

RECONFIGURATIONS OF THE AMERICAN SUBLIME

RECONFIGURATIONS OF THE AMERICAN SUBLIME IN THE FICTION OF
JOAN DIDION, DON DELILLO AND PAUL AUSTER

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the fiction of three contemporary American writers – Joan Didion, Don DeLillo and Paul Auster – who interrogate the legacy of the American sublime in its contemporary configurations and reconfigurations. The texts that I have selected by each writer dramatize and question how and why the American sublime remains a fundamental way for American culture to conceptualize power as an expression of American identity and progress. In turn, what each text conveys is the destructive consequences that often follow with investing natural phenomena, technology, cultural sites and practices with power that elicits the particular qualities of awe and terror unique to the American sublime. Above all, these texts illuminate why American culture continues to produce, reproduce and popularize experiences and images of sublimity within cultural sites, practices, art and literature.

Moreover, by emphasizing that these texts locate the American sublime as a culturally produced experience, my analysis develops from – but also departs from – the most recent book-length studies of the sublime and American fiction. The work of scholars such as Barbara Claire Freeman, Joseph Tabbi and Christophe Den Tandt who have considered the sublime in relation to gender, technology and urban landscapes complement my approach to the cultural impact of the American sublime in the fiction of Didion, DeLillo and Auster. At the same time, my examination of the ways in which their fiction accounts for the dissemination of the American sublime through art and literature as well as popular culture, brings to the forefront an important feature each text shares – the possibility that art might contest – rather than reinscribe – traditional configurations or reconfigurations of American sublimity.

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Introduction

The concept of the sublime, in its various configurations, remains the preeminent way of describing the indescribable, of making sense of overwhelming and singular events and phenomena in the Western world. For example, if any moment in recent American history embodied and elicited the kind of fundamental terror and awe associated with the sublime, it was surely the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.¹ On the most immediate level, it seems logical that 9-11 would evoke such emotions: the scale, swiftness and unexpectedness of the attack as well as the tragic loss of life that resulted could only be experienced as something catastrophic, which, in part, explains the sublime's lasting currency, especially in America. Indeed, the cultural impact of 9-11, as an unprecedented assault on American identity and power and the ways in which the attack has been memorialized, suggests why 9-11 resonates within the particular traditions of the American sublime. As a result, we need to ask what it is about the American sublime that makes it a viable way of registering – and understanding – the cultural effects of an event like 9-11.

Traditionally, the American sublime represents a means of turning awesome and/or terrifying phenomenon into affirmative expressions of American culture, which suggests why viewing 9-11 as a sublime event remains so unsettling. From iconic, natural landmarks such as Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon or Virginia's Natural Bridge, to technological marvels such as the Brooklyn Bridge, the Hoover Dam or Apollo XI, imbuing such wonders and innovations with sublimity has represented a key way of locating American identity, progress and power within spectacles that can be consumed by the general public and made a tangible part of American culture. Above all, then, 9-11

directly undermined what the American sublime connotes: with the attack America's technology was turned against itself in a destructive display that might otherwise be evidence of American power.

Broadly speaking, how and why the American sublime remains a fundamental way for American culture to conceptualize power animates the analysis of texts by Joan Didion, Don DeLillo and Paul Auster in this dissertation. More particularly, this dissertation examines texts by each author that illuminate the ways in which the American sublime persists even when it is clearly implicated in destructive expressions of power that do harm to Americans as well as others. These texts directly address the sort of underlying dynamics of the American sublime – and the consequences of those dynamics – which were put into relief by 9-11. By extension, it is not surprising that the responses each writer made about 9-11 anticipate key points that will inform the analysis of their texts, and that their responses offer greater insight into why 9-11 asks us to question what is at stake with the American sublime.

For instance, the way the attack was seen in light of the images of mass destruction found in Hollywood films represents a central, problematic quality of the American sublime that we shall see Didion, DeLillo and Auster consider in equal measure in their fiction – the fact that the American sublime, even when attributed to scenes of disaster, often reduces them to spectacles of popular entertainment. 9-11 by contrast, challenged this convention: the uncanny resemblance between the horror of the attack and the images in these films could not be easily reconciled, which was expressed by the immediate suppression of upcoming films depicting either the World Trade Center or terrorist activity. Yet suppression did not resolve the issue; as Žižek and other cultural

theorists noted, the question of the hour remained: “*Where have we already seen the same thing over and over again?*” (Zizek 17)² Suppressing the films, in fact, only confirmed what has long been suggested about disaster films in film studies, that they are entertaining because they displace anxieties about the possibility of events like 9-11 taking place, that they affirm precisely what 9-11 challenged, America’s authority as a global power.³

Like many early commentaries on the attack, the responses from Didion, DeLillo and Auster chart the impact of 9-11 on such cultural products and practices as disaster films and moviegoing; moreover, like some of the more radical responses among the first wave of commentaries, they also account for the ways in which 9-11 has been recuperated into the sort of ideological consensus exemplified by action and disaster films. Collectively, however, what makes their responses not only nuanced but potentially radical is the suggestion that the sublimity of 9-11 not only indicated but somehow superseded such recuperation, and in a way that both addresses – and respects – the victims and those who were most directly affected by the attack.

For instance, Didion explains how the initial shock of 9-11 made it impossible to reconcile what had happened. Learning of the attack while on a book tour, she remarks that “none of these commonplace aspects of publishing a book seemed promising or even appropriate things to be doing” (173). Even though she says that she, like everyone else who was “in New York that week” (173), “was in a kind of protective coma, sleepwalking through a schedule made when planning had still seemed possible” (173-174), this “protective coma” could easily be broken: when asked to read a passage about New York from an essay she had written in 1967, Didion recalls that she was “unable to

finish reading the passage, unable to speak at all for what must have been thirty seconds” (174). In the final analysis, what Didion finds most remarkable during this period is the way the uncertainty and shock initially lead many people to consider responses that conflicted with what later became the prevailing attitude, and which hastened the Bush administration’s response. Quoting Steven Weber, Didion is moved by the fact that, as Weber puts it, “there was a substantive discussion about what it is about the nature of the American presence in the world that created a situation in which movements like al-Qaeda can thrive and prosper” (qtd. in Didion 183). Thus, for Didion, 9-11 initially represented a challenge to what happened later, the way “the irreconcilable event had been made manageable” (176), which, in turn, allowed America to recover what she derisively labels as its “theory, or fixed idea” (192) about itself, its role of bearing “the mantle of beneficent power that all nations except rogue nations . . . were yearning for us to assume.”

Similarly, like Didion, DeLillo observes that it was precisely America’s confidence in its ability to act as an agent “of beneficent power” that was the target of – and was jeopardized by – the 9-11 attack. DeLillo argues that it was the essence of American culture and its efforts to sustain its global influence that provoked the attack. According to DeLillo, “It is America that drew their fury. It was the high gloss of our modernity. It was the thrust of our technology. It was our perceived godlessness. It was the blunt force of our foreign policy. It was the power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life and mind” (33). Moreover, and in contrast to Didion, DeLillo finds that 9-11 has continued to haunt the ways in which it has been redressed, the various efforts America has used to restore its view of itself that was undermined by the

attack. If, for Didion, the real suffering of the American people was subsumed by a “flattening celebration of its victims” (177), particularly through public displays in which the images of the towers were “removed from advertising, as if one might conveniently forget they had been there,” DeLillo finds evidence of other forms of mourning at work that coincide with the spirit of “discussion” that struck Didion. For DeLillo the individuals touched by 9-11 bear “marginal stories” and express their grief in “improvised memorials” that can be “set against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practiced response” (35).

What is perhaps most important for DeLillo, then, is the presence of these “improvised memorials” produced by and “set against” the sublime horror of 9-11 and that the “marginal stories” connoted by these memorials might also be expressed by other means. Even as “the event has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile,” that “we have to take the shock and horror as it is,” DeLillo insists that “living language is not diminished,” and it, would seem, the potential for resistant art as well (39). Writing, he hypothesizes, can be “part of the counter-narrative, hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel,” as “the writer begins in the towers, trying to imagine the moment, desperately.” Ultimately, DeLillo appears to say, there are cultural practices that can stand against the horror of 9-11 but that are not, in the end, synonymous with a simple return to the dominant ideology of the “theory, or fixed idea” described by Didion. Instead, for DeLillo, a characteristic like “the thrust of our technology” (33) cannot – either at the level of an invention or in terms of urban development – simply erase what 9-11 signifies: “The new Palm Pilot at fingertip’s

reach, the stretch limousine parked outside the hotel, the midtown skyscraper under construction, carrying the name of a major investment bank – all [are] haunted in a way by what has happened, less assured in their authority, in the prerogatives they offer” (39). In short, 9-11 lingers.

Paul Auster also finds that in the aftermath of 9-11 there was a disparity between the responses of those who were most affected by the attack and the Bush administration, and that this disparity can, in part, be attributed to the status of 9-11 as a sublime event. Echoing the statements about disaster films in relation to 9-11, Auster says “we all knew this [the attack] could happen” but “now that the tragedy has struck, it’s far worse than anyone ever imagined”: “We have no precedent for what has happened today, and the consequences of this assault will no doubt be terrible. More violence, more death, more pain for everyone” (506). Yet even as Auster laments what he believes will inevitably follow, he finds a measure of hope in the fact that his concerns appear to be shared by his fellow New Yorkers. For Auster, New Yorkers “experienced that day as a family tragedy” (509) and their response to 9-11 differs greatly from the actions of the Bush administration. According to Auster, “When the Bush administration launched its War on Terrorism by invading Afghanistan, we in New York were still busy counting our dead” (510), which is indicative of the contrast between New Yorkers and the government:

No one is sorry that the Taliban regime has been ousted from power, but when I talk to my fellow New Yorkers these days, I hear little but disappointment in what our government has been up to He [Bush] simply isn’t democratic enough

for us. He and his cabinet have not encouraged open debate of the issues facing the country.

Thus, like Didion, Auster views forgoing or silencing “open debate” as synonymous with the absence of an effective means of public healing for the victims of the attack. At the same time, like DeLillo, Auster also believes that such mourning and a more enlightened view of the attack can be found at the local level of the New York families and communities.

In fact, much like DeLillo, Auster claims that this alternative response to the attack can be achieved through art and disseminated in a public forum. For Auster, this kind of art is exemplified by Art Spiegelman’s 9-11 cover for the first issue of *The New Yorker* published after the attack. According to Auster, Spiegelman’s 9-11 cover, like many of his other covers for *The New Yorker*, is at odds with the “at once cool, sophisticated, and complacent” “tone” of the magazine, which has remained consistent “as the country has lived through wars, depressions, and violent upheavals . . .” (458). For Auster, Spiegelman’s 9-11 cover speaks to – and for – the needs of New Yorkers, while effectively aligning the Bush government with “*The New Yorker* style.”

More remarkable still, Auster suggests that it is Spiegelman’s treatment of the image of the towers on the 9-11 cover as “sublime” (463) that makes it so meaningful and powerful. Rather than following his initial “iconoclastic impulse” (462) to make “a solid black cover to represent mourning, an absent image to stand as a mirror of the ineffable” (462), Spiegelman uses a “black-on-black” (463) aesthetic to portray the Towers: the Towers are “there and not there, effaced and yet still present, shadows pulsing in oblivion, in memory, in the ghostly emanation of some tormented afterlife” (463).

Claiming that Spiegelman employs the sublime, therefore, is significant because it suggests that sublimity can be made distinct from the sensationalism and covert erasure found in disaster films, or the more direct forms of erasure found with the suppression of these films and the removal of the Towers from other films and advertisements, which Auster reveals Spiegelman nearly followed with his initial impulse “to dispense with images altogether” (462).

The difficulty of achieving such aims and why they are unconventional, though, extends far beyond Spiegelman’s cover or Auster’s interpretation of it, even though as a cultural product the cover reflects the larger cultural dynamics that it embodies. For example, the opposition DeLillo poses between cultural resistance and “the thrust of our technology” provides a vital clue for what was at stake with 9-11 and why claims for resistance are difficult to make with respect to the American sublime. As awe-inspiring, man-made inventions in themselves, the Towers constituted an expression of the American technological sublime and its long history that extends as far back as the creation of the railroad and a host of other inventions that emerged with American industrialization, which is captured by DeLillo’s description of technology’s connection to America’s identity and authority, the way “the materials and methods we devise make it possible for us to claim our future” (37). Indeed, DeLillo’s point illustrates the fundamental element of the American sublime that has remained even as the objects and sites of sublimity have shifted – that even when deflecting threats of power it does so as an expression of power, which was what 9-11 challenged by turning America’s technology and inventions against itself.

The responses of Didion, DeLillo and Auster to 9-11 and what they suggest about its relationship to the American sublime bring forth a number of questions. How can something that resists the dominant norms and values of American culture come about through the sublime when it expresses power in deceptive ways? Why do such contradictions not simply collapse? And why does American sublimity continue to elicit awe, wonder and terror? These and similar questions are what this dissertation attempts to illuminate if not resolve with the selected texts by these authors, but in order to read them it is first necessary to understand the cultural, literary and artistic history in which they are situated and – in a number of ways – attempt to challenge and reconfigure.

II

In order to grasp how Didion, DeLillo and Auster consider the possibilities for such reconfigurations, it is necessary to approach their novels within – and as responses to – the complex history and parameters of the American sublime. This is no small task because it requires more than simply parsing the sort of contradictions exemplified by the relationship between 9-11 and disaster films. In addition, it means finding how such oppositions underlie the larger, long-standing, schematic categories of nature and technology as sublime and the ways in which these configurations have retained a lasting influence. Indeed, what must be questioned is the way the contradictions that emerge through these confluences typically strengthen rather than weaken the power invested in sites of American sublimity.

By exploring this line of questioning and investigating how the older configurations of the American sublime have persisted within new configurations, my approach differs from – but also develops from – the more ambitious studies of sublimity

and American fiction in the last two decades. Book-length studies such as Barbara Claire Freeman's *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess In Women's Fiction* (1995), Joseph Tabbi's *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* (1995) and Christophe Den Tandt's *The Urban Sublime in American Literary Naturalism* (1998) have offered new, important readings of American fiction and the sublime in terms gender, technology and urban landscapes, and their work often complements or informs my concern with the broader cultural as well as literary legacy of the American sublime in Didion, DeLillo and Auster. At the same time, my efforts to foreground the multifaceted cultural history of the American sublime aligns my analysis with the ways in which it has continued to be examined in the field of cultural studies, particularly David E. Nye's excellent study *American Technological Sublime* (1994), which, beyond its invaluable historical insights, alerts us to the fact that the American sublime has been – and continues to be – produced and disseminated by art and literature as cultural products.

Even though my broader, cultural and historical examination approaches the topic of the American sublime differently than Tabbi, Den Tandt or Freeman (while offering new readings of the particular texts by Didion, DeLillo and Auster), my critical assessment of technology, the urban scene and the possibility for reconfiguring the American sublime in more advantageous ways coincides with or adds to their contributions. For instance, like Tabbi, I consider DeLillo's fiction to be one of the preeminent examples of contemporary American literature that responds to the view that technology and global capitalism are now fundamental sites of sublimity: as Tabbi puts it, DeLillo's fiction reveals how there is "a simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from

technology, a complex pleasure derived from the pain or representational insufficiency” (i), which extends to corporate culture “that is itself sublime” (11). Likewise, I agree with Tabbi’s claim that DeLillo’s fiction often portrays writers who realize “the impossibility of achieving a wholly literary opposition” (173) when faced with negotiating the “representational insufficiency” (i) attributed to technology and corporate culture. In addition, though, I claim that DeLillo’s texts do more than depict how a writer or artist struggles to describe the sublimity of technology and corporate culture. Much like Didion’s and Auster’s texts, I argue that DeLillo’s texts suggest a writer’s or artist’s struggles often stem from how they are complicit with the production of seeing technology and global capitalism as sublime, which occurs because the American sublime promises individual empowerment.⁴

Indeed, what is particular to the American sublime in its various configurations underlies why I approach the texts by Didion, DeLillo and Auster differently than other critics, and which can be summarized in three interrelated points. First and foremost, I argue that it is necessary to locate European or contemporary theories of sublimity within the conventions of the American sublime: to do otherwise runs the risk of misrepresenting the sublimity depicted in these texts and the cultural heritage they are situated within. Second, not accounting for the American tradition can obscure the fact that all theories of the sublime are culturally produced, which can create a larger theoretical problem: by applying a theory of the sublime without examining its relationship to the American tradition implicitly grants that theory a problematic space “outside” the text and its American context. Third, I argue that it is necessary to account for the way traditional configurations of the American sublime can be found within sites

or events that exemplify contemporary theories of sublimity: not exploring the relationship between the American tradition and contemporary theory misses the cultural relevance of new configurations. In fact, because the American sublime is characterized by the persistence of older configurations in spite of their apparent tensions, it is necessary to consider why this continues to be so, why these tensions add to rather than detract from the allure of viewing particular sites or events as sublime.

Viewing 9-11 as a sublime event, for instance, conveys the importance of examining the tensions that continue to make the American sublime a way of understanding the American experience. Returning to the tension between terror and awe that we considered in relation to 9-11 in section I, it is significant to note that this particular tension originates with the first configurations and sites of American sublimity – the natural landscape; moreover, here, too, we can see why the American sublime needs to be considered a cultural construction, since this tension sheds light on the way the American sublime supports what we might call America's original "theory, or fixed idea" about itself – Manifest Destiny. Seen either as awe-inspiring or terrifying, the unique landscape of the American wilderness was construed as a positive, sublime experience because it was interpreted in terms of Christianity. As Barbara Novak suggests in her study of American landscape painting and the sublime, four different – and divergent – approaches to viewing the sublimity of the landscape made it amenable to the first settlers and ripe for colonial conquest. Conceptualized as either the "Primordial Wilderness, as the Garden of the World, as the original Paradise" or as "America awaiting the regained Paradise attending the millennium," encounters with deadly natural forces, deadly Native Americans or simply deadly unforeseen events in the

new wilderness could be reconciled and attributed to a divine plan (4). Such opposing views of the natural American sublime, however, were not restricted to such large, paradigmatic structures, nor were they confined to the pulpit, painting or poetry; as the many terrifying and awe-inspiring natural icons of the American sublime illustrate, particular natural sites were – and still are – routinely and assiduously experienced according to these conventions.

For example, Virginia's Natural Bridge, which Thomas Jefferson celebrates in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1853), represents an icon that elicits both sublime terror and awe but in a way that offers an individual a sense of empowerment as well as shared experience through its religious and nationalistic connotations. As Richard Slotkin notes, Jefferson "views the bridge from two points of view, one of which harrows him with sublime terror, while the other soothes him with visions of harmony" (245). Indeed, Jefferson, who effectively taught people how and why to view the bridge as a preeminent example of the natural sublime, insists on the importance of the presence of both terror and awe in equal measure. Perched on the span of the bridge, Jefferson says that looking down produces terror, while gazing up from the ground produces awe: "If the view from the top be painful and intolerable, that from below is delightful in an equal extreme" (qtd. in Slotkin). And for Jefferson, it is precisely this awe and terror that makes the Natural Bridge so iconic. "It is impossible," he says, "for the emotions arising from the sublime to be felt beyond what they are here; so beautiful an arch, so elevated, so light, and spring as it were up to heaven! The rapture of the spectator is really indescribable" (qtd. in Slotkin 246). Jefferson, then, argues that the reason the sublimity of the Natural Bridge is representative is due to the way it is predicated on a mixture of awe and terror, which, in

turn, supports its religious aura – “springing as it were up to heaven!” – and confers power on the spectator, whose “rapture . . . is really indescribable.”

In spite of his effusiveness, though, Jefferson’s response is not simply a case of overwrought poetic language or wishful thinking. Seen from a more prosaic standpoint, his final statement about the “rapture of the spectator” is as much a sales pitch as a well-worn poetic sentiment. In fact, the realization of this boost for personal empowerment through the religious and touristic practices associated with the bridge demonstrates how the metaphorical and connotative meanings found in Jefferson’s rhetoric were turned into reality. On the one hand, as David Nye explains, Jefferson’s promise of the spectator’s transcendence through his contact with the bridge was realized through religious practice, by “the Baptists [who] constructed a church near the Natural Bridge and used a pool directly beneath its arch for baptisms” (28). At the same time, the touristic practices surrounding the bridge – particularly the custom of writing one’s name on it – represented a means for Americans to declare their individuality and status as American citizens, which Nye says allowed the average American “to share in its [the bridge’s] importance, to declare himself present in it . . .” (27). Thus, comparing Jefferson’s remarks to the cultural history of the bridge shows how real cultural practices enacted and supported its status as an icon of the American sublime, and through this comparison we can see one of the key elements we need to consider in order to understand the lasting significance of the American sublime: the importance placed on the individual subject and his or her identity as an American.

Clearly, Jefferson’s emphasis on the “spectator” finds its corollary with the centrality of the individual experience within the touristic and religious practices

associated with the bridge. Yet to see how this emphasis on the individual relates to the bridge's other characteristic quality – the way it embodies and attempts to reconcile sublime awe and terror – we need to turn to other theoretical and literary sources. Missing from Jefferson's description but implicit in the cultural practices surrounding the bridge is the sense of the individual's experience of – and role within – the effort to reconcile awe and terror, and to understand what is at stake here it is useful to consider two very different sources that illustrate the quintessential dynamics of the American sublime – Edmund Burke and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Moreover, by turning to Burke and Emerson, we can trace the underlying affinities that place such disparate sites, objects or events as the Natural Bridge, disaster films and the 9-11 attack in the category of the American sublime.

First, Burke, although a European thinker, has had a lasting influence on the American sublime, and as Nye notes, in America Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) “went through at least ten editions before the Civil War” (4). In addition, Burke's significance in America mirrors his significance in Europe because he explains why sublime terror, such as in disaster films, is experienced as pleasurable and “delightful” for an individual (Burke 37). For Burke, this “delight” occurs when an individual perceives something terrifying from “certain distances, and with certain modifications” (36-37), whereas “when danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible . . .” (36). And what is of particular importance for Burke here, and which resonates so strongly within the American context, is the meaning he suggests this dynamic has for an individual and in his or her relation to others.

For Burke, the physical experience associated with viewing terror from a distance brings about an affective response of self-preservation. As Philip Shaw notes in regard to the correlation Burke draws between one's physical "eye" and the "I" that constitutes his or her identity, self-preservation is activated when viewing a terrifying phenomenon from a distance: "the eye and the 'I' are defined by their ability to 'labour' against destruction" (54). In addition, Burke attempts to claim that this self-preservation benefits society as well as the individual. As Steven Cresap aptly explains, Burke connects the experience of self-preservation to sympathy for others, and in this logic, the sublime experience of terror has a positive, social function:

During the sublime experience, we imagine, with faint feeling-images, the experience of actual victims. Our natural inclination to sympathize with others produces a faint reflection of their misery. This faint reflection is moderate terror, hence emotional exercise, which produces delight. And pity gives a positive pleasure on its own. Thus the sublime strengthens the spectator-bond with others by strengthening powers of fellow-feeling. (119)

In light of Cresap's explanation, Burke's description of sublime terror as producing "fellow-feeling" might seem applicable to an event like 9-11 (in fact, Burke uses the hypothetical reactions of spectators to the destruction of a city to support his claims), but not all examples of sublime terror involve a sympathetic identification with the plight of others, which is clearly shown with the concerns about and the suppression of disaster films in the wake of 9-11. From Burke, then, we can see that there is an inherent tension about how sublime terror is consumed: in the end, there is no guarantee that the self-preservation of the spectator, stimulated by experiencing terror at a distance, will not take

precedence over identification with or “sympathy” for others – they, too, are in the distance. Furthermore, this failure of sublime terror to have some inarguable, positive, social function once more emphasizes the larger tension between awe and terror that is so central in the American context.

Burke’s attempt to turn the experience of sublime terror into a beneficial one bypasses the opposition between awe and terror; for Burke, the difference between terror and awe is really a matter of degrees: with sublime terror, he says, “the subordinate degrees are awe, reverence, and respect . . .” (123). Yet in the American context such omissions cannot be sustained. Even as the American sublime performs ideological work, reifying dominant – and often divisive – cultural norms and values, it is eminently visible, participatory and unifying: as the example of the Natural Bridge conveys, awe and terror need to be reconciled, and so, too, does the sort of Burkean opposition between the spectator and victims that underwrites the anxieties we find between 9-11 and disaster films. In fact, within the parameters of the traditional American sublime both issues are effectively redressed by the meaning ascribed to the self’s experience of the sublime. As Jefferson’s comments about the spectator indicate, in the American context the prototypical self actually reconciles awe and terror through the transcendent quality of his or her “rapture”; similarly, this “rapture” is construed as something more than just the kind of self-preservation described by Burke. Instead, the American sublime becomes an occasion for self-fashioning that purports to be communal and democratic, a paradox that is explicated in Emerson’s “Nature.”

Emerson’s description of crossing the “bare common” in “Nature,” where the narrator has “enjoyed a perfect exhilaration” and is “glad to the brink of fear” coincides

with the “delight” described by Burke and the awe-and-terror-induced “rapture” described by Jefferson (Emerson 184). More particularly, the narrator’s contact with the sublimity of nature becomes a way of imagining what amounts to a diminution and expansion of the self once it is held in the divine thrall of nature: “Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (184). With this conception of the American sublime, then, the self is both humbled and empowered – “I am nothing; I see all”; however, this statement is ultimately indicative of Emersonian self-reliance and egotism – in spite of the nominal ways in which it might be differentiated from “mean” expressions.

As James Kirwan notes, in Emerson what is most important is that “it is the self that is to be made sublime, the landscape is no more than an appropriate reflection” (128), a foundational point on which the more elaborate framework of Emerson’s thought is built and, more broadly, which signals a distinguishing feature of the American sublime. According to Kirwan, Emerson’s “importance to the history of the sublime lies in the way in which . . . he makes sublimity a standard of truth” (129). While claiming that Emerson is singularly responsible for this development in the American sublime perhaps overstates the case, Emerson’s view of the self, the divinity of nature and the perception of universal truths nevertheless expresses what comes to be one of the key and lasting characteristics of the American sublime, how experiences of sublimity grant authority to the prototypical American self, which is fundamentally realized – and expressed – by the capacity to create one’s self anew. As the narrator in “Nature” insists, “Once inhale the upper air,

being admitted to behold the absolute notions of justice and truth, and we learn that man has access to the entire mind of the Creator, is himself the creator in the finite” (217).

Emerson’s conception of the American sublime reaffirms and revises the emphasis on the self that we find in Jefferson and Burke, but without fundamentally resolving the tensions between awe and terror or observer and observed found in their writings. Instead, Emerson’s argument about self-fashioning demonstrates how such tensions are resituated and made amenable to the dominant norms and values of American culture. Above all, Emerson sees the experience of sublime nature as a validation of American identity that separates it from its European roots with the creation of a present and a future that are not bound to that past. As the narrator in “Nature” argues, this validation of American identity in the present can be seen in the often paradoxical reactions of Americans to the past. According to the narrator, the fact that older generations “beheld God and nature face to face” (181) explains why many Americans are fixated on the past; however, the great irony is that if they were to embrace this sublime relationship in the present their fixation with the past would end – like the narrator, they, too, would find that this relationship “animates me to create my own world through the purification of my soul” (217). Thus, from a national perspective, Emerson’s view of the American sublime and the special role of self-fashioning signal why icons like the Natural Bridge accrue cultural capital: not only do they show how the various, biblically influenced conceptions of the landscape support the view of America as a “virgin land,” but such icons also show how the newly minted American subject plays an active role in realizing Manifest Destiny.

As a result, it is clear that this larger cultural role of the American sublime, which Emerson's ideas illuminate, points to its problematic, imperial legacy. Indeed, even though Henry Hart convincingly argues how Emerson, on a personal level, would clearly object to the consequences that have occurred through the coupling of the American sublime with cultural imperialism, Emerson's writings, as Hart rightly notes, still "underwrites them willy-nilly" (292).⁵ Moreover, even if we absolve Emerson's work from propagandistic intent, the extent to which his treatment of the American sublime bears such "willy-nilly" underwriting is, in itself, a vital point because it is so characteristic of the literature and cultural practices associated with the American sublime. Viewing Emerson's writing (and, as we shall see, Didion's, DeLillo's and Auster's novels) as part of a discourse that is indicative of the way paradoxical and contradictory elements of the American sublime support, reify and adapt with the dominant ideologies of American culture, requires a teasing out of repeated structures, tropes and themes that might at first glance seem unintentional or, more importantly, circumstantial. In fact, to do otherwise misses the ways in which the various, traditional configurations of the American sublime retain a lasting, cultural resonance. Even when traditional configurations have apparently been superseded by new configurations, the imprint of the traditional configurations underlies the appeal, power and conflicts that are found in such contemporary examples of sublimity as 9-11 and disaster films.

With this in mind, it is not surprising that Emerson clearly underwrites the ideological dimension of the American sublime not only in terms of nature but also technology. Indeed, Emerson represents one of the key literary figures whose works chart this relationship between nature and technology, which increased America's

fascination with sublimity, creating, in the process, the American technological sublime. Appropriately, even in “Nature” Emerson clearly addresses the moment Leo Marx describes as the situation of the machine in the garden, which brings with it “the instantaneous clash of opposed states of mind: a strong urge to believe in the rural myth along with an awareness of industrialization as counterforce to the myth” (229). As Marx puts it, in “Nature” Emerson employs “the rhetoric of the technological sublime” (230) to describe the railroad, making the wonders of nature and technology complimentary expressions of American exceptionalism and where, ultimately, “the machine will unearth the hidden graces of landscape” (234). In addition, the treatment of the railroad in “Nature” also provides an example of the way the tensions between awe and terror and self and other are recalibrated in an effort to support this nationalistic vision, the way the technological sublime represents an even more efficacious and singularly American configuration of sublimity.

Even though Emerson argues that the railroad literally provides the means to “unearth the hidden graces of landscape,” the unique perspective afforded by this technology generates a separation from the observer and the observed that underlies other configurations of the American sublime. According to Emerson, the “man who seldom rides . . .” occupies a privileged point of view in which those he might see “are unrealized at once, or at least wholly detached from all relation to the observer, and seen as apparent, not substantial beings,” as the railroad provides a new, transcendent experience in nature: “What new thoughts are suggested by seeing a face of country quite familiar, in the rapid movement of the railroad car!” (208) Separation from others, therefore, is construed as a positive experience, in which perceiving through “mechanical means” (209) the

“difference between the observer and the spectacle” becomes an occasion for the American sublime: “Hence arises a pleasure mixed with awe; I may say, a low degree of the sublime is felt from the fact, probably, that man is hereby apprised, that, whilst the world is a spectacle, something in himself is stable.”⁶ Much like Burke, then, Emerson attempts to resolve the exclusiveness of the sublime experience. For Emerson sublimity glorifies the self in a way that – in theory – is open to all Americans so long as they partake in experiences of nature and technology in the appropriate manner, in a way that implicitly supports Manifest Destiny and the cultural products – such as the railroad – that indicate its potential – and imminent – realization.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, beyond the particular theorizations of Jefferson, Burke and Emerson, the championing of the American self has remained a key feature of the American sublime, effectively overwriting the tensions within sublime experience that might call its efficacy into question. In fact, after nature, with the subsequent configurations of the American sublime in which the site or object of sublimity is technology, industrial or urban landscapes, the glorification of American individualism becomes even more dominant and visible. The celebration of the American self becomes a key way in which the natural sublime is yoked to the technological sublime and a reaffirmation of American solidarity. As Nye explains, the initial harmonious wedding of nature with technology described by Marx is predicated on the same view about what is most vital about the American self:

The sublime was inseparable from a peculiar double action of the imagination by which the land was appropriated as a natural symbol of the nation while, at the same time, it was being transformed into a man-made landscape. One appeal of

the technological sublime in America was that it conflated the preservation and transformation of the natural world. (37)

Attributing sublimity to technology, then, effectively extends and further validates the authority of the self that Emerson says can be discovered through contact with nature, the fact that man is indeed “the creator in the finite.” As Nye concludes, the technological sublime merges the limits of the finite with the infinite, and through technological objects that elicit awe and terror, those who create them are akin to Prometheus stealing the sacred fire: “The sense of weakness and humiliation before the superior power of nature was [sic] thus redirected, because the power displayed was not that of God or nature but that of particular human beings” (60).

Categorically, this transition between nature and technology is emblematic of the relationship between objects and sites of the American sublime and the formal, discursive properties and strategies that characterize the ways in which it has been – and continues to be – disseminated, as well as the challenges Didion, DeLillo and Auster face in their efforts to contest and reconfigure it in their fiction. On one level, the transition between nature and technology illustrates how the inclusion of new modes of sublimity and the new sets of contradictions these often introduce – such as the “harmonious” conflation of nature with technology – effectively lessen the visibility of other contradictions such as the tensions between awe and terror and observer and observed.⁷ Even so, by considering how the displacement of these contradictions support ideological purposes, we can begin to understand why appeals to sublimity are so deeply ingrained in American culture.

For example, looking at the role of the self in the transition from the natural to the technological sublime provides a vital clue about the relationship between 9-11 and

disaster films as interrelated expressions of the American sublime: that the reason why destructive spectacles that involve technology elicit fascination is that, like more benign yet no less dazzling displays of technology, they too, testify to the power of the inventor, engineer or technician and, by extension, the political, economic and often militaristic purposes and agendas that they are aligned with. Indeed, as we shall see in texts by Didion and DeLillo, nuclear technology has long been associated with the American sublime, but other, more quotidian forms follow the same logic as well. As Den Tandt argues in his study of the urban sublime in American naturalist fiction at the turn of the twentieth century, the spell the city casts over its populace – via its architectural marvels as well as the economic processes that give rise to them – works by “encouraging subjects to admire overwhelming landscapes of exploitation, or to give their assent to upper class utopias of urban planning” (6). No less than such singular inventions as nuclear reactors and weapons, the sublimity associated with the urban landscape garners support by making claims to an individual’s agency even though that landscape may also be destructive. Support can be obtained through the celebration of an architect, or, vicariously through the practices of one who dwells – and more importantly consumes – within the urban landscape, in spite of the fact that either form of empowerment may be fleeting, counterfeit or exploitative.

From a contemporary standpoint, this configuration of the American urban sublime in which sublime transport reflects the economic activities in a man-made landscape might seem the most prescient. In fact, the texts we will consider by Didion, DeLillo and Auster depict such urban landscapes in a similar manner and have affinities with Frederick Jameson’s definition of the “postmodern sublime,” which he uses to

explain the kinds of emotions the world of multinational capitalism and consumer culture elicit. That said, the response of the texts by Didion, DeLillo and Auster to the urban sublime also alerts us to the fact that American sublimity has, almost from its inception, been a consumable, commodified experience. Purchased through tours of such iconic natural wonders as Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon or Virginia's Natural Bridge as well as such equally iconic technological or architectural marvels as the Hoover Dam, the Brooklyn Bridge, or the Empire State Building, the American sublime has been a complex commodity which, in turn, suggests why Jameson's "postmodern sublime" so aptly describes contemporary consumer culture.

For Jameson, the "postmodern sublime" is constituted by "a kind of peculiar exhilaration of the individual subject unaccountably generated by the trash and junk materials of a fallen and unredeemable commodity culture" and has affinities with Burke's definition of the sublime while marking the culmination of the older configurations of the technological sublime (Jameson, "Baudelaire" 260). Citing Burke, Jameson argues that the effects of simulation and depthlessness that characterize contemporary culture are akin to an encounter with terror. Similarly, this encounter with terror produces a new mode of Burkean self-preservation, the ability "to convert anxiety into that experience physiologically virtually identical with it which is eagerness, anticipation, anxious affirmation" (262), which explains why the "unredeemable commodity culture" is so fervently embraced: "in a situation of radical impotence, there is really little else to do than that, to affirm what crushes you and to develop one's capacity for gratification in an environment which increasingly makes gratification impossible." Jameson, then, offers an important insight when he argues that the

experience of consumer culture produces effects that are a reflection of the sites invested with the American sublime. By insisting that sublimity “has been transferred from nature to culture, or the urban,” Jameson accounts for the presence of older configurations of sublimity and the indelible imprint they retain on the public consciousness.

Moreover, Jameson’s historical emphasis on the “postmodern sublime” associated with consumer culture is relevant for another reason as well: it points to why the effects he describes are often so entrancing – because consumers readily respond to older images of the American sublime. As Rob Wilson notes in “Techno-euphoria and the Discourse of the American sublime,” “residual versions of euphoric nationalism do linger on in American discourse, at least at the level of cultural and political production” (212) and “icons of national sublimity are still being summoned to recycle cultural capital and to renew international profits” (216). For example, as Wilson suggests, Philip Morris’s decision to sponsor an exhibition of Albert Bierstadt’s landscapes – promoting it with prints of “Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California” (1868) with celebratory copy added from the tobacco company – is indicative of how fully appeals to older configurations of the sublime and their support of Manifest Destiny can coincide with commercial interests and the cultural effects described by Jameson: “Reeking of postmodern nostalgia,” Wilson concludes, “this painting would again resonate as a spectacle of Late Capitalist enterprise . . .” (215).

With this point in mind, then, I want to suggest that the texts by Didion, DeLillo and Auster that portray similar examples of nostalgia and simulation resonate with Jameson’s remarks about contemporary novelists and their engagement with the “postmodern sublime”: because their texts address the redeployment of older

configurations of the American sublime, they do indeed “tap the networks of the reproductive process and thereby . . . afford us some glimpse into a postmodern or technological sublime . . . evoking a new postmodern space in emergence around us” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 37). Each writer offers a “glimpse” and more. Not only do they account for the persistence of the older configurations of the American sublime and the contradictions that support them, each testifies to the important role American sublimity plays within other literary contexts and cultural narratives that still retain – and accrue – cultural capital. Overall, the breadth of their work demonstrates why the American sublime remains an important area of study: the way a uniformity of concerns is spread across and supports a broad cross section of the American cultural imaginary.

For instance, the first two chapters examine the American sublime in the context of frontier mythology in Didion’s *Play It As It Lays* and *Democracy*. In the chapter on *Play It As It Lays*, I investigate how that text locates the technological sublime as a key element of the L.A. landscape within the generic conventions of the anti-Hollywood novel, which, in turn, suggests how the frontier mythology of California is mobilized with promises of agency that are predicated on a destructive erasure of the cultural – as well as the protagonist’s – past. In addition, I examine the persistence of the natural sublime in this anti-Hollywood context, particularly with the ethos of “wagon train morality,” which derives from initial contact with the California wilderness and appears to foster mutuality in light of renewed contact with these natural “sources.” Similarly, in the analysis of *Democracy*, I consider the natural and technological sublime in relation to frontier mythology, but here I address how the influence of the American sublime and the

frontier are located within a larger cultural canvas, how they are more clearly situated as expressions of anti-democratic forces that support cultural imperialism.

Democracy, much like *Play It As It Lays*, uses a particular place and its history to register its critique. In the first section of the chapter on *Democracy*, I consider how the text links Hawaii's colonial history to war and atomic tests to effectively rewrite Leo Marx's classic trope – the way the natural sublimity of Hawaii as a “garden” supports the fetishization of weapons as expressions of the technological sublime and, in turn, militarization. In the following section, I draw attention to how intractable the text presents these dynamics through the failed efforts of particular characters to resist them. Of central importance here is the narrator, “Didion,” who effectively writes the text and her reliance on her literary predecessors who have created works that voice American sublimity. Along with contextualizing the characters in *Democracy*, the narrator anticipates what is exemplified by Philip Morris's co-optation of Bierstadt and becomes more prevalent in the succeeding chapters: the way art that attempts to undermine or reconfigure the conventions of the American sublime faces increased challenges with its dissemination through consumer culture.

Indeed, in turning to DeLillo's *White Noise*, I begin by analyzing how it portrays the new ways in which the American sublime has become commodified in the era of multinational capitalism, particularly with the proliferation of simulation in contemporary culture. By doing so, moreover, I examine the connections the text draws between the kind of spectatorial fascination with weapons in *Democracy* to other scenes of death, destruction and disaster, which are central to the new commodification of the sublime. In the second section of the chapter, I consider further what *White Noise* suggests is the end

result of this dynamic – the way acts of violence are transformed into a destructive expression of agency and transcendence. Lastly, with this focus I also reexamine a central, critical debate in DeLillo criticism: such violence, I argue, is, in fact, directly connected to what is often referred to as a “radiance in dailiness” (DeCurtis 70) in DeLillo’s fiction, which others suggest refers to elements of mystery and states of transcendence that oppose – rather than support – the processes of simulation and commodification.

By extension, even though *White Noise* is usually the center of this debate, I suggest that the analysis I offer about the “radiance in dailiness” in regards to that novel also resonates with DeLillo’s most ambitious novel, *Underworld*, which I examine in the following chapter. *Underworld*, I argue, shows how the overproduction of commodities, weapons and waste, and imbuing them with the power of sublime objects, represents a response to the threat of Soviet dominance in the Cold War. In a scenario that eerily anticipates the crisis DeLillo describes in his response to 9-11, *Underworld* reveals how the capacity to imbue man-made objects with such cultural capital breeds disaster. Even the efforts of artists to be “part of the counter-narrative” DeLillo hypothesizes about with 9-11 seem marginal at best in *Underworld*, particularly with Klara Sax’s repainting of decommissioned bombers: as she attempts to reconfigure their meanings she nevertheless wishes to restore their original allure as objects of the technological sublime.

The final chapters on Auster’s *In The Country of Last Things* and *Moon Palace* examine similar artistic struggles: the characters in those texts hold artistic aims that are as contradictory as those of Klara Sax, and the increasingly visible and self-conscious quality of those aims mark how deeply the appeal of American sublimity extends to the

ability of individuals to define themselves. That said, like the texts by Didion and DeLillo, I argue that in Auster's texts the drama of artistic struggles coincides with an emphasis on subjectivity and subject formation, which draws our attention to the fact that sublimity is a cultural construct, created by generic literary and artistic conventions – as well as a history of cultural practices.

In The Country of Last Things, for example, details processes of commodification analogous to what we find in *White Noise* and *Underworld*, but it connects those processes directly to a post-apocalyptic version of the generic, American urban sublime: in Auster's nightmarish city, death itself is literally a commodity that is performed as a sublime spectacle for others and represents a final, desperate attempt to express some semblance of agency. At the same time, the possibility for turning the material world into artistic expressions that resist this deterministic, economic logic is even more curtailed than in *Underworld*. Here, the wellsprings of creativity and imagination are turned not only to negotiating the inscrutable thrall of the city streets but to fulfilling the most basic human needs, which is expressed by either indulging in imaginary feasts to sate one's hunger or the more proactive search for abandoned commodities – last things – that can be turned over to the ruling powers for profit. Within the city in *In The Country of Last Things*, the power and allure it holds seemingly forecloses any possibility for the kind of expression Auster lauds in Speigleman's response to 9-11, even though the text calls into question the literary and cultural history that support the possibility for urban spaces to exert such control.

Lastly, the chapter on *Moon Palace* highlights how that text also examines the way past literary and artistic treatments of the American sublime directly shape – and

limit – its popularity and the extent to which it can be reconfigured. With the protagonist Fogg, his self-conscious use of literary and artistic representations of the American sublime motivate his effort to construct himself as the prototypical, self-fashioning Adamic figure who gains his identity and authority via contact with the natural, technological or urban sublime; indeed, while I consider the Adamic figure within the context of subjectivity and the sublime in the texts by Didion and DeLillo, in *Moon Palace* this figure takes on a more central role because Fogg consciously – and self-consciously – sees himself in these terms. Moreover, why such self-conscious emphasis is placed on the Adamic figure in *Moon Palace* is particularly relevant: by critiquing this figure in relation to the American sublime, the text draws attention to what is conveyed less prominently in Didion’s and DeLillo’s texts – how the visibility of the contradictions between configurations of the American sublime, as well as exposure of its imperial history, do not fundamentally lesson its appeal. This shift in emphasis, then, is significant not only with respect to *Moon Palace* but the other works I examine in this dissertation. Fogg’s ill-fated efforts to create an Adamic persona through the sublimity he draws from his own experiences as well as from art and literature, in order to stand against his country’s materialism and imperial history, speaks to how fully the promise of empowerment and transcendence remain bound to the American sublime.

Endnotes

1. In “Terrorism and the Sublime: Or Why We Keep Watching,” published on 17 September 2001, Margaret Weigel draws comparisons between 9-11 and the sublime and speculates whether, in the future, it will be possible to create sublime spectacles intended for entertainment “without unwittingly conjuring up its dark doppelganger” (1).
 2. See also Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem for the Twin Towers*.
 3. See for example, Yacowar and Keane.
 4. By extension, it is this concern with the way sublimity offers empowerment that is clearly culturally produced that makes my work compliment Den Tandt’s and Freeman’s, even though I extend my focus to the presence of reconfigured forms and sites of the American sublime, particularly within consumer culture. Den Tandt restricts his focus to the urban sublime in American naturalist fiction, but I suggest that his view of the urban sublime extends to other configurations of the American sublime as well: to understand the American sublime we need to examine how it is disseminated through tangible, cultural experiences of empowerment that often prove to be detrimental or destructive. For Den Tandt, the sublimity associated with “the urban world generates in its inhabitants a dialectic of powerlessness and power fantasies that inspires negative affects, no doubt, but also exhilaration” (x), and I suggest that this dynamic is essential to understanding why the American sublime persists with vestiges of the natural as well as the urban sublime within contemporary configurations. Moreover, by understanding how such power dynamics works gives us a way of seeing – and potentially challenging – the ideological connotations associated with the American sublime. Indeed, this reflects the affinities my approach has with Freeman’s assessment of the sublime in terms of gender where she claims “I argue for a reading of the sublime as an allegory of the construction of the patriarchal (but not necessarily male) subject, a self that maintains its borders by subordinating difference and by appropriating rather than identifying with that which presents itself as other” (4). Similarly, my examination of the ways in which the responses of Didion, DeLillo and Auster to 9-11 as a sublime event resonate with their fiction corresponds with Freeman’s efforts to detect the possibility for “identifying with that which presents itself as other” within the sublime experience, and her wish “to explore other ways of envisioning and writing the sublime.”
- More recently, in *Paradigms of Paranoia: The Culture of Conspiracy in Contemporary American Fiction* (2005), Samuel Chase Coale offers a book length study of contemporary American novelists (among them Didion and DeLillo) in which he examines postmodern sublimity and its relationship to the uncertainties of postmodern subjects and the prevalence of conspiracy narratives in Western culture. For Coale, what he defines as postmodern sublimity emphasizes how “the sublime always outstrips our ability to categorize and represent it, since it resonates with a source of ultimate mystery and irrationality beyond our comprehension” (6). Meanwhile, conspiracy theory, Coale argues, represents a negative response to the reality of postmodern uncertainty, and he claims that postmodern sublimity can offer a positive alternative because it “encourages exhilaration, as source of wonder, the exaltation of thought thrown back on itself,

delighting in itself” (7). With Didion, Coale argues, her fragmented narrative structures reflect the “opacity of her characters” (58) and conveys their experiences of the postmodern sublime, which, in turn, undercuts the conspiratorial thinking that is generated by the presence of “actual conspiracies” such as the covert operations and arms dealing in works such as *Democracy*. In DeLillo, by contrast, Coale argues that the postmodern sublime informs DeLillo’s religious sensibility and relates to his attempts to challenge conspiracy theory and the culture industries. For Coale, postmodern sublimity is the result of DeLillo’s “need to subvert conscious intention in pursuit of rapture and in doing so, opens up the possibility of submission to some greater unnamed and uncommodified power” (90).

Similarly, the issue of the relationship between the sacred, the sublime and postmodern theory is the focus of the essays in *Through A Glass Darkly: Suffering, the Sacred, and the Sublime in Literature and Theory* (2010). As the editor Holly Faith Nelson remarks, by investigating a number of literary traditions, the collection reflects how “interest in and anxieties about the ways in which suffering, the sacred, and the sublime converge are particularly evident in enquiries into trauma, religion, and aesthetics” (xv). While this collection, like Coale’s chapter on DeLillo, resonates with my treatment of the sacred, consumption and the sublime in DeLillo’s *White Noise*, my focus clearly departs from the three essays it includes on American authors. For instance, see Bowen who argues that contemporary configurations of the sublime are “less likely to be an awe-inspiring experience of mountains than an encounter with incomprehensible cultural extremes, and perhaps in particular the threat of alienation created by our techno-scientific culture” (318).

5. Hart’s excellent essay responds, in part, to Donald Pease’s contrary view of Emerson’s “Nature,” in which Pease claims that “if the American sublime converted Nature into a commodity, Emerson dissolved the ideological discourse that sustained this conversation” (48). For another response that argues against Pease’s claim see Diehl, “From Emerson to Whitman: Engendering the Sublime,” 1-25.

6. In light of Nye’s analysis of the reception of the railroad, it is clear that the opposition between observer and observed played out in a larger way that was widely popular and did much to appease initial anxieties about this new technology: the “observer,” who was familiar with the railway mocked the “observed,” who was “unprepared for the encounter” and so “turned to the supernatural: dragons, monsters or visions of hell” to explain the impact of seeing a locomotive for the first time. Those in the know, therefore, could exercise authority that was granted to them by the sublimity of the machine: “Their laughter expressed superior knowledge, declaring the difference between those who understood the new machine and were moved by its sublimities and those who did not understand it and ignorantly interpreted it in supernatural terms” (55).

7. American art provides some of the starkest examples of the integration of urban and industrial landscapes with the conventions of portraying the sublime, natural, American landscape. For instance, Thomas Moran’s “Lower Manhattan from Communipaw, New Jersey, 1880” places the burgeoning urban landscape in the background where, in the

past, a majestic mountain range would have been depicted. As Tim Barringer explains, this is one of the key paintings that

announced a new formulation of the Sublime, now borne aloft by the financial and industrial institutions of high capitalism. Skyscraper canyons dwarfing the individual, just as the natural chasms had dwarfed the explorers of the 1850s, became an emblem of American identity for the twentieth century. (64-65)

For a discussion of a similar aesthetic of integration in Charles Sheeler's well-known works of the "industrial sublime" see Marx, "Epilogue: The Garden of Ashes," 354-365.

Play It As It Lays: The Frontier, Hollywood and the American Sublime

The ancestral stories Joan Didion heard as a child about the overland crossing to California in the mid-nineteenth century, and their relationship to the mythology associated with California, have remained key elements in her fiction and non-fiction throughout her career. From her first novel, *Run River*, in which she charts the Faulknerian decline of two families in her native Sacramento, to her recent memoir, *Where I Was From*, in which she nostalgically recalls her childhood even as she debunks California's grosser illusions about its past, present and future, Didion remains conflicted about but bound to where she was from. Throughout her work, Didion reveals how familial bonds are forged and breached in ways that resonate with the larger myths about California and the frontier, which speaks to how closely she examines the impact of culture and history on the intimate lives of the characters in her fiction as well as the lives of the people she writes about in her nonfiction. Moreover, just as she observes how the individual's experience reflects the cultural myths about California, she locates this mythic California as a microcosm for America as a whole.

Even when she does not deal with California specifically – as in *Democracy* – what California embodies reveals the unity of her interests and concerns, how California and other places bear the imprint of America's frontier legacy. In fact, it is precisely the ways in which the frontier persists in America's consciousness that is the crux of her ambivalence about – and obsession with – her home state. As William R. Handley remarks in his recent reexamination of the frontier and *Run River*, it is the codes, conventions and contradictions associated with the frontier paradigm that underlie Didion's perspective about California: "The legacy of the frontier is, for Didion, a highly

ambiguous one of irreconcilable causes and effects, of Edenic drives and hellish results, of perpetual erasures of the past that only produce a haunting” (207).

In *Play It As It Lays*, the “haunting” qualities of California that relate to the frontier are located within the various configurations of the American sublime, which linger from the state’s past and are an integral part of the contemporary Los Angeles landscape. Indeed, the reason why the frontier history of California exerts such power over the protagonist, the actress Maria Wyeth, and those within her family and her Hollywood circle, derives from the way the American sublime has, historically, been associated with the frontier paradigm. As Henry Nash Smith notes in his classic analysis of Turner’s frontier thesis, the transformation that occurs with contact with the wilderness – “this perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities” (Turner 2) – is commensurate with Emerson’s description of the natural sublime in “Nature”: “The idea of nature suggested to Turner a poetic account of the influence of free land as a rebirth, a regeneration, a rejuvenation of man and society constantly recurring where civilization came into contact with the wilderness along the frontier” (Nash Smith 252). For Didion, though, the “rebirth,” “regeneration” and “rejuvenation” associated with the sublimity of the natural landscape (and the sublimity of the man-made landscape that followed) are not benign nor are they simply attributable to “Edenic drives.” In addition, these associations produced and produce the “hellish results” that inform California’s cultural past and present, such as the infamous plight of the Donner Party and the awe-inspiring yet alienating contemporary landscape that Maria Wyeth inhabits, illustrated most memorably by the sprawl of Los Angeles freeways. Epitomizing the best of Didion’s fiction and nonfiction, then, *Play It As It Lays* is a text

that is highly conscious of the ambiguous history and culture that give rise to its subject matter. Thus, to begin my analysis of how effectively *Play It As It Lays* critiques the role of American sublimity in relation to the frontier, I consider the affinities the text has with the anti-Hollywood novels that precede it, which have responded to the same cultural heritage.

I

Play It As It Lays represents an exemplary instance of the anti-Hollywood novel because of its references to the destructive legacy of westward expansion and the false hope embodied in the image of California as a golden land. What is unique to the text's approach is its distinctive use of the technological sublime as a basis for critique, especially with respect to the perennial Adamic hero found in typical frontier narratives. In particular, the treatment of such iconic examples of the technological sublime as the Hoover Dam and the Los Angeles freeway system, in addition to aspects of the film industry and consumer culture, turn the cultural and literary history of California into a means of undermining traditional constructions of the American sublime.

Situating the protagonist of the novel, Maria Wyeth, in the vein of the Adamic figure, initially described by R. W. B. Lewis as “the authentic American . . . figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history” (1), clearly strikes an ironic note because Maria is a woman but also because of her personal history. After a failed marriage to the filmmaker Carter Lang, an abortion, numerous lovers and, finally, a breakdown that precipitates her committal to the UCLA Neuropsychiatric ward, any vestiges of “innocence” and “vast potentialities” or inklings of “a new history” seem entirely remote for someone who, at one point, describes her life as amounting to nothing

more than “one dreamed fuck, no beginnings or endings, no point beyond itself” (69). That said, Maria’s gender and troubled past shed light on the longevity of the Adamic paradigm; *Play It As It Lays* uses the ironies between Maria and the traditional Adamic figure to expose its destructive influence and inescapable legacy in the context of Hollywood, California and the frontier.

As Charles L. Crow and Michelle Carbone Loris observe, Maria represents the quintessential Didion protagonist because she reflects the complex figures of frontier women Didion often cites in her nonfiction. According to Crow, Maria makes an effort to embody “the competency of the pioneering ancestors whose self-reliance . . . [she] (if no one else) believes she inherits” (212). Similarly, for Loris, Maria typifies one of Didion’s “American Eves” who “set forth on a spiritual journey through the wilderness of recent America” and when tested “discovers within herself the resources needed to survive in her hostile environment” (6). Moreover, even though, as Loris aptly puts it, “Didion women tend to be neurotic and passive,” they do have affinities with the active and costly heroism Didion finds in the lives of real frontier women.

Didion’s recent memoir *Where I Was From* clearly reveals her respect for the heroic, frontier women in her own family’s history while also suggesting the negative affinities they share with her protagonists: that as “American Eves” they, too, embodied and followed the values supported by the Adamic paradigm in the journey westward with destructive – and self-destructive – results. According to Didion, while “women in my family would seem to have been pragmatic and in their deepest instincts clinically radical . . .,” they, like Maria, appeared to have been “given to breaking clean with everyone and everything they know” (7), which has unforeseen consequences: “. . . when there was

time or inclination, there developed a tendency, which I came to see as endemic, toward slight and major derangements, apparently eccentric pronouncements, opaque bewilderment and moves to places not quite on the schedule” (8). Frontier women, therefore, followed a particular Adamic logic – “the past could be jettisoned, children buried and parents left behind, but seeds got carried” (7) – that, in theory, produced the means for psychic equilibrium and wholeness as long as they were moving forwards, as long as they could “accommodate any means in pursuit of an uncertain end” and could “avoid dwelling on just what that end might imply.”

For Didion, what is of critical interest is that such movement did not ensure avoidance, and through *Play It As It Lays* implicitly registers the costs that were exacted from frontier women and their families as they sought California in the spirit of Adamic individualism. But *Play It As It Lays* does more than simply evoke the past: the text demonstrates Didion’s interest in the tangible ways in which frontier mythology and its destructive history continue to resonate in the contemporary world. For instance, as a number of critics have noted, Didion’s references to the infamous Donner-Reed Party offer a direct link to the frontier past: as Jennifer Brady puts it, the Donner Party serves as “the original antimyth of the golden land in which the promised land becomes the heart of darkness” (45).¹ The Donner Party is particularly relevant for Didion because it represents a historical moment when the consequences of the journey West could no longer be displaced by advancing forward or by reaching California’s shores, a conclusion that can be drawn, for example, from factual details about the expedition. As Brady notes:

The blizzards encountered in the Sierras, hunger, lost time, the wrong route, and an ill-equipped group of men, women and children culminated in the deaths of nearly half the group. The survivors' fates were as unfortunate. They were rescued only to become social outcasts because they had resorted to cannibalism during the mismanaged crossing.

Clearly, the Donner Party can be viewed as what Didion, in her essay "On Morality," refers to as an object lesson in "wagon-train morality" – "the grief awaiting those who failed in their loyalties to each other" (158). Moreover, the implications of breaching the code of "wagon-train morality" by abandoning one's blood kin can be seen as a larger indictment of the traditional frontier narrative. As Handley puts it, "What Didion's pioneer descendents need to be redeemed *from* are their ancestors' betrayals of primal loyalties in their attempt, on the frontier, to cut clean from all ties" (201).

Even though this interpretation of the tragic circumstances of the Donner Party may represent Didion's indictment of the California dream, this does not mean it is the most widely held view or the only one she accounts for in her writing. As Brady suggests (with reference to Didion's essay "Notes from a Native Daughter"), "the tale can be interpreted as a celebration of California as a type of Eden" (45). Likewise, as Ellen G. Friedman remarks, it is this alternative view of the Donner Party that more fully "represents California – its distance from its own dream and its strategies for pretending that the dream is realized" (83) and which, in fact, is the view of the Donner Party Didion was taught as a child. As Didion explains in "On Morality," in this version neither the ethos of heroic individualism nor of "cutting clean" are questioned – the point of the Donner Party is that these ideals had been realized in an improper and tragic way. The

Donner Party had failed because its members had “somewhere abdicated their responsibilities, somehow breached their primary loyalties,” but this acknowledgement of broken ties is more acceptable than the possibility that they had simply been killed “by the mountain winter, by circumstances beyond their control” (159). The story of the Donner Party can be interpreted as a morality tale about the failure of individual nerve, and so can imply that individuals – as Americans – can use their power correctly, that Americans will achieve great things. In effect, by placing the emphasis on the breach of “wagon-train morality,” the Donner Party supports the idea that Americans can – and therefore should – accomplish the project of westward expansion.

Although these two ways of interpreting the Donner Party might suggest a problematic position from which to build a successful, critical narrative, it is precisely the way Didion’s fiction embraces these oppositions that makes it effective and relevant. Indeed, it is the presence of the oppositions about California in *Play It As It Lays* that explains why it is often grouped with other important anti-Hollywood novels such as Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* (1939).² According to David Fine, with authors like West as well as James M. Cain and Horace McCoy, “the tension between myth and anti-myth, between Southern California as the place of the fresh start and as the scene of the disastrous finish, recurs in almost all the fiction” (7), a point which, in turn, illuminates how Didion creates a critical perspective about California’s frontier legacy that is neither reductive nor didactic. More particularly, *Play It As It Lays* uses the same iconography of the freeway and fake architecture found in these earlier novels to embody the contradictions about California and Hollywood, a similar, critical view of technological development as a sign of progress. At the same time, what distinguishes

Play It As It Lays from the fiction of the 1930s is the explicit depiction of the freeway and other technology as expressions of the technological sublime.

This does not mean, though, that Didion arbitrarily grafts the technological sublime onto the conventions of Los Angeles fiction, the context of California or, for that matter, the concept of the frontier. If, broadly speaking, one of the key elements of the technological sublime is the belief that nature can be dominated through spectacular, man-made, technological inventions, it is clear that this belief is also embedded in the project of frontier expansion. As Richard Lehan suggests, faith in technology follows “the idea of the West” and also finds a unique expression in Los Angeles (29). First, as Lehan explains, “the frontier movement” (32) was founded upon “a belief in the potential of self and technology and the desire to control others and to dominate what technology had created.” Second, because of the particular demands of urban development and the corresponding introduction of new modes of transportation, Los Angeles was “the first city in the western world to take its dimensions from automobiles . . . ,” culminating in the spectacular network of freeways (30). For the novelists of the 1930s who were writing at the beginning of the technological development of the landscape, their fiction responded in kind; as Fine puts it, once Los Angeles “became increasingly a city on wheels, the central figure in the L.A. novel became the man – or woman – in the driver’s seat,” a situation that *Play It As It Lays* duplicates with Maria’s daily treks on the freeway early in the novel (51).

Indeed, as Fine observes when summarizing the lasting influence of Cain and McCoy, the way the road functions in Los Angeles fiction of the 1930s is reflected in *Play It As It Lays* as well as other contemporary novels set in Hollywood.³ Much like the

Donner Party, the road is a symbol that can be used to either critique or support the myth of the frontier. When used critically, the road can draw attention to the falseness of the California dream. For example, as Fine remarks in reference to Cain and McCoy, when the road comes to an end “the dream, comes to an end as well” (44), a scenario in which “the road, with its deceptive promise of mobility and freedom provides the chief metaphor for the betrayed promise of the West” (45). In novels of the 1930s, moreover, the end of the road often signals the end of the “promise of the West” for the characters in the most immediate way, through a deadly crash on a coastal highway, and a similar pattern occurs in *Play It As It Lays*. For Maria, “promise” ends when she takes wrong turns that lead to “a scrap metal yard in San Pedro . . . or out somewhere no place at all . . .” (17), or into the town of Baker, “within sixty miles of where Carter was making a picture” (30). At the same time, up until the moment the road ends, it elicits the same response from Maria that it does from the characters in the 1930s novels: the road connotes the same kind of freedom that it would if it were used to express a positive image of California.

There is, in fact, a marked similarity between Cain’s *Mildred Pierce* and *Play It As It Lays* that illustrates the positive connotations of the freeway, which can be illuminated by Fine’s discussion of Mildred Pierce’s driving on the freeway, even though he does not pursue this comparison between the texts. For Mildred, driving on the freeway represents a means of transcending the history of her unhappy marriage and her new status as a divorcee, which anticipates Maria’s use of the freeway to separate herself from Carter and the other members of their intimate Hollywood circle. As Fine explains, for Mildred Pierce, “fast driving is a source of exhilaration, pleasure and even sexual

excitement” and while “she craves highway speed, equating – and confusing – geographic mobility with liberation” (51), the power of her responses cannot be denied: “The car was pumping something into her veins, something of pride, of arrogance, of regained self-respect, that no talk, no liquor, no love, could possibly give” (qtd. in Fine 52).⁴

Likewise, for Maria, driving the freeway daily provides her “with a greater sense of purpose” each morning and a way to control “the day’s rhythm, its precariously imposed momentum” (15). As with Mildred Pierce, Maria attempts to assert her authority and freedom through speed and mobility, which extends back to frontier mythology as well. As Crow rightly puts it, Maria’s driving also recalls the movement of frontier women and offers her a moment of “temporary transcendence” (212). Maria drives the freeways

as a riverman runs a river, every day more attuned to its currents, its deceptions, and just as a riverman feels the pull of the rapids in the lull between sleeping and waking, so Maria lay at night in the still of Beverly Hills and saw the great signs rear overhead at seventy miles an hour, *Normandie ¼ Vermont ¾ Harbor Fwy I.* (16)

Clearly, then, *Play It As It Lays* explicitly highlights the atavistic quality of Maria’s driving, the way it replays the journey of frontier women and has Adamic resonances that evoke a whole host of possible literary and cultural allusions, of seekers bound on frontier quests.

A significant, interrelated point that has not been considered by previous critics, however, is the way *Play It As It Lays* casts Maria’s driving on the freeway as an

encounter with the technological sublime, producing a “temporary transcendence” that resembles her other encounters with awe-inspiring and/or terrifying forms of technology. The mobility that makes Maria resemble the figure of a frontier woman who embraces the Adamic practice of discarding the past is created by the freeway’s status as a technological site. The impact and fleeting nature of Maria’s feeling of transcendence is not only dependent upon the fact that the road must keep her free from Carter and others, it is also predicated on her interaction with technology as sublime. For Maria, the freeway conforms to a general observation by Nye about the technological sublime, that it “does not endorse human limitations; rather it manifests a split between those who understand and control machines and those who do not” (60).

For instance, Maria realizes such control by merging from one freeway to another, “by the successful passage from the Hollywood onto the Harbor,” an action which demonstrates her expertise because it “required a diagonal move across four lanes of traffic” (16). Moreover, this accomplishment frees her from the obsessive thoughts and memories about Carter and others that haunt her: “On the afternoon she finally did it without once braking or once losing the beat on the radio she was exhilarated, and that night slept dreamlessly.” Yet what Maria’s freeway driving also demonstrates is that power conferred through the technological sublime is on some level always illusory – that control and exhilaration such as Maria’s only comes about through a more fundamental immersion in – and surrender to – technology. As Didion explains in her oft-quoted essay “Bureaucrats” about Los Angeles freeways, there is a difference between “driving” on the freeways and “participating” in them as Maria does: “Actual participants think about only where they are. Actual participation requires a total surrender, a concentration

so intense as to seem a kind of narcosis, a rapture-of-the-freeway. The mind goes clean. The rhythm takes over” (83). Defined as “actual participation,” then, Maria’s driving on the freeway suggests how the sublime transcendence of one’s past or present often entails a submission to technology. Such individual expressions of power, therefore, are bracketed by a conditional experience of powerlessness.⁵

This paradoxical conferral of power that Maria gains from technology is not restricted to the freeway or a single instance of the technological sublime. Other examples of technology elicit these temporary and illusory experiences of empowerment, which in turn implicates these experiences in Maria’s dissipation and eventual breakdown. Moreover, I suggest that by depicting the technological sublime as destructive, *Play It As It Lays* locates Maria’s story within the larger context of California and Hollywood by redefining two key conventions of the anti-Hollywood novel, what Fine refers to as “absurd role playing and eclectic, counterfeit architectural design” (3).

With respect to role playing, Maria, like other actress heroines in Los Angeles fiction, can be viewed in light of Fine’s comments about these characters, particularly Nathanael West’s Faye Greener. Like Faye, Maria views her life as “a series of roles,” and she has trouble trying “to distinguish living and acting” (13).⁶ In contrast to *The Day of the Locust*, though, *Play It As It Lays* explicitly links Maria’s confusion between “living and acting” to being filmed and the kind of power and authority that is available to her through technology. The two films that Carter has made starring Maria, the first one simply called *Maria*, an art house feature constructed from home footage Carter has shot of Maria, and the second one called *Angel Beach*, an exploitation film in which

Maria's character is raped by a motorcycle gang, dramatize the effects of technology on Maria's perception of herself and her world.

In response to the first film, *Maria*, Maria feels revulsion and tries to distance herself from it because “the girl on the screen in that first picture had no knack for anything”: “She never thought of it as Maria. She thought of it always as that first picture” (21). Moreover, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff evocatively suggests, the reason why Maria reacts to the film as she does can be traced to the connotative meanings the text invests in the concept of the cut in relation to film editing. “The cut,” Wolff observes, “denies any intrinsic order to Maria's identity; the film . . . can be ‘cut’ many different ways” (131). Thus, as Wolff explains, the film *Maria* extends control of Maria to Carter and to anyone who views the film.⁷ For viewers, film technology offers them power over Maria because “anybody can look at her whenever he wants – speed her up, slow her down, run her backwards” Also, Carter exercises power over Maria while he makes the film, “assembling and reassembling ‘Maria,’ putting her together so that he could exhibit her” (131), which suggestively robs the real Maria of all agency with the final cut, when “at the end she was thrown into negative and looked dead” (*Play It As It Lays* 20). Maria's desire to separate herself from *Maria*, then, is indicative of her larger struggle to preserve and protect her identity.

Ironically, the novel also suggests that Maria attempts to empower herself by watching her onscreen self playing a fictional character in *Angel Beach*, but her preference for the studio's version of the film rather than Carter's implies that she, too, takes part in cutting her identity. The fact that Maria prefers the studio's end of the film over Carter's is problematic because whereas “Carter's original ended with a shot of the

motorcycle gang, as if they represented some reality not fully apprehended by the girl Maria played,” the “cut released by the studio ended with a long shot of Maria strolling across campus” (19). By implication, through her preference for the studio cut, Maria becomes complicit in the erasure and cutting of the character’s horrible experience, which also has a direct bearing on her view of “the girl” and herself. Even though each time Maria has watched the film she has never had “any sense that the girl on the screen was herself” (19), she nevertheless “liked watching the picture: the girl on the screen seemed to have a definite knack for controlling her own destiny” (20). Maria’s preference for the studio cut, therefore, comes with the price of minimizing the girl’s experience and represents a double-sided act of self-violation: not only is the girl, on one level Maria, but Maria knowingly wishes to emulate a false image that she, in part, supports – one with only a fabricated “knack.” Thus, through Maria’s response to *Angel Beach* as well as *Maria, Play It As It Lays* uses the blurred distinctions between film and reality to suggest that technology can only provide Maria with disempowerment masquerading as empowerment, as she pursues the principle of cutting clean from her past.

In a more expansive way, but with no less personal repercussions for Maria, *Play It As It Lays* situates these destructive qualities of technology in experiences of transcendence that are produced through the effects of the fake architecture in Los Angeles and, appropriately, Las Vegas as well. If, as Fine remarks, in response to Los Angeles in the 1930s “virtually all the writers were struck by the region’s sham architecture” and used it as evidence of Hollywood’s false promise, then the Los Angeles depicted in *Play It As It Lays* continues this trend (5). What distinguishes Didion’s text, though, is the way it locates reactions to the artificial, man-made landscape in terms of

the technological sublime and the image of California in the contemporary world.⁸ From a broader perspective, *Play It As It Lays* demonstrates how the technological sublime has been transformed into a celebration of grotesque kitsch objects described by Jameson as the “postmodern sublime.” Even though the Los Angeles and Las Vegas landscape bear little comparison to marvels such as the Brooklyn Bridge, *Play It As It Lays* reveals that they are celebrated in the same manner and – in principle – for the same underlying reason – the ability to dominate nature through man-made objects. In essence, then, *Play It As It Lays* conveys how the differences between traditional icons of the American technological sublime and the contemporary California landscape are only a matter of degrees. Ingeniously, the text illustrates how the crass commercialism that first surrounded and later became a constituent part of traditional sites of sublimity has, in the exemplary examples of Los Angeles and Las Vegas, become the defining feature of sublime, technological objects.

The most memorable example of this kind of object in the novel – and certainly the most meaningful one for Maria – is the sign for a Thriftmart, the “big red T” (76). Paradoxically, for Maria the sign represents a way of transcending the circumstances in which she views it, as the landmark where she will meet the man who will take her to have an abortion she does not wish to have. Moreover, given Maria’s paradoxical view of the sign, it is not surprising that the promise of transcendence it apparently offers proves to be illusory, which is conveyed with the images that haunt Maria after the abortion and that precipitate her eventual breakdown. Although it might seem absurd to suggest the sign could function in the manner that Maria hopes, on a thematic level the text does bridge the gap between the meaning the sign has for Maria and the meaning it

has for others. As a result, Maria's perception of the T's transcendent properties is not restricted to her, even though her particular circumstances expose the implications such transcendence has for others as well. The T shows the appeal but also the cost of cutting clean – the way this principle typifies consumer choice with the promise of transcendence without consequences. Indeed, Maria's shame and regret following the abortion speaks to the way Carter, the man who drives Maria to the abortion and even the abortionist suggest that the abortion represents nothing more than a consumer choice and their insistence that she ought to view it this way, too.

Overall, the falseness of the T is equated with the false liberation it promises, which is conveyed by the symbol it resembles and replaces – the Christian cross.⁹ Recalibrated within the dynamics of consumer choice, the transcendent possibility of resurrection that the cross traditionally connotes has become an empty marketing tool of consumer culture, and the text underscores the significance and emptiness of the T by its prominence over – and within – the manufactured sprawl of the contemporary California landscape. Where once healing and religious qualities were associated with such sites of natural sublimity as Virginia's Natural Bridge, these qualities have now become conflated with the signs, slogans and brands of mass culture. As Maria approaches the T, it represents the apex of a mechanized landscape that has apparently poisoned whatever remnants of the natural world remain:

The stillness and clarity of the air seemed to rob everything of its perspective, seemed to alter all perception of depth, and Maria drove as carefully as if she were reconnoitering an atmosphere without gravity. Taco Bells jumped out at her. Oil rockers creaked ominously. For miles before she reached the Thriftmart

she could see the big red T, a forty-foot cutout letter which seemed peculiarly illuminated against the harsh unclouded light of the afternoon sky. (77)

This landscape, therefore, elicits the sublime reactions of awe and wonder mingled with dread, but it fails to translate into anything beneficial or empowering for Maria.

Maria's journey towards the T, of course, also underscores the illusory liberation that is provided by the freeway, but here it is even more pronounced than with her previous excursions: while she moves through this setting she appears to be engulfed and directed by the odd, listless force that emanates from it, rather than making her own course. Along with the experience of the T, it is with Maria's movement through the streets, hotels and casinos of the Las Vegas Strip that *Play It As It Lays* illustrates the kind of elevated yet oppressive experience that is generated by the artificial and technological landscape.¹⁰ For Maria, moving through the Strip produces a state that Didion describes in the essay "Marrying Absurd" as the defining feature of Las Vegas, that "extraordinarily stimulating and interesting place" (81), in which there is the appearance of "no 'time'" (80) – "no night and no day and no past and no future" (80) – or "any logical sense of where one is" (80). Movement on the Strip does not mean that Maria can successfully traverse it, let alone claim a renewed sense of self in the traditional dynamic of the American sublime; instead, as Sandra K. Hinchman puts it, "Both time and space are warped here: phone numbers are no longer in service" and "hotels have new wings in which Maria, veteran of freeway navigation cannot find her way . . ." (88). Trekking daily and nightly through the city in search of transcendence, Maria's potential for discovering agency through her quest is negated because she "did

not decide to stay in Vegas: she only failed to leave She was there on some business but she could not seem to put her finger on what that business was” (169).

Like the T, the Strip does produce sensations of sublimity for Maria, but rather than culminating with a moment of epiphany, she only thinks “about nothing” (170). But her absence of thought, the text makes plain, is not indicative of the usual promise of Adamic self-fashioning following contact with sublime phenomena. The traditional pattern is inverted as Maria’s mind is overwhelmed by the Strip: “Her mind was a blank tape, imprinted daily with snatches of things overheard, fragments of dealer’s patter, the beginnings of jokes and odd lines of song lyrics.” The longer Maria stays in Las Vegas, the more her mind is filled by a chaotic mass of sensations, which begin to impede her capacity for simple logic: she has difficulty distinguishing “where her body stopped and the air began.” In the end, Maria’s grip on reality is consumed by the hyperreal spectacle of the Strip, and the only thing she may have garnered from this experience is the ability to distinguish between casino signs that appear to connote a hidden, deeper meaning: “She was beginning to feel color, light intensities, and she imagined that she could be put blindfolded in front of the signs at the Thunderbird and the Flamingo and know which was which” (171).

In the larger scheme of the novel, therefore, Las Vegas and the T evoke a false transcendence that makes them serve as examples of the technological sublime in a manner that, in effect, demythologizes its more traditional configurations. In essence, the reason *Play It As It Lays* uses these examples with such effectiveness can be attributed to the fact that even as they challenge and critique the conventions of the technological sublime, the T and Las Vegas do so because they represent the logical outcome of

investing man-made objects with sublimity in the first place, with a luster that, by extension, validates technological and commercial enterprise. The text's resemblance to the Los Angeles fiction of the 1930s, particularly its use of the physical landscape, explains why it effectively undermines the validity of California's frontier mythology; in addition, the way *Play It As It Lays* links contemporary California to the technological sublime extends the scope and relevance of its critique, explaining the lasting appeal and seductive power of the West.

Indeed, the text's emphasis on Los Angeles and Las Vegas in reference to the technological sublime offers a comprehensive critique because, in effect, it takes into account the popular, derogatory perception of Hollywood as the "dream factory" and Las Vegas as "Sin City." Without portraying Las Vegas or Los Angeles in terms of the technological sublime, *Play It As It Lays* could seem at best, overly simplistic and at worst, even redundant. Yet by using the iconic Hoover Dam to represent the same negative and destructive qualities as Los Angeles and Las Vegas, the text directly addresses the congruence between mythical and antimythical elements in the West. In particular, it is the similar effect of the Hoover Dam and these other examples that is of primary importance here, because the Hoover Dam appears to embody different and positive qualities that are generic to earlier icons of the American technological sublime.

With the text's depiction of the Hoover Dam, popular perception offers a useful frame of reference, because whereas the T, Los Angeles and Las Vegas can simply be held as objects of ridicule, the Hoover Dam continues to be an object that can elicit respect, at least as a technological achievement. Moreover, this respect can be attributed to the way the dam apparently testifies to the triumph of rational thought and human

engineering. In contrast to the chaos and disorder that are found in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, the Hoover Dam stands as a manifestation of order and rationality and, as Didion puts in an essay about the dam, “the notion that mankind’s brightest promise lay in American engineering” (199).

Without question, the Hoover Dam’s lofty and logical purpose, coupled with its vast and orderly structure, makes it an appealing and also ideal example of the technological sublime. For Maria, such order, like mobility, is an integral a part of the transcendence she seeks through technology. Even in the example of the freeway, part of its appeal for Maria lies, as David J. Geherin puts it, in the way it can allow her “to seek order and meaning to counteract her growing sense of disorder” (107), which also explains why she always needs to be driving on it “by ten o’clock” (*Play It As It Lays* 15). Likewise, with the Hoover Dam, Maria sees it as offering a similar remedy to disorder, the possibility for transcendence conveyed by the control of the Colorado River and the desert. As Katherine Usher Henderson explains:

The dam represents man’s control over water, an essential natural resource and a symbol of spiritual renewal. Its compelling power enables Maria to forget momentarily her own helplessness and desolation, and it functions symbolically, as an image of order and control, to balance the image of life as a random game of chance. (39)

Nevertheless, while this description of the dam and its relationship to water accurately reflects the symbolic resonances Maria wants the dam to embody and, more extensively, falls in line with the conventions of the American technological sublime, her actual experience of the dam does not have such positive associations or beneficial effects.

Ultimately, *Play It As It Lays* presents the Hoover Dam as an even more deceptive form of sublime technology than either the freeway, the T or the Las Vegas Strip. While the orderliness of the dam and its apparently harmonious relationship to the life-giving resources of the natural world clearly distinguish it from these examples, representing the ideal of “clean” technology that has so often been attributed to such achievements of national pride, the text turns these qualities into a means of demystifying the allure of the dam and linking it to these other forms of technology.¹¹ Drawn from the Las Vegas Strip to the dam by “the pressure and pull of the water,” it appears that Maria will attain a moment of transcendent empowerment through her contact with the dam; however, her actual experience turns out to be another example of being overwhelmed and – literally – submerged by technology: “All day she was faint with vertigo, sunk in a world where great power grids converged, throbbing lines plunged finally into the shallow canyon below the dam’s face, elevators like coffins dropped into the bowels of the earth itself” (171).

Here, then, *Play It As It Lays* not only inverts the sublime as a lofty experience but also uses metaphor and simile to connect Maria’s encounter with the dam to the false connotations associated with the other examples of technology in the novel. Hence, her “vertigo” is not indicative of the “spiritual renewal” that Henderson says the dam appears to symbolize: like the T, the dam offers a death-like experience that falsely connotes the possibility for resurrection. Above all, Maria discovers that the dam is an enclosed, technological space that is as alienating as the films Carter produces with her image and as disorienting as the Las Vegas Strip. Thus, for all its orderliness, the iconic Hoover Dam is figured as something beyond Maria’s grasp – a sublime experience that cannot be

used as a vehicle for self-empowerment, but which seems to promise such empowerment as an expression of California's frontier spirit.¹²

II

Given the emphasis on the technological sublime in *Play It As It Lays*, it might seem that the text fails to account for other elements of the American sublime or even, perhaps, the way such elements might offer a different view of technology and its meaning within the broader context of California and the West. While these concerns are, of course, speculative, I see at least two important and interrelated questions that emerge from them, and which I would like to consider. First, how does *Play It As It Lays* depict nature and account for the natural sublime? From examples like the water at Hoover Dam, it could be supposed that the text makes appeals to affirmative representations of the natural world in order to critique technology. If this were the case, *Play It As It Lays* would fail to account for the development of the technological sublime from the natural sublime in America's cultural history, and that the natural sublime continues to persist in America's public consciousness. In addition, a second question that needs to be asked is whether "wagon-train morality" might represent a principle that is not bound to destructive, Adamic self-fashioning and the practice of cutting clean. And, if there is a distinction here, how, in turn, might "wagon-train morality" relate to nature in the context of the American sublime? In what follows I will address the way the novel's depiction of nature relates to "wagon-train morality" and suggests the potential for a reconfigured mode of the American sublime; however, I will argue that this potential is qualified and preempted by the reinscription of traditional patterns and

structures of the American sublime. Above all, I will show that this failed potential reveals the lasting relevance of the American sublime in the context of the frontier.

I want to begin by returning to Didion's thoughts about "wagon-train morality" in her essay "On Morality" from *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Here, in contrast to what I have argued about *Play It As It Lays*, she appears to suggest that "wagon-train morality" might also yield empowerment as well as the punitive despair and disgrace that haunts Maria Wyeth or, similarly, the hapless survivors of the Donner Party. Even as Didion uses the principle of "wagon-train morality" to signal the failure of the California dream – with the Donner Party to deglamorize the myth of the West and with Maria's actions to critique the frontier ethos of cutting clean – in "On Morality" she also seems to hold that this principle can be realized in a positive light, where the ties of "blood kin" can, in fact, be honored in a beneficial way. For example, in "On Morality" Didion recalls an incident where a boy was killed in a traffic accident and a man, moreover a stranger, stayed with the body, protecting it from threats such as coyotes, until the coroner could arrive. According to the man's wife, his motivation was simple: "'You can't just leave a body on the highway,' she said. 'It's immoral'" (158). For Didion, then, this instance appears to be proof that the principle of "wagon-train morality" can be upheld for the common good of the living as well as the dead.

By contrast, *Play It As It Lays* consistently offers a different view. Even as the text creates scenarios in which "wagon-train morality" could, potentially, have effects that are as positive as the example in "On Morality," things always take a turn for the worse. For Maria, "wagon-train morality" is an ideal that she consciously attempts to honor in her familial relationships, so the fact that her efforts consistently end badly

suggests that something more is at issue than her inability to properly anticipate the consequences of her behavior and its impact on loved ones. There is something inherently problematic about exercising the principle of “wagon-train morality,” which the text suggests stems from the concept’s relation to California mythology. *Play It As It Lays*, in fact, adheres to Didion’s critical comments about “wagon train morality” and what it signifies with the mythic retelling of fate of the Donner Party, an encounter with the natural, American sublime. As noted earlier, what both supportive and critical interpretations of the Donner Party share is the use of “wagon-train morality” to imply that the members of the party were not ill-equipped to deal with the challenges of the natural environment. With this in mind, then, I suggest that *Play It As It Lays* makes a comprehensive and definitive antimythical statement by conveying the link between “wagon-train morality” and the need to assert mastery over the natural world, by the way Maria’s thwarted efforts to honor familial bonds repeatedly stage a confrontation with the natural, American sublime.

Throughout the text, Maria’s efforts to express affiliation as a daughter or mother bring about an encounter with the natural world, which is depicted as a hostile or even deadly force. For instance, in Maria’s dream of living an idyllic life with her daughter, Kate, and her lover, Les Goodwin, the setting in a house by the sea, where “they would gather mussels together, Kate and Maria, and still later all three of them . . . would eat the mussels” (115), testifies to Maria’s desire for the mutual support and affiliation at the heart of “wagon-train morality.” Not surprisingly, though, this dream turns out to be a fantasy that is dispelled in two ways: first, by Maria’s inability to not be “plagued by her

own and his own and Kate's own manifold histories," and second, by the fact that "the mussels on any shore Maria knew were toxic."

Similarly, the death of Maria's mother, Francine, is an instance that Maria views in terms of "wagon-train morality," and in this case the destructive role of nature is even more prevalent. Moreover, the resemblance between Francine's death and the boy's death in "On Morality" illustrates how *Play It As It Lay* challenges the conventional relationship between "wagon-train morality" and nature. Like the boy in "On Morality," Francine dies in a highway accident: as Maria puts it, "my mother ran the car off the highway outside Tonopah" (8). In contrast to the boy's accident, however, no one is present at Francine's side and nature strikes in a manner that makes the possibility of honoring "wagon-train morality" even more remote. About her mother's death, Maria says "I didn't know about it for a couple of weeks because the coyotes tore her up before anybody found her and my father couldn't tell me." Thus, in this instance, nature makes it impossible for this incident to be seen positively in the terms of "wagon-train morality," and the image that subsequently haunts Maria – "the mother dying in the desert light, the daughter unavailable in the Eastern dark" – reflects the extent to which nature exerts a negative and disempowering influence over her (61).

From these examples, it is clear that the impossibility of achieving a positive, empowered position within the terms of "wagon-train morality" is connected to the text's depiction of the natural world. Moreover, these examples subvert the traditional American version of the natural sublime in which, as Bryan Wolf aptly puts it, "the threat presented by nature [turns] into an opportunity for self-expression" (159). Indeed, if nature were not a "threat" that so completely overwhelms Maria and other characters, the

text could be seen as reinscribing the traditional pattern described by Wolf, “that characteristically American project of self-making,” in which there is “a virtual substitution of self for world . . . an incestuous twining of nature back into the self . . .” (155).

How the text disrupts this typical process might appear potentially problematic, though. Because the examples above (particularly the death of Francine) depict nature as a force that apparently negates any possibility of honoring or breaching the code of “wagon-train morality,” the ethical values the code represents are potentially negated as well. Nevertheless, in presenting Maria’s failed efforts at affiliation, *Play It As It Lays* demonstrates that is not the principle of “wagon- train morality” that is at issue but the difficulty of separating it from an ethos of individualism, the context of westward expansion and traditional configurations of the natural as well as technological sublime. In other words, I argue that the text reflects Didion’s conclusion in “On Morality” that even though “wagon-train morality” can be destructive when used in mythic appropriations of events like the plight of the Donner Party, the principle itself remains “the only kind of ‘morality’ that seems to me to have any but the most potentially mendacious meaning” (159).

With this in mind, what I suggest is particularly remarkable about *Play It As It Lays* is that by supporting the fundamental ethical principle of “wagon-train morality,” the text nearly reconfigures the natural American sublime as well, outlining a site that could foster affiliation. That is, by attempting to preserve the ideal of affiliation that “wagon-train morality” embodies, while also undermining the vision of the individual’s mastery over nature that the concept typically connotes, *Play It As It Lays* comes close to

inscribing the ethics of the code in a new way within the framework of the traditional American sublime. In order to sketch out what might seem an unclear or tenuous distinction, in what follows I will consider three examples with Maria – her meeting with a woman in Nevada, her reaction to news stories about mothers and children and, finally, her actions in connection to BZ’s suicide – that suggest how *Play It As It Lays* explores the possibilities of – and marks the limitations for – such a reconfigured mode of the American sublime.

In the first example, where Maria meets with the woman who runs a coffee shop in Nevada, the afternoon they spend together at the woman’s trailer represents a moment of affiliation, potentially revising the sort of individualism that is constructed and supported through contact with the natural sublime. On the most basic level, the woman’s trailer on the edge of the Nevada desert provides Maria with a refuge from the Las Vegas Strip and Carter, who is shooting a film nearby. On a more personal level, the question that the woman asks Maria testifies to the woman’s maternal concern for her: “‘Honey,’ the woman said. ‘You pregnant or something?’” (199) Still more remarkable is the importance of this exchange within the larger scheme of the novel, in terms of character and setting, individualism and cutting clean from the past and the power of the natural world. Even as the woman shows care and concern towards Maria, *Play It As It Lays* sets this empathy alongside an independence that clearly casts the woman as another archetypal, frontier woman. Abandoned by her philandering husband, Lee, the woman attributes her resilience to her ability to cut clean from her past and others: “I made my decision in ’61 at a meeting in Barstow and I never shed one tear since.”

Even though she is situated in the desert, her individualism is not, so it seems, of the Adamic variety associated with the natural sublime. Not only does the woman's concern for Maria stand in stark contrast to this kind of egotism, but the woman's relationship to nature is one of constant and futile struggle, in which the desert literally and metaphorically overwhelms her efforts to keep it at bay. The "hundred miles of drifting sand" that surround the trailer beyond "a split-rail fence" continually threatens her and the woman's actions underscore her inability to master it (198):

The sand was blowing through the rail fence onto the concrete, drifting around the posts, coating a straight-backed chair with pale film The woman picked up a broom and began sweeping the sand into small piles, then edging the piles back to the fence. New sand blew in as she swept. (199)

Quite plainly, then, the woman's sweeping does not imply the mastery of nature found in the typical dynamics of the natural American sublime, but neither is her sweeping met with the full destructive force of the desert that kills Francine Wyeth. By eschewing the principle of dominance, the woman apparently attains the basis for expressing a different kind of power, one that is admirable because of its persistence and because it is tempered by the kind of empathy she shows towards Maria.

From a theoretical perspective, this affiliation that Maria experiences with the woman as well as the woman's relationship to the desert evoke the sort of revised views of the sublime discussed by Patricia Yaeger and Barbara Claire Freeman. For Yaeger, what she alternately refers to as a "sublime of nearness" (195) or a "feminine sublime" (205) resembles the text's depiction of Maria with the woman because this scene goes against traditional versions of sublimity that support "our Western allegiance to an

imperial, Cartesian, Adamic self who is supposed to act as its own triumvirate and tribunal.” In place of such patterns of dominance and self-fashioning, a space that affords the kind of exchange that passes between Maria and the woman is opened, “a zone where self-empowerment and intersubjective bliss entertain one another” Likewise, if viewed from the perspective of Freeman’s similar definition of a “feminine sublime,” the woman’s relationship to nature can be seen as the grounds for this sort of “zone” because “rather than represent the object of rapture [here nature] as a way of incorporating it, as the traditional sublime of domination does, the feminine sublime does not attempt to master its objects of rapture” (3).¹³

Yet even as these reconfigurations are applicable to Maria’s contact with the woman and the woman’s contact with nature, the instances in which Maria’s familial bonds are more fully emphasized indicate the limits such reconfigurations have as expressions of the American sublime. The brevity and singularity of Maria’s encounter with the woman notwithstanding, *Play It As It Lays* undercuts the scope of these kinds of reconfigured sites of sublimity by evoking two interrelated elements unique to the American sublime. First, even as the text accounts for the way sites of sublimity like Virginia’s Natural Bridge, Niagara Falls or, of course, the Hoover Dam, are often group experiences in which collective identification becomes a means of reifying the Adamic self, the text shows how this can yield an experience of alienation and disempowerment for an individual. Second, *Play It As It Lays* overtly addresses the spectatorship that is traditionally employed at such sites and how it bars the sort of identification at the heart of the mutuality described by Yaeger and Freeman.

Play It As It Lays counters the positive qualities Freeman says underlie the spectatorship found within the traditional configurations of the sublime. For instance, for her there are inherent contradictions in Burke's view of spectatorship that presuppose the possibility and realization of affiliation and mutuality. She argues that "the experience Burke describes as sublime depends not only upon maintaining a certain distance from terror, but also upon an identification or merger between observer and observed that precludes the distance that supposedly is essential to sublime experience" (46). Certainly, Freeman's comments illuminate the illogic of spectatorship and the sublime, but *Play It As It Lays* insists that the paradox of "distance" and "merger" does not necessarily mean that "identification" will be beneficial or empowering or, more fundamentally, that the habitual – and ultimately distancing – way of experiencing such moments of sublime spectatorship can be categorically altered or erased.¹⁴

With the news stories, for example, Maria finds that they not only speak to but also aggravate her fear that "the peril would find Kate" (102). Here, the identification Maria draws between herself, Kate and the mothers and daughters who are the victims of the terrible circumstances in the news stories effectively stages a movement away from the possibility for the sort of identification and nurturance described by Freeman and Yaeger; instead, an overwhelming sense of fear and powerlessness engulfs Maria. With the newspaper stories, Maria reveals that she once read them avidly, that they once "leapt at her from the page" (99), but she now refrains from reading them because she cannot help linking Kate to the victimized children in the stories: "the four-year-olds in the abandoned refrigerator, the tea party with Purex, the infant in the driveway, rattlesnake in the playpen, the peril, the unspeakable peril, in the everyday" (99-100). Moreover, rather

than fostering her confidence in her ability to protect Kate, reading these stories has convinced Maria of her own irremediable disempowerment, about the ineffectiveness of her role as a mother and motherhood in general: “She grew faint as the procession swept before her, the children alive when last scolded, dead when next seen, the children in the locked car burning, the little faces, helpless screams” (100). Reading these stories, then, explains to Maria why the mothers “were always reported to be under sedation” and also why this fails to assuage their anxieties, that “in the whole world there was not as much sedation as there was instantaneous peril.”¹⁵

Nevertheless, despite this realization, Maria attempts her own form of “sedation,” which is revealed when she admits that she often “ate frozen enchiladas, looked at television for word of the world, thought of herself as under sedation and did not leave the apartment on Fountain Avenue.” Moreover, by Maria watching television “for word of the world” and as a means of “sedation,” the text reveals that more is at stake than how fully she identifies with the powerless mothers in the newspaper stories. For Maria, watching the televised news stories of disaster becomes an activity that makes her more powerless because of the relation between spectatorship and identification that it creates. And with Maria watching these stories, *Play It As It Lays* effectively critiques the American sublime on two fronts: first, by the way Maria’s identification with women in these televised stories does not yield the kinds of sympathy envisioned by Yaeger or Freeman; and, second, by the way a potentially collective identification through the medium of television is not conducive to personal empowerment, undermining the traditional model of the American sublime in which collective experience forms the basis for an individual to refashion himself or herself anew.

As Maria watches “a television news film of a house about to slide in the Tujung Wash” (103), the text suggests the degree to which the spectatorial view of the woman “whose house it had been” (103) and Maria’s adoption of her perspective marks the impossibility for either the “nearness” and “intersubjective bliss” envisioned by Yaeger and Freeman or the claims to personal empowerment in the traditional model of the American sublime. The woman, rather than expressing dismay, makes an appreciative comment to the news crew who has filmed the destruction of her home – “You boys did a really outstanding camera job” (103). Meanwhile, as Maria watches this she takes on an equally disturbing position by copying the woman’s words – repeating the “compliment out loud” – and then smoking a joint. Maria’s identification with the woman, then, becomes a means of adopting her indifferent spectatorial perspective in the face of terror and the threat of the kind of personal “peril” that Maria fears; moreover, rather than offering anything positive or even an effective means of “sedation,” the text shows that this popular, public consumption of sublime terror amounts to a defeatist object lesson about how to depersonalize personal “peril.”

By extension, what is additionally significant about Maria watching the TV news is that as she adopts this spectatorial view she also has an opportunity to exercise it by watching other stories that depict danger or threat, “a report of a small earth tremor” and a story of “a Pentecostal minister who had received prophecy that eight million people would perish by earthquake . . .” (104). More directly, *Play It As It Lays* suggests that it is the cumulative effect of Maria watching these stories and perceiving them from a position of relative safety that, in turn, can grant her the sedation she seeks from the particular harm that might come to her and Kate:

The notion of general devastation had for Maria a certain sedative effect (the rattlesnake in the playpen, that was different, that was particular, that was punitive), suggested an instant in which all anxieties would be abruptly gratified, and between the earthquake prophecy and the marijuana and the cheerful detachment of the woman whose house was in the Tujunga Wash, she felt a kind of resigned tranquility.

For Maria, then, the position of spectatorship she exercises in relation to these various stories grants her an experience of sublimity that can, it would seem, potentially erase her fear of the “particular” and “punitive” threats like “the rattlesnake in the playpen.”

Because Maria experiences this sublimity through degrees of identification, it is important to note how it differs from the reconfigured sublimities of Yaeger and Freeman. In place of empowerment and affiliation, the sedated point of view is one of resignation in which fear is displaced through spectatorship and alleviated in a potentially masochistic manner, where “anxieties” will no longer be painful because they will be “gratified.” Hence, any claims to a resistant sublime where power is derived through mutuality appears to be denied in this scenario; in fact, despite Maria’s powerlessness here, this version of sublimity has more in common with the traditional, American scheme: like the Adamic mode of self-fashioning there is an implied cutting clean and search for transcendence, from the limiting particularities of an individual’s circumstances.

With this similarity in mind, then, it is not surprising that *Play It As It Lays* depicts Maria’s “sedation” as being as temporary and ineffective as her efforts at self-fashioning. On the one hand, she continues to be haunted by her recurring nightmare

about her involuntary abortion in which plumbing is clogged with “hacked pieces of human flesh” (97): the morning after watching the TV she flees the apartment “when the shower seemed slow to drain” and she fearfully realizes that “there would be plumbing anywhere she went” (104).¹⁶ At the same time, her desire for sedation does not outweigh her desire to be a good mother to Kate. As Maria explains in a first-person aside set in the present, she persists because of Kate: “Why bother, you might ask. I bother for Kate. What I play for here is Kate” (4). And as Maria’s use of the word “play” suggests (along with its allusive reference to the title of the novel), the scope and significance of her commitment and despair extend beyond her immediate and particular circumstances. If Maria’s “plays” turn out to be overly optimistic or illusory, much of this can be attributed to the way they are shaped by the “lay” of the land, by the influence of California and Hollywood.¹⁷

This influence of the artificial setting, which we have considered in terms of the technological sublime and the conventions of the anti-Hollywood novel, also has significance because it casts Maria’s experiences and actions in the realm of the absurd. Again and again, whether it is through her failed attempts to honor familial bonds or her various efforts to transcend or escape her circumstances, Maria encounters the threat of meaninglessness – what she and BZ, Carter’s producer, enigmatically refer to as “nothingness” – and which, as a number of critics suggest, bears a resemblance to what we find in writers like Camus.¹⁸ Indeed, looked at from the perspective of existentialist concerns, *Play It As It Lays* poses questions about the possibilities of achieving empowerment at the individual and collective levels in a world of spectacle and illusion. More particularly, I suggest that these concerns can be condensed down two fundamental

“existential” questions that are nevertheless wedded to the text’s critique of Hollywood. First, how does one persist in the absence of genuine or lasting affiliation with others? Second, what does one do to create meaning in one’s life when everything is apparently superficial and deceptive? It is with these questions in mind, then, that I would like to conclude by considering BZ and Maria’s role in his suicide and, in turn, the way this scene reflects the text’s assessment of the lasting influence of the American sublime and the possibilities for it to be reconfigured.

Maria’s presence at BZ’s suicide, which occurs in a desert motel during a movie shoot, brings the issues of absurdity and affiliation to the forefront and to an unforgettable climax, illuminating not only the destructive legacy of frontier mythology in the context of Hollywood but within the larger parameters of the American sublime as well. In this instance, the setting of the desert plays as significant a role in what takes place between BZ and Maria as it has in the death of Francine and the sweeping of the woman who runs the coffee shop, and with BZ and Maria, *Play It As It Lays* offers what amounts to a summation of these previous examples in which the deadly power of the desert is revealed to be as much about the cultural meanings it connotes as by its actual physical force. For BZ and Maria, the “nothingness” at the heart of their mutual despair about the artificiality and meaninglessness of their Hollywood lives is prompted, first and foremost, by the figurative power of the desert and its wider, cultural associations.

The fact that the desert’s status as a site of overwhelming natural sublimity is culturally produced may not be immediately clear. Because Maria and BZ are literally surrounded by the desert, it is easy to miss the way the figurative, sublime “nothingness” they experience there is implicated in the sham culture of Hollywood and Las Vegas. For

instance, while Hinchman's initial point about the desert is accurate, that it "dispels the sorts of illusions that Hollywood and Las Vegas encourage" (90) and brings BZ to the point where he can no longer abide his empty Hollywood lifestyle, this does not mean, as Hinchman later concludes, that the desert is a "silent wall of reality" (91) that serves as a sort of life-affirming "outside," as a cultural corrective.¹⁹ As BZ and Maria move towards greater and greater despair while ensconced in the motel, two events in the desert demonstrate that its "nothingness" is, in fact, deadly precisely because of the meanings – and practices – that construct it as a frontier zone.

These two events, as Hinchman suggests, address the significance of the desert as fact and fiction, reality and myth: the death of the man who seeks God in the desert, and Maria's wish to feel the aftershocks of an underground nuclear device, detonated in her former hometown of Silver Wells, once owned by her father. Yet in contrast to Hinchman's claim, the text shows that the desert's power and its deadliness are predicated on the fictions and false optimism associated with it rather than as a reminder of reality. For instance, with the man who wanders from a nearby trailer park into the desert to talk to God, his actions prove fatal when his corpse is found "bitten by a rattlesnake" (204). Here, while the real dangers of the physical landscape cause the man's death, this only occurs because he views the desert in fictional terms, according to the traditional paradigm of the American sublime in which transcendence can be achieved through contact with the divinity of nature.

Similarly, with Maria's desire to experience the aftershocks in the missile range where Silver Wells once stood, *Play It As It Lays* illustrates the lasting impact of the false promise associated with frontier. Although Silver Wells has disappeared, Maria remains

drawn to where it stood because it continues to connote the possibility of transcendence and self-creation for her. The text, however, reveals that Silver Wells was – and remains – an illusion that Maria cannot disavow, even though it was as artificial as the Hollywood or Las Vegas landscape, part of a “ghost-town scheme” in which her father marketed Silver Wells as a tourist attraction (6).²⁰ As Thomas Mallon concurs, “Even when it [Silver Wells] existed, it was a kind of illusion, kept pumped up by the pipe dreams of her father and Benny Austin . . . but it is recalled by Maria with a kind of puzzled reverence” (66). Indeed, it is Maria’s “puzzled reverence” that leads her to expect something revelatory and transformative to occur at the missile range that has replaced Silver Wells, which is emphasized by her rising “before the dawn to feel the blast” (204). Yet rather than achieving the personal “new day” implied by rising “before the dawn,” Maria feels “nothing.” Here, then, *Play It As It Lays* once more reveals how technology fails to offer Maria the transcendence she habitually seeks, but in this case it is the memory of Silver Wells that has spurred her on, which is a frontier fiction that is as poisonous in its emptiness as the rattlesnake that kills the man from the trailer park. For Maria, there is no comfort in “nothing,” even though she may now see how the fiction of a home on the range has given way to the fact of a missile range.

Not even the presence of someone who shares the experience of “nothingness” offers Maria comfort, which is conveyed through her relationship with BZ, who insists that their bond is their peculiar knowledge of superficiality and meaninglessness: “you and I, we *know* something. Because we’ve been out there where the nothing is” (212). In contrast to what BZ’s words might appear to convey, their knowledge of “nothingness” speaks to the limits of their mutuality and reflects on other instances in the text where the

sublimity of the desert is a shared, transformative moment. In particular, in spite of their closeness, Maria's experience of the desert with BZ does not fulfill the kind of initial promise of affiliation signaled by Maria's earlier encounter with the woman who runs the coffee shop. Maria and BZ's relationship during the final moments of his life, when he takes a lethal dose of Seconal capsules, more closely resembles the distanced, spectatorial view Maria adopts – and shares – with the woman on TV who loses her home in the Tujung Wash. Even as BZ asks Maria to “hold onto me” (213) and she reciprocates by holding his hand, the concern with artificiality on BZ's part – “Don't start faking me now” (213) – alongside Maria's rebuke of his method of suicide – “That's a queen's way of doing it” (212) – gives the scene an oddly impersonal quality and the very aura of artificiality that their relationship and his suicide might seem to contest.

In fact, the staged quality of their exchange is corroborated by an earlier scene in a similar motel bedroom. When Maria, drunk after a party, engages (perhaps involuntarily) in sadomasochistic sex with BZ and his wife Helene, the text elaborates upon what occurs at BZ's suicide – the putative logic behind BZ's decision to kill himself, the distance that underlies the intimacy between him and Maria and the larger, cultural context in which the scene resonates. A grotesque parody of intimacy, the orgy is only partially revealed through Maria's perspective – she “had a flash image of BZ holding a belt and Helene laughing and she tried not to look at the bruise on Helene's face” (163). Moreover, as Henderson points out, with these scant details the text emphasizes the importance of the morning after for them, that “BZ will not permit either of them to express regret” (25) because he views what has taken place – and life in

general – as a game: “If you can’t deal with the morning, get out of the game. You’ve been around a long time, you know what it is, it’s play-or-pay” (164).

With BZ’s enigmatic use of the word “play,” which recalls Maria’s comments about her determination to “play” (4) for Kate, *Play It As It Lays* suggests that all expressions of intimacy and affiliation are potentially – if not already – compromised by the pervasive artifice of Hollywood and Las Vegas. More particularly, in BZ’s case, even though his contact with the desert brings him to the point where he can no longer play, it is clear from his comments to Maria and Helene that this is not because he has suddenly realized that he, too, has been playing all along. Instead, BZ’s suicide expresses his despair about the fact that he has been unable to load the deck of life in his favor, which is captured by one of the last things he says to Maria: “Some day you’ll wake up and you just won’t feel like playing any more” (212). Thus, in contrast to views such as Winchell’s, that BZ’s suicide represents “a last significant act of defiance” (98), or Chabot’s, that “BZ prefers suicide to ennui” (119), BZ’s death signifies his inability to step outside the view of life as a game, even though he clearly understands that this perspective is, in essence, a form of playing as well. Bound to the “play-or-pay” philosophy that he attempts to impose on Maria, Helene and himself, BZ ultimately pays with his life (164).²¹

For Maria, though, her efforts to “play” for Kate represent a steadfast rejection of BZ’s decision. Ending with the narrative told in the first person by Maria, *Play It As It Lays* creates an imagined dialogue between Maria and BZ in which Maria successfully counters him. “*I know what ‘nothing’ means, and keep on playing*” (214), she says, and then she answers BZ’s hypothetical response: “*Why, BZ would say. Why not, I say*”

(214). Cast in this light, Maria's decision to play for Kate even though "NOTHING APPLIES" (4) can seem, as Geherin insists, as "a positive gesture, a reaching out of love, a celebration of value in a meaningless world" (111). Nevertheless, in spite of Maria's affirmative position here, it comes across as another illusory attempt at authority. As Winchell rightly puts it, Maria's ultimate plan – "(1) get Kate, (2) live with Kate alone, (3) do some canning" (*Play It As It Lays* 210) – is a "cause for optimism, however, only if there is a chance of its being realized" (98), and the fact that this is unlikely implies "that Maria's dream is simply a last-ditch act of self-delusion." Seen from within the larger scheme of the novel and the cultural contexts that shape her, it is clear that Maria does not, fundamentally, reject BZ's philosophy. Through her commitment to Kate, Maria continues to try and win at the game of life by pursuing the frontier dream of her forbearers.²²

The same false, frontier optimism Harry Wyeth taught Maria that drove his failed plans for Silver Wells and has made it a haunting memory for her, informs her future plans for a life of canning with Kate. Moreover, Harry's lessons have affinities with BZ's, which is signaled by his references to games. Silver Wells, Maria reveals, epitomizes the overarching lesson her father taught her, that life is a "crap game," which clearly parallels BZ's claims in the motel rooms. The same kind of fatalism that informs BZ's perspective lurks within Harry Wyeth's vision of life as a "crap game" (200). On the one hand, as Maria recalls at the outset, her father told her she was "holding all the aces" (9): "I was raised to believe that what came in on the next roll would always be better than what went out on the last" (5). On the other hand, Harry offers her a piece of

contradictory advice that carries with it a fundamental sense of resignation, which alludes to the title of the novel: “it goes as it lays, don’t do it the hard way” (200).

Harry’s contradictory advice embodies the frontier legacy that underlies the cultural mythology of California and Hollywood, and, in the end, Maria “plays” this legacy out in her own singular way. Maria is critical and skeptical of her father’s lessons: “As lessons go these . . . seem to hold up, but not to apply.” She even suggests that she has moved beyond his influence: “From my father I inherited an optimism which did not leave me until recently” (5). Nevertheless, she remains bound to her family’s heritage: “I remain Harry and Francine Wyeth’s daughter and Benny Austin’s godchild. For all I know they knew the answer too, and pretended they didn’t. You call it as you see it, and stay in the action. BZ thought otherwise” (210). In spite of her skepticism (and the suspicion that her family members might also have doubted the validity of their optimism), Maria remains committed to playing just as BZ did. Even when Maria directly questions the notion that life is a game, she is unable to envision anything else: “I mean maybe I was holding all the aces, but what was the game?”(10) Thus, with Maria, text suggests that familial bonds still reify the cultural mythology of the frontier, sustaining Maria’s faith in the possibility for sublime transcendence, even though the final cost is the destruction of such bonds.

To convey this, *Play It As It Lays* does not conclude Maria’s narrative with a traditional example of either the technological or natural sublime; however, Maria’s fixation on the hummingbird at the clinic, which gives impetus to her future plans of a life of canning with Kate, encapsulates the same dynamics. Repeated throughout the sections of Maria’s present that frame the novel, the hummingbird acts as a refrain that

announces Maria's desire for new opportunities of empowered self-creation, but like her contact with the more conventional sites of sublimity, this, too, proves to be a powerful deception. In fact, the hummingbird is so powerful that other critics have seemingly been held by it as much as Maria. Loris, for instance, sees Maria's awareness of the hummingbird as a positive experience that is tied to her new interest "in the art of preserving fruit," which, taken together, are "signs of life, preservation, health, inner stillness" (51). Meanwhile, Geherin argues that the hummingbird embodies the qualities Maria achieves – "a similar stasis, an inner peace which enables her to confront existence and prepare for the future once more" (112). Yet Maria's description of what she tries to achieve through the hummingbird's presence – "I try to live in the now and keep my eye on the hummingbird" (11) – suggests that like other sites of sublimity the hummingbird is indicative of – and fosters – Maria's desire to follow the Adamic pattern of escaping from the past into a perpetual present.

Indeed, the opening and italics sections of the novel set in the clinic where Maria mentions the hummingbird, and which intrude into the linear details of Maria's history as a perpetual present, demonstrate how the past cannot, in fact, be erased. For example, when confronted by Carter, Helene and others at the clinic about her past, Maria suggests that she will "stay in the action" (210) through a renewed effort to cut clean: "Fuck it, I said to them all, a radical surgeon of my own life. Never discuss. Cut. In that way I resemble the only man in Los Angeles County who does clean work" (203). Moreover, just as this statement implicitly – and ironically – references the involuntary abortion that cannot be erased and forgotten, Maria's efforts to negate her life as she watches the hummingbird speak to the contrary as well. Even as she apparently rejects the settings of

her past, specific moments like the abortion and her faith in things that do not apply illustrate how her past haunts her, revealing the powerful influence of her frontier ancestry and the illusory promise of a new home on the range with Kate.

Through Maria Wyeth's personal struggles, then, *Play It As It Lays* examines the ways in which such illusory promise shaped America's past and still persists in the contemporary cultural landscape, particularly through the destructive sublimity associated with technology and the man-made landscape in Los Angeles that is both the culmination – and consequence – of the frontier dream. At the same time, the text's critical treatment of nature plays a vital role in depicting how and why these contemporary configurations of the American sublime are connected to – rather than supplant – older configurations. By treating the desert as a deadly force, *Play It As It Lays* illustrates these connections and by doing so undermines the ostensibly positive connotations of the American sublime in the context of the frontier: through its treatment of the desert as an expression of the natural sublime, the text exposes what remains the preeminent feature of the American sublime, the way it connotes empowerment and mutuality while masking a destructive celebration of American individualism.

In addition, this is why Didion's comments on "wagon-train morality" are so relevant to the text. Coming from the actual frontier experience that was based on a disavowal of the past, the concept sheds a unique light on the way sublimity endorses individualism and impedes the grounds for mutuality. Because the concept was figured as a means to honor familial bonds in the face of sublime nature, the fact that it was realized with the sacrifice of those bonds – and with the "cutting clean" from the consequences of that sacrifice – underscores why the American sublime contributes to the

incompatibility between American individualism and mutual empowerment. For Maria Wyeth, moreover, the fact that this ethos of “cutting clean” is still passed on through familial bonds makes her efforts to honor “wagon-train morality” doubly destructive.

Maria’s predicament conveys how the promise of transcending the past still plays a role in contemporary culture and still has dire consequences. *Play It As It Lays* illuminates the ways in which such transcendence appears to be made readily available through new sites of sublimity like those found in Hollywood and Las Vegas. However, in a culture of sham, illusion and spectacle, which encourages the frontier faith in perpetual renewal, *Play It As It Lays* suggests that the possibilities for reconciling the consequences of the past and finding empowerment are less likely than before. Indeed, by doing so, the text effectively extends the critical perspective of L.A. fiction into the contemporary world, and implicitly makes a case for effectiveness of American art to deglamorize – if not contest – its foundational cultural narratives. As we shall see in the subsequent chapters, though, making allusions to or adopting generic elements from other American literary and artistic works can be problematic, particularly when those works play an instrumental role in defining or redefining the legacy of the American sublime.

Endnotes

1. The Donner Party also plays a significant role in Didion's first novel about California, *Run River*. Here, the story of the Donner Party becomes part of a childhood game for Martha McClellan. Assuming the role of Tamsen Donner, who was "left, day after day to perish by the side of the husband whose foolish miscalculations had brought them all to grief," Martha compares her ancestors to them unfavorably, and when she learns "that someone in her father's family had traveled with the Donner-Reed Party as far as the Applegate Cut-off, Martha had been despondent for several days" (*Run River* 100). Martha, then, as Brady puts it, "despairs that her own ancestors made the overland journey without the sacrifice exemplified by Tamsen's refusal to leave her dying husband" (49). And as Brady concludes, in this text the Donner Party serves as myth rather than counter-myth: "The cautionary story of the pioneers' collapse into mutual betrayal and final descent into cannibalism in the Sierra snows is metamorphosed, in Martha's selective version, into romantic suicide pacts and heroic death wishes." Similarly, Didion, in "Notes From a Native Daughter" reveals how she, too, has found herself shaped by the positive, mythic view of the Donner Party. When speaking about her trips back to Sacramento after moving to New York, she recalls that she would be "trying to prove that I had not meant to leave it [Sacramento] at all" because "it is assumed that those who absent themselves from its blessings have been banished, exiled by some perversity of heart. Did not the Donner-Reed Party, after all, eat its own dead to reach Sacramento?" (176) More recently, in her memoir about California, *Where I Was From*, Didion again reveals the lasting influence of this story on her as well as her ambivalence towards it: "Once on a drive to Lake Tahoe I found myself impelled to instruct my brother's small children in the dread lesson of the Donner Party, just in case he had thought to spare them" (199). For more about the Donner Party and its significance for *Run River*, see Handley, particularly 200-208.
2. See for example, Winchell, who argues that Didion "seeks to demythologize Hollywood, to see it as neither heaven nor hell but as a company town where real people live and work" (90), even though he concludes that in *Play It As It Lays* "we seem to have . . . the tawdry and nihilistic setting of traditional antimyth fiction . . ." (93).
3. For Fine, Cain's use of the road can be traced back to "Whitman, Twain and Cooper" (51) as well as the Los Angeles based writers who followed him: ". . . recently in such novels as Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*, Roger Simon's *The Big Fix*, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, and John Gregory Dunne's *True Confessions*, high-speed movement across an endless California landscape is a recurring theme" (51).
4. The circumstances in which Mildred's driving takes place in this passage also resonate with Maria's. Recently separated from her unemployed and philandering husband, Bert, Mildred takes the car from her husband in order to finalize her new steps towards economic freedom and independence with her first job. Mildred confronts Bert: "From now on, that car's mine. I'm working, and I need it, and you're not, and you don't need it. And if you think I'm going to pound around on my feet, and ride busses, and lose all

that time, and be a sap, while you lay up with another woman and don't even use the car, you're mistaken, that's all" (72).

5. Overall, there is nearly a critical consensus about the temporary and/or illusory quality of the liberation Maria finds on the freeway. For example, for Wilcox, "Maria's daily runs on the freeway are logical extensions of the idea of refuge in the present implicit in 'playing it as it lays'" (72); for Geherin, "only on the freeways is she able to feel the orderly rhythm of life that she finds nowhere else" (107); while for Loris, "she drives the freeway seeking liberation from the moral danger that threatens her existence" (42), and when the freeway ends she is "brought to where she would have to face the facts of her experience." At the same time, other critics extend such views in light of larger cultural and literary contexts. Wilcox's observation, for instance, that Maria's driving ultimately serves as "a debased version of the journey west, a parody of the effort to find new passages in a land beyond history" (73) is affirmed by Wolff who reminds us that "the open road has always seemed a 'sign' of the opportunity for betterment: for Puritans, the pathway to Paradise, for Alger the road to riches. Rush hour had been Jay Gatsby's emblem for the Magic of the New World . . ." (134). Similarly, for Brady, "the freeway is the 'new free land' designed to satisfy the needs of a people whose training (as Turner suggested) leads them constantly to demand new frontiers in order to release their expansive energies" (52), but when Maria finds that the freeway does not offer "a refuge from thought and memory . . .," this demonstrates that "America's new frontier is even more timebound than that which inspired the original migrations westward." Lastly, and most recently, Rhodes contrasts Maria's driving with "Hemingway's treatment of bullfighting" (5), suggesting that her driving "rests content only in the simulation that one can participate in the objective world without making any compromises, without altering one's subjective vision" (6).

6. Faye Greener clearly anticipates Maria Wyeth with the way in which her roles as an actress overlap – and merge with – her offscreen life. With Faye, however, her onscreen roles are connected to her penchant for storytelling and her power as a femme fatale. As Tod Hackett notes: "She had a large assortment of stories to choose from. After getting herself in the right mood, she would go over them in her mind, as though they were a pack of cards, discarding one after another until she found the one that suited" (104). In contrast to Maria's roles, then, Faye's "pack" of stories is largely within her control even though they are influenced by her onscreen roles, which is demonstrated when Tod notes how one of her stories is based on "a Tarzan picture" (105) on her wall, the way the picture "had a lot to do with inspiring it [her story]." For West, however, such narrative power should not be confused with agency because even as Faye exercises more control than Maria, Faye, too, is trapped by Hollywood and her own machinations. For instance her story about the way "careers are made in the movies" is described as "all nonsense" (158): "She mixed bits of badly understood advice from trade papers with other bits out of the fan magazines and compared these with the legends that surrounded the activities of screen stars and executives. Without any noticeable transition, possibilities became probabilities and wound up as inevitabilities."

7. Like Wolff, Hinchman notes the relation between “cutting,” Maria’s agency and the films but also draws parallels to Didion’s reaction to Hollywood in “The White Album.” For Hinchman, the films in *Play It As It Lays* reveal how “Hollywood is the land of the camera, an instrument which can foster cognitive disorientation and undermine our sense of reality” (86). At the same time, in “The White Album,” when Didion talks about her own sense of “cognitive disorientation,” she does so in terms of narrative and in the terminology of moviemaking: whereas her life had once been comprised of a clear narrative with “cues” (12) and a “script” (12), eventually her life became “not a movie but a cutting-room experience” (13). Didion recalls: “In what would probably be the middle of my life I wanted still to believe in the narrative and in the narrative’s intelligibility, but to know that one could change the sense with every cut was to begin to perceive the experience as rather more electrical than ethical.”

8. In *The Day of the Locust*, the narrator describes the poisonous effects of such architecture on the landscape: “But not even the soft wash of dusk could help the houses. Only dynamite would be of any use against the Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages, and every possible combination of these styles that lined the slopes of the canyon” (61). Even the smallest details of such homes are infected with such fakery: Homer Simpson’s “queer” (80) house, for example, has a door “of gumwood painted like fumed oak” (80), attached with machine-made hinges “carefully stamped to appear hand-forged” (81) and with a thatch roof “which was not really straw but heavy fireproof paper colored and ribbed to look like straw.”

9. Geherin and Wolff also read the T in the context of the cross and as a symbol of false hope. According to Geherin, for Maria the T indicates how religion “leads to the same dead ends the freeway did” (111): “Religion, a traditional source of consolation in time of stress, is represented in the landscape of the novel by the giant red T of the Thriftmart . . .” (110). Likewise, Wolff suggests that the religious connotations of the T point to the absence of such “consolation” through an intertextual reference to the red A in the sky above the scaffold in *The Scarlet Letter* and to the American Red Cross Handbook that belonged to Maria’s mother, which Maria recalls during the abortion. As a result, with these connotations and associations, the T represents “the emblem of some earlier age, an age whose loving mercy had been founded upon an acknowledgement of suffering, an age when freedom and duty had been more meaningfully balanced” (137).

10. Maria’s experience of the Las Vegas Strip recalls Jameson’s remarks about the development of the postmodern sublime from Burke’s description of the sublime and “pleasure in pain”:

What can be retained from this description (Burke’s) is the notion of the sublime as a relationship of the individual subject to some fitfully or only intermittently visible force which, enormous and systematized, reduces the individual subject to helplessness or to that ontological marginalization which structuralism and poststructuralism have described as a “decentering” where the ego becomes little more than an “effect of structure. (“Baudelaire” 262)

11. In her essay “At the Dam,” Didion offers a view of the dam that coincides with Maria’s experience and which undermines the argument that sublime technology is a facet of the natural world. Didion characterizes touching one of the turbines as “a peculiar moment, but so explicit as to suggest nothing beyond itself” (200). Thus, if technology represents a key method of asserting a “harmonious” control of nature, the dam, in Didion’s handling of it here and in the text, dramatizes a technological rationale that ultimately exceeds the human rationality it is meant to celebrate. This idea, I conclude, is implied in *Play It As It Lays* and explicitly stated in “At the Dam” when Didion looks at the dam’s star map that has been made “for when we were all gone and the dam was left” (201): at this moment she is struck by “the image I had seen always, seen it without quite realizing what I saw, a dynamo finally free of man, splendid at last in its absolute isolation, transmitting power and releasing water to a world where no one is.”

12. Friedman and Wolff also argue that the novel depicts Hoover Dam in a less than celebratory, even unfavorable light. For Friedman, the dam represents an example of the quintessential Didion “paradise.” In terms of the “Didion sensibility,” however, paradise is a “solipsistic” (89) site, “a self-contained, self-sustaining system in perfect working order usually free of the burden of meaning” (89-90) and is situated in “a world that is without joy, suspicious of good works and optimism” (90). Wolff – if only implicitly – links the dam to the technological sublime with her passing reference to Henry Adams and his fears about the impact of the Dynamo on American culture, which, with Maria, is dramatized through her realization that “with the freedom to do ‘everything,’ ‘everything of value’ entirely disappears” (134). More directly, though, for Wolff this view of the dam is confirmed by its relationship to Maria’s abortion, the way “the dam sums and confirms the conflation of plumbing fixtures with the processes of feminine reproduction that has haunted Maria’s thoughts ever since the fetus fell into the drain, amniotic fluid and incipient life indistinguishable from waste.” According to Wolff, then, the negative impact of the dam on Maria has as much to do with her abortion as it does with the dam itself as an actual, historical and cultural site. “Thus,” she concludes, “this monumental damming of water with its life-giving force stands as emblem for those processes which have offered ‘nothingness’ where vitalizing moral and emotional commitment ought to be.”

13. For Yaeger, because the sublime is “concerned with empowerment, transport, and the self’s strong sense of authority, the sublime is a genre the woman writer needs” (192). But for women writers to benefit from writing in the sublime mode, they need to be able to reconfigure it, and Yaeger describes three strategies in which such reconfiguration – however transitory – can take place. First, there is the “failed sublime” (201), which comes closest to resembling what occurs with Maria in *Play It As It Lays*. According to Yaeger, with the “failed sublime” “we witness a woman’s dazzling, unexpected empowerment followed by a moment in which this power is snatched away – often by a masculine counter-sublime that has explicit phallic components.” In spite of the failure, though, texts that employ this strategy prove “that women, like men, are capable of joining the great” (201) and expose “the social forces that conspire against a female sublime” (202). Second, Yaeger suggests that there is the strategy of the “sovereign

sublime” that revises how, when faced with an awesome or terrifying sublime experience, the self typically overcomes this experience, which testifies to “the mind’s powerful univocity – its potential for mental domination of the other.” The strategy of the sovereign sublime, by contrast, upsets “this economy of domination”: the writer envisions mutuality rather than dominance, and this mutuality is expressed when “the writer expends or spills whatever power the sublime moment – in its structure of crisis, confrontation, and renewed domination, has promised to hoard.” Lastly, Yaeger argues that revising traditional psychoanalytic dynamics of the sublime can result with writers voicing a “pre-oedipal” (204) sublime. In this mode, “libidinal elements are not repressed; they break into consciousness and are welcomed as a primary, healthful part of the writer’s experience, as part of the motive for metaphor” (205).

For her part, Freeman’s view of “the feminine sublime” (2) coincides with Yaeger’s to the extent that it suggests the possibility for an experience that is not based on domination. That said, Freeman argues that “by viewing the sublime exclusively as a mode of writing or narrative strategy, Yaeger actually domesticates it” (150). For Freeman, “the feminine sublime is neither a rhetorical mode nor an aesthetic category but a domain of experience that resists categorization, in which the subject enters into relation with an otherness – social, aesthetic, political, ethical, erotic – that is excessive and unrepresentable” (2). For additional, critical commentary on Yaeger’s article see Edelman.

14. Freeman’s points about spectatorship and the sublime clearly reveal the sort of inherent contradictions that underlie its various configurations, “its ability to blur distinctions between observer and observed, reader and text, or spectator and event” (5). However, to claim that experiences or sites of sublimity are fundamentally inclusive because “what happens to ‘the other’ also happens to the subject who perceives it” can misrepresent how the contradictions and apparently democratic nature of the American sublime reflects various types of authority – whether it is the inventor of a new technological wonder or those who profit from a spectacular, man-made landscape such as L.A. or Las Vegas.

15. Throughout the novel there are numerous moments where Maria recalls her brief encounters with other women, which suggest her fundamental alienation from them. At once rejecting or rejected, Maria’s experiences convey the ways in which the culture of California and Hollywood exacerbate – and perhaps even generate – these moments of failed mutuality. For her part, Maria is ever watchful of becoming one of the women she sees in the supermarket who are single and therefore undesirable, and who can be identified by their habitual purchases – “one lamb chop and some cat food and the morning paper” (122).

16. Maria’s involuntary abortion – and her guilt about this act – has been read in various ways – as indicative of her commitment to or disavowal of family values, as a confrontation with evil and mortality and as a commentary on the legacy of the frontier. For Winchell, “Because Maria has strong maternal instincts, her abortion is the cause of much guilt and anxiety. It can also be seen as a symbol of the breakdown of the family and of traditional standards of morality” (97). By extension, Rhodes, Henderson and

Hinchman see the loss of such bonds as the lasting effect of the abortion on Maria. For Rhodes, the abortion has a direct relationship to – and wider significance for – Maria’s ongoing familial and interpersonal problems: “If this fetus is understood as a mirror image of Maria, then its abortion implies not only her death, but her refusal even to be born and enter the social collectivity” (4). For Henderson, Maria’s “illegal abortion becomes the central event of the novel, both literally, because she cannot recover from the loss and guilt it produces, and figuratively, because all relationships in the novel are aborted – sometimes by Maria herself, but more often by the cruelty or indifference of others” (23). Meanwhile for Hinchman, “. . . the absence of externally imposed punishments [for the abortion] makes matters worse for Maria, who now feels guilty not only for her transgressions but also for escaping retribution for them” (87). From a larger perspective, Geherin and Loris see the abortion as Maria’s confrontation with death, evil and absurdity. Geherin remarks, Maria’s “inability to deal with guilt associated with the abortion is perhaps the strongest single factor in her emotional collapse, the culmination of her deepening awareness of the irrationality and absurdity of life” (109), while Loris argues that “if evil is the enslavement of a wrong choice, Maria’s abortion symbolizes that kind of wrong choice. The abortion faces her with a vision of the nothingness that evil is . . .” (38). Finally, Chabot, Wilcox and Brady suggest that Maria’s reaction to the abortion registers her relationship to history and, with Wilcox and Brady, the frontier. Chabot argues that the abortion sets Maria at odds with her past: “She would amputate the past so as to absolve herself for past actions; what is troubling [for her] is the limited extent that she can do so” (121). Similarly, Wilcox argues that “the abortion leaves Maria stranded at the dead end of her personal history” (73) and relates to the context of the frontier: “The abortion calls to mind Didion’s image of ‘cutting clean’ – the image associated with the frontier dream; Maria has repeated the frontier nightmare of primal transgression, blood betrayal. In terms of her own past, this profound moral failure triggers memories of another primal betrayal – her failure to be with her mother at death” (73-74). Likewise, Brady, situates the abortion as an act of “cutting clean” and as an expression of the frontier mindset: “The abortion symbolizes Maria’s effort to order her life by ‘cutting clean’ (to appropriate the image Didion uses in reference to the frontier imagination) from the past, both the immediate past of the child’s inception and that of her own childhood” (53).

17. Once again, Maria’s predicament is comparable to that of Faye Greener’s in *The Day of the Locust*. Faye is clearly infected with Hollywood fakery at the most fundamental level of her being. As Tod notes, Faye’s words and gestures do not match: “The strange thing about her gestures and expressions was that they didn’t really illustrate what she was saying. They were almost pure. It was as though her body recognized how foolish her words were and tried to excite her hearers into being uncritical” (159). In this way, moreover, Faye seems doomed to the same fate as her father, Harry Greener, the vaudeville performer whose face “plowed . . . by years of broad grinning and heavy frowning” (119) makes it impossible for him to “express anything either subtly or exactly.”

18. Geherin, for example, argues that *Play It As It Lays* is first and foremost an existentialist novel, in which its characters must wrest meaning from their various

encounters with the nothingness of death: “For although Hollywood is her setting, nothingness is Didion’s theme” (105). In a similar but less optimistic vein, Friedman argues that Didion is ultimately more pessimistic than either Camus or Sartre:

For the existentialists, the ‘narrative’ may be recovered by the individual. Didion, however, has no faith in the authority of individual choice and action. The individual in her view is not endowed with the power to recreate the world, imbue it with meaning, restore coherence and purpose. (81)

By contrast, while Geherin sees the novel addressing Maria’s confrontation with death and meaningless, he stops short of endorsing a categorically existentialist reading of the text: “I fear that the mere presence of resonant words like ‘nothingness’ is too readily taken as a sure sign that we are on the track of existentialist profundities” (123). Indeed, in light of this, it is worthy to note that in the film version of *Play It As It Lays* scripted by Didion and her husband, Maria openly mocks existentialism as nothing more than an artistic cliché when she remarks: “Existentially, I’m getting a hamburger.”

19. For Hinchman, the desert is “not simply the ‘negative’ of empty lives and meaningless projects but the ‘positive’ of raw, unmediated sensation” and therefore becomes a site in which “the immediate data of consciousness, its building blocks, alone remain” (91).

20. According to Maria, the family moves to “Silver Wells, Nev., pop. then 28, now 0” when she is nine, after her father “lost the Reno house in a private game” (5). Appropriately, given the artificiality embodied in Silver Wells as a sort of frontier town simulacrum, the history behind Harry Wyeth’s ownership cannot be confirmed: “He had bought it or won it or maybe his father left it to him, I’m not sure which . . .” In addition, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff suggests, the name “Silver Wells” itself has a significant bearing on the relationship between the real and the artificial, which, in turn, reflects on the relationship between the past, the present and the possible future of California and Hollywood in the text. Set in the “silver age,” the novel depicts how “the present has fallen away from the greatness of the past” (128), but, according to Wolff, “Didion deploys this pattern with a wry twist” in which she indicates how the “golden age” of California was never truly golden, that “California’s past has dubious implications and its future is little short of apocalyptic.” As a result, as Wolff rightly observes, silver indicates the tarnish of “gold” as well as its own status as a base metal, with its attachment to various moments and elements in the text that connote dashed hopes or false promise: “Maria is a girl of the silver screen; she was reared in the town of Silver Wells, a town where the ‘wells’ have never had water and where the silver stopped flowing long ago. But silver still drifts in and out of the fiction – in echoes of her mother’s longing to cross the ocean in a silver plane, in the silver vinyl dress that Maria buys to help herself forget the abortion, in the ‘Silverlake home’ of the charlatan hypnotist.”

21. Other critics have offered perceptive yet equally problematic interpretations of BZ and his suicide. Geherin, for example, sees BZ as the quintessential existential outsider: “Stripped of a name, reduced almost to a cipher, BZ is never even physically described in the novel; he exists only as a voice, a presence, a shadow. He has gone all the way to Z,

to the end where there is nothing more, and he can find no reason to live one moment longer” (112). At the same time, however, Geherin draws a compelling link between BZ and Beelzebub, arguing that BZ’s “name suggests a parallel with Beelzebub, a Satanic tempter who seeks to corrupt Eve from her innocence.” For a similar, more developed analysis of BZ and Beelzebub, see Loris.

22. Maria’s commitment to Kate has been interpreted by others as either a sign of her ultimate redemption or agency or, alternately, as the one commitment she is unable to negate in her efforts to escape her responsibilities. Wilcox, for example, sees Maria’s recognition of her familial bonds at the end as a possible way in which “Didion hints at the way toward salvation” (74) for her. By contrast, for Chabot, Kate represents “the sole imperfection in her [Maria’s] otherwise successful excision of anything which might matter . . .” (123).

“The light at dawn”: Edenic Blight in Didion’s *Democracy*

Didion’s fiction and nonfiction after *Play It As It Lays* are characterized by a greater national and international scope. While the frontier history of California, the conventions of L.A. fiction and the ways in which both relate to the American sublime clearly situate that novel as a critique of America’s most dominant national myths about itself, when compared to what follows, it can seem a much more regional work because none of the events take place beyond the North American continent. Without question, nonfiction such as *Salvador* (1983), *Miami* (1987), *After Henry* (1992) and *Political Fictions* (2001), has established Didion as a political journalist attuned to foreign affairs, ever interrogating the detrimental role of America’s “fixed idea” about itself within a variety of international circumstances and contexts. Similarly, while her later fictional protagonists share, in varying degrees, Maria Wyeth’s debilitating self-focus, they are much more resilient and worldly. Even as their issues are, like Maria’s, largely a product of their adverse relationship to their culture, which materializes as marital strife, breached familial bonds and the desire for some kind of higher or transcendent meaning, these elements are set within foreign, often dangerous locales in a state of turmoil, revolution and unrest and against more global concerns. From the family infighting for political control of Boca Grande in *The Book of Common Prayer* (1977), to the international arms dealing set during Iran-Contra scandal in *The Last Thing He Wanted* (1996), Didion’s fiction appears to have been led by her journalistic impulses, yet what links these works to her California fiction is the way elements of the frontier paradigm and American sublimity often surface.

Ironically, it is in *Democracy* (1984), which Didion wrote between *The Book of Common Prayer* and *The Last Thing He Wanted*, that most directly connects what we find in *Play It As It Lays* to a larger critique of America's cultural influence abroad. Just as *Play It As It Lays* uses California to demonstrate why and how the frontier and configurations of the natural and technological sublime remain central narratives in American culture, *Democracy* uses Hawaii to show that they extend to places such as the Marshall Islands and Kuala Lumpur as support for American imperialism and militarism. Yet even as *Democracy* effectively broadens the focus of *Play It As It Lays*, by moving well beyond the original locales and events that give rise to the frontier mythos and the American sublime, its focus more directly engages with the foundational ways in which the frontier and the American sublime have been conceived. For instance, in Section I I consider the applicability of Leo Marx's well-known concept of "the machine in the garden" to *Democracy's* depiction of Hawaii and the Bikini Atoll, but do so in order to point out how the text critiques and undermines the traditional deployment of the concept. Likewise, in Section II I account for the ways in which *Democracy*, like *Play It As It Lays*, responds to works in the American literary tradition that mark the effectiveness of this critical perspective; however, whereas *Play It As It Lays* draws on the conventions L.A. Fiction, *Democracy* is potentially even more subversive by having the narrator directly cite canonical works that express – and problematize – American sublimity in a manner that ideally support the kind of traditional configurations described by Marx.

In this first section I would like to begin by considering *Democracy's* allegorical use of Hawaii's cultural history as a microcosm for America's imperial legacy. More precisely, I want to argue that this evocative use of Hawaii extends, as it were, the critique of frontier mythology and its relation to the forms of the natural and technological American sublime found in *Play It As It Lays. Democracy*, I will show, establishes connections between these concerns and what might appear unrelated elements in the text – particularly, Paul Christian's murder of his daughter and Jack Lovett's view of the atomic tests in the Pacific – which serve as a fundamental indictment of anti-democratic forces in America's past and present.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the novel's treatment of Hawaii is, as Mark Royden Winchell observes, less immediate than one might expect, especially given Didion's long-standing "fascination with our fiftieth state – not as an exotic island paradise, but as an integral, if idiosyncratic, part of the larger American scene" (122). That said, the terms Winchell uses to define this "fascination" can, if transposed, put us in a better position to understand the logic behind *Democracy's* oblique depiction of Hawaii: it is, in fact, precisely because Hawaii is often viewed as an "exotic island paradise" that it is "integral" to "the larger American scene" but also "idiosyncratic." Put more overtly, it is because Hawaii exists in the cultural imagination as a frontier zone that it is captured throughout the novel almost intangibly, most memorably in fleeting descriptions about the quality of light in the equatorial climate and in the enigmatic, original working title "Pacific Distances."¹

While this claim might appear to excuse Didion's failure to successfully render or develop the novel's Hawaiian context, a consideration of *Democracy* in connection to her

nonfiction about Hawaii as well as another set of literary and cultural conventions associated with the frontier suggest otherwise. If, for instance, *Play It As It Lays* uses California and Nevada to critique the image of the frontier as a desert, then *Democracy* uses Hawaii to critique what has, traditionally, been viewed as the opposing figurative terrain – the frontier as a garden. Like the image of the desert, the image of the garden represents a means of conceptualizing the American landscape from an imperial perspective, but this imperial perspective underlies the differences between the way the desert and garden are conceived as well. Historically, as Eric Heyne remarks, “land that had not yet been populated by whites” was viewed as a desert or a garden depending upon whether it “could yield immediate profit” (4). If the way a piece of land might be used was not readily apparent, “it was not merely wild but a desert, a place of danger and deprivation.” On the other hand, “if the technology was available to exploit the land (via farming, mining, ranching), the wilderness was a garden, a pastoral refuge needing only a civilizing hand to make it bloom.” Thus, the frontier as a garden legitimizes imperialism as an expression of utility, as a means of realizing Manifest Destiny through agrarian enterprise.²

Typically, as Reginald Dyck points out, the destructive consequences of making the wilderness “bloom” are anxiously negated or unsuccessfully erased in the tradition of American writing about the frontier. “The myth of the garden,” Dyck observes, “necessarily hides the violence that took place as Americans gained access to Eden. But violence erupts within the garden as well” (58).³ In order to preserve the efficacy of viewing “virgin land” as an unspoiled garden, writers who use this trope are faced with the cultural pressure of devising narrative strategies for preserving the promise invested

in the landscape. Against the perils of disillusionment and acts of “self-violence” that frequently occur when characters find the image of the garden contested in some way, writers must act as mediators: they must, according to Dyck, “either ignore or minimize this violence, or present a critique of the myth itself.” Indeed, it is the ways in which *Democracy* offers “a critique of the myth itself” that makes the murder of Inez’s sister by their father not only the stuff of a private family melodrama but the grounds for a larger critique of the family as first settlers in the garden of Hawaii.

To appreciate how the murder resonates in this way, it is useful to turn to Didion’s nonfiction about Hawaii, particularly “Letter from Paradise.” From this essay we can gather details about Hawaii’s colonial context that explain why *Democracy’s* narrator describes the family’s conflict as “a study in provincial manners, in the acute tyrannies of class and privilege by which people assert themselves against the tropics” (Didion, *Democracy* 22). For example, the significance of this equation between the Christians and a particular demographic of Hawaiian culture becomes clearer when viewed in light of “Letter from Paradise.” For much of its recent history, the essay reveals, Hawaii was essentially governed by the interests of five family-based corporations that “began as ‘factors’ for the sugar planters” (198) and formed an oligarchy as family members “intermarried, sat on one another’s boards, [and] got into shipping and insurance and money” (199).⁴ Thus, with their Chriscorp container business, the Christians clearly represent a fictionalized, modern-day part of this oligarchy, what Didion refers to in “Letter” as an “interlocking directorate [that] extended into every area of Hawaiian life” and through which “power could be exercised immediately and personally.” Moreover, of equal importance for the Christians is what happened when the five families lost their

ability to wield their power. In “Letter” Didion describes this loss of power as the moment when “mainland money came in, against all Island opposition” after World War II and the image of Hawaii as “some subtropical cherry orchard” was “blighted” for the ruling families (190), a moment that *Democracy* captures through the infighting between the Christians, which is the catalyst for Paul Christian’s madness and violence.⁵

For Paul Christian, his disillusionment with Hawaii and his path to violence begins with both the loss of his position as the head of the family and Chriscorp to his brother Dwight. Afterwards, Paul briefly travels in Tunis and returns to Hawaii, coming to the conclusion that his family’s influence has become a threat to the image of Hawaii as a garden paradise. Moving into a house that reflects his belief that he is “‘down,’ or ‘on the bottom,’ the passive victim of fortune’s turn and his family’s self-absorption,” he literally adopts a new and different vantage point on his family: the house is situated “within sight both of Janet and Dick’s house on Kahala Avenue and of the golf course on which Dwight Christian played [sic] every morning at dawn” (130). As the narrator puts it, the house “was a location that ideally suited the prolonged mood of self-reflection in which Paul Christian arrived back from Tunis” (130), a location that apparently becomes the stimulus for the writing of his autobiography and “gathering together certain papers that would constitute an indictment of the family’s history in the islands, what he called ‘the goods on the Christians . . .’” (131). In effect, then, *Democracy* appears to critique the construction of Hawaii as a garden at the level of narrative but also at the level of character: Paul Christian, it seems, has decided that the imperial history of the islands is undemocratic and that the lavish lifestyle of the Christians represents its contemporary equivalent.

Nevertheless, even as Paul Christian voices dissent against the family's legacy, his need to preserve his view of "himself as a romantic outcast, a remittance man of the Pacific" belies the fact that he remains, as the narrator puts it, part of "a family in which the colonial impulse had marked every member" (26). Even though Paul's murder of Janet and the Nisei congressman Wendell Omura appears to be a crime based wholly on his disdain for the hypocrisy and double-dealing of Janet, Omura and Dwight – by the fact that they have been in collusion and cheated Janet's husband by selling him unusable land for his "Sea Meadow" development scheme – Paul's motivations and the significance of his actions are more complex and contradictory than this. As Winchell perceptively puts it, there is "the hint of an interracial affair [between Omura and Janet] and the conflict of cultures remains vague precisely because it is filtered through the prism of Paul Christian's insanity" (128-129).⁶

Taken from this perspective, Paul's violence represents a grotesque attempt at purification, an interpretation that is ultimately supported by the narrator's comments about what has apparently sparked Paul's anger – a photograph in the Honolulu *Advertiser* that depicts Jane presenting Omura with an environmental award for blocking development projects. As the narrator explains, a letter Paul writes to the *Advertiser* demanding the retraction of the photograph reveals that his "objection to the photograph did not appear to be based on the fact that the development Wendell Omura was blocking was Dick Ziegler's. His complaint was more general, and ended with the phrase 'lest we forget'" (135). In an illogical attempt to preserve historical memory, Paul Christian's actions ironically mark another chapter in the way the history of the Christians has been displaced in order to protect the family's authority on the island, and through Paul's

actions *Democracy* uses the acts of violence from within the family to suggest the external violence that occurred through the colonial history and the imaginary construction of Hawaii as a garden. Furthermore, by doing so, the text follows a path that is similar to what we have seen in *Play It As It Lays* and Didion's writing about the Donner Party: the destruction of familial bonds registers the fundamental – and inescapable – ethical failure inherent in the construction of frontier zones as sites of imperial expansion.

In the context of Hawaii, the final comment in Paul's letter implies that his actions are not simply a paradoxical means of restoring order to the family by ousting a racial outsider; more schematically, his final comment reflects part of a larger cultural effort in Hawaii to erase the history of vulnerability and violence that was posed by another foreign intruder – by the Japanese and the attack on Pearl Harbor. Like other elements of Hawaiian history and culture in the *Democracy*, Pearl Harbor looms as an unspoken event that is referred to only by implication or association, and the text captures what Didion refers to in "Letter" as an "aura" or a "mood" of war. Rather than undermining the view of Hawaii as a garden, Didion explains that "war is viewed with a curious ambivalence in Hawaii because the largest part of its population interprets war however unconsciously, as a force for good, an instrument of social progress" (198). In turn, Didion's comments illuminate how *Democracy's* depiction of Hawaii serves as a critical investigation into the ways in which the frontier as garden can now, in fact, be recuperated by elements that might otherwise threaten or challenge the validity of their construction.⁷ By doing so, moreover, *Democracy* takes issue with a significant pattern in America's cultural and literary history, which, as we shall see later, plays a central role

in DeLillo's *Underworld* as well: the way the American technological sublime validates militarism while simultaneously reducing it to a spectacle for popular consumption through the marvels of modern weaponry.

In *Democracy*, this view of weaponry has a significant resonance with the image of Hawaii as a garden. Pearl Harbor and the Pacific tests Jack Lovett witnesses at the beginning of *Democracy* exemplify – and critique – the trope Leo Marx famously describes as “the machine in the garden.” For Marx the “rhetoric of the technological sublime” (195) could, even in the early twentieth century, deflect attention away from such grim realities as American industrialization by celebrating the union between certain man-made objects and the natural world. Similarly, “Letter” and *Democracy* demonstrate how objects that are designed solely for the purpose of death and destruction can likewise mediate what Marx terms “the contradiction between rural myth and technological fact” (354) and still even inspire what he calls “pastoral hope” (355). Indeed, what “Letter” and *Democracy* suggest is most troubling is that the sort of spectatorship associated with the technological sublime in *Play It As It Lays* has made this “pastoral hope” of the garden inseparable from the “mood” of war in Hawaii, the way war “engages the imagination as mere paradise never could” (190).

With the coupling of “pastoral hope” and the “mood” of war in Hawaii, the position of sublime spectatorship means that war is viewed from a distance, from a position of relative safety or implied indifference, and *Democracy* and “Letter” present this spectatorship as a complex, American cultural phenomenon. In “Letter,” for example, after Didion speaks to Hawaiians about Pearl Harbor, she learns that many viewed the destruction from the type of “safe distance” described by Burke but also from

the group perspective encouraged by such sublime, American landmarks as the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls or Virginia's Natural Bridge: she learns that "people drove up into the hills and parked to watch the fires just as they do now when a tsunami wave is due" (196). Still more disturbing for Didion, is the discovery that these tourist practices associated with popular sites of the American sublime have become a lasting and constitutive part of the way the attack has been memorialized.

First, Didion finds that the wreckage of the naval ships is also viewed in a touristic way. Tours of the *Utah* and the *Arizona*, she explains, begin with "a kind of sleazy festivity at first, the prospect of an outing on a fine day . . ." (191). Moreover, Didion realizes that like other iconic sites of the American sublime, the shared meaning of the ships as sublime objects is culturally constructed and, in essence, independent of them. The attack, Didion remarks, "is, after all, a familiar story that we have come to hear – familiar even to the children, for of course they have seen John Wayne and John Garfield at Pearl Harbor . . .," and the "familiar story" extends to the actual experience of the *Arizona* and the *Utah* (192). Genuinely overwhelmed when viewing the ships, Didion nevertheless realizes that the experience does not provide her with something other than the "familiar story"; brought to tears in the presence of the ships, she does not know what the experience means for her fellow passengers. In the end, her firsthand experience is supplanted by what she has heard *about* how people respond to the ships: "All I know about how other people respond is what I am told: that everyone is quiet at the *Arizona*." In "Letter," then, Didion suggests that the sublime spectatorship connected to Pearl Harbor and the wreckage of the *Utah* and *Arizona* consists of three interrelated parts: the

tourist-like perspective from which the ships are viewed, the popular depictions of the attack and the common knowledge about how one responds to the memorial.

In *Democracy*, similar patterns of sublime spectatorship structure the view of the atomic tests in the Pacific and, as we find through the consciousness of Jack Lovett, the tests in the Nevada desert as well. Although making a connection between the ships and atomic bombs might seem tenuous, in “Letter” Didion validates this logic by suggesting that the atomic tests, like the *Arizona* and the *Utah* are part of Hawaii’s “aura” of war. As she reveals in “Letter,” the threat of nuclear destruction is somehow lessened by the simple fact that many view Hawaii as a strategic military site, as “the hub of the Pacific” – which in the words of one American means “if the *situation* goes the other way, we’re in the right spot for that, too” (197) – and explains why Didion draws the following conclusion: “Perhaps nowhere else in the United States is the prospect of war regarded with so much equanimity” (197). Alarming, in *Democracy* such “equanimity” is not confined to Hawaii. Jack Lovett’s perspective reveals that an attitude of “equanimity” is indicative of a common view of atomic tests, and the text interrogates the relationship between this view of atomic tests and the American sublime in a significant way: rather than presenting descriptions of the explosions from either the narrator, Jack Lovett or other characters, the only details that are offered are the circumstances before and after the tests, a textual strategy that emphasizes how the tests are conceptualized like other, more benign displays of the technological sublime.

With the Pacific tests, for example, the closest *Democracy* comes to depicting an atomic explosion is through Jack Lovett’s memory of the “light at dawn” before a detonation (11).⁸ On the surface, the omission of the explosion might seem to make

perfect sense: the moment is remembered because it occurs shortly before the detonation; however, because there is no mention of the detonation at all, the content of Lovett's memory takes on an odd and added significance. The fact that *Democracy* begins in this fashion (even giving Lovett's memory priority over initial plot or character explication) points to the emphatic way the novel demonstrates how the image of the garden can persist, even in the presence of the deadliest of machines. With this persistence in mind, then, it is not surprising that Lovett's description of the color of the sky and the flora and fauna of the islands evokes the natural, American sublime of transcendence and transport, with the natural imagery even capturing his romantic attachment to Inez Victor (the person he addresses):

He said: the sky was this pink no painter could approximate, one of the detonation theorists used to try, a pretty fair Sunday painter, he never got it. Just never captured it, never came close. The sky was this pink and the air was wet from the night rain, soft and wet and smelling like flowers, smelling like those flowers you used to pin in your hair when you drove out to Schofield, gardenias, the air in the morning smelled like gardenias, never mind there were not too many flowers around those shot islands. (11)

Clearly, this memory has positive connotations for Lovett, but his perspective is troublesome. As Michael Tager notes, Lovett fails to offer "any political or moral commentary": "He nostalgically recalls the concrete details of life on the atolls prior to the detonations, with no discernable regret for their obliteration" (202). Not only does *Democracy* subtly call our attention to the selectiveness of his memory, but within the details of his description, the text alerts us to why and how the imminent destruction is

displaced. Quite literally, the presence of the detonation theorist reminds us – if not Lovett – of the circumstances in which this Edenic scene is described. In addition, the failure of the detonation theorist to capture the sublimity of the natural world in his painting suggests that he, too, is absurdly blind to the consequences of his professional activities: like Lovett, he disregards the destruction that will follow because of his readiness to view the landscape and, by implication, the bomb, as sublime.

This latter point is, in fact, borne out by how fully Lovett's perspective is bound to that of the technicians and scientists. In his role as a secret, official "observer" (12), Lovett shares a place of privilege alongside the technicians and scientists, a place that encourages viewing the bombs as expressions of the American technological sublime: like technicians and scientists, Lovett is granted a position that is predicated on the fundamental belief that underlies America's devotion to the technological sublime, that man-made objects testify to the inventor's authority, power and control. In the context of the tests, moreover, *Democracy* not only questions the ethics of these select few who wield such power, the text also links their position and apparent disregard for the destructive consequences of atomic weapons to a more pervasive lack of accountability: the undemocratic way such tests were conducted, a situation, as Nye puts it, in which "ordinary citizens were denied the chance to vote on the desirability of weapons of mass destruction" (230).

This undemocratic exclusion – like the detonation of the atomic weapons that it brings about – is not presented directly in the text. Rather than an exposition of the decisions and policies that breached democratic debate, Lovett's perspective reveals the hierarchies among those who inhabit the highest echelons of power within the military

and the government, providing a window into the working of these undemocratic dynamics. In particular, through Lovett's inability to view the latter tests at the Aleutians "with any nostalgia whatsoever" because of the presence of politicians and civilians, *Democracy* illuminates the dominant ideologies that are the impetus for the tests and that make it acceptable for them to be conducted without public approval (13). As Tager notes, for Lovett all the tests he witnesses are ideally an expression of "the national security state and its premises" that "he upholds against meddling politicians," so the tests in the Aleutians and other tests in Nevada are a threat: "The latter explosions in the Nevada desert and the Aleutians Islands cannot compare with the ones in the Pacific, partly because they attracted 'the civilians' – congressmen and other observers who destroyed the solitude and aesthetic pleasure of the occasions for Lovett" (202).

However, even as Lovett finds these tests lacking in "aesthetic pleasure," this does not mean that he or anyone else present at them questions their legitimacy; instead, what emerges here is the ways in which viewing these tests as expressions of the technological sublime bind people together in spite of potential divisiveness, undemocratic policies and the destructive power of atomic weapons. As with the ships at Pearl Harbor, at the tests the cultural practice of sublime spectatorship appears to outweigh the possibility for dissent. Even when a detonation fails during the Nevada tests and laughter ensues, with the "Los Alamos photographers . . . snapping away at that Livermore tower – still standing, you understand, a two-meg gadget and the tower still standing, which was the humorous part . . .," the test still remains an occasion for solidarity (13).⁹

Overall, the evocative qualities contained in Lovett's perspective qualify his reliability and authority and speak to the ways in which American sublimity remains connected to its imperial, frontier legacy through a celebration of militarism. Even as Lovett witnesses the destruction of the atolls, his sensitivity to their beauty recalls Paul Christian's similar perspective about Hawaii – that technological development inherently expresses a productive utilization of nature, in spite of the destruction and violence that follows. Writ large, these responses indicate the destructive and recuperative qualities of spectatorship as they relate to the technological sublime, while on an individual level these responses indicate what Didion notes about elements of dissent at Pearl Harbor, that we are all subjects of the "familiar story." That said, because the narrative voice of *Democracy* seems to offer – if not actualize – the potential for such individualistic resistance by virtue of telling of these events, the text illuminates an inherent contradiction that might yield a positive reconfiguration of the American sublime: that even while American sublimity encourages identification at a collective level it does so by appealing to individualism. As a result, in what follows I will now turn to how *Democracy* addresses this contradiction in relation to more overt forms of individualistic resistance, within the fictional parameters of the text as well as at a metafictional level with the narrator who, enigmatically, identifies herself as "Didion."

II

Within the larger scheme of the novel, Jack Lovett's displeasure with the tests at the Aleutians portrays tensions between the individual and the group that encompass more than his personal dislike for civilians and politicians. In fact, *Democracy* locates these qualities of independence and solidarity as one of many tensions that are embodied

in examples of the American sublime. By doing so, I argue that *Democracy* reveals the inherent contradictions that typically support the American sublime, a move that provides an important basis for a critique of anti-democratic practices. That said, I want to suggest that the text exposes these contradictions in an ambivalent manner, as an admittedly qualified critical strategy, because sites of sublimity often do express only one side of such oppositions – as we have seen in the previous section with the examples of the machine and the garden. Even as *Democracy* finds fault with the logic behind the construction of the American sublime, this does not, the text insists, fundamentally alter how sublimity supports the possession and use of cultural or geographical spaces as frontiers for American expansion or conquest. In order to address this, I will now consider how *Democracy* sets the individual values, ethics – and even heroics – of the narrator, Jack Lovett and Inez Victor in conflict with collectively mobilized forms of militarism and imperialism, which underscores the complex and intractable way literary and cultural traditions of the American sublime justify such enterprises.

From a paradigmatic standpoint, these characters typify the perennial Adamic figure. Yet as we have seen with the example of the Christians, *Democracy* parodies efforts at self-creation by linking them to colonial dominance. As Michelle Loris explains, rather than “struggling to achieve a godly life, . . . Didion’s modern day Christians . . . depict America’s imperialistic and commercial battling for power and prosperity” (72). On one level, then, I wish to argue that *Democracy*’s treatment of such figures corresponds, in part, to the grim sacrificial qualities of Maria Wyeth and BZ in *Play It As It Lays*, but I would also like to suggest that the potential grounds for agency

and affiliation that they find – albeit despite themselves – are even more remote for the characters in *Democracy*.

With the narrator, for example, I would like to turn more overtly to Mark Busby's points about the Christlike qualities of the Adamic figure, if only to sketch the generic qualities that resonate here. According to Busby, once the Adamic figure faces a lethal threat of some kind and endures hardships and privations in "some form of captivity or attempted escape from captivity," he moves from innocence to knowledge and wishes "to transform the world into one of hope, community, and love, or at least one in which it is easier to live" (100). Most relevant with respect to the narrator in *Democracy*, though, is the way the typical Adamic figure eventually achieves knowledge of "the illusory nature of this world, and . . . that for destructive illusions to be overthrown they must be clearly articulated." Indeed, the text's emphasis on the narrator's Adamic qualities is appropriate because the Adamic figure often becomes a writer as he becomes Christlike in his efforts to articulate "illusions" (100), since it is "language that creates illusion and that conversely can be used to strip away inhumane beliefs and create humane ones" (101). Thus, the Adamic figure's Christlike and authorial attributes depict the confluences between the will to self-fashioning and democratization.

Given *Democracy's* concern with the contradictions that are embedded between the ideals individualism and democracy, it is not surprising that even as the narrator conveys Adamic qualities, her authorial powers are depicted as woefully insufficient. Moreover, the added significance of the narrator identifying herself as "Joan Didion" only underscores the fact that while it is certain that the novel she is ostensibly narrating will be written, it is important for us to believe that this "Didion" is somehow not up to

the task. Hence, the curious power of “Didion,” to possess the intimate facts about Jack Lovett and Inez Victor and to co-opt their voices or merge them with her own, as well as her uncanny knowledge about the untold family history of the Christians in Hawaii, clearly establishes her Adamic ability to pierce “the illusory nature of this world” and even write about her world as if she cannot. As a result, I argue that the paradoxical manner in which the text makes the narrator function, simultaneously asserting and undercutting her authority, conveys how such self-fashioned individualism is not only incompatible with – but also incapable of producing – a genuine, democratic community. Moreover, although the paradoxical treatment of the narrator’s efforts to write the novel casts her in a self-critical light, I do not think this means that she transcends the anti-democratic elements in American culture that effect her, Jack Lovett or Inez Victor: her artistic integrity cannot, it seems, ultimately be wrested from the Adamic individualism that supports false forms of democracy, particularly those that are supported by the traditions of American sublimity.

In spite of the frequent distinctions the narrator makes between her fictional methods and more conventional forms of narration (especially, as we shall see, mass journalism), it is, remarkably, the parallels *Democracy* draws between her novel-in-progress and other literary works about the American sublime that most fully reveal the limitations of her aims. Even though her metafictional practices can, as Paul Jude Beauvais puts it, be seen to reflect her desire to not “impose a narrative logic on a historical period that is characterized by chaos rather than connection” (24), I suggest that in keeping with the literary conventions of the American sublime, she nevertheless attempts to transcend such chaos through a carefully crafted textual persona.¹⁰ Ostensibly,

her subject matter still poses a challenge for her, and it does so as the sort of ego test that is staged in literature about the American sublime. With this in mind, then, I want to explore the two instances where she discusses her writing and where – strangely and enigmatically – she contextualizes her struggles in terms of nature and technology and with reference to Wallace Stevens and Henry Adams.

In the first instance where she discusses her writing, “Didion” recalls the natural imagery in her novel that has tested her authorial powers, and which she resolves with reference to the first two stanzas from Stevens’s poem “Of Mere Being.” Two descriptions of nature from her characters and the natural imagery from her own recurrent dream have proven to be problematic. From her characters she has “those pink dawns of which Jack Lovett spoke” (16) that supersede his memory of the atomic tests, as well as “Colors, moisture, heat, enough blue in the air” – a phrase spoken by Inez which, as we shall see, plays an important role in her own efforts at self-liberation and altruism. Also, the narrator has the scene from her dream “in which my entire field of vision fills with rainbow, in which I open a door onto a growth of tropical green . . . and watch the spectrum separate into pure color” (16-17). All of these images are problematic for the narrator because “they tend to deny the relevance not only of personality but of narrative . . .,” a fact that is apparently borne out in comparison to the lines from Stevens. In place of the narrator’s anxiety and awkward handling of these details because, as she puts it, “I have no unequivocal way of beginning” (16), the speaker in Stevens’s poem offers a measured, self-possessed path through a natural landscape that has also been internalized – “The palm at the end of the mind,” in which “A gold-feathered bird/ Sings in the palm, without human meaning,/ Without human feeling, a foreign song” (16). Thus, at the

outset, the main distinction between the natural imagery described by “Didion” and Stevens’s speaker is less a matter of what is depicted (in each case, notably, an exotic tropical landscape) and a more fundamental difference in the connection between the imagery and an implied or actual authorial presence.

In both cases the role of human beings in relation to nature is put into relief – or even into question – because nature overwhelms human consciousness and action, because nature is “without human meaning” or “human feeling” in the poem and denies “personality” in the novel. As a result, these images conform to the traditional sublime dynamic where nature threatens to engulf the self but also offers a possibility for transcendence. At the same time, the fact that the “Didion” cites Stevens rather than, say, Whitman or any number of other possible literary sources of the American sublime suggests that there is something peculiar to Stevens that is important for her: indeed, “Didon,” following the example of the speaker in Stevens’s poem, attempts to revise the traditional scenario between the self and nature in order to find a new form of the American sublime that will, concomitantly, be the grounds for a renewed mode of Adamic authorship.

If, like Rob Wilson, we approach Stevens in light of his poem “The American Sublime,” we find that “Of Mere Being” revises the more conventional, grandiose tropes of the natural sublime because, as the speaker in “The American Sublime” explains, “One grows used to the weather,/ The landscape and that,” which is easy fodder for the “mickey mockers” (114). New tropes can reassert the self’s relation to nature. Even as “the sublime comes down/ To the spirit itself,/ The spirit and space,/ The empty spirit/ In vacant space,” (114) there is the basis for a new poetic form in which the typical Stevens

speaker “produces *new* images and tropes of leaving, flowering, and blooming as a way of refiguring the American ground” (Wilson 195).¹¹ In this way, then, the traditional dynamic is resinscribed: the poetic self “beholds” nature, in line with “the American will to contemplate nature as moral idea and transporting mood,” but the self also “subjugates” nature, following “the American will to take possession of the landscape as a material resource subservient to mental designs” (179).

For “Didion,” as for the generic speaker in Stevens, the ability to behold and subjugate nature corresponds to the ability to write and, if need be, to forge new “mental designs” through new modes of expression. If, on the one hand, after finding her style reduced to a rhetorical exercise “in a textbook for student composition,” “Didion” says she “lacked even that minimum level of ego which all writers recognize as essential to the writing of novels . . . [and] lacked faith even in my own technique,” the way she can view nature from what seems a rational, unromantic and demystified perspective offers her a sense of authorial mastery (17). At once revealing she has “no equivocal lone figure on the crest of the immutable hill,” an admission that might effectively undo any claim to Adamic authorship, her focus on the fact that she has, in turn, “no immutable hill” because she is “the granddaughter of a geologist” represents a strategy in which she can claim the self-sufficiency of the “lone figure” in a manner akin to Stevens’s speaker (18).

“Beholding” nature from the perspective of a geologist provides her with the ability to see an order in (or impose an order on) nature: “I learned early to anticipate the absolute mutability of hills and waterfalls and even islands. When a hill slumps into the ocean I see the order in it” (18).¹² In addition, her perception of this order construes nature as sublime through the traditional means – through a spectatorial distance from a

terrible, natural phenomenon: “When a 5.2. on the Richter scale wrenches the writing table in my own room in my own house in my own particular Welbeck Street I keep on typing.” Yet even as earthquakes are a well-worn trope of sublimity there is, as in Stevens, a subtle process of revision at work here. By speaking about the earthquake metonymically as the “5.2 on the Richter scale” and in terms of its effects on her writing, “Didion” subjugates nature, and the sublime conventions of transport and self-possession (conveyed through the repetition of “my”) are channeled into and constituted by the act of writing. As a result, “Didion” transcends and masters her material by establishing new relations from it: her ego is restored – “A hill is a transitional accommodation to stress, and ego may be a similar accommodation” – and her technique is no longer defined by others – “A waterfall is a self-correcting maladjustment of stream to structure, and so, for all I know is technique.” Having gone through this process, it seems that she now controls the natural imagery and, apparently, the other details of her novel by announcing her authorial struggles to the reader as parts of the narrative are explained and openly “abandoned,” “scuttled,” or “jettisoned” before the reader’s eyes (19). *Democracy*, however, suggests that because this strategy is drawn from the literary traditions of the American sublime we should be watchful of “Didion’s” narrative presence.

While “Didion’s” open contract with the reader might be viewed as an inclusive and hence democratic gesture, I maintain that *Democracy* casts her relation to her writing and her audience in an ironic and overtly critical light within the context of the American sublime. If Stevens’s revised model of the natural sublime in poetry provides “Didion” with a renewed sense of Adamic authority and the stimulus for her stylistic innovations in her novel, then it is fitting that Stevens’s model is implicated in anti-democratic practices

through “Didion’s” response to the technological sublime.¹³ Her approach to the technological sublime, which she adapts from Stevens’s treatment of the natural sublime, resonates in two important ways: first, her stance belies the fact that her powers – and by implication all human reason and discourse – are limited in the face of some examples of technology and its widespread effects; and second, her newfound narrative method is complicit with anti-democratic forces represented by – and in – the mass media.

Appropriately enough, it is through an English class “Didion” taught at Berkeley about “the idea of democracy in the work of certain post-industrial writers,” where she was concerned with “pointing out similarities in style, and presumably in ideas of democracy . . . between George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway, Henry Adams and Norman Mailer,” that her narrative strategies are connected to the technological sublime. In particular, it is two lines she quotes from *The Education of Henry Adams* (the first from “Chapter I “Quincy [1838-1848]” and the second from Chapter XXV “The Dynamo and the Virgin [1900]”) that resonate here: “‘Probably no child, born in the year, held better cards than he’ and ‘he began to feel the forty-foot dynamo as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross . . .’” (71). By referring to the lucky, “better cards” Adams held, “Didion” clearly situates him (for lack of a better term) in the same Adamic mode of self-fashioning and promise that she casts herself in through the natural sublime and Stevens. Indeed, as Tim Parrish notes, Adams’s persona in *The Education* is not simply authoritative but nearly authoritarian as well: “Adams wrote about himself as if he were a modernist god-author inventing a world that could only deny his relationship to it” (178). And it is the way the world can – and does – “deny” Adams’s authority that is of

primary importance here, offering an important link between the narrator, “Didion,” in *Democracy* and the technological sublime.

In “The Dynamo and the Virgin,” when Adams views the dynamo at the Great Exposition of 1900, he experiences the dynamo as an example of the technological sublime. For Adams, this man-made invention is more powerful and wondrous than nature: “The planet itself seemed less impressive, in its old-fashioned, deliberate, annual or daily revelation, than this huge wheel . . .” (380). Nevertheless, the dynamo becomes ensconced in the cultural conventions of the traditional American sublime that began in response to nature: “Before the end, one began to pray to it; inherited instinct taught the natural expression of man before silent and infinite force.” Significantly, although Adams’s response to the dynamo conforms to these conventions of the technological sublime, his admission that the dynamo surpasses human understanding sounds a troublesome note for his authority – and one that ultimately reverberates for “Didion” in *Democracy*, too.

If, historically speaking, the technological sublime testifies to the superiority of inventors and celebrates human reason, then Henry Adams’s remarks about his response and the inventor Samuel P. Langley’s to the dynamo are particularly relevant. According to Adams, for Langley the dynamo is an invention that threatens the authority of the inventor rather than standing as a marvelous achievement of human reason. The dynamo undermines the systems of thought that produced it and unleashed “new forces [that] were anarchical”: “Radium denied its God – or, what was to Langley the same thing, denied the truths of his Science. The force was wholly new” (381). Similarly, for Adams, the dynamo is an “occult mechanism”:

Man had translated himself into a new universe which had no common scale of measurement with the old. He had entered a supersensual world, in which he could measure nothing except by chance collisions of movements imperceptible to his senses, perhaps even imperceptible to his instruments, but perceptible to each other, and so to some known ray at the end of the scale. (381-382)

Thus, for both men, viewing the dynamo's sublimity does not assert man's power over nature nor does it offer proof of man's elevated reason. Instead, for American society as a whole, the dynamo challenges the traditional pattern of behavior associated with the technological sublime, and from a personal perspective, it challenges the authority Adams and Langley invested in their professional roles – Langley's as a man of science and an inventor and Adams's as a man of letters and an historian.

Overall, it is this loss of authority and what it entails – the loss of narrative power – that links Langley and Adams to the narrator, "Didion." As Parrish points out, what she shares with Adams is the way "the historian's traditional role has been usurped by the subjects (the people and forces) she or he presumes to master" (167). For Adams, the dynamo left him "lying in the Gallery of Machines at the Great Exposition of 1900, his historical neck broken by the sudden eruption of forces totally new" (382), a reaction that is largely synonymous with "Didion's" experience of technological and cultural changes in the contemporary world: Having "first noticed the quickening of time" (72) in 1955, by the time she teaches the class at Berkeley in 1975, she says "time was no longer just quickening but collapsing, falling in on itself, the way a disintegrating star contracts into a black hole . . ." (73). "Didion's" class takes on an added urgency as she must pursue the same question as her students: "Consider the role of the writer in a post-industrial

society” (72). Thus, her reference to Adams, like her earlier reference to Stevens, alludes to what she adopts from his literary example – here, how Adams ultimately resolved his similar narrative crisis by writing *The Education* in “the autobiographical third person,” which, coincidentally, is one of the types of narrative she wants her class to consider. Implicitly, Adams provides “Didion” with another means to claim narrative authority. Her efforts to alert us, like her students, of her use of the autobiographical point of view – “*Consider, too, Didion’s own involvement in the setting . . .*” – testifies to how deftly she embraces the qualities of self-deprecation and plain speaking that characterize Adams’s use of the autobiographical third person. Moreover, her comments speak to her inherent faith in narrative and her particular skill at wielding it.

Representing narrative insufficiency and experiencing it, are, of course, two very different things, and the extent to which “Didion” may use the former to hide evidence of the latter remains a riddle the text refuses to solve. That said, *Democracy* does, I propose, depict at least one instance of narrative failure for “Didion” that is not wholly scripted by her, and which also reflects negatively on her evasive tactics. The news stories, “the dispatches from Southeast Asia,” which “Didion” reads while at Berkeley, are stories that she says provide “a graphic instance of the black hole effect” (73). If we take her at her word, she finds narrative gaps that cannot be filled when she reads the same stories in different papers “under new headlines and with updated leads . . .” – gaps that the text suggests may be as contrived as her own omissions: “Tank battalions vanished between editions. Three hundred fixed-wing aircraft disappeared in the new lead on a story about the president playing golf at the El Dorado Country Club in Palm Desert, California.” As a result, then, *Democracy* asks us to view “Didion’s” anxiety

about the limits of narrative as honest and truthful, even as it cautions us about her own methods of narration.

“Didion’s” final remarks about writing the novel appear accurate. Because much of the subject matter she has written about has been so excessively mediated as news, it seems logical that she has not “experienced the rush of narrative inevitability . . .” (232), that she has suffered from a lack of “the basic narrative assumption, which is that the past is prologue to the present” (233). Nevertheless, her disclosure does not erase how she actively manipulates the narrative and temporal logic of the text. The doubts she voices about her powers sit in an uneasy tension alongside such comments as “I am resisting narrative here” (113) when she reproduces an official document and a telegram about the murder of Janet and Omura or when she says that “narrative is a certain calculated ellipsis” (162), admitting “I know the conventions and how to observe them, how to fill in the canvas I have already stretched . . .” only *after* she has apparently employed such “conventions.” In fact, *Democracy* implies that “Didion’s” methods mirror the practices of mass journalism. With the “dispatches” about Vietnam, the text suggests that the forces of militarism and imperialism that largely dictate journalistic practices are indicative of undemocratic tendencies within “Didion’s” methods as well.

On one level, the peculiar power “Didion” exercises over access to the material of the novel illustrates her undemocratic, authorial position because, as Alan Nadel aptly puts it, “the author’s involvement is thus everywhere and nowhere, functioning with absolute power and absolute impunity, the two conditions that militate against democratic activity” (115). At the same time, it is primarily through Stevens and Adams that she finds a means of exercising such power by constructing a transcendent – albeit deferential

– narrative persona: through their examples she not only finds the means to turn her limitations into an expression of authorial power, she expresses self-fashioning in the Adamic mode.¹⁴ “Didion’s” use of Stevens and Adams, then, is at the center of why her authorial methods are incompatible with genuine democratic practices. Despite her professed aims, she generates a narrative that effectively hampers the sort of critical scrutiny that might, conceivably, be employed when democracy has failed or gone astray.

I want to emphasize, though, that the limits of the narrator, “Didion,” do not correspond to the limits of *Democracy*, even though it is, ostensibly, the novel she has written. If “Didion” and *Democracy* were equivalent, the scope of the text would indeed be reduced to her authorial powers. With this point in mind, I suggest that *Democracy* offers the negative, Adamic qualities of “Didion” as a reflection of other misplaced forms of heroic individualism, particularly in the case of Jack Lovett and even more so with Inez Victor; as a result, in what follows I will, necessarily, “quote” “Didion’s” points about Lovett and Inez with only a limited degree of suspicion. Above all, I will argue that like “Didion,” both Lovett and Inez devise means of asserting their authority against the possibilities of narrative insufficiency, which nevertheless perpetuates anti-democratic forces and ideologies that they define themselves against or attempt to resist.

Lovett, perhaps more than any other character in *Democracy*, embodies the heroic attributes of the traditional Adamic figure. As Loris observes, Lovett functions as a “chivalric knight” to Inez in keeping with the “elements of romantic fiction”: “Archetypal hero, it is Jack Lovett who, on Easter Sunday, March 31, 1975, rescues Inez from the disaster of her sister’s murder, her father’s insanity, the break up of her Christian family, and her failed marriage” (75). Similarly, according to Winchell, Lovett “is a man who

combines vitality and realism with compassion and sentiment” – “a latter-day Rhett Butler”; moreover, it is Lovett “who possesses a sufficient sense of responsibility to accompany Inez to Vietnam to rescue the drug-addicted Jessie,” Inez’s daughter (130). From these points, Lovett can clearly be viewed from the Adamic paradigm, suggesting at once Slotkin’s “American hunter [who] regenerates himself through violence so that he can return to the familial bonds of civilization with a renewed awareness of his individuality” (Busby 96), but also the Christlike, authorial qualities that enable him to pierce the “illusions” of the world.

Nevertheless, Lovett’s actions with Inez and Jessie are neither unquestionably heroic nor free from the ironies embedded in the notion of regeneration through violence, which is made clear by the way *Democracy* treats Lovett’s Christlike or authorial tendencies. For Lovett, his possession of “information” as a covert operative for the CIA and as an arms dealer testifies, at least in his mind, to his power to interpret the world accurately. “All information,” according to Lovett, “is seen as useful. Inaccurate information is in itself accurate information about the informant” (36). The world is a fully legible text; because “Lovett was one of those men for whom information was an end in itself” this means that “he was also a man for whom the accidental did not figure”: “In Jack Lovett’s system all behavior was purposeful, and the purpose could be divined by whoever attracted the best information and read it most correctly.” Thus, like “Didion,” Lovett’s perspective imposes a worldview that gratifies the needs of his ego. Yet whereas “Didion” admits the insufficiency of her knowledge and, as we have seen, unwittingly reinscribes the narrative practices of forces that produce such insufficiency in

the first place, Lovett's approach is much less artful – he simply denies that his knowledge is insufficient.

Despite his lack of subtlety, Lovett's vision is no less duplicitous than "Didion's," nor is the significance of his vision confined to the horizon of one individual, or just indicative of his arrogance. In fact, *Democracy* links the sort of moral apathy Lovett displays at the Pacific tests to his "reading" of information. His thoughts about a hypothetical scene, which is similar to the ones the narrator reads about in the dispatches from Vietnam, dramatizes the relationship between his moral apathy and reading information: "A Laotian village indicated on one map and omitted on another suggested not a reconnaissance oversight but a population annihilated, x number of men, women and children lined up one morning between the maps and bulldozed into a common ditch" (36-37). Such disappearances "between the maps," moreover, do not affect Lovett; for him it is more important that these disappearances are accounted for, which suggests that his need for authority guards the policies his covert activities support.

In other words, Lovett's vision justifies imperial and military activity because he cannot conceive of other individuals and, more broadly, nations beyond the scope of capital and militarization: "All nations, to Jack Lovett, were 'actors,' specifically 'state actors' . . . , and he viewed such actors abstractly, as friendly or unfriendly, committed or uncommitted; as assemblies of armaments on a large board. Asia was ten thousand tanks here, three hundred Phantoms there. The heart of Africa was an enrichment facility" (37). Lovett's "heroic" actions, therefore, take on a different meaning and, appropriately, challenge the legitimacy of his authority in two ways. First, his rescue of Jessie from Vietnam occurs by chance – by accident – when he happens to stop in a bar in Saigon. In

addition, and further underscoring the weakness of his point of view, he finds her despite his access to the task force map of Metro Saigon that is intended to chart who will be removed from Saigon: quite literally, as Inez says, Jessie is “not on the map” (199). Secondly, Jack’s death is anything but heroic and denies the efficacy of his military and imperial vision; rather than being the victim of a covert assassin (which would be his likely end), he dies of natural cause while swimming “at the Hotel Borobudur in Jakarta” with Inez (221).¹⁵

Inez’s final heroics in Kuala Lumpur, where she decides to work with refugees, also follow an unexpected pattern. Unlike Lovett, Inez is motivated by what appears to be a genuine, altruistic desire that is borne out of a search for empowerment and agency after a lifetime of suffering and marginalization that, in many ways, recalls Maria Wyeth’s history in *Play It As It Lays* – an early loss of an influential but ineffectual mother, an unhappy marriage to a selfish husband and the destructive glare of the media spotlight. For Inez, like Maria, moreover, these experiences and conditions that bring about her disempowerment are interconnected, making empowerment entail a fundamental change in her life and perceptions. For example, from her mother, Carol, who endures an unhappy marriage to Paul Christian, Inez adopts misplaced beliefs that do much to explain the pattern of her love life. Her mother’s belief in “the romantic convention of happy endings” (73) suggests why Inez stays in a loveless marriage with Harry Victor, who for all his posturing as a family man indulges in extra-marital affairs with his political attachés Frances Landau and Connie Willis (104). Similarly, the reason why Inez remains in a distant affair of her own with Jack Lovett can be attributed to

Carol's remarks about why Paul Christian was perpetually absent – “When a man stays away from a woman it means he wants to keep their love alive” (24).

The media has a direct impact on the unhappiness and disempowerment Inez experiences in her marriage as well: as an object of constant public scrutiny, she cannot escape from her role as a politician's wife. Continually hounded by the paparazzi, Inez, as “Didion” puts it, “had developed certain mannerisms peculiar to people in the public eye,” the most suggestive detail being “a noticeably frequent blink, as if the photographer's strobes had triggered a continuing flash on her retina” (50). In addition, the media also suggests how her disempowerment has affinities with “Didion's” predicament: in essence, like “Didion,” Inez experiences a loss of narrative power. But for Inez, perhaps, this loss is more personal: it occurs primarily through her inability to shape or even recall her personal history. Her life is reduced to a series of news “clips.” As she explains to an interviewer, “Things that might or might not be true get repeated in the clips until you can't tell the difference” (53).

Claiming narrative authority and personal history are not compatible options for Inez anymore than they are for Maria Wyeth: like Maria's “cutting clean” from her past, Inez's ultimate rejection of her past appears to be the only avenue to exercising narrative authority and achieving empowerment. Similarly, for both women rejecting one's past only perpetuates the pattern of the frontier ethos of Adamic self-fashioning, and the terrible irony with Inez, even more so than with Maria, is that she clearly believes that rejecting her past stands for a rejection of this ethos as well. Above all, though, what is most different in the case of Inez Victor is the way her predicament becomes a larger critique of the failure of American democracy in a global context. With her decision to

work with refugees coupled with her rejection of her past, *Democracy* situates her personal struggles within a larger commentary on the destructive legacy of Manifest Destiny that lies at the heart of American democracy at home and abroad.

For Inez, separating herself from her husband and children, while she continues to feel “responsible for them in a limited way,” coincides with her realization that there is nothing intrinsically special about being an American – “she could no longer grasp her own or their uniqueness, her own or their difference, genius, [and] special claim” (208) – as well as a sense of entitlement “just because they were Americans” (208). Rejecting her role as Harry Victor’s wife, Inez, in turn, apparently rejects her colonial, Hawaiian background. She appears to assert a newfound identity and independence that positions her against oppressive and antidemocratic forces, “her adult life immersed in Harry Victor’s conviction that he could be president” and her childhood, defined by “the local conviction that the comfortable entrepreneurial life of an American colony in a tropic without rot represented a record of individual triumphs over a hostile environment” (211). Yet as much as Inez appears to move beyond the cultural claims of American exceptionalism, she continues to be complicit with those claims and reinscribes them with her exodus to Kuala Lumpur.

One way in which this complicity is signaled is through the affinities between Inez’s new position and plans and “Didion’s” narrative struggles: significantly, when Inez announces her decision to leave her husband, she does so in a letter to his chief public relations man, Billy Dillon, an act that situates her empowerment as an expression of narrative authority. As Stout puts it, with her letter, Inez finds her “voice,” “speaking to whomever she wants to when she wants to, stating her reasons in her own terms . . .”

(223). However, for Inez, like “Didion,” achieving narrative authority as an expression of personal empowerment comes about in a problematic way, as sublime transport through a tropical landscape of her own devising, which the text alludes to because the description of this landscape is the one that “Didion” has quoted from Inez earlier. Although free from the self-conscious intertextual weight that bolsters “Didion’s” similar embrace of an imagined, tropical landscape, the reasons Inez gives for leaving Victor serve the same end: her expression enacts a moment of transcendence in a sublime landscape. Bluntly expressed, Inez’s reasons are no less poetic in origin and effect than “Didion’s”: “Colors, moisture, heat, enough blue in the air. Four fucking reasons. Love Inez” (232).¹⁶

Implicitly, Inez remains committed to the ideologies she wishes to oppose, particularly the colonialism of her Hawaiian upbringing that embodies the frontier dream of self-creation in a virgin land. Moreover, even if the scope of her transformation were restricted to her discovery, as Winchell puts it, that “the only remaining refuge is the West within” because “all frontiers have been traversed . . . ,” she would still be complicit with the perpetuation of cultural imperialism (131). The fact that her apparent liberation from Victor entails a journey to a real frontier zone of Western occupation brings this complicity to the forefront. In contrast to Winchell’s argument, or one such as Loris’s, that the desire for “colors, moisture, heat, enough blue in the air” signals “a recovery from meaninglessness that lies at the center of the cultural experience” (80), Inez’s newfound independence aligns her with the dominant forces in American culture more directly than ever before, which is confirmed by her work with the refugees in Kuala Lumpur.¹⁷

Surprisingly, in place of a detailed account of Inez's time in Kuala Lumpur, *Democracy* furnishes peripheral points about where and when Inez decides to work with refugees and a tourist's perspective of the Kuala Lumpur airport. And in this way, the text covertly emphasizes how Inez's work is situated within a national and international context. For example, the origin of Inez's decision to work with refugees casts a shadow over her subsequent actions in Kuala Lumpur. Initially conceived as "a special interest" in support of Victor's bid for the presidency of the United States, Inez's actual work with refugees inevitably bears a taint of opportunism, in spite of the fact that at the outset she uses it to express her independence (she makes the announcement "unexpectedly and with considerable vehemence"), or, in the end, that Billy Dillon rejects this plan because "refugees were an often controversial and therefore inappropriate special interest" (56). Still more revealing is the image of the Kuala Lumpur International Airport on a postcard that "Didion" has on her desk. "Didion" recalls that she bought the postcard when she "flew up from Singapore to see Inez in Kuala Lumpur," and it is the scene the postcard depicts at the airport rather than the actual visit that "Didion" describes: "In this view of the Kuala Lumpur International Airport there are no airplanes visible but there is, suspended from the observation deck of the terminal, a banner reading "WELCOME PARTICIPANTS OF THE THIRD WORLD CUP HOCKEY" (109). Superseding a detailed account of Inez's work with the refugees, the image of the banner at the airport contextualizes that work; as Alan Nadel explains, the message on the banner ironically encapsulates the relationship between the Third World and the First World, which, in turn, is underscored by Inez's "tending to refugees" (117):

The word *world* is distributed in the sentence in such a way as to identify the underdeveloped nations and also an international sporting event From an ironic perspective, the sign couples the citizens of the Third World with the international sport of the First World, in a subordinate relationship to which they willingly submit. (116-117)

Overall, then, *Democracy* demonstrates how and why Inez's efforts at self-assertion are inextricably bound to forces that divert and distort her aims.

As a result, it might seem that the text punitively creates an impossible situation that limits Inez's ability to achieve her goals: the strange dynamic where in order to claim the status of an empowered but also altruistic individual, she must reject the prototypical concept of the Adamic, American individual in which such power is routinely defined and found. Even so, this does not discount Inez's altruistic impulses, only their limited realization since she cannot, fundamentally, shed her American identity. As "Didion" puts it, in the end Inez "said that although she still considered herself an American national (an odd locution, but there it was) she would be in Kuala until the last refugee was dispatched" (234). Thus, even as *Democracy* implicitly links colonial Hawaii to Kuala Lumpur it does so by marking the tragic consequences that are incurred by the individuals who seek change and cannot escape their origins.¹⁸ Indeed, what makes *Democracy* as well as *Play It As It Lays* a lasting contribution to fiction about the relationship between the frontier and the American sublime is the way they show how the cultural faith in forging a new democratic space of empowerment and affiliation must reckon with how it may only perpetuate what has gone before. At best, like her fictional counterpart, it seems that Didion says efforts to revise such narratives can only go so far:

perhaps the most that can be done is to recognize the way art can alert us to them as constructions even if it must admit its own complicity.

Endnotes

1. The original title, “Pacific Distances,” is cited in Winchell (125).
2. For Heyne the desert and the garden represent one axis – “the axis of utility” (4) – in which the concept of the frontier has been – and continues to be – employed. At the same time, Heyne argues that “laid across this spectrum of utilitarian names for the frontier is another set of terms, which may be defined by the opposition of *margin* and *range*” (6). According to Heyne, the frontier as margin in this “axis of spatial representation” (4) acts as “a negation and a challenge” (7) that the dominant American culture asserts it must somehow achieve: “Insofar as the frontier is understood only as a boundary, what lies beyond it is fundamentally an aporia, an emptiness – uncivilized, unmapped, unsurveyed, without clear title.” Complimenting, and effectively answering the challenge posed by the frontier as margin, the frontier as range offers an idealized view of inhabiting the frontier. Though still “a relatively empty place (except for its original inhabitants, of course, who must be eliminated),” the frontier as range becomes a site in which Euro-American cultural identity can be recreated, enacted and tested: “Crossing into this place is just the beginning. Once there, one needs to know one’s way around in order to survive. It is the place Americans go to test social conventions against the old standard of nature, to take the measure of their civilization.” For the ways in which all four conceptions of the frontier can be found within a particular – and modern-day example – see Heyne’s discussion of Alaska (7-9). For a similar, schematic overview of the spatial configurations associated with the frontier paradigm, but with a greater emphasis on the frontier hero and the “self-made figure” (23) see Mogen.
3. For Dyck, even though the myth of the garden and the myth of the frontier are connected to American westward expansion, they represent two opposing ways of negotiating – and displacing – the costs of this imperial enterprise. “The myth of the garden,” Dyck explains, “attempts to hide the American legacy of violence, and the myth of the frontier celebrates it” (55). At the same time, what connects the two myths and allows them to coexist is the way they “create a picture of American exceptionalism based on the land” (56); moreover, “in both myths the land shaped the unique American character” through representative, idealized figures – the yeoman farmer in the garden and the frontiersman on the frontier.
4. In “Letter” Didion reveals that the “Big Five” – “C. Brewer, Theo. H. Davies, American Factors, Castle & Cooke, and Alexander & Baldwin” (198) – were mostly effected by the post-war boom and the arrival of industrialists like Henry J. Kaiser and the construction of his “Hawaiian Village Hotel” (189). Ironically, at the same time, Didion notes how the vestiges of Hawaii as a “subtropical cherry orchard” (190) that the “Big Five” promulgated remain ensconced in the older hotels that were part of the upper class tourist industry that did much to uphold the old order. In her essay “In the Islands” Didion more fully details the ways in which the insulated, privileged culture supported by places like the Royal Hawaiian hotel, which began as “the distant and mildly exotic ‘pink palace’ of the Pacific” (137), have remained on some level unchanged:

What the place reflected in the Thirties it reflects still, in less flamboyant mutations: a kind of life lived always on the streets where the oldest trees grow. It is a life so secure in its traditional concerns that the cataclysms of the larger society disturb it only as surface storms disturb the sea's bottom, a long time later and in oblique ways. (139)

5. According to Dyck, even when writers admit the presence of violence they often use strategies that minimize it in ways that I maintain Didion's text does not. For instance, in contrast to my reading of Didion's fictional and non-fictional treatment of Hawaii, with Willa Cather Dyck finds that even as she presents frontier violence to ensure "her fiction's dramatic force and sense of authenticity regarding pioneer life" (58), she makes this violence "exotic" (58), with events that are either "remote" (59) or that "occur inexplicably as a curious aberration" (59) and so do not undermine "the sense of safety in the garden" (59).

6. In "Letter from Paradise" Didion clearly suggests that racial tensions continue to exist in modern day Hawaii in spite of its apparent inclusiveness, which could very well be brought to the surface by a relationship such as Omura's with Janet. Didion speculates: "Perhaps because Hawaii sells itself so assiduously as the very model of a modern melting pot, the entire area of race relations is conversationally delicate" (201-202).

7. In "Letter from Paradise" and "In the Islands," Didion also mentions the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, located in the crater of the extinct volcano Puowaina. "[C]ommonly called Punchbowl" ("In the Islands" 140), the crater functions as a curious site that produces – and negotiates – the "aura" of war. At once a means of memorializing the dead from World War II, Didion reveals that it has also served as a final resting place for dead American soldiers from Korea and Vietnam. Not restricted to the dead soldiers who were "Island boys" (141), Didion notes that the "Punchbowl" represents – on a national level – a site that effectively ameliorates the costs of war with the dead soldiers "carried here by families who live thousands of miles across the Pacific, a gesture that touches by its very difficulty." At the same time, Didion claims that the first-hand experience of the Punchbowl can illuminate the reality of war. Visiting the Punchbowl during the Vietnam War, Didion reveals that

Vietnam seemed considerably less chimerical than it has seemed on the Mainland for some months, less last year's war, less successfully consigned to that limbo of benign neglect in which any mention of casualties was made to seem a little counterproductive, a little *démodé*. There in the crater it seemed less easy to believe that weekly killed-in-action figures under 100 might by some sleight-of-hand add up to zero, a nonexistent war.

8. As Tager observes, Lovett's reference to the "light at dawn" offers an ironic "parallel to the national anthem ('by the dawn's early light') (202)" in order to critique "an arm of the government clandestinely exploding a tremendously destructive weapon designed to enhance American security against unseen communist adversaries."

9. This reaction to the atomic tests has a wider cultural resonance. As Nye explains, atomic tests were often regarded as a spectacle for tourists: “The Atomic Energy Commission once promoted the viewing of a test as an exiting holiday event” (233), which was a common practice in Las Vegas as well as Hawaii.

10. For Beauvais, *Democracy's* “metafictional technique” makes “self-conscious the novel’s narrative artifice while also establishing the discontinuity that marks recent history” (24). As a result, the text is postmodern and potentially subversive in that it reflects a moment in history and “an ideological position that presumes the inadequacy of traditional techniques and accordingly casts into question the verisimilitude of representations that employ those techniques” (20). Indeed, I agree with Beauvais’s insistence on the prevalence of such narrative tactics and the fictional “Didion’s” need to embrace them, even though I argue that this stance is not, in the final analysis, subversive because they are ultimately linked to literary traditions associated with the American sublime. For a more explicit consideration of the elements of “Didion’s” style in relation to her subject matter and the historical moment see Stout, who rightly concludes that “Didion” “tells things in a compressed shorthand, sometimes imagistic but sometimes carefully abstract, both for impact and for control, for protection from the disorder” (221).

11. Wilson’s reading of Stevens’s poetry through “The American Sublime” is especially pertinent when seen in light of contemporary configurations of American sublimity. For Wilson, Stevens’s reduction of conventional, sublime imagery and tropes illustrates why his stance is still relevant, because it responds to the way “American culture reaches toward the big and the super in everything from comic book heroes to hamburgers to skyscrapers to shopping.” As “Didion’s” use of Stevens demonstrates, his work provides an answer to the following question Wilson poses: “How can anyone proclaim transcendence (self-transport) in a commodity-glutted American landscape without measures of self-irony?” (174)

12. The fact that “Didion” is the granddaughter of a geologist also suggests the way the development of geology as a discipline in the nineteenth century coincided with – and supported – traditional notions of the American sublime. As Raymond J. O’Brien notes in his study of the art and tourism associated with the Hudson Valley, interest in geology “enabled travelers and scientists to examine geological events in such a way that God and nature were placed in a closer aesthetic proximity than Puritanical thinking had ever allowed” (123). For an excellent overview of the impact of geology and science in the works of such thinkers as Lyell, Humboldt and Darwin on American writers and artists such as Emerson, Cole and Church, see Novak, Chapter IV, “The Geological Timetable: Rocks” (47-77).

13. Loris also suggests that the text uses the allusions to Stevens in a critical manner, to register how “the life struggle” (80) for Americans is a “move from ideal to reality only to come back to what we wanted fact to be, not to what it has, too often, remained for us” (81).

14. As Winchell and Loris suggest, “Didion’s” allusions to other non-American texts like Joseph Conrad’s *Victory* and Graham Greene’s *A Burnt-out Case* also indicate her struggles with and victories over the material of her novel. As Winchell notes, the moment when “Didion” finds the “image of Inez at the airport in the rain . . . unlocked this novel for her. ‘This scene,’ she writes, ‘is my leper at the door, my Tropical Belt Coal Company, my lone figure on the crest of the immutable hill’” (qtd. in Winchell 133). Yet the way in which these moments of intertextuality occur in the larger scheme of the novel is as much a rhetorical rouse as the other discoveries she makes through her use of Adams and Stevens. At the beginning of the novel, “Didion” assures us that she still has neither a “leper who comes to her door every morning at seven” (18) nor a “Tropical Belt Coal Company” (18), which Loris argues will ultimately help her “forge a way through the moral chaos of her world and find a form for her art” (81); however, at the implied time of writing the novel, she already clearly possesses such a scene. Moreover, the fact that “Didion’s” disingenuousness about her lack of authorial skill is somehow linked to the duplicitous colonial enterprise embodied in the images from Conrad and Greene, casts her position in a potentially even more unfavorable light.

15. The elements of frontier mythology coupled with Lovett’s rescue of Jessie Victor, also situate *Democracy* in the context of Vietnam fiction. As John Clark Pratt argues, “the literature of the Vietnam War is filled with American characters who enter as traditional frontier hunters, then become men trying merely to survive in a wilderness they do not understand” (238). Moreover, the text’s ironic treatment of Lovett’s heroics can, in the context of Vietnam fiction, be seen in light of Didion’s ambivalence towards John Wayne in her essay “John Wayne: A Love Song.” For Didion, Wayne is the idealized, ubiquitous figure who “rode through my childhood, and perhaps through yours, . . . [and] determined forever the shape of certain of our dreams” (30). Meanwhile, Pratt remarks that Wayne “is seen in the early [Vietnam] fiction as a role model, then later as a figure of derision . . .” (238).

16. Inez’s decision to go to Kuala Lumpur also has intertextual resonances with some of the works quoted by “Didion” and the heroine of Henry Adams’s novel *Democracy*, Madeleine Lightfoot Lee. On one level, as Winchell puts it: “The difference is that Adams’s Madeleine Lee is a political idealist who becomes disillusioned by what she sees, whereas Didion’s Inez is too hardboiled and apolitical ever to have been an idealist” (131). At the same time, Inez can be seen to represent what might have happened to Lee if she had blindly followed her idealism and married the corrupt senator Ratcliffe and therefore not “got to the bottom of this business of democratic government, and found out that it was nothing more than government of any kind” (Adams 190). Indeed, Lee’s initial rejection of her philanthropic activities before she decides to acquaint herself with Ratcliffe and “the tremendous forces of government, and the machinery of society, at work” (9) and her subsequent decision “to return to the true democracy of life, her paupers and her prisons, her schools and her hospitals” (190), casts her as a much more complicated foil to Inez Victor than as just a “political idealist.” Similarly, like the narrator, “Didion,” Inez has affinities with the protagonists of Conrad’s Axel Heyst in *Victory* and Greene’s Query in *A Burnt-out Case*. Heyst’s retreat to his private island and his failure to establish the Tropical Belt Coal Company on it, can, as Loris explains,

be seen in relation to what the refugee work might do for Inez: “Axel Heyst, like Inez Victor, is detached and needs to become involved in life. The Tropical Belt Coal Company acts as the vehicle by which Heyst recognizes the active role he must take in human existence” (81). More particularly, however, I suggest that with Heyst it is the failure of the Tropical Belt Coal Company and what this conveys to him about his occupation of the island in the first place that is most relevant in relation to Inez. For Heyst, his failure makes him realize that “there must be a lot of the original Adam in me, after all” (Conrad 135). Lastly, like Greene’s Querry, Inez’s efforts at Kuala Lumpur recall his work at the leprosarium in order to renounce – and escape – his fame as an architect. Moreover, as Giles Foden remarks, as with Heyst, it is the failure of the leprosarium to give Querry what he desires that brings about growth. Loss and failure are necessary for Querry as well: “Like Querry, Heyst says he believes in ‘nothing,’ and wants ‘nothing’ – nothing except to be left alone, which is why he retreats to his island, a paradise that is bound to be disturbed” (vii). In the final analysis, Querry’s laughter as he is shot to death signals a potential redemption: “He’d learned to serve other people, you see, and to laugh. An odd laugh, but it was a laugh all the same” (qtd. in Foden xi).

17. In contrast to Loris and Winchell, other critics are more skeptical of Inez’s renunciation of her past and transformation or, at least, what this means within a larger context. Tager, for instance, argues that Inez’s “self-effacing actions does not negate the more powerful anti-democratic forces elaborated upon throughout the novel” (208), but he sees her transformation as a genuine: “Even though Inez explains her reasons for staying in aesthetic terms to Dillon (‘colors, moisture, heat, enough blue in the air’), she seems in the end the novel’s truest democrat by trying to effect change at the local level” (208). Parrish, on the other hand, shares my skepticism. Although he does not elaborate further, he claims that Inez’s renunciation would be “a shattering moment of self and national recognition (that is, if one did not see it as twentieth-century replication of nineteenth-century cycle of Manifest Destiny)” (179).

18. As Tim Parrish has most recently commented, readers who see things from Inez’s perspective wish for a happy ending in which “a disastrous American history can be confronted and recuperated,” and which reduces global relations to overly simplistic terms: “Inez would be the United States evacuating Vietnam, appropriately chastened by its experience and ready to redress the wounds of those whom she has injured” (179).

Commodified Death and the “Radiance of Dailiness”: Simulation and the American
Sublime in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*

Like Didion, Don DeLillo conveys the problematic legacy of American sublimity in contemporary culture, and in doing so questions the degree to which that legacy might be contested. Just as Didion locates figurations of the natural and technological sublime as key ways in which the frontier mythos sustains multinational capitalism and cultural imperialism, DeLillo portrays traditional elements of sublimity within the processes of consumer culture; in fact, DeLillo effectively offers a parallel explanation of why and how awe and terror are elicited by hyperreal landscapes like Los Angeles in *Play It As It Lays* and spectacles of deadly technology like the atomic tests in *Democracy*. In *White Noise*, for example, through the misadventures and obsessions of Jack Gladney, his family, and his academic colleagues, DeLillo portrays sites, events and cultural practices that evoke traditional configurations of the American sublime but which now primarily function as expressions of consumer culture. While DeLillo, like Didion, clearly supports the view that American sublimity has, historically, been a cultural experience – and construct – disseminated through forms of popular media as much as art, literature or ancestral stories, in *White Noise* he suggests that it is now mediated by culture in more elaborate ways. Fundamentally, the types of mediation associated with contemporary consumer culture – especially simulation – have strengthened the efficacy of older configurations of sublimity, even as they have been radically transformed in the process. For DeLillo, the problematic elements of American sublimity remain intact – particularly the destructive appeals to individualism through the promise of transcendence and self-fashioning and a spectatorial fascination with destruction and violence – but in *White*

Noise these have become more pervasive and diffuse by their incorporation into the consumer practices of contemporary culture.

I

Before turning to Gladney's experiences in connection to the American sublime, we need to explore the changes that simulation has had on iconic and other sites of sublimity. This section will begin by considering the relationship between simulation and authenticity in the context of the American sublime. In order to do so, the depictions of the Grand Canyon in Walker Percy's "The Loss of the Creature" and Niagara Falls in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "My Visit To Niagara" will be juxtaposed against the well-known "most photographed barn in America" (12) in *White Noise*. These comparisons will demonstrate the significant impact simulation has had on such sites; from Hawthorne and Percy we shall see the integral role authenticity has played in the way the American sublime has been understood, experienced and disseminated, and from *White Noise* how and why the role of authenticity has changed with simulation. Moreover, it will be made clear that accounting for these changes is necessary for understanding contemporary reconfigurations of the American sublime because authenticity has served as a point where, traditionally, the efficacy of the American sublime has been threatened. The fact that simulation has displaced claims to authenticity has major consequences for the American sublime: the efficacy as well as the power of its various configurations and reconfigurations have increased and become more stable, which means that exposing, challenging and undermining the negative qualities of traditional configurations has changed as well. Indeed, in *White Noise* the barn, as well as other sites of sublimity, demonstrate that simulation has become a means of strengthening those negative

qualities: the impassive spectatorship in the face of awesome or terrifying spectacles; the seductive allure of technology even when it is destructive; and the collective solidarity and acquiescence that typify the way sites of sublimity are perceived and experienced. Fundamentally, then, what *White Noise* criticizes about this relationship between simulation and the American sublime is that disaster, violence and death have been reduced to commodified spectacles.

One of the most pertinent scenes in *White Noise* that depicts the relation between the American sublime and simulation comes with “the most photographed barn in America,” which satirizes such iconic, sublime landmarks as Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon. Given that the barn has become a textbook example of Baudrillard’s description of simulation in the contemporary world, it might seem unnecessary to reiterate how this is so, yet in order to see the barn in terms of both simulation and the American sublime, mention of a few familiar points is necessary. Without question, the barn resembles Baudrillard’s description of simulations that displace the real things they represent. As Baudrillard puts it, a simulation is an image that “has no relation to any reality whatsoever” (6), which applies to the barn because it is a place where, as Murray Jay Siskind observes, “No one sees the barn” (12) and tourists can be found “taking pictures of taking pictures” (13). From Siskind’s comments, moreover, we learn that the simulation produced by photography creates an “aura” – “We can’t get outside the aura. We’re part of the aura” (13) – that inverts Walter Benjamin’s well-known ideas about photographic reproduction and the aura of fine art in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” As John Frow explains in a general remark regarding *White Noise* and Benjamin, “the libratory effect” Benjamin imagined could be achieved

by “destroying the quasi-religious aura surrounding the work of art” is contested in the novel: “the commodification of culture has worked to preserve the myth of origins and of authenticity” (40). With the barn, however, something different occurs in terms of authenticity and what it means for the tourists.

In the case of the barn, the simulation created through photographic reproduction has created an aura in which authenticity is no longer of any interest to the tourists.¹ Equally alarming, is that the tourists’ inability to see the barn as a real, distinct object creates a scenario that is just as restrictive and confining as the one Benjamin criticized; as Siskind’s comments indicate, rather than conveying freedom, the tourists taking photographs express an obedient awe: “We’re not here to capture an image, we’re here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura” (12). Yet to appreciate the significance of what is at stake here, we need to consider these comparisons to Benjamin and Baudrillard in the context of American culture and in light of the literary, cultural and historical context of the American sublime. By doing so, we can see that the barn illustrates that the way sublimity has been invested in iconic sites has changed, and in turn, the means of challenging the traditional configurations of such sites.

Authenticity represents the key point of difference between the barn and traditional sites like the Grand Canyon and Niagara Falls. Even though the elements of simulation at the barn are comparable to what can be found at the canyon or the Falls, the ways in which their “authentic” sublimity has, in the past, been rescued are not applicable to the barn. If, as David Cowart notes, with reference to Walker Percy’s “The Loss of the Creature,” the Grand Canyon, like the barn, is “a touristic simulacrum [that] renders an actual vista invisible, perhaps irrecoverable” (87), what I suggest is of more vital interest

is the text's steadfast negation of the sort of perceptual strategies Percy claims might make an "actual vista" visible, and which Cowart does not explore. In fact, within the framework of the American sublime, the barn offers a covert commentary on the history of achieving such "pure" vision at sites of sublimity against the obstacles of cultural mediation.

To understand the scope of Percy's tactics in relation the barn, I also want to make reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne's sketch about a tourist's experience of Niagara Falls in "My Visit to Niagara." There are two reasons for this. First, Hawthorne's sketch offers a useful fictional predecessor to Percy's and DeLillo's texts because it depicts the struggle to "recover" a sublime icon from intrusive cultural influences. Secondly, through this struggle, the sketch portrays how and why strains of a "mock sublime" that satirize inauthentic versions of sublimity from these cultural influences can be turned into a validation of an authentic, serious sublime in the traditional mould. Before elaborating on the sketch further, however, I need to briefly summarize the most pertinent strategies described by Percy that will mark the key points for comparing these texts with DeLillo's.

For Percy, to truly perceive the real Grand Canyon, there are three ways in which a hypothetical sightseer might "recover" it from "the symbolic complex which has already been formed in the sightseer's mind" (47). First, the sightseer can leave "the beaten track" (48), which means that one "sees the canyon by avoiding all the facilities for seeing the canyon," that is, by avoiding any viewing spots or tours operated by the Park Service. Secondly, after someone has followed this strategy, he or she might return to "the beaten track" with other tourists and then view the Grand Canyon with fresh eyes:

“Our complex friend stands behind his fellow tourists at the Bright Angel Lodge and sees the canyon through them and their predicament, their picture taking and busy disregard. In a sense, he exploits his fellow tourists; he stands on their shoulders to see the canyon” (49). Lastly, Percy claims that the disruption of the sightseer’s preconceived ideas about how the canyon will appear as well as how he or she will view it can, in the end, be a way for the canyon to “be recovered,” through “a breakdown of the symbolic machinery by which experts present the experience to the consumer.” Overall, Percy insists that these three strategies, which he labels “the Inside Track, the Familiar Revisited, [and] the Accidental Encounter” (50), may once more make viewing the canyon a moment of “confrontation” (47) for the sightseer, where he or she might share the sort of “wonder and delight” of the explorers who first viewed it.

Even though Percy does not explicitly link his perceptual strategies to the American sublime, it is clear that they are intended as ways of achieving a “pure” or “genuine” sublimity. Indeed, it is because of this implicit goal that Hawthorne’s sketch offers a useful point of elaboration because Hawthorne’s anonymous tourist follows these strategies to the letter in an effort to see the true sublimity of Niagara Falls. Although written in 1835, Hawthorne’s sketch accounts for what is at stake for Percy’s sightseer. At this time the popularity of seeing the Falls as sublime and having it fall short of a tourist’s expectations had already become a commonplace, an occurrence which, as Elizabeth McKinsey notes, was often reported in the popular press or a recurring subject in literary works from the latter half of the nineteenth century. For Hawthorne’s tourist, as Leo Levy explains, the “stereotypical expectations only stand in the way . . .” (402), so he does not initially experience the Falls as truly sublime:

Oh, that I had never heard of Niagara till I beheld it! . . . My mind had struggled to adopt these false conceptions to the reality, and finding the effort vain, a wretched sense of disappointment weighed me down. I climbed the precipice, and threw myself on the earth – feeling I was unworthy to look at the Great Falls, and careless about beholding them again. (Hawthorne 58)

In spite of this failure, however, the tourist's despair signals that the process in which he will ultimately view the authentic sublimity of the Falls has begun. As McKinsey points out, he "experiences . . . humility before the wonders of Niagara" (198), signaling that he has begun to undergo the typical sublime ego-test, which culminates with him claiming Adamic empowerment in accordance with two of Percy's strategies.

For instance, following his first contact with the Falls, the tourist then experiences them as an "Accidental Encounter" when he hears their sound at night. According to the tourist, the sound of the Falls "mingled with my dreams and made them full of storm and whirlwind" (58), and, as a result, he claims, "I spent a wakeful hour at midnight, in distinguishing its reverberations, and rejoiced to find that my former awe and enthusiasm were reviving" (58-59). Here, the tourist experiences the Falls without a preconception, and as McKinsey explains, this occurs because "not only is hearing the most passive of human senses, but it is far less encumbered by convention or commercialism than sight at Niagara" (193), a point, which not surprisingly, we shall see no longer holds true in DeLillo's world of "white noise."

Hawthorne also distinguishes this sublimity from the tourist's previous expectations by having him follow the strategy of "the Familiar Revisited." In keeping with Percy's description of the sightseer's response to the canyon and other tourists,

Hawthorne's tourist literally sets himself above others. "Leaning over the cliff," he explains, "I saw the guide conducting two adventurers behind the falls" (59), and this observation becomes the basis for mocking those who can only discover false sublimity; the tourist then imagines that once they arrive at "the guide's cottage" (60) that the adventurers will receive "a certificate of their achievement, with three verses of sublime poetry on the back." What begins as a commentary on Niagara Falls in the vein of a "mock sublime" becomes an object lesson about how to achieve a true sublime by mocking others. And the tourist's mockery of others represents a covert ratification of the traditional paradigm of the American sublime. In fact, it is fitting that once the tourist gains his new status as a "child of nature" or a "first settler" through his sublime contact with the Falls, that this new status is predicated on mocking those who have more viable claims to such titles: the tourist is distinct from those who are unable to approach the Falls in the "appropriate" manner – a child who "gave himself wholly to the enjoyment of a stick of candy" and "a native American" who consults "a volume of captain Hall's tour, and labored earnestly to adjust Niagara to the captain's description, departing, at last, without one new idea or sensation of his own." Unlike them, the tourist engages with the Falls as an Adamic moment of self-fashioning, appropriation and conquest: "My enjoyment became the more rapturous, because no poet shared it – nor wretch, devoid of poetry, profaned it: but the spot, so famous through the world, was all my own!" (61)

In *White Noise*, by contrast, such elaborate efforts at claiming the barn as an icon of the American sublime are unnecessary. Because issues of authenticity are not at stake for the tourists, the kind of tensions found in traditional configurations of sublimity such as Hawthorne's, and which could be refashioned as a means of critique, are not

applicable to the barn. For instance, the tension between the individual and the group that occurs when Hawthorne's tourist views the Falls as "the Familiar Revisited" could, as we have seen in Didion's *Democracy*, be the grounds for an effective contemporary critique, but such tensions are apparently absent with the barn. The issue of origins that is barely contained at the end of Hawthorne's sketch, and which is made evident through the opposition between the tourist and others, is neither visible nor seemingly at issue for those who view the barn. The individualistic transformation of Hawthorne's tourist at the Falls, in which diminution turns into grandiosity by resisting the presence of others, is not what occurs for the tourists in *White Noise*. At the barn there is no differentiation between the individual and the collective, so it appears as if the ideal of the American sublime as a fully unifying experience has, at last, finally been achieved. As Siskind explains:

Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism. (12)

This sublimity, while evidently free from the tensions that qualify older, traditional configurations of the American sublime does not mean that the text affirms the effect of the barn on the tourists. Rather, the barn implies that such grounds for critique may no longer be effective because of the new mode of participation that can be found at sites like the barn.

For example, perhaps the most notable difference between the Falls and the barn is the effect their sounds have on the tourists. For Hawthorne's tourist, the experience of

the “rushing sound” (58) of the Falls as an “Accidental Encounter” grants him the opportunity to perceive the Falls in their “authentic” sublimity, and, in turn, to claim a new (albeit problematic) sense of self-empowerment, while for the tourists in *White Noise*, the sounds at the barn appear to have a more communal effect but with no less troubling implications. Three times, in-between Siskind’s comments, Gladney says that all that he can hear is silence – “A long silence followed” (12), “There was an extended silence” (12), “Another silence ensued” (13). Yet what is of primary significance here is the other sound that this silence apparently conceals or that emerges from it, “the incessant clicking of shutter release buttons, the rushing crank of levers that advanced the film.”

This sound of the cameras, in contrast to what Hawthorne’s tourist hears, testifies to the collective solidarity of those who view the barn, and explains, in part, the basis for the barn’s allure as a sublime site. If, as Joseph M. Conte claims, the sound of the cameras squares with Abraham Moles’s seminal definition of “white noise” – “a more or less continuous noise consist[ing] of erratic repetitions of elementary shocks recurring with such a large average clarity as to become indiscernible . . .” (qtd. in Conte 118) – then the reaction the sound of the cameras elicits is comparable to other, traditional examples of auditory sublimity like waterfalls. The response of tourists in *White Noise*, which Conte describes as “a form of awe reserved for that which is alien to our consciousness” (119), clearly resembles the rapture of Hawthorne’s tourist. Yet the fundamental difference between the two sounds, and the inclusiveness that they produce, ultimately hinges on the role of simulation and marks a disturbing change in formations of the American sublime.²

Categorically, in Hawthorne authenticity functions as a means of guaranteeing that the forces that would mock, trivialize, undermine or contest the ideological work of the traditional American sublime are effectively silenced. In *White Noise*, on the other hand, the widespread prevalence and acceptance of simulation as the norm suggests that the cultural need for the kind of strategies that appeal to authenticity, like those conveyed in Hawthorne's sketch, has disappeared. I want to emphasize, however, that *White Noise* does not suggest that the destructive legacy of the American sublime is no longer felt or present in the contemporary American scene. In *White Noise* the ubiquity of simulation demonstrates that a more impenetrable screen has been created and disseminated with sublime "auras" like the one created with the barn. Much like the depictions of Los Angeles and Las Vegas in *Play It As It Lays*, *White Noise* demonstrates how American sublimity is no longer strictly bound to singular formations of nature or technology. Now even something as mundane as a barn can be infused with such wonder, and, as a result, if the barn is a simulation of a real barn it is also a simulation of the traditional American sublime.

It is with this treatment of simulation, then, that we can see how *White Noise* accounts for – and depicts – new configurations of the American sublime. Furthermore, by doing so, DeLillo's novel, unlike Hawthorne's sketch, offers a satirical critique that is not complicit with reinscribing the efficacy of older configurations. In effect, by having a simulation stand in for more iconic sites of sublimity, DeLillo's novel points out that appeals to sublime "authenticity" were always suspect in the first place because the commercial elements at places like Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon indicated that they were always cultural productions intended for public consumption. What *White Noise*

suggests has changed, though, is that even as consumers may be less disingenuous than before, their desire to acquiesce before a consumable, sublime spectacle is even more assured.

This acquiescence remains structured by the principles of the American sublime, even though the novel presents new configurations of its earlier paradigms. As in Didion's *Play It As It Lays* and *Democracy*, and as we shall see most overtly in Auster's *In The Country of Last Things*, what *White Noise* presents as most alarming is the way this acquiescence is connected to sublime spectatorship and the rendering of violence and death as spectacles for consumption. *White Noise* is replete with examples in which characters watch, read or hear about terrifying and deadly events from a distance, or in which characters find themselves part of an event that others consume from a similar vantage point. In what follows, I will focus, in varying degrees, on four such examples: the disasters that the Gladneys watch on the television news, the car crash movies that are the subject of Siskind's college seminar, the potential plane crash at the town's airport and the airborne toxic event that occurs with a chemical spill at the town's railway yard. With these examples I will examine the aura of simulation at the barn, and the more overt acquiescence it engenders, in relation to other sites of American sublimity that prove to be more resistant and intractable than those found in the past.

In the first example, the disasters that the Gladneys watch on the news during their habitual, Friday night gathering in front of the television, their reaction bears a resemblance to Maria Wyeth's when she watches similar footage on television in *Play It As It Lays*. Like Maria, the Gladneys view the footage from a position of spectatorship: as Saltzman aptly puts it, for the Gladneys, "Television provides contact with trauma of

course, but it is a sublimely conditioned contact, filtered by the promise of distance” (38). At the same time, the Gladneys’ motivations for wanting to have this kind of “contact with trauma” are different than Maria’s. For Maria, as we saw earlier, her spectatorship offers sedation, and her wish to view more disasters serves as a form of self-retribution for her perceived failures as mother. For the Gladneys, by contrast, the disaster footage holds them in silent awe – “We’d never been so attentive to our duty, our Friday assembly” (64) – even as the “wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping” becomes for Jack, at least, a source of guilt. Yet for our purposes at this point, what is most significant about these distinctions is not the potential virtue that might be attributed to Gladney’s pang of guilt, but what *White Noise* reveals about the family’s rapt interest in terms of spectatorship on a broader cultural level.

When Gladney voices his concerns to his colleague Alfonse Stompanato about the family’s reaction, Stompanato’s explanation does much to clarify why the Gladneys, like other characters in the text, are drawn to watching such footage. According to Stompanato, the logic is simple: “Because we’re suffering from brain fade. We need an occasional catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information” (66). Moreover, Stompanato explains that this sort of “break up” as an antidote to “brain fade” only functions effectively because of one’s ability to assume the position of a spectator: “Only a catastrophe gets our attention. We want them, we need them, we depend on them. As long as they happen somewhere else.” Yet what Stompanato misses is that “brain fade” is not fundamentally remedied within the pattern he describes. Spectatorship, coupled with viewing ever more elaborate experiences or representations of death, violence and destruction has the opposite effect – “brain fade” is increased. As

Matthew J. Packer explains, for the Gladneys (as well as others), “the repetition of catastrophe means catastrophes themselves soon pale” (657). On a more schematic level, it is because spectatorship displaces the impact of disasters and because repetition makes them comparatively less terrible, that watching them contributes to “brain fade,” that, in other words, they become commonplace.

White Noise also depicts spectatorship in a negative light because it often supports a celebration of destruction that is masked by America’s national rhetoric of progress and optimism. For example, through Siskind’s comments about car crash films, the novel shows that they encourage the same sort of sublime spectatorship towards destruction that is elicited with the TV disasters, but in the films it is fused with a celebration of technological achievement that functions in terms of the technological sublime. Siskind remarks: “I see these car crashes as part of a long tradition of American optimism. They are positive events, full of the old ‘can-do’ spirit. Each car crash is meant to be better than the last. There is a constant upgrading of tools and skills, a meeting of challenges . . .” (218). Moreover, Siskind’s comments even indicate that the films serve the same purpose as the exhibitions and parades that were used for promoting objects of the technological sublime in the past.³ Siskind adds: “Watch any car crash in any American movie. It is a high-spirited moment like old-fashioned stunt flying, walking on wings.” The car crash films, therefore, represent what can be seen as a new embodiment of the technological sublime; they collapse the technological object with its forms of dissemination. But by doing so, these films perform the traditional work of the technological sublime in a more destructive manner.

There is, admittedly, an associative and whimsical quality to Siskind's reasoning here, but this does not mean that locating these films as a new extension of the technological sublime is unwarranted. *White Noise* presents this new configuration of the technological sublime as something that demands caution and does not affirm Siskind's unbridled enthusiasm or advocate his advice to Gladney about how to watch the films – "Look past the violence, Jack. There is a wonderful brimming spirit of innocence and fun" (219). On the contrary, *White Noise* criticizes these films because they garner the same sort of fascination that *Democracy* portrays with the viewing of atomic tests in the United States and abroad – the celebration of the destructive capacity of technological inventions and the position of spectatorship that encourages viewing this destruction as "progressive."

Moreover, with the films, there is another new element at work: the celebration of technological progress is not confined to the destruction of the technological object; it extends to film technology, which can capture and reproduce the crashes in exceedingly impressive ways. The spectatorial distance from the real crashes is increased as they become more violent and destructive, through the manipulation of such filmic properties as lighting, sound and camera angles as well as special effects. Thus, when Siskind's students challenge him by saying the films simply portray "the suicide wish of technology" (217) they are nearly correct; it is, in fact, the optimistic character of the films that makes them truly embody "the suicide wish of technology" through the production of sublime fascination.

Lastly, *White Noise* emphasizes yet another interrelated point about these films that neither Siskind nor his students appear to take issue with, that these crashes are

essentially staged. If, as Baudrillard states, the final stage before an image becomes hyperreal is when it “masks the *absence* of a profound reality” or when “it plays at being an appearance” (6), the contrived nature of the crashes in the films demonstrates this stage as well as what follows – the point where the “sovereign difference” (2) between the real thing and its representation ceases to matter, where the representation takes precedence over the real.⁴ In this sense, spectatorship, mediation through film and the staged quality of the crashes all contribute to what Baudrillard calls the point at which there is “a liquidation of all referentials” and the stakes change: “It is no longer a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real” The films, much like the barn, represent the confluence between simulation and the perceptual dynamics, the cultural practices and cultural sites associated with the traditional, American sublime. But there is, of course, a difference. The films, in contrast to the barn, direct spectatorship and simulation towards scenes of destruction, and it is with the plane and the airborne toxic event that the implications of this dynamic of spectatorship, simulation and destruction are fully realized: whereas the films produce simulation through staged destruction, these other examples demonstrate the reduction of real disasters to simulations.

With the potential plane crash, *White Noise* depicts the transformation of a real, near disaster into a simulation through the same type of spectatorship and celebration of technological destruction found in the car crash films; what is more, the text even implies that such films have taught people how to reduce this kind of real situation to a simulation. For example, when someone announces over the plane’s intercom what the plane crash will look like, the cinematic quality of the speaker’s imaginary description creates a perspective of spectatorship, emphasizing the spectacle of the plane’s

destruction: “We’re falling out of the sky! We’re going down! We’re a silver gleaming death machine!” (90) Here, what amounts to a generic image of a plane crash displaces the reality of the present experience. Moreover, even in a moment where it seems reality is most immediate and tangible, there is a qualification. When someone claims that the crew feels a “pure” fear, a fear that is different from what they have felt when training in the enigmatically named “death simulator,” this claim is immediately superseded by another description made with cinematic gloss: “They will find our bodies in some smoking field, strewn about in the grisly attitudes of death.” Finally, the most direct way reality is turned into a simulation comes about at the most basic level of representation and mediation – through language: “Certain elements in the crew had decided to pretend that it was not a crash but a crash landing that was seconds away. After all, the difference between the two is only one word. Didn’t this suggest that the two forms of flight termination were more or less interchangeable? (91)” Through these various stages, *White Noise* conveys the subtle ways in which simulation can displace real, imminent disaster, even with the apparently innocuous change of “only one word.”

The crew’s effort to displace their terrifying experience could, perhaps, be explained as a natural response for coping with immediate trauma, but *White Noise* emphasizes that this is not the case: in addition to the similarities between the perception of the crew and what is engendered by car crash films, the similarities between the crew’s perception and that of the passengers once the plane has safely landed confirm the role of spectatorship and simulation. As Gladney notes (he is at the airport to meet his daughter who has arrived on a different plane) the passengers, like the crew, view their terror from a spectatorial distance: “They were not yet ready to disperse, to reinhabit their earthbound

bodies, but wanted to linger with their terror, keep it separate and intact for just a while longer.” Moreover, there are clear similarities between the passengers’ reaction and what takes place with other examples of sublimity in the text. The passengers congregate with a rapt attention that recalls the tourists at the barn, and the passengers’ interest in their terror is indicative of the effort to remedy “brain fade.” As they listen to someone recount their experience, Gladney observes:

No one disputed his account or tried to add individual testimony. It was as though they were being told of an event they hadn’t personally been involved in. They were interested in what he said, even curious, but also clearly detached. They trusted him to tell them what they’d said and felt.

Thus, the behavior of the passengers confirms the important role sublime spectatorship plays in turning real disasters – or near disasters – into simulations. But something else is alluded to as well: the collective awe such scenes garner, along with the collective need to alleviate “brain fade,” reduce death, violence and destruction to marketable commodities.

The most spectacular moment of disaster that conveys this commodification is the toxic spill of Nyodene D and the poisonous cloud that follows, dubbed the “airborne toxic event” (117). At first glance, Gladney says the “black billowing cloud” reminds him of “some death ship in a Norse legend,” but his subsequent description of the cloud and those who observe it, with “expressions set in tones of outlandish wonderment,” ultimately casts the ATE as sublime:

We weren’t sure how to react. It was a terrible thing to see But it was also spectacular Our fear was accompanied by a sense of awe that bordered on

the religious. It is surely possible to be awed by a 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. (127)

Given Gladney's description, here, then, it is not surprising that a number of critics have considered the ATE as sublime, but what is surprising is that they have failed to connect this event to other sites or elements of sublimity in the novel and within the American tradition.

That said, these critics should not be faulted too harshly, since those who have discussed the elements of commodification and simulation in the novel have not, in turn, fully connected them to the ATE or the sublime. Conte and Lentricchia, for example, account for Gladney's description of the ATE as sublime, but they hold that his invocation of the sublime is evidence of his singular inability to grasp the co-optation of the ATE by "mass culture" (Lentricchia 108) because of his "high art" (108) sensibility and his "training as an academic in the Western tradition" (Conte 130): in effect, the sublime and mass culture are incommensurable. Meanwhile, those critics who addressed the ATE in terms of "mass culture" have missed how it relates to the sublime. For example, Osteen concludes that the ATE only elicits fascination for a short period of time, for as long as it is not appropriated by the "advertising language" (177) that will "repackage death and turn it into magic" (179); however, this conclusion fails to account for the fact that there is no distinction here, that the underlying dynamics of the sublime structure the entire experience of the ATE. Indeed, although he only notes it in passing, Arthur Saltzman's observation about TV offering "trauma" through "a sublimely conditioned contact" is the only instance in which the ATE is linked to the sublime in

terms of mass culture, that “contact” through TV shapes the reactions of Gladney and the rest of the populace to the ATE, which explains why they “are simultaneously threatened and mollified by the impenetrability of the experience” (38).

Clearly, Gladney’s perception registers his knowledge of “mass culture” and a shared, collective viewpoint, which comes to the forefront with his second description of the ATE. Watching the ATE and the helicopters that track it through the night, he once more evokes the sublime but in conjunction with the media, commodification and simulation: “In its tremendous size, its dark and bulky menace, its escorting aircraft, the cloud resembled a national promotion for death, a multimillion-dollar campaign backed by radio spots, heavy print and billboard, TV saturation” (158). Moreover, the metaphorical connection Gladney draws here soon proves to be entirely factual. As Leonard Wilcox explains, the ATE “depicts a condition where subjective responses are both constructed and validated by radio and television” (101).

The operations of SIMUVAC, “short for simulated evacuation,” during and after the ATE, illustrates the most direct way in which the ATE, and its status as a sublime event, becomes linked to simulation and commodification (139). As a SIMUVAC technician explains to Gladney during the ATE, the only reason SIMUVAC is present is because it is “a new state program they’re still battling over funds for” and because the ATE provides a training opportunity, “we thought we could use it as a model.” Fundamentally, then, *White Noise* suggests that SIMUVAC co-opts and exploits the ATE and other catastrophes as well, thereby reducing them to simulations. Indeed, after the ATE, with SIMUVAC’s “evacuation for a noxious odor” (270) that doesn’t exist, the text ironically demonstrates the end result of these activities, which, in turn, reflects the

response of people to the ATE. When faced with an “actual noxious odor” that appears “three days” after the simulation, those who have participated with SIMUVAC as victims, in “half an hour of self-induced gagging and vomiting” (270), react passively: “They’d taken part in the SIMUVAC exercise but were reluctant to flee now. There were those who wondered what caused the odor, those who looked worried, those who said the absence of technical personnel meant there was nothing to worry about” (271).

Similarly, with the ATE, those who flee with Gladney to an evacuation center exhibit the same sort of passivity and inability to see the reality of the disaster for what it is; and at the evacuation center, *White Noise* more clearly demonstrates how and why the passivity of the evacuees is symptomatic of their complicity with SIMUVAC and other forms of exploitative mediation. As Conroy observes, people agreeing to play victims during the noxious odor simulation is “an expression of civicism in its most perverse form” (100), which takes on a larger dimension and significance during the ATE: “Apparently this community sees its victimhood as the only way to present itself to itself and others. The possibility of mounting some political opposition to the conditions that produce the event in the first place is not even considered.” Instead, what is most pressing for the evacuees is the absence of media coverage that keeps them from expressing their “victimhood,” which is illustrated when a man with a tiny TV holds forth to the other evacuees and garners “applause” (162) and “a sustained burst of shouting and hand-clapping” for his speech: “The airborne toxic event,” he observes, “is a horrifying thing. Our fear is enormous. Even if there hasn’t been great loss of life, don’t we deserve some attention for our suffering, our human worry, our terror? Isn’t fear news?”

With this attention to the newsworthiness of fear, then, *White Noise* suggests that what is most pressing for the evacuees is whether they can “sell” their fear, a desire that comes about by their experience of the ATE as sublime within new forms of mediation and simulation. Indeed, through the evacuees *White Noise* depicts a significant shift in the role fear plays within the tradition of the American sublime. As Duvall explains, “Their terror . . . cannot register in a Romantic sublime where origin is still attributable to the Godhead. The awe and terror of this man-made disaster can only be validated through the electronic media” (173). However, even though Duvall rightly identifies the new way the evacuees’ experience of the ATE can be “validated,” the implication that older configurations are now displaced and that appeals to “origin” still matter as they once did misses the connection between a site like “the most photographed barn in America” and the ATE. As we shall see in the following section, appeals to “Godhead” still play a significant role in the universe of *White Noise* in so far as they are a part of the ways in which simulation and sublimity support a consumer logic that is predicated on selling fear and producing violence.

II

With the novel’s depiction of simulation contributing to new, more collective forms of the American sublime than in the past, it might seem justified to take the view expressed by some critics that *White Noise* sacrifices character development for an unbridled fascination with the glossy surfaces of the contemporary world.⁵ Yet if we turn our attention to the interaction of the characters with those glossy surfaces, the complexity with which DeLillo attends to his characters within their fascinating, fictional world and within the context of the American sublime becomes clear. Moreover,

examining the intellectual and emotional responses of the Gladney family to the types of sublimity they encounter is significant for another reason as well. By doing so, I will engage in an ongoing critical debate about the degree to which some characters in DeLillo's fiction may resist the simulated and spectacular displays of mass culture, a debate that begins, in large part, with DeLillo's own comments about what he calls the "radiance in dailiness" in *White Noise*.

DeLillo's enigmatic remarks to Anthony DeCurtis about this "radiance in dailiness" (70) that seems to indicate "something extraordinary hovering just beyond our touch and just beyond our vision" (71), can appear to suggest proof of the existence of some immaterial or spiritual realm of experience. Moreover, DeLillo's later comments to DeCurtis about infant speech and babbling as a type of glossolalia can also be seen to have a correspondence to this "radiance," because such behavior suggests "that children have a direct route to, have direct contact to the kind of natural truth that eludes us as adults" (72). With these points in mind, then, it might not be surprising that it is the moments of transcendence felt by Gladney and others in response to their daily lives and to children that have been taken as evidence of culturally resistant modes of experience. At the same time, what is surprising is that this argument has been advanced sometimes in relation to – and sometimes seemingly in spite of – what DeLillo locates as the specific source of this "radiance in dailiness" in the text, the physical space of the supermarket.

Taken as a whole, these critical interpretations of the "radiance in dailiness" can be viewed as marking a succession of ever more overt and elaborate claims about the ways in which families and children are sources of wonder that are not subject to the laws of simulation and consumption. Thomas Ferraro, for example, while accounting for the

fact that DeLillo connects the “radiance in dailiness” to the supermarket, insists that it is not simply “a site of cultural brainwashing” (31). According to Ferraro, the supermarket even lends luster to the family’s activity there: it is “as if the radiance that DeLillo identifies with the supermarket has by dint of the family work within the supermarket passed over into the Gladney confraternity itself” (34-35). Likewise, Arnold Weinstein follows a similar path by equating the “radiance in dailiness” with domestic life and children. For him one can take a culturally resistant stand by seeing “like a child again,” by seeing the marvelous in the everyday in a manner that is not scripted by the mass media and consumerism: it is a way “to see dimensions, to perceive auras, to grasp the connectedness of what is discrete, the odd magic of the material world we have made” (131). Still more dramatic is the argument put forward by Ellen Pifer, in which she makes no reference to the supermarket in terms of the “radiance in dailiness.” For her, the “radiance” is found by Gladney as he watches his children, when “Jack marvels at the wondrous nature of the ordinary” (214), which follows DeLillo’s points about children: that “these children possess special powers of discernment and knowledge – as though they, like Wordsworth’s child, had entered the world ‘trailing clouds of glory’ from some prior realm of being” (216).⁶ In order to address these arguments and to offer a new clarity to this debate, in what follows I will argue that these forms of transcendence associated with dailiness and children are not unique. Instead, I will show that the text locates these forms of transcendence as expressions of the traditional structures of the American sublime and their new relation to simulation and consumption in the contemporary world.

The view that the “radiance in dailiness” indicates the presence of otherworldly forces can be explained, in part, by DeLillo’s description of it to DeCurtis as one of many elements of “mystery” (63) in his work and by Murray Jay Siskind’s description of supermarket as a space that “recharges us spiritually” (37). DeLillo, when asked about the presence of “the occult and superstitions of various kinds” and of “nonrational systems” in his work, replies: “I think my work has always been informed by mystery I would say that mystery in general rather than the occult is something that weaves in and out of my work” (63). Moreover, DeLillo links this “mystery” to the “radiance in dailiness”: “Sometimes this radiance can be almost frightening. Other times it can be almost holy or sacred. Is it really there? Well, yes” (71). That said, from DeLillo’s additional comments and from what occurs in *White Noise*, we can see that the supermarket does not truly embody a space that is “holy or sacred” in the usual or literal sense. The supermarket testifies to DeLillo’s interest in the way “mystery” functions as a cultural phenomenon, rather than a verification that the “holy or sacred” is real. DeLillo explains: “I don’t believe as Murray Jay Siskind does in *White Noise* that the supermarket is a form of Tibetan lamasery. But there is something there that we tend to miss.”

Specific forms of “mystery” aside, *White Noise* illustrates that for Siskind, as for DeLillo, it is the production of transcendent effects through the environment of the supermarket that explains its power: “All the letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases” (38). As Siskind explains, these qualities make it seem that “it is just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability” (38), so the supermarket adheres to the same logic of simulation as “the most photographed barn in

America” (12). According to Siskind, “peeling off the layers of unspeakability” is not what is really at stake here – “Not that we would want to, not that any useful purpose would be served” (38). The supermarket, like the barn, attests to the fact that sites of transcendence need only produce the correct semblance of effects, and what the comparison between the supermarket and Tibet underscores is that this semblance is apparently enough to keep people entranced. As Siskind puts it: “This is not Tibet. Even Tibet is not Tibet anymore.”⁷ Fundamentally, then, *White Noise* suggests that the “radiance in dailiness” has the same kind of prevalence and power as other sites of sublimity; indeed, what makes the supermarket so captivating is its mediation of death like the televised disasters and the presence of the media at the airborne toxic event.

Once again, DeLillo’s comments to DeCurtis can be useful because he explains that death, or more precisely, the fear of death, is connected to sites like the supermarket that embody the “radiance in dailiness.” DeLillo remarks that the fear of death “is something we all feel, something we almost never talk about, something that is *almost* there,” and that the fear of death has a direct relationship to the “radiance in dailiness”:

I tried to relate it [the fear of death] in *White Noise* to this other sense of transcendence that lies just beyond our touch. This extraordinary wonder of things is somehow related to the extraordinary dread, to the death fear we try to keep beneath the surface of our perceptions. (71)

Thus, in places of “radiance” the fear of death takes on a special quality and significance, a point which is most clearly depicted in *White Noise* when Gladney immerses himself in the experience of shopping.

The subject of Gladney's efforts to use shopping to keep his fear of death at bay has received much attention by critics, but this subject has not been fully considered in relation to the "radiance in dailiness," particularly by those who claim supermarket's "radiance in dailiness" is somehow subversive. As a result, the arguments by those who have considered Gladney's shopping in the context of his fear of death can provide us with a vital starting point for addressing "the radiance in dailiness" and its link to consumption. Most of these critics have arrived at what amounts to a critical consensus about the relationship between the fear of death and consumption in the novel that can be categorized into two, often overlapping currents. First, a number of critics concur with Siskind's view that the supermarket evokes rebirth or immortality, with points like Mark Osteen's, where he observes that "for Jack and many Americans, consuming attaches persons to the things whose reproducibility betokens immortality" (171). Second, critics also argue that the supermarket supports the denial of death; for instance, as Arno Heller eloquently puts it, in the supermarket, "Man is overwhelmed by the sheer number of material things, brand names, information and codes in an entropic simulacra world whose main function is to cover up death" (40).⁸

While both views identify key factors about Gladney shopping – the role of commodities, the space of consumption, the promise of immortality and the suppression of the fear of death – what has not been accounted for is the "radiance in dailiness" and other examples of sublimity in the novel. Both Heller's and Osteen's views, for instance, are right as far as they go (particularly Heller's which implicitly describes the supermarket in terms of sublimity), yet neither view, nor the similar ones offered by other critics, account for the ways in which sites like the supermarket that produce the

“radiance in dailiness” are connected to other examples of sublimity in the text. In the supermarket and the local shopping mall that Gladney also frequents, the transcendence that these settings connote and the meanings that the commodities within them signify does not simply repress the fear of death; instead, the settings and the commodities are evidence of a consumer logic that alternately alleviates and exacerbates the fear of death in order to generate a profit.

For Gladney, the spaces of the supermarket and the Mid-Village Mall produce transcendent effects that are similar to what he notes about the “most photographed barn in America.” But these consumer spaces have an even more dramatic and personal impact on him. On one level, as Leonard Wilcox and Lydia Yuknavitch claim, this impact can be explained as another byproduct of simulation. What Gladney feels in the supermarket exemplifies the “ecstasy” described by Baudrillard, the “ecstasy,” as Yuknavitch puts it, in which “subjects are overstimulated by simulations or ‘simulacra’, an overwhelming cacophony of media and information culture” (62). Indeed, it is fitting that the supermarket and the mall produce this “ecstasy” through the same element that Gladney responds to at the barn – white noise. Gladney remarks:

I realized the place was awash in noise. The toneless systems, the jangle and skid of carts, the loudspeaker and coffee-making machines, the cries of children. And over it all, or under it, a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension. (36)

Clearly, then, like the cameras clicking at the barn, the din of the supermarket permeates the scene with an aura of simulation, but with the qualifying “as of,” the connotation of

an imperceptible reality is part of the simulation as well. Likewise, when Gladney shops at the mall the white noise there elicits an analogous reaction from him:

A band played live Muzak. Voices rose ten stories from the gardens and promenades, a roar that echoed through the vast gallery, mixing noises from the tiers, with shuffling feet and chiming bells, the hum of escalators, the sound of people eating, the human buzz of some vivid and happy transaction. (84)

Thus, the awe elicited by these sites that produce the “radiance in dailiness” is comparable to other forms of simulation and white noise in the text.

That said, this awe is also structured by the reproduction of the conventions of the American sublime through simulation. In fact, by addressing how the conventions of the American sublime are present in the supermarket and the mall, we can appreciate the systematic way the transcendence produced within these sites celebrates and encourages consumption. For example, understanding the role of the American sublime in these sites clarifies what can be seen as a discrepancy between the kinds of transcendence these sites connote – even if such transcendence is simply the product of simulation. In the supermarket, the allusion to some kind of “outside” (36) sacred realm appears to be at odds with the transcendent “human buzz” (84) in the mall, but this distinction is not indicative of a categorical opposition. As Rob Wilson explains, in its earliest, historical configurations, the American sublime “is always located in the same place: not so much in the landscape as in the power implicit behind that landscape and selfhood, namely God” (*American Sublime* 81), which can be likened to what is simulated at the supermarket. Moreover, as can be gathered by the terms of “landscape and selfhood” in which Wilson locates this religious sublimity, a covert celebration of the self-fashioning

Adamic figure was already firmly in place (a point that Wilson perceptively traces in his analysis of such poets as Bradstreet, Livingston and Bryant). In *White Noise*, then, the emphasis on the human rather than the divine in the mall does not represent an either/or proposition; rather, attributing “mystery” or “radiance” to the awe-inspiring productions and qualities of those who have built and inhabit the mall testifies to their ability to capture and express divine inspiration, even if this creative energy is now reduced to a band playing the white noise of “live Muzak” (84).

Access to such energy, however, comes with a nonnegotiable price: for Gladney and the other shoppers to share in the production of transcendence and the experience of self-fashioning they must shop. Recalling a shopping excursion to the supermarket, Gladney says that it is after buying products that he and his family feel fulfilled, that they have “achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less . . .” (20). For Gladney and his family and, by implication, other shoppers as well, shopping becomes an expression of the prototypical American self, in which the achievement and expression of a “fullness of being” signals a transcendence of limits – of “less.” The transformative power of sites like the supermarket and the mall lies in one’s ability to shop within them, and the simulated elements of the American sublime that they produce both support and are supported by, shopping.

For those who do not shop, however, the mall is a potentially alienating and even deadly space, and in this way *White Noise* most clearly illustrates why imbuing consumer spaces with sublimity is problematic. With the Treadwells, for example, the elderly brother and sister who get lost in the mall for four days, *White Noise* implies that the mall will only support those who know how to use it for shopping. By not doing shopping, the

sublime elements of the space will not support self-fashioning. For the Treadwells, “the vastness and strangeness of the place . . . made them feel helpless and adrift in a landscape of remote and menacing figures” (59), and this experience culminates with the sister’s death: “The doctor said she died of lingering dread, a result of the four days and nights she and her brother had spent in the Mid-Village Mall, lost and confused” (99). The fate of the Treadwells functions as a cautionary tale: through them, *White Noise* demonstrates that all that separates Gladney and other shoppers from a similar end is their ability to be savvy consumers, and that their confidence in doing so may be unwarranted. As Ferraro notes, even as “the ‘radiance’ within temples of consumption reflects not so much the marketing of commodities per se as it does the energy of familial interaction that takes place there” (31), this does not mean that Gladney or the other shoppers experience something that is entirely positive.⁹ Indeed, the fact that Gladney’s shopping spree occurs in the same mall as the Treadwells’ misadventure underscores that his apparent empowering transformation there, a symbolic death and rebirth, is not as it seems.

Significantly, whereas the Treadwells are undermined by their inability to shop, the force that causes Gladney’s “death” in the mall can apparently be thwarted by his power as a shopper. When a colleague, Eric Massingale, meets Gladney in the mall and remarks that Gladney looks less impressive without the dark glasses and the academic robes he usually wears on campus, Massingale effectively kills him: “You look so harmless, Jack. A big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy” (83). But Gladney knows how to recover from this symbolic death: “The encounter put me in the mood to shop.” Automatic and apparently habitual, Gladney’s response indicates that he has recovered

from other symbolic deaths in the past by shopping, which is, in fact, borne out when he begins to shop after his encounter with Massingale : “I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I’d forgotten existed. Brightness settled around me” (84). The mall supports Gladney. Because he knows how to shop, he can recover from Massingale’s attack and the physical elements of the mall that have overwhelmed the Treadwells seem to support his rebirth: “I kept seeing myself unexpectedly in some reflecting surface” (83). For a time, then, the mall apparently offers a space in which Gladney can exercise the power to refashion himself against “deadly” forces, at least for as long as he shops.

Gladney’s empowerment, of course, is illusory and the feeling is fleeting. His belief that he has been reborn and has been freed from death by shopping and spending money – “sums,” he claims, that “in fact came back to me in the form of existential credit” (84) – is undone by what he has bought. Indeed, from this point on Gladney’s “existential credit” is revoked whenever he looks at what he owns. As Tom LeClair observes, in reference to the scene where Gladney throws old household objects away, “Jack’s fear of dying is intensified, rather than relieved, by the objects he has collected over the years” (13), but what is also revealed is that this fear of death is shaped by commodities. In this light, it is not surprising that dread, or the fear of death, like the kind that kills Gladys Treadwell, is what Gladney experiences as he tries to divest himself of these objects.

By attempting to renounce his consumer practices, Gladney moves towards becoming an ineffectual shopper like the Treadwells, but the fact that his situation is still defined by his connection to commodities is revealing: ridding himself of things will not

work because he cannot, in effect, reverse things and expect the same feeling of transcendence and power. “The more things I threw away,” he observes, “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” (262). This “mortality,” though, has little to do with the fact that the household items are old or because Gladney sees them as old; the novel implies that this “mortality” has always been there, which is revealed when Gladney sits on his front steps, looks at the pile of things he has taken to the curb and anxiously waits for his fear to subside, “for a sense of ease and peace to settle in the air around me.”

Immersed in his fear, his inability to understand his predicament is signaled by the woman who passes on the sidewalk, uttering the generic names of a number of products – “A decongestant, an antihistamine, a cough suppressant, a pain reliever.” Each name signifies a product encoded with an ailment and its cure, which suggests the way all commodities amplify the fear of discomfort, pain or death in order to make them wanted or needed. As a result, the text reveals that Gladney’s feeling of awe and transcendence that he otherwise gains from buying commodities represents just one stage in the cycle of consumption. Commodities exacerbate fears as well as promising to alleviate them.

This dynamic of consumption, which, in turn, entails the promise of self-fashioning through the sublime “radiance” of consumer space and purchasing commodities, has a significance that extends beyond the supermarket and the mall. *White Noise* links the mediation of the fear of death to the commodification of death, and by doing so, the text links the sublimity associated with the consumption in the supermarket and the mall to the consumption of destruction and disaster found with the car crash films

and the airborne toxic event. *White Noise* offers a complex critique of the legacy of the American sublime: the awe and terror produced by scenes of destruction or deadly power that validate the quintessential American self are revealed to be integral to the underlying logic of consumption. And as a result, this dynamic explains the presence of the numerous, diverse and interrelated sites of the American sublime in the text. Above all, by treating the American sublime as an expression of consumer culture, *White Noise* makes its most provocative critical claim: that the relationship between simulation, sublimity, and consumption can lead to violence and erase the impact and the implications of that violence not only for those who witness it as spectators, but for those who perpetrate it as well.

Gladney's attempt to kill Willie Mink in a motel exemplifies the ties between the spectatorship of violence and the perpetration of violence, and explains how and why this climactic moment, which might otherwise seem implausible, fits in the larger scheme of the novel. Much insightful criticism has been written about this scene that uses, as a starting point, Siskind's comments to Gladney about killers and diers: that for Gladney to successfully transcend his fear of death he needs to become a "killer" rather than a "dier" (291). However, I offer a new view of Gladney's role as a "killer" by arguing that it must be understood as a secondary, constituent element of his actions as a consumer. Certainly, Siskind's advice gives direction to Gladney's subsequent actions, but these actions represent, first and foremost, a subversive consumer act – a theft – that is intended to free him from his predicament and provide him with the ultimate commodity, Mink's miracle drug, Dylar, which has been created to erase one's fear of death.¹⁰

For Gladney, this theft represents a subversion of the consumer system, with the added benefit of acquiring a drug that could make his freedom from the fear of death last, but it is an action that nevertheless shows how he remains trapped in the same cycle of consumption. Becoming a thief is synonymous with becoming a killer, and Siskind's description of killers and diers reveals that the difference between the two is based on consumer agency: "The killer, in theory, attempts to defeat his own death by killing others. He buys time, he buys life." Therefore, a view such as Duvall's is nearly correct when he claims that "Murray's theory of killing for life-credit substitutes for Jack's now untenable sense of shopping for existential credit" (184). But for Gladney killing neither "substitutes" for shopping nor is shopping judged an "untenable" means of gaining "existential credit"; instead, Gladney's actions are directly related to solving his problem through consumption, precisely because that problem is defined for him by commodities. Significantly, the anger that leads to his actions is fired as much by the commodities that have failed him that connote "mortality" as the discovery that his wife has slept with Mink to acquire Dylar for herself. Gladney reveals: "I bore a personal grudge against these things. Somehow they'd put me in this fix. They'd dragged me down, made escape impossible" (294). Thus, shopping is not an "untenable" solution; for Gladney it just needs to be pursued in a new way – as a thief but also as a murderer.

In the actions that ensue, theft and murder become even more entangled, and it is through this entanglement that *White Noise* criticizes the traditional sublime mode of self-fashioning as an act that is predicated on the spectatorship of violence, death and destruction. On the one hand, as Leonard Wilcox notes, the text undermines Gladney's belief that he gains a new identity through his confrontation with Mink by exposing that

identity as a simulation. As Wilcox puts it, Gladney's belief that he achieves "a moment of heroic self-fashioning" (104) actually stems from "a play of stylistic mannerisms, from the high modernist heroics of the existential hero to the B-movie heroics of the hard-boiled detective" (105). In particular, it is Gladney's self-consciousness that reveals the role of simulation here when, as Wilcox says, "Gladney assumes the voice-over style of the Raymond Chandler hero." Similarly, I suggest that this self-consciousness also conveys the central role of spectatorship in this scene. In fact, the text weaves simulation and spectatorship together with an additional, ironic twist: part of the reason Gladney can wield power over Mink is because Mink has been taking Dylar and suffers from one of its known side-effects, that it causes the "user to confuse words with the things they referred to . . ." (310). When Gladney says a number of phrases that connote imminent disaster – "Falling plane" (309), "Plunging aircraft" (309) and "Hail of bullets" (311) – Mink writhes in pain as if facing these threats, and Gladney derives power from viewing Mink's suffering and imagining how he, Gladney, appears to Mink: "I loomed in the doorway, conscious of looming, seeing myself from Mink's viewpoint, significant, threatening" (311-312). As a result, Gladney's ability to gain dominance at this moment, through his simulated persona and the position of spectatorship, is dependent upon Mink's own susceptibility to simulation from taking Dylar.

It is through Gladney's spectatorship here, moreover, that *White Noise* also reveals how displacing the fear of death can be connected to commodifying death. With Gladney's discovery that Dylar doesn't work, he effectively turns Mink's death into a commodity that he must consume in order to transcend his fear of death, which occurs when he shoots Mink and experiences this act as sublime: "I watched the blood spurt

from the victim's midsection. A delicate arc. I marveled at the rich color I saw beyond words. I knew what red was, saw it in terms of dominant wavelength, luminance, purity. Mink's pain was beautiful, intense" (312). For Gladney, his experience of empowerment is based on the spectatorial distance he has from Mink, reducing Mink's death to another thing that can be consumed, which is underscored when Gladney shoots him again to "relive the experience." By doing so, Gladney shows that he wants to view himself from Mink's perspective, and that he wants to consume – or more accurately, steal – that perspective: "I tried to see myself from Mink's viewpoint. Looming, dominant, gaining life-power, storing up life-credit. But he was too far gone to have a viewpoint." Believing, in effect, that he has stolen Mink's life, Gladney sees his plan as a success: "It was going well. I was pleased to see how well it was going."

With the disruption of Gladney's plan, though, *White Noise* brings to the forefront the similarities between what happens between Gladney and Mink and what occurs at sites like the supermarket and the mall, the destructive impact of the relationship between the American sublime and consumer culture. Apart from shooting Mink, nothing goes as planned for Gladney, and the discrepancies between what happens and Gladney's plan only emphasize further that the conflict between Gladney and Mink is part of an overarching consumer act: Dylar, apparently, does not work and Mink shoots Gladney in the wrist destroying Gladney's moment of triumph – "What had happened to the higher plane of energy in which I'd carried out my scheme?" (313) In turn, Gladney decides to take Mink to a hospital and feels a rebirth of his humanity by doing so – "There was something redemptive here" (314). Even after things go awry for Gladney, he remains the quintessential consumer: another symbolic death (Mink shooting Gladney) and

another symbolic rebirth (Gladney saving Mink) amounts to another trip to the supermarket and the mall, with the promise of self-fashioning and transcendence as a means of erasing the fear of death.

Indeed, to view Gladney's repentant "rebirth" after he decides to save Mink as anything less than disingenuous would be mistaken. Gladney clearly rationalizes his actions in order to give greater meaning to his life, in yet another effort to accrue "life-credit" and displace his fear of death.¹¹ His rhetorical question about what he has done at the motel signals that he has not changed his perspective: "Is it 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 empty street." From Gladney's behavior, then, *White Noise* clearly casts his relationship to the "radiance in dailiness" in a critical and even satiric light, from the apparently benign sites of consumption like the supermarket and the mall to the nearly deadly scene of violence in Mink's motel room. As a result, with these points in mind, the debate about the "radiance in dailiness," about the way it can be distinct from simulation, the media and consumption, and particularly, the way this "radiance" can include the role and effect of children, could seem incongruous at best. Nevertheless, they, too, have a direct connection to Gladney's efforts to escape his fear of death through simulation, consumption and the American sublime.

The link between the "radiance in dailiness" and children is not made explicit by DeLillo in his interview with DeCurtis. Still, because DeLillo speaks to him about children as another "mysterious" element in his work, a number of critics have suggested that children represent this "radiance" while not, curiously, discussing children in terms

of the setting in which DeLillo first mentions it – the supermarket. In *White Noise* there is indeed a connection between the awe that children elicit from Gladney and what he draws from the supermarket. As Siskind notes, Gladney’s fascination with Wilder is because Wilder has what Gladney most desires, freedom from the fear of death:

He doesn’t know he’s going to die. He doesn’t know death at all. You cherish this simpleton blessing of his, this exemption from harm. You want to get close to him, touch him, look at him, breathe him in. How lucky he is. A cloud of unknowing, an omnipotent little person. (289-90)

For Gladney, children seem to be another solution to his dilemma, and he apparently believes that he can obtain what he needs by listening to their infant speech and babbling.

In this respect, Gladney’s behavior conforms to DeLillo’s remarks to DeCurtis that infant babbling appears to convey a deeper mystery.¹² DeLillo compares babbling to glossolalia, “to speaking in tongues, which itself is what we might call an alternate reality,” and which contributes to “the way we feel about children in general. There is something they know but can’t tell us. Or there is something they remember which we’ve forgotten” (72). DeLillo’s comments are particularly useful in respect to *White Noise* because they illuminate how the Gladney children do not, in fact, have access to “an alternate reality,” that they only appear to have such access because of the way adults respond to them. Hence, as with DeLillo’s comments about the “sacred” qualities of the supermarket, his comments about infant babbling suggest how the text examines the fascination people have with something without asserting that their fascination is based on a true belief. In contrast to some critics, I suggest that there is no evidence that Gladney’s interactions with his children reveal a culturally resistant and/or other-worldly

form of communication. In particular, I want to position my interpretation against Bonca's view that the language Gladney's children speak represents a positive "human strategy to cope with mortality" that is distinct from cultural influence as well as Pifer's parallel claim that through the kind of language children display a "profound connection to the unfathomable source of being" (217). Instead, I argue that Gladney perceives his children's utterances as sublime because of his fear of death, and, more disturbingly, because his fascination betrays the same spectatorial and potentially dehumanizing view of others that is most fully realized with his attack on Mink. Overall, these moments that might otherwise convey familial closeness are evidence of the same type of consumption found with other examples of the "radiance in dailiness."

The most dramatic examples of the impact of children on Gladney occur when his daughter, Steffie, says "Toyota Celica" in her sleep and when his son, Wilder, cries, continuously, for seven hours. According to Bonca, Steffie's words testify to the overarching function of language in the text, that language "bridges the lonely distances created by the fact that we are all going to die," and which, in Steffie's case, could be seen as expressing her fear of the airborne toxic event to her father (29). For Bonca, what is most important about this moment is that Steffie's words demonstrate the way the communication of her fear of death emerges in spite of the words she uses, that it is "an example of the death-fear speaking through consumer jargon" (36):

It is a moment of powerfully charged ambivalences: pathetic that Steffie has had to express her fears this way, but amazing that she does; awe-inspiring what strange psychic trails she had to follow to make her deepest fears heard, equally wondrous that on some level, they are heard. (37)

Similarly, Pifer argues that for Gladney Steffie's words "puts him in touch with a realm . . . that [has] nothing to do with the product, its purchase, or its consumption" (219). For Bonca and Pifer, "the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence" that Gladney says he derives from the words occurs in spite of what the words mean (155).¹³

To some extent, this point about the meaninglessness of the words is supported by DeLillo's comments about this scene in another interview with Adam Begley, but DeLillo does not suggest that the text presents the interaction as evidence of "outside" forces that resist consumer culture. According to DeLillo, "Toyota Celica" represents the kind of "computer generated" words that are "devised to be pronounceable in a hundred languages," which therefore have a "chantlike quality" that can be found "when you detach one of these words from the product it was designed to serve":

If you concentrate on the sound, if you disassociate the words from the object they denote, and if you say the words over and over, they become a sort of higher Esperanto. This is how Toyota Celica began its life. It was pure chant at the beginning. Then they had to find an object to accommodate the words. (97)

White Noise does register DeLillo's comments about the effect the words "Toyota Celica" have as just sound through Gladney's rapture with the words before he recognizes them. The words are "familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant" (155), but nowhere is there any indication that they mean anything more to Steffie than their sound, that they indicate her contact with a "alternate reality" or communicate her fear of death, that they are anything else but another form of white noise. It is only Gladney's perspective that suggests that they could be viewed otherwise, and in spite of being "a

simple brand name, an ordinary car”: “Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence.” What becomes clear is that Gladney wants to consume the words because of their transcendent effect, and, disturbingly, his desire to consume them represents the foundation of the familial bond here. “I depend on my children for that,” he says, and reveals “I sat a while longer, watching Denise, watching Wilder, feeling selfless and spiritually large.” Fundamentally, then, Gladney’s interaction with Steffie represents another act of consumption and, in light of what happens later with Gladney’s “selfless and spiritually large” action of saving Mink, Gladney’s final comment takes on a decidedly darker resonance.

Similarly, when Wilder cries, Gladney is fascinated by the way meaningless words quell his fear of death. According to Gladney, Wilder “was crying out, saying nameless things in a way that touched me with its depth and richness. This was an ancient dirge all the more impressive for its resolute monotony” (78). Not surprisingly, for Bonca, what happens with Wilder is akin to what happens with Steffie: through “his hysterical terror, Wilder is expressing (however unconsciously) his fear of death, and in a primal way is trying to ‘bridge the lonely distances’” (35). Yet it seems even less likely that Wilder expresses a “dirge” than Steffie when she murmurs “Toyota Celica” in her sleep; with Steffie, at least, her recent encounter with the airborne toxic event offers some tangible reason why her words could be seen as a response to death. What the two scenes do have in common, though, is that they reveal Gladney’s need to consume these sounds from his children, and with Wilder Gladney’s need clearly surpasses his parental concerns, which explains why he does nothing to assuage his son’s cries.¹⁴ Gladney remarks:

I began to think he had disappeared inside this wailing noise and if I could join him in his lost and suspended place we might together perform some reckless wonder of intelligibility. I let it break across my body. It might not be so terrible, I thought, to have to sit here for four more hours, with the motor running and the heater on, listening to this uniform lament. It might be good, it might be strangely soothing. I entered it, fell into it, letting it enfold and cover me.

Here, then, what might have been a moment of affiliation between father and son is less important to Gladney than the possibility that he could experience transcendence, “some reckless wonder of intelligibility.” Thus, on the surface, Pifer is correct when she says that through this exchange “Jack also discovers a medium for expressing his own sorrow, for releasing his pent up fear,” which makes him feel “magically cleansed, purified, renewed” (226). However, the lack of reciprocation between Gladney and Wilder recalls that other moment when Gladney’s desire for transcendence takes precedence over someone else, when he co-opts Mink’s viewpoint at the motel and experiences the “rebirth” that follows.

Wilder’s impact on Gladney, though, is not simply a reflection of Gladney’s warped sensibility. The reactions of the other family members and other characters to Wilder coincide with DeLillo’s comments to DeCurtis that children appear to have access to something that adults have forgotten, or that children know something that they cannot communicate. For example once Wilder stops crying, the text suggests that the awe Wilder elicits from other family members is because they, in fact, view him as “wilder,” an Adamic “wild child” in touch with supernatural forces, which is conveyed by invoking the natural sublime:

They watched him with something like awe It was as though he'd just returned from a period of wandering in some remote and holy place, in sand barrens or snowy ranges – a place where things are said, sights are seen, distances reached which we in our ordinary toil can only regard with the mingled reverence and wonder we hold in reserve for feats of the most sublime and difficult dimensions. (79)

Granted, the family's reaction is, of course, narrated by Gladney so is filtered through his obsessive need to find evidence of immortality, but in this instance, the text appears to allow Gladney to speak for the mindset of the other family members as well. Indeed, Wilder's undeniable impact here is confirmed by his "miraculous" trek across the freeway on his tricycle, and in doing so the text suggests that Gladney's perception is more representative than we might like to believe.

Wilder's misadventure on the freeway, in which he safely crosses three lanes of busy traffic only to tumble down an embankment after riding "parallel to the traffic," reveals that he draws wonder from others as well as Gladney and the family (323). Moreover, the readiness with which people are willing to view Wilder's "mystically charged" (322) movement as evidence of some preternatural ability for escaping the deadly flow of traffic illustrates the affinities between Gladney's perspective and others. There is no evidence that Wilder escapes harm for any reason other than pure luck, so the text shows that the collective desire to see Wilder as otherworldly is indicative of something else: Wilder's trek is another example of a sublime spectacle that is readily consumed because it dramatizes escape from a deadly threat, which hints at the possibility of immortality. With the actual details of Wilder's trek as well as the false

transcendence it connotes by taking place on the freeway, *White Noise* suggests that Wilder's influence is culturally determined. He does not possess a state of grace or election nor does the awe he elicits from those who witness his trek challenge the spectatorship which makes sites of sublimity attractive, consumable experiences.

The fact that Wilder's trek takes place on – and alongside – the freeway connects it to the same kind of well-known associations of freedom and progress found with Maria Wyeth driving the freeway in *Play It As It Lays*.¹⁵ Wilder's movement across traffic recalls Maria's brief, defiant moments of deft navigation, and, as Weinstein puts it, does indeed represent "an image of the child's immersion into the flow" (qtd. in Pifer 231). Wilder's trek is no more an example of genuine freedom than Maria's morning excursions. In fact, like *Play It As It Lays*, *White Noise* uses the reality of the freeway experience to undercut its mythic, figurative connotations. Just as Maria's journey leads her to a dead end, so, too, does Wilder's. Wilder's trek begins with his initial failure to comprehend a dead end, so his subsequent safe passage across the freeway occurs in spite of his blissful ignorance and self-absorption. As Gladney puts it, Wilder's trek begins when "Wilder got on his plastic tricycle, rode it around the block, turned right onto a dead end street and pedaled noisily to the dead end" (322). Unable to understand the dead end, Wilder is incapable of heeding what the simplest obstacle might mean. Even though he could be praised for being undeterred by dead ends (symbolic or otherwise), his trek is at best a mock-heroic adventure, which does, in fact, come to an end, leaving him literally all wet at the bottom of the embankment, "in a water furrow, part of the intermittent creek that accompanies the highway" (323).

The reaction of the spectators, too, strikes a paraodic note. Through the staged and self-conscious quality of their reactions to Wilder's trek, it is clear that Wilder is not the stimulus for a new, positive inclusiveness: in contrast to Pifer, for instance, who says the onlookers rise above the "the mechanical indifference that individuals routinely display toward one another in society overrun by technology" (231), *White Noise* once more demonstrates the presence of spectatorial fascination in the face of potential tragedy. The "two elderly women" (322) who silently watch Wilder's progress from their porch before calling out to him, Wilder's "decision to cry" (323) when he falls into the embankment and the overly dramatic gestures of the man who rescues Wilder are an oddly depersonalized picture of human emotions that recalls the other scenes of sublime spectatorship in the text: "They called and waved, were approaching the early phases of uncontrollable terror when a passing motorist, as such people are called, alertly pulled over, got out of the car, skidded down the embankment and lifted the boy from the murky shallows, holding him aloft for the clamoring elders to see" (324). The self-conscious use of journalistic language when describing the man as "a passing motorist, as such people are called," coupled with the man's behavior that suggests he has won some contest for the approval of "the clamoring elders," casts Wilder's trek as another instance in which reality is predetermined – and subverted – by cultural narratives that produce an aura of simulation. As LeClair rightly notes, these imposed narrative elements ultimately connect Wilder's trek to other moments in the novel, moments which I suggest are examples of sublime awe and terror: Wilder's "minor miracle" is "an event out of what Jack has earlier called 'the tabloid future, with its mechanism of a hopeful twist to apocalyptic events'" (20). Indeed, the same logic that informs the meaning given to

Wilder's trek by those who witness it underwrites the culminating scenes of the text, in which Gladney and others watch the sunsets from the freeway overpass and visit the supermarket checkout line that is home to the tabloid racks.

Like Wilder's trek, the sunsets evoke "the tabloid future" as a promise of immortality through a sublimity that is self-conscious and staged. On one level, this self-consciousness is expressed by the manner in which *White Noise* calls our attention to – and undermines – the way the sunsets can appear to function as traditional expressions of the American sublime, particularly through the juxtaposition of Gladney's final descriptions of the community watching the sunsets and the supermarket. As LeClair puts it, concluding *White Noise* with just the sunsets "would make a good religious finale," but this is denied when "DeLillo chooses to conclude with a scene in the supermarket" ¹⁶ At the same time, the self-consciousness with which Gladney and others watch the sunsets asks us to question the efficacy of the traditional paradigm of the American sublime, even as the rapt attention of the onlookers illustrates the powerful allure to do so. With this in mind, then, I suggest that the text's critique is more complex than simply striking an ironic counterpoint between the sunsets and the supermarket; instead, *White Noise* links the sunsets to the supermarket as yet another consumable, sublime commodity. ¹⁷

Shortly after Gladney and others begin to routinely watch the sunsets, he knowingly describes one of the less dramatic ones in the terminology of the sublime: "Another postmodern sunset," he notes, "rich in romantic imagery" (227). Even as Gladney potentially reduces all these sunsets to a commonplace occurrence *because* of their sublime attributes, he remains entranced by those attributes when they are more

pronounced, like in the previous sunsets that have exhibited “more dynamic colors, a deeper sense of narrative sweep.” Rather than rejecting the aesthetics of the American sublime, Gladney’s comments illustrate his commitment to it. Like Hawthorne’s tourist at Niagara, knowledge of the conventions and unfulfilled expectations does not shake Gladney’s willingness to experience the sunsets as sublime, nor, like the tourists at the most photographed barn in America, does the issue of authenticity play a determining role for him. Instead, as his comments about the sunsets at the end of the novel illustrate, he feels their power even as his tone betrays a complacent attitude towards the conventions that define that power:

Certainly there is awe, it is all awe, it transcends previous categories of awe, but we don’t know whether we are watching in wonder or dread, we don’t know what we are watching or what it means, we don’t know whether it is permanent, a level of experience to which we will gradually adjust, into which our uncertainty will eventually be absorbed, or just some atmospheric weirdness, soon to pass. (324-325)

Gladney’s familiarity, then, and, arguably, the implied familiarity of others that is conveyed through his use of “we,” does not detract from the sublimity of the sunsets; like other iconic examples of the American sublime, the sunsets draw a steady stream of onlookers. Yet what is distinct about the sunsets is the way *White Noise* highlights their construction as sublime and does so with a phenomenon that puts into relief the destructive dynamics that can be found in more traditional sites of sublimity as well as those reconfigured sites particular to the text. Chemically enhanced by either the residual Nyodene D from the ATE or the “microorganisms that ate the cloud” (227), the sunsets

may, as a result, be poisonous. Thus, in the final analysis, *White Noise* demonstrates how the desire to experience sublime transcendence for signs of immortality outweighs not only the knowledge that such experiences are largely fabricated, but how this desire can lead people to passively court real danger or even death.

Concluding *White Noise* in the supermarket is appropriate because it is the site that most fully expresses the American sublime as “the radiance in dailiness” and the consumer logic that motivates the characters to seek such “radiance” in its various forms. In keeping with the other depictions of the supermarket, *White Noise* dramatizes how the American sublime is integrated with processes of commodification and, above all, the efficiency of this relationship. In the final scene, the text connects the experiential qualities associated with sublimity – awe, terror, death, immortality, rebirth – to a marketing strategy that directly impacts the act of consumption in the physical space of the supermarket. “One day without warning,” Gladney observes, the “supermarket shelves have been rearranged,” which produces “agitation and panic in the aisles, dismay in the faces of older shoppers”: “They walk in a fragmented trance, stop and go, clusters of well-dressed figures frozen in the aisles, trying to figure out the pattern, discern the underlying logic, trying to remember where they’d seen the Cream of Wheat” (325). Absurd but not surprising for a culture entranced by sublimity, the sudden movement of products on the shelves registers as a disaster akin to the ATE and elicits similar responses from the shoppers.

With the responses of the shoppers in mind, Simmons’s comments about this scene are particularly insightful. For Simmons, it exemplifies how “DeLillo’s cultural criticism typically operates on the levels of both analysis and mystification,” so the text

encourages us to accept the “suspicion of ‘order’ or some ‘higher’ or ‘deeper’ level of control” (64). The terror the shoppers feel with the rearrangement of the shelves is a clear sign of such “control”: the terror is orchestrated – but also remedied – by the supermarket. Amid the rearranged shelves, Gladney observes that “the generic food is where it was, white packages plainly labeled,” and the checkout line offers a way out “the altered shelves, the ambient roar” as the shoppers “try to work their way through confusion” (326). Moreover, in an unprecedented moment of clarity, Gladney realizes that the checkout line is intended to direct rather than resolve their “confusion.” As long as the will to purchase wins out, shoppers will be rewarded for their persistence: “But in end it doesn’t matter what they see or think they see. The terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly. This is the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living.”

Underlying the “confusion” of the shoppers, then, is the logic and means of consumption that work “infallibly,” and here, once again, *White Noise* enigmatically suggests that the fear of death plays a central role. Just as commodities heighten this fear and offer temporary remedies that promise some kind of rebirth or immortality, which we have seen with Gladney’s household items that connote “mortality,” the supermarket exacerbates this fear with the rearrangement of the shelves and reconfigures it at the checkout line. Making a purchase offers the promise of partaking in “how the dead speak to the living.” Nevertheless, like Steffie’s mysterious murmuring of a brand name, this promise is only evidence of how fully consumer culture has been inflected with simulation and the legacy of the American sublime, its promises of transport, empowerment, or renewal.

Within the larger scheme of *White Noise*, the checkout line effectively summarizes the ways in which the American sublime is conflated with the processes of simulation and commodification. Yet even as *White Noise* conveys the efficiency, ubiquity and appeal of this dynamic, the text ultimately suggests that simulation and commodification leave people fundamentally unsatisfied, which culminates with Gladney's violence against Mink but also underlies the more pervasive sense that death and destruction might erupt at any moment. As Packer notes, in the interview with DeCurtis, DeLillo explains that he sees violence "as a kind of sardonic response to the promise of consumer fulfillment in America", and so "in closing the novel at the supermarket," Packer concludes, "DeLillo questions the market's supercession of the traditional sacred as a means of containing resentment" (qtd. in Packer 661).

Indeed, for the characters in *White Noise*, as much as their desires and fears are mediated by consumer culture, they remain unfulfilled even when most fully immersed in the "radiance," which is most clearly conveyed with Gladney's description of the tabloids in the checkout line. The tabloids are a discursive part of "the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living." As Conroy puts it, they offer "the lineage to the ancestral dead, the celebrities and the attendant hope of immortality" (109), and, as Valdez Moses observes, possess "the seemingly limitless power to transform and reconstitute the very being of the contemporary individual" (72). Even so, Gladney reveals how they cannot fill an essential need in himself or, in what seems an accurate assessment, others: "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" (326).

Endnotes

1. Overall, critics rightly view the barn's "aura" in terms of Baudrillard's description of simulation: for example, Heller says the barn has "lost its original historical concreteness" (41) and so is part of "the aura of media simulacra" (41) that surrounds Gladney and his family; similarly, Wilcox describes the barn as part "of a simulational world where signs triumph over reality, where experience is constructed by and in service of the image, and the ephemeral image takes on its own resplendent, mystical 'aura'" (101). In this light, then, Frow's point that the barn is not indicative of the scenario imagined by Benjamin is correct: as Duvall puts it, "Frow rightly points out that Benjamin's hope that mechanical reproduction would destroy the pseudo-religious aura of cultural artifacts has been subverted . . ." (181). However, Frow's assertion that the aura at the barn is predicated on the appearance of authenticity, or as Duvall concurs, that "here, as elsewhere in the novel, the myth of authenticity that is aura comes into being through mediation, the intertextual web of prior representations," misses the effects of the barn as a simulation on the tourists. Indeed, Lentricchia says it best when he places the assumed knowledge and experience of the novel's readers alongside that of the tourists: "We prefer not to know what the barn was like before it was photographed because its aura, its technological glow, its soul, is our production, it is us" (90). Experiencing the "aura" at the barn, then, attracts the tourists because it "is tantamount to the achievement of a new identity – a collective selfhood brought to birth in the moment of contact with an 'accumulation of nameless energies.'"

2. For a contrary view of the sound of the cameras see Boxal, "Death and the avant-garde: *White Noise*," 109-130. For Boxall, the sounds of the cameras disrupt the power of simulation, particularly the way it creates the illusion of timelessness and erases a larger sense of history through photographing the barn: "The rustling of the film itself, the tactile crackling of celluloid as it passes from one roll to the other in the body of the camera, comes as a form of sense memory to a reader. . . . The sound evokes a continuing history of the material conditions of photography, and by extension a history of seeing" (117-118). To account for "a history of seeing" here, though, I argue that it is the history of viewing sites of the American sublime that fundamentally shapes the practices of looking at the barn. Moreover, while the sound of the cameras can be viewed as means of alerting us, "the reader," to the material history of photography, it does not appear to have the same effect on Gladney or the tourists.

3. The historical precedent for these films can be found in examples like the Great Exposition of 1900 where Henry Adams saw the dynamo, but even more so with the parades that celebrated America's development of the railroad. As Nye observes, these parades "were dramatic enactments that created a bond of shared perceptions among the participants" (65).

4. For Baudrillard the loss of "sovereign difference" (2) is problematic because it generates the sort of apathy and dehumanized interest we find with Siskind and his students in relation to the car crash films. On one level the hyperreal reduces the possibility for more varied or critical representations: as Baudrillard puts it, "It is no

longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody.” Similarly, as Richard J. Lane explains in his excellent, introductory study of Baudrillard, “The important and disturbing point to all this is that the hyperreal doesn’t exist in the realm of good and evil, because it is measured as such in terms of its performativity – how well does it work or operate?” (86)

5. For an excellent overview of the critical reception of DeLillo’s characters, see Yehnert, particularly 357-359.

6. For some critics, the “radiance in dailiness” simply refers to DeLillo’s attention to the details of everyday life, and by extension, signals a narrative strategy for returning meaning to that life against the processes of simulation and consumption. Packer, for instance, argues that the “radiance in dailiness” can be found in DeLillo’s “constantly shifting attention to otherwise significant things” (656), while Saltzman adds that with such attention DeLillo “hopes to create a sense of ‘radiance in dailiness’ that restores the edge to everything we have accumulated” (44). For others, who account for the context in which DeLillo introduces the phrase, it becomes a shorthand way of describing the effects of the supermarket. For example, Arno Heller says that in the supermarket, the “radiance in dailiness” describes the “religious transformation of the world of surfaces” (39). Similarly, but more concretely, and with the perceptive link to TV, Mark Osteen says that the “radiance in dailiness” refers to “the supermarket, the shopping mall, the TV set” (166) and the spell they cast: “Television and other sites of consumption muffle, as well as amplify, the spiritual yearnings of consumers and audiences.”

7. As a number of critics have noted, this reference to Tibet is connected to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* mentioned elsewhere in the novel (72) and to Ernest Becker’s *The Denial of Death*. In personal correspondence with Tom LeClair, DeLillo, in fact, confirmed that Becker’s book is an influence (LeClair “Closing the Loop: *White Noise*” 11). According to LeClair:

DeLillo seems to accept Becker’s Existential and Rankian positions that the fear of death is the mainspring of human motivation and that man needs to belong to a system of ideas in which mystery exists. But DeLillo differs with Becker’s conclusions that repression of the death fear is necessary to live and that “the problem of heroics is the central one to human life,” for repression and heroic attempts to overcome death place Gladney in life-threatening situations.

For more about Becker and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* in relation to *White Noise*, see also Cowart and Osteen.

8. Among the first group, Valdez Moses notes that the supermarket is “completely saturated with the aura of the sacred” (71). Barrett, although more skeptical of the text’s position, concurs: “While Murray is too farcical to be taken completely seriously as a spokesman for spiritual fulfillment, the supermarket’s importance – as a site of competing languages, of guides to the occult, and of mystery – cannot be entirely dismissed” (101). And for Packer the efforts to deny the sacred explain why its semblance returns in the supermarket: “The casting out of the earliest human science (religion) by the advanced knowledge of the latest science of technoconsumerism paradoxically reinstates the

sacred, which DeLillo depicts reappearing in the supermarket – the ‘truth’ of the market being its reputed sanctity, the inviolability of the economic” (661). Among the second group, Simmons says the supermarket has a specific function: “Shopping has become our ritual preparation for death, with the information flows and simulating practices of our consumer environments containing hidden messages to ease our passage to the next world” (64). Saltzman makes a similar point, but emphasizes that the knowledge of death cannot be displaced by the aura of the sacred: “Here everything has an exclamatory glow about it, a euphemistic sheen to needs manufactured and met. But dread penetrates” (34). Meanwhile, Duvall links the supermarket and the displacement of death to TV: “Both serve the participant (shopper/viewer) as a temporary way to step outside death by entering an aestheticized space of consumption that serves as the postmodern, mass-culture rearticulation of Eliot’s timeless high-culture tradition” (170).

9. For Ferraro, the “aura of connectedness” that is produced through consumption provides “an illusion of kinship, transiently functional but without either sustaining or restraining power, a stimulant that at the same time renders one unable to feel either the sacredness or the tyranny of the family bond” (21).

10. As Paul Cantor points out, Gladney’s role as a killer also resonates with his career as a Hitler scholar: “Gladney is searching for someone who can restore significance and value to his life, and the powerful image of Hitler offers fullness to his emptiness” (47). DeLillo, in his interview with DeCurtis, confirms this interpretation and explains that “The damage caused by Hitler was so enormous that Gladney feels he can disappear inside it and that his own puny dread will be over-whelmed by the vastness, the monstrosity of Hitler himself” (71). For more about the role of Hitler in *White Noise* see Young.

11. LeClair, for instance, argues that Gladney’s wound brings him out of his role as a killer and his efforts to displace death: “Literally reminded of mortality, Jack forgets the Dylar and secrecy; he takes Mink to a hospital, saving his victim’s life and, perhaps, his own tenuous humanity” (20). My position on this issue coincides with Joseph Dewey’s and other more skeptical positions. As Dewey puts it: “One system shot, so to speak, Gladney resorts to building another, a new lie, a new pretence, a new role. Feeling a rush of compassion and remorse, he abandons the role of killer to become humanitarian rescuer” (217). Indeed, as Dewey suggests, this “pretence” is underscored by the fact that Gladney insists “that Willie had in fact shot first and had wounded both himself and Gladney,” a lie that conveniently places Gladney as an innocent victim.

12. In an earlier interview with LeClair, DeLillo mentions a short story he wrote “that ends with two babies babbling at each other in a car” (8) and makes similar remarks to LeClair about language and children. Here, too, DeLillo emphasizes that what he finds fascinating is the impression – rather than the fact – that the babies are communicating infinite knowledge: “I felt these babies knew something. They were talking, they were listening, they were commenting, and above and beyond it all they were taking an immense pleasure in the exchange.”

13. Other critics also take Gladney's experience at face value and suggest that this reflects DeLillo's position as well. Lentricchia, for example, says that because Gladney's perception of Steffie's words is not rendered from a "corrosive satiric perspective – which would have been the conventional literary payoff in this moment – but with amazement and awe" (111), we find a valuation of "domestic commitment or a sense of wonder on behalf of the culture's binding power" (112). Similarly, for Maltby, the awe Gladney feels is "typical of DeLillo's tendency to seek out transcendent moments in our postmodern lives that hint at possibilities for cultural regeneration" (216). Most critics, however, remain skeptical of Gladney's experience and see it as DeLillo's critique of advertising's power and place in contemporary culture. On an uncommon note, Simmons maintains that the ironic treatment of this moment reflects well on Gladney, that it "signals Gladney's characteristic suspicion not only of any moment of transcendence, but of his own ability as a parent to respond adequately to the unprecedented conditions in which his children are growing up" (58). By contrast, others argue, and to my mind more correctly, that Gladney shows much less self-scrutiny or understanding of the larger implications of his motives, reactions and experiences. For some, the larger implications of Steffie's words and Gladney's reception of them can best be explained through well-known cultural theorists: for Osteen, Raymond Williams and the way advertising meets religious needs (180), and for Duvall, Benjamin and the way the "aura" "has merely migrated to the marketing of consumer goods" (177). Meanwhile, others have offered similar, critical views with – in some cases – only passing reference to other theorists: according to Packer, "Steffie exposes the unconscious for what Marshall McLuhan understood it to be . . ." (655); Cowart insists that Gladney's "transcendence is merely what Freud disparaged as 'oceanic'" (73); Heller argues that Steffie illustrates how "the deepest region of the self bordering on the subconscious and mystical – so it appears – has been invaded by the brand-name babble of multinational corporations" (39); Saltzman observes that the "co-optation of private motives" by the media has reduced "even transcendence . . . to the tawdriest common denominator . . ." (37); and Weinstein quips, "we can hardly fail to see, that, once again, 'outside' has gotten 'inside,' that the TV is no longer 'out there' at all" (139). Lastly, John Frow concludes that "there is a definite source for the utterance, but in another sense Steffie is not this source: the words are spoken through her, by her unconscious but also, as Jack recognizes, by the unconscious of her culture" (46). Although with this statement Frow might seem to deflect attention away from the real source of her words, which Packer takes him to task for by rightly saying that they are "utterly of this world" (655), Frow's consideration of the "triads" of corporation and product names that occur throughout the text with their implied, multiple sources, remains essential reading.

14. Not surprisingly, in contrast to Steffie murmuring Toyota Celica, Wilder's crying has been regarded with less skepticism by critics and not directly related to the novel's depiction of mass culture. Saltzman shares my skepticism about some fundamental sort of communication taking place, that "the sound does not enlighten as it enfolds" (41), but his conclusion that "Jack remains distant from the sublimity he imagines there" obscures the fact that "sublimity" is precisely what Gladney does imagine here. In addition, Saltzman views Wilder's crying as yet another example of "white noise," "a uniform distraction, so that, as with the malfunctioning smoke alarm that is always buzzing, no

one knows how, or whether, to react.” Others, however, believe that some kind of exchange takes place. Barrett rightly emphasizes Gladney’s role here and says that “Jack laments the present age’s fragmentation and desperately attempts to link his own decade with a legendary past which might offer some promise of a future” (105). At the same time, although less emphatically than either Bonca or Pifer, others argue that Wilder is indeed communicating the fear of death from his special position as a child: Dewey argues that “wordless Wilder” is the “one child in this family who is still able to respond to the elemental world with the vulnerability, wonder and even fear that marks an original relationship with the universe . . .” (220); Osteen observes that “Wilder clearly acts as a medium or channel for the others nameless dread. . .” (175); and Weinstein concludes that “Wilder’s marathon crying jag points to a dark core of pure affect, perhaps of terror, underneath it all, and DeLillo reveres that ultimate opaque language that is prior to all codes and grammars” (139). Lastly, Maltby also turns his discussion about Wilder’s crying to DeLillo’s comments about language. For Maltby, with Wilder DeLillo takes part in “that familiar Romantic myth of some primal, pre-abstract level of language which is naturally endowed with greater insight, a pristine order of meaning that enables unmediated understanding, community, and spiritual communion with the world around” (219).

15. The beginning of *White Noise* also parodies these associations when the station wagons arriving with students at the university are likened to a wagon train. The text lists items on the roofs of the station wagons that meet basic necessities, but it soon becomes clear that these evoke the provisions and accoutrements of culture necessary for an overland crossing, many of which can be of no practical use for the students on campus: “The roofs of the station wagons were loaded down with carefully secured suitcases full of light and heavy clothing; with boxes of blankets, boots and shoes, stationary and books, sheets, pillows, quilts; with rolled-up rugs and sleeping bags; with bicycles, skis, rucksacks, English and Western saddles, inflated rafts” (3). For a more in-depth analysis of this scene in the context of the western see Barrett, 100-101.

16. Muirhead makes a similar observation. “The sunset,” she notes, “stands as an emblem of American romance” (411).

17. A number of critics have addressed the sunsets in regards to sublimity but not the American sublime, or, alternately, they have discussed elements of the sunsets and their relation to other experiences in the text but not considered these as expressions of the American sublime. Frow, for instance, following Lyotard’s definition of the postmodern sublime, argues that the sublimity of the sunsets comes from their “unrepresentable” (36) quality, which is distinct from the conventions of the American sublime: “The twist here is that the sense of inadequacy of representation comes not because of the transcendental or uncanny nature of the object but because of the multiplicity of prior representations” (36). A sunset is “postmodern,” then, because it “is another sunset, an event within a series, never an originating moment but mass-produced . . .” (35). While this interpretation explains how the self-consciousness with which people view the sunsets contributes to them being experienced as sublime, it does not account for the fact that people treat them as expressions of “transcendental or uncanny nature” in spite of that

self-consciousness. Wilcox, too, sees the sunsets as indicative of simulation: “Even the natural world – the ultimate ground of the ‘real’ – succumbs to a hyperreal condition of multiple regress without origin” (102). Meanwhile, Valdez Moses and Osteen claim that the awe and terror elicited by the sunsets are grounds for DeLillo’s critique of technology, but in doing so fail to account for the ways in which these responses are, as we have seen elsewhere, integral to traditional configurations of the American technological sublime and its relationship to nature. For Valdez Moses, the sunsets are indicative of technology reducing “nature to a postmodern simulacrum” (65), which, in turn, shows that “man assumes sovereignty over a reality that was once understood to transcend man himself. Formerly regarded as superhuman threat, guide, or order, nature ceases to exist except as a representation which man both produces and consumes” (65). Likewise, Osteen fails to see how the “dread” (189) the sunsets produce is not simply evidence of the way “the god of nature has been soiled by the devil of technology,” by the fact that the sunsets may be a toxic byproduct of the ATE. On a different front, Conroy and Saltzman offer opposing views about the inclusiveness that is produced by people watching the sunsets and how this relates to other moments and experiences in the text that I link to the American sublime. Conroy, even though he does not consider the American sublime, aptly describes the kind of spectatorship that takes place with the sunsets – “. . . the result is a community of spectators who enact and view their own possible demise” (108) – as well as other instances in which such spectatorship occurs: “. . . as with TV, the crowd comes to look, not converse.” Saltzman, by contrast, argues that the sunsets epitomize why the unfathomable mystery of the “radiance in dailiness” is positive: “What *is* certain is that people linger, exchange, participate – instead of pressing heedlessly, habitually onward, they are moved to interpret and dwell upon the defamiliarized heavens” (44). Likewise, other critics have read the text’s depiction of the sunsets as traditional expressions of the American sublime even though they do not use this terminology. Maltby claims DeLillo affirms – and succumbs to – the “Romantic-metaphysical” associations connoted by the sunsets and concludes that this is a major failing in the novel because “DeLillo’s awestruck subjects contradict the postmodern norm” (223). For his part, Dewey argues that “the vignette at the highway overpass is a miraculous artifact of hope offered to DeLillo’s reader” (222) in which the text offers, “perhaps unknowingly, the healing most particular to traditional apocalyptic literature” (223). Lastly, Pifer, in passing, also accepts the text’s presentation of the sunsets at face value and uses them as a simile for the positive, uplifting effects DeLillo’s fiction can have on his readers (232).

Cold War ‘Cast-Offs’: The Art of Waste in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*

In many respects, DeLillo’s longest and most ambitious novel to date, *Underworld* (1997), represents both a culmination of his preceding fictional works and a master key for the subsequent ones – the increasingly shorter and more condensed works that can be seen as missing or cast-off pieces that have yet to be added to the puzzle that is *Underworld*. Indeed, the reason *Underworld* appears to condense the best of what has gone before and anticipate what has followed since can be attributed to the internal logic that animates the scope and complexity of this encyclopedic work. As the character Jesse Detwiler explains, when he considers the elaborate processes of waste management in the novel, “everything is connected” (289). Not surprisingly, then, a main point of connection between *Underworld* and *White Noise* is the way the destructive dynamics of simulation, commodification and American sublimity effectively “underwrite” the fictional reality in *Underworld*.

In *Underworld*, however, establishing the connections between these dynamics within the fictional reality of the text is more complicated and arguably more illuminating than in *White Noise*. Set during the course of the Cold War era, *Underworld* spans the early 1950s to the mid 1990s, recounting such significant national and international events as the legendary 1951 baseball game between the New York Giants and Brooklyn Dodgers, the second Soviet atomic test on the same day and the launch of Sputnik. Yet this breadth of vision does not mean that *Underworld* sacrifices the clarity or concision of the earlier work; in fact, by highlighting the real, historical, and temporal connections between such events and conflating them with the personal histories of its fictional characters, *Underworld* shows how the relationship between American sublimity,

commodities and death in *White Noise* resonates on a much larger scale. Indeed, *Underworld* suggests that this relationship supported the increased production of weapons and waste during the Cold War, which represented a primary means for America to compete with the Soviet Union on a material and ideological level, simultaneously displacing fears of atomic destruction while making the possibility of it happening more imminent.

Most importantly, perhaps, *Underworld* is as much about the present as it is the past: even as the text reveals how the production of commodities, weapons and waste is symptomatic of the Cold War era, this does not mean that it fails to account for the consequences that followed. Instead, *Underworld* demonstrates how integral commodities, weapons and waste are to contemporary American culture and within the contemporary world, precisely because they draw on the powerful legacy and appeal of American sublimity. As we shall see, even when contested by art that purports to offer the sort of “counter-narrative” DeLillo envisions in response to 9-11, the coupling of American sublimity with an increased need to declare global authority remains peculiarly seductive and intractable. Moreover, much like the claims of Didion’s novels, *Underworld*’s own claims of achieving such artistic aims are neither total nor exclusive; even as it mounts a critical impetus by a similar means of citing or inverting other conventions or works, it does so by implicitly marking its own place within the dynamics it portrays.

I

This section will consider the ways in which the dynamics between the American sublime, commodities and violence portrayed in *White Noise* are extended in *Underworld*

to the context of the Cold War and the period shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In particular, I will focus on *Underworld's* depiction of traditional elements of the American sublime as a vital part of the increased production of commodities and weapons during the Cold War, which the United States used to define and to defend itself against Communism. At the same time, I will examine how *Underworld* locates the material legacy and consequences of this era as expressions of the American sublime – the excess amounts of waste produced by commodities and weapons – and the way this waste extends the practices of commodification and militarism of the Cold War into the era of global capitalism. In order to convey how *Underworld* links the American sublime to commodities and weapons and their transformation into waste, I will focus on three sites of sublimity in the text – the October 3, 1951 baseball game between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers that coincided with the second atomic test by the Soviets, the landfill and recycling sites in the United States and, finally, the Soviet test site and later weapons disposal site in Kazakhstan.

In the “Prologue” to *Underworld*, the baseball game commonly referred to as “the shot heard ‘round the world,” represents a traditional configuration of the American sublime and provides an important series of elements and events that link its sublimity to commodities, weapons and waste. Even though the iconography of baseball is not, strictly speaking, a common representation of either the generic American natural or technological sublime, the text’s treatment of the physical space of the stadium, coupled with the cultural meanings associated with the game, situate it within the traditional parameters of the American sublime. Described from the perspective of Cotter Martin, who the narrator casts as a typical, representative American – “He speaks in your voice,

American, and there's a shine in his eye that's halfway hopeful" (11) – the physical space of the stadium elicits from him an experience of sublime transcendence. Entering from "a shadowed ramp and into a crossweave of girders and pillars and spilling light" (14), the spectacle of the stadium is transformative:

He hears the crescendoing last chords of the national anthem and sees the great open horseshoe of the grandstand and that unfolding vision of the grass that always seems to mean he has stepped outside his life – the rubbed shine that sweeps and bends from the raked dirt of the infield out to the high green fences.

It is the excitement of a revealed thing.

Here, the physical grandeur of the man-made setting is set in harmony with the "grass" and affects Cotter as a traditional configuration of the American sublime: this experience produces an affirmative, inclusive vision of the nation, supported by the climactic sound of "the national anthem," and holds out to Cotter the promise of self-fashioning and transcendence, of stepping "outside his life."

Cotter's experience, then, clearly foregrounds the qualities baseball shares with the conventions of the American sublime. As Kathleen Fitzpatrick notes, *Underworld* draws on the conventions of baseball fiction, which she claims is "overwhelmingly about self-making, about the formation of the American individual" (153). That said, of equal importance is the fact that baseball fiction shows how baseball is, as Timothy Morris argues, also "about assimilation" (qtd. in Fitzpatrick 152), a point that Fitzpatrick implies is secondary to "self-making" (153). Nevertheless, Morris's argument that self-making and assimilation are combined more accurately reflects Cotter's experience of being part of the crowd and an individual, of mirroring the ideal of what Morris calls "perfectibility"

that an athlete achieves through a spectacular, “perfect,” individual performance and as a member of the winning team (15). Indeed, viewing Cotter’s sublime experience in light of these dynamics reveals how the game is related to the depictions of sublimity elsewhere in the text, in which self-making is dependent upon a competitive – and as we shall see, ultimately militaristic – ethos and ideology.

While not discrediting Cotter’s experience, *Underworld* does treat it critically, as an indication of the way inclusiveness and assimilation, of being a member of the team or a fan, masks an ideal of self-making that is divisive and potentially destructive. As a number of critics note, the text criticizes the mythology of baseball as an inherently democratic sport by the conflict that emerges between Cotter and Bill Waterson over the winning ball, and which is inevitably drawn along racial lines between the African American Cotter and the Caucasian Bill.¹ It is as fans, though, that they initially bond but it is also as fans that they finally clash. As John Duvall explains, “Realizing they are both Giants fans, Bill and Cotter develop a friendship over the course of the game, an ostensible bonding between two males who can appreciate individually talented players within baseball’s larger tradition” (297). At the same time, it is Cotter and Bill’s adoption of what the players’ performances signify, identified by Duvall as the qualities of “courage, independence, and risk-taking” (299), which initiates the conflict between Cotter and Bill and culminates with Bill’s discriminatory remarks to Cotter. Fittingly, it is as Bill and Cotter demonstrate these qualities as they wrestle over their team’s homerun ball in the stands – mirroring, in effect, the actions of opposing players rather than teammates – that they take part in the competitive spirit of the game and put an end to their friendship.

Underworld connects Cotter's experience of the stadium and his role as a fan to the American sublime in another way as well: to the way the self-making conveyed through the game is founded upon a sense of timelessness, and, by implication, the transcendence of death.² As Bill explains to Cotter, participating in baseball as a fan or as a player is about being included in a timeless tradition: "That's the thing about baseball, Cotter. You do what they did before you. That's the connection you make. There's a whole long line" (31). Indeed, within the very structure of the game, the cyclical return to home plate shows how a perfect, self-making performance also connotes an entry into immortality. As Christian K. Messenger explains in *Sport and the Spirit of Play in Contemporary American Fiction*,

Baseball is, ordinarily, an *affirmation* of 'coming home,' in the passage around the bases, in the redistribution of power from father to son. The affirmation of baseball is told without a death, without a return to the earth to replenish life. Baseball is rather a humanistic re-telling of origins that circumvents the consciousness of death. (337-338)

In *Underworld*, however, the game's timeless qualities represent not only an escape from the "consciousness" of death but also the consciousness of death.

Provocatively, *Underworld* insists that there is something to be learned by reading a relationship between these sublime qualities of baseball and America's involvement in the Cold War. By having the news of the Soviets' "second atomic explosion," Joe 2, reach none other than J. Edgar Hoover in the stands, the text goes to great lengths to suggest that this news has a bearing on this baseball game (23). Implicitly, the dynamics of self-making, competition and transcendence found in baseball, underlie America's

response to the Soviet threat, and the shift from the perceptions of Hoover to the announcer, Russ Hodges, during the final moments of the game dramatizes what is most disturbing here: that American's capacity to maintain its conflict with the Soviets and mass produce atomic weapons and waste can be located in something as seemingly innocuous as its "favorite pastime."

Through Hodges, the text connects the transcendence of death found in baseball to the displacement of other unpleasant, threatening or potentially deadly circumstances, such as America's conflict with the Soviets. In particular, it is through Hodges's nostalgic view "of this safe game of ours," which he knows is a fabricated sentiment, that *Underworld* draws a correlation between baseball and the Cold War (60). Hodges, perhaps more than any other character in the text, knows firsthand that baseball is not as simple as it seems. By doing "ghost games" (26) on the radio in which he would create "ninety-nine percent of the action" (25) from "a piece of paper filled with letters and numbers" (25), Hodges is adept at using the mythic elements of baseball to full effect: "he liked to take the action into the stands, inventing a kid chasing a foul ball, a carrot-topped boy with a cowlick (shameless, ain't I) who retrieves it and holds it aloft . . ." (26).³ Still, as he announces the game between the Giants and the Dodgers we find that he, too, remains susceptible to baseball's allure. He "feels lucky" to be announcing the game "at the Polo Grounds – a name he loves, a precious echo of things and times before the century went to war," so through Hodges *Underworld* announces a subtle, troubling caveat (15). If Russ Hodges, concocter of "ghost games," can feel a nostalgic rapture for the timeless qualities of baseball in spite of the reality of two world wars, how can the

American public, represented by the average baseball fan, be expected to view atomic power or the Soviet threat realistically?

As if to answer this question, *Underworld* takes us into the consciousness of Hoover who, while representing the average baseball fan by virtue of his place in the stands, of course signifies much more, a duality with which the text illustrates America's response to the Soviet tests and registers the consequences that followed.⁴ Through Hoover, *Underworld* demonstrates that the kind of displacement displayed by Hodges did indeed persist in the Cold War era, that the shared dynamics of the American sublime and baseball informed America's response to the Soviets. On the one hand, Hoover's perspective reveals that in order for America to negotiate, control and displace the reality of potential atomic warfare, the historical precedent for turning a spectatorial fascination towards destructive, sublime technology provided – and provides – an invaluable resource. Like *Play It As It Lays*, *Democracy* and *White Noise*, *Underworld* critiques such fascination, and does so by showing how insidious such fascination can be, by linking it to the self-making and assimilation in baseball, to baseball's covert support of the same competitive spirit that fueled America's production of commodities, weapons and waste during the Cold War.

For Hoover, the news of the test demands a swift and competitive reply, which, not surprisingly, the government carries out in a way he endorses. Learning that the "White House will make the announcement [of the test] in less than an hour," Hoover's thoughts reveal why this preemptive move is necessary: "By announcing first, we prevent the Soviets from putting their own sweet spin on the event. And we ease public anxiety to some degree. People will understand that we've maintained control of the news if not

the bomb” (28). Couching this move in the language of sport, by referring to the “sweet spin” the Soviets would put on the test, does, of course, indicate the competitiveness that came to define American and Soviet relations, but Hoover also realizes that beating the Soviets to the punch this time will not, fundamentally, “ease public anxiety.” Hoover rightly sees that the reality of Soviet atomic weapons will inevitably reshape the ways in which Americans have hitherto defined themselves. As he looks at the fans he remarks: “All these people formed by language and climate and popular songs and breakfast foods and the jokes they tell and the cars they drive have never had anything in common so much as this, that they are sitting in the furrow of destruction.” In order for America to preserve its cultural identity, Hoover realizes, the reality of “the furrow of destruction” needs to be reconciled.

Underworld demonstrates how such reconciliation is problematic because it entails the transcendence, or what amounts to the psychological displacement of death, which is revealed through the turns and fancies of Hoover’s mind and its dual role as both an individual and representative consciousness. Moreover, through the dual role of Hoover’s mind, the text illustrates the lasting and key role America’s continued invocations of sublimity play and why they should be taken seriously: how the characteristic, spectatorial view of destruction and the fascination with weapons so singular to the American sublime take on an essential role in the context of the game and the test, validating America’s competitive relationship with the Soviet Union. In fact, this covert form of validation is the text’s central criticism of the relationship between the game and the test, which is emphasized by the introduction of another element into the game – the reproduction of Bruegel’s nightmarish *The Triumph of Death* on two

discarded pages from Life magazine that Hoover finds in the stands. Indeed, because the “Prologue” bears the title of the painting, it seems safe to conclude that DeLillo wants it to be eminently clear that the distinctly American qualities that make victory possible on the baseball diamond are the same qualities that could bring about mass destruction when extended to the world stage.

Seen from the perspective of the American sublime, particularly in terms of spectatorship and the fascination with technology, *The Triumph of Death* locates the presence of these qualities in America’s response to Joe 2 and Soviet atomic power in general. More precisely, through Hoover’s consciousness and his view of the painting, *Underworld* reveals how the American sublime became an important cultural resource for legitimizing conflict with the Soviets. Looking at the painting in light of the news of the test, Hoover imagines a scene of atomic destruction, but he envisions this scene from the same sort of Burkean distance from terror as the scene in Bruegel’s painting. As Hoover looks at the painting,

at the flaring sky in the deep distance and beyond the headlands on the left-hand page – Death elsewhere, Conflagration in many places, Terror universal, . . . he thinks of a lonely tower standing on the Kazakh Test Site, the tower armed with the bomb, and he can almost hear the wind blowing across the Central Asian Steppes, out where the enemy lives in long coats and fur caps, speaking that old weighted language of theirs, liturgical and grave. What secret history are they writing? (50)

Clearly, then, the implication is that the terror of atomic destruction is reduced to “Death elsewhere” and is displaced into “the deep distance” as Hoover’s vision merges with

Bruegel's painting, but something else is happening here as well: this vantage point becomes a means of connoting the threat of Soviet secrecy, which, in turn, makes competition imperative.

Indeed, secrecy represents a means of assigning motives to the Soviets that are at once inscrutable but just clear enough to be determined as hostile. And in Hoover's vision, this secrecy is not only contingent upon the displacement of terror but through his fascination with the atomic bomb.

This is what he knows, that the genius of the bomb is printed not only in its physics of particles and rays but in the occasion it creates for new secrets. For every atmospheric blast, every glimpse we get of the bared face of nature, that weird peeled eyeball exploding over the desert – for every one of these he reckons a hundred plots go underground, to spawn and skein. (51)

Thus, the bomb, too, becomes integral to describing – and implying – the magnitude and proliferation of Soviet secrets, while also eliding the reality of atomic destruction. Like the spectatorial view that is produced when Hoover looks at the painting, the blasts he imagines emphasize the importance of the Soviets' secrets for seeing them as enemies, and those secrets clearly outweigh all else in Hoover's skewed logic. That said, Hoover's perception should not be taken as just another – albeit fictional – example of his legendary paranoia; instead, Hoover's final thoughts about "Us and Them" reveal precisely why it is so fitting for him to entertain these ideas at the game. Enigmatically, he muses that "It's not enough to hate your enemy. You have to understand how the two of you bring each other to deep completion," which casts the Soviets as just an opposing team rather than an atomic superpower, where the stakes are about "deep completion,"

“perfectibility” and self-making through competition, rather than the possibility of atomic destruction.

The meaning of the relationship between *The Triumph of Death*, the atomic test and the baseball game is not restricted to what the painting depicts; in addition, the painting’s status as waste – as one of many pieces of paper thrown by the fans – has a bearing on America’s anxiety about Soviet power and the need to view this power in the manageable terms of competition. But this is not to say that the form and content of the painting should be considered separate; *Underworld* uses both the form and content of the painting to elaborate upon America’s response to the Soviet threat. For instance, as Philip Nel observes, the image in the painting offers a commentary on the baseball game and the test even without Hoover’s mediating consciousness or his visions: “The visual juxtaposition of the New York Giants’ triumph with Bruegel’s *Triumph of Death* creates a tension between two realities: a local victory and a national defeat; a euphoric crowd and a scene of mass death suggestive of atomic attack” (733). At the same time, what the painting depicts, coupled with its status as waste, reflects the underlying reality that already frames the victory celebration and the lives of the fans, the seemingly endless forms of production and consumption and the recirculation of waste into the commodity system, which will only increase with America’s competitive position against the Soviets. Indeed, the painting’s depiction of “gluttony, lust and greed” and the ways in which “the dead fall upon the living” reflect this “underworld” reality as much as the imminent threat of atomic warfare (50).

This shift in emphasis is both significant and appropriate because, as Molly Wallace explains, supporting the production and consumption of commodities became a

fundamental – if not the defining – feature of American life during the Cold War period. “In the face of an enemy defined primarily by its differing economic system,” Wallace writes, “celebration of the American economy was virtually mandatory” (368). Not surprisingly, then, America’s competition against the Soviet Union through commodities was connected to the production of weapons as well, which, in *Underworld*, is given particular emphasis in Part 5, the snapshot of the Deming family from October 8, 1957. Here, a number of the Demings’ household items – such as the son’s Hydrox cookies that he likes “because the name sounded like rocket fuel” (519) and his mother’s “new satellite-shaped vacuum cleaner” (520) – convey a relationship between commodities, weapons and/or potential weapons’ technology, which also reveals the extent to which they are woven into the fabric of everyday life for the average American family.

Significantly, *Underworld* suggests that the challenges represented by Soviet technology, through such examples as the atomic test and Sputnik, explain why waste comes to occupy a special place in America’s cycle of production and consumption, why it is imbued with qualities traditionally reserved for icons or sites of the American sublime. With the launch of Sputnik, for instance, which takes place during the episode that chronicles the suburban life of the Demings, the vacuum cleaner that is “satellite-shaped” is viewed “ruefully now” (520) by the mother because Sputnik has created “a twisted sort of disappointment. It was theirs, not ours” (518). Sputnik undermines what the vacuum cleaner has signified for Mrs. Deming; as Wallace, again, rightly puts it, “the satellite raises the possibility that the Soviets, despite their different economic system, might not only be world-class producers, but also discriminating consumers, a possibility that threatens the coherence of American national identity” (376). More pervasively,

Sputnik represents a challenge to the optimism produced by the American technological sublime, which can be traced in the connotations the vacuum cleaner shares with satellite technology; before Sputnik, the vacuum “seemed futuristic and hopeful,” but after Sputnik, the vacuum is reduced to a “clunky object filled with self-remorse” (520). With Mrs. Deming’s reaction to Sputnik, then, it becomes clear why *Underworld* depicts the nearly sacred reverence for waste that would, in more typical circumstances, be associated with new technological objects: casting waste as a site of sublimity represents a means of restoring a useful – and even the “futuristic and hopeful” – quality to an object like the vacuum cleaner that has become uninspiring and so, in one sense, “used-up,” defunct.

This interpretation is borne out even more explicitly by the way landfill, recycling and other waste disposal sites are viewed as sublime by other characters in the text. In these instances, the logic behind the recuperation of waste into the cycle of production and consumption more clearly depends upon marketing transcendence, much like the relationship between death and commodities in *White Noise*. In *Underworld*, however, imbuing waste with transcendent qualities ensures that the ethos of competition, expressed in such diverse practices as baseball and the production of commodities and weapons, will not only remedy a general fear of death, but the specific fear of atomic destruction and the particular threat posed by the Soviets. Yet for this to happen, the efficacy and efficiency of the commodity system must be maintained; indeed, as David H. Evans convincingly argues, what *Underworld* presents can be best understood as an expression of Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of “liquid modernity” that “reacts to garbage not by excluding it, but by converting and reintroducing it into the cycle of production,

consumption and reproduction” (109).⁵ Therefore, sending broken objects or “used-up” objects like the vacuum cleaner to the landfill (or, in more recent times, the recycling plant), represents a means of restoring the “futuristic and hopeful” connotations to an object as waste.

With this restoration, then, I argue that while these processes of recycling need to be understood as part of the same “liquid modern” dynamic of production and consumption described by Bauman, they also need to be understood as expressions of the American sublime. Seen in conjunction with the American sublime, we can better understand how *Underworld* suggests that the entire life cycle of a commodity or a weapon can reinscribe the competitive ethos through the production of transcendent effects, a point that Evans does not account for and, as we shall see later, marks our opposing interpretations of the artistic figures who appropriate commodities and weapons for their art. At this stage, however, it is first necessary to consider the way the optimism associated with technology is transferred to waste and the way waste sites resemble traditional configurations of the American sublime. By doing so, we can begin to understand why Brian Glassic and Nick Shay who work for the Whiz Co recycling company view waste sites with such reverence, why, for instance, when Nick looks at the recycling plant, “the experience is less a glimpse into the grimy and fetid foundation of consumer society than a magnificent spectacle . . .” (121).⁶

For instance, Brian Glassic’s view of the Fresh Kills landfill reveals why he and Nick see waste as transformative and positive, why waste sites function for them and others as traditional sites or icons of the American sublime. Fundamentally, like well-known examples such as the Hoover Dam, the Fresh Kills landfill appears to convey a

harmony between nature and technology that ultimately attests to man's "rightful" dominance of nature through technological achievement. Classic

imagined he was watching the construction of the Great Pyramid at Giza – only this was twenty-five times bigger, with tanker trucks spraying perfumed water on the approach roads And the thing was organic, ever growing and shifting, its shape computer-plotted by the day and the hour. In a few years this would be the highest mountain on the Atlantic Coast between Boston and Miami. Brian felt a sting of enlightenment. (184)

Classic's "sting of enlightenment," then, much like Nick Shay's experience when he views the crater for a future waste site (where he says "I felt a weird elation, a loyalty to the company and the cause" [285]) represents a moment that has, traditionally, been reserved for those who create sublime, technological marvels. For Classic, realizing that "the mountain was here, unconcealed, but no one saw it or thought about it" (185) signals his inclusion with other experts: "he saw himself for the first time as a member of an esoteric order, they were adepts and seers, crafting the future, the city planners, the waste managers, the compost technicians" Yet as is so often the case with traditional examples in which sublimity is connected with technology and industry, (or, as we have seen, even with an apparently less conventional site like a baseball game), the celebration of expert, individual achievement is supported by – and, in fact, dependent on – collective awe and approval.⁷

Classic certainly desires such approval for his work at the Fresh Kills landfill. Even as he says that the landfill is unseen by the general public, his vision of his role in the "esoteric order" ends with him imagining "the landscapers who would build hanging

gardens here, make a park one day out of every kind of used and lost and eroded object of desire.” For Glassic, then, the superior status of technicians and engineers is supported by the imagined presence of the general public, with the Fresh Kills landfill turned into the sort of sublime tourist attraction exemplified by Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon or Hoover Dam. And as a result, Glassic’s vision reveals something else: how such tourism not only supports the authority of the inventors but the consumer logic that produces and sanctifies waste as well. Indeed, turning waste sites into public spectacles signifies more than just an expression of man-made power, it also acts as a defensive gesture that protects the production of commodities and weapons, a gesture which the text explicates more fully through the visionary “waste theorist,” Jesse Detwiler (285).

Detwiler’s aim of constructing waste sites for Whiz Co as tourist attractions serves as the ultimate support of Cold War ideology, by championing the overproduction of commodities as well as weapons. With commodities, Detwiler argues that “basic household waste ought to be placed in the cities that produce it. Bring garbage into the open. Let people see it and respect it. Don’t hide your waste facilities. Make an architecture of waste” (286). Meanwhile, with the sort of deadly waste associated with weapons technology, Detwiler insists that it ought to be isolated – but only in order to make it more spectacular and marketable for the tourist: “The more toxic the waste, the greater the effort and expense a tourist will be willing to tolerate in order to visit the site . . . Isolate the most toxic waste, okay. This makes it grander, more ominous and magical.” Although Detwiler is clearly mad, what *Underworld* suggests is the greater madness is that his hypothetical strategies of waste disposal are, in fact, sound, put into practice and still used in the decade after the end of the Cold War: the tours of the atomic

waste site Glassic and Nick visit in Kazakhstan and the Whiz Co plant Nick takes his granddaughter to represent the fetid fruits of Detwiler's vision.

Underworld's treatment of these examples criticizes the self-making, transcendence and competitiveness that underlies the American sublime and the connections between these qualities and commodities, weapons and waste. More particularly, with these examples the text exposes the principle logic that binds these points of commonality together and which extends beyond the Cold War into the present – the need to defend and, in essence, recycle, the efficacy of American identity. Much like *White Noise*, then, *Underworld* identifies commodities as a key way in which Americans (like the representative Deming family) define and redefine themselves; at the same time, *Underworld* also suggests that waste and waste recycling offer the possibility for such definition and redefinition as well.

Glassic, for instance, realizes that during the Cold War his work is not just about maintaining a competitive edge with the Soviets through the overproduction of commodities; his work is also about preserving the American public's faith in the commodity system and what commodities can do for them. His work, he concludes, is “not [about] engineering or transportation or source reduction. He dealt in human behavior, people's habits and impulses, their uncontrollable needs and innocent wishes . . . and the question was how to keep this mass metabolism from overwhelming us” (184). Maintaining such equilibrium, therefore, entails the process of safeguarding and ensuring the production of new things and the new ways they might fulfill desires, and, in the end, the text suggests that the recycling plants and the sublimity associated with them share in this process as well. When Nick takes his granddaughter, Sunny, through the recycling

shed at the Whiz Co plant, the text illustrates how the technological sublime associated with the plant's structure and machinery is embedded in the waste as it returns to being a marketable commodity. Nick observes: "Brightness streams from skylights down to the floor of the shed, falling on the tall machines with a numinous glow. Maybe we feel a reverence for waste, for the redemptive qualities of things we use and discard. Look how they come back to us, alight with a kind of brave aging" (809). Nick's experience, then, demonstrates what Glassic describes as the need to keep waste "from overwhelming us" and which converges with Detwiler's vision of the transcendent possibilities of waste sites for tourists and the technicians who manage those sites (184). As in a traditional configuration of the American technological sublime, these waste sites create man-made objects that produce – and reproduce – an assurance of "a kind of brave aging," the ability for Americans to rise above and remake their circumstances, even in the unwholesome reality of waste.

Underworld illuminates this unwholesome reality, however, by showing how it is connected to the production of atomic weapons and the displacement of the terrible consequences from Cold War atomic tests. Contrasting the Whiz Co recycling shed with the site in Kazakhstan known as "the Polygon" (792) where Joe 2 was detonated, and which has since become a multinational atomic waste disposal operation, the text links the positive view of waste recycling to the real legacy and real waste of the Cold War. Whereas Nick tells us that the recycling shed is a place that elicits awe and wonder from Sunny and the other children who routinely visit – "Sunny loves this place and so do the other kids who come with their parents or teachers to stand on the catwalk and visit the exhibits" (809) – at the Polygon Nick and Glassic discover other "exhibits." Underlying

the magnificent operation of atomic waste disposal, they find “the Museum of the Misshapens” (799) that houses the fetuses deformed by the Cold War atomic tests and nearby, the radiation clinic that is home to the descendents of “the people who were downwind” (800), the living testimony of these tests.

While “the Museum of the Misshapens” serves as a clear indication of the costs of atomic testing, Whiz Co and the Polygon continue business as usual: Whiz Co does not change its protocol or its vested interest in the Polygon, and the Polygon uses atomic weapons to dispose of atomic waste. As Viktor Maltsev explains, whose trading company Tchaika “will pick up waste anywhere in the world, ship it to Kazakhstan, put it in the ground and vaporize it” (788), his company profits because Whiz Co and the Polygon follow the same circular logic: to effectively reduce the public’s anxiety about atomic waste, it is brought back into the processes that supported the production and testing of atomic weapons. Maltsev says, “We try to bury it. But maybe this is not enough” (791). Instead, he insists that what is needed is “the fusion of two streams of history, weapons and waste. We destroy contaminated nuclear waste by means of nuclear explosion.” Thus, just as Whiz Co turns other waste into commodities which justifies the overproduction of the capitalist system, Tchaika turns atomic waste into an item that can be disposed of by using the weapons that produced that waste in the first place. In fact, the two operations are interconnected because Whiz Co will earn “a broker’s fee” (788) for finding atomic waste, which means that Whiz Co’s recycling operation is directly involved with Tchaika’s displacement of the horrors of the Cold War.

Underworld, then, implies that the ways in which the Whiz Co operation embodies qualities of the American sublime has a bearing not only on the Cold War but

on its lasting influence in the decades that have followed. Indeed, the text makes the tacit suggestion that such multinational capitalist endeavors as the Polygon's waste disposal can be traced back to the earliest stages of the Cold War and the dissemination of the American sublime as well. On a purely ideological level, *Underworld* reveals that America had already won the Cold War once the terms of the conflict became defined and measured by the production and stockpiling of atomic weapons. Moreover, given Maltsev's comments to Nick about how the Soviets saw their role in this situation, it is indeed appropriate to suggest that they adopted the American way of seeing technology and weapons as sublime. Nick recalls: "It is interesting, he [Maltsev] says, how weapons reflect the soul of the maker. The Soviets always wanted bigger yield, bigger stockpiles. They had to convince themselves they were a superpower" (790). Like their American counterparts, then, the Soviets invested weapons with "the soul of the maker," which corresponds to Americans investing technological objects with sublimity and masterly expressions of self.

The display that Nick and Glassic witness at the Polygon, and the manner in which the display is orchestrated by Tchaika, illustrates this global dissemination of the American sublime. Tchaika functions within the framework of multinational capitalism and supports the view of globalization as synonymous with Americanization. As Nick remarks, "Tchaika is connected to the commonwealth arms complex, to bomb-design laboratories and the shipping industry" (788).⁸ In addition, Tchaika still extends the role of the Polygon during the Cold War, because as Peter Knight explains, "the novel suggests that the overt ideological struggle of the Cold War was merely a sideshow for what was – and still is – literally business as usual" (826). Even so, I suggest that with

Tchaika's demonstration of its waste disposal methods we find evidence of an ideological shift, what amounts to a fully realized treatment of weapons and waste according to the conventions of the American sublime. Accompanied by the same sort of public fanfare as the atomic tests Didion portrays in *Democracy*, Tchaika's demonstration at the Polygon bears the unmistakable imprint of the displays of technological wizardry that are the hallmark of selling technology as sublime in America. From the gate of the Polygon, which Glassic says "resembles the entrance to a national park" (792), to Maltsev echoing Detwiler when he says to Nick, "don't be surprised there will be tourists here someday," Tchaika clearly follows the same pattern of constructing a site of sublimity as any number of iconic American landmarks or the other waste sites the text invents.

Most relevant here, is the way *Underworld*, like *Democracy*, locates and critiques the role the American sublime plays with this kind of test: through the frustrated expectations of those who have gathered to view it. Expecting a more dramatic and visual display, the onlookers at the Polygon only feel "a ground motion, a rumble underfoot" (798) and only hear "a guncotton thud" (798), which, as Nick reveals, has an anticlimactic effect:

We stand and look for some time, a few of us speaking briefly, soft-voiced, and there is a sense of anticipation left dangling in the wind. No ascending cloudmass, of course, or rolling waves of sound. Maybe some dust rises from the site and maybe it is only afternoon haze and several people point and comment briefly and there is a flatness in the group, an unspoken dejection, and after a while we go back inside. (798-799)

Clearly, the “unspoken dejection” of the group testifies to the degree to which they have expected – and perhaps have been led to believe – that the demonstration will be like Cold War atomic tests, which exposes not only Tchaika’s complicity with these older tests but its calculated use of the staging and dynamics that made them sublime in the first place. Indeed, what I suggest should be taken from this demonstration and the reaction of the crowd is that by referencing the qualities of the American sublime found in the Cold War tests, Tchaika is really marketing the sort of public display of power that marks the sublimity of the other sites in the text and which express how America and the Soviet Union were bound together in their competitive stockpiling and testing of atomic weapons.

What Tchaika’s operation preserves – and shares with the baseball game and the Whiz Co sites – is the display and support of competitiveness through its sublime qualities, which overshadows its destructive, dehumanizing – and, of course, potentially deadly – consequences. With Tchaika, competition revolves around selling its services, but even here we can see how the spectacle it promises to produce is based on offering a new freedom from the past, on American-style self-making, even if the company’s ultimate goal amounts to nothing more than establishing a niche in the global waste recycling marketplace. As Nick observes as he, Glassic and Maltsev view the remains of the old shot tower at the Polygon before the demonstration, the loss of the Cold War that is evidenced by this debris – the “Guilt in every dosed object, the weathered posts and I-beams left to the wind, things made and shaped by men, old schemes gone wrong” (792) – is effectively redressed by Tchaika in a symbolic manner, by the use of the same

weapons in the same place as before, and in the same competitive spirit within a global context.

Above all, however, what I suggest *Underworld* portrays as most disturbing with Tchaika is nearly unstated. The text leaves it up to us, as readers, to deduce the fact that the failure of the demonstration to elicit a sublime response from the onlookers at the Polygon does not alter their faith in empowerment, self-making and transcendence that the expected outcome would confirm. More concretely, though, neither does this failure alert them to the fact that the connections between commodification, recycling and militarization are imminently harmful: Nick, who stands in for the collective voice of those who witness the demonstration, simply returns to America with (it seems safe to assume) a deal struck between Tchaika and Whiz Co, and then he visits the recycling shed with Sunny, unperturbed by the odd symmetry between the children who routinely visit and the children in “the Museum of the Misshapens.” Indeed, with this parallel, as with the more overt juxtapositions between the ballgame, the Soviet test, commodification, weapons production and waste recycling, *Underworld* ultimately evokes the intractable allure these cultural practices and processes have by their relationship to the qualities of self-making, spectatorship and transcendence that are drawn from the American sublime. Yet what is of equal importance, and which I want to turn to in the following section, is the way the text takes up the unrealized potentialities of the failed sublimity at the Polygon in more common cultural practices and sites. To this end, it will be particularly useful to consider the art of Klara Sax and Ismael Munoz which, like text’s critical use of *The Triumph of Death*, suggests the way art can reveal

and appear to openly challenge both the legacy of the American sublime and that of the Cold War.

II

For a number of critics, Klara's use of the planes and their status as waste demonstrate how they come to serve subversive ends. For example, as Timothy Parrish puts it, "Klara . . . deactivates the dangerous energies of the Cold War by transforming its materials into forms for her art" (718). Similarly, Paul Gleason argues that Klara's planes reflect and criticize the Cold War's legacy in the contemporary world: as art, the planes represent "a way in which humanity can reject and survive an American culture whose mass-market capitalism and weapons of mass destruction threaten individualism and human life" (140). In addition, for Mark Osteen and Evans, it is the status of the planes as waste and their relation to the recycling practices of artists and the economy that distinguishes their disruptive potential. The planes, Osteen insists, in combination with the works of other artists in the novel, are evidence of a resistant recycling aesthetic: "These works – salvage operations, recycling projects – redeem and transmogrify the refuse of consumerism and the Cold War" (216); more particularly, through bricolage with waste materials, the artists attempt to "lay bare the secrets of the Cold War culture and criticize the excesses of capitalist society, but, more importantly, to redeem its artifacts and transmute them into lasting testaments to eccentricity and community" (245).⁹ Finally, for Evans, these artists engage in an activity that is distinct from the economic logic of Bauman's "liquid modernity." According to Evans, even though they work with waste, they produce "work [that] is created by interrupting the cycle of consumption-reprocessing-and-reconsumption" (122), which signals the anti-capitalist

quality of their art: “What ties art and garbage is a common resistance to utility; in this sense, *Underworld* suggests that the making of art is the ultimate act of irresponsibility,” irresponsibility that would confound a capitalist insistence on production and consumption. In sum, then, these various views claim that the commodities and weapons of the Cold War can be inflected with new meanings once they have been turned into waste and re-appropriated as art, that this process can have a significant impact on the community and, in turn, that it can engender more inclusive and empowered types of community.

While these critical views do much to identify the aesthetic principles that underlie Klara’s artistic treatment of the planes as well as the cultural contexts in which her work is situated, what has not been accounted for is the ways in which Klara’s project functions as a traditional site of the American sublime, and so supports the elements of commodification and militarization that might otherwise appear to be subverted. On the most immediate level, for instance, Klara’s endeavor is sanctioned by the military-industrial complex, by the institutions that produce commodities and weapons. As Klara explains:

We have cooperation from the military up to a point. We can paint their deactivated aircraft. They let us paint and they promise to keep the site intact, to isolate it from other uses and to maintain the integrity of the project. No other objects, not a single permanent object can be located within a mile of the finished piece. We also have foundation grants, we have congressional approval, all sorts of permits. What else? Materials donated by manufacturers, tons of thousands of dollars worth. (69)

In addition to official approval and financial support, then, these institutions also limit the parameters in which Klara can use the planes and, most directly with the role of the “manufacturers,” the planes are kept in the cycle of production, consumption and recycling. Yet what I suggest is most noteworthy here is that the actions and prescriptions of these institutions are instrumental to Klara realizing her project as another icon of the American technological sublime.

Indeed, Klara’s acceptance of the conditions in which she must work, coupled with her comments about why these conditions are, in fact, necessary for her art, convey that she envisions her aims within the conventions of the technological sublime. Appropriately, what initially reveals her adherence to these conventions is her description of why the isolated desert landscape is an essential element for her art. According to Klara, the project “is a landscape painting in which we use the landscape itself”: “The desert is central to this piece. It’s the surround. It’s the framing device. It’s the four-part horizon” (70). More revealing, is why Klara insists that the desert must function for her work in the manner she describes, because the desert “enables us to show our mastery” (71): The “beauty of the desert,” she explains, “makes us feel, makes us as a culture, any technological culture, . . . feel [that] we musn’t be overwhelmed by it. Awe and terror, you know. Unconducive – and she waved a hand and laughed – to industry and progress and so forth It’s only logical of course” (70-71). Clearly, then, Klara accepts the desert as an expression of the American natural sublime – of “awe and terror” (71) – and holds that it is appropriate – “only logical of course” (71) – that it be mastered by “industry and progress” (71) and turned into an expression of the American technological sublime, which is what America, as a “technological culture” (70) has done. Therefore, a

view like Osteen's is partly correct when he argues that "the desert is the perfect setting for her project" because of the "craters and signs, visible emblems of the secret war that took place on American soil" (256). Still, Klara does not see these "emblems" as evidence that qualifies America's faith in "industry and progress." Instead, her view of the desert implies that some kind of human interaction with it is a prerequisite, if not an American birthright.¹⁰

More directly, Klara's embrace of the planes as technological objects reveals how her artistic treatment of them is predicated on the American technological sublime. As technological objects, the planes have been a long-standing source of fascination for her. Problematically, though, Klara's rapture with the planes when she has seen them in the past, in combination with her nostalgia for them in the present, represents a covert support for the Cold War preoccupation with commodities and weapons and the competitive dynamic they upheld; indeed, as Jesse Kavadlo notes, she mourns the lost "assurances of Us and Them, Good and Evil, and Black and White [that] have all melted into uneasy and uncomfortable shades of gray . . ." (388). In the past, when Klara would watch the night sky and see "a kind of halo moving across the star fields," she liked to imagine that the light was from B-52s "on permanent alert," an image that would elicit from her "a sense of awe, a child's sleepy feeling of mystery and danger and beauty" (75).¹¹ Moreover, in contrast to Peter Knight, who argues that Klara "expresses a fondness for the certainties of four decades ago, while also recognizing the misery of living under the shadow of such terror" (816), it is clear that the awe Klara experienced when she saw the planes is only possible because of the terror that produced "the certainties" of the Cold War. Tellingly, when Klara insists that she is glad that the

“misery” of the Cold War is over, her final, unfinished sentence betrays her ambivalence towards “such terror”: “Not that I want to bring it [the Cold War] back. It’s gone, good riddance. But the fact is” (76). Thus, in spite of herself, the Cold War continues to exert a strange attraction for Klara.

Clearly, Klara does not wish that the Cold War was still being waged; rather, what she recalls with pleasure is the power she felt embodied in the planes, which was conveyed through the feelings of terror they could produce. “Power,” she says, “meant something thirty, forty years ago. It was stable, it was focused, it was a tangible thing. It was greatness, danger, terror, all those things. And it held us together, the Soviets and us” (70). Even though Klara recognizes that this power brought about and supported the Cold War, in her mind it is as if the planes can somehow transcend this context, as examples of the technological sublime. Her wish to preserve the planes hinges on the belief that their power is a property of their design and manufacture, and so this power can therefore be retained – “we are not going to let those great machines expire in a field or get sold as scrap.”

On a schematic level, Klara’s statement reflects the complex manner in which her art converges with the production, consumption and recycling of commodities, weapons and waste criticized elsewhere in the novel.¹² While Klara’s “cast-off” planes are not, in the strictest sense, part of the recycling processes we have considered elsewhere or like the Whiz Co waste sites or the Polygon, the way she wants to preserve the planes as art nevertheless links them to these processes and sites. On a purely material level, the similarity between the planes and other waste is indicated by how Klara carries out her loosely defined – even contradictory – method of preservation. As noted earlier, Klara

accepts the addition of “materials donated by manufacturers,” but she also allows for the planes to be “stripped of most components that might still be useful or salable to civilian contractors” (69). For Klara, the power the planes had for her in the past supersedes, perhaps even reconciles, the contradictions inherent in her aesthetic approach, which shows that she wishes to preserve the planes as objects of the technological sublime. In fact, the most vital link between the planes, the waste sites and the processes of recycling is that Klara’s project not only preserves the planes but, more broadly, preserves the efficacy of viewing technology and waste as sublime in the first place.¹³

Indeed, in *Underworld*, it is this covert defense of sublimity that underlies what is most problematic about Klara’s art. Not only does she attempt to remove the power she sees in the planes from the context of the Cold War, but by doing so she sanctions the possibility for similar conflicts in the future by preserving technology as a site of sublimity that can express such competitive power and authority. Fundamentally, what is at stake in Klara’s art is an effort to reclaim this power rather than to simply preserve it, and *Underworld*, much like Didion’s *Democracy*, critiques this reclamation by exploiting one of the inherent tensions within traditional configurations of the American technological sublime: the need to reclaim control when the power of a sublime, technological object appears to threaten the authority of its inventors.

In *Underworld*, the planes embody this threat by association, through the atomic bombs they carried, which Klara says were largely responsible for the difficulty artists had in responding to the Cold War: “We all tried to think about war but I’m not sure we knew how to do this. The poets wrote long poems with dirty words and that’s about as close as we came, actually, to a thoughtful response. Because they had brought

something into the world that out-imagined the mind” (76). Thus, *Underworld’s* depiction of the bomb, much like *Democracy’s* intertextual use of Adams’s “Dynamo and the Virgin,” portrays what occurs when the man-made power of a sublime, technological object not only dominates nature but extends beyond man’s control and powers of perception. At the same time, whereas *Democracy* reveals how Adams’s example provides the narrator with a disingenuous means to reassert her narrative authority, *Underworld* reveals how Klara’s response is even more deceptive and potentially harmful, through artistic goals that appear to undermine the status of the planes as weapons while, in fact, supporting that status.

On the surface, Klara’s comments about her work can indeed appear as though she wages an assault on the planes as mass-produced weapons, or as Mark Osteen argues, as an example of the way “the spirit of resistance wells up to mount guerrilla attacks on the dominant culture” (216). Klara says:

See, we’re painting, hand-painting in some cases, putting our puny hands to great weapons systems, to systems that came out of the factories and assembly halls as near alike as possible, . . . and we’re trying to unrepeat, to find an element of felt life, and maybe there’s a sort of survival instinct here, a graffiti instinct to trespass and declare ourselves, show who we are. (77)

By “putting our puny hands to great weapons systems,” however, Klara attempts to reclaim their power, to “unrepeat” what has been lost since the Cold War, the way, she explains, “Many things that were anchored to the balance of power and the balance of terror seem to be undone, unstuck” (76).

Ironically, though, restoring such “balance” entails reinscribing the bomb as an object of the technological sublime that does not exceed the control of its inventors, in the same terms that supported the bomb’s creation and resulted with “things” becoming “unstuck.” Moreover, in bringing the unthinkable magnitude of the bomb under control through her artistic use of the planes, Klara’s activities can be likened to the disposal of atomic weapons as waste that Nick and Brian find at the Polygon. Indeed, in *Underworld*, the atomic bomb is defined as waste in two ways that links Klara’s methods to those used at the Polygon. As Klara, herself, explains, the bomb was first referred to as “shit” by its inventors, particularly by Oppenheimer, because “You can’t name it. It’s too big or evil or outside your experience. It’s also shit because it’s garbage, it’s waste material” (77). With waste understood from this perspective, then, Klara’s work with the planes – as an element of waste – performs a double function: it brings waste under control and makes it stand as a monumental celebration and testament of that control, of man’s power through weapons. As a result, Klara achieves in art what could not be achieved with the underground detonations at the Polygon, establishing a site of sublimity that restores, produces, validates and directs the awe and terror that can be associated with atomic weapons. As Nick remarks when he gazes upon the planes, they convey the imprint of creative, human control – “the whole thing [was] oddly personal, a sense of one painter’s hand moved by impulse and afterthought as much as by epic design” (83) – and a power that comes about through the imposition of these man-made objects within the natural landscape: “The air was color-scrubbed, coppers and ochers burning off the metal skin of the aircraft to exchange with the framing desert. But these colors did not

simply draw down power from the sky or lift it from the landforms around us. They pushed and pulled.”

The manner in which Klara’s art embodies the relationship between sublimity and waste recycling is not an isolated phenomenon; in other instances *Underworld* identifies the limits of what might appear as resistant or subversive art. For example, the Wall in the South Bronx exemplifies how fully the relations between sublimity, waste recycling and art have permeated the common practices and fabric of contemporary American life.¹⁴ Most importantly, the Wall is an example of art that is not, in its conception, complicit with the dominant culture, but which is nevertheless co-opted by that culture, in part, because of the proximity between art and the everyday, quotidian world. Indeed, unlike Klara’s planes, which represent a renewed version of a traditional icon of the American sublime with their placement in a revered site like Virginia’s natural bridge or the Hoover Dam, the Wall serves as a more troubling example than the planes because of how fully it is immersed within the center of the physical and social landscape, even as it is “a tuck of land adrift from the social order” (239). As Nick explains, the planes and the Wall exert their influence on people differently. Sites like the planes, the Whiz Co operations and the Polygon function in a more traditional manner and call for – and encourage – a different type of viewing experience: “Sometimes I see something so moving I know I’m not supposed to linger. See it and leave. If you stay too long, you wear out the worldless shock. Love it and trust it and leave” (83). Thus, when Nick views Klara’s planes, it is not surprising that he follows this dictum. Seeing “the fittingness of what she’d done,” he leaves promptly – “when I’d seen it all I knew I wouldn’t stay an extra second” (84). Categorically, then, there is a fundamental

difference between sites like Klara's planes and the Wall: whereas the planes require unique, isolated conditions to generate their effects on the viewer, a less traditional site like the Wall does not require such conditions.

The different ways in which Klara's planes and the Wall are experienced also has a bearing on the communal impact of each work. In contrast to Klara's planes, the Wall's relative closeness to people registers its ultimate failure to offer a resistant, communal experience that is free from the negative qualities associated with the recycling of waste and other forms of commodification; instead, this proximity marks the way the American sublime is neither fundamentally inclusive nor democratic. With the Wall, the relationship between those who "make" it – by painting angels on it to commemorate deaths in the neighborhood – and those in the Bronx who view it is, on one level, blurred. Yet such closeness between creators and viewers does not mean the Wall fosters an inclusiveness that is culturally resistant, which is underscored when the Wall is televised on CNN for a world audience. Rather, the Wall illustrates how inclusiveness can be a form of divisiveness when a work of art adopts the characteristics of the American sublime. To some extent, this paradoxical quality of the Wall is foreshadowed through what we have seen with Klara's planes. Klara's art seeks to restore control of the sublime object to the inventor, and in the process subsumes the "many hands" into an expression "of one painter's hand" that stands in for the inventor. Similarly, the Wall merges the creators with the consumers, while more explicitly illustrating that the authority and self-fashioning inherent in the American sublime is always a restricted process, that those who are excluded from the means of self-determination and equality are given only the appearance of shared control.

In the South Bronx, the “cast-offs” celebrated through the sublime display of the angels are those who are excluded from the dominant, affluent, society. In fact, through the comments of the local nun, Sister Gracie, *Underworld* draws our attention to how these people are, in essence, reduced to waste material that is used in the common processes of waste recycling and disposal, by the incidents of “laboratory waste” – “the amputated limbs” – that “end up in the Wall. Dumped in a vacant lot or burned in the waste incinerator” (249). In order to elaborate more fully what is at stake here, though, I suggest that it is useful to turn to Bauman’s work on waste, but to move beyond and also to restate my contrary position with Evans about Klara’s planes in light of Bauman’s points about waste recycling. Turning to Bauman’s remarks about art, waste – and sublimity – provides a framework that illuminates the example of the Wall and its connection to waste and the American sublime.

According to Bauman, art is intimately connected to waste. In particular, in the case of High Renaissance sculpture, he insists that the goal is to reveal “a perfect form hidden inside the formless slab of raw stone,” which demonstrates that “waste is the wrapping that conceals that form” (*Wasted Lives* 21). This correlation, however, can also apply to other forms of art such as Klara’s planes or Ismael’s angels because they, too, are dependent upon waste in their creation – by the materials each artist works with or discards as well as by the waste they depict, the bomb and the dead of the South Bronx. What is most important here, though, is Bauman’s remarks about the meaning of waste in terms of art, which can be seen with these examples from the text as well: “waste,” he says, is “an indispensable ingredient of the creative process. More: it endows waste with an awesome, truly magic power . . . – the power of a wondrous transmutation of base,

paltry and menial stuff into a noble, beautiful and precious object” (22). Fundamentally, then, it is this association of waste with creation that is most relevant to the context of art and the American sublime in *Underworld*; significantly, for Bauman, this “magic power” explains why waste is “an embodiment of ambivalence,” why “waste is sublime,” configured with a “unique blend of attraction and repulsion [and] arousing an equally unique mixture of awe and fear.”

For Bauman, the “awe and fear” elicited by waste illustrates another quality that resonates with resistant art in *Underworld*, that all waste has the power to exceed how it is defined and by whom. Waste, Bauman explains, is an unstable category that requires special attention, mediation and control: “However hard one tries, the frontier separating the ‘useful product’ from ‘waste’ is a grey zone: a kingdom of underdefinition, uncertainty – and danger” (28). Moreover, when Bauman argues that this “danger” extends to “human waste” (32), he offers a particularly useful point for understanding *Underworld*’s residents of the South Bronx, those who have been cast aside from mainstream culture, who work with Ismael and are represented by his angels. As the “universal category of the exempted/excluded,” these “other” New Yorkers reveal their status as waste by being cast out from the rights, opportunities and resources that their fellow citizens enjoy, by “design” and “law,” by being placed “outside the rule-governed realm which it [law] has circumscribed.”¹⁵ Thus, by being “outside,” Ismael, his crew and the other disenfranchised people of the South Bronx are defined in terminology that threatens to collapse under its own elaborate weight. Similarly, through their association with Ismael’s art, the existence of these people takes on the potential for a more direct form of subversion. Not only do the angels elicit the sublime qualities of “awe and fear”

by virtue of physically shaping waste as art, but as representations they reveal the dirty truth about waste and defining people as waste, the fact, as Bauman explains, that “no objects *are* ‘waste’ by their intrinsic qualities, and no objects can *become* waste through their inner logic” (22).

On one level, Ismael’s work does appear to accomplish the aim of denaturalizing the category of waste. By exploiting the inherent contradictions in the definition of waste, Ismael’s work seems to show and claim the intrinsic value of the people in his community. Indeed, Ismael’s ability to negotiate the processes of waste recycling that shape his community and the world beyond suggests that his methods and his art are subversive. Quite literally, by salvaging cars for “a scrap-metal operation in remotest Brooklyn” (241), Ismael exploits the recycling industry for ends that directly benefit the community and support his art. In the first place, for the nuns who notify him about the cars he can recycle, some of the money he earns from this business goes to “the friary for groceries.” In addition, as the nun, Sister Edgar notes, he uses the rest of his money “more or less altruistically, teaching his crew of stray kids . . . – giving them a sense of responsibility and self-worth” (813), which is ultimately expressed as they paint the angels. As a result, because the angels embody a collective effort as well as the dead they represent, it can appear as if Ismael’s art achieves what Osteen claims, that the “‘angels’ rescue dignity from death, and remind those driving by of the human leftovers of capital’s bounty” (256).

The view of “those driving by,” however, indicates the limits of the resistant, positive and communal effects the angels might otherwise have. Like other forms of waste, the angels, the people they represent, Ismael and the crew and the citizens of the

South Bronx become commodities for the public to consume. As Todd McGowan observes, the South Bronx, “a region that the capitalist economy has rendered destitute here becomes a tourist attraction precisely because of its status as a waste product” (138), which is confirmed when Sister Gracie sees “a tour bus in carnival colors with a sign in the slot above the windshield reading South Bronx Surreal . . .” (247). But there is much more to the tourists’ actions than just “slumming.” Turning the South Bronx into a surreal art exhibit clearly evokes a connection to Klara’s avant-garde work with the planes, but this aesthetic view of the South Bronx also reflects what can be found at such diverse sites as the baseball diamond, the Whiz Co facilities and the Polygon. All these sites connote a transformative experience of sublimity and offer a transcendent, awe-inducing or terrifying power for the people who experience them. With the tour of the South Bronx, there is an underlying belief that this site can offer the same kind of “stable” (76) power predicated on “danger” and “terror” that Klara first responds to when she sees the planes or that Hoover envisions when he contemplates the Soviet test at the baseball game. As Sister Edgar suggests, the tourists crave this kind of power and now try to recapture it by turning other scenes of terror and destruction into consumable experiences through a spectatorial point of view: “She thought she understood the tourists. You travel somewhere not for museums and sunsets but for rains, bombed-out terrain, for the moss-grown memory of torture and war . . .” (248). Indeed, the text confirms her interpretation a moment later when a subway fire breaks out and Sister Edgar sees the “tourists getting off the bus and edging along the street, poised to take pictures . . .”

The full implications of this example, though, and its relevance within *Underworld* as a whole, only becomes apparent through a final series of events connected with these characters in the South Bronx, one event more awesome and terrifying than the next. For instance, the murder of Esmeralda, a homeless girl who lives near the Wall, is consumed by the same spectatorial view used by the South Bronx tourists and the CNN coverage of the angels on the Wall. CNN, in fact, reports Esmeralda's death as well, with footage of Ismael's angel for her, which the text indicts as another moment where the media produces a spectacle for public consumption, recalling the potential airplane crash and the airborne toxic event in *White Noise*.¹⁶ In *Underworld*, however, the news coverage of Esmeralda's death carries with it the loss of what, conceivably, could have withstood – if not resisted – such exploitation by the media, the communal bonds forged through Ismael's art as an act of local, public mourning for Esmeralda. Told from the perspective of Ismael and the crew, the text elaborates on the way the media brings about a violation of Esmeralda's memory and, in turn, a repudiation of the way their art claims meaning for her and themselves as a community. For them,

There is a news report of the murder, their murder, and it is freaking network coverage, CNN – tragic life and death of homeless child. The crew is stunned to see footage of the Wall, two and a half seconds of film that shows the building they're in, the façade of spray-painted angels, the overgrown lots with their bat caverns and owl roosts. They gawk and buzz, charged with a kind of second sight, the things they know so well seen inside out, made new and nationwide. They stand smeared in other people's seeing. (816-817)

Here, as in *White Noise*, *Underworld* implicates the American tendency to view suffering from a position of spectatorship within the American sublime and its relationship to the culture industries. The crew “gawk and buzz with a second sight” and assume the same position of those who view them on TV; the crew, like the implied TV viewers and perhaps like the tourists of the South Bronx Surreal, experience a transcendence, “a second sight,” from the spectacle of their despair and destitution, even as the text registers their alarm and victimization as the subjects of this spectatorial gaze, “smeared in other people’s seeing.”

Underworld, like *White Noise*, portrays the mainstream media’s sensationalistic absorption of subcultural forces that could be subversive. That said, with the event that follows the CNN coverage of Esmeralda’s death, *Underworld* turns the focus away from how the coverage is connected to negative experiences of transcendence and power back to the larger question of why this is so. Indeed, this question resonates with the mysterious scenario that concludes the novel’s treatment of the South Bronx, the miraculous appearance of Esmeralda’s image on a billboard advertisement by the Wall, which resembles the mystery and “radiance” of such phenomena as the sunsets above the overpass at the end of *White Noise*. Moreover, like those similar examples in *White Noise*, the billboard in *Underworld* attracts crowds who neither confirm nor deny the existence of otherworldly forces; instead, their presence indicates one certainty, that the belief in such phenomena functions as an expression of the American sublime in contemporary culture.

This is not to say, though, that *Underworld* evades the critical issue that underlies Esmeralda’s relation to Ismael’s art. By reframing her death with this miraculous event

the text still addresses whether she can defy her categorization as waste. For some critics her appearance on the billboard signals a challenge to the forces of commodification and waste recycling that support this categorization, which are represented through the coverage by CNN.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the appearance of Esmeralda's ghostly image on the billboard over a Minute Maid advertisement, and the response this juxtaposition elicits from the crowd, is not, in fact, subversive when accounted for as a reconfiguration of the American sublime.

For example, Osteen's argument that "the juice cans cannot contain all the large-scale longings that seep from them" (257) as people view Esmeralda on the billboard does not mean that these "longings" are necessarily resistant or distinct from the way all such longings are culturally determined. Similarly, Evans's insistence that Esmeralda's image turns the billboard into an expression of "uniqueness, uselessness, and non-identity" (131) does not counter the processes of waste recycling by creating a non-functional space: the enigmatic words "*Space Available*" (824) that are pasted on the billboard when the advertisement and Esmeralda's image are removed illustrate how this space is ever ready to be re-used. By extension, the "uselessness" of Esmeralda's image does not fully account for why its appearance on the billboard becomes an occasion for the sort of sideshow marketing that so often becomes associated with traditional icons of the American sublime. Much like Niagara Falls, which is surrounded by gift shops that sell its image on T-shirts, postcards and posters as well as wax museums, casinos, theme parks and haunted houses, the billboard is surrounded by the vendors who "sell laminated images of Esmeralda on prayer cards" along with "flowers, soft drinks and live kittens" and "pinwheels that never stop spinning" (823).¹⁸

At most, the changing surface of the billboard offers a unique opportunity for *Underworld* to directly address the significance of such sites and events in the American popular consciousness. Conflating us with those who have witnessed Esmeralda's appearance on the billboard, the narrative voice asks us to consider the appeal of such sublime moments: "Does the power of transcendence linger, the sense of an event that violates natural forces, something holy that throbs on the hot horizon, the vision you crave because you need a sign to stand against your doubt?" (824) This multifaceted question is largely rhetorical, however, and directs us towards an implied answer about the various sites of sublimity in the novel: the reason they are consumed again and again is because even as American culture has changed – and the efficacy of its norms and values have been challenged – the American sublime offers experiences of power that promise renewed faith for the individual and the nation, as "a sign against your doubt."

Underworld's critical analysis of this custom, then, does not discount the lasting legacy or allure of the American sublime. Instead, *Underworld* presents the curious forms the American sublime took with the particular demands of the Cold War era, that the American sublime helped to preserve American culture against Soviet dominance in immediate, material terms through the competitive production of commodities and weapons and recirculation of waste. Indeed, even as the text points out the inherent contradictions and negative consequences that emerge through the relationship between the American sublime and these processes, we are not offered a consoling vision: at best, the possibility of resistant art marks these consequences as it testifies to the resilience and dominance of these processes. In the end, what is perhaps most alarming, though, is the way the relationship between Cold War ideology and these processes of commodification

and recycling was displaced and supported by the practices of everyday life, and the way the impact of such processes continues to be hidden in plain sight under a screen of normalcy.

Of course, as we have seen, invoking a rationale for defining normalcy or quotidian realism in DeLillo's fiction is best done in a flexible manner, and the final scene of *Underworld* provides an exemplary instance of why this is so. With a scenario that rivals Esmeralda's magical appearance on the billboard or any of the moments of "radiance" in *White Noise* for muddying the terms of fictional plausibility and possibility, when Sister Edgar apparently achieves a ghostly existence in cyberspace, *Underworld* offers a final caveat and a summary of its treatment of the American sublime as she views an atomic explosion on the H-bomb homepage and the word "Peace" (827) flashes on the image of the blast. While for some critics this juxtaposition of peace and the bomb resembles the disruptive aesthetic found with Ismael spray-painting graffiti angels on the Wall and Klara hand-painting the B-52's, with cyberspace providing the means for the same kind of communal spirit that animates their art, I suggest that there is a more problematic, shared quality that *Underworld* identifies here: in effect, the text illuminates why and how potentially subversive qualities actually support or are co-opted by the underlying forces they appear to contest.¹⁹ Overall, like the ostensible, positive qualities of Klara's and Ismael's art, this peace superimposed over the explosion shows how it is built on the ethos of competition and the processes that produce commodities, weapons and waste.

Endnotes

1. While DeLillo, himself, in his essay “The Power of History,” published alongside *Underworld*, does not offer the sort of criticism of baseball that directly supports what Duvall and others have found either in the original “Prologue” or the one published in the novel, in the essay DeLillo does offer a description of the game in relation to Joe 2 that is nevertheless suggestive. For DeLillo, the home run was “soon to be known, vaingloriously, as ‘The Shot Heard ‘Round the World’ and “found its vast and awful counterpoint” in a “Russian mushroom cloud” (60). Thus, for DeLillo, baseball is clearly understood as a means for expressing national pride and even, at worst, “vainglory,” which must be considered from an international context.
2. For a discussion of self-making in *Underworld* from the perspective of the American Adam, with a focus on Nick Shay that extends beyond his professional role as a waste manager, see Gass.
3. Hodges’s “ghost games” and his broadcast of “The Shot Heard ‘Round the World’” have been conflated by a number of critics and discussed with reference to simulation, but often in opposing or even contradictory ways, and likely because of DeLillo’s enigmatic comments about the game in “The Power of History.” For DeLillo, Hodges’s broadcast of the game represents a form of “unconsumed” media because he finds Hodges’s “rapturous radio account” something that is “beautifully isolated in time – not subject to the debasing process of frantic repetition that exhausts a contemporary event before it has rounded into coherence” (62). Thus, for some critics like David Cowart, the game and the elements of it that survive like the winning homerun ball become preserved, “un-diminished as an experience of reality because it was never transformed to media simulacrum” (53). However, to claim that what remains of the game is finally separate from the processes of repetition and recycling does not hold – particularly with the baseball that becomes a commodity that is recycled again and again through a series of owners wishing to preserve or recapture the game in some form. For an excellent analysis that charts the relationship of the game to other forms of media see Mexal.
4. The use of Hoover has garnered criticism from Peter Knight who rightly suggests the danger of using a figure whose paranoid vision could be seen to reify America’s more conspiracy-based, Cold War policies. For Knight, “The reader is left to suppose that the emergence of paranoia in the collective imagination is in part a result of Hoover’s projecting his own internal weaknesses and thwarted desires onto the external scene of American society” (818). However, I argue that the text’s emphasis on Hoover’s dual status as a fan and as the Director of the FBI at the game does much to counter such potential misreading. Indeed, DeLillo’s discovery that Hoover was, in fact, at the game seems the primary motivation for using his perspective in the first place, and in a manner that is clearly situated within the larger context of the game and the test. In “The Power of History” DeLillo explains that “it was Hoover’s presence on the scene that enabled me to bring news of the Soviet atomic test into the Polo Grounds and to set an early tone for the shifting conflicts I hoped to examine” (62).

5. Bauman's notion of "liquid modernity" describes the processes of flexible accumulation that he defines against "heavy modernity", which Evans aptly summarizes "defined itself against those parts which were not organized, and which remained obdurately purposeless and unproductive" (107). In the era of liquid modernity, by contrast, everything is put to use in order to serve the logic in which "lightness, speed and flexibility become the crucial elements of success." Bauman's theories, then, are particularly applicable to *Underworld* not only because of its emphasis on recycling but because it portrays the processes that represent the shifting economic and political landscape that Bauman's theories attempt to describe. For Bauman's own overview of these concepts and commodification, recycling and waste, see Chapter 5, "Consumers in Liquid Modern Society," 80-115, in *Liquid Life*.

6. This view of waste sites as sublime can be seen as the logical culmination of the strategies with which industrial landscapes were integrated into the American public's consciousness in favorable terms, as ecologically friendly or at least interesting and not harmful. Indeed, beyond the Cold War context, these waste sites correspond to the sublime view of industry exemplified by the paintings of Charles Sheeler, which, as Leo Marx put it, show how "the industrial landscape is pastoralized" through "imposing order, peace, and harmony upon our modern chaos . . ." (356). Indeed, with this in mind, the waste sites in *Underworld* clearly embody elements of the two strategies of the "industrial sublime" that Nye has more recently identified – the "merging of industry into a pastoral landscape" or when "the industrial world was presented as a separate realm, fascinating because it was utterly unnatural" (126).

7. Indeed, Brian's vision of himself with the "adepts and seers" (185) recalls the way parades celebrated technological achievements as a communal experience, even though these public displays increasingly excluded workers so that inventors, engineers and their technology were instead surrounded by "politicians, military heroes, and national leaders" (Nye 67).

8. The name, "Tchaika," for Viktor's company is appropriate because, as Nick explains, "Tchaika means seagull and refers poetically to the fact that the company's basic business is waste" (790). Even more evocative, though, is the revelation that Viktor "likes the way seagulls swoop down on garbage mounds and trail after ships waiting for the glint of jettison at the bow." Thus, through this name we can see how the text portrays the company as a capitalist, multinational operation that is connected to the new global networks of waste recycling.

9. Osteen admits, however, that some forms of art that use montage and bricolage are less successful even as he maintains that these aesthetics are part of "the social philosophy to which the novel points, an ecological ideal in which recycled waste represents a form of grace" (216). For example, in his view the film about the Rolling Stones, *Cocksucker Blues*, is less subversive than it might appear because it "embodies irresolvable contradictions, at once exposing the rock world as a branch of capitalism and retaining reverence for its debased beauty" (250), but for him this does not mean that the aesthetic principles it employs are also in question. In contrast, I argue that such

discrepancies are more evidence of *Underworld's* depiction of the co-optation of potentially resistant art by the culture industries and the processes of recycling. For instance, the novel's magnificent portrait of Lenny Bruce, who Osteen argues DeLillo represents as a more oppositional force than the film, as an example that both "opposes and embodies the nuclear age and its contradictions" (253), is clearly co-opted when the advertising executive Charles Wainwright steals a line from Bruce for a sales pitch, "a line off a Lenny Bruce LP" (528), for which "Charlie didn't think he had to credit the source."

10. Klara's view of the desert as an example of the natural sublime, which takes its ultimate significance from a conquering American presence, is mirrored by Matty Shay who works in the atomic weapons industry in the Nevada desert at "the Pocket." When Matty and his girlfriend Janet Urbaniak make a trip into the desert, he sees it in terms of frontier mythology, as inseparable from American culture and Manifest Destiny: the desert offers "a realization of some half-dreamed vision, the otherness of the West, the strange great thing that was all mixed in with nation and spaciousness, with bravery and history and who you are and what you believe and what movies you saw growing up" (449-450).

11. As with his corresponding impression of the desert, Matty Shay also provides a view that parallels Klara's response to the planes as examples of the technological sublime. With the jets that fly overhead at "the Pocket," Matty "sometimes . . . stood outside his quarters before nightfall and watched the matched contrails of half a dozen aircraft in tight formation, the planes themselves long gone, but it was the drag and sonic shock, this is what awed and moved him, and then the afterclap rolling off the mountains, like they were blowing out a seam in the world" (408). Moreover, much like Klara it is the sense of secure power that he responds to. Indeed, elsewhere we discover that what Matty finds attractive here is described by his response to the sound of F-4 Phantoms, which convey a power that he equates with the stability of American culture:

Yes, he loved the way power rises out of self-caressing secrecy to become a roar in the sky. He imagined the sound waves passing over the land and lapping forward in time, over weeks and months, cross-country, eventually becoming the gentlest sort of rockabye rhyme in a small safe room where a mother nurses a baby and a man stands with his arm over his head, a research fellow, not in fear of shattered plaster and flying glass but only to draw down the shade – the sky is going dark, and a tangy savor drifts from the kitchen, and there is music in the house. (468)

However, like Klara's "sense of awe, a child's sleepy feeling of mystery and danger and beauty" (75), Matty's response is founded on a violent assertion of man-made control. With the F-4 Phantoms he is "speechless in the wake of a power and thrust snatched from nature's own greatness, or how men bend heaven to their methods" (468).

12. Given DeLillo's comments in "The Power of History" about the role of the novel in the contemporary world, it is not surprising that some critics have read *Underworld's* depiction of art as the realization of the kind of resistance DeLillo strives for as an author. Yet the type of subversion DeLillo reads in his own work in *Underworld* differs greatly

from what he portrays with Klara Sax or Ismael Munoz. Unlike them, for DeLillo it is language that has the capacity for creating “a form of counterhistory,” and he suggests that it is in his “small tactics, minor maneuvers” like the use of “lower-case letters for such trademarked terms as Styrofoam, Velcro, Plexiglas” that we can find his methods of subversion. That said, with this example at least, such tactics are not as neatly contrived as they might at first appear. He says that “I didn’t realize until the book was nearly done that I wanted to unincorporate these words, subvert their official status,” which he concludes is evidence of “the tendency of the language to work in opposition to the enormous technology of war that dominated the era and shaped the book’s themes.” Speaking of a general tendency, however, is very different from claiming that it is successful, and, in any case, such subtle ploys (successful or not) stand in marked contrast to the grandiose displays of Klara and Ismael that are more clearly enmeshed with or linked “to the enormous technology of war” (63).

13. Klara’s acts of preservation also focus on a particular plane called *Long Tall Sally*, named after the pin-up on its nose art. While for Gleason Klara’s refusal to paint over Sally “indicates DeLillo’s understanding of the sacred role of art and language in preserving and revealing individual human lives” (140), Sally is not simply representative of human life. Sally is also “a charm against death” (77), and in this sense she functions as a support of the plane’s role as a bomber and displaces the potential consequences of this activity as a good luck charm. Indeed, as one of the bombers remarks during a mission, “this girl out there is good luck for us. Nearly forty missions without a major incident” (610).

14. By naming the site “the Wall,” the text clearly invites comparison to the Berlin Wall, a broad, evocative gesture which implies that the same processes of militarization and commodification that defined the Cold War era persist here in the South Bronx. Indeed, as Molly Wallace puts it with respect to these forces, “Although, on an international macro-level, the Wall may be down, on an intra-national, micro-level, the Wall persists” (379).

15. Bauman’s description of human waste draws on Agamben’s recent reinvigoration of the concept of the *homo sacer*, the category in Roman law that describes one who “is devoid of value, whether in the human or in the divine perspective” (32). While the original concept relates to an entirely different cultural context than DeLillo’s South Bronx, Bauman’s description of the *homo sacer* in “contemporary secular terms,” where the “present-day version [of] the *homo sacer* is neither defined by any set of positive laws nor a carrier of human rights that precede legal rules,” offers an apt description of what we find in *Underworld*, the sort of hegemonic constraints Ismael and the crew struggle against in their effort to claim the intrinsic value of the people in their community.

16. The CNN coverage of Esmeralda and her angel corresponds to DeLillo’s comments in “The Power of History” about the negative effects of videotape and the larger phenomenon of what he calls “the rerun, the sequel” (63). Implicitly, such media coverage follows the same consumer logic that underlies other practices and events in the novel; CNN is another example of the way things are rendered consumable, disposable

and re-consumable that has affinities with the spectatorship found in traditional configurations of the American sublime. Indeed, the footage about Esmeralda and the crew functions like what DeLillo refers to as the footage of “the commonplace homicide”: “It is another set of images for you to want and need and get sick of and need nonetheless, and it separates you from the reality that beats ever more softly in the diminishing world outside the tape.” Another key example of this in the text that has received much critical attention is the footage of the Texas Highway Killer, Richard Henry Gilkey, murdering someone, which elicits the same kind of response from Gilkey whenever he sees it broadcast on TV: “he thought he was going to turn up in his own living room, detached from who he was, peering squint-eyed over the wheel of his compact car” (270). Thus, Gilkey can also be viewed from the perspective I discuss with Gladney and his confrontation with Mink in *White Noise*, where Gladney’s disassociation becomes a means of legitimizing his action in his own mind and produces a sense of transcendence. Indeed, like Gladney, for the Texas Highway Killer, killing is a way “to take everything outside, share it with others, become part of the history of others, because this was the only way to escape, to get out from under the puissant details of who he was” (266). For more about the Texas Highway Killer, see Green and Mexal.

17. As with the debate about the moments of the “radiance in dailiness” in *White Noise*, critics are divided on whether Esmeralda’s image on the billboard is a genuine supernatural event. That said, while a number of critics are willing to leave the question somewhat open to debate (Osteen, for example says it is “either a genuine irruption of the spiritual world or a group hallucination” [(257)], by doing so they take the focus away from why the text treats this scene as it does. Even Todd McGowan, whose ultimate goal is to suggest that Esmeralda’s billboard image challenges the role waste plays as a commodity says that a “cynical” or “religious” perspective seems inevitable, interfering with DeLillo’s hope that we will “look at waste in the proper way, seeing in it the limit of global capitalism rather than another potential commodity” (140).

18. For an excellent cultural history of tourist practices at Niagara Falls in terms of the American sublime see, McKinsey. For information about current tourist activities at Niagara Falls go to the *Tourism Niagara Official Website*.

19. If, on the one hand, cyberspace does indeed represent the opportunity for making new connections, and can offer us the reworking of conventional meanings like Klara and Ismael’s artistic work with waste, it is the connections between cyberspace and its origins in the military-industrial complex and its present use with the kind of mediation exemplified by CNN that brackets its more democratic potential. In *Underworld*, cyberspace is the place where the “*dot com miraculum*” (807) website publicizes and continues to exploit events such as Esmeralda’s death and her miraculous appearance on the billboard, as a commodity of waste that can be consumed and re-consumed more readily than ever before. Cyberspace also furnishes the H-bomb home page, where Sister Edgar’s experience of the atomic flash and peace supports the lingering competition of the Cold War, which now resonates with the way America supports the competitive processes of global capitalism that circulate through the web. According to Sister Edgar, the peace is “a way of seeing the other side and a settling of differences . . .” (826), which

recalls the rules that govern opposing teams and that rationalize the consequences of competition, silencing opposition and promoting the status quo; indeed, this peace is a position where “all argument, all conflict [is] programmed out.”

Auster's Urban Sublime: In the Country of Last Things

On the surface, Paul Auster's fiction can appear to be relatively unconcerned with representing historical or cultural contexts even though many of his novels are set – if at times only in passing – in his beloved Brooklyn, New York. To some extent, this impression of Auster's novels is justified and has been enhanced by the immense critical attention that has been garnered by his celebrated *The New York Trilogy*. Without question, the similar plots and themes between the novels of *The New York Trilogy* and Auster's subsequent fiction, as well as the critical appraisal of these particular works has done much to support the impression that Auster's novels comprise a genre of their own, populated by tormented narrator-authors who wrestle with solitude and confront the limits of written and verbal expression as they record, confess or reinvent their personal histories. What is more, given the fact that Auster's protagonists rarely show an interest in or even have a solid footing in the world at large (they are often either confined to closed spaces or pitched headlong on hapless quests across cities and continents), the political, economic and historical forces that compose the texture of daily life are less immediate and visible than in the work of either Didion or DeLillo.

In view of this comparison, Auster's work might seem ill-suited to what I have pursued with Didion and DeLillo. For instance, this criticism could even be corroborated by a commentary such as Stephen Bernstein's about *The Locked Room* (the last novel in *The New York Trilogy*), in which he insists that Auster, in a characteristic manner, invokes a sublimity that is less determined by cultural processes than his protagonist's confrontation with the unrepresentable "opacity beyond death, . . . perhaps the single most sublime consideration in the novel" (98). Yet in spite of such points, two novels in

particular – *In the Country of Last Things* and *Moon Palace* – demonstrate how Auster’s fiction lends itself to the kind of cultural and historical analysis of the American sublime that I have taken with Didion and DeLillo.¹

In the Country of Last Things, for example, depicts an anonymous urban world that nevertheless has affinities with such specific locales as Didion’s Hollywood or DeLillo’s Mid-Village Mall; in fact, if these places serve Didion and DeLillo as cultural contexts that are integral to dramatizing, interrogating and reconfiguring the American sublime, then Auster’s city dramatizes even more overtly how the qualities of a physical setting can represent this kind of contested site of sublimity. Even though the exclusive focus of *In the Country of Last Things* on a “representative” urban scene might seem to sacrifice a fully nuanced, culturally relevant depiction of American sublimity, the city the text presents responds to specific historical and literary contexts that correspond with American urban development, the genre of the “urban sublime” established with the works of American naturalist fiction.

Indeed, the overwhelming city in *In the Country of Last Things* has affinities with the sublime cities depicted in the literary works of American naturalism. As Christophe Den Tandt explains, in American naturalism the city is imbued “with an aura of mesmeric seduction,” in which “the literary metropolis is endowed not only with infinite scope but also unfathomable depth” (8). In depicting cities as sublime, moreover, there are two generic trends, originating in American naturalism, which *In the Country of Last Things* interrogates: the way naturalist works mystify the city in order to capture the physical immensity of the urban scene, and the way this mystification is tied to a presentation of economic processes and cultural practices that makes them largely inscrutable. In what

follows, I will consider the degree to which Auster's text works towards demystifying the seductive power of its representative city by portraying its sublimity as a visible cultural production that is connected to the city's destructive economy and waste recycling.

Moreover, by doing so, I will show how *In the Country of Last Things* situates the "urban sublime" within the larger historical, cultural and literary conventions of the American sublime, with particular attention paid to the elements of spectatorship and transcendence that Auster, like Didion and DeLillo, addresses in order to expose, challenge and reconfigure the legacy of American sublimity.

I

In many respects, the plot of *In the Country of Last Things* displays the criteria of the "typical" Auster narrative. While searching for her missing brother in a nameless city, Anna Blume endures isolation, hunger, poverty and homelessness interspersed with fleeting periods of stability and interpersonal contact with a colorful cast of characters – among them the elderly Isabel and her insane husband, Ferdinand, and the wily Boris Stepanovich who sells antiques to support a homeless shelter called Woburn House – all recounted in Anna's letter in her notebook – the text – hours before she will attempt to escape from the city. The first third of *In the Country of Last Things*, however, is given over to Anna's laborious description of the city's practices, a textual decision that has the cumulative effect of conveying the overwhelming impact of the city on Anna and its other inhabitants, and which conforms to Den Tandt's observation about characters in naturalist, urban fiction, "that the urban landscape outreaches their powers of perception" (3).²

Although unique, this experience of the “urban sublime” is not isolated from the other natural or technological elements of the American sublime; it represents, in fact, a transition that develops from the natural sublime through figurations of the landscape. As Den Tandt explains, “the spectacle of the metropolis stirs emotions of sublimity anchored in memories of overwhelming nature” (4). Yet as we have seen elsewhere with transitions between the natural and the technological sublime, this shift between the natural and the urban is neither seamless nor benign. Indeed, the absence of natural landscapes in naturalist works of the urban sublime conceals a fundamental alteration in the imperial character of the American sublime. As Den Tandt rightly claims, when the “rituals of spectatorship that construct nature as an object of desire and conquest” migrate to the city, these rituals encourage “subjects to admire overwhelming landscapes of exploitation, or to give their assent to upper-class utopias of urban planning” (6). Appropriately, then, *In the Country of Last Things* does not erase nature from the city; instead, nature remains an inescapable part of city life – most notably in the stark oscillations between light and darkness and seasonal change such as “the Terrible Winter” (90). Thus, rather than presenting the traditional, urban sublime devoid of nature, the text depicts natural elements that confer neither the potential for ecstatic self-fashioning found in the traditional natural sublime nor an affirmative luster to the city’s presence, which would serve the ideological thrust of the urban sublime.

For example, even though sunlight comes in “a brightness that is sometimes intolerable – a brilliance that stuns you and seems to blanch everything, all the jagged surfaces gleaming, the air itself almost a shimmer,” it does not offer any otherworldly illumination; it only poses a threat to walking – “You must be careful in this light not to

open your eyes too wide, to squint at just the precise degree that will allow you to keep your balance” (21). Similarly, while the ice that forms during the Terrible Winter offers “weird configurations” (91) that are aesthetically pleasing, “bumps and ripples and whorls, entire waves caught in mid-undulation, a kind of geological frenzy in miniature,” the hazard the ice poses, resulting in “skulls cracking on the ice, bodies flopping helplessly on the smooth, hard surfaces,” precludes the possibility for any ecstatic merging with nature. In these instances, nature fails to offer the promise of transport or mastery; at best, nature only serves as a prosaic reminder of the harsh and unpredictable environment of the city.

Nevertheless, even though the text undermines the traditional role of nature in the American sublime and does not use it to cast the physical and material conditions of the city in positive terms, the relationship of nature to the overall incomprehensibility of the city is potentially problematic. As Den Tandt notes, representations of American cities as sublime characteristically entail a “pseudo-totalizing” perspective, and the relation between nature and the city in *In the Country of Last Things* could be seen as evidence of this convention. The pseudo-totalizing view in naturalist, urban fiction applies sublime tropes from nature to the city to manage the real awe and terror the development of urban centers elicited in the nineteenth century. In a novel like Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, for instance, Carrie likens her experience of the city to “the strange power of Niagara” (qtd. in Den Tand 40), which turns the terror that is elicited by the city into an awe in which the city becomes “dangerously fascinating” (34) – even seductive. Thus like the equation of Carrie’s experience of the city to “the strange power of Niagara,” the descriptions of

nature through Anna Blume could be viewed as employing sublimity as a form of pseudo-totalization, obscuring a critical representation of an urban world.

Yet rather than applying a compensatory, mystifying rhetoric of sublimity to the city, *In the Country of Last Things* inverts and undermines the way the sublime has typically been deployed in depictions of urban scenes. For example, whereas a protagonist like Dreiser's Carrie has limited descriptive abilities and, as Den Tandt puts it, "loses all sense of her insertion in the city's social structure" (58), Anna Blume offers a detailed taxonomy of the city in the first third of her letter, demystifying the city's power structures and governing principles. Through Anna's enumeration of the various marketing strategies of corrupt private and municipal markets, the strange rituals of death-cults as well as the horrific practices of state-sponsored suicide and recycling centers, sublimity is not a rhetorical, pseudo-totalizing ploy; instead, in *In the Country of Last Things* the sublimity of the city is an experience that is disseminated for popular consumption and designed for hegemonic control by the city's ruling powers.³

In the Country of Last Things directly challenges the fascination literary depictions of cities traditionally hold over their protagonists. *In the Country of Last Things* undermines the rhetorical elements of sublime terror in naturalist depictions of cities that often serve to obscure the workings of economic and political forces: the city in *In the Country of Last Things* literally deals in death. As Tim Woods aptly puts it, in *In the Country of Last Things*, "Death is transformed into an aesthetic action, in which beauty and the 'grand spectacle' dominate as ritualized forms of self-transcendence" (122). Fascination in this economy is directly stimulated through advertising and commodities that cater to and foster excessive desires, which, in turn, are only realized

through sublime spectacles of suicide and murder.⁴ On one level, the city's economy encourages people to indulge in elaborate consumer fantasies that are seldom fulfilled. Simulation, corruption and greed are the order of the day, and people participate in this economy out of desperation: "renegade grocers," Anna reveals, "will sell anything just to turn a profit: eggs and oranges filled with sawdust, bottles of piss pretending to be beer" (5); people go to rental agency offices to "look at photographs of buildings on tree-lined streets, of comfortable rooms, of apartments furnished with carpets and soft leather chairs" even though they know "that these pictures were taken more than ten years ago" (8-9); and many people willingly speak the enigmatic "language of ghosts" by indulging in elaborate, imaginary meals, insisting that "there is a nutritional value in these food talks – given the proper concentration and an equal desire to believe in the words among those taking part" (10).⁵

What is perhaps most alarming, though, is that certain institutions do, in fact, provide a semblance of these falsely advertised and fancifully imagined "consumable" items for a price. In particular, when people go to the Euthanasia Clinics, they "are treated to an opulent life, catered to in a manner that rivals the splendor of the old luxury hotels" before they are killed: "There are elaborate meals, wines, entertainment, even a brothel, which serves the needs of both men and women" (14). Thus, in contrast to the way naturalist works use sublimity to mystify – and support – the inner workings of the urban economies they represent, *In the Country of Last Things* presents a city in which sublime awe and terror are visible, tangible and integral elements that effect how items are marketed. Moreover, the way the text shows how consumers become the objects of

spectatorial fascination suggests why the conventions of the urban, American sublime are so problematic.

Like Didion's and DeLillo's texts, Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* portrays spectatorship as one of the most destructive legacies of American sublimity; Anna's notebook reveals that viewing death from a spectatorial position is the defining characteristic of the city. As the well-publicized methods of the Euthanasia Clinics suggest, in the city death is, in essence, a public affair, but it is the practices of the Runners and those who opt out for the "Last Leap" that most clearly convey the link between public death and sublime spectatorship. According to Anna, those who join the Runners or who become a Leaper create a public spectacle from their "dramatic" (11) deaths: the Runners (who run until they die and "advertise that their method is over ninety percent failure-proof" [13]), "run through the streets as fast as they can, flailing their arms wildly about them, punching the air, screaming at the top of their lungs" (11) and depend upon being a part of a group – "each member of the group is swept along by the others, encouraged by the screams, whipped to a frenzy of self-punishing endurance" (11); with the Leapers, however, there is no advertising but what is classified as a "solitary" (13) death has also "been transformed into a kind of public ritual" (13).

These public deaths, therefore, recall what we have seen in Didion and DeLillo and support Nye's insistence that the American sublime "has increasingly become a group experience rather than a moment of private contemplation" (xviii); at the same time, for those who witness these deaths there is also the "delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror" (123) that Burke reminds us can only be attained "at certain distances" (36). As in DeLillo's depictions of crowds in *White Noise* and *Underworld*,

the city dwellers who gather to witness a Last Leap experience death aesthetically – at one remove – and so as a form of transcendence. Anna remarks: “You would be amazed at the enthusiasm of the crowds: to hear their frantic cheering, to see their excitement. It is as if the violence and beauty of the spectacle had wrenched them from themselves, had made them forget the paltriness of their own lives” (13). Here, as in Didion’s and DeLillo’s texts, the collective spectatorship that emerges around death and destruction represents a criticism of traditional American sublimity, which Nye notes was typically constructed and viewed as an experience that “purified and uplifted the mind and helped individuals see themselves as members of a larger community” (36). In *In the Country of Last Things*, by contrast, spectatorship precludes such “community” as the basis for a genuine experience of “purified” transcendence.

The practice of such spectatorship and its degraded version of transcendence is ubiquitous; even Anna Blume partakes in the perspective of the crowd when viewing a Last Leap: “I admit there is something stirring about watching one, something that seems to open a whole new world of freedom inside you” (13). Much like *White Noise*, then, *In the Country of Last Things* suggests that what is most troubling with such spectatorship is that the capacity to view another person’s death aesthetically and derive a transcendent experience from it can turn the spectator of violence into the perpetrator of violence. For instance, when Anna defends herself against the demented Ferdinand by choking him, she experiences the same sort of “freedom” that she has felt with a Last Leap as Ferdinand’s life begins to drain away:

In that first instant after I began to apply the pressure, I felt an immense happiness, a surging, uncontrollable sense of rapture. It was as though I had

crossed some inner threshold, and all at once the world became different, a place of unimaginable simplicity. I shut my eyes, and then it began to feel as if I were flying through empty space, moving through an enormous night of blackness and stars. As long as I held on to Ferdinand's throat, I was free. I was beyond the pull of the earth, beyond the night, beyond any thought of myself. (65)

To her credit, Anna recoils from the "pure pleasure" she feels through killing Ferdinand, releases him and admits "I understood that I was not killing him in self-defense."

Nevertheless, Anna's decision to spare Ferdinand's life does not, fundamentally, undermine the cultural forces that have given rise to and shaped her "pleasure"; instead, the text links Anna's pleasure to the practices of the city and to the conventions and historical development of seeing cities as sublime.

When Ferdinand attacks Anna, her pleasure as well as the blurred boundaries between self-defense and murder embody a larger trend that is exemplified by the practices of another cultural group, the Assassination Clubs. At the Assassination Clubs, people pay to be murdered and can only "opt out for life again" by killing their assassin, a stipulation which, in conflating assassins with victims, promotes the aestheticization of death (15). Moreover, it is the ways in which the Assassination Clubs aestheticize death through sublime spectatorship that makes them such an attractive option in the first place. Like the Last Leap, which Anna says is universally attractive because it "corresponds to everyone's inner longings: to die in a flash, to obliterate yourself in one brief and glorious moment" (13), the Assassination Clubs guarantee their victims an equally "glorious moment": "Instead of old age, disease or accident, a member of an Assassination Club can look forward to a quick and violent death in the not-too-distant future: a bullet in the

brain, a knife in the back, a pair of hands around his throat in the middle of the night” (15). What links the Runners, the Leapers and those who are members of the Assassination Clubs, then, is the way a spectacular death intended to awe others is also intended to awe the individual so that a person becomes – in effect – a spectator to his or her own death and experiences it as sublime. As if to challenge Burke when he insists that sublimity does not endorse violence and death because it can only be achieved “if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the destruction of the person” (123), *In the Country of Last Things* creates a scenario in which the promise of physical pain and death are – quite literally – the “last things” that can still elicit a collective, affective response, albeit in an excessively mediated fashion. As Anna puts it, “I sometimes think that death is the one thing we have any feeling for. It is our art form, the only way we can express ourselves” (13).

Clearly, Anna situates the city as a threatening, singular and alienating space that typifies the urban sublime. Yet as much as her notebook reveals this sublimity to be the calculated production of specific cultural practices (and not the pseudo-totalization Den Tandt criticizes), the city still emerges as an overwhelming whole that confounds Anna and other characters in the text. With this in mind, I want to suggest that *In The Country of Last Things* uses this “total” view to expose negative structures of sublimity like spectatorship to dispel and qualify the allure that is still ascribed to urban landscapes. In fact, the text links the spectatorship associated with the city’s bizarre groups and practices to the perception of the total cityscape as sublime, highlighting the cultural and historical contexts that have given rise to this mode of American sublimity.

Not surprisingly, when and where Anna experiences this total view of the city is particularly significant: as she gazes down from the rooftop of Isabel's and Ferdinand's apartment building. By locating Anna's total view of the city from this perspective and at this point in the narrative, the text invests this moment with two layers of contextual meaning: first, Anna's position recalls a key cultural and historical development that links the American sublime to cities – the development of skyscrapers; and second, Anna's reason for being on the rooftop in the first place, to carry out Isabel's plan of making Ferdinand appear like a Leaper (by throwing his corpse off the rooftop), implicitly links the spectatorship embodied in this action to her perception of the city below.

Anna's view of the cityscape reflects a new type of sublimity that emerged with America's development of skyscrapers at the turn of the twentieth century, what Nye calls the "geometrical sublime." According to Nye, the geometrical sublime, associated with the first large-scale bridges as well as the first skyscrapers in the nineteenth century, represented a new assertion of American mastery in the landscape through technological and urban development. In contrast to earlier technological triumphs like the railroad that "conquered space and time," Nye explains that "the geometrical sublime was static and appeared to dominate nature through elegant design and sheer bulk" (77). Moreover, with skyscrapers, the positions of spectatorship they created validated capitalist and consumer enterprise.

On the one hand, skyscrapers were intended to direct an individual's gaze upwards, and the effort to build increasingly higher structures reflected rival promotion strategies directed at the consumers on the ground. In particular, the skyscrapers that bore the names of successful businessmen – most notably F.W. Woolworth and Walter P.

Chrysler – were a form of branding: Woolworth, Nye reveals, “confessed that the Woolworth Building was going to be like a giant sign-board to advertise around the world his spreading chain of five-and-ten-cent stores” (93). Moreover, a new spectatorial view emerged in the popular imagination once “architects began to realize the appeal of looking at the city from atop its tallest structures” and “when a view from a skyscraper window became a recurring motif in magazine advertising” (96). At first, the magazines portrayed “an executive against a window,” symbolizing the power of producers and big business. Within a short period of time, though, the magazine advertisements suggested that the executive’s view of the cityscape could be had by anyone willing – or able – to pay for a glance from the observation deck of the Empire State Building, with the implication that “the reader was expected to identify with this captain of commerce.”

Gazing from a skyscraper, therefore, became a practice in which power relations are conditioned by spectatorship, by the ability to see the whole cityscape and experience it as sublime. Once awed by the dwarfing majesty of the skyscrapers from the ground, an individual can suddenly ascend to their heights, observe “the city as a vast map” (105), reducing others to the position one had risen from, “tiny figures without personal characteristics, mere insects whose humanity had disappeared,” all because of a technological feat of human and American engineering. The power to possess – and create – the urban landscape through the construction of skyscrapers, then, offers a variation on that central feature of the traditional, American sublime we have considered in the texts by Didion and DeLillo – the empowerment of the prototypical American self within a site of self-creation.

By contrast, *In the Country of Last Things* emphasizes how Anna does not achieve such empowerment from her rooftop view of the city, undermining the way such empowerment would, in turn, validate the design, hierarchies and processes of the city. Indeed, when Anna gazes from the rooftop, she questions the ubiquity of the city and the authority this ubiquity connotes.⁶ Glimpsing the ocean, Anna has what amounts to an epiphany: “For the first time since my arrival,” she reveals, “I had proof that the city was not everywhere, that something existed beyond it, that there were other worlds besides this one” (74).⁷ At the same time, as Anna looks below and sees “people walking below, too small to be human anymore,” she does not feel superior to them. Instead, she says that “everything seemed alien to me” and identifies with the powerlessness of the people below: “I suddenly felt that I was dead, as dead as Ferdinand in his blue suit, as dead as the people who were burning into smoke at the edges of the city.” Through this identification, then, the text destabilizes the hierarchy and flow of power between the positions of spectatorship that characterize the geometrical sublimity of skyscrapers.

More particularly, Anna’s identification with others from the rooftop is a moment that reconfirms how the everyday practices of the city, and the consumable spectacles they produce, dehumanize the city’s inhabitants. In fact, when Anna and Isabel engage in one of these practices on the rooftop, by attempting to make Ferdinand appear like a Leaper, the text directly implicates the sublimity invested in skyscrapers with the awful spectacles in the streets below. Moreover, in order to critique the traditional power dynamics associated with skyscrapers, the text inverts those dynamics further: Anna is not empowered when she and Isabel make Ferdinand appear like a Leaper because this act redirects visual authority to people on the ground. Anna and Isabel decide to make

Ferdinand appear like a Leaper so “at least the neighbors would think Ferdinand still had some fight in him They would look up at him flying off the roof and say to themselves that this was a man who had the courage to take matters into his own hands” (72). Thus, by inverting the traditional power dynamics associated with the geometrical sublime, the text depicts the authority and agency those dynamics promise as illusory, like the other forms of sublimity that constitute the cultural life of the city.

Significantly, though, as Anna’s experience of the rooftop inverts the conventions of the geometrical sublime, *In the Country of Last Things* suggests that resistance – if only at the level of perception – may be possible. When Anna and Isabel stage Ferdinand’s death, Anna does not view his “Last Leap” with the spectatorial fascination she has demonstrated earlier. Rather than experiencing an aesthetic distance, she faces the grim reality of throwing a corpse off a building: “His stomach hit the edge first, which made him bounce a little, and then he toppled off. I remember listening for the sound of the body landing on the pavement, but I never heard anything but my own pulse, the sound of my heart beating in my head” (76). Provocatively, through this act the text presents how Anna experiences a different perspective towards death even as she attempts to carry out one of the practices that encourage an aesthetic view of death. In refuting the traditional sublime experience, here, *In the Country of Last Things* nevertheless suggests the possibility for reconfiguration.

By connecting the urban sublime to these practices, *In the Country of Last Things* does more than upset literary conventions like pseudo-totalization or cultural traditions like the geometrical sublime. In addition, the text suggests that with real, cultural and historical conventions like the skyline view as well as with the fictitious practice of the

Last Leap, there may be the possibility for contingent factors to upset sublimity, which can result in new ways of perceiving, negotiating – and perhaps resisting – the urban world. In the next section, I will consider the degree to which the text addresses the subversive potential of such reconfigured moments of sublimity as Anna’s experience on the rooftop.

II

With the destabilization of Anna’s sublime skyline view by her efforts to make Ferdinand appear like a Leaper, *In the Country of Last Things* ascribes a degree of agency to the singular actions and perceptions of individuals. With this point in mind, I now want to consider how the text relates this sort of agency to potentially resistant artistic practices, even though these practices are ultimately complicit with or compromised by the city and its sublime processes. Moreover, in order to do so I want to suggest that Michel de Certeau’s theorizations of city life can illuminate the ways in which *In the Country of Last Things* critiques and undermines the conventions of the urban sublime, particularly the meaning and significance of certain cultural practices in the city. For instance, the text’s inversion of the traditional dynamics of the geometrical sublime when Anna and Isabel dispose of Ferdinand’s corpse on the rooftop recalls de Certeau’s well-known distinction between the “voyeur-god” enigmatically perched in the World Trade Center and the “walkers” “below the thresholds at which visibility begins” (de Certeau 93). Similarly, when Anna is transformed by her actions on the rooftop, her reaction suggests the “tactical” character de Certeau insists can be found in “everyday practices,” which occurs when she engages in the “everyday practice” of producing Ferdinand’s Last

Leap, barring her from the “voluptuous pleasure” de Certeau insists accompanies the perspective of the “voyeur-god” (92).

Indeed, Anna’s other activities – walking, scavenging and writing – can also be seen from de Certeau’s theoretical framework because, as Tim Woods explains, “Anna Blume derives her intimate knowledge of the city from her perambulatory experiences” (111). For Woods, the fact that Anna must walk the streets of the city becomes a form of subversion that resonates with de Certeau: as she furtively navigates the streets and uncovers new knowledge about the city, she maps out a spatial configuration in which “the challenge to the domination of space becomes the invention of new spaces” (Woods 109). Hence, for Woods, an activity like Anna’s scavenging, for example, can be viewed as an “everyday practice” where such spatial reconfigurations take place since she must carefully consider objects “metonymically, where the part forms a new yet different whole”: each time she perceives a new use for an old object “this new metonymical arrangement causes alternative spatial arrangements to emerge” (113).

Whether these emergent “spatial arrangements” are truly “tactical” in the sense that de Certeau might have it is a debatable point – and for that matter, so too, is the “tactical” character that might be attributed to the professional forms of scavenging, object hunting and garage collecting. For de Certeau the tactical character of everyday practices broadly refers to the way “users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production” (de Certeau xiv), and refers to the contrary uses – the “making do” – consumers find for products. Clearly, Anna’s object hunting resembles de Certeau’s “making do,” a process in which there are “select fragments taken from the vast ensembles of production in order to compose new stories with them” (de

Certeau 35). However, in contrast to Woods's insistence that Anna's object hunting transforms space in a positive manner, I argue that because Anna makes objects marketable, her object hunting remains an unquestionably supportive, constituent part of the city's economic structure and space.

Above all, it is the fact that Anna's object hunting is an activity that involves the recycling of waste that makes it problematic. Like *Underworld*, *In the Country of Last Things* portrays waste recycling as a defining feature of contemporary, Western culture in a way that has affinities with Bauman's insights about waste. In Auster's city, the recycling of human corpses and feces represents a nightmare version of Bauman's observation that "the waste-disposal industry is one branch of modern production . . . that will never work itself out of its job" (*Wasted Lives* 27); as Anna puts it: "Dead bodies and shit – when it comes to removing health hazards, our administrators are positively Roman in this organization, a model of clear thinking and efficiency" (*Last Things* 30). Thus, as a form of waste recycling, Anna's object hunting represents an integral feature of the economy that supports – and is in turn supported by – the city's corrupt food markets and Euthanasia Clinics.

Anna's complicity, however, is neither intentional nor total, which makes the larger, ineffectiveness of her resistant efforts all the more tragic. As she finds new uses or "new stories" for things that are readily redistributed into the city's cycle of production and consumption, her perception evokes a form of "making do." In spite of the end goal of Anna's work, she brings to her task a creative quality that is not simply determined by the market; when gazing on objects, she momentarily views them apart from their original form and use and the ultimate form and use they may take once they are

reinserted into the world of commodities. By imagining the indeterminate ways these objects might be reformed, Anna expresses a creative perception that is not scripted by the city's influence. Perceiving objects from "somewhere in between," between the reduction to "a cipher of it-ness" and the retention of "a semblance of their original shape," Anna finds a space and a brief moment in which to "hover" that makes the imaginative reconfiguration of the object an end in itself: "The job," Anna remarks, "is to zero in on these little islands of intactness, to imagine them joined to other such islands, and those islands to still others, and thus to create new archipelagoes of matter" (36). Evocatively, then, *In the Country of Last Things* suggests that through scavenging Anna imaginatively and "tactically" joins de Certeau's resistant consumers who "wander out of orbit" but who are nevertheless bound to "a system too vast to be their own, too tightly woven for them to escape from it" (xx).

In the Country of Last Things does indeed depict the sort of qualified resistance de Certeau theorizes, but the text offers a scenario that is far less hopeful because the city's dominance remains so intractable. In contrast to Elizabeth Wesseling, who argues that Anna's "creative reorganization of waste could be regarded as an alternative art form, which closely resembles the practices of the avant garde" (499), the text does not equate Anna's creative intentions or potential with the fruits of her labors: her bricoleur-like gaze is not validated through the actual transformation of objects.⁸ Much like DeLillo's Klara Sax in *Underworld*, the artistic characters in *In the Country of Last Things* cannot, it seems, re-use objects resistantly, in a manner that is fundamentally distinct from the city's waste recycling or the production and consumption of spectacular commodities. In fact, amid the sublime-producing practices of the city, artistic endeavors are often already

subsumed within these practices, especially when they recycle waste or other material objects.

The relationship between sublime effects, cultural practices, waste recycling and artistic creation is most fully explicated through Ferdinand's hobby of building miniature ships. First, even though Ferdinand insists that his ships attest to his rejection of the outside world (illustrated by his "outraged" response to Anna's remark that the ships could be sold for money), his craft aligns him with the city's recycling practices (53). For example, Ferdinand's artistic methods connect him to the Resurrection agents who recycle the findings of scavengers because the bottles and the other objects he uses – "scraps of wood and paper, glue, string" (52) – can only come from either Isabel or Anna. In addition, a similar, but much more gruesome resemblance can be found between Ferdinand and the Transformation Centers that burn the dead. Ferdinand, Anna reveals, takes great relish in holding mice "over the flames of the stove" (53), eating them whole, saving their bones for "masts or flagpoles or harpoons" (54) and, in two grotesque instances, using a mouse's ribs "as oars for a galley of a ship" and "a mouse's skull as a figurehead" on "the prow of a pirate schooner." Clearly, Ferdinand's methods employ the same efficient means of recycling that underlies many of the city's practices, so it is not surprising that the subject matter and aims of his art are comparable to other practices as well: through his art, Ferdinand engages in simulation in order to produce sublime effects.

Like the people who fantasize about food and speak the "language of ghosts," Ferdinand indulges in an imaginary world of swashbucklers and pirates that is supported

by his ship building.⁹ In fact, Ferdinand's obsession with popular sea lore is so total that it has upset his footing in reality. According to Anna, Ferdinand

looked like someone's cartoon version of a beachcomber. It was almost as though his obsession with ships had led him to play out the role of a man marooned on a desert island. Or else it was the opposite. Already stranded, perhaps he had begun building ships as a sign of inner distress – as a secret call for rescue. (52)

Yet if Ferdinand's obsession with the sea represents "a secret call for rescue," it also provides him with a means of escape – illustrated when Anna finds him playing with one of his ships in the air "like a six-year-old . . . and acting out the parts in a game he had invented" (55).

Escape is not the only support Ferdinand draws from his ships and the imaginary world they help him to inhabit. Like the other cultural practices his ship-building resembles, Ferdinand's ships are constructed in a manner that is meant to produce sublimity as a means of asserting power and authority. Curiously, though, rather than offering an immense spectacle, Ferdinand's aesthetic goal is to confound and dazzle people with the smallness of his ships. At one point, for example, while "bragging about his accomplishments as an artist" to Anna, he says, "The smaller the better": "Some day I'll make a ship so small that no one else can see it. Then you'll know who you're dealing with, my smart-ass little tramp. A ship so small that no one can see it! They'll write a book about me, I'll be so famous" (55). Thus, with Ferdinand, his ships represent an individual's attempt to produce a sublime display that claims power in a more affirmative way than, say, the suicide of a Leaper. Nevertheless, rather than signaling such power, Ferdinand's art marks the limits of individualistic, subversive potential

because his ships, like the other cultural practices in the city, are shaped by – and produce – traditional configurations of sublimity.

For instance, Ferdinand's ships can be viewed as an expression of the American technological sublime. As we have seen with the examples of technology (and art that uses technology) in Didion's and DeLillo's texts, Ferdinand's ships are sublime because they are "a celebration of the power of human reason," eliciting "awe" that has, historically, "granted special privilege to engineers and inventors" (Nye 60). Moreover, even though Ferdinand's ships are small by comparison to, say, the Hoover Dam in *Play It As It Lays* or Klara Sax's planes in *Underworld*, the ships still embody traditional theorizations of sublimity. In fact, Ferdinand's description of the effect he hopes his ships will have on people recalls Burke's claim that infinite minuteness is the equivalent of "vastness" for producing sublimity, that "we become amazed and confounded at the wonders of minuteness; nor can we distinguish in its effect this extreme of littleness from the vast itself" (66).¹⁰ In the end, perhaps, it is why Ferdinand wants his ships to produce such sublimity that most directly registers the limits of his art and links it to the city, the way his ships represent a futile attempt for him to regain the sort of prestige he enjoyed as a celebrated "commercial sign painter" (47) before he lost his business and retreated to the apartment. Above all, then, within the larger scheme of the novel, the sublimity of Ferdinand's ships exemplifies the similarities between artistic and other cultural practices in the city, and the ways in which artistic vision can be aligned with the economic logic and bureaucratic structures of the city.

With Ferdinand's example, *In the Country of Last Things* clearly illustrates the obstacles that impede the artistic characters from altering their lot within the overarching

totality of the urban world. In particular, given how Ferdinand's artistic intentions are compromised by and interwoven with other forms of cultural production and consumption, an experience such as Anna's failure to be appropriately affected by the geometrical sublime seems an aberration. In the same vein, any practical, subversive application of the bricoleur-like perception Anna experiences while object hunting seems doomed to failure. In fact, it is presence of the bricoleur-like perception in Anna's writing that registers what is perhaps most dehumanizing about the city, that subversive writing, as a form of imaginative communication can be co-opted by the forces of disempowerment and destruction, reduced to the level of an imaginary food conversation or one of Ferdinand's sea fantasies.

By the simple act of writing Anna wants to contest the city, to express a resistant consciousness through language that can withstand the city's all-encompassing aura of inscrutable power and the dehumanizing practices that support and produce that aura. Implicitly, through her letter, Anna makes an appeal to the resistant and inclusive potential of alternative forms of expression and communication as she demystifies many of the city's practices. Moreover, at the basis of this appeal is what she expresses through her bricoleur-like perception, knowledge about the relationship between language and the material world, which she attempts to use in order to reclaim the imaginative qualities of storytelling from the destructive fantasies produced by or connected to the urban market. By reimagining what an object can be through object hunting, and in essence renaming it, Anna discovers how the fundamental disjunction between words and things – and the knowledge of this disjunction – can produce and support a resistant perception and consciousness that can be communicated to others. "Words," as Anna declares at one

point, “tend to last a bit longer than things,” and even though she concludes that words “fade too, along with the pictures they once evoked,” this observation signals her knowledge about the power of words to supplant things, which offers her a degree of hope (89).

Similarly, Anna is not reduced to despair when she recognizes that the disjunction between language and the material world means that she can never fully capture that world in her writing. Her initial, reluctant acceptance that writing is insufficient gives way to a new perspective on the power of language. For Anna, the inability “to fit everything in” (183) as she writes her story brings about what Ilana Shiloh evocatively describes as Anna’s realization that writing “is a quest whose end can never be attained” (155), a remark that once more characterizes Anna’s writing, like her object hunting, as an experience imbued with infinite creativity – and perhaps even hope. As Anna puts it, “The closer you come to an end, the more there is to say. The end is only imaginary, a destination you invent to keep yourself going . . .” (183). More broadly speaking, then, even as Anna discovers that she cannot record things as she would wish, she is still encouraged by the discovery that there is a creative element in language that is not dependent upon external factors.

External factors, however, can shape the physical production of writing, and if those factors are as deplorable as those in the city, they can either make it impossible for the writer to write or reduce what he or she produces to “the language of ghosts.” As Anna discovers when she lives in the National Library with Samuel Farr, a journalist who has been writing a book about the city, his book will never be read. When the library burns, Farr’s book burns with it, and he loses the hope that his book has offered him,

which at one point he insists “is the only thing that keeps me going” (104). As the library burns, Farr recalls to Anna “that he actually knew the precise moment when the flames entered our room and ate up the pages of the manuscript” (162). Thus, not only is the book destroyed but, for a time, Farr’s resistant, creative perception as well: imagining the book burning, Farr reaches a point where “everything lost definition for him” and he becomes like “an underground creature who had gone into hibernation.”

Moreover, with Farr arriving at the point where “everything lost definition for him,” *In the Country of Last Things* demonstrates the constant threat all resistant, artistic endeavors in the city face, the threat that all will be subsumed into “the language of ghosts,” thereby supporting the city. Even before Farr’s book is physically destroyed, he has struggled against lapsing into despair because of the threat that what he has written will not – and cannot – be accurate. Anna recalls, “He would call it worthless, a futile heap of papers trying to say things that could not be said, and then spin off into a depression that lasted from one to three days” (109). Like Anna’s writing, Sam’s writing encounters representational limits. Even though, as Anna explains, “Sam knew more about the city than anyone I had ever met” (107), because his book must use language it, too, can be reduced to ghost-speak.

In spite of Anna’s optimism about her own creative endeavors, what Farr’s book and Ferdinand’s ships illustrate is that conditions of the city make such optimism largely implausible. Faced with the city, creative freedom and resistance can be transformed into inaccuracy and self-deception because the very thing that makes language potentially subversive can make it support the city and its practices. Like all language, the power residing in the “language of ghosts” originates from its inherent separation from what it

represents, so *In the Country of Last Things* presents a disquieting truth: that the distinction between resistant writing and speech and the “language of ghosts” does not hinge on anything inherently different. All writing, the text suggests, can be reduced to the “language of ghosts” if conditions are as oppressive and desperate as those in the city; at most, only an individual’s knowledge of signification, the relationship between words and things, might keep him or her from despair and keep their creative spark alive. Knowledge of signification is what allows the artistic figures to challenge their reality in the text, provided they can still make some rudimentary distinctions between fact and fiction, which is jeopardized in a world where things and words are fast disappearing and occluded by simulations and spectacles.

Armed with knowledge of signification, the artistic characters in the text can – if only for a short time – directly challenge their reality, evoking the tactics of de Certeau’s consumers who use “the simulations, tricks, and disguises that certain fishes or plants execute with extraordinary virtuosity” (40). Most overtly, with Boris Stepanovich, *In the Country of Last Things* illustrates the extent to which the knowledge of referential limits can be used directly and subversively. Boris’s work as the “Woburn House supplier” (144), which entails selling the Woburn antiques to Resurrection Agents for basic necessities, resembles other recycling practices, but it is Boris’s ability to conjure elaborate stories about the antiques and deftly navigate the demands of the market that makes him successful, demonstrates his uncanny creative powers.

As Anna puts it, Boris’s “trick,” his “ability to make inert things come to life,” is accomplished by his playing with the relationships between words and things. His speech when selling an antique, for example, directs attention to the sound of his voice

and the sound of words – an “intricately fashioned barrage of syllables” (151) – rather than what they signify. Similarly, his carefully crafted personas are tailored to the particular tastes of Resurrection Agents in order to disarm them – “bursting through the door with open arms on some, slinking in quietly on others” (149). Lastly, with his detailed histories created about the antiques, Boris renders their material or market value of less importance than his fictions: as Anna explains, “it would have been wrong of Boris to insist on their utility. The whole point was that they were extravagances When you bought an antique vase from Boris Stepanovich, you were not just getting a vase, you were getting an entire world to go along with it” (151). Thus, while resembling other practices that support the city, Boris’s sales tactics demonstrate how his knowledge of signification challenges the efficacy of the city’s structures and its aura of being a totality that cannot be breached – and in doing so, he apparently validates and reclaims imaginative narrative and discourse as a viable means of resistance.

In the end, though, even Boris’s powers and his optimism are curtailed, and the text charts his decline with as much elaboration as it has enumerated his successes. Signaling his creative defeat, Boris explains to Anna that Woburn House is “built on a foundation of clouds,” and the only reason it has appeared to flourish boils down to a disheartening conclusion: “We all speak our own language of ghosts, I’m afraid” (155). Indeed, following this comment, the text reveals how Boris’s luck, skills and creative powers have inexplicably changed and even turned against him: he cannot ascertain whether the travel permits he has obtained for the staff of Woburn House to escape the city are forged because “the talk he hears is too muddled and discordant to be of any concrete value” (186). Confronted with his failure to verify the authenticity of the travel

permits, Boris concocts one fantasy after another, creating, as Anna puts it, “a new plan almost every morning, each one more absurd than the last” (187); and as if to confirm that he, too, speaks the “language of ghosts,” Boris loses weight and undergoes a mysterious decline. Described by Anna as having “a certain haggard look on his face, as though he were suffering from some illness” (186), Boris begins to undergo the typical death of the “ghost people” who begin to exude “a weird glow of otherness . . . , as if they have already begun to disappear” (11). Thus, near its conclusion, *In the Country of Last Things* suggests that the city effectively undermines the subversive “tactics” that individuals or groups might use, which in turn reinscribes the inscrutable and overwhelming menace of the city.

Given that *In the Country of Last Things* alternately suggests the potential for resistance and then details how limited such resistance is when it is put into practice, it might seem that the text offers either a contradictory or overly pessimistic view of resistance in its fictional city. However, a clear logic animates the text, which reflects the cost of embodying a city with the characteristics of the urban sublime. In order to register why the traditional qualities of the American sublime are destructive in the urban context, *In the Country of Last Things* offers an extreme version of the paradigmatic, sublime city. As a result, the text depicts how material forms of resistance – and resistant modes of consciousness – are co-opted by the city, which critiques how the urban spectacle has traditionally been read as a sign of American innovation and mastery. While deglamorizing the urban sublime by locating it as the production of visible cultural practices associated with marketing, violent death and recycling, the text only moves so far towards portraying “tactical,” resistant practices of equal force within the spectacle-

inducing structures of sublimity: in essence, these resistant efforts either fail or are in some way recuperated for the text to critique and portray the city's aura of sublime fascination and power.

The text's double-sided mode of critique, therefore, does not discount the resistant efforts of its characters; instead, it conveys how abhorrent conditions can impede realizing those efforts. In fact, the text's treatment of Anna Blume's final, hopeful words about her writing suggests they are valid in spite of her ultimate disappearance and probable death – that her story should be read as a dire warning of possible things to come, where the kind of resistance she envisions can no longer benefit her – or anyone else – directly. Even though it is indeed tempting to look for signs where Anna might effectively change her lot before her disappearance, the fact that she does not signals her tragic circumstances rather than a loss of nerve or artistic failure on her part.

As much as possible, Anna strives to remain free from delusion, and it is her tenacious effort to do so that saves her from indulging in Boris's absurd, final fantasy of a magic show. For some critics, Anna's remarks about this fantasy signal her personal and artistic triumph because of the special role Boris reserves for her, in which Anna "will climb into a wooden box and get sawed in half" and emerge "at the precise moment when all hope has been lost" – "my limbs intact, gesturing triumphantly, blowing kisses on the crowd with a bright, artificial smile on my face" (187). Shiloh, for example, argues that Anna's role in this fantasy represents her "final transformation, the reintegration of her self, . . . metaphorically conveyed through Boris's fantasy of a magic show," and in keeping with "the American literary tradition, Anna creates her self, engenders her self through action" (150). However, if Anna does indeed find a "reintegration of self," it is

not through a faith in Boris's fantasy or what it might connote about her actual creative powers.

Rather, it is Anna's critical stance towards Boris's fantasy and her final, direct address to the reader, just hours before she will attempt to escape the city, which suggests her qualified triumph. In response to Boris's fantasy, Anna remarks: "Considering what we have to look forward to, it is pleasant to dream of these absurdities" (187). Moreover, with this categorization of Boris's fantasy, she implicitly critiques her imagined role in the fantasy and the kind of "reintegration of self" through the "action" that her creative efforts might otherwise appear to suggest. In contrast to what we have seen with the protagonists and artistic figures in Didion and DeLillo, Anna does not represent – or covertly see herself as – a self-created figure who "writes" her future; instead, she admits "I cannot imagine it. I cannot even begin to think of what will happen to us out there" (188). At the end of the novel, then, Anna recalls her earlier claim that the "end is only imaginary, a destination you invent to keep yourself going . . ." (183): she still attempts to distinguish her authorial powers from those who indulge in the "language of ghosts" even as she admits that her powers are insufficient. As a result, what matters most is the sincerity of her intentions, which she communicates as directly as possible to her reader(s) with her final words: "This is Anna Blume, your old friend from another world. Once we get to where we are going, I will try to write to you again, I promise" (188).

Where Anna arrives is never specified, and she never writes in the notebook again. Nevertheless, although the awful conditions of the city most likely claim her life, the fact that the letter in her notebook survives, validates her struggle. As Auster, himself, has explained in an interview Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, "Anna

survives, at least to the extent that her words survive. Even in the midst of the most brutal realities, the most terrible social conditions, she struggles to remain a human being, to keep her humanity intact I think of Anna Blume as a true heroine” (321-322).¹¹ According to Auster, then, the point of Anna’s story is her success at keeping her “humanity intact,” and the text confirms this by her efforts to demystify the city’s sublimity in her letter.

The letter, however, is not proof of her infallibility nor is her fallibility proof of her failing to keep her “humanity intact.” Through her struggles to separate her perception from the practices of the city through her actions and words, *In The Country of Last Things* emphasizes how the dehumanizing effects of the city resonate not only with the urban but other configurations of the American sublime as well: the reason why it is difficult to mount resistance that can keep one’s “humanity intact” is precisely because the American sublime is a mode of perceiving the world that is connected to empowerment. Moreover, by projecting a city from the conventions of the urban sublime that represents a possible, post-apocalyptic present or future, the text illustrates how perceiving the world differently becomes more urgent – but also less likely – as cultural conditions become more inhumane and deny people genuine empowerment.¹²

In contrast to the figures in traditional texts of the urban sublime, Anna demystifies the city: her letter reveals how its sublimity is created by cultural practices. By extension, even though Anna disappears in the city, *In the Country of Last Things* suggests that her creative perception might have a larger, more direct, resistant effect if conditions were less horrific, which is shown by the fundamental difference between her and the other artistic figures in the text, a difference which also resonates with the artistic

figures in the texts by Didion and DeLillo. In contrast to Anna, Ferdinand and characters like “Didion” in *Democracy* and Klara Sax in *Underworld* attempt to claim power through their art by drawing upon the history of the American sublime or by producing sublime spectacles of their own, which explains why Anna’s writing has much more potential than their art, even as it could be reduced to the “language of ghosts.”

That said, it is, perhaps, the way Anna’s writing is ultimately consumed that is the most crucial difference because the circumstances in which it is read makes its written content – however insufficient – support the critical perspective of the text: the fact that her words only survive by chance suggests that this language from a ghost testifies to the danger of imbuing the urban landscape with sublime qualities. As Anna’s letter reveals, to make the urban landscape sublime gives rise to forms of empowerment that are not what they seem. With its depiction of the city, *In the Country of Last Things* critiques the connotations of empowerment and progress that might otherwise be signaled above the population through architectural marvels such as skyscrapers, and which displace the immediate, present reality on the streets below. Auster’s text exposes what such progress might yield even as it reveals the deadly allure that progress might still exert as life is reduced to last things. As we shall see in the next chapter, though, Auster’s texts also suggest that the ability to free oneself from such false promises of empowerment and progress remain difficult even in more benign circumstances, because past consequences can be displaced as well.

Endnotes

1. Auster's recent fiction has continued to demonstrate his interest in cultural and historical contexts. *The Brooklyn Follies* (2006), for instance, ends just hours before the 9-11 attack, much of *Man in the Dark* (2008) is set in two worlds – post 9-11 America and an imaginary America where Civil War has erupted, and the events in *Sunset Park* (2010) are directly shaped by the 2008 economic collapse.
2. Even though Den Tandt's study looks exclusively at naturalist fiction because he sees it as the point where the conventions of the urban sublime are first established in American literature, he suggests that the urban sublime can be found in more recent fiction as well: "After naturalism," he explains, the urban sublime "resurfaced in novelists like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, John Dos Passos, and Thomas Pynchon, and also plays a decisive part in popular genres like detective stories and science fiction" (x). In addition, Den Tandt also suggests that the urban sublime develops from earlier theories of the sublime and can be found in revised "postmodern" configurations such as Jameson's, which inform my analysis of Didion's, DeLillo's and Auster's texts. For Den Tandt, the "tendency to describe the metropolis as a site of terror and wonder, in accordance with Edmund Burke's definition of the sublime" remains prescient: "Today, this emotional configuration still influences our perception of urban landscapes in the form of what is now called the postmodern sublime"
3. A number of critics and commentators have speculated on the probable models for the city in *In the Country of Last Things*. For instance, Auster's editor, Joseph Howard, maintains that when he first read the novel's depiction of rental properties that "I snorted with the sardonic recognition of a renter in a New York in the grips of a prolonged housing shortage" (92). Moreover, with this recognition Howard found more similarities between Auster's fictional city and modern-day New York, which in turn led to a confirmation by Auster himself. Howard recalls: "At that moment I flashed that *In the Country of Last Things* was indeed about New York – a New York in which the plagues of homelessness, poverty, and drugs had simply been extrapolated to their grim conclusions. (The author has confirmed my suspicions on this score)" (92-93). For their part, Washburn and Varvogli have found Auster's city to have much broader affinities. Washburn, for example, says that the city "mirrors other cities, other dark times, as it tunnels through twentieth-century history: the Warsaw Ghetto, the Siege of Leningrad (without any redeeming purpose), postearthquake Managua, the last days of Berlin, and, above all, New York in the present" (63). Meanwhile, Varvogli notes that the "working title of the novel was *Anna Blume Walks Through the Twentieth Century* and many scenes in the book do, indeed, recall some of the more horrific events in recent Western history" (89), particularly the Warsaw ghetto. Finally, in an interview with Joseph Mallia, Auster affirms such broad readings:

I feel that it's very much a book about our own moment, our own era, and many of the incidents are things that have actually happened. For example, the pivotal scene in which Anna is lured into a human slaughterhouse is based on something I read about the siege of Leningrad during WW II. These things actually happened. And in many cases, reality is far more terrible than anything we can imagine.

Even the garbage system that I describe at such length was inspired by an article I once read about the present-day garbage system in Cairo. Admittedly, the book takes on these things from a somewhat oblique angle, and the country Anna goes to might not be immediately recognizable, but I feel that this is where we live. It could be that we've become so accustomed to it that we no longer see it. (284-285)

For more, similar comments from Auster about the city see his interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory.

4. My insistence about the lasting importance – and dominance – of commodification in the city, in spite of its overall destitution, coincides with Varvogli's position. For him, even as “this country of last things is what remains of the affluent society . . . a sterile urban landscape which is the result of hundreds of years of civilization,” what he refers to as “consumerism and its excesses” still governs the city – hence the fact “that even people have become a commodity, reduced to pieces of meat to be sold in the black market” (91). By contrast, a view such as Shiloh's, in which she describes the city as “plagued by an inexorable, all-encompassing process of disappearance – of the basic physical necessities, human decency, memory, hope, language, and all the aspects of human civilization” (148) is right in the particulars, but misses how these elements are recycled through acts of consumption. Indeed, to claim that because “the disappearance is never complete” that this might simply be grounds for resistance misses the overarching logic of consumerism in the city. Similarly, a claim such as Wesseling's, that “art has disappeared, and there are no rituals or ceremonies anymore which may function as rites of passage” (497), misses how these things are connected to her observation that “the only thing which is practices with some ceremony, grimly enough, is suicide.”

5. In this instance, the imaginary meals point to a common theme in Auster's fiction – hunger. As Varvogli explains: “These images of starvation are used for various purposes. They may underscore the protagonist's moral or psychological degradation, or they may be used for social critique, while they also function as metaphorical or metafictional elements reflecting the author's views concerning language and narrative” (88). Indeed, in much of Auster's fiction these concerns overlap – perhaps most visibly in *The New York Trilogy* and *Moon Palace* – as well as in his nonfiction essays about other literary works – particularly “The Art of Hunger” in which Auster considers Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* and Franz Kafka's “A Hunger Artist.” There are, however, considerable differences between what we find with hunger and art in Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* and these other works. For Auster, Hamsun's narrator follows a defiant artistic credo in which willful starvation creates “an art of necessity, of desire” (18), an art that is “the direct expression of the effort to express itself” (19). Similarly, Auster finds a variation of this pure creative expression in Kafka's “hunger artist” who inverts artistic conventions, producing through his performance an art that, as Varvogli puts it, “mocks the very desire for signification” (95). Yet the ways in which the hunger artist's refusal to eat because “he could not find the food he liked” turns the meaning of what fasting typically connotes on its head – “the desire for spiritual purification . . . for transcendence, or the belief that it can be found in fiction” – which is very different from

what we find with those who take part in the imaginary meals and suffer from involuntary hunger.

6. Similarly, another piece of engineering in the city that is designed to make it seem ubiquitous has the opposite effect. The Sea Wall Project, a wall that surrounds the city, is intended by the obscure ruling powers to effectively strengthen the efficacy of the city as an overwhelming, inescapable totality, but this structure, like the skyscrapers, also undermines such efficacy in the text. On an intertextual level, as Washburn argues, the Sea Wall is evidence of the way in which “the city, under some last, mad, military directive, is expanding its final resources in building a Sea Wall to repel invaders, an echo of a similar enterprise undertaken by Thucydides’s Athenians near the end of the Peloponnesian War which ultimately destroyed them” (63). Meanwhile, for Foertsch the Sea Wall Project is evidence of an “offstage” world that shows that “the boundaries of this country of last things are both penetrable and thus dissolvable” (341).

7. With Anna’s view of ocean, here, it might seem as if the text evokes a traditional, positive image of the American natural sublime in order to disqualify the city as a site of sublimity. This might indeed be the case if it were not for the negative qualities the text attributes to nature elsewhere (as we have seen in the example of the Terrible Winter).

8. As Washburn, Wesseling and Howard note, Anna’s name suggests the potential for “creative reorganization” (Wesseling 499) through its allusiveness. According to Wesseling, “Auster clearly alludes to the love poem ‘An Anna Blume’ (1919) by the Swiss Dadist Kurt Schwitters” (498), and as a Dadist, Schwitters “collected newspaper cuttings, graffiti, scraps of conversations, verbal clichés and the like, and subsequently reorganized them into poems” (499). While this does suggest the way Anna attempts to engage with the material world in a creative and resistant way, this does not mean that she is ultimately able to change that world. As Washburn puts it, while Anna’s efforts to be one of the “rare agents” who preserve the past “perhaps . . . accounts for her name, borrowed from an obscure poem of Kurt Schwitters which celebrates an eponymous ‘pale Anna Blume’” there is a considerable difference between the two Annas: “Auster’s Anna, however strong and unfaltering her powers of observation, is a wan ghost of the past astray in an intolerable present” (65). Indeed, as Howard suggests, it is this contrast that connects Auster’s Anna to other “great women witnesses to the historic devastations of this century, from Anne Frank to Anna Ahkmatova” (92).

9. According to Wesseling, Ferdinand’s ships suggest that he and Isabel may be doubles for Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, “the founders of the Spanish empire, who commissioned the expeditions of Columbus in the fifteenth century” (498).

10. In Auster’s *The Music of Chance*, Willie Stone engages in a creative endeavor similar to Ferdinand’s and which also resonates with the urban, “geometrical” sublime. Stone’s “City of the World” (79) is a miniature city in which his presence and authority as its engineer can be discerned when one partakes in his “God-like,” “rooftop” perspective. As Jim Nashe discovers when looks down at the model:

For all the warmth and sentimentality depicted in the model, the overriding mood was one of terror, of dark dreams sauntering down the avenues in broad daylight. A threat of punishment seemed to hang in the air – as if this were a city at war with itself, struggling to mend its ways before the prophets came to announce the arrival of a murderous, avenging God. (96)

11. According to Auster, the text gives subtle clues that Anna’s writing survives within its fictional world: “The little phrases that appear a few times at the beginning – ‘she wrote’ or ‘her letter continued’ – put the whole book in a third person perspective. Someone has read Anna Blume’s blue notebook; somehow or other, her letter has arrived” (317).

12. The apocalyptic connotations of the city have been considered by Shiloh, Wesseling and Foertsch and suggest why there is a hopeful quality to the text. Shiloh and Wesseling, for example, see the survival of Anna’s writing as a confirmation of Derrida’s well-known argument about apocalypse as a textual construct, that it “can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or a text” (qtd. in Wesseling 500). As a result, as Shiloh explains, “We can only talk and write about the apocalypse as long as it has not yet taken place . . .” (153), so *In the Country of Last Things* implicitly resists a pessimistic conclusion. While viewing the text in these apocalyptic terms might seem to obscure the fact that it is very much about the hideous conditions of the present – albeit an imagined one – Jacqueline Foertsch suggests that the temporal position of the city in an alternative present encourages a critical perspective within the apocalyptic paradigm. Foertsch argues that *In the Country of Last Things* is an “alterapocalyptic” text (334), that it is precisely this present quality that distinguishes it from a “postapocalyptic” text and Derrida’s definition of apocalypse. For Foertsch, the critical power and meaning of an alterapocalyptic text and its dystopian – and it would seem always urban – world resides in the way it “hangs back from a far-in-the-future designation so as to maintain its relevance to modern readers” (339). Similarly, it is this temporal position that indicates how effectively and significantly *In the Country of Last Things* critiques the conventions of the urban sublime.

Moonlight and the Legacy of the American Sublime in Paul Auster's Moon Palace

Moon Palace (1989), published after *In the Country of Last Things*, is Auster's most overt and sustained treatment of the literary, artistic and cultural history of the American sublime. While *In the Country of Last Things* clearly addresses the urban sublime from a similar historical perspective, *Moon Palace* has a greater scope: much like Didion's *Play It As It Lays* and *Democracy*, *Moon Palace* is concerned with the imperial legacy and persistence of foundational American myths, particularly the American Adam and his relationship to initial figurations of the American wilderness and technology as sublime. Yet whereas Didion's critical treatment of the American sublime is directed towards the particularities of frontier mythology, *Moon Palace* offers a more heterogeneous view of many of the same concerns, which makes its treatment both more categorical and at times apparently less critical of the imperial history it takes issue with. For instance, the protagonist Marco Stanley Fogg has greater affinities with the typical Adamic figure than either Maria Wyeth or Inez Victor, which adds to his immediate appeal: his gender, age and resistance to social convention during the events he narrates cast him as a sort of latter-day Huckleberry Finn, as do the often absurd situations he finds himself in that are caused or enlivened by his precociousness. However, even though the text might seem to support Fogg by virtue of his role as narrator and his comedic mishaps, as with Didion's protagonists, Fogg's Adamic attributes are a sign of his complicity with the larger forces of American imperialism – and their relationship to American sublimity – that the novel critiques.

On a fundamental level, it is Fogg's conscious adoption of these Adamic attributes from the films, books and art he avidly consumes that is a significant part of the

problem. *Moon Palace* dramatizes how Fogg's efforts to model his life and expectations according to these works are largely responsible for the harm he brings to himself and others through his misadventures, but the text also suggests that these negative effects have a direct correlation to the role these works have played – and continue to play – as instrumental expressions of Manifest Destiny and the American sublime. In particular, when Fogg takes on the role as a personal assistant to the blind and paralyzed millionaire, Thomas Effing, *Moon Palace* sets the stage for a series of startling revelations that link Fogg to the art and aesthetics of the Hudson River School as Effing begins to recount his life story to Fogg. Fogg's discovery that Effing is, in fact, his grandfather and was a famous landscape artist who apparently disappeared on a painting expedition in the Utah desert, establishes a tangible lineage between Fogg's destructive actions and art: for Effing, the same spirit of Adamic individualism and social rebellion Fogg embraces defined his role as an artist and was expressed in the sublime landscape paintings he produced. Moreover, even as the tale Effing tells Fogg is clearly cautionary, it fails to register for either one of them in a cautionary way. Instead, *Moon Palace* takes a more radical stance that asks us to consider why Fogg and Effing insist the art they respond to and create can be divested from its cultural contexts and turned against those contexts into a form of cultural resistance and subversion.

I

Before exploring the question of whether *Moon Palace* depicts art as a challenge to the imperial legacy of the American sublime, it is first necessary to recognize how such subversive potential is connected to the novel's portrayal of Fogg prior to meeting Effing. Through Fogg's early misadventures and his self-conscious – and even self-

parodying – Adamic attributes, the text draws our attention to experiences of nature and technology as sublime, which effectively mark the parameters resistant art must confront. Indeed, I want to suggest that *Moon Palace* demonstrates how the visibility of the imperial legacy of the American sublime – along with the visibility of the inherent contradictions that support its traditional configurations – does not significantly alter or diminish either its widespread popular appeal or cultural capital. As we shall see, in contrast to critical interpretations that maintain *Moon Palace* redeploys traditional configurations of the American sublime for anti-imperialistic ends, I argue that the text signals how embedded these traditional configurations remain in American culture. Categorically, through Fogg I claim that *Moon Palace* dramatizes the way the American sublime continues to provide an explanatory vocabulary for American culture that can adapt to the sort of personal and cultural transformations found in Fogg’s narrative.

From the most rudimentary details of Fogg’s life, *Moon Palace* situates him as a classic, Adamic figure. Coming from an unknown paternity and adopted by his maternal Uncle Victor after the death of his mother, Fogg exemplifies the “innocent, solitary” figure and the self-fashioning, “forward-thrusting personality” defined by Lewis (28). For instance, Fogg’s surname, middle-name and first name signify these Adamic qualities, and he takes delight in their connotative meanings and his ability to shape those meanings. With his surname (his mother’s maiden name), Fogg revels in the discovery that Fogg was originally Fogel, a European name that he likes to think signifies the Americanization of his matrilineal ancestry. “*Fogel* meant bird,” Fogg reveals, “and I liked the idea of having that creature embedded in who I was. I imagined that some valiant ancestor of mind had once actually been able to fly. A bird flying through fog, I

used to think, a giant bird flying across the ocean, not stopping until it reached America” (3-4). Likewise, the most significant allusion Fogg finds for his American surname evokes similar, metaphorical connotations of travel, exploration and quests. After seeing the film version of Jules Verne’s *Around the World in 80 Days* and discovering that “the hero of that story was named Fogg,” Fogg embraces Uncle Victor’s habit of calling him “Phileas as a term of endearment” after “the man who had stormed around the globe in less than three months” (6).

Fogg’s real first name, Marco, and his middle name, Stanley, yield similar allusions – “Marco Polo, the first European to visit China” and “Stanley . . . the American journalist who had tracked down Dr. Livingstone in the heart of darkest Africa.” Moreover, when Fogg begins to sign his name M.S. Fogg, the additional connotations that he ascribes to the initials of these names unmistakably signals his view of himself in the Adamic mode. Fogg’s observation “that the initials stood for *manuscript*” encourages Uncle Victor to offer a truism that Fogg eagerly adopts: “‘Every man is the author of his own life,’ he said. ‘The book you are writing is not yet finished. Therefore, it’s a manuscript’” (7). Self-consciously, Macro Stanley Fogg attempts to be an Adamic figure. Fogg, as Aliko Varvogli aptly puts it, is a “self-mythologizer” (122) who actively seeks out references from literature and popular culture to explain his hardships and losses as well as his hopeful views of himself and his future. As Fogg explains shortly after he moves in with Uncle Victor, “I apparently moped around a lot and did my fair share of sniffing, sobbing myself to sleep at night like some pathetic orphan in a nineteenth century novel” (5). In essence, then, *Moon Palace* effectively puts Fogg in the position that resembles the narrator in *Democracy*: Fogg wishes to fashion himself and empower

himself in the Adamic mode through his knowledge of literary history and, as we shall see, his many modes of authorship.

I want to begin by addressing Fogg's description of himself as a "pathetic orphan," how this resonates with his the Adamic view of himself, how experiences of loneliness and loss initiate his efforts at self-making and why the text presents these efforts as problematic. Following the pattern of the traditional bildungsroman, it might seem that the text uses the moments of Fogg's losses, and the efforts at self-making that follow, as indications of the necessary steps he must take towards earning a hard-won maturity. By contrast, I suggest that *Moon Palace* uses such moments as a meta-commentary on this pattern to expose how the Adamic paradigm has traditionally been figured, as a way of managing threats to the hero's authoritative powers and creative resources. More particularly, the way the text depicts Fogg represents a revision and critique of the more complex Adamic model that Lewis finds with the protagonists in Cooper, Hawthorne and Melville, in which the Adamic figure experiences "a 'fall' that can be claimed as fortunate because of the growth in perception and moral intelligence granted the hero as a result of it" (127), resulting in "the destruction of his [the hero's] own egotism" (55).¹

In *Moon Palace's* revised version of this scenario, for such a renunciation of "egotism" to take place, Fogg must forgo his self-mythologizing tendencies, effectively rejecting the Adamic paradigm he exemplifies, which is precisely what he fails to do with each loss that he faces. Instead, these losses – and the truths they reveal – remain secondary to his wish to view himself in the Adamic mould, a fact that is most dramatically revealed when he discovers that Sol Barber is his father. For Fogg, the

discovery of who his father is (which could conceivably heal “the loneliness of my childhood”) has the opposite effect: “My origins were a mystery, and I would never know where I had come from. This is what defined me, and by now I was used to my own darkness, clinging to it as a source of knowledge and self-respect, trusting in it as an ontological necessity” (295). Fogg’s unknown origins, then, are what define him, and what he wishes to define him, so his identification with explorers is not, as some critics have argued, a metaphorical expression of his quest to chart his ancestry and discover his unknown past. Instead, Fogg’s response to Barber’s revelation (as well his decision to journey alone to the west coast after Barber’s death) exemplifies the fact that Fogg wishes the search for his origins to be an impossible quest, so that he can maintain his status as a “pathetic orphan in a nineteenth century novel,” as an Adamic figure whose capacity to re-imagine his identity preserves his ego.²

Moreover, like the traditional Adamic figure, Fogg’s emulation of that figure has a larger, cultural resonance: but through Fogg, *Moon Palace* criticizes what the traditional Adamic figure signals within – and signals about – American culture. Seen from a broader, cultural perspective, Lewis explains that the traditional Adamic figure’s lack of origins and efforts at self-renewal reflect the fact that “America . . . has been persistently a one-generation culture” (9). As a result, the traditional Adamic figure supports the elimination of America’s European roots, its indigenous predecessors but also the elements in the new, burgeoning culture that have proven to be non-progressive. In *Moon Palace*, though, when Fogg attempts to be a resistant figure who challenges the “non-progressive” elements of American culture, his efforts ultimately expose how the Adamic model is something that needs to be eliminated. Unbeknown to him, his

adoption of the Adamic role reveals how its relationship to the American sublime perpetuates America's imperial legacy, which is precisely what he wishes to challenge. Fogg's decision to be "an instrument of sabotage . . . a loose part in the national machine, a misfit whose job was to gum up the works" (61), is directed towards the oppressive forces in American culture that are, in fact, supported by the Adamic figure, so Fogg, in turn, supports those forces as well.

Uncle Victor's departure for a tour with his music group and his death is the first loss for Fogg that encourages his self-appointed role as rabble rouser, and which indicates how his Adamic pretensions support American imperialism. Wearing Victor's unfashionable suit after his departure, Fogg delights in playing the "the skulking Malevole who stood apart from the herd" (15): "More than anything else, the suit was the badge of my identity, the emblem of how I wanted others to see me" (15-16). Moreover, after Victor's death, Fogg mourns his uncle's passing by reading Victor's library in order to preserve the Adamic identity Victor has encouraged him to adopt. On one level, as Ilana Shiloh puts it, reading the library represents Fogg's way of "seeking to become his uncle both physically and mentally" (124), while, on another level, reading the library is also a symbolic gesture that supports the meanings he and Uncle Victor have attached to his identity. For Victor, the fact that the books number "one thousand four hundred and ninety-two volumes" is a "propitious number . . . since it evokes the memory of Columbus's discovery of America" (13). Thus by reading the library, Fogg simultaneously commiserates with his uncle one last time and supports the connotative meanings and the intertextual allusions they have associated with Fogg's names. According to Fogg, reading the books "was almost like following the route of an explorer

from long ago, duplicating his steps as he thrashed out into virgin territory, moving westward with the sun, pursuing the light until it was finally extinguished” (22).

Fundamentally, then, the loss of Uncle Victor and reading his library sets Fogg out on his own perilous quest, which the adult Fogg later characterizes with a startling degree of accuracy. Deriding “the ridiculous poses I struck back then,” which were meant to show “that I was somehow more grown-up than my class mates,” the adult Fogg concludes: “the truth was that I had merely found a different way of being young” (15).

Indeed, Fogg’s “poses” are clearly an expression of youthful rebellion, and in order to understand how and why *Moon Palace* ultimately suggests that the adult Fogg continues to resort to the same “way of being young,” it is necessary to see what frames the allusions the text makes about Uncle Victor’s library as support for Fogg’s Adamic potential. In order to grasp the text’s complex critique of Fogg’s actions within a larger cultural and imperial context, we must consider the fact that these allusions are predicated on Fogg’s experiences of the American sublime. In turn, it is not surprising, then, that like other traditional Adamic figures, Fogg’s most intense experiences of self-transformation come about by his contact with sites of the technological and natural sublime. His experiences are emblematic, but they are also peculiarly personal, and in this way the text alerts us to what is at stake by Fogg willfully constructing his identity as an Adamic figure through sublime transport.

For example, as Varvogli explains, Fogg’s discovery of the Moon Palace sign is a key instance in which the text introduces “a unifying symbol, bringing the universal into the personal” (130). On one level, the sign resonates on a larger level because of the presence of the moon, which Shiloh rightly says is “the central image of the novel, . . . a

multilayered metaphor, simultaneously evoking America's past and future quests . . .” (131). In addition, it is the way the sign functions as a manifestation of the technological sublime that makes it so immediately potent for Fogg and – conceivably – for readers as well. Indeed, Fogg's rapturous experience of the sign exemplifies what Nye refers to as the “electrical sublime,” which he says offers an individual “a heightened sense of reality” and the opportunity to “leave behind the accidents and problems of daily life and merge with the flashing lights” (191).³

For Fogg, looking from his apartment windows at “the smallest, most abbreviated portion of Broadway,” he finds this view “filled up” by the “vivid torch of pink and blue letters that spelled out the words MOON PALACE” and feels transformed: “the force with which those words assaulted me drowned out every practical reference and association. They were magic letters and they hung there in the darkness like a message from the sky itself” (17). The sign, therefore, offers Fogg an experience of transcendence from his circumstances that adheres to Nye's description of the electrical sublime, and in doing so, the sign also suggests that Fogg can accomplish the ultimate Adamic task, in which “having created himself, he must next create a home” (Lewis 50): “Little by little,” Fogg adds, “I understood that I had come to the right place, that this small apartment was indeed where I was meant to live” (17). From Fogg's perspective, the discovery of the sign stages a hopeful, traditional experience of the American sublime in which technology indicates progress, which is supported by the fact that he feels he can fashion and assert his identity, authority and “self-reliance.”

Moon Palace, though, emphasizes that this kind of traditional configuration of the American sublime supports American imperialism, and the text does so in a paradoxical

manner – through Fogg’s pretensions of being a culturally resistant, Adamic figure. Turning the Adamic figure on his proverbial head, the text uses Fogg as a voice of cultural criticism who unwittingly implicates himself in what he critiques. Reacting to the Apollo moon landing, Fogg criticizes it as an act of imperialism, in spite of the fact that it represents a triumphant moment in the history of the technological sublime and is the modern day equivalent of the sort of quest narratives that he romanticizes.⁴ When Fogg sees the moon landing on television, he describes it as part of the “national machine” that he condemns: “I saw the two padded figures take their first steps in that airless world, bouncing like toys over the landscape, driving the golf cart through the dust, planting a flag in the eye of what had once been the goddess of love and lunacy” (31). For Fogg the loss of the moon as “the goddess of love and lunacy” signals the loss of both creative and resistant power – “Radiant Diana, . . . image of all that is dark within us.”⁵ Acting as the voice of resistance, then, Fogg takes on a contradictory position that might seem to do away with any logical consistency in the text’s characterization of him; however, through Fogg’s contradictory position, *Moon Palace* illustrates how he is unaware of his true relation to these forces that he wants to denounce.

Fogg explicitly links the astronauts to Adam, and by doing so the text shows that underlying his criticism of the moon landing is his wish to preserve Adamic authority. As Fogg scoffs at the “absurdity” of the president’s claim that the moon landing is “the greatest event since the creation of man,” his final comment makes his position clear. According to Fogg, “there was one thing no one could challenge: since the day he was expelled from Paradise, Adam had never been this far from home.” For Fogg, the astronauts are reduced to the defeated counterpart of the American Adam. “Expelled

from Paradise” and “far from home” (31), they exemplify the old, sin-ridden Adam, who Lewis remarks is “the exile, the prodigal son, Adam after the expulsion, not the new unfallen Adam in the western garden” (50).⁶

Fogg’s struggle to maintain his faith in the optimistic paradigm, though, is not simply indicative of his naivety or youth. The contradictions between Fogg’s response to the moon landing and his attitude towards other quests and explorers embody the underlying tensions between traditional configurations of the natural, technological or urban sublime in America. By having Fogg’s rejection of the “national machine” culminate with his escape to Central Park, *Moon Palace* conveys how the tensions between the natural, urban or technological sublime traditionally affirm rather than qualify sites of sublimity and the Adamic hero’s ability to use them to his own ends. Instead, with Fogg’s retreat to Central Park, the sort of contradictions conveyed in his response to the moon landing are writ large, and the text ultimately reveals the ways in which these are another subtle re-inscription of America’s imperialist ethos.

Critics have not read the Central Park episode along such lines, which, perhaps, is not surprising given the fact that *Moon Palace* casts the park as an archetypal, pastoral “middle-ground” and retreat, with Fogg’s perception of the park responding to it in corresponding terms. For instance, Varvogli rightly observes that the park “which partakes of both nature and city is neither,” but he does not question why, in light of Fogg’s reading and movie-going, that Fogg wishes to see it as “a place where the ordinary laws of the city are suspended.” Instead, Varvogli suggests that the park momentarily frees Fogg from his “self-mythologizing” tendencies, is a place where “Fogg finds momentary relief from the burden of signification,” rather than being another

expression of those tendencies: because the park “does not carry a host of connotations and associations,” it is “the perfect setting for a character who is already over-determined by his fictional status, his name and, within his own world, by the way other people view him” (135). Meanwhile, Seidl’s less positive interpretation of the park’s effects on Fogg is equally troublesome. For Seidl, the reason Fogg does not find the park to be a site of “regeneration” is only because it is not a real, natural environment, because it “is only artificial and does not have the same regenerating forces that that the real wilderness has” (72). Yet, in this instance, the fact that the park is “artificial” does not diminish Fogg’s belief that it can function as a site of resistance.

For Fogg, Central Park indeed functions as the classic, pastoral “middle-ground” and as a site of sublimity, precisely because it is a man-made, natural environment that supports his Adamic vision of himself. As Fogg puts it, the park is an example of “nature enhanced . . . , and it offered [sic] a variety of sites and terrains that nature seldom give in such a condensed area” (62), which affirms Fogg’s view of his Adamic potential: it “allowed me to imagine that I was traveling over great distances, even as I remained within the boundaries of my miniature world” (63). Moreover, Fogg believes that the park does provide him with a refuge against the elements of the urban world that he equates with the “national machine” (61), that the park supports his efforts to refashion himself as a resistant figure: “If the streets forced me to see myself as others saw me, the park gave me a chance to return to my inner life, to hold on to myself purely in terms of what was happening inside me” (58). Thus, from Fogg’s point of view, he does experience the park as “regenerative” but not because it is entirely natural.

Moon Palace offers a critical view of such regeneration and shows that Fogg's experience of Central Park is derived from the sort of literary works he embraces. Embodying neither the iconographic features of the sublimity associated with urban centers or the American wilderness, parks have nevertheless represented a hybrid form that resolves experiences of terror and awe and anxieties about progress into a positive, reassuring expression, which *Moon Palace* captures through Fogg's citation of (or more properly use of) yet another literary source – Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.⁷ Much like the intertextual links the narrator in Didion's *Democracy* makes to Wallace Stevens and Henry Adams, in *Moon Palace* *Leaves of Grass* serves as a text that marks historical changes in the American sublime that still resonate today. Clearly, Fogg evokes *Leaves of Grass* when he describes Central Park as a place where “the grass and the trees were democratic,” where “I loafed in the sunshine of a late afternoon” (57).⁸ In other words, for Fogg the park is a site of sublimity and renewal by virtue of its similarities to Whitman's conception of the natural sublime.

First, it is appropriate that just as the word grass is enough to connote Whitman's text, the word has a corresponding weight within *Leaves of Grass* as a catch-all symbol for the American sublime. As Rob Wilson explains, “Grass was for Whitman as miraculous as a mountain, waterfalls, or stars,” and Whitman's own comments to R. M. Bucke explain how he insisted that such commonplace elements of nature were imbued with the same power and worthy of the same reverence as more traditional icons of the American sublime: “After all, the great lesson is that no special natural sights – not Alps, Niagara, Yosemite or anything else – is more grand or more beautiful than the ordinary sunrise and sunset, earth and sky, the common trees and grass” (qtd. in Wilson 138).

Moreover, Fogg's claim that the nature found in the park is "democratic" also follows Whitman's view of nature as sublime and what it shares with the icons he compares it to, as an experience that embodies and engenders democracy. Here, though, *Moon Palace* casts a wary eye on such claims, which is expressed by Fogg adopting Whitman's embrace of oppositions, a strategy that implicitly supports Adamic individualism and imperialism.

In the park, Fogg is greeted by moments of inclusion and random acts of kindness that come his way, like the woman who gives him five dollars "just like that, without any explanation at all," and the people who invite him "to join them on the grass for a picnic lunch" (58). At the same time, while in the park Fogg is homeless, hungry and destitute (and ultimately ill from exposure to the elements), and the park presents just as many negative experiences as positive ones – among them, when he is robbed by an old man, chased by a gang of kids, threatened by a drunk and held at gunpoint by a pervert. Above all, though, in Fogg's view the park is a positive site because it allows for greater self-expression, which suggests that determining whether the park is essentially good or bad is not the issue; rather, *Moon Palace* emphasizes that Fogg, like Whitman's prototypical speaker, wishes to embrace but also displace oppositions with an assertion of his ego.⁹

For instance, while the good things that happen to Fogg could – realistically – be attributed to the positive effects of the park or just the charity of good people, the text reveals that Fogg wants to take credit for them. "Whenever something good happened to me," Fogg explains, "I did not attribute it to chance so much as to a special state of mind. If I was able to maintain the proper balance between desire and indifference, I felt that I could somehow will the universe to respond to me" (58). Still more revealing, Fogg's

reaction to his negative experiences is indicative of the same logic. Significantly, it is when Fogg contemplates his negative experiences in the park that he defines himself as “an instrument of sabotage” (61), which is part of the same ego-driven perception he displays when contemplating his positive experiences in the park. With these negative experiences Fogg says, “I was able to interpret them as spiritual initiations, as obstacles that had been thrown across my path to test my faith in myself. If I learned how to overcome these I would eventually reach a higher stage of consciousness.” Therefore, rather than an example of self-esteem or an effort to deny that some of his experiences in the park are negative, Fogg attempts to use the sum of his experiences there as a means of transcendence and an assertion of his authority.

As outlandish as Fogg’s position may seem, he does seem to achieve a transcendent moment in the park where he experiences “a higher stage of consciousness,” but the text uses this moment in an ironic manner to undermine Fogg’s position and to expose its wider implications. In fact, it is appropriate that Fogg believes he achieves this moment of “a higher stage of consciousness” when – sick with fever – he retreats to a cave in the park and dreams about the Moon Palace sign, which, as we have seen, has produced similar states of elation for him in the past. Indeed, at this point in the narrative, the sign now carries with it Fogg’s opposing, contradictory views about the moon landing, so the text uses the sign to further register and critique Fogg’s Whitmanic embrace of oppositions as a means of revelation and self-fashioning.

Prior to Fogg’s dream in the park, he attaches new meanings to the Moon Palace sign after seeing the astronauts on TV, meanings that reflect the new reality of the moon landing. As Fogg looks at the sign, he reveals that “everything was mixed up in it at

once: Uncle Victor and China, rocket ships and music, Marco Polo and the American West” (32):

I would think: the Apollo Project: Apollo, the god of music; Uncle Victor and the Moon Men traveling West. I would think: the West; the war against the Indians; the war in Vietnam, once called Indochina. I would think: weapons, bombs, explosions; nuclear clouds in the deserts of Utah and Nevada; and then I would ask myself – why does the American West look so much like the landscape of the moon? (32-33)

On one level, then, Fogg clearly situates his contradictory views about quests, the American West, technology and the moon landing within the history of the American sublime and its connection to American imperialism. On a more fundamental level, though, Fogg does not gain any insight here; instead, all the connections Fogg makes remain “mixed up” and produce the very sort of epiphany he hopes to achieve in the park.

Looking at the sign, Fogg says that “the more I opened myself to these secret correspondences, the closer I felt to understanding some fundamental truth about the world. I was going mad perhaps, but I nevertheless felt a tremendous power surging through me, a Gnostic joy that penetrated deep into the heart of things.” Yet as soon as this elevated experience occurs it is gone: Fogg is soon “back in the world of fragments, back in the world of hunger and bare white walls” with “the world . . . pressing down on me again”(33), which only underscores the fact that he fails to gain any insight into the implications of his beliefs.

By extension, when Fogg dreams about the Moon Palace sign in the park, the text uses the sign and the landscape of the park to indicate the intractable nature of Fogg’s

self-mythologizing tendencies and the way they are connected to America's imperialist past. Once again Fogg's experience of the sign is defined by a series of reversals, in which a fleeting sense of empowerment and enlightenment is followed by a more profound sense of deflation and uncertainty. In his dream, the sign is initially far more impressive than ever before – “the pink and blue neon letters were so large that the whole sky was filled with their brightness” (69) – only to be reduced to “the two *os* from the word *Moon*” (70), which Fogg says turn into “the eyes of God” and view him “with scorn and impatience.” Effectively cast out of Paradise, then, like the astronauts he wishes to distinguish himself from, Fogg immediately recovers from this reversal by embracing the sublimity of nature in the park, and it is perhaps in this moment that *Moon Palace* most clearly demonstrates Fogg's unwitting support of the imperialist forces –and past – he claims to resist.

Crawling from the cave, Fogg gazes at the sky, the sun and the landscape and begins to dream of Native Americans in a pristine forest, and *Moon Palace* uses this experience of nature and the dream to expose the imperial legacy of the American natural sublime as the basis for fashioning the American Adamic self. For Fogg, the nature in the park is sublime and – he hopes – restorative: “The sky above me was immense, a dazzling clarity that had no end to it,” and he imagines that “the warmth of the sun could evaporate my fever, literally suck the illness out of my bones.” By contrast, the text reveals that Fogg's experience reflects his destructive desire to reclaim his Adamic authority, which is signaled when, “without any sense of falling asleep,” he dreams that he runs with the “Indians,” moving ever “closer to understanding the spirit of the forest.” Fogg's wish for “understanding” euphemistically masks a covert wish for

domination, and it is fitting that in the presence of his fantasy that his physical illness remains as irremediable as the larger consequences that such fantasies have wrought in America's past.

If, in the logic of Fogg's dreamscape, he wishes to restore his authority as an American Adam by turning the park into a virgin American forest, then by accomplishing this goal he supports the displacement of America's imperialist past. As Chenetier notes, the fact that Fogg imagines that his dream takes place "350 years ago" (*Moon Palace* 70) "places Fogg in 1619" (Chenetier 126), a year before "the 'Mayflower' 'Separatists' set foot on . . . Cape Cod," which negates the reality of first contact between America's indigenous people and its first settlers. As a result, rather than realizing that he, too, draws on the narratives that support this imperial history, the drama of Fogg's dream once more demonstrates how his efforts to stand against the forces that have created this history make him complicit with it. Moreover, despite the fact that Fogg apparently escapes facing the implications of his dream when he is woken by friends who rescue him, as we shall see, the text accounts for the dream's significance later when Fogg gazes at a similar vision in Ralph Blakelock's *Moonlight*.¹⁰ Indeed, in what follows, I will examine the dynamics of Fogg's Edenic vision from within the conventions of American landscape painting, which illustrates another critical concern: that Fogg's desire to channel his energies into a culturally resistant art is ineffective, due, in large part, to the way the American sublime has been defined by and disseminated through American art.

II

For a number of critics, Fogg and Effing take a similar, culturally resistant stance through their creative endeavors, which is dramatized by Effing discussing his history as

a painter and teaching Fogg how to view and describe the world in a new way. Much like what we have seen with Anna Blume's object hunting, or Klara Sax's planes in *Underworld*, Effing's paintings and Fogg's writing are viewed by some critics as subversive practices that challenge the dominant norms and values of American culture. Unlike these other texts, however, *Moon Palace* depicts a much more direct relationship between art and traditional configurations of the American sublime, which, surprisingly, is precisely what some critics cite as the basis for the resistant qualities and effects of Effing's and Fogg's art. For instance, Seidl claims that Effing's contact with the terrifying, natural sublimity of the desert brings about his discovery of a new aesthetic, which, in turn, explains why the subsequent art he produces effectively stands against American culture. In a similar vein, Bernd Herzogenrath argues that with the sublime terror Effing encounters in the desert, Effing produces an art that is resistant because it goes against mimetic realism, "is of no use but being a point of referential failure" (148).

Moreover, both views imply that through his experience of the desert and the creation of his new forms of art that Effing renounces the same sort of Adamic and self-mythologizing tendencies as Fogg. For Seidl, Effing's view of himself as a painter and explorer is demythologized: "Effing moves from a very mythicized, legendary narration, to an account that is more detached from the traditional myths and legends . . ." (66). Meanwhile, for Herzogenrath, Effing's art testifies to his rejection of man's domination and union with nature, an expression of the traditional, harmonious version of the American natural sublime in which nature supports the Adamic ego. In contrast to such claims, I argue that to insist that the sublime terror of the American wilderness offers a space that is genuinely outside culture or that it is categorically different than the less

dramatic variations of the natural, American sublime represents a significant misreading of the text and the literary and cultural sources that it uses. Instead, *Moon Palace* portrays the ways in which the wilderness has functioned as a key site in traditional configurations of the American sublime. Furthermore, even though the text illustrates that the aesthetic Effing derives from his contact with the wilderness (and which he attempts to pass onto Fogg) does indeed represent a critique of the traditional American sublime and the Adamic figure's relation to it, I will show that this does not mean that either Effing or Fogg ultimately share this point of view.

Much like Fogg, Effing holds contradictory views about quests and exploration, at once embracing certain glamorous and popular elements associated with them, while at the same time rejecting others, primarily in light of their imperial connotations. Moreover, much like Fogg, Effing paradoxically reveals his complicity with the very cultural forces and institutions he critiques. Effing's complicity originates with his earliest artistic aspirations, which is significant because it shows how seemingly oppositional sites of sublimity support his Adamic pretensions before his contact with the desert and the aesthetic he follows afterwards. Two historical figures inspire Effing to become a painter – the inventor, Nikola Tesla, and the painter, Thomas Moran – even though he links them to imperialism. For instance, Effing criticizes Tesla for being a part of the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which Effing sees as a celebration of colonial conquest through a display of the technological sublime: “The idea was to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America. Bring out all the gadgets and inventions and show them how clever the scientists were” (142). At the same time, Effing remains entranced by Tesla and his inventions in a way that

conflicts with his criticism. “He was like some prophet of the future age,” Effing enthuses, “and no one could resist him. The total conquest of nature! A world in which every dream was possible” (144). Indeed, when Effing in fact meets Tesla, Effing views Tesla as an Adamic figure who is ushering in a new age and who sets Effing on a similar path as well. Overwhelmed by meeting his hero (“when Tesla’s eyes went through me, I experienced my first taste of death”), Effing experiences his first of many rebirths, realizing “that my life was my own, that it belonged to me and no one else” (146), that he, too, like Fogg, is an “author of his own life.”

Similarly, Effing both rejects and accepts certain views that are expressed by or associated with Moran’s art. On the one hand, like Fogg with the moon landing, Effing criticizes Moran’s paintings as an expression of imperialism that brings with it crass commercialization and the loss of creative potential:

Manifest Destiny! They mapped it out, they made pictures of it, they digested it into the great American profit machine. Those were the last bits of the continent, the blank spaces no one had explored. Now here it was, all laid out on a pretty piece of canvas for everyone to see. The golden spike, driven right through our hearts! (149)

At the same time, Effing shares some aesthetic influences and concerns with Moran, even as he rejects others: Effing reveals that they had both “been influenced by Turner, . . . along with a passion for landscape, a passion for the real world” (150), even as he insists that “I wasn’t a painter like Moran” (149) but “part of the new generation, and I didn’t hold with any of that romantic bullshit.” Lastly, Effing accepts – and even adopts – Moran’s rationale for going West: “If you don’t go out there, he said, you’ll never

understand what space is. Your work will stop growing if you don't make the trip. You've got to experience that sky, it will change your life" (150). As with Tesla, then, Effing criticizes Moran's association with imperialism. At the same time, Effing views Moran as a kindred spirit, as a self-fashioning, Adamic figure who draws his creative power from his sublime contact with the wilderness, which in a contradictory way, Effing believes will offer him the means to differentiate himself from both Moran and Tesla.

Effing's expedition dramatizes these contradictory aims, and in doing so exposes how his artistic engagement with the desert only appears to be unconventional and subversive, how his experience of sublime nature only appears to stand against the imperial elements of American culture. Moran's prediction that contact with the desert will transform Effing and his art is accurate, but the transformation does not significantly alter the conventions associated with the natural sublime or Effing's adherence to those conventions. Instead, through Effing's artistic engagement with the desert, *Moon Palace* suggests that the transformation he undergoes does not fundamentally alter his Adamic view of himself or produce a new way of seeing: at most his transformation better hides his authority even as that authority is reaffirmed.

According to Effing, the deadliness and the vastness of the desert transform his art. When Jack Scoresby, the guide of the expedition, abandons Effing and his friend Edward Byrne in the desert, Byrne soon succumbs, and for Effing Byrne's death resonates with his perception of the landscape. For Effing, the desert is a "dead world": "Wagon wheels, skullbones, empty bullet shells – I saw all those things out there, even as late as 1916. A giant cemetery was what it was, a blank page of death" (154). Moreover, by seeing the threat the desert poses to civilization, Effing believes that it

represents a threat to his ability to inscribe his authority on the desert through his art. Thus, for Effing the magnitude of the desert apparently challenges his artistic preconceptions: “I hadn’t thought the scale would make a difference, but it did, there was no other way to wrestle with the size of things.” Above all, the desert feels alien and is alienating: as Effing puts it, “It didn’t feel human anymore” (155).

Given these initial reactions, it might not be surprising that Seidl and Herzogenrath take Effing at face value. Both offer similar interpretations of the relationship between the wilderness, the sublime and art in the text, that the non-representational paintings Effing eventually produces while lost in the desert are evidence of a sublimity that is at odds with the Adamic mode of self-fashioning and American culture. As Seidl puts it, when Effing first sees the desert, he “cannot handle the experience of the sublime, he is not able to paint or draw any pictures, as he is so overpowered” (64), so when he does paint, he creates an art “uncorrupted by any conventional social standards” (74). Similarly, what Herzogenrath refers to as Effing’s “breakdown of subjectivity” when he “experiences the impossibility of representing the vast, infinite space of the desert landscape” (138), might seem to indicate that Effing cannot use this sublime experience as an occasion for self-making: “For Effing, having to face this unbearable situation for so long, the moment of resolution is deferred” (139). Nevertheless, in lieu of Effing’s subsequent comments about the paintings he creates, his stance does not represent a subversive reconfiguration of the American sublime.

Effing retains his artistic authority in the desert, which, in fact, is demonstrated when he explains in more detail how the desert cannot be represented. When Effing first struggles to comprehend the desert, he does not somehow lose himself within it.¹¹

Recalling the immensity of the desert, Effing reveals that the one thing that he could always be certain of was the resilience of his own perception, the implacable authority of his consciousness. The desert may be “too big, the dimensions . . . too monstrous,” but according to Effing “eventually it just stops being there”: “In the end it’s a figment. The only place you exist is in your head” (156). By extension, with Effing describing the desert in this manner, *Moon Palace* illustrates that the way Effing sees himself in relation to the sublimity of the desert is a culturally produced “figment.”

When Effing insists that the desert cannot be adequately captured, he nevertheless depicts the desert by citing comparative examples that are hardly subversive. For instance, when Effing says that the desert cannot be represented, that it is “too massive to be painted or drawn; even photographs can’t get the feel of it” (157), he describes this unrepresentable quality by comparing the desert to other things. The desert landscape resembles “thumbs, eye sockets, penises, mushrooms, human beings, hats,” comparisons that he insists are common knowledge because these “inadequate” comparisons have been seen in photographs and movies:

Everyone knows what these places look like now, you’ve seen them a hundred times yourself. Glen Canyon, Monument Valley, the Valley of the Gods. That’s where they shoot all those cowboy-and-Indian movies, the goddamned Marlboro Man gallops through there on television every night.

In effect, without seeming to comprehend the contradictory implications of his logic, through these comparisons Effing espouses the traditional view of the desert as a sublime site that cannot be represented, which is disseminated through images and associations that he rightly says exploit these unrepresentable qualities. Ultimately, then, rather than

discovering or expressing metaphysical truths about man, nature and representation, Effing takes part in a way of seeing that is determined by cultural context and history.

Indeed, *Moon Palace* offers a commentary on the aesthetic history and cultural practices associated with viewing the West, which is dramatized by Effing's response to the physical features of the desert through his art. For example, seen from the perspective of Paul Bryant's essay "Nature Writing and the American Frontier," *Moon Palace* clearly illustrates how Effing's response to the desert is neither unprecedented nor indicative of someone moving beyond cultural influence. Bryant's essay reminds us of the way the American desert was first viewed by the Spanish explorers and, in turn, the way their response relates to the American writing and painting that followed. First, Bryant's points about Pedro Castaneda's encounter with the Grand Canyon, which brought about the first European effort to describe the American desert, convey why Effing's point of view and his art remain intrinsically and patently American. Castaneda's interpretation of the same desert features that come to preoccupy Effing (particularly, its magnitude and emptiness), illustrate an important difference. As Bryant puts it, for Castaneda "the great empty spaces of the West were obstacles between them [the Spaniards] and El Dorado, not matters for aesthetic contemplation" (208). Moreover, when Castaneda is faced with one of the preeminent icons of the American sublime – the Grand Canyon – something remarkable happens but for a remarkably simple reason:

. . . confronted with the Grand Canyon, Castaneda does not mention the sublime .

. . . The concept of the sublime in scenery had not yet been invented. Castaneda did not have the literary tradition for dealing with the Western landscape that has served writers in the last two centuries or so. (209)

In connection to Effing, then, Castaneda's response explains why Effing does not – and cannot – view the landscape in a way that is fundamentally “outside” of civilization; more centrally, Castaneda's response reveals that even if it were possible for Effing to step “outside,” there is nothing inherent in the desert that makes Effing view it in terms of the American sublime.

Moon Palace illuminates how sublimity is first and foremost a cultural construction, and in doing so the text does not support the subversive potential other critics have said Effing derives from experiencing the desert as sublime. Looking at Effing's art from the perspective of Bryant's essay we can see how *Moon Palace* responds to the traditional ways of seeing the landscape as sublime, but also how Effing's art resonates with an alternative approach that is often co-opted by the more dominant, sublime aesthetic. According to Bryant, there are two oppositional ways of viewing the natural landscape – as a “picture” (210) or as a “milieu” (213). To view a landscape as a “picture” is a foundational part of constructing that landscape as sublime. In the kind of paintings that Effing critiques such as Moran's, nature is represented as an “object from which the observer is separated” (210), which encourages seeing “nature as a static picture” (211). By contrast, viewing “nature as a milieu” is a more engaged approach and has affinities with Effing's response to the desert through his art:

The true purpose of art was not to create beautiful objects It was a method of understanding, a way of penetrating the world and finding one's place in it, and whatever aesthetic qualities an individual canvas might have were almost an incidental by-product of the effort to engage oneself in this struggle, to enter into the thick of things. (170)

By entering “into the thick of things,” Effing resembles those “milieu” writers and artists who Bryant says “go beyond nature as picture to a sense of participation” (213). Like them Effing seems concerned with “meticulous notice of detail, understanding of relationship and process, and sympathetic participation” (Bryant), but like many of them he also inadvertently supports the artistic tradition of the American sublime.

To successfully represent “nature as milieu,” an artist or writer ideally enters into an “ecological tradition” that stands against the kind of utilitarian approach to the landscape found in Moran’s work and which Effing rightly links to Manifest Destiny and imperialism (213). Effing, however, falls short from representing “nature as milieu” because he violates at least two of the characteristics that Bryant says such an approach must take: rather than “focus more on the detail of natural structure and processes” (213), Effing focuses on his “penetrating” (170) relationship to the desert; and rather than “emphasize what the human observer/participant may learn about self in coming to terms with nature” (213), he brings nature under his control as he finds his “place in it” (170). Eventually Effing finds the vastness of the desert less threatening, achieving a spectatorial distance from it that more clearly renders it as sublime. In “coming to terms with nature” through his painting, Effing makes the desert sublime and a transformative site that reaffirms his authority.

He was no longer afraid of the emptiness around him. The act of trying to put it on canvas had somehow internalized it for him, and now he was able to feel its indifference as something that belonged to him, as much as he belonged to the silent power of those gigantic spaces himself.

Such contact, then, clearly fulfills Effing's new artistic credo "of penetrating the world and finding one's place in it," but he realizes this credo in purely Adamic terms: his negotiation with the terror of the desert wilderness becomes a new occasion for self-making within the conventions of the American sublime.

As we have seen with Fogg in Central Park, Effing's contact with the desert represents a traditional expression of the natural sublime in which nature serves the project of self-making. Moreover, even though Effing's experience differs from Fogg's by not evoking the harmonious, idyllic version of the American natural sublime, Effing's position is no less traditional. Instead, his example is indicative of the kind of duality that we have seen can be found in response to such icons as Virginia's Natural Bridge, an example which illustrates the way, as Howard Horwitz puts it, "the sublime is simultaneously threat and cultivation" (39).¹² In fact, in *Moon Palace*, it is the degree to which Fogg, too, comes to experience nature as "threat and cultivation" through art and under Effing's guidance that the text demonstrates the persistent legacy of the American sublime in spite of the various oppositions – and contradictions – that constitute it.

For Fogg, the development of his descriptive and literary skills with Effing is part of his effort to achieve a newfound humility after he is rescued from Central Park, the "need," as he explains, "to repent for all my excesses of self-involvement" (73). *Moon Palace*, however, suggests that such positive, personal transformations remain unlikely so long as experiences of self-making and transcendence are bound to the kind of narratives that Fogg, as an American, is subject to and, like many other Americans, he embraces. Just as Effing's new art does not keep his subsequent transformations from being culturally determined or destructive (he even becomes a stock character in an Old West

shootout before his return to civilization), Fogg likewise remains a product of his cultural and literary heritage, becoming more complicit with the forces he attempts to resist.¹³

Like Effing, the harder Fogg works at redefining himself and atoning for his past, the more deluded he becomes about his motivations and the less aware of the significance of his actions in the present.

Moon Palace dramatizes this ironic dynamic through Fogg's artistic education with Effing, his efforts at description and narration during his walks with Effing and, finally, his composition of Effing's life story and obituary. As a result, Fogg's ability to realize his goal of "total selflessness" by "performing good works" becomes measured by his apprenticeship to Effing, his adoption of Effing's artistic credo and what he creates through his verbal skills (73). More broadly, through these moments the text registers what can be achieved within the American literary and visual arts, by the fact that under Effing's guidance Fogg remains immersed in the kind of cultural and artistic influences that shaped him before he meets Effing. For instance, like the books Fogg shared with Uncle Victor, the books Effing has Fogg read in preparation for their walks are about travel, adventure, exploration and quests; moreover, Fogg explains, the walks appear to be orchestrated and viewed by Effing along the same lines as such ventures: "Effing looked forward to an excursion through the streets of the neighborhood with all the enthusiasm of an explorer about to begin a journey to the Arctic" (119).

Effing's instruction teaches Fogg the kind of observational and descriptive skills found within such books. Even as the books are "fraught with marvels" (112) and appeal to Fogg's romantic inclinations, unlike Uncle Victor, Effing, it appears, does not want Fogg to indulge in such things. Instead, Effing wants Fogg to garner more from the

books, which perhaps explains why the books are all nonfiction – “John Wesley Powell’s books about his mapping expedition down the Colorado River, and . . . eighteenth- and nineteenth-century captivity stories, firsthand accounts written by white settlers who had been abducted by Indians” (110) – and why Effing greets Fogg with a snarl when he suggests they read “Cyrano’s journey to the moon” (111), a book that was one of Uncle Victor’s favorites. Less hypothetical, though, is what occurs when Fogg, following Effing’s directions, sees the piece of art that plays the most central role in his development, Ralph Blakelock’s *Moonlight*, an encounter with which the text sketches the limits of separating form from content and, in turn, the basis for a resistant form of art.

Fogg’s journey to *Moonlight* comes about after a period of struggling to describe things to Effing during their walks, an aspect of Fogg’s apprenticeship that is significant because he learns the importance of recognizing and abandoning a degree of authority in order to make his descriptions communicable to the blind Effing. As Steven Weisenburger notes, “Marco soon recognizes that, if his purpose is to ‘help him [Effing] see for himself,’ then ‘the more air I left around a thing, the happier the results’” (141). Rather than pursuing his initial approach where he was “piling too many words on top of each other” (123) in order to “capture every possible nuance of what I was seeing, jumbling up details in a mad scramble to leave nothing out” (122-123), Fogg discovers that by leaving “more air” he is more successful because it “allowed Effing to do the crucial work on his own: to construct an image on the basis of a few hints, to feel his own mind traveling toward the thing I was describing for him” (123). As a result, because Fogg’s words are communicated to another – and because they are fashioned to be

communicable – they are eminently more convivial than Effing’s art. In effect, Fogg’s desire for atonement and humility appears to be synonymous with his descriptive art and is engendered by the task of making it: the effort “to describe things accurately” (121), Fogg recalls, “was precisely the kind of discipline that could teach me what I most wanted to learn: humility, patience, rigor” (121-122).

Not surprisingly, though, given Fogg’s history and Effing’s influence, *Moon Palace* clearly illustrates how Fogg does not achieve such humble aspirations through his descriptions or – later – his writing. As with Effing’s art, Fogg’s descriptions and writing ultimately represent another means of asserting Adamic authority. In the same breath in which he hopes his training will teach him selflessness and self-discipline, Fogg says “I began to consider it as a spiritual exercise, a process of training myself how to look at the world as if I were discovering for the first time” (122). More overtly, it is through Fogg’s encounter with the aesthetics of *Moonlight* that the text unequivocally demonstrates how Fogg’s art is qualified for the same reasons as Effing’s – that it is neither as exclusive in its conception nor as inclusive in its effects as Fogg would like to believe.

According to some critics, *Moonlight* is a subversive work, so it is important to address why, in fact, it is not in order to consider its influence on Fogg’s and Effing’s art. For critics like Shiloh and Herzogenrath, looking at *Moonlight* completes Fogg’s training and signals his final renunciation of his earlier, romantic views about the West. In short, Shiloh and Herzogenrath claim that Fogg learns how *Moonlight*’s formal properties challenge the traditional meanings associated with the scene it represents.¹⁴ From this perspective, the painting’s depiction of “an Indian teepee and a campfire” (138) in a moonlit landscape, in which figures appear in “harmony” (139) with their surroundings,

leads Fogg to view the scene in an untraditional manner. The painting's formal properties alert Fogg to the consequences of westward expansion, which is revealed when he concludes "that Blakelock was painting an American idyll, the world the Indians had inhabited before the white men came to destroy it" (139).

Shiloh, for example, argues that Fogg's conclusion signals his realization of what the mythology about the West obscures, particularly the role of the American Adam: if indeed "the West had ever been the Garden of Eden, it was not because of God's intention to give the American Adam a second chance, but because the Indians had lived there in prelapsarian harmony of man and nature" (130). Similarly, for Herzogenrath, the formal properties of *Moonlight* offer "a subversion of tradition 'from within,' subverting a 'genre' and its 'solace of good form' by – formally – showing what this form represses" (151).¹⁵ Thus, for Herzogenrath, *Moonlight* teaches Fogg how to interpret his experiences in a more critical manner, which can also be achieved through the aesthetic principles he has learned with Effing. In contrast to such views, however, I argue that for Fogg to truly embody a resistant stance the text requires him see the relationship between *Moonlight's* formal properties and its content from a more well-informed, critical position. Fogg, needs to understand how, in lieu of the conventions of American landscape painting, *Moonlight's* seemingly subversive elements covertly support the preferred way of reading what it depicts.¹⁶

First, Fogg's interpretation of the "peace" and "serenity" associated with "Indian" life in the painting, that "it was not a landscape, it was a memorial, a death song for a vanished world" (139), is not evidence that either Blakelock or Fogg regard them as more than noble savages. From the context of American landscape painting, the juxtaposition

of such harmony with inevitable destruction is neither resistant nor uncommon. As Barbara Novak points out, the presence of “Indians” in such landscapes does not humanize them in the eyes of the implied, white spectator. Typically, “the Indian” is understood “as a function of nature . . . [and] symbolizes its unexplored state,” so his presence is not granted the same agency as that of the implied, white spectator (189). Moreover, Fogg’s sense that the “Indians” are doomed does not undermine this dynamic. As Novak explains, the sentiment that Native Americans were doomed fit with the larger program of Manifest Destiny – that their passing, albeit tragic, was predetermined, a necessary step in the conquest of the American wilderness:

God had given white America the mandate to develop the land and endowed it with the technology to do so. God’s blessings could never be withdrawn.

Unfortunately, the noble savages, or Indians, for all their connection with a primitivism for which nineteenth-century Americans were already nostalgic, were not similarly blessed. (164)

Fogg’s view of *Moonlight*, then, as “a death song for a vanished world” represents a response that was engendered in such paintings and the accepted way of viewing them.¹⁷ Rather than signaling a development in Fogg’s sensibilities, his reaction to the scene depicted by *Moonlight* conveys how he remains bound to the traditional ways of seeing that support the dominant ideologies of American culture and displace its imperial history.¹⁸

Likewise, the formal properties of the painting that draw Fogg’s attention are less subversive than they might appear, which is made clear when seen how they relate to the content of *Moonlight*. In fact, it is precisely this relation that Herzogenrath misses and

limits his otherwise insightful interpretation of the painting. Even as he rightly understands that “*Moonlight* is painted according to the tradition of Manifest Destiny” (151) and the “harmonic sublime” (152), his argument becomes problematic when he claims that the anti-realist technique used in the painting depicts a sublimity that runs counter to the American tradition. *Moon Palace* clearly suggests otherwise.

Significantly this anti-realist technique is only employed in art, like *Moonlight* or Effing’s desert paintings, which renders the more untamed and/or magisterial elements of nature.

Moon Palace examines *Moonlight* as part of the tradition of American landscape painting in which the American sublime promises empowerment while covertly negating the consequences of such empowerment. As a result, Herzogenrath’s claim that *Moonlight*’s anti-realist elements are “inconsistencies [that] are nevertheless ruptures ‘within’ a definable discourse, within the genre of American landscape painting,” ultimately reflect the deceptive, complex aesthetic in works such as *Moonlight*. Like Effing’s desert paintings, *Moonlight* is evidence of the way depictions of the wilderness as unrepresentable coincides with more picturesque depictions of nature, and that they are the product of cultural conventions that express the multi-dimensional landscape of the American natural sublime. In *Moonlight*, these awesome and unrepresentable aspects of nature – the moonlight that shines “with an unnatural intensity” (138) – as well as the other “odd things” are captured through Blakelock’s anti-realist technique:

The sky, for example, had a largely greenish cast. Tinged with the yellow borders of clouds, it swirled around the side of the large tree in a thickening flurry of brushstrokes, taking on a spiraling aspect, a vortex of celestial matter in deep

space. How could the sky be green? I asked myself. It was the same color as the lake below it, and that was not possible.

Moonlight, therefore, reflects the artistic conventions associated with the American sublime in landscape painting. Depicting nature as calm and peaceful but also “odd” and potentially threatening, *Moonlight* exemplifies the way, as Novak puts it, American landscape paintings often portray both “an experience of sublimity through repose” (39) alongside “the sublime [that] reflected overwhelming natural energies” (35).¹⁹

Moreover, with Fogg’s final conclusion that the “overwhelming natural energies” do not upset the painting’s overall depiction of “harmony,” the text reveals and critiques the subtle, unified and lasting power of contradictory elements of the American sublime.²⁰ By Fogg questioning whether “Blakelock hadn’t painted his sky green in order to emphasize this harmony, to make a point of showing the connection between heaven and earth” (139), *Moon Palace* clarifies how he remains complicit with American imperialism and the ways in which it has been rationalized. The ideals of an unfettered union between man and nature that Fogg finds indicative of the possibility for a fresh start – “if men can live comfortably in their surroundings . . . , if they can learn to feel themselves a part of the things around them” – once more reveals his inability to make fundamental connections, here how figurations of harmony and rebirth support conquest and death.

With these points in mind, I suggest that through Fogg’s encounter with *Moonlight* the text conveys how the painting encourages Fogg to employ and/or celebrate a similar, non-representational aesthetic in his descriptions and writing that is connected to the same imperialistic cultural narratives. More significantly, as we have seen most

clearly with Effing's art and *Moonlight*, I argue that *Moon Palace* uses the ways in which this aesthetic is employed to expose what it conceals, a textual strategy which ultimately qualifies Fogg's efforts to continue to pursue his power as an Adamic "namer." For example, during his final walks with Effing, Fogg's creative power clearly rests on his use of the anti-realist, descriptive aesthetic he has learned from Effing, which favors representational gaps over literal description. Fogg, as Weisenburger puts it, "revels in the errancy of representational discourse rather than its finality," that there are "amidst the acausal spaces between words and things . . . chances for innovation" (141). For Fogg, it is the power to shape the world through imagination that inspires him.

For instance, when on one of their final walks Fogg and Effing encounter a man who carries a broken umbrella and gives it to them to protect against imaginary rain, Fogg approves of the man's behavior. By "tiptoeing nimbly around imaginary puddles, warding off raindrops by tilting the umbrella at different angles, and chattering on the whole way in a rapid-fire monologue of ridiculous associations and puns" (209), the man epitomizes the freedom of imaginative expression that coincides with Fogg's own descriptive goals. "This," Fogg says, "was imagination in its purest form: the act of bringing nonexistent things to life, of persuading others to accept a world that was not really there it was raining and yet not raining, and the cloudburst pouring through our broken umbrella did not hit us with a single drop" (209-210). Thus, as Susanne Rohr puts it, Fogg takes part in "a communicative game of mutual persuasion" in which they "spell and act out for us in extreme what it takes to create reality – every day anew" (108), but it is the wish to make "every day anew" that indicates the darker connotations underlying Fogg's appreciation. Appropriately, it is when Effing and Fogg go out the

following night with the “magic” (211) umbrella, and then try to use its magic as protection against real rain, that the motivations behind – and direct consequences of – their creative acts are most directly revealed. Effing believes that he has at last achieved a final victory: “It smells like rain. It sounds like rain. It even tastes like rain. And yet we’re perfectly dry. It’s mind over matter, Fogg. We’ve finally done it! We’ve cracked the secret of the universe!” (213) However, his willful exposure to the elements brings about his death.

With Effing’s death, then, *Moon Palace* brings Fogg full circle. Reduced once more to an orphan, his life does indeed imitate art, and the narrative of the text, which charts the similar experiences of Fogg and Effing, apparently confirms this. Because Fogg does effectively fulfill Uncle Victor’s wish that he will become “the author of his own life” by writing *Moon Palace*, it might seem that he does gain a newfound maturity. Indeed, by *Moon Palace* ending with Fogg standing at the edge of the Pacific, poised on the brink of a new start, it seems he will now fully realize his artistic capabilities and gain maturity by going on to write his story in earnest, in the form of the text. However, rather than indicating Fogg’s maturity, *Moon Palace* signals exactly the opposite. Implicitly, by ending where and when it does, the text reflects Fogg’s desire to maintain a “way of being young” (15). In fact, it is telling that the real author of the text suggests that Fogg’s “progress” is not what it seems. As Auster remarks in the interview with McCaffery and Gregory, Fogg’s “progress” questions the meaning of progress on a cultural level. “Each generation,” Auster remarks, “repeats the mistakes of the previous generation. So it’s a critique of the notion of progress. And if America is the land of progress, what are we to make of ourselves then?” (324)

Repetition critiques progress. And in *Moon Palace* Fogg's repetition of Effing's experiences and aesthetic practices is encouraged by the literary and artistic traditions that say America is a land of progress. As a result, then, with the final, emblematic image of Fogg standing on the shore of the Pacific, watching the moon rise "until it had found its place in the darkness" (307), *Moon Palace* reaffirms how the wish for sublime transport and Adamic fashioning reflects a larger repetition and legacy that is indicative of – but qualifies – America's claims to progress. Once more looking upon the moon as "Radiant Diana," as a beacon that validates his faith in himself as an Adamic figure and in the American sublime, Fogg's narrative merges with and recapitulates the literary and artistic traditions that give rise to it. As Ugo Rubeo claims, this ending invites comparisons with the endings of a number of American texts that while "dramatizing the final defeat of the main character" also "remain somehow ambiguously suspended, leaving open the possibility for a not accounted for new beginning" (519).²¹ That said, while Rubeo rightly claims that the text opposes this kind of ending, I suggest that it does so by showing how Fogg continues to strive for a "new beginning" even though the "world is no longer 'new'" (520) and repeated failures mark his passage West.

Journeying West, Fogg has hoped to discover Effing's cave and his desert paintings, but this quest ends abruptly when Fogg discovers that Effing's cave has been submerged by the newly expanded Lake Powell. Yet rather than accepting this failure, and using it as opportunity for reflection, Fogg moves forwards to the Pacific, which represents a continuation of why he has pursued his quest for Effing's cave in the first place. Indeed, in contrast to Shiloh, who argues that "the very failure of his heroic endeavor constitutes his success" (132), I suggest that this view reflects Fogg's

perspective rather than the text's. *Moon Palace* treats Fogg in a more complex, ironic and critical way. For Fogg, his failures can be rationalized and embraced as another opposition that furthers his cause. Even before he undertakes the search for Effing's cave, Fogg is already prepared to turn failure – “the idea of a useless quest” (288) – into “a metaphor I could live with, the leap into emptiness I had always dreamed of” (288). Thus, faced with such “emptiness” as he looks into the night sky, “an emptiness that went clear to the shores of China” (306), he feels beckoned to inhabit that space and start anew once more: “This is where I start, I said to myself, this is where my life begins.”

In the final analysis, at the end of the novel Fogg takes his place within the Adamic tradition in which contact with sublimity becomes a form of self-definition and a sign of the American “progress” Auster describes to McCaffery and Gregory. Yet *Moon Palace* does not align itself with Fogg's vision of himself or what it signifies for American art. Instead, *Moon Palace* demonstrates the appeal and persistence of Fogg's characteristically American vision in order to suggest that first step towards a positive reconfiguration of the American sublime can only be achieved by accounting for its cultural history.

In this sense, *Moon Palace* shares a central concern with the other texts I have examined in this dissertation. Each text illustrates the presence and dissemination of the American sublime within popular culture, art and literature. Film, TV, poetry and paintings depict sites of sublimity and the novels by Auster, Didion and DeLillo examine the effects of such mediation, which emphasizes *their* place in the cultural dynamics they critique. Through their examination of the diverse contexts in which awesome and terrible phenomenon and events are made sublime, these novels ask us to consider how

the American sublime still affects us, while demonstrating that it is the promise of empowerment that underlies the fundamental attraction the American sublime still holds for us, even when that power is destructive. Indeed, these novels ask us to consider how and why we could be as potentially complicit as Fogg in the way we consume what they depict, alerting us to the possibility of our own spectatorship and fascination, revealing a desire to possess something transcendent and uniquely our own through cultural products.

Endnotes

1. According to Lewis, the “fortunate fall” is one strategy that displaces the Adamic figure’s inevitable encounters with negative experiences by turning them into opportunities for acquiring maturity. Thus, on a purely schematic level, this variation reifies the original version of the purely innocent, American Adamic figure in response to the historical and cultural developments that could undermine his efficacy. With this more complex version, Lewis notes that even though “he could never regain [the earlier] Adam’s radical innocence, he need never regress to [the earlier] Adam’s ignorance. Conscience was, after all, higher than innocence” (73).

2. Seidl, for instance, argues that Fogg’s “identity as the prototypical explorer or pioneer is already established throughout the first pages of the novel,” and this stimulates his “quest for his identity, which turns out to be an exploration of his obscure genealogy” (67). Similarly, for Shiloh, even though she notes that the “paternal absence is the quintessence of Fogg’s self,” she also argues that Fogg’s role as an explorer supports his “quest for the absent father” (123). Moreover, and in contrast to my reading, she concludes that because the discovery of fathers, sons and grandfathers in the Fogg family is “interwoven with stories of the nation” (122) that the healing that takes place through these discoveries stages a larger, national repatriation that represents a way of “shedding a different light on the ideology that helped shape their dreams” (130).

3. According to Nye the “electrical sublime” that emerged in the early 20th century with the development of the electric cityscape had a profound cultural effect, while corresponding to the dynamics found in older sites of sublimity and anticipating future configurations. Indeed, like other modes of the American sublime the “electrical sublime” resonated in overtly ideological, political and economic ways. In reference to a preeminent example, Broadway and “the 400-foot ribbon of lights on the Times Building” (191), Nye concludes: “The resulting landscape can quite literally be called the landscape of corporate America. It embodied the dominant values of individualism, competition, advertising, and commodification, and at the same time it transformed these values into a disembodied spectacle with an alluring promise of personal transformation” (198).

4. Fogg’s contradictory view of the moon landing reflects the controversy and hope that surrounded this pivotal event. As Shiloh puts it, “The conquest of the moon was imprinted on the collective consciousness as the 20th century version of the conquest of the West, the final stage in the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny” (130). Yet Fogg’s displeasure with it is not unique. As Varvogli explains, “the Apollo moon landing [represents] an event which signals the beginning of a new era, but which fails to live up to its promise. Looking back, Fogg recalls a time of unrest and discontent rather than hope” (124-125). However, as the text shows, Fogg’s displeasure is not simply the result of hindsight; rather, he takes issue with the moon landing as it happens. With this, *Moon Palace* clearly captures how people experienced the moon landing as an example of the technological sublime. As Nye points out, at the time of the launch nearly half of the American population thought that it was an exorbitant – even unnecessary – expense,

“that would leave more than a million dollars’ worth of high-tech litter on the moon at a time when Nixon was cutting back on social-welfare programs” (250). At the same time, those who supported the moon landing and who have expressed positive views of space exploration since reflect the way launches embody the American technological sublime: “After 1969,” Nye remarks, “the space launch became a form of authentic experience, continuing to draw a large crowd well after it had ceased to be attractive on television. At least 100,000 people are present at any launch (usually many more), and providing good seats has become a profitable business” (247-248).

5. In his interview with McCaffery and Gregory, Auster provides an evocative gloss on the definition of the moon in the novel. According to Auster, one of the things he believes the moon represents is “the longing for what is not, the unattainable, the human desire for transcendence” (324).

6. Lewis claims that the innocent, prototypical version of the American Adam is most fully and unconditionally realized through Whitman’s speaker in *Leaves of Grass*. And with this in mind, as I point out in the discussion about Fogg in Central Park, it is appropriate that it is Whitman who Fogg paraphrases to illustrate his identification with the American version. Indeed, as Lewis notes, with Whitman his speaker does not even need to recast himself in terms of the fortunate fall to displace experience or original sin – isolation, rather than exile is his lot, and it codifies his preeminent task and makes it emblematic. In the face of isolation, the Adamic figure turns it into an opportunity for self-expression: “Each simple separate person must forge his own framework anew. This was the bold, enormous venture inevitably confronted by the Adamic personality. He had to become the maker of his own conditions – if he were to have any conditions or any achieved personality at all” (50).

7. For a discussion about parks inside and outside urban centers and the ways in which they mediated concerns about urbanization and technological development, see O’Brien, Chapter 8, “Steam and Iron versus the Romantic and Pastoral” 164-190 and Chapter 12, “The River, the Park, and the Mountain” 260-281.

8. Fogg paraphrases lines 4-5 from “Song of Myself”: “I loafe and invite my soul, / I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass” (23).

9. For more about Whitman’s speaker and contradiction in connection to the American sublime see Wilson, Chapter Six, “Walt Whitman: The American Sublime as ‘Song of Myself,’” 134-166, and Kronick, Chapter 3, “On the Border of History: Whitman and the American Sublime,” 51-82.

10. While the text does restrict a more developed engagement with Fogg’s view of the “Indians” and its cultural and historical significance until his encounter with *Moonlight*, the negative effects of his use of other racial stereotypes are evident elsewhere, particularly through his doomed relationship with Kitty Wu. Indeed, the fact that Fogg calls her “Pocahontas” (70) when she helps rescue him from Central Park and refers to her as “the Dragon Lady” (94) later, shows how he views her as a racial other. From the

outset of their relationship, for example, he relates to her as his property, which the text connects to Fogg's romantic view of colonial exploration and its imperial connotations: "Had Uncle Victor lived to meet her," he muses, "I'm sure he would have appreciated the fact that Marco, in his own small way, had at last set foot in China" (8).

11. The view that Effing experiences a "death" in the desert that causes him to renounce his ego in a lasting way is problematic because it misses how he continues to follow the pattern begun after his encounter with Tesla. In the desert, his renunciation of his identity as Julian Barber is self-orchestrated and is designed to protect his authority. Following Byrne's death, Effing decides against going home because it "would be too much for him: the questions, the recriminations, the loss of face. Much better that they should think he had died That was the moment when Julian Barber was obliterated: out there in the desert, hemmed in by rocks and blistering light, he simply cancelled himself out" (165). Likewise, this is precisely what occurs again later after his paralyzing injury, which he views "as a form of cosmic retribution" (188). Here, as with Byrne's death, mourning and guilt are rationalized into a new, empowered identity and the opportunity for a fresh start: "His crime had been paid for, and suddenly he was empty again: no more guilt, no more fears of being caught, no more dread." Now, "if anyone challenged him about his identity, he would tell them to go to hell" (189).

12. Horwitz shows how Thomas Cole's "Essay on American Scenery" celebrates the kind of "sublime terror" (Slotkin 245) and "harmony" (245) described by Jefferson at Virginia's Natural Bridge as well as the Potomac Gap, "an experience of the destructive and creative powers of the land" (246), which illustrates "the course of American history, from threatful present to promising future" (247). For Cole, (and following Jefferson's agrarian ideal) cultivation represents a way of improving and "taming" the landscape that "exalts social, cultural, and moral capacities, and is a higher form of appropriation," so cultivation eschews "mere utilitarianism" and preserves nature as "our birthright" (qtd. in Horwitz 39). Moreover, by relating to cultivated nature in this way, we can still find and appreciate the raw, overwhelming sublimity of nature, in which "we become a part of what we behold." As Cole puts it, cultivated nature is positive because it "encompasses our homes, and, though devoid of the stern sublimity of the wild, its quieter spirit steals tenderly into our bosoms mingled with a thousand domestic affections and heart-touching associations." Thus, as Horwitz explains, the processes of threat and cultivation coincide, and the proper cultivation of the landscape leaves one open to a reciprocal cultivation by nature experienced as salutary threat, as sublime: "Sublimity and cultivation constitute a double assimilation, by and of nature."

13. According to Seidl, Effing's violent encounter with the Gersham brothers who use his cave as a hideout represents a challenge to Slotkin's theory of "regeneration through violence" and offers him the ability "to leave the mythic frontier for good" (65). While I agree with Seidl that the text presents violence without the usual "heroic and purifying dimension," this does not mean that Effing no longer sees himself in mythic terms. Instead, Effing clearly relishes playing his violent role when he confronts one of the Gershams and says "I'm afraid you've got it the wrong way around You're the one who's dead, not me" (154). Moreover, even though the text does not register his

response to this violence in terms of the dynamics of sublime spectatorship, Effing's response after the killing resembles Jack Gladney's encounter with Willie Mink in *White Noise*. There is a similar lack of emotion on Effing's part: "He was surprised to discover he felt no remorse, that he could look at the men he had killed without the slightest tinge of conscience" (33)

14. Similarly, Chenetier suggests that *Moonlight* exemplifies Auster's aesthetics: "In effect, his aesthetics, in *MP*, place the 'reality' taken in charge by the novel at a double remove, promoting the consciousness of the artificiality of processes and constructs in order to make sure referential illusion can never solidify" (148-149). However, while I agree with his view that the text alerts us to "the artificiality of processes and constructs," missing from Chenetier's account is the way the destruction of Native Americans (which he discusses on pages 119-120) as part of the "national historical legacy" (117) relates to the aesthetics of the painting. Seidl, for his part, argues that Fogg's encounter with *Moonlight* shows him how "the two major promises of the frontier: wealth and harmony with nature" are fleeting, that the painting predicts "the transitoriness of these promises" (63). Lastly, Weisenburger suggests that by engaging with the *Moonlight's* status as an "antirepresentational text" Fogg comes to understand this transitoriness in a new way: he mourns the loss of Native culture and the potential "cross-cultural contacts between Native American and Eurocentric culture," "for innovative cultural contact, a chance seen as having been destroyed under the wheels of an obsessively lineal narrative of progress and destiny" (138).

15. Herzogenrath's argument here reflects his efforts to read elements of the American sublime in the text through other conceptions of the sublime, particularly Kant's and Lyotard's. While this approach offers valuable theoretical points of comparison, it can obscure how Auster's texts engage with the complexity of the American sublime and the fact that all conceptions of the sublime are culturally produced. For instance, I suggest such problems emerge when Herzogenrath claims that the American sublime "leaves the field of the sublime proper and moves into the direction of what Kant calls 'the beautiful' and which he explicitly opposes to the sublime" (142-143). Similarly, as I point out in the discussion of *Moonlight*, Lyotard's notion of a subversive, sublime aesthetic that "puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself" (Lyotard, "Answering the Question" 81) and which "denies itself the solace of good forms" (qtd. in Herzogenrath 148) does not supersede the conventions of American landscape painting: in fact, *Moon Palace* accounts for the aesthetic of the "unrepresentable" within those conventions.

16. The text's emphasis on the necessity for reading paintings within their artistic, cultural and historical context is, as Seidl notes, also signaled by the presence of one of Thomas Cole's paintings from *The Course of Empire* series in Fogg's room at Effing's apartment (*Moon Palace* 108), which Seidl rightly identifies as "the third painting of the series, called *The Consummation of Empire*" (62). Ironically, though, for Seidl, it is the fact that *The Consummation of Empire* is taken out of its immediate artistic context (its relation to the other paintings in the series), which shows what Effing and Fogg ultimately learn and what the series as a whole conveys – "the consequence of the conquest of civilization and of the wealth and prosperity that came along with it: the

decadence and the decline of the empire and of civilization as such” (62-63). However, while Cole’s painting does, as Raymond J. O’Brien points out, caution against “material progress” (167) by situating America like “other empires that had succumbed to the inevitable historical cycle: a brief moment of glory, followed by downfall and ruin,” this did not mean that Cole’s use of classical iconography ultimately portrays America as doomed or that the public read it in this way. Instead, as Novak explains: “*Course of Empire* was a fantasy about imperial pagan ambition. America, a Christian nation, could not succumb to a similar fate. The so-called March of Empire, in America, was always shielded by its Christian intent” (164). Thus, the presence of *The Consummation of Empire* alerts us to the importance of context and, as we see with *Moonlight*, that apprehending this indicates how such works typically support as well as reflect the culture’s dominant norms and values.

17. For Novak, Tocqueville offers the most definitive description of why this portrayal of the fate of the “Indians” supports Manifest Destiny. Novak cites Tocqueville’s observation that God refuses “the first inhabitants the capacity to become civilized [and] has destined them in advance to inevitable destruction” because “the true owners of this continent are those who know how to take advantage of its riches” (qtd. in Novak 164). Similarly, Barringer cites Tocqueville when discussing the sentiment – the “melancholy pleasure” – that this view created for those who first saw these paintings, the way “thoughts of the savage, natural grandeur that is going to come to an end became mingled with splendid anticipations of the triumphant march of civilization” (qtd. in Barringer 51). For additional discussion of the ways in which artistic depictions of native Americans support this ideology, see Hortwitz, Chapter 1, “Sublime Possession, American Landscape,” 20-56.

18. In his review “Moonlight in the Brooklyn Museum” Auster’s description of the painting is reproduced almost word for word with Fogg’s description in *Moon Palace*.

19. As Novak explains in Chapter 3, “Sound and Silence: Changing Concepts of the Sublime” (34-44), Thomas Cole’s “Essay on American Scenery” also illustrates the two modes of representing nature as sublime as emerging from the shifting categories of the sublime, the beautiful and the picturesque. For Cole, looking at the mountains of New Hampshire, he could see “the sublime melting into the beautiful, the savage tempered by the magnificent” (qtd. in Novak 38), and in his later response to the Franconia Notch, we can see how he viewed two categories of the natural sublime as complimenting each other. At the Notch, Cole was “overwhelmed with an emotion of the sublime such as I have rarely felt” (qtd. in Novak 39), a landscape where “brooded the spirit of repose, and the silent energy of nature stirred the soul to its inmost depths.” Moreover, to express these forms of the natural sublime, certain features of the landscape became invested with both qualities, especially water, which Cole considers in the form of lakes, waterfalls and rivers. With water, for example, Novak explains that “Even in the large, dramatic compositions which maintain contact with the older sublime, water often inserts a quota of stillness, symbolizing a spirit untroubled in its depths and unifying both surface and depth in its reflection of the world above” (40). For Cole’s essay see *American Monthly Magazine* 1 (1836): 1-12. For more about these configurations in other painters, see

O'Brien, Chapter 8, "Steam and Iron versus the Romantic and Pastoral," particularly the sections "Analyzing the Elements of Romantic Landscape" 170-175 and "Above All Else, a Sublime Landscape" 175-177. For an additional consideration of Cole and Church, see Bryan J. Wolf, particularly 164-171. Lastly, for the most comprehensive overview of nineteenth century American painters and the shifting configurations of the natural, technological and urban sublime, see Wilton, "The Sublime in the Old World and the New" and Barringer, "The Course of Empires: Landscape and Identity in America and Britain, 1820-1880."

20. In her review of Blakelock's work, Roberta Smith comments on Blakelock's "self-conscious painting methods" (2) that she says produce the same kind of impression of harmony that the text shows with Fogg's reaction. According to Smith, Blakelock "seems to be continually experimenting with different ways of putting paint on canvas, always taking care to knit the surface into a unified whole that is both visual and poetic." For more about Blakelock and his art see Davidson, Dorinda Evans, and Tebow.

21. In particular, Rubeo suggests that *Moon Palace* "'revisits' the finale of three classics of the Twenties and Thirties" (519) – William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

Conclusion

The novels by Didion, DeLillo and Auster that I have considered in this dissertation interrogate and do much to explain the lasting legacy of the American sublime. Each novel captures the breadth and adaptability of the concept, how and why it continues to bolster claims of the nation's progress and development. Even as the American sublime has changed, its past configurations have persisted and left an indelible imprint on the American consciousness. With its earliest configurations associated with nature and the frontier, its radical transformations associated with technology and urban development, and its postmodern reconfigurations that have extended it into new forms of consumption and mediation, the American sublime has retained an ideological uniformity because it remains a preeminent – albeit harmful – expression of American empowerment. From the outset, the idealistic claims to Manifest Destiny and democracy that American sublimity promised materialized into cultural imperialism, later extending into a spectacular fascination with the technology that has disseminated this ideology into the contemporary, global context. Yet what the novels of Didion, DeLillo and Auster capture so immediately is the appeal the concept still garners, even as they examine how fully – and dangerously – it diverges from its ostensible claims. Given where we began, then, with the ways in which I suggested each writer's initial response to 9-11 captures how the attack posed a peculiar challenge to the American sublime, it is useful, by way of conclusion, to consider how their post 9-11 work has continued to critique the American sublime and reveal its powerful allure.

Didion, for example, while enjoying newfound critical praise and popular success with the celebrated memoirs, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) about the sudden

death of her husband, and *Blue Nights* (2011) about the long illness and death of her daughter, has also produced a compelling memoir about California, *Where I Was From* (2003), in which she reexamines the frontier mythos and how it has shaped her sensibility both as a Californian and a writer. In *Where I Was From*, as in her earlier fiction and nonfiction, Didion traces the historical roots of the frontier paradigm and the natural and technological American sublime into the contemporary world. At the same time, what is unique to *Where I Was From* is Didion's revelation that, much like her protagonists, narratives about the frontier and the American sublime have had a profound effect on her. For instance, like Maria Wyeth and Inez Victor, Didion locates her identity as a Californian to frontier mythology and the sublimity of the natural world:

To be a Californian was to see oneself, if one believed the lessons the place seemed most immediately to offer, as affected only by 'nature,' which in turn was seen to exist simultaneously as a source of inspiration or renewal ('Born again!' John Muir noted in the journal of his first trip into Yosemite) and as the ultimate brute reckoning, the force that by guaranteeing destruction gave the place its perilous beauty. (66)

Thus, as we have seen in *Play It As It Lays* and *Democracy*, Didion demonstrates how the imperialist ideology remains embedded in the frontier mythos and the natural sublime. Faced with the knowledge of the "brute reckoning" of nature, which has brought about tragic results like the predicament of the Donner Party in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Didion, too, has been taught to view such encounters as "lessons" that endorse California as a place of heroic self-fashioning. Yet unlike her protagonists, Didion is much more

conscious of the implications of these “lessons” and has learned how fully she and others have internalized them, how fully they permeate the cultural landscape.

In particular, Didion emphasizes what her novels ultimately reveal and critique, that it is the promise of transcending and rewriting the past that constitutes the lasting power of frontier mythology and its relationship to the American sublime. Through Maria Wyeth and Inez Victor, *Play It As It Lays* and *Democracy* demonstrate how this “cutting clean” from the past is destructive, and in *Where I Was From* Didion reiterates that this “cutting clean” is tied to a “pernicious mood of nostalgia” (160), which can be seen with Maria’s longing for Silver Wells and Inez’s ties to colonial Hawaii. Didion, however, unlike either of her protagonists or her fictional counterpart in *Democracy*, is much more attuned to this “mood of nostalgia” in *Where I Was From*, detecting it not only in the family stories passed down to her as a child but in her earliest writing about California and even her first novel, *Run River*.

What Didion uncovers about this “nostalgia,” though, demonstrates why *Play It As It Lays* and *Democracy* remain significant texts. In *Where I Was From* she notes a crucial irony that undercuts such “nostalgia”: the perpetual renewal promised by the myth of the frontier and the American sublime coincides with appeals to pure origins that are, in the end, as artificial and morally bankrupt as the Hollywood landscape in *Play It As It Lays* and which reinscribe America’s imperial legacy in places like Kuala Lumpur in *Democracy*. Indeed, throughout *Where I Was From* Didion reveals how contemporary California is replete with examples that follow this pattern, like the Bonafante Gardens in Gilroy County designed “to show how the county was in the 1950s and 1960s” (174), which for Didion only resembles “a hologram that dematerializes as I drive through it”

(175). For Didion, then, such dehistoricization continues to support America's view of itself as progressive, in spite of the consequences that the pursuit of progress yields at home and abroad. Similarly, by invoking the mythic potential of the frontier and experiences of sublime transcendence, America continues to obscure the reality that these defining cultural narratives initially wrought, that "the settlement of the west, however inevitable, had not uniformly tended to the greater good, nor had it on every level benefited even those who reaped its most obvious rewards" (151).

As texts, I have suggested that *Play It As It Lays* and *Democracy* challenge this traditional, recuperative construction of the frontier and the American sublime, and Didion's comments about the content and narrative qualities of "crossing stories" in *Where I Was From* neatly summarize what I have argued these novels accomplish. Indeed, in form and content, *Play It As It Lays* and *Democracy* respond to the conventions of crossing stories. For example, according to Didion, the traditional encounters with the sublimity of nature, in which one goes through a metaphorical death and rebirth are the preeminent outcome of the crossing story: "Each arriving traveler had been, by definition, reborn in the wilderness, a new creature . . . [and] the very decision to set forth on the journey had been a kind of death, involving the total abandonment of all previous life . . ." (29). Moreover, if, as Didion puts it, the "moment of leaving, the death that must precede the rebirth, is a fixed element of the crossing story," part of the reason why this element resonates as it does is because of the "fixed" elements of narrative, of form as well as content (30).

As Didion makes clear in *Where I Was From*, narrative form plays an integral role in shaping how real historical events and crossings have been made to conform to the

traditional, “fixed” content. For instance, when considering the story of Josephus Adamson Cornwall, who parted dramatically from his mother before undertaking such a crossing, Didion notes that the narrative point of view reflects neither the son’s nor the mother’s perspective, which reveals the effect of form on content in crossing stories: “Such stories,” Didion concludes, “are artlessly told. There survives in their repetition a problematic elision or inflation, a narrative flaw, a problem with point of view: the actual observer, or camera eye, is often hard to locate” (30). For Didion, then, the point of view in crossing stories performs an ideological function that coincides with the creation of ideological content: “It was through generations of such apparently omniscient narrators that the crossing stories became elevated to a kind of single master odyssey” (31).

This problem with the point of view in crossing stories, then, clarifies how and why *Play It As It Lays* and *Democracy* position their critique and how far that critique extends. First, by drawing attention to themselves as texts, these novels stand in contrast to the ways in which crossing stories erase their construction. By making allusions to and reworking genre conventions, as *Play It As It Lays* does with L.A. fiction, and by inverting classic tropes, as *Democracy* does with the machine in the garden, Didion’s texts address the issue of point of view by contesting the kinds of cultural revision and narrative reification crossing stories support. Second, and more directly, Didion’s texts emphasize the individual points of view of characters, their responses to and adoption of the sort of content the texts share with crossing stories. For instance, with Maria Wyeth’s inability to renounce the frontier hope instilled in her by her father, and, similarly, Inez Victor’s inability to renounce the colonialism of her Hawaiian background, *Play It As It*

Lays and *Democracy* demonstrate how the fallacy of a “single master odyssey” develops and persists.

In a similar vein, DeLillo’s recent fiction illuminates the degree to which *White Noise* and *Underworld* not only contest – but resist – the elements of the American sublime that they depict. In novels such as *Cosmopolis* (2003), *Falling Man* (2007) and *Point Omega* (2010), simulation, commodification and mass spectacles that elicit awe and terror still animate the cultural critique at the heart of his fiction, while the impact of children, subcultural groups and art continue to be held up as potential – although in many ways compromised – sites of resistance. In light of his response to 9-11 in “In the Ruins of the Future,” which in the introduction I suggest has affinities with the examination of the American sublime in *White Noise* and *Underworld*, I will restrict my final thoughts to *Falling Man*, which directly engages with 9-11 through the experiences of a man who escapes from one of the towers, Keith Neudecker.

First, *Falling Man* clearly develops DeLillo’s points about the towers from “In the Ruins,” that they are an example of the technological sublime that expresses American power in a global context. Moreover, in a gesture that is typical of DeLillo’s texts, in *Falling Man* certain characters offer rapturous descriptions of technology as sublime even as they are instrumental in articulating the text’s criticism of viewing technology in this manner. In *Falling Man*, for instance, the character Martin resembles Murray J. Siskind and Jesse Detwiler as he holds forth on why the towers were an effective target for the terrorists to “strike a blow to this country’s dominance” (46):

Weren’t the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction? You build a thing like that so you can see it

come down. The provocation is obvious. What other reason would there be to go so high and then to double it, do it twice? You are saying, Here it is, bring it down. (116)

Thus, recalling the concerns about 9-11 in relation to disaster films, Martin evocatively explains why imbuing the towers with sublimity has negative connotations – and in a way that resonates with DeLillo’s other texts: because sublimity is based on a spectatorial fascination with power, death and destruction are often reduced to commodified spectacles as a way of maintaining that power. By extension, even as Martin voices the same kind of criticism we find about such commodification in *White Noise* and *Underworld*, his melodramatic rhetoric suggests that he, too, is complicit with such fascination.

Like *White Noise* and *Underworld*, *Falling Man* depicts the pervasiveness of such fascination, which, in turn, becomes the focal point for the similar, possible types of cultural resistance these texts examine. For instance, much like the Gladney children in *White Noise*, in *Falling Man* Neudecker’s young son, Justin, and his friends initially appear to embody some preternatural, mysterious powers that insulate them from 9-11 and the media coverage surrounding it, which elicits awe and wonder from adults. The children seem to respond to 9-11 wholly on their own terms: they speak of “Bill Lawton” (72-73) (an obvious Americanization of Bin Laden) and Justin insists that the towers “were hit but did not collapse” (72). Yet much like Steffie and Wilder Gladney, the behavior of Justin and his friends is not indicative of some conscious, calculated or fundamental stance of resistance; instead, what Lianne Neudecker refers to as the children’s “twisted powers of imagination” conveys their knowledge that 9-11 can be

subject to the conventional structures of the mass media. In spite of the fact that Justin has been shielded from television coverage, he and his friends view 9-11 as a sublime event, which is revealed by their secret practice of watching the skies with binoculars from Justin's apartment building, "waiting for it to happen again." Much like *White Noise*, then, *Falling Man* demonstrates how the potential for children to transcend or stand "outside" the mediation of culture is evidence of how fully such mediation is present, even when its influence may appear absent or indirect. More critically, with Justin and his friends, DeLillo once more alerts us to the costs of such mediation: through their behavior DeLillo subtly dramatizes how 9-11 *can* be reduced to a commodified spectacle by their inclination to view it as sublime.

In fact, as Martin's comments and the children's behavior suggest, in *Falling Man* there is the threat that 9-11 may be reduced to a simulated, commodified spectacle of death like the ATE in *White Noise* or the atomic waste sites in *Underworld*. As a result, *Falling Man* reaffirms what DeLillo adds to our understanding about the legacy of the American sublime in *White Noise* and *Underworld*, how sublimity has been radically reconfigured by the culture industries, which makes opposition to the dominant ideologies of American culture increasingly difficult. And, appropriately, for DeLillo as a novelist, such opposition often plays out in art. Whereas the children in *White Noise* and *Falling Man* inadvertently confirm the powerful relationship between the American sublime and the culture industries, it is through art, such as Klara Sax's "cast-offs," Ismael Munoz's angels or David Janiak's performances as Falling Man, that DeLillo's texts examine the direct ways in which that relationship can be contested, drawing attention to what they achieve as art.

Unlike the work of the artists he portrays, DeLillo's novels effectively consider their own limits by examining the potential of art, its means and methods; in contrast to the works of Klara Sax, Ismael Munoz or David Janiak, DeLillo's novels test propositions about art, particularly how and why art is complicit with the cultural forces it so often claims to resist. For example, *Falling Man* the novel can be distinguished from *Falling Man* the performer. Janiak's performances, in which he falls from "various parts of the city, suspended from one or another structure, always upside down, wearing a suit, a tie and dress shoes" (33) are, like Klara's planes, designed to elicit a sublime response of awe and terror from spectators, and in doing so are implicated in the possibility that 9-11 could be turned into a commodified spectacle. Indeed, when his performances become linked to "a particular man who was photographed falling from the north tower of the World Trade Center" (221), Janiak does nothing to modify his routines and says "nothing about it when questioned by reporters" (222); instead, he exploits the connection to keep his audience in a state of spectatorial shock. In contrast, by portraying Janiak's art, DeLillo's *Falling Man* exemplifies the social concern and responsibility that underlies his critical treatment of the American sublime in *White Noise* and *Underworld*, the ways in which it reduces events to commodities through simulation and other forms of contemporary mediation, leeched of their singularity, history and human dimension.

What DeLillo's fiction shares with Didion's, then, is that it asks us to consider the significance – and limits – of art that attempts to reconfigure the cultural, literary and artistic history of the American sublime, which supports contemporary processes of imperialism and commodification. Auster's fiction shares these concerns as well. However, in comparison to the novels by Didion and DeLillo that I have examined in this

dissertation, *In the Country of Last Things* and *Moon Palace* convey the limits of resistant art differently through their responses to America's literary and cultural past. Whereas Didion's texts invert literary conventions like the Adamic figure and the machine in the garden through Maria Wyeth and Hawaii, and DeLillo's texts merge traditional configurations of the American sublime with simulation and commodification through the most photographed barn in America and the Whiz Co waste sites, Auster's texts extend the traditional literary and cultural expressions of the American sublime to their logical, disastrous conclusions, most visibly with the generic conventions of the urban sublime in *In the Country of Last Things*. As a result, even as the critical strategy of Auster's texts imposes limits on how fully they can imagine the possibility of reconfiguring the American sublime, it is the clearly self-conscious, dialogic nature of these texts that gives them such peculiar urgency.

Even though much of Auster's more recent fiction has moved away from an explicit interrogation of generic conventions or America's past, it is fitting that in *Man in the Dark* (2008) and *The Brooklyn Follies* (2006), where Auster addresses the 9-11 attack, he seems compelled to situate 9-11 within and against American history, art and literature. Auster has been remarkably outspoken in his condemnation of America's response to 9-11. While still in its inception, Auster derided the Bush administration's war against Iraq as patently un-American, undemocratic and "a global catastrophe in the making" ("NYC=USA" 510). Also, if Auster stops short in saying that America's response to 9-11 is a clear extension of its imperialistic past, his fiction clearly reflects his belief that the aggressive policies of the Bush administration have brought only ruin. *Man in the Dark*, for example, depicts a dreamer who inhabits two Americas, one the

real, post 9-11 America, and the other an alternative America that has erupted into Civil War because of the Bush administration's win in the 2000 election. In this alternative America, moreover, 9-11 has not occurred nor has the war in Iraq, so the dreamer concludes that "one nightmare replaces another" (31). For the dreamer "this other America, which hadn't lived through September 11 or the war in Iraq, nevertheless has strong historical links to the America he knows" (50), and in this way *Man in the Dark* condemns the ideology behind the policies of the Bush administration in spite of 9-11 and the war in Iraq.

Similarly, *The Brooklyn Follies* refers to 9-11 from a historical perspective, but this text also recalls what I have examined in *Moon Palace*: the way American art and literature popularizes the Adamic figure and his quest for sublime transcendence. The bookish characters Tom Wood and his uncle, Nathan Glass, have much in common with Fogg, Uncle Victor and Effing, and through Wood and Glass *The Brooklyn Follies* reevaluates the romance associated with America's literary past, which so often celebrates Adamic individualism as an antidote to America's social ills and as a sign of cultural progress. Similarly, like *Moon Palace*, *The Brooklyn Follies* suggests that the sort of nostalgia America's literary past elicits is akin to the "nostalgia" Didion cites in relation to California: such nostalgia masks and replicates ineffective or detrimental conceptions of empowerment. Just as Fogg, Uncle Victor and Effing embrace past literary and artistic figures such as Whitman, Blakelock, Bierstadt and Moran, Wood and Glass view Thoreau and Poe as representatives of the kind of cultural opposition they, too, wish to embody. According to Wood, "Both men believed in America, and both men believed that America had gone to hell, that it was being crushed to death by an ever

growing mountain of machines and money” (16). Like the artists and writers celebrated by Fogg and Effing, Poe and Thoreau provide Wood and Glass with models to emulate:

How was a man to think in the midst of all that clamor? They both wanted out As long as a man had the courage to reject what society told him to do, he could live on his own terms. To what end? To be free. But free to what end? To read books, to write books, to think.

Moreover, even though the goal to “read books, to write books, to think” might be the basis for cultural resistance, as with Fogg and Effing, what Wood and Glass adopt from their heroes yields neither critical introspection nor subversive action.

Instead, Wood and Glass attempt to replicate the idealized and imaginary modes of solitude envisioned by Thoreau in *Walden* and Poe in “The Philosophy of Furniture.” Like Thoreau, they wish to follow his example of “pretending to exile himself in the woods – for no other reason than to prove that it could be done” and like Poe, his desire to retreat “into a dream of perfection,” in “his imaginary room . . . designed for exactly the same purpose.” Yet what Wood and Glass fail to realize as they create their own similar modes of retreat, is that Poe and Thoreau were unable to curb the fact that “America had indeed gone to hell” with the Civil War, “a human bloodbath generated by the very machines that were supposed to make us all happy and rich.” Indeed, even as Wood and Glass find places such as the idyllic Chowder Inn in Vermont, where one can find “unexpected moments when the voice in your head goes silent and you feel at one with the world” (167), the text insists that this is not an effective form of resistance, regardless of the transcendent, sublime moments one might feel. As in *Moon Palace*, moreover, *The Brooklyn Follies* concludes by revealing how seductive claims to

American sublimity remain, even as Glass's ultimate rebirth comes at "eight o'clock on the morning of September 11, 2001" (306).

Like the six novels that have been the focus of this dissertation, the recent work by Didion, DeLillo and Auster illuminates why the American sublime still matters. On one level, the various contexts in which the novels situate their depictions of American sublimity testify to this. At the same time, it is their engagement with the fundamental configurations of nature and technology as sublime and the fundamental ways in which they appear to offer empowerment, self-making and transcendence, which speak to why American sublimity can be found in such diverse elements of American culture. Yet by examining the significance of traditional configurations of the American sublime, and by accounting for how and why they persist in new reconfigurations, Didion, DeLillo and Auster offer a challenge to these promises of American sublimity. Their novels show how new forms of commodification and militarization continue to express America's imperial origins as sublime, even though this has, by and large, destroyed the pristine American wilderness, which was the original site of the American sublime. Indeed, it is because their novels alert us to the special role America's cultural, literary and artistic history has played in the persistence of the American sublime, in spite of its internal contradictions and negative effects, that the similar, often shared critical vantage point of Didion, DeLillo and Auster is so significant. Above all, by interrogating the legacy of American sublimity through their art, Didion, DeLillo and Auster draw attention to the way art has played – and plays – a significant role in constructing and disseminating the American sublime, and the possible ways in which it might now be reconfigured.

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