

Reluctant Warriors: Reading DeLillo's Cold War

Laura Tanenbaum
Fellow
International Center for Advanced Studies
New York University
lat202@nyu.edu

Do not cite without permission.

Working Paper: #12
November 2003
The Cold War as Global Conflict
International Center for Advanced Studies
New York University

The opening of *Libra*, Don DeLillo's 1988 treatment of Lee Harvey Oswald and his most sustained historical meditation up to that time, impresses immediately on the reader a sense of the confinement and anonymity that will define the novel's central figure:

This was the year he rode the subway to the ends of the city, two hundred miles of track. He liked to stand at the front of the first car, hands flat against the glass. The train smashed through the dark. People stood on the local platforms staring nowhere, a look they'd been practicing for years. He kind of wondered, speeding past, who they really were. . . It had nothing to do with him. He was riding just to ride.¹

By contrast, DeLillo's subsequent 1991 novel, *Mao II*, which in telling the story of a reclusive writer nonetheless expands its scope to scenes including Khomeini's funeral and the streets of Beirut, opens with one of the crowd scenes DeLillo is known for, in this case a Moonie wedding at Yankee stadium observed by the parents of one of the participants:

Here they come, marching into American sunlight. They are grouped in twos, eternal boy-girl, stepping out of the runway beyond the fence in left-center field. The music draws them across the grass, dozens, hundreds, already too many to count. They assemble themselves so tightly, crossing the vast arc of the outfield, that the effect is one of transformation. From a series of linked couples they become one continuous wave, larger all the time, covering the open spaces in navy and white.²

Taken together, these scenes vividly present two sides of a classic portrait of modernist alienation: the atomized individual moving through the cityscape and the faceless crowd partaking in mass delusion. *Underworld*, DeLillo's 1997 novel of

¹ Don DeLillo, *Libra*. (New York: Viking, 1988) 3.

² Don DeLillo, *Mao II*. (New York: Viking, 1991) 3.

the Cold War United States, begins with another crowd scene, but from the opening Whitmanesque lines it is clear we are on far different ground:

He speaks your voice, American, and there's a shine in his eye that's halfway hopeful.

It's a school day, sure, but he's nowhere near the classroom. He wants to be here instead, standing in the shadow of this old rust-hulk of a structure, and it's hard to blame him – this metropolis of steel and concrete and flaky paint and chopped grass and enormous Chesterfield packs aslant on the scoreboards, a couple of cigarettes jutting from each.

Longing on a large scale is what makes history. This is just a kid with a local yearning, but he is part of an assembling crowd, . . .³

From the use of the second person to the colloquial phrasings, this introduction to the novel's opening set piece describing the famous Giants/Dodgers pennant game of 1951 suggests far different possibilities for historical representation and consciousness than those of *Libra* and *Mao II*. "Local yearning" here evokes not only DeLillo's first prolonged return to the Bronx landscape of his youth but a new attention to the concrete lived reality through which the novel's historic vision emerges. In considering the novel's treatment of history, this turn will present possibilities that undermine familiar representations of daily life during the Cold War and offers new understandings through its visionary portrait of the period.

I: A Brief Underground Tour: A Synopsis

"The menace of the history of quiet lives . . ."
Don DeLillo, *Americana*

³ Don DeLillo, *Underworld*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997) 11. Subsequent references will be by page number in the text.

Sharing with *Vineland* and *American Pastoral* a traditional quest structure in which an individual mines the past for understanding, *Underworld* builds, as James Wolcott observes, the novel “*from* a climax, tracing the seismic ripples generated from its tremendous opening.”⁴ This climax takes the form of a cinematic set piece: the prologue, “The Triumph of Death,” evokes from the stands to the press box the famous baseball game of October 3, 1951 in which the New York Giants won the pennant on Bobby Thompson’s home run. From DeLillo’s recreation of J. Edgar Hoover, we learn that on this same day the Soviets have exploded their second nuclear bomb, and we watch a young African-American boy take off with the homerun ball. The first section of the main body of the novel, “Long Tall Sally,” takes us forward to 1992, where we encounter the novel’s central figure, a middle-aged waste manager named Nick Shay who currently owns the homerun ball. We see him visit Klara Sax, an older woman he had an affair with as a teenager, now a conceptual artist working with converted B-52s in the desert. He bickers with co-workers, cares for his aging mother and measures the silences with his wife. The novel then begins its gradual backwards motion through time. Scenes from the eighties and early nineties show us Nick’s acquisition of the baseball, the end of his wife’s affair with a co-worker, and his return to the Bronx of his childhood, where figures from that past, including Klara’s husband, the high school teacher Bronzini, continue to live. The following sections isolate moments that serve less as turning points than as distillations. In the spring of 1978, Nick meets a

⁴ James Wolcott, “Blasts from the Past,” *The New Criterion*, December 1997, 66.

woman in a hotel and reveals to her that as a teenager, he spent time “in correction” for shooting another man and confesses the encounter, but not the shooting, to his wife. Part IV shows us the “rooftop” summer of 1974, which focuses on Klara and uses a range of art objects, from the Zapruder film to a concert film of the Rolling Stones to subway graffiti to mark historical, social and personal change.

In between all of this, the story of the baseball continues. Most notably, three sections entitled “Manx Martin” tell the story of this African-American man, the father of the boy who originally took the ball home, and are separated from the structure of the rest of the novel. As the novel moves towards the crucial years of the fifties and sixties, it shifts towards an episodic form. Thus Part V, “Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry,” is subtitled “Selected Fragments Public and Private in the 1950s and 1960s” and contains twenty such scenes, all given a specific date. This section also contains more direct reference to factual historical events and individuals than any other section of the novel, including intertwined scenes of Lenny Bruce’s performances and Truman Capote’s famous Black & White Ball, as well as scenes of Nick’s stay with the Jesuits and his early relationship with his wife. In the final section of the novel’s main body, which many have singled out for its powerful and moving evocation of youth, we witness Nick and his family in friends in a panorama of scenes that lead to his shooting of George Manza, an older heroin dealer from the neighborhood. Finally, an epilogue entitled “Das Kapital” returns us to the novel’s present, offering a glimpse of the post-Cold War future through Nick’s visit to Kazakhstan, where he views a hospital

full of Chernobyl victims and confronts Brian about his affair with Marian. The second half of the epilogue returns to Nick's domestic life in Phoenix, where his son reads on the internet of the miracle concerning Esmeralda, a dead girl on Sister Edgar's Bronx streets; her magical story and the ripples it creates conclude the novel.

II: Underground Readers: The Critical Reception of DeLillo and *Underworld*

Described by on the jacket by Michael Ondaatje as “an aria and a wolf-whistle of our half-century,” *Underworld* was treated upon its publication not only as an instant classic but as a definitive rendition of Cold War experience in the United States. Defined by the parameters of the era, from the prologue set on October 3, 1951 to the epilogue set in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, the Bronx and cyberspace, the novel seemed to transcend the sum of the Cold War artifacts it evoked in order to present a lucid chronicle of the period, turning the “effluvia of modern life” into “a dazzling, phosphorescent work of art,” as Michiko Kakutani's *New York Times* review asserted.⁵ To address the scope of DeLillo's project, many reviews of *Underworld* inevitably began by attempting to give readers a sense of the novel's reach, often through the DeLillo-esque form of the list. In his enthusiastic *Washington Post* review, Michael Dirda notes that comparisons to a range of classics are in order because:

[t]his is a novel, after all, that draws together baseball, the Bomb, J. Edgar Hoover, waste disposal, drugs, gangs, Vietnam, fathers and sons, comic Lenny Bruce and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

⁵ Michiko Kakutani, “*Underworld: Of America as a Splendid Junk Heap*,” *New York Times*, 16 September 1997, 6:8.

And that's just for openers. It also depicts adultery, weapons testing, the care of aging mothers, the postwar Bronx, '60s civil rights demonstrations, pop culture, advertising, graffiti artists at work, Catholic education, chess and murder. And we're still not through.⁶

Noting the relation of these elements and themes to those familiar to readers from cultural histories of the period and representations of the Cold War in popular culture, many of these accounts have an air of inevitability about them, as if five years after the presumed end of the Cold War, someone would naturally write it a proper epic elegy. Yet there is little in DeLillo's previous work that would lead one to anticipate this kind of sweeping historical project. In fact, until the 1988 publication of *Libra*, few would have labeled DeLillo as a historical novelist at all. In a 1983 review of *The Names*, David Bosworth described the author as "[r]elentlessly contemporary," a writer who "has sought to explore the most modern face of America - its executive suites, its obsession with film and TV, its passion for football and fame and rock music and weapons technology."⁷ While Bosworth praises DeLillo for his journalistic scope, DeLillo's work throughout the seventies and early eighties displayed this scope by considering a range of cultural institutions and milieus rather than through a temporal or historical frame. Hailing *Underworld* as a necessary and timely elegy for Cold War, if not for "the American Century" itself, critics took the desirability of an ambitious, all-encompassing and possibly allegorical vision of the Cold War for granted, making it easy to forget that many of

⁶ Michael Dirda, "The Blast Felt round the World," in Hugh Ruppersburg and Tim Engles, eds. *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*. (New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 2000) 76.

⁷ David Bosworth, "The Fiction of Don DeLillo," in Ruppersburg and Engles, 45.

DeLillo's earlier novels were extensively critiqued as insular, as lacking traditional plot and character development and, by extension, for lacking sympathy for the social milieus being depicted.⁸

With the publication of *White Noise*, a novel that continues DeLillo's examination of various institutions and systems by combining an academic satire with a portrait of consumer society and technology, responses to DeLillo's work became more numerous and varied, with a division emerging between readings emphasizing the social critique of consumer culture and those finding a neo-Romantic treatment of that culture.⁹ Not surprisingly, it was largely at the moment DeLillo began to achieve critical and commercial success that conservative attacks on DeLillo began to appear. In one of the most extensive and cited outlines of this critique, Bruce Bawer ignores the possibility of a neo-romantic reading and asserts that *White Noise* is only another in DeLillo's series of "tracts" which are "designed

⁸ For example, turning DeLillo's obsessive concern for language against him, for example, Stephen Koch asserted that "There are no stockbrokers, terrorists, or wives - dehumanized or not - in *Players*. There are only words, inky squiggles on a page, telling us things that we do not believe." It is in these terms that James Woods associates DeLillo with the weaknesses of postmodern fiction which he asserts "know a thousand different things . . . but do not know a single human being" and that subscribe to "the notion of the novelist as a kind of Frankfurt School entertainer, fighting the culture with dialectical devilry." Stephen Koch, "End Game," in Ruppensburg and Engles, 39; Mark Mordue, "The Pull of 'New Gravity,'" *The Nation* 6 May 2002, 40-5.

⁹ See Mark Osteen, "Introduction," in Mark Osteen, ed. *White Noise: Text and Criticism*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1998) vii-xiv. As John McClure outlines, this neo-Romantic reading is rooted in the extent to which DeLillo's work often illustrates the mystical overlay that overtakes the languages of science, technology, consumerism and conspiracy, much as modernist texts relied on the exotic to recreate the enchantment seemingly lost from the modern world. John McClure,

to batter us, again and again, with a single idea: that life in America today is boring, benumbing, dehumanized” and to advocate primitivism and violence.¹⁰ As Frank Lentricchia points out, such readings moved away from complaints about the obtuseness of his prose towards out-and-out Red baiting and further use of “the sixties” as a means to brand the works as outmoded forms of critique. Although the sixties do not appear directly in *White Noise*, Jonathan Yardley’s review argues that the novel “retail[s] the shopworn campus ideology of the ‘60s and ‘70s and demands “[c]ould there be a more predictable catalogue of trendy political themes: radiation, addiction to violence, television as religion, the trivialization of suffering, the vulgarity of America?”¹¹ Some of the few negative responses to *Underworld* were in a similar vein: James Wolcott accuses the novel of appealing to “those who

“Postmodern Romance,” in Frank Lentricchia, ed. *Introducing Don DeLillo*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) 99-116.

¹⁰ Bruce Bawer, “Don DeLillo’s America,” *The New Criterion*, April 1985, 35-42.

¹¹ Jonathan Yardley, “Don DeLillo’s American Nightmare,” *Washington Post*, 13 January 1985, B:6. While throughout the seventies and eighties, DeLillo’s detractors often relied upon aesthetically conservative arguments (the novels lack proper character and plot development) and, to varying degrees, on analogous politically conservative assertions (the novels echo the stale sixties critique of American consumerism and technology), with the 1988 publication of *Libra* and its explicit turn to the historical, these debates quickly shifted to more specific political ground. As Ruppensburg and Engles note, George Will’s assertion that “DeLillo is a study in credulity regarding the crudities of the American left” was only the most overheated of those made by numerous reviewers, who often discussed the plausibility of DeLillo’s plot in great detail. What seemed to most disturb these critics was that in granting symbolic weight to this character, the novel takes quite seriously the ideological struggles of its central character. DeLillo’s response to Will offers a wonderfully succinct assessment of the terms of debate: “Will also said that I blamed America for Lee Harvey Oswald. But I don’t blame America for Lee Harvey Oswald, I blame America for George Will.” Hugh Ruppensburg and Tim Engles, “Introduction,” in Ruppensburg and Engles, 8; George F. Will, “Shallow

have experienced malaise ever since the Age of Aquarius went bust.” The obsession with criticizing the sixties is of course familiar neo-conservative ground, but the logic by which Wolcott arrives there is revealing: people sympathetic to the movements of the era like the novel because it concludes “that white, middle-aged, middle-class America is in the dumps literally and emotionally.”¹² In addition to missing the novel’s frequent optimism and multicultural scope, Wolcott reverses a familiar role of the sixties in political discourse: not only is talking about the sixties talking about America writ large, it seems, talking about contemporary America is talking about the sixties, and any critical vision can thereby be saddled with the perceived political baggage of the period. If, as Jameson suggests, taking a position on the postmodern always entails a position on late capitalism, taking a position on works regarded as postmodern fiction becomes a position on the sixties.

In fact, if, prior to *Underworld* and with the exception of *Libra*, DeLillo’s work was largely viewed as a portrait of various contemporary strains of American culture, it was viewed widely through its relationship to the transformations of the sixties by those more sympathetic to his aims as well. In part because of the causal relation often assumed by literary and cultural critics between the New Left and counterculture of the sixties and postmodernism, readings of DeLillo’s work have tended towards conclusions about mass culture, consumption, paranoia, and fear that are deeply enmeshed in debates about the decade. Rather

Look at the Mind of an Assassin,” in Ruppensburg and Engles, 57; DeLillo cited in David Remnick, “Exile on Main Street,” *The New Yorker*, 15 September 1997, 48.

than tracing his critique to the radicalism of New Left and the counterculture, these accounts frequently suggest the “what comes after” logic of a response to traumatic historical experience, although the period is rarely explicitly discussed in these terms.¹³ Often citing DeLillo’s own assessment that his work could not have been written before Kennedy’s assassination, critics have viewed DeLillo as a particularly post-sixties author, working through the implications of the period as authors more directly associated with the era have presumably failed to do. Peter Knight thereby asserts “it was only in the paranoid atmosphere of the late 1960s and the post-Watergate period of disillusion that a certain form of countercultural paranoia - and DeLillo’s writing - could take shape.”¹⁴ Comparisons to “sixties writers” have similarly proliferated; in 1976, reviewing *Ratner’s Star*, J.D. O’Hara noted DeLillo’s importance as a writer who “is already the writer Vonnegut, Barth, and Pynchon were once oddly and variously taken to be,” applying the traditional assumption that historical fiction requires a certain degree of temporal distance to works that bear a more indirect relationship to a given period.¹⁵

¹² James Wolcott, “Blasts from the Past,” *The New Criterion*, December 1997, 65-70.

¹³ Although it has produced a rich literature concerning the question of historical representation, as suggested in my introduction, the discourse of trauma is not particularly useful in considering representations of this period, despite the influence of this framework in *American Pastoral* and the whole of Roth’s recent historical trilogy.

¹⁴ Peter Knight, “Everything is Connected: *Underworld*’s Secret History of Paranoia,” in Hugh Ruppersburg and Tim Engles, eds. *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*. (New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 2000) 284.

¹⁵ J.D. O’Hara, “Your Number Is Up,” in Ruppersburg and Engles, 37.

Nevertheless, these comparisons tend to emphasize DeLillo's vision of a contemporary moment frequently described as "post-sixties" rather than his treatment of the period itself. Even in the case of *Libra's* particular historical project, critics gave more attention to the question of what kind of history can be written - and how distrust, fear and paranoia shape our understanding our own lives as well as those of historical figures - than to anything DeLillo might have to say about the period being depicted. More than the representation of political outsiders in *Libra* or the treatment of dissolution of a counterculture figure in the rock and roll novel *Great Jones Street*, it is DeLillo's portrait of consumer culture and its various subcultures that is read through the decade.¹⁶ Although Roth, Pynchon and DeLillo were all born within three years of each other, the periodization of the recent past in social, cultural and literary histories has most often placed them in differing relations to the sixties and its transformations. Roth continues to be seen as a relic of the pre-sixties world, alternatively standing in awe and horror at its unfathomable disappearance, while Pynchon has been read as both a chronicler and an artifact of

¹⁶ DeLillo's own comments on his experience of the period are revealing. In a *New Yorker* profile, David Remnick cites DeLillo as remembering a distanced fascination with the culture and politics of sixties radicalism: "I found the sixties extremely interesting, and, at the same time that all that was happening – enormous social disruption – I also felt that there was a curious ennui, a boredom, which actually may be part of my first novel. I think it's something I sensed around me, which would seem to be completely at odds with what you were seeing and hearing in the streets." Remnick nonetheless notes that DeLillo's novels "radiate a sensibility tempered in the sixties and seventies." David Remnick, "Exile on Main Street," *The New Yorker*, 15 September 1997, 46. As these comments suggests, DeLillo's treatment of the sixties has consistently showed less of a sense of ownership over the historical materials and cultural productions of the decade than

the period. DeLillo, on the other hand, is considered the writer best suited to make sense of the culture that has emerged since then, with *Americana*, a road novel written and set in 1971 laying the foundation. With the exception of *Libra*, rather than depicting the most visible transformations of the period directly, DeLillo's work portrays various sectors of contemporary life shaped by these transformations. In order to do so, as Jameson outlined in a review of 1982's *The Names*, the depiction of systems and institutions, with their jargons and hermetic knowledges, seemed to eliminate the possibility of a narrative built "out of pieces and bleeding chunks of raw experience."¹⁷

This emphasis on systems over particularized experience reaches its height in *Mao II*, in which the particulars of various systems give way to the nature of the mass itself. Displaying a dystopic view of the mass and crowds that yolks together participants in a mass Moonie wedding, soccer fans, mourners at the Ayatollah's funeral, the reproduced images of Warhol's celebrity silk-screens, and consumers of mass culture more generally, the novel embodies the seeming impossibility of the kind of historical consciousness found in Lukács' vision of the historical novel, with the figure of the serious writer witnessing his own obsolescence and disappearance with more detached curiosity than sorrow or

most critics and writers who have treated the period, including both Roth and Pynchon.

¹⁷ Fredric Jameson, Review of Don DeLillo's *The Names* and Sol Yurick's *Richard A. The Minnesota Review* 22, (Spring 1984), 116. For the most comprehensive use of this framework to read DeLillo's work, see Thomas LeClair, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

anger.¹⁸ In this light, many of DeLillo's earlier novels can best be understood as documents that collect artifacts of the late Cold War period rather than as chronicles that engage with the historical narratives of the period. Stephen Bernstein persuasively argues that even with *Libra*'s explicit turn to the historical, the framework of the systems novel with its implied pessimism about the possibility of historical consciousness persists.¹⁹ Many responses to *Underworld* saw the novel as an extension of this examination of systems. Paul Quinn's review in the *Times Literary Supplement* suggests a shift only in scale: "To some extent, DeLillo's career can be seen as an ongoing project that has systematically taken on the systems, visible and invisible, that affect American life: television, in *Americana* (1971); sport, in *End Zone* (1972); rock music, in *Great Jones Street* (1973); science, in *Ratner's Star* (1976); the CIA, in *The Names* (1982), and so on. *Underworld* is undoubtedly a summation of all the above and more."²⁰

¹⁸ Although many reviewers responded to the scope of *Underworld* as a triumph against the perceived marginal role of the novel, DeLillo himself has offered a more skeptical view of the question in his fiction and in interviews, frequently suggesting that the cultural displacement of the novel is not the cause for lamentation that Roth perceives it to be. When a character in *The Names* notes that "[i]f I were a writer . . . how I would enjoy being told the novel was dead. How liberating, to work in the margins, outside a central perception. You are the ghoul of literature. Lovely," he suggests that a project like *Underworld* can be read as a beneficiary of the novel's alleged marginality rather than as possible solution to this state of affairs.

¹⁹ Stephen Bernstein, "Libra and the Historical Sublime," *Postmodern Culture* 4.2 1994.

²⁰ Paul Quinn, "Hitting the Homerun," *Times Literary Supplement*, 26 December 1997, 21. See also, for example, Hans-Ulrich Mohr, "DeLillo's *Underworld*: Cold War History and Systematic Patterns," *European Journal of English Studies*, v. 5, no. 3 (December 2001) 349-65.

Yet the novel's scope has clear implications that fall outside this cumulative framework. First, it represents a shift from a synchronic study of institutions, systems and cultures at a given moment to a diachronic study of a given historical period. More importantly, it calls into question the other half of Jameson's opposition: the "bleeding chunks of raw experience" that in his formulation can only be found in works that lack the "socio-historical and economic explanation of what happens to people in our world" of DeLillo's work.²¹ The novel's backwards movement from the early nineties to the early fifties along with the recurring image of the title suggests an excavation of lost histories. I will argue that through this process the novel recovers lost artifacts of daily life, pieces of everyday language, modes of artistic and creative expression, and moments of domestic and private life. My reading of the novel will suggest that its engagement with the history and politics of the Cold War period reconfigures the systems approach and the treatment of mass society and culture most vividly rendered in *Mao II*. The historic frame of the Cold War thereby coincides with an explosion in the representations of everyday life, a shift many critics have overlooked even while noting that the novel marks DeLillo's first explicit use of the Bronx environment and culture of his own upbringing.²² The results of this shift from stories based in

²¹ Jameson 116.

²² This is further reflected in the strange contention of many critics and reviewers that *Underworld* contained few memorable characters other than its historic figures. Critics emphasizing neo-romantic elements of DeLillo's work begin to suggest how these texts render the experience of everyday life, especially through a consideration of language, mass communication and consumerism. For the most part, however, these critics are most concerned with scenes with a tendency towards the mystical

one particular institution at one particular time to *Underworld*'s depiction of communities, families and a range of both ordinary and famous historical figures across fifty years therefore remains to be fully understood.

One possible reason for this oversight can be found in the categories most often used to divide recent fiction. As noted in my introduction, Jameson's review of *The Names* remarks in passing that "For many of us, Don DeLillo has been the most interesting and talented of American post-modernist novelists (which is to say finally, I suppose, of current white male novelists, although the category may also include a few individuals of other gender and racial specifications.)"²³ In parenthetically noting the association of DeLillo, postmodernism, the systems novel, and the work of white men, Jameson suggests the associations one would place on the other side of the ledger: fiction that eschews "socio-historical and economic explanations" for "bleeding chunks of raw experience" would presumably be the realm of women writers and writers of color. This assessment underlies both many recent outlines of contemporary fiction and critical accounts animated by the left critique of postmodernism, as in John Kucich's critique of DeLillo's fiction as highly symptomatic of the political impotence of white male postmodern writers in

not present in some of the most compelling and overlooked scenes of domestic and community life in *Underworld*.

²³ Frederic Jameson, Review of Don DeLillo's *The Names* and Sol Yurick's *Richard A.*, 119. In terms of readership, many critics have assumed DeLillo's audience to be primarily male, and DeLillo himself noted in a 1988 interview that "[c]ertainly *White Noise* found a lot of women readers, and I don't think that too many women had been reading my books before that." Anthony DeCurtis, "'An Outsider in this Society': An Interview with Don DeLillo," in Frank Lentricchia, ed. *Introducing Don DeLillo*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, 60.

the United States. Drawn to the authority of marginal voices but unable to convincingly occupy this position in other than trivial ways, Kucich argues, DeLillo's white male characters emerge as "befuddled and aimless men whose chief problem is their chronic half-heartedness." Noting the range of DeLillo's political themes, Kucich argues:

[t]hat DeLillo should be so devoted to this kind of social criticism, but so unwilling or unable to take the next step at articulating the alienation of his white male characters in usefully oppositional ways; that he should be so willing to trail off into admitting lamely that "most of us don't know how to feel," as Jack Gladney concludes in *White Noise* – this set of problems typifies the general estrangement between postmodern politics and the white male writer.

Without naming names, Kucich blames identity politics at least in part for this state of affairs: "DeLillo's novels clearly show how his paralysis results both from the transient, ungrounded nature of his characters' attempts to oppose shifting centers of American political power, and from the facile linkage between desires for opposition and social identity that postmodern thought encourages."²⁴

Among reviewers and critics more sympathetic to DeLillo, Kucich's assumption that his fiction is largely defined by the limits of white male subjectivity remains, with paranoia serving as the compensatory impulse of those otherwise unable to conceive of a historical or public world. Preoccupied with questions of paranoia, these accounts overlook *Underworld's* "chunks of raw experience" – most notably those connected to domestic life and sexuality. Moreover, despite the numerous references to the novel's scope, few remarked on the novel's

multiculturalism or its interweaving of the points of view of male and female and straight and gay characters, especially notable given their relative absence in both many of the “big” novels mentioned by these reviewers and in DeLillo’s earlier fiction.²⁵ In fact, references to the novel’s scope are often used to mean just the opposite: Martin Amis suggests that the arrival of *Underworld* offers an answer to the question “where has the mainstream been hiding,” defining the American literary mainstream as “the great Jews and Updike,” begging the question of whether a mainstream presumably “in hiding” deserves the title.²⁶ Similarly, Paul Quinn notes that “*Underworld* strives for an inclusivity which was lost with big-game baseball,” suggesting that the inclusiveness is to be found not in any multicultural vision but only in the presumably lost common narratives of the early Cold War.²⁷

²⁴ John Kucich, “Postmodern Politics: Don DeLillo and the Plight of the White Male Writer,” *Michigan Quarterly Review*, v.27, no. 2, Spring 1988, 334.

²⁵ John N. Duvall’s essay “Excavating the Underworld of Race and Waste in Cold War History: Baseball, Aesthetics and Ideology,” in Ruppensburg and Engles, 258-281 is one notable exception. However, through his focus on the novel’s opening set piece, Duvall relies heavily on sources outside the novel, such as the deployment of Jackie Robinson as an apolitical figure or the ideology exported with baseball to Japan through the U.S. military. While thought-provoking, Duvall’s argument seems to underscore the difficulty many critics have had in considering the treatment of race, class and gender which is found within the novel itself. For consideration of the role of race or its absence in DeLillo’s earlier work, see Tim Engles, “Who are you, literally?: Fantasies of the White Self in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*,” in Ruppensburg and Engles, eds., 171-195 and John McClure, *Late Imperial Romance*. (London & New York: Verso, 1994).

²⁶ Martin Amis, “Survivors of the Cold War,” *The New York Times Book Review*, 5 October 1997, 12.

²⁷ Paul Quinn, “Hitting the Home Run,” *Time Literary Supplement*, 26 December 1997, 21.

Underworld's shift towards the depiction of everyday life offers a suggestive means to reconsider questions of historical representation of the recent past and in particular of representations of the period with which DeLillo's work has been so strongly associated. Paul Gediman offers a telling comparison of the vision of the recent American past presented in *Underworld* in comparison to *American Pastoral*. While Roth's novel presents an absolute divide between the Swede's sense of order and the chaos embodied by Merry, *Underworld* examines the cultural and social forces at work behind what may appear to be chaotic. He concludes: "*Underworld* is a more rewarding book than *American Pastoral* because, aesthetically and morally, it's more interesting to explore and give shape to what isn't understood than simply to call it 'chaos' and send it into manichean battle with something called 'order.'"²⁸ This distinction will prove useful in understanding DeLillo's approach to representing postwar American history in general and the sixties in particular. While Roth's historical inquiry circles continuously around the unfathomable nature of a single act of violence, *Underworld* builds on DeLillo's earlier work by selecting a series of events and images that can be understood in relation to familiar accounts of the period, both fictional and non-fictional, offering the possibility for an exploration of the everyday invisible or illegible in the world of the systems novel.

Considering the novel's treatment of the transformations of "the sixties," it is clear that *Underworld*, unlike both *Vineland* and *American Pastoral*,

²⁸ Paul Gediman, "Visions of the American Beserk," *The Boston Review*, v. 22, no.

never presents this period as exceptional or as an absolute break. Rather than presenting a variation on traditional periodizations like Arthur Marwick's "long sixties" or emphasizing yet again that "the sixties" was really the late sixties and early seventies, *Underworld* places the period within a larger Cold War framework. Yet the resulting half-century is not presented as the all-inclusive array of loosely connected moments and events suggested by many descriptions of the novel. Instead, the novel's much-discussed obsession with finding connections and its use of juxtaposition serves to present a highly particular vision of "the sixties," one that emphasizes continuity as well as transformation and presents changes in social mores, sexuality, modes of cultural expression, domestic life and racial, gender and sexual identities as deeply rooted in the ways in which the Cold War shaped everyday life and how the transformations of sixties began to alter these conceptions. This may help explain why, unlike *Vineland* and *American Pastoral*, as well as many of DeLillo's earlier novels, *Underworld* received largely favorable reviews and, with the exceptions noted above, was largely insulated from political attack.²⁹ Yet with this praise has come a resistance to considering the full range and implications of the novel's historical vision.

4, October/November 1997, 48.

²⁹ Hugh Ruppersburg and Tim Engles, "Introduction," in Ruppersburg and Engles, 10. As noted earlier, the few exceptions relied on their association of any critique of contemporary consumer capitalism with "the sixties" rather than on specific representations of that period or of the Cold War as a whole. Although critics extensively discussed the novel's use of historical figures ranging from J. Edgar Hoover and Jackie Gleason to Lenny Bruce, no reviewer to my knowledge labeled these representations as politically or historically "irresponsible" (in the way that

In my discussion of *American Pastoral*, I argued that Roth's turn towards historical representation seems to challenge but ultimately affirms his vision of the recent American past as one in which "everything is permitted; nothing matters."³⁰ In DeLillo's vision, it seems as though everything is not only permitted but fully accounted for. DeLillo's narrative inclusiveness departs dramatically from Roth's lamentation, and many responses to the novel have not surprisingly become weighted by their own sense of needing to account for the totality of DeLillo's vision. The question of what matters, however, has yet to be fully discussed in the mostly reverential treatment the novel has received. Turning to the specifics of these representations and their engagement with other fictional and non-fictional accounts of the period, it is clear that DeLillo's vision of the period steps outside and beyond both Roth's obsession with the roots of white middle-class radicalism and Pynchon's genealogy of the Left. In shifting away from *Mao II*'s overwhelming fear of the mass towards a detailed portrait of everyday life during the Cold War, the novel confronts the representational challenges of the period. In so doing, it persuasively suggests a means of understanding the extent to which the

Libra's representation of Oswald was asserted to be) or took specific issue with the politics of these representations.

³⁰ As my earlier chapter suggests, this seemingly absurd statement stems not only from Roth's admiration for the Eastern European writers he has championed, but a familiar sense of his own limitations in comparison to their subversive influence. It is worth noting that DeLillo has drawn similar comparisons between his own situation and those of writers in more repressive countries, most notably in the address he delivered at the New York Public Library on behalf of the Chinese dissident writer Wei Jingsheng: "In the West, every writer is absorbed, turned into breakfast food or canned laughter. But the more nearly total the state, the more

ideologies of the Cold War can be understood to have shaped everyday life in the United States.

How does the novel's scope incorporate both history from "above" (as in the depiction of historical figures like Hoover) and from "below"? How does the novel's backwards motion treat the question, central to Roth and Pynchon, of how one historical moment comes from another? How does this vast portrait treat the relation between the most public of events - the crowds scenes for which DeLillo is so well known - and the most private - his more overlooked treatment of changes in domestic life? And finally, does DeLillo's inclusiveness lead to an even-handedness that obscures the political vision so clearly forming throughout much of the novel? I begin by discussing the novel's depictions of political identity, radicalism and the counterculture. I then consider the question, largely overlooked in responses to DeLillo's work, of sexuality and the changes to private and domestic life central to the period, suggesting that while the novel at first appears indifferent to political commitment and to the transformations of the sixties looking at these spheres offers new possibilities for a politically engaged depiction of everyday life under the sway of cold war ideology. I further consider the novel's treatment of nostalgia, which manifests itself in far more diverse and diffuse forms than in *Vineland* and *American Pastoral* and outside the parameters in which nostalgia has been most often understood as a regressive force. Finally, I turn to the epistemological and historiographic questions that *Underworld* shares with

vivid the dissident artist." Don DeLillo, "The Artist Naked in a Cage," *The New*

American Pastoral and *Vineland*, questions that shed new light on the much-discussed role of paranoia or conspiracy in DeLillo's work.

III: Politics, Radicalism and the Counterculture

Happiness is taking part in the struggle, where there is no borderline between one's own personal world, and the world in general.

Epigraph to Don DeLillo, *Libra*

As suggested earlier, much of *Libra*'s power rests in its poignant depiction of Oswald's failure to live the vision outlined in this epigraph. By contrast, *Underworld* depicts a diverse range of characters that embody at various moments political and historical visions of the Cold War United States. Moreover, although not solely or even primarily a novel about the sixties as *American Pastoral* and *Vineland* both are, the transformations of that period and its radical political and countercultural spheres are crucial to the depictions of this vision. As noted in previous discussions, many historical accounts of the period have argued that given the extent and success of the conservative and reactionary political backlash against the radical movements of the period, cultural and social transformations can be understood as the most visible ongoing effects of the period. While *Underworld* similarly downplays the notion of reaction central to *Vineland*, it emphasizes the continued impact of cultural transformations on the mainstream. Thus the radicalism of the period is not presented as an unfathomable event that a historical novel must continually circle around in search of meaning, as in *American Pastoral*. At the same time, the reaction that followed this radicalism is not considered the

Yorker 26 May 1997.

historically absurd and aberrational phenomenon it appears to be in *Vineland*. Instead, the novel recreates a range of lived experiences that presents the period's radicalism in the context of the dominant logic of militarism and the threat of nuclear annihilation.

In taking the bomb and the early fifties as its historical point of origin, *Underworld* represents a shift from much of DeLillo's earlier work, in which Kennedy's assassination serves to lay the foundation for the "post-sixties" world which the novels explore. While DeLillo's comments about the role of the assassination in his work suggest that only after that event could his visions of paranoia and conspiracy take shape, the Soviet explosion of a nuclear bomb as an event shares much with the assassination in shaping the vision of history that will emerge. Taking the larger fact of the bomb's existence, both events can be experienced by individuals only at a literal and conceptual distance, less because of official secrecy than because of the implications of recognizing their full meaning. Thus the novel gives the representations of artistic creations or the media, which alternatively foster and undermine the denial of these historical forces, a central role. Thus in the summer of 1974 Klara Sax, who will later head to the desert to create an artistic meditation out of discarded B-52s, finds herself taken to a viewing of the Zapruder film in a trendy art studio. While access to this representation is a sign of cultural privilege, Klara feels a distance from the content on the screen ("men who carried the power of the state"). She instead marvels at the aesthetic existence of the film: "it was glary and artless and completely steeped in being

what it was, in being film” (495). The aesthetization of history here reflects an inevitable aspect of Cold War experience. Penetrating without completely overtaking the experiences of daily life and demanding ideological compliance while making clear that absolute decision making powers of life and death remain hidden and obscured, DeLillo’s *Cold War* both limits and demands participation.

At the same time, the novel rarely directly depicts the kind of increased direct participation in public life that was central to the radical movements of the sixties. In the political sphere, the idea of participatory democracy, foundational to the New Left, viewed voting as an insufficient means of participation, and in the cultural sphere, alternative participatory institutions from theater groups to underground papers flourished. *Underworld* depicts much of this participation in a marginal way, emphasizing instead characters’ more indirect participation in mass institutions and their indirect relation to the dominant narratives of postwar history. Particularly striking is the marginal role of political and social movements. When the daughter of Manx Martin, the original owner of the Thompson homerun ball, attends a civil rights demonstration, the novel offers a brief description largely disconnected from the novel’s web of connections. Similarly, we witness an anti-war demonstration in Madison through Marian as she listens to a radio station that has been taken over by student radicals. The narration slowly shifts to the observations of an invisible narrator, as happens frequently in the novel’s crowd scenes, but the tone remains removed and disoriented:

The San Francisco Mime Troupe was supposed to be in front of Old Chemistry. This was the interesting thing. They were supposed to

be passing out copies of Faculty Document 122, in front of Old Chemistry, which is exactly where they were, chanting Faculty Documents 122 authorizes force against students. This was interesting because it meant that the people in whiteface on the Liberty Mall must be members of Terminal Theater, the legendary factoidal group whose name, even, was subject to conjecture, or was an aspect, perhaps, of the group's borderline existence. (602)

As if to explain the novel's remove from this scene, Marian's father comes on the scene and muses "Do you know what this means to me, the injuries of the students? What can I compare it with? Because I want to be fair to them. It's like the life and death of a fly, on a wall, in the village, somewhere in China. That's how much I care" (604).

Underscoring his distance from the most recognizable of the period's political events, Marian's father turns to a telling comparison. An often demonized but central aspect of the period's radicalism, the insistence on identification with Third World struggles similarly baffles *American Pastoral's* Swede Levov. In the context of DeLillo's novel, the proliferation of complex identifications and estrangements within American culture erase the fact that for many during this period, a Chinese village - or of course, one in Vietnam - was more than an abstraction or rhetorical figure of comparison. (By contrast, the symbolic resonances of Cuba are vividly evoked in *Libra*.) Given *Underworld's* scope and reliance on juxtaposition, the novel inevitably renders some strains more vitally than others. Nevertheless, it is striking that this scene of political protest is treated at such a distance, transformed into another reflection on the unreal experience of crowds and the silences of domestic life. In contrast to Roth, who at times appears to

disdain political or ideological commitment but throughout *American Pastoral* treats it with a high degree of seriousness, DeLillo's novel at times seems to view political commitment as an even more distant and esoteric pursuit than those of the various subcultures explored in his earlier works. While attempts at political and historical consciousness do not result in the catastrophic failures of *Libra* or *Mao II*, they are recorded through the cumulative experiences of vividly realized individuals rather than through the libratory experiences of collective social movements.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the figure of Nick. As DeLillo's seemingly most autobiographical character, a nostalgic middle-aged manager looking back on his life, he seems on first reading, like *American Pastoral's* Swede Levov, ideally suited to Lukács' role as a middle-of-the-road figure that comes to experience and to understand historical change. But while the Swede experiences what *American Pastoral* depicts as a fall into political and historical consciousness, Nick remains a passive figure who carries symbolic historical and cultural weight without seeing himself as an historical actor. Those few characters in *Underworld* who are self-consciously political are not demonized as in Roth, but remain largely marginal to the novel's central figures, for whom the political is most often transformed into the personal or the artistic. Instead, the novel's historical and political vision comes from outside the consciousness of any individual characters, through DeLillo's own reflective narration. This is true even of many of the much-discussed historical figures. In keeping with Lukács' proscribed role for historic figures in the historic novel, J. Edgar Hoover, Frank

Sinatra, Jackie Gleason and Lenny Bruce all appear as minor characters. They serve not to create a sense of historic “background” or atmosphere or to provide entertaining “behind the scenes” anecdotes but as a choral repository of historic events and information, especially as they reoccur in various media incarnations: Russ Hodges’ voice echoes across the city streets; Jackie Gleason appears on the Shays’ television long after his death.

In contrast to the obsession with radical (largely white and female) violence found in *American Pastoral* and *Vineland*, DeLillo sees the period’s few acts of radical violence as a marginal part of the story. Referring tangentially to the Madison bombing as a part of the chronology of Nick and Marian’s romance, the novel evokes the event in the same wistful tone that marks its depiction of a range of historical events: “We’d be married three years later. Our daughter would be born in 1970, the year a small group of radicals bombed the Army Math Research Center at the University of Wisconsin in Marian’s Big Ten town by igniting a carload of agricultural fertilizer and fuel oil. Killed one man, injured five others” (636). DeLillo further complicates the question of violence by juxtaposing these scenes to the story of Chuckie Wainwright, part of the homerun ball’s chain of owners, and here a soldier in Vietnam. Contrasting political experiences of the period to the experience of combat, the novel echoes Lukács’ description of “the enormous quantitative expansion of war” as crucial to the new mass experience of history that emerged during the late eighteenth century and underscored the origins of the

historical novel.³¹ Yet for DeLillo, the possibility of historical consciousness through the experience of war can only be suggested through its distance from the experiences of the home front. Chuckie humorously measures this distance through the escape fantasies of combat:

A number of times lately on these routine missions Chuckie has had ejection fantasies. Check the leg guards and ankle restraints and then pull the trigger ring and *boom*. He'd be fired down and out and in to the smoky sky. To come floating over Golden Gate Park, in the playful movie version, where a miniskirted blond named Sally raises her head from a copy of Franz Fanon maybe or Herbert Marcuse, two authors Chuckie has had a hard time finding in the PX on the base, to see a polka-dot parachute dropping towards the treetops. (615)

Chuckie then disappears from the novel; we know he returns from Vietnam only because earlier in the novel he plays a role in Nick's obtaining of the homerun ball. If, in *American Pastoral*, Merry's desire to bridge this gap represents her pathology, *Underworld* views this distance with poignancy. The combat experience of Vietnam cannot be assimilated into the novel's connections and is instead echoed through the low-level experiences of war that pervade the Cold War period.³²

³¹ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 24.

³² As Susan Jeffords argues, this division is mirrored in many fictional and non-fictional accounts of the war, in which the division between those with first hand experience of the war and those without it is treated as absolute to such an extent that the perspectives of "enemy" soldiers can be more readily assimilated than those of outsiders in general and of women in particular. At the same time, as H. Bruce Franklin outlines, some writers, most often working outside the bounds of realist fiction, including the poet Steve Hasset and science-fiction writer Kate Wilhelm, have powerfully bridged this gap in works that link everyday life in the United States to the war's atrocities. See Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); H. Bruce Franklin, "The Vietnam War as American Science Fiction and Fantasy," in *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000).

Thus while *Underworld* avoids the demonization of radicalism found in *American Pastoral*, the novel imagines a Cold War world that precludes any substantial role for an oppositional Left. As Dominick Cavallo and others have pointed out, the origins of the New Left rested heavily on the struggle to create a political force not bounded by the Cold War by breaking with both the structures of the Old Left and the anti-communism of Cold War liberalism.³³ Yet within DeLillo's work the very dynamics of political radicalism necessitate a directed focus removed from *Underworld*'s inclusiveness. DeLillo's earlier works have frequently described marginal political figures in terms of a precise and limited vision and experience. *Libra*'s Oswald, for example, feels his already limited world shrink even as he desperately desires a role in public life: "If the world is where we hide from ourselves, what do we do when the world is no longer accessible? We invent a false name, invent a destiny, purchase a firearm through the mail."³⁴ Giving serious consideration to Oswald's Marxism, this treatment of political marginality and violence is echoed throughout DeLillo's work, from *Players* and *Mao II* to the recent short story "Baader-Meinhof" and "In the Ruins of the Future," the *Harper's* magazine article written in response to September 11th. As David

³³ Dominick Cavallo, *A Fiction of the Past: The Sixties in American History*. (New York: Palgrave, 1999).

³⁴ Don DeLillo, *Libra*. (New York: Viking, 1988) 148. Notably, *Libra* also presents the intelligence community his conspirators come from as an insular subculture that circumscribes his characters' worlds. It is thereby the seeming parallels between the Left outsider Oswald and a man like Laurence Parmenter of the "Groton-Yale-OSS network of gentleman spies," so far inside as to become outsiders, that upset conservative critics of the novel as much as its version of the assassination. (30)

Cowart suggests, DeLillo has focused on the experience of marginality and the language and rituals of political consciousness rather than the specifics of political ideology and motivation. In “American Blood,” an article published in *Rolling Stone* prior to the writing of *Libra*, DeLillo describes Oswald as “Jack Kennedy’s secret sharer” who in turn generates a stream of the literal doubles of assassination lore.³⁵ DeLillo’s Oswald can even be read as a victim of his own belief in individualism.³⁶ For DeLillo, then, political violence even of the most dramatic sort is not the inexplicable catastrophe of *American Pastoral* or the expressionistic display of *Vineland* but an extension of social anomie that the very collective nature of *Underworld* serves to dissipate; the revolutionary possibilities which represent a traumatic break in *American Pastoral* and a utopia still waiting to be claimed in *Vineland* here seem to be absorbed into the textures of Cold War life.

If the assassin remains for DeLillo a crucial figure in the historic representation of the recent American past, the public figures whom the assassin might target remain elusive, as does the specter of state violence, which is not absent but repeatedly rendered as mysterious throughout DeLillo’s work, as if prevailing ideology has succeeded in making this possibility unfathomable even to his very suspicious and savvy characters. There is no figure like *Vineland*’s Brock Vond to represent the seductions of power: J. Edgar Hoover remains a comic and passive character, and the nuclear scientists Nick’s brother Matt works with live in

³⁵ Don DeLillo, “American Blood,” *Rolling Stone*, 12 August 1983, 24.

³⁶ See Christopher M. Mott, “*Libra* and the Subject of History,” in Ruppensburg and Engles, eds., 229-244.

the shrouded world of code, expertise and hyper-specialization. Indeed, the ability of the powerful to shield themselves from the blinding lights of contemporary culture has been apparent throughout DeLillo's work. Kennedy remains a cipher throughout *Libra*; when a character in *Great Jones Street* tells the hibernating rock star Bucky Wunderlick "Your people aren't underground people. The presidents and prime ministers are the ones who make the underground deals and speak the true underground idiom," he refers not to the countercultural cache of the underground label but the protection offered to the powerful.³⁷ When DeLillo's Lenny Bruce describes the "rush" of the Cuban missile crisis as "twenty-six guys from Harvard deciding our fate" the reader laughs from recognition of the statement's literal truth, and because Bruce's comedy may provide the fullest portrait of these characters available to us (505). His riff on the names of the elite, figures the novel resists showing us directly, serves to remind of us the strangeness inherent in the power given to the state and our own acceptance of it:

Rosewell Gilpatric. *Rosewell*. It's not a put-on. It's real. Look, shown here in the cabinet room. Captured on film. The secretaries, the assistant secretaries, the undersecretaries, the deputy undersecretaries, the advisors on Russian affairs. Alexis Johnson. *Alexis*. Bromley Smith. *Bromley*. Llewellyn Thompson. *Llewellyn*. Four *l*'s in Llewellyn. Takes balls, baby. Secretly, see, I have to admire them. Because they understand the logic of how to conduct yourself unsentimentally in the world. (592)

We witness Hoover at the ballgame and again at the Black and White Ball (before which he casually plans to squash the demonstrators outside the Plaza), but the novel's structure does not allow us to see him on his home turf - in the corridors of

³⁷ Don DeLillo, *Great Jones Street*. (New York: Vintage, 1983) 232.

power.³⁸ By limiting our view of Hoover and the powerful, the novel's encyclopedic reach is not only contained but also flattened. Despite the strangeness of the powerful suggested in Bruce's monologue, their appearance at the baseball game and the Black & White Ball removes them from the very context that defines this strangeness. Presented outside of hierarchies of narrative or meaning, the powerful, like those who would challenge them, appear only as yet more figures in the novel's historical pageant, making the emergence of what we would recognize as a critical, engaged historical vision more difficult.

Another striking example of this flattening appears in Part IV of the novel, set in the summer of 1974. Nick's brother Matt is a nuclear scientist, part of one more sub-community with its rituals and language, like the baseball memorabilia collectors or the swingers Nick encounters elsewhere: "The Pocket was one of those nice tight societies that replaces the world. It was the world made personal and consistently interesting because it was what you did, and others like you, and it was self-enclosed and self-referring and you did it all together in a place and a language that was inaccessible to others" (412). The constant presence of anti-nuclear protesters touches rather than angers Matt. Eventually he approaches one of them and speaks to her "in a reassuring, trite and slightly compulsive way, like a first-timer nervous in a singles bar" (418). In sharp contrast to the many scenes in Roth's work in which massive blocks of dialogue recreate ideological

³⁸ For a reflection of the disproportionate role given to the depiction of Hoover, see Timothy L. Parrish, "From Hoover's FBI to Eisenstein's *Unterwelt*: DeLillo Directs the Postmodern Novel," *Modern Fiction Studies*, v. 45, n. 3. (Fall 1999) 696-723.

conflicts, DeLillo only briefly and from a distance mentions the received arguments Matt makes to the protester, who does not respond. Given that the anti-nuclear movement stands as a powerful refutation to the notion that the post-sixties movements represented a retreat into narrow identity-based political movements, it is striking that the novel turns this lone figure into a reflection of Matt's own alienation. At its most extreme, this tendency seems to create a strange parallelism in the novel between opposing cultural and political forces. What Gediman reads as DeLillo's tolerance for the chaotic nature of the period can thereby also be read as kind of leveling that renders equivalent the mainstream and oppositional political and cultural strains of the period, between the mainstream and the counterculture, between the radicals and the powerful they seek to oppose.

Some critics have lauded this phenomenon as a kind of evenhandedness rather than as a reflection of the paradoxes of contemporary political experience. David Cowart goes so far as to praise *Running Dog* for suggesting that "the corruption fostered by the war [Vietnam] extended as a matter of course to the doves as well as the hawks."³⁹ By contrast, in his reading of *Libra*, Skip Willman suggests that DeLillo's use of "harmonies and symmetries" that seem to have this leveling effect "signals something other than complicity with the social system. The harmony DeLillo invokes is a purely aesthetic one that signals a

³⁹ David Cowart, *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language*. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2002) 59.

utopian aspiration for the eventual reconciliation of the individual and the social.”⁴⁰ Rather than presenting radical politics as a form of pathology, as *American Pastoral* tends to do, or eulogizing its failures, as *Vineland* does, *Underworld* presents the experience of radical politics as a part of the Cold War symmetries that structure the novel. In so doing, however, the novel emphasizes less the eventual reintegration of many radical figures into the political mainstream, as so many fictional and non-fictional accounts have done, than a symbolic fulfillment of the radical ideal of integrated political, social and personal experience, repeatedly representing ideological and political conflict through intimate relationships and as more often implicitly than explicitly stated. In place of the expected conflict in which Matt’s future wife would oppose his work as a nuclear scientist, Matt silently hopes for her resistance: “He finally told himself the truth, that he’d wanted her to talk him out of his job. This was the question he’d been asking all along. Aren’t you going to tell me that you don’t want me to do this kind of work, for your sake, and the baby we’ll have, and the home we’ll own someday? But Janet did not cooperate” (461). While both Roth and Pynchon extensively employ verbal arguments between characters as the most visible reflection of historic and political conflicts in everyday life, DeLillo repeatedly turns to the dynamic of this scene in order to depict conflicts that remain unarticulated. Thus Marian’s mother senses that she wants her to argue against her relationship with Nick, and Klara hopes Miles will challenge her praise for a new young artist (597; 480). The division of individuals against themselves seems to

⁴⁰ Skip Willman, “Art after Dealey Plaza: DeLillo’s *Libra*,” *Modern Fiction Studies*,

dissipate the novel's sense of political and ideological conflicts, as if in a world where everything is connected, all conflicts are internal.

Nevertheless, if cultural and artistic expression can be understood as a sphere in which these internal conflicts are dramatized, *Underworld's* treatment of alternative, underground, and radical cultural spheres appears to fill in for its marginal treatment of political radicalism and suggest greater possibilities for historical consciousness. The novel's title, serves, like the titles of *American Pastoral* and *Vineland*, to evoke an allegorical sense of space and suggests a range of associations that call into question the notion of the mainstream. Is the underworld where the gay Latino graffiti artist Moonman works a subculture? The circle of avant-garde artists who flock to see the lost Eisenstein film which shares the novel's title? The mob underworld which Nick imagines to have killed his father? The secret world of nuclear scientists? What of the obsessive world of baseball memorabilia collectors? This last may suggest yet another variation of the "from politics to lifestyle" narrative in which niche consumerism overtakes and divides various subcultures into micro-groups, thus undermining the promise of collective transformation. In *Underworld*, however, this proliferation of diverse spheres creates a pluralistic portrait in which various subcultures do not arise spontaneously and inexplicably from the transformations of the sixties but both shape and are shaped by these changes.

45.3 (1999) 632.

The novel's middle sections, depicting the seventies, offer the greatest proliferation of these worlds, including swingers, graffiti artists, underground film connoisseurs, and avant-garde painters. The novel also underscores the celebrity aspects of countercultural influences through its treatment of Lenny Bruce and Mick Jagger. Rather than treating the counterculture through mass events that seem to echo mass political experience like Woodstock, the novel focuses on more intimate communal experiences, particularly those created through the reception of countercultural artistic artifacts. Thus instead of a Rolling Stones concert, we see Klara Sax attend a film group showing of the documentary *Cocksucker Blues*, which shows "Mick standing slack-jawed in room. The mouth gargling and splitting, licking ice cream cone. And the concert footage that's gelled red, bodies bioluminescent, what we all love about rock, Klara thought, the backlit nimbus of higher dying" (384). The boundaries between the film and the observers begin to break down as the viewers seek first to orient themselves in the confusing footage and then to offer pointed and personal responses. The African-American artist Acey recalls another concert: "I don't know if it's the same night but it's the same show, the same city, the same motherfucking band of emaciated millionaire pricks and their Negro bodyguards." (385). Highbrow artists thereby critique a commercialized version of the counterculture through a fragmented commentary, bringing down boundaries between high and low as well as between the countercultural and the mainstream.

If Acey's comments illustrate racial differences that upset familiar definitions of the mainstream and counterculture, DeLillo's juxtaposition of the screening of a fictional lost Eisenstein film to a description of the graffiti artist Moonman 187 tagging the trains of New York offers an even more striking contrast. Although critics have given more attention to the novel's treatment of Eisenstein, the contrast emphasizes the greater vitality of Moonman's art. While Klara wonders aloud of the film "will we actually be able to sit through it," Moonman's art "can't stand still, it climbs across your eyeballs night and day, the flickery jumping art of the slums and dumpsters, flashing those colors in your face - like I'm your movie, motherfucker" (427; 441). Moonman rejects the mainstream's fascination with the marginal when the representative of a downtown gallery expresses interest in his work. His imagined challenge to the complacency of both the mainstream and the avant-garde only begins to suggest the possible conflicts that might proliferate below the surface.

Sharing allegorical dimensions with the titles of *American Pastoral* and *Vineland*, the title of DeLillo's novel similarly suggests a vast landscape. The visual notion of underworlds - literalized through Moonman's journeys through unseen parts of the subway tunnels - suggests relationships of hidden connections and foundations rather than conflict. While the novel blurs political divisions by pushing radicalism to the margins, cultural divisions dissolve as the margins and the center, the underworld and the above-ground, blend in a dizzying array of connections. Thus Klara's counterculture art takes on the nuclear age and wins

permissions from the Pentagon, garbage philosopher Jesse Detwiler becomes a corporate guru, and Eisenstein's film reminds Klara of "the other *Underworld*, a 1927 gangster film and box office smash" (431). Klara speaks the same way to the film-snob Miles as she does to the financier Carlo, whom she eventually marries. Yet if figures from the counterculture and the margins do not stand clearly apart from the mainstream, they serve as its most astute readers.

Nowhere is this more striking than in the depiction of Lenny Bruce, whose audiences "waited for him to tell them how they felt" and "wanted to be challenged and attacked, who wanted to hear their well-meaning sentiments exposed as so much liberal dinner prattle" (504; 626). While Roth feels it necessary to dissect middle-class hypocrisies through the detailed set-piece dinner party that closes the novel, DeLillo's characters once again point to their own. As a figure who straddles the political and the cultural, Bruce offers through his performances the novel's only space in which the obscenities of power and militarism can be fully articulated: "Those were the terms of Lenny's act. If you didn't like the bits he did, you were a mass murderer" (583).⁴¹ Like Moonman's throw-away line "I'm your

⁴¹ By contrast, a similar sentiment is much more directly and factually stated by Piercy in relation to the central character of *Vida* cited in the previous chapter. Piercy noted that she aimed "to make real how the war felt to those of use who were living then, how dirty, how compromised - that if you didn't end the war, you didn't deserve to live." Piercy of course recalls numerous similar articulations of absolute opposition in the language of the movement; for example the founding statement of the May 2 Movement concludes by noting "One can choose to oppose this struggle, or to join it. To oppose it is to be a murderer." Celia Betsky, "Talk with Marge Piercy," *New York Times* 24 February 1980: 8:37; "What is the May 2nd Movement," lists.village.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/PL_M2d_manifesto.html

movie, motherfucker,” this observation serves as a rare articulation of absolute opposition that cannot be assimilated into the novel’s network of connections; the novel relies wholly on numerous scenes of his performances to evoke the similarly undigestible experience of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Bringing the invisible world of the powerful and the unthinkable to his audience through his repeated screams of “We’re all gonna die!”, Bruce represents the paradox of political and historical consciousness within the novel’s vision of the Cold War. Only a figure of genius willing to step across all boundaries of taste and decorum can come close to articulating the lived realities of daily contemporary life. In the process, Bruce helps his audience to “make the transition to the global thing that’s going on out there,” or, as Thomas Myers puts it, teaches them to “keep worrying and live the bomb.”⁴² Historical consciousness is no longer only a question of seeing one’s life as part of larger struggles, as it was for Lukács, but in experiencing it viscerally as such despite the temptation to feel “[h]ow real can the crisis be if we’re sitting in a club on Santa Monica Boulevard going ha ha ha.” (507). In *Vineland*, seemingly throw-away lines suggest the utopian vision whose reconstruction is central to that novel’s project; in *Underworld* the throwaway moments of opposition from figures like Moonman and Bruce point to the transformations rarely explicitly articulated but whose impact are all over the novel. Moreover, as the power of Bruce’s use of

⁴² Thomas Myers, “*Underworld* or: How I Learned to Keep Worrying and Live the Bomb” in Joseph Dewey, Steven G. Kellman, and Irving Malin, eds. *UnderWords: Perspectives on Don DeLillo’s Underworld*. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002).

sexual invective suggests, sexuality represents in the novel a place where these transformations can become more explicitly visible.

IV: “*Todo y Nada*”: Sexuality Above and Below Ground

Woman: There’s a mystery here. The people behind the walls of the brown house next door. What do they say and how do they survive it? All that idle dialogue. The nasality. The banality. I was thinking how strange it is. How do they do it, night after night, all those nights, those words, those few who do it and survive?

Man: They Make Love. They make salads.

Don DeLillo, “The Mystery at the Middle of Ordinary Life: A One-Minute Play”

In “Afterthoughts on Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*,” Tony Tanner suggests that the characters populating the novel remain disembodied, describing the work as “a novel of voices.” He speculates that this disembodiment rests on a sense of alienation he links to the writer’s Catholic upbringing, explored explicitly for the first time in *Underworld*: “By coincidence I read this in the *Guardian* in a piece by Hugo Young [while reading DeLillo], also brought up a Catholic. ‘I also absorbed and relished the sidelong stance, the somewhat distanced obliqueness as regards the established state, which the Catholic inheritance conferred.’ You feel DeLillo would agree.”⁴³ This view of a cerebral writer, distant if not more frequently absent from the page, more interested in questions of language than direct representation of embodied experience, has led many critics to ignore or dismiss the role of sexuality in DeLillo’s work. Similarly, discussions of DeLillo as a “post-sixties” author have not looked to changes in sexuality as a part of the

⁴³ Tony Tanner, “Afterthoughts on Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*,” *Raritan*, Spring 1998, 62.

transformed culture being recorded.⁴⁴ Recently Philip Nel noted the lack of attention to gender in considerations of DeLillo's work. His own reconsideration, however, sees the intersection of gender and sexuality as occurring largely through a treatment of masculine violence and engagements with pornography, ignoring the range of cultural spheres, both domestic and public, in which these questions are explored in *Underworld*.⁴⁵

This lack of attention to questions of gender and sexuality has been particularly striking in the case of *Underworld*. Most reviews and critical articles treat the novel's historical Cold War frame, its use of public figures, its treatment of paranoia and of themes running from waste to conceptual art, but pay little attention to domestic aspects of the story. One could even imagine a complete novel with all the much-commented on features from the baseball game to J. Edgar Hoover to the descriptions of waste stripped away. *Underworld* would still contain the rich and coherent story of a middle-aged man, a new grandfather who has recently discovered and forgiven his wife's affair with a co-worker. Moving backwards, this narrative would describe his reunion with an older woman from his youth, his brief encounter with a woman at a swinger's convention and the fates of a range of figures from his childhood in the Bronx. This abridged novel would then move to his brother's ascetic scientist's life, and a deeply moving account of his Bronx days,

⁴⁴ Terry Caesar's thoughtful discussion of the sexual and Oedipal dynamics of *Libra* represents one notable exception. See Terry Caesar, "Motherhood and Postmodernism," *American Literary History* 7.1 (1995): 120-40.

⁴⁵ Philip Nel, "Amazons in the Underworld: Gender, the Body and Power in the Novels of Don DeLillo," *Critique* v. 22, no. 4 (Summer 2001) 416-36.

including the circumstances leading to the possibly accidental shooting of an older man, an event that comes to define Nick's life.

This survey of the overlooked elements of DeLillo's narrative underscores not only the novel's pointed and poignant treatment of the domestic, but the extent to which the transformations of private life, sexuality, and gender relations shape the novel's vision of the recent historical past. The notion that these changes represent the "real" legacy of the sixties has been a frequent strain in fictional and non-fictional representations of the period. Social histories emphasizing the role of gender and sexuality in various stages of Cold War culture have also proliferated in recent years.⁴⁶ Yet few considerations of DeLillo's novel have noted its innovative reworking of well-known images taken from the intersection between the Cold War, family life and sexuality. Moreover, the sexual revolution, feminism and the emergence of gay identity have not been recognized as events central to the novel's depiction of the last fifty years of American history. Instead, in the readings of many critics, sexuality serves primarily as one more arena in which paranoia can emerge, operating under the logic of latency and repression. Thus Peter Knight notes that the novel's presentation of J. Edgar Hoover "reads like a return to pop-Freudian theories of paranoia as a result of repressed

⁴⁶ See, for example, Suzanne Clark, *Cold Warriors: Manliness on Trial in the Rhetoric of the West*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000); Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

homosexuality,” a depiction underscored by its reflection in Sister Edgar’s hypochondriac homophobia. Yet how are these representations in turn altered by the presence of the gay Latino artist Moonman, Acey, the lesbian African-American painter of politically and sexually charged icons, and Klara Sax, who throughout the novel evolves from schoolteacher’s wife to avant-garde artist through an archetypical yet highly particular feminist quest for independence? Rooted in the dynamics characteristic of cultural histories of the fifties and early sixties, critical readings of the novel have read sexuality as a subtext to political and historical discourse rather than the explicit text it has since become.

The novel begins to explore these questions in the early sections outlining contemporary consumer culture. As interested in transformations to the mainstream as in the subcultures that flourish in *Vineland*, the novel explores what DeLillo calls “the package of attitudes and values known as lifestyle,” rooted in the consumerist ethic but also in the liberationist assumptions of the sexual revolution (109). Thus Brian acts out his “scornful solos of high alienation” by dragging Nick to a store called Condomology, and the collector Marvin passes through “floating zones of desire” in San Francisco: “[i]t was the what, the dismantling of desire into a thousand subspecialties, into spin-offs and narrowings edge-wise whispers of self” (112; 319). While *Underworld* does not present these “narrowings” with the exuberance *Vineland* displays for the worlds of martial artists and bisexual bikers, they are never treated as symbols of decline and disintegration, as the entrance of *Deep Throat* into liberal dinner party conversation is received in Roth. Similarly,

the novel presents Marian's affair with Brian with a wistful realism that recalls the early treatment of the sexual revolution in a work like John Barth's *The End of the Road* without the sense of chaos and decline that pervades the depiction of contemporary sexual mores in *American Pastoral*.

Far from simply exposing yet again the absorption of desire by consumerism, as several reviews suggested, the novel excavates contemporary consumerist desire to find the utopian impulses lying beneath while retaining a powerful sense of its destructive possibilities. In a section crucial to the novel's structure entitled "The Cloud of Unknowing," Nick, in the Mojave Desert for a waste management conference, meets Donna, part of a group of swingers with whom the managers are sharing a hotel. Anxious to step outside the controlled transgressions of the group, Donna engages Nick in the verbal play characteristic of DeLillo's couples. She plays the role of the post-sexual revolution "realist" to Nick's utopian longings. Nick speaks of a mystical text he encountered when he was sent to the Jesuits after reform school, and refers to sex as "*Todo y nada . . .* the one secret we have that approximates an exalted state and that we share, two people share wordlessly more or less and equally more or less, and this makes it powerful and mysterious and worth sheltering." Donna counters that for most people, "Sex is what you can get. For some people, it's the most important thing they can get without being born rich or smart or stealing. This is what life can give you that's equal to others or better, even, that you don't have to go to college six years to get" (297). Thus Donna comes to both embody and challenge the utopianism of a certain

strain of the sexual revolution reflected in what David Allyn identifies in mini-genre of “sexual utopian novel” made possible by the success of commercial books like *The Harrad Experiment*. Described by Allyn as “a middlebrow mix of titillation and pleas for tolerance,” this easily commercialized ideology begins to enforce its own constraints.

In this scene, Donna “cheats” by choosing Nick rather than one of the husbands and takes a measured view of the possibilities of liberation while Nick’s defense of privacy represents the utopian position, returning through mysticism to the medieval text “The Cloud of Unknowing” evoked in *White Noise*. His reflections also point to the connection of death and eros central to that novel and many of the iconic texts of the counterculture by writers like Marcuse and Brown. Most importantly, after Donna wonders aloud why Nick is given to reading dense spiritual texts, Nick reveals that he had been “in correction” for shooting an older man when a teenager. His confession marks the first time the reader learns of the event whose rediscovery forms the object of the novel’s quest. The dynamics of repression and liberation are reversed such that rather than serving as the object that needs to be revealed, sex becomes a catalyst for further revelation, creating a temporary connection far different from what the utopian vision anticipated.

Nick’s encounter with Donna also emphasizes the role of countercultural ideals, now imbedded in the mainstream, in creating the contemporary ideal of the “relationship.” Beth Bailey argues that this ideal, with its emphasis on communication, gender equity, and often monogamy or cohabitation if

not marriage, represents one of the most significant ongoing impacts of the sexual revolution.⁴⁷ While Roth views this ideal as one more aspect of liberal middle-class hypocrisy to be pilloried, DeLillo demonstrates the extent to which it has become the implicit language of a wide range of interactions. Thus while Donna advocates one version of this ideal in her appeal to openness, Nick poignantly fails at another version in his twenties as his relationship with Amy comes to an end, and his later marriage to Marian moves between periods of silence and understanding. When Marian dismisses his suspicions of her affair with Brian, Nick remarks: “She looked at me and walked out of the room. I heard the shower running across the hall and I realized I’d done it all wrong. I should have brought up the subject standing in the doorway while she was watching TV. Then I could have been the one who walks out of the room” (117). Regarding his marriage from the outside as something to be performed for a particular effect, Nick later symbolically acquiesces to the demands of liberal couple-hood in the numerous scenes where we witness him dutifully separating his recyclables.

The resonance of “relationship,” with its implicitly political demand for a new kind of equality and cohesiveness that is meant to stand against that anomie of contemporary life to which Nick is particularly vulnerable, forms a common thread in much of DeLillo’s work. The famous husband and wife dialogue of *White Noise*, which Bawer accuses of being “consistently fast-paced and facile, and occasionally witty, and absolutely *never* sounds like two married people talking

⁴⁷ Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999)

to each other,” is usually understood as a reflection on the poverty of received language.⁴⁸ Yet these exaggerated exchanges outline the ideal of communication so central to the ideology of contemporary relationships, as Gladney’s own comments suggest:

Babette and I tell each other everything. I have told everything, such as it was at the time, to each of my wives. There is more to tell, of course, as marriages accumulate. But when I say I believe in complete disclosure I don’t mean it cheaply, as anecdotal sport or shallow revelation. It is a form of self-renewal and a gesture of custodial trust. Love helps us develop an identity secure enough to allow itself to be placed in another’s care and protection.⁴⁹

In *Underworld*, Nick’s increased distance from his family life (increasing in time and thereby decreasing as the novel progresses) forms the underside of the female artist Klara Sax’s greater empowerment and reflects the influence of what Barbara Ehrenreich has termed the “masculine revolt” against the breadwinner ethic of the fifties.⁵⁰ While Paul Quinn places Nick in the “perverse genealogy of unconnected, impenetrable men,” Nick’s alienation stems not from the fear of entering the world of the mass which motivates *Mao II*’s Bill Gray or of the failure to find a place in the world that shapes *Libra*’s Oswald, but from the constraints of an evolving

205-11.

⁴⁸ Bruce Bawer, “Don DeLillo’s America,” *The New Criterion*, April 1985, 37.

⁴⁹ Don DeLillo, *White Noise*. (New York: Penguin, 1985) 29. This exploration of the limits of intimate communication also forms the core of DeLillo’s short 2001 novel *The Body Artist*, suggesting that it represents less of a departure from *Underworld* than its extreme economy would indicate.

⁵⁰ See Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*. (New York: Anchor Press, 1983). As suggested in an earlier chapter, Ehrenreich’s framework provides a more useful context for understanding the context of Roth’s work than the notion of the sexual revolution alone. In the case

masculine identity. Thus Nick's masculine alienation from his domestic and professional roles culminates when, having discovered his wife's affair, he fantasizes about ceding his place to his rival: "But it was also satisfying, for just a moment, to think of giving it all up, letting them have it all, the children of both marriages, the grandchild, they could keep the two houses, all the cars, he could have both wives if he wanted them. None of it ever belonged to me except in the sense that I filled out the forms" (796).

While contemporary sexuality thereby embodies the contradictions of consumerism's demands for openness, DeLillo's novel gives more sustained attention to the liberationist and identity-based ideals of the sexual revolution than does either *American Pastoral* or *Vineland*. Klara's progression from housewife to artist, while far from wholly utopian, is consistently presented as a process of liberation, with her wisdom about relationships the ultimate prize as much as sexual independence. She summarizes this wisdom for Nick: "It took me a long time to realize I was careful and logical about affairs, really sort of scrupulous about who and where and when, and completely reckless when it came to marriage" (72). Even her brief fling with the seventeen-year-old Nick is cast as a source of knowledge that pointed to a way out. Albert, the old-world and old-school husband left behind, suffers because these transformations leave him behind: bound by duty, he lacks the self-knowledge promised by liberationist ideology. Moreover, the utopian liberationist elements of the sexual revolution are reflected through

of DeLillo, it similarly offers a useful framework for contextualizing

sexuality's ability to undermine social divisions. While in *Vineland*, sexuality is a weapon the powerful and powerless wield against one another, sexual openness here creates unexpected encounters between various social strata. Thus while the scene of Capote's Black and White Ball highlights Hoover's sublimated sexuality, his aide Clyde Tolson recognizes that much more is at stake: "There was a self-conscious sense of some profound moment in the making. A dreadful prospect, Clyde thought because it suggested a continuation of the Kennedy years. In which well-founded categories began to seem irrelevant. In which sex, drugs and dirty words began to unstratify the culture" (571). The reference to Kennedy is telling: while lifestyle can serve to unite the elites of government, entertainment and the arts, it deflects but does not erase political opposition. Thus the protesters at the ball remain outside, wearing not the masks of sexual carnival of those inside but "the faces of Asian kids, some blood-spattered, others with eyes seemed shut" (569). While the sexual pathology of the rebellious young is not at issue as in Roth and Pynchon, radicalism remains outside of sex's unifying powers.

While Hoover loosely echoes *Vineland's* Brock Vond as he speculates about the link between sexuality and political rebellion, it is largely through the figure of Lenny Bruce that the novel explores the relationship between sexuality and power. Bruce serves as a rare public figure and a kind of martyr of the sexual revolution as well as an icon of the counterculture who straddled the divide between cultural and political radicalism. As David Allyn notes, Bruce's

quintessentially alienated modern or consumerist male subjects.

1964 arrest on obscenity charges prompted action by the New York League for Sexual Freedom, which soon took action on behalf of for the rights of prostitutes and gays.⁵¹ Playing with the cliché of Bruce as an apostle of obscenity, DeLillo has Bruce indulge his audience's desire to hear him talk dirty: "There was no context for the line except the one that Lenny took with him everywhere. The culture and its loaded words. He looked around some more. He seemed to need a particular kind of face into which to deliver his scripture. One of the college profs smiled invitingly and Lenny obliged with, 'Fuck suck fag hag gimme a nickel bag'" (585). While *Vineland*'s characters speculate on their own fascist tendencies to eroticize forces of domination, Bruce articulates relations between sex, the powerful and the possibility of annihilation far beyond the imaginings of even DeLillo's famously philosophical characters:

You look at these girls and you mourn the lost glamour of women's undergarments. The whole nazified system of straps and harnesses. It's a legal outlet for your secret fascist longings . . . All that slithery hardware that makes wars worth fighting. . . The whole point of the missile crisis is the sexual opportunity it offers. You get Raytheon to your place and convince her the whole world's about to go zippo (585-6).

Notably, these relationships between sex and politics shape the rhythms of Bruce's performance: earlier in this bit, echoing Nick's visit to Condomology, Bruce distracts himself in showcasing a condom and for a moment "*the nuclear showdown had slipped his mind*" (584). A masterful practitioner of what Bailey terms the "sex-as-weapon" strain of the sexual revolution, DeLillo's Bruce explodes the

⁵¹ David Allyn, *Make Love, Not War: The Sexual Revolution: An Unfettered*

clichés of Oedipal conflict based on generational identities, instead using the language of sex to get at the unfathomable qualities of power and the threat of annihilation. Bruce thereby inverts the notion of political activism as a manifestation of sexual repression or pathology, suggested in both *American Pastoral* and *Vineland*; instead, sexual language and invective serve to diagnose political and historical maladies.

Unlike Roth, who sees Merry's verbal invective as a symptom of unrealized sexuality, or the many accounts of the period which treat sexual invective as an unfortunate "excess" of the period's radicalism, DeLillo reconstructs through Bruce the power of sexually charged invective to dramatize the disorienting disconnect between proprietary norms and political and historical realities. In recreating the everyday experience of sexual hypocrisy and the pleasure unleashed in its exposure, the novel posits a reconsideration of the role of sexuality in our understanding of the period, suggesting it must be seen not only as a means of what Molly Hite terms "a retrospective analysis" or as compensation for political failures or as yet another once liberatory force co-opted by consumerism. From the poignant depiction of Nick's domestic life to the possibilities of liberation and the power of sexual invective, *Underworld* tracks the varieties of sexual life under the Cold War that critics focused on paranoia as a dominant force in personal and political life have yet to fully explore.

V: Playing it Backwards: DeLillo and the Politics of Nostalgia

History. (Boston: Little, Brown & Company) 47.

“The more powerful the nostalgia, the closer you come to violence. War is the form nostalgia takes when men are hard pressed to say something good about their country.”

DeLillo, *White Noise*

Described by Martin Amis as a “wake” for the Cold War, *Underworld* shares with *American Pastoral* and, to the more limited extent that it mourns the defeats of the Left, *Vineland*, the status of elegy.⁵² A wistful tone that easily slides into nostalgia pervades various sections of the novel, accentuated through the backwards and forwards temporal motions of the narrative but also through DeLillo’s eloquent use of the present tense and sentence fragments. In both *American Pastoral* and *Vineland*, the object of one’s nostalgia comes to shape the novel’s politics and the way they have been received. In *Underworld*, by contrast, nostalgia pervades the vast material of the novel seemingly with little preference or discrimination. Undermining the notion of the sixties as exceptional or as a definitive break, the novel thereby displaces the particular question of nostalgia for the sixties as this has come to be played out in the culture wars. In fact, nostalgia for the traditional components of sixties experience and the sense of ownership that accompany them is notably absent in the novel, reflecting DeLillo’s own comments about his sense of distance from the most noted events of the period: “I found the sixties extremely interesting, and, at the same time that this was happening -

⁵² Martin Amis, “Survivors of the Cold War,” *New York Times Book Review*, 5 October 1997, 12.

enormous social disruption - I also felt that there was a curious ennui, a boredom.”⁵³

Instead, the politics of nostalgia emerge in a more subtle and elusive manner, while the ubiquitous nostalgia for the fifties unfolds in such a way as to call into question common assumptions about its significance.

Despite the presence of Sinatra, Hoover and Jackie Gleason in the opening scene, the novel’s most vivid rendering of the fifties emerges through its treatment of Nick’s Bronx neighborhood, scenes which, as many have noted, represents DeLillo’s first extended treatment of the Italian-American Bronx of his own childhood. Not surprisingly, then, the novel displays its nostalgia most vividly when it walks those streets. In Part II, as Nick visits his mother, we are given a vivid depiction of an Italian-American community with a sense of poignant pride that at first appears to be strikingly similar to *American Pastoral*’s treatment of the Swede’s immigrant generation: “They made their world. They said, Who’s better than me?” (207). The old science teacher Albert Branzoni, once Klara’s husband and Matt’s chess coach, serves as our guide, resembling, as both Cowart and Gediman have noted, a Bloom-like figure, wandering the streets while pretending not to notice his wife’s affairs. Albert’s Bronx, the setting of Parts II and VI, forms a frame around the novel, managing to fill the reader with a sense of lost time even as we move temporally backwards: “Seasons ran together, the years were a stunned blur. Like time in books. Time passes in books in the span of a sentence, many

⁵³ David Remnick, “Exile on Main Street,” *The New Yorker*, 15 September 1997, 46.

months and years. Write a word, leap a decade. Not so different out here, at his age, in the unmargin'd world" (236).

This specificity of place in turn shapes the novel's treatment of the fifties. After working our way through a number of dated scenes from the decade in part V, part VI returns us to the Bronx from the fall of 1951 to the summer of 1952, depicting the events leading up to Nick's shooting of George Manza. Through Albert's laconic wanderings and Nick's carousing, we move through the iconic urban spaces of barber and butcher shops. Nevertheless, the novel departs in a number of crucial ways from the traditional nostalgia for the "old neighborhood," for lost urban landscapes and for the fifties as a whole. Even Albert tells Matt "We want nothing to do with this business of mourning the old streets" (214). While the novel abounds with poignant descriptions of nostalgia as it is experienced and lived, it avoids the narrative of decline that animates the particular politicized nostalgia of *American Pastoral*. The Bronx of the eighties and nineties is marked by loss, but never becomes the dead landscape of "nothing ever again" that is Roth's contemporary Newark. While Cowart asserts that "DeLillo's Bronx, finally resembles the Newark of Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*" and that "both authors meditate on a once-vital immigrant community and its fate in the late decades of the twentieth century," Gediman recognizes that DeLillo's Bronx is in fact central to the novel's optimism.⁵⁴ While Roth's Newark prompts nearly apocalyptic musings, DeLillo's Bronx remains a place of vitality, repeatedly described as "real," where

Moonman creates, Bronzini continues his wanderings, and a miracle can occur. It is for Sister Edgar “the truth of the world, right here, her soul’s own home, herself” (248). Moreover, if the “after” is not marked by decline, the “before” is far from idyllic. Nick is particularly nostalgic for the mood of casual street-fights, and the Bronx of the fifties is above all the site of his decisive shooting of the heroin dealer George Manza. Nick’s sense that his life will never contain something like the early event of the shooting and that “all the interesting things in my life happened young” helps to form a nostalgia that is for energy rather than innocence, rawness rather than tenderness:

I long for the days of disorder. I want them back, the days when I was alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real. I was dumb-muscled and angry and real. This is what I long for, this breach of peace, the days of disarray when I walked real streets and did things slap-bang and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself. (293; 810)

In sharp contrast to the characters of *American Pastoral* and *Vineland*, who experience a nostalgia specific to their generational and political affiliations, Nick yearns for an even greater isolation than even his middle-aged alienation can provide.

As many critics have noted, the section depicting the Bronx of the fifties employs a form of social realism that stands in striking contrast to the rest of the novel and DeLillo’s work as a whole. Contemporary representations and critical discussions of the fifties have often taken the reified, television-shaped and

⁵⁴ David Cowart, *The Physics of Language*, 202; Paul Gediman, “The American Berserk.”

inevitably either nostalgic or anti-nostalgic depiction of the fifties as their point of origin. Thus Jameson asserts that “if there is ‘realism’ in the 1950s, . . . it is presumably to be found there, in mass culture representation.” The fifties he is speaking of, however, is “the stifling Eisenhower realities of the happy family in the small town, of normalcy and nondeviant everyday life.”⁵⁵ As Peter Knight points out, this world is only marginally treated in the novel, “thoroughly satirized” in the brief “Jell-O” section depicting the family of Eric Demming, later one of Matt’s nuclear colleagues, featuring “things and words. . . Breezway. Crisper. Sectional. Car pools. Bridge parties. Broadloom.” (520).⁵⁶ By contrast, DeLillo’s Bronx takes shape through a highly traditional form of what Michael Denning terms the ghetto pastoral, complete with the alluring role played by the figure of the gangster who may or may not be responsible for the disappearance of Nick’s father.⁵⁷ Thus we no longer witness the “historic events” of the outside world, famous figures as characters or experience reworked through artistic or media representation. The focus and specificity of these chapters differentiates their depiction of the period from the reification of the era so common both in popular culture’s own representations of the era and in novels and films that rely on the artifacts of popular

⁵⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 280.

⁵⁶ Peter Knight, “Everything is Connected,” in Ruppensburg and Engles, eds., 285. For a more detailed reading of this brief scene see Molly Wallace, “‘Venerated Emblems’: DeLillo’s *Underworld* and the history-commodity,” *Critique* Summer 2001, 367-383.

⁵⁷ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*. (New York: Verso, 1997), 230-258. Denning notes that many have viewed works of this genre as apolitical because of the lack of direct representation of events such as strikes or of political militants as characters.

culture to represent the period. Despite the earlier presence of Jackie Gleason, who Nick and his aging mother later watch in late-night reruns, the fifties of *Underworld* are ultimately far removed from the fifties of television memory.

Is the novel's nostalgia thereby a yearning for the real and for experience unmediated by representation and technology? While the novel's treatment of nostalgia, unlike that of *Vineland*, seems largely removed from the reification of the era through the images of popular culture, it is shaped by the encyclopedic use of Cold War artifacts. As DeLillo himself has noted, the transformations of the sixties have helped imbue a particular strangeness onto many material artifacts of the earlier period. What DeLillo describes as the "antiquity" of the Cold War artifacts he discovered in the course of writing the novel emerges through vivid descriptions that often feel like nostalgic celebrations.⁵⁸ Most notably, it is difficult to read the novel's use of baseball outside of this frame, especially given the contrast with the distanced cerebral treatment of football in *End Zone*. As one of the few critics to consider in detail the novel's treatment of race, John Duvall asserts that "if *Underworld* illustrates the dangerous tendency of baseball to aestheticize and erase international politics, it also comments on the way baseball can participate in a mystification of racial politics within America,"⁵⁹ a

⁵⁸ Don DeLillo, "The Power of History," *The New York Times Magazine* 7 September 1997, 62.

⁵⁹ John N. Duvall, "Excavating the Underworld of Race and Waste in Cold War History: Baseball, Aesthetics, and Ideology," in Ruppensburg and Engles, eds., 266. In fact, much of the context Duvall points to - the deployment of Jackie Robinson as a counterweight to Paul Robeson, the military exportation of baseball to Japan - comes from outside the novel's framework. Only through the story of Manx Martin

mystification that coexists with endless fascination for the minutiae of the game itself, particularly through the fetishistic treatment of the homerun ball: “How the hand works memories out of the baseball that have nothing to do with games of the usual sort. . . I thought of the old radio voice, Russ Hodges, dead now twenty years or more, disbelief and thrill, the force of a single human voice coming out of a box.” (132).

The novel thereby illustrates the nostalgia with which its characters experience the consumer artifacts of the recent past. While the novel may seem to continue the parody of consumer culture found in *White Noise*, these objects are in fact treated with a mysticism that transforms them into what Gediman describes as oracles. Even looking for meaning in waste is here less an occasion for outright parody as in *White Noise* than a reflection of the longing displaced onto strange artifacts by the gaps in our experiences of technology and commodity culture. As we watch Nick’s co-worker Brian Glassic glance in awe at the scene of Fresh Kills landfill, waste is seen as a living object, a monument to the culture rather than a cause for pastoral yearnings and lamentations. In sharp contrast to Roth’s description of the dead factories as “The pyramids of Newark: as huge and dark and hideously impermeable as a great dynasty’s burial edifice has every historical right to be,” Brian imagines Fresh Kills as a living monument:

[Brian] imagined he was watching the construction of the Great Pyramid at Giza - only this was twenty-five times bigger, with tanker

is the link between race and baseball explicitly treated, and this story remains strangely isolated from the rest of the narrative, lying outside its temporal sequence and largely disconnected from the novel’s web of associations.

trucks spraying perfumed water on the approach roads. He found the sight inspiring. All this ingenuity and labor, this delicate effort to fit maximum waste into diminishing space. The towers of the World Trade Center were visible in the distance and he sensed a poetic balance between that idea and this one (184).

Unlike Pynchon, then, who seems to delight in descending from his authorial heights to play in the muck by reeling off TV movie titles, DeLillo instinctively sympathizes with the attempt to read the tea leaves of consumer culture. When another memorabilia dealer tells Marvin he is a victim of “[t]he revenge of popular culture on those who take it too seriously,” he responds by wondering “What’s not to be serious about? What could I take more seriously than this? And what’s the point of waking up in the morning if you don’t try to match the enormosity of the known forces in the world with something powerful in your own life?” (323).

Underworld thereby approaches the particular artifacts of the Cold War period not with the fetishism Jameson identifies in nostalgic representations of the period and of the fifties in particular but with an attention to their context that serves to recreate rather than diminish notions of authenticity, originality and meaning.⁶⁰

The nostalgia that adheres to the geographical space of the Bronx and to the artifacts of the Cold War period throughout the novel similarly permeates the more direct treatment of historical events. As in *Vineland* and *American Pastoral*, nostalgia plays a central role in the relations that emerge between individuals and the history they experience. As Peter Knight points out, DeLillo depicts the nostalgia that attaches itself even to the moment of the Kennedy assassination, as

⁶⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism*.

remembered through a 1974 downtown art-scene showing of the Zapruder film. In “American Blood,” DeLillo compares the Kennedy assassination, which was “a home movie,” to the Reagan shooting as “pure TV, a mini-cam improvisation.”⁶¹ The juxtaposition echoes the trajectory from *Gravity Rainbow*’s obsession with film to *Vineland*’s treatment of television. Thus at the end of the Zapruder viewing, the filmmaker Miles remarks wistfully, “It’s outside language,” and DeLillo goes on to note that this

was his way of saying far-out, or too much, or the other things they used to say, and here was an event that took place at the beginning of the sixties, seen belatedly, that now marked the conceptual end, carrying all the delirium that floated through the age, and people stood around and talked, a man and a woman made out in a closet with the door open, remotely, and the pot fumes grew stronger, and people said, “Let’s go eat,” or whatever people say when a thing begins to be over. (496)

The echo of Pynchon (“the other things they used to say” recalling “it was the way people used to talk”) here serves not to recreate a particular structure of feeling that can be identified with the sixties but to sketch the vague outlines through which individuals sense the divisions between events and periods. For DeLillo, nostalgia functions less as the desire to recapture a particular era than as the emotion through which individuals experience these beginnings and endings.

The nostalgia for terror evidenced by the treatment of the Zapruder film points to the larger question of the extent to which the overarching category of the Cold War has come to be seen as an appropriate object of nostalgia. The emergence of this political yearning, as distinct from the specific nostalgia for the

⁶¹ Don DeLillo, “American Blood,” *Rolling Stone*, 8 December 1983, 24.

high Cold War period of the fifties is perhaps the most problematic recent turn in the politics of nostalgia. As Peter Knight argues, both Klara and Marvin explicitly express these yearnings. Strikingly, he then concludes: “there is a homesickness not so much for the ‘safe’ domesticity of the 1950s as for the paranoia of the nuclear age, whose obsessive dedication to murderous detail can almost seem touching in an age when, with the privatization of public responsibility, the paranoically intimate interest of the state in the daily lives of its citizens - even for sinister purposes - has begun to disappear.”⁶² In Knight’s formula, repression (in retrospect, of course) has the virtue of clarity and common purpose. If the expression of nostalgia for the fifties or sixties has served as a judgment on the transformations of the sixties, this yearning for the “certainties” of the Cold War serves to act as if these transformations never occurred. This version of nostalgia asserts that opposition to the assumptions of the anti-Communist position and its cultural corollaries - let alone a direct challenge the state’s “dedication to murderous detail” - never took place.⁶³

In fact, although Knight’s formula is far from uncommon, there is much in the novel itself to call it into question. As Knight himself notes, many of the novel’s characters express everyday “low-level” versions of paranoia that depart from the state’s official Cold War paranoia and underscore the divisions of race,

⁶² Peter Knight, “Everything is Connected,” in Ruppensburg and Engles, eds., 285-6.

⁶³ By contrast, in *Libra*, the perversities of this deployment of nostalgia are elucidated when the wife of CIA man Lawrence Parmenter recognizes his mood: “When you sweep through the house guzzling gin. I know exactly what it means. Nostalgic for Guatemala.” Don DeLillo, *Libra*, 124.

class and gender that nostalgia for “stability” effectively negates. At the same time, *Underworld* undermines the notion that a “stable” version of Cold War paranoia should offer a more comforting historic vision. The novel’s epilogue serves to distill both of these strains and their challenge to the idea of Cold War nostalgia. On the one hand, when Nick and Brian travel to Kazakhstan we confront directly the victims of the Cold War, as Nick becomes a first-hand historical witness. Touring a clinic for the victims of Chernobyl, Nick himself points to the terrible insufficiency of the “post-Cold War” label. Remarking on the appeal of a religious fanatic, Nick’s guide wonders “Fifteen thousand followers. You can believe this? Educated people, look very normal. I don’t know. After communism, this?” Nick responds, “After Chernobyl maybe” (802). By contrast, attempting to assess the content of the novel’s historical intervention, John N. Duvall underscores this representation of the casualties of the Cold War and suggests that DeLillo thereby “urges Americans to acknowledge the cost, both in personal identity and world resources, of our Cold War victory.”⁶⁴ While underscoring the novel’s challenge to the emergence of the totality of the Cold War framework as an object of nostalgia, Duvall’s formulation rests on the bipolar world-view called into question by counter-forces throughout the novel.

These forces coalesce most strikingly in the second half of the epilogue. After returning to Phoenix, Nick watches his son surf the internet. Through a website devoted to miracles, we return to the Bronx of Sister Edgar and

⁶⁴ John N. Duvall, “Excavating the Underworld of Race and Waste in Cold War

Ismael, who used to be the artist Moonman, where a young girl is raped and murdered and begins to be observed in visions. Many critics have read this conclusion as highlighting the strain of mysticism and transcendence that runs throughout *Underworld*.⁶⁵ Equally notable, however, is the fact that this final vision of transcendence and connection comes through the most marginalized of all the novel's underworlds. In this scene, even Sister Edgar's willful paranoia gives way to insight, as she effectively dismisses another nun's assertion that "'It's gross exploitation of a child's horrible murder'" by asking, "'You say the poor. But who else would saints appear to? Do saints and angels appear to bank presidents?'" (819). The distinct split between the two halves of the epilogue suggests that Esmeralda's story represents the distinctive emergence of new subjectivities from a new kind of outsider. Through this return to the Bronx, the novel deftly undermines the nostalgia for white male subjectivity expressed by the Swede in *American Pastoral* and satirized through Brock Vond in *Vineland*. The limits to Nick's subjectivity that pervade the novel are a product not of the increased power of women and minorities or the changes of the sixties persay but of the contingencies and complexities of historical experiences. In serving to highlight rather than efface these complexities, the novel's particular use of nostalgia not only transcends the familiar representations of the politically problematic nostalgia for a given period of

History: Baseball, Aesthetics, and Ideology," Ruppensburg and Engles, eds., 278.

⁶⁵ Particularly notable is John Leonard's flippant review aimed at revealing DeLillo's secret status as a "holy roller" while ignoring the significance of the novel's historical and political representations. John Leonard, "American Jitters," *The Nation*, 3 November 1997, 18-24.

Cold War history but the tendency to read the novel as a whole as a transparently nostalgic artifact.

VI: A Cloud of Knowing?: Historiography and Epistemology

“History was not a matter of missing minutes on the tape. I did not stand helpless before it. I hewed to the texture of collected knowledge, took faith from the solid and availing stuff of our experience.”

Underworld

DeLillo’s novels have been consistently concerned with questions of knowing and pseudo-knowing, with the much discussed role of conspiracy, paranoia, and cults representing just one thread of this inquiry.⁶⁶ Both *Libra* and *Mao II*, like *Underworld*, apply these concerns to the question of historical knowledge. In *Underworld*, the Cold War represents a period in the history of the United States in which, as Lukács asserts of the bourgeois triumph following the French revolution, “the national idea becomes the property of the broadest masses.” In Lukács’ formulation, the mass experience of history made possible by revolution is inseparable from the role of the modern mass army and “the enormous quantitative expansion of war.”⁶⁷ For DeLillo, it is above all the shared possibility of annihilation that serves to create a national historical experience. Back in Phoenix after visiting Klara’s reworked bombers, Nick muses, “But the bombs were not released. I remember Klara Sax talking about the men who flew the strategic

⁶⁶ See David Bosworth, “The Fiction of Don DeLillo,” in Ruppensburg and Engles, 46.

⁶⁷ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962): 25; 24.

bombers as we all stood listening in the long low structure of sectioned concrete. The missiles remained in the rotary launchers. The men came back and the cities were not destroyed” (122). Yet a larger narrative voice outside the reflections of individual characters is needed in order to register the meaning of this central non-event. Thus DeLillo is neither absent from the page, as Pynchon frequently seems to be, or hyper-present through the voices of his characters, like Roth. DeLillo’s authorial narrative voice instead fills the gaps between the web of characters woven together by history and circumstance and turns the novel’s numerous artifacts into a chronicle. Thus the authorial commentary many critics have described as excessive and repetitious offers direct historical interpretation with the assistance of minor characters that play a choral function. Creating a historical narrative neither from above or from below in the traditional sense, *Underworld* portrays the Cold War period as a totality framed by the possibility of destruction yet deeply altered by the possibilities and transformations of the sixties.

Aside from the limits placed on historical consciousness by paranoia, critics of the novel have seen its use of historic figures as central to its treatment of the Cold War. Yet even a figure like Hoover, despite his eccentricities (in addition to the well-known sexual proclivities, DeLillo’s incarnation sports an obsession with his height), serves largely as a recorder of information rather than as a powerful historical actor. Tellingly, in addition to the opening baseball game, the novel’s largest set piece featuring historical figures occurs not in the corridors of government but at the Plaza hotel, where at Capote’s Black & White Ball, Hoover

mingles with a range of celebrities. When an oddly-dressed woman brings to mind “of all things and all people, the hip sick dopest comic - Lenny Bruce,” Hoover’s surveillance helps complete the novel’s historical record:

No, Lenny Bruce was not a guest at the Black & White Ball. Lenny Bruce was dead. Died several months ago, at his home in Los Angeles, of acute morphine poisoning, naked on his toilet floor, limbs gone stiff, mucus trailing out of his nose, his glassy eyes wide open, the syringe still stuck in his arm. An 8x10 police photo of the bloated body - the picture could have been titled *The Triumph of Death* - was in the Director’s personal files. (574)

In his essay “The Power of History,” DeLillo points to the role of these files, suggesting that his willingness to manipulate historical figures for his own purposes was enhanced in the case of “a man who distorted the lives of real people as a matter of bureaucratic routine.” He goes on to suggest that the novelist works to create a kind of “counterhistory,” in which the novelist’s imagination inevitably runs against the grain of mimetic historical representation: “[a]gainst the force of history, so powerful, visible and real, the novelist poses the idiosyncratic self. Here it is, sly, mazed, mercurial, scared half-crazy. It is also free and undivided, the only thing that can match the enormous dimensions of social reality.”⁶⁸

In this essay DeLillo explicitly articulates the historical aims of the novel, which appears far more ambitious than what is found in Roth or Pynchon. While *American Pastoral* highlights the tragedy that results from the attempt to stand outside of history and *Vineland* creates a historical chronicle that celebrates the traditions of American radicalism, DeLillo aims at a complete portrait that

challenges and stands in for the mythologies evoked by the conventional terminology of the Cold War. Not surprisingly, then, the few negative assessments of the novel have frequently called the scope of these ambitions into question. In his critique of DeLillo's approach to history within the novel, James Woods suggests that the novel errs in attempting to "defeat the likes of Hoover on his own turf." Woods argues that DeLillo essentially confronts Hoover on aesthetic rather than political grounds, treating Hoover essentially as a "bad novelist," in response to whom "it is time to act like a good novelist." Instead of fighting the mystification of history with a vision grounded in reality, as Tolstoy did, Woods argues, DeLillo "fights superstition with a new superstition. He fights the religion of history with the religion of fiction."⁶⁹ Inverting the largely positive response of critics who attuned to DeLillo's neo-Romantic impulses, Woods' critique rests on a reading of the novel in which the attempt to counter received notions of history comes through a visionary totality rather than any direct interventions into the representation of specific events, figures or ideologies. In this light, the frequent assertion that only the historical characters are memorable, becomes an argument about the novel's vision of historical consciousness. In this view, the relation individuals express to history, from the street preacher's conspiratorial assertion that "history is on the smallest scrap of paper," to Nick's assertion that "it was not a matter of missing minutes on the tape," are subsumed under mass experiences. Only through

⁶⁸ Don DeLillo, "The Power of History," *New York Times Magazine*, 7 September 1997, 62.

⁶⁹ James Woods, "Black Noise," *The New Republic*, 10 November 1997, 42, 44.

repetition and echo does any particular vision of history take on significance; thus the great attention by critics like Woods and Knight to enumerating the various forms in which paranoia appears throughout the novel. Woods' reading thereby leads him to underscore the very emphasis on crowds and mass experiences of paranoia he views as antithetical to the development of historical consciousness within the novel.

Yet while they are central to the novel's depiction of historical experience, the crowd scenes in *Underworld* never suggest the mindlessness evoked by scenes of mass weddings or funeral mobs in *Mao II*. Instead, these set pieces are the occasion for the shared historical experiences shaped by the elements of everyday life. Thus the radio commentator Russ Hodges uses the game as an occasion for speculation:

Russ thinks there is another kind of history. He thinks they will carry something out of here that joins them all in a rare way, that binds them to a memory with protective power. People are climbing lampposts on Amsterdam Avenue, tooting car horns in Little Italy. Isn't it possible that this midcentury moment enters the skin more lastingly than the vast shaping strategies of eminent leaders, generals steely in their sunglasses - the mapped visions that pierce our dreams? Russ wants to believe a thing like this keeps us safe in some undetermined way. (59-60)

Critics have described this evocation of "history from below," echoed throughout the novel, as a reflection of the novel's paranoid imagination, as yet another manifestation of the novel's relentless insistence that "everything is connected." By underscoring to the connections left out of Hodges' equation, however, John Duvall argues that these scenes offer the kind of distinctions that, as noted earlier, often

seem to be lacking throughout DeLillo's work. Turning to the isolated story of the African-American boy who catches the ball and his father, Duvall reads the scene as an outline of the dangers of mass spectacles that serve to elide political conflict and racial difference. For Duvall, this use of spectacle is a reminder of the danger of the aestheticization of politics. Echoing Benjamin's famous juxtaposition between the Marxist politicization of art and the fascist anesthetization of politics, Duvall argues that Hodges' formulation of historical knowledge - along with that found in Klara's art - cannot escape the fascist dangers of contemporary consumer culture. He contrasts these figures with those of Eisenstein, Bruce and Moonman, all of whom point to the other side of Benjamin's formulation.⁷⁰ In juxtaposing these two tendencies, Duvall suggests that rather than simply accumulating modes of historical knowledge as it accumulates historical data, the novel points to the kinds of demystification which can bring this knowledge to the forefront.

As noted earlier, many critics and reviewers of the novel have asserted that its visionary and religious elements prevent this process of demystification from taking place and circumscribe the possibilities for historical knowledge. Like Woods, Tony Tanner asserts that the novel's religious impulses get in the way of the historical work being done. Placing the novel's tendency towards epiphany and transcendence in opposition to the demands of "the cold prose of the real," Tanner points to the ambiguity of the optimism of the novel's final gesture, the story of Esmeralda's death and the shrine that develops in the Bronx

⁷⁰ John Duvall, *Underworlds: A Reader's Guide*. (New York: Continuum, 2002)

where visions of the girl are reported. Like the pastoral tableau of the family picnic that concludes *Vineland*, this scene seeks to memorialize what is actively erased from dominant historical narratives and transcend the limits of mass media representation that hover at its borders. Yet the scene ultimately underscores the novel's optimism, an optimism that extends beyond these specifically transcendent elements. As inextricable from the bounds of national allegory as from the politics of nostalgia, the central role of baseball further underscores this optimism, with its recurring use of the second person from the opening line "(h)e speaks in your voice, American, and there's a shine in his eye that's halfway hopeful" (11). Through its turn towards a temporally sweeping vision of the recent American past, *Underworld* suggests how the social anomie depicted in various spheres of contemporary culture can be seen in relation to the possibilities and limitations of historical consciousness. The optimism the novel shares with *Vineland* rests less on an investment in the particular concerns involved in representations of the transformations of the sixties than does Pynchon's novel. Yet this optimism and the novel's faith in the possibilities of historic consciousness and representation are unthinkable without the vision of a postwar culture suffused with these transformations. If the radicalism of the sixties does not serve as an allegorical representation of Americanness, as in Pynchon, the novel nonetheless pays tribute to its impact, from a vision of the fifties that bears little resemblance to the nostalgic creation of the post-sixties backlash to a contemporary culture marked by

subjectivities and cultural expressiveness made possible by the transformations of the period.