

The Green in *White Noise*:
Consumption, Technology, and the Environment

by
Katelyn Hummer

A thesis presented for the B.A. degree
with Honors in
The Department of English
University of Michigan
Winter 2013

Acknowledgements

To all voices of encouragement forming the panasonic halo that compelled a silent pen: though I will refrain from including pages of names, please know that you are my signifieds, my referents—my rock. Words cannot express the depth of my gratitude.

Abstract

In this thesis, I examine consumption in *White Noise* from two aspects: the characters' motivations to consume and, subsequently, the ecological consequences of this consumption. Through this discussion of consumption, I propose a re-thinking of *White Noise*'s canonical status as a postmodern novel, suggesting that perhaps it is a pioneer of a post-postmodern genre.

Chapter One begins with an exploration of why it may be "natural" for Jack and Babbette to want to consume, which reveals that they consume to viscerally remain detached from their inanimate environment, ultimately allowing them to "conquer" death. However, the characters' unnatural, over-consumption results in a state of being too detached; and this feeling of disconnection renders their consumption unfulfilling because they feel an ambiguous lack of a concrete *something*. This feeling of lack results in a desire for an attachment to something *real* and *tangible* in a world of commodities and simulacra, which I propose entails a return to "ancient" "tribal" values.

But, in Chapter Two, I show that a sense of *telos* can also satiate this desire for existential attachment. I first discuss how consumption results in the formation of identities. In a world of commodities designed for immediate exhaustion, we see Jack Gladney consume to constitute an infinite chain of identities to shield him from his own mortality. Yet, again, we see this same ambiguous lack of *something* that renders Jack's succession of identities unfulfilling. I suggest, then, what Jack truly desires is a single, stable identity as a teleologically-oriented producer, an attachment that would give his life meaning. In the second half of this chapter, I shift gears to discuss the consequences of consumption, relaying Deitering's notion that in place of a society of consumers, we may see a society of waste-producers. I then explain how, using the idea of archeology as a tool, Jack may be able to fasten himself to a single identity by restoring the waste of his already-used-up commodities.

In the final chapter, I first explain how mankind has now risen to the status of a geological force, capable of creating ecological crises. I then examine "The Airborne Toxic Event" section through ecological perspectives to show that man's production of waste has the potential to inspire environmental cataclysms, especially when mankind refuses to acknowledge the consequences of its actions. I follow this section with a re-reading of Jack's confrontation with Mink, showing how this scene may serve as an allegory for man's ascension to the status of a geological force: by trying to detach from and conquer our environment, we have, ultimately, *created* a planet that requires us to save it; we must re-attach to our surroundings. I end by positing that *White Noise*'s true accomplishment may lie in its upheaval of the "ancient" and its relocation of that sense of stability within Jack, which mirrors the agency that mankind has attained as a geological force. Perhaps, more optimistically, the post-postmodern will come to show man's ability to re-enchanted his commoditized world, just as *White Noise* does through its descriptions of beautiful sunsets caused by the atmospheric presence of Nyodene D.

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Introduction

The Pope resigning, the latest zombie media fad, environmental toxins, climate change: our society reads like a contemporary version of the book of Deuteronomy, and one that is not too far removed from Don DeLillo's *White Noise*; indeed, DeLillo's 1985 novel features a nun who does not believe in God, a society of consumers who are alive but do not *live*, as well as a cataclysmic man-made toxic event. And Jack Gladney, the novel's narrator and protagonist, is, just as most of us are, trying to find the underlying meaning of it all—an authority amidst all of the chaos. “What is out there? Who are you?”¹ Jack wants to call out to the sky. But the joke is on us: there is no answer. Nothing is out there; our sky and our world have undergone a loss of depth, and there are no concrete referents for signifiers: the sky is just a flat blue plane, and our world is one of waves, radiation, and simulacra. At least, this is what a contemporary postmodern ideology would show us; and the popular consensus of much literary scholarship tells us that *White Noise* is a quintessential piece of postmodern fiction.² Though Frederic Jameson explains in his book *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* that the concept of postmodernism is almost impossible to fit into “any conveniently coherent thumbnail meaning,”³ I believe we can arrive at a better understanding of what postmodernity entails by viewing this ideology within the narrative of industrialization (particularly that of the United States). Indeed, if we accept

¹ Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 2009), 101.

² Richard Powers, introduction to *White Noise*, rev. ed., by Don DeLillo (New York: Penguin, 2009), xii.

³ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durnham: Duke University Press, 1991), xxii.

scholar Leonard Wilcox's notion of Jack being a "modernist displaced in a postmodernist world,"⁴ we may ask: how did he end up there? And, more broadly, how has our contemporary society, potentially, come to find itself in a chapter of Deuteronomy?

We can root this abbreviated narrative of industrialization in the modernist's desire to, as scholar Frederick Turner says, "rise above nature."⁵ In essence, the modernist is struggling *against* nature to overcome the limitations it imposes on mankind. Dipesh Chakrabarty expounds on this modernist desire to rise above nature by noting, "one could say that freedom [which he defines as "a blanket category for diverse imaginations of human autonomy and sovereignty"] has been the most important motif of written accounts of human history of these two hundred and fifty years."⁶ He goes on to say that "the mansion of modern freedom stands on an ever-expanding base of fossil fuel use. Most of our freedoms so far have been energy-intensive."⁷ Bruno Latour corroborates Chakrabarty's insights in his essay on modernization and environmentalism. He explains how the modernist sees himself in opposition with the omnipotent and mysterious Nature: "A modernist, in this great narrative [of the pursuit of freedom and the "Endless Frontier"], is one who expects from Science the revelation that Nature will finally be visible through

⁴ Leonard Wilcox, "Baudrillard, DeLillo's 'White Noise,' and the End of Heroic Narrative," *Contemporary Literature* 32 (1991): 346.

⁵ Frederick Turner, "Escape from Modernism: Technology and the Future of the Imagination," *Harper's* 269 (1984): 55.

⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 208.

⁷ *Ibid.*

the veils of subjectivity—and subjection—that had hidden it to our ancestors.”⁸

Latour further states that the modernist hopes science (i.e. technological innovation) will allow him “to run forward to break all the shackles of ancient existence.”⁹ Well, Latour congratulates the modernist for escaping his attachment to (or his subjugation by) the natural environment.

But what, then, is next for the modernist? Jameson offers an answer:

“Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good.”¹⁰ Now that man has “run forward to break all the shackles of ancient existence”—now that he has reached the end of the “Endless Frontier”—where does the modernist go? He vanishes, moving into the stratosphere of waves and radiation—a vacuum for concrete referents, objectivity, a sense of self, unitary meaning, and definitive answers.¹¹ The modernist is stripped of his sense of *teleos*—having already reached his end—and is “phantomized”; he is now the translucent poster child of postmodernity. Indeed, Jameson defines the postmodern as an “age that has forgotten how to think historically.”¹² What we see in postmodernism is a loss of trajectory—perhaps this is why Walter Benjamin described it as “distracted.”¹³ The postmodern man is presented with a brick wall to climb over—

⁸ Bruno Latour, “‘It’s Development, Stupid!’ or: How to Modernize Modernization,” review of *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility*, by T. Nordhaus and M. Shellenberger (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007), 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

¹¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, x. Steinar Kvale, “Themes of Postmodernity,” in *The Truth about The Truth: De-confusing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World*, ed. Walt Anderson (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), 18-25.

¹² Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

¹³ *Ibid.* Jameson quotes Benjamin in his book.

yet, the wall reaches infinitely into a God-less sky, and he is already too far gone in the clouds to find the ground from which he came.

Here we are *in medias res* of the narrative of industrialization; the postmodern man (that is, “a modernist displaced in a postmodern world”) is caught between a modernist desire for emancipation from the authority of, as economist R.H. Nelson puts it, “a natural order”¹⁴ and a desire for a sense of existential attachment to *something* concrete in the chaos of a world that has lost its belief in higher beings and is experiencing “airborne toxic events.”

In the first half of this thesis, I take a look at the role of consumption¹⁵ plays in straddling the postmodernist’s contracting desires for both detachment from and attachment to a sense of order and permanence; that is, why the postmodern man, like Jack Gladney, feels compelled to consume but is, ultimately, unfulfilled by this consumption. Accordingly, in Chapter One, I explore why it may be “natural” for Jack and his wife Babette to want to consume; this decidedly “biological” perspective reveals that they may consume in order to remain viscerally detached from their external environment, which allows them to (perceivably) “conquer” death. I concurrently tie this desire to physically detach and dominate one’s environment (to maintain an animate form among inanimate surroundings) to the modernist’s desire to rise above nature by “consuming” their environment via

¹⁴ Robert H. Nelson, *The New Holy Wars: Economic Religion vs. Environmental Religion in Contemporary America* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 10.

¹⁵ I use consumption in the broadest sense—ranging from food to commodities to technologies (like television).

technology (that is, the process of industrialization) to become almost God-like.¹⁶

Yet, I show that it is possible for Jack and Babette to become too detached through the unnaturalness of their over-consumption, which leaves them longing for an attachment to something concrete—a longing that also renders their consumption unfulfilling. I link this feeling of being *too* detached to the postmodernist who is lost in a world of waves, radiation, and simulacra (once “nature is gone for good”). By the end of this chapter, I show how Jack seems to find a sense of natural order or grounding through a return to “ancient”¹⁷ and “tribal” values.

I take a different view of the motivations behind, particularly, Jack’s consumption in Chapter Two, referencing Zygmunt Bauman’s notion that postmodernism marks the point at which a producer society gave way to a consumer society. In this section, Jack’s consumption still provides a way of (perceptibly) detaching from death, but, through this socio-historical lens, consuming commodities now becomes a way for Jack (as an example of the consumer Bauman describes) to form an on-going chain of identities that can, in Jack’s mind, stand in between him and his mortality. However, we again see how this same ambiguous lack of a concrete *something* renders Jack’s consumption (i.e. the formation of his seemingly infinite chain of identities) unsatisfying. In this chapter, I propose that

¹⁶ Latour, “It’s Development,” 12.

¹⁷ For the purposes of this thesis, I interpret “ancient” to signify a time when there was widespread faith in a Truth underneath all of the world’s twists and turns—that there was a force behind all instances, granting them purpose. Whether it is God or Nature, antiquity seems to reassure us that humans are not in complete control and are inferior to at least one entity. By this token, “ancient” also connotes a reassuring concreteness: definitive identity and unitary meaning; a time when signifiers were cemented to their referents.

this concrete *something* is a sense of *telos* granted by the single, temporally oriented identity of a producer, as Bauman describes it.

It is at this point where my thesis shifts gears: instead of examining the *motivations* of consumption, I now focus on the *consequences* of over-consumption (both fictional and actual) in a postmodern society. In the second half of Chapter Two, I expound on Cynthia Deitering's relaying Deitering's notion that in place of a society of consumers, we may see a society of waste-producers. I then explain how, using the idea of archeology as a tool, Jack may be able to fasten himself to a single identity by restoring the waste of his already-used-up commodities, thereby satiating his desire for a deeper sense of existential attachment to something permanent.

In the final chapter of this thesis, the *deus ex machine* appears: the consequences of our consumption are the means to a permanent ground to which the postmodernist can attach *without* surrendering the agency that the modernist has strived to attain over the natural world; in fact, the postmodernist must entirely own (and own *up* to) that agency. The postmodern man can find salvation by *himself* becoming that missing authority he craves. Indeed, with the arrival of the 21st century in our real world, as Chakrabarty explains, some scientists have proposed that humans are now a geological force; that is, we now have the agency to affect our planet on a global scale, creating ecological crises.¹⁸

¹⁸ Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," 206.

Using this ecological perspective in which mankind has now risen to a greater cosmic authority, I examine “The Airborne Toxic Event” section of *White Noise*. Through this analysis, I show that man’s production of waste has the potential to inspire environmental cataclysms, especially when mankind refuses to acknowledge the consequences of its actions. I follow this section with a re-reading of Jack’s confrontation with Mink, demonstrating how this scene may serve as an allegory for man’s ascension to the status of a geological force: by trying to detach from and conquer our environment, we have, ultimately, *created* a planet that requires us to save it; we must re-attach to our surroundings. Indeed, Jack finds a sense of fulfillment as Mink’s savior—and Latour and Chakrabarty urge us to do the same with our planet.

Ultimately, my goal for the pay-off of this thesis is a re-thinking of *White Noise*’s canonical status as a postmodern novel; I believe that we can perhaps instead view DeLillo’s masterpiece as a beginning of a post-postmodern genre. In Chapter One, I agree with Richard Powers that what distinguishes *White Noise* from the postmodern genre is, as Powers states in his introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of the novel, “a naked earnestness hiding inside a [perceptibly postmodern] style”¹⁹—a desire to return to the permanence of “ancient” values in a chaotic world of simulacra.²⁰ At the end of Chapter Two, I transmute this idea of what may constitute a post-postmodern genre and how the attributes are present in *White Noise*. I posit that a focus on the *effects* of excess consumption (or the

¹⁹ Powers, introduction, x.

²⁰ Ibid, xii.

accumulation of waste)—which is what Deitering calls a “toxic consciousness”²¹—may be the stable ground of natural order that the postmodern man unconsciously desires. In Chapter Three, I take a more optimistic view of *White Noise* and the potential for a post-postmodern genre. As I discuss in Chapter Two, mankind’s actions *are* rooted in the real world, but, if he becomes conscious and *conscientious* of his capabilities, these capabilities may come to allow him to re-enchant a commoditized world.

Literature that conveys man’s power to instill meaning in a world in which a pope has resigned, our climate is changing, there are mass species extinctions, and zombies have come to represent consumer culture is exactly what I think we need. Perhaps global warming can melt the wintry satire of postmodernism, allowing hope to rise up through a sense of human agency: for, unlike the book of Deuteronomy, we can read *White Noise* as a kind of beginning rather than an end.

²¹ Cynthia Deitering, “The Postnatural Novel,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ed. Harold Fromm et al. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 196.

I. The Biological Need to Consume

In the beginning, we are bombarded with Waffelos and Kabooms, Mystic Mints and Dum-Dum pops, inflatable rafts, soccer balls, and a long line of station wagons reflecting back human faces—perhaps even our own. We are the new, the proud: the consumers. And, in *White Noise*, consumption plays no small role. Indeed, literary critic Arno Heller tells us that for the characters of *White Noise* (especially for Jack Gladney) consumption becomes “ritualistic.”²² To be clear, consumption, according to scholar Zygmunt Bauman, entails:

...using things up: eating them, wearing them, playing with them and otherwise causing them to satisfy one’s needs or desires...To consume also means to destroy. In the course of consumption, the consumed things cease to exist, literally or spiritually...they are ‘used up’ physically to the point of complete annihilation.²³

So *why* do these characters feel compelled to consume? And what lies beneath this desire that ultimately renders their consumption unfulfilling?

I will first posit a biological answer to these inquiries, which is a perspective that becomes particularly relevant when we consider two essential questions that literary scholar Tom LeClair educes from *White Noise*; those are: “How has the

²² Arno Heller, “Simulacrum vs. Death: An American Dilemma in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*,” in *Simulacrum America*, ed. Carolin Auer et al. (Rochester: Camden House, 2000), 38.

²³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Work, Consumerism, and the New Poor* (New York: Open University Press, 2005), 23. Bauman is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom.

nature of nature changed? [And] if so, has our relation to nature changed?”²⁴

Accordingly, in this chapter, I will first examine why it seems biologically “natural” that the characters of *White Noise* feel the need to consume and how that need corresponds to the modernist desire to “break all the shackles of ancient existence” mentioned in the introduction. I will then posit how the “unnaturalness” of the Gladneys’ consumption is linked to the insatiability of that desire to consume, tying this insatiability to the postmodernist’s existential displacement. Ultimately, I show that the characters are unable to reconcile their desire for autonomy (which I believe stems from their fear of environmental attachment) with their desire for a sort of existential attachment. This chapter closes with an extended examination of how Jack, by choosing an attachment to his humanity over the acquisition of autonomy, manages to quell the instability of his “need” to consume. The pay-off of this chapter lies in how the characters’ desire for some sort of deeper, primal attachment challenges *White Noise*’s status as a postmodern novel.

To establish what is “natural” about the Gladneys’ desire to consume, we may turn to both Dr. Lenny Moss’s²⁵ essay “Detachment Genomics and the Nature of Being Human” and Pieter Lemmens’²⁶ essay “The Detached Animal—on the Technical Nature of Being Human.”²⁷ Lemmens expounds upon Moss’s principle of

²⁴ Tom LeClair, “Closing the Loop: *White Noise*,” in *White Noise: Text and Criticism*, ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 394.

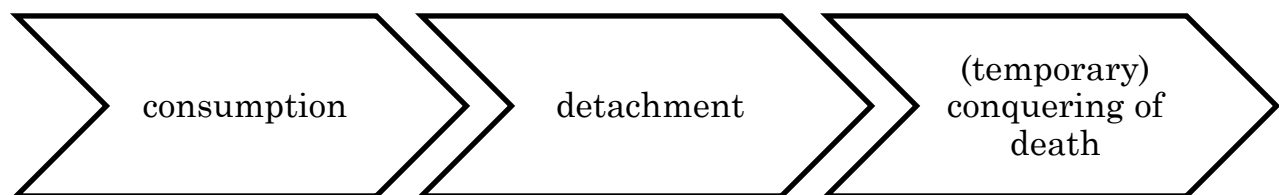
²⁵ Lenny Moss is an associate professor at the University of Exeter with Ph.D.s in both biochemistry and philosophy.

²⁶ Pieter Lemmens is a Wageningen University researcher with a background in biology and a Ph.D. in philosophy.

²⁷ Lemmens’ essay is an explication of and elaboration on Moss’s original essay “Detachment Genomics.”

detachment.²⁸ The principle of detachment is concerned with the idea that all living things are detached from nature’s material world—their form persists *in spite* of nature—but they are also dependent upon their non-living environment for the matter they require to maintain their constant form.²⁹ Lemmens defines detachment as “the extent to which an entity maintains independence from the larger fabric of reality, from ‘physical nature’, the extent to which it is isolated from the rest of the world and the ability to persist as such, i.e., to preserve this state of ‘autonomy.’”³⁰ The *union* of matter and form, then, is when the animate is assimilated back into the inanimate realm: attachment is death.³¹ To simplify this concept: an organism’s consumption of a part of its environment equals detachment from this environment, which, ultimately, results in a temporary mastery of death.

Figure 1: The Principle of Detachment



²⁸ Pieter Lemmens, “The Detached Animal—On the Technical Nature of Being Human,” in *New Visions of Nature: Complexity and Authenticity*, ed. Martinus Drenthen et al. (New York: Springer, 2009), 117.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 118-9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

Again, death is when an organism becomes attached to its non-living surroundings: the material environment. By this token, we can see that the characters of *White Noise* are “naturally” inclined to consume to escape their fear of death.

Correspondingly, Bruno Latour provides a historically ideological context for this notion that an organism desires detachment from its non-living environment in his essay “How to Modernize Modernization.” He argues that the modernist wants to use “Science, technology, markets, etc.” to create “a future in which there will be less and less of these imbroglios [of the living and non-living],”³² as well as to “advance toward a greater emancipation [from his entanglement with Nature and the non-living world].”³³ Lemmens even mentions that “the distance principle of technology [entails] the liberation of the human body from contact with external objects.”³⁴ The modernist’s quest for freedom from his environment involves the consumption (or the “using up”) of this environment via technology; indeed, Dipesh Chakrabarty says that “the mansion of modern [human] freedom stands on an ever-expanding base of fossil fuel use”³⁵—here, modernist emancipation lies in the consumption of fossil fuels.

Now we can draw a parallel between the modernist’s desire to free himself from his omnipotent non-living environment (through technological advance) and an organism’s biological “need” to detach itself from its inanimate surroundings

³² Latour, “It’s Development,” 6.

³³ Ibid, 5.

³⁴ Lemmens, “The Detached Animal,” 125.

³⁵ Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 208.

(through consumption). The final goal for both modernist and organism is the same: a (temporary) conquering of death. While, from Lemmens' view, this conquering of death is quite visceral for an organism, Latour's modernist "conquers" death by becoming God-like—being a tier above his surroundings.³⁶ Indeed, Fredrick Turner explains that "one of the goals of modernism" is to "rise above nature."³⁷ But this drive to "conquer" one's surroundings seems justifiably "natural" through the principle of detachment.

This digression on the biological need for living things to consume in order to remain alive (i.e. to maintain a separation from their environment) and how this biological need intertwines with the modernist desire for emancipation from a non-living environment provides a backdrop for examining why the characters of *White Noise* feel compelled to consume; that is, the principle of detachment allows us to read the *White Noise* characters' consumption as a way of detaching from their environment to "beat" death. But, as I will concurrently show, the Gladneys' consumption in an attempt to "conquer" death goes *too* far and has a price: over-consumption empties out meaning from their daily lives. Indeed, there are several instances in which the characters of *White Noise* become separated from their environment as a result of their consumption. But, eventually, they become *too* detached, resulting in a *desire* for a sense of attachment—an attachment that

³⁶ Indeed, the conclusion of Latour's essay employs an analogy that equates humans with God as creators. Latour, "It's Development," 11-12.

³⁷ Turner, "Escape from Modernism," 55.

modernists may have overlooked in their desire to “break all the shackles of ancient existence.”³⁸

Babette

We may first examine Jack’s wife Babette, whose “consumption” of a drug called Dylar—a pill-like apparatus that steadily releases a medication to quell a person’s fear of death—is a manifestation of Moss’s principle of detachment. Yet, from the way Jack describes Babette before and after she takes Dylar, we catch glimpses of his longing for the sense of attachment Babette loses after she takes the medication. To begin with the principle of detachment, we can consider that Babette is consuming Dylar to subvert the inevitability of her eventual death—to make the thought of it go away. At the same time, the actual, *visible* result of her consumption is Babette’s detachment from her surroundings. After discovering Babette has been taking Dylar, Jack notices the suspicious changes in her behavior. He notes:

Babette, for her part, could not seem to produce a look that wasn’t significant. In the middle of conversations she turned to gaze at snowfalls, sunsets or parked cars in a sculptured and eternal way. These contemplations began to worry me. She’d always been an outward-looking woman with a bracing sense of particularity, a trust in the tangible and real. This private gazing was a form of estrangement not only from those of us around her but from the very things she watched so endlessly.³⁹

³⁸ Latour, “It’s Development,” 5.

³⁹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 176.

We may assume, as Jack does, that Babette’s “estrangement” from her environment (i.e. snowfalls, sunsets, and parked cars) is a result of her consumption of Dylar. Here, we seem to see a clear demonstration of Lemmens’ biological description of detachment: Babette’s “estrangement” from the world around her as a result of taking in Dylar corresponds to Lemmens’ notion of an organism gaining “independence” from its physical surroundings via consumption. Even further, Babette’s consumption of Dylar is her way of conquering death, which results in the fissure between Babette and her environment—just as an organism’s more general act of consumption is its way of detaching from its environment in order to temporarily stave off death. Through this biological lens, Babette’s “need” to consume Dylar seems only “natural”: it (presumably) maintains her autonomy in the face of death. Babette makes her inclination to avoid the fear of death sound even more “natural” when she tells Jack that “no animal has this condition [of being conscious of its own death]. This is a human condition. Animals fear many things...but their brains aren’t sophisticated enough to accommodate this particular state of mind.”⁴⁰ By separating the fear of death from the animal world, Babette attributes a greater sense of “naturalness” to her desire to consume Dylar, as this medication will eliminate her “unnatural” fear of death.

It is also worth noting that Jack describes Babette’s gaze—the very symptom that indicates her estrangement—as “eternal.” There is significance in Jack’s diction: Babette’s gaze that “estranges” her from her surroundings is free from

⁴⁰ Ibid, 186.

death (it is “eternal”); the immortality associated with Babette’s estrangement is intuitively linked to Lemmens’ claim that detachment from matter constitutes life.⁴¹ Thinking of Babette as an organism that consumes to distinguish itself from its physical environment (thereby conquering the omnipresence of death) provides us with a biological explanation for this need to consume. Indeed, within Babette’s desire to break free from death (the ultimate human limitation) and within her subsequent environmental “estrangement,” we see the reflection of Latour’s modernist who wants to conquer all environmental attachments to become almost God-like.

However, immortality is intuitively *not* “natural”; in fact, Jack has compared Babette to an inanimate *sculpture* through her gaze. Let us compare this aforementioned description of Babette to how Jack describes her at the beginning of the novel: he calls her “a full-souled woman, a lover of daylight and dense life...[she was] unlike [Jack’s] former wives, who had a tendency to feel estranged from the objective world.”⁴² This image of Babette as a full-souled lover of daylight and dense life seems to be the *epitome* of all that is “natural” and *alive*; yet, this description is of the pre-Dylar Babette. Consequently, we can conclude that Babette’s ingesting of Dylar is a demonstration of the Gladneys’ consumption going too far, resulting in Babette becoming “unnatural” (“sculptured”) and *too* detached from the world around her.

⁴¹ Lemmens, “The Detached Animal,” 118.

⁴² DeLillo, *White Noise*, 6.

Yet, Moss and Lemmens extrapolate this “unnaturalness” of being to mankind as a species, describing man as “the ‘outsider’ of nature, the animal thoroughly implicated in the ongoing secession from nature.”⁴³ Interestingly enough, Moss seems to have a name for Babette’s estranged state of “private gazing.” He calls it the “pain of detachment.”⁴⁴ In trying to conquer death—which is, by virtue, trying to supersede what is biologically “natural”—we (humans), in effect, become *too* free, *too detached* to a point that is painful or distressing to us.⁴⁵ Lemmens, expounding on Moss’s concepts, explains that this “pain of detachment” is a result of a transformation in “[man’s] way of ‘being-in-the-world’”⁴⁶; man, as Lemmens goes on to explain, goes from being enmeshed within his environment, moving through it with an animalistic “instinct-driven vitality,” to being detached in a vacuum of “existence” that Lemmens calls an “*ek static* way of being.”⁴⁷ This metamorphosis that Lemmens details is exactly what we see in Babette through Jack’s passage. She transforms from a woman with a “dense life” intertwined with the “tangible and real,” always “*doing* things in measured sequence, skillfully, with seeming ease”⁴⁸ (displaying an “instinct-driven vitality”) to an empty form that is “estranged” from both her animate and inanimate surroundings, “private[ly] gazing” in on a world from which she has detached herself by consuming Dylar. By using Dylar to attempt a detachment from and conquering of death, Babette also

⁴³ Lemmens, “The Detached Animal,” 118.

⁴⁴ Lenny Moss, “Detachment, Genomics and the Nature of Being Human” (University of Exeter, 2008), 12.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Lemmens, “The Detached Animal,” 124.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* By “*ek static*,” Lemmens seems to be referring to a state of being outside one’s biological self.

⁴⁸ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 6. Emphasis mine.

becomes detached from her own “instinct-driven vitality” that tethers her to the “real,” “natural” world. And it is Babette’s missing aura of attachment to the “real” world that Jack desires after she has taken Dylar.

Jack

Within Jack Gladney we see another instance of this spectrum of biological and existential attachment. First, his experience with the toxic Nyodene-D reverse engineers a demonstration of Moss’s principle of detachment. Jack’s incident shows us that physiological *attachment* with the non-living world (i.e. breathing in the Nyodene D-ridden atmosphere)—again, the *union* of a living form with its surroundings—results in death. In a conversation with Murray, Jack explains: “That little breath of Nyodene has planted a death in my body...I’ve got death inside me...Even if it doesn’t kill me in a direct way, it will probably outlive my body. I could die in a plane crash and the Nyodene D would be thriving as my remains were laid to rest.”⁴⁹ Jack’s words correspond to Moss’s view of death as an integration—a “relapse into the global flow of nature.”⁵⁰ Death is a *thing* that can be physically “planted” in the living body via the body’s attachment to the outside world (specifically, the attachment of Jack’s lungs to the atmospheric Nyodene D particles). Moreover, the notion of death as a union of a being and its environment is particularly apparent in Jack’s vision of Nyodene D “thriving” in his non-living remains; this image is an extensive integration of living form and environment.

⁴⁹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 144.

⁵⁰ Lemmens, “The Detached Animal,” 118.

Therefore, if death is the result of an attachment to one's surroundings, *life*—or an escape from death—naturally appears to be the result of a detachment from these surroundings.

In fact, we eventually see Jack try to detach from the Nyodene D particles within him—that is, to "defeat his own death,"⁵¹ a death guaranteed by his attachment to these particles. Jack attempts this detachment through the ultimate consumption: "killing others,"⁵² which eventually entails Jack's attempted murder of Willie Mink (the creator of Dylar with whom Babette had an extra-marital affair). Killing as a form of consumption is granted credence by Bauman's notion that "to consume also means to destroy."⁵³ Moreover, Jack's "need" to "consume" Mink's life in order to save his own is not only made to seem "natural" by the principle of detachment, but this desire is also posited to be "natural" by Murray; he asks Jack, "Isn't there a sludgy region you'd rather not know about? A remnant of some prehistoric period when dinosaurs roamed the earth and men fought with flint tools? When to kill was to live?"⁵⁴ To feel compelled to detach from death through violence and conquering of an opponent is, according to Murray, what is "natural." Here, we can draw a parallel to the modernist's desire to overpower his environment in order to, as Murray puts it, "buy life."⁵⁵ Indeed, scholar R.H. Nelson corroborates this notion by explaining that the modernist views "wild nature" as

⁵¹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 277.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Bauman, *Work*, 23.

⁵⁴ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 279.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 277.

something to be “controlled” by the “newfound power of human beings,” a power that was brought about by “the rise of organized technological advance”⁵⁶—a power that places mankind a tier *above* nature, making humans God-like. More simply, autonomy over one’s environment results in the affirmation of *life*.

But this idea of detachment gets complicated for Jack; just as consuming Dylar not only estranges Babette from the environment "she watched so endlessly," but also from "[her family] around her," Jack's (attempted) "consumption" of Mink's life not only (theoretically) emancipates him from the death that Nyodene has "planted" in his body, but it also renders Jack incapable of seeing Mink as a fellow human being. More simply, Jack's attempt to detach himself from "that little breath" of his toxic environment (and his death) results in his subsequent detachment from his humanity. This detachment from feelings of empathy indicates that Jack’s “consumption” of Mink has gone *too* far and has a sense of “unnaturalness” about it.

To specify how Jack becomes detached from his sense of humanity, we may first look to his disconnect from a sense of empathy in the scene when he drives to Mink's hotel to kill him. At first, Jack refers to Mink as "Mr. Gray,"⁵⁷ a formality that distances the flesh-and-blood Mink from Jack's plot to kill him. Moreover, while moving to enact his murder plot, Jack references his new sense of sight no less than four times—saying things like "I saw things new."⁵⁸ With this "second

⁵⁶ Nelson, *The New Holy Wars*, 5.

⁵⁷ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 290.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 291, 297.

sight,"⁵⁹ Jack sees Mink's fear as "brilliant" and calls it "beautiful."⁶⁰ And, after shooting Mink in the torso, Jack perceives Mink's pain as "beautiful, intense"⁶¹ and only sees his blood "in terms of dominant wavelength, luminance, [and] purity."⁶² Thus, as a result of his (perceived) "consumption" of Mink, Jack's detachment is two-fold: his emancipation from his environment (and, theoretically, his death) results in his detachment from any sense of empathy towards Mink. Jack registers Mink's fear, pain, and blood just as a machine would. Here, again, we see that Jack's consumption has gone too far, and he becomes *too* detached. The "nature" of his "human nature" has changed; it has become emotionless (indeed, Jack describes the "nameless emotions [that] thudded on [his] chest"⁶³).

However, unlike the unresolved effects of Dylar on Babette that "estrangle" her from the surrounding world, the "unnaturalness" of Jack's "consumption" of Mink is corrected. After Jack thinks he has killed Mink and puts the gun in his hand to make it look like a suicide, Mink shoots Jack in the wrist, and "the world" of "extra dimensions" and "super perceptions" "collapse[s] inward."⁶⁴ Jack experiences a return of visceral sensation; he says, "The pain was searing. Blood covered my forearm, wrist and hand. I staggered back, moaning, watching blood drip from the tips of my fingers."⁶⁵ We can view this scene as Jack's reattachment to a "real" and "tangible" world—his blood and physical pain reconnect him to his own physical

⁵⁹ Ibid, 295.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 297.

⁶¹ Ibid, 298.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid, 297.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 298.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

body as well as to his mortality. But, it is not only his own mortality with which Jack is reattaching; the gravity of his physical pain also prompts "the restoration of the normal order of matter and sensation," after which Jack says, "I felt I was seeing [Mink] for the first time as a person. The old human muddles and quirks were set flowing again. Compassion, remorse, mercy."⁶⁶ These "old human muddles and quirks" are what seem to be "natural," not a prehistoric desire of killing to live. Thus, it would appear that we are seeing a restoration of the "nature of nature": Jack's pain of existential detachment is displaced by a physical pain that also reawakens his sense of empathy for (or *attachment* to) a fellow human being.

Tribalism vs. Technology

So far, we have examined what happens when the Gladneys' consumption gets too extreme; but we have yet to discuss what exactly defines the boundary between natural and unnatural consumption. The answer lies with technology; Lemmens elucidates this notion, stating, "Man's extreme detachment is not the result of a biological evolution, it is the outcome of a *techno-evolution*, or more exactly: of a co-evolution of technology and man's biology."⁶⁷ This intertwining of man's biology and his technologies results in the creation of what Lemmens calls "self-made and self-enclosed 'spheres'" that not only detach (and "protect") him from an external nature, but also distance him "from his own 'internal' nature as well."⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Ibid, 299.

⁶⁷ Lemmens, "The Most Detached Animal," 123.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 125.

Essentially, it is man's use of technology that makes his consumption "unnatural" and subsequently results in man becoming *too* detached from his surroundings.

Indeed, the idea that consumption via technology causes man's pain of detachment is exactly what we see in Babette's ingestion of Dylar. When Jack describes Dylar, he places it in direct opposition to the "natural," saying that this drug is a "[technology] to swallow that would rid [the] soul of an ancient fear [of death]." ⁶⁹ The result of Babette's consumption of the drug is her "*ek static* way of being" ⁷⁰ that detaches her from her "love of daylight and dense life," making her seem "sculptured"—entirely sealed off from a thriving "natural" world around her. Moreover, the Zumwalt automatic that Jack uses to shoot Mink is a technology that similarly renders Jack's ultimate form of consumption "unnatural." Jack describes the effect of the Zumwalt, saying, "The gun created a second reality for me to inhabit...it was a reality I could control, secretly dominate." ⁷¹ This "second reality" that the gun creates resembles Lemmens' description of the "self-made and self-enclosed 'spheres'" that man manufactures with his technology. Furthermore, once Jack is in this "reality" or "sphere," he loses any sense of "the natural order" of his humanity. Thus, we may answer the first question that LeClair educes from *White Noise*—that is, "Has the nature of nature changed?"—with an apparent *yes*, the nature of nature has changed due to the intertwining of man's biology with his technology.

⁶⁹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 201.

⁷⁰ Lemmens, "The Most Detached Animal," 124.

⁷¹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 283.

This same dichotomy between the “natural” and the technological crops up in Pico Iyer's review of *White Noise*. He points out that a "driving theme" in the novel is: "the rising struggle between tribalism and technology...in [Jack] Gladney's world, primal instincts are threatened by a conception of progress that would transform men from animals into machines."⁷² These "primal instincts" seem to align with "the old human muddles and quirks" like "compassion, remorse, and mercy"—they are what is inherently “natural.” Technology and "progress," on the other hand, correspond to man's acquisition of autonomy; this autonomy amounts to a detachment from a threatening environment and from the “natural,” tribal "muddles and quirks" like compassion. In the case of Babette, as previously mentioned, her attempts to gain autonomy through the technology of Dylar result in her estrangement from her surroundings as well as her “full-souled” internal nature; for Jack, his quest for autonomy via the technology of the Zumwalt automatic consequently threatens to erase his sense of humanity. Indeed, the acquisition of autonomy also threatens, as Iyer puts it, to transform men (or, more specifically, Jack and Babette) into machines.

To frame this dichotomy in a historical context, we can again return to the modernist notion of human progress: to rise above nature, "to break all the shackles of ancient existence" through technological advance; the environment is an antagonistic force, tethering man to the realm of the mortal, making him susceptible to death. As a result, the modernist sees technology as man's self-

⁷² Pico Iyer, “A Connoisseur of Fear,” in *White Noise: Text and Criticism*, ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 381.

created armor that liberates him from his environment, elevating him to the level of a god. We may recall that Nelson credits “the newfound power of human beings” to “the rise of organized technological advances.”⁷³ But something Murray says about technology complicates the modernist's black and white worldview: “[Technology] creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other.”⁷⁴ What happens when man becomes fused with his armor—trapped in a “second reality” and permanently detached from old human muddles, daylight, and dense life? Is he not human anymore, but, rather, just a machine? Does he bring about his own extinction?

It follows that postmodernism is the result of the modernist becoming *too* detached from the “real” and “tangible” world as a result of his technology. What happens when the modernist has used technological innovation (such as the burning of fossil fuels⁷⁵) to “run forward to break *all* the shackles of ancient existence?”⁷⁶ As I mentioned in the introduction, Jameson seems to answer this question by stating, “Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good.”⁷⁷ Now that the modernist has “consumed” or “used up” his environment so thoroughly that he has reached the end of the “Endless Frontier,”⁷⁸ he vanishes, moving into the stratosphere of waves and radiation. It is as if the modernist has detached from his antagonistic environment

⁷³ Nelson, *The New Holy Wars*, 5.

⁷⁴ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 272.

⁷⁵ Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 208.

⁷⁶ Latour, “It’s Development,” 5. Emphasis mine.

⁷⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

⁷⁸ Latour, “It’s Development,” 3.

so completely that he is in outer space: far away from all that is “natural,” “ancient,” “real,” and “tangible”—including his own sense of self.

Or perhaps the modernist just becomes more and more dependent upon his television, a technology that Murray describes as a source of “waves and radiation”⁷⁹ and Wilcox calls “a ‘peak experience’ of postmodern culture.”⁸⁰ In fact, David Foster Wallace comments on how television has contributed to this existential sense of being too detached; he says, “‘Television,’ after all, literally means ‘seeing far’...[and it] trains us to relate to real live personal up-close stuff the same way we relate to the distant and exotic, as if separated from us by physics and glass, extant only as performance.”⁸¹ It is worth noting that this *television* is precisely how Babette “privately” views her “estranged” surroundings and how Jack views Mink with a “second sight” while caught up in the hyperreal of “extra dimensions” and “super perceptions.”

But in *television something* is missing—some essential, visceral, and “natural” connection. Wilcox calls this something “a realm of meaning,” one that does not exist “beyond surfaces, networks, and commodities” in an “information society.”⁸² Indeed, this *something* is what causes what Moss calls man’s “pain of detachment.” The modernist “frees” himself from (or gains autonomy over) his “natural” and “ancient existence” through technology, and, as a result, the

⁷⁹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 51.

⁸⁰ Wilcox, “The End of Heroic Narrative,” 350. Wilcox makes this inference about television from a section of Murray’s dialogue.

⁸¹ David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1997), 64.

⁸² Wilcox, “End of Heroic Narrative,” 350.

postmodernist displaced in the realm of waves and radiation is *too* free—having no stable ground to which to attach himself; *something* is missing. Here, we witness the irreconcilability between complete autonomy—detachment from and control over the environment that allows one to “conquer” death—and a type of “tribal” existential attachment.

Tribalism Trumps Technology

By the end of *White Noise*, we see valuing of tribalism, or a conventional sense of what is “natural” or “real,” over the autonomy afforded by technology. We must first take into account Moss’s elaboration on the *problems* caused by total emancipation (as a result of technology and consumption); he says:

Simply expanding the internal degrees of freedom is not a solution in itself [to “cure” environmental susceptibility and mortality], indeed it is the source of a potential problem and crisis [the pain of detachment]. If everything is always up for grabs where does order come from?⁸³

Relating Moss’s inquiry back to the analogy of the postmodernist floating aimlessly in outer space: where does one find stable ground in a vacuum? Yet, Jack actually seems to answer Moss's question when he equates "the restoration of the normal order of matter and sensation" with feeling "the old human muddles and quirks" (i.e. "primal instincts) like "compassion, remorse, and mercy" for Mink. It follows, then, that "order" comes from a return to tribal values or what is “natural.” Indeed, Moss later says that the "dire need of compensation for the pain of detachment" resulted in a "motive force of social cohesion."⁸⁴ More simply, social cohesion, which

⁸³ Moss, “Detachment,” 12.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 15.

we can venture to say is a primal instinct, fills the void brought about by excessive detachment.

However, we must acknowledge that excessive detachment is not without its appeal. Murray tells Jack that technology (which is intimately linked to consumption) is "what we invented to conceal the terrible secret of our decaying bodies."⁸⁵ Technology and consumption are vehicles to autonomy—to overcoming "our decaying bodies" (bodies slowly being reclaimed by inanimate surroundings); and this autonomy is where the appeal of extreme detachment lies.

Nonetheless, in the end when he is confronted with the irreconcilability of autonomy and existential attachment, Jack ultimately appears to favor the "ancient" and "natural" human muddles over the sense of "control" and "domination"⁸⁶ that the Zumwalt automatic affords him. More specifically, once "the normal order of matter and sensation" is restored for Jack after being shot by Mink, Jack says that "the key to selflessness"—to humanity—is to "forgive the foul body [and] embrace it whole."⁸⁷ Within the scene, Jack appears to be referring to Mink, but, taking the final pages of the novel into account, we see that perhaps Jack is actually referring to his own "decaying" physical body. Moreover, in these final pages, we see Jack distance himself from technology; he says, "I am making it a point to stay away [from Dr. Chakravarty, who wants to see how his "death is progressing]...I am afraid of the imaging block. Afraid of its magnetic fields, its

⁸⁵ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 272.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 283.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 300.

computerized nuclear pulse. Afraid of what it knows about me."⁸⁸ By attributing a life (a "nuclear pulse) to technology that is separate from his own, Jack assures us that the progress of technology is not threatening to transform him "into a machine."⁸⁹ And so it appears that Jack accepts his death, sitting with it, resigning himself to the biological and uncontrollable "nature of nature." More broadly, Jack reconnects with a sense of the "natural order" of life—one that unavoidably ends in death.

As a further demonstration of Jack's return to "ancient" tribal values, the novel begins the home stretch of its ending with social cohesion and a different order of environmental attachment that entails a figurative connection. Crowds of people, including Jack, Babette, and their son Wilder, have gathered to watch one of the brilliant sunsets that, "ever since the airborne toxic event...[have] become almost unbearably beautiful."⁹⁰ Jack elaborates:

Warm nights brought crowds to the overpass...Something golden falls, a softness delivered to the air. There are people walking dogs, there are kids on bikes, a man with a camera and long lens, waiting for his moment. It is not until some time after dark has fallen...that we slowly begin to disperse...restored to our separate and defensible selves.⁹¹

In this passage, we see the environment metamorphose from the modernist's view of it as the antagonistic other to a catalyst of social cohesion; instead of the environment threatening to attach Jack to its Nyodene D particles, we are seeing the environment creating beauty *from* this same toxic debris, resulting in a

⁸⁸ Ibid, 309.

⁸⁹ Iyer, "A Connoisseur of Fear," 381.

⁹⁰ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 162.

⁹¹ Ibid, 308-9.

communal gathering. Indeed, Jack uses a collective "we" throughout the majority of the passage and contrasts the crowd's tribal gathering with a return to their "separate and defensible selves" only *after* the sun has slipped below the horizon. Moreover, I believe there is significance in the fact that the sky is only able to produce these "unbearably beautiful" sunsets after it has become infused with Nyodene D particles; that is, the same environmental component that has "planted" death inside of Jack has produced the sunsets that inspire social cohesion. Once Jack forfeits any sense of autonomy—once he accepts death (the Nyodene D within him) and distances himself from technology—he is able to feel a sense of existential attachment to the soft air around him (he is rooted in the "real" and "tangible") as well as a communal attachment to the collective "we" who gather to experience the sunset. In the end, it would seem that tribalism triumphs over technology for Jack; autonomy cannot be reconciled with a sense of existential and communal attachment.

Finally, we may return to the idea of the characters' insatiable desire to consume. Jack's final words to us are: "Everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks. The tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead."⁹² This passage resonates with what Murray says to Jack and Babette much earlier in the novel while they are in the supermarket: "[Death] is the end of attachment to things...Here we don't die, we shop."⁹³ Perhaps, in this context,

⁹² DeLillo, *White Noise*, 310.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 38.

the acceptance of death—though I have argued that it entails physiological attachment to an organism's surroundings—results in the separation of man (specifically, Jack) from his reliance on technology and consumption (indeed, Murray's phrase orients shopping in opposition with death). Thus, Jack's final phrase becomes more revealing: if "everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks," then *nothing* is in the tabloid racks. Once Jack has accepted death, his "need" to consume is now satiable by the primal, "natural" elements of food and love; he no longer feels compelled to detach from his mortality through the supernatural, the miracle vitamins, or other remedies "invented to conceal the terrible secret of our decaying bodies." The "nature of nature" has, in this view, been restored, and Jack no longer has to suffer from the "pain of detachment."

Post-Postmodern?

"White noise, black humor,"⁹⁴ is how one reviewer described *White Noise* in 1985; another reviewer calls the novel "DeLillo's dark vision"⁹⁵; a third voice chimes in, saying of DeLillo's style, "His is a hard-edged, unsmiling kind of satire. It is not user friendly."⁹⁶ Finally, another reviewer writes, "The reader's awareness of the restless and skeptical intelligence of the author may in some absolute sense operate against such reader responses as sympathy and identification."⁹⁷ This cacophony of

⁹⁴ Sol Yurick, "Fleeing Death in a World of Hyper-Babble," in *White Noise: Text and Criticism*, ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 366.

⁹⁵ Albert Mobilio, "Death by Inches," in *White Noise: Text and Criticism*, ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 373.

⁹⁶ Iyer, "A Connoisseur of Fear," 380.

⁹⁷ Diane Johnson, "Conspirators," in *White Noise: Text and Criticism*, ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 377.

literary voices echoes the widely-accepted notion that *White Noise* is a quintessential piece of postmodern fiction. However, by the end of the novel, *White Noise* seems to cry out for a return to a “natural order,” making a sincere and wholehearted attempt to get our attention; this novel bleeds red, not black. In fact, literary scholar Richard Powers also questions the canonical status of *White Noise* as a postmodern novel in his introduction to the 25th-anniversary edition of DeLillo’s masterpiece. Powers writes: “I marvel too, on this late rereading, at a naked earnestness hiding inside a style that I years ago mistook for pure postmodern irony.”⁹⁸ He goes on to say:

I’m struck, in reading a work that has become synonymous with grim postmodernism, one that so perfectly nails the *Zeitgeist* of the past-stripped present, by how often the book employs the word ‘ancient.’...[The novel’s] full achievement may lie in its connection, underneath the litanies to Waffelos and Kabooms, with the long past. Something in co-opted consciousness is still stabbing away, trying to find *forever*.⁹⁹

Perhaps, rather than beating us over the head with a kind of postmodern, deadpan nihilism, DeLillo is giving us an inside critique of the ailments of the postmodernist (such as the *pain* of detachment)—in the place of a vacuum, we have found a mirror.

Looking at the novel through this earnest approach, *White Noise* appears to be something else—possibly another genre *after* postmodernism. In fact, David Foster Wallace speculates in his 1990 essay “Television and U.S. Fiction”:

The next real literary ‘rebels’ in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti*-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and

⁹⁸ Powers, introduction, x.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, xii.

instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction.¹⁰⁰

Though Wallace's essay was published five years after DeLillo's novel, perhaps traces of resistance to nihilism and black humor had already started in *White Noise* through its earnest nostalgia for something "ancient" and concrete—a presence in "that fifth century A.D. sky ablaze with mystery and spiral light."¹⁰¹

As a final word on the post-postmodern, I will step outside the literary realm to conjecture what the next step is in a historically ideological context *after* postmodernism. What follows a world of waves and radiation? In his book *The New Holy Wars* (published in 2010), R.H. Nelson explains that there has been a contemporary backlash against modern technologies that "are now seen to pose grave dangers."¹⁰² He goes on to explain that one of the main "moral crusades" emerging from this backlash has been environmentalism, which aims to alleviate the environmental threats resulting from these modern technologies.¹⁰³ Ultimately, Nelson says, environmentalism "seek[s] to offer the hope of restoring—however improbably—the past certainties of a true 'natural' order in the world."¹⁰⁴ This desire to restore a "natural order" appears remarkably similar to Powers' latest reading of *White Noise*: both the environmentalist movement (as Nelson describes it) and DeLillo's novel seem to long for a regression into a more "ancient" time during which natural law was certain and could provide a fundamental ground, or

¹⁰⁰ Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing*, 81.

¹⁰¹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 101.

¹⁰² Nelson, *The New Holy Wars*, 8.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

even a historical point of orientation for the individual. This nostalgia for a seemingly simpler era appears to sprout directly from the wintery satire of “grim” postmodernism that is characterized by a state of being *too* detached: in a culture that has trouble focusing on anything but the present, there is a push-back from the desire to find “*forever*.”

II. Consumption as the Formation of Identities

Yet, according to Moss, a reattachment to “ancient,” “tribal” values (or to “forever”) is not the only way to ease the pain of detachment; he says, "Detachment must be compensated. Is final cause anything other than this drive for compensation?"¹⁰⁵ In this view, "order," rather than resulting from a resurgence of universal human values, arises from life being oriented toward an end goal. Accordingly, in this section, I re-examine how consumption factors into the postmodernist's concurrent fear of and desire for some sort of attachment. Through this socio-historical view, I show how consumption functions to detach Jack from a type of permanence that differs from ancient tribal values of humanity; this time, as Moss has brought up, that permanence is a sense of *telos*—that is, a final cause or end goal around which and individual orients his life. I begin by setting up a socio-historical context against which to view the role of Jack's consumption in the formation of his identities, and, as a result, how Jack attempts to use these identities to evade his fear death. Next, I discuss how Jack's fluctuation between consumer tendencies and producer desires constitutes the insatiability of his consumption. I then shift gears to propose that Jack's very method of detaching from a sense of *telos* actually creates *consequences* that force him into a temporal trajectory. At the end of this chapter, I return to an examination of the tenuous status of *White Noise* as a postmodern novel coupled with the proposal that our contemporary society has moved into a post-postmodern era.

¹⁰⁵ Moss, “Detachment,” 15.

The Formation of Identities

To provide context, we may first look to Zygmunt Bauman, who, in his book *Work, Consumerism, and the New Poor*, defines the transition from modernism to postmodernism as the moment when a society of producers gave way to one of consumers. Nelson puts a finer head on this point when he discusses the rise of economic religion and its belief that "the arrival of total abundance and the end of material struggle would yield a 'new man.'"¹⁰⁶ This arrival of total material abundance (which was "based on the new power of human beings to control nature" with technological advances¹⁰⁷) was the modernist's end goal, a goal that gave his life a sense of temporal trajectory. Once this goal was accomplished, the "new man" born out of the toil was the postmodernist—the consumer. Jameson verifies this shift from modernism to postmodernism, stating, "In modernism...some residual zones of 'nature' or 'being,' of the old, the older, the archaic, still subsist; culture can still do something to that nature and work at transforming that 'referent'"¹⁰⁸—again, this malleable, external environment provides a sense of *telos* for the modernist. On the other hand, Jameson contends, "Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good."¹⁰⁹

Moreover, Bauman discusses how modernity (i.e. industrialization) charged a person with the task of "self-construction," which Bauman defines as "building one's

¹⁰⁶ Nelson, *The New Holy Wars*, 4.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 5.

¹⁰⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

social identity."¹¹⁰ At first, in a producer society, Bauman explains, the creation of one's social identity was accomplished "steadily" and "consistently" through a lifetime of work or production in an individual's career. More simply, the producer's life was wrapped around a sense of *telos*. However, after the cultural shift to a postmodern consumer society, a person's identity has come to be formed through the *products* he or she consumes.¹¹¹ In this way, a single identity only lasts as long as the consumer's current commodity. Furthermore, since consumers have an infinite array of commodities (which range from food to clothing to television) that they may choose to consume, their identity, or their living form, can seemingly go on forever, allowing the individual to, in his mind, "conquer" death. Literary critic Arno Heller echoes this sentiment in his essay on *White Noise* by stating, "Man is overwhelmed by their sheer number of material things, brand names, information, and codes...whose main function is to cover up death."¹¹² Indeed, the production of an ongoing ray of identities is how Jack uses commodities (for a time) to transcend death.

More specifically, there is an instance in *White Noise* when Jack provides insight on the euphoria of shopping and how it seems to sustain him. However, before examining this scene, we must note the significance of Jack's encounter with Eric Massingale, a fellow instructor from the College-on-the-Hill, that directly precedes this shopping venture. Upon seeing Jack, Massingale immediately notices that Jack is not wearing his dark glasses—a trademark accessory Jack uses to

¹¹⁰ Bauman, *Work*, 27.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 39.

¹¹² Heller, "Simulacrum," 40.

comprise his intimidating identity as the professor of Hitler studies. When Jack bumps into his co-worker again minutes later, Massingale then inventories Jack's outfit, noting his missing academic gown and glasses (for a second time) as well as his Turkish army sweater and shoes. Massingale finally admits to Jack, "You look so harmless, Jack. A big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy."¹¹³ Massingale uses Jack's material commodities (or lack thereof) to determine his identity as a "harmless...sort of guy." Additionally, it is also worth noting that "aging" (i.e. moving closer to death) is placed directly beside "indistinct." The proximity of "aging" and "indistinct" suggests a correlation between the two: *losing* a perceptible sense of identity makes Jack seem older and closer to death. As a result of this encounter, Jack is "put...in the mood to shop."¹¹⁴ While at the mall with his family, Jack narrates:

I kept seeing myself unexpectedly in some reflecting surface...There was always another store...I shopped with reckless abandon...I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgot existed...Our images appeared on mirrored columns, in glassware and chrome...I traded money for goods...I was bigger than these sums...These sums in fact came back to me in the form of existential credit.¹¹⁵

To begin to chip away at this quote, we can first consider the fact that being called harmless, aging, and indistinct made Jack want to shop. Here, we see a direct demonstration of Bauman's notion that consumption is a means of constructing a social identity. This correspondence only becomes more apparent as Jack goes on in

¹¹³ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 83.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83-4.

his narration. He repeatedly observes himself in reflective surfaces and then perceives his family's image in mirrors, glassware, and chrome. This imagery is a physical manifestation of consumption as the formation of identity: Jack quite literally sees himself (and his family) *in* commodities; it is as if these are potential future images of themselves that can only be accessed by consuming the product. Indeed, as Jack *does* consume, he augments his self: "filling himself out," "finding new aspects of himself," and, ultimately, constructing a new person (or one he "forgot existed"). And this is not an isolated occurrence either—for "there [is] always another store." There is always another station where Jack can re-fuel his sense of value and self-worth whenever he feels "aged" or "indistinct." Perhaps, then, what Jack means by his purchases giving him "existential credit" is that shopping prolongs his existence. Restated with Bauman in mind, consumption has the power to form an infinite string of identities that negate age and re-affirm one's living form.

The Motivations and Consequences of Consumption

However, while this string of identities may provide a distraction from the consumer's fear of death, it is this same ever-changing identity that prevents Jack, as a consumer, from truly *living*. Still, we see that Jack fears the singular identity of the producer because this sole identity teleologically orients an individual towards an end (that is, death); it is within a single identity that one is most vulnerable, for he is most glaringly mortal. Murray describes this consciousness of

one's own death to Jack as the point at which "we know too much"¹¹⁶—we know we will eventually cease to be. It is when we know too much, Murray elaborates, that we become susceptible to and conscious of "pain, death, [and] reality...[and] we can't bear these things as they are...So we resort to repression, compromise, and disguise. This is how we survive the universe."¹¹⁷ This "repression, compromise, and disguise" suggests the progression from a single identity into a plethora of identities through technology and consumption. Indeed, this shroud of infinite selves is "how we survive the universe" and shield (or "disguise") our mortal vulnerability from death—as Murray says, "[Technology is] what we invented to conceal the terrible secret of our decaying bodies"¹¹⁸). Yet, Bauman peers into the intricate cogs of this consumerist mentality and elucidates its motivations and consequences. He explains, "The desire of [a singular] identity and the horror of satisfying that desire, the attraction and repulsion that the thought of identity evokes, mix and blend to produce a compound of lasting ambivalence and confusion."¹¹⁹ Essentially, what Bauman is saying is that the consumer both fears and longs for a singular identity, which creates turmoil within him. Bauman goes on to explain the appeal of the producer's singular identity. He claims, "The fulfillment of duty [in a producer society] has its inner, time-intensive logic and so it structures time, gives it direction, makes sense of such notions as *gradual* accumulation or delay of

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 272.

¹¹⁹ Bauman, *Work*, 30.

fulfillment.”¹²⁰ In this way, production allows one to hover within a single identity—to actually *invest* in something—and confront death head-on with a lifelong self-actualization; indeed, Winnie Richards rhetorically asks Jack, “Isn’t death the boundary we need? Doesn’t it give a precious texture to life, a sense of definition? You have to ask yourself whether anything you do in this life would have beauty and meaning without the knowledge you carry of a final line, a border, or limit.”¹²¹ Consumption, on the other hand, moves an individual into the realm of infinite identities where the fear of death is evaded and repressed rather than acknowledged and accepted; in this realm of endless identities, the consumer forfeits his opportunity for the fulfillment of self-actualization (accomplished through a teleologically-oriented identity).

Jack: Producer Desires and Consumerist Tendencies

To return more concretely to *White Noise*, we can see how Murray elaborates on these conflicting producer and consumer ideologies when addressing Jack’s imminent death. He says to Jack, “There are numerous ways to get around death. You tried to employ two of them at once. You stood out on one hand and tried to hide on the other.”¹²² Jack fears a sense of *telos* because it, ultimately, leads to death, but he also desires this temporal trajectory that will assign a sense of meaning to his life (or, as Winnie says, “a precious texture,” “a sense of definition”).

¹²⁰ Ibid, 31. Emphasis mine.

¹²¹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 217.

¹²² Ibid, 275.

Specifically, the way in which Jack stands out as a producer is building his career as a scholar of Hitler studies. As Murray told Jack in the novel's beginning:

You've established a wonderful thing here with Hitler. You created it, you nurtured it, you made it your own...He is now your Hitler, Gladney's Hitler. It must be deeply satisfying for you. The college is internationally known as a result of Hitler studies. It has an identity, a sense of achievement.¹²³

In this regard, Jack falls into Bauman's notion of a producer ideology: his ascension into a prominent Hitler scholar has been "a gradual accumulation [and] delay of fulfillment" that gave him a sense of direction, unlike his manic shopping sprees. On the other hand, Jack has not been creating his *own* identity, but, rather, he has been hiding behind that of Hitler. Indeed, early on in the novel, Jack says, "I am the false character that follows the name [Hitler] around."¹²⁴ This aspect of Jack's relationship with Hitler's aura echoes Bauman's descriptions of consumerist tendencies: Jack constantly nibbles at the idea of Hitler—he reads *Mein Kampf*, tries to learn German, and grows facial hair—consuming the dictator's persona to "conceal [him]self in Hitler and his works"¹²⁵ as a shroud of invisibility in the face of death. Jack *uses* Hitler in the same way he uses other commodities: to generate yet another identity to hide behind. Indeed, Heller relates Hitler to consumption for Jack, saying, "Consumption—comparable to his Hitler scholarship—becomes a ritual to him, filling up the existential vacuum."¹²⁶ In this instance, we see

¹²³ Ibid, 11.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 17.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 274.

¹²⁶ Heller, "Simulacrum," 38.

Bauman's notion of "the desire of an identity and the horror of satisfying that desire" within Jack: he both tries to create an identity as well as to hide behind many.

It is from the "ambivalence and confusion" of straddling the roles of producer and consumer that Jack's dissatisfaction with his life (after his death has been guaranteed due to Nyodene D) seems to rise. Jack's desire to be a producer—to embody a single identity—causes the insatiability of his consumption. Restated, Jack is a consumer who *wants* to be a producer. On one hand, Jack solidifies his role as a consumer when he tells Babette, referring to her habit of running, "Don't make a major involvement out of it. Everything is a major involvement today," to which she responds, "It's my life. I tend to be involved."¹²⁷ But for Jack, as a consumer, the whole point is to be involved as little as possible in his life: he must hide behind a chain of identities provided by commodities and Hitler. Again, Jack's lack of commitment is cited by LeClair: "[Jack] plans the future only when forced to,"¹²⁸ for his consumerist mentality believes that involvement results in a susceptibility to death. Indeed, Jack says earlier in the novel, "All plots tend to move deathward."¹²⁹ Murray, however, disagrees with him near *White Noise's* end; he counters, "To plot ["to take aim at something, to shape time and space"] is to *live*."¹³⁰ Ironically

¹²⁷ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 287.

¹²⁸ Leclair, "Closing the Loop," 390.

¹²⁹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 26.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 278. Emphasis mine.

enough, in Murray's dialogue¹³¹ on plot we find traces of Bauman's producer society in which "fulfillment of duty [i.e. commitment to a single identity]...structures time and gives it direction, [and] makes sense of such notions as gradual accumulation or delay of fulfillment." This opposition between how Jack and Murray define what it means "to plot" (or to commit to a single identity) reflects the conflict within Jack between his consumerist tendencies and his desire to be a producer. Perhaps when Jack tells Murray, "There's something artificial about my death. It's shallow and unfulfilling,"¹³² it is because Jack realizes "[he has] been a dier all [his] life."¹³³ The thought of Jack's actual death seems surreal to him because his life has consisted of negating "major involvements" and "plots" that, in Murray's view, would lead to a unified identity—simply, Jack has never really *lived*; he has only "survived" by denying the fear of death.¹³⁴

Moreover, after his doctor appointment that reminds him of his inevitable death (as a result of Nyodene D), Jack's internal dialogue while throwing away used commodities ties his non-life as "a dier" to his consumption. He thinks, "I bore a personal grudge against these [used commodities]. Somehow they'd put me in this fix. They'd dragged me down, make escape impossible."¹³⁵ In this passage, commodities—consumption—becomes the enemy instead of death. Jack's feeling of

¹³¹ This notion seems ironic when considering the fact that Wilcox calls Murray "the postmodernist" who "takes it upon himself to be Gladney's tutor in the new semiotic regime [of a postmodern world]." Wilcox, "The End of Heroic Narrative," 350.

¹³² DeLillo, *White Noise*, 270.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 278.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, 282. Jack tells Babette that humans must repress their fear of death—to deny it—as "the only way to survive."

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 280.

being dragged down by these items may be read as a result of his wearing each one as the skin of a different, once-new identity, and it is from his role as a “dier” that these commodities make it impossible to escape. Again, “dier” seems to be synonymous with consumer: a ghost who inhabits identity after identity in order to survive (i.e. psychologically evade death), but, *because* of this, never really lives (i.e. never really plots—“steadily” and consistently” constructing a single identity).

As a final note, if we pay particular attention to Jack’s claim of bearing a “personal grudge” against these commodities, the opposition between Bauman’s producer and consumer within Jack materializes further. The resentment Jack feels towards each of “these things”—these commodities—that he, as a *consumer*, once hid behind as a shield against mortality now appears to stem from his dashed potential for a consistent or, as Bauman would say, producer identity. Indeed, at this point, Jack has already said to Murray, “Once your death has been established, it becomes impossible to live a satisfying life.”¹³⁶ Perhaps what Jack really means is once the imminence of death can no longer be evaded through infinite commoditized identities, life becomes meaningless: the phantom consumer is dragged out from behind his items back into a temporal and teleological plane to find that not only does he not have destination, but he also lacks the steady vehicle of a producer’s identity to get there. Wilcox even highlights “this crisis of subjectivity that Gladney faces,” saying, “Any notion of an essential identity is all but erased in this [postmodern] realm of free-floating signifiers and simulation [i.e. a consumer

¹³⁶ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 272.

society].”¹³⁷ By noting the emerging desire within Jack to become a producer as it grinds against his consumer tendencies, we can see perhaps one reason as to why consumption is insatiable and unfulfilling: it is a deconstructive process; it attempts to disassemble the fear of death, but, by doing so, it also seems to deteriorate any foundation on which to construct a permanent self-actualizing (though finite) identity.

Consumer to Producer-of-Waste

It is here where I shift gears from examining the insatiability of consumption to investigating how this over-consumption becomes an ecological threat; restated, rather than focusing on the *motivations* behind consumption, I will now emphasize the *consequences* of consumption. Cynthia Deitering lays a foundation for examining the consequences of consumption in her essay “The Postnatural Novel.” She exposes the black underbelly of modernism’s transformation into postmodernism (as Jameson describes it), explaining:

What has happened recently, as evidenced in a number of novels written since 1980 [citing *White Noise* as an example]...is a transmutation of Heidegger’s essence of technology in which what we have previously regarded and represented as the standing reserve of nature and material objects has been virtually used up. Thus, what we call the Real is now represented not as the standing-reserve but as the already-used-up...In other words, what is revealed now is the waste of the empire...human enterprise has subsumed what was once the privileged category of Nature itself into the province of the artificial.”¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Wilcox, “The End of Heroic Narrative,” 352.

¹³⁸ Deitering, “The Postnatural Novel,” 199-200.

Deitering's passage affects our perception of Jack's consumerist tendencies; now that the natural world, which Wilcox calls "the ultimate ground of the 'real,'"¹³⁹ has vanished, there is no "referent" that Jack can work to "transform."¹⁴⁰ More simply, Jack is incapable of being a producer in the industrial sense; his "job" as a member of a late capitalist society is to consume. However, in this postmodern world of the "already-used-up," Deitering tells us that there has been "a shift in our cultural identity—a shift from a culture defined by its production to a culture defined by its waste."¹⁴¹ She goes on to say that fiction during the 1980s (and she includes *White Noise* in this category) becomes increasingly concerned with man's contribution to ecological crises and that a "toxic landscape functions in these novels as a metaphor for the pollution of the natural world."¹⁴² Indeed, LeClair seems to corroborate Deitering's notion of a "toxic consciousness" in *White Noise*, stating that DeLillo writes his novel with an intricate awareness of mankind's actions: "*White Noise* is the compact, accessible model of [other postmodern novels' environmental] warnings, one more example of DeLillo's desire to be in the loop of general readers...[*White Noise* is DeLillo's] most emotionally demonstrative book, an expression of his passionate concern with human survival, his rage at and pity for what humankind does to itself."¹⁴³ We may infer, then, that DeLillo is conscious of and concerned with how mankind's tendencies have resulted in ecological crises

¹³⁹ Wilcox, "The End of Heroic Narrative," 351.

¹⁴⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

¹⁴¹ Deitering, "The Postnatural Novel," 196.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ LeClair, "Closing the Loop," 392-3.

and, therefore, that the interactions he creates between his characters and their trash is worthy of further study.¹⁴⁴

In fact, there are several passages in *White Noise* that explicitly address Jack's engagement with his family's production of waste. In one instance, after Jack returns home from a visit to his family doctor (during which he is reminded of his imminent death as a result of being exposed to the lethal chemical Nyodene D), he begins throwing things away. He provides us with a catalogue of all that he has discarded:

I threw away fishing lures, dead tennis balls, torn luggage. I ransacked the attic for old furniture, discarded lampshades, warped screens, bent curtain rods. I threw away picture frames, shoe trees, umbrella stands, wall brackets, highchairs and frames, collapsible TV trays, beanbag chairs, broken turn tables. I threw away shelf paper, faded stationary, manuscripts of articles I'd written, gallery proofs of the same articles, the journals in which the articles were printed. The more things I threw away, the more I found. The house was a sepia maze of old and tired things. There was an immensity of things, an overburdening weight, a connection, a mortality.¹⁴⁵

Bauman supplements Jack's passage, explaining that during a time when capitalism demands that products "aim for maximal impact and instant obsolescence,"¹⁴⁶ most individuals leave behind a life "strewn with discarded and lost identities."¹⁴⁷ And this wasteland of used-up commodities is exactly what we see when Jack begins throwing away the superfluous contents of his house. In this

¹⁴⁴ Indeed, in DeLillo's novel *Underworld*, published in 1997, his protagonist is a *waste* management executive.

¹⁴⁵ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 249-50.

¹⁴⁶ Bauman, *Work*, 28. Here, Bauman is quoting George Steiner, retired Emeritus Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Geneva.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

passage, the Gladneys' trash appears to be given a life of its own: as if it were a malignant tumor, continually amassing despite Jack's efforts to tame it—"the more things I threw away, the more I found." Moreover, these used-up commodities turn the family's home into a "sepia maze"; just as how Deitering tells us that "pollution of the natural world...inevitably transmogrifies one's experience of the earth as primal home,"¹⁴⁸ the Gladney's waste transforms their home from familiar to strange, unnavigable territory. The repetition of "things" at the end of Jack's passage in tandem with the increasingly staccato list describing them increases the feeling of the trash's immensity, almost as if Jack is being suffocated. Indeed, he ends the passage saying that the mass of used-up items constitutes a mortality, which creates a stark contrast to the previous notion of, as Heller puts it, "the sheer number of material things, brand names, information, and codes...whose main function is to *cover up* death."¹⁴⁹ That is, commodities, once used up, seem to exacerbate the consumer's feeling of mortality rather than cover this feeling up.

In yet another, more unpleasant encounter Jack has with the family's garbage while searching for Dylar, Jack expresses disbelief in their ability to create such a repugnant collage of waste. He details:

No one was around. I walked across the kitchen, opened the compactor drawer and looked inside the trash bag...I felt like an archeologist about to sift through a finding of tool fragments and assorted cave trash. It was about ten days since Denise had compacted the Dylar...I unfolded the bag cuffs, released the latch and lifted out the bag. The full stench hit me with shocking

¹⁴⁸ Deitering, "The Postnatural Novel," 200.

¹⁴⁹ Heller, "Simulacrum," 40. Emphasis mine. Additionally, Jack's use of "connection" also opposes the idea of commodities being used to *detach* the consumer from a sense of permanence.

force. Was this ours? Did it belong to us? Had we created it?...I picked through it item by item, mass by shapeless mass, wondering why 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?...I found a banana with a tampon inside. Was this the dark underside of consumer consciousness?¹⁵⁰

Deitering also references this particular quote, saying, "Here the familiar notion of finding one's identity in commodity products is transformed into the notion of finding one's identity not in the commodities themselves but in their configuration as waste products."¹⁵¹ Deitering makes an interesting point: unlike Bauman's portrayal of a consumer's wasteland of commodities (a life "strewn with discarded and lost identities"¹⁵²) that the individual leaves behind, the consumer, or rather, the producer-of-waste, becomes *attached* to and defined by his used-up identities (which is, again, contrary to the a late capitalist notion of a commodity's purpose). I would additionally like to call attention to the *transformation* of the family's used-up commodities into foul waste; this conversion from used-up commodities to waste is a belied, inconspicuous process going on in the Gladney's trash bin. Indeed, the unbearable stench is a result of the family's neglect to dispose of its waste in a timely manner and is, therefore, the family's creation, but the Gladney's used-up commodities have become something entirely foreign to Jack: "Was this ours? Did it belong to us? Had we created it?" Perhaps, then, the "dark side of consumer consciousness" is decidedly less comical than a tampon inside of a banana; perhaps it is the perpetual conversion of used-up commodities into waste.

¹⁵⁰ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 247.

¹⁵¹ Deitering, "The Postnatural Novel," 198.

¹⁵² Bauman, *Work*, 28.

Yet, *White Noise* proposes the solution for the consumer-turned-accidental-producer earlier in the novel through Denise, Babbette's daughter who disapproves of her mother taking Dylar. Jack begins by describing Denise's room, calling it:

An archeology of childhood, things Denise had carried with her since the age of three, from cartoon clocks to werewolf posters. She is the kind of child who feels a protective tenderness toward her own beginnings. It is part of her strategy in a world of displacements to make every effort to restore and preserve, keep things together for their value as remembering objects, a way of fastening herself to a life.¹⁵³

This idea of “fastening herself to a life” closely corresponds to how Bauman's producer forms a single identity. Rather than consuming to create a schizophrenic collection of identities that allow the postmodernist (like Jack) to temporarily detach from his fear of death, the postmodernist should instead become a *producer* of his own archeology by “restoring and preserving, keeping things together for their value as remembering objects.” The passage in which Jack rummages through the family's garbage, revealing used-up commodities to be unguarded signifiers of the Gladneys' private identities highlights the contrasting agency Denise has in consciously constructing her archeological identity. Additionally, the restoration and preservation of used-up commodities functions two-fold: for one, it (perhaps quite literally) lays a historical trajectory for the postmodernist—a member of an “age that has forgotten how to think historically”¹⁵⁴—granting him an existential anchor and sense of agency in the creation of his own, singular identity. Restated, the postmodernist has the power to consolidate his nihilistic junkyard of “lost” and

¹⁵³ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 102.

¹⁵⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, xi.

“used-up” identities into *one* whole and continuous identity. Secondly, this restoration of used-up commodities has the potential to transform our own, as Deitering refers to the contemporary world, “fouled nest”¹⁵⁵ back into a “primal home.”¹⁵⁶

Post-postmodern?

Deitering’s classification of *White Noise* as a postnatural novel coincides with Chapter One’s proposal that DeLillo’s masterpiece, rather than being a textbook demonstration of literary postmodernism, is perhaps the beginning of a new genre *after* postmodernism. What Deitering calls a “toxic consciousness”¹⁵⁷ in these postnatural novels—that is, an *awareness* that mankind’s pollution is capable of threatening the “ecological collapse” of our “natural” world¹⁵⁸—drags the postmodernist out of the stratosphere of “waves and radiation” and grounds him in the very *real* mess he has created. This return to the “real” and “tangible” world in the postnatural novel, I think, requires the same sense of earnestness and instantiation of “single-entendre principles”¹⁵⁹ that Powers found in *White Noise* during his most recent re-reading of the novel. Love supports this correlation between literature’s re-grounding us in our “real,” postnatural world and a shift in the values that literature emphasizes; he claims, “The revaluation of nature will be accompanied by a reordering of the literary genres...[with those genres that] value

¹⁵⁵ Deitering, “The Postnatural Novel,” 200.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing*, 81.

unity rising over post-structuralist nihilism.”¹⁶⁰ We may extrapolate from this “unity” of which Love speaks (though does not elaborate upon) to see the potential correspondence between “unity” and the desire to return to “ancient” and “tribal” values—a time of primitive “social cohesion”—expressed in Chapter One. Or perhaps this “unity” can be viewed as an existential union between the postmodern self and a sense of *telos* discussed in Chapter Two. Or maybe the “unity” is actually between the postmodernist’s consumption and the ecological consequences of that consumption. Nonetheless, in all three of these speculations, a sense of *unity* seems to be the cure for the pain of *detachment* that ails the postmodernist. Consequently, we may say the “reevaluation of nature” that Deitering points out in *White Noise* (via its “toxic consciousness”) does not inspire a “reordering of literary genres,” but, instead, allows us to view *White Noise* as a pioneer of a *new* genre; a genre that lies beyond (or, rather more accurately, *beneath*) postmodernism and its borderless galaxy of simulacra.

Additionally, it is worth mentioning that, similar to this thesis’s analysis of *White Noise*, Deitering also ventures outside the literary realm and into a socio-historical context to explain the development of “new ‘toxic consciousness’ in fiction [beginning in the 1980s].”¹⁶¹ More specifically, Deitering says the rise of the postnatural novel

...reflects a fundamental shift in historical consciousness; for at some point during the Reagan-Bush decade, something happened, some boundary was

¹⁶⁰ Glen Love, “Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ed. Harold From et al. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 236.

¹⁶¹ Deitering, “The Postnatural Novel,” 197.

crossed beyond which Americans perceived themselves differently in their relation to the natural world and the ecosystems of the American Empire. What happened...is that we came to perceive, perhaps inchoately, our own complicity in postindustrial ecosystems, both personal and national, which are predicated on pollution and waste.¹⁶²

Essentially, Deitering fills in the narrative of what happens *after* the United States' industrial boom: the modernist conquers nature, "breaking all the shackles of ancient existence"¹⁶³ and is utterly free—too free, in fact. He is now stranded in a "past-stripped present"¹⁶⁴ of waves and radiation, which we may call a postmodern or late capitalist society. But, as Deitering details, what comes *next* is the realization that our society is *not* grounded in the nothingness of radio waves, but in the real and tangible "fouled nest" of our own creation. Enter: archeology, stage left.

The significance of archeology as a concept in *White Noise* and in a postmodern society is that it *unites* all the concreteness of the "ancient" with a singular identity along a historical trajectory in addition to evoking a "toxic consciousness"; and using archeology as a tool does this all while allowing the individual to maintain his autonomy (he has the power to choose how his identity will be formed). In Chapter One, I discussed how the use of technology (for *White Noise*'s characters as well as for the modernist) intertwined with man's biology to alter "the nature of nature,"¹⁶⁵ thereby seemingly creating an irreconcilability between the autonomy afforded by modern technology and the "naturalness" of "ancient" and "tribal" values. However, the concept of archeology would appear to

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Latour, "It's Development," 5.

¹⁶⁴ Powers, introduction, xii.

¹⁶⁵ LeClair, "Closing the Loop," 394.

reconcile one's deeper, existential attachment to what is "natural" with his acquisition of autonomy. Archeology allows the individual to organically re-attach to the historical timeline of all that came before him, from "ancient," "tribal" origins through the wasteland of his used-up identities while also preserving his sense of agency; again, one's agency is maintained by allowing the individual to be in control of the identity to which he "fastens himself."¹⁶⁶ The individual's use of archeology as a tool to create a singular identity also unites the perpendicular producer and consumer ideologies mentioned in Chapter Two. Archeology, in the sense that DeLillo has Denise utilize it, enables producers-turned-consumers-turned-producers-of-waste to harness that "waste" to consciously form a singular, unified identity. The third component of this view of archeology is its use as a tool of healing: not only does it ease the postmodernist's pain of detachment (connecting him to both the "ancient" and to a temporal trajectory), but it also attempts to "restore and preserve"¹⁶⁷ the "already-used-up"¹⁶⁸—to turn the postnatural world into a "primal home"¹⁶⁹ once again. Archeology entails a future that is highly conscientious of its past, ideologically swapping detachment for attachment in a post-postmodern society by re-defining consumption—a way of detaching—as waste-producing and how our waste attaches us to an identity (whether we want it to or not).

¹⁶⁶ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 102.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Deitering, "The Postnatural Novel," 199.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 200.

III. Mankind as a Geological Force

In this final chapter, I show how waste in both *White Noise* and the real world not only attaches us to an identity, but also how it changes mankind's *relation* to nature. After demonstrating the contemporary dynamic between humans and the environment in our real world, I then examine the ways in which "The Airborne Toxic Event" section of *White Noise* shows man to be capable of impacting the environment by producing waste; I follow this examination with a discussion of Jack's refusal to accept both mankind's far-reaching capabilities as well as the ecological consequences of such capabilities, and how he hides behind "ancient" and "tribal" values. I simultaneously demonstrate how "The Airborne Toxic Event" section displays uncanny similarities to how ecologists (and literary ecologists) describe contemporary Western consensus regarding the environmental issues in our real world. From here, I re-read Jack's confrontation with Mink as an allegory for mankind's acceptance of its relationship with the natural world as a geological force, further showing that autonomy can, in fact, be reconciled with attachment. I conclude this section by positing that the autonomy acquired through technology does not have to be viewed perpendicularly to the "ancient"; rather, mankind's status as a geological force also entails the ability to create our own sense of the "ancient."

The Contemporary Dynamic between Mankind and Our Environment

I use the possessive determiner “our” in this section’s header purposefully: according to some ecologists, human beings have now “mastered” our environment. Specifically, in 2000, Paul J. Crutzen, an atmospheric chemist and winner of a Nobel Prize, and Eugene F. Stoermer, a marine specialist and University of Michigan professor of biology, introduced the term “Anthropocene” as a name for the current geological epoch.¹⁷⁰ The two scientists chose this term to “emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology [i.e. to emphasize the significant effects human activities are having on global scales].”¹⁷¹ In 2002, Crutzen explained that he believes the Anthropocene—this epoch of human global domination—began in the late 1700s when air samples extracted from polar ice revealed increasing atmospheric levels of carbon dioxide and methane; he is sure to note the concurrence of this epoch with the upswing of the Industrial Revolution as well as “James Watt’s 1784 design of the steam engine.”¹⁷² In short, the arrival of the 21st century has been accompanied by the more ubiquitous acknowledgement that mankind has exceeded its status as a biological entity existing *within* nature; we have now become “geological agents,” as historian Naomi Oreskes puts it.¹⁷³

However, the mindset of today’s average American seems to coincide with that of Jack Gladney; just as Wilcox calls Jack “a modernist displaced in a

¹⁷⁰ Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 209.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid, 209. I have obtained Crutzen’s quote from Chakrabarty’s essay.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 206. Chakrabarty’s essay provides Oreskes’ coined phrase “geological agents.”

postmodern world,”¹⁷⁴ the contemporary American seems to long for the order and sense of *telos* afforded by high modernism (or, as Bauman puts it, a producer society); yet, the average man attempts to find this order or “to create meaning from the flux and fragments of an atomized contemporary world, to pierce the veil, to reveal underlying truth”¹⁷⁵ through technology and consumption. But it is this very technology and consumption that renders the notion of discovering “Truth” null and void; as Jameson relays, postmodernism marks the end of “‘nature’ or ‘being,’ of the old, the older, the archaic”¹⁷⁶—of a “real” world that still contains referents—and the start of “a more fully human world.”¹⁷⁷ Indeed, Jameson seems to have spoken prophetically: this “more fully human world” is the state of our earth during the Anthropocene. However, instead of recognizing mankind’s acquired autonomy and power over his environment during this epoch (when the modernist has *reached* his end goal of “rising above nature”¹⁷⁸), the postmodern man becomes lost within the waves and radiation of an invisible realm of his own creation, no longer inhabiting this “real” world. But the danger of disappearing into this invisible world of simulacra is that the postmodernist still wields the power of a geological force, though he does so blindly, detaching his consciousness from the consequences of such behavior. More specifically, what we are seeing is the contemporary man use technology in tandem with consumption to try to find a transcendence that he has already *unknowingly* achieved—which results in the insatiability of this

¹⁷⁴ Wilcox, “The End of Heroic Narrative,” 348.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Turner, “Escape from Modernism,” 55.

consumption; but the *excess* of his technology and consumption produces waste that, seeming to take on a life of its own, has the power to inspire serious ecological crises.

The Production of Waste: Reality in a Fictional Denial

In this section, I will apply to *White Noise* the previous chapter's discussion of redefining our society as one of producers-of-waste (rather than one of consumers) and how this reassessment allows us to view the concealed power of man's technology and consumption to create waste that has ecological effects. More specifically, there is an instance at the beginning of "The Airborne Toxic Event" section that can be viewed as an embedded warning to a society of consumers or waste-producers. In this scene, Jack describes the contents of the Gladney's attic while Heinrich is perched on the roof, eyeing the toxic cloud. Jack tells us: "Abandoned possessions were everywhere, oppressive and soul-worrying, creating a weather of their own."¹⁷⁹ First off, the fact that Jack still calls these used-up commodities "possessions" after he says they have been *abandoned* by the family assigns the items a sense of resilience. Not only are these objects portrayed to be persistent, but Jack's diction also attributes a sense of agency to them; it is almost as if once they were abandoned, their ubiquity became apparent, and these used-up commodities were capable of making the family feel confined (or "oppressed"). The final phrase, "creating a weather of their own," adds to the objects' agency while also suggesting that these abandoned possessions are functioning as a microcosm

¹⁷⁹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 108.

for the toxic cloud (which is also “creating weather”). This phrase can perhaps be read as an inconspicuous accusatory finger, pointing at the Gladneys who stand in for a mankind who inspires, as LeClair puts it, DeLillo’s “rage and pity” for what our species does to itself¹⁸⁰—in this case, we see that creating waste is not only “oppressive” to us as consumers but is also capable of taking on a life of its own to “create weather” that is ecologically hazardous.

On a larger scale, the man-created toxic cloud (composed of the poisonous chemical Nyodene D) is a further demonstration of how the residual effects of man’s technology (i.e. the spillage of Nyodene D) have the power to create environmental crises. When Heinrich first notices the cloud issuing from a tank car, he calls it: “A shapeless growing thing. A dark black breathing thing of smoke.”¹⁸¹ Just as the “abandoned possessions” Jack spots in the attic foreshadowed, we see that the *new* threat of the exterior (which, for the modernist, was an antagonistic “Nature”) is now one of human creation via the production of waste. To solidify the connection between this fictional set-up and our real world, we can consider how the man-made airborne toxic event parallels Latour’s comparison of man to Dr. Frankenstein (and the postmodern environment to his creation). Additionally, Latour states, “The environment is what appears when unwanted consequences come back to haunt the originator of the action.”¹⁸² We cannot help but notice how the personification Heinrich assigns to the cloud—it grows, it *breathes*—is intimately linked with

¹⁸⁰ LeClair, “Closing the Loop,” 393.

¹⁸¹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 109.

¹⁸² Latour, “It’s Development,” 8.

Latour's statement about what humans have done to their environment (or what mankind has created out of "the already-used up"¹⁸³). Under the simulacra of "surfaces, networks, commodities,"¹⁸⁴ is a pulse of a *new* nature: one created by man through the waste he produces via technology and consumption, one that grows, breathes, and may one day spiral out of control to destroy, just as the airborne toxic event does. This notion that Latour brings up of Dr. Frankenstein and his monstrous creation can also link back to the passage in which Jack is shocked by the foul-smelling waste that his family's "abandoned possessions"—discarded pieces of their identities—have produced. Again, perhaps this production of repugnant (and, in the case of the toxic cloud, *dangerous*) waste is the actual "dark underside of consumer consciousness"—indeed, this process operates outside the *consciousness* of the consumer and beneath the realm of waves and radiation, wreaking havoc on the "real," "tangible," and once-"natural" world.

Indeed, Jack is so far removed from a consciousness of the ecological consequences for a society of waste-producers that he does not even think he or his family can be affected by the toxic cloud. Despite seeing the conspicuous "heavy black mass" surrounded by fire engines, hearing radio warnings, police sirens, and air-raid alerts, Jack denies the approaching danger of the toxic cloud no less than eight times, saying things like: "It won't come this way."¹⁸⁵ Here, Jack appears to stand in for the average, conflict-avoiding American of today. In fact, Glen Love's

¹⁸³ Deitering, "The Postmodern Novel," 199.

¹⁸⁴ Wilcox, "The End of Heroic Narrative," 350.

¹⁸⁵ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 188.

description of Western culture's avoidance of the very real danger of ecological crises closely corresponds to Jack's mentality; Love states, "Rather than confronting these ecological issues [with "doomsday" potential], we prefer to think on other things...[because] a diminished environment is, for the present, a post-ponable worry."¹⁸⁶ Why is a compromised environment a post-ponable worry? Because, as Latour tells us, modernism viewed the environment as "a huge unknown reserve on which to discharge the bad consequences of collective actions,"¹⁸⁷ confining these "bad consequences" to an external realm that is entirely separate from the sanctuary of humanity's interior sphere of civilization. Additionally, Deitering calls a pre-toxic consciousness "an age of relative innocence in regard to the global contamination of the environment"¹⁸⁸—but this ignorance is not a benign innocence: it is mankind's refusal to recognize the consequences of our "collective actions." Jack, again, demonstrates the modernist's pre-toxic consciousness when he tries to reassure Heinrich, saying, "The important thing is location. [The toxic cloud is] there. We're here."¹⁸⁹ "Here," for Jack, constitutes more than just the interior of the Gladney home: "here" is the realm of waves, radiation, and simulacra, where ecological crises are confined to television screens¹⁹⁰; "here" is *above* the "dark underside of consumer consciousness"¹⁹¹; "here" is solely a state of mind that yearns for order, yet refuses to acknowledge the consequences of disregarding "natural"

¹⁸⁶ Love, "Revaluing Nature," 226-7.

¹⁸⁷ Latour, "It's Development," 8.

¹⁸⁸ Deitering, "The Postnatural Novel," 196.

¹⁸⁹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 114.

¹⁹⁰ See: DeLillo, *White Noise*, 64.

¹⁹¹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 247.

laws (i.e. converting nature's "standing reserve" into the "already-used-up"¹⁹²). And "there" is a "huge unknown reserve" that Jack, with his modernist mindset, cannot understand has been transformed by a late capitalist society into "the already-used-up."

In fact, Jack's modern, capitalist mindset becomes exceedingly clear when he further denies the viability of the toxic cloud's threat by claiming that his economic and societal status renders him invulnerable to environmental travesties. He says:

These things [like the toxic cloud] happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. Society is set up in such a way that it's the poor and the uneducated that suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters...I'm a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods?¹⁹³

The "there" that contains the toxic event is now a space only inhabited by the televised images of the "poor" and "uneducated." Jack's statement aligns with what Naomi Klein describes in a news article "Capitalism vs. the Climate" as "right-wing climate conspiracies," which maintain that attributing environmental crises to the habits of a capitalist society is a scheme to instantiate socialism.¹⁹⁴ In both cases, high social and economic standing act as a buffer between Jack/right-wing conservatives and the threat of environmental crises (crises that both Jack and the right-wing conservative have, arguably, played a part in creating); this buffer forever confines such crises to the "there" outside of mankind's (or maybe just the

¹⁹² Deitering, "The Postnatural Novel," 199.

¹⁹³ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 112.

¹⁹⁴ Naomi Klein, "Capitalism vs. the Climate," *The Nation*, November 9, 2011, accessed September 20, 2012.

middle-to-upper class's) "civilized" bubble. We may conclude that Jack's denial of the connection between his family's "interior" sphere and the threatening "external" that contains the toxic event is a modernist stance; a stance that may be seen as representing much of Western culture's denial of mankind's status as a geological force, labeling the environmental damage that results from man's newfound agency as "a post-ponable worry."

Surrendering Agency

However, DeLillo confutes the modernist's notion that his social and economic status will forever seal him off from the consequences of his technologies and consumption, for, in "The Airborne Toxic Event" section of *White Noise*, the "post-ponable worry" of a damaged environment becomes a penetrating and immediate danger to the Gladney family. Just before the Gladneys decide to evacuate their home, thereby acknowledging the concrete reality of the toxic cloud's threat, they hear "sirens that hadn't been tested in a decade or more...[that] made a noise like some territorial squawk from out of the Mesozoic."¹⁹⁵ These sirens seem to give the environmental crisis a voice, allowing it to reclaim (with a "territorial squawk") a place in the world of waves and radiation—indeed, perhaps we can read the succession of *White Noise*'s "Waves and Radiation" section by "The Airborne Toxic Event" section as an usurping of the hyperreal by the real. Once the family does accept the plausibility of the toxic cloud's threat, Jack offers up a glimmering instant of accepting responsibility for this man-made event. He relays, "What people

¹⁹⁵ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 115.

in an exodus fear most immediately is that those in positions of authority will long since have fled, leaving us in charge of our own chaos.”¹⁹⁶ By putting a collectively possessive adjective in front of “chaos”—with “chaos” likely referring to the toxic cloud and the panic surrounding the event—it seems that Jack is subtly taking responsibility for this toxic ecological crisis. However, “immediate fear” now stands in for denial, which still inhibits any agency Jack could use to combat this man-created chaos.

This lack of agency is reflected in Jack and Heinrich’s late night conversation concerning the disconnect between the present-day man and the collective capabilities of the human species. After the family has settled into the community shelter, Heinrich says to his father:

It’s like we’ve been thrown back in time [because of the toxic event]...Here we are in the Stone Age, knowing all these great things after centuries of progress but what can we do to make life easier for the Stone Agers? Can we make a refrigerator? Can we even explain how a refrigerator works? What is electricity? What is light? We experience these things every day of our lives but what good does it do if we find ourselves hurled back in time and we can’t even tell people the basic principles much less actually make something that would improve conditions...We think we’re so great and modern. Moon landings, artificial hearts. But what if you were hurled into a time warp and came face to face with the ancient Greeks...What could you tell an ancient Greek that he couldn’t say, ‘Big Deal.’...Here it is practically the twenty-first century and you’ve read hundreds of books and magazines and seen a hundred TV shows about science and medicine. Could you tell those people one little crucial thing that might save a million and a half lives?¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 117.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 142-3.

Here, Heinrich is singling out both himself and Jack as mere biological agents, disconnecting them from any sense of agency as well as from a historical trajectory: they are detached from the ability to make refrigerators, to harness electricity, to land on the moon, to engineer artificial hearts, and, by extension, are incapable of “saving a million and a half lives.” Unlike the community of ancient Greeks, to whom Heinrich attributes a sophisticated *shared knowledge*, Jack and Heinrich are at the shallow end of the present-day network of *collective intelligence*. Because the father and son lack even a working knowledge of mankind’s technology and how to produce commodities, it would seem as if they cannot be held accountable for the waste (in the form of a toxic cloud) produced by a contemporary lifestyle (for they are powerless to “save lives” without such knowledge). Alternatively, Chakrabarty explains that the elevated status of mankind as a geological force implicates the human species as a *whole*.¹⁹⁸ While Chakrabarty’s stance calls for mankind’s shared responsibility for the “bad consequences of collective actions” that have compromised our environment, Heinrich’s speech isolates him and Jack from the geological autonomy of the human species and, therefore, from any sense of responsibility or attachment they could feel in regard to their man-made toxic environment.

A Retreat to the “Ancient”

It can be argued that Jack’s detachment from the agency of a collective, contemporary society marks the transition from a modern, producer society to a

¹⁹⁸ Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 213.

postmodern, consumer society; and it is this transition that causes Jack's desire to retreat to "ancient" certainties. Unlike the modernist who can still, as Jameson puts it, work to "transform the referents" in an "archaic" "natural" world,¹⁹⁹ the postmodernist is kept at a distance from his surroundings—he only has *television*.²⁰⁰ As a result, if the postmodernist like Jack cannot be attached to the sense of agency granted by transforming or having *already* transformed the last of nature's "referents," he desires an attachment to *something* concrete. Glen Love describes this postmodern phenomenon of detachment from our natural world as it occurs in present-day Western culture, saying, "We have grown accustomed to living with crises, and to outliving them."²⁰¹ Indeed, if we examine an earlier *White Noise* scene in which the Gladneys "gather in front of the [TV] set" to watch natural disasters (such as floods, earthquakes, mudslides and erupting volcanoes) occurring across the globe, we see more than the family just "living with crises" and "out living them"; Jack relays, "Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping."²⁰² Perhaps the Gladneys' wish comes from this same recurring desire for attachment to something "real" and "tangible" in the postmodern world. The airborne toxic event gives the family their wish: "[The cloud of Nyodene D] was a terrible thing to see, so close, so low...But it was also

¹⁹⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

²⁰⁰ Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing*, 64.

²⁰¹ Love, "Revaluing Nature," 226.

²⁰² DeLillo, *White Noise*, 64.

spectacular, part of the grandness of a sweeping event.”²⁰³ Jack continues to elaborate on what constitutes “something bigger, grander, and more sweeping”:

Our fear was accompanied by a sense of awe that bordered on the religious. It is surely possible to be awed by the thing that threatens your life, to see it as a cosmic force, so much larger than yourself, more powerful, created by elemental and willful rhythms. This was a death made in the laboratory, defined and measurable, but we thought of it at the time in a simple and primitive way, as some seasonal perversity of the earth like a flood or tornado, something not subject to control. Our helplessness did not seem compatible with the idea of a man-made event.²⁰⁴

In what James calls “the more fully human world” of the postmodern,²⁰⁵ the Gladneys are attracted to this visceral fear of their environment as a “cosmic force” capable of killing them; and this attraction to the illusion of an “old, older, and archaic” world with real “referents”²⁰⁶ is what creates a “more sweeping” feeling for the Gladneys. Thus, in these passages, we are seeing the family’s postmodern *desire for attachment* to their environment—to be closer to an authority, to “real” excitement in which the stakes are raised; this desire for attachment exists concurrently with their decidedly modern *denial* of attachment to this environment—they refuse to accept their responsibility as a geological force capable of “chaos,” for the modernist part of them still views their environment as a “huge unknown reserve”²⁰⁷ that will forever seal off the consequences of mankind’s environmentally harmful activities.

²⁰³ Ibid, 124.

²⁰⁴ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 124.

²⁰⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Latour, “It’s Development,” 8.

Moreover, the way that Jack “hides” from his having to acknowledge the role mankind plays in ecological crises (like the airborne toxic event) is by attaching to a type of “ancient” existence. “Ancient” appears to connote a simpler time when humans were inferior to a greater authority like an autonomous environment—in fact, Jack associates “primitive” with “seasonal perversity of the earth.”²⁰⁸ Again, we can see from where the appeal of “ancient” things for Jack comes: the concreteness and stability of this higher power—anything that will save us from “our own chaos”; Jack even says, “The genius of the primitive mind is that it can render human helplessness in noble and beautiful ways.”²⁰⁹ The postmodernist’s “primitive mind” operates through delusion, allowing him to still believe that there is an “old, older, and archaic” that persists even after the modernist has succeeded in “conquering” nature. So, while the modernist teleologically orients himself towards the end goal of “breaking all the shackles of ancient existence,”²¹⁰ the postmodernist, once he realizes that these “shackles of ancient existence” are broken and that he is utterly detached amidst the void of simulacra and the environmental “chaos” created by the modernist’s “defeat” of nature, quickly backtracks into the “ancient”; the postmodernist now seems to unconsciously realize that these “shackles” were actually his only tether to a sense of “natural” order.

In the case of *White Noise*, Jack’s retreat back to the “ancient” assigns the authority of a “natural” world to the toxic cloud. Jack supplements this claim when

²⁰⁸ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 124.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 135.

²¹⁰ Latour, “It’s Development,” 5.

he describes a scene the Gladney family witnesses on an overpass as they are fleeing Blacksmith in their car; he tells us:

Out in the open, keeping their children near, carrying what they could, they seemed to be part of some ancient destiny, connected in doom and ruin to a whole history of people trekking across wasted landscapes. There was an epic quality about them that made me wonder for the first time at the scope of our predicament.²¹¹

What is interesting about Jack's description of the families from "some ancient destiny" trudging across the overpass is how his diction assigns a sort of perpetual struggle to their situation: "carrying what they could," "doom and ruin," and "trekking across wasted landscapes." When Jack then says that these people have an "epic quality about them," he suggests that they are actively working to surmount adversity, struggling against human "helplessness"; Jack *victimizes* the families. And, by victimizing these families, Jack inconspicuously assigns autonomy and authority to the environment; the toxic cloud is the unnamed antagonist, and these families are "out in the open"—subjected to a nature that has reclaimed its territory *within* the border of the human "interior." The attribution of power to the natural world detaches Jack (a stand-in for mankind) from having to accept any of the responsibility for or consequences of the human-manufactured toxic cloud (for "[his] helplessness did not seem compatible with a man-made event").

²¹¹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 119.

Moreover, this “ancient” sense of “helplessness” also allows Jack and his fellow refugees to re-attach to aboriginal-like tenets of a simpler time; once in the safe house, Jack relays:

The presence of other stranded souls, young women with infants, old and infirm people, gave us a certain staunchness and will, a selfless bent that was pronounced enough to function as a common identity. This large gray area, dank and bare and lost to history just a couple of hours ago, was an oddly agreeable place right now, filled with an eagerness of community and voice.²¹²

Here, we see the safe house transform into a “primitive” communal village in which people co-exist and sleep as a collective, tell stories, and exhibit “no sign of skepticism or condescension...in [this] weakened and receptive state.”²¹³ The earnest, core human values to which Jack and his compound cohort readily attach themselves (in tandem with autonomy being re-assigned to the environment) would seem to provide that permanence, ground, or ambiguous *something* for which “the modernist displaced in a postmodern world” (a world in which Jameson tells us “nature is gone for good”) is searching.²¹⁴

In fact, while talking with a zealously devout man in the safe house, Jack wonders, “Is this the point of Armageddon? No ambiguity, no more doubt?”²¹⁵ Restated, Jack muses that the end of the world will pull back the shroud of obscurity to reveal that *something*—something permanent and stable—for which

²¹² Ibid, 126.

²¹³ Ibid, 139-40.

²¹⁴ Indeed, as we saw in Chapter One, the postmodernist’s pain of detachment can be soothed through “social cohesion,” which seems inherently linked to a “tribal” society (like the one formed in the safe house during the airborne toxic event in *White Noise*)

²¹⁵ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 132.

Jack has been searching. But perhaps Jack has already gotten a glimpse of what is behind that veil—indeed, the toxic cloud seems to be the “Armageddon” of the postmodern world (a world characterized by “ambiguity” and “doubt”). For Jack, the toxic crisis functions not as a wake-up call, but as a nostalgic fantasy in which the “natural” world’s authority and the resurgence of “tribal” human values constitute the missing “referents” of a postmodern world that is actually “fully human.”²¹⁶

Dissolving an Illusion of the “Ancient”

However, DeLillo does now allow Jack to linger in this fantasy of “ancient,” “tribal” values. While the Gladneys are still in the shelter, Jack and Babette have a discussion that rockets them back from the “ancient” into the present Anthropocene—when mankind wields the power of a geological force and the toxic cloud is a “man-made event.” The couple’s conversation unfolds:

[Babette:] Every [scientific] advance is worse than the one before because it makes me more scared.

[Jack:] Scared of what?

[Babette:] The sky, the earth, I don’t know.

[Jack:] The greater the scientific advance, the more primitive the fear.²¹⁷

Through an ecological perspective, Latour builds upon the effects of mankind’s “scientific advances,” discussing the relationship between technology, mastery, and theology: “The link between technology and theology...hinges on the notion of

²¹⁶ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

²¹⁷ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 154.

mastery...[mastery being] the technical, scientific and economic dominion of Man over Nature,” which allows the modernist to model himself after the “Christian God.”²¹⁸ Considering Jack and Babette’s conversation in the context of Latour’s claim, we see that it is *not* the natural world that has the authority: it is mankind. As earlier concluded, primitive fear arises from being inferior or subject to one’s surroundings. But if mankind has “mastered” his environment through technology, then how can Babette’s fear of the sky and the earth be *more* primitive with greater scientific advances? The answer lies in this chapter’s earlier discussion of the disconnect between Jack and the collective capability of humans as a species; we may recall that this disconnect was used to explain Jack’s inability to acknowledge his role in man’s creation of a new “real” world composed of the waste of “the already-used-up”²¹⁹—waste that has the power to create ecological crises like the toxic event. What we are seeing is a *new* interior/exterior dichotomy forming: the invisible world of waves, radiation, and simulacra is layered *on top of* the polluted wasteland of the “real” once-“natural” world; now, instead of Nature ruling the “exterior” world, mankind has unknowingly taken the reins. At one point during Jack and Babette’s conversation in the shelter, Babette appears to speak with DeLillo’s voice, saying, “What scares me is have they thought it through?”²²⁰ Have *we* as a society thought it through—that is, the consequences of our excessive technology and consumption?

²¹⁸ Latour, “It’s Development,” 12.

²¹⁹ Deitering, “The Postnatural Novel, 199.

²²⁰ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 154.

As a result of a collective mankind's control over the "real" world, the "primitive fear" that "average" people like Jack and Babette feel is even more terrifying: authority (and therefore control) no longer belongs to an omnipotent, eternal Nature or even a fair, almighty god; authority now belongs to the human race who has potentially not thought their status as geological agents through. This elevated status of man was, arguably, the end goal for the modernist—as Latour says, "to run forward and break all shackles of *ancient* existence."²²¹ But *White Noise* places the modernist (represented largely by Jack and Babette²²²) *beyond* this finish line in the postmodern realm of waves and radiation, where mankind's supreme rule results in the individual's disorientation and sense of emptiness; the postmodern man is too preoccupied with his fear of death and insatiability of his consumption in this realm of simulacra to be bothered by the ecological consequences of the waste produced by his technology and consumption.

Jack's Confrontation with Willie Mink

However, I believe we can re-read Jack's encounter with Willie Mink as an allegory for mankind's eventual acknowledgement of his agency in creating the "real," postnatural world of the "already-used-up." By examining Jack's shoot out with Mink through an ecological perspective as well as in relation to "The Airborne Toxic Event" section, we can see Jack's progression from Mink's attacker to his savior as the ideal trajectory for mankind to follow as a geological force. For both

²²¹ Latour, "It's Development," 5. Emphasis mine.

²²² Wilcox, "The End of Heroic Narrative," 346.

Jack and mankind, becoming a “savior” offers the possibility of reconciling autonomy with attachment.

First off, I want to more fully explain the roles that Mink and Jack allegorically stand in for at the scene’s beginning before Mink returns fire on Jack. In my view, Mink represents the environment as the modernist sees it. Jack, then, stands in for the modernist who is driven to “rise above nature,”²²³ “consuming” it in order to gain life credit; indeed, Jack mentions twice that he sees himself from Mink’s viewpoint as “magnified, threatening”²²⁴ as well as “looming, dominant, gaining life-power, storing up life-credit.”²²⁵ More specifically, in his initial confrontation with Mink, Jack represents the modernist’s “ideal”—that is: the exact moment when the modernist succeeds in “breaking all the shackles of ancient existence.”²²⁶ Wilcox describes this moment as: “The modernist ‘epiphany’: a moment of profound imaginative perception in which fragments are organized and essence revealed.”²²⁷ Interestingly enough, Latour describes a similar experience of this “modernist epiphany,” calling it “the revelation that Nature will finally be visible through the veils of subjectivity—the subjection—that had hidden it to our ancestors.”²²⁸ For Jack, the Zumwalt automatic seems to create the euphoric state of his “modern epiphany”; he says, “The gun created a second reality for me to

²²³ Turner, “Escape from Modernism,” 55.

²²⁴ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 297.

²²⁵ *Ibid*, 298.

²²⁶ Latour, “It’s Development,” 5.

²²⁷ Wilcox, “The End of Heroic Narrative,” 349.

²²⁸ Latour, “It’s Development,” 5.

inhabit...It was a reality I could control, secretly dominate.”²²⁹ In Chapter One, I compared this “second reality” constructed by the technology of Jack’s automatic firearm to Lemmens’ notion of technologic “enclosed spheres”²³⁰; in this chapter, I want to take the idea of a second reality a step further, viewing it as an alternative, idealized reality (as imagined by Wilcox’s and Latour’s modernist) in which humans have achieved ultimate “control” and “domination”²³¹ over their environment.

Viewing Jack as the modernist’s “ideal” also entails our seeing him as a stand-in for mankind after its ascension to the status of a geological force. Indeed, the Zumwalt’s creation of a “second reality” for Jack to *control* sounds remarkably similar to the Anthropocene epoch that Chakrabarty describes in which the human species acquires the *agency* of a geological force. Moreover, once Jack is driving to Mink’s hotel room to enact his plot to kill him, we see Jack fully inhabit this “second reality.” He thinks: “This must be how people escape the pull of the earth...Simply stop obeying. Steal instead of buy, shoot instead of talk.”²³² In this line, there is an up-rooting of authority: “simply stop obeying,” and we may assume Jack’s refusal to obey refers to “the pull of the earth.” It is here where Jack most clearly stands in for the modernist’s “ideal,” for obeying the pull of the earth is, arguably, what constitutes “the shackles of ancient existence.” Additionally, we can tie Jack’s dialogue back to Chakrabarty: figuratively, Jack overturns the authority of (“the pull of”) the earth by becoming magnified, threatening, and dominant in relation to

²²⁹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 283.

²³⁰ Lemmens, “The Detached Animal,” 123-5.

²³¹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 283.

²³² *Ibid*, 288.

Mink, which is exactly how Chakrabarty relates the human species to our earth now that we have become a geological force. Additionally, the juxtaposition of the phrase “shooting instead of talking” (which the gun that creates a “second reality” for Jack will do in his confrontation with Mink) with the grandiose notion of “escaping the pull of the earth” can allow us to read Jack’s shoot out with Mink as an allegory for mankind’s ascension to the status of a geological force in the once-“natural” world.

It is also important to note that, in Jack’s confrontation with Mink, Jack’s recognition of his agency in relation to Mink starkly contrasts his attitude during the man-created airborne toxic event during which he and Babette do not include themselves among the “they” capable of developing environment-altering scientific advances. Yet, even in his confrontation with Mink, Jack is *still* (initially) detached from the consequences of his actions (just as he is during the airborne toxic event); Jack is robotic, only capable of experiencing frenzied, “nameless emotions”²³³ in place of empathy, which is perhaps why he describes “[feeling] extraordinarily light—lighter than air, colorless, odorless, invisible.”²³⁴ Jack’s inability to accept the consequences of his (as well as his fellow man’s) actions remains consistent in both “The Airborne Toxic Event” section and his initial attack on Mink. Additionally, when Jack, just after being shot in the wrist by Mink, says, “The world collapsed inward, all those vivid textures and connections buried in mounds of ordinary stuff.

²³³ Ibid, 297.

²³⁴ Ibid, 289.

I was disappointed. Hurt, stunned and disappointed,”²³⁵ we see a connection to Latour’s claim that “the environment is what appears when unwanted consequences come back to haunt the originator of the action. If this originator is a true modernist, he will see this return as incomprehensible since he believed he was just liberating himself from all ties and getting finally free.”²³⁶ The appearance of “unwanted consequences” is a result of the mistaken notion that Jack—that the modernist—could “simply stop obeying” and “escape the pull of the earth.” In Jack’s case, Mink’s return fire seems to constitute an immediate example of Latour’s environmental resurgence, much in the same way that the toxic cloud—the “unwanted consequences” of mankind’s chemical waste—comes to life to “haunt” the Blacksmith community.

However, the progression of events after Mink shoots Jack in the wrist represents a diversion from the narrative that we see during the airborne toxic event; instead of shifting the blame onto an ambiguous “they” who stand in for mankind’s ability to manufacture ecological crises (like the toxic event) through scientific advances, the only person Jack can point an accusatory finger at his *himself*; he alone is the one who shot Mink, and it is at this point when Jack departs from the modernist’s “ideal.” During the toxic event, we may recall that the immediacy of the Nyodene D cloud causes Jack’s denial of the reality of man-made ecological consequences to be displaced by fear and a loss of agency; and it is this fear and loss of agency that prompt him to retreat into a desire for the “ancient.” On

²³⁵ Ibid, 298.

²³⁶ Latour, “It’s Development,” 8.

the other hand, after Mink returns fire on Jack, Jack feels “the restoration of the normal order of matter and sensation,” “[sees Mink] for the first time as a person,” and experiences “epic pity and compassion...[by] merging [his and Mink’s] fortunes, physically leading [Mink] to safety.”²³⁷ Here, we see Jack *maintain* his sense of agency in relation to Mink, even after Jack is “haunted” by the unwanted consequences of his actions (i.e. after Jack is shot). As opposed to being magnified, threatening, and looming in relation to Mink, Jack is now standing over him “to breathe powerful gusts of air into his lungs”²³⁸; Jack acquires agency through his role as Mink’s savior rather than his attacker. In Chapter One, I demonstrated how Jack’s re-attachment to Mink signifies his re-attachment to an “ancient” and “tribal” sense of humanity. But, in this chapter, I move to say that Jack’s attachment is to a *different* sense of permanence: that is, the acceptance of the consequences of his actions; agency and a sense of attachment are not mutually exclusive.

In fact, Latour describes how autonomy can be reconciled with attachment, explaining that the harder the modern tries to free himself from the limitations of his environment, the more attached he becomes to this environment. He states:

What [for the modernist]...was taken as the proof of an increasing human mastery and an advance toward greater emancipation, could also be re-described, not as the dialectical opposite but as an entirely different phenomenon, namely, a *continuous* movement toward a greater and greater level of *attachments* of things and people at an ever expanding scale and at

²³⁷ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 299-300.

²³⁸ *Ibid*, 299.

an ever increasing degree of intimacy. Emancipation or attachment, two great narratives for the same history.²³⁹

Essentially, what Latour is saying here is the modernist's attempts to conquer and dominate nature (freeing himself from the "ancient" threat of an autonomous environment) may actually be seen as mankind's getting *more* attached to an environment that is becoming increasingly *dependent* upon humans. More simply, the modernist succeeded in taking away nature's autonomy so fully that our environment has now become weak and in need of man's care. Literary ecologist Michael McDowell puts it more simply: "Human life is 'conjoined' with that life of nature."²⁴⁰ Correspondingly, in *White Noise*, we see several instances when Jack is similarly "conjoined" with Mink. As a wounded Jack hauls Mink, who is also injured, into the back of his car, Jack remarks, "I was no longer possible to tell whether the blood on my hands and clothes was his or mine."²⁴¹ Jack also describes the "grim intimacy" of putting his mouth on Mink's "to breathe powerful gusts of air into his lungs."²⁴² Just as McDowell abolishes the boundary between the human interior and the "natural" exterior, the boundary between Jack and Mink is blurred in these passages: their blood mixes, their mouths touch, and Jack's oxygen becomes Mink's. And it is not just that Jack and Mink become attached in these instances, but Jack also becomes *responsible* for Mink's life (loading him into the car and performing mouth-to-mouth).

²³⁹ Latour, "It's Development," 5.

²⁴⁰ Michael McDowell, "The Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight," in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ed. Harold Fromm et al. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 379.

²⁴¹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 300.

²⁴² *Ibid*, 299.

It is when Jack is rescuing Mink that Jack gets to the heart of exactly how the acquisition of power and autonomy is compatible with a deeper sense of attachment. Jack asks himself, “Is it better to better to commit evil and attempt to balance it with an exalted act than to live a resolutely neutral life? I know I felt virtuous, I felt blood-stained and stately, dragging the badly wounded man through the dark and empty street.”²⁴³ By balancing evil with an exalted act, the individual has autonomy as the agent responsible for tipping the balance. It is the feeling of *having* the power to commit evil and to then attempt to balance it with an exalted act that fleshes Jack out: he feels virtuous, stately, “large and selfless.”²⁴⁴ Jack is overwhelmed by his nobility and heroism that stems from taking responsibility for his own “evil” actions. More simply, agency accompanies an attachment to the consequences of one’s actions.

This same idea of agency being linked to one’s acceptance of responsibility for his actions appears in Chakrabarty’s call for mankind to realize its ascension to the status of a geological force. While the mindset of high modernism led mankind “to commit evil”—to use technology to “consume” our environment and, as a result, rise above it—the mindset of man realizing he is a geological force, as Latour and Chakrabarty hope, will lead us to balance that evil with the “exalted act” of actively taking care of our planet—breathing “powerful gusts of air into its lungs.” Latour gets more specific about what this “exalted act” would entail when he relays the ideology of a group that he calls the “postenvironmentalists”; Latour describes their

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

plan, stating: “From now on, we should stop flagellating ourselves and taking up explicitly and seriously what we have been doing all along at an ever increasing scale, namely, intervening, acting, wanting, caring [in relation to our environment].”²⁴⁵ Through intervening and acting, the modernist’s desire for power and autonomy is preserved while also fostering a deeper relationship with our planet as its caretaker rather than its attacker. Jack echoes this sentiment when he says, “It hadn’t occurred to me that a man’s attempts to redeem himself might prolong the elation he felt when he committed the crime [i.e. shooting Mink to “escape the pull of the earth”] he sought to make up for.”²⁴⁶ Jack suggests that, in trying to buy “life credit”—to escape death (or a submission to his environment)—by killing Mink, Jack instead finds a sense of “life credit” in *saving* Mink after having shot him: “emancipation or attachment, two great narratives for the same history.”²⁴⁷ But unlike what I proposed in Chapter One, we can see through Jack’s confrontation with Mink that the path to true autonomy is a sense of attachment—indeed, Jack says, “the key” to feeling “large and selfless” is: to “forgive the foul body. Embrace it whole.”²⁴⁸ We can now read Jack’s line as evidence that attachment—like a sense of parental responsibility of “embracing the foul body whole”—produces a feeling of agency. In the same way, if mankind can acknowledge its status as a geological force, we may find a sense of autonomy through the attachment to our planet as its savior from the consequences of our own actions.

²⁴⁵ Latour, “It’s Development,” 9.

²⁴⁶ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 301.

²⁴⁷ Latour, “It’s Development,” 5.

²⁴⁸ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 300.

Archeology

For another take on how to reconcile autonomy with attachment, in this section I revisit the idea of archeology that I introduced in Chapter Two in order to show how Jack is able to finally recycle his “waste” of the already-consumed into a singular identity to which he can fasten himself; in this sense, we can now view Jack as a consumer in his confrontation with Mink. Indeed, in Chapter One, I posited that Mink was the ultimate “object of consumption” for Jack in that his annihilation of Mink (to use a part of Bauman’s definition of consumption) would result in Jack’s autonomy (or gaining of “life credit”). Arguably, after Jack shoots Mink and thinks he has successfully killed him, Mink then becomes the “already-used-up”—waste, even. And, in the same way that Jack tries to detach himself from his “old and tired things” and his “abandoned possessions,” as well as his reluctance to handle the his family’s foul-smelling trash, Jack avoids contact with the “used-up” Mink. Just after Jack shoots Mink, thinking he is dead, Jack details “[approaching] the sitting figure, [being] careful not to step in blood, leav[ing] revealing prints.”²⁴⁹ Jack also describes the “consumed” Mink who is covered in blood as a “scene of squalid violence,” and, not even two lines later, Jack again mentions “step[ping] back, regard[ing] the squalor.”²⁵⁰ Once Mink has presumably been “consumed” (or killed), Jack now sees Mink’s blood not in terms of “dominant wavelength, luminance, [and] purity”²⁵¹ but as a mess of dirt and grime—“squalor”

²⁴⁹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 298.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

that Jack must be careful not to step in. However, as Jack oddly seems to foreshadow near the novel's beginning when describing his hesitance to learn German words: "What we are reluctant to touch often seems the very fabric of our salvation."²⁵²

Indeed, according to Latour, Jack's "mastery" of Mink should imply a connection between them rather than a detachment. Latour states that the modernist bases a sense of what mastery entails off of a Christian God but then fails to realize that this God

...is not a master that masters anything (in the first modernist sense of the word) but who, on the contrary, gets folded into, involved with, implicated with and incarnated into His Creation; and who is so much attached and dependent on His Creation that he is continually forced...to save it again and again.²⁵³

Correspondingly, after Mink shoots Jack in the wrist, we see the Jack who is detached from the "squalor" of Mink's blood turn into a "blood-stained"²⁵⁴ Jack who feels connected to Mink. Jack's attachment to Mink resembles Denise's "protective tenderness" toward the already-consumed objects of her past that she uses to "[fasten] herself to a life."²⁵⁵ Contrary to Jack's initial attempts to *not* have his identity reflected in Mink's blood (for stepping in it would "leave *revealing* prints"²⁵⁶), Jack eventually uses Mink to *define* his newfound identity as virtuous,

²⁵² Ibid, 31.

²⁵³ Latour, "It's Development," 5.

²⁵⁴ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 299.

²⁵⁵ Ibid, 102.

²⁵⁶ Ibid, 298. Emphasis mine.

stately, large, and selfless.²⁵⁷ In fact, when a delusional Mink asks Jack (as Jack is saving him), “Who are you, literally?,” Jack responds with: “A passerby. A friend. It doesn’t matter.”²⁵⁸ Here, we see Jack define himself *in relation* to Mink. Just as Denise’s “strategy in a world of displacements [is] to make every effort to restore and preserve” as “a way of fastening herself to a life,”²⁵⁹ Jack’s “exalted act” of “restoring and preserving” Mink—of putting life back into the “used-up”—also allows Jack to fasten himself to a life (or a singular identity). At the same time, the construction of his own identity also gives Jack a sense of agency—arguably, the same sense of agency that Jack was looking for when he shot Mink in the first place, prompting him to say: “A man’s attempts to redeem himself might prolong the elation he felt when he committed the crime he sought to make up for.”²⁶⁰ We can now use this line to view archeology as a tool that reconciles autonomy—the power to define one’s own identity—with a deeper sense of attachment—a connection to that singular identity.

Additionally, this sense of attachment includes a connection to the tangible world as well as an individual’s temporal trajectory, which is essential for Jack as a postmodern man who is lost in a world of waves and radiation. In fact, during the two instances that Jack explicitly references archeology and anthropology, we witness a sense of trajectory and orientation. The first time Jack mentions archeology, he is referring to a literal trail of blood that Mink leaves behind as Jack

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 299.

²⁵⁸ Ibid, 300.

²⁵⁹ Ibid, 102.

²⁶⁰ Ibid, 301.

tugs him to his car: “I was shocked at the amount of blood we were leaving behind. His, mainly. The sidewalk was striped. An interesting cultural deposit.”²⁶¹ Calling Mink’s visceral, bloody trajectory a “cultural deposit” manages to give it physical and historical permanence in a postmodern realm of simulacra. Furthermore, this “cultural deposit” is a created by Jack’s “exalted act” of dragging Mink’s body “through the dark and empty street,”²⁶² which not only “fossilizes” Jack’s act of valor, but also marks a solid sense of direction in a “dark and empty” space—perhaps a metaphor for the grim postmodern world.

The instance in which Jack references anthropology presents a figurative, yet anchored sense of orientation—that is, development. After Jack returns home from the hospital, he relays, “The rear seat was covered with blood. There was blood on the steering wheel, more blood on the dashboard and door handles. The scientific study of the cultural behavior and development of man. Anthropology.”²⁶³ Though Jack uses the collective term “man” as the subject of study, it seems likely that he is being self-referential; indeed, on this night, Jack has learned selflessness, felt honor, and experienced his humanity soar. Jack has recorded a small part of his existence and made it permanent: Mink’s blood on the rear seat, steering wheel, dashboard, and door handles concretizes Jack’s “attempts to redeem himself” for the crime of attacking Mink; perhaps this is how Jack’s elation may be prolonged: Jack can now physically *witness* the “development of man”—seeing his own progression

²⁶¹ Ibid, 299.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid, 305.

from attacker to savior through Mink's blood. Here, again, archeology (and anthropology) reconcile agency and attachment.

In relation to the postmodern realm of waves and radiation, archeology is the only system powerful enough to unite signifier with signified and to “restore and preserve” the already-used-up as a way of “fastening oneself to a life” (and this is exactly what Jack does through his “recycling” of Mink). In fact, archeology can be used as a tool to “work at transforming [those (albeit “used-up”)] ‘referents’”—a concrete process that Jameson claims was lost in a postmodern age.²⁶⁴ As a final note, this notion of archeology functions on a larger scale as well: it has the power to transform a society of waste-producers into a “selfless” and “large” geological force, capable of undoing our own over-consumption. As a geological force, mankind *will* leave behind an ecological footprint (despite environmentalists’ efforts to the contrary); but do we want our descendents to find the “dark underside of consumer consciousness” or the preserved record of an “exalted act” to restore our waste? Perhaps, more importantly, do we want *descendents* at all? If left unchecked, waste resulting from the excess of our technology and consumption that constitutes a “fully human world”²⁶⁵ could very well acquire a pulse and destroy its creator. However, a consciousness and *conscientiousness* of our geological agency may present an optimistic view of what lies ahead for both literary trends and our real world.

²⁶⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Post-Postmodern?

In this final section, I will further transmute the proposals in Chapters One and Two of what the post-postmodern entails. I began a discussion on the post-postmodern by describing it as a push-back against nihilism from the desire to find “*forever*.” Yet, considering DeLillo’s use of archeology in tandem with mankind’s ascension to the status of a geological force, I move to say that perhaps the post-postmodern is more than just a cry for a nostalgic natural order or even a grounding in “toxic consciousness” (that is, realizing our ability to destroy our “primal home”); maybe the post-postmodern does not have to grimly shun mankind’s capabilities, marking them as “evil”—blatantly unnatural or, even worse, futile. The post-postmodern, rather, may be defined by mankind’s ability to *create* its own sense of the ancient. Frederick Turner corroborates this notion, writing, “It is not that we shall rise above nature—one of the goals of modernism. Rather, we shall *be* nature.”²⁶⁶ Post-postmodernism, then, can possibly be defined by its demonstration of man’s role in re-enchanting the world.

Indeed, I think what keeps *White Noise* refreshingly contemporary even almost three decades after its publication is its uprooting of the core stability of the “long past,” the “ancient” and redistributing that power within Jack. More specifically, in one of the novel’s final scenes during which Jack speaks with an “ancient”²⁶⁷ nun, we see the complete upheaval of what Powers refers to as “*forever*.”

²⁶⁶ Turner, “Escape from Modernism,” 55.

²⁶⁷ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 301.

To Jack, a nun is “someone [who] still believes in angels, saints, all the traditional things...[like] the old heaven and hell, the Latin mass, the Pope is infallible, God created the world in six days. The great old beliefs. Hell is burning lakes, winged demons.”²⁶⁸ But Sister Hermann Marie, the nun with whom Jack speaks, tells him that she does not *actually* believe in “all the traditional things”; she only feigns belief in “things no one else takes seriously.”²⁶⁹ Moreover, Jack asks her, “All the old muddles and quirks...faith, religion, life ever-lasting. The great old human gullibilities. Are you saying you don’t take them seriously? Your dedication is pretense?”²⁷⁰; to which she eventually responds: “Soon no more. Soon you will lose your believers.”²⁷¹ And Sister Hermann Marie has already described the result of such a loss: “If we did not pretend to believe [the old beliefs], the world would collapse.”²⁷² But, as we may recall, Jack’s world already *has* “collapsed inward” once: the “second reality” that caved in when Mink shot him in the wrist. And only after this world collapses are “the old human muddles and quirks...set flowing again [within Jack].”²⁷³ I do not think the repetition of these two phrases (the “world collapsing” and “the old muddles and quirks”) is accidental. In fact, the twinning of these phrases equates, on some level, orthodox theology with the “second reality” that the gun allows Jack to inhabit: both seem to be a “higher plane of energy,” a reassurance of control and authority with “white noise everywhere,”²⁷⁴

²⁶⁸ Ibid, 303.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid, 304.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid, 303.

²⁷³ Ibid, 299.

²⁷⁴ Ibid, 295.

though both are ultimately detached from “the old human muddles and quirks.” Indeed, when Jack’s “[secondary] world collapse[s] inward” (after he is shot by Mink), “the extra dimensions, [and] the super perceptions [constituting this world]” are “reduced to visual clutter, a whirling miscellany, meaningless.”²⁷⁵ Almost identically, once the orthodox world of “the great old beliefs” collapses for Jack (since the nun stops pretending to believe “old things, old beliefs”²⁷⁶), Sister Hermann Marie begins speaking in German, and Jack “fail[s] to understand”²⁷⁷ He infers that she may be “reciting something...[like] litanies, hymns, catechisms. The mysteries of the rosary perhaps. Taunting [him] with scornful prayer.”²⁷⁸ But these “litanies, hymns, catechisms,” and “mysteries of the rosary” are all like the “extra dimensions and super perceptions” that are reduced to meaninglessness. Theology, or, the idea of God, comes to be represented by the nun’s speaking in German; though Jack has tried to learn the language throughout the novel, it remains outside of his comprehension. For Jack, the idea of God—arguably, *the* core of stability for an “ancient” past—is now no more than a signifier in a foreign language: “a whirling miscellany, meaningless.” As a side note, it is interesting that Dylar, the medication used to quell one’s fear of death, functions to make “the user...confuse words with the things they [refer] to”²⁷⁹; indeed, the drug could give rise to (the impression of) a real God and real beliefs just through the transmission of signifiers in a postmodern world.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, 298.

²⁷⁶ Ibid, 303.

²⁷⁷ Ibid, 305.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid, 295.

Nonetheless, by attaching orthodox theology—a manifestation of “*forever*”—to a system as fleeting as language, *White Noise* uproots theology’s core stability. But this nucleus of stable meaning—a central point of orientation—is not lost in a stratosphere of waves and radiation (as “grim postmodernism”²⁸⁰ would have us believe), but it is instead transplanted somewhere else: in the “exalted act” that attempts to balance the evil we have committed. Indeed, “the old muddles and quirks” that become detached from the nun find their way into Jack as he looks at a wounded Mink with “compassion, remorse, [and] mercy.”

Here, *again*, Latour resurfaces: emancipation and attachment occurring simultaneously. Jack has surpassed the use the nun provides: he no longer needs her to tether him to “the old muddles and quirks” of an “ancient” traditional past; after his “exalted act” of saving Mink, Jack himself has become *directly* attached to these “old muddles and quirks.” Thus, instead of regressing into an ancient past—i.e. finding a point of orientation in the “*forever*” (whether that be God, Nature, or the spirit that rolls through all things)—*White Noise* severs any “connection with the long past” and diverts that point of orientation to Jack and his autonomy. It is *here* where I believe *White Noise*’s achievement lies: a sense of nostalgia can also be seen as prophecy—for the very parental attachment Jack feels to Mink that instills meaning within him is the same type of attachment both Chakrabarty and Latour urge their fellow, contemporary man to adopt toward our environment—now seeing ourselves as a geological force.

²⁸⁰ Powers, introduction, xii.

A testament to this sense of human agency is our ability to re-enchant our world. The nun warns Jack, “Hell is when no one believes,”²⁸¹ but perhaps in a post-postmodern world, we do not have to believe. Turner augments this idea through his idealistic description of mankind’s capabilities:

Our poetry will become less obviously symbolic, for symbols will not be plastered onto the outside of reality but will be a concrete and accepted part of its plot, as the technical hardware is in a science-fiction novel. Facts will be significant, and symbols will be facts.²⁸²

Restated, a time of scientific advance does not necessitate a loss of the “ancient.” In fact, by the end of *White Noise*, what do we see but Jack surrounded by his family and the Blacksmith community who are *united* by “that fifth century A.D. sky ablaze with mystery and spiral light”²⁸³—an “unbearably beautiful”²⁸⁴ sky *created* by the airborne toxic event, by mankind. Jack uses the anaphoric clause “we don’t know” in his description of the sunset, also saying:

There is anticipation in the air but it is not the expectant midsummer hum of a shirtsleeve crowd, a sandlot game, with coherent precedents, a history of secure response. This waiting is introverted, uneven, almost backward and shy, tending toward silence.²⁸⁵

This sense of not knowing arises from a lack of “coherent precedents” and “a history of secure response”; however, there is not an ambiguous *something* underneath this sunset, just barely eluding Jack’s grasp—indeed, the white noise of missing

²⁸¹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 304.

²⁸² Turner, “Escape from Modernism,” 55.

²⁸³ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 77.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 162.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 308.

referents²⁸⁶ has been displaced by “*silence*.” Consequently, I believe we can read this “we don’t know” not as “we don’t know what’s *missing*” but as “we don’t know what’s *next*”—for mankind’s agency as a geological force is unprecedented without “a history of secure response”; the possibilities are endless. Perhaps post-postmodernism, then, will re-enchant our world by employing the myth-making capabilities of our technologies (such as *White Noise* does with its Nyodene D sunsets). While “ancient” myths were used to explain the phenomena of our natural world, contemporary, post-postmodern myths will seemingly have to do the opposite—that is, to ground man-made phenomena in the archeological sense: the power to create our own geological weather requires a consciousness of the *physical* legacy that this agency leaves behind. Indeed, as DeLillo shows us in *White Noise*, this awe-inspiring legacy can be as stunning as a molecularly-enhanced sunset or as dangerous as a cataclysmic toxic cloud.

²⁸⁶ Earlier in the novel, Jack wants to ask the “fifth century A.D. sky”: “Who is out there? Who are you?” DeLillo, *White Noise*, 101.

Conclusion

On a metaphysical, literary level, DeLillo functions as a guiding example for his characters in *White Noise*, particularly Jack. LeClair describes DeLillo's authorial method, stating, "As a systems novelist, DeLillo recycles American waste into art to warn against entropy, both thermodynamic and informational."²⁸⁷ Within the world of *White Noise*, we can see how Jack's consumption (at least initially) declines into entropy, which, in a thermodynamic sense, occurs when energy cannot be converted into work. Jack's consumption has no purpose: the "energy" (or perhaps *elation*) he gets out of it is not converted into any sense of fulfillment; in fact, Jack uses consumption to *avoid* attaching to a singular identity that would supply meaning and self-actualization. Even worse, these used-up commodities accumulate into piles of waste. DeLillo, on the other hand, sifts through landfills of overlapping systems of thought and ideologies (intellectual "waste") to create art from meaninglessness: art that may not have a conventional plot but does, in fact, have an end. Yet, *White Noise* shows us that the end is not nearly as important as the narrative, for it is *within* the narrative that waste gets recycled into art; it is here where energy (or information) is converted into "work," and entropy is avoided. And so it goes with archeology: the *recording of life* is emphasized over death. Indeed, Jack eventually learns that he must *use* the energy afforded by his consumption to restore and preserve the "used-up" in order to create an identity and a greater sense of meaning; in the same way, DeLillo uses the intellectual energy of

²⁸⁷ LeClair, "Closing the Loop," 392.

overlapping ideologies to restore and preserve what might have been lost in a cluster of frequencies, giving white noise a voice. Ultimately, *White Noise* is, as I believe Jack comes to be, less concerned with endings than with “the precious texture”²⁸⁸ of what is recorded and our agency in such a process.

²⁸⁸ DeLillo, *White Noise*, 217.

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