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Generation storytelling: (Counter-)narrative identity in Douglas Coupland's *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*

Abstract: Douglas Coupland's 1991 novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* is about the generation born between the early 1960s and 1980s, who grew up in the economic decline of the period as a generation who experienced "having less" (economically as well as in terms of future prospects) than their parents, the "baby boomer" generation. Told by the character Andy, representing the X generation's worldview, it is a story of coming to terms with and laying distance to the pervasive materialism and societal expectations of contemporary culture – and of searching for one's own identity. Here, storytelling is an important element. The novel has been read as illustrating the postmodern debates concerning the end of history, the death of the grand narratives of Western society, and the upcoming of their replacements, the little narratives. In this article, this perspective is developed by including the concept of "master and counter-narratives," which are approached as social and cultural expressions of and reactions on the grand narratives governing society. The binary relationship between grand and little narratives clearly invites reflections on master and counter-narratives within postmodernity. In addition to interpreting Coupland's novel, the purpose is to elucidate the connections between these two conceptual pairs (grand/little and master/counter) and propose ways they can be applied in literary research.

Keywords: counter- and master narrative; little and grand narrative; Douglas Coupland

1 Introduction

"Either our lives become stories, or there is just no way to get through them," the character Claire Baxter says in Canadian author Douglas Coupland's *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991: 8). Here, Claire subscribes to the widely accepted idea that "identity" is narrative and that meaningfulness depends on the

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creation of an evolving and internalized story by and of the self. As we go through our lives, we construct our identities by talking about our experiences and integrating both change and continuity into our personal storyline, according to, for example, Bruner (1987) and McAdams (2011), just to mention a few of the theorists who have explored this line of thinking.[1]

However, identity-shaping stories are not just personal creations. They are dependent on and embedded in societal and cultural narratives, perhaps even reacting on and countering some of them. In sociology and identity research, this has been approached through the concepts of "master narratives" and "counter-narratives" (Bamberg and Andrews 2004). Counter-narratives are conceived as alternative identity-shaping stories of marginalized or underrepresented groups, challenging dominating cultural narratives (the master narratives) and giving voice to overlooked or misrepresented experiences and identities. Since Andrews and Bamberg coined the terms in a sociological context, they have been implemented widely in a variety of social, cultural, organizational, and institutional settings (Lueg and Lundholt 2021).

The exploration and questioning of the cultural and social normative (historical or contemporary) and the bridge between these narratives and "nonconforming" individuals' or groups' conflicts with them is, of course, a recurring theme in novelistic fiction. Nonetheless, the terminology of "master and counter-narrative" has not really found its way into the analysis of narrative literature.[2] In this article, I will pay attention to an example of a "generation novel" – that is, a novel giving voice to a new generation and thematizing the gap between generations. Every generation's relationship to the previous generation will be characterized by questions about power, wealth, and influence, as well as by complex feelings and emotions related to the identity work, and the history of the novel most certainly shows this as a recurring theme across periods and languages. My example will be the afore-mentioned *Generation X*. Compared to Andrews and Bamberg's conception of

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1 This idea has nonetheless been contested from different sides; see, for example, Strawson (2004) and Hyvärinen's reconsideration of Strawson's position (Hyvärinen 2012).

2 A couple of exceptions: In the *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*, a section is devoted to "Counter-narratives, literature and ideology" (Lueg and Lundholt 2021: 281–334) and includes a chapter on Kenyan Mau Mau novels by Wafula Yenjela, on Indigenous fiction by Sonja Mausen and Judith Eckenhoff, and on cancer novels by Cindie Aaen Maagaard. I have myself analyzed Maria Gerhardt's autofictional cancer novel *Transfervindue. Fortællinger om de raskes fejl* (2017) [*Transfer Window: Narratives about the Flaws of the Healthy*] from the perspective of master and counter-narratives and -metaphors in the discourse on cancer (Hansen 2018). In the theme-issue of *Narrative Works* on political counternarratives, Virginia Pignagnoli interprets Halle Butler's *The New Me* with attention toward the counternarrative against the "grand narrative as a source of personal fulfil-ment" (Pignagnoli 2024).

counter-narrative that emphasizes its utility for underrepresented and marginalized groups, the protagonists of *Generation X* might be on the borderline of representing a minority or an oppressed group, but if we allow for the more "extended" use of the concept, as it has developed over the years, it becomes quite useful. Coupland himself stated in an early article about the characteristics of the X generation that the term "denotes a large chunk of the population ignored because its members have no money and because Baby Boomers outnumber them" (1987: 169). It is evident that he, as a representative of the generation, is identifying and positioning the "chunk" as an oppressed group due to the prior generation's (the baby boomers') numeric, economic, and cultural dominance in society.

However, there is also another reason for paying attention to Coupland's *Generation X*. Due to its explicit focus on storytelling in a postmodern/late-capitalism setting, the novel has been read with reference to several of the theorists and theories of postmodernism: Frederic Jameson's work on "late capitalism," Francis Fukuyama's observations of "the end of history," Jean Baudrillard's simulacre idea and his book on America, and Jean-Francois Lyotard's analysis of the "postmodern condition," with its focus on the death of the grand narratives and the rise of *petits récits* 'little narratives'.[3] In the following, I will pick up on the latter, since the binary relation between grand and little narratives patently opens the door for reflections on master and counter-narratives of postmodernity. Besides offering an interpretation of Coupland's novel, my aim, therefore, is to clarify the relations between the two conceptual pairs (grand/little and master/counter) and to suggest how they may be operationalized in literary research.

2 The X generation

Generation X portrays the generation born in the period between the early 1960s and the early 1980s. Approached through Karl Mannheim's theory of generations (1952), where location and historical landmark events are defining factors for how a generation's specific consciousness and perspectives are shaped, the economic challenges following the oil crisis in the 1970s and the political uncertainty and geopolitical tensions of the Cold War are defining factors. Where the previous generation, the baby boomers, emerged through postwar optimism and economic stability, the X generation's foundation was characterized by economic decline, rising unemployment rates, and nuclear anxiety (McKenna 2025).

The label of the generation, generation X, is to some degree Coupland's invention and appears originally as the title of an article he published in *Vancouver Magazine*

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3 See, for example, Annesley 1998; Forshaw 2000; Lainsbury 1996; Zurbrigg 2005.

in 1987 and, later, in the "Gen X" comic strip he made together with Paul Rivoche, featured in the Toronto-based magazine *Vista* (Jennifer 2016). The term "generation X" had, however, been used earlier for describing youth generations: in 1953, photographer Robert Capa published a three-part photo essay named "Youth and the World" in the magazine *Holiday* with images of the "unknown" youth generation who entered adulthood immediately after World War II. The essay was announced in the December 1952 issue under the headline "Generation X" (Ulrich 2003: 32). Later, in 1964, Charles Hamblett and Jane Deverson published an interview-book called *Generation X,* in which they collected the testimony of the post-Beatles generation, whose parental and future skepticism pointed toward punk dogma (Doody 2011: 25–27). This designation reappeared when punk musician Billy Idol named his band Generation X in 1976 with reference to Hamblett and Deverson's study. In his 1987 article, Coupland refers to Idol's band, stating that even though Idol "technically" wasn't an Xer himself, since he was born in 1955, he was a "prime mover of the generation whose main claim to creative fame is the creation and abandonment of Punk style after members of the Baby Boom started ripping it off" ((1987: 169). Coupland later commented on this: "I would like to say […] that it was edited in such a way as to make the term Generation X sound like it came from the name of Billy Idol's band, but it wasn't – it comes from the final chapter of a book called *Class* by U.S. social critic Paul Fussell". The full title of Fussell's book is *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System* (1983), and Fussell used "X" to describe a group of young people who wanted to escape societal pressures and norms. Coupland found a parallel resonance in this concept in relation to his own generation. In the *Vancouver Magazine* article, he presents a fictional generation X character, Kevin, as over-educated, underemployed, directionless, home staying, unpolitical, and nonreligious. It is this type, and the generation he represents, that Coupland explores in more depth in the novel.

3 About the novel

Originally, Coupland was commissioned to write an ironic nonfiction book portraying this new generation, but he ended up handing in a manuscript for a novel, albeit different in format and layout than what would be expected in this genre. The book is squared in size, giving allusions of a school textbook or a magazine, and at the same time providing enough space on the pages for a vast amount of marginalia: neologisms characterizing the lives and circumstances of generation X, single panel cartoons (drawn by Paul Rivoche) depicting emblematic situations for the generation, slogans graphically resembling the American artist Barbara Kruger's works, and simple line drawings illustrating significant artifacts and roles from the X

generation's daily life – all characterized by an ironic tone promoting a meta-perspective introducing the reader to the X generation but also exposing it through mild caricature.

The novel closes with an epilog or appendix named "Numbers" with data supporting the premises for the novel – the most important one being that where the baby boomer generation enjoyed economic prosperity and job stability, the X generation face economic uncertainty and job instability. To give a few examples: "Percent of U.S. budget spent on the elderly: 30 / on education: 2"; "Percentage of households under age 25 living in poverty […] / in 1979: 20 / in 1984: 33"; "Percentage increase in income for over-65 households (senior citizens) between 1967 and 1987: 52.6 / for all other households: 7" (Coupland 1991: 181–183). This economic development positions the X generation in a situation where they are dependent on support from their parents and where the majority of them believe that it will be much harder for them to live as "comfortably as previous generations" (183). "Our parents had more" (9), the statement-like title of the novel's second chapter says, while another says: "Eat your parents" (83), perhaps illustrating the phenomenon of "boomer envy" defined in one of the margin texts: "Envy of material wealth and long range material security accrued by older members of the baby boom generation by virtue of fortunate births" (21). A baby boomer, "Helen, 52," is quoted in the prolog of the novel, and her statement illustrates the situation the X generation see themselves caught in: "They're my children. Adults or not, I just can't kick them out of the house. It would be cruel. And besides – they're great cooks" (n.p.). On the one hand, she expresses parental love and support, but on the other, it is also clear that she benefits from the situation the children are caught in – unable to leave home, but also not getting the parental support that might make it happen.

Despite all these uncommon features of the novel (and an extraordinary layout of every first page of every chapter), the body text is a quite ordinary first-person narrated story. It is told by the Xer Andy Palmer, who in addition to telling his own story also tells the stories of his close friends, Claire Baxter and Dag Bellinghausen. The three live side by side in rented bungalows in Palm Springs, California, in a sort of self-imposed exile from the middle class they come from. They consider themselves "members of the poverty jet set, an enormous global group" (4), with low-paid service jobs, always on the move, and with a shared discomfort and disillusionment with their parents' generation. In the perspective of Andy, Claire, and Dag, the baby boomers are depicted as having once been part of the counterculture movement, advocating for peace, love, and environmental sustainability, but they have since become the embodiment of the consumerist and materialistic values they once opposed – some of them due to simple opportunism and to "selling out" out of their ideals for material comfort and social status (in the margin, we find a definition of a "Bleeding pony-tail – an elderly sold-out baby boomer who pines for hippie or pre-sellout days" [21])

and others because they never really got it, as illustrated in an anecdote Andy tells about his mother, Louise: After a Thanksgiving dinner, Andy sees her bag the dinner trash in a nonbiodegradable bag. He tells her to consider using one of her degradable bags instead, and she says:

> 'You are right! I forgot I had them!' and so she grabs one of the good bags. She then takes all of the trash, bad bag and all, and heaves it into the new one. The expression on her face was so genuinely proud that I didn't have the heart to tell her she'd gotten it all wrong. Louise Palmer: *Planet Saver.* (84)

Louise's attempt to do it right only makes it worse due to her lack of recognition of what is at stake, and Andy reacts with a mixture of abandonment, sarcasm, and pity.

The generational fear of the potential extinction of the planet due to environmental abuse or nuclear warfare is a recurring theme, and together with the distrust toward the parental generation, the X generation holds a postmodern nihilism without faith in either the past, the present, or the future. The reader of the marginalia is introduced to both "historical underdosing" ("To live in a period of time when nothing happens. Major symptoms include addiction to newspapers, magazines and TV news broadcasts" [7]) and "historical overdosing" (with an identical definition set aside where "nothing" is exchanged with "too much" [8]), and sees that Andy recognizes that the comfortable life of the middle class comes with the price of being anonymous:

> You see, when you're middle class, you have to live with the fact that history will ignore you. You have to live with the fact that history can never champion your causes and that history will never feel sorry for you. It is the price that is paid for day-to-day comfort and silence. And because of this price, all happinesses are sterile; all sadnesses go unpitied. (147)

It is this situation that Andy, Claire, and Dag are seeking shelter from in their informal community in Palm Springs, and Palm Springs is a strong symbolic frame for the group's existential exile. Situated in the desert, "a land that is barren – the equivalent of a blank space at the end of a chapter – and a land so empty that all objects placed on its breathing, hot skin become objects of irony" (19), Palm Springs reflects the novel's themes of disillusionment and escape. In his article on ritual and epiphany in Coupland's novels, Andrew Tate highlights how Palm Springs, with its desert landscape and association with leisure and retirement, serves as a backdrop for the characters' retreat from mainstream society and urban life.

> Andy, Dag, and Claire regard the 'resort community' of Palm Springs as a space of hope. There is a note of parody in their chosen haven: far from being an unpeopled landscape it is scarred by shopping malls and bad architecture. Yet the extremes of rich and poor coupled with the lack of a true American middle-class appeals to these sojourners. Palm Springs is a place that should not exist – the city brought into the desert, manufactured and, like Eliot's London, unreal. (Tate 2002: 330)

Palm Springs figures as a place of stasis: "There is no weather in Palm Springs – just like TV. There is also no middle class, and in that sense the place is medieval" (Coupland 1991; 10), Andy tells us. "We live small lives on the periphery: we are marginalized and there's a great deal in which we choose not to participate," and he continues: "We had compulsions that made us confuse shopping with creativity, to take downers and assume that merely renting a video on a Saturday night was enough. But now that we live here in the desert, things are much, much better" (11).

Nonetheless, Andy, Dag, and Claire leave Palm Springs by the end of the novel and heads toward Mexico. Here, they want to make a hotel where other drifting Xers can check in and share stories.

4 Bedtime stories in a world falling apart

The relationship between Andy, Claire, and Dag is close, even though their friendship is not old, and their confidence is based on a built-up routine of telling bedtime stories: "It's simple: We come up with stories, and we tell them to each other. The only rule is that we are not allowed to interrupt, just like in AA" (14), Andy says, referring to the fact that he got the inspiration from an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting. The difference between the AA stories and Andy, Claire, and Dag's is that while the expectation is that in AA you tell your own, real story, reality is not a limitation for our trio, neither do the stories have to be confessional or have the narrator's own experiences as a focus. When telling the stories, they are genre-conscious, making an explicit distinction between fiction and true stories, and they have created their own categories. One of Dag's favorites is "end-of-the-world" stories being "eschatological You-Are-There accounts of what it's like to be Bombed, lovingly detailed, and told in a deadpan voice," Andy explains (62). "Texlahoma stories" is another kind, set in a fictional and very stereotypical American world: "It's a sad Everyplace, where citizens are always getting fired from their jobs at the 7-Eleven and where the kids do drugs and practice the latest dance craze at the local lake […]" (39). In general, however, they can tell the story they feel like telling: personal (or told) experiences, often concerned with moments of disillusionment, existential angst, or observations of the irony and paradoxes of the society and culture that surrounds them; modern-day parables with a moral undertone; or straight out imagined scenarios, establishing counterfactual storyworlds for the sake of escapism or envisioning alternative possibilities. Narrative and storytelling are thus both central themes in the novel and means of our protagonists' cautious attempts to come to terms with and gain a place in the world – a world in which, on the one hand, they were created, but, on the other hand, they do not trust or feel a belonging to.

There is a strong intertextual reference to Giovanni Boccacio's *The Decameron* (c. 1351), which was written in the wake of the Black Death. Here, a group of ten young noble men and women have taken exile from the plague in a country villa outside Florence, spending their time telling stories – one each every day over a period of ten days. Both works use storytelling as a means of coping with crises – Boccaccio's characters with the Black Death and Coupland's characters with the existential crises of (post)modern life. Both authors use their characters' stories to provide social commentary. Boccaccio critiques the moral and social decay he observes in his society, while Coupland critiques the consumer culture and lack of meaningful connections in late 20th-century America. Here, we find yet another understanding of the "X". The word "decameron" is derived from the Italian *decamerone*, which is a combination of the Greek words *δέκα* (*deka* 'ten') and *ἡμέρα* (*hēmérā* 'day'). In Roman numerals, X is 10. In this way, generation X is "generation 'decameron'" – that is, the generation for whom storytelling is a means of survival in a world falling apart.

5 Grand/little and master/counter-narratives

As stated by G.P Lainsbury, *Generation X* is a "meditation on the end of history" (1996: n.p.), for it is set in the background of "the great divide between the historical and posthistorical eras" following the emergence of late capitalism. The novel can therefore be read as a portrayal of the distrust of what Jean-François Lyotard defined as the *grands récits* 'grand narratives' or 'metanarratives' in his seminal 1979 work *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport sur le Savoir*, translated into English as *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984).

In Lyotard's understanding, grand narratives are totalizing narratives or metadiscourses of modernity. "I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth" (1984: xxiii). These narratives provide ideologies with a legitimating philosophy of history and are manifested in the ideologies of the Enlightenment, democracy, liberalism, and Marxism – all overarching ideologies characterized by a narrative scheme where the development of history is perceived as an irrefutable progress toward emancipation and a greater good.

Lyotard claims that what characterizes the "postmodern condition" is a skepticism toward these grand narratives, which are losing their epistemic authority, validity, and coherence. "The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal" (xxiv), he states with a sort of socio-poetical verve, and he argues that the grand narratives are being replaced by an

epistemic relativism which he approaches through Wittgenstein's notion of "language games" (1984: 9). The grand narratives are being resisted by petits récits 'little narratives' that find their legitimacy in specific, local contexts and acknowledge the diversity of human experience. The "little narratives" are therefore characterized by demonstrating paralogical disruptions (60) and subverting the ruling epistemic values and replacing them with alternative, local "truths."

Where Lyotard's interest was analyzing the status of "knowledge" and the sciences in the postmodern condition, his concepts quickly gained traction in a great variety of contexts. Matti Hyvärinen and Samuli Björninen suggest that the later formulated concepts of "master" and "counter-narrative" were informed by Lyotard's critique of the grand narratives of Western Society ((Hyvärinen and Björninen 2024: 2). As mentioned in the introduction, these concepts have been used to understand marginalized groups in terms of the stories they tell about themselves. Molly Andrews describes counter-narratives as stories that people tell and live, which resist dominant cultural narratives, either implicitly or explicitly (2004: 1). Hilde Lindemann Nelson explains that identity damage inflicted by a powerful social group on a less powerful group can be repaired through "identity-constituting counterstories" that depict group members as fully developed moral agents (2001: xii). Thus, counter-narratives (or counterstories, as Nelson calls them) are stories of resistance that form the foundation for establishing new identities.

The term "counter-narrative" inherently opposes another relational category, "master narratives," as defined by Bamberg and Andrews. Master narratives function as scripts that dictate and control societal processes. Stanley (2007) states that a master narrative serves as a blueprint for all stories, shaping our understanding of the world. These narratives become internalized, influencing our perception of reality. Interestingly, master narratives often remain implicit and have little "tellability." They act as the backdrop against which counter-narratives unfold, as noted by Hyvärinen (2021: 27).

Despite a lack of rigor in the way the concepts of, respectively, grand/little narratives on the one hand and master/counter-narratives on the other have been set to work, I will distinguish them from each other in this (rather) schematic way (Figure 1):
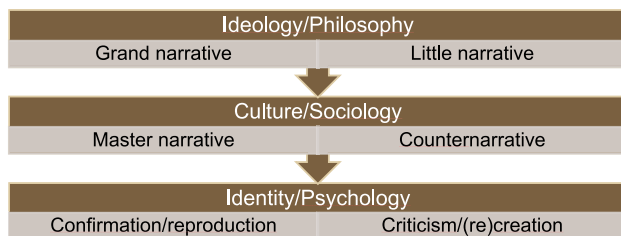

Ideology/Philosophy	
Grand narrative	Little narrative
Culture/Sociology	
Master narrative	Counternarrative
Identity/Psychology	
Confirmation/reproduction	Criticism/(re)creation

Figure 1: Narrative as ideology, culture and identity.

As presented above, Lyotard's focus was on ideology and the state of "knowledge" under the postmodern condition. Here, a grand narrative is a totalizing story about history and human goals. It aims at legitimating society by anticipating the completion of an unrealized overarching idea. Andrews' and Bamberg's concept of the master narrative carries some of the same characteristics and refers to a dominant cultural story or overarching framework that shapes our understanding of reality. It often reflects societal norms, values, and power dynamics. Despite the sense of overlap, one can argue that master narratives are social regulating expressions of the ideological grand narratives, concerning the specific behavioral patterns and roles of a given society. Master narratives express norms and values that have become internalized, influencing our perception of the world and our place within it. The concept of the master narrative, therefore, emphasizes internalization and positional nature, whereas the concept of the grand narrative highlights the totalizing and legitimizing functions of ideology. Counter-narratives come into being when someone cannot identify with or find room for themselves in the master narrative and, at the same time, has the experience of being "mastered" by it. This experience of estrangement and suppression opens the way for perspectives on the master narrative that reformulate and reposition it. As Hyvärinen and Björninen observe, counternarratives can be seen as a "particular mode of telling that is able to *construct* and *designate* a master narrative to which the counter-narrative stands in enacted and marked position" (2024: 2). It is not until the hegemonic function of the master narrative is being expelled by those who are being dominated or excluded that it really becomes a mastering narrative. Counter-narratives position the mastering discourse as a master narrative by installing it as an opponent to their own identity work and by telling or retelling it from the perspective of being mastered by it.

In *Generation X*, Andy states: "When someone tells you they've just bought a house, they might as well tell you they no longer have a personality. You can immediately assume so many things: that they're locked into jobs they hate; that they're broke; that they spend every night watching videos; that they're 15 pounds overweight; that they no longer listen to new ideas. It's profoundly depressing" (Coupland 1991: 143). He is laying distance to one of the master narratives of the grand narrative of Western civilization: the striving dream of private property and of becoming an established citizen. One could say that even though the grand narrative of Western civilizations is dead to him (and the rest of the postmodern Xers), he still feels the presence and the pressure of the mastering narratives grounded in this grand narrative. Clair has a comparable experience when her brothers and relatives constantly pay attention to the fact that she still is not married, her being around 30. The master narrative of the nuclear family and that women "must be in want of a man" (to paraphrase Jane Austen, albeit with a different gender orientation) pushes

her to try to connect to a young yuppie, Tobias, but she ends up being abused by him and returns to Andy and Dag to live another life, countering the normativity and pressure of the master narrative.

In *Generation X*, the disillusion with and rejection of the master narratives of their parents' generation, the American Dream and the constant aspiration of upward mobility, is the common ground for the three main-characters. Instead, they embrace a more fragmented, individualized approach to life, which aligns with Lyotard's idea of delegitimation (1984: 37). At their first encounter, Claire asks Andy why he his is in Palm Springs: "I obliquely told her I was merely trying to erase all traces of history from my past, and she took that at face value" (Coupland 1991: 36). Dag has a similar urge: "I needed a clean slate with no one to read it. […] My life had become a series of incidents that simply weren't stringing together to make for an interesting book" (31).

However, at the same time, they are constantly confronted by the master narrative they are up against. Dag reacts to a bumper sticker on a car that says, "We're spending our children's inheritance." It is reasonable to think that the sticker is meant as a joke by the car owner and the legitimation of it is based on the master narrative of progress and ever-growing wealth ("we can spend the inheritance, since they won't need it"). But seen from the Xers' counter-perspective, it precisely expresses the experience of the X generation. Dag scrapes a boulder across the front hood. "I don't know […] whether I feel more that I want to punish some aging crock for frittering away my world, or whether I'm just upset that the world has gotten too big – way beyond our capacity to tell stories about it, and so all we're stuck with are these blips and chunks and snippets on bumpers. […] I feel insulted either way" (5).

There is, therefore, also a sense of loss related to their situation. The stories they tell are not directly edified but often melancholic, ironic, or cynical. As argued by Andrew Tate, Dag's insulted feeling of the world being "too big" for him to tell stories about it is not just a matter of "defending recreational sabotage. Neither is Jean-François Lyotard's celebrated definition of the 'postmodern condition' simply capitulated to in Coupland's fiction" (2007: 43). Their disbelief in the grand narrative of Western society and their resistance against the master narratives of the baby boomers leaves them with an edge of nostalgia or mourning over the absence of a defining story or mythology. It is on this ground that they practice their storytelling. As Claire states in the quote cited at the beginning of this article: "Either our lives become stories, or there is just no way to get through them" (Coupland 1991: 8). Andy and Dag agree, and Andy, the narrator, states that this is the reason for them to be in the desert – "to tell stories and to make our own lives worthwhile tales in the process."

By the end of the novel, the trio leave the rented bungalows in Palm Springs and head to Felipe in Mexico. Their gesture seems ironic insofar as they travel against the

current of migrants from Mexico, who seek the American Dream but often end up in the same "McJobs" the Xers took, but with even fewer social rights and possibilities to fulfill this dream. However, the plan for Andy, Claire, and Dag is to establish an even more provisional space for living than they had in the desert of Palm Springs: a small hotel that can accommodate other drifters and be a scene for even more storytelling. This move calls into mind an earlier generation of storytelling disbelievers of the grand narrative of liberalism and of the master narratives of postwar materialism and sexual morality – the beat generation. The beats also went to Mexico, but not only to escape from America. To them, it was also the mythology, the culture, the revolutionary history of the country, the access to drugs, and so on, that attracted them (Calonne 2022). However, for Andy, Claire, and Dag, the move to Mexico is more a matter of escape than of search. This also enforces the reference to *The Decameron*, but where Boccacio's noble young people, by the end of the narrative, return to Florence once the plague settles, Andy, Clair, and Dag seek a permanent exile. Their "plague" isn't over yet.

6 Conclusions

Being more than 30 years old and being published in the wake of the great debates concerning the end of history, the death of the grand narratives, and their replacement by little narratives, Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* is, indeed, telling tales for "an accelerated culture," as the subtitle of the novel says. Despite the fact that the X generation has been replaced with new generational tags (e.g., millennials, generation Z), the acceleration of Western culture has not ceased, and the younger generations' claim of identity and their awareness of the hegemony and destructiveness of the still reigning master narratives of Western culture gives the novel relevance, not only for historical reasons. It embodies the mechanisms in the conflicts between generations by focusing on the relation between the overarching cultural and ideological narratives and their conceptual counterparts: the local and diverging alternative narratives of the marginalized. One could argue that Lyotard's grand narratives are easier to get a hold on than Andrews' and Bamberg's master narratives, insofar as the former is formulated as ideologies and, therefore, governing norms and rules for living, while the latter are more blurred and perhaps best become visible as the backdrop for the counternarratives resisting the often silent hegemony of the master narrative, as Matti Hÿvärinen has argued (2021). I do not think that master narratives in general are silent – they are being expressed through politics and cultural institutions, in curricula, through the news, and among the citizens of a given society. However, they are always being negotiated, and therefore to some extent up for both discussion and reinterpretation.

If we understand literature and fiction as a discourse where things are often "larger than life" and more "profiled" than in our everyday lives, it is also a discourse where our ideas and understanding of these overarching and mastering narratives are clearly illustrated and contested. This is evidently the case for Coupland's novel. As presented above, Coupland had made a few initial attempts to bring attention to the generation he was part of – and for which he saw a radical new situation when compared to the former generation, the baby boomers – before writing the novel. He was commissioned to write a humorous lifestyle handbook about and for his generation, and it seems reasonable to think that the texts and illustrations in the margins and the statistical data in the appendix, as well as the square format of the book, derives from this project. However, Coupland chose to turn it all into fiction. By combining the (fictionalized) handbook genre with a classic first-person narrated novel told by a representative of the generation in focus, Coupland gives room for both an external and an internal perspective on the generation. Andy becomes a witness for the reader, a voice of and for the X generation, whose circumstances are illustrated in the margins. Of the many neologisms introducing the reader to the new generation, seemingly only one[4] was not made up by Coupland (Doody 2011: 24), but nonetheless the fictitious definitions were recognized as relating to the cultural and societal reality they were reflections of, and Coupland provided the generation he had in focus with a vocabulary for their identity-shaping counter-narratives and for criticizing the hypocrisy and hegemony of the master narratives they are coming from and up against.

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4 "McJob: A low-paid, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future job in the service sector. Frequently considered a satisfying career choice by people who have never held one" (Coupland 1991: 5).

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