

THE ENVIRONMENTAL UNCONSCIOUS  
IN THE FICTION OF DON DELILLO

Elise A. Martucci

Routledge  
New York & London

## STUDIES IN MAJOR LITERARY AUTHORS

WILLIAM E. CAIN, *General Editor*

### WRITING "OUT OF ALL THE CAMPS"

*J.M. Coetzee's Narratives of Displacement*

Laura Wright

### HERE AND NOW

*The Politics of Social Space in D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf*

Youngjoo Son

### "UNNOTICED IN THE CASUAL LIGHT OF DAY"

*Philip Larkin and the Plain Style*

Tijana Stojković

### QUEER TIMES

*Christopher Isherwood's Modernity*

Jamie M. Carr

### EDITH WHARTON'S "EVOLUTIONARY CONCEPTION"

*Darwinian Allegory in Her Major Novels*

Paul J. Ohler

### THE END OF LEARNING

*Milton and Education*

Thomas Festa

### READING AND MAPPING HARDY'S ROADS

Scott Rode

### CREATING YOKNAPATAWPHA

*Readers and Writers in Faulkner's Fiction*

Owen Robinson

### NO PLACE FOR HOME

*Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*

Jay Ellis

### THE MACHINE THAT SINGS

*Modernism, Hart Crane, and the Culture of the Body*

Gordon A. Tapper

### INFLUENTIAL GHOSTS

*A Study of Auden's Sources*

Rachel Wetzsteon

### D.H. LAWRENCE'S BORDER CROSSING

*Colonialism in His Travel Writings and "Leadership" Novels*

Eunyoung Oh

### DOROTHY WORDSWORTH'S ECOLOGY

Kenneth R. Cervelli

### SPORTS, NARRATIVE, AND NATION IN THE

FICTION OF F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

Jarom Lyle McDonald

### SHELLEY'S INTELLECTUAL SYSTEM AND ITS

EPICUREAN BACKGROUND

Michael A. Vicario

### MODERNIST AESTHETICS AND CONSUMER

CULTURE IN THE WRITINGS OF OSCAR WILDE

Paul L. Fortunato

### MILTON'S UNCERTAIN EDEN

*Understanding Place in Paradise Lost*

Andrew Mattison

### HENRY MILLER AND RELIGION

Thomas Nesbit

### THE MAGIC LANTERN

*Representation of the Double in Dickens*

Maria Cristina Paganoni

### THE ENVIRONMENTAL UNCONSCIOUS IN THE FICTION OF DON DELILLO

Elise A. Martucci

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL UNCONSCIOUS IN THE FICTION OF DON DELILLO

江苏工业学院图书馆

藏书章

Elise A. Martucci

Routledge  
New York & London

Quotes from *White Noise* by Don DeLillo, copyright © 1984, 1985 by Don DeLillo. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

Quotes from *Underworld* reprinted with the permission of Scribner, an imprint of Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, from *Underworld* by Don DeLillo. Copyright © 1997 by Don DeLillo. All rights reserved.

Quotes from *Americana* by Don DeLillo, copyright © 1971 by Don DeLillo. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

Quotes from *The Names* by Don DeLillo, copyright © 1982 by Don DeLillo. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

Quotes from *End Zone* by Don DeLillo, copyright © 1972 by Don DeLillo. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

Quotes from *Libra* by Don DeLillo, copyright © 1988 by Don DeLillo. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group  
270 Madison Avenue  
New York, NY 10016

Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group  
2 Park Square  
Milton Park, Abingdon  
Oxon OX14 4RN

© 2007 by Elise A. Martucci  
Routledge is an imprint of Taylor & Francis Group, an Informa business

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

International Standard Book Number-10: 0-415-98102-6 (Hardcover)  
International Standard Book Number-13: 978-0-415-98102-6 (Hardcover)

No part of this book may be reprinted, reproduced, transmitted, or utilized in any form by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying, microfilming, and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without written permission from the publishers.

**Trademark Notice:** Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Martucci, Elise A.  
The environmental unconscious in the fiction of Don DeLillo / by Elise A. Martucci.  
p. cm. -- (Studies in major literary authors)  
Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 0-415-98102-6  
1. DeLillo, Don--Criticism and interpretation. 2. Human ecology in literature. 3. Postmodernism (Literature)--United States. I. Title.

PS3554.E4425Z75 2007  
813'.54--dc22

2007009897

Visit the Taylor & Francis Web site at  
<http://www.taylorandfrancis.com>

and the Routledge Web site at  
<http://www.routledge.com>

# Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	1
<i>Chapter One</i> DeLillo, Postmodernism, and the Nature of Nature	7
<i>Chapter Two</i> "How Real the Landscape Truly Was": Reading <i>Americana</i> as a Pastoral Critique	31
<i>Chapter Three</i> <i>The Names</i> : Discovering the Deeper Textures	49
<i>Chapter Four</i> <i>White Noise</i> : A Level of Experience to which We Will Gradually Adjust	75
<i>Chapter Five</i> Taking Meaning out into the Streets: The Significance of Place in <i>Underworld</i>	107
Conclusion	143
Notes	163



## Acknowledgments

My completion of this book would not have been possible without the support and help of a number of people. First, I would like to thank the people who provided me with the spiritual and material means to succeed, especially my mother and father who always encouraged me and had so much confidence in my abilities, not just during this project, but always. I would also like to thank my brother Joseph for instilling confidence in me, but also for making me laugh and providing me with new perspectives when I needed them most. Additionally, I thank my husband Paul who has consistently offered his encouragement, interest, support, and understanding throughout the process. He provided me with a sense of security and peace that enabled me to get through times of doubt and frustration.

I would also like to thank those who helped me develop my ideas and pursue my interest in this project from its conception, to the completion of my dissertation, to my development of this book. My mentor, Dr. Jonathan Levin, directed me towards new ideas and theories that became essential to this project and led me to new directions and perspectives that I did not anticipate. Additionally, my four dissertation readers, Dr. Leonard Cassuto, Dr. Maria Farland, Dr. Nicola Pitchford, and Dr. Phil Sicker, provided me with encouraging feedback and suggestions, which were crucial in getting the project started and preparing to defend the dissertation. Finally, I would like to thank Don DeLillo whose writing has inspired me to research and explore the complexities of our modern landscapes and who has also offered me his personal support and encouragement throughout the writing process.



## Introduction

In the 1999 film *The Matrix*, the main character Neo, an ordinary citizen of a city located somewhere within the United States, becomes aware through a series of enigmatic phone calls and meetings with unusual characters that the world as he experiences it is not real. A complex of powerful and intelligent computers, known as the Matrix, has created a simulation of human life on earth. The Matrix, Neo learns, has been in control of the earth for years while the majority of humans have lain dormant with their brains plugged into a computer program that simulates life on earth. Once freed from this simulated world of the Matrix, Neo discovers that the earth's environment has been destroyed by nuclear bombs and that the individuals who are not part of the Matrix live deep in the earth's crust, the only place where the earth still yields the necessary elements for human survival.

The popular acclaim and subsequent sequels of this film demonstrate our fascination with the possibility of our creations becoming our masters. Of course, this is not a new fascination. From Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* to Stanley Kubrick's film *2001, A Space Odyssey* and beyond, the popular imagination has been intrigued by the thought that with our scientific discoveries and technological advances we are interfering where we have no right to interfere. We are tampering with nature, or with God, and will, subsequently, suffer the consequences. What is different about *The Matrix*, the reason why it represents a new era in human concerns with manipulating our world, is that not only have the machines taken over, but they have done so without our noticing it. The movie, then, demonstrates the ways in which the increasing power of technology—computers, television, electronic media, the Internet, nanotechnology—can obfuscate the world as we know it and our essential connection to it. In fact, this is a common postmodern fear found in film and literature of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the works of Don DeLillo.

However, what *The Matrix* does not emphasize, but what I find particularly compelling about the film, is the connection it draws between environmental destruction and human destruction, demonstrating the way in which the two are not ultimately separable. This is an idea that is also central to Don DeLillo's works. Like other contemporary artists, DeLillo explores the way in which new technologies create a world of simulacra and simulation; however, DeLillo keeps the material world at the forefront of his novels, thereby illuminating the environmental implications of these technologies and emphasizing the lasting significance of place to our consciousness.<sup>1</sup> His fiction does not present environment as nature only. Instead, it emphasizes how our environment is an integration of culture and nature. The way in which technological advances, consumerist ideologies, and media representations interact with and affect this integrated environment is the topic of Don DeLillo's novels. This project will demonstrate how DeLillo's works present a synthesis of consumer culture, technology, and natural landscape as a key to his central theme of human survival in the postmodern world.

The natural landscape I will be referring to is the American landscape in its primal form, including deserts, mountains, fields, and other remote spaces that make up the pastoral image of America. I will be considering the ways in which technology and consumerism (advertising, television, shopping malls, consumer products and consumer waste) affect and eventually become a part of this American landscape to constitute the postmodern environment in DeLillo's novels. My term "environment," therefore, includes all the stimuli, created and natural, that an individual contends with on a daily basis.

My use of the term "environment" is based on the way contemporary ecocritics define environment, stressing the importance of the conception of environment as not just "nature" in the image of a pristine tract of land, but as a culmination of first and second nature—nature in its original condition and nature altered by humans.<sup>2</sup> In his introduction to *Uncommon Ground*, William Cronon explains, "many popular ideas about the environment are premised on the conviction that nature is a stable, holistic, homeostatic community capable of preserving its natural balance more or less indefinitely if only humans can avoid 'disturbing' it. This is in fact a deeply problematic assumption" (24). Cronon and others stress that the term "environment" necessarily includes the human societies and cultures that inhabit any specific place and that nature is a culturally constructed concept. I intend to demonstrate the ways in which this contemporary perception of the environment is reflected in DeLillo's works as he focuses simultaneously on consumerism and technology's effects on what is considered the "natural landscape," and on the environment's—including first and second nature—effect on the humans that inhabit it.

As I explore DeLillo's presentation of this type of environment, I will consider the way this presentation calls forth what ecocritic Lawrence Buell terms the "environmental unconscious." In *Writing for an Endangered World*, Buell explains that in one sense the environmental unconscious is what we are incapable of expressing about our environment (for a variety of reasons ranging from the limitations of language to intentional repression). He explains that this negative aspect of the term indicates "the impossibility of individual or collective perception coming to full consciousness at whatever level" (22). However, Buell continues to explain that "environmental unconsciousness is also to be seen as potential: as a residual capacity (of individual humans, authors, texts, readers, communities) to awake to fuller apprehension of physical environment and one's interdependence with it" (22). Drawing from this definition, and from discussions of place posited by sociologist E.V. Walter and philosopher Edward Casey, I intend to use the term environmental unconscious to demonstrate the lasting significance of the material world expressed in DeLillo's novels. DeLillo's characters exhibit an often repressed awareness of the natural world underlying their image-dominated environment. It is this awareness and the subsequent desire to connect with their material world that illuminates environmental consequences and challenges the conditions of our postindustrial society.

DeLillo brings to light the ways our consumer and technology-driven culture subvert and damage the natural world. Moreover, the emphasis on the damage and dangers of consumerism to the environment become increasingly overt as his works progress. In order to examine this progression I will argue that DeLillo's representation of children, and his presentation of language and art, function as indicators of the damaging effects of our consumer culture, as well as the human ability to adapt to and survive the damage by transcending the materialism and irresponsibility that are inherent dangers to a consumer culture.

In examining DeLillo's presentation of language and art and his representation of children, I focus on four of DeLillo's novels: *Americana*, *The Names*, *White Noise* and *Underworld*. I have selected these particular novels for the ways in which their presentation of children, language and art reveal postmodern environmental concerns, and suggest human adaptation. Of course, all of DeLillo's novels examine how our consumer culture relates to an altered environment and each suggests the human need for survival. However, I believe that these four novels not only offer the fullest consideration of these issues but also reveal how environmental concerns have developed throughout DeLillo's body of work. While DeLillo's first novel, *Americana*, demonstrates the myriad ways in which consumerism alters the social and

natural environment, the link between consumerism and the environment becomes increasingly overt until *Underworld*, where waste is one of the central themes of the novel.<sup>3</sup>

In Chapter One, "DeLillo, Postmodernism, and the Nature of Nature," I discuss how current environmental rhetoric stresses the importance of understanding nature and culture as interrelated systems in the environment, and how this perception of environment is what DeLillo offers in his texts. Drawing from works by Dana Philips and William Cronon, I demonstrate that what critics may call a postmodern "end of nature" in DeLillo is rather a new way of perceiving nature. These critics, along with Lawrence Buell, stress the importance of understanding the way in which the "environment" is a complex system made up of what is typically thought of as "nature" and includes human structures and interactions with nature. I also borrow from Buell's term "environmental unconscious" to explain how DeLillo presents in his characters a peripheral awareness of the significance of the material world. Additionally, as I discuss DeLillo's role in the literary canon, I introduce some of the pertinent DeLillo criticism, explaining how my study extends and adds new perspectives to some of these discussions. More specifically, I will look at how the systems theory that Tom LeClair discusses in his text allows for a more inclusive representation of environmental concerns that are unavoidably linked to other postmodern concerns.<sup>4</sup> I argue that while DeLillo presents an image-dominated postmodern world where nature may appear to be inconsequential, his denouements and character development distinguish his work from other postmodernist fiction and from popular concepts of nature and culture.

Chapter Two, "How Real the Landscape Truly Was," reads *Americana* as a contemporary American pastoral. Throughout American literature, from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* to Mark Twain's river in *Huckleberry Finn*, non-urban spaces have been portrayed as areas of retreat from the ills of society to spaces where one can form a new, better identity. In this chapter I demonstrate the ways in which the narrator of *Americana*, David Bell, engages in this type of pastoral retreat. However, I also demonstrate that through this narrative of retreat DeLillo undermines pastoral fantasies by demonstrating the impossibility of the pastoral, and by revealing the false notions of innocence and purity associated with these spaces. In *Americana* DeLillo shows that the pastoral impulse is a construct that supports the systems it supposedly negates and leads to a dangerous neglect of the actual land. While even failed pastoral can be useful to the extent that it foregrounds specific places, DeLillo demonstrates that the dangers of pastoral escapism are compounded in the latter half of the twentieth century

as media images obscure the specific places of retreat and support the systems that pastoral seeks to escape.

Chapter Three, "*The Names*: Discovering the Deeper Textures," explores the topic of American accountability towards land and culture that DeLillo presents in this novel. The main character of this novel, James Axton, is an American living abroad who attempts to escape responsibility by denying the culture of the people in whose land he lives and conducts business. He accomplishes this by disassociating himself from his wife and child and by dehistoricizing the world around him. He dismisses his forays into foreign economics and politics as a simple business matter. Here, DeLillo demonstrates how a disconnection from the land has damaging results to culture as a whole. It is not until Axton is able to accept humanity's ties to the land—ties that are established through art and language—and to recognize his own humanity—clarified to him by his son—that the character becomes able to accept responsibility for his own actions and to appreciate the beauty of the environment as an integration of nature and culture.

Chapter Four, "*White Noise*: A Level of Experience to which We Gradually Adjust," focuses on the combination of popular culture and postmodern thought that DeLillo presents in order to illuminate his theme of human survival in a radically altered environment. It is in this novel's presentation of the airborne toxic event that DeLillo's concern with environment becomes intensely overt. DeLillo presents this environmental disaster within a seemingly standard slice-of-life narrative of a family's everyday struggles. However, by placing the toxic event directly in the middle of the narrative, DeLillo effectively demonstrates how the toxic event is an inevitable extension of the consumer society in which this family engages. Despite the increasing power of the media and other technologies portrayed by DeLillo in this novel, I argue that *White Noise* demonstrates our ability to survive within a postmodern environment comprised of the natural world, cultural constructs, and the toxins and pollutants that culture has integrated into this environment.

Chapter Five, "Taking Meaning out into the Streets: The Significance of Place in *Underworld*," focuses on the theme of recycling and the emphasis on place found in this novel. *Underworld's* repetition of many of the themes and subjects of DeLillo's earlier works leads critics to note DeLillo's own artistic recycling in this novel. This recycling of themes, along with the characters' artistic and physical recycling, is essential to the environmental issues DeLillo raises in this novel. However, in this chapter I argue that it is not just DeLillo's theme of recycling, but his emphasis on physical places that uncovers the environmental unconscious of the novel. In this novel, DeLillo places primacy on particular personal places, not just the abstract places of



his earlier novels—the desert, the suburbs, the west. He demonstrates the devastating results of weapons testing, consumer waste, and toxicity to particular places. DeLillo also weaves back and forth between global and local environmental issues, achieving a comprehensive examination of the connections between American consumerism and industrialism and its effects on the earth as a whole. The artistic characters in this novel use the altered landscape as an essential background for their creations, and children adapt their games to this altered landscape. Through the artistic works he describes and the scenes of children at play, DeLillo shows our ability to recognize the importance of particular places in an effort to adapt to and survive the damaging effects of our consumer culture.

Through my analysis of DeLillo's fiction I do not attempt to establish that DeLillo is an environmentalist in the traditional, limited sense of the term. I do not propose that DeLillo pushes a conservationist agenda in these works. Rather, I argue that concerns about the environment—as a space for human habitation—grow out of DeLillo's portrayal of our postindustrial consumer society, demonstrating the way in which nature and culture are not ultimately separable. In the novels I discuss, DeLillo presents actual—as well as potential—results of our consumer habits and technological advances. Billboards clog the roadways in *Americana*, cars emit dangerous levels of carbon dioxide in *The Names*, a cloud of toxic chemicals invades the suburban community in *White Noise*, and mounds of garbage overflow the landfills in *Underworld*. However, DeLillo's novels are not only concerned with how technology and consumerism affect the material world, but also with the way in which humans respond to and interact with this altered material world. I do not argue that DeLillo is anti-technology or even particularly adverse to consumerism, but I do propose that his novels bring to light the environmental implications of consumerism and technology, and that they raise questions about how we can adapt to and survive in this environment.

## Chapter One

# DeLillo, Postmodernism, and the Nature of Nature

Since the publication of *Americana* in 1971, critics have quite often grouped Don DeLillo with fellow contemporary novelists, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme—to name a few—under the label “postmodernist.” To give one such example, in *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* Christopher Butler refers to “a sense of postmodernism as a cultural phenomenon, which has left us over the last 30 years of its influence with a canon of major works, particularly from writers like Abish, Barthelme, Coover and DeLillo, and on through the alphabet” (123). Butler seems to feel quite comfortable placing DeLillo in this group. However, although DeLillo's novels present and respond to the postmodern environment in which they are set, they do not necessarily adhere to the principles of postmodern thought, nor do they strictly abide to formal postmodern fictional techniques. In fact, none of DeLillo's novels are self-reflexive in the way that novels by Pynchon and Coover are. And, while novels such as *Libra* and *Underworld* do present a fictionalized version of history, these novels do not fit into the definition of postmodern historical metafiction that Linda Hutcheon presents: “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (5). For instance, in *Libra* DeLillo presents largely unknown events and incidents that actually occurred and he creates a fictionalized account of the plot to kill Kennedy based on these actual events. On the other hand, in novels such as Doctorow's *Ragtime* or Coover's *Public Burning* the authors present radically and obviously altered versions of American history. Putting the debate over whether or not DeLillo's fiction adheres to postmodernist techniques aside, I am most concerned with what the label “postmodernist” suggests about DeLillo's understanding and presentation of the natural world.

While DeLillo's narratives do not conform to some definitions of postmodern fiction, many critics feel comfortable placing him within the broader category of postmodernism because of the subject matter of his novels, or the elements in his individual novels that appear to fit the rather broad criteria of Postmodernism. In fact, DeLillo's name often appears in such encyclopedic texts as *Postmodernism: The Key Figures*, in which Christopher Douglas acknowledges the difficulty of answering the question, "Is DeLillo a postmodern writer or is he a pathologist of postmodernism?" He attempts to answer this question by explaining, "the answer to this too simply formulated question is not a modern either/or, but fittingly, a postmodern both/and" (104). Douglas then asserts that DeLillo "can better be considered postmodern in the thematic sense: he is an author whose work, since the early 1970's, has registered certain currents within what Raymond Williams would call the 'structure of feeling' known as postmodernism" (104). While acknowledging DeLillo's limited use of metafiction and self-reflexive narratives, Douglas still calls DeLillo a postmodernist, explaining, "with this representation of a world governed by simulation and quotation DeLillo comes closest to a formal postmodernism" (106). Because of DeLillo's presentation of an image-dominated environment, with its ability to obfuscate the real, other critics also firmly place DeLillo among postmodern writers.

Studies of DeLillo's works appear in texts with titles such as *Design & Debris: A Chaotics of Postmodern American Fiction* and *Critical Essays on American Postmodernism*. The first of these two texts, written by Joseph Conte, includes the chapter, "Noise and Signal: Information Theory in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*." This chapter focuses on the chaotic dissemination of information in the novel, and Conte declares that "DeLillo represents the postmodern condition in *White Noise* as the continuous ambiguity of the presence of the 'message'" (117). The latter text, edited by Stanley Trachtenberg, includes an essay by John Johnston, "Representation and Multiplicity in Four Postmodern American Novels," in which Johnston groups DeLillo's *Ratner's Star* with Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Joseph McElroy's *Lookout Cartridge*, and William Gaddis's *JR*. Johnston declares that all of these novels "engage us in various kinds of multiplicity, both in the sense that the contemporary world is registered as a multiplicity and inasmuch as they themselves articulate multiplicities in and through their novel orderings and arrangements of heterogeneous kinds of information" (169). Regardless of the narrative devices employed in these different novels, critics such as Johnston and Conte affirm DeLillo as "postmodern" in his presentation of Baudrillardian themes, emphasizing the chaotic lack of stability and the way in which signs and symbols overwrite reality.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, some critics reject this categorization of DeLillo. In his introduction to *New Essays on "White Noise"*, published in 1991, Frank Lentricchia declared "impulses aesthetic and critical have—classically—stood in starkest opposition, but they go together in the modernist idea of literature, perhaps no more seamlessly than in Don DeLillo, last of the modernists, who takes for his critical object of aesthetic concern the postmodern situation" (14). By calling DeLillo the "last of the modernists" Lentricchia can focus on the undeniably humanistic themes of *White Noise*—themes that are essential to the novel's structure.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas LeClair also challenges DeLillo's status as postmodernist. His book-length study of DeLillo, published in 1987, seeks to overcome the difficulty in categorizing DeLillo by altogether abandoning such problematic labels. Instead, LeClair argues that DeLillo is a "systems novelist," along with Gaddis, Pynchon, and Coover. LeClair explains that "systems theory" is best understood as a set of assumptions about nature and as an interpretive methodology—as a metascience, rather than as a scientific discipline with its own rules of experimentation and proof" (3). Systems theory is based on principles of connection between the many systems, natural, economic, psychological, social, etc . . . through which we interact with the world. He declares, "the 'systems novel' is a valuable new category that breaks up some of the artificial dualisms of current academic criticism—traditional and experimental, realistic and self-referential, modern and postmodern [ . . . ]" (xii). LeClair's category enables a discussion of DeLillo among canonical contemporary writers without labeling these writers as postmodernists: "Gaddis, Pynchon, Coover, and DeLillo are frequently considered to be postmodernists, but if postmodernism continues to be defined as a deconstructive movement—and I believe it almost always is—these 'systems novelists' would be more accurately termed 're-moderns,' to suggest their continuity with modernism" (9).<sup>3</sup> With this new category, LeClair is able to discuss DeLillo's engagement with a postmodern environment, without associating him with postmodernist literary theory.

This evasion of labeling DeLillo is appealing, and some more recent critics have sought to demonstrate the way in which DeLillo's fiction stands outside these conventional categories. For example, Jesse Kavadlo argues that DeLillo's fiction contributes to a new sense of the author: "[ . . . ] taking both the modernist's author-priest and now-waning postmodernist's authorial diminishment in anticipation of the new author's role. The contemporary author, standing between reverence and irreverence, romantic imagination and journalistic note taking, understands his importance but also his tenuous, precarious place in the world" (*Recycling Authority* 386).

For Kavadlo, DeLillo's fiction does not demonstrate the postmodern concept of the "death of the author," nor does it insist on a modernist author's God-like authority. In this way, DeLillo's role as author separates him from either category.

Additionally, Curtis Yehmert focuses on DeLillo's character development to support the claim that he does not fit neatly into either category:

Characters such as Billy Twillig, James Axton, Jack Gladney and Klara Sax constitute a marked contrast to DeLillo's modernists and postmodernists. These autonomous, existential individuals do not mark a return to modernism, for they do not win their individuality through agonistic struggle, nor have they found themselves or transcended themselves. Rather, they have accepted uncertainty and mediation, the responsibility for their own self-creation. They resist assimilation fully aware of their predicament: that they have no stable ground on which to stand but must stand anyway, that they have no guaranteed action to take but must act anyway. For DeLillo, this is the crux of human possibility. (364)

Shifting from Lentricchia's assessment of DeLillo as modernist to an assessment of DeLillo as neither modernist nor postmodernist, critics such as Kavadlo and Yehmert demonstrate the complexity of DeLillo's novels. Analyses such as these, which explore DeLillo's body of work on its own terms, not in the dualistic modernist/postmodernist terms, are most useful in investigating the methods and meanings of DeLillo's fiction.

### POSTMODERNISM AND "THE END OF NATURE"

The debate can, and no doubt will, continue over where to place DeLillo. In analyses of DeLillo's specific works, such as those by Joseph Conte and John Johnston discussed above, the label of postmodern writer most often remains. Additionally, while the most recent book-length study of DeLillo by Kavadlo argues against DeLillo as a postmodernist, David Cowart's still influential 2002 book-length study of DeLillo sustains the label. Cowart denies that DeLillo's characters offer a point of resistance against postmodernism, yet he admits that DeLillo's texts do not present a strict post-structuralist view of language where signifiers represent nothing but other signifiers (5). Cowart focuses on the way in which DeLillo "affirms something numinous in [language's] mysterious properties" (5). So his analysis of DeLillo admits to the way in which DeLillo's use of language separates him from postmodernist theory.

Cowart offers an interesting and useful analysis of language in DeLillo. However, he does not stress the close relationship DeLillo forges between language and place in his novels, something I will focus on in order to illuminate the environmental aspects of his fiction. DeLillo's fiction illuminates the nuances of language that exist in different geographic regions, and stresses the way in which language reveals the significance of the world it represents, even if there remains a gap between the representation and the represented. It is this relationship between word and world that I seek to establish and explore. While DeLillo's fiction undoubtedly engages us with postmodern themes of simulation and simulacra and calls to attention the limitations of language, I submit that his emphasis on the significance of place to characters' understanding of themselves and the world around them demonstrates a concern with our contemporary environment that is uncommon in postmodern thought.

In labeling DeLillo postmodernist, critics have overlooked the environmental aspects of his novels, even suggesting that his novels demonstrate a contemporary disassociation with nature. Labeling DeLillo as postmodernist suggests that his novels fit standard postmodern assumptions about the end of nature's existence and significance in the contemporary environment. Lawrence Buell speaks of "the postmodernist claim that we inhabit a prosthetic environment, our perception of which is more simulacra-mediated than context-responsive" (5). Dana Philips claims, "the postmodern idea about nature is that nature is largely irrelevant to today's culture both on philosophical grounds (grounds articulated by poststructuralism and similar schools of thought) and as a matter of historical fact [ . . . ]" (24). Philips refers to "the coroner's report certifying the death of nature issued by a number of prominent theorists and critics of postmodernism since the 1970's" (24).<sup>4</sup> The danger with labeling DeLillo as a postmodernist writer, then, is that we miss the environmental implications of his work.

Philips seems to place DeLillo among these postmodern thinkers in his essay "Don DeLillo's Postmodern Pastoral" where he claims that in *White Noise*, "the role of nature as reproductive source, even as awareness of it is echoed in certain moments of the novel, tends to get lost in the haze of cultural signals or 'white noise' that Jack Gladney struggles and largely fails to decipher" (241). Such interpretations of the irrelevance or death of nature in DeLillo's work are quite common. Scott Russell Sanders points to DeLillo's *White Noise* as evidence for his claim of the "ignorance of land and landscape illustrated in the stylish fiction of our time." He explains, "the only time you are reminded that anything exists beyond the human realm is when his characters pause on the expressway to watch a sunset, and even the sunset interests



them only because a release of toxic gases from a nearby plant has poisoned it into Technicolor" (193). For Sanders, even nature is not "natural" in this novel. Furthermore, in her study of the toxic consciousness of *White Noise*, Cynthia Deitering explains, "the most recent literary version of nature reflects that of a society which at some level understands itself to be living in what Bill McKibben has termed a 'postnatural world' and whose conscious need for nature is merely superficial, as McKibben has suggested in his book *The End of Nature*" (201). Deitering considers *White Noise* to be one of the first "literary expressions to come out of this postnatural world." She insists that "nature is no longer a central presence in the world of the novel" (201). In a similar vein, Michael Valdez Moses claims that DeLillo's point is that "it is precisely by way of technology reducing nature to a postmodern simulacrum (a copy with no original) [ . . . ] that man assumes sovereignty over a reality that was once understood to transcend man himself. Formerly regarded as a superhuman threat, guide, or order, nature ceases to exist except as a representation which man both produces and consumes" ("Lust Removed from Nature" 65). Finally, in her interpretation of the concluding scene in *Underworld*, Joanne Gass laments that the word "peace" appearing in cyberspace indicates that "our isolation from nature is complete" (129). These critics all stress that DeLillo's presentation of the postmodern culture inevitably entails the end of nature.

### THE NATURE OF NATURE

These claims of DeLillo's presentation of the "death" or insignificance of nature in our post-industrial culture overlook the complexity of the term "nature." In particular, they do not take into account the premise that environmental historian William Cronon explains in the introduction to *Uncommon Ground*: "Recent scholarship has clearly demonstrated that the natural world is far more dynamic, far more changeable, and far more entangled with human history than popular beliefs about 'the balance of nature' have typically acknowledged" (24). Cronon explains that popular ideas about the natural world are based on outdated and erroneous theories, most particularly the influential ecological theory of Frederic Clements:

The first generation of American ecologists, led at the start of the twentieth century by the Nebraska scientist Fredric Clements, believed that every ecosystem tended to develop toward a natural climax community much as an infant matures into an adult. This climax, according to Clements and his followers, was capable of perpetuating itself forever unless something interfered with its natural balance. (Cronon 24)

Such a theory suggests that nature constitutes a sphere separate from human existence, and that human presence interferes with nature's "natural" balance.<sup>5</sup> In *The Truth of Ecology* Dana Philips also discusses this outdated theory: "Clements was a leading figure in American ecology before the Second World War. Two of his ideas, *climax* and *the organismal concept*, were accepted widely by other scientists at one time, and remain part of the popular conception of ecology today (regrettably so)" (54). Both Philips and Cronon lament the sustained popularity of this theory, which they see as an analogy and metaphor more than a legitimate theory of nature. Philips notes that "Clements' enthusiasm for the organismal concept led him to gloss over or deny its inconsistencies, of which a few, at least, of his contemporaries were fully aware" (55). Cronon explains:

By the 1950's . . . scientists were realizing that natural systems are not nearly so balanced or predictable as the Clementsian climax would have us believe and that Clements' habit of talking about ecosystems as if they were organisms—holistic, organically integrated, with a life cycle much like that of a living animal or plant—was far more metaphorical than real. (25)

Despite the scientific evidence to the contrary, the theory sustained popular images of nature as a separate sphere from the human environment and led to literary, philosophical and national perceptions of nature as the "other."

In "The Trouble with Wilderness" Cronon explains the problem with these popular notions that nature is completely separate from culture:

If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall. The place where we are is the place nature is not. If this is so—if by definition wilderness leaves no place for human beings, save perhaps as contemplative sojourners enjoying their leisurely reverie in God's natural cathedral—then also by definition it can offer no solution to the environmental and other problems that confront us. (80–81)

In other words, we need to understand how "nature" is not just the expanse of untouched lands found in national parks. In order for us to appreciate and respect our environment, we need to recognize nature within our own daily existence. What some postmodern theorists and critics perceive as the end of nature in works such as DeLillo's, others will see as the revelation that it is merely the end of the holistic concept of nature founded on theories like those of Clements.'

## NATURE/CULTURE

Despite his claims that *White Noise* presents "DeLillo's portrait of the way in which postmodernity also entails the devastation of the natural world," (235), Philips concedes that DeLillo's point may be "that the distinction between culture and nature cannot be taken as absolute" (245). Such recognition of the interrelation of nature and culture that DeLillo reveals is essential in an ecocritical analysis of his fiction.

By insisting on DeLillo's place as a systems novelist instead of a postmodern novelist, Thomas LeClair begins to acknowledge this type of understanding of nature in DeLillo's fiction. LeClair explains: "Systems theory has as its purposes to understand the fundamental and particular processes of life, to find the essential relations among sciences that isolate parts of the ecosystem for study, and to provide a new paradigm for thinking about reality" (3). LeClair describes the sources of "systems theory" as "the sciences of man and nature that 'systems theory' aims to synthesize" (2).<sup>6</sup> By analyzing DeLillo in terms of systems theory, LeClair is able to raise questions about DeLillo's presentation of nature. *White Noise*, LeClair asserts, raises the questions, "What is natural now? Has the nature of nature changed? If so, has our relation to nature changed?" (LeClair 214). LeClair answers these questions by applying Gregory Bateson's theory of nature in his text *Mind and Nature* and concluding,

Because nature, whether strictly defined as living systems or more widely defined as the world in its totality, is a complex of multiple, overlapping systems, many of which are open, reciprocal, and equifinal, the coherence of either/or logic, a major basis for delusions about certainty, should not, suggests DeLillo, be expected to apply to the simultaneous, both/and nature of phenomena. (226)

LeClair's emphasis on systems theory paves the way for a closer analysis of environmental issues in DeLillo's novels. We can extend LeClair's emphasis on the ambiguity of human nature to an emphasis on the ambiguity of the physical world and what we consider to be "nature."<sup>7</sup>

DeLillo's novels undoubtedly raise questions about man's relation to and understanding of nature. They also demonstrate how the postmodern world has altered traditional concepts of nature. However, in raising these questions DeLillo is far from suggesting the end of nature. His novels may demonstrate that the nature of nature has changed in the postmodern environment, but he also demonstrates that nature was never quite the pristine

landscape envisioned in popular perspectives of nature. An excellent example of DeLillo's presentation of culture's ineluctable role in our understanding of nature occurs in *Underworld* when Matt Shay goes camping in the most remote location he can find: "a wildlife preserve and gunnery range" (449). The most remote place Matt can find, a place that is nothing but "a white space on the map" (*UW* 451), is actually an active military test site.<sup>8</sup>

Shay decides to go camping here with his girlfriend Janet in an effort to get back to nature and, he believes, confront head on their problematic relationship. For Matt, the natural setting will allow them to confront the issues that they avoid in their everyday lives. He tells Janet that the point of the trip is to be alone; in response to her claim that they can be alone in Boston, Shay remarks, "they don't have bighorn sheep there. We want to see bighorns in the wild" (449). Still skeptical, Janet asks what they will do when they see these sheep and Matt explains, "we'll be happy. It's rare that anyone sees them. And it's very remote, where we're going. We'll rejoice and be glad. They're beautiful animals that no one ever sees" (449). Matt believes that by escaping the distractions of culture and experiencing the natural world they will gain a clearer perspective on what they want from each other. Ironically, this preserve of bighorn sheep is also an active weapons range: this is not the death of nature, but it is also not nature untouched by human hands.

They never do see these sheep, but Matt still feels that he is experiencing nature when "they saw hawks installed on utility poles and she looked them up in the bird book and said they were kestrels—falcons, not hawks, and this made him happier yet" (449). With Matt's experience DeLillo reflects the turn in thinking about the environment that William Cronon stresses: "'Nature' is not nearly so natural as it seems. Instead it is a profoundly human construction" (25). Not only do the birds reside on man-made structures—utility poles—but also Matt's ultimate enjoyment of them comes from reading about them in a book of classification. His experience of the natural world is so deeply embedded in culture that the two are almost inseparable.

In fact, what enhances Matt's enjoyment of this trip is the culturally constructed concept of the American West that he brings with him: "The landscape made him happy. It was a challenge to his lifelong citiness but more than that, a realization of some half-dreamed vision, the otherness of the West, the strange great thing that was all mixed in with nation and spaciousness, with bravery and history and who you are and what you believe and what movies you saw growing up" (450).<sup>9</sup> Matt feels like he is joining some part of American history by traveling through this landscape. Of course, his perception of this history seems to be cultivated from movies, most likely the "Westerners" popular in the 1950's, when Matt was a boy. Adding to this

irony is the fact that by traveling through "nature" in the middle of this artillery range he *is* experiencing what constitutes American history—a history in which Americans not only *explored* but also attempted to *dominate* "the otherness of the West." Cronon points out that "the removal of Indians to create 'an uninhabited wilderness'—uninhabited as never before in the human history of the place—reminds us just how invented, just how constructed, the American wilderness really is" (79). From *Americana* through *Underworld* DeLillo repeatedly and with increasing clarity underscores the point that the American myth of the wilderness is a culturally constructed concept, not a reality. The West is not an ideal place. Beginning with the massacre of the Indians and continuing through to the use of the desert as a site for nuclear testing, the American West represents the militarism and destruction that contributed to the nation's status as a world power.

DeLillo emphasizes this connection between the idyllic concept of the West as "wilderness" and shaper of American character, and the West as a place where human aggressive tendencies are enabled. Matt explains to Janet the restrictions of traveling on this military test site. They need security clearance to enter and are warned that "air-to-air exercises were set to commence three days from now. Friendly fire. It put a little edge in their schedule" (450). The tight schedule and impending danger brought on by the scheduled military exercises enhance the experience of camping "in the wild." He tells Janet with excitement that there were no human inhabitants, gas, food, lodging or other facilities here, that they will encounter military items such as fuel drums, flare casings, tow targets, and projectiles carrying warheads. The narrator explains that these conditions excite Matt:

But he didn't tell her why this excited him. He didn't say anything about this because he didn't understand it, the stark sort of shudder, the leveling out, the sense of knowing he was headed into remote Sonoran waste, where the interplay of terrain and weapons was a kind of neural process remapped in the world, a hollow sort of craving lifted out of the brain stem, or wherever, and painted over with words and sky and diamondback desert. (451)

Without realizing it, Matt's perception of the wilderness includes American militarism; the power and danger of weapons excites him as much as the natural surroundings. The "interplay of terrain and weapons" that he finds at this military test site is part of his perception of the West. The trip is fulfilling to Matt because the landscape does respond to his culturally constructed image of the American West both in the promise of nature's ability

to transcend and in the human ability to destroy. This vision of the West maps United States history in the Cold War era. It is at once the geography of American individualism (the old west) and American military-industrial prowess (the test site for the bomb).

## AMERICAN CONSTRUCTIONS OF NATURE

Through Matt Shay's understanding of his surroundings, DeLillo shows the extent to which our perception of wilderness—both our thoughts about nature and our experience of it—is dependent on culture. When Matt and Janet come across a bunker-like military structure, they decide to camp nearby:

There was something irresistible about the building. [...] it stood alone here, with mountains behind it, and carried the tilted lyric of a misplaced object, like some prairie drive-in shut down for years with the audio hookups all askew and the huge screen facing blankly toward a cornfield. It's the kind of human junk that deepens the landscape, makes it sadder and lonelier and places a vague sad subjective regret at the edge of your response—not regret so much as a sense of time's own esthetic, how strange still and beautiful a chunk of concrete can be, lived in fleetingly and abandoned, the soul of wilderness signed by men and women passing through. (460)

Here, DeLillo suggests that without human interaction with nature, the concept of nature cannot exist. The insidious presence of the military in this natural landscape, the mythical perception of the West as "other," and the signs of culture found in the bird identification book and the man-made shelter all function to enable Matt's experience of this "natural" landscape. Upon describing the shelter, the narrator explains that the "soul of wilderness" can only exist through human perceptions of the loneliness and isolation of this term.

Of course, this is not a radically new literary approach to conceptions of nature. Think, for example, of Wallace Stevens' "The Snow Man," where "one must have a mind of winter" in order to not project human emotions onto the barren winter landscape (8). Stevens is suggesting that concepts of nature are subjectively constructed. In fact, such understandings of nature reach back to the Romantics. The epigram to Chapter 8 of philosopher Edward Casey's *Getting Back into Place* quotes a letter written by Nathaniel Hawthorne on visiting the Lake District of England in 1855:



On the rudest surface of English earth, there is seen the effect of centuries of civilization, so that you do not quite get at naked Nature anywhere. And then every point of beauty is so well known, and has been described so much, that one must needs look through other people's eyes, and feel as if he were seeing a picture rather than a reality. (229)

Casey explains that in this statement Hawthorne "points to the ineluctable contribution of culture, a contribution not just to the literal landscape, but to our very manner of perceiving this landscape" (230).<sup>10</sup> While the Romantics first associated wilderness with the sublime and celebrated its transcendental properties (Cronon 71–75), as far back as 1855 writers understood that culture, and literature in particular, was informing our perceptions of nature.

### THE PASTORAL AND THE POSTMODERN

Even while recognizing the way in which culture was informing our perceptions of nature, American writers such as Hawthorne still constructed an ideology based on an intense conflict between culture and nature. In fact, this conflict has been a central theme in American literature from the inception of the nation to the modernist movement. In *The Machine in the Garden* Leo Marx comments on American writers' representation of culture as a "vivid contrast" to nature's "sense of all encompassing harmony and peace" (13). He explains that this contrast is "a variation upon the contrast between two worlds, one identified with rural peace and simplicity, the other with urban power and sophistication, which has been used by writers working in the pastoral mode since the time of Virgil" (19). Even though the idealistic version of nature was already part of our cultural understanding, American writers often lamented the coming of civilization into these idealistic settings. In the nineteenth century writings Marx refers to, the contrast consists of physical, material interruptions of the natural landscape. Thus, machines, factories, locomotives, and steamboats seem to intrude upon rural landscapes, creating a conflict between nature and culture.

The technological developments of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries complicate our understanding of this conflict. For instance, the infiltration of image media into the most private sectors of life has raised questions of the origins and authenticity of any seemingly natural scene. Furthermore, the development of the atomic bomb and its apocalyptic threat to all environments has made the postmodern conception of death a totalizing and global one. Additionally, our newest technology, known as nanotechnology, alters the environment at a molecular level that we can neither see, nor

completely understand.<sup>11</sup> These technologies and their effect on humans are central concerns in DeLillo's novels; in this way, DeLillo is clearly describing and responding to a postmodern environment. Reflecting this postmodern environment, DeLillo's novels differ from earlier literature because he presents not a contrast between society and nature, but society's envelopment of nature through the technologies of the late twentieth century. Changing the molecular structure of particles in the environment and creating virtual realities, recent technologies differ drastically from the earlier industrialism in their power to co-opt nature. We find an example of this difference in *White Noise* when the narrator, Jack Gladney, goes to see "the most photographed barn in America." As he and his colleague, Murray Siskind, travel to this popular tourist attraction, Jack's description of the surroundings subverts pastoral expectations of peace and simplicity: billboards, tour buses, a souvenir booth and a multitude of cameras fill the characters' surroundings. Here, culture does not interfere with or stand in contrast to nature in the way that a locomotive train running through the woods or a factory standing aside a lake would interfere with an idyllic view of nature. Instead, culture now obliterates nature, as the process of capturing the image of the barn, not enjoying the agrarian landscape, becomes the central form of pleasure for these tourists. Siskind tells Jack that "we're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura" (WN 12). People are not there to see the barn for its representation of America's agrarian past; they are there to see it because it has been advertised and photographed.

Frank Lentricchia notes how this scene subverts the pastoral image of America by glossing over the natural landscape and turning the barn into image (*Libra as Postmodern Critique* 196). However, this scene also challenges the original myth of idyllic first nature, since a barn is a man-made structure. Although the photographs and souvenirs seem to replace the physical landscape here, even the barn is a human construction. So, while the photographers and signs convert the barn into image and aura, the barn itself transformed the natural landscape before it was ever photographed. In this way, DeLillo demonstrates the way in which our perceptions of "nature" are always part of our cultural construction of the landscape.

If we understand that nature is a culturally constructed concept, and sometimes even object, we must also recognize that "nature" does not have an absolute definition. Cronon explains the complexity of the term nature:

For some modern Americans, ideal nature is clearly a pristine wilderness [...] for others [...] ideal nature is the pastoral countryside or

the small town, while others still would celebrate the suburb or even the city as the natural home of humankind. It hardly needs saying that nothing in physical nature can help us adjudicate among these different visions, for in all cases nature merely serves as the mirror onto which societies project the ideal reflections they wish to see. (Introduction 36)

Seeing the barn as idyllic nature is yet another culturally constructed image of nature, reemphasizing the way in which nature is not a remote condition, the "other" that is not human.

### REAL PLACES

DeLillo's fiction demonstrates the dangers of perceiving nature as "other" by both emphasizing and complicating the significance of place in his novels. In *Getting Back into Place*, philosopher Edward Casey critiques the modern demise of the sense of place. He notes that Aristotle claimed place is before all else and that other ancient philosophers based their thinking around this point. But modern thinkers have been conditioned to work from the primacy of time, and to overlook the significance of place (13–14). He explains, "in the past three centuries in the West—the period of 'modernity'—place has come to be not only neglected but actively suppressed" (xiv). His text argues for a renewed emphasis on place in contemporary thinking: "place, by virtue of its unencompassability by anything other than itself, is at once the limit and the condition of all that exists" (15). Addressing "postmodern" concerns with the ontological, Casey explains that the priority of place "is phenomenological as well as ontological: places are primary in the order of description as in the order of being" (31). DeLillo's novels demonstrate this concept as many of his characters describe themselves and search for their identity in relation to the place in which they exist and the place from which they come.

However, many of DeLillo's characters attempt to find their identity in relation to a myth of a place instead of an actual physical location. David Bell from *Americana*, Gary Harkness from *End Zone*, and an assortment of characters from *Underworld* journey towards the myth of the American West without realizing that their destination is "placeless." They travel towards a concept, not a place. By traveling toward the myth of America, instead of toward any stable location, these characters remain placeless and suffer the consequences of this condition. Casey explains the emotional symptoms of placelessness: "homesickness, disorientation, depression, desolation" (Casey x). These characters experience a sense of placelessness as they attempt to

reach a concept of America, instead of an actual location. However, each of these characters remains attached to some sense of their place of origin or departure, most often in their memories of home. Casey explains this need of place: "as Freud, Bachelard, and Proust all suggest, to refind place—a place we have always already been losing—we may need to return, if not in actual fact then in memory or imagination, to the very earliest places we have known" (x). DeLillo demonstrates this need through his characters' memories of and sometimes longings for their hometowns.<sup>12</sup> Of course, some of DeLillo's characters, such as James Axton in *The Names*, actively and knowingly deny physical place. Despite the fact that he has been living in Greece for years, Axton considers himself a tourist and thus effectively evades responsibility for any particular place. In either case, through his characters' reactions and relations to place DeLillo demonstrates the important role the physical world plays in our perceptions of self and environment.

"The most photographed barn in America" scene in *White Noise* emphasizes the postmodern tendency to deny our place within and our dependence on the material world. The toxicity that invades the material world of *White Noise* is the result of such denial. What becomes important to the characters in *White Noise*, and in DeLillo's other novels, is the nature that exists in their own backyards. In this way, DeLillo's fiction demonstrates the dangers of technology's subversion of the material world and it calls for a new understanding of the environment as a human space that is part of the natural world.

In *Writing for an Endangered World*, Lawrence Buell explains "by 'environment(al)' I refer both to 'natural' and 'human-built' dimensions of the palpable world. Though I shall also insist on the distinction, one must also blur it by recourse to the more comprehensive term" (3). As complicated as the term might be, "nature" does, of course, still exist. The natural world—the trees, the land, the atmosphere—cannot be denied just because our perceptions of "nature" are culturally constructed. However, by including the natural and the human-built into environmental studies, Buell and other ecocritics allow for a more comprehensive and honest examination of the physical world. In "The Trouble with Wilderness" Cronon explains the dangers of perceiving nature and culture as two separate entities: "pretending that we live in the civilized world, but that our 'real' home is in the wilderness allows us to evade responsibility for the lives we actually lead" (81). Matt Shay's camping trip emphasizes this point. After all, Shay works in "the pocket," a secret, underground weapons development site, where he does not witness the results of his work on the natural landscape. He attempts to forget his work by traveling into the wilderness, but the wilderness to which he

travels suggests the insidious presence of the military culture that he attempts to escape.

Contrary to some critical claims, DeLillo's fiction does not suggest that the material world is doomed. Nor does it suggest that because of technology's power to co-opt the real we inevitably fail to form stable identities or connect with the material world. Instead, he presents the dangers of becoming so engrossed in technology, with its ability to subvert the real and alter the environment in subtle ways, that we neglect the material world. In order to keep the material world within our consciousness, we need to understand nature's role in culture. Throughout DeLillo's oeuvre, the characters who do not understand that nature is part of culture and culture is part of nature are unable to achieve a stable identity, and continually evade responsibility. As Curtis Yehner explains, "For DeLillo looks not only at the effect of the environment on the characters, but also at the effect of the characters on the environment. They may be shaped by it, but they have created the milieu that will grant them relief from the burden of existence" (359). These are the characters, like Murray Siskind, who willingly embrace culture's subsumption of the material world.

However, our culturally constructed perceptions of the natural world are not new to our postindustrial society. As the quote from Hawthorne reveals, culture always has influenced our perception of "nature." The danger of postindustrial technologies and capabilities, DeLillo demonstrates, emerges when they allow us to deny the existence of and the need for the material world that we call home, or when they alter this material world in toxic ways. Thus, Siskind may delight in the way the act of photographing the barn has become more relevant than the barn itself, but the other characters do not delight in the cloud of toxic waste that displaces them from their home and threatens their lives.

DeLillo repeatedly relates a character's denial of place or unrealistic idealization of place to a toxic threat or physical deterioration of the place. The postmodern condition, the signs and symbols that interrupt the real, may only be an extension of earlier cultural interpretations of places, such as the paintings and writings about the Lake District that shaped Hawthorne's perceptions of the place. However, the unique, all encompassing power of postindustrial technologies to subvert the real enables DeLillo's characters to easily escape their responsibility for the physical places that remain essential to human existence. In the novels I discuss here, I will demonstrate how characters such as David Bell, James Axton, Jack Gladney and Nick Shay attempt to distance themselves from the material world in order to avoid painful memories, complex personal relationships, or death itself. In each

case the characters devise methods of relinquishing themselves into images and myths of America that subvert the reality of the world immediately surrounding them.

## PLACE AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL UNCONSCIOUS

All is not hopeless in DeLillo, for he brings his readers, and at least some of his characters, back to a recognition of the significance of place. The way in which his characters understand themselves is often revealed through their relationships to the particular places they come from or they reside. Place is often an underlying influence on characters' behavior and knowledge. By demonstrating the subtle influence of place on perceptions and attitudes, DeLillo invokes the positive elements of the "environmental unconscious" that Buell describes: "a residual capacity (of individual humans, authors, texts, readers, communities) to awake to fuller apprehension of physical environment and one's interdependence with it" (22). All of DeLillo's novels demonstrate the need for this type of apprehension of the physical environment, but those that emphasize the significance of particular places, through characters' longings for, or evasions of them, most clearly invoke Buell's "environmental unconscious."<sup>13</sup> In these novels DeLillo presents works of art that illuminate the essential connections between culture and nature, demonstrates how language engages characters with the material world that it represents, and shows how children—with their powers of perception and their ability to adapt—convey the lasting significance of the material world to our cultural survival. In this way, DeLillo invokes the environmental unconscious of his readers and his characters most poignantly through language, art and representations of children.

In *After the Great Divide* Andreas Huyssen claims that "modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture" (vi). While not all modernist texts may represent this division between art and mass culture, the theory of this division is an element of modernist thought that DeLillo avoids. His project is not to distance his art from the ruins of modernism but to emphasize the part artists play in the altered environment damaged by modern culture. It is through DeLillo's representation of artists and art in his novels that he reveals the ability of art to work within its own cultural framework, not in hostility to or distance from it.

This ability to work within his own cultural frameworks does not invalidate DeLillo's claim that "the writer is the person who stands outside society, independent of affiliation and independent of influence" (qtd in Keesey 11).



The artists in his works do stand outside commercial society, but his novels also demonstrate the artists' need to use the mass-produced materials of their current society in order to avoid becoming "part of the system and part of the structure that now, more than ever, we have to resist" (DeLillo, qtd in Keesey 12). This resistance, paradoxically, calls for some immersion into contemporary mass culture, an understanding of the fears and fantasies produced by the postmodern environment. DeLillo presents art as a way to reconfigure our reconfigured landscape. For example, in *Underworld*, DeLillo shows how the post-cold war environment is left in the wake of commercial and military waste, and he suggests that the most creative and life-affirming response to these conditions is to make art out of the fragments of this postmodern waste. The artists in the novel achieve this by using the commercial waste as material for their art, or by presenting wasted landscapes as backgrounds to their art.

This is not to say that DeLillo portrays waste as an ultimately desirable result of consumerism. Waste (nuclear waste, human waste, garbage) is a presence in many of his novels, and DeLillo does not explicitly offer a solution to what we will do with the garbage we cannot aesthetically recycle, nor does he specifically explain how we can save our environment. For this neglect, he may be dismissed by ecocritics. However, as Buell concedes, by making garbage and toxicity into metaphor DeLillo is bringing the problem into our consciousness (*Writing for an Endangered World* 52). Furthermore, DeLillo's illumination of the ways in which artists integrate the waste products of consumerism into the American landscapes in order to create art prompts a reconsideration of what defines waste while still exposing the damage our consumer culture has done to our environment, both human and non-human.

As Buell explains, art plays a major role in awakening the environmental unconscious. Thus, DeLillo's use of artist figures in his novels, and the role that art plays in their lives is central to his presentation of the environmental problems we face. In *American Magic and Dread*, Mark Osteen goes further to examine the spiritually transcendent capabilities of art in DeLillo. While my study extends some of Osteen's claims, my focus is on how art includes the natural landscape (first nature) in refashioning the products of consumerism. DeLillo's artists find their natural surroundings to be essential backgrounds for their artistic creations, revealing the deep and intrinsic connections between culture and nature. Osteen sees DeLillo's characters as "seeking forms of magic—quasi-religious rituals, pseudodivine authorities, miraculous transformations—that they hope will help them rediscover sacredness and community" (1). I argue that these characters' integration

within, or acceptance of, their immediate environment, while still maintaining an awareness of its natural origins, is what brings them to community and sacredness.

The essential tool of DeLillo's art is words, for it is through language that DeLillo confronts the postmodern environment. It is also through the language and speech patterns of his characters that DeLillo illuminates the integration of consumerism and its by-products into the traditional American language. In *The Physics of Language* David Cowart offers an extensive study of language in DeLillo's novels in which he claims, "the enigmatic quality of the DeLillo aesthetic suggests a recognition that language will always resist and betray attempts by the unsubtle to make it a transparent medium, a window on the world of things. Immured in language, one has, like Nabokov's Humbert Humbert, only words to play with—words that refer to other words and such reality as words may construct, but never to the world in its extralinguistic integrity. The named thing escapes" (2). While Cowart demonstrates that in DeLillo's fiction "language subsumes image" (2), it can also serve as a reminder of the pre-modern age, when words more closely signified the things they named. DeLillo establishes the two ways words can function through his presentation of two different kinds of language in the world of his characters. For instance, in *Americana*, the narrator David Bell associates an alteration in language with the conflict between an America of natural beauty and purity and an aggressive world of media images. He demonstrates this association when he explains that at the television network "words and meanings were at odds. Words did not say what was being said nor even its reverse. I learned to speak a new language and soon mastered the special elements of that tongue" (36). DeLillo demonstrates the difference between this new language of the media, where words have no stable meaning, to a more traditional language when Bell explains, "there was a vein of murder snaking across the continent beneath highways, smokestacks, oilrigs and gasworks, a casual savagery fed by the mute cities, and I wondered what impossible distance must be traveled to get from there to here, *what language crossed*, how many levels of being" (emphasis added 124). Bell believes he can transcend the destruction of America by crossing over to a language that is not filled with deception and capable of destruction. However, as I demonstrate in Chapter 2, David Bell only achieves his escape from the network language by removing himself from society completely. He distrusts words and believes that his manuscript cannot convey meaning. His failure to embrace the communicative abilities of words leaves him in isolation and despair.

DeLillo extends the theme of the two types of language in his sixth novel, *The Names*. Here, the main character, James Axton, is an American