested in the particular logic of the visual, the descendants of the scientific exploration I spoke of in my first chapter. How can one speak of the locally grown tropes and histories that disappear in Baudrillard’s grand unifying narrative of the Western World without simply condemning them to the screen of images overlaying and erasing their tenuous existence? The problem is one of absorption and effacement of the local into the rootless and endlessly circulating image. It is a problem of how to show that local roots exist without simply digging them up.

Edward Soja argues that Baudrillard articulates the simulacrum not as a prophetic warning, but as a fait accompli, an already total postmodern apocalypse from which there can be no escape, only a state of perpetual, expanding stupefaction. In response, Soja goes on to argue that the margins, what he calls “spaces of radical openness,” must be positioned against what he damingly labels the “nihilistic closures of baudrillardism” (Postmetropolis 329-30); however, his understanding of a resistant marginality may underestimate the impressively elastic
apparatuses of contemporary mass mediation. The problem with notions of “marginality” is that they function in much the same way as Gast’s American Progress; the sense of space and otherness that they produce is ultimately false because they are still articulated entirely within the context of Western thinking. The representation of otherness may be more empathetic in contemporary times than it was historically, yet the idea of the “poor other” kept at a distance ultimately involves a narcissistic and self-serving version of that otherness. This is why Timothy Taylor essentially gives up on a notion of an articulate or visible resistance to baudrillardism and leaves the task instead to those invisible forces going “round and round in the forest.” In Stanley Park the Marxist revolutions of Baudrillard’s dreams take place offstage – in the abject places of the West Coast – as horrific rumour, indigestion, and urban legend. The hinterland resistance of the local appears on the screen of West Coast history only as a disturbing after-effect. Taylor writes an apocalypse characterized by an abject silence as opposed to a spectacular revelation.

To understand how Taylor’s work poses a challenge to Baudrillard’s vision of a surface-obsessed West Coast, we must first understand more thoroughly what Soja means by “the nihilistic closures of baudrillardism.” For Baudrillard, the postmodern apocalypse begins with God’s death by iconic erasure and is linked to Christianity’s initial gamble to visually depict the divine. Put briefly, from this moment, the image goes through four phases:

- it is the reflection of a profound reality;
- it masks and denatures a profound reality;
- it masks the absence of a profound reality;
- it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (Simulation 6)
In the procession of the rooted divine image towards the simulacrum Baudrillard claims that, “all of metaphysics . . . is lost.” There remains “No more mirror of being and appearances, the real and the concept” (4). With no negative term, the real becomes the all-absorbing hyperreal, the “desert of the real itself” (1-2), though, as I have suggested, Baudrillard retains Europe as a kind of place of the historical real in opposition to the superficial, space-oriented desert of the West Coast.

In “grounding” Baudrillard’s postmodern apocalypse through the local one can simultaneously interrogate its relation to history. He says of America that “Having known no primitive accumulation of time, it lives in a perpetual present” (76). According to this vision of a “perpetual present,” there can be no apocalyptic, because everything is already instantly revealed via the hyperreal simulacrum; even revelations are mere recycling. In this way of thinking, a postmodern apocalypse is an inverted *apocalypse of no apocalypse*. No undercurrents of history, no dark energies of the unknowable can accumulate and contort the image to the point of an apocalyptic rupture, and this impasse becomes its own kind of apocalypse – a postmodern apocalypse of total superficiality, the total sign, the precession of simulacra. Theresa Heffernan raises an important question at this point concerning what she dubs Baudrillard’s “seductive call to suicide”: “What is at stake in this narrative of a future without a future?” (171).

Heffernan’s is a good question on its own terms, but it is equally valuable to reverse the temporality of her interrogation and explore what is at stake in the narrative of a “perpetual present” without a past. To do this, I return to Baudrillard’s statement that “Demonstrations can

---

22 See Derrida, Porter, and Lewis’s “No Apocalypse: Not Now.”
only go round and round in the forest, where the participants alone can see them” (44). To me this suggests a highly localized kind of politics, one that does not necessarily register when one speaks broadly of “postmodernism,” but one that in itself has the potential to momentarily disrupt the world of hyperreality. Baudrillard is right to draw attention to the valuelessness of the image alienated from any semblance of history, of which Shea’s “Under Fire” is a perfect example, and yet he also perpetuates in the process a stereotypical image of the West Coast as the place for escape and reinvention; California becomes once again the place of the primitive other. By contrast, in Stanley Park Taylor suggests through various means a largely invisible, unknowable politics of the rainforest. The misty West Coast geography becomes the offstage soul of the city, one that cannot penetrate the media screen except through urban legend, unsolved murders, and an unpublished anthropological study, but whose existence is everywhere implied. Putting this West Coast text in a distant relationship to Californian simulacra helps shake up both, disruptively doubling them and reintroducing for a moment the dimension of real space, the real local. In the process of implying the limits of what can be witnessed via the simulacrum, Taylor also hints at the possibility that the supposed place of ultimate superficiality – the West Coast – does actually have roots.

The narrative of Stanley Park mediates between two visions of the apocalyptic: a Baudrillardian postmodern one (an apocalypse of meaninglessness, where the only thing to be unveiled is the endless confusion of meaning within a non-linear, circulating system of images), and a traditional apocalypse like Shea’s, which involves a violent instant when the apocalyptic moment itself could supposedly break history open to restore meaning and truth to a world
corrupted by simulacra and simulation. While traditional apocalypse produces meaning through a showdown between an abstracted good and evil, Taylor recognizes the impossibility of such terms given the linguistic insights of post-structuralist theory. No matter how badly one wants to escape history, the desire to do so only discursively perpetuates it: something of an apocalypolitics remains. Both Taylor and his protagonist are fully aware of the conceptual pitfalls of any sort of direct, open transgression of the screen of the simulacrum. Any “shocking revelation,” no matter how lurid, entails immediate reabsorption as a valueless simulacrum. Instead, then, of revealing his apocalypse, Taylor manufactures a disturbing silence, one that does not attempt finally to destroy the simulacrum but haunts it, jars it, and distorts it (one might even say roughens it up). Put simply, the postmodern apocalypse encounters in the novel an apocalyptic silence – the silence of the abject.

To understand how this encounter occurs, it helps to have a sense of what might constitute a disruption in a postmodern, image-obsessed historical moment. Paul Virilio suggests an interesting possibility: “Today, when all examples are followed in real time by the hyperpowerful mass media, an event is exclusively a break in continuity, an untimely accident, that crops up and breaks up the monotony of a society in which synchronization of opinion cunningly finishes off the job of standardization of production” (italics in original, City 26). Put simply, any overt resistance to a hyper-mediated experience is instantly effaced and absorbed by its real-time media representation. Before speculating on what might actually constitute a “break in continuity” or an “untimely accident,” it is first worth noting some of the ways in which
Taylor depicts media-standardized experience in *Stanley Park*, and how the simulacrum and commodity blur together in the novel.

Chef Jeremy Papier aspires to a cuisine that makes thorough the use of “local bounty,” a shifting menu based on whatever local food he can acquire; however, due to poor financial planning, he finds himself eventually having to partner with Dante Beale, head of the barely fictional Pacific Northwest company, Inferno Coffee International:

The ubiquitous Inferno coffee logo was visible from virtually any point in the city where a potential consumer might come briefly to light, a stylized godhead with a coffee, the steam from the cup sweeping and enveloping the face. Providing the deity’s obligatory beard and long hair. It could have been Adam’s perspective on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, God offering not the touch of life but a hot cup of joe. (62)

The ubiquity of the logo here effaces any specificity of location. In the face of this thoroughly commodified icon, we can also recall Baudrillard’s discussion of the divine image and the anxiety that “the image didn’t represent anything at all. . . that these images were in essence not images, such as an original model would have made them, but perfect simulacra, forever radiant with their own fascination” (*Simulation* 5). The commodity, with its material implications, and the Baudrillardian simulacrum, with its theological connotations, blur together in the stylized godhead of Inferno Coffee; it is rootless, placeless, and as far from the realities of its production as it could possibly be. At the same time, Taylor plays with a spectral perspective and spatiality here. The Sistine Chapel, a symbol of the Old World if ever there was one, is flattened out in the logo of Inferno Coffee, and while the logo might appear flat to a fictional consumer or tourist, the
introduction of the Sistine Chapel at the level of narration potentially twists a reader’s perspective. Through Taylor’s allusion to European art and architecture, and more specifically, his imaginative insertion of Adam’s perspective into the narrative, a reader can sense the spectre of dimension and history being added to the simulacrum of the logo.

When Dante gets his hands on Jeremy’s visionary bistro, The Monkey’s Paw, he quickly and insidiously transforms it into an uber-trendy, post-national culinary hotspot with its own special brand of superficiality: Gerriamo’s with a G. Beale explains to Jeremy that the restaurant’s name is supposed to remind people of Jerry Garcia: “Garcia is Christ without Revelations. You can really ride on a non-brand like Garcia” (256). The idea of “Christ without Revelations” not only resonates with the theological connotations of the empty Inferno godhead, but also suggests an anti-apocalyptic desire for an audiovisual experience completely devoid of obstacle or anxiety, a teddy bear Christ who gleefully ignores the unpleasant realities of worldly injustices. Even the texture and taste of food itself are not important beyond the demand for “vibrant flavours”; echoing the Book of Revelations, where Babylon is “arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold” (17:4), Dante notes that with _fooderati_ focus groups “both purple and gold score very well” (256).

If the commodity-simulacra of Gerriamo’s and Inferno Coffee imply a desire for a completely smooth, anxiety-free experience, Virilio’s metaphor for disruption makes good sense. He desires “cropping up” and “breaking up” within the visual and textual monotony of mass-mediated opinion and reality – the crucial incursion of depth and dimension. This is also where the rough geography of the northern Coast can be used as a model to critique the universalization
of the flatness and shallowness characterizing California. Elsewhere Virilio suggests how one would achieve an “untimely accident,” using airline stun-grenades as a metaphor for everything from terrorism to performance art: “Dazzling and deafening, this audiovisual detonation produces instant paralysis of the adversary without apparent injury. A bit like the Biblical weapon against the fugitives of Sodom and Gomorrah, it transforms its victims of the moment into pillars of salt” (italics in original, City 53-54). He implies that such a detonation could halt or at least trip up the precession of the simulacra, but, like Soja’s spatial metaphor of margins, Virilio’s stun-grenades may still rely too heavily upon a model of overt, visible, easily absorbed resistance. One may cause a moment of theoretical indigestion, yet the simulacrum will recover quickly enough. (Who could resist for long the visual pleasure of purple and gold food?) A special meal in Stanley Park performs a similar function to these intellectual stun grenades, but brings other senses crucially into play. The novel suggests that invocations of taste, texture, and echo can add an unsettling sense of dimension, if only temporarily, to the impenetrable surface of the simulacrum. Jeremy Papier produces an apocalypse replete with “echoes of what’s been lost,” rather than one of overt transgression.

In the novel’s climax, the gala opening of Gerriamo’s, Jeremy and his team of guerrilla chefs secretly replace the supposedly hip post-national cuisine with an uncanny meal of true Vancouver food: racoons, geese, squirrels, rabbits, and a bevy of other animals harvested under the cover of darkness from Stanley Park. While Papier proclaims to an international food critic that Gerriamo’s is the “restaurant of no place,” and that it belongs “to no soil, to no cuisine, to no people, to no culinary morality,” his kitchen team actually assembles and offers up precisely the
opposite (364). He proclaims the food of the simulacrum – of no connection to reality – but he is in fact dissimulating. He is certainly post-national, but not in the sense of a rootless simulacrum; his version of post-national is the utterly local, moving round and round in the forest, where the participants alone can see it. It emerges as a “demonstration” only through rumours following the event itself. A group of homeless people – including a man named Siwash, who is named after a natural landmark similar to the Twin Sisters that connects a name to a set of customs and the land – live in a space that would be entirely offstage (and obscene) for the critic and the diners. In interviews Taylor has repeatedly mentioned that he did not live in Stanley Park while researching the book. Perhaps this is his way of gesturing to those who actually do live there, a way of pushing the narrative off the thin pages of a book or magazine.

While for the reader the full truth of the meal is revealed, for the diner – particularly Dante Beale – a horrific revelation awaits. As in Lot 49, it awaits, but it never fully arrives. The menu itself becomes a metaphor for the simulacrum, the self-obsessed screen substituting for all reality, but Jeremy’s dissimulation leaves a sense of truth, some might say a horrific one, lurking on the other side. As Baudrillard puts it, “[P]retending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’”(3). Lies conceal and imply a truth, and although we only have a simulation of the truth in a fiction, witnessing the stunning action of the meal raises the possibility of – but does not answer – unsettling real-world analogies concerning food, origins, and dissimulation. If you have ever heard the urban legend
about the Chicken McNugget that turned out to be a deep-fried cyst, you may begin to understand the type of sickening, non-visual detonation into which Taylor is tapping.

In a clever formal twist, Taylor offers a tangible visual aid – the menu of Gerriamo’s (336-37) – to enhance the impact of the novel’s climactic moment. It ripples with mockingly scintillating exotic ingredients like “yam wafers,” “squab crapaudine,” “Turkish couscous,” and, punningly, “game consommé” – a consumed game. The dishes subscribe very intentionally to what his sous-chef Jules describes with disdain earlier in the novel as “the product of some ‘spontaneity’ rule of some kind” the result of which is something “totally... incoherent” (50).

One could recall here the loss of metaphorical bearing evident at the end of “Under Fire,” or the crazily circuitous series of historical twists attending the Lions’ Gate with which I began this chapter, but Taylor is more self-conscious of this incoherence as a strategy of dissimulation. He takes the Coast’s supposed superficiality and gives it an implied depth by revealing its falseness; this revelation itself reintroduces a sense of ethical responsibility into a place that is supposedly without systems of meaning. The novel’s climax involves an interview with a trendy international food critic named Kiwi Frederique, in which Jeremy espouses a completely fictive culinary philosophy, ranting about food that is, impossibly, “Beyond international. Beyond globalized” (364).

The reproduced menu in the novel masks but cannot completely erase the rest of the story. As a reader physically holds the book in his or her hands, the menu draws attention to the absence of the story of the menu’s and the novel’s production. One can physically feel what lies beneath the menu and this gives a glimpse, for instance, into the way that in the real world a
person would see a chef embodied as a person rather than simply being the “Papier” in a book. Although a reader is, strictly speaking, dealing with text in relation to more text and the circulating sign, one momentarily feels a spectre of the real right within his or her hands. The consumption of the West Coast novel momentarily does not “sit right” as one ponders what secret additions to the “papier” of the menu may have been encountered in food eaten over the years. Experience tempers the theory that the world has collapsed into a meaningless set of interchangeable signs.

Jeremy Papier’s apocalyptic meal is, notably, not as amoral as a cyst McNugget, which is easily absorbed into the precession of simulacra that characterizes consumer culture; Papier’s meal has a clear ethics. Throughout the novel, Dante Beale is described as inhabiting a placeless place: “He floats in a plane just above the surface of the earth” and obsesses over all things “wired” and “post-national” (256). It is hard not to correlate Dante’s floating image to the image of Progress Gast places over American history, especially given Beale’s total disregard for his employees throughout the novel. We can think of Beale’s placeless place in much the same way that we think of Baudrillard’s simulacrum: it lacks connection to a real-world referent. At the same time we can express Jeremy’s dissimulating version of the simulacrum in a pun-packed sentence: *No place is a placeless place.* No place is without place, and the idea of “no place” – a utopia – has no reality to it, not even in the purported “achieved utopia” of America and the West Coast.
Beale is ultimately brought down to earth by the dissimulating meal, but he does not know exactly how; during the dinner a disgruntled employee describes how she once discovered Jeremy experimenting with squirrel meat. Beale, rather than getting a simple comeuppance – the shocking truth – can only take pause over the rumor’s plausibility, and suddenly find himself “very full all at once.” Additionally, he notices that the “sense of food in his belly [is] growing stronger” (392). These details suggest a sudden sense of heaviness, a bringing down to earth, a connection of the living simulacrum – Dante Beale – to the realities of his immediate Vancouver environs. From the roots of this initial rumor grow others. Many of these may be false but they do not lack power for it, which ultimately leads to the large-scale protesting and vandalism of Inferno Coffee everywhere (404-06). Though the protests are mostly only hinted at, where they do appear, they appear as after-effects, absorbed easily enough into audiovisual mediation of local news media. The more important thing is where they do not appear: the abject spaces that haunt representations put forth by the media.

Rumours and legends of horrific, revolutionary truths aside, Taylor’s ethical apocalypse also happens in the belly of the post-national capitalist beast, the man who seeks to completely and finally rip out the roots of place. Confronted with the rumoured truth of the monstrous meal he has just eaten, Dante Beale suddenly experiences a ghostly resurrection of the people who have fallen as a result of his aspirations: “the mother glowering at him from the coffin. That woman Jeremy had worked with, the sharp one, overtly hostile. And the young man himself. . . always faintly resisting. They were like faces staring up at him from the plate, laughing” (392). This ghostly resurrection of the social and political victims of Beale’s post-national capitalism
might be termed something like the *dessert* of the real; something does not sit well. Something faintly resists. We could also speculate that this is a celebratory dinner from the forest of the real, which, at least from Jeremy Papier’s perspective, leaves its participants “satisfied and strengthened and full of unknowable joy” (402).

While the depth and richness of the novel have forced me to leave much of it offstage, I would like to finish up by hinting at a few of its own potentially apocalyptic silences. Set in Vancouver, a city whose population is over half non-white, the story contains no characters with an identifiable non-European ethnicity except for the grocer, Chang. Seen from an Asian perspective, the Coast has been a site of repeatedly halted beginnings, which I will discuss in chapters to follow. There was the activity of the Asiatic exclusion league in the early 1900s which reacted against the cultural integration of Chinese railroad workers, then the Chinese immigration laws and Head Tax in the 1920s which banned labourers from bringing their families to the Coast, and finally the internment of the Japanese during World War Two. More recently, and less disastrously, Hong Kong investors fearing the worst for the Chinese takeover of their home city poured money into False Creek developments in downtown Vancouver (a security measure which has ultimately proven unnecessary, another false start). Perhaps *Stanley Park* merely exhibits features a bit like Baudrillard’s vertiginous leaps in scale, distorting and effacing certain political realities as the scope of its theoretical topography increases. Perhaps the ethical apocalyptic is a corollary of this imaginative distortion, a distortion similar to that imposed by Dante in his commodification of everything from coffee beans to humans. In Beale’s various attempts to break free of place, we might end and begin with a striking summation of the
West Coast apocalyptic made by Jeremy Papier’s father, the Professor, who actually lives in the forests of Stanley Park: “Too often, I think, the desire for freedom masks the desire for destruction. . . You want to destroy everything around you” (196).

Baudrillard’s sometimes careless theorization of North American culture operates as a deracinated version of the judgments of the Coast made by George Vancouver and the other early West Coast explorers, implicitly reifying a European “outsider” identity. It is hard to imagine what a similar trajectory going the other way would look like – a West Coaster going to Europe and using “Coastal” criteria to judge the castles and history and deep sense of death – and yet perhaps that is partly what Taylor is doing. Why, for instance, does he use the Sistine Chapel to describe icons of North American consumer culture? Perhaps the echoes and rumours are all that can be recovered from the initial European invasion (and discursive invention) of the West Coast, and yet the unspeakable geography itself may have begun to regroup and go on the offensive (via secret raccoon dinners, for example.) Perhaps Pauline Johnson’s “Lost Island” of Indigenous peoples’ cultures and traditions is being found to an extent, through a mode of communication that would hardly register to a realist mimetic mode, though this does not settle the question of the ethics or appropriateness of an emergent white indigenity on the West Coast. The question is open: is Taylor’s work “only the shadow” of a West Coast identity or is it tapping into, or even appropriating, “all the courage and bravery” Indigenous peoples “had before the white man came” (Johnson, “Lost” 79)?
Perhaps it is the accumulation of death on the West Coast – the “echoes of what’s been lost,” the “shadows” of former cultures, the babes that are literally in the woods – that ultimately begins to speak back to the apparently more founded regions of the world (the regions that are only spatially different from the Coast, not more introspective or cultured or advanced). Taylor’s use of the Babes in the Woods as a founding myth does attempt to connect people to the land, although it is quite possible that apocalypses of abjection haunt this narrative, too. Either way, these shadowy feedback mechanisms from the Coast reinforce a dehierarchization of critical perspectives that in turn destabilizes the haughty tone of introspection sometimes taken by people speaking of the shallow West Coast. Such destabilizing mechanisms are paramount to the non-apocalyptic motives of my thesis; they posit a means by which spaces are held in productive tension rather than consigning them to a disaster of collapse. Even within various topological configurations of the West Coast, forms of hinterland resistance may occur between cities like Los Angeles and Vancouver, or Vancouver and Prince George; it can easily scale up or down according to the needs of the locals.

Let me return, somewhat cyclically, to where I began, but with some revelations. Even if the Western world always experiences postmodernity in reference to California, receiving its information in real time from the Western cultural stronghold of Hollywood, the spatial differentiation of what is here and what is there distorts the interpretation of place in the loci of its occurrence. The exact same “information” – the genre of apocalypse itself, for example – is given unique, locally meaningful value by whatever vestigial “tutelary daimon” remains of a place, but what we have learned is that the West Coast’s “daimon” in many instances appears to
be the death of the daimon. Vancouver may in some sense be describable in terms of the simulacrum, including its architectural fascination with the curtain wall façades adored in Los Angeles, and yet it is anything but flat. Daimons of the local emerge from within the regional and inform its growth in the process. Mark MacDonald’s *Flat* suggests that the attempt to impose flatness (such as the flattening image of the simulacrum) onto the northern reaches of the West Coast terrain results in a vertigo that initiates an apocalyptic rift giving birth to new, more specific configurations of coastal regional identity.

Building upon Mark MacDonald’s speculations on intraregional differentiation, I detect a productive gap between Baudrillard’s expansive claim that “territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it” (*Simulation* 1), and the utterly localized Siwash’s claim that “too much map is problematic” (italics in original, Taylor 333). Too much map is problematic in the sense that it warps perspective increasingly as it attempts to assimilate more territory. The simulacrum itself, as a concept used to map postmodernity, begins to show the tatters of the real in light of the various localities where it appears: “It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours” (Baudrillard, *Simulation* 1). Metaphorically speaking, Baudrillard himself succumbs to “the cartographer’s mad project of the ideal coextensivity of map and territory” (2); the territory he addresses is the entire world at a particular historical moment. Perhaps the real is not a metaphorical desert – it may simply be whatever “tutelary daimon” actually murmurs beneath the visible region that produces a particular version of the simulacrum. The failure to negotiate the simulacrum with localities – places with *real* dimensions that can be measured in “millimetre accuracy across this ground and
in the sanctity of parameters” (Stanley 334) – results in a mistaking of a strong theoretical concept for the world itself. The larger “the size and topology of the domain that it organizes” (Sedgwick, Touching 134), the more it begins to show its stresses: “it gets much worse with scale” (Taylor 333).

Taylor’s representation of place haunts Baudrillard’s claim that everything is essentially gone in an era of simulacra, his idea that,

By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials – worse: with their artificial resurrection in the system of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalencies, to all binary opposition, to all combinatory algebra. (Simulation 2)

If, as Baudrillard claims here, the referent has been traded for the sign which has no allegiance to any particular ethics or morality once cut loose – if representation “lends itself” to all modes of political and ethical organization – then this is indeed the moment of the postmodern apocalypse. He says as much: “The apocalypse is finished, today it is the precession of the neutral, of forms of the neutral and of indifference” (160). On the other hand, if the “era of simulacra” is read as a dissimulation, a lie that veils and masks an undercurrent of truth circulating in the unknowable, localized spaces of the real, then a rooted and grounded ethics is still possible. Perhaps we must situate ourselves somewhere in between conscious and unconscious versions of the local, like the bridge that both does and does not connect Vancouver to its past. To get at this possibility, some
examination of the simulacrum within the cultural context of its production – specifically Los Angeles – must occur. This is where I would like to shift the focus in the next chapter.
Chapter 5

Nobody Walks in L.A.: The Ecstasy of Movement in *Volcano* and *Crash*

Up to this point I have been articulating several factors contributing to the development of apocalyptic narratives on the West Coast. I suggested that apocalypse in the region has shifted from an incidental to a more self-conscious mode of representation, and that, in the process of this shift, apocalyptic narratives have come increasingly to efface historical realities and circulate ever more as self-contained systems of signs. Baudrillard’s postmodern apocalypse, which is centred in California, is in many respects the perfection of this process; from the point when the simulacrum is articulated, the apocalyptic itself forecloses any possibility of a meaningful revelation. All vestiges of Indigenous prophetic traditions and the historical justice they seek, along with all subsequent possibilities for a grounded and meaningful ethics on the Coast, are consigned to the desert of the real and are replaced with an undifferentiated, non-hierarchical, circular system of signs.

At the same time that the structure of this postmodern apocalyptic reaches its perfection, an alternative kind emerges: an *apocalypse of abjection*. This term is deliberately oxymoronic. If an apocalypse is a narrative that seeks to reveal the truth behind a history of injustice, and the abject is that which is fundamentally unspeakable, unknowable, and unnarratable, then an apocalypse of abjection occupies a discomforting space that incorporates both of these. Apocalypses such as Shea’s and Baudrillard’s are so totalizing in the way they structure the world that they can hardly count as revelations. While Shea’s may be a less self-conscious
representation than Baudrillard’s, in each case the totalizing way of representing the apocalypse leaves no possibility for the desired moment when the screen of history would actually be removed to reveal a hitherto absent sense of justice. In other words, all is revealed, so nothing else can be revealed. Such apocalypses found one possible epistemology of the Coast – a hyper-visual and rationalized organization of the region, which drives the simulacrum itself.

An apocalypse of abjection, on the other hand, must remain unnarratable to some extent; it involves a space open on the far side of what appears from the vantage of history to be strictly a catastrophe (representational, geographic, or otherwise). An apocalypse of abjection deals with the vast remainder of a metonymically depicted universe, all that goes unspoken in historically evolving forms of representation. As such, it can only murmur and ripple and erupt through the all-absorbing surface of text as a disturbing after-effect from an effaced, unknowable provenance. Although Baudrillard leaves a blank space – “the desert of the real” (Simulation 1) – at the tattered borders of his postmodern apocalypse, I argue in this chapter that it is possible to populate the desert with alternative, hitherto abject perspectives on the local. To accomplish this, I return to the locale that for Baudrillard is where the postmodern moment first becomes visible: Los Angeles.

In the previous chapter, I began to suggest some ways that Timothy Taylor both recognizes and challenges totalizing narratives of apocalypse on the Coast, and I raised questions as to the problematic nature of a white West Coast indigeneity. Is it possible to feel connected to a land when “land” itself has been treated alternatively as a frontier of exploitation and an impenetrable surface of signs? In this chapter, I extend this question, primarily by comparing two
very different West Coast apocalypses: the 1997 disaster film *Volcano* and Wayde Compton’s *49th Parallel Psalm*. I choose these texts because of the radically different ways that they approach representation of experience on the Coast. The movie depicts Los Angeles’s history and present in terms of a binarized, polarized population whose difficulties can only be apocalyptically resolved, while Compton’s writing seeks to undo racialized categorizations of experience altogether and is anti-apocalyptic as a result. Much like in “Under Fire,” the threat of immolation and destruction in *Volcano* negates a wide range of other possible identifications, and Compton’s writing moves along precisely the opposite trajectory, ceaselessly opening up numerous new possibilities for being. As a bridge between these two primary texts, I also discuss the acclaimed film *Crash* (2005), which expresses a desire to escape the limits of apocalyptic thinking in Los Angeles but does not successfully negotiate a way beyond it.

While I argued in the previous chapter that Taylor’s writing seeks to challenge “the nihilistic closures of baudrillardism,” here I am interested in examining the ways in which Wayde Compton, who is also a British Columbian writer, shifts the historical meaning of the simulacrum. Taylor’s writing, with its various strategies of dimensional haunting, evinces everywhere echoes of the abject, and yet his implicit challenges to the simulacrum may fail to suggest anything beyond their own green ethical compass. Taylor is clearly invested in an ethics that places value in the forest, but as I argue in this chapter, such green politics on the Coast have frequently been appropriated throughout history to support an economic and spatial control underpinned by white supremacist attitudes. If a mere thirty years ago journalist Joel Garreau was claiming that the Pacific Northwest was “green” and “a decidedly Anglo place” in the same
breath (255-56; 272), it seems worth examining how the association of environmentalist concerns with the region has elided discussions of race. I am not suggesting that environmentalism on the Coast is a racist or exclusively white practice per se, nor do I intend to diminish the urgency with which issues of climate change and environmental catastrophe should be addressed. Rather I argue that West Coast environmentalism is not an intrinsically ethical discourse that can be considered independently of its practical deployments; to ignore these is to treat environmentalism as a discourse as groundless as that of progress in the Far West. In many cases environmentalist discourse has been used on the Coast, and particularly in Los Angeles, to circumvent discussion of the economic and cultural mobility of underprivileged populations.

To get at that which has been excluded by previous articulations of an apocalyptic L.A. cityscape, we can proceed from a simple question: if Los Angeles is supposed to be a city “in love with its limitless horizontality” as Baudrillard suggests in America (52), what role does the invisible and subterranean – what we might call the sub’vertical – play in the city’s semiotics? Given the precession of simulacra, that unfurling, limitless sheet of textuality and image that effaces and precedes any underpinning reality, can there even be an alternative, underground symbolic economy? Would it not just be absorbed into the limitless sprawl of the groundless image? Baudrillard is crystal clear about where he stands on the subject:

No elevator or subway in Los Angeles. No verticality or underground, no intimacy or collectivity, no streets or facades, no center or monuments: a fantastic space, a spectral and discontinuous succession of all the various functions, of all signs with no hierarchical
ordering – an extravaganza of indifference, extravaganza of undifferentiated surfaces –
the power of pure open space, the kind you find in the deserts. (125)

This utterly lateral representation of the city has been significantly complicated by events that occurred subsequently to Baudrillard’s description, especially the 1992 L.A. riots, and these later events can be used to trace out several problems with the initial (and ongoing) conception of L.A. as a city of “undifferentiated surfaces.” Los Angeles actually has a fascinating history with sub-verticality, particularly with the idea of the subway, and although Baudrillard’s representation of the city’s endlessly circulating, literally pointless surface is thought-provoking, his critical perspective neglects the histories of injustice to which the surface responds. The difficulty with a critique of Baudrillard, as I noted in the previous chapter, is that from a certain perspective any effort to reveal an alternative “truth” to his, any effort to rupture the seamless surface imposed by the precession of simulacra, simply results in more surfaces.

While I suggested that Taylor uses echoes and rumour to disturb the notion of a rootless simulacrum, I construct my own critique of the simulacrum in the following pages, exploring the historical emergence of the simulacrum as an idea. Specifically, I am interested in determining what role it has played in the imagining of Los Angeles, the geographic context in which the notion was articulated and the place where it is arguably most applicable. How can we understand the simulacrum’s discursive emergence from a context where the earth itself – at least in the cultural imagination – persistently threatens to split open, and where racial and economic tensions likewise threaten to erupt from beneath one’s feet at any given moment? I believe that separating the discourse of the simulacrum from its local cultural contexts becomes a sort of self-
fulfilling prophecy, where the image loses touch with reality not because the world has become meaningless but because critical deployments of the simulacrum simply fail to take into account the social realities from which they emerge. To be sure, the simulacrum, once separated and distanced from the contexts which produce it, can be seen to represent a widespread cultural phenomenon, visible in everything from advertising to the news media, and yet it can also be reverse-engineered to help us understand how a history of racial and economic tension has directly produced the false image of a superficial Los Angeles. In other words, this chapter involves a project of re-rooting and de-theorizing the simulacrum, two activities which would seem at first contradictory to the way it organizes the world.

*Crash* and *Volcano* may seem like strange bedfellows, given that the former is an Oscar-winning drama and the latter might best be categorized as *disasploitation*, yet their mutual focus on prevalent Los Angelino themes of movement, race, and apocalypse makes for a revealing comparison. In very different ways, each film approaches a moment of total, overt, class- and race-based warfare and steers away from it at the last possible moment. Their common strategy of symbolically replaying Los Angeles’s history of rebellions and then neutralizing it suggests a pattern of apocalyptic repetition similar to the one I discussed in Chapter two. As with any case of repetition compulsion, the destruction of Los Angeles only really exacerbates the original source of anxiety instead of neutralizing it. The film industry’s obsession with apocalyptically obliterating this city and its historical problems simply serves to incite rather than alleviate
further racial and economic tension, and as a result both of these films represent a failure to imagine the city’s way out of a repeating history of apocalyptic disaster.

To understand the reasoning behind the repeated desire to obliterate Los Angeles, the work of several others who have sought to read and reimagine the symbolic shortcomings of the city is helpful. Min Hyoung Song argues that apocalyptic renderings of Los Angeles (and California in general) often represent a “cleansing figuration of disaster . . . a terrible cataclysmic event or a slow ebbing of living standards that would alter the way we think, that would reshape social relations, and that would compel us to begin anew” (1). She argues that such representations “lead us to a particular vision of the future that is replete with uncontrollable change, social disorder, and wholesale violence. In large part, this happens because our future has become populated by foreigners, nonconformists and racial others” (3). Californian apocalyptics in Song’s reading are often produced through a rigidly binary, black-and-white approach to race, and in response to this she introduces an analysis of a third term – the Korean-American immigrant – to complicate the way critics think of urban space. Using a sociological perspective, Edward Chang and Jeanette Diaz-Veizades echo Song’s strategy of destabilizing binaries, arguing that “[t]he theoretical and historical overemphasis on the black-white paradigm or two-group paradigm of race relations has led to a simplified understanding of intergroup relations; that is, there is not one path but many, not all of which converge in the same place” (3).

The multiplication of perspectives on urban spaces would ideally help to destabilize the racialized anxieties repeatedly played out in representations of the Coast and thereby open up more space for a wider variety of ways to experience and exist in the region. However, Los
Angeles represents a particularly tough place in which to introduce third terms; terms like urban spaces involve in LA a fusion of symbolic and physical meanings. Urban planning practices are often tough to extricate from dualistic symbolic representations of the cityscape, and this fusion of geographic and symbolic spaces has contributed directly to visions of apocalyptically reconciling the city’s problems. Indeed the oversimplifying black-and-white schematics of Volcano, complete with their realization in a set of conflicted urban spaces, recall more repugnant fantasies of racialized apocalypse on the West Coast, such as Andrew MacDonald’s widely circulated white supremacist novel The Turner Diaries (1978), in which the desire to sort out black from white with a genocidal finality begins in Los Angeles. To work past the desire for a violent apocalyptic resolution to the city’s problems, one must first go searching for the abject and non-schematic histories of the city and its geographic region.

To understand where fantasies of racialized segregation and apocalypse come from in Los Angeles, and in a less focused way throughout the West Coast, one needs to look back to the history of Los Angeles and California. Founded as a Spanish city in 1781, and later assimilated into the Mexican independence from Spain, Los Angeles was bought by the United States, along with the rest of California, in 1848 as part of the Treaty of Hidalgo which ended the Mexican-American War. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the state became a destination for freed and escaped black slaves, because its government had never legalized slavery. In his fragmented epic 49th Parallel Psalm (1999) Wayde Compton, who identifies himself as a “Halfrican” BC poet (Bond 15), uses archival material, poetic invention, and family history to
chronicle this migration of blacks from the Southeast to California and eventually northward. He notes that although slavery was technically illegal in California, already limited black rights began to erode around the middle of the nineteenth century – “got/ t runner further jus/ t stand still” (Psalm 33). This forced many blacks to move northward to British Columbia as a way of retaining their freedom and even finding fortune (via the Gold Rush).

While British Columbia initially seemed a godsend with its first governor James Douglas, himself a black man passing as white, promising freedom and “land. . . for 1 pound per acre” to black immigrants from the US (Compton, Psalm 44), it turned out to be the home of a much subtler, no less dangerous, brand of racism than the one they had left behind. Compton asks: “O James Douglas, did you ever see yourself/ in us?/ did you ever stop. in your war versus the wilderness/ and think/ we?” (Psalm 19). In this representation of Douglas, the “war versus the wilderness” is used to deflect attention away from and even substitute for any consideration of racist colonial practices, and the modern day speaker’s desire for a “we” stretches the poem’s chronology into the present. In a strangely resonant way, Min Hyoung Song (6), Edward Soja (Postmetropolis 319), and Mike Davis (Quartz 162) all note that certain environmentalist practices in California such as the “slow growth movement” have in many cases served as fronts to legitimate and institutionalize the segregation of “secure” wealthy all-white neighbourhoods in Los Angeles over the course of the twentieth century (Davis 172-73). The war for the wilderness on the Coast becomes another convenient way to draw attention away from the war against non-white presences. It effectively greenwashes what are, at their core, racist and otherwise discriminatory practices.
While the relationship of colonial settlers to “the wilderness” may have shifted increasingly from one of resource extraction to one of stewardship since the early days of settlement on the Coast, the indirect and unspoken impact on economically and historically disadvantaged groups has remained oddly similar. In Los Angeles, wealthy, predominantly white activist groups have relied upon arguments about the negative environmental impact of allowing higher density (i.e. lower income) housing to be developed in spread out, wealthy neighbourhoods, and have historically lobbied for policies that allow for de facto segregation. The “war versus the wilderness” here becomes a conservative war against urban evolution and movement. In the opening moments of Volcano, we see a white male activist/land developer telling a Latina labourer that she does not need the subway because “busses run every ten minutes.” His claim that a subway will cause “downtown’s problems [to] make their way west – drugs, gangs, crime –” echoes a history of economic segregation in Los Angeles, a desire to restrict the mobility of certain groups. Although the man is not necessarily depicted in a sympathetic way, his concerns are legitimated by the narrative arc of the movie. Blasting for the subway opens up a seismic fault line that causes millions of dollars in property damage. The film makes clear gestures throughout that link non-white others to these seismic dangers, including a scene at the film’s opening where an image of an abject black homeless man emerging from a drainage tunnel cuts immediately to a burning volcanic underground furnace. The effects of the city’s de facto policies of segregation can be seen to directly produce schematic, racialized versions of apocalypse, inscribing a physical line between the more and less well-to-do, a line which in turn continuously threatens to break down.
How does this schematizing apocalypse look from another angle, that of those pounding at the gates of the gated communities? Frank Kermode’s suggestion that the apocalyptic begins where the prophetic cannot survive sheds an odd light on several lines of Compton’s “Sport of the King of Kings”: “with rolling and gathering/ no moss / rolling and gathering / no Moses” (152). In Compton’s formulation, no Moses – no prophet of the people – has emerged for African-Americans because they have existed in a perpetual state of apocalypse since their advent (i.e. their arrival in North America); no “moss” of a history is able to gather when one is being constantly uprooted and moved from one place to another. The attempt to schematize African-American presences in Los Angeles and throughout the Coast through forced movement reverses for Compton the temporality of Kermode’s claim. African-American people have historically existed in a world that was apocalyptic before prophecy could take root. No justice was ever truly possible because there was no original, un tarnished tradition – no “moss” – upon which one could build a sense of justice. As I stated earlier, movement itself – the question of whether it is forced or desired – has much to do with a particular person’s and group’s relationship to the (West Coast) apocalyptic.

Compton’s completely fragmented and interstitial depiction of black movements across North America into the present – his “cuttin on the word ((( nigga )))” throughout his work (Psalm 169) – draws attention to a certain aspect of irretrievability that haunts the pieces of the story that can still be represented. In essence, he implies that African-Americans have continually suffered an apocalypse of abjection. Uprooting may certainly entail a form of revelation – an apocalypse with the potential for justice – but it also entails a constant, violent tearing away from
historical roots. A little (or a lot) gets left behind with each repetition of this upheaval. These unspeakable remainders become the place of the abject, that of the obscene or the obscured or the buried – that which cannot be located fully in language. No single word can describe this place – one can only gesture at its haunting presence by “cuttin” among resonating metaphorical connotations and vague historical echoes. According to Derrida, Porter, and Lewis, the apocalypse occurs precisely at the moment when it can no longer be articulated (“No Apocalypse”) – the moment when the archive of history is itself destroyed – and this moment describes very well Compton’s depiction of the fragmentary, repeatedly halted and upset progress of African-Americans on the Coast.

In the process of beginning to articulate these fragmentary apocalypses of abjection, however, history (and the prophetic itself) begins to emerge. When the apocalypse can finally be revealed and “gathered” as an archive of texts rather than persisting as an unspeakable mode of existence, then the dream of historical and material justice can finally begin to materialize. Perhaps this is why Compton formally highlights revelatory gaps in African-American history. Through broken lines, wordplay, experimental typography (such as his seismic – ((( )))) – parenthetical waves), font variations, omission, cyclical repetition, appropriation of historical documents, and a host of other “cuttin” techniques, the gaps become an important part of opening a conceptual space in which one can rewrite a fuller version of the Coast’s history. Indeed “cuttin” – slicing, splicing – is a key goal of this dissertation, too. Though the gaps in West Coast history cannot be fully bridged – neatly written over with a hasty, teleologically progressive vision of history – their articulation can suggest that something has been missing.
Indeed, to reiterate (and return), Compton’s claim that black people in North America have “No Moses” initiates a prophetic call for the grounding of what has been a functionally apocalyptic African-American history on the West Coast: “sinking Zion’s song / into a stranger’s land” (*Psalm* 169). From this germinating localized prophetic may be built new, real hope: “borders giving way just the same / as a read sea” (175). The hope here is for entry through the gates of a written (and “read”) history *on one’s own terms*. Compton even positions himself as a prophetic voice by writing something resembling epic poetry; the process of recording and narrativizing historical black movements allows for a politicization, rather than simply an apocalyptic fantasy, of justice – a gathering of cultural “moss” in the previous face of “No Moses,” the prophetic space occupied by nobody. As he puts it, “they can’t seem to sense us/ claiming the numbers/ is against us” (*Psalm* 152-53). The second line break here marks a site of contestation where “the numbers” of history are up for grabs. They raise the question of *who* is claiming the numbers: “us” or “they.” Ultimately, this gets him to the point where “the breath we draw before the next line,” the last line of his first collection, *49th Parallel Psalm*, “is singing.”

The intake of breath is ready to emerge “singing” into read history and “sinking” into the ground (171), a moment that resonates with Taylor’s representation of the Babes in the Woods murder and the way that burial, sinking, becomes a way of rooting oneself in the local. The revelation of death – especially unjust death – draws an abject past into consciousness; it is from such a paradoxically rooted position that one becomes able to participate in history and, as a result, the future.
Compton’s representational strategy is similar to Taylor’s sounding of “echoes of what’s been lost” that I discussed in the previous chapter, but Compton amplifies them, making a “Translation live on location” (102). He takes the fact that, in West Coast spaces like Los Angeles, location has been constructed in conjunction with racialized identities, and he translates this into something new, retrieving it from its buried past and bringing it into a living, present consciousness. He puts a unique spin on the writing of historical gaps in “The Reinventing Wheel,” a key poem from his second collection Performance Bond: “The rupture is inscription, the brokenness tradition,/ the repetition the affliction, the body the preserved fiction./ The script the fiction” (103). This formulation resonates with Taylor’s “echoes” in the sense that both invoke the absent to disturb the totalizing precession of simulacra, the writing of history, that ultimate fiction. However, instead of “haunting” the simulacrum like Taylor, Compton speaks gaps into it – “the rupture is inscription, the brokenness tradition.” He draws attention to racist traditions’ seams as seams, inscribing the gaps in white noise without filling them with an objectifying “black finality” (109). The repetition in these lines themselves, the consonance, rhythm, and rhyme, along with the visual aid of the poetic form, all seek to produce moments of stoppage and halting similar to the “audiovisual detonation” in the simulacrum that Virilio seeks (City 53-54). Yet Compton is not looking for a single “intellectual stun-grenade”; he wants a strategy of stunning, a “line between / us and I” (Performance 103), a gap (and bridge) among the visual surfaces of writing, one that can link together a single detonating voice with a larger tradition – moss, gathering.
Compton’s highlighting of the fault lines in white West Coast culture marks its own kind of inscription into history but it is, significantly, not simply one that replaces “white” content with “black.” The breaks themselves become a tradition, not of blackness, but gaps in “the white page/ versus black finality” (109). Noticing these breaks becomes the first important step to a recovery from abjection, which is the remainder from the objectifying treatment of any group with a “black finality” – the elimination of life from words. This is exactly why Compton does not want to fill the gaps he is able to open; he does not want to speak for, yet again, those who have too frequently been spoken for. A poignant example of a gap in the material history of the Coast would be the fact that British Columbia’s first governor James Douglas was passing as white, a fact that Compton returns to frequently but always with a different take. Compton has also done a great deal to reconstruct a history of black British Columbian literature itself, particularly through his collection *Bluesprint*. The archive of his work renders the uncomfortable absence of certain voices from the West Coast’s historical record rather than offering them up as another directly, easily absorbed, variable within the perfect machinery of the simulacrum – the kind of absorption that occurs so easily in *Volcano* and so many other disaster narratives that deal with race on the Coast.

To return to the history of California, then, with some added awareness of its conceptual gaps, the state’s annexation to the United States, along with a developing mythology of the primitive and adventurous West, resulted in a population explosion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Between 1850 and 1900 Los Angeles’s population jumped from 5,728 to
102,479, and between 1900 and 1910 it increased by approximately 117,000 more, over one hundred percent (US Census). Much of this growth occurred immediately following the Civil War and, as Mike Davis and Edward Soja note, involved former slave owners and other whites from the defeated South attempting to make what one radio preacher referred to as “the last stand of native-born Protestant Americans” (Davis, *Ecology* 305). The confluence of impoverished former slaves and wealthy former slave owners created institutional and political imbalances that many would argue are still being played out today. Conflating a genocidal racist history with current realities of the city, one LAPD officer explains that “Neighborhood watch is like the wagon train in the old-fashioned cowboy movie. The neighbours are the settlers and the goal is to teach them to circle their wagons and fight off the Indians until the cavalry – the LAPD – can ride to their rescue” (quoted in *Ecology*, 388-89). These historical circumstances have directly contributed to tensions so widespread that they have periodically erupted into full blown racial and economic battles, most notably in the Watts Riots in 1965 and the Rodney King riots in 1992.

The demographic factors that make up West Coast populations have also fed into a long history of fantasies of a segregated “White Nation” on the West Coast, several of which were perpetuated by a Pynchonesque-sounding group called “The Invisible Empire in the American West.” This Ku Klux Klan-based entity, which was at its strongest in the 1930s, held among its beliefs that “the world was on the verge of apocalypse” and this would lead to “a separate racial nation for whites” (Toy, “Hoods” 263). In this fantasy, the symbolically charged end time cannot be separated from the spatialization of race; the West Coast apocalypse will lead to the
establishment of separated, race-based nationalities. This particular movement, along with the numerous historical attempts at segregation and population control within California and specifically in Los Angeles, constitute(d) efforts to “stop” precisely the gaps that Compton tries to open; the desire underpinning these fantasies is to equate the “black finality” of race with a person’s entire existence so that alternative forms of experience are kept from intruding into a binarized picture of the world. A similar tendency towards racial “stoppage” even marks Ernest Callenbach’s successful futuristic environmentalist novel *Ecotopia* (1975), which, although not violent, ultimately represents African-Americans as choosing to segregate themselves after everyone concludes that “the races cannot live in harmony” (107-10). In each case, a monolithic white identity is reinforced through the stoppage of physical, economic, and genetic flows; in racist apocalyptic versions of the West, such flows are represented as signifying an ultimately moral drift.

Paradoxically, the desire to impose finality only heightens apocalyptic anxieties. As a correlative to cycles of segregation and their occasional venting in Los Angeles, a widespread cultural myth of rupture has sprung up and has often been expressed through images of natural or, one might say in this context, inevitable disaster (which is really just the breaking of racial and economic flows through attempts to impose a “black finality”). A good example of this conflation of apocalyptic and social anxiety is the history of wealthy land owners blaming fires on the homeless, the criminal, and even the sexually deviant (Davis, *Ecology* 132-34). The threat of a literal and metaphorical entry of an objectified other into one’s neighbourhood and especially one’s home (that MacLuhanesque extension of the skin) is the most terrifying thought
possible for those obsessed with the preservation of symbolic spaces (Ecology 134). As Compton says, “The rupture is inscription,” and the inscription of the other into the visual and conscious history of the Coast through things like lurid news reports and films can only occur as a kind of horrific revelation and a violation. No voice of the abject other can truly enter this schema. The rupture – the revealed gaps in a flattened simulacrum of otherness – is treated as the most frightening and dangerous possibility in representations like Volcano. It is inscribed as an unknowable apocalyptic threat rather than a position of empowerment, which is how Compton understands it. In a sense, then, the perspectives of writers like Compton and films like Volcano start from exactly the same place but move in radically different directions. Again, whether the “gap” is threatening or empowering has everything to do with one’s relationship to current arrangements of institutional and cultural power.

In the opening moments of Volcano, we are (dis)oriented by a familiarly superficial and bizarre Los Angeles cultural landscape. We see bodybuilders, billboards, sun tanners, cars swirling languidly through the freeway system, exercisers running and listening to that beloved icon of the nineties, the Walkman. Tying together and overlaying all of these visual markers of L.A. is the omnipresent noise of radio voices, narrating to millions of people their existence in real-time through local news, cosmetic surgery ads, preaching, psychic hotlines, and traffic reports. This could be the beginning of any number of films set in L.A. No “breakthru” in the blissful continuity of existence is allowed, not yet. This is the superficial Los Angeles Baudrillard so delightfully and terrifyingly describes:
from Hollywood to disco-pap, from ET to Star Wars, from the pseudo-rebellious itchings on
the campuses to the ravings of Carl Sagan, from the neo-gnostics of Silicon Valley to
the wind-surfing mystics, from the neo-Indian gurus to aerobics, from jogging to
psychoanalysis as a form of democracy, from criminality as a form of psychoanalysis to
television as an instrument of despotism, California has set itself up as the world center of
the simulacrum and the inauthentic. (*America* 102-03)

Here nothing can surprise, nothing can penetrate; this is the world of Bret Easton Ellis’s *Less
than Zero* and *The Informers*, both of which deal with the vacuum of culture generated by MTV
and the accelerated consumerism of Los Angelino Culture. When psychoanalysis becomes a
form of democracy, when all can be pathologized equally and thereby escape the notion of
difference or all notions of feeling unwell, then a breakthrough “to a tutelary daimon” would
seem impossible. Nothing is left to learn because everything has become more undifferentiated
information. In this place, we have reached a moment of perfect justice, “achieved Utopia,” and
an attendant total injustice which is just more of the same. Here one can take up any insane
pursuit one pleases. He has become so coddled by a global order geared to his existence that “he
expects destruction to come only as the fruit of his own efforts” (*America* 103), an “easy-does-it
Apocalypse” (*America* 102) that is merely another activity among many.

In its attempt to threaten this cozening screen of total disorientation, and total
information, *Volcano* introduces a series of mysterious offstage rumblings. While to most of the
film’s characters these rumblings appear to be nothing, Mike Roark – the innovating, white, mid-
western Director of the Office of Emergency Management played by Tommy Lee Jones –
suspects that the city is indeed approaching a moment of crisis. Here comes an apparent apocalyptic “break in continuity,” the “untimely accident” that could “crop up” and “break up” a land of media-perpetuated meaninglessness (Virilio, City 26). While nothing definite has yet broken to the surface, Roark begins to emerge as having a sense of purpose beyond all of the various people in the film who believe they live in a world of total control and domination over the natural; he is a prophet among fools. This cast of the complacent includes his second in command Emmit Reese (played by Don Cheadle) who thinks that Roark should take the day off, as well as an ineffectual and clearly bureaucratic transit director who scoffs at Roark’s warnings, and Roark’s estranged wife who feels that he should spend less time worrying about his job and more time worrying about his daughter. Each is so blinkered by his or her preservation of the apparently achieved Utopia that the mention of impending catastrophe seems ludicrous. In seeing beyond these various figures of sprawling bureaucracy and a complacent civilization, Jones’s character becomes a voice in the wilderness, one with precisely the “heroic sense of destiny” that is supposed to have been obliterated by the West Coast’s decidedly final geography (Baudrillard, Simulation 46).

Of course he does not regain a true sense of destiny, at least not in the way Baudrillard means it. Jones’s character is more correct than he knows when he says that he can only fight “what [he] can see”; he only sees lava and disaster rather than the not-so-subtle racialized symbolism that underpins the lava in the film. A key element of the de facto segregation that has characterized much of Los Angeles’s symbolic and material history is the set of relationships that emerges from the semiotics of freeways, barricades, mass transit, movement, and the
underground. If L.A. freeways constitute the prerequisite for limitless, endless movement, and translate into the perfect symbol of the simulacrum that characterizes “a city of incredible proportions but without space, without dimension” (Simulation 13), then one must have a way of entering the freeways to become a part of the city. To quote Clay, the languid protagonist of Ellis’s Less than Zero, “You have to merge” (66). Thus arises the fascinating car culture that makes eighties pop band Missing Persons poignantly state: “nobody walks in L.A.” To be a real part of the hyperreal city, to be “starring in the movies,” one must drive and move; otherwise one is nobody, a missing person and a “cardboard cut out of a man” that does not fit into the visual economy of circulation without stoppage (Bozzio23, “Walking”). When one of Volcano’s first eruptions takes down a large, two-dimensional billboard of a woman, one is reminded simultaneously of the person without dimension – the “no body” that walks in L.A. – and her haunting absence/presence behind the flattened screen of the hyperreal image.

The woman in the billboard appears to be a somebody, a shining starlet wreathed in an aura of glamour and success. Given the film’s apocalyptic themes and assorted biblical references, it is possible to read this image as an allusion to the Whore of Babylon (Babylon is, after all, one of many nicknames Los Angeles has garnered over the years). Such a reading would be productive, given that Babylon is revealed to St. John the Divine to be “that great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth” (King James Bible, Rev. 17:18). Babylon is supposed to be the manifestation of earthly power and fascination, the pinnacle of idolatry (the worship of an image that refers to nothing but itself), which certainly does not seem too far from the mark in

23 Terry Bozzio wrote the songs for the band Missing Persons.
the context of Hollywood’s mythic superficiality. Here we could also note the obvious problem
with the idea of the Whore of Babylon; the Revelation of St. John the Divine articulates a sexual
woman’s body as total materiality, the ephemeral world of formless substance, an idea which is
strikingly similar to Baudrillard’s notion of Los Angeles as “a city of incredible proportions but
without space, without dimension” (Simulation 13).

In Revelations, Babylon also notably rides on a beast that “was, and is not, and yet is”
(King James Bible, Rev. 17.8) – a simulacrum if ever there was one – and this idea is fascinating
when reread in the context of car culture. The beast, much like the automobiles in which L.A.
somebodies ride their way into existence, is ultimately false, the simulacrum upon which an
“achieved Utopia” – a place that “is not, and yet is” – builds itself like a food that belongs “to no
soil, to no cuisine, to no people, to no culinary morality” (Taylor 364). A haunting, abject reality
appears to suggest its presence in the spaces of the simulacrum; the rupture of the falsified and
flattened woman-image, symbol of Babylon itself, marks the possibility of an inscription of other
realities, and yet the movie in its spectacular destruction of “what [an] I can see” misses its
chance to haunt the simulacrum, to introduce an ethics into the meaningless world it wishes it
could confront (Volcano). How can we take pause here to both recognize and reproduce Taylor’s
haunting efforts, shifting them from a chef’s brilliant but ephemeral tactic to a full-blown
strategy of “cropping up” and “breaking up” the flow of the simulacrum? Can we, following
Compton, delimit a cogent pattern of resistance, of creating a resistant and gap-filled landscape,
rather than simply running around putting out fires like Mike Roark or the firefighting heroes in
“Under Fire”?
Perhaps.

If the freeways are the place of somebodies – the ghostly simulations of humans, the “some bodies,” that populate the hyperreal city – then the city’s neighbourhoods are the opposite (with the exception of one). The numerous boroughs that were absorbed to make Los Angeles into the sprawling postmodern monster it has become are the places where the freeways stop, the pockets where people’s lives are grounded and localized and, if you ask them, real. One alone – Beverly Hills – transcends this stagnant fate of the nobodies, for there you can take guided bus tours to witness those who have participated in the ultimate form of mobility – the embodiment of the American dream in the form of perfected humans, celebrity actors, those shining stars who embody not only fortune, which you can find anywhere, but fame, the ultimate translation into postmodern permanence via the cinematic ecstasies of Hollywood. Ecstasy: “An exalted state of feeling which engrosses the mind to the exclusion of thought; rapture, transport” (OED). The image of the cinematic meets the raptures of “transport” – “the carrying of a person to another place or sphere of existence” (“rapture” dictionary.com). Transportation becomes the semiotic engine of the simulacrum and the movement carries with it notions of the “rapture” itself; on the flipside exists the “excluded thought,” the no-body. This is a perfect, rapturous inversion of reality: she who uses her body to move, he who must labour to live rather than riding the glorious waves of fame, is no-body. Nobody walks everywhere in L.A., pervading at all points the achieved Utopia with his or her abject presence/absence. Nobody is the referent of the simulacrum; it is the root of the rootless, the persistence of the abject beyond what is visible and known. This formulation echoes the obscene meal from Stanley Park, and inscribes the rupture
from 49th Parallel Psalm – both of which give some ghostly substance to that which appears to be nothing.

One can take bus tours of Beverly Hills, but one cannot move through the city in a bus and still be someone (for that would make you some zero). Anthony, a character played by hip-hop artist Ludacris, laments in Crash the decline of “smart articulate black men” from the 1960s into rappers who make what he describes as “music of the oppressor” which is perpetuated by “the FBI.” He steals cars from white people in return, stating very clearly that “you have never seen me steal from a black person ever in your life.” He steals cars as a kind of cultural payback for the racism that everywhere pervades the film, but one could also read his activity as a desire to make money, to assimilate into Los Angelino culture by making a speedier merge onto the freeway – the way of those some-bodies languidly moving free from the roots of their labour. In a pivotal moment of the film, he is confronted with the limits of his intellectually rationalized criminality when he sneaks up and carjacks (a) someone who he is surprised to see is black, an event which in turn (following several other plot details) forces him to reconsider the apparent purpose of his vocation.

The difficulty is that, when Anthony stoops to taking a bus back home, he looks around and sees nothing but the abject Angelinos of colour and low socioeconomic status; this merely reaffirms his earlier opinion that “they put them great big windows on the sides of busses . . . to humiliate the people of colour who are reduced to riding on them.” From his perspective, anyone who rides the bus is a nobody from a culturally dominant perspective, and having no body is the most frightening thing in the visually charged world of Los Angeles. Anthony is eminently aware
of appearances, noting earlier that he and his friend are “two black guys who look like UCLA students” rather than being “dressed like gangbangers,” and he fashions himself as an intellectual who sees past the blatant racism of “the trigger happy LAPD.” Confronted with being the “cardboard cut-out of a man” – the no-body who is marked and segregated by the flattening screen of race as opposed to a self-identified form of existence – he leaves the bus to steal a van that is sitting by the side of the road, and he is finally moving once again, alive in what he calls the “sea of over-caffeinated white people.”

From Anthony’s perspective, it is a better fate to be labelled a criminal than to succumb to total abjection; mass transit is the best that nobodies can do for movement in the symbolic landscape of Los Angeles. The Latino protestor at the beginning of *Volcano* asks, poignantly, “If we have no cars, how are we getting to work?” and is answered with the now telling argument that “busses run every ten minutes.” The utilitarian functionality and scripted routes of transit will merely bring the masses from point A to point B, or allow them to admire those who embody the ultimate social movement, those stars who have finally, permanently arrived. Transit riders’ way is not the free-way, it is the fixed-way. In this regard, Anthony’s choice of criminality – which is itself barely a choice given his other options – illustrates perfectly the problem with dualistic representations of Los Angeles. If those of higher socioeconomic status are able to move freely and continually reinvent themselves, those of lower status are treated with a “black finality” that resonates with Compton’s critique of West Coast history. For people trapped within this schematic black finality, the only apparent means for escape from their own personal simulacrum is transgression, and yet, as Baudrillard argues, this will ultimately just lead
to a redistribution of the visual rather than any systemic or systematic change. The crime of car theft in L.A., however, is doubly dangerous; if it were a mere transgression of the law that would be a mere crime, but if one simulates a position of power by stealing a car, creating an uneasy “third way” or shortcut to success in L.A., then he or she must be taken entirely out of the picture, excessively segregated into that nadir of mobility, California’s notoriously brutal prison system. According to both Davis and Soja, Los Angeles and California replicate segregating structures on all levels of society, from their gated communities to their carceral shopping malls and surveillance-driven city-centres, to their three-strikes-you’re-out forever penal system.24

While the narrative of Crash may ultimately have trouble locating any site for “cuttin” the simulacrum, its representation of Los Angeles is innovative insofar as it does not in the end imprison Anthony. It leaves at least somewhat of a rupture in the form of vigilante justice inscribed in the otherwise seamless world of freeways. Yet ultimately its rendering of his criminality-of-necessity, along with several more cynical endings for other characters, assumes a defeatist position when it comes to the possibility of representing constructive third spaces – what Compton calls at one point “above ground railways” – in Los Angeles (Psalm 176). Evincing the repetition compulsion I have suggested, the movie ends where it began, offering only an endless, self-feeding circularity to the city’s racist mistrust, one that blends with Baudrillard’s representation of Los Angeles as an endless, pointless flow of simulacra. The simulacrum of the city itself is rendered visible in two key moments of simulated apocalypse in Crash, and yet the filmmakers limit the scope of these revelations. In the first a little girl appears

24 For more, see Chapter 4 of Davis’s City of Quartz, called “Fortress LA” (221-64). Also see the chapter in Soja’s Postmetropolis entitled “The Carceral Archipelago” (298-322)
to get shot in the back because of an Iraqi man’s racial prejudice against her Hispanic father, and in the second a black woman seems to be left to burn alive by a racist police officer who has molested her in a separate incident the previous night. In each case, death itself becomes a simulacrum, because the predicted outcome does not come to pass. The images of the film efface for a moment the fact that the characters are actually not dead, which in turn offers up a split-second where something approximating truth or reality peers out from under the image; as with Anthony’s open-ended criminality, the last-minute rescue in both cases draws attention to how the precession of simulacra fails to be total. The rupture is inscribed.

This inscription of rupture could be read as a moment when the vestiges of reality pull away from the false image of death in cinema, and the attendant death of reality produced by the cinematic image. It renders visible the simulacrum of Los Angeles’s spectacularized violence as a false image, and yet the film still concludes with a “black finality” that effaces other possible realities. In the final sequence a young white cop who has spent his first two days on the police force fighting against his racist and cynical white colleagues panics and kills Anthony’s friend who appears to be acting suspiciously; here one of the most visibly “good” characters in the movie actually ends up a racially motivated murderer. The final message is clear: as one merges into Los Angeles, ethics and value cannot keep hold. You may escape briefly, but the city will catch up to and reabsorb you based on your image. At the last possible moment, the film re-inscribes an ultimate racial dichotomy that puts a cynical spin on all of its other tense moments of escape and transport – a stark black and white opposition loaded with all possible symbolic, historical, and even archetypal value. Revealing the film’s narrative to be one long flashback, the
final scene ends where the film begins. Like a wheel going round, the interconnections between the characters’ narratives create a seemingly closed circuit; the film finally suggests that there is no end in sight to the racial tensions that underpin the city.

Anthony’s return to criminality, his willingness to transgress the law to carve out a space and become a someone, resonates with a similar moment of crossing into criminality in Volcano, but in the latter film any challenge to structures of economic and racial power is much more quickly contained instead of being left as the only open (however ultimately doomed) option. In Volcano, an unnamed black man is arrested when he evokes Rodney King to confront a racist police officer over his apathy towards the volcano’s flow into black neighbourhoods. Here the revelation of the abject, unspeakable history of racism Anthony discusses is quickly halted by the removal of what little agency the black man has (i.e. his voice). While he is eventually released by another cop, this seems to occur only so that he can dismiss, as if by magic, his initial revelation of the LAPD’s racist history. It is as if the film’s narrative at this point takes over the work of the racist cop – to silence any version of history that would threaten existing narratives of power in the city.

Set free of his desire to inscribe the King beating into history, the unnamed black man proceeds to participate in stemming the flow of lava. He helps curtail the disaster that has occurred as a result of foolish, idealistic efforts to desegregate the city via the subway. As in Crash, criminality is still represented as an unwillingness of a nobody to remain invisible, but in Volcano there is the sense that one can instantaneously “heal” from past disasters like the L.A. Riots if he silently accepts the order of the city – the injustice Anthony rails against – and stays
out of the way of institutional efforts to control the disaster (of economic and racial mixing). The evocations of an abject history such as the one represented by the Rodney King beating must remain offstage, out of the officer’s face, in order for the black man to live in the city. The preservation of the existing order prevails over all.

Several Hollywood productions, most notably *Independence Day* (1996) and *Strange Days* (1998), deal with fictionalized, symbolic versions of the Rodney King events and, like *Volcano*, each is careful to re-establish an ordered, racially hierarchized society (or at least to obliterate those who refuse to participate in such a hierarchy). In each case the fear is not ultimately of the wholesale destruction of white order in the city but rather of its contamination and infiltration. This is why the black man in *Volcano* is only released when he offers to preserve the physical integrity of his black neighbourhood; he is out of the officer’s face, rendering himself invisible to history and its protectors. To create new channels of power – by, for example, speaking out – would be to call into question the authenticity of existing ones (a particularly threatening proposition in a city perpetually teetering on the brink of total loss of meaning). When the man in *Volcano* directly confronts the police officer, the embodiment of white domination in Los Angeles, he must be neutralized, but when he offers to consolidate and promote the spatial order of the city, he is more than welcome to help. The lava in *Volcano* is not simply “black people,” but the abject *nobodies* I have been describing – the unseen remainders of the city who wish to challenge its careful spatial arrangement – the semiotic screen that keeps some bodies moving and others from interfering.
The movie is, consciously or not, profoundly cynical in the way it arranges Los Angelino populations. With an awareness of such cynicism, Bret Easton Ellis expresses a great deal of skepticism towards the likelihood of “a break in continuity” in the real-time sprawl of simulacra forming daily existence in Los Angeles. At the end of *The Informers* (1994), for example, Ellis has a character reveal to his jilted girlfriend:

> my name is Yocnor and I am from the planet Arachanoid and it is located in a galaxy that Earth has not yet discovered and probably never will. I have been on your planet according to your time for the past four hundred thousand years and I was sent here to collect behavioral data which will enable us to eventually take over and destroy all other existing galaxies, including yours. It will be a horrible month, since Earth will be destroyed in increments and there will be suffering and pain on a level your mind will never be able to understand. (225)

For Ellis, a violent apocalyptic rupture ultimately becomes a sick joke told by a bored person to another bored person in the L.A. Zoo, and this also describes the overarching theme of his first novel *Less than Zero*, which is similarly set in 1980s L.A. Rather than subscribing to some notion of respect, compassion, or responsible, ethical behaviour, the speaker in this passage feels that any story is essentially undifferentiated from any other; it does not matter what he says because nothing matters in a setting without dimension.

Ellis’s apocalypse of boredom offers a West Coast prophecy that logically follows from spectacular apocalyptic representations of Los Angeles like that in *Volcano*: the city is going to burn again and again, and each time the apocalyptic disaster will lose more of the force of a
meaningful event. Time on the Coast has become not cyclical, as with Indigenous prophecies, but instead an inward spiral that loses energy with each revolution. The cars on the freeway will eventually run out of gas. There is no possibility of regeneration in the vision of an endlessly circulating city, so all that can occur is the persistent dwindling of that which already exists. Put differently, apocalyptic Los Angeles is not the “Reinventing Wheel” Compton calls for, but something approximating more closely a black hole – a celestial body characterized by both entropy and the inability to shed any new light. The unconscious, increasingly automatic repetition of apocalypse by filmmakers and writers alike results from a failure to address or even discuss histories of segregation and racist population management. The burning will thus become more distanced from history each time it is repeated, a simulacrum of apocalypse rather than a challenge to the prevalence of simulacra. West Coast Generation Xers like Ellis, Taylor, and Coupland are to varying degrees trapped in a system of moping at the edge of a continent where progress towards a meaningful end of history seems impossible.

While the ongoing, unquestioned repetition of apocalypse in Los Angeles may seem to forecast a simultaneously grim and banal future for the city, the gaps inscribed into apocalyptic narratives of Los Angeles could be opened up by engaging Canadian and American representations of the West Coast – by looking to regional rather than national influences. The fact is that although Los Angeles often appears to operate according to its own closed system of rules – rules which ceaselessly create simulated apocalypses – the city is not the entire world. No matter how enraptured it is of its own image, and no matter how easy it is to mistake images from Hollywood for images of Anyplace, North America, a reader still experiences the city
through a perspective that is coloured by a specific location. It is not that the precession of simulacra is not widespread, but rather that it is not, as Baudrillard claims, “finished” (*Simulation* 160). Even though the real of the Coast may be “toast”  from a Los Angelino perspective, the city’s apocalyptic antics still appear as entertainment, experienced by outsiders with various degrees of ghoulish glee and bemusement. By adding outside perspectives into the mix, LA’s simulated apocalypses may still be read in terms of their ethics – as still being connected to a meaningful reality. As I suggested in the last chapter, the precession of simulacra at the very least exists in different phases in different places, taking on various regionalized forms, which in turn suggest “echoes of what’s been lost” precisely where no narrative of past and present, or presence and absence, should be allowed to occur.

For a world of somebodies and nobodies which organizes along lines of one’s ability or inability to move physically and economically, Wayde Compton’s work suggests the possibilities of the disembodied – abject bodies that complicate and haunt dualistic pictures of the postmodern city. Compton is in many respects the “intellectual black man” that Anthony sees as having been historically effaced – right down to the fact that Compton’s work involves tracing African-American migrations along the West Coast physically (and conceptually) away from the United States. The intellectual black man did not disappear but moved; there are different movements reaching beyond the stagnant narratives of a dualistically racialized, apocalyptic Los Angeles. Compton reminds us of Chang and Diaz-Veizades’s claim that when it comes to analysis of race “there is not one path but many, not all of which converge in the same place” (3). To put it

---

25 “The Coast is toast” is the tagline for *Volcano.*
differently, Wayde offers a different kind of Compton from the ‘hood in Los Angeles, from which gangsta rap, Anthony’s “music of the oppressor,” first emerged – the place of economic stagnation around which the L.A. riots in 1965 and 1992 were focused. Wayde Compton’s work makes a good argument for the critical reading of Canadian and American representations of the West Coast alongside one another. Rather than pessimistically assuming that there is nothing outside the simulacrum of postmodern Californian life, Compton demonstrates that there are still very real, grounded and ethical sites of contestation available from which one may critique and dispute versions of the Coast that would envision it as a simulacrum.

My roundabout arguments here are not without a point. To stem and guide the all-destroying flow of infiltrating lava in Volcano, Tommy Lee Jones’s character needs to guide it with the help of barricades. His choice of props is telling in relation to the anxieties and desires that underpin the film’s narrative: he uses busses and K-rails (the concrete guards used to keep cars from running off free-ways, from turning somebodies into nobodies). If busses afford nobodies some little amount of movement through the city, then what does it mean that the apocalyptic disaster in Volcano necessitates their being rendered immobile? In the time of crisis, authoritarian control of population becomes perfectly acceptable; the film starts with a black screen featuring white block letters: “The Office of Emergency Management (O.E.M.) is a permanent division of the city of Los Angeles.// In the event of emergency or natural disaster, its director has the power to control and command all the resources of the city.” The biggest problem with the seemingly innocuous and even heroic role of the director is that Los Angeles is

26 I refer here to the fact that Wayde Compton shares the name with Compton, the neighbourhood in Los Angeles.
all too frequently represented in terms of crisis. The city exists in a perpetual state of emergency, which becomes a perpetual state of exception where laws can be suspended for the sake of prudence. As Giorgio Agamben claims, “modern totalitarianism can be defined as the establishment, by means of the state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system” (2).

In other words, what appears to be Roark’s MacGyverian innovation throughout the film is really just more of the same old same old, a narrative as old as the city: the abject forces of the underrepresented, economically weak, and the racially marked can be constrained and guided at will because they are dangerous to the city’s political system. Mike Davis’s *Ecology of Fear* concludes with a famous satellite photo of Los Angeles burning during the 1992 riots, which shows the visible effects of authoritarian population control. What is interesting about this photo is the way the city’s freeways essentially quarantine any activity outside certain venting zones in downtown and South Central Compton (exactly the ones threatened in *Volcano*) (*Ecology* 421-22). The K-rails that define freeways prevail when it comes to the disaster that is the possibility of economic mobility and social justice in L.A. The freeways themselves act as barricades between populations and neighbourhoods. The fact that the busses are used as barricades in *Volcano* is not far from their everyday cultural function.

The most important detail of all in *Volcano*, one that links back to the questions with which I began this chapter, is the thing that triggers the volcano itself: the development of a new

---

27 See Mike Davis’s *Ecology of Fear*. 174
subway line linking downtown to Beverly Hills. We gradually learn that underground blasting for the line has opened up a fault line, and this eventually causes molten lava to erupt to the surface, destroying everything in its path. What does this mean in terms of the city that is obsessed with surfaces? What unspeakable role does the subterranean and sub-vertical play in the city of “limitless horizontality”? We can turn to Wayde Compton again for some clues. In a city with no “over ground railway,” no visible spaces in its imaginary for constructive alternatives to racist practices, racial and economic tensions are forced into the invisible, abject underground spaces where they become superheated.

These subterranean threats are the unconscious of the simulacrum, the unspeakable histories that produce an illusion: a city that has no contact with its own reality. Like the dark forest that Jeremy Papier stumbles through in *Stanley Park*, and even more so the offstage murmurings that disrupt the capital flow of Inferno International, the unspeakable meaning of the underground in Los Angeles lurks, waiting for its moment to emerge. This sub-vertical lurking represents the fear that no matter how much visible planning and organization one does, no matter how well guarded one’s home truly is, the very ground upon which it is built – a city with a history of racial inequality – may bubble up and consume its “black finality.” As one character from *Volcano* says, explicitly linking natural disaster with biblical apocalypse, “It was a foolish man that built his house upon the sand” (*King James Bible*, Matt. 7:26). The private is ripped open and made public in the film’s finale; the very building that the white activist leader seeks to protect from low income people circulating into his neighbourhood is imploded to divert the lava’s flow into the Pacific Ocean, that quenching body that forms the West Coast.
The city’s apocalyptic energies have been temporarily vented, and yet the same media(ting) voiceovers with which the film began reappear at its end. This ending is no parting of Compton’s “read sea”: there is no Moses, nobody to open the gap to the promised land in the “sea of over-caffeinated white people” that inscribes its history onto the West Coast. The Coast itself, as the place that produces narratives of halted westward wanderings, cannot consciously transcend the unspeakable histories of racism that form its repetitive obsessions, and so it grows a little more tired. The narrative of victory over the unspeakable other is once again going the wrong way along the free-way, headed for yet another apocalyptic crash. Roark may indeed fight and even temporarily defeat what he can see, and the penultimate scene – which features a convenient rain of race-neutralizing ash – may suggest a papering over of problems, but what has really changed? The cityscape itself appears to be transformed by a huge volcano, and yet the movie ends with the same media narration with which it began. The three-dimensionality and verticality of a mountain in the city – the potential to realize the unseen racism that boils obscenely beneath the simulacrum – is flattened by the fact of the entertainment industry itself, whose simulations of more rooted forms of prophecy mirror the radio and televisual mediation within the film. Once again, a “heroic sense of destiny” disappears into a simulacrum. Los Angeles, as it is represented in Volcano, is a city that has accumulating difficulty coming to terms with its own injustices. Its tired mistakes will be happily repeated.

Because of the lack of memory, of conceptual off-ramps and railways exiting the circulating city, people in L.A. representations, going back at least to Nathanael West’s Day of the Locust (1933), tend to get sucked in but are unable to leave. Writers like Wayde Compton do
not fear the opening of fault lines as the writers of narratives like *Volcano* do, because they have a memory of that which has “sunken” into the West Coast earth (and what has grown from it). The barrier of the large bus windows through which nobodies can watch somebodies, and vice versa, may appear on the surface to benefit those with economic and ethnic power, but it does not dissolve the state of perpetual panic in which they live. Through Compton’s explorations of black migrations to the West, and through his reintroduction of black British Columbian writers into “read history,” he brings to light the dead ancestors (actual and metaphorical) that have given rise to racism and racial panic on the West Coast. He represents them in an ultimately non-apocalyptic way. The stone has been rolled for long enough; its articulation in Compton’s work could be used to relieve the Sisyphi of Hollywood of their repetitive task. Like the revelation of the Babes in the Woods story, which breaks with the colonial past and initiates a more locally rooted future, Compton’s refusal of both the white page and black finality offers a promising new kind of West Coast indigence – a new way of living with the land.

Compton’s poetry, and particularly “49th Parallel Psalm,” may at first appear to replicate the desired flight from culture and return to the “primitive” that characterize narratives of the West, yet there are some critical differences. When the African-American characters in his poetry and non-fiction flee to the Canadian Coast to escape racism elsewhere, they often simply encounter another disturbingly silent brand of racism, a civil and civilized racism that can be traced back to British Columbia’s earliest days. Rosemary Brown and Dorothy Nealy, whose recorded oral narratives in *Bluesprint* describe what it was like to be a black person living in 1930s Vancouver, comment in different ways on the “subtle and polite nature of Canada’s
particular brand of racism” (122). Similar concerns inform Ethel Wilson’s “Down at English Bay” (1949), where a ladies’ group called the Minerva Club meets behind closed doors to discuss the shocking truth about one of their members: “Mrs. Hamilton Coffin has been seen more than once in a public space, bathing in the arms of a black man” (45). Compton offers no parting of the seas to the promised land in the Great White North: we are stuck with a racist history, but enough memory has accumulated to do something about it.

My discussion of Volcano in this chapter intentionally resonates with the discussion of “Under Fire” in the second chapter, but there are some key differences between these two texts. On the surface “Under Fire” appears to be concerned primarily with schematizing the (false) interface between the internal and external boundaries of culture, whereas Volcano is concerned with civilization’s – or at least the Coast’s – internal composition and potential disruption. Unlike the apocalyptic wildfires that threaten houses on the periphery of society, the titular volcano of the movie erupts directly into the middle of Los Angeles, a narrative feature that at least recognizes that everything, even the wilderness, is a part of culture. Much like “Under Fire,” Volcano is organized according to a remarkably coherent apocalyptic schema, and yet the relationships in the latter are more clearly based on the historical context provided by a specific locale. The white hero “from Kansas” played by Tommy Lee Jones finds his closest ally in an African-American sidekick played by Don Cheadle (who plays a very different, less schematic, role in Crash). The witty dialogue between Jones and Cheadle echoes the relationship between the firefighters and fire in “Under Fire,” but here the other cannot ultimately be rejected because
Jones’s and Cheadle’s characters must continue to inhabit the same urban spaces once the events of the narrative have unfolded.

The subplot depicting the relationship between Jones’s and Cheadle’s characters, and its sanctioning of the relationship between a black and a white male as central to the city’s narrative, carefully preserves a racial hierarchy, one that gets at much of what I have been discussing in this chapter. The white hero is still the boss at the end of the day. Although Cheadle’s character reminds Mike Roark that he’s “not in Kansas anymore” and states playfully throughout the movie that he wants Roark’s job, in the climactic moment of the film he says (in a weirdly inverted appropriation of the famous nineties Nike commercial featuring Michael Jordan): “I wanna be like Mike.” In the context of this chapter and my discussion of Compton’s explorations of the prophetic, this comment is particularly telling, especially given that Cheadle says elsewhere, of the lava: “Moses couldn’t reroute this shit.” What Moses cannot do, Mike Roark with his renewed “sense of heroic destiny” does. Otherness and the abject – along with the hope of a prophetic tradition that would offer justice within the bounds of historical time – are forced entirely underground once more by the film’s concluding scene: a child (white, though now coated in ash) looks out across the ash-covered faces after the volcano has subsided and says: “they all look the same.” In the future, seen through the eyes of the child, we will all just get along.

The facile and ultimately useless nature of this final revelation may explain why the image of child murder has become such an important trope on the West Coast: many writers, infuriated by suggestions of the Coast’s meaninglessness, seek to destroy its future as embodied
In children. In the next chapter, I suggest that the murder of children by their mothers has become its own kind of West Coast apocalyptic, one aimed at the heart of colonialism and its aftermath. In relation to this domestic apocalypse, I examine the role that the figure of the provincial housewife has played in containing the detritus of empire, and how this has led to a kind of frustration-turned-hysteria that BC writer Daphne Marlatt reacts against. The move from representations of women whose significance is primarily symbolic to the grassroots development of a feminine and feminist psychology in Marlatt’s *Ana Historic* reflects and reinforces Wayde Compton’s attempts to bring to light the abject of history. Marlatt’s writing, like Compton's, is oriented towards inscribing rupture, and yet her protagonist’s position also resonates with that of the “decidedly Anglo” activist homeowners that I touched on in this chapter. Could this mixture of open-ended rupture and grassroots activism mark a historically emergent hybridity on the Coast, or is it another example of the same old attempts to assimilate the other without addressing historical injustice?
Chapter 6

“Zero Attrition Rate”: Entropy and Revitalization at the End of the Western World

“The time is the last of the warmth
and the fading of brightness
before the final flash and the night”

– “November Walk Near False Creek Mouth,” Earle Birney

“it isn’t dark but the luxury of being has woken you, the reach of your desire, reading us into the page ahead.”

– Ana Historic, Daphne Marlatt

I.

If you ever go to the Sylvia Hotel in Vancouver, you might get a sense of some weirdly forgotten version of the city, a nostalgic snapshot that seems to have been around as long as Vancouver itself. Though the building is well maintained, the sense of decay in this place is pervasive; with time it only becomes ever more pronounced, growing itself into a kind of culture. “The theme” of this culture “lies in the layers/ made and unmade by the nudging lurching/ spiralling down from nothing” (italics in original, Birney, “Walk” 134); the paradoxical emergence of layers – a culture, an identity – from “nothing” would seem impossible, and yet this dissertation itself and its tracing of apocalypticism on the West Coast began with such paradoxes, what I dubbed in my first chapter the scientific sublime. The broad-scale failure to
quantify the West Coast has lingered as a kind of conceptual turbulence, a culture of uneasy negations which finds one of its finest expressions in the Sylvia Hotel. Here decay merges with a confusing vagueness to form an uneasy malaise in its denizens. The past that informs this place is obscure, partial, and unconscious, and as a result, any attempt to apocalyptically rupture it only really exacerbates the confusion. Escape from this cycle would seem hopeless.

By contrast, Daphne Marlatt’s *Ana Historic* (1989) offers a mode of revelation that appears conciliatory and progressive. The destruction of an old order and establishment of a new one, which solidly resonates with Frye’s description of apocalypse, is for Marlatt absolutely necessary to find new ways of living on the West Coast. I argue in the first part of this chapter that the key difference between these two kinds of West Coast apocalypse – one empty, one jubilant; one destructive, one reparative – resides in the ability of a person to recognize and act against perceived histories of injustice. To understand more clearly why the West Coast Apocalyptic can be alternatively exhausting or invigorating, I invite you to imagine the stage on which this dramatic reversal of apocalyptic perspectives plays out.

At the Sylvia Hotel, the craggiest of ancient British ex-pats tip pints while a sprinkling of vaguely awestruck thirtysomethings, known as hipsters, vaguely ironize them; all watch blandly out across English Bay, day after day, as “the earth turns/ from its burning father/ here on this lowest edge of mortal city” (Birney, “Walk” 133). This tired ritual observing of the sun’s daily egress has been going on for at least half a century, perhaps longer, and the hipster generation is really only the latest addition to a long-running stream of denizens that have filtered through. The
setting of the sun into the Pacific, framed perfectly by the plate-windows of the Sylvia, marks the entry into the uncomfortable sleep of people who are both restless and exhausted. Each day the ritual loses a little more of its connection to a history, becoming ever more uprooted and meaningless, and a sense of this gradual erasure has slowly infiltrated into an overall picture of the (post-)colonial West Coast. The “burning father” – the Apollonian light of poetry and truth – daily abandons this place. As Earle Birney puts it,

the barren end of the ancient English
    who tippled mead in Alfred’s hall
    and took tiffin in lost Lahore
    drink now their fouro'clock chainstore teas
    sighing like old pines as the wind turns (Birney, “Walk” 133)

The consumption of imported beverages at the end of the workday not just at the Sylvia but throughout Vancouver echoes the “sea of over-caffeinated white people” of Crash. In Birney’s poem the link between the Coast’s caffeine culture and a miserable, exhausted colonialism – “lost Lahore” – is rendered explicit. While the over-caffeinated sea in Crash was described a full fifty years after Birney wrote the poem above, and suggests the aftermath of American rather than Canadian or British expansionism, the Sylvia Hotel offers a glimpse of the continuities between past and present, exotic places and local ones.

Why is it that the hipsters – successors to the disenchanted, border-crossing Generation X – blend so seamlessly with “the barren end” of empire or, conversely, that nostalgic British expats seem to share a kinship with a group known for its use of irony emptied of any political
aspiration? Perhaps it is that each spirals “down from nothing” – birthed from a culture that never quite was – the “unculture” of unspeakable, intangible guilt and agitation that emerges from the historical and geographic end of the British empire. Everything of note happened before this moment, or, as the cliché goes, “it’s all been done”; here, at the end of the world, nothing remains but cliché. The generations that frequent the hotel blur together precisely because they meet up in mutual and totalizing agreement that nothing worth noting can any longer be accomplished. One can only yearn for or mock the past. While the content of these generations’ complaints may be different, the location and motive are the same.

The blurring of generations is a common pattern in the Coast’s history, regardless (and perhaps because) of repeated attempts by white postcolonial writers to escape the dual gravities of nostalgia and guilt. Fifteen years ago, in the mid-nineties, for example, things appeared to be headed in a new direction but quickly swerved back into the doomed repetitions that characterize the West Coast Apocalyptic. Two fictional Generation Xers visited the Sylvia and found themselves questioning the assumption that “magic was something that happened someplace else to other people” (Coupland, *Life* 281); these characters were briefly acknowledging that the exotic – supposedly so rich in places like “lost Lahore” – was something that was readily available on the Coast. By now, however, the Xers have become the perfect embodiment of the Reaganite yuppie dream that they tried so earnestly to re-evaluate in the early nineties. Like the hippies they loved to mock, these one-time rebels have been sold their particular brand of
rebellion, and perhaps they always were. They are now just more over-caffeinated white people, searching for magic in a cup of coffee. Kurt Cobain committed suicide. Douglas Coupland himself – prophet of the X generation – has begun to parody his own youthful optimism by simultaneously speaking for hipster characters and ridiculing them as “a depressing assemblage of pop culture influences and cancelled emotions, driven by the sputtering engine of only the most banal form of capitalism” (*JPod* 115). This self-parody of his youthful searching – or is it a pre-emptive strike for/against younger writers? – is only more of the nostalgic decay that pervades the Sylvia. Coupland’s writing participates in a long-standing teleology that involves the collapse of different generations’ aspirations on the Coast into a sense of purposelessness.

Regardless of who comes out on top in this largely zero sum game, Coupland’s articulation of the hipster generation is spot on: these younger adults, the generation that came after Generation X, have now begun to consume eighties and nineties *retro* in the most “banal” and “cancelled” ways. *American Apparel*, based in downtown Los Angeles, taps into this consumption by recycling and revamping fashion trends spawned almost solely from within the early neoconservative era. The action of consuming the eighties becomes both a parody and perpetuation of the collapse in political activism of the sixties and seventies; race, sexuality, and gender have become hip consumables because the greed of neo-conservatism completely envelops the historical timeframe in which hipsters have lived. The activity of parodic recycling

---

28 I refer here to Thomas Frank’s *The Conquest of Cool*, in which he argues that the rise of hippies occurred simultaneously with the marketing of the rebel image through consumer items like the Volkswagen van; his assessment of hippie rebellion can be summarized as a peculiar form of consumption – “buy this to escape consumerism” (69). A similar pattern may be recognizable in the signs of Generation X. Starbucks Coffee, for instance, which was started in Seattle just as Xers were about to enter adulthood (1976), is inextricable from the emergence of Xers’s beloved coffeehouse culture.
gradually becomes, as it did for the Xers, a form of vampirism and entropy, a slow countdown to
ture adulthood, the age when any semblance of irony ceases and the implosion squarely into the
category of “North American consumer” is complete. For young adults now there is no outside or
time before the accelerated consumerism of the eighties. This is life, and from the perspective of
a hipster Baudrillard was right: “it happened, it is finished, it will never happen again…. Not
only are we no longer able to produce a new history, we are not even able to ensure its symbolic
reproduction” (America 23). This is a nice description of the vagueness that pervades The Sylvia
Hotel: you cannot even pretend to have participated in history anymore because fewer and fewer
people have any idea of what that would look like. Reproduction, insofar as it perpetuates the
past into the present, has become strictly mechanical; new generations do not entail new life but
the sputtering continuation of older ones. Art fuses with advertising. There is now only the
mouldering of space and history into the tepid dreamscape of strip malls, outlet stores, and the
generalized commodification of experience.

Figures 6.1 and 6.2 Images from
American Apparel’s website
Given this cultural stage, perhaps it is not surprising that beneath English Bay and “the ocean’s abyss” outside the Sylvia’s plate glass windows lies what Birney sees as “the dense unbeating black unapproachable/ heart of this world” (Birney, “Walk” 134). Such a bleak description suggests an alternative, but not altogether different, version of the potentially reparative energies shut up by the conclusion of Volcano. In both representations, the idea of the halting and quenching sea finally deflects any attention away from the momentary appearance of abject perspectives into the world of the West Coast. The Pacific Ocean, in its representation as a space that can neutralize historical discord, becomes a means for obscuring something muffled and unspeakable within the ex-pat (hippie, Gen X, hipster, etc.) observer. The non-word “unbeating” from Birney’s poem suggests the evolution of words like “unfathomable” and “innumerable” on the Coast; in one sense “unbeating” just denotes stillness, and yet the negative prefix evokes something that exceeds the word’s most literal meaning, as if there should be (or have been) a beating heart to the world as it is reflected in the Pacific. A lingering question is how the heart of this world became unbeating. What is present at the fibrillating moment of a culture that never exactly was?

In the eyes of many rapt observers, the body of water forming the West Coast has become a force characterized only by its relentless erosion of the land on which its denizens stand, the external form of an internal longing. It is seen as “eating water at an eaten shore” (Birney 135). Even though the ocean consumes, it is not fully alive; it is merely moved by that unbeating heart whose (assumed) “inapproachability” makes it impossible to fully resuscitate “the world.” The sea has become a mirror for the vampiric and banal forms of capitalism and consumption that
pervade the contemporary Coast, and its symbolism informs other key cultural symbols from the region as well. The Los Angeles aqueducts, the water veins that sustain the city, are often read, for example, as draining the “stolen snowmelt of the Sierra and Rockies” and constituting “a rupture with both Nature and Law” (emphasis added, Davis, *Ecology* 10; McClung, *Landscapes* 7). As in Birney’s poetry, the landscape reflects the insatiable, unnatural hunger of the observer.

Such an attitude of insatiable hunger is guilt-ridden and melancholic, a state characterized by an inward turning and a regression to a sort of primary narcissism. The object of apocalyptic desire – whatever harmonic world that lay beyond the veils of the horizon – now escapes forever, and, rather than properly mourning the loss, “owing to a real or slight disappointment,” the ego seeks to incorporate part of the other into itself “by devouring it” (Freud, “Melancholia” 586-87). This pattern of devouring the absent, abject other itself becomes a way of maintaining the ego’s self-centredness, but the cost of “unapproachable” and retreating guilt is a kind of cultural zombification – melancholia itself on a broad, cultural scale. For the sake of a revitalization and metaphoric *defibrillation* of “the unbeating black unapproachable heart” of the Coast, it is first important to note that, in Earle Birney’s formulation, “the barren end” of the empire is not a location but only a certain kind of person, one among many of the Coast’s denizens. The “old pines” and the coastal topography they represent are not necessarily sighing (and dying). Their “ancient English” observer is. He and the later generations with which he blurs have become enraptured by an ultimately narcissistic form of self-reflection, and the “unbeating heart” is really only an absence at the core of this *insubstantial* form of reflection.
This (self-)observer sighs because he cannot come to terms with the death of progress and the end of a world well suited to the cravings of an unexamined desire that the Coast signifies. From this point, he lives on like Tithonus, the figure from Greek mythology who is unable to die but continues to age as a captive of Eos, goddess of the dawn. Each new day means only that he has become more “ancient.” On the Coast, he must suffer the undeath of being perpetually absorbed into an already decaying cluster of symbols – the “crisis of an achieved utopia” (Baudrillard, *America* 23). His “unbeating” world consists only of a zombified repetition, an endless recycling of irony and cliché. It has all been done, but the “eating” Pacific is never satiated in its mechanistic quest to become the perfected, unchanging, immobile symbol of consumption. The Coast is the promised land, but for some reason it is monstrous: a bloodless place of total stagnation and lifelessness, a barren end, a mechanically reproduced form of desire.

The idea of mechanized reproduction resonates with another Generation Xer’s preoccupation with people “so hungry and unfulfilled that they ate their own children” (Ellis, *Less* 207). If the Pacific Ocean has become the zombified reflection of a certain kind of observer, then the zombielike observer has begun to consume the symbolic future as well as the present. Children no longer embody hope for progress and growth but have become competition and another thing to be consumed “in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development” (Freud, “Melancholia” 587) – the repetitive melancholic rut in which the adults are trapped. Such a pessimistic, implosive way of representing the Coast and its future is wholly

---

29 Much of my reading of Tithonus is in reference to Tennyson’s poem of the same name. In the poem, Tithonus waxes nostalgic over the loss of his youthful vigour and efficacy, and he provides through his reflection an argument in favour of a revitalized (tacitly colonial) masculinity.
narcissistic in itself, but like Narcissus’s enraptured gaze, it can be seen from an outside perspective to rely upon a fundamental misrecognition; there is more to the picture that is going unseen. Without acknowledgment of the depthlessness, emptiness, and stagnation present in the Narcissus myth, the West Coast appears from the outside as a place of the ultimate superficiality. Narcissus unwittingly gazes into his own reflection at the edge of the Pacific, the end of the Empire, unaware that there are things more brilliant than he could imagine moving just beneath the surface (and indeed echoing through the forests all around). In these coastal locales, rhythms can be read as tidal and replenishing rather than mechanistically dwindling and entropic; the Coast’s sites of abundance cannot be captured and rendered perfectly visible, but they can be peripherally detected if one is not too hasty in evaluating the geography. The sea and forests are not merely objects to a phallocentric subject. They can be understood as hinting at something abject, obscene, immeasurable, unfathomable, and teeming with life for it – something monstrous, pursued because of a “fascination of desire for what lay out of bounds” (Marlatt, Ana 77). Such murmuring green monsters haunt the writing of this and the next chapter. They stir up momentary ripples in the perfect reflection of the Western World that the West Coast has for some become.

If representations such as Volcano and “Under Fire” open apocalyptic fissures simply to vent and safely re-contain them within narcissistic schemata, and the frequent repetition of this action produces a kind of cultural melancholia because it must repress the excess energies it agitates, then perhaps the effort to neutralize horror in the first place is a problem on the Coast. Technologies such as gated communities and their extension into what Mike Davis calls the
carceral city have become a way of evasively perpetuating, rather than confronting, historical injustice. They produce the apocalyptic energies that spectacular representations like *Volcano* try to excise. Perhaps a shift in conceiving the Coast becomes possible when we acknowledge the hitherto abjected perspective that volcanoes and forest fires enrich the soil they cross. Life ensues in the wake of fire. Volcanoes ultimately add to and replenish, rather than simply “eat” or consume, the land. Perhaps once the West Coast apocalypse has begun – regardless of the anxieties producing it – it needs to be opened up more and allowed to continue unceasingly, to replenish and grow rather than being suppressed and extinguished by the sea. This action would be a kind of perpetual, materialized deconstruction-as-geological-process.

Advocates for better land management on the Coast often make the point that people should not be fighting against natural disaster but forming a productive coalition with it. Beyond this argument’s significance to resource management, it may be indicating a deeper cultural shift. It expresses a genuine desire to conform to or work with the unspeaking landscape rather than continuing to resist and impose upon it. The movement here is one from the self-centred effacement of an abject otherness to an acknowledgment of the intrinsic value of rhythmic natural phenomena, including death. While my formulation may appear to rely upon a careless metaphoric conflation of disparate natural and cultural processes, I would argue they have never been far apart. Both apocalyptic narratives and natural resources can be exploited to economic and political ends. In cases like *Volcano*, disaster itself has been exploited to produce political and actual capital. If West Coast apocalypses have become a means for selling various forms of reactionary and bigoted behaviour, and this “sell” relies upon a fantasy of containment, then
perhaps in some cases apocalyptic narratives should instead be left to run their course. The idea of an endless, unchecked apocalyptic is similar to what Michel Foucault refers to generally as a “politics of discomfort,” but here, in this dissertation, there has emerged a set of tangible metaphors and cultural patterns – a materialized stage on which a politics of discomfort can be enacted.…. 

Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* features several dramatic vignettes, some obviously staged, some more apparently historical, and each of these involves an uncanny “release mechanism” of sorts. The repetition of this trope suggests a place where a critic can begin to perceive a politics of discomfort on the Coast and begin to dramatically reverse the cycle of melancholia and apocalypse that characterizes narcissistic representations of the Coast. There emerges a series of counter-narratives, or anti-narratives, from within the most obvious and apparent narratives in Pynchon’s novel – threatening undercurrents that have the potential to completely disorder the main narrative and, depending how far you want to extrapolate it, the whole world and universe. At one point, in a play recounted within the novel, 

a new mode of expression takes over. It can only be called a kind of ritual reluctance. Certain things, it is made clear, will not be spoken aloud; certain events will not be shown onstage; though it is difficult to imagine, given the excesses of the preceding acts, what these things could possibly be. (53)

This bizarre Jacobean revenge play, *The Courier’s Tragedy*, appears in its first several acts to stage that which by definition should not be shown on stage, the *obscene*. The opening acts
involve graphic scenes of incest, “protracted torture,” and a catalogue of eviscera (50-53), but somehow there is something “difficult to imagine” that exceeds even these horrors. The possibility that something else could exist at all occurs because obscene violence has simply become the seen/scene on the West Coast; this is a place where spectacularized apocalypse as a “mode of expression” occupies a position of central cultural significance. If apocalypse is a daily occurrence, then what remains to be revealed? That is the question.

The “excesses” that I examined in the preceding chapters – the mad dashes through postmodern Los Angeles and Vancouver, the violent duels between man and fire, and the effacement of Indigenous peoples’ lands through imported practices of naming – invite a similar kind of “ritual reluctance” as these un-events which haunt The Courier’s Tragedy. Histories of trauma may be too difficult to immediately explain in the available apocalyptic terms, and that is because apocalypse on the Coast often involves a navigable and fathomable set of formal features. What happens to apocalypses of abjection, ones that do not neatly resolve a set of binary hierarchies because their terms are to some extent unspeakable? Introducing points of “ritual reluctance” suggests that some narratives require very gradual and laboured revelations to emerge fully, and recognizing some of these emergent narratives from the Coast is very much a desired outcome of this chapter and dissertation.

Even if it is the case, as I have suggested in contravention to Baudrillard’s claims, that Los Angeles and the Far West have untold depths, it does not mean that these can then be readily or easily sounded; for some “[t]he language of grief is silence” (Kogawa 14) and sometimes enough silence must accumulate for the absence of voice to become recognizable, for it to spring
forth as a new entity. Ultimately, I am speaking of the slippery concept of the unspeakable here, trying to unpack the value of zero in narratives performed on a cultural stage that has become too self-obsessed and self-important to see past itself; when you have (and are) everything, notes one character from Brett Easton Ellis’s *Less than Zero*, you “don’t have anything to lose” (190).

What happens when one has nothing, zero, not even a legitimated existence as a *someone*, to begin with? Some spaces – however “difficult to imagine” – must open from which these new modes of existence can emerge; they will appear as minor disturbances before they can fully break through the surface of history.

Another key vignette from *Lot 49* involves the recounting of a fictional historical group known as the Scurvhamites, a “sect of most pure Puritans” who believed in two types of predestination, one that runs “off the will of God, its prime mover,” and another that runs “off some opposite principle, something blind, soulless” (128). Although according to the novel the sect’s desire was “to woo converts into the Godly and purposeful sodality of the Scurvhamites,” they ultimately found themselves “looking out into the gaudy clockwork of the doomed with a certain sick and fascinated horror” and one by one succumbing to “the glamorous prospect of annihilation” (128). It is as if their narcissistic universe, where all moved according to the beneficent will of a favouritist God, could not handle the broader sodality of the world at large: “For He makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust” (*King James Bible*, Matt. 5:45). The “something blind and soulless” of the Scurvhamites resonates with “the dense unbeating black unapproachable/ heart of this world” that confronts the “barren end” of the British Empire; a neatly recognizable, teleological vision of the world grinds
to the halting moment when it must pause and reflect upon itself. The “unapproachable” is in reality not unapproachable but a hovering over the horrifying prospect of having one’s entire epistemology undone by “something blind” – not fully sensate: something submerged.

At the end of Pynchon’s novel, the titular “crying” involves the opening of a similarly horrifying gap, and at many points the author articulates an indeterminate space between order and chaos. He evokes continually the fuzzy region between what is observable and what is not, and I suggest that this is the space of ritual reluctance on the Coast – of “lack as a ghostly presence in both time and space” (Song 22). Notably, it is not a plunge wholly into chaos, but rather a space where what is coherent begins to break apart. This is the threshold at which the uneasy movement of “something else” into narcissistic versions of West Coast history could begin. Crying’s final moment, which promises to resolve the question of whether its entire narrative has been a paranoid fantasy, lingers at the moment of emergence without resorting to the resolution and recontainment of Volcano; like the novel’s protagonist, we “await the crying of lot 49” (152), the decisive moment, but it never occurs and a reader is invited instead to confront assumptions about history and narrative. The final and most important piece of information as to what happened becomes the observer’s opinion.

Catherine Owen’s poetry collection Cusp/detritus, which is also set primarily on the West Coast, involves a similar kind of postmodern invitation; the book’s numerous vignettes concerning several characters’ poeticized lives are not resolved or synthesized into transcendent moments of truth, which leaves a great deal of space for a reader to experience the narrative as he or she desires. Such a formal suspension of synthesis describes my own aim for the present and
the next chapter; the ghosts of a cogent theory of the Coast certainly emerge, but are swept back into broader West Coast themes. A full revelation of history – an adequately reparative apocalypse – is impossible on the West Coast; too much remains “archaic and irretrievable” (Owen 30) and yet something can come of self-reflexively open-ended attempts at speaking about the Coast. Something can come of attempts to asymptotically approach the unapproachable “end” or even of quantum leaps into “what lay out of bounds” – the coming into contact of the apocalyptic with other narrative modes.

In pursuit of these leaps, the title of Owen’s book articulates an odd but useful opposition: her speaker can bring herself to the cusp of unfathomable experiences – the detritus of West Coast culture – but cannot ever be fully immersed in them because her own history is too coherent and navigable. The opposition, then, is not between what is known and what can be neatly demarcated as “unknown,” but between the limits of her knowledge – the cusp – and whatever alternative epistemologies move beyond; like the implosive Scurvhamite cosmology, the slash (or punctuating cusp) in Owen’s title only emphasizes the inability of the first term to reach the second without becoming it. Her speaker still ultimately “cannot mine anymore” that which has been lost (1) – her deceased lover and muse, but also the detrital lives that have been effaced by narcissistically complacent representations such as sad, sighing British expats. Like Jeremy Papier’s father from Taylor’s Stanley Park, one would have to become a homeless person to understand homelessness; otherwise s/he would simply be reflecting on him- or herself. The unknown ocean articulates the limits of those on land through the cusp of the coastline.
The West Coast is indeed an excellent place to consider a politics of discomfort – an
apocalypse without cessation, the glamorous prospecting for annihilation – because so many
wounds are still fresh, even bleeding; the ragged edges of history have not been washed over
with time. The Japanese internment during World War Two, for instance, was an apocalypse of
abjection that cannot be tidily or comfortably washed away by the “sea of overcaffeinated white
people,” nor can the 1992 riots in Los Angeles or the trauma of residential schools; for many
people on the West Coast these events recur like the tides. They are unending. Periodically
reopened wounds translate into a frequently appearing chronotope of the Coast: the inextricable
blending of past and present, and of subject and object. The wide-scale reiteration of such spatio-
temporal confusion continuously destabilizes a sense of historical order. As I suggested in
chapter four, histories may unfold here in visibly spatial terms rather than following along strictly
linear, narratable trajectories; this blurring means the geography of the coast itself has become
imbued with the mythic, mystic significance of an ongoing “mistory” (Ricou 19). The idea of the
unceasing apocalypse that cannot come to final terms is markedly different from Baudrillard’s
notion of a completed apocalypse because the unceasing apocalypse assumes that revelations
must continue indefinitely, that there will indeed be constantly new waves of horrific, abject
otherness coming into focus as others recede, each redefining the West Coast as it emerges.
Things have not necessarily moved into a phase of Baudrillardian “stupor” nor need they ever
(“Masses” 100).

In the process of confronting these terrifying moments of history – “the panic and the
screaming, the lost bodies” (Marlatt, *Ana* 78) – apocalypses of abjection begin to seep into the
narcissistic West Coast mainstream, creating a kind of unsettled reflection (and self-reflexivity) like the “ritual reluctance” in the vignettes from Lot 49. An unceasing apocalyptic rippling back through the decaying empire allows the crucial point to emerge where it is acknowledged that to some extent everyone is abjected by language, even those who may have in the past held much greater access to institutions of power. This would mark a movement from a long-standing phase of melancholia, which involves an inward turning to solidify the ego, into mourning, which fully acknowledges the loss of the object and the need to live on. On the cusp of the West Coast there is an opportunity to bury the dead sprawl of the dehierarchized sign, to allow new life to constantly spring *from the depths* as it were. This is no longer a process of enlightenment, a casting out, but one of reparation and emergence; this is not another impatient apocalyptic panacea for history but a cultural triage station, one that constantly receives and retrieves new patients.

Where (and when) does an unceasing apocalypse begin? Probably in an unbalanced moment: another day passes Tithonus by under the guise of comfy West Coast living. Another wish unfulfilled or a word spoken out of place slips into the fissures opened by consciousness and rationality. Let enough of these gaps emerge and perhaps you begin to feel *crazy* at the inability to draw together the solid facts anymore. Let us start there. The fissures from which we start are enough to leave one asking “what is fact? (f)act. the f stop of act. a still photo in the ongoing cinerama” (Marlatt, Ana 30). The ongoing cinerama, life projected on all sides, wide enough that some of it slips out of vision: the periphery is by definition impossible to look at, and
definition throws peripheral visions out of focus. The resulting chiasmatic ga(s)ps – these fleeting moments between assertion and comprehension – can make a little poetic room for us, offering a “tiny cell of light, late, after the others have been extinguished” (30). From here, new histories of the West (Coast) can emerge. While exhausted Tithonus rests in his cell of darkness and can only dream of better days as Eos stalks up on him once again, Ana Richards – sidereal sister of the narrator from Daphne Marlatt’s *Ana Historic* – sits on the coast, “on the other side of a day in England she already knew”; here she is half a world away from the heart of the British Empire “writing against her absence” (47). By pondering what constitutes such a writing, we can begin to delimit alternatives to the apocalyptic resetting (and resettling) of the region. Ana knows well what Eos and Tithonus are up to; she writes from the “other side” of their entropic daily dramas – the spent day – from a place literally and symbolically without name, “the point having no English geographic name, no transplant label” (127). She writes from a location on a land prior to its being named after its British explorer, Vancouver. On the West Coast, because it is so far away from more important corners of the world, the day (and time itself) can be experienced as a spatial relationship; time becomes two places at once, and something vitally new emerges from the expanse between them.

While Ana’s day job as a schoolteacher requires that “she begins with her name, a name that is not really hers” (47) during roll call, her furtive scribbling at night allows her to express something beyond this name that is not hers, her father’s name Richards. For her, the Name of the Land – Vancouver – becomes interconnected with the Name of the Father; both efface all
non-patriarchal and non-colonial possibilities for existence in this location. By constructing a narrative for the historical figure she calls Ana, the novel’s narrator Annie seeks to construct a non-patriarchal and non-colonizing place on the Coast for herself; her inventive rewriting of a historical figure does not reflect a nostalgic desire for a return to a pre-colonial moment but an active desire to form a space for herself in the present. In the schematics of the novel, the reiterative naming of the land functions the same way as the father’s last name does when it comes to a person’s body: each iteration of the name repeats and confirms an initial effacement of other possibilities (especially that of another father); it becomes a role call. At least in Annie’s reparative formulation, Ana feels she must write against the absences created by her role or symbolic function, against the daily utterance of her father’s name in place of her own unspeakable ones: with her nocturnal scribbling she creates other names for herself, her own illegitimate, abject ways of being spawned from “the living intimacy of these Ferns and small Bushes” of the coastal rainforest (46). She exists somewhere between legitimate and illegitimate, and this doubled form of self-emergence between Ana and Annie is distinctly not a narcissistic “unbeating heart” because she is giving life rather than seeking to devour it: “it’s women imagining all that women could be that brings us into the world” (131). When Annie gives herself her own last name at the novel’s finale, she chooses Torrent – a name of the misty coastal geography itself, the new milieu from which she chooses to issue forth. The first step to this self-naming and self-narrating against previous effacements is to create the imaginative space of

30 Captain George Vancouver is notorious for having used Indigenous peoples’ directions for exploration, and then replacing all Indigenous geographic names with European ones (Brealy).
“Ana,” a name given by Annie to the historical figure known only to official documents by men’s names – “Mrs. Richards” and then “Mrs. Springer.”

Like a lively tide, the pattern of struggling into existence by the unspeaking figures of history repeats and gains momentum: a hundred years later, in roughly the same location, another woman writes against suburbanite oblivion from her diminutive “condo in a remote suburb of a remote city” (Coupland, Hey 175); simultaneously, Annie Torrent is “here. scribbling again” (Marlatt 90), creating herself as text, writing herself into existence; Oedipa Maas, protagonist of Pynchon’s Lot 49, is intent on understanding “the sense of buffering, insulation” that surrounds her life and “the absence of an intensity, as if [she was] watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix” (10). Nostalgic apocalypse or revelatory celebration: without a phallic projectionist fixing what one sees on the Coast, the question becomes how to look at the ongoing cinerama that has gone out of focus: “I find myself in a new world, Father, and that has made all the difference” (Marlatt, Ana 85). Absent fathers are too busy building empire elsewhere, dreaming that names alone can carry on their lineage. Even when they are present on the Coast they are often too busy mourning the emptiness of what they have created, and in their place they leave points of reluctance in the narrative of the New World. These are exactly the spaces from which others may locate the emergence of new worlds. Abandoned by the wasting gods of Empire – the Narcissi and Tithonii – these West Coast women write themselves, trying to speak of a differently focused world, one with a beating heart, trying to become “ab-original in the new world.” They are “straying close to animism, souls in trees and
other pagan notions” (Marlatt, *Ana* 84), and it is not just “women” of the West Coast “straying” from their lineage but an abundance of abject beings.

In *Ana*, the end of the old phallocentric world springs from what is described as a “monstrous leap of imagination” (135). Daphne Buckle, who emerges from the male-dominated world of the *TISH* poets to become Daphne Marlatt, rewrites an old joke at the beginning of her novel: “Who’s there? she was whispering. knock, knock. in the dark” (9). The answer involves a revelation marked not by violence but by jubilation. However, it proceeds from a question that is no laughing matter for those trying to write new narratives on the West Coast: Oedipa Maas knows she must make an escape from the banal insanity (and insane banality) of her life, but a key question lingers, unresolved: “What [does] she desire to escape from?” (11). Both Annie and Oedipa (and perhaps Daphne) find themselves beginning at the cusp of monstrosity, the fuzzy and insensate transitional space where bodies are not quite what they are; in time, each comes to recognize that monstrous things (the haunting echoes in the forest) only appear so from the fixated perspective of the narcissist. For these women, chaotic echoes on the coast begin to signify a liberation from rules of the Old World, or at least the movement into a new one that renders old paradigms more monstrous. The end of the World is the beginning of the world and it is possible partly because the daffodils (the infamously narcissistic blooms of Empire) flower a little too early and eagerly here – they are slightly too obvious. They reveal their own grotesque desperation.

Something about this place is distinctly different from the Lake District, on this “barbarous coast, among natives more inclined to murder us for our property than to assist us”
(Thompson, *Journals 877*), and the bold imposition of old taxonomies begins to falter and distort under the weight of its own hubris. The West Coast is where Apollo, god of the enlightening sun and of poetry, disappears each day after having risen from back East: a poetics of the Western World continually slips through the clutches of the coastal land and becomes marked by its pregnant absences. By the same token, the “echoes of sorrow for what has been lost in the process” of empire building and its postmodern consumeristic offshoots can, in the moment of slippage and imbalance before the narcissistic figure plunges headlong to his transformative death, regain (or gain for the first time) their corporeality on the West Coast (Taylor 364). These (re)incarnated echoes from the land can feed back into the desirous, self-centred, economic(al) swindle that initiated their being pushed to the linguistic and epistemological brink of extinction. Echoes are no longer merely the faded remnant of a woman who pines over Narcissus: they are all that he lacks as a result of his self-adoration – his reflection that has dwindled into nothing more than the name of a flower. From his perspective, hovering enraptured over a superficial image of himself, when the body dies, one only carries on in history as the hollowed name of his father.

Writing oneself from being an abject nobody into a being – the dash from the cusp of empirical and imperial detritus – comes not a moment too soon, not for Ana nor for Annie. The end of the world is not something to be feared, not for them. Like Catherine Owen on the cusp, Annie must linger on “the edge” of the Coast moving from the submerging water to the land, from the “tiny cell of light” to the broader place where “it isn’t dark” at the novel’s conclusion (153); she moves in a contrary direction to those following Frederick Jackson Turner, whose
imaginations chase the sun forever westward in a progressive fantasy, oblivious to the fact that
the West has long since run out. Richard’s last name – the Name of someone else’s Father –
becomes “a name that is not really hers,” “the sound of a door closing” (47; 152). “Who’s there”
on the other side of the name, she asks, and “Annie Torrent” emerges at the end of the novel as
the response. She is the torrent moving behind (and bursting from) the narcissistic reflection. She
has not arrived on a frontier defined by back East, entropically decaying as she goes and leaving
a trail of death in her wake; she identifies instead with the element that gives life to the land and
sea, the torrential downpour of the temperate rainforest. Her self-fictionalization is opposed to
history and the historian’s record of names and facts. In terms of her discursive present, she has
not arrived from the past as it is passed down through a father’s name; her poetic self-
identification is instead sprung metaphorically from the sea – aboriginal, emergent.

Annie’s celebratory revelation enables her (and a critic) to rewrite the past (of this
chapter, of history) from the vantage of the present. A teenage friend’s near drowning, for
instance, becomes for Annie a conversation with her adult self: “i can still remember the feel of
your body as i fought you back, as i hugged you back to air.// and the will i felt. and the sheer
jubilation” (83). In this fluid geography, self fuses with other, and past with present; the
emergence from beneath a lake called Princess Pool becomes symbolic of Annie’s torrential
emergence from the deadening role as housewife taken for granted. The watery coastal
geography becomes inextricable from the naming of self, and once she has named herself, she
can “take the leap” (152) into the form of desire – “the sheer jubilation” – that she detects as a
young woman rescuing a friend. She has finally befriended herself and is no longer rendered
pacific by her husband’s narcissistic desire. She has come to the moment, the place, the cusp where “terror has to do with the trembling that takes you out of yourself” (152). With each new wave of writing, recognizable elements of the past expand and create new spaces until the point where “you” are *tidalectically* taken out of yourself. The past and its paradigms are not gone but they are transformed and focused in new ways.

This slippery “you,” which gradually emerges throughout *Ana Historic*, is the paradoxical acknowledgment of oneself in two places in time, and the doubling of self emulates the Coast’s atemporality as it transforms and undoes a linear progression of time from past to present. The Old World, and the apocalypses produced by its perspectival lacunae, are undone and rewritten by a new, subsequent one. Unlike the entropically repeating and blurring generations of Tithonii populating the Sylvia hotel, Annie’s confusion of self and other – you and I – offers a point of opening, celebration, and new life. The departure from traditional paradigms of apocalypse lies in the symbolic rejection of the phallus, which, it should be noted, is not strictly a lesbian gesture (nor is “lesbian” strictly a category). Annie’s jubilant revelation is one of a new kind of world, one without proper name or pronoun, terrifying and revivifying because “it takes you out of yourself.” What do you then become? For Annie, she is taken by Zoe “into a room that is alive with the smell of her” – the lively and torrential plunge into a new world. It is a world that is “bleeding and soft” (152), *not* dense and unbeating. This symbolic uterine movement away from the bloodlessly unbeating and mechanistic role thrust upon her as child-bearer constitutes an opening that is, in the slippery way Marlatt puts it, “not a bad end” (136).
Annie’s ending is of course only one possibility among others, both within the novel and beyond its limits. This scribbling – Annie’s and mine – can also be read as a struggle towards “the luxury of being” (Marlatt, Ana 153). Any monstrously lateral leaps I might take here and throughout this dissertation can be read as my reluctance to oversimplify traumatic histories by using a spectacular and banal mode of full revelation that has come to characterize much writing from the Coast. Indeed, the tortuous form that Annie’s self-revelation takes constitutes its own kind of ritual reluctance. She acknowledges that her narrative is “circling around the same idea” with “all these bits and pieces thrown in” (81) rather than being told in a straightforward way based solely on a “groundwork of facts” (88). She repeatedly grapples with the endlessly negating voices of her husband Richard and mother Ina and culture itself, worrying that there is “nothing without quotation marks” (81), no thoughts free of patriarchal lineages. This becomes particularly significant when she envisions her husband reading her scribbling and saying outright that “this is nothing” (81). In having her writing described as nothing, it occupies the same space as that “without quotation marks” – the place of zero-value. Her circuitous linguistic finessing spins momentarily free of the anxiety of influence. In identifying as “nothing” she becomes phantasmic something, the mysterious value of zero. This is strikingly similar to the spectral nobody that walks in LA: “this nothing is a place he [her husband] doesn’t recognize, cut loose from its history and its relentless progress towards some end. this is undefined territory, unaccountable. and so on edge” (81). The similarity between this “place her husband doesn’t recognize” and the place of nobodies in Los Angeles returns us to the culture of decay with which I began this chapter, but with a more celebratory spin. The lack of acknowledgment and
recognition by people stuck in old modes of knowing can itself create spaces for new reparative identifications, new luxurious “beings,” to emerge.

Marlatt’s contemplation of a haunting “nothing” here also returns to what I was arguing in chapters three and four: the pervasive desire in narratives of the West to cut progress loose from its undesirable byproducts ultimately produces unconscious apocalyptic anxieties. In narratives like “Under Fire” the monstrously insensate and irrational elements of history are discarded into figures of domesticity, particularly housewives, which are in turn disposed of in horrific, apocalyptic ways so that (a spectral) nothing is confronted directly. All of the residual melancholic gloom from the material and actual “devouring” of otherness must go somewhere, and so it unfolds as an uncanny confrontation/negation. Annie’s jubilant revelation at the end of Ana Historic hinges on the idea of these uncanny confrontations and bends them in a previously unthinkable direction. For her, forms of desire considered non-existent by patriarchal narratives and familial structures now offer the unnamed space for the “the luxury of being” (153). Annie articulates the relationship between history, apocalypse, and her own imaginative writing at one point: “come back, history calls, to the solid ground of fact. you don’t want to fall off the edge of the world” (111). By the end of the novel she does. The idea of the edge of the world is precisely what Annie must cross because it is only really the edge of the known world, the solid world produced by fact and history. She ultimately comes to occupy the space demarcated previously as nothing. Although the “edge” of the Pacific Ocean appears to be a perfect mirror reflecting back on the empire, it is – in Annie’s final perspective – the haunted place from which other desires have sprung.
Examining the binary tension between fact and acts, and surface and depths, in the novel helps get at the pivotal role-reversal that plays out in *Ana Historic*. As Annie notes, her scribbling shares the same root as cut – *skeri* (81); as a project of scribbling, the writing of the narrative is the process of cutting herself free from patriarchal conceptions of the world, and yet there are also questions of whether *she* neglects anything in this process. In her own scribbling – her efforts to cut herself free from Richard’s imposing narrative – another derivative of *skeri* emerges: her role as bearer of the Father’s name is decided against. Through the temporary gaps opened up by her linguistic experimentation, she gains an elusive form of agency. She is not writing nothing, as Richard might have it, but a version of herself that attempts to operate independently of his. In other words, she no longer accepts her position as *scission*, a woman divided between her husband’s desire and her own. She *decides*, and by virtue of its etymology this “de-scission” is inextricable from the initially tenuous act of writing. As she scribbles she cuts, which serves to reverse the invasive excision that is enacted upon her hysterical mother in the form of a lobotomy.

At the same time, her imagined belief that Richard would consider her writing to be “cut loose from its history” serves a different purpose, a way of illuminating the biases of his perspective. Annie carefully traces through facets of personal and documentary history to arrive at her decision, and in some regards the open, imaginative, and loose form of her story takes many more possibilities into account than the “diligent research behind his [Richard’s] books” (134). If she is excising his version of history, it is only to make room for an abundance of others’, the “missing persons in all this rubble” (134). Scribbling in this sense only cuts loose the
tired unidirectional hierarchies implied by phallocentric and linear versions of history. The ambiguous referent of “you” and “us” in the novel’s final pages allows her to articulate her desire without closing off, or closeting, others’ desire. The form of her decision – her cutting that opens something larger – is opposed to the linear gaze of the figure with which I began this chapter – the West Coast observer who stares blankly into the sea wondering what to do next. Because of her position on the other side of his story, her decisive revelation is non-horrific: in crossing over the conceptualized “edge of the world,” she becomes monstrous and realizes, instead, that “it is not Frankenstein” that resides there “but a nameless part” she already knows (152). She has imagined her way into the unspeakable spaces of the scientific sublime. Her scribbled revelation suggests that the world of the imaginary – that echoing, abject space that consistently challenges and blurs the apparently solid world of fact – always existed. It can only be treated with varying degrees of neglect, horror, or love based on how well one can incorporate it into his or her environment.

Another scene from The Crying of Lot 49 anticipates the apocalyptic reverse of Annie’s jubilant personal revelation. Oedipa Maas’s psychotherapist, Dr. Hilarius, eventually ends up going insane after working with what he describes as too many “nutty broads” (113). While his derogatory label is partly facetious, it actually says a lot in the context of the West Coast apocalyptic. Details from Ana Historic suggest where all the “nutty broads” have come from. Although Annie is ultimately able to imagine and decide upon a space for her own desire in her late-eighties setting, her mother Ina, confined to the domestic roles of a nineteen-fifties
housewife in the far-flung reaches of the British Empire, can conceive of apocalypse as the only possible escape from her life:

you [Ina] wanted it to end, the world i mean, at least the world as it was then constituted. because for you there was no way out. we felt your wanting it and it scared us, Jan and me (Marta was too young), as we stayed up late, whispering in bed together, wondering about the peaches you’d fed us for dessert (botulism! you said, if one of us got a stomach ache), the chicken we’d had (it must have been off, you said). would you deliberately put an end to us, we wondered. (143)

For Ina, the “end of the world” is inextricable from “an end” to her family and the domestic spaces symbolized here by the children’s bedroom. Ina knows no other world than a patriarchal one. The fatal “end” fantasized here doubles the revelatory end of the novel, yet the temporal gap between the world of Annie’s present and “the world as it was then constituted” enables the “luxury of being” not available to Ina. Apocalyptically poisoning the nourishment that sustains both empire and family symbolizes for Ina the only possible escape from the Name of the Father and Empire, but it remains symbolic, whereas Annie is able to unearth and (re)construct alternative spaces of nourishment. While Ina may be unaware of the implications of her apocalyptic fantasy for the melancholic attitude that pervades the coast, she notably responds to the feeling of being devoured by fantasizing about poisoned food.

Ultimately, Ina is lobotomized for her hysterical behaviour. Her desperate attempts to maintain colonial trappings in a foreign land while simultaneously gaining some sense of self result in unnavigable gaps in her subjectivity. Stan Dragland, seeking to emulate formally the gap
itself, calls it “the prison which Ina in her paranoia for her daughters represents to them as a charmed circle of obedience” (173). Ina occupies a spatiotemporally backward-looking position similar to the nostalgic hipsters and ex-pats – she is trapped in a “charmed circle” of zombified repetition. The biggest problem is that, as a mother, she lacks the time and cultural freedom to incessantly sigh and pine. It is not merely the impossibility of negotiating a sense of personal agency within patriarchal family structures, but also the negotiation of contradictory cultural, national, and geographic spaces that is foreclosed to her as a woman that causes her psychotic break.

Hilarius, on the other hand, goes insane because he can navel (or is it naval?) gaze: “a part of [him] must have really wanted to believe – like a child hearing, in perfect safety, a tale of horror – that the unconscious would be like any other room, once the light was let in” (110). His position of power and cultural dominance as a psychoanalyst who experiments on unwitting and unwilling “volunteers” – including his actions as a Nazi scientist charged with psychologically torturing Jews – has too many indigestible byproducts to offer a viable and nourishing reality. For Hilarius, the revelation of the source of melancholia leads to psychosis because he cannot reconcile the truth with his life as it exists in his West Coast setting. He realizes that he actually produces “nutty broads” for a living – an unpalatable and unsustainable “tale of horror.” Instead of cutting himself away from institutions of power in which he has little investment, then, as Annie does, he essentially cuts himself in two. As he lets “light” into the “dark rooms” of his own psyche, he illuminates the psychologically unbearable contradictions between his work and its byproducts. The dramatic difference between the after-effects of Annie’s and Hilarius’s
revelations suggests that it is not merely the coming to light of one’s unconscious that makes something appear apocalyptic, but the inability to negotiate and reconcile these revelations with the cultural and social detritus generated by their occurrence.

Annie Torrent’s friends provide her with the space to embrace, rather than fear, the apocalyptic disappearance of the ego. Just prior to the end of the novel she finds herself in a room with several feminist activists, working towards a common cause, and the room itself is intertwined for her with a West Coast geography. Here, in a house in the East End of Vancouver with “dream soaked walls” she finds herself wanting to listen to other women as she “used to listen in the woods to the quiet interplay of wind, trees, rain, creeping things under the leaves – this world of connection” (151). Each element is interconnected, and inextricable – unable to be cut from the other. She drinks “cappuccinos from a café down the street” (151), but in terms of their associations they differ radically from the “four oclock chainstore tea” of the expats at the Sylvia. Her revelation of identity is so much more viable than Hilarius’s because it brings together into her setting all of the “bits and pieces” – the rubble or waste – that she has been scribbling about throughout the novel – ideas of the monstrous, the living rainforest, lesbian desire, negation, null-value, non-patriarchal identities, and an abundance of other previously abject possibilities. Her decisive scribbling away from Richard is only her entry into a new world where “detritus” is homelike.

Unlike Annie’s narrative of revelation, neither Ina’s nor Hilarius’s horrific revelations of daily life can be negotiated with the historical moment in which they find themselves. The same inability ultimately marks the split within the relationship between Richard and Annie. As I have
suggested, apocalypses on the West Coast frequently involve the radical eruption of localized nothings – negated identities and possibilities – into an hierarchized, organizing fantasy of the world at hand, but Ana Historic is particularly noteworthy in that it is told from the perspective of a so-called “nothing.” Hystery, a “going off the deep end” of imagination (88), the taking of things too far, the letting loose an exploration of the monstrous and detrital by-products of fact: the gaps and points of overlap among these have some potential to revivify the zombified patriarchs who inhabit this place. Non-horrific revelations finally give breathing room to those narratives closeted in various ways by history. Knock, knock: who is the nothing submerged behind Narcissus’s perfected reflection, the atrophied name of the flower? Eve Sedgwick has noted that certain kinds of ignorance actually “correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth” (Epistemology 8), and this applies when it comes to Richard’s imagined negation of Annie’s narrative. Part of Richard’s specific version of history is the belief that other modes of history do not, or cannot, exist. He is correct on his own terms, but he is missing the broad picture. This nutty scribbling of Annie’s – this breathing literary life into the history of the Coast and all of its inhabitants – is no laughing matter.

At the same time that Ana Historic partly alleviates the accumulating pressures of the West Coast as a post-colonial space by opening new spaces for being, a key question haunts its narrative aims: how does Annie Torrent’s revelation depart from the recurrent trope in the American West of “an apocalyptic version of imaginative survival in flight from society”? (Sullivan 155). In locating a happy ending for herself, and leaving her heterosexual relationship,
is she not a little like a Western cowboy – the American colonialist figure – trying to flee from the duties of culture and family in favour of the homoerotically charged, unknown frontier? It is a commonplace in Canadian literary criticism to argue that Canadian writing differs from American in that “Canadian literatures, as a part – indeed producer – of Canadian culture, display themselves most acutely when exposing the limitations of monologic discourse” (Blodgett 151), and it would not be difficult to see how the end of Ana participates in this pattern by parodying rather than reproducing a monologic discourse. Along these lines, but in a more explicitly apocalyptic context, Marlene Goldman argues that “in their rewriting of apocalypse, contemporary Canadian authors give voice to the trauma of the non-elect” (26). However, while these kinds of claims for Canadian literature have certainly served a purpose in the past, they may also reiterate a kind of straw patriarchy or “monologism” – an easy and predictable (American, white, able-bodied, individualistic, heterosexual male) bad guy to position oneself against. While Marlatt’s ending does parody to some extent something like the “monologic” fantasies of the open American West evident in “Under Fire” and Volcano, the idea of escape – of “reading us into the page ahead” (153) – seems oddly similar to a dash across the symbolically empty frontier. Is Marlatt unwittingly using a revelation – a feminist torrent instead of racist fire – to clear new conceptual space for the practices of colonialism to breathe once more?

It has been difficult for critics to answer that question. While Lola Lemire Tostevin posits that the ending of Ana Historic merely reproduces a traditional middle-class comedic narrative of domesticating containment, others ascribe significant value to the fact that the “happy couple” consists of two women (Scheel 12), and moreover argue that Marlatt’s innovative uses of genre,
intertextuality, and experimental language – particularly her use of pronouns – offer not one but a multiplicity of available subject positions for readers. In the way critics frequently frame the debate, both sides can still be read as aspects of the same phallocentric symbolic order, one as an affirmation, the other as a rejection, and in this sense it is the debate itself rather than its content that has become interesting. The question for me at this point becomes how one can keep open all of the other non-rationalized possibilities, some illogical or irreconcilable with the specifics of Annie’s psychological movement, that have been enabled by the narrative? Why does a critic need to resolve, finally, the novel into some rationalized meaning – good or bad – particularly when the novel itself illustrates the oppressive effects of monological discourses?

The role of the West Coast critic in this context could instead be to keep the politics of discomfort – or of perpetual revelation – from sliding into familiar arguments about essentialism vs. constructivism, or monological vs. anti-monological discourses. Indeed, the open question should really be one of how a critic approaches and acknowledges the potentially infinite number of trajectories on the West Coast and the indeterminacy of appropriate perspective created by them. How can one begin to read revelation beyond the trajectories followed by single texts read in isolation? Every time I describe this project to a colleague or friend, I receive several new useful suggestions for texts or ideas to incorporate. Ideally, none of these possibilities should be invalidated and much is lost when they are reconciled with a single kind of “svelte” symbolic rationale such as a Marxist or psychoanalytic reading (Sedgwick, Epistemology 24). Each representation offers on its own terms additional ways of understanding the Coast, and the
totality of these cannot be satisfactorily accounted for by fully defining in advance one’s critical vision.

In this regard, rather than aligning solely with Marlatt’s protagonist and dismissing Annie’s antagonistic and chauvinistic husband out of hand (even if he appears to be nothing but another Dick), perhaps a reader of West Coast apocalypses could occupy a more complicated role of perpetual agonist – “a person engaged in a contest or struggle” of sorting out these two perspectives on an ongoing basis (OED). The idea here is to broaden the critical topography of the Coast by being critically reluctant to race to conclusions. This could begin with a reading of Richard’s own representation as a phallocentric monster of sorts in the novel, and the fact that Annie appears to neutralize the idea of monstrosity at the novel’s finale: where does this leave the phallocentric antagonist that has driven her drama of self-identification? Although Annie must make a decision, perhaps the perpetual failure of a decisively organizing tropology on the West Coast has led to the point where a critic would do well to provide something more fractal and complex. To say that Annie’s escape “into the page ahead” is a fully satisfying resolution to the novel’s energies is to “cut loose” or falsely contain other aspects of West Coast history, including those of the narcissistic Dicks, which may in turn lead to zombified future repetitions of apocalyptic rupture (rather than reparative or jubilant new moments of revelation).

That Annie’s decisive confrontation with her personal sense of injustice might be satisfying for a reader does not mean that it should or could be the last word on the West Coast. Within such reading, a smug, anti-monological version of Cancrit (or Amercit?) sneaks into the picture, becoming its own tacit form of monologism. Glen Lowry, among others, has made
arguments similar to mine, calling into question the appropriateness of a singular finale to the novel, although in his arguments there still remains a critical tendency to replace one hero with another (in Lowry’s argument, Wayde Compton’s more replete and self-conscious representations of racism on the Coast rush to fill in Marlatt’s so-called “faulty” nationalistic ones). Even in pointing to this oft-rehearsed drama of monologism/anti-monologism, I have been setting up myself as an anti-monologic hero (and thereby participating in a monologic discourse). Can a reader of the West Coast really rest easy knowing that the bad guys have been sorted out from the good, the cowboys who wear white from those in black? Does it change anything? Has the first part of this chapter simply set up an opposition between a melancholic hipster straw man and an echoing, vivacious, “nutty broad”? How can a critic keep indeterminate the cusp between monological and anti-monological discourses? To begin, a criticism of West Coast literature may paradoxically need to come to terms with the significance and importance of the collapsing hero, rather than simply relocating a kind of heroism to the body of the critic; a critic might attempt instead to navigate through “all these people standing on the span of a bridge which is slowly collapsing under their own weight” (Ana 78).

II.

To this end, I would like to shift focus at this point. If the first part of this chapter looked at the reversal that plays out as one moves from a melancholic and destructive kind of apocalypse to a celebratory and reparative one, then the pages ahead examine the exact moment of rapturous reversal in order to undo both sides. My question from this point on becomes how to hold a
monological and anti-monological perspective in an uncomfortable tension rather than resolving
them into a happy ending: how to linger on the cusp of the decried final truth in order to preserve
spaces for untold other revelations? I have already suggested several metaphors that can help
illuminate what I mean by this uncomfortably tense cusp: that of a bridge collapsing under the
weight of its users (but not yet collapsed), and that of “a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that
the projectionist refused to fix” (Pynchon 10). In each of these cases, things are neither wholly
structured, nor wholly unstructured, but suspended in some moment of transport between
possibilities. The latter example suggests fairly clearly the role I wish to play in relation to this
cusp where reversal recurs: that of a projectionist who refuses to “fix” a picture of the West
Coast.

If one is to perform critically the uncomfortable role of agonist, a good place to begin
would be with a re-evaluation of the figure of the phallocentric monster itself – a destabilization
of the firm grounds on which notions of antagonism are often constructed on the Coast. M.
Allerdale Grainger’s 1908 novel Woodsmen of the West, which is set in British Columbia, is one
of the earliest and most significant fictional West Coast texts featuring the oppressive narcissism
that I teased out in the first part of this chapter. Precisely because of its lack of nuance, it offers
an excellent stage on which the West Coast apocalyptic may be reread. In Woodsmen the
housewife serves only as a stabilizing figure for competing masculinities, which causes her to
appear as something like a ghostly, non-psychologized version of what would later become Ina.
The housewife here is as an entirely symbolic figure, one who has only the scantest presence at
the farthest reaches of a novel that says at the outset, pointedly, that “You see very few women” in its world (13).

Indeed, although the driving action of the narrative occurs almost entirely between men, the brief appearances of women are all the more fascinating. Early on, the protagonist, named after Grainger himself, leaves Vancouver to work in a northern logging camp because he feels that those in the city “indulge in Comfort” (30). While logging, he encounters an aggressive individualist of a boss named Bill Carter who treats his men as little more than “dead matter he uses for his own purposes” (57). Confrontations between Grainger and Carter escalate to a breaking point, but in the climactic scene, the point at which all civility appears stripped away and the men nearly come to blows, no violent finale occurs (141-42) – no apocalyptic decision between their perspectives is made. Instead, Grainger walks away from his position at the camp and decides in the final poetic lines of the novel to settle for precisely the comfort he initially scorns: “Farewell to loggers and my youth! / Farewell to all: marriage is better” (147).

Blink and you miss her, as many did in British Columbia’s early literary history. While the nameless woman at the end of Grainger’s novel is only hauntingly present as an object of marriage, she stands diametrically opposed to the apocalyptically confrontational scenario where two versions of masculinity, one represented as enlightened and progressive and the other as selfish and narcissistic, physically and symbolically spar for the dominant worldview. As Woodsmen is narrated by a British-Canadian who still hears first-hand tales of the American-
Canadian Pig War\(^{31}\) on the streets (18), the narrative ultimately favours a return not just to civilization – via the housewife – but also to the British colonial enterprise it represents; Carter’s depiction on the other hand, while not American, suggests a stereotyped version of the individualistic and heroic masculinity promoted in \textit{Volcano} and “Under Fire.” Virility plays out through the domination of nature. By having the protagonist happily return to civilization in search of a British housewife, Grainger effectively seeks to propagate a non-violent British (Canadian) subjectivity.

The contrast between the two main characters in \textit{Woodsmen} reflects almost exactly Rosemary Sullivan’s concluding remarks to the \textit{Crossing Frontiers} conference in1977\(^{32}\):

[The Western] book is not an apocalyptic version of imaginative survival in flight from society, nor are we in that part of the American imagination where man seeks a new world commensurate to his capacity for wonder. On the frontier the Canadian always turns back to accept the compromises of the world and his participation in it. (155)

On the surface, this quotation describes the action of \textit{Woodsmen} to a tee; Carter’s rejected form of masculinity mirrors the rejection of a violently overthrown British civility in the New World that Sullivan implies. However, given the analysis of non-patriarchal, illegitimate identities in the first part of this chapter, much can be added to Sullivan’s commentary on the “Western book.” For starters, the “compromise” in \textit{Woodsmen} relies entirely upon the positioning of an unnamed,

\(^{31}\) A rather strange altercation, in which Washington State and British Columbia nearly went to war over the shooting of a British man’s pig by an American neighbour on the San Juan Islands in 1859. The conflict and its near outcome was one of the more poignant examples of some Americans’ desire to annex British Columbia in its pre-Confederation phase (Barman \textit{West} 75-76).

\(^{32}\) This conference was one of the earliest fora for discussion of the similarities and differences between the American and Canadian Wests. It was attended by many key scholars of the West, including Leslie Fiedler, Richard Etulain, and Dick Harrison. Its proceedings were published in 1979.
silent housewife (a lot like Ina and, initially, Annie) at its borders; she is inextricable from the novel’s dramatic action, playing the crucial role of receptacle to all of the untamed energies that have gone before – history itself. In this regard, the housewife in *Woodsmen* functions as an embodiment of the anti-apocalyptic book; she finally resolves or contains all of the energies that are articulated and amplified throughout the text. Her role, analogous to that of the New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelations, is peripheral yet absolutely necessary. In light of Annie’s revelations of Ina in *Ana Historic*, however, the woman’s role of containment is not as anti-apocalyptic as it might first appear; as Marlatt’s novel demonstrates, everything depends on whose perspective a narrative of revelation valorizes.

While it is true that the absent/present housewife’s position at the end of the entire text of *Woodsmen* positions her as a sort of historical stopgap for the potential fluidity of the male figures, and that she symbolically prevents a confrontational masculinity’s endless eruption into the world outside the book, her two-dimensionality is obviously problematic for a woman who occupies the role of house-wife. Treated as a symbol, the housewife functions much like a Lefebvrian *social space*, “an unlimited multiplicity or unaccountable set” of representations that is gathered generically under a single name and continually (re)produced over time. The problem with this similarity, of course, is that reading people as spaces ultimately effaces any sense of agency; they are only ever projected upon and discursively produced by others. Indeed, in terms of the structure of *Woodsmen*, the protagonist himself can be read as every bit as narcissistic and effacing towards others as Carter because he treats woman symbolically; reconciled under the symbol of the ghostly woman, masculinity in the novel can appear as a monolithic, fully
incorporated entity, regardless of all the conflict between men that has gone before. This woman can be read as the house/wife, an entity both static in space and without agency – the thing into which all unknowable and negated energy of empire- and province-building is cast at the end of the day. Marlatt even uses excerpts from *Woodsmen* throughout *Ana Historic* to represent the narcissism of an early masculinity on the Coast – “mastery over huge, heavy logs” (*Ana* 25; *Woodsmen* 60) – but here we, the critical agonists at least, can announce our awkward silence.

There is an important problem with the intertextual inclusions from *Woodsmen* in *Ana Historic*. By virtue of her selections, Marlatt essentially posits Carter’s masculinity as the only one represented by Grainger. In doing so, she treats *Woodsmen* as a sociological document rather than a literary text, participating in one of the oldest blunders of Canadian literary criticism according to Frank Davey – the paraphrase. In *Ana Historic* there is no acknowledgment that *Woodsmen of the West* ultimately rejects Carter’s overtly aggressive masculinity, and no acknowledgment of the heterogeneity within masculinity evident throughout the novel. By omitting these details, Marlatt essentially reproduces Carter’s as the primary experience of masculinity on the Coast, a problem that makes Annie’s revelation more coherent but less convincing in terms of its authenticity as a representation of the actual, complex ways people experience the world. To complicate things further along these lines, and contradicting Rosemary Sullivan’s claims about the differences between American and Canadian literature (and tacitly, their masculinities), Carter is actually a Nova Scotian, one who does no compromising or turning back at all. These and other details from *Woodsmen* can be emphasized to leave open the question of whether there are uncomfortable divisions within a phallocentric, narcissistic
masculinity on the Coast. Pointing out these complexities within West Coast masculinities also frees up a little room for the emergence of the potentially infinite number of other identifications in the region.

My introduction of nuance here points to why I have positioned this chapter near the end of this dissertation. Like the West Coast itself, which presents solid ground with a chaotic sea, this bifurcated chapter is meant to serve as a kind of cusp between the more theoretically ordered early chapters and my final chapter, which performs a sort of polyvocal, non-theoretical, detrital version of the West Coast Apocalyptic. If neither housewives nor (post-)colonial male subjects from the Coast operate without fractal and sometimes irreconcilable divisions within, and an articulation of these divisions may help alleviate some of the historical stresses that have apocalyptically accumulated on the West Coast, then this chapter and the next must sketch out some of these complexities according to their “own rules” (Baudrillard, *America* 10). My task, simply put, is to surrender the comfort of teleological, conciliatory narratives of the Coast. In truth, the figures I began by outlining – the expat patriarch and the house-wife – no longer need to be read strictly in opposition; they could instead be understood in terms of their appearances within their various literary, social, political, historical, (etc.), contexts. The open-ended and agonistic turns of argumentation from this point on are an attempt to embody simultaneously the countless nothings that haunt perspective itself on the Coast and some of the strange and monstrous energies that emerge through the region’s interstices. The geographic and cultural complexities of the West Coast, in their inextricability from unspeakable, abject energies, begin to interfere with the possibility of some comforting, symbolic return to civilization. The stage on
which binaries of nature and culture, masculinity and femininity, subject and object, and fact and imagination (among innumerable others), have repeatedly played out, begins to collapse like a bridge buckling under too much weight.

In recognition of this collapse in binary conceptions of the world, some writers from the Coast have begun to shift Sullivan’s “compromise” itself towards a pragmatic and tactical reformism that complicates its normative gendering. In Taylor’s *Stanley Park*, for instance, Margaret (also known as Peggy, Maggie, and mom), is not only symbolically but actively anti-apocalyptic. As opposed to being the mere stopgap or receptacle for the apocalyptic energies of empire from earlier representations, she is eminently practical and active in response to Vancouver’s precarious situation in a seismic zone. Not only does she claim that “throwing darts at the millennial calendar is less useful than, say, four gallons of water a person and heavy-soled shoes under the bed” (140), but she also actively prepares for the inevitabilities of geological change on the Coast through her work. In her career with an engineering firm, she works to prevent damages “by designing such things as seismic gas-flow cut-off triggers, shock absorber systems. Restraining cables for heavy objects and the crafty reinforcement of fifty-year-old bridges” (140); she literally bolsters the physical bridges of Vancouver, leaving the sorting of their symbolic meaning to navel-gazing Narcissi and Tithonii of the Coast.

Though strangely similar to Mike Roark insofar as she works against disaster, Margaret’s proactive and pragmatic attitude towards disaster means that she does not need to rely on apocalyptic narratives and the seizure of people’s property and rights that they can entail. This proactive stance has the ethical advantage of never requiring a state of exception; the foe is never
constructed as so unspeakably frightening that it can be used to incite panic and consolidate reactionary, authoritarian behaviour. Disaster is merely treated as an inevitability that can be largely circumvented with foresight and planning, rather than as an eruption of submerged and negated energies into a rigid symbolic order. This proactive attitude extends beyond her work and into the community in the form of activism. She is “treasurer of the Western Canadian Women’s Business Association” and believes in “the power of feminist industry” (139). In both her career and lifestyle, then, she actually rearranges space in more socially and economically significant ways than even the most prominent male characters in *Woodsmen*. She is no longer the housewife into whom all excess historical detritus is cast, but an actual producer – or, better still, steward – of West Coast spaces. Her role as housewife is only one of many for her, some of which are represented as having no particular founding in the symbolics of gender.

All of this re-forming of the West Coast’s apocalyptic tropology leads to the point at which it becomes important to recognize explicitly that the figure of the housewife itself has begun to destabilize; it must be read as a historically shifting idea rather than a plausible and stable form of experience. In this regard, the figure of the anti-apocalyptic housewife and its implosion in *Ana Historic* can be read as reflecting the fate of colonialism itself in British Columbia. Because of her symbolic and actual reproductive function, her collapse mirrors the collapse of Empire. On the other hand, the opportunity to disentangle symbol from experience arises here from the fact that, with the West Coast, narratives of Empire have never been fully integrated into ones occurring daily at a local level; housewives need not be defined by symbolic
schemas imposed from an experiential distance. Although anti-apocalyptic housewife figures are obviously present in many literatures, and they have collapsed alongside gender normativity, the particular symbolic, geographic, and historical significance of the West Coast – the “amount and combination” of its cultural features – creates more pronounced internal contradictions than elsewhere.

As the next chapter demonstrates, the convergence of Asian, Indigenous, African-American, and European identities on the West Coast only amplifies the contradictions within categories of gender and sexuality that I have outlined here. As Marlatt’s text begins to suggest, rather than feeling an allegiance to any unified history, people could easily follow numerous lineages on the fractal, non-rationalized West Coast. This also tacitly suggests why when Ina and Ana try to negotiate their training in “civilized” colonial ways with a rugged, unfamiliar geographic and cultural terrain, they repeatedly fail and stumble. Annie’s emergence exists only through a total reorientation of her position within the multifaceted and complex cultural and physical geography of the coastline and its ecology and, as I have suggested, even her narrative can be undone by the ghosts produced by its anti-monological structure.

The collision of numerous narratives on a personal scale on the West Coast has significant implications for identity formation in the region, and this chapter has only hinted at the complexity of this problem by illustrating the tensions that begin to fragment a strictly psychoanalytic or feminist reading. At the core of Stanley Park’s picture of Vancouver is a different kind of personal apocalyptic narrative, one hinted at throughout this chapter, that illuminates some of the conceptual contortions that must occur to stabilize a picture of the Coast:
that of the child-murdering mother. Symbolically speaking, the figure of the murdered child stands in for the cessation of empire; if the American Revolution was a patricide, a severing of past ties and obligations, then a key trope for understanding the West Coast apocalyptic is the filicide, the murdering of the future via the child. Throughout the twentieth century this was often the only way one could imaginatively ensure an end to the melancholic, zombified repetition that everywhere marked the literary Coast; it is a myth fit for the farthest reaches of a failed system of epistemological assimilation.

The murdered child as a founding myth of the West Coast is compelling insofar as it seeks to lay to rest the propagation of the colonial and simultaneously nourish (through burial) the soil from which a separate new locally rooted identity can emerge and grow; however, its content repeats the problematic Coastal narcissism I teased out when I began this chapter. One could ask why the favoured trope has not instead been something like interethnic coupling, which would both reorient (or ignore) colonialism and provide a space for the continuation of new West Coast identities. What about orphaned or adopted or even autochthonous children? Any of these might begin to address some of the historical problems on the Coast, but they would move beyond an obsessive, implosive symbolic paradigm into the realities of the region – particularly the intercultural contact that has long been present. For all of the progressiveness in canonized West Coast texts by non-white writers like Joy Kogawa, Eden Robinson, and SKY LEE, it is fascinating that so many still prominently feature the end to non-white lineages on the Coast. Do critics favour these writers because of their self-destructive themes? Is it fine to address injustices of the past, so long as it leaves the future to precisely those who have dominated that past?
Although Bret Easton Ellis and Douglas Coupland have reacted with cynicism towards the murderous, narcissistic white parent on the Coast, perhaps an understanding of the region would benefit more at this point from an effort to read forward and develop a critical vocabulary that encapsulates the trope’s meaning without reproducing its violence. At its roots, the child-murder simply seeks out a means to move away from assumptions of a progress-oriented and teleological worldview while acknowledging that life must go on. Along these lines, Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of the “contact zone” has been suggested by both Fred Wah and Wayde Compton as a starting point for rereading the Coast (Diamond 68-70; Bond 48), because it posits “frontiers” as zones actually involving multi-directional paths of cultural exchange. The contact zone could be used to destabilize symbolic readings of the Coast, because it acknowledges some of the relational aspects of intercultural contact rather than strictly emphasizing power imbalances. As I have suggested, symbols – particularly when they are imposed on people – have the tendency to confuse their terms with a stable reality and in the process violently efface other possibilities for agency and self-definition. As such they mimic the unidirectional discursive thrust of a frontier. The point of introducing the notion of the “contact zone” is not to do away with symbol altogether but simply to acknowledge that critical practices would ideally remain alert to the ongoing negotiations that occur as localized experiences erupt into symbolic renderings of the world.

Perhaps Marlatt begins to gesture at such a multi-directional resolution in Annie’s entry into a romantic relationship with Zoe, particularly in her use of the first person plural towards the end of the novel, and yet the symbolism of this gesture would ideally be held in tension with the
particularities of the women’s experiences. Annie’s lesbian relationship is not just a reaction to
the symbolism of Richard or phallocentrism; it also constitutes a *locally grown* and unique
identity. While Pratt’s definition of the “contact zone” focuses on the contact among people with
various ethnic identities, there is no reason that it cannot be opened up to include the interactions
among any identifications from those of sexual orientation to class to gender, particularly when
these are equally as influential as ethnicity in a locus of contact. Indeed, I hope I have
demonstrated by now the problems with limiting a discursive analysis to a single category of
identification on the West Coast. Although, for instance, it may be tempting to argue that Annie’s
relationship with Zoe represents a movement from A to Z, beginning to end of empire, Annie’s
own history illustrates that such a symbolic reading could be a dangerously effacing proposition.
The women’s coming together can be read along numerous other discursive axes, focusing on
everything from their class to their gender to their coffee drinking habits or any configuration of
these and other factors.

What is equally important to note here is that the communal nature of the East End
household in *Ana Historic* offers some positive space for imagining new, non-symbolic, multi-
directional ways of self-identifying on the Coast. The conclusion’s activist orientation is also
recognizable in the work of Indigenous writers such as Lee Maracle and Eden Robinson. For
instance, in Robinson’s short story “Queen of the North,” the protagonist Adelaine finds a brief
and even empowering reprieve from her incestuous household up north when she visits her aunt
and cousins in East Vancouver. Although she still encounters the dominating desires of post-
colonial capitalism as she makes fry bread to support a charity called Helping Hands, she seems
unfazed when an aggressive white man with “perfect” teeth offers her a large amount of money to perform her indiginity for him (208). While she makes him fry bread and lets her hair down to feed into whatever narcissistic fantasy he is indulging in, she simply takes the money when she is done and walks away ignoring the fact that he says “something else” to her (209). In a sense, the scene suggests that the continual apocalyptic return to the horrors of colonialism are a pointless concern when there are more tangible problems that can be addressed through activism in the present. Robinson represents the exchange as occurring in a sort of contact zone, the powwow itself. While in a sense Adelaine reflects back to him what the man wants to see, and this may in itself be disturbing, the ambiguity of the outcome and the centrality of Adelaine’s perspective also suggest that much eludes his structure of understanding.

I include Robinson’s text here to steer away from the temptation to fix any special connection between white, middle-class housewives and activist, non-apocalyptic approaches to the Coast’s history. Indeed, while the anti-apocalyptic housewife offers a coherent enough trope to analyze, the shift from symbolically anti-apocalyptic figures in early texts like *Woodsmen* to activist, non-apocalyptic characters in texts like *Ana Historic* and *Stanley Park* suggests that the association is entirely fluid and open-ended. More than anything, my arguments in this chapter have revolved around the sense that historical meaning on the West Coast is indeterminate, at some moments symbolically legible and at others not. From this indeterminacy, we could enquire whether the prevalence of a melancholic attitude is really an authentic form of guilt for past injustices on the Coast or whether it is just an inward turning of the disappointment that
colonialism could not keep going: what is the “disappointment” driving its lethargic core?

Perhaps more important than answering this question, this region’s unique historical and geographic features present a provocative problem: how to turn back outward amidst so much narcissism and melancholia.

The West Coast marks the simultaneous and mutually amplifying exhaustion of British colonialism and American Manifest Destiny, and the epistemological complexities of the region allow critics and writers alike to speculate on how new worlds can be born from the end of the Old World. Without such speculation, colonialism continues in the form of reflection on colonialism; colonialism and history become not the chance for hitherto abject experiences to emerge, but a discussion about what a British subject or American pioneer did wrong. Problems from the past are not allowed to undergo a process of re-orientation, not because it is impossible but because it is for some undesirable. This denial constitutes the final clinging to the edge of the frontier, the negation of the West Coast as a possible contact zone, as a site of symbolic and actual intercultural growth. In texts like “Queen of the North” and Ana Historic the writers imply that the past is not what matters most – the protagonists’ objectification is the least of their concerns. They wish to move life in new directions – to allow new identities to sprout from the abject, echoing spaces of the Coast. It may be telling that Annie’s efforts are ultimately more successful than Adelaine’s, because for this latter character there is no Zoe, no completing and invigorating other; things are only beginning to open.
Like a vampire, a state of guilt is characterized by its insatiability. Indeed, in the West Coast postcolonial context, guilt and vampirism are closely linked, they wrest history by force but consistently expend their own life force in the process. Here we can return to the idea of entropy: when one expends all of his or her energy maintaining a certain view of the world, then there will come a moment when everything reaches a state of equilibrium – things asymptotically approach a state of total inertia, a symbolic death. As *The Crying of Lot 49* illustrates, however, there are two kinds of entropy – one physical or thermodynamic and one informational – and these may be theoretically set against one another, particularly in the fault-ridden West Coast context. Pynchon’s exploration of Maxwell’s Demon – a physical thought experiment that suggests that the loss from physical entropy can be recovered as information to create a perpetual motion scenario – can give us a critical model for understanding how to draw (perpetually) Marlatt’s view of the revivifying West Coast into conversation with more entropic representations of the region.

The ocean, that which has hitherto been considered chaos and death by those approaching the Coast with notions of progress in mind, is precisely what gives life to Annie: the nonce taxonomy – informational system – that she develops throughout the course of the novel harnesses precisely the entropy involved in the physical system of (halted) westward movement. The ocean’s surface forms the barrier between these perspectives, a barrier across which glances are exchanged continually. The loss of energy from one paradigm revitalizes the other, but the action itself – activism itself, the continual undoing of apocalypticism – is what is really

33 In one of the short story/chapters in *The Informers* Bret Easton Ellis actually depicts a group of economically and socially elite vampires that continually prey on the vacant Los Angelino citizens.
important because it is the place from which future energies – new taxonomies – will spring. This action is important because people are neither angels nor demons, like Maxwell’s; they are not perfect embodiments of symbolic energies; one cannot perfect revivification and live eternally no matter how happy an end she finds. This is why Pynchon leaves it open as to whether W.A.S.T.E., the alternative underground mail system in his novel, actually exists. Although one character says of its agents that they “Reach the Coast every time, zero attrition rate, not a scratch on them” (143), it is not fully clear whether “they” only exist as a paranoid fantasy apparent in a ritual reluctance and the exchange of possibly meaningless glances. In theory all of the “attrition” from official channels of information – the U.S. Post system and the symbolic function of successful communication it embodies – ultimately feeds the W.A.S.T.E. system, and yet that may only be the case in theory. Indeed W.A.S.T.E. – or as Annie calls it, “rubble” – which is also Catherine Owen’s “detritus” – is nothing but the information lost through entropy in producing a “groundwork of facts.” This no-thing is why Annie can have a non-horrific revelation, becoming a Torrent that gives rather than destroys life.

Such an open-ended reading of the West Coast would offer a less accusatory (and critically heroic/narcissistic) means for explaining why a film like Volcano can be so entertaining and symbolically rich. Pleasure does not necessarily derive from the undeniably racist blind-spots of the film. Perhaps instead it could stem from the glaring silence the film displays in its utter neglect of cultural harmonization; perhaps it has something to do with the way that the fantastically heavy-handed race-neutralizing coat of ash at the end of the film so obviously contradicts the action of the rest of the film; perhaps this ash could even be read as future-
oriented, as a kind of unspoken “new mode of expression,” like the turning point of *The Courier’s Tragedy* in *Lot 49*, rather than as past-oriented, self-centred colonial guilt. The point is that it can be all of these things rather than a single, all-consuming one. To negate more affirmative possibilities out of hand just because more sinister ones exist may be to fall into a trap of cynicism reminiscent of the hipsters and ex-pats who narcissistically believe there is nothing left to do in the world, who believe that nothing new can grow because they have become enraptured of a symbolic order. Such a surrender would be to abandon the critical position of agonist for one of self-congratulatory disgust.

What I am teasing out here is a non-phallocentric criticism of the contact zone, one that does not seek to normalize responses to a text or provide a coherent reading but instead remains as indecisive as to its allegiances as the end of *Lot 49*. This is what Eve Sedgwick describes as “the unrationalized coexistence of different models” (*Epistemology* 47). This is not the same as having no allegiances, but instead waiting to see what they will be, based on one’s localized responses to a particular situation. Does it really matter why *Volcano* gives pleasure at the same time as it closes certain conceptual doors? Could one not focus instead on the flow of localized, non-symbolic responses and wash away the theoretical and symbolic apparatuses that limit their meaning? This undecidability of purpose so available on the West Coast could be beneficial for the practice of literary and cultural theory in general. The region’s fault-lines are still very fresh; its fractal nature has not been eroded to the point of unrecognizability. It is a good starting point. While the ending of *Volcano* may seem grim from a certain critical perspective, it also suggests a time and space for growth. What purpose is there in a knowingly cynical or paranoid critical
stance – against which Pynchon explicitly warns – rather than an activist, future-oriented one? Could such a paranoid critical position simply be subscribing to more of the narcissism that has for so long pervaded representations of the Coast? In this regard, this chapter represents a scission within this dissertation: rather than arriving at a conclusive symbolic of the West Coast apocalyptic – a symbol that could unify all apocalyptic perspectives – I have sought to perform an about face, presenting an alternative set of possibilities: the non-horrific revelation, the reparative apocalyptic, the activist apocalyptic, the perpetual revelation, the waste apocalyptic. These offer some nonce possibilities for a perpetually shifting critical terminology, but to claim that these are the only contribution of this scholarship is to miss entirely the often chaotic “waste” that underpins West Coast literature, the West Coast apocalyptic, and the processual indulgences of this chapter.

As Annie Torrent puts it, in her typically processual and tortuous fashion, this writing is the process of

writing the period that arrives at no full stop. not the hand manipulating the pen. not the language of definition, of epoch, of document, language explaining and justifying, but the words that flow out from within, running too quick to catch sometimes, at other times just an agonizingly slow trickle. the words of an interior history doesn’t include … that erupts like a spring, like a wellspring of being, well-being inside… (Ana 90)
Chapter 7

West Coast Revelations

“The absence of an end does not obviate our wanting one.”

– Lois Parkinson Zamora, Writing the Apocalypse

If Daphne Marlatt is preoccupied with questions of “Who’s there” lurking beneath the Coast’s melancholic cultural geographies, then this chapter explores that question’s implications beyond a personal scale. I reveal innumerable others that are “there” on the Coast. These last pages are, after all, the extremity of this dissertation, and like a West Coast Book of Revelations, they seek to unveil and release some of the chaotic, crazed energy that has underpinned my last several hundred pages of history and explication. While my previous chapters have been aimed at describing geo-historical causes for various apocalyptic “pieces” of the Coast, this one aims to fuse these and others together in a simultaneous effort to mimic and render visible some emergent representational rhythms of the region. I ask whether a unique “idiom” of the West Coast has begun to develop – one whose tropes, though recycled from literary paradigms and apparently recognizable as English, have taken on new significance based on the cultural contexts from which they arise. Although electronic media, global economics, and regional factors such as the Coast’s settler-invader culture have prevented Coastal chatter from becoming a pidgin proper, we have seen that a concept such as “apocalypse” may signify very differently here than in other places. Harking back to my introductory chapter, the key problem I navigate here is how to recognize the region’s realities without subsuming them into revelatory paradigms
of conceptual thinking. I want to maintain the greatest possible tension between the “dirt and
disorder” (Kermode 106) of the region and paradigms of apocalypse.

I am prospecting for instabilities that underpin representations of the Coast, the
(archi)tectonic slippage among numerous representations – critical, literary, and personal: “the
form that dominates the American West, and doubtless all of American culture, is a seismic
form: a fractal, interstitial culture, born of a rift with the Old World, a tactile, fragile, mobile,
superficial culture – you have to follow its own rules to grasp how it works: seismic shifting, soft
technologies” (emphasis added, Baudrillard, America 10). While the idea of “soft technologies”
describes well some of the generic innovations – the slightly out of focus ways that West Coast
differences are often expressed – the idea does not cover the whole story of the region. If only the
writing of this chapter was so simple as watching the emergence of “soft technology” from
continual cultural rifts; the rifts here compete with other stories that carry a lot of weight.
American nationalist narratives of rupture and rebirth simultaneously disrupt and are washed
over by more recent bioregional narratives connecting coastal literary terrain from both the States
and Canada, ones like the murdered child, for instance, or Laurie Ricou’s own interconnected
version of the region: “I live and read a place whose living connects rain to sea to salmon to
Japan to cedar to racist exclusion” (Ricou, Arbutus 17). The grounds in this place and its
representation keep shifting: “the world could no longer be trusted to stay steady beneath our
feet” (Hodgins “Earthquake” 78).

Marlatt’s metaphor of a perpetually collapsing bridge and Pynchon’s of a slightly out of
focus projection are home-grown critical tropes that can be used to address the underlying
epistemological complexities of the West Coast. Critics from the region often use a method of approximation or hodgepodge to get at the Coast’s seismically emerging interstices and the ways they interfere with more petrified national, bioregional, and regional narratives. A picture of the coast emerges paratactically and by degrees. Moving along the Coast, one alternatively encounters “innumerable rocky flats,” and geographic formations that “rise very abruptly from the sea” (Vancouver 22); with these crazed, unfathomable geographies, one cannot help wondering how to put the world back together. I do not try. I follow Eve Sedgwick’s call in a slightly different context for “the unrationalized coexistence of different models” (Epistemology 47), which opens the greatest possible terminological and conceptual space for identity construction.

My shift from a hypotactic to a paratactic critical approach in this chapter, and in the broader trajectory of this dissertation, acknowledges that the conceptual gaps among different theories are precisely the places from which new possibilities for describing experience may emerge. Rather than resolving binaries under an ultimately logocentric pro/anti model, leaving things slightly out of focus allows one to see what else might enter the picture. Full revelation only ever ends up being a simulation of full revelation because there will always be more coming into focus and distorting a particular version of apocalypse. I am not alone in this non-hierarchized, paratactic way of thinking about how to represent the West Coast. Soja, Baudrillard, Ricou, Davis, and other leading West Coast critics have all departed from a model of critical synthesis towards a mode of polyvocal reportage in their work, and this critical pattern is also evident in literary texts like Ana Historic and 49th Parallel Psalm among others. If my
reader can bear with a bit of critical disorientation over the course of this chapter, the appropriateness of an open-ended, paratactic style of critically representing Coast will I hope by the end become evident.

There begins to occur a distortion in perspective as one travels West from back East: “The dogs were against the eye and in the eye. They were in the land but not of it. They were of Coyote’s house, but become aristocrats in the time that had yielded them up to the timeless hills” (emphasis added, Sheila Watson, “Four” 84). On the Coast, the progressive march of Western historical time meets the timeless hills (once again); the forward-looking eye cannot properly focus. Historically speaking, when the aristocratic “dogs” finally returned to the coastline from Europe and the more civilized parts of Eastern North America, Coyote started his own, mythic counter-project: gradually “he fed tooth to tooth until one tooth remained and this he hid in his own belly” (86). Read through this indigenous trope, the European dogs began to consume their (discursive) bodies until they were almost totally transformed, and the tiny, toothy kernel that remained of their former selves – perhaps the stubborn insistence of linear time itself among the Coast’s “timeless” geography – was hidden away within Coyote’s story. The dogs faced a ceaseless spiral of self-reinvention, where time appeared to progress but events continually repeated. This hybrid coastal temporality at first appears similar to the cyclicality of Indigenous peoples’ narratives, but it lacks any sense of completion and rebirth.

Coyote’s stunt, the hiding of European narratives within his own, was a way of ensuring that they could never take hold on the coast, that no matter how many times this world appeared
New, no matter how many times the label was imposed upon the land, it would always be haunted by something unseen. Notions of the Best West were gradually drained by an intangible, backward-looking guilt born of repressed trauma, always marked with the same repeated, atemporal belief: “in making all new, some future state will restore a lost innocence” (McClung, *Landscapes* 7). This haunting absence in the present, this loss from the past, initiates the endless mini-apocalypses of the Coast, the mechanistically repeating West Coast Apocalyptic itself – partial rebirth upon partial rebirth to the point of an indigestible, disorienting meaninglessness, the tooth that Coyote hid in his belly. For the aristocratic dogs, Coyote arranged a monstrous fusion of linear, teleological time and cyclical rebirth, a narrative to be repeated and subjected to entropy indefinitely. The West promises “the possibility of continuous and radical beginning” (Sullivan 155) but never reaches its actualization.

An accumulating trail of death left in the wake of the self-defeating search for a mythic fullness of life, the western limit of the replete continent is the hard fact of limited space confronting the fantasy of the frontier. Although this confrontation leads to narratives concerned “as much or more with frontiers of consciousness as with frontiers of place” (Etulain, “Inventing” 46), for American historians “the frontier ends on schedule in 1890; the Indians are removed; the buffalo killed; the minerals, discovered; the churches and schools, built; and there is no more West” (Limerick 53). The West Coast undoes the just apocalypse that was supposed to provide meaning to Western history. Civilization itself ends up being the apocalypse: imported order becomes the destruction and depletion of the indigenous first and eventually itself. This is the end of the road for utopian dreams of the West. For soul-searchers at the
“Ragged Green Edge of the World” (Hodgins, *Resurrection* 1), what remains of the West that once promised such grand and lively visions of an endless, spiritual “possibility”? New Age cults? Vampirism and cannibalism? “Images of parents who were so hungry and unfulfilled that they ate their own children… Images so violent and malicious that they seemed to be my only point of reference for a long time afterward. And I left” (Ellis, *Less* 108).

*I left, after all – left the Coast to gain some perspective on the place, maybe cash in on what little I could salvage from the Coast’s thoroughly picked over mythologies of progress. Was the journey into the savage civilization back East my version of a spirit quest? Quite possibly: years later, I would be haunted enough by images of a Coastal self-destruction “so violent and malicious” that a dissertation would begin to emerge from them. Perhaps the narrative tooth hidden in Coyote’s belly had begun to grow a new autochthonous dog, a new member of “Coyote’s house” in the form of me? Perhaps the tooth just turned out to be indelible toxic shit in the form of me – the last laugh of Coyote, the sempiternal by-products of an otherwise expired mentality (me, me, me)…the shitting upon paradise was, after all, precisely what occurred with the introduction of biting, consumptive, linear time into “the timeless hills” of the West Coast.

‘You have the camera? We’re almost there,’ says Anna-Louise…

There is nothing here. There is no Glen Anna.

Or rather, there was a Glen Anna. We just missed it. The forest is gone and there are no words I can say. There are no magic spells I can cast to bring back the trees.

Anna-Louise and I are sitting on a stump, a stump as large as a giant’s dinner table, in a prairie of grey mud and stumps. There is nothing on any horizon. There are no
birds or animals because there is nothing for the birds and animals. The loss is absolute and Anna-Louise and I are soaking wet, still too numb to cover our heads. (Coupland, *Shampoo* 85)

Some would guess Coyote was hit by a car in L.A. back in the eighties (Ellis, *Less* 41), and with it came an irreversible *disorientation*. Orientation: its root word is “orient” – the Far East opposed to here, the occident. Disorientation: a loss of perspective, a loss of the eye’s firm perspective looking out to the horizon. The gruesomely uprooted eye is *in the land but not of the land*. Perspective is lost on the Coast. In response to Anna-Louise’s question above, maybe nobody has the camera anymore, and the panorama – “the ongoing cinerama” (Marlatt, *Ana* 30) – is so monstrous that words cannot describe it. “There is nothing on any horizon” says a white male protagonist: horizon has been stripped of its Turnerian metonymic value. Horizon now signifies not an absent abundance to be endlessly recovered through progress, but an endless monstrous absence materially created as a by-product of progress (“or is it monstrous?” one reluctantly questions). “We’re almost there,” to the coastal rainforest paradise, but nobody ever seems to arrive. Apocalypse is supposed to be the “magic spell” that would puncture the horizons of both space and history to unleash a deluge of ultimate paradisiacal pleasure, but the analyses of neatly structured apocalyptic narratives in the preceding chapters reveal that the obscene whispers haunting the “magic” of apocalypse are precisely what prevents an actualized paradise. The desire for a post-apocalyptic utopia at the expense of the present realities of the region is precisely what prevents utopia. Without the continual revelation of history and the realities of its messy politics, paradise is a disaster.
Disorientation: loss of the Orient. What is to be done?

An ordering of social space... functions individually and collectively as a method of orientatio: as mastery; as protection from ambiguity and multiplicity, from the terror of 'vertigo brought on by disorientation,' from the experience of being thrown into the 'limitless, unknown and threatening extension' (Eliade) that is the space beyond the skin, the spacing between self and other, us and them. (Soja, *Postmetropolis* 362-63)

The terror of the other – the instability of the gap between self and other – generates a desire to order spaces and the people that occupy them. The indeterminate narrative of the Coast, when not treated with the openness of a contact zone, constitutes a state of perpetual emergency and disorientation. The desire of some to feel firmly rooted demands that others be completely – uprooted.

Re: Orientals – what is the easiest way to reorient oneself? Re-Orient them:

There it was in black and white – our short harsh history. Beside each date were the ugly facts of the treatment given to Japanese Canadians. ‘Seizure, and government sale of fishing boats. Suspension of fishing licences. Relocation camps. Liquidation of property. Letter to General MacArthur. Bill 15. Deportation. Revocation of nationality.’ (Kogawa 34)

Not all apocalypse on the West Coast revolves around a white Westerner’s mythic quest for a paradise following the eschaton (which somehow a [falsely] coherent Western subjectivity is supposed to survive). Not all perspectives on the West Coast (can) look in the same direction, at
the same horizon, with a largely traceable lineage and clarity of vision: “there’s// a/ tumult/ of/
singed/ hair// falling/ thru/ the/ offal air// in/ front/ of/ my lens// there’s/ a conflagration/
inscribed/ in these words” (Kiyooka, “Mutualities” 167). No syntax of history, no coherence of
line, no breathless, timeless literary movements of an I through paradise: each broken breath of
Roy Kiyooka’s “Mutualities” speaks volumes. For many more “[t]he language of grief is silence”
(Kogawa 13), and for those who aim to speak through a history of grief – from a place where
“the air is a fist” (Kogawa 210) – what language is available? “Who’s there?” ask the
disoriented, confused, emergent nobodies, non-entities, into a language that was made for and by
someone else34 (Marlatt, Ana 9). A movie, just perceptibly out of focus, can be gradually
refocused to reveal trauma and grief: look into the mouth of the empire that has grumbled its way
West, but do it from a non-Western perspective. Looking back, embody the excluded of the
Asiatic Exclusion League and feel the undoing of Eastward-looking eyes. One has the feeling of
being // uprooted, forced / away from one’s / home // here: disorientation, to say the least.

For historically exploited Asian immigrants, no eastward questing across the (blank page
of the literary) land; instead, a history of being driven east (as labour, as cattle, as the enemy),
being driven into the land. E.J. Pratt’s epic “Towards the Last Spike” touts the heroism of nation
building and effaces the realities of progress:

And this consistent punching at her belly
With fire and thunder slapped her like an insult,

34 Frye famously asks “Where is here?” in the conclusion to The Literary History of Canada (830); he suggests that
for Canadians this is far more perplexing a question than “who am I?” which is the central preoccupation of many
other literatures. On The West Coast, perhaps the question is neither who am I, nor where is here, but who is there?
As with the blasts the caches of her broods
Broke – nickel, copper, silver and fool’s gold,
Burst from their immemorial dormitories
To sprawl indecent in the light of day. (Pratt 193)

A unifying symbolic railroad made for the sake of the young nation becomes doubly insulting for those forgotten in its construction: pioneering women become the land to be punched, slapped, and insulted, and the Chinese labourers who built the railroads disappear almost entirely, present only as “the blasts” of their labour. The former is erased in metaphor, the latter transformed into spontaneously emerging precious metals. In the rhythmic, all-encompassing long poetry of a unified Canada, the revelation of the “broken broods” is incomplete. The people who discover “nickel, copper, silver and fool’s gold” are trans-muted into the products of their labour. Only then, when silenced, can they be “decently” revealed in the daylight. To talk about the others that built the West would just be bad manners, as indecent and sprawlingly grotesque as the classes to which they belong. Even though F.R. Scott asks of Pratt, in solidarity with the workers who built the railroad, “Where are all the coolies in your poem Ned?” (“All Spikes but the Last” 194), this sarcastic lurch towards historical revelation is only temporary. Scott later relies upon precisely the same “Railroad track roaring away to the west” to preserve his poetic inspiration in the “No Outlet” face of back east (“Poetry” 133). Things can get so easily derailed when the language of grief is silenced; without the revelation of injustices, voices of grief and grievance can only emerge and subside with the tides of history.
Some feel that a “tidalectics” can be seen sculpting the Coast into its present form:

“history as a palimpsest where generations overlap generations, and eras wash over eras like a tide on a stretch of beach” (Compton, *Bluesprint* 17). Undercurrents erupt to the surface and then disappear again, pulled backward into the “dense unbeating black unapproachable / heart” by reactionary riptides, regimes of acceptable truths (Birney, “Walk” 134). Don’t discount the hard to find footnotes and citations of apocalyptic histories because soon enough they will be bursting to light again. Unearthing the history of westward progress may seem “indecent in the light of day,” its undercurrents of racism and exploitation tarnishing the “decent” rendering of “immemorial” – timeless, ageless, priceless – objects, marking them instead as indecent, ahistorical, worthless, or at least not worth the price, and yet without such revelations, pressure builds as it does in a chaparral grove eighty years overdue for a burn (Davis, *Ecology* 101), burns like a long sentence itching to end. A tidalectic criticism helps unearth and sift through the innumerable unremembered, unspoken, unmentionable, silent narratives of the West Coast. A tidalectic approach to the region preempts future reactionary violence.

All that molten nickel, copper, silver, mixed eerily with blood under the surface of the West Coast geography: it’s no wonder that deracination and self-reinvention in the Far West become such fixations; it’s also no wonder that apocalypse works its way so thoroughly into the cultural imagination of the West. Regardless of fantasies of forgetting, all gold is fool’s gold when its value comes at the expense of social justice. Value itself is inverted and imploded by such calculation. Besides, for all but the most privileged of West Coasters, narratives of escape never quite work: “got / t runner further jus / t stand still” (Compton, “Records” 33). Even the
Golden State – California, a state of mind, “a kind of Arcadia” (McClung, Landscapes 12) – is a false ideal from the moment of its conception; the failure to address the unbalanced economic and social residue of slavery makes “the west the south” (Compton, “Records” 32). The frontier of exploitation and its silent histories result not exactly in the curse of the mummy, but a parallel, West Coast, idea: efforts to ignore murderous exploitation are a sure-fire prophecy of future apocalypses. This is the curse of the mummies I discussed in the previous chapter: the symbolic housewives walking around full of murderous histories they witness only because they have been relegated to the role of receptacle for cultural detritus. The Mother contains within her a future pregnant with disaster.

Revelation is ideally a way of speaking exploited and repressed lives into existence, yet it can also be appropriated as a strategy for erasing (rather than reconciling) past injustices. Apocalypse can become merely a way of reiterating the violence of history. After events like the L.A. Riots, the “cosmopolis” gives way to the “claustropolis” and anti-chaos armies are subsequently created to prevent (and inadvertently incite) further rupture (Virilio, City 68; 107). Apocalyptic discourse here rationalizes increased racial and economic segregation; things will go horribly wrong if the silent others are allowed into the legitimized spaces of West Coast History. The hard working white homeowners who have suddenly come under siege occupy the position of the downtrodden, as if they had always been innocent bystanders to the creation of barbarous hordes roaming the streets. The fissures in such apocalyptic appropriations, however, are themselves rendered visible by the rest of the story – this revelatory dissertation, those inclusive Coasto-critical strategies of polyvocal reportage that aim to supplement and multiply narrow
perspectives of the westward drive, effaced narratives themselves being gradually revealed through texts like *Obasan* and *Ana Historic*. The tooth at the core of the West Coast sprouts new doomed dogs, as micro-apocalypses multiply and claw for the apocalypse, the final reckoning of history (something which only ever exists as a phantasmic projection veiled in language).

Everyone wants the text of history to play out on his or her side, but as Derrida, Porter, and Lewis observe, paradoxically, the destruction of the textual archive (of the Coast, of the world) is the only truly apocalyptic scenario (“No Apocalypse”). The moment of the apocalypse is the moment when it ceases to be a possibility existing only in text (and subject to all of the partiality of language) and no “sides” can remain.

Barring such total annihilation something else must abound: a micro-apocalyptics, a perpetual revelation, apocalypses of the abject. Apocalyptics becomes a field of political and spatial contestation. The desire inherent in language is mirrored and realized grotesquely in the voracious West Coast nostalgia for the frontier. To keep the possibility of new identities alive, these accumulating layers of nostalgia must be peeled back (or washed away) again and again. Fortunately, the possibility of perpetual, small-scale revelation is present at the moment of one’s birth into language: “the mirror projection of such a field into the field of the other… gives human space its originally ‘geometrical’ structure, a structure that I would be happy to call *kaleidoscopic*” (Lacan, *Écrits* 27). The “field of the other” and the projecting, phallocentric field of self inhabit a relational kaleidoscopic field, one that is always slightly out of focus because of its constant dynamism. Although this formulation would appear to retreat from the realities of the Coast into paradigms of humanity, the persistently refractory nature of a universalized “human
space” becomes something unique as it is amplified by jarring facets of coastal mountains and water, infiltrated by a profusion of non-human terrain. The other is not simply a person, but everything one encounters. These physical facets of region, once introduced, become an inexorable disruption in the productive interplay between self and other; they form unique, site-specific identities, and the intensity of geographic disruption on the West Coast lends itself to apocalyptic fantasies of resolution.

The cross-cutting of self-representation by a crazed geography initiates a productive disruption, an anxiety that becomes a regional identity: “Every new appearance, as we proceeded, furnished new conjectures; the whole was not visibly connected” (Vancouver, *Voyage 54*). The fractal coastline, experienced as a fragmentary mess at the ground level, infiltrates the representation of self and gives rise to the apocalyptic desire for total revelation and unity. With regard to this desire, the claim that “apocalypse attempts to convert what Lacan calls the imaginary, the register of the subject’s delusional sense of plentitude and unity, into reality” (Wilkins 5) is too general, too non-localized. There is something *unique* occurring in the formation of the West Coast, even if uniqueness only resides in the experience of baffled vexation as one moves among more coherent “conjectures.” This amplification and infiltration of the land itself into the geometric structure of “human space” suggests a possibility for the perpetually uncomfortable formation of the “West Coaster” in language.

From the beginning, the West Coast becomes a place of ceaseless apocalypse because neither self nor other – nobody – can keep a good cultural footing. For all “the luxury of being” (Marlatt, *Ana* 153) there are mountains of West coats being peeled off successively here,
unveiling momentary glimpses of the haunting End of the World, the Other, the Death of self. Although the all-effacing precession of simulacra seems inescapable, a fait accompli, and this would seem to annihilate the possibility of revelation and meaningful death, the unspeakable aspects of Coastal geography slip into all-encompassing narratives as an uneasy, ghostly gap through which the Other might occasionally be witnessed. Some simply say of the Coast that you “keep going west until you run out. You come to the edge. Then you fall off” (Atwood 54). In such a formulation the Coast is nothing but Death – the opposite of the simulacrum – yet the formulation itself is structured by its particular westward approach. What if you are not approaching the region from back East and cannot “fall off”? What if you have to live here? What if you came at the coast from the other (Far) East, or travel endlessly north and south along its lines as so many do? What if your ancestors are buried within the land, the mineral grandfathers and grandmothers of trees and life itself? Maybe you do not need to commit suicide or bury your children – to negate the future – if you follow one of these other possible trajectories into the contact zone, or are already there.

The centres of culture back east can repeat their false revelations of the apocalyptic coast because cities do not move; the West is always the West if one approaches from Europe or Eastern North America (unless of course one approaches from the cinerama of Hollywood, in which case everywhere is nowhere). The discovery of the West is narrated as a repeated (and always somehow incomplete) revelation, and by virtue of this becomes semiotically intertwined with the erotic apocalyptic drive towards unveiling the (totally abject) bride. This is precisely why Marlatt asks repeatedly in Ana Historic: who’s there? What else is there besides the fantastic
projections of apocalyptic narratives onto the supposedly incomplete or fragmentary body of the bride? What is there to revelation besides the narrative of complete man and empty woman, subject and object, place (house) and wide open horizon? What obscene realities remain to be revealed once “the horrors of the preceding acts” (Pynchon 53) – the histories of injustice that everywhere mark the West – have played out?

Like Coyote, the symbolic woman thwarts the possibility of full revelation because she is always vaguely aware that she has been misrepresented. Using language itself, she bundles up against histories of her false unveiling: “She shut the door behind her and took the occasion to blunder, almost absently, into another slip and skirt, as well as a long-leg girdle and a couple pairs of knee socks” (Pynchon 29). At the core of her narrative is the fact that her treatment as a symbol has made other possibilities for her existence obscene and abject. She knows, in an “almost absent” way, that if total apocalypse were to occur she would cease to exist. The symbol of the bride would no longer be necessary as the event of the apocalypse came to be. On the other hand, the apocalypse has not happened. People are caught in the throes of history and the metaphorical gendering of apocalyptic narratives does matter (Carpenter 109). People are effaced, often violently, by their treatment as symbolic players in a supposedly cosmological battle. So the woman treated as a symbol layers up against history, but still finds herself all too often “amid a wall-to-wall scatter of clothing and spilled bourbon” (Pynchon 30) when it comes to the historical realities of the coast: “I gave the Indians some liquor, which I had brought on
purpose for them; they were noisy all night, but not troublesome” (Henry, Thompson’s 683). Apocalypses of abjection, such as the many enacted upon Indigenous peoples of the Coast, may not be total, but the fact that they can be averted altogether by a rewriting or rethinking of the metaphors one uses for apocalypse makes such a project highly desirable.

Who’s there, behind the wet coats? Explorers in their revelation of the landscape bundle up and hunker down against the elements, but constantly run the risk of exposure: “Here we are left the sport of fortune, at the mercy of chance, on a barbarous coast, among natives more inclined to murder us for our property than to assist us, and during a war which any moment may strip us of our all” (Henry, Thompson’s 877). Indeed, the bravest of explorers finds himself in a position much like that of the woman to be finally unveiled at the end of history; he himself becomes the abject nobody on the West Coast, “stripped” of the discursive coats that have previously protected his phallocentric existence, and he is ridiculed by scholars of history so that they may project their own incoherence into the flaw of another. When David Thompson went incommunicado for several weeks following a retreat from the Piegans, future historians would become uneasy. His silence has to be interpreted as a sign of personal weakness rather than an indicator that his unlocatability marked the point of collision between the kaleidoscopic nature of Eurocentric “human space” and the unfathomable (or at least hieroglyphic) nature of the Indigene’s Coast. His silence was read as a threat to scientific inquiry and needed to be shut up with narratives of failed heroism. Critics’ condemnation of Thompson served to mask the

35 This reference is partly unfair to Thompson who became a teetotaller later in life and refused to supply Indigenous peoples with alcohol, at one point even shattering a several barrel supply by intentionally placing it “on a vicious horse” (Jenish 142).
possibility that from the point of this collision, the aristocratic, history-oriented explorer’s continued existence becomes the choice of the “natives.” The “barbarous coast” and its peoples narrate Thompson into a position of abjection. Coyote has a good laugh at how badly old Morton and Glover\textsuperscript{36} squirm at this one, but maybe he’s not choosing sides. Maybe Thompson was just out wandering after all (Jenish 150-66).

While the sense of a happy ending or total rebirth might be a bit premature given ongoing trouble in Indigenous communities on the Coast, perhaps these last two chapters have indicated that it is time to look at old things in a new light. Without efforts at reparation, melancholia simply continues like a missile along its guilt-ridden, (canni)ballistic course (desiring the moment of final, total obliteration, and perhaps one day even achieving it). While it may be gratifying to see the downfall of the historical bad guys – the European explorers and colonialists that came to inhabit the Coast, or the Dicks that symbolically and physically oppress West Coast housewives – the only fully satisfying resolution would see all parties reach a point of reparative reconciliation. Ideally, all parties in the contact zone of the Coast would be able to produce space in a way that both meets each person’s needs and respects all others’. This may not be happening anytime soon, but if continued, the relentless guilt (on both the West Coast and the Western world) will ensure that it never happens.

\textsuperscript{36} A.S. Morton and Richard Glover were two mid-twentieth-century Canadian historians and editors of David Thompson’s journals who felt it necessary to react against J.B. Tyrell’s “hagiographic” treatment of the explorer in his 1916 edition.
Perhaps the hints of a collaborative contact zone were available right at the moment the aristocratic dogs came back over the timeless hills. As Simon Fraser reaches the cusp of the Pacific slope – the Rocky Mountains – he waxes poetic:

in the hills there was a steep rock or bank of considerable elevation and length, resembling an immense pile of natural architecture far surpassing anything that ever entered the idea of mortal man, and in what, though without any regularity, all of the different orders seemed to be combined, which created a pleasing and awful sensation to behold and consider the superiority of God’s works over those formed by the hands of man. But to describe what I have often felt in these romantic and wild regions where nature appears in all its forms is far above my slender abilities even was I possessed of more leasure and materials than I am. (Fraser 154)

His acknowledgment that the land surpasses “anything that ever entered the idea of mortal man” provides space for the entry of the abject into Eurocentric narratives. The fact that Fraser and others of his aristocratic pedigree defer to their “slender abilities” can also be read conversely, as their own humble entry into Coyote’s “timeless hills.” What better description of a timeless place could there be than one where “all of the different orders seemed to be combined”? Angels and animals share the time of eternity.

The critical study of the West Coast no longer need involve a game of “the man of suspicion double-bluffing the man of guile” (Sedgwick, Touching 125). For starters, one cannot double bluff a trickster; Coyote’s not even a man. He (or she) slides out from under attempts to be fixed in a single, unifying story. Moreover, the longer that narcissistic critical game gets
played, the more withered Tithonus becomes. How long can self-centred guilt go on? Eos must let her nostalgic consort finally die. If any trope of murder is aching to occur on the West Coast, it is not that of children or mothers or even patriarchs, but of language that seeks to form the coast: from the beginning “there were no perceptible connections here” (Macdonald, Flat 66).

While for those who look backward trying to piece together what went wrong “This place is a wasteland, a bomb crater, and the torrential rain can’t mask the smell of death” (127), for others looking to the future the region is simply “full of unknowable joy” (emphasis added, Taylor 402).

Where representations of the Coast go from here depends on the perspective you want to take. All of the disorientation I have been generating thus far has been leading to a moment of suspense, where versions of the Coast’s realities as a contact zone cannot be easily collapsed into one another. I have been struggling against the critical apocalyptic decision, the truth underlying the realities of history on the Coast. Narratives of a crazed multiplicity go back to the moment when Westerners first tried to piece together a picture of the land: people “couldn’t take its measure” if they tried (Gibson 146). “[N]ear corpses kept on the move now only by a crazed end-of-the-world curiosity” (Bowering 157), but that’s only what has become of the confrontation between man and an unquantifiable, timeless nature. Man was confronted from the beginning with death and a perpetual disorder that attempts to order things, driven towards the “unseen western edge of the world” that is unseen not necessarily because it was unseeable (Bowering 181), but because he had focused through the wrong lens. Take away the maddened and abject wife and what remains? Who’s there? Can a critic accept this crazy state of things as the baseline
and begin anew from there? Can a lack of perspective become the foundation for a malleable mythology, driven precisely by what it cannot see, what can never be seen? Has the “Lost Island” become the trope not of Indigenous cultures but of those who came after?

And yet, isn’t this beginning to sound familiar, in a kind of cyclical way? Have the familial histories of Coyote and the aristocratic dogs grown into their own hybrid animal?

‘we Indians have lost many things. We have lost our lands, our forests, our game, our fish; we have lost our ancient religion, our ancient dress; some of the younger people have even lost their fathers’ language and the legends and traditions of their ancestors. We cannot call those old things back to us; they will never come again. We may travel many days up the mountain-trails, and look in the silent places for them. They are not there…’ (Johnson, “Lost” 71)

We West Coasters have lost our ancient religion, legends and traditions: when I came back East, I was shocked to see that anyone still cared about words like denomination and Catholic school. Religion has been started from scratch on the West Coast, both in reality and fiction: Heaven’s Gate, Brother XII, countless UFO and New Age cults, The Revelations Colony of Truth (Hodgins, Invention), the Ephratah, and The Charcoal Burners. Every one of these is a hoax of unity, rigged up in the face of a faceless coastline. Their incoherence is what allows them to thrive, but it is also their undoing, for the “silent places” do not contain truths; they undo them. The deracinated native myth, already well in process as Pauline Johnson transcribed a living orality onto steel printing tablets, turns out to have been prophetic for the contemporary West Coast. Many of the younger people in this contact zone have lost their parents’ language, culture,
traditions. We cannot call those old things back – this writing cannot call those old ones(’r) back. The coast’s interstices have begun to overtake imported traditions.

Certainly, there have been numerous scenarios of coercion and “intractable conflict” on the West Coast. There have been attempts to completely erase cultures, if not the people that embody them. Yet indigenous mythologies have seeped into imported ones, Oriental ones into Occidental ones, regardless of historical inequalities in power. “Human space” is kaleidoscopic, not unidirectional. All manner of containment and effacement may be enacted, but repressed perspectives on the world find their way out through the mechanisms of the unconscious. “If you’re pure anything you can’t be Canadian” (Wah 53), says a canonical Canadian poet, and the notion of a West Coast identity works its way into both American and Canadian people living on the Coast – “peoples geographically and historically separated” from their national counterparts on other parts of the continent. If you’re a native West Coaster can you be a pure Canadian or American? By the same token, if you’re not an Indigenous West Coaster, can you ever feel as if you are born of the land? A sense of deracination does not apply evenly to all people who live on the Coast. Has the historical appropriation (and deracination) of Indigenous apocalyptic stories been successfully reappropriated to other historically disenfranchised groups living in the region? When you’re done “struggling with what comes next” (or what happened in the past) is it possible to start “reading ourselves into the page ahead” (Marlatt, Ana 148; 152)?

What is the West Coast Apocalyptic? A better question is what is the West Coast? Where does the West Coast apocalyptic exist? It is imperative to first ask how and where one locates the
West Coast. It both is a geography (cultural, physical, etc.) and it is not, in the sense that its boundaries are arbitrary and fluid and yet frequently referred to as having some re-cognizable shape. It is persistently coming into (and going out of) focus. The same could be said of a West Coast culture, which does not simply begin or end in any one of the many locales where it could be said to exist. There are the nationally defined West Coasts, there are provinces and states, and if you ask people from Vancouver, Seattle, or San Francisco if they and their Los Angelino counterparts are of the same ilk, their angry reactions will tell you that they just might be. In a sense, one could say that the West Coast exists as the collection of its instances – it’s the totality of each articulation of place combined – and yet that is itself another articulation, another instance of “amount and combination” (Coupland, *Stories* 3). Perhaps this is why there can be so many threads of the West Coast apocalyptic. Each generic strand contributes to and distorts all previous ones. More will occur.

Of course the same could be said of the relationship between any genre and region. A genre is performative; it exists by virtue of its reiteration, not as some fixed essence, and yet there is something particularly intriguing about the West Coast Apocalyptic. Generically speaking, it is just a baby, not nearly as easily interpellated as something found in more mature, established regions. “The society was at an inchoate, not a maturing stage” (MacLaren, *Influence* 7) when George Vancouver traversed the coastline two hundred years ago. The same can still be said in the present. The region will not find peace until the contact zone becomes collaborative – until the intractable conflicts are read as every bit as tractable as history itself. The chaotic
incongruities in the Coast’s personality still show, like so much babbling of an infant trying to master its language.

The question is, has a place that started as something else, always in reference to elsewhere, never self-sufficient or self-sustaining, over time become a more stable, solid entity? Will it? The process of petrifaction itself is worth exploring. Central Canada, where I have lived for the past five years, also exists through iterations, but the opinions on its composition are not nearly as wildly varied as in the West. To rework a saying just before it becomes a cliché, the West Coast is a land of opportunity, but I believe it is a place of a very different kind of opportunity than that espoused in some colonial fantasy of endlessly pillaged resources. It is a place where there still exists a tangible opportunity to prevent the fantastic projection of place from taking hold. In this regard the West Coast is an apocalyptic place, at least potentially, for it can blast apart at the seams its articulation as an object. Such an exercise can reverberate back through the distant remnants of empire, destabilizing all objects in its path.

Could the diversity and multiplicity of apocalyptic instances on the West Coast be getting at something? Could the style of polyvocal reportage that has characterized so much writing from the West Coast – from Pratt, to Compton, to Marlatt, to Ellis, to Coupland, to Kogawa and Choy and Mootoo, Kiyooka, Ricou, Soja, Davis, and Melsom – could it be getting at something unique about the object of articulation? If the second chapter of this dissertation is written in a “West Coast way” to avoid the exacerbation of apocalyptic thinking on the West Coast, then what does this final chapter accomplish by being written in a “West Coast Apocalyptic way”? Like those masses underpinning the West Coast itself, the plate-tectonics of this dissertation would benefit
scholarship if they contributed to and underwent a continual release of pressure, a goal both impossible and worthy of effort. The depressurization of an otherwise apocalyptic zone means the exercise of constantly rendering visible its faultlines and hidden energies, as I have sought to do in this final chapter: “with rolling and gathering/ no moss/ rolling and gathering/ no Moses” (152). No need for an apocalyptic prophet arises if the present is a place where all narratives, even the most traumatic ones, are allowed to emerge and be told. The telling is never complete. Apocalypse is perpetual on the West Coast, but when it becomes daily life then it can take no victims, as it has a long history of doing. To this endeavour there can be no omega.
Conclusion

At the end of this crazed and tortuous journey, it is still unclear whether the West Coast Apocalyptic even exists. Any apocalyptic corpus from the Coast is haunted by the numerous voices that whisper from beneath its visible surface. We can identify a collection of apocalyptic texts through its paradigmatic similarities to other apocalypses, but on the Coast apocalyptic resolutions really accomplish nothing. They add to rather than reduce confusion about the region and its problems. The West Coast Apocalyptic is precariously situated between myth and history, and it continually undoes both. It beckons from obscure places and announces gaps into the solidity of fact. It is something that presents, to borrow a phrase from Howard O’Hagan, “evidence – without a finding” (119). That is all I can offer at the end of this dissertation, but it is not for lack of looking. I have come to realize that, like California, the West Coast Apocalyptic is less a state than a state of mind.

Instead of concluding, then, I would like to comment on what persist for me as the most intriguing elements of this study. While the revelations in Ana Historic and 49th Parallel Psalm ultimately suggest the possibility of positive, productive spaces for a varied, open-ended sense of a regional identity, far more often writers have used the West Coast Apocalyptic as a mechanism of escapism and even oppression. With the Western reaches of North America now completely colonized, apocalypse is too often used in attempts to recover the vigorous, myth-making energies of continental expansion. Perhaps it is the region’s relative youth or its history as a frontier of exploitation that lends itself to the apocalyptic myth. Either way, all of the comforts of contemporary Coastal existence are treated as meaningless. Life in the suburbs, which finds some
of its finest expressions in Los Angeles and Vancouver, is commonly seen as a drain on the vitality of an existence connected to the abundant and shockingly beautiful geography of the Far West.

The belief that apocalypse could resolve the draining features of the Coast’s cultural geography suggests some strange problems when considered alongside the region’s geo-historical realities. Why, for instance, would the appropriate response to a sense of suburbanite meaninglessness be to burn everything down and start again? Does anyone really believe that partial and historically bound West Coast apocalypses could resolve the universal disconnection between the subject and object that Northrop Frye discusses? Without genuine self-examination, would people living on a post-apocalyptic Coast not just build up an identical set of problems to those they face today? If a material Utopia has been achieved through the undeniable comforts and beauties of West Coast living, why haven’t people acted a little more grateful about it? What ingredient is really lacking?

The West Coast Apocalyptic in all its wondrous multiplicity has emerged in a very organic way from the region’s history, but at the same time, it is now important to formulate questions of the genre’s meaning and purpose. The ceaseless repetition of apocalypse in film and popular media from the Coast has gradually obscured all sense of its historical production and is most insidious precisely when it seems to address historical problems. While fantasies of resolution are undeniably tantalizing, the resolution offered by apocalyptic narratives is illusory and ultimately detracts from more careful, analytical approaches to history’s problems. Apocalypse plays out a powerful series of historically charged emotions, but in the process it

262
basically negates that energy. People on the Coast may feel apocalypse gets them somewhere, but they have not moved in the slightest, and the sense stagnation has only multiplied over time. All of the malaise, angst, and melancholia that I outlined results. Humble, ground-level projects such as this dissertation have much more potential to address the unique demands of a particular geography than both apocalypse and a mode of high-theoretical revelation.

The West Coast’s relatively emergent status as a region makes it a useful case study for future discussions of identity formation. As the disorientation present in my last two chapters may have indicated, it can be a disorienting process to experience identities that are in an emergent form. I don’t believe that I’ve been gimmicky or lazy in trying to capture formally some of the tidalectic rhythms of emergence. Texts like 49th Parallel Psalm and Ana Historic indicate that the arising of new identities and new vocabularies for experiencing something often only emerge through and as a tortuous and laborious process. One is bound to experience, like David Thompson, some missteps and backpaddling along the way, but these can become the greatest strength of a study. It seems human enough to want to mitigate the ambiguities of emergent forms, but when this mitigation goes unexamined, bad things can happen.

At its worst, in texts like Volcano, apocalypse is used to negate or suppress trends that may ultimately benefit society. The unpredictable emergence of new ideas and voices becomes an emergency, and ultimately necessitates authoritarian reactions. However, as Giorgio Agamben reminds us, necessity is always constructed to meet subjective desires (1). The sense of necessity in apocalypse is its key problem as a resolution. Using unconscious, subjective anxieties, it posits a constructed threat as real; at the same time, while thoroughly driven by the energies of desire, it
seeks out the elimination of the subject-object divide – the very elimination of desire! While
Volcano, for example, is satisfying on one level, on another, it echoes and perpetuates the
mentality that led to the Los Angeles riots and the Rodney King beating itself. The desire to sort
West Coast spaces into rigid, identifiable zones prevents the region from becoming the open,
productive contact zone it could be. Without contact, the Coast becomes a new frontier, where
the only media of communication are lead and steel – bullets and automobiles. While the
ahistorical screen of a movie or television may appear to place people at a safe distance from the
realities of violence, it also represses legitimate complaints about inequality to the point where
they can only come into consciousness as eruptions or explosions. A lot may still be learned from
those close-contact chats that David Thompson and his various Indigenous hosts had two
hundred years ago. They provided a framework for a saner form of coexistence among the many
peoples of the Coast.

I also believe that elements of this study can contribute to the field of literary criticism at
large. Building on the critical groundwork laid by Eve Sedgwick, I have everywhere tried to
demonstrate the usefulness of a site-specific criticism. Even when critics are not consciously
aware of the locations from which they write, these locations often influence perspective,
terminology, and metaphor. Why not build this influence directly into critical projects? Beyond
keeping things honest, a site-specific criticism can provide an abundance of unexpected,
critically forceful terms and metaphors. I have discovered innumerable new terms and ways of
thinking in this project, none of which need be reproduced the next time I write unless they fit
particularly well. I hope that some of my nonce taxonomies have contacted your own sensibilities in ways that I could never predict on my own.

Finally, I would like to emphasize in closing that the site specific energies that a critic can tap into need not be physical ones. While the West Coast certainly suggests an “end of the world” in physical terms, in virtual terms new worlds and identities have increasingly flourished. These need not reproduce the mode of invasion that characterized the discovery of the New World. A growing number of people align themselves with the explicitly technological identities of internet communities, and these will produce new, unexpected geographies in years to come. Such emergent identities need not be treated apocalyptically. There is no need to close the arguments made in this project, and indeed I would hope my work has opened up countless possibilities for others to explore on their own terms.
Works Cited

Print.


Print.


266


*Crash.* Dir. Paul Haggis. Perf. Don Cheadle, Sandra Bullock and Thandie Newton. Lions Gate Films. DVD.


271


Harrison, Dick, ed. *Crossing Frontiers: Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature.*


Higham, Carol, and Robert Thacker, eds. *One West, Two Myths: A Comparative Reader.*


Hirt, Paul, ed. *Terra Pacifica: People and Place in the Northwest States and Western Canada.*


  ---. *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne, or a Word or Two on Those Port Annie Miracles.*


Jenish, D’Arcy. Epic Wanderer: David Thompson and the Mapping of the Canadian West.


71-78. Print.


Tool. Ænima. Zoo, 1996. CD.


King, James. A Compendious History of Captain Cook’s Last Voyage Performed in the Years 1776, 1777, 1778, 1779 and 1780 in which all Interesting Transactions are Recorded, Particularly those Relative to His Unfortunate Death with a Map of New Discoveries and the Track of the Ships. London: G. Kearsley, 1784. Print.


MacLauries, Mr. [Sir Alexander MacKenzie]. *A Narrative or Journal of Voyages and Travels through the North-West Continent of America; in the Years 1789 and 1793*. Boston: E.G. House, 1802. Print.


Vancouver, George. *A Voyage of Discovery to the Pacific Ocean and Round the World in which the Coast of North-West America has been Carefully Examined and Accurately Surveyed Undertaken by His Majesty’s Command, Principally with a View to Ascerta...* 285
of any Navigable Communication between the North Pacific and North Atlantic Oceans;
and Performed in the Years 1790, 1791, 1792, 1793, 1794 and 1795, in the Discovery Sloop
of War, and Armed Tender Chatham, Under the Command of George Vancouver. London:
John Stockdale, 1801. Print.

Vibert, Elizabeth. “‘The Natives were Strong to Live’: Reinterpreting Early-Nineteenth-Century


Volcano. Dir. Mick Jackson. Perf. Tommy Lee Jones, Anne Heche, Gaby Hoffmann, and Don
Cheadle. Twentieth Century Fox, 1997. DVD.


