

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Rethinking the Dualism: Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and the Ecocritical Possibilities of the Nature/Culture Mix questions current applications of ecocriticism and offers that these applications are inadequate in dealing with the perceived nature/culture dualism. This thesis suggests that ecocritics need to stop thinking in dualistic terms, but instead must consider that the separation between nature and culture is an illusion created by the postmodern culture. Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, then, is used to illustrate the possibilities of rethinking the relationship between nature and culture. DeLillo exposes the illusion of the dualism by constantly implicating humans in the alteration of nature and, despite humans' attempts to live within the illusory dualism by controlling nature through technology, by revealing that man's efforts will always fail through unintended consequences. This thesis culminates by proposing that considering nature and culture as connected entities that constantly reshape each other will absorb dualistic thinking and provide opportunities for ecocritics to expose truths that are vital to fueling the desire to alter destructive relationships between nature and culture.

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Rethinking the Dualism: Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and the Ecocritical Possibilities
of the Nature/Culture Mix

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Natalie A. Bowman

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APPROVED:

Redacted for Privacy

Major Professor, representing English

Redacted for Privacy

Head of the Department of English

Redacted for Privacy

Dean of the Graduate School

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Natalie A. Bowman, Author

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Rethinking the Dualism: Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and the Ecocritical Possibilities
of the Nature/Culture Mix

Natalie A. Bowman

Introduction: Reconsidering the Nature/Culture Dualism

Within the university system, literary study continues to foster compassion and empathy for human beings despite increasing academic emphasis on the “hard” sciences. As concerns over environmental degradation intensify in our culture, it is only fitting that literary criticism broadens its scope to attend to the problematic relationship between human culture and nature. On a most basic level, “all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it,” and hence explores the relationship between these seemingly disparate spheres (Glotfelty xix). As ecocriticism continues to evolve and expand, and encompasses academics of multiple backgrounds and disciplines, many critics hope that the relationship between nature and culture will be better understood and consequently help lessen or even eliminate negative interactions between them.

Many ecocritics feel that the work of better understanding the relationship between nature and culture must begin with the elimination of the nature/culture dualism. In fact, Eric Todd Smith explains that much of ecocriticism largely deals with the idea that “dualisms result in abuse” and hence allow for the objectification of nature by culture (30). Furthermore, the dualism appears to designate culture as dominant, and so promotes the devaluing of nature. The way to bridge the gap between nature and culture, then, resides in a writer’s ability to let nature speak through his/her work and in a reader’s potential to listen to that voice. In order to achieve this new level of communication, many critics suggest that we must reorient ourselves even further by taking the focus off of the human subject and by placing the

earth at the center of our writing and discussion about literature. Such a shift in focus would require “us to rethink our assumptions about the nature of representation, reference, metaphor, characterization, personae, and canonicity” (Buell, *Environmental 2*). For a number of ecocritics, the goal of the ecocentric work in eliminating the dualism involves not only getting back in touch with the earth through such environmental projects as sustainable living and establishing a sense of place, but ultimately involves eliminating the interference of a dominating human presence.

According to many ecocritics, anthropocentrism is the root of the culture/nature dualism, and its elimination is integral to overcoming that perceived dichotomy. In current ecocritical debate, critics seek out works of literature that help “revalue” a nature that has been oppressed by the culturally produced forces of pollution, over-population and harmful technologies by “redirect[ing] human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world” (Love 237). William Howarth contends that the best way to “redirect” and combat anthropocentric consciousness is to study works of literature that “put our minds to land and help us write about reading nature” (“Ego” 3). By reducing the emphasis on human life, and focusing on nature, ecocentric works concentrate on nature’s intrinsic worth as a subject for literature and more importantly, as its own entity. The result is an equalized playing field upon which humans and nature can enter into a more harmonious relationship.

An influential nature-oriented writer like Henry David Thoreau, who arguably participates in projects like sustainable living and establishing a sense of place which help overcome anthropocentrism, is a favorite among ecocritics who emphasize the

importance of this kind of work. Indeed, because he is the alleged “father of ecology,” we cannot underestimate his serious contemplation of nature as well as the many valuable insights that his work offers into the importance of establishing harmony between humans and nature.

Many critics find Thoreau’s greatest ecocentric potential in his experiment in sustainable living at Walden Pond. While his reasons for living in Walden Woods were not necessarily more environmental than political or spiritual, his exercises in sustainable living nonetheless created opportunities for nature to be presented as having intrinsic worth. He cautions us not to desire more than the animals do and reminds us that “the bison of the prairie” only require “a few inches of palatable grass [and] water to drink” (*Walden* 7). By providing one’s own shelter and food, like the animals, and becoming acquainted with the product of one’s own labor, an individual is able to live in harmony with nature. The alternative, the pursuit of excess, promotes a destructive attitude toward nature that “rob[s] the nests and breasts of birds” (*Walden* 8). The production of luxury contributes to the excessive extraction of natural resources that Thoreau witnesses in his own environment. He is well attuned to the reality of such ecological problems as deforestation at Walden Pond and of the woodchoppers who have “laid [the trees] to waste” (*Walden* 129). Thoreau admits that he too, through farming, building, and existing on the land, has profaned nature. He questions his dominance over nature in planting his beans when he ponders: “but what right had I to oust johnswort and the rest?” (*Walden* 104). However, unlike the farmer whose crops do not yield to his expectations and calls “Nature but a robber,” Thoreau accepts the fact that nature will do what it will and is satisfied (*Walden* 11).

By considering the intrinsic worth of nature around him he considers: “these beans have results which are not harvested by me. Do they not grow for woodchucks partly? [...] How, then, can our harvest fail? Shall I not rejoice also at the abundance of the weeds whose seeds are the granary of the birds?” (*Walden* 112). James McGrath emphasizes that through Thoreau's treatise on sustainable living, “[h]e describes an alternative vision of value, of true wealth, which includes spiritual purity, simplicity, [and] leisure” that would ultimately allow the individual to require less of nature (153). If the needs of society were as simple as those of Thoreau at Walden Pond, society would not need to rely so much upon nature as a resource for human consumption, and hence could better conceive of its intrinsic worth. By entering into this more harmonious relationship with nature, we could ultimately become more sensitive to the earth-centered vision that many ecocritics promote through the study of such literature.

The value of Thoreau as an ecocentric writer is also apparent in his acute attention to and description of his local environment. Such immersion in local environment helps develop a sense of place that further connects human beings with the earth and promotes harmony between them. Through his walks “in the countryside or into the woods,” David M. Robinson explains, “Thoreau tried to examine and understand natural phenomena and their patterns of interaction, and to test and refine his own capabilities as observer” (83). In an effort to learn as much about his environment as he can, he takes detailed notes on the appearances and habits of the non-human inhabitants of Walden Pond, the changes of the pond with the seasons, and the types of trees and plants in the area. By studying the environment in

this way, he “was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to [him] [...] that [he] thought no place could ever be strange to [him] again” (*Walden* 89). It is through these more objective descriptions of nature that Thoreau is able to acknowledge and present its inherent worth and beauty and let the descriptions speak for themselves. Nancy Craig Simmons relates that although Thoreau meticulously studies the environment around him, his “compulsion to record is not just for the human record, for human consumption; it is also a way of enabling nature to speak, to express itself on its own terms” (229). By allowing nature a prominent position as a subject, the result is a less anthropocentric worldview that facilitates a harmonious relationship with it and stresses nature’s intrinsic worth.

Lawrence Buell, in his important ecocritical work, *The Environmental Imagination*, further utilizes Thoreau’s work as his prime example of the way that privileging nature as a subject can overcome the dualism. He explains that Thoreau’s potential as an earth-centered author, starting with *Walden* and developing further in the later natural history essays, resides in his keen observation and “magnification of the minute” detail in nature (Buell, *Environmental* 106). He sees Thoreau’s promise as a writer in a late journal entry in which he describes

the gravel of a railroad causeway. The individual pieces loom with a Brobdingnagian hugeness, the gravel ‘stratified like some slate rocks, on their edges, so that I can tell within a small fraction of a degree from what quarter the rain came...Behind each pebble, as a protecting boulder...extends northwest a ridge of sand an inch or more, which it

has protected from being washed away.' (Thoreau qtd. in Buell, *Environmental* 105)

One of the values of this description, distorted though it may be through magnification, resides in the fact that such extrospection facilitates a heightened awareness of the environment that is independent of human concern (Buell, *Environmental* 104). In this moment, Thoreau does not aim to assert himself, but rather provides us with an observation of nature that we may not have taken the time to recognize ourselves.

In this process, Thoreau also seems to overcome anthropocentrism by "relinquishing" himself from the description of nature. For Buell, relinquishment is "to give up individual autonomy itself, to forgo the illusion of mental and even bodily apartness from one's environment" and eliminate any involvement of human consciousness that may allow anthropocentrism to enter into the equation (*Environmental* 144). With the relinquishment of the human presence, nature becomes more than a mere symbol expressing greater meaning for man, but rather nature is revealed in its "'isness,' its materiality" (Buell, *Environmental* 163).

Without the dominating human presence, and with details that aim to express the "isness" of nature, Buell argues that we become as close to a "real" representation of nature as possible. The idea seems to be that trying to present something "real" closes in the gap of the dualism, by letting nature, and not just man, come through the writing and "speak" through its descriptions. While imagination always comes into play in literature, Buell argues that literature can complement empirical science (*Environmental* 94). He claims that the attempt to represent "realistic" details about

nature “makes discourse accountable to the object world” (Buell, *Environmental* 91). We can then compare these descriptions with those we perceive for ourselves in nature (Buell, *Environmental* 94).

Buell then claims that in these ways, there is a distinct ecocritical advantage of works of nonfiction over fiction. He says that, in general, “the aesthetic of relinquishment in the long run fits environmental nonfiction better than lyric poetry and prose fiction” because elements such as “plot, characterization, lyric pathos, dialogue, intersocial events, and so on” are anthropocentric in nature (Buell, *Environmental* 168). Nonfiction, more specifically environmental nonfiction, offers an opportunity for the speaker to exist on the periphery as a more passive observer. On the other hand, a work of fiction “presupposes” that the human subject is the point of the work and any detail serves only a symbolic function (Buell, *Environmental* 169, 96). Consequently, Buell celebrates writers like Thoreau and Annie Dillard, who are more likely to present what they see with little introspection. Indeed, as Peter Blakemore contends, Thoreau’s later works, in which he more frequently offered observations like the one of the railway gravel, “led him deeper into an ecologically connected self than we can find in practically any work by an American before or after” (116). It is for this reason that Thoreau, at his most “objective” moments, is such a respectable model of an environmentally engaging author.

Through careful examination of Buell’s argument, however, a number of complications arise. One point for consideration is that in praising Thoreau’s progression as an ecocentric writer, and hence as an example of Buell’s aesthetic of relinquishment at work, he tends to devalue the very elements of Thoreau’s writing

that appeal to so many readers. To dismiss Thoreau's presence in his work is also to dismiss his commentary, such as the advice that he gives in *Walden* on leading a simpler and hence more ecologically oriented existence. Clearly, Thoreau himself meant to inspire others to reevaluate their own lives partly out of a human concern for the environment. This advice could not be provided through empirical observation alone.

In fact, Thoreau's transcendentalist tendency, more often than not, causes him to appreciate nature in terms of what it could reveal about divinity and man rather than nature itself. For most of his writing career, Thoreau appears to be first and foremost a transcendentalist and a writer and never wishes to lose himself in the empirical world of science that makes relinquishment possible. We can see such sentiments expressed in a journal entry written on February 13, 1852. Thoreau says: "By the artificial system we learn the names of plants—by the natural their relations to one another—but still it remains to learn their relation to man—The poet does more for us in this department" (qtd in Walls 34). Furthermore, while he utilized science and made empirical observations, Thoreau mistrusted the kind of observation that would completely relinquish the presence of the human. In another journal entry written on April 19, 1854, Thoreau warns: "there is no such thing as pure *objective* observation. Your observation, to be interesting, *i.e.* to be significant, must be *subjective*. The sum of what the writer of whatever class has to report is simply some human experience, whether he be poet or philosopher or man of science" (qtd in Walls 61). His claim here supports the fact that "humans [...] cannot conceive of nature apart from their personal and cultural conceptions of nature" and it is not clear that Thoreau even

wanted to do so (Smithson 99). In this sense, what drives Thoreau as a writer is still rooted in a human concern for nature and his own work calls into question Buell's theory of relinquishment.

Aside from the aforementioned issues, Thoreau's thoughts on subjectivity also draw attention to the more important fact that no matter the degree of self-relinquishment, human beings must still speak for nature, and therefore nature is still a construct of human culture. Eric Todd Smith rightly argues that nature

do[es] not share human language. [Therefore,] conflicting accounts of what nature is telling us lead quickly to an argument about who *really* understands what nature wants [...]. In the end, the question of 'what the land means' carries only as much weight as the person arguing for it; conflicting accounts of what nature 'means' will persist and the ensuing arguments will necessarily be over who has perceived the authentic meaning. (32, 34)

In this sense, we need an alternative to thinking about the relationship between humans and nature in terms of subjects and objects (Smith 32). It is not enough to merely place nature in the position of subject rather than object; it is naïve to assume that it is nature that speaks, rather than the writer speaking for nature. In this sense, it is nearly impossible to put forth a pure voice that is in no way mediated by the writer and his/her own agenda. Smith further explains that even thinking of nature in terms of subjects and objects is dualistic and reinforces the divide between nature and culture without considering what might exist in between (30).

While Buell does overcome the problem of anthropocentrism by valuing nature as a subject, he ultimately fails to overcome the dualism. Consequently, the greatest disadvantage of the kind of thinking that Buell, and other theorists like him, offers is the fact that the attempt to eliminate the human from nature continues to privilege one subject over another, and ironically maintains the kind of dualism that he seeks to eliminate. His privileging of one form of literature over another further reinforces this dualistic tendency. By privileging environmental nonfiction as the way to meet the goal of self-relinquishment, Buell severely narrows and limits the scope of ecocriticism. Academia will not let go of works of fiction, and rather than dismiss these works from the discussion, we should find ways to incorporate them. In *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell underestimates the importance of fictive pieces and their ability to add to the discussion of the relationship between nature and culture. In addition to his promotion of the relinquishment of human involvement in literature, his dismissal of fiction for nonfiction is yet another way that Buell separates culture and nature, rather than bringing them together.

Another scholar who overcomes anthropocentrism in his work, but not the dualism, is Neil Evernden. In his book, *The Social Creation of Nature*, Evernden reveals a mistrust for the kind of relinquishment that Buell proposes because he sees the separation of humans and nature as a way in which scientific and technological forces alter and dominate nature. However, in seeking an alternative, he calls for a solution that is equally problematic and implausible. Evernden champions the famous and often misquoted Thoreau assertion that, “in wildness is the preservation of the earth” in order to proclaim the need for human beings to return to a precognitive-like

state (qtd. in 121). This state is only accessible to small children and a few special adults, but it nonetheless provides the only opportunity for humans to experience wildness and a temporary return to the earth (Evernden 107-24). His theory is not only limited in the sense that the return to the earth that he stresses is temporary, but also because such experiences with wildness affect only a small number of individuals. Harold Fromm points out that, even “to the average child of the United States in the present day Nature is indeed a great mystery, not insofar as it is incomprehensible but insofar as it is virtually nonexistent to his perceptions” (33). Children in our current culture are not predisposed to the kind of experience with nature that Evernden proposes because they are immediately accustomed to comforts of culture that obscure the relationship between nature and objects of consumption (Fromm 33).

In addition, Evernden arrives at his theory of wildness after exploring the ways in which pre-modern societies better respected nature because it contained spiritual meaning for humans and it was infused with divinity that they did not wish to disturb. Such sentiments cause us to look to the past in search of more “pure” nature and also to look to a future in which, ironically, “Nature [...] can [only] recuperate over time when all humans and their works are removed” (Tuan 20). If we did not eliminate human beings altogether, it is difficult to discern just how simplified human life would have to be so as not to exploit nature (Tuan 49). Lynn White, Jr. explains that we are very far from such a return. Even with small developments in plow designs, for example, “man’s relation to the soil [hence, the earth] was profoundly changed. Formerly man had been part of nature; now he was the exploiter of nature” (8). This

changed relationship with nature is essentially the legacy with which we are left in the modern world and to change it would involve abandoning technological advancements we have made, even such basic inventions as the plow. The task of ecocriticism, led by theorists like Evernden, is essentially to “unmak[e] [a] history” in which human beings have failed to recognize the part they have played in the altered state of nature (Phillips, “Is Nature” 222). However, the task of unmaking history, ideal as it is, is extremely problematic in the drastic reconstruction of the world for which it calls and in what it leaves out, modern technology and the entire culture.

Our current ways of dealing with the perceived nature/culture dualism are inadequate in the sense that they are extremely idealistic and impractical. More importantly, they do not achieve its elimination. Another problem with the dualism resides in the fact that the majority of the population is quite happy with the idea of living within it. In a society that depends on the comforts of sanitation, electricity, and SUVs, ecocriticism still needs to deal with a technological society that makes the idea of getting back to nature seem impossible to most people; even Thoreau reintegrates himself into the comforts of society at the end of *Walden*. As Fromm explains, technology has changed our relationship with nature by creating a dualism that we are quite content with because it preserves our complacent lives. He explains that, because of technology,

man is much less likely to perish from the heat or cold, to starve for want of food; his formerly intolerable dependency on the caprices of Nature is no longer so gross; his relation to the other animals and to the vegetable creation appears thickly veiled- by air conditioning, frozen

foods, washing machines, detergents, automobiles, electric blankets, and power lawnmowers. (Fromm 32)

Dana Phillips further suggests that technology has eliminated the need to establish a sense of place or be aware of the environment around us; for instance, modern fisherman require little knowledge of nature when they are aided by the technology of automatic chart coursing, depth finders and weather detectors ("Is Nature" 211). Even most radical environmentalists are not willing to let go of the comforts culture affords in exchange for a shack by Walden Pond, regardless of negative, environmental tradeoffs. Such a return, Fromm explains, is "like an adult of forty pretending to have the innocence of a child" (33).

Inherent in these inadequacies is the fact that we also need an alternative ecocritical view that deals with nature *and* culture rather than carrying out the self-defeating task of further trying to separate them. I propose, then, that we take the focus off of extreme measures like "going into the woods," and taking on the impossible task of ridding the world of all signs of human culture, stay in the society we have created, and instead question the very nature of the dualism. In fact, instead of thinking in dualistic terms, we need to attend to the more plausible possibility that the dualism does not exist, but rather is an illusion created by the comfort culture and maintained by the dominating technology that operates within it. For while we build civilizations to suppress nature, we are still its creatures, and our interactions, even the negative ones, with the environment around us influence and are influenced by nature, and the two constantly reshape each other. Instead of trying to eliminate a dualism that never really existed, we may stand a better chance of dealing with nature if we

begin to contemplate the ways in which the illusion of the dualism operates in our technological society. We may then re-conceive of our relationship to nature without relinquishing our involvement in it. Consequently, we need a literature that will help us reorient ourselves in this way.

As Buell utilizes Thoreau as his model for the aesthetic of self-relinquishment, in proposing a less dualistic ecocritical approach to literature, I will use Don DeLillo's *White Noise* to illustrate the possibilities of moving in this direction and thinking about culture as well as nature. In my discussion of *White Noise*, I will explore the ways in which Don DeLillo exposes the illusion of the dualism by constantly implicating humans in the alteration of nature. He also reveals that despite our attempts to live within the illusion of the dualism by controlling nature through technology, our efforts will always fail. When the dualism breaks down, he reveals that nature enters. The ecocritical value of DeLillo, then, resides in the fact that rather than separating humans from nature, he gives us the whole mixed-up and complicated mass of nature and culture, and in doing so, reveals the interconnected layers that bind them together and cause them to continually affect each other.

Through close analysis of *White Noise*, my first chapter, "Creating the Illusion: Distancing Devices and the Dualism," will focus on the various ways in which the illusion of the dualism allows culture to appear distant from nature. Driven by the fear of their connection to nature, primarily through decay of the body and death, DeLillo's characters depend upon the notion that they live in a carefully constructed and self-sufficient world that has little to do with nature, and hence strengthens humans' feeling of security and well-being. In this sense, DeLillo exposes the way in which

this illusion of the dualism has become a main mode of existence for the society and emphasizes the ease with which we become so dependent upon it. We can begin to see through these distancing effects, the ways in which we as a culture tend to ignore the effects that our actions have upon nature.

In chapter 2, "Maintaining the Illusion: Dominating Technology and the Dualism," I will advance the discussion of the distancing effects of the illusory dualism in *White Noise* to explore the ways in which this same notion of the dualism is maintained by the forces of dominant technology. In this section, I will argue that DeLillo gives us occasion to contemplate the separation of nature and culture and how it is even further facilitated by the promises of high technological solutions to any problems of nature that may threaten culture. DeLillo further reveals the ways in which humans subscribe to the illusion of the dualism, because by positing technology as a problem-solver, dominant technology also promises to make nature submit to the desires and demands of culture. Thus, this technology also appears to conquer nature and secure culture's dominant role. DeLillo uses this sense of security to precipitate the society's "fall from grace," as the very actions that appear to allow for culture's dominance are also the ways in which all control is lost.

In chapter 3, "Breaking Through the Illusion: Unintended Consequences and the Dualism," my discussion of *White Noise* will culminate with an exploration of the ways in which DeLillo breaks down the illusion of the dualism by subjecting his characters to the unintended consequences of dominating technology. While culture seems to be unaffected by nature because technology appears to keep it protected and in control, the unintended consequences that arise in *White Noise* ultimately facilitate

recognition of the undeniable connection between nature and culture. It is through such ironic consequences that DeLillo ultimately raises environmental consciousness. He rouses the culture from its complacency and provides the possibility for recognition of implication in ecological crisis by both characters in the novel and readers. It is through unintended consequences that the greatest hope for change is revealed in the novel, as DeLillo suggests that recognition of our collective actions, and attending to our connection to nature in more healthy ways, is an alternative to participation in the destructive illusion of the dualism.

Ultimately, I will argue that DeLillo reinforces the idea that the human is in nature and nature is in the human, and the two cannot be separated. Through DeLillo's careful presentation of a society that operates under the illusion of the dualism, he exposes the dualism as an illusion. In doing so, he reminds us that "although we cast nature and culture as opposites, in fact they constantly mingle, like water and soil in a flowing stream" (Howarth, "Some Principles" 67). To dismiss writers like DeLillo from the ecocritical discussion because they have not eliminated the human from the text would be a mistake, and would preserve the sense of the dualism that ecocriticism aspires to eliminate. In fact, considering nature and culture together absorbs the dualistic thinking that consumes much of the ecocritical debate. Looking at DeLillo's exploration of our complex society gives us an alternative way to realize truths that are vital to fueling the desire to change our relationship to the environment. Instead of merely cultivating appreciation for nature, DeLillo's fiction calls attention to our self-destructive refusal to accept our connection with nature and

helps us recognize that a change in ecological consciousness is dependent upon such acceptance.

Chapter 1: Creating the Illusion: Distancing Devices and the Dualism

In Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, fear of death is the motivating force behind many of the focal characters and therefore complicates the postmodern society's relationship with nature. The very fact that the human body connects individuals to nature proves to be problematic for these characters because, as Richard Kerridge explains, the natural "especially [...] means the process of growth and decay in the body" (187). In other words, the connection of the body with nature ultimately signifies an inevitable death. Nature, then, is a force from which the society wishes to keep its distance.

As a result of this desire for distance, the dualism operates in this postmodern society in such a way that human beings are "mostly unaware of a connection to Nature that has been artfully concealed by modern technology" (Fromm 33). Harold Fromm explains that through the notion of the dualism, the human mind gains an independence from nature that it did not know when, before the growth of industrialism in the eighteenth century, large numbers of people died at one time due to plague and when food sources were mostly unstable. Human beings had no choice but to acknowledge their connection to the earth; their only way of transcending nature, and therefore death, was to abandon the body to nature in exchange for a spiritual life with God (Fromm 30-01). In modern technological society, however, culture seems to mediate most interactions with nature; therefore, if nature is an entity that even exists at all, it appears to be completely separate from the culture (Fromm 34). In exploring the society in which this separation seems to occur, I will discuss a number of devices that the culture in *White Noise* utilizes to create distance. In turn,

DeLillo's exposure of these devices not only reveals the ease with which the illusory dualism becomes the main mode of existence for the characters, but also shows us a naïve and complacent culture destined for disaster.

The effect of living with the impression of a dualistic society in which culture is not only separate, but the dominant of the two spheres, is the belief that the more culture we have, the less connection we must have with nature. Whether through money, education or prestige, only to name a few examples, culture provides individuals with a kind of protective covering under which they construct identities independent of nature to feel secure from its potential threats. When Jack Gladney observes the parents dropping their children off at the College-on-the-Hill, he notices that their uniform wealth, and general well-being that radiates from conscious attempts to sculpt everything from personalities to physical features, ““gives them a kind of rude health. They glow a little”” (6). These people not only exude a sense that they are conscious products of culture, but as Babette relates, she has ““trouble imagining death at that income level”” (6). Through the idea of the dualism, there is “massive insurance coverage,” but seemingly no death, and no nature that absorbs human beings (3).

Jack may not have an income level that grants him immortality, but he attempts to utilize his identity as a professor as a distancing device. Yi-Fu Tuan explains that “high culture,” of which academia is an example, “offers [...] escape from bondage to the earth” (13). The ultimate bondage, then, presumably is the human body that ultimately threatens a return to nature through death. On campus, Jack has a looming presence; he wears dark robes and glasses and he makes conscious

attempts to adhere to instructions from a former department head to “become more ugly” (17). More importantly, he specializes in a “larger than life” subject like Hitler, an arguably immortal figure who lives on in the imaginations of most individuals. Hence, Hitler is “solid, dependable,” and his seemingly omnipotent image appeals to Jack who lives with feelings of chaos created by his obsessive fear of death (89). Jack’s only vulnerability while taking on this Hitler-like image is his inability to speak German, but once he has tackled this task, he believes that the language will act as “a protective device” and will be “the very fabric of [his] salvation” (31). As long as he is in the academic setting, “death was strictly a professional matter”; he says, “I was comfortable with it, I was on top of it” (74). In his struggle to distance himself from that which he most fears, Jack tries to achieve a “designer lifestyle, the emphasis on the self as constructed culturally, [...] rather than naturally” (Kerridge & Reeve 310). In this way, he steps into the role of culture that seeks to custom-make the world and live in the protection of the dualism. However, later in the chapter, I will attend to the fact that this particular distancing device will not always work, and will cause Jack to turn to yet another device.

In addition to the construction of identities independent of nature, a second distancing device utilized by the culture is evident in its attempt to create “safe” and contained living spaces removed from nature. In this way, Jack’s profession works in conjunction with the actual, physical space of the College-on-the-Hill. The college is located in the town of Blacksmith, a place that is neither city nor nature. In fact, the town literally does not seem to be connected to any other space (Phillips, “Don DeLillo’s” 237), so its distance presumably keeps it free from culturally or naturally

produced threats. In this sense, Lawrence Buell remarks, “the cultural construction of suburbia in the United States [...] has drawn heavily upon pastoral imagery and values: envisioning communities of safe, clean, ample residential and public spaces” (*Writing* 37). Indeed, this “safe” suburban space is one of the miracles of modern invention because it limits nature by restricting it to carefully landscaped lawns or parks, but also contrasts the city, in which people are “gut-shot, slashed, sleepy-eyed with opium compounds” and commonly victims of ecological crisis (76).

Within this space, the college itself is even more distanced from threat; “The school occupies an ever serene edge of the townscape, semidetached, more or less scenic, suspended in political calm. Not a place to aggravate suspicions” (85). At the start of each year, young people enter this space, along with an influx of cultural products that range from generally accepted necessities like “sheets, pillows, [and] quilts” to an excess of junk foods like “Dum Dum pops” and “Mystic mints” (3). These products themselves are conceived from ideas of self-sufficiency and distance; from the bedding that protects from the cold, to the candies that are manufactured with chemicals and artificial flavors, they are clearly the products of civilization. In combining such products with the collegiate pursuit of higher knowledge, the students at the college have basically constructed an all-encompassing world from which they never need to venture. Even the name of the department with which Jack shares a building, “American environments,” suggests the distance between nature and culture that has become the comfortable norm not only for the students, but for the society in general. The academic study of popular culture as an “environment” in the department complicates notions of what can be considered a “natural” environment.

In fact, pop culture seems to replace nature through what Jack refers to as “the natural language of the culture,” a language of fast food, “bubble gum wrappers and detergent jingles” that is being “deciphered” by his obsessed colleagues (9). This language is also that of a world, like the college that contains the department, that has in some way created itself, a world in which nature does not seem to be involved.

In this sort of closed-off environment, then, there seems to be no need to heed precautionary warnings of potential threats. When toxicity threatens to intrude upon the protected space of Blacksmith, Jack does not believe it will “come this way” and hurt him (111). His protest combines the fact that he has a highly civilized profession and the fact that he lives in a seemingly pastoral space when he says: “I’m a college professor. [...] We live in a neat and pleasant town near a college with a quaint name. These things don’t happen in places like Blacksmith” (114). Jack’s statement is representative of the suburban, college town mentality in the novel that allows individuals to lead complacent lives and keeps them from ultimately acknowledging their own participation, in some shape or form, in ecological disaster. In chapter 3, however, I will reveal the ways in which Jack is deceived by his perception of Blacksmith as a “safe” place.

Another distancing device of the culture is the television. Jack claims that the television is Blacksmith’s only potential danger because it is “where the outer torment lurks, causing fears and secret desires” in the citizens of the seemingly cut-off town (85). However, according to Murray, it is still “a primal force in the American home” and like the town, it too, appears to be “Sealed-off, timeless, self-contained” (51). Murray’s use of the word “primal” not only connotes something of utmost

importance, but also it refers to something that has its existence in primeval times. Like the “natural language of the culture,” television seems to have always been in existence and therefore supplanted the role of nature long ago. References to “CABLE HEALTH. CABLE WEATHER. CABLE NEWS. CABLE NATURE” suggest a world in which everything is not only regulated by this technology, but that it has been created in such a way as well (231). We are kept at a distance from nature because forces such as health, weather and nature all have their roots in culture.

In addition, Kerridge explains that

“CABLE NATURE” undoubtedly means wildlife programmes, which [...] position the viewer as a ghostly onlooker where he or she could not be in reality. To be there would either be too dangerous, or the viewer’s presence would disturb the activity which makes the spectacle. To be a spectator, in this way, is to have an illusion of immateriality and therefore immortality. (187)

In this way, television is a perfect distancing device and it supplies us with vicarious experience that does not force us to acknowledge any kind of connection with what we see. Jack and his family are able to watch “floods, earthquakes, mud slides, [and] erupting volcanoes” without any impingement upon their own sense of mortality (64). As Alfonse Stompanato, one of the instructors at the college, explains to Jack, ““only a catastrophe gets our attention”” and breaks up the constant flow of information in the culture (66). Consequently, it is pleasurable to see others ““punished for their relaxed life-style,”” as long as the viewers are not implicated (66). Distance from implication is very much the point of television and such distance is what fosters Jack’s tendency,

and presumably that of many others, to later view the toxic event as a “sound and light show” happening for his benefit, rather than an event in which he is involved (128).

In the culture’s further pursuit of self-sufficiency, a fourth distancing device that arises is the culture’s attempt to virtually erase all of its remaining connections to nature. This attempt is best illustrated through the environment of the supermarket, a place of central importance to the community members of Blacksmith. In the supermarket, the dualism prevails by obscuring any and/or all connection that products of consumption have previously had with nature. According to Kerridge, the supermarket is full of culturally “pre-shaped, pre-packaged commodities” and emphasizes “suppression of origin and labour”; therefore it has a “resemblance to paradise” (183). In paradise, innocence abounds, so the violence of food production all but disappears. The very nature of packaged and/or processed, even un-packaged, meats in deli cases, eludes any connection to the animal’s corpse for which the word “meat” is a euphemism. Produce, a word that stems from the mechanical word “production,” is “in season,” despite the “unnatural” appearance of various fruits and vegetables out of season or unusual for a particular locale, and it is “sprayed, burnished, bright” (36). In all of these products, it is possible to recognize the human intervention, and in the appearance of the fruit especially, the underlying involvement of genetic engineering and pesticide use.

In further correlation with paradise, the supermarket also swells with fecundity. Jack observes that “apples and lemons tumbled in twos and threes to the floor when someone took a fruit from certain places in the stacked array. There were six kinds of apples, there were exotic melons in several pastels (36). Here, we have

inexhaustible choice, plenty and stability that is quite distanced from a nature that can often be unpredictable and exhaustible. In contrast to the perceived chaos of nature, according to Dana Phillips, “the supermarket is the place that the characters in the novel depend on most for a sense of order, pattern, and meaning” (“Don DeLillo’s” 244). In this sense, the supermarket acts as a microcosm for the rest of society, and as Jack says, “Everything was fine, would continue to be fine, would eventually get even better as long as the supermarket did not slip” (170). The supermarket, then, is yet another way in which “people [...] distance themselves from it [nature] by establishing a mediating, more constant world of their own making” (Tuan 10). Just like the town of Blacksmith, and the television, it is “sealed off, self-contained. It is timeless”; however, the supermarket is very much like the “THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA” that appears to be pastoral, but is nothing more than an image mediated by technology (38, 12).

A final distancing device that works in conjunction with the obfuscation of culture’s connection to nature, is the society’s dependence upon excess. This excess appears to make up for the limitations of nature as a resource for human consumption. In this sense, according to Jack, “when times are bad, people feel compelled to overeat” and consume, places like the supermarket and the mall, another place constructed in the image of nature with “waterfalls, [...] and gardens” and products displayed like “tropical fruit,” make people feel good (14, 82). These places are reassuring in times when carefully constructed worlds grow unstable. Directly following events in the novel like the evacuation of the elementary school, the Gladneys make trips to the supermarket (18). They don’t buy a few items, but fill

their cart to capacity with items that resemble those brought to the College-on-the-Hill by the students. In the spirit of over-consumption, Jacks says of one purchase:

in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plentitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight and size and number, the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in ours souls—it seemed we achieved a fullness of being. (20)

The Gladney excess sharply contrasts those individuals, “who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening” (20). Jack’s comparison between his own excess and others’ lack of it, suggests a vulnerability from which he seeks to shield himself through excessive packaging and quantity. This link between vulnerability and excess is even further illustrated through Jack’s encounter, outside of the college context, with a colleague. His protective, distancing Hitler-like image is threatened by the fact that without his robe and glasses, he looks “harmless, aging, indistinct” and therefore vulnerable (83). In an effort to combat the thoughts of mortality that seize him at that moment, he feels “in the mood to shop” (83). Like his experience in the supermarket, Jack’s pursuit of excess leaves him feeling “endless well-being” and “expansive” and we are forced to reflect on Murray’s earlier comment that in the postmodern culture, “we don’t die, we shop” (83, 84, 38). Although Jack will reexamine his role as a consumer of excess later on in the novel, for now, excess is clearly an attempt to gain distance from nature and is a direct result of the protective

function of the illusory dualism.

The inability to embrace the human connection to nature and the natural processes to which human beings are tied remains the driving force behind the distancing effects of the illusory dualism. In fact, such distance is not only a necessity, but it seems to be the point of human nature. Jack says, “‘It’s natural to deny our nature, according to Murray. It’s the whole point of being different from animals’” (296). However, when we take a moment to pause and consider the disadvantages of this kind of relationship with nature, the absurdity of the dualism quickly becomes apparent. While the dualism seemingly allows for the preservation of human beings, it does not allow for a society that gives much thought to that of the earth. The human being naively fails to recognize that one is always dependent upon the other. Rather than acknowledge the connection, the idea of the dualism is employed to solve any lingering problems in the relationship between nature and culture. However, through the illusion of the dualism, culture does not stop with distancing devices, but rather moves on to attempts to control nature as well.

Chapter 2: Maintaining the Illusion: Dominating Technology and the Dualism

Behind the distanced and complacent society in *White Noise*, there are multiple dominant technologies at work that both aim to sustain and operate through the illusion of the dualism. These forces can be seen at work, to borrow Murray's words, in the "glorious evasions" and "great escapes" created by the comfort culture, such as the television and the supermarket previously discussed (290). Dominant technologies and systems have made possible the illusion of stable and ordered culturally created worlds in which people feel self-sufficient and independent from nature. However, according to Harold Fromm, out of the "autonomy and independence" that a human being receives from the illusion of the dualism, arises "a mind so assured of domination of Nature [...] that it seems to be [...] cut off from any [...] roots in the earth" (34). Ironically, it is this very disconnection that many of the characters in *White Noise* ultimately desire.

Because dominating technology seeks the same aims of the culture by carefully controlling those "spontaneous natural processes" (Devall & Sessions 48) which include decay of the body and death, it presents itself as the ultimate problem-solver for the death-obsessed community that places its faith in it. As Murray says, "It's what we invented to conceal the terrible secret of our decaying bodies. But it's also life, isn't it? It prolongs life, it provides new organs for those that wear out. New devices, new techniques every day. Lasers, masers, ultrasound" (285). It promises to manipulate nature into meeting the desired ends of the culture. Hence, high technology is not only posited as the problem-solver of the characters' death woes, but

it rather seeks to conquer nature and ensure culture's place as the more dominant sphere within a seemingly dualistic world.

The ultimate believer in such technology is Babette. Babette's intense death fears not only pre-dispose her to easy faith in dominating technology that promises any release from her ties to natural processes, but her very outlook on life is compatible with such science. In fact, Babette describes herself as a person for whom "everything is correctable" (192). In describing herself in this way she says:

"Given the right attitude and the proper effort, a person can change a harmful condition by reducing it to its simplest parts. You can make lists, invent categories, devise charts and graphs. [...] I'm not a very ingenious person but I know how to break things down, how to separate and classify. [...] How else do you understand the world, is my way of looking at it." (192)

In Babette's claim that "everything is correctable," Michael Valdez Moses explains, she "echoes Bacon and Descartes in her approach to the most basic human problems and activities and in her understanding of the world" that proposes, "for every problem a solution. For every desire a technique. For every natural limitation a technological breakthrough" (67, 68). In this sense, Babette's mentality is representative of the dominating culture "at large" that, armed with reinforcing systems and technologies that arise out of the belief in the dualism, appears to be equipped to guard itself from any spontaneous force of nature that may exert itself. The domination inherent in Babette's view of systems and technology as problem-solvers and correctives promises that natural forces will ultimately be made to comply with the order imposed

by culture. Consequently, in the face of threat, Babette tries to gain control by turning to yogurt instead of fatty foods. She sees the toxic event as “a time for discipline, mental toughness” in which the order instilled by her mind and actions can counteract the chaos of any physical threat brought on by disaster (132). Yi-Fu Tuan explains that “when uncertainty is so much a fact of life, escape into a make-believe world of perfect order” is often the result (14). Clearly, it is the dualism upon which the construction of such a world rests, because in viewing culture as the more dominant sphere, total faith can easily be placed in technological and therefore seemingly more reliable solutions to the problems that nature causes.

Babette, who clearly relies on a dualistic perception of the world for her very existence, gives herself up entirely to the dominating technology that seems as if it will bring stability to her life. Dylar, then, is the drug of choice because it arises out of problem-solving technology that “offers an abundance of systems and structures that promise to confound mortality and deliver fulfillment” (Coward 78). In fact, Dylar, an “elaborately engineered” drug, is the epitome of the promise of high technology that is “carefully controlled” by state of the art processes (184, 187). Every component to it reflects control, from a “controlled dosage” that “is meant to eliminate the hit-or-miss effect of pills and capsules” to “specific rates” of release that prevent “overdosage” or “underdosage” (188). Winnie Richards explains that the “system is [so] efficient” that it even appears, at first, to guard against any usual, negative side effects such as “upset stomach, queasiness, vomiting, muscle cramps” (188). On a most basic level, Dylar is “some kind of psychopharmaceutical” that is “probably designed to interact with a distant part of the human cortex” and hence

provide some calculated response (189). The calculated response is to engineer people out of their troublesome, natural responses to fear of death.

In its aims, Dylar not only holds the promise to “confound” death, but it also seems to be indicative of technology that, in the long run, will ultimately work toward the total eradication of death. According to Richard Kerridge, Dylar is the perfect postmodern drug because it provides answers for a society that believes that “survival will be possible only if Nature becomes something knowingly maintained, manipulated, designed and commodified” (188). What could be better for the dualistic society than a prescription drug that manipulates biological responses and ultimately seeks to obliterate any lingering connections to nature? Even in their ignorance of its alluring promise, its efficiency alone inspires awe in both Winnie Richards and Jack, who is “impressed” and “dazzled” by the mechanics of Dylar that seem to provide the solution to any potential problem that the technology might encounter (188). Jack’s inclination to look at Dylar as “benevolent,” a kind of “technology with a human face,” makes us aware of the ease with which one could put his/her faith in dominant systems, and hence absolutely believe in the dualism that appears to provide answers to all uncertainties (211).

The reductive, technological understanding of the world that offers Dylar as a corrective to “problems” of nature is ultimately indicative of the way that culture attempts to dominate through the belief in the dualism. Buried in Babette’s claim that “everything is correctable” is Neil Evernden’s theory that technology understands nature “as a realm dominated by rational principles that can be discerned and described” and therefore can be seemingly subjected to the control of culture (191,

83). Because the dualism allows nature and culture to appear as separate realms, the technological approach to nature posits it as a non-human entity without sentience and meaning, and therefore as a set of mechanical objects that can be reduced to its “simple parts” (191). In the case of Babette, and presumably the entire death-fearing culture, the pursuit for dominance over the human body results in a “willingness to abandon our bodies to Nature: that is, we think of our physical bodies as merely the material containers of the real human person” who is part of culture (Evernden 54). The illusion of the dualism, then, makes it possible for characters like Babette to give themselves up to technology and act upon the body, like science upon nature, as if it were only the “sum of [...] chemical impulses” (200). Hence, we can see the importance for these characters of maintaining a clear boundary between nature and culture that positions humans “not as an integral part of natural processes, but rather as rightfully dominating and controlling the rest of Nature based on principles of scientific management” (Devall & Sessions 135). Engineering oneself out of the fear of death provides a necessary assurance against the instability of nature that has the potential to upset daily life.

Dylar, then, is the ultimate expression of a culture’s need to keep up the illusion of the dualism in order to evade death. It emerges as central to the novel clearly because it is the dominance that the technology promises that most of the characters in the book, in some shape or form, are after in their attempts to escape mortality through culture. In this society, everything is mediated in some way by technology. From the supermarket that provides the foods people eat within a “dense environmental texture” of technology’s own making, to transportation like air travel

by which people move about “at nearly supersonic speed, at thirty thousand feet, [...], in a humped container of titanium and steel” and to the ““sealed-off, timeless, self-contained, self-referring”” force of television to which people look for models for their very existence, society puts its faith in these dominant technologies because they seem to ensure the continuation of a comfortable and controlled existence uncomplicated by nature (168, 212-13, 51). It is directly out of this context, then, that the similar technology of Dylar arises. In fact, according to Frank Lentricchia, “What we see from a Dylaramic prospect is everyday life in America as a 360-degree display of what are called ‘controlled substances’, America as the culture of the Dylar effect” (103). Lentricchia’s claim draws attention to the fact that while the intent of Dylar appears to be far-reaching and even absurd, it is not so extreme when considered within the context of the postmodern culture that relies so completely on the very similar, aforementioned technologies.

While DeLillo’s plot in *White Noise* is quite minimal, by focusing on Dylar as a kind of representative of the desires of a culture, it does center on the theme of technological domination. Dylar, even from the outset of the novel, is the driving force behind the plot in the same way that the various characters are driven by a need for control over death. As the novel opens, Babette is already taking the Dylar although readers do not yet know the full significance of her actions. While Jack does reveal that she has death fears, he nonetheless sees her as representing an order that contrasts the disorder and instability of his former wives. He says: “I watch her all the time doing things in measured sequence, skillfully, with seeming ease” (6). Through

Jack's description, DeLillo seems to hold Babette up as a mirror for the stable, distanced culture that I described in chapter 1.

However, like the culture, she too is motivated by fear of connection to nature and turns to the reinforcement of high technology. As early as chapter nine of *White Noise*, this fact becomes more apparent when Jack's daughter, Steffie, reveals Babette's drug use. Hence, the plot is advanced as DeLillo uses the Dylar to begin to raise questions about Babette's perceived stability and hence about that of the technology dependent culture. For example, when Denise scrutinizes Babette's choice of chewing gum, under the surface of their discussion, they really seem to be talking about the nature of technologies like Dylar. While Babette claims that she's not "a criminal" due to her reliance upon technology to hold herself together, Denise replies that her predicament is "not that simple" (42). Denise's comment implies complications inherent in dominant technology and hence foreshadows the consequences of Dylar use that I will talk about near the end of this chapter and in chapter 3.

Furthermore, just as culture seeks to obscure the reality of the human connection with nature, DeLillo mirrors the way in which this illusion is kept intact and reinforced through Babette's avoidance of any discussion that comes close to revealing the reality of her Dylar use. When Denise tries to confront Babette about the Dylar, Babette quickly diverts the discussion to various popular culture facts. Through this shift, the family, like technological society, "works toward sealing off the world" and hence seeks to overcome any sense of insecurity that even the discussion of death might arouse (82). It is not a coincidence, then, that following this

confrontation, the family goes on the major shopping spree, discussed in chapter 1, that further evades Jack's own insecurities. Because of evasions like these, the true nature of Dylar remains a mystery for much of the novel, but the elusiveness of its nature drives the plot onward as the characters seek the same certainty and stability that the entire culture desires to gain from technology.

The mystery of the Dylar plot directly corresponds to the mystery of Jack's impending death, so it is fitting that Dylar becomes Jack's own personal struggle as he searches for a means to deal with his own death. While further implication of Jack's struggle to come to terms with death will be discussed in chapter 3, Jack's search for the Dylar, and the hope that he acquires from its existence, directly mirrors the culture's faith in and need for dominating technology that provides distance from nature. Once he knows about the supposed function of Dylar, Jack desires it, claiming that he wants it "for the sake of historical accuracy" (209). However, he cannot help but think of the possibilities for control that such technology brings. Throughout the last section of the novel, he searches for the Dylar with the same fervor as he searches for answers to his death and is all the while propelled by a potential escape. He avers: "Would it ever work, could it work for some but not others? It was the benign counterpart of the Nyodene D menace" (211). He sees the possibilities of the same kind of technology that produced the toxins that have afflicted him. Because of his impending death, he feels that his "need is intense" and he considers that perhaps he will make a better test subject than Babette (225). He has heard the warnings of Winnie Richards that Dylar contains "no medicine, obviously" and Denise's claim that his desire to eradicate fear is "a little stupid" (230, 251). At times he considers

that he's "better off without it" and that he would "face whatever had to be faced without chemical assistance" (252, 259). Still, he pursues Willie Mink in the event of gaining some kind of control over his mortality and seizing the Dylar for his own possession. His continuing struggle for dominance over his own fate is also highly indicative of the culture that seeks salvation through the possibilities provided by culture.

When Jack makes the comment that he is "eager to be humored, to be fooled" by the promises of Dylar, his statement speaks to the society's need for control through the illusion of the dualism (250). It is in this struggle that, Moses argues, "the technological understanding of the world," one that proposes a need for Dylar, becomes "so deeply ingrained in the minds of DeLillo's characters that it comes to seem unremarkable, merely the necessary expression of the way things are" (67). However, all along, DeLillo seems to suggest that this technological understanding of the world does not reflect "the ways things are," and so he sets up the society for a fall. This intention becomes clear when the ultimate postmodern drug, reflective of the society's collective will to live in a stable and dualistic society, turns out to be, in its current state, nothing more than an illusion, "Fool's gold" (209). The problem with Dylar is that it is faulty; it does have side effects and ends up not being able to control nature at all. In fact, its side effects are especially devastating because they ironically propose even more kinds of damage than an individual might anticipate. These side effects include "outright death, brain death, left brain death, partial paralysis, [and] other cruel bizarre conditions of the body and mind," such as the inability to "distinguish words from things" (251, 193). While Mink suggests that a

“remedy for fear” may one day be found through technology like Dylar, he implies that it will be “followed by a greater death” (308).

Moreover, DeLillo alludes to the fact that those who continue to depend upon the illusion of the dualism for their existence are doomed to a fate such as that created by Dylar. The inability to face one’s connection to nature not only results in more risk of death, but the willingness to give oneself up entirely to technological solutions and faith in culture also results in the cruel production of Dylar’s greatest unintended consequence, Willie Mink. Mink not only suffers from the side effect of Dylar that leaves him incapable of “distinguishing words from things,” but he also communicates in television-generated dialogue of commercial jingles and television programs. Because Mink communicates in this way, DeLillo seems to present him as the embodiment of the “white noise,” illustrated through the various lists of brand names and fragments of television dialogue, that interrupts the narrative in the characters’ various moments of despair and appears to fill the void. However, these cultural messages are just as empty as the promises of Dylar and Mink who continues to take it and moves further and further out of reach. While Mink is posited as the only source of hope for Babette and Jack, he is also arguably the most ominous character in the novel and consequently signifies a shift in the hope with which technology provides the culture.

In fact, in Jack’s imagination, Mink is “gray-bodied, staticky, unfinished,” often the “composite” of “four or more grayish figures engaged in a pioneering work,” and so he aptly seems to represent all that is unnatural and disconcerting behind attempts to engineer nature out of culture (241). Part of Jack’s desire to confront

Mink comes from a need to reverse a sense of vulnerability and powerlessness that the very image of Mink causes him to feel. This vulnerability partly originates in his wife's sexual submissiveness to Mink, but it also resides in the fact that Mink is ironically the holder of the potential power of the Dylar. Jack says: "I felt his mastery and control. The dominance of his position. He was taking over my mind" (241). The wariness that he feels about Mink sets readers up for the fact that after Jack shoots Mink, he does not follow through with his plan to take the Dylar. Jack's ultimate abandonment of the drug coincides with the fact that Mink appears to be DeLillo's ultimate critique of technological domination. Mink reveals the underlying and urgent message of unintended consequences. This message is that we must let go of the idea of living with the illusory dualism or we will end up like Mink, nothing more than a "weary pulse of a man, a common pusher now, spiky-haired, going mad in a dead motel" (307). In this sense, Mink is the epitome of hopelessness, and surely, no one seems more out of control in the novel than this man does.

In their pursuit of control, the characters in DeLillo's world create more chaos and uncertainty than they could ever anticipate. While its users and producers essentially know the effects of Dylar, there are other forces in the novel that are not so easily predicted. Perhaps the most profound effect of the attempt to dominate nature, then, is the creation of uncertainties about what kinds of reactions the technology will produce. The creation of such uncertainties anticipates the unintended consequences that result from such inherently faulty attempts to dominate through governing technologies. In his critique of the means of domination, DeLillo forces us to confront the fact that "efforts at escaping [which exist behind the motivation for control],

whether purely in imagination or by taking tangible steps, may fail—may end in disasters for themselves, for other people, for nature” (Tuan 27). As a result, the very ways in which culture seemingly dominates nature are the same ways in which that control is lost through unintended consequences.

Chapter 3: Breaking Through the Illusion: Unintended Consequences and the Dualism

The problem with the attempt to dominate nature, predominately through technology, is that “it creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other” (285). With the implementation of an ever-increasing number of dominating technologies, countless kinds of death and disaster emerge through the creation of unintended consequences. Unintended consequences are of our own making and expose the “queer part we play in our own disasters” (126). In this sense, they reveal the futility of our efforts to control nature and consequently represent a reality that is almost too harsh for the dualistic thinking society to accept. However, if culture is carefully constructed in order to keep distance from nature through the dualism, unintended consequences reveal the illusion, quickly break through it, and expose the naivete and vulnerability of a culture that endorses the separation between nature and culture. Although unintended consequences are most often horrific, ironically, it is only these dire consequences that have the potential to allow nature to enter and cause the “comfort” culture to reevaluate its perceived dominance.

While Don DeLillo is being playful with Alfonse Stompanato’s response to peoples’ attraction to disaster in his explanation that “we need an occasional catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information’,” disaster is indicative of DeLillo’s project in breaking through the illusory dualism created by the technological society (66). Richard Kerridge and N.H. Reeve explain that in a world seemingly negated by culture, “in a sense the only effective way of breaking through the packaging and rendering human beings ‘real’ is by hurting them” (315).

Similarly, it is only when, as Harold Fromm explains, “man’s nurturing environment threatens to stop nurturing and to start killing” that his sights may begin to turn to the problem of ecological crisis (34). By subjecting his characters to multiple unintended consequences produced by the postmodern society, DeLillo upsets a once complacent culture by revealing its instability and exposing the fluid boundaries between nature and culture. As a result, he opens up a dialogue in which both the characters in the novel and readers can assess their own complicity in the creation of unintended consequences. Depending on their reactions to these consequences, characters may gain the potential to experience a nature that has long been obscured by the illusion of the dualism.

In a society in which everything seems to be “‘carcinogenic’,” one of the most unsettling conditions of unintended consequences is that it is often hard to detect their source (88). Due to the uncertainty that often arises with these consequences, they constantly undermine the stability and certainty of culture. DeLillo alerts his readers to the endless possibilities for contamination when the Gladney girls’ elementary school is shut down due to an ambiguous source of toxicity. Scientists reveal that the threat could be generating from

the ventilating system, the paint or varnish, the foam insulation, the electrical insulation, the cafeteria food, the rays emitted by microcomputers, the asbestos fireproofing, the adhesive on shipping containers, the fumes of the chlorinated pool, or something deeper, finer-grained, more closely woven into the state of things. (35)

All of these technologies that enhance an individual’s life and keep him/her at a safe

distance from the unstable forces of nature, reveal themselves to be the very source of the instability. The result is an uncertainty for which even science cannot provide answers because the “Mylex suits” that the emergency workers wear are made of “a suspect material” that obscures any conclusive answers to the problem (35). In addition to the school, the safe haven of the home, according to Heinrich, is not even free from the uncertainty of unintended consequences. Although Jack is skeptical, perhaps because of his intense fear of death, Heinrich points out that people are at risk from the “things right around you in your own house” that emit constant doses of radiation (175). In this sense, culture creates, to use Babette’s words, an “either/or” society in which the “sugarless gum” that is designed to be better for an individual, also “causes cancer in laboratory animals” (53, 41). As a result, the protective culture becomes suspect. While culture aims to transform humans into unconquerable beings, risk alerts individuals to the fact that even the human mind, once depended upon to dominate nature, “is, after all, a very frail vessel, floating upon a bloodstream that is easily contaminated by every passing impurity” (Fromm 38). Unintended consequences, then, have the ability at any time, and without warning, to ultimately cause an individual to face nature and his/her own death.

A more urgent sense of death intrudes upon the “sealed off” community of Blacksmith by way of the airborne toxic event. Despite Jack’s attempts to assure his family that the toxic cloud “won’t come this way,” this toxicity renders the distancing project of the suburb irrelevant by penetrating the seemingly protected space (110). While attempts are made by science and the media to stay “on top of the situation” by naming the toxic cloud, giving it an accurate description and calculating

risk with “death-measuring instruments,” it cannot be contained (115, 116). The cloud is “a terrible thing” that “move[s] like some death ship in a Norse legend” and sends the community into a state of uncertainty (127). It too, like the contaminated school, creates uncertainties that elude science because the toxic culprit could be any number of chemicals, such as “chlorides, benzines, phenols, hydrocarbons” (127). Nyodene D itself is an unintended consequence of a dominating technology because it ““is a whole bunch of things thrown together that are byproducts of the manufacture of insecticide. The original stuff kills roaches, the byproducts kill everything left over”” (131). One of the ironies of Nyodene D is that it is a waste product itself. Another irony resides in the fact that creators of the technology, in their attempts to dominate nature, fail to anticipate the creation of a ““whole new generation of toxic waste”” for which there is no easy solution (138). While the SIMUVAC authorities claim that ““One part per million can send a rat into a permanent state’,” its exact effects on humans and the environment remain undeterminable (139). Kerridge and Reeve explain that this loss of control resulting from the toxic event, “cause[s] irreversible physical changes, changes to the human body which, [...] cannot be abstracted or engineered at will” (311). While an attempt is made to ““make the spill harmless”” by ““using snowblowers to blow stuff on”” it, this is only a temporary solution at best (113). This kind of management does not account for the fact that the chemical will take on a life of its own through its death-dealing possibility (113). As Jack remarks: “This death would penetrate, seep into genes, show itself in bodies not yet born” (116). It is through his exposure to Nyodene D, then, that Jack is forced to confront the mortality, and that connection to nature, that he most fears.

Due to his exposure to the toxic cloud, Jack seems to experience what Lawrence Buell, in his later work *Writing for an Endangered World*, calls “the shock of awakened perception” (35). This new perception often arises in toxic discourse and involves “the horrified realization that there is no protective environmental blanket, leaving one to feel dreadfully wronged” (Buell, *Writing* 36). Jack feels especially betrayed by unintended consequences because they deconstruct all of the distancing devices that once compensated for his fear of death. While other, more fortunate community members seem to be able to return to their normal, complacent lives, Jack, because he fits under the category of “‘Exposure’,” undergoes changes in his perception of the culture (137). He realizes that for him, at least, the toxic event “‘marks the end of uneventful things’” (151). Jack’s protective community no longer signifies blissful isolation, but rather inspires feelings of alienation due to the fact that there is “no large city to blame for our sense of victimization” and so Blacksmith is left “feeling [...] a little lonely” (176, 177). This isolation from a city transforms into a negative reality for Jack. As mentioned in chapter 1, such isolation was once positive because urban troubles and violence provided a necessary contrast to Jack’s own uneventful life in the suburbs. In a similar sense, Jack’s positive Hitler-like image no longer seems to protect him from feelings of mortality because his efforts to speak German ultimately fail and leave him “death-prone” (274). However, it is due to such collapse that Michael Valdez Moses argues that “for DeLillo’s characters, the immediate threat of death, brought on in some cases by the apparent failures of technology, may paradoxically serve a potentially redeeming function” (71). Jack can no longer escape from his impending death. This fact, combined with his realization

that culture has abandoned him, provides Jack with the potential to recognize his connection to nature. If nothing else, his exposure marks an end of complacency for Jack and he can no longer enjoy the delusions provided by the dualism. Consequently, changes in his perception of culture can also be glimpsed through his actions following the unintended consequence of the toxic event.

Before Jack's exposure to Nyodene D, he finds solace in technology and praises the fact that its smooth operation eases his mind and keeps him from having to think about underlying processes. For example, when Jack uses an ATM machine, "waves of relief and gratitude flowed over [him]. The system had blessed [his] life. [He] felt its support and approval. The system hardware, the mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant city. What a pleasing interaction" (46). While technology appears to be the friend of humankind that the illusion of the dualism positions it to be, Jack also finds it "disquieting" (46). In this instance, his comment that he and this governing technology are "in accord, at least for now" draws our attention to the fact that this sense of harmony will not endure (46). Indeed, after the toxic event, no such harmony can be found.

Jack begins to be negatively affected by the illusion of the dualism when the technology of modern medicine reduces his biology to mere data, and in doing so, causes his prognosis and the functions of his body to become elusive. Jack's life, death and history are registered as a series of "computerized dots" and "bracketed numbers and pulsing stars," that no human being can interpret (140). In fact, the more data that is entered into the computer about Jack's health, the more elusive his prognosis becomes and the more estranged his body becomes. He comments on the

tendency of technology to displace nature and biology as it is “wrested from the gods. It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying” (142). In this sense, Dana Phillips explains, the body becomes “a curiously disembodied thing. It no longer makes itself known by a means of apparent symptoms that can be diagnosed by a doctor, not by means of feelings that can be decoded” by the afflicted individual (“Don DeLillo’s” 243). Alienating Jack from his own death is one the illusory dualism’s strongest efforts to maintain distance between a culture in control and an irrelevant nature.

Jack’s growing skepticism of dualistic technology becomes even more apparent as he continues to search for answers about his own impending death. Jack believes that he’ll receive “human” information that “machines can’t detect” at “Autumn Harvest Farms,” a name that suggests a pastoral time pre-dating modern ecological disasters such as the toxic cloud (277). However, this is the place where Jack is most alienated from his own sense of biology. All of the “gleaming precision equipment” in the hospital represents a governing power that aims to keep nature at a distance and make the body “transparent,” even if that means concealing death altogether (275, 276). According to Moses, “the power of technology allows its possessor or user to cover over the nearness and inevitability of personal death. The greater the wealth, the greater the quantum of technological power, the more distant the personal death seems” (74). Rather than referring specifically to the illness and death that the machines can predict, the technician claims that ““this equipment saves lives”” (277). What Neil Evernden identifies as the “perfect language of mathematics,” and presumably of technology such as the computer-generated print-

outs containing Jack's elusive diagnoses, is supposed to bring individuals closer to the "real" properties of nature, and therefore guard against uncertainty (49). However, when it comes to acknowledging death, the threat from which technology ultimately seeks distance, more uncertainty results. This technology, then, puts Jack in a place of desperation rather than security and culture, for him, begins to slip.

After Jack's exposure to Nyodene D, he also begins the process of disposing excess in his house. The first time that he begins to throw objects away, the town seems to be "on the verge of forgetting" about the toxic event while he is sentenced to remember it (221). His disposal of objects may ultimately be another way for him to gain "endless well-being" similar to that which he seeks through his shopping spree that I discussed in chapter 1 (83). Nonetheless, Jack comes to view material excess as having unintended consequences of its own. He says: "abandoned possessions were everywhere, oppressive and soul-worrying, creating a weather of their own among the exposed beams and posts, the fiberglass insulation pads" (110). In this instance, the fulfilling and culturally produced excess that once protected him and filled him with a sense of well-being, essentially backfires and becomes a burden. Excess too, becomes indicative of an impending death. Jack's view of excess here, parallels the empty feelings that all of the Gladneys experience after their trip to the shopping mall, when they "drove home in silence" and retreated to their "respective rooms, wishing to be alone" (84).

The intentions behind Jack's acts of disposal of excess in his home have been scrutinized by a number of critics. Jesse Kavadlo rightly warns that "garbage is part of the same cycle as purchasing, and throwing the items away is simply the last stage

in the consumerist fix Gladney finds himself in" (394). Kavadlo's point is extremely valid; clearly, Jack's motivation to gain power through disposal of excess is as wrong-headed as his motivation to accumulate it. Indeed, after another stint of disposal following a frustrating doctor's visit, Jack can only wait "for a sense of ease and peace to settle in the air around" him, and so we cannot be sure that disposal is ultimately any more satisfying than buying (262). Cynthia Deitering, a scholar whose article on "toxic consciousness" in novels written during the 1980s will be further discussed in the conclusion, moves even further into the discussion of Jack's disposal. She identifies a possible source of Jack's actions through her belief that "during the 1980s we began to perceive ourselves as inhabitants of a culture defined by its waste" (Deitering 198). Therefore, she asserts that Jack's personal identification and connection with the objects around him is a consequence of "a postindustrial economy which depends upon the expeditious transformation of goods into waste" (Deitering 198). We cannot dismiss the bleak and apocalyptic implications of such a reading and consequently of merely viewing the earth as a wasteland; surely, DeLillo isn't providing any easy answers when it comes to the ways that his characters view ecological crisis.

However, it is also important, and positive, that Jack does not completely detach himself altogether from the excess that he has accumulated. Instead, regardless of what he hopes to gain from the process of simplification, he nonetheless implicates excess as a source of his despair. His despair draws attention to the fact that inherent in the process of buying, and even of disposing, is the sense that excess does not contain the power to fulfill after all. His disillusionment with what culture has to offer

becomes apparent in that first instance when he throws away a few items like “old paperbacks” and “magazines” (222). At this time, he feels abandoned by the culture that moves on while he is “left holding the bag” for their collective sins in creating unintended consequences (221). The second time, he begins to throw away more objects, including even larger ones like “highchairs and cribs” (262). He completes his task with even greater determination than before to “get the stuff out of the house” without “help or company or human understanding” (262). His growing alienation from culture, at this point, results from his doctor’s inability to offer him anything besides technology-generated diagnoses that fail to provide comfort (262). The third time, after a long discussion with Murray about his feelings of helplessness in the face of death, Jack begins to throw away even more in a “vengeful and near savage state” (294). During this process, Jack, on some level, begins to react against the cultural forces that govern through the illusion of the dualism. He realizes that the pursuit of immortality through excess, like the seemingly dualistic society that provides such temporal fixes, had “Somehow [...] put me in this fix. [...] dragged me down, made escape impossible” when its ultimate goal was to provide such escape (294). In this sense, we can begin to contemplate the double standard of trying to completely cut ourselves off from nature and live entirely within the unsteady confines of culture.

It is also important, then, to consider the subject of garbage itself. Garbage is not necessarily a surprise consequence, although one normally concealed and given little thought by most individuals, but it is nonetheless a consequence that was not intended when culture building began. It is Jack’s search for Dylar that ironically sends him into the elusive world of trash where he is forced to contemplate his role in

its production: "The full stench hit me with shocking force. Was this ours? Did it belong to us? Had we created it?" (259). The garbage is somewhat threatening, "massive" and "mocking" and in the process of rifling through it, he must contend with truths that he uncovers:

I felt guilty, a violator of privacy, uncovering intimate and perhaps shameful secrets. [...] Is garbage so private? Does it glow at the core with personal heat, with signs of one's deepest nature, clues to secret yearnings, humiliating flaws? What habits, fetishes, addictions, inclinations? [...] Was this the dark side of consumer consciousness?
(259)

He not only detects in the garbage those aspects of self that the family members presumably seek to repress, but he also reflects on the self-indulgent nature of the culture that produces it. It is truly a moment in which, as Ruth Helyer describes, "we are implicated in our own excrement; it remains bound up in our identification, preventing us from standing back and being objective, we cannot escape our involvement" (1004). We can apply Helyer's implication of humans in the production of waste to the fact that we cannot ignore our connection to nature, or the fact that we will one day return to it, simply by believing in the dualism. Fromm says that "refuse being dumped into the oceans and atmosphere for years and years in ever-increasing quantities does not 'go away'" and so it is the consequence that, unless we face up to it, may ultimately threaten our very existence (34-5). We cannot simply exist within culture and presume that nature is not also imperative to the well-being of all life on earth. In this sense, Kerridge explains, garbage is indicative of the failings of culture

because it

is the unmanageable excess, which refuses to disappear or keep within boundaries, and thus reveals hidden relations. [...] Rubbish and litter stand as a rebuke and challenge to instrumental systems, and to subject-positions, because rubbish is what is left when the operation of the system is complete and nothing should be left. [...] its presence disrupts the dualistic separations of viewer and spectacle, humanity and nature, subject and object. (192)

Because garbage is ultimately an unintended consequence of the dualistic culture, in the process of confronting ourselves as producers of waste, perhaps we can begin to attend to the environmental problems we have had a hand in creating.

The modern sunsets too are unintended consequences that, in their ambiguous meaning, also break down the illusion of the dualism and cause several characters to reflect upon their connection to them. As a possible victim of unintended consequences, Heinrich seems to be more sensitive to the meaning of the sunsets. Jack relates that a possible motivation for Heinrich's reluctance to view them with the rest of the family is "because he believed there was something ominous in the modern sunset" (61). It is his own receding hairline that consistently causes him to take the "critical-observer position" and to constantly question humans' relationship to the world around them (103). According to Jack, Heinrich is a reminder of the fact that "man's guilt in history and in the tides of his own blood has been complicated by technology, the daily seeping falsehearted death" (22). It is unclear whether or not it is Heinrich's genetic make-up that predisposes him to hair loss or perhaps the result of

being raised “in the vicinity of a chemical dump site, in the path of air currents that carry industrial wastes capable of producing scalp degeneration” (22). The sunsets too, then, represent a similar mix of nature and culture. While the sunsets are a natural phenomenon, Jack perceives that there is something unnatural in their hour-long lengths and in the fact that they are “unbearably beautiful” (170). Consequently, he wonders “if the special character of Nyodene Derivative (added to the everyday drift of effluents, pollutants, contaminants and delirians) had caused this aesthetic leap from already brilliant sunsets to broad towering ruddled visionary skylines, tinged with dread” (170). Ultimately, the cause of their brilliance is as ambiguous as the community’s reaction to them. Jack relates, “most of us don’t know how to feel, are ready to go either way” (324). While these reactions and the passive waiting of the characters in the novel will be discussed further in the conclusion, the unsettling effect caused by these unintended consequences is of immediate importance. Through the uncertainty created by the sunsets, many of the viewers are roused from their complacency in order to contemplate, if even for a moment, the possibility that nature and culture flow into each other. In this sense, the sunsets point to Eric Todd Smith’s claim that “nothing can be entirely of nature or entirely of culture. Every thing is a mediation and translation of other things” (36). By providing the sunsets for contemplation, DeLillo sets up a context through which individuals can begin to perceive the illusion of the dualism that keeps them from realizing their own roles as mediators and as those who both affect and are affected by their relationship with nature.

Unintended consequences bring along with them the power to break through

the illusion of the dualism, and so DeLillo seems to suggest that it is up to the individual as to whether or not he/she will try to reestablish it. This reconstruction is contingent upon whether or not that individual deals with mortality in positive or negative ways. Through the unintended consequences that he creates, DeLillo clearly reveals that humans need to reconsider their “arrogant, shocking, and suicidal disregard of his roots in the earth” and their very existence depends upon the acknowledgement of their ultimate connection to the earth (Fromm 39). Jack is one who, as Yi-Fu Tuan explains, proves that “human imagination can dwell on one’s own death such that a mere endpoint is given the power to haunt or color the whole of life” (63). Due to this fact, dealing with death in a positive manner is a struggle for Jack and DeLillo does not provide any definitive answers for him. However, there is much in the text to suggest that embracing death is imperative to a cultivating a better relationship with nature. This sentiment becomes evident in those moments in which Jack reflects on the pre-modern world with its “clear and uncontaminated” sky (110). Jack considers that, in pre-modern times when man was closer to the earth, it is unlikely that someone like Attila the Hun would have had a “sense of the irony of human existence, that we are the highest form of life on earth and yet ineffably sad because we know what no other animal knows, that we must die” (99). The key point for Jack seems to be that such a man would have “accepted death as an experience that flows naturally from life” (100). Overall, he seems to desire to be part of this natural order, but in the postmodern culture, he does not exactly know how to get there.

However, Moses explains, “The airborne toxic event, though produced by a fully technological society, nevertheless replicates a primal and elementary human

situation” that allows Jack to begin questioning the effects of living with the illusion of the dualism (81). What Jack does learn from his impending death is that he is deeply disconnected from the earth. He says: ““there’s something artificial about my death. It’s shallow, unfulfilling. I don’t belong to the earth or sky. They ought to carve an aerosol can on my tombstone”” (283). Jack begins to understand the negative effects of trying to elude death by attempting to control and keep nature at a distance from human experience. While it is difficult to discern who the voices of reason are in *White Noise*, Winnie Richards provides an important alternative to the technological approach to facing mortality. She says: ““I think it’s a mistake to lose one’s sense of death, even one’s fear of death. Isn’t death the boundary we need?”” (229). While Jack finds her view to be limiting and unacceptable, it is also important that he rejects the technological solutions that Murray proposes in his claim that ““fear is unnatural”” (289). Murray says of technology: ““Give yourself up to it, Jack. Believe in it. They’ll insert you in a gleaming tube, irradiate your body with the basic stuff of the universe. Light, energy, dreams. God’s own goodness”” (285). While Jack’s refusal to go to any more doctors may just be another part of his denial of death, it more importantly is a step that he also takes to end the alienation that technological solutions have created. He is ““afraid of the imaging block. Afraid of its magnetic fields, its computerized nuclear pulse”” (325). The potential of Jack’s mistrust of technology will be further discussed in the conclusion, but it is clear that Jack desires an alternative to his current way of dealing with mortality. It is possible that he might find it without reestablishing the illusion of the dualism and herein lies much of the hope in the novel.

Unintended consequences that allow for the breakdown of the illusion of the dualism, although damaging, can nonetheless be the last sources of hope for change when people begin to embrace nature as an integral part of their existence. On the other hand, these consequences can merely be apocalyptic foreshadowing of the “tabloid future” that might not be “so very remote from our own immediate experience” if we continue to deny nature through more and more culture building (146). Surely, in the attempt to elude death, Lynn White, Jr. explains, “no creature other than man has ever managed to foul its nest in such short order” (5). DeLillo, then, reveals the problems inherent in the illusion of the dualism that promotes “complacent and overprotected lives,” and does “not allow for encounters with brain-dead rats” that make could make people aware of the dangers involved in eliminating the human from nature (139). While it is quite clear that DeLillo, like Jack, is “not a believer in easy solutions,” through unintended consequences, he brings uncertainty to his characters’ lives (211). Through this uncertainty, the characters, as well as readers, might begin to contemplate current ways of dealing with unintended consequences and also anticipate a future that will be dictated by responses to them. In this way, DeLillo’s message takes on urgency and he presents ecological issues as if our lives depended on facing them.

Conclusion: Moving Toward an Alternative: The Ecocritical Possibilities of Reading
Nature and Culture

In the previous three chapters, I have explored the ways in which *White Noise* critiques the illusion of the dualism and its obfuscation of a seemingly self-sufficient culture's connection to nature. In exposing the dualism as an illusion, DeLillo strategically reveals the ways in which we become caught up in and submit to the trappings and complacency of this carefully controlled culture. Most importantly, he reveals the self-destructive implications of the illusory dualism and draws attention to the fact that despite our efforts to act independently of nature, our very lives depend upon the health of nature which the idea of the dualism oppresses. In fact, in exposing the illusion of the dualism for our contemplation, DeLillo posits this subject as one of great importance to which the reader must attend with urgency.

DeLillo reveals the importance of reevaluating our relationship with nature by presenting very real unintended consequences, such as the airborne toxic event, that break through the protective coating of the seemingly distanced and dominant society that resembles our own and exposes nature and culture as fluid entities. Through images like the postmodern sunsets, for example, DeLillo constantly reminds us that the events of our lives do, in fact, unfold in nature, and so the way that we live will have some consequence and effect upon it. In terms of our own mortality, we are also undeniably a part of nature and so it too will ultimately have some consequence and effect upon our lives. DeLillo dramatizes this interconnectedness between humans and nature as he places Jack, and arguably the reader too, in a position to confront himself as a consumer, a producer of waste, a victim of environmental pollution, and

as one who will ultimately return to the earth through death. Through his exploration of these issues, it is clear that DeLillo holds the idea of the dualism accountable for our contribution to ecological crisis.

From this challenging and complex perspective, then, DeLillo's revelations about this illusive separation between nature and culture are invaluable in reevaluating current methods of reading literature ecocritically. In emphasizing the fact that the human is in nature and nature is in the human and that the two cannot be separated, he offers a very clear alternative to the traditional ecocritical tendency to concentrate on literature that only deals with nature, and thus continues to separate nature and culture instead of bringing them together.

Although more postmodernist scholars have commented on *White Noise* than ecocritics, DeLillo's treatment of the dualism has not gone unnoticed. Cynthia Deitering, in her brief but informative essay, "The Postnatural Novel: Toxic Consciousness in the Fiction of the 1980s," situates DeLillo as one of a number of writers in the 1980s who began to treat the subject of toxicity in their work. As mentioned in chapter 3, Deitering claims that during this period of increasing pollution, a shift resulted in society's perception of its relationship with nature. In essence, this was "a shift from a culture defined by its production to a culture defined by its waste" and hence changed our "experience of the earth itself" (Deitering 196).

In *White Noise*, Deitering sees this shift dramatized in a scene that I explored in chapter 3 in which Jack studies his family's trash while searching for the lost Dylar tablets. She views this moment as an expression of the way that "we have begun to see in our garbage parts of ourselves, of our personal histories. On some level,

perhaps, we have begun to comprehend our seminal role as producers of waste” (Deitering 198). Consequently, this changed consciousness of the 1980s displaced perceptions of a more unspoiled nature with a perception of the earth as a “toxic riskscape” of our own creation (Deitering 200). In her explanation of this shift in consciousness, she does not directly refer to the idea of the dualism, but it is clear that she sees DeLillo complicating the relationship between nature and culture through his privileging of waste in the novel. In fact, she perceives in *White Noise* a world in which the dualistic separation between nature and culture is broken down due to the fact that “true” nature can no longer be distinguished from nature altered by humans. It is in this sense that she recognizes DeLillo’s attention to the illusion of the dualism and she identifies the novel’s worth through his exploration of this theme. In fact, Deitering calls works like *White Noise* “political texts” that “do much to raise the environmental consciousness of the society that sees itself in the mirror” (202).

Another variation of Deitering’s discussion of *White Noise* can be found in Dana Phillips’s essay, “Don DeLillo’s Postmodern Pastoral.” In the beginning of his essay, Phillips draws attention to the fact that critics often overlook DeLillo’s attention to ecological crisis. In fact, he says, “I would argue that one of the great virtues of DeLillo’s novel is the thoroughgoing and imaginative way in which *White Noise* puts the questions not just of human nature but of ‘nature in general’ back on the agenda for ‘critical discussion’” (“Don DeLillo’s” 235-6). In the essay, he argues that in the postmodern society, we can no longer look at nature in terms of the traditional pastoral which relies on the notion of binary opposites between nature and culture and the harmony and simplicity that results from everything being in its place.

In fact, Phillips explains that what DeLillo represents in *White Noise* is a “blocked pastoral” (“Don DeLillo’s” 236). This blocked pastoral is characterized by the “placelessness” of Blacksmith, a town like any other with homogenous features such as strip malls and office parks that replace actual distinctive geographical differences. In addition, culture-mediated landscapes such as that which contains “THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA,” and carefully controlled environments produced by the supermarket and television technology make for a mix of nature and culture that does not leave one distinguishable from the other (12). Part of the characters’ struggle, then, is to find their way through this mix which Phillips argues is a kind of wilderness in itself. As a result, he does not accept the postmodern claim that wilderness has been lost and explains that “postmodernism is a frontier thesis for the next millenium, more dependent on what has been called ‘the idea of wilderness’ than its exponents have realized” (Phillips, “Don DeLillo’s” 245). Phillips acknowledges the fact that DeLillo suggests a breakdown of the dualism, and even argues more powerfully than Deitering that it is, in fact, an illusion. However, while Deitering and Phillips recognize DeLillo’s attention to the breakdown of the dualism, and both explore postmodern perceptions of nature, neither fully explores the possibilities for awareness that arise from reading *White Noise* ecocritically.

Richard Kerridge too, in his essay, “Small rooms and the ecosystem: environmentalism and DeLillo’s *White Noise*,” recognizes some positive aspects of DeLillo’s exploration of the relationship between nature and culture; however, he mainly views the novel as an interrogation of postmodernism that ultimately fails. Kerridge’s main problem with *White Noise* is its ambiguous ending. He claims that

DeLillo allows the toxic airborne event to be absorbed into the narrative and hence “refuses to acknowledge the reader’s anxiety” (193). In this sense, readers are placed in a similar position to Jack Gladney’s as he waits to see what effects the chemical will have on him while the rest of the society seems to return to the norm, unscathed (193). Kerridge’s essay implies that DeLillo breaks down the illusion of dualism with the intrusion of toxicity upon the cultural “paradise” created by the characters in the novel (192). However, he ultimately explains that the novel leaves Jack, and readers, in “a condition of passive waiting” and hence “dramatizes [...] the impasse between environmental consciousness and the inability of a culture to change” (194). In this sense, his reading of *White Noise* seems to be more apocalyptic than Deitering’s or Phillips’s because he considers its ending as an impossible situation for which there is no real resolution or potential for change.

Waiting, and the complacency of those characters that do so, is still a problem in the novel that is not necessarily resolved. Clearly, it often seems as if disaster “jolted [people] out of reality” rather than immersed them in it (129). When discussions ensue about the dangers of the toxicity, one of the Gladneys always changes the subject in order to focus on some trivial fact, such as Jack’s question: ““Was it the *Monitor* or the *Merrimac* that got sunk?”” (176). In addition to their inability to face the reality of threat, the refusal to believe that a danger factor even exists protects the characters’ complacency. When the airborne toxic event first occurs, Babette urges Jack to consider the danger, but his response is that ““Everything in tank cars is dangerous,”” almost as if the threat is too commonplace to be a serious problem (115). Furthermore, because the postmodern society appears to

be utterly toxic, people do not really seem to sense the urgency in such disasters. Because “‘It’s happening everywhere’,” the government does not appear to do much about toxic events and the media does not find good reason to continue coverage in its aftermath despite the fact that such an event “‘is a horrifying thing’” (135). Babette adds to this fact when she says: “‘Every day on the news there’s another toxic spill. Cancerous solvents from storage tanks, arsenic from smokestacks, radioactive water from power plants. How serious can it be if it happens all the time?’” (174). According to Lawrence Buell, such reactions are in sync with common reactions to toxicity within “toxic communities” and include, among others, “acquiescence [and] denial” (*Writing* 36). However, this complacency keeps the illusion of the dualism in place. It is the inability of the characters to see through the dualism that DeLillo ultimately scrutinizes; he does not merely dismiss any attempt to resolve the novel.

At the end, we are still waiting, but not in the dire impasse that Kerridge suggests. Technology is ultimately an ominous and looming presence at the end of the novel. The “holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly” seem to hold the people captive in the supermarket (326). This technology urges the characters on to a tabloid-like future that awaits them if they fail to see the problems inherent in efforts to maintain the illusion of the dualism and ignore its dangers. While the focus on dominant technology and “white noise” is most disconcerting, and perhaps does not reflect the change we would like to see in the society, there are other forces at work in the conclusion of novel that reveal some potential for change. In the end, Jack expresses a great mistrust for the technology that governs his life. He is not only “making it a point to stay away” from doctors and

the technology that they use to “decode” his life, but he also views the SIMUVAC men as “gathering their terrible data, aiming their infrared devices at the earth and sky” in an attempt to dominate nature (325). Even preceding these representations of Jack’s skepticism, DeLillo makes his greatest comment on the dualism when Jack leaves the Dylar, the not- so- extreme extrapolation of the dualistic society, behind after his long-awaited confrontation with Willie Mink. Even if such actions are not fully understood by Jack himself, it may ultimately be less important for Jack to see their significance than it is for the readers to do so.

In fact, Jack may be lost in ambiguity at the end of the text, but since the readers’ experience has been directed by DeLillo throughout, they are able to perceive the problems revealed through the narrative. The greater possibility for hope in the end of the novel extends beyond the text and lies with the readers upon which DeLillo’s work is making an impression. The readers have the power to break the impasse that Kerridge argues exists at the end, even if Jack and the others trapped within the novel cannot. While Jack claims that “it is hard to know how we should feel about” the awakening perception that culture is not as far from nature as many people like to believe, he is in the process of trying to understand (324). Readers, on the other hand, are able to perceive the problem with the dualism and can continue to better understand the relationship between nature and culture. As outsiders, readers have the advantage of studying the whole society that DeLillo creates and even compare it to their own. In this sense, Daniel Aaron explains, DeLillo is “the sociologist of crisis, pondering ways in which the raw facts of natural and man-made disasters are processed into theory and insinuated in the public mind” (70). Armed

with the understanding that he gives us about our unhealthy relationship with nature, hope resides in what we attempt to do with DeLillo's critique.

In spite of the various possibilities for reading *White Noise* ecocritically, DeLillo's work remains problematic for Buell. Buell does concede, in a later work, *Writing for an Endangered World*, that various types of literature that engage environmental issues may "affect one's caring for the physical world: make it feel more or less precious or endangered or disposable" (2). However, in Buell's inclination to privilege literature that lends itself to the relinquishment of human presence and concern as a way of "revaluing" nature, he claims that *White Noise* is too egocentric in its concerns with the postmodernist condition to serve ecocritical aims. He contends that DeLillo's *White Noise* is "blasé" in its treatment of toxic events as metaphor (Buell, *Writing* 52). However, as James A. Papa explains, even more "ideal" nature writers like Annie Dillard and Thoreau use "common natural phenomena such as sandbanks, ice, cedar trees, muskrats, and dead frogs" as a means "to articulate through metaphor, deeper universal truths" (71). Still, Buell further argues that DeLillo's works are examples of the way in which "toxic discourse may repress, fail to fulfill, or swerve away from itself according to the drag of other discourses with which it cross-pollinates" (*Writing* 51). We might ask, instead, whether or not such cross-pollination is not the point?

A work of literature like *White Noise* may not offer "objective" and empirical observation of nature like the later, more extrospective works of Thoreau; however, Buell underestimates the importance of DeLillo's choice to place his readers within the offending society in which we live. In positioning readers in this way, he reveals

society's shortcomings and makes us aware of the need for reconsidering our current relationship with nature. While reading and writing in ways that privilege nature as the most worthy subject for ecocritical study may offer us opportunities to appreciate nature and be more aware of our environment, this will not be enough to motivate every reader to reconsider his/her relationship with nature. More importantly, "accurate" descriptions of nature do not seem to implicate man in the process of depreciating nature to the extent that works that include both matters of culture and nature can. In fact, in privileging these kinds of narratives Buell perpetuates the dualistic notion that nature and culture still appear to be disparate spheres that do not mix. As a result, Eric Todd Smith explains, proposing to "preserve literature as a pure salve [...] for an alienated human soul," limits the possibilities of ecocritics who are in a unique position to offer an alternative to the dualism, which is "the infinite variety and possibility of our shared existence" (38). The first ecocritical advantage of works like *White Noise* is their ability to implicate humans in a text in which they can see their role in the relationship being questioned, and to foster their participation as active readers of such a text.

By looking to works like *White Noise* which dramatize societal attitudes toward and perceptions of nature and the destructive ways in which we live in the dualism, we can begin to explore the relationship between nature and culture more fully. In addition, we can explore the ways in which our present tropes of thinking and, consequently, of acting affect the environment. In other words, to the extent that works of literature can act as social and political commentary, they can also be instructive and reveal a kind of moral lesson that has the potential to appeal to a wider

audience. In this way, works of literature that contain both nature and culture can actually expose the ways that the two spheres are connected and reveal the extent to which man is complicit in ecological crisis.

White Noise places readers in an active position of feeling the immediacy of environmental problems. Indeed, *White Noise* is a novel that speaks to its readers in different ways than environmental nonfiction. Cornel Bonca, a scholar who has taught the text to a wide range of students for many years, commends this quality of the novel. He says: “the novel seems to draw out a certain buried awareness in my students that the most familiar aspects of their lives [...] harbor deep and resonant mysteries. It affects them, I think, as a sustained defamiliarization of their own lives” (Bonca 26). He explains that after reading the novel, it is nearly impossible for students to view culture in the same way and so it is a work that “somehow *helps*” (26). One key to understanding our role in the current ecological crisis, then, resides in examining works that raise such consciousness and alert us to the possibilities of loss that result from attempts to live without recognizing the ways in which nature and culture are connected.

Another advantage to an ecocritical approach that encompasses the human element is that we would have the flexibility to read almost any work ecocritically. If nature is absent or obscured in a particular narrative, we might also learn to look at the absence and see what it has to tell us about our own dualistic tendencies. When looking at any work of literature, we should be asking whether or not narratives that focus on culture more than nature can give us insight into our current relationship with nature and how we can begin to think about changing the course of the narrative of our

own lives. This action would be more productive than merely focusing on what fiction like *White Noise* cannot tell us about nature.

For example, in a work of fiction like *White Noise*, human concerns are necessarily going to be wrapped up in those of the environment. Environmental degradation is a very human problem and it is a definite byproduct of the technological society that is represented in the novel. We cannot underestimate the importance of what the self-centeredness of characters like Jack Gladney reveal in moments of ecological crisis. According to Glen A. Love, it is typical that

Rather than confronting [...] ecological issues, we prefer to think on other things. The mechanism which David Ehrenfeld calls 'the avoidance of unpleasant reality' remains firmly in place' [...] For the most part, our society goes on with its bread and circuses, exemplified by the mindless diversion reflected in mass culture [...]. In the face of profound threats to our biological survival, we continue, in the proud tradition of humanism, to, as Ehrenfeld says, 'love ourselves best of all.' (226)

We can just as easily see Gladney's hang-ups as those of the self-absorbed culture that tends to think and live in terms of the illusion of the dualism and hence fails to be ecologically engaged. Getting back to nature, and in the process exposing what is wrong with the society as Thoreau does in *Walden*, may help us get in touch with the nature we have lost. However, DeLillo also raises the more modern problem of how we continue to lose sight of our connection to nature. In allowing us to see nature and culture as fluid, DeLillo reveals the inadequacy of our idealistic and problematic

theories of getting back to nature and provides us with ways to re-conceive of our relationship within the culture. It is clear that our fault in looking at some narratives to the exclusion of others, and hence appearing to accept dualistic modes of thinking and being, is that we fail to perceive the necessity for and the common goal of both nature and culture oriented works of literature. That goal is to better understand our current ecological crisis.

We must take advantage of this newer field of ecocriticism in order to find relationships between nature and culture wherever we can, not narrow it to particular kinds of narratives to the exclusion of others. What better shows the extent to which nature and culture run together, and defeats dualistic thinking, than the idea that relationships between the two can be perceived almost anywhere? *White Noise* not only reveals the illusion of the dualism within the text, but it also alerts us to fact that this separation between humans and nature is further perpetuated within the larger, ecocritical discourse that often wrong-headedly tries to eliminate it, rather than exposes it as an illusion. As DeLillo argues, through Jack's struggle to come to terms with his eventual death, that embracing nature is crucial in avoiding ecological crisis, so we also need to find a place for culture within the ecocritical agenda. We are stuck with culture and making it disappear from our literature is not going to solve the very real problem of environmental degradation. DeLillo's *White Noise* illustrates the possibility that such social and political works can cause us to recognize the limitations of culture and can suggest the urgent need to embrace nature as an integral part of our very existence. If we do not learn to look at the narratives of nature and culture as those that shape each other, we may lose sight of our ultimate project as

ecocritics. That project is to find some way to end the violence that the misunderstood relationship between nature and culture does to the earth and to humankind.

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