

“Local Yearnings”

Re-Placing Nostalgia in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*

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2010-01-05

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Abstract

Many scholars have read DeLillo's fiction as an illustration of "how conflicting postmodern practices collide" (Parrish 697). In this essay, I proceed from the recognition that the nature-culture binary is more fluid than ever and situate DeLillo as a theorist not only of postmodern culture but also of postmodern nature. I examine DeLillo's most ambitious and complex novel, *Underworld*, through the lens of green cultural studies—a phrase I prefer to "ecocriticism" because it resonates with cultural studies' interdisciplinarity, ideology critique, and attention to power. Combining a cultural studies methodology with more traditional ecocritical strategies, green cultural studies confronts networks of power while exploring the socio-environmental dimensions of a given text. A green cultural studies approach is particularly well-suited to addressing the novel's compelling, often confounding, refractions of the postnatural condition. Using this critical framework, I suggest that this simultaneously nostalgic and ironic text, characterized by an alternately worshipful and irreverent treatment of nature, both maps and engenders a radicalized postmodern nostalgia—nostalgia with a critical edge. Unlike critics (such as Renato Rosaldo, William Cronon and others) who have theorized nostalgia's limitations, *Underworld* shows how nostalgia can be harnessed and utilized in the service of social and environmental critique.

Introduction

In a world where second lives, on-line pets, biotechnology, virtual landscape planning, plastic surgery and hypoallergenic cats are realities, it seems fair to say that nature has, in many ways, been denaturalized. New technologies, scientific theories, poststructuralist insights and other influences are redefining nature in material and ideological ways that "render it more ductile, less inflexible—subject to revision" (Ross 25). Today's nature is often twice removed from its original state and remade as third nature, a representational category that includes the "simulated natures of everyday TV and magazines, games like SimEarth...[and other] powerful means of manipulating nature as 'information'" (Braun and Castree 4). To make things even more complicated, the relationship between first nature and its successive manifestations is not self-evident; in fact, some argue, "the 'second nature' is no longer produced *out of* the first nature, but rather the first is produced *by* and within the confines of the second" (Smith and O'Keefe 35, original emphasis). With first nature's autonomy in question and second and third nature proliferating, nature's function in the political economy is more complex than ever.¹

¹ Informed by Kate Soper, my use of nature (like Smith's and, I will suggest, DeLillo's) assumes that discursive, socially constructed "nature" and material, or "first," Nature—that which exists autonomously from human control—are always imbricated in complex ways (8).

While it makes sense to insist on our postnatural status, nostalgia for “pure” (first) nature persists in both popular and academic discourse.² As more people find themselves surrounded by “cable nature,” it is no wonder there is a reactionary nostalgia for “walking in the woods” (DeLillo, 1984 231, 279). On a large scale, this longing can take the shape of what Renato Rosaldo has termed “imperialist nostalgia,” one incarnation of which occurs when first-world countries long for environments they have played a leading role in destroying.³ For Fredric Jameson, all that remains of nature is our nostalgia for “some organic precapitalist peasant landscape and village society, which is the final form of the image of Nature in our own time” (34). Jameson attributes this state of affairs to “the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself,” which has become powerful enough to invade even the “precapitalist enclaves [of] Nature and the Unconscious” (38, 49). Much in the same way that Theodore Roosevelt, Owen Wister, Frederick Jackson Turner and others in the early twentieth century lamented the American frontier’s closing, Jameson’s declensionist narrative, in which capitalism’s final frontier, nature, is officially closed, reveals a distinctly late-century nostalgia.⁴

Don DeLillo, with his insights into late capitalism, postmodernity and the nostalgia that characterizes both, contributes an important literary voice to these discussions. Many scholars have read DeLillo’s fiction as an illustration of “how conflicting postmodern practices collide” (Parrish 697). In this essay, I proceed from the recognition that the nature-culture binary is more fluid than ever and situate DeLillo as a theorist not only of postmodern culture but also of postmodern nature.⁵ I examine DeLillo’s most ambitious and complex novel, *Underworld*, through the lens of green cultural studies—a phrase I prefer to “ecocriticism” because it resonates with cultural studies’ interdisciplinarity, ideology critique, and attention to power. Combining a cultural studies methodology with more traditional ecocritical strategies, green cultural studies confronts networks of power while exploring the socio-environmental dimensions of a

² The first text to coin the term “postnatural,” Bill McKibben’s *The End of Nature* is perhaps one of the most rhetorically influential descriptions of contemporary nature. McKibben mourns the loss of a “set of human ideas” in which we conceive of “nature as eternal and separate” and insists “*we have ended the thing that has, at least in modern times, defined nature for us—its separation from human society*” (8, 64, original emphasis). In reifying nature as distinct from and, ideally, untouched by human culture, *The End of Nature* participates in a prevalent nostalgic narrative in which nature is a pure, originary environment that humans have corrupted. William Cronon offers an incisive critique of this perspective.

³ Rosaldo focuses on the ways in which “nostalgia makes racial domination appear innocent and pure,” only briefly mentioning the environmental implications of his oft-cited phrase (107).

⁴ Dana Phillips also notes echoes of frontier rhetoric in postmodern theories like Jameson’s (245). In a variation on the same theme, Todd McGowan suggests that “capital sees waste as the final frontier for commodification” (139). As Linda Hutcheon (1989) argues, Jameson’s approach to postmodernity often reveals his own nostalgia for a time before late capitalism robbed parody of its critical edge.

⁵ Some critics have attended to the environmental dimensions of *White Noise* but not yet *Underworld*. For “green” readings of *White Noise*, see Phillips, Deitering, and Heise.

given text.⁶ While recent readings of *Underworld* have branched out to include religious and even humanist interpretations,⁷ a green cultural studies approach is particularly well-suited to addressing the novel's compelling, often confounding, refractions of the postnatural condition. Using this critical framework, I suggest that this simultaneously nostalgic and ironic text, characterized by an alternately worshipful and irreverent treatment of nature, both maps and engenders a radicalized postmodern nostalgia—nostalgia with a critical edge.⁸ Unlike critics (such as Rosaldo, William Cronon and others) who have theorized nostalgia's limitations, *Underworld* shows how nostalgia can be harnessed and utilized in the service of social and environmental critique.

Of course, the kind of nostalgia DeLillo deploys requires explication. Like many of DeLillo's novels, *Underworld* shuns closure and foregrounds the inability of narrative to "offer pattern and insight by virtue of its capacity for transcendence" (Stewart 22-3). This sense of narrative's failure leads to its own kind of nostalgia, a troubling result of poststructuralist insight. One of nostalgia's most prominent theorists, Susan Stewart, explains that postmodern nostalgia longs for "a genesis where lived and mediated experience are one, where authenticity and transcendence are both present and everywhere" (23).⁹ While *Underworld's* readers are forced to consider the inadequacies of narrative (as well as the blurry line between fiction and history), its characters display this postmodern nostalgia as they long for various cultural objects: authenticity, childhood, originality, unmediated experience, a unified self, the cohesion of signifier and signified.

However, the novel's longing has a spatial, material component as well. Murray Jay Siskind, the witty cultural theorist in *White Noise*, describes the feeling of being "homesick for a place even when you are there" (DeLillo, 1984 251). *Underworld* explores how this everyday nostalgia overwhelms characters in a range of environments. Part of what John Duvall and others identify as "DeLillo's ongoing critique of the political economy" proceeds through a relocation of nature within this political economy and an identification of capitalism's effects on specific environments.¹⁰ *Underworld's* nature—which includes human bodies, desert landscapes, and urban neighborhoods—is both material and ideological. In DeLillo's literary world, first nature is inextricable from the nostalgic narratives we tell about it, the products we make from it and the waste those products become. Thus, *Underworld*, like Jameson's theory of postmodernity,

⁶ Although they evolved side-by-side, ecocriticism and cultural studies seem to me to have more or less merged. In her recent *PMLA* article, Ursula Heise seems to agree when she identifies ecocriticism's "triple allegiance" to science, political struggle, and "the scholarly analysis of cultural representations" and admits that, "somewhat like cultural studies, ecocriticism coheres more by virtue of a common political project than on the basis of shared theoretical and methodological assumptions" (506).

⁷ For a religious perspective, see Eaton. For a humanist reading, see Kavaddo.

⁸ I theorize the critical potential of what I call "counter-nostalgia" in more detail (though in regards to a different historical period) in "Longing for Wonderland."

⁹ On nostalgia for transcendence in *Underworld*, see McGowan (132).

¹⁰ While Duvall is right to note DeLillo's fascination with "the eco-threat of consumer culture," the nature of this threat has yet to be fully interrogated (Duvall, 1999 561).

posits first nature as a frontier that capitalism has conquered. Yet, unlike Jameson, DeLillo *wields* nostalgia, using it as his ally even while holding it at a critical distance. DeLillo's deployments of nostalgia for nature alternate between sincerity and irony: nostalgia becomes both a mode through which to read and describe the past and the present as well as an ideological affect to be approached warily, with a healthy dose of skepticism.¹¹

His postnatural worlds are ironic, in part, because second and third nature have begun to coexist alongside first nature. Dana Phillips observes that what is striking in DeLillo's work "is not so much the replacement as it is the displacement of older forms by newer ones, and the potential overlapping or even the merger of all those forms in an increasingly crowded cultural and natural landscape" (239). Even while the definition of nature shifts, familiar narratives and genres, including the pastoral, the sublime, and even the American western, continue to stake out their territory. *Underworld* illustrates both Phillips' insight and the observation by Neil Smith and others that the production of second (and third) natures out of first nature is no longer so clear-cut; indeed, the process works just as well the other way around. As DeLillo's Americans gather around toxic chemical clouds to experience a beautiful sunset or congregate at a billboard to catch a glimpse of the sublime, simulated nature generates many of the familiar, first-nature narratives that have circulated throughout the century. Readers must ask what it means that man-made events and simulated environments can improve upon nature itself, or whether we should be disturbed that a pile of waste at an urban landfill can take on the first-nature aura of an iconic desert feature.

With this postnatural framework as a starting point, my essay examines how nostalgia functions on local scales to "ground" new histories, complicate conventional narratives about nature and expose injustices in the present. This reading of *Underworld's* "homesickness" pushes beyond the prevalent view of its nostalgia as targeted at balanced Cold War binaries and the stability associated with a single, identifiable enemy.¹² My goals here are twofold: to expand conversations about nostalgia in DeLillo's work and to "re-place" nostalgia by emphasizing its environmental dimensions. The first section describes DeLillo's "ironic nostalgia" and locates the beginnings of the novel's environmental justice message via a reading of the prologue. Then, I turn to the particular environments—the "white places on your map"—in which this nostalgia manifests itself. I hope to show that, by combining a sincerely nostalgic mood with an ironic

¹¹ A few critics have hinted at the coexistence of irony and nostalgia in the text, noting *Underworld's* "deadpan ironies and post-nostalgic cool" as well as its ability to parody nostalgia (Evans 104). For a discussion of DeLillo's parodic nostalgia in relation to the 1950s, see Wallace. Stephen J. Mexal mentions (in footnote four) the "irony...of using nostalgia in order to critique nostalgia"—a point that is salient to my essay.

¹² DeLillo has contributed to this dominant reading. In an interview he notes "a curious sense of nostalgia for the Cold War, of people missing the clearly defined sense of confrontation, the sense of measurable certainties" (Gillmor 66). Many critics have echoed this sentiment. For an example, see Knight, who writes about "the nostalgia many characters in *Underworld* feel for the stable paranoia of the Cold War" (825).

approach to consumption, to the past, to nature, and even to nostalgia itself, DeLillo plays on postmodern American nostalgia in order to incite a critique of late capitalism and make a provocative argument for environmental and social justice.

Ironic Nostalgia: Race, Baseball and Body-Memories

It is tempting to condemn *Underworld* as, quite simply, a nostalgic novel. DeLillo's characters long for a pre-technological past where experience is more direct, less mediated, "real."¹³ Many characters think the 1960s was the decade when traditional history "ended" and simple categories began to break down.¹⁴ Clyde, the homosocially faithful assistant to a ruthlessly caricatured J. Edgar Hoover, expresses fear of the "continuation of the Kennedy years. In which well-founded categories began to seem irrelevant. In which a certain fluid movement became possible" (571). Sister Edgar, a neurotic, repressed nun who works with inner-city New York's poor, is nostalgic for the Cold War past, when "things were simpler...clothing was layered, life was not" (238). Matty, brother to Nick Shay, the closest person to a protagonist this diffuse novel can claim, voices the poignant postmodern question: "Is this when history turned to fiction?" (459). Even Klara Sax, arguably the most well-adjusted character in the novel, laments the loss of the "real" past: "Didn't life take an unreal turn at some point?" she wonders. "Things have no limits now...no measure of value" (72, 76).

These comments reflect Stewart's postmodern nostalgia and echo Jean Baudrillard's cryptic claim that "[w]hen the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning" (1984, 257). Linda Hutcheon sees things differently, insisting that "there is nothing natural about the 'real' and there never was—even before the existence of mass media" (1989, 33). Even if Hutcheon is right, though, the notion of the "real" is a lot like the notion of the "natural"; both are objects of nostalgia, despite their tenuous objective status. In other words, nostalgia functions whether or not its object ever existed. It is not exactly right to say, then, that "DeLillo mimics nostalgia for an audience who no longer believes in it" (Parrish 703). As his characters' unease about the "seamless landscapes" they inhabit indicates, postmodern subjects do believe in nostalgia, perhaps more than ever (Phillips 239).

¹³ There are numerous examples of the word "real" throughout the novel. The "real" is associated most often with the past, particularly with childhood; as Nick explains, his was "dumb-muscled and angry and real" (810). Black & white film, the streets of New York and Russ Hodges' narration of the 1951 baseball game are all deemed "real." DeLillo's characters echo his own statements in "The Power of History," where he identifies a "curious antiquity" in black and white film: "the shakier and fuzzier the picture, the more it lays a claim to permanence."

¹⁴ This time period roughly corresponds to DeLillo's own discussion of fundamental changes in American culture after the Kennedy assassination, as well as many postmodern theorists' location of the onset of postmodernism. For example, David Harvey marks the beginnings of postmodernism "somewhere between 1968 and 1972" (38).

Hutcheon points out that in the postmodern moment it is not unusual for “nostalgia itself [to be] both called up, exploited, *and* ironized” (2000, 205). When nostalgia becomes irony’s object, as it often does in DeLillo’s oeuvre, it engenders a “distance [that is] necessary for reflective thought about the present as well as the past” (207). The novel’s formal fragmentation and jarring juxtapositions precipitate a startling back-and-forth movement between mourning the lost past and ironizing that mourning. On one hand, the novel embraces nostalgia as an affective and narrative mode through which both past and present might be defamiliarized. On the other hand, the novel critiques nostalgic narratives of the past that are simplistic, romantic and dishonest, suggesting these optimistic renditions of the nation’s history elide “secret” histories of events and people. In effect, nostalgia in *Underworld* is (to borrow Hutcheon’s word) “doubled”: it fluctuates between sincere exploitation and ironic distancing.¹⁵

The prologue, arguably the novel’s most evocative and reader-friendly section, best illustrates this doubling move. The nostalgia surrounding the game—while not for “nature” in any traditional sense—is for embodied experience, for collective belonging, for an event with an aura that precedes its commodification. Tapping into the nostalgia surrounding American baseball and then disrupting that nostalgia, the prologue explores the tension between a famous Giants-versus-Dodgers baseball game and the Soviet detonation of its second atomic bomb, which was announced on the same day (October 3, 1951) and featured alongside the Giants’ come-from-behind win on the front page of the *New York Times*. DeLillo shows how the game operates politically at international, national, and local scales in order to expose the way the baseball game becomes more “real” in the national memory than the bomb test. The prologue is compelling for its sensual images that invite “you” to become a complicit spectator, to feel part of the crowd at the game, and to feel nostalgic for the event even though you may not have been present. DeLillo addresses “you,” the reader, frequently, saying “He speaks in your voice, American,” and “Look at Cotter under a seat,” or “Here comes a cop in municipal bulk...” (11, 47, 14). The language renders readers complicit spectators and places us in the crowd. The players, crowd, and sportscasters are “connected” by the common understanding that the event they’re witnessing will be recorded as history; there is something about the game that “makes people want to be in the streets, joined with others, telling others what has happened” (47). This collective impulse, this longing to belong, is perhaps most successful at the purely physical level. The game “enters the skin” and has “flesh and breath that quicken to the force [of the event]” (60). Players have “body-memories,” fans have a desire to touch players and each other, and when Russ Hodges narrates the game-winning homerun, his voice is “excessive with a little trickle of hysteria” (41, 43). Especially if we have seen and heard the recording of Bobby Thomson’s game-winning homer and Hodges’ now-famous broadcast (which is

¹⁵ Hutcheon (2000) also uses the word “doubled” to describe postmodern nostalgia. She refers to its “doubling” of “an inadequate present” and an “idealized past” (198).

available on You Tube), DeLillo's narrative depiction of this intense moment in sports history is affective.

However, the prologue invokes our nostalgia only to frustrate it; DeLillo constantly interrupts the sense of belonging his narrative elicits. For instance, the presence of Hoover, Jackie Gleason, Frank Sinatra, and Toots Shor tempts readers with nostalgia for these familiar historical figures. But, a glimpse into Hoover's mind makes us aware of Cold War tensions and our own mortality; his lonely meditations on a carnage-filled Bruegel painting contrast sharply with the crowd's celebrations on the field (50). In the same vein, DeLillo's grotesque rendering of Gleason is not just difficult to stomach; his vomiting is a manifestation of excess consumption ("the daylong booze and the greasy food"), which resonates with the crowd's many overindulgences—junk food, American tradition, and, ultimately, the ideal of a democratic nation united by a shared faith in commodities (38). While Gleason loses his lunch, the famous foursome is showered with paper and garbage, tangible byproducts of overconsumption.

In addition to Hoover's gloomy political knowledge and Gleason's self-induced illness, Cotter Martin's experience at the game is another way DeLillo manipulates our nostalgia. Juxtaposed against these famous figures, Cotter is a young black boy whose presence at the game is illegitimate: unable to afford a ticket, Cotter joins a group of schoolchildren who jump the turnstiles to sneak into the stadium. Cotter's situation invokes a nostalgic sense of carefree youth, "playing hookie" from school, eating peanuts in the stands, and watching your favorite team pull off an unexpected win. However, DeLillo frustrates any identification readers may have had with his character by removing him from the rest of the novel shortly after the prologue.

Yet, Cotter's presence, however fleeting, calls into question the extent to which mass consumption spawns a genuinely democratic community. His experience shows how, during the game, consumption unites the crowd and mystifies race and class politics; but, after the game, he demystifies these same social relations. Having become "lost in the crowd," Cotter befriends his bleacher-mate, Bill, an older white man, for "the way he can make Cotter believe this is a long and close association they share" (31). As Cotter and Bill eat peanuts together (not insignificantly, a consumptive act) "Cotter's racial and class identity, through Bill's big-brotherly attention, seems to melt away" (Duvall, 1995 296-7). Meanwhile, Cotter quietly worries that a black peanut vendor will "mak[e] him visible...their common color jump[ing] the space between them" (DeLillo 20). Not sure how long his "close association" with the crowd will last, Cotter just wants to blend in.

Bill and Cotter "connect" through tradition, which Bill defines in race-neutral terms as "what they did before you. That's the connection you make. There's a whole long line...It's part of something...a privilege in a way" (31-30). However, the "privilege" of American baseball does not extend to Cotter; the "they" of Bill's tradition proves to be

racialized.¹⁶ When the crowd wrestles for the game-winning ball and Cotter comes up with it, any notion of the game as a democratic, collective experience is destroyed. The post-game interaction between Bill and Cotter, when the now-commodified baseball displaces the illusory camaraderie of the game, further proves that the belonging felt at the game was based on the temporary displacement of social relations by fetishized commodities and conspicuous consumption.

One might conclude, then, that the prologue condemns the way nostalgia for the baseball game years (or even moments) later is something of an opiate. Not only does this nostalgia numb sensitivity to Cold War events, but it also glosses over social stratification in the U.S. and reifies a sense of tradition based on exclusive white privilege. Yet, DeLillo does not leave us there. If we trace the ironic-nostalgic longing beyond the stadium, we end up in a very different place. Significantly, it is nature—or more accurately, the urban environment—that facilitates the post-game turn in the narrative and its associated critique. After the game, racism comes to the fore as the streets beyond the stadium shape the action. Bill's friendship quickly turns to animosity as he wolfishly stalks, then chases, Cotter home, trying to persuade him to give up the ball. At first, Cotter is worried about being perceived as “a black kid running in a mainly white crowd”—a crowd that will surely judge him a thief (52). Only when they reach “unmixed Harlem,” Cotter's predominantly black neighborhood, does Bill become frightened and back off, realizing that he is now in the minority (57). Bill's about-face reveals his anxiety about what he perceives as a dangerous urban wilderness. Of course, since DeLillo has begun to describe Bill as a predatory animal, readers are asked to be wary of his judgment and perhaps wonder about our own associations of blackness with the inner city. Harlem takes on a sort of local power as Cotter returns safely to his neighborhood with the baseball, “feeling a sense of placeness that grows more familiar” as he gets closer to home (58). Cotter's victorious display—he does a “danceman's strut,” mocking Bill by flaunting and twirling the prized ball—propels Bill's flight from the area, and Cotter is free to go home and relive the incredible game (57). DeLillo dares us not to celebrate Cotter's victory in a one-sentence paragraph that reads simply: “Don't tell me you don't love this move” (57).

On one hand, Harlem's temporary power is negligible next to the knowledge Cotter has gained: despite the promises of the “homogenous” crowd at the game, the race and class structures within which these individuals exist endure long after the stands are empty. On the other hand, Cotter's performance on his home turf prepares the reader for DeLillo's forthcoming critiques of environmental racism. We are prepared, for instance, to hear a street preacher remark about how he and other ghetto residents—whom he calls “veterans of a particular place”—are subject to forces that render them invisible (352). He warns wary passersby that when the atomic bomb is dropped only

¹⁶ The presence of Jackie Robinson and Willie Mays marks the historic end of segregated baseball teams, if not the end of racism. Notably, these players are also caught up in the crowd's consumption. Mays is “trying to get a jingle out of his head...thinking helplessly, Push-pull click-click, change blades that quick” (DeLillo 22).

cockroaches will survive. Then, in a common environmental justice move, the preacher draws on local knowledge to highlight the problems with *this* particular place: “Nobody here need scientific proof that insects be the last living things. They already pretty close. We dying all the time, these roaches still climbing the walls and coming out the cracks” (352). Echoing DeLillo’s earlier description of Cotter’s neighborhood as one in which the “side streets are weary with uncollected garbage and broken glass,” a perceptive reader begins to see the environmental justice thread DeLillo weaves through the text (55).

With an eye on this thread, it seems important to remember that the novel begins with Cotter Martin and his “local yearning”:

[l]onging on a large scale is what makes history. [Cotter] is just a kid with a local yearning but he is part of an assembling crowd, anonymous thousands off the buses and trains,...and even if they are not a migration or a revolution, some vast shaking of the soul, they bring with them the body heat of a great city and their own small reveries and desperations, the unseen something that haunts the day. (11)

It is significant that *Cotter’s* longing frames the prologue, since his marginality to the cohesive nation imagined in the stadium is instrumental to the prologue’s politics. His failure to successfully belong at the game reveals that racism still “haunts” the nation.

DeLillo reflects more directly on racism when he fastforwards to “Spring-Summer 1992,” where another baseball game is being played, with Nick, Sims, Brian, and a British interviewer (there to “devour American culture”) as spectators (92). DeLillo’s close juxtaposition of these two games highlights their dissimilarities. At the 1990s stadium, the characters are sitting in a glass booth, “set apart from the field,” from the “real people” in the stands and the noise of the crowd (91). Echoing DeLillo’s comments in “The Power of History,” Brian and Nick try to explain Nick’s purchase of the baseball from the legendary ‘51 Polo Grounds game, saying “the Thomson homer continues to live because it happened decades ago when things were not replayed and worn out and run down and used up before midnight of the first day” (98). Sims recalls how even he, “a black kid who didn’t even root for the Giants,” was so moved by the game that he ran into the streets shouting “*I’m Bobby Thomson*” (94).

Their dialogue picks up on Cotter’s longing as well as an earlier expression of longing: Klara’s desire to “unrepeat,” to get at “the ordinary thing” (77).¹⁷ More than that, the conversation provides another example of the power nostalgia can have when it

¹⁷ Such un-repetition can potentially cut through ideology. The baseball is the book’s primary emblem of this “longing for unmediated presence” (Parrish 709). The “retold stories” surrounding the ball help denaturalize commodity fetishism by infusing the object with personal meaning that is irreducible to exchange value. Nick explains, “the hand works memories out of the baseball that have nothing to do with games” (DeLillo 132).

operates as a starting point for critique. Nick's explanation of why he bought the baseball involves not just his unusual desire to commemorate loss but also his curiosity about "what it is that brings bad luck to one person and the sweetest of good fortune to another" (99). While Nick is content to muse about this, Sims has an explanation. He compares the suicidal death of one failed athlete—a game-losing black pitcher who shot his wife (nonfatally) and killed himself—to the celebrity status of Ralph Branca, the pitcher who threw the fateful ball that Thomson hit out of the park. Reflecting on the dominance of the white middle class in baseball and beyond, Sims explains Branca's relative success as follows: "Because he's white. Because the whole thing is white. Because you can survive and endure and prosper if they let you. But you have to be white before they let you" (98). The image of a young Sims running outside and shouting "*I'm Bobby Thomson*" becomes ironic and heartbreaking after this analysis.

In both baseball game scenes, DeLillo's affective "hook" is nostalgia; he invites us to get "lost in the crowd" but then surprises us with serious political content. Nostalgic stories *begin* with the past (when Nick and Brian describe the sentiments surrounding the '51 game) but end up being explicitly about the *present*, when Sims expresses his uncomfortable assessment of present-day racial politics and America's failed democratic pretensions. In effect, the nostalgia generated by these doubled baseball games enables a critique of the ways in which not just conditions of production but also social relations—including race and class inequalities, which are perpetuated by a late-capitalist economy—can be obscured by commodity fetishism. From the book's opening pages, then, the reader is set up to consume the novel, but the back and forth between induced and frustrated—or sincere and ironic—nostalgia prevents us from being passive spectators.

“White places on your map”: Making Visible Local Environments

Beyond its powerful prologue, *Underworld* continues to refract nostalgic longing for the “fifties”¹⁸ through particular environments.¹⁹ By remembering the fifties as a national “golden age,” the novel cautions, Americans tend to overlook the transitional nature of the decade, particularly the social, technological and economic changes that accompanied the shift to late capitalism. *Underworld* confronts fifties mythology head-on via its satirical sketch of the Deming family and their suburban household.²⁰ DeLillo

¹⁸ Here it is important to note Jameson's distinction between the 1950s and the “fifties” (281). For him, the former refers to the historical period, whereas the latter indicates the decade as reconstructed by media representations. Thanks to Molly Wallace for drawing this distinction to my attention (Wallace 381).

¹⁹ For a discussion of this “fifties mythology” see Ferraro.

²⁰ Wallace also rightly notes how DeLillo depicts the decade “as a parody of the kind of nostalgic substitutions that Jameson deplors” (372). Knight concurs, observing that *Underworld* “does not evoke

invokes “the placid nineteen-fifties. Everybody dressed and spoke the same way. It was all kitchens and cars and TV sets” (410). Yet, his portrayal of the Demings tweaks stereotypes of the “Leave it to Beaver” decade, complicating any nostalgia readers may have for it. To borrow a phrase from Tony Tanner, the Demings illustrate the “panic inside the plastic” of everyday existence during the Cold War period, in which the military industrial complex infiltrates even “placid” suburban homes (62). To make this point, DeLillo interjects various warning labels from household packages, cleverly punning on the notion of the “nuclear” family: “Avoid contact with eyes, open cuts or running sores”; “Danger, contents under pressure” (514, 516). DeLillo’s ironic nostalgia inquires how to make sense of a society in which “you can’t tell the difference between...a soup can and a car bomb, because they are made by the same people in the same way and ultimately refer to the same thing” (446).

Readers are implicitly challenged to ask what similar connections exist today, when multinational corporations with economic ties to the military have even greater power. *Underworld*’s reverse chronology enables us to flash back from a waste-ridden future and reflect on how the rise of consumer culture in the 1950s contributes directly to the present-day global capitalist economy. For instance, the Deming family’s Ford evokes both “routine family applications” and a “crouched power” revealed by “eating up the landscape” (516). Approaching this statement from a contemporary perspective, in which gas-guzzling automobiles are politically charged in ways they were not in the 1950s, this casual remark about landscape gestures toward present environmental crises—global warming, species extinction, the depletion of natural resources—and the ways in which overconsumption contributes to these crises. The image also echoes an earlier scene in which Nick is driving through the desert to visit Klara, who had been his lover, briefly, when he was a teenager. Nick likens his rented Lexus to the desert, saying the car is “a natural match for the landscape” because both are “empty,” “completely free of human presence” (63). Here, Nick seems to fetishize the car much as he does the baseball, suggesting that a post-Fordist economy produces vehicles with even less visible evidence of human labor. However, the comparison of the car with the landscape initiates a self-consciousness about the degree to which either is really “free of human presence.” Through Nick’s nostalgia, the human components of both the car and the landscape are revealed rather than mystified.

Nostalgia first becomes apparent in the scene when Nick admits that his desire to access “old times” drove his impulsive decision to visit Klara (64). There is a distinct trace of the western romance in his hopes for their encounter: Nick wants “to see her again and feel something and say something, a few words, not too many, and then head back into the windy distance” (64). His Lexus might well be a horse, trotting toward the setting sun; readers can visualize Nick’s backward glance and his tipping of the cowboy hat as Klara tearfully waves her handkerchief. Explicitly linking his vision to “a hundred

nostalgia for a Norman Rockwell-esque version of the 1950s—a view that is thoroughly satirized” in the section on the Demings (815).

movies,” Nick mocks his own sense of romance when he thinks he sees “a horseman with scabbarded rifle or a lone cameleer” trotting across the desert—a “thing” which turns out to be a “New York taxi” (64-5). The hand-painted taxi represents “ancestral New York” for Klara (66). While it is often acknowledged that “sites of natural beauty are heavy with...nostalgia,” the “ancestral” taxi reminds readers that it is not only natural spaces that carry nostalgic traces and so asks us to be reflective (as Nick is) about our own nostalgia for various environments (Baudrillard, 1988 126). In this incidence of ironized nostalgia, the boundaries between urban space and desert space break down, laying the groundwork for DeLillo’s inner city landscapes later in the text.

Nick’s first impression of the desert as a first-nature space that is “free of human presence” turns out to be false when he finds Klara, along with plenty of “able-bodied volunteers,” participating in an art project that is embodied, nostalgic, and political (68). Klara defines the project as “a landscape painting in which we use the landscape itself”—a desert landscape that is beautiful for being “so old and strong” (70). While Klara says hers is “an art project, not a peace project,”²¹ she immediately makes a statement that seems to be about peace. She observes that the desert serves as a space for a “technological culture” to “show our mastery” (70-1). Specifically, her project’s goal is “to find an element of felt life” through an embodied approach to art. Klara describes her group’s process as “putting [their] puny hands to great weapons systems” in order to “unrepeat” the factory-produced homogeneity of these weapons (77). It is a kind of recycling, a taking up of discarded refuse and a generating of something new and useful. Later in the novel, Nick takes his wife to view the stunning art project from the air and calls Klara’s planes “great things, painted to remark the end of an age and the beginning of something so different only a vision such as this might suffice to augur it” (126).²² Clearly, this piece bears traces of the postmodern nostalgia I detailed earlier. Through its placement within a desert landscape—the vastness, the remoteness, the sense of emptiness, the “beauty of things that are normally unseen”—the project takes on a sublime aura (126). Moreover, the desert betrays visible markers of the violent byproducts of “industry and progress and so forth”; it “bears the visible signs of all the detonations we set off” (71). Marked as (and by) military history in this way, the desert is no longer a “pure” natural space—indeed, we might long to know what this environment looked like before there were weapons tested there— and Klara’s landscape art is political “by nature.”

The connection between weapons and nature resurfaces later in the novel, when Nick’s brother, Matt, and his wife, Janet, take a drive into the desert as a break from Matt’s job in “the Pocket, where weapons [a]re conceived and designed.” Matt heads to the desert “because he need[s] time to get away and think” and because he doubts “the rightness of his role” in bomb research (404). Their destination is, significantly, one of

²¹ Duvall (2002) makes a similar claim, saying *Underworld* is “not a peace project; it is an attempt to construct fully historicized art” (63).

²² For a reading of the novel as delineating historical periods, see Wegner.

the “white places on your map” (404). This phrase is attributable to Joseph Conrad, for whom it serves as “an allusion to a continent of black people” but also to “the darkness of imperialism and all the brutality and plunder associated with it” (Nesiak 4). DeLillo’s “white places” signify present-day and historical secrets and the often invisible spaces that house them. These spaces, like Cotter Martin’s neighborhood, might be sites of environmental racism. Or, like the desert, a “white place” might be a means of mapping the violence of U.S. nuclear power, tracing the nation’s imperialism and invoking “real” nature—and real humans—as victims of the nation’s displays of strength.

The desert and the city are both real and ideological spaces—a simultaneity that inspires mixed reactions. Janet feels “nervous” and resentful of the desert landscape, which is “too big, too empty” and has “the audacity to be real” (449). But Matt is happy because the desert is “a challenge to his lifelong citiness” as well as the “realization of some half-dreamed vision, the otherness of the West, the strange great thing that was all mixed in with nation and spaciousness, with bravery and history and who you are and what you believe and what movies you saw growing up” (449-50). Matt’s attempt to posit nature as a foil for his identity fails as “nature” fragments into multiple meanings. Nature invokes not just vague ideals about one’s own “nature” (“who you are and what you believe”) but also hegemonic narratives of the American frontier (“nation and spaciousness”) as well as consumer culture (“what movies you saw growing up”).

Here, conceptions of first nature—bodies and landscapes—are clustered alongside second and third nature in ways that demand reflection. The urge to “get back to nature” and engage in soul-searching is complicated by these simultaneous manifestations of nature. What we find in nature is not tranquility but rather “challenge,” “audacity,” and a complex social space. Nick echoes his brother’s experience when he goes to a correctional facility in upstate New York after killing a man as a teenager. He finds “rolling hills that made you wonder who you were and how you got here.” Yet, these hills “ha[ve] no more connection to your life than a calendar with a picture of hills...fixed to some kitchen wall” (501). Meant to lend him “perspective on [his] life,” nature instead folds back on itself, blending with its cinematic and linguistic representations and pointing toward social issues. Nature’s “otherness” is not sustainable; nature cannot be distinguished from its social production when first, second and third nature overlap in such complex ways.

Perhaps this overlap is a good thing. Attention to local environments, and to the shifty nature narratives embedded in them, helps DeLillo make visible what is typically unseen, whether remote landscapes or social inequity. Klara articulates the nature of her project in terms that might well describe the whole novel: it is “a graffiti instinct” (77). *Underworld* takes up this instinct explicitly when the narrative relocates to New York and introduces Ismael Muñoz (aka Moonman 157) into its loose plot. The Wall, where his crew of graffiti artists works, is (like the desert) “a tuck of land adrift from the social order” (239). However, also like the desert, the Wall turns out to be very social; it is only these spaces’ deceptive “sense of exclusion” that suggests otherwise

(239, my emphasis). Rather than “look[ing] for positive things to emphasize,” as Sister Gracie, a local nun, recommends, Muñoz and the other artists make social injustice visible by spray-painting angels on the wall each time a child in the neighborhood dies (239).

The “wildness” Nick feels when he views Klara’s project is recapitulated in this urban space (84). Esmeralda, one of the homeless children in this New York ghetto, is depicted as a sort of savage: she “forages” for clothes; she “plucks spoiled fruit” from waste bins; she does not talk; she runs with the “easy stride of some creature of sylvan myth” (810). Rather than mystify the inner city as a “jungle,” as Bill does with his fear of Harlem, DeLillo’s overt nature metaphors highlight and question the tendency towards such mystification. In case readers don’t get the message, the nuns immediately follow up this description of Esmeralda with a conversation about “how the last decade of the century looks worse than the first in some respects” (811). For these urban residents, the final years of the millennium yield little more than “spoiled fruit.”

Similar critiques of environmental racism emerge periodically throughout the novel. For example, a ship containing toxic cargo becomes the subject of several conversations. Sims tells Nick that LDC’s—which are “less developed countr[ies] in the language of banks and other global entities” but which Sims sarcastically renames “little dark-skinned countries”—will take money in exchange for accepting such shipments of waste (278). Their discussion clearly points to the racialization of environmental waste as well as to one of the causes of this injustice: the spatialization of race.²³ Equating blackness with American inner cities, this “newest form of racism replaces direct references to race, whether biological or cultural, with spatialized terms like ‘urban’ and ‘ghetto’”—a process which elides racism in favor of “neutral” geographic metaphors (Bennett 175). As Sims’ commentary shows, the same phenomenon occurs at the international level: whole countries are “dark-skinned” in the American imagination, just as the urban ghetto remains a white place on many an American’s cognitive map.

DeLillo redraws the contours of this map in bold strokes. By rendering the ghetto’s occupants “veterans of a particular place,” DeLillo combats the tendency to displace race onto geography—and so, perpetuate further environmental racism—by repopulating the ghetto, giving these residents individual stories and identities and exposing the heterogeneity of urban spaces (352). Like Ismael’s graffiti, DeLillo undertakes his own form of “cognitive vandalism” and makes it impossible to overlook social inequality (Duvall, 2002 63). Illustrating specific ways in which “the last decade looks worse than the first,” DeLillo undermines any teleological myth of progress. Over and against nationalistic nostalgic myths, which implicitly reify a progress narrative as they look longingly back on simpler times, DeLillo redefines “progress” ironically: “the smoke and filth that hung over the landscape, this was progress, this was industrial might and drive” (310). This definition points not just to the negative impacts on landscape but

²³ For a full discussion of the spatialization of race, see Bennett.

also to the often overlooked human victims of so-called progress, the byproducts of a system that excludes some humans by treating them, and their environments, as waste.²⁴

Indeed, DeLillo suggests that much of what Americans are nostalgic for ultimately becomes waste. Knight attributes DeLillo's "turn to waste" to his engagement with "the previously invisible global interaction of 'natural' and industrial forces" (832). I would take this observation a step further and suggest that waste reveals complex connections between consumption, nature, and *nostalgia*. The end result of consumptive longing, waste links past and present in a way that disrupts nostalgia and forces humans to confront their consumer desires. From the falling trash in the stadium at the Polo Grounds in the novel's opening pages, waste is an emblem of an unfulfilled "wish to be connected" (DeLillo 45). As nature becomes waste at a staggering pace, DeLillo hypothesizes a transference of nostalgia that mirrors an evolution from landscapes to waste-scapes and even posits a new form of tourism catering to this fascination with waste. Sister Edgar muses that tourists look for "ruins, bombed-out terrain, for the moss-grown memory of torture and war" rather than for "museums and sunsets" (248). Detwiler, a "waste theorist" and colleague of Nick's, describes the "scenery of the future" as literally waste-full, "an architecture of waste" (285-6). Toxic waste, the most extreme form, provides the best tourist experience: "the hot stuff, the chemical waste, the nuclear waste, this becomes a remote landscape of nostalgia. Bus tours and postcards..." (286). When asked to clarify "what kind of nostalgia," Detwiler responds: "Don't underestimate our capacity for complex longings. Nostalgia for the banned materials of civilization, for the brute force of old industries and old conflicts" (286).

Complex longings, certainly. Shortly before Detwiler's declaration, the "wild" urban ghetto had briefly become an ironic theme park of its own, illustrating "old conflicts" that are explicitly racialized. Just as tourists to national parks have traditionally been white and middle-class, these same members of the bourgeoisie are now shifting their attention to postnatural environments. When a tour bus wielding a destination sign reading "*South Bronx Surreal*" shows up to "gaze...at the derelict tenement," Sister Gracie is irate. "It's not surreal," she shouts; "It's real, it's real. Your bus is surreal" (247). In this scene, we see the most recent incarnation of an inner-city cultural tourism present throughout the century in various forms, from slumming in the 1920s to the Beats' appropriative identification of black culture with "life."²⁵ Rather than sanction such appropriation, though, DeLillo raises an eyebrow at this racialized tourism. Echoing the novel's more general nostalgia for easy Cold War binaries (and underscoring Detwiler's linkage of nostalgia and conflict), this scene reveals the tendency of tourism to memorialize its object—whether natural or human—and relegate it safely to the

²⁴ McGowan notes that Esmeralda herself is a form of waste in the novel (139).

²⁵ Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* exemplifies such romanticization, as Sal Paradise wanders the streets of Denver "wishing [he] were a Negro" and longing to "exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America" (180).

past. In effect, the tourist gaze renders violence, waste, and poor people of color non-threatening, nothing more than a “surreal” spectacle.

While new forms of tourism do evolve, the novel’s characters don’t seem to require designated tourist areas. The persistence of a nagging, everyday longing renders all of daily life a tourist attraction. As Marvin Lundy, collector of baseball memorabilia, explains: “You think you’re missing something and you don’t know what it is. You’re lonely inside your life...You look at old cars and recall a purpose, a destination” (170). Significantly, this everyday nostalgia—the feeling that “you’re missing something” on a daily basis—seems to result, in part, from a despatialized sense of present and past. These characters are “lost in America,” subject to a desertification of space and meaning,²⁶ living in “cities with no downtowns,” in which old spatial boundaries no longer seem to hold (176). This point is dramatized by Brian Glassic’s visit to Staten Island’s Fresh Kills landfill. The landfill is the end result of human longings, the byproduct of a “mass metabolism” that threatens to consume us (184). It is, in effect, another kind of “man-made” nature—a point DeLillo does not fail to hammer home. Once again using the rhetoric of first nature to describe a man-made environment, DeLillo says this mountain of waste is reminiscent of “an Arizona butte”—it is “monumental” and “swept by wheeling gulls.” Brian, in keeping with the tradition of the American sublime, feels “invigorated” and finds “the sight inspiring” (184).²⁷

Gay Hawkins recently suggested that this Staten Island scene fails to show how “the material recalcitrance of abandoned commodities...might capture our attention and challenge habits of disposability and denial” (351). To the contrary, by appealing to conventional nature narratives—here, the sublime—DeLillo not only captures our attention but also forces the reader to contend with our depletion of that (first) nature, our contamination of our everyday environments, and our complicity in the alienation that results from late capitalist “habits.” The nostalgic rhetoric of sublime nature reinserts distinctions that had seemed to be erased. There *is* a difference between a butte and a landfill, even if the same rhetoric can be used to describe them, and even if the affects they inspire are similar. Readers are asked to consider not just which is preferable but also the socioeconomic connections between the two.

Hidden as it is from the daily experience of privileged Americans—but notably, not from those living in poverty, for whom garbage is part of the “natural” urban environment—the landfill also represents the “secrets...[that are] spread open before us” but usually go unnoticed (185). As virtual tourists of experience, postmodern Americans are part of a capitalist society that feels just as simulated, or perhaps more so, than the supposedly homogeneous fifties (785-6). The opening lines of the

²⁶ See Baudrillard’s *America* for a provocative discussion of “desertification” and the ways in which “culture itself [becomes] a desert” in certain places (126).

²⁷ Interestingly, the now-closed Fresh Kills landfill is slated to become a park, and tours are currently available. See the NYC Department of City Planning at http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/fkl/fkl_index.shtml.

epilogue, “Das Kapital,” pick up where the critique of the commodified baseball in the prologue left off:

Capital burns off the nuances in a culture. Foreign investment, global markets, corporate acquisitions, the flow of information through transnational media, the attenuating influence of money that’s electronic and sex that’s cyberspaced, untouched money and computer-safe sex, the convergence of consumer desire—not that people want the same things, necessarily, but that they want the same range of choices. (785)

As the Cold War ends and democratic liberalism becomes, in the minds of many, the only viable option,²⁸ Americans adhere “not to cold war ideologies of massive uniformity” but to a different kind of homogeneity, produced by a “planing away of particulars” in our capitalist culture (DeLillo 786). DeLillo shows how strategies of flexible accumulation render space both homogenized and differentiated according to capital’s need to be efficient while creating consumers in niche markets. In *Underworld*, this tension produces both a sense of diminished cultural nuance as well as a “sense of displacement” for individuals as they confront the kind of “random arrangement” that “puts a club...up on the forty-second floor of a new office tower filled with brokerage houses, software firms, import companies and foreign banks” (786).

In the epilogue, DeLillo seems to be asking us to read the Cold War as a dubious victory for capitalism and to question what the unseen byproducts of its “victory” were. While the connection between weapons and waste is at the forefront of the novel’s closing pages, capitalism is never far from the discussion, even when weapons are the topic. Viktor, who leads Nick and Brian on a tour of a nuclear test site in Kazakhstan, explains how capitalism’s very efficiency produces distance so thoroughly that even the neutron bomb becomes impersonal, a matter of utility and calculation, “the perfect capitalist tool. Kill people, spare property” (790). Despite capitalism’s tendency to homogenize, to obscure the contexts of production, and to deterritorialize, capitalism does leave its mark: environments and human bodies foreground the reterritorialization of capitalism in telling ways. Even if “geography has moved inward and smallward,” in the sense that leaders no longer dream of territorial conquests but rather technological ones, we “still have mass graves” that reveal the victims of such conquests (788). The large-scale competition of the Cold War, for instance, produced the human and natural byproducts of nuclear testing. While the “gouged earth” reveals the violence of the testing, “downwinders” embody the harmful effects of radioactive exposure (792). Safely enclosed in what Viktor nicknames the “Museum of Misshapens,” these “villagers who are patients now” have “faces and bodies [with] enormous power” (800-1). Their power is in exposure: their own exposure to radioactive waste in turn exposes the violence of

²⁸ See Fukuyama for an overview of this perspective.

the misleadingly named Cold War.²⁹ Significantly, the visit to the test site reveals its power via ironic nostalgia. Its gate “resembles the entrance to a national park,” and Viktor tells them “there will be tourists here someday” (792). It is the downwinders’ “faces against the landscape, the enormous openness” that underscores their poignancy and reminds readers that our world’s worst “secrets” are always “seeping invisibly into the land and air, into the marrowed folds of the bone” (802-3). It is our responsibility, DeLillo suggests, to make these secrets visible.

The novel ultimately proposes a way of bucking the trend toward perpetual, ubiquitous commodification (and the ensuing unfulfilled longings): by “connecting” with, and rendering visible, society’s “misshapen” others. Nostalgia facilitates this process by initiating a critique of late capitalism that links environmental and social injustice. While in Kazakhstan, in a passage that echoes the “enduring reassurance” of the baseball game’s falling paper, Nick feels “homesickness for the things on the shelves...Ipana and Oxydol and Chase & Sanborn” (793). His nostalgia quickly leads to a question: “does anyone remember why we were doing all this?” (793). This important question indicates how nostalgic longing might in turn mark a need to understand the larger purposes behind systems and the ways consumptive choices “connect” to larger economic, political, environmental and social factors. Even though Nick doesn’t answer his own question, *Underworld* suggests the reader should.

Space Available: Communal Longings and Last Words

The climactic scene of the novel—a public gathering at a neighborhood billboard—leaves us with an example of the everyday connections *Underworld* advocates and the power of collective longing to identify injustices. The scene takes place after Esmeralda is brutally raped and killed, and an image of her face appears on a billboard—but only for brief instants when a passing train illuminates it. Crowds gather in the evenings to bear witness to the young girl’s face, which is superimposed on an advertisement for “a hundred identical cans” of orange juice (820). Echoing the crowd scene at the baseball game, the billboard scene is, on one level, hopeful. As Sister Edgar explains, “no one’s exploiting...people go there to weep, to believe” and to connect with one another in the way that “a crowd brings things to a single consciousness” (821). Even as Gracie articulates an incisive critique of the news coverage of the “event”—“It’s the local news at eleven with all the grotesque items neatly spaced to keep you watching the whole half hour”—there is a sense that the people are making their *own* news; the event is “the news without the media” (819).

²⁹ Duvall (2002) frames these victims in similar terms, as “waste that cannot be managed” and as “war casualties” (66). Readers might also be reminded of the nuclear tests that were conducted above-ground in the U.S. while participating in DeLillo’s literary tour of Kazakhstan.

Sister Gracie insists that this event does not violate natural forces but rather has a “natural” explanation: Esmeralda’s image is an illusion, caused by the image underneath the orange juice ad shining through. Other onlookers read the scene as “holy” (824). More than just an “exploration of the possibility of authentic aesthetic aura,” the billboard scene raises questions about the productive potential of nostalgia to counter capitalism’s ability to commodify events (Duvall, 2002 63). Of course, Esmeralda’s image is commodified through and through. The billboard on which she is seen is, after all, an advertisement. Moreover, people soon discover they can make a few bucks selling “laminated images of Esmeralda printed on prayer cards” and pinwheels. Finally, her image disappears when the billboard is wiped clean and replaced with “two lonely words, *Space Available*” (823-4).

Significantly, DeLillo ends this scene with a suggestive series of questions to the reader regarding memory’s potential power:

And what do you remember, finally, when everyone has gone home and the streets are empty of devotion and hope, swept by river wind? Is the memory thin and bitter and does it shame you with its fundamental untruth—all nuance and wishful silhouette? Or does the power of transcendence linger, the sense of an event that violates natural forces, something holy that throbs on the hot horizon, the vision you crave because you need a sign to stand against your doubt? (824)

No matter how you read the mysterious appearance of Esmeralda, DeLillo’s direct questions place the importance on “what...you remember” and on what narratives are told about the event. Perhaps this is what DeLillo means by the “power of transcendence”—the power of memory to re-narrate experience and to spark awareness of (in this case) social abjection.

While other characters, including Sims, believe the past “is not what we remember but what happened...to the parties involved,” here DeLillo asks us to be more self-consciousness about our memories and our nostalgia (94). The crowds at the baseball game and the billboard share an affective experience that, however short-lived, affirms provisional connections while countering conceptions of the past as knowable fact. Nostalgia in *Underworld* becomes not unlike that in Thomas Pynchon’s *Vineland*, as James Berger describes it, where “the unrealized possibility of social harmony and justice itself compulsively returns, providing an alternative to existing conditions and a motive for changing them” (43). Indeed, nostalgia can be a catalyst, a conjuncture of memory and narrative with the potential for “stirring the hope that grows when things surpass their limits” (DeLillo 818). As the palimpsestic billboard and the other postnatural environments in the novel suggest, nature’s limitless narrative and material forms generate new kinds of possibilities for collective affect.

Haunted by the prologue’s opening sentence—“He speaks in your voice, American”—the epilogue reminds us of longing’s important role in “mak[ing] history” (11). The scene

at the billboard accentuates the transience of all signs; the profound sense that things are “all falling indelibly into the past” at an uncontrollable rate perpetuates an everyday postmodern “sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing” (DeLillo 60, Stewart 23). By the end of the novel, DeLillo gives his readers an object, a word, on which to focus that longing: peace. Peace is “a word that spreads a longing,” and readers are left with the impression that when longing is spread it can become powerful (827). Late-capitalist technologies—like the World Wide Web, which makes a special appearance in *Underworld*’s epilogue— enable longing to spread across geographies faster than ever before, traveling rapidly “through the raw sprawl of the city and out across the dreaming bourns and orchards to the solitary hills” (827). The nature imagery here is not to be dismissed; it reminds us of how longing, like capitalism, has long tentacles that can touch down on, and perhaps unite, previously disconnected landscapes.

DeLillo admits that “most of our longings go unfulfilled” (803). However, he challenges us not to accept a perpetual lack of contentment but instead to ask questions about what it means that we experience longings at all. The scenes that bookend the novel demonstrate how DeLillo’s nostalgia can be not only self-conscious but also pointedly critical of consumer capitalism and environmental injustice. While *Underworld* has been read as a “call to readers...to hang on to their paranoia because paranoia more effectively creates the possibility of resistance to the total flow of capital,” perhaps it is nostalgic longing, rather than paranoia, that more effectively creates the space for such resistance (Duvall, 2002 69).

Focusing on nostalgia’s spatial dimensions helps pinpoint our longings and locate injustices so we can conceive of a better world. Hutcheon writes that “[n]ostalgia...may depend precisely on the *irrecoverable* nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal” (Hutcheon, 2000 195). I’d place the emphasis on a different word: *nature*. Despite first nature’s increasingly “irrecoverable” quality, *Underworld* suggests that nostalgia might be useful for grounding our collective longings, even, at times, by drawing on the familiar nature narratives that continue to circulate in a postnatural world. At a time when increasingly complex material and rhetorical manipulations of nature raise questions for environmental politics, DeLillo’s novel helps us reevaluate the “local yearnings” that drive the global economy, create histories, unite communities, expose environmental injustices, and potentially inspire change.

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2010-01-05

Journal of Ecocriticism, 2(1), 1–18. <ojs.unbc.ca/index.php/joe/article/view/50>

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