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Unruly Bodies in the Fiction of Don DeLillo

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Submitted for the award of Doctor of Philosophy
University of Sussex
September 2021

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another university for the award of any other degree.

Signature:.....

Summary

Throughout Don DeLillo's oeuvre, anxieties of American culture are expressed through unruly, excessive bodies, and in the interactions between body and world. Bodies uniquely and variously channel their cultural contexts in DeLillo's fiction: in characters' experiences of pain, illness, and violence, boundaries are challenged and selfhood negotiated. Bodily fluids and wastes variously invoke horror and fascination, and force a reckoning with how the body's borders are thought and maintained. Abject and leaky bodies challenge and undo idealised notions of the embodied subject as intact and safe from contamination.

Chapter one examines how, in *Falling Man* (2007), DeLillo interrogates the relationship between the body and language, suggesting that the unique vitality and chaos of embodied experience escapes the limited capacities of narrative form. Chapter two looks at abjection, pain and selfhood in *Mao II* (1991) and *The Body Artist* (2001). Chapter three focuses on the relationship between bodily transgressions and cultural abjection in *Americana* (1971). Chapter four explores how specific anxieties of the Cold War are expressed through bodies and bodily fluids in *Underworld* (1997). Finally, Chapter five looks at ideas of containment and consumption in *Players* (1977).

DeLillo's writing of the body both resonates with existing theory and philosophy, and represents an idiosyncratic line of enquiry all its own. The overall argument of this thesis is based on close readings, supported by relevant theory and criticism and revelatory archival research. Whilst DeLillo's oeuvre is widely recognised as a prolific and cerebral engagement with U.S. culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, here it is shown to also represent a fecund and ongoing account of how the body in the context of American culture might be thought and written.

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Acknowledgements

This project was made possible through the generous support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council's CHASE consortium. My research trip to the Harry Ransom Center was supported by Sussex University through the International Placement Scheme, and the School of English funded a number of trips to attend and present at conferences. My research was also supported by an Eccles Centre fellowship, to carry out research in their collections at the British Library. Completing the project would not have been possible without a grant from the University of Sussex Hardship fund, which is generously funded by individual donors.

My profound thanks to Professor Maria Lauret, for sparking my interest in American literature and DeLillo specifically, and for championing the project with unwavering belief and encouragement, for guiding me through stumbling blocks big and small, and for bringing high expectations as well as kindness. On the cusp of a new adventure for both of us, I hope that the future brings good things. My thanks also to Professor Peter Boxall and Doctor Doug Haynes, who provided invaluable insights and support in the development of the project, and to Laura Vellacott in the School of English office for her tireless help.

To Kate Rainbow, I have been so lucky to have your support, your kindness, dedication, and enthusiasm has been incredible. You were always there to give help in whatever form I needed it. Thank you so much for being there for me all the way to the finish line, and for making the whole experience so much more enjoyable. Thank you as well to Loveday Sarah Pope for being a sunny and compassionate support.

Thank you to my counsellor Rachael Costelloe for being an attentive and dependable guide through difficult terrain, and supporting me as I continue to find my voice and my worth. Thanks to Riikka Simonen for conducting my ADHD assessment, such an important turning point that led to finally getting the support I needed. My thanks also to the team at the university counselling service, and to David Wallace-Morrison for emotional support during tough times. To Tom Bamford-Blake, Tim Cahill Gurowich, Joe Upton, Kiron Ward, Katherine

Da Cunha Lewin, Peter Brown, and Lana Northey, thank you so much for your friendship and encouragement.

My auntie Bidgie, a fearless inspiration, who passed away in 2018. You nourished me with love and delicious food, and made me feel at home in Williamsburg and in my own skin. You led by example and I am so grateful for the time we spent together. Thank you for everything, and thank you to Greta for being a model of strength, grace, and compassion. To my partner Tom, for being the most wonderful, kind, and dedicated partner in every way, thank you. I couldn't have done it without you, you make me so happy and I am so proud of our little family. And thank you to our cat Vinnie, who has been a model of power and resilience, calmly and gracefully doing his business in his litter tray as I write.

I thought of men embedded in the ground, all killed, billions, flesh cauterized into the earth,
bits of bone and hair and nails, man-planet.
- *End Zone*

There were few things more pleasantly disgusting, he believed, than watching his own spit
hit the dust, half quivering with fragments of earth, a tiny spoonful of drool. He curled up
tighter, head between his knees, hands in the dirt, happy in his sub-reckonings, his
dumbbody whiff, his spittle glisten, the persistent images of pure form.
- *Ratner's Star*

There's nothing like a raging crap [...] to make mind and body one.
- *The Body Artist*

Introduction

'Curdled sludge and pink drippings': The primacy of bodily 'stuff' in DeLillo

In DeLillo's third novel *Great Jones Street*, published in 1973, we are faced with a ridiculous manifestation of a cerebral act. Bucky Wunderlick observes the character Menefee in a break in conversation:

Menefee remained by the door, his body yielding to an occasional mild twitch, his face reflecting a mental concentration so intense I thought his eyeballs might suddenly click backward in their sockets in order to peer into the depths of his mind, leaving curdled sludge and pink drippings for my own eyes to gaze upon. (p. 161)

Here a meditative "looking inward" is made literal, rendered as a bizarre process, disgusting and intensely fleshy. Elsewhere we encounter a similar visceral energy: the fans at the baseball game in *Underworld's* prologue are unbearably excited, 'people with their hands in the air, holding in their brains' (1997, p. 46). In a passage found in a draft of DeLillo's debut novel *Americana*, bodies are unmanageably buoyant. A character declares that J. Edgar Hoover would 'frown on bald agents', as the weight of a head of hair helps to hold a man down upon the earth and prevent him from committing reckless acts: 'When a man loses his hair he loses a little bit of control over himself. He becomes a fraction less responsible. He's not held down by the force of gravity as much as he used to be' (Don DeLillo Papers, 2.8). DeLillo's power as a novelist lies in his insightful and artful delineations of American culture,

which are at once cerebral meditations, and unruly expressions of ideas. Busy and textured scenes are a mainstay of DeLillo's fiction, sometimes frantic, often overwhelmingly material. DeLillo's emphasis on the 'stuff' of the body is manifest when, in *Great Jones Street*, a moment of self reflection culminates in a gruesome bodily outcome, 'curdled sludge and pink drippings'. As Bucky Wunderlick suggests that Menefee's eyeballs might turn inward so that he might regard his own brain, in *Americana* a violent murder is figured as a biological curiosity: as '[he] started tearing at his throat. I don't think he particularly wanted to kill the guard. He just wanted to get inside him, open him up for inspection' (DeLillo, 1971/1990, p. 295). Meanwhile the protagonist David, listening to his father speak with rapt attention, notes the way that he 'taps his elbow when making an important point' and wonders 'whether the significance of his remark might be fully uncovered only by opening up the elbow and picking with a delicate surgical instrument among its connective tissues' (p. 82). DeLillo's profound articulations of American identity and the texture of lived experience are always bound up with weird bodies. The texts attend to material texture, to 'stuff', in characters' place in the world, 'knee deep in the gick of the ages', and at the heart of consciousness: 'self in the soft wallow of what it knows' (1971a, n.p.; 2010, p. 63). As Xan Brooks gives voice to the way texture and timbre are expressed through bodies, DeLillo 'has made it his business to speak the language of America; to channel its tensions and pick at its scabs' (2016, n.p.). DeLillo's substantial body of fiction represents a profound and at times eerily prescient engagement with U.S. culture. This has been acknowledged in a wide readership and numerous accolades, and in the academy, in the wealth of existing scholarship which seeks to interpret the texts. While DeLillo's works have been met with a substantial amount of critical attention, a crucial aspect of his fictional project has been largely overlooked: that is, his attention to the materiality of the body. DeLillo's writing of the body both resonates with existing theory and philosophy, and represents an idiosyncratic line of enquiry all its own.

As we will see, throughout DeLillo's works, a series of ideological frameworks within which America's citizens believe themselves to be 'safe' are shattered, in turn, by events which confound understanding: The Vietnam War, the onset of the Cold War nuclear conflict,

the terror attacks of 9/11. DeLillo always channels this sense of containment and its consequent breaking or undoing through bodies, and the traumatic experience of becoming unmoored when social constructions that are felt as containing structures are revealed to be illusory, and DeLillo expresses this sense of traumatic unmooring, which occurs repeatedly throughout the decades he portrays, through an attention to embodied experiences. His characters' attention to their bodies, from the idle contemplation of an itch to profound revelations on mortality, ground DeLillo's writing of national identity and trauma in 'stuff'. The texture of the grotesque matter expelled from Menefee's head from the effort of concentration is reflected throughout DeLillo's works, as he describes mortality: 'it's self in the soft wallow of what it knows, and what it knows is that it will not live forever' (2010, p. 79). This sense of material immersion is consistent across DeLillo's expressions of intimate self knowledge, and moments of collective historical importance. We saw in the character of Menefee that self reflection is not profound and cerebral, rather DeLillo imagines it as a funny and strange image, the character turning their eyeballs inward to look at their own brain.

This leads to a number of questions which motivate my research. My readings focus on a mix of "major" and lesser-studied texts. My thesis proceeds thematically and so takes on DeLillo's works out of chronological order. I select the texts under study for their compelling and fascinating expressions of my key areas of investigation. The works are chosen for the specific bodily concerns that they raise: What has led scholars to consistently overlook this aspect of the works? What are the consequences of this oversight? As I will show, the relatively small number of critics who have acknowledged the body in DeLillo focus on ideas of postmodern loss and semblance, rather than the materiality of the body. What can be found if we correct this? What purpose do DeLillo's various and strange portrayals of the body serve? How does his attention to bodies in his fiction contribute to his writing of specific periods in American culture, and particularly key historical moments? To what ends does DeLillo's fiction consistently engage with the borders of the body and bodily wastes? What role does this play in how characters think their own subjectivities in relation

to their embodied experiences? All of these areas of enquiry overlap and rhyme with one another, and I indicate how these concerns are developed throughout the oeuvre with reference to DeLillo's other works. The profound insights for which DeLillo is known are always tied up with material bodies. He engages with a number of different concerns which I explore throughout the thesis, and the role of the body is integral to each one. My chapters engage with these ideas in turn: The body might help us to refigure and process trauma, specifically the trauma of 9/11. Through DeLillo's portrayal of novelists and performance artists, the body is implicated in creative work. The seedy underbelly of U.S. culture (particularly the Vietnam War) is manifest through grotesque bodies. The way bodily wastes are characterised communicates overarching social concerns, particularly the fear and divisions of the Cold War era. Finally, embodied experiences of hunger and sexual desire reflect the emotionally stunted quality of life under late capitalism.

The need for this research is prompted by the bodies in the texts that assert themselves in strange ways throughout DeLillo's entire oeuvre. In acknowledging and exploring this aspect of DeLillo's work, I make an important contribution to the field of existing scholarship, working to counter the current emphasis on bodies that are spectral, mediated, or otherwise absent. DeLillo's works do feature bodies that lapse into postmodern semblance, identities that fracture and break down, and technology that brings with it the possibility of transcending the mortal body. However, the field of scholarship has not yet accounted for the way that these ideas are expressed always in tandem with an unavoidable materiality. In *Libra*, DeLillo's fictional engagement with the Kennedy assassination, Lee Harvey Oswald is figured as a characteristically postmodern subject: 'not as a fixed point but a series of desperate and dissolving gestures' (Adams, 2001, n.p.). And yet this sense of uncertain, immaterial being is bound up with the insistent presence of bodily 'stuff': Stationed in Japan, Oswald catches 'the clap' and is dismayed by the symptoms; a 'thick discharge [...] a dreadful yellowish drip' (DeLillo, 1988, p. 114). When we encounter the shooting itself, an onlooker sees 'the stuff just erupt from the President's head [...] [t]wo pink-white jets of tissue rising from the mist' (DeLillo, 1988, p. 400). A member of the police escort is shocked as 'the

sleet of bone and blood and tissue struck him in the face [...] the stuff hit him like a spray of buckshot and he hears it pink and spatter in his helmet. [...] he kept his mouth closed tight so the fluid would not ooze in' (p. 399). Nicholas Branch, working to reconstruct the events, to 'follow the bullet trajectories backwards to the lives that occupy the shadows, actual men who moan in their dreams', examines 'a microphotograph of three strands of Lee H. Oswald's pubic hair' (p. 181): DeLillo's subjects never quite become bodiless. DeLillo engages with 9/11 in much the same way: his writing of the horror of the attacks has disgusting 'body slop' at its heart (*Falling Man*, 2007, p. 244). As with *Libra*, as readers we encounter bodily articulations of American culture through the decades. Specific moments of historical rupture—the Kennedy assassination, the Cold War, 9/11—are expressed through bodies, as are DeLillo's broad meditations on selfhood and American identity, and the more specific concerns that prompt each of my chapters. My thesis also meets a need to place DeLillo's work in conversation with other modern and contemporary literature which is better understood as engaging with the thinking of embodiment. For example, scholarship on grotesque and abject bodies tends to build upon more explicitly transgressive fiction, by authors such as William Burroughs, Bret Easton Ellis, and Kathy Acker. I work to show that similar concerns can be productively read in fiction not typically grouped into this category. I also seek to mount a consideration of bodies that is somewhat distinct from an analysis of gender: the concerns of the body and gender can never be wholly separate, but I counter Ruth Helyer's assertion that any reading of the body is inevitably a reading of gender (1999, p. 987)¹. My readings acknowledge and respond to the importance of masculinity, and gender roles and masculine bodies are very important to my final chapter on DeLillo's 1997 novel *Players*, but my underlying aim with the thesis is to engage with how DeLillo's characters experience their own bodies in relation to the world, rather than to divide these experiences along gendered lines.

¹ I am largely in agreement with Helyer and her really interesting and relevant work, it is only this assertion that stands out as something I seek to question.

Defining 'unruly bodies'

I use the term 'unruly' to describe the key unifying characteristic of the bodies in DeLillo's fiction. The word carries associations of being disorderly or disruptive, uncontrollable and resistant to discipline, what Eve Sedgwick terms 'the uncontrollable *meaningfulness* of the body' (1987, p. 126, original emphasis). Within this overarching category of unruly bodies, my thesis investigates different, yet interconnected kinds of unruliness: embodied experiences, particularly of traumatic violence and of pain, that cannot be captured in language or narrative form, bodies that emit abject fluids and wastes, challenging the fantasy of the whole and complete body that is wholly distinct from the external world, and bodily obscenity and taboo that challenges the body politic. Throughout, the bodies under discussion are seen to exceed and disrupt boundaries, formal structures, and organising principles. Throughout my research this term developed from an initial interest in bodies as uncontrollable, and specifically the idea of uncontrollable exchanges, in between bodies and between body and world. This idea remains important within my readings, but with the more general category of "unruly" I hope to move away from the idea of a human subject specifically trying to maintain control over their own or others' bodies, and to cast the bodies under discussion as more generally chaotic and resistant to control.

The guiding concern with unruly bodies is informed by the rise of the term in contemporary writing and visual art. A 2007 collection by Susannah Mintz is titled *Unruly Bodies: Life Writing by Women with Disabilities*. Mintz looks at the work of eight contemporary American autobiographers, and explores the ways in which life writing is used to challenge common modes of thought on embodiment and identity, with a particular focus on disability and gender. Here Mintz combines elements of disability theory and feminist autobiography studies. In 2018 Roxeane Gay produced a collection of essays in partnership with the online publishing platform Medium titled 'Unruly Bodies'. Gay describes the aim of the collection, to offer a window into the diversity of experiences of living in a body. 25 writers reflect on topics including chronic pain, aging, vomiting, addiction, fatness, sex, queerness, and trans identity. Gay herself recounts her experience of weight reduction surgery. Carmen

Maria Machado, in the essay 'Unruly, Adjective', lists 'Acne, muscle spasms, period cramps. deep, painful zits under my arms and anywhere else my body touches my body. Stretch marks, birthmarks, moles, cellulite. Anemia' (2018, n.p.). In one anecdote she injures her toe in the dark and unwittingly treads blood all over her apartment. Taken together, these experiences are the body asserting itself; 'The body that says "I am here"'. Subheadings break up the text, together reading 'disorderly' 'and disruptive' 'and not amenable to discipline' 'or control'. The listing of bodily sensations seen in Maria Machado's work is a technique that DeLillo also uses, as we shall see, particularly in the case of the protagonists of *Americana* and *Mao II*. Many of the experiences that Maria Machado lists are painful or uncomfortable, but taken together her description does not conjure a sense of alarm or urgency, of the need for symptoms to be addressed and treated. While many of the sensations themselves are not positive, the effect is of a meditative process, of scanning, and noting, and importantly, accepting, the experiences that make up being in the body. As we shall see, this resonates with DeLillo's efforts to convey the everyday sensations that make up his characters' inner lives. We will see that DeLillo's characters cling onto experiences of discomfort and even sickness as reassuring reminders of their status as embodied beings. Meanwhile Maria Machado's description of 'The body that says "I am here"' resonates with an assessment of a body in *Cosmopolis*, when a doctor states of a blackhead, 'let it express itself'. In February and March of 2022 the London-based organisation Arts and Health Hub curated a season of artist talks, workshops, and an exhibition, also titled *Unruly Bodies*. Curated by Daniel Regan & Eve Loren, the series aimed to explore 'Bodies in resistance', 'bodies and minds that are different, challenging, celebrated and denigrated', and 'the unruly connection between body and mind'. The works variously address embodied experiences that exist outside a normative societal framework, often through narratives of those living in disenfranchised, othered bodies.

A key element of the way I understand the bodies in DeLillo's fiction is the idea of plurality. Gay selects a diverse group of writers for her essay collection, with the aim of honouring the diversity of embodied experience, and my own research builds upon work that

views embodiment as essentially multitudinous and, indeed, unruly in nature. The ways in which DeLillo characterises bodies borrow from a number of different theoretical and philosophical schools of thought, but defies categorisation; the main defining characteristic is this very pluralism. A number of writers have engaged with body theory as irreducibly complex, and have foregrounded this complexity rather than treating contrasting or contradictory ideas as problems to be solved. We see this positive sense of pluralism, rather than a diagnosis of loss and fragmentation, in Antje Lindenmeyer's reading of Jeanette Winterson's 1992 novel *Written on the Body*. Lindenmeyer finds that 'Winterson disturbs fixed boundaries and rigidly gendered identities that objectify the body in order to build up a concept of the body that is fluid and leaves room for changes and mergings with other bodies, where bodies are held together not by a stable body image and a gendered identity, but by forces of connection and interaction between parts of the body' (1999, p. 48).

Elsewhere, Héctor Castaño identifies the significance of French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's thinking of the body within contemporary philosophy. Castaño describes Nancy's book *Corpus* as 'a powerful reflection on the body—although we should rather say bodies—that is not based upon a univocal and universal concept' (2016, p. 80). Nancy's work offers an alternative to the idea of the 'body proper' advanced by French phenomenology. Castaño explains that 'Instead of proposing a concept of the body, Nancy tries to give an account of bodies and their singularity [...] the movement of this reflection cannot consist in knowing, understanding, or finally stating what a body is'. The *Corpus*, in Nancy's formulation, is 'neither an individual nor a finished entity but, rather, a singular whose fragmentation continuously takes place'. Here Nancy leaves room 'for the infinite number of aspects of a body, acknowledging that a body is not a principle of unification but rather the finite coexistence of this infinity of aspects' (p. 84). Nancy's at times fragmentary writing style is a tactic to reinforce this sense of multiplicity, his 'rejection of an argument leading to the demonstration of a thesis'. The final paragraph of *Corpus* is evidence of Nancy's 'unforeseeable and singular style' (Castaño, 2016, p. 85):

A body is an image offered to other bodies, a whole corpus of images stretched from body to body, local colors and shadows, fragments, grains, areolas, lunules, nails, hairs, tendons, skulls, ribs, pelvises, bellies, meatuses, foams, tears, teeth, droolings, slits, blocks, tongues, sweat, liquors, veins, pains, and joys, and me, and you. (Nancy, 2008, p. 121)

Here once again, listing is employed as a tactic. Meanwhile, Nancy addresses a set of concerns that cannot be simply or wholly described in plain language - rather the meaning is conveyed through the particular style of writing, as here Nancy evocatively enacts the fragmented nature of body parts.

Looking elsewhere once again, to Michel Serres' 1999 book *Variations on the Body*, we find an emphasis on metamorphosis. Here once again the body is above all else plastic in nature, constantly transforming. In the opening pages Serres describes how, climbing up steep rocky terrain, we instinctively adopt an animalistic posture, proceeding on all fours (p. 3). Standing with arms and legs outstretched the body is animalistic, like a 'starfish, octopus or gibbon', then geometric, as of a 'cube, prism or large paving Stone', then 'curled up within the womb' (Serres, 1999, p. 4). The power of fiction is the opportunity to stage and to work through these ideas. The way an author approaches these issues, characterises the experiences of subjectivity and embodiment in their fiction, can be powerful and generative because they are imaginatively enacting these phenomena rather than simply seeking to describe them. Both the style and the subject matter of DeLillo's writings come together to form a unique interrogation of bodily problems and questions. DeLillo's fiction is an expression of the multiplicity, the plasticity of bodies, and a rejection of universal absolutes. In seeking to sum this up I settle on the term 'unruly' to describe the bodies in DeLillo's fiction.

Methodology and theoretical approach

The set of concerns that I am exploring in DeLillo's fiction are present throughout his oeuvre. As I have worked to indicate throughout the thesis by relating my discussion to examples from other texts, DeLillo repeatedly returns to and restages particular ideas. For example,

reading his work with an attention to the boundaries of the physical body yields interesting insights across so much of his work, and it has been necessary to limit discussion to one or two novels at a time. In selecting the texts that I chose for sustained consideration, I worked to identify the instances where DeLillo addresses my key concerns in the most explicit or interesting way, and also aimed to select texts that reflected each era of his long writing career. In the same way, deciding how to apportion my time at the archive came with similar struggles; the archival material relating to DeLillo's entire oeuvre would no doubt hold useful and interesting insights. I began by carrying out a brief overview of the materials relating to my chosen texts, and confirmed that the drafts of *Americana* would be the best materials to dedicate my time and resources to. I was already invested in thinking about how that novel was revised and edited, as it had the most uneven journey to publication, and I already had access to the two different published versions. A brief look at the contents of the boxes at the Harry Ransom Center confirmed that DeLillo's edits and revisions prior to publication offered a wealth of further insights. The thesis proceeds thematically rather than taking DeLillo's works chronologically, as each chapter builds upon themes and ideas established in previous chapters.

I opted to make the thesis a single author study, so that I could dedicate as much effort as possible to understanding the texts and the connections between them, rather than spreading my attention across multiple authors and working to compare them. With this as my goal, sustained and in depth consideration of DeLillo's prose is of greater value than a less detailed analysis that brings in different writers. As I lay out in my literature review I have identified a gap in existing literature, which I aim to address. I aim to provide insights into DeLillo's writing of the body throughout my thesis, but also to pave the way for body-centric readings of DeLillo, and of modern and contemporary literature more generally, and to open up a significant area of enquiry for further study.

Much existing criticism imposes pre-existing frameworks of theory and philosophy onto DeLillo's works. Such approaches are well-trodden, and while I do make use of theoretical concepts—in particular Julia Kristeva's work on abjection (1982)—I take on the

works on their own terms, not as a mere illustration or instantiation of a preconceived idea or mode of thought. Focusing on the art of the texts, I let my arguments come from a thorough understanding and knowledge of the novels and their relation to one another. The thesis thus has its own logic and integrity, bringing the reader back to how the texts resonate together and across decades. I address my areas of enquiry through close readings of DeLillo's fiction. I support my arguments using relevant critical work, and some use of literary theory and philosophy. I make use of DeLillo's interviews and nonfiction writings as well as his fiction.

In 2020 and 2022 Bloomsbury published a pair of DeLillo monographs by Michael Naas: *Don DeLillo, American Original: Drugs, Weapons, Erotica, and Other Literary Contraband*, and *Apocalyptic Ruin and Everyday Wonder in Don DeLillo's America*. Naas reads DeLillo in terms of a conceptual strand that runs throughout the oeuvre, that of 'band' and 'contraband'. Naas identifies the idea of two contrasting or opposing poles, and the importance of doubleness and duplicity, at work throughout all of DeLillo's fiction. Bloomsbury offers Naas' work as a 'startlingly original and provocative reinterpretation' of DeLillo's oeuvre. A lifelong Derrida scholar, Naas is no doubt informed by philosophical concerns in his readings, and yet he declares at the outset that his focus is the texts, and that he reads them in conversation with one other, not with existing theory and criticism. Naas compellingly draws out the idea of two contrasting forces, band and counterband, to be a unifying idea across the works, and his argument succeeds as a close, considered scrutiny of DeLillo's prose that offers us something new. As Naas suggests, bringing in other existing critical work on DeLillo, and theory and philosophy more generally, would dilute and distract from the central task, to interrogate the texts and the interrelations between them. He reads DeLillo's fiction 'as a way of life or as equipment for living, rather than as a critical puzzle to be solved' (publisher's note). I find Naas' approach refreshing, generative, and enlivening, and in the time that I have spent with DeLillo's works I have sought a similar approach. My goal is not to read the texts without any kind of critical or contextual framework, but this approach offers an alternative to those critics who set out to apply a particular theory to

DeLillo's fiction, which we see in works such as Marc Schuster's 2008 monograph *Don DeLillo, Jean Baudrillard, and the Consumer Conundrum* and Graley Herren's article 'American Narcissus: Lacanian Reflections on DeLillo's Americana' (2016). My goal is to employ theory to enhance my readings where appropriate, and to protect my analyses of the literary texts from being overlaid, even suffocated by theory². My conceptual framework arises from sustained and meticulous consideration of the texts, with theory and philosophy brought in to support, serve, and enrich where appropriate. DeLillo's prose is always at the heart of my analyses, and I interrogate it through close reading and through archival research.

Revelatory archival research is key to the project. I undertook a placement at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, and studied their complete collection of DeLillo's revised manuscripts, as well as DeLillo's own research materials and correspondence, materials that range from 1959 through to 2003. This research gives crucial insights into how DeLillo developed his ideas through his numerous drafts and revisions, and these findings are key to my chapter on *Americana*, in which I share these new findings from the archive. The DeLillo Papers were acquired by the Harry Ransom Center in 2004, and a special issue of the journal *Orbit: Writing around Pynchon* features a number of articles which variously make use of findings from the archive (2016). At a 2016 conference, Matt Kavanagh shared a never-before-studied screen treatment, which contains formative ideas that DeLillo later developed in *Libra*. The significance of these materials, then, has begun to be acknowledged, but there is still a wealth of discoveries to be made. My close analysis of specific passages in DeLillo's novels, alongside the edits and revisions evidenced in the drafts, gives insight into how he laboriously edits and revises his work on a sentence-by-sentence level. The manuscripts reveal an attention to specific word choices,

² Regarding critical work on DeLillo that makes use of Baudrillard, David Cowart warns that 'Critics have not been slow to recognize and exploit the affinity between DeLillo and Baudrillard, but in doing so they have risked overstating DeLillo's involvement with—as opposed to criticism of—the image (2003, p.4).

and the cutting down or deletion of phrases or whole concepts. These findings enrich my arguments, and represent unique and nuanced insights into DeLillo's writing processes.

I acknowledge that a focus on issues of race and gender in DeLillo's fiction is long overdue, and while my work touches on these concerns I defer to those scholars who have taken this on as their central inquiry, whose work forms a welcome and necessary addition to scholarship. Examples include 'Gender and Terror in Gerhard Richter's October 18, 1977 and Don DeLillo's "Baader-Meinhof"' by Karin Crawford (2009), Sally Robinson's 'Shopping for the Real: Gender and Consumption in the Critical Reception of DeLillo's *White Noise*' (2013), and 'Transhumanism and the Biological Body in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*: A Material Feminist Perspective (2021) by Lay Sion Ng. Tim Engles' chapter 'White Male Nostalgia in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*' in an edited collection on postmodern literature and race (L. Platt & S. Upstone, eds., 2015) provides another useful inroad.

Explanation of key theorists and concepts

My reading of *Falling Man* in Chapter One makes use of the work of Cathy Caruth and Jacques Derrida. Caruth, in her 1996 book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* explains that trauma cannot be fully experienced as it occurs, and can be perceived only through a retroactive return. There is no 'simple knowledge' of the traumatic event, which confounds knowledge and representation, and remains unassimilated, returning to haunt the survivor. Jacques Derrida, speaking on 9/11, explains that the event confounds representation in language, 'out of range for a language that admits its powerlessness'. Caruth's work is notable for bringing trauma theory to the humanities, and she uses techniques of interpreting literary texts and ideas from narrative theory to understand how traumatic events are experienced. Caruth has noted the influence of Derrida upon her own work. Derrida, known for deconstruction or post-structuralism, pioneered an approach to literary criticism that acknowledges the text as founded upon irreducible difference and inner contradictions. Deconstruction proceeds from an understanding of the text, and language itself, as irreducibly complex. These two thinkers are concerned with experience that is

resistant to understanding and representation, and so form a useful conceptual framework for my study of DeLillo's 9/11 novel *Falling Man* (2007) in Chapter One of the thesis. I also make use of Kacper Bartczak (2002) who explains that any search for meaning is further complicated by the impossibility of attaining 'neutral ground'; it is impossible for the subject to 'step outside the discourse' under scrutiny. DeLillo's longstanding interest in the limitations of language and narrative form comes to the fore here, and elements of trauma theory and post-structuralist thought help in understanding DeLillo's novel. Caruth, Derrida, and DeLillo are all variously engaged in the struggle to articulate that which is beyond language. Meanwhile DeLillo's novel offers a departure from these theories; a hopeful possibility that a focus on embodied experience might hold the key to processing traumatic events. I explore this idea with reference to other works of visual art and poetry that sought to respond to the 9/11 attacks.

My reading of monstrosity in *Mao II* (1991) and bodily performance in *The Body Artist* (2001) makes use of Julia Kristeva's definitive work on abjection. Kristeva brings a psychoanalytic approach to literary theory, and in *Powers of Horror* (1982) she defines abjection as a process of casting out that which 'disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'. Bodily wastes provoke horror because they represent death, the ultimate breakdown and dissolution of subjectivity. Kristeva here reads matter as ideologically and psychoanalytically charged. My readings of two of DeLillo's artist protagonists, author Bill Gray of *Mao II* and performance artist Lauren Hartke of *The Body Artist*, are enriched by Kristeva's theories of abjection, and her formulation of embodied subjectivity as under constant threat, and help us to understand the struggle of DeLillo's characters to comprehend and manage their own bodies and subjectivities. Kristeva's formulation of subjectivity as a process, an ongoing struggle against abjection, 'what I permanently thrust aside in order to live', is key for its resonance with DeLillo's characterisations of selfhood. I also make use of theories of performance art and body image to support my readings.

In Chapter Three, my reading of *Americana* focuses in detail on the changes that occurred in the text through multiple drafts and revisions. My focus is close study of archival materials and the novel's two published versions, and discussion of theory and philosophy is limited here. My new findings from the archive, and how they impact our understanding of the text, are the focus of this chapter. However, the key ideas at play here lead on from the earlier discussion of abjection. *Americana*, DeLillo's debut novel, takes on the rottenness of the nation, suggesting a kind of abject body politic, and the cutting of 'obscene' material throughout the novel's draft versions mirrors Kristeva's formulation of casting out abject matter. Through *Americana*'s protagonist, a filmmaker and writer, DeLillo foregrounds problems of language and narrative, in the same way that we have seen in the other texts. In *Americana*, DeLillo announces his preoccupation with the messy heterogeneity of embodied experience, impossible to contain within a narrative framework.

Chapter Four once again considers the role of abject matter and bodily wastes, in DeLillo's massive 1997 novel *Underworld*. DeLillo takes on a period spanning from the onset of the Cold War to its aftermath, and the various historical moods are expressed in relation to bodily boundaries and bodily fluids. I make use of *History of Shit*, a 1978 book by French psychoanalyst Dominique Laporte, and the work of Slovenian philosopher Slavov Žižek, who also works in a psychoanalytic tradition, and who works on materialism drawing on Hegel and Lacan. Chapter Five, on DeLillo's novel *Players* (1977) employs Fredric Jameson's formative account of the postmodern condition. I make use of Laura Tanner's formulation of 'lost' bodies, a particular dissolution of subjectivity. As distinct from death, 'the lost body' is ambiguous, it 'disappears from cultural view, buried along with the sensory traces of its corporeal presence' (Tanner, 2006).

Literature review and contribution to knowledge

The body in critical theory and popular culture

Descartes famously put forward a model of mind-body dualism, positing a distinction between the mind and the body's senses. The mind (encompassing consciousness and self awareness) is immaterial, and accorded a greater significance as it makes us uniquely human, setting us apart from other organisms. Descartes believed that it is the non-physical, non-spatial mind which makes us human. This iteration of the mind-body problem, a model of the body as separate from, and inferior to, the mind or the soul is foundational to Western thought. Dalia Judovitz refers to 'the persistent legacy of the Cartesian mind-body duality that continues to obscure and even elide prior formulations of the body' (Judovitz, 2001, p. 1). Efforts 'to inquire into the construction of the body must take into account the obstacle presented by its conceptual consolidations, which attain over time a factual authority and stability that are very difficult to overcome'. Iris Clever and Willemijn Ruberg (2014) identify a 'corporeal' or 'bodily' turn of the 1980s and 1990s, in which the body's cultural and historical significance came under scrutiny. As Dalia Judovitz similarly states in her 2001 book, *The Culture of the Body: Genealogies of Modernity*, 'the critical literature of the past decades bears witness to a renewed interest in the body, in its literary, philosophical, social, and historical construction' (p.1). Particularly within sociology and feminist philosophy, scholars began to address areas such as fatness, disordered eating, disability, menstruation and childbirth, beauty norms, and the regulation of bodies along racialised and gendered lines. Clever and Ruberg describe a new 'conceptualization of the body as discursively shaped and socially disciplined' (2014, p. 547). Departing from a concept of the body as a wholly biological entity, determined by evolution and genetics, thinkers such as Foucault and Butler found that our bodies are shaped by social forces. Foucault argues that bodies are culturally constructed; not only shaped by power relations, they are actually constituted by them. Butler critiques and opposes Foucault, but the two share an anti-essentialist view on embodiment. Butler argues that bodies are produced through normative gendered power

relations, and posits that gender is performative. In these understandings of bodies as socially constituted they are no longer timeless biological entities; rather they are moulded by their particular historical and cultural contexts. Butler's work challenges ideas about certain bodily characteristics being 'natural', particularly the attributes and capabilities of male versus female-coded bodies. In turn, conceptualizations of the body as discursively shaped and socially disciplined have been met with critique, as they fail to account for individual bodily agency and feeling. Within New Materialism, thinkers such as Elizabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti seek to reformulate the relationship between body and mind, not as separate but profoundly entangled.

In what follows, I set out the relevant work from the field of existing literature, and also give space to explaining key ideas that are important to my analysis. I explain my own approach in relation to existing work, and so my review includes a number of diversions in which I explain key concepts and articulate the direction of my work. Scholarship on representation of the body in DeLillo's fiction collects around his later works, as, with the publication of *The Body Artist* in 2001, a slim text detailing the protagonist's attempt to process her grief through performance art, DeLillo announces a newly explicit focus on the body as subject. His 2007 novel *Falling Man* then prompted a number of body-focused readings from critics, largely centring once again a performance artist who features in the novel. The emergence of the body as a subject of critical enquiry within DeLillo studies, prompted by *The Body Artist*, broadly corresponds with a more general turn to the body in literary criticism. After the high moment of theory, we can see a return to concerns of materiality and embodiment. Recent works that signal this return include the 2015 essay collection *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, which seeks to historicize embodiment through a range of texts, from medieval to contemporary, and explores topics including pain, obesity, and the maternal body (2015). In 2016, Oxford University Press added *The Body: A Very Short Introduction* to its collection of popular and accessible study guides. In 2019 Bill Bryson's *The Body: A Guide for Occupants*, an entertaining exploration of human physiology, topped the *Sunday Times* bestseller list. Since 2013 The Institute of

Gender Studies at the University of Chester has held the 'Talking Bodies' conference which features diverse work on gender and ideology, issues such as body modification and porn, and the relationship between the body and language, embodiment and creative practice.

Long a concern of sociology, and specific disciplines such as gender studies and disability studies, the body is increasingly becoming a subject of critical thought within literary studies. We have seen the growing field of the medical humanities, which seeks to synthesise approaches to the body and connect scientific discourse up to lived experience, and calls for attention to subjective experience of pain and illness as an object of study. The growing field of the medical humanities seeks to bring together scientific and humanistic frameworks of understanding the body. In *The Body: A Very Short Introduction*, Chris Shilling convincingly charts a number of factors leading to a rise in interest in the body as a subject of academic study, and such concerns have only become more pressing. As we navigate a changed world within the global Coronavirus pandemic, questions of how bodies are regulated, and issues of control and contamination, are made newly urgent.

Ideas circulate and become lore in DeLillo criticism, which spawns a mythology all its own. We see this in the characterisation of DeLillo as intensely private, in the vein of enigmatic recluses like Thomas Pynchon and J.D. Salinger, an idea that has become so entrenched in the discourse that DeLillo himself is moved to correct it. With a wariness and sardonic humour with which he seems to treat interviewers and academics alike, DeLillo sums up the interaction: "I know you never do interviews". They say that to me all the time. "But here I am" is my stock reply' (DeLillo, cited in Streitfeld, 1992, n.p.)³. Here DeLillo plays down the rarity, and resulting value, of the interaction that the speaker desires, and leaves us with a funny image of the author, exasperated, fending off yet another interviewer's comments about his refusal to discuss his work. DeLillo certainly does like to play upon his

³ In David Streitfeld's profile 'Don DeLillo's Gloomy Muse', DeLillo states that

Interviewers want to feel that they're cracking a barrier that doesn't exist. I've been called 'reclusive' a hundred times and I'm not even remotely in that category. But people want to believe this because it satisfies some romantic conception of what a dedicated writer is and how he ought to live. (1992, n.p.)

own disappearance: in an oft-cited incident he responded to Tom LeClair's request for an interview by handing him a business card with his name and the words 'I don't want to talk about it' (LeClair, in DePietro ed., 2005, p. 19)⁴. He accepted his first National Book Award in 1985 with a brief speech: 'I'm sorry I couldn't be here tonight, but I thank you all for coming' (Purcell, 2016). At a 2015 conference an audience member expressed that it was a privilege to share the room with the distinguished figure, and DeLillo responded 'how do you know it's really me?' (cited in Boxall, in Da Cunha Lewin and Ward, eds., 2019, p. 160). The prevailing myth of the author-recluse leads to a strange sense that DeLillo's repeated assertions of his own absence are to be taken at face value, even when that face, and the body of which it is a part, are inarguably sitting on a chair in front of us.

These interactions reveal a few strands of thought relevant to the present purpose. DeLillo wryly deflates the idea that an audience with him is precious, rare, and therefore valuable, and he brings a similar energy to his decision to give his drafts and research materials over to the Harry Ransom Center archive. This acquisition by the prestigious archive further cements DeLillo's status as a writer of importance, but DeLillo details the interaction as primarily practical, almost an opportunity for decluttering:

I ran out of space and also felt, as one does at a certain age, that I was running out of time. I didn't want to leave behind an enormous mess of papers for family members to deal with. Of course, I've since produced more paper—novel, play, essay, etc.—and so the cycle begins again. (DeLillo, cited in D. T. Max, 2007, n.p.)

Meanwhile in his fiction, DeLillo takes down the academy in the incisive and funny portrayal of Jack Gladney, professor of Hitler studies (*White Noise*). In *Underworld* a 'waste theorist' articulates a compelling theory of the primacy of waste, in which civilisation rises in response to its waste products, but at the same time the man is a charlatan, arrested for stealing rubbish from outside the house of J. Edgar Hoover (pp. 286-287). Celebrities' rubbish later turns up for sale, 'the actual stuff deep-frozen in a warehouse' (p. 319). I find these

⁴ Neither man actually commits to the bit: LeClair cites this anecdote in one of the many interviews that they did together.

negotiations of waste and value very funny, and in a similar vein I had a moment of clarity in the reverent hush of the archive. I was very excited to find a page of a draft where DeLillo had scrawled the words ‘offal’ and ‘defecation’ in the margin, and had to stifle my laughter (see Figure 1); I am essentially reading the works of one of America’s greatest living novelists for references to poo and wee. This tension is always at work in DeLillo’s articulation of American culture, in which there is a constant cross-contamination of the sacred and profane.

As we have seen with DeLillo’s entrenched persona, it is important not to get swept up in the tide of existing scholarship. As I will detail in my review of existing literature, critics have departed from common theoretical frameworks, reading the works for gender and bodily performance and the body and trauma, but this line of enquiry needs to be developed further. Within the field of existing criticism DeLillo’s writing of the body has begun to be acknowledged as a compelling area for study, but this work is heavily weighted towards his later fiction, from the 2001 text *The Body Artist* onwards. I work to correct this by demonstrating a continuation of concerns surrounding embodiment, reading the later works, which many critics have read for bodily concerns (*The Body Artist*, *Falling Man*), alongside the “major”, early, and lesser-studied works (*Americana*, *Players*, *Underworld*, *Mao II*), on which very little relevant work has been done.

The field of DeLillo criticism

DeLillo’s oeuvre is weighed down by a heavy and growing burden of scholarship. Monographs, book chapters, and articles repeatedly return to the same set of concerns in his fiction: film, media, and consumer culture, technology, terrorism, globalisation, and more abstract ideas regarding the telling of history, the limits and capabilities of language, and DeLillo’s place within literary movements of modernism and post-modernism. He is also read for his accounts of cultural touchstones: the Cold War, Vietnam War, the onset of the new millennium and the terror attacks of 9/11, and the Iraq War. There are a number of monographs dedicated to reading across DeLillo’s oeuvre, the first being Tom LeClair’s

idiosyncratic *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (1988), which uses systems theory to read DeLillo's works from *Americana* to *White Noise*. Elsewhere Mark Osteen focuses on media history and theory, and postmodern themes and strategies in *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (2000). Reflecting common lines of critical enquiry, David Cowart's monograph *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* (2002) places DeLillo in conversation with poststructuralism and postmodernism, and explores his uses of language (after DeLillo's assertion that language is 'a subject as well as an instrument in my work'). Boxall, through his readings of DeLillo, interrogates the role of fiction in our newly global and media-saturated culture in *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (2006). Other works include Henry Veggian's *Understanding Don DeLillo* (2015), Graley Herren's *The Self-Reflexive Art of Don DeLillo* (2019), and *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* (Duvall ed., 2008). The journal *Modern Fiction Studies* had a special issue on DeLillo in 1999, as did *Orbit: Writing around Pynchon* (2016) to mark the 45th anniversary of his debut novel *Americana*. More recently, the collection *Don DeLillo after the Millennium: Currents and Currencies* includes discussion of the 2016 novel *Zero K* (Zubeck, ed., 2017).

2016 saw a cluster of events accompanying the 20th anniversary of *Underworld's* publication, as well as the publication of *Zero K*. DeLillo appeared at the 2016 conference 'Fiction Rescues History' at the Sorbonne dedicated to his work, and had other speaking engagements in Paris and London. University of Sussex conference 'The State of Fiction' which led to the Bloomsbury collection *Don DeLillo: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* to which I contributed a chapter (Da Cunha Lewin and Ward, eds., 2019). The DeLillo Society organise regular conference panels and is dedicated to collating news and scholarship, their exhaustive and regularly updated list of DeLillo scholarship is a very useful resource (delillosociety.com). Since this thesis was begun DeLillo has added to his corpus with *Zero K* (2016) and *The Silence*, a slim text published in 2020.

My thesis focuses on six of DeLillo's novels from his prolific body of work (which includes eighteen novels, seven plays, and numerous short stories): *Americana* (1971),

Players (1977), *Mao II* (1991), *Underworld* (1997), *The Body Artist* (2001), and *Falling Man* (2007). While I have organised my readings thematically, rather than working through the texts chronologically, the specific context of each work is important, and I have sought to include a range of early and late works, so as to demonstrate a key finding: that the body across DeLillo's entire oeuvre is a compelling and significant area of study that has been largely overlooked. As a result my review of existing literature is skewed towards criticism of the later texts, around which the majority of relevant criticism has collected.

Americana, Players, Mao II

Three of the novels that I have selected for close analysis have generated limited relevant scholarship, and I consider them together here. They are DeLillo's debut novel *Americana* (1971), his 1977 novel *Players*, and *Mao II* of 1991. I break new ground by focusing on understanding the bodies in these texts, an area of enquiry that has gone largely unexplored.

In his 2003 book, in chapters on *Players*, *Americana*, and *Mao II*, David Cowart investigates 'DeLillo's career-long exploration of language as cultural index' and finds that DeLillo consistently 'foregrounds language and the problems of language' (p. 2). Tim Engles (Engles, in Da Cunha Lewin and Ward, eds., 2019) finds that, through *Americana*'s protagonist, DeLillo interrogates the white American male archetype, while Graley Herren (2016) reads the character as an American Narcissus figure. *Players*, which features an attempted bombing of the New York Stock Exchange, has been read for its critique of late capitalism and its depiction of terrorism. Alessandra De Marco (2013) reads *Players* as an account of the financialization of the U.S. that took place after the capitalist crisis of the 1970s, finding that DeLillo engages with and critiques the workings of finance capital. *Mao II* is known for its proclamation that 'the future belongs to crowds' (1991, p. 16). DeLillo engages throughout the novel with crowds and ideas of collective being, alongside a contrasting attention to the figures of the novelist and the political prisoner, 'the man in the small room' (DePietro ed., 2005, p. 100). In 'Two's A Crowd: 'Mao II', 'Coke II', and the

Politics Of Terrorism in Don DeLillo', Richard Hardak (2004) explores masculinity, subject position and mass identity in *Mao II* and *White Noise*, in relation to transcendentalism after Melville and Emerson. In a 2011 essay collection edited by Stacey Olster, David Cowart discusses *Mao II* in terms of millennial dread, Peter Knight the end of history, and Laura Barrett mixed media. Laura Barrett also reads *Mao II* in an earlier article (1999), finding a troubling of subjectivity within postmodern space. Mark Osteen (2000) in his book chapter on 'Spectacular Authorship in *Mao II*' argues that the novel charts a shift from 'the grand narrative of modernist authority' to the supremacy of the image, a new era in which public consciousness is moulded by the spectacle of photography and television footage.

Besides these examples, there is some more relevant work that I build upon in my analyses. My chapter on *Americana* makes use of Peter Boxall's assiduous reading of the empty shoe in the novel (Boxall details the significance of this motif as running not only through *Americana*, but into later works) (2006). My study of *Players* makes use of Anne Longmuir's work, who reads *Players* alongside *Running Dog*, finding that the novels dually upset conventions of 'genre' and 'gender' (2007). For *Mao II* I focus specifically on monstrosity and the grotesque in the novel, offering an alternative to critical focus on the relationship between the individual and the crowd. A short piece 'The Nature of the Fun' by David Foster Wallace is notable and useful to my reading, as Wallace engages with the figure of the monstrous body in *Mao II* which is central to my analysis, and acknowledges its grotesque and bizarre nature (Wallace, in Blythe, 1999). These writers support certain aspects of my readings, but otherwise my approach to these novels is completely new. Peter Sloane's 2019 monograph, *David Foster Wallace and the Body*, identifies Wallace's similar preoccupation with body matter, and also reveals a critical blind spot. Wallace has explicitly discussed DeLillo's writing of bodies as an influence on his own work, but DeLillo's prose has not been explored for these concerns in the in-depth way that Sloane reads Wallace's fiction. Sloane particularly addresses the line of influence from DeLillo to Wallace in a chapter on 'Disfigurement, Disability, and "Crip Humour"', proceeding from Wallace's interest in DeLillo's depiction of the 'hideously defective' monstrous body in *Mao II* (1991).

Waste and bodily boundaries in *Underworld*

My chapter on DeLillo's 1997 novel *Underworld* builds upon existing criticism on the significance of waste in the novel. Boxall—to return to his engaging monograph—connects the recycling of waste matter in *Underworld* to DeLillo's recycling of themes and ideas throughout his works (2006). In 'Refuse Heaped Many Stories High': DeLillo, Dirt, and Disorder', Ruth Helyer's analysis links waste to boundaries and to the body, a key connection that I similarly explore in my reading, and which informs the argument of the whole thesis (1999). Helyer argues that in *Underworld*, DeLillo

explores boundaries, particularly the thin dividing line between what is considered waste product and what is not. Any discussion about what constitutes dirt and abjection leads to questions about concepts of "the body" [...] The narrative's relentless revelation of borders as fluctuating, rather than fixed, demonstrates the problems, not only of disposing of waste, but of identifying waste in the first place' (p. 987).

Here Helyer articulates DeLillo's attention to the boundaries and limits of the body as troubled and uncertain, a key insight which I build upon and develop in my work. Meanwhile Kelsie Donnelly is doing very interesting work in a similar vein to my own, and uses Kristeva's *Power of Horror* to explore abject art and terrorism in *Falling Man* (2019). Mary Foltz explores the connection between waste and warfare in *Underworld* through the image of 'fecal bombing', and considers 'waste as weapon' in the novel (2020). Foltz prioritises bodily wastes specifically, rather than considering refuse and bodily wastes together, and her study of *Underworld* forms a chapter in her book on 'excremental culture' in American literature, thereby placing DeLillo's treatments of excrement within a broader tradition.

Gender and bodily difference in *Underworld*, *End Zone*, and *White Noise*

Gender plays a part in my readings of DeLillo but is not my main organising principle. My analyses of *Americana*, *Players* and *Underworld* posit masculinity as one among a number of containing frameworks within which DeLillo's characters seek to define themselves. For

example, my reading of *Underworld's* prologue acknowledges that the embodied experiences—telling a rape joke, urinating into a communal trough—are strongly male, but my priority is the way that bodily wastes interact with and communicate the texture and concerns of a key historical moment, rather than delineating character's experiences along gendered lines. There is an important strand of criticism that seeks to understand gendered bodies in DeLillo's fiction, and I defer to existing work on this subject. In 2001, Philip Nel identifies a need to 'deepen and expand' the study of DeLillo beyond well-travelled [...] critical grounds' (p. 146). Nel's own work on gender contributes to this necessary area of enquiry. In his article 'Amazons in the Underworld: Gender, the Body, and Power in the Novels of Don DeLillo'. Nel usefully reads the body in terms of gendered power relations, touching upon *Amazons*, *White Noise*, *Libra*, *Mao II*, and *Underworld*. I take a similar approach, reading for connections across DeLillo's oeuvre, and working to read "major" DeLillo as of a piece with the shorter, earlier, and less well known works. Reading across time periods, Nel's approach allows for new and insightful connections, particularly with his inclusion of *Amazons*, which DeLillo published under a pseudonym, and asked to be excluded from the canon. Nel's approach as well as his subject matter breaks away from a tendency to focus on DeLillo's major works. Elsewhere, Michael Hardin (2000) reads DeLillo's 1972 novel *End Zone* in terms of homosocial ritual and homosexual denial. This is a welcome interrogation of the early text, in which masculinity is intriguingly and overwhelmingly material, players' bodies figured as 'prize beef at the county fair' (DeLillo, 1972, p. 7), but Hardin's close readings stretch the material to tenuous ends.

There is a cluster of work around gender in DeLillo's 1985 novel *White Noise*. While they read an earlier novel, these were all published after the year 2000, supporting my finding that criticism on the body in DeLillo is a relatively new area of enquiry. Returning to Nel, our champion of gender in DeLillo, he provides us with an analysis of 'homicidal men and full-figured women' (2006) in *White Noise*. Meanwhile Ruth Helyer, whose 1999 article on waste and bodily boundaries is helpful to my analysis of *Underworld*, focuses on gender in two book chapters on the masculine academic in *White Noise*, and masculinity in *White*

Noise, *Underworld*, and *Libra* (2008; 2008a). Jeanne Hemming takes an ecocritical approach in her article “‘Wallowing in the great dark lake of male rage’: The Masculine Ecology of Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*’ (2009).

In ‘Falling Towers and Postmodern Wild Children: Oliver Sacks, Don DeLillo, and Turns against Language’ James Berger (2005) makes a brief study of *The Names* and *White Noise*, in relation to Oliver Sacks’ autobiographical writing on the amputation of his leg, a spiritual crisis in which a body part becomes uncanny and foreign. While I do not analyse these texts directly, Berger’s reading of bodily difference in DeLillo is insightful and has helped me in developing my own set of concerns. As I will argue, in *Players* and *Mao II*, DeLillo employs a well-worn link between bodily difference and monstrosity, a mainstay of the horror genre. Berger successfully argues that DeLillo’s writing of bodily difference *also* resists such harmful frameworks, as, through queer and disability studies, othered bodies can ‘re emerge as banished others that both destabilize and enable norms of gender and physical ability’ (p. 345)⁵.

The body, space, and time in DeLillo’s post-millennial works

The limited criticism that does consider the body in DeLillo’s work has a strong focus on the ways that characters are alienated from embodied experiences, and bodies are fragmented or reduced to postmodern semblance. While my findings do not contradict these ideas and their presence in DeLillo’s works, I identify an important and unexplored countercurrent, of bodies in the texts that are overwhelmingly material. Boxall (2017) focuses on the body’s relationship to space and time, arguing that DeLillo’s later fiction details ‘a new and distinctive relationship between historical time and the experience of embodiment, expressed in the starkest, barest of terms’. He evocatively details ‘a particular diminishment, a starving to nothing’ expressed through DeLillo’s ‘stripped, sinewy prose’, and shows us that the late works offer a ‘glimpse [of] the differently embodied life, the shifted relation to the

⁵ Berger’s argument also reminds us of the importance of separating out what characters say and what the text does: the works challenge norms of gendered behaviour, while featuring unlikeable, even abhorrent protagonists who subscribe to and perpetuate those norms.

body in empty space and stretched time' (p. 527). Boxall identifies different kinds of 'self-erasure', reading from *The Body Artist* to *Zero K* and including the short story 'The Starveling'. Jonathan Butler (2011) and Russell Scott Valentino (2007) find, regarding *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis* respectively, that the city space dominated by media and technology and governed by 'mechanical time' or 'mortgaged time' denies DeLillo's characters a dialogue with the body's sensations (2011, n.p.; 2007, p. 147). Characters are alienated from their own bodies within medical discourse and within the virtual register of cyber capital, built upon 'fantastical' foundations. For Valentino *Cosmopolis* deals in 'absent bodies' and 'liquid conceptions of the self'⁶. For Butler, DeLillo suggests the possibility of redemption, but not until his 2010 work *Point Omega*, which posits a return to 'body time', a move to 'reclaim the body' from the city space (2011, n.p). Butler finds that, prior to this, DeLillo's characters are alienated 'from the actual experiencing of their own bodies' and ignore feelings of hunger, pleasure, and sexual attraction, 'the dialogue which their bodies continuously instigate'. Butler's findings are specific to *Cosmopolis* and *Point Omega*; he does not make this claim about the entirety of DeLillo's earlier works, but at the same time we have yet to encounter scholarship that makes the case for the importance of those very sensations in the texts. As I will show, embodied experiences are vital to DeLillo's writing of lived experience. Experiences of pain, discomfort, nausea, and acts of expelling spit, shit, urine, and vomit form a strange and compelling through line, from DeLillo's debut novel, that calls for critical attention.

The Body Artist: Reading against ghosts

Anne Longmuir, in her analysis of *The Body Artist*, identifies '[t]he increasing centrality of the body in DeLillo's fiction' (2007a, p. 538). Meanwhile Linda Kauffman, in her study of 'Bodies in Rest and Motion' declares that DeLillo's 2007 novel *Falling Man* is 'obsessed with the material body' (2011, p. 201). While DeLillo's short novel of 2001 prompts a slew of body-focused readings, they tend to prioritise *The Body Artist* as a ghost story. The body,

⁶ Aaron Chandler (2009), using Levinas, similarly finds 'an unsettling, alternative self' in *Cosmopolis*.

while finally at the fore thematically, is materially absent. The protagonist Lauren is in mourning, and works to process her grief following her husband's suicide. This struggle is bound up with her uncertain relation to her body and her attempt to ground herself through performance. She encounters an ambiguous, spectral figure in her home who she names Mr. Tuttle, and towards the end of the narrative she performs a work of body art entitled 'Body Time' in which she seems to momentarily become her late husband. Pavlina Radia (2014) argues that the text details a 'postmodern transaesthetics', and that DeLillo portrays body art as 'a productive, yet potentially commodifying means of renewal whereby corporeal suffering is reduced to a plethora of aestheticized crossings' (p. 194). Elsewhere in 'The Ghost in the Tape Machine...' Mikko Keskinen explores 'posthumous voice and residual presence' in the text (2008). Laura Tanner examines 'The Ghost of the Body...' in a chapter of her book on bodies which are neither living or dead, but 'Lost', 'Inhabiting the Borders of Life and Death' (2006). Boxall concludes his 2006 monograph with a coda which prioritizes the morphing and vacant qualities of the bodies in the text. While these scholars successfully articulate the undeniable importance of loss and semblance to the text, these readings do not account for the materiality of Lauren's processes, scrubbing the soles of her feet with a pumice stone, trimming hangnails and shedding 'grains of dead skin' (2001, pp. 80-81). Once again, Philip Nel (2002) provides an important insight, acknowledging the importance of physical acts, particularly when Lauren attends to her body's boundary, alongside the shifting, unbounded nature of Mr. Tuttle, and regarding *The Body Artist* as 'return to form' (here Nel dually refers to physical form and literary form, as he argues that DeLillo returns to a modernist poetics). Laura Di Prete regards *The Body Artist* as 'Performing the Body, Narrating Trauma', reading performance art as a strategy to 'force trauma into representation' (2005, p. 484). Anne Longmuir similarly explores the idea of 'performing the body', and Sylvie Bauer considers a 'choreography of trauma' in the text (2007a; 2015). While the slim text of *The Body Artist* is often considered in contrast to its gargantuan predecessor *Underworld*, as an afterthought or aftershock, Longmuir asserts that '*The Body Artist* is an important reworking and development of some of the most salient ideas' of

DeLillo's previous works⁷ (2007a). Longmuir finds that in *The Body Artist* 'DeLillo turns to the notion of a bodily or semiotic aesthetic', and uses Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* and Foucault's *History of Sexuality* to understand Lauren's body as both shaped by societal forces, and simultaneously a site of resistance to those forces (p. 530). Works by Jacqueline Zubeck and Michael Naas also resonate and fit with my findings: Zubeck considers performance art as a work of mourning in *The Body Artist* and *Falling Man*' (in Zubeck, ed., 2020), and Naas (2008) performs an insightful reading of the interrelations between identity and the body in *The Body Artist*. Longmuir (2007a) reads for continuation and connection across the oeuvre, as does Boxall, an approach which I align myself with over critics who divide, periodize, and entrench the works in their specific contexts. DeLillo constantly revisits, repeats, and develops themes and ideas, and Naas' strategy is similarly enlightening, honouring and mirroring the density of allusions and cross-currents that run through DeLillo's works, 'webbed in obsessive detail' (*Falling Man*, 2007, p. 155).

Identity, performance, and embodiment in *Falling Man* and beyond

Together with *The Body Artist*, *Falling Man* has spawned the majority of relevant criticism. Jenn Brandt (2014) reads *Falling Man* in terms of 'topologies of 9/11' and asserts that '[p]hrases such as "the body" often mark an essentializing construction that reduces all bodies to arbitrary and externally defined stereotypes'. She argues that the bodies in *Falling Man* unsettle this, acting as 'metaphors of resistance against the totalizing, corporeal colonization involved in the making of "9/11 as event"'. She employs the figure of the Möbius strip to communicate

the ways in which narrative structure, space, and the bodies of characters [...] reveal the futility of binary logic as it relates to identity, language, and nation in response to terror [...] the Möbius strip becomes a metaphor for the ways in which the subject is neither an interior space nor an exterior surface but, rather, is always continuous with the Other (pp. 580-581).

⁷ Similarly, Nel (2002) not only attends to the physical body in the narrative, but also argues the significance of the slim text, rather than viewing it as dwarfed by its huge predecessor, *Underworld* (1997).

Here Brandt elegantly articulates the intimate and reciprocal relation between body and world, inside and outside. While I do not make use of this specific image, it is a helpful formulation which informs my approach throughout the thesis, particularly in considering the body as existing always in relation to its spatial, social, and cultural contexts. I am also inspired by the work of Ruth Helyer, who articulates a set of concerns similar to my own. She asserts in her reading of *Underworld* that ‘Any discussion about what constitutes dirt and abjection leads to questions about concepts of “the body”’, and identifies ‘[t]he narrative’s relentless revelation of borders as fluctuating, rather than fixed’ (1999, p. 987)..

I read the body of the performance artist in *Falling Man* as a potential site of recovering meaning and processing traumatic experience. I argue this in line with Kauffman, who goes so far as to assert the novel’s obsession with the material body, and Lewis Gleich, who details DeLillo’s strategy ‘to refocus attention on the body’ through the performance artist, as a corrective to ‘the predominance of images in the memory archive of 9/11 and the War on Terror’ (2011; 2014). Gleich reads the body in the text as a site of resistance, in this case challenging the postmodern proliferation of images. I build upon these readings, which stand out among readings that consider the performance artist ‘Falling Man’ in primarily aesthetic terms, such as Laura Frost’s (2008) reading of 9/11’s falling bodies as ‘still life’, and Boxall’s attention to the specific placements of the body—‘Slow Man, Dangling Man, Falling Man’—in relation to the ethical implications of the text (2010).

In a 2013 article Katrina Harack explores the interrelation of body, space, and time, in a reading of *White Noise* and *Falling Man*, and articulates the way that memories are ‘embedded’ and ‘embodied’ in the texts, finding similarity rather than contrast in the early and the late novel. Identifying these concerns in the earlier work is a significant insight, as we have seen much discussion of space and time regarding the later works. Harack regards questions of embodiment as a consistent through line rather than a recent turn in DeLillo’s fiction, as I seek to do, and I am excited by Harack’s reading and the way it chimes with my own approach. Similarly, Trevor Westmoreland (2019) finds that the postmillennial work ‘from

The Body Artist to *Zero K* is newly focused on ‘embodiment and the significance of place’, but seeks to reorient this critical focus through a reading of the earlier short story *The Ivory Acrobat* (1998)⁸. For Benjamin Bird (2007), *Cosmopolis* ‘insist[s] on the need for reflection on the body, both as a site of trauma and as a palimpsest-like history of the human subject, which may be examined for clues to the interrelation of past and present’. Bird demonstrates that in DeLillo’s post-9/11 fiction, history, emotion, and mourning are expressed in relation to the body.

In a 1990 article on *White Noise*, Hayles identifies ‘a characteristic strain in postmodern life’:

On the one hand, we all experience ourselves as embodied creatures, living in specific times and places and limited by the biological, cultural, and historical inheritances that define us. On the other, contemporary technology, especially informatics, has given us the sense that we can transcend these limitations and live a disembodied, free-floating existence made possible in part by the near-instantaneous transfer of information from one point on the globe to any other. Both senses are evident in postmodern theories and culture; neither succeeds in negating the other. Existing in uneasy juxtaposition, they push against each other, the conflicts and contradictions between them unresolved. (1990, p. 394)

DeLillo’s engagement with these ideas is undeniable, as we see detailed in much of the above literature, but as Hayles figures the relationship a disembodied existence is always bound up with and cannot escape its counterpart, an unavoidable materiality. Many existing readings do not give sufficient space to this tension, this ever-present duality. I work to correct this, to acknowledge and articulate the ways in which this *duality* is expressed throughout DeLillo’s fiction.

Of DeLillo’s post-millennial works, Boxall states that it is possible ‘to glimpse the differently embodied life, the shifted relation to the body in empty space and stretched time, that it harbors’ (2017, pp. 526-527). Boxall here identifies a new concern in the ‘exhausted aridity’ of DeLillo’s later works. As he shows in readings of *The Body Artist*, *Point Omega*,

⁸ While Westmoreland—similarly to Valentino and Jonathan Butler—cites an ‘altered experience of time and space in the modern era’, he argues that DeLillo advances a response to this ‘based in a reaffirmation of the body as the seat of being’ (2020, n.p.).

and the short story *The Starveling*, DeLillo's post-millennial fiction is newly invested in the body under the conditions of 'stretched time' that are subjected to starvation, disappearance, and various kinds of unbecoming. This attention to bodies that are unmade and re-made in the texts is valid and necessary, but asserting a new and troubled formulation of the body implies a stable "before" period, in which issues surrounding embodiment were not problematised or simply did not feature. Boxall himself explores how the periodising impulse to group and separate the canon into categories of 'early' and 'late' can be an unhelpful and artificial process, and he reads always across the oeuvre for intertextual connections. This is demonstrated when he likens Mr. Tuttle of *The Body Artist* to the 'soft boned disfigurement' of 'the Micklewhite kid' in an early, lesser-studied text, *Great Jones Street*, noting his 'peeled' appearance and the 'moist surface of his face' (DeLillo, 1972, p. 155). Bodies have always had an unruly presence in DeLillo's fiction. The spectral or evacuated bodies in the later works represent only the latest in a long line of disruptions and challenges to embodiment, which in DeLillo's fictional project begins with the onset of the Cold War. As set out in Donna Haraway's influential work *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) and Katherine Hayles' thorough account of the field in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), technological and social developments force us to rethink and expand the category of the human, as bodies are newly and increasingly entangled with technology⁹.

I find that readings of the posthuman in the later works do not acknowledge the blunt refusal: DeLillo returns always to a corporeality. DeLillo's exploration of posthuman possibility is bounded and limited, not even as advanced as Haraway's formative text. DeLillo brings us back always to an undeniable materiality, as we will see in Eric Packer's repeated assertion that 'this is who he was' (2003, p. 207). As such, I find work on the posthuman in DeLillo interesting but not always acknowledging this aspect. In *Underworld's* final pages DeLillo takes on the phenomenon of the internet, which had only recently become widely accessible. The nun Sister Edgar dies and transcends to a kind of 'digital

⁹ Boxall explores this at length in his book *The Prosthetic Imagination: A History of the Novel as Artificial Life* (2020).

afterlife' in 'a leap from the convent cell and the sequestered self to a new, limitless interdependence' (Begley, 1997, n.p.). This jump into cyberspace is signalled with a now-defunct hyperlink, '[http://blk.www/dd.com/miraculum](http://blk.www.dd.com/miraculum)', in a passage that now seems dated (DeLillo, 1997, p. 810). In *Cosmopolis* and *Zero K* in particular, we encounter technology that carries the possibility of posthuman transcendence. Sonia Front explores transfers of consciousness: 'Minds in New Bodies', and Adèle Nel studies posthuman bodies in *Zero K* (2020; 2021). In *Cosmopolis* (2003), Eric Packer dreams of living within the technological register of cyber capitalism, 'transcending his body mass, the soft tissue over the bones, the muscle and fat' to 'live outside given limits, in a chip, on a disk, as data', to succeed in 'the practical mapping of the nervous system onto digital memory'. Eric realises that

The things that made him who he was lived and milled in his body, everywhere, random, riotous [...] this is who he was [...] the stuff he sneezes when he sneezes [...] He'd come to know himself, untranslatably, through his pain [...] the small wart he feels on his thigh every time he showers [...] and his strangely achy knee, the click in his knee when he bends it, all him, and so much else that's not convertible to some high sublime, the technology of mind-without-end. (pp. 206-208)

Eric's reflective listing of intimate, everyday sensations brings him back, simply and repeatedly, to 'him' and to 'who he was'. In *Mao II*, the novelist Bill Gray insists that his 'true biography' would be 'a chronicle of gas pains and skipped heartbeats, grinding teeth and dizzy spells and smothered breath, with detailed descriptions of [him] leaving his desk to walk to the bathroom and spit up mucus (1991, p. 135). Shards of glass from an explosion embed themselves in his hand cause a pain that is familiar from childhood: 'It was a summer wound, a play wound, one of the burns and knee-scrapes and splinters of half a century ago' (p. 129). For Eric in *Cosmopolis*, 'his pain interfered with his immortality' (2003, p. 207). For Lauren, the body artist, through whom DeLillo's engagement with embodiment is later magnified, filling the slim text, the body is similarly experienced as an archive of sensation, as 'she isolated a digit for sharp regard', scraping at a callus on her foot with 'the kind of

solemn self-absorption that marks a line from childhood' (2001, p. 80). Looking back to DeLillo's first novel, *David Bell*—another writer—declares that within the 'orderly proportions' of his autobiography '[t]oo much has been forgotten'; 'the scar on my right index finger, the white medicine I took as a child, the ether visions of my tonsillectomy' are missing. To David these details are vital: 'the resonance of these distant things is sheer thunder, outlasting immortal books, long and short wars, journeys to other planets' (1971, pp. 345-346). The primacy of sensations, from intimate, everyday discomforts to serious sickness and wounding, is declared repeatedly. While I will perform a sustained reading of some of these moments later on, reading for their nuance and relating them to the particular concerns of each work, the protagonist of *Cosmopolis* is subject to the same kind of revelation as *Americana*, a sentiment that is remarkably unchanged across the decades. The historical and cultural developments that DeLillo charts do impact the way that bodies are thought, but only up to a point, at which thoughts of posthuman transcendence are interrupted by a blunt thesis, an insistence upon of the materiality of the body and the vital primacy of embodied experience. This sense, of the impossibility of thinking beyond the body, is recapitulated when Eric Packer states that 'When he died he would not end. The world would end' (*Cosmopolis*, 2003, p. 6), and when a character in *Mao II* declares: 'I'll tell you when a book is finished. When the writer keels over with a great big thump' (1991, p. 73). In *Point Omega* speculations on apocalypse—'transcendence, paroxysm, the end of human consciousness'—are made suddenly trite and unimportant when a character learns that his daughter is missing in the desert, perhaps murdered:

It seemed so much dead echo now. Point omega. A million years away. The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as it enters a body. All the man's grand themes funneled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere, or not. (2010, p. 124)

Near the beginning of DeLillo's career as a novelist, in *End Zone*, the unthinkable nature and scope of the destruction wrought by a nuclear explosion has a counterweight in bodies:

[L]anguage moves masses of people or a few momentous objects into significant juxtaposition. After that it becomes almost mathematical. The placements take over. It becomes some sort of historical calculus. [...] A million pilgrims face Mecca. Think of the power behind that fact. All turning now. And bending. And praying. (1972, pp. 43-44)

The vision of finance capital detailed in *Cosmopolis* offered its own kind of immortality in ideologies of aggressive, unending growth and the acquisition of unlimited wealth, which ended with a crash. *Zero K* considers immortality through a technology that is markedly retro. In *Zero K*, the act of subjecting bodies to cryogenic freezing relies on the belief that a process of reanimation will be successfully developed in the future. As such it is speculative, '[f]aith-based technology', predicated upon a scientific advancement that does not yet exist (2016, p. 9). From the sceptical viewpoint of Jeffrey Lockhart whose mother and father decide to undergo the process, the possibility of this afterlife is not really indulged. He regards the subjects, shaved and naked, asleep inside body pods, and we seem to have arrived back where we started, as a disciple of the process declares, 'we will know ourselves as never before, blood, brain and skin' (p. 130).

Chapter outline

Chapter One explores *Falling Man*'s (2007) dual attention to possibilities and limitations of the body and narrative form, through which DeLillo suggests strategies to express and process traumatic violence that we encounter as incomprehensible or unspeakable. Chapter Two interrogates *Mao II* (1991) and *The Body Artist* (2001), asking how embodiment and subjectivity is understood at the body's limits, at the site of the skin and in the matter that is expelled. Selfhood is lost and regained here, through creative acts of writing and bodily performance, and troubled by spectres of bodily difference, monstrosity, and 'leaky' subjectivity. Here the body's waste products, and even pain and sickness, act as positive and meaningful carriers of identity. Chapter Three explores *Americana* (1971) in terms of the rejection and casting out of body wastes rendered as abject, and the relationship of this movement to a concurrent cultural process of othering, by which the grotesque elements of

U.S. history are suppressed. Chapter Four explores *Underworld* (1997) with a focus on body wastes, which are given narrative priority and characterised in bizarre formulations. These are integral to the articulation of the texture and timbre of the culture, and through detailed attention to vomit and shit, everyday lived experience is expressed in consort with grand historical forces. Finally, Chapter Five explores *Players* (1977), arguing the ways in which characters' relationships to food and sex—bodily concerns here made grotesque once again—reflect the vacant and meaningless qualities of life under capitalism. At the same time, through the destruction of masculine bodies and ideologies, the novel suggests that frameworks that bound lived experience and behaviour might be undone; once perceived as safe, containing structures, their harmful and illusory nature is revealed.

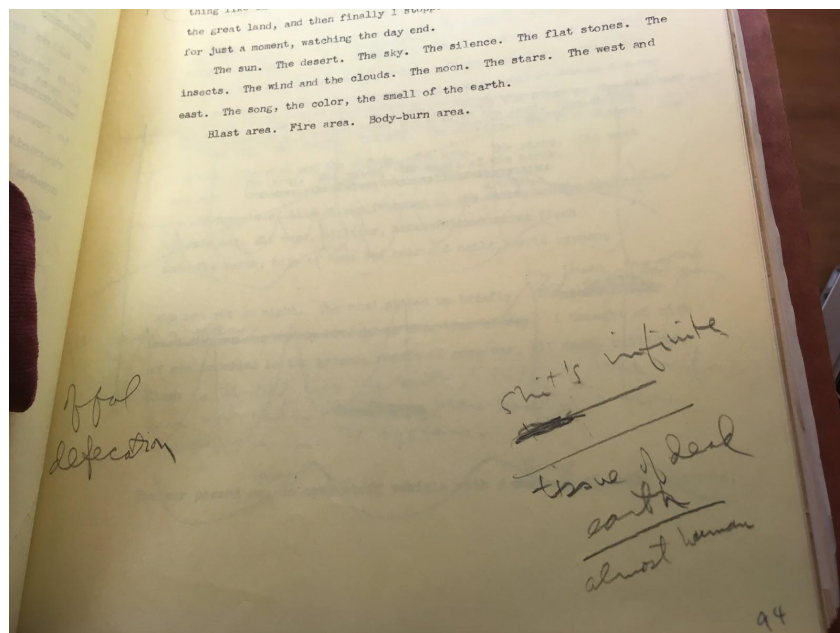


Figure 1: Draft revision page for *End Zone*.

Marginalia reads 'offal/defecation'.

Don DeLillo Papers, container 20.3, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Chapter One: Bodily Integrity and Narrative Control in *Falling Man*

Many of the theoretical and fictional responses to 9/11 grapple with traumatic experience as something that resists comprehension and representation. Cathy Caruth, in her 1996 book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* explains that trauma cannot be fully experienced as it occurs, and can be perceived only through a retroactive return. There is no 'simple knowledge' of the original event to be recovered (1996, p. 5). According to Caruth, trauma 'is not locatable in the simple violent or original event, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on' (p. 4). Caruth identifies a 'central problem of listening, of knowing, and of representing that emerges from the actual experience of the crisis' (p. 5), and this sense of traumatic experience as confounding modes of representation is strongly apparent in the following decade, as scholars attempt to engage with the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, invoking Caruth's foundational text. In conversation with Giovanna Borradori, Jacques Derrida declares that when we speak the various names by which we refer to the attacks, we announce our inability to comprehend the events:

'Something' took place, [...] out of range for a language that admits its powerlessness and so is reduced to pronouncing mechanically a date, repeating it endlessly, as a kind of ritual incantation, a conjuring poem [...] We do not in fact know what we are saying or naming in this way [...] The brevity of the appellation (September 11, 9/11) stems not only from an economic or rhetorical necessity. The telegram of this metonymy—a name, a number—points out the unqualifiable by recognizing that we do not recognize or even cognize, that we do not yet know how to qualify, that we do not know what we are talking about. (Derrida, cited in Borradori, 2003, p. 86)

For Derrida, the terror attacks confound our understanding; we lack the critical apparatus to comprehend them, and language becomes powerless in the face of the event¹⁰¹¹. DeLillo responded to the 9/11 attacks in a nonfiction essay 'In the Ruins of the Future' in December of 2001, followed by the novel *Falling Man*, published in 2007. In both texts, DeLillo engages with 9/11 as a crisis of knowledge and representation, but the novel *Falling Man* also offers us something more generative and hopeful. In the novel, the imposition of narrative coherence upon the events of 9/11 is presented as a futile and impossible task, and instead, we are asked to consider the ways that the body might carry vital and dynamic meaning; how it might 'speak' for itself. To borrow a term from a doctor in *Cosmopolis*, who reassures the protagonist Eric Packer about a blackhead, 'a plug of sebum and cell debris on his lower abdomen', we must 'let it express itself' (2003, p. 45). My analysis of *Falling Man* illustrates this central premise: in the novel, narrative is shown to be insufficient to the task of processing the trauma of the attacks, and DeLillo turns instead to a material, embodied register. The novel's two central characters, Keith and Lianne, have differing relationships to their own bodies, and to attendant ideas of control and bodily integrity. DeLillo advances a way of thinking about authority and control which relates to the characters' attitudes to embodiment, and in turn to ideas about the role of the author. Keith, who was working in the North tower when the first plane struck, struggles to process his status as a survivor, and experiences the aftermath as a troubling loss of integrity as a subject. To him, the traumatic events effect a breakdown of boundaries, between body and world, self and other. This breakdown of elemental, differential meaning results in the loss of stable, discrete, and continuous selfhood. Meanwhile, DeLillo offers an alternative mode of being, in Lianne's fluid and dynamic relation to the world. Linda Kauffman rightfully draws our attention to *Falling Man*'s status as 'a novel obsessed with the corporeal body' (2011, p. 135) and by attending

¹⁰ Lewis Gleich's (2014) study of 'Ethics in the Wake of the Image' in *Falling Man* cites Derrida's (2003) argument that the 'excessively visible nature of 9/11 preempted any effective "hermeneutic apparatus", that the attacks destabilized our attempts to "comprehend, interpret, describe, speak of" the events (p. 93).

¹¹ It is important to note that my analysis, with its focus on the material, departs from Caruth's model of trauma: As Aaron Mauro explains, Caruth relegates falling to a metaphorical realm, which actually serves to undermine bodily experience (2011, p. 588).

to the various ways that meaning is expressed through the bodies in the text, we can see that DeLillo offers an embodied register as a generative way of approaching and processing traumatic experience, a rich and promising alternative to the limited capacities of narrative¹².

In the novel's opening, Keith makes his way through the streets in the immediate aftermath of the first plane striking the North tower of the World Trade Center. Throughout the narrative, in the days, weeks, and years after, he recovers fragments of memory of being in the tower when the plane struck. In the novel's climax we finally return to the scene of the attacks, and learn of the fate of Keith's friend Rumsey, who worked alongside him in the North tower. Keith tries and fails to rescue his wounded friend, and must abandon him so that he can escape himself. Framed by the opening and concluding passages set at the scene of the attacks, the novel follows the activities of Keith, his wife Lianne—once estranged and then tentatively reconciled—their son Justin, Lianne's mother and her lover Martin, and Florence, a fellow survivor from the towers with whom Keith begins an affair. Keith's crisis of selfhood is bound up with the fate of his friend, and for both men DeLillo portrays a mode of being in which a positive relation to the world is aligned with a sense of control, expressed in tactile terms as a secure and stable interaction. Rumsey's way of relating to the world is addressed briefly, in a strange and significant detail. He confides to Keith that he has 'compulsions', a habit of counting women's toes.

He admitted this to his friend. [...] He was compelled to count things including the digits that constitute the foreparts of a woman's foot [...] the fixation was not directed toward sexual ends. It was the counting that mattered, even if the outcome was established in advance. Toes on one foot, toes on the other. Always totaling ten. [...] Women on benches or steps, reading or doing crosswords, [...] sandaled women, some of them, toes exposed [...] the counting always led to ten. This was not a discouragement or impediment. Ten is the beauty of it. This is probably why I do it. To get that sameness, Rumsey said. Something holds, something stays in place.
(DeLillo, 2007, pp. 121-122)

¹² Throughout DeLillo's work there is a sustained interest in the creative impulses of artists and novelists. In *Falling Man*, he departs from a metafictional mode and looks at other kinds of artistic expression as well. Graley Herren, in his book *The Self-Reflexive Art of Don DeLillo* (2019) usefully explores DeLillo's fictional engagements with images and texts. For Herren a number of DeLillo's characters, and not just the ones that are actually authors themselves, fulfil the role of 'embedded author', including Nick Shay in *Underworld* (1998) and Jeff Lockhart in *Zero K* (2016).

The logic of this ritual relies on the shoe, revealing the toes yet holding the foot in place. 'Looking for women in open-toed sandals' (p. 121), Rumsey explains that 'The toes meant nothing if they were not defined by sandals. Barefoot women on the beach were not about their feet' (p. 122). Here the sandal provides a containing context, which bestows significance on the toes and makes the act of counting important and necessary. This sense of containment and stability is also present in the sameness that Rumsey finds across different women's bodies, the toes 'always totaling ten'. The repeated act of counting depends on the reliability of bodily sameness: that each foot has the predicted and 'correct' number of toes. Rumsey seeks to verify that his expectations match up with the external world, by literally tallying up body parts, the outcome 'established in advance' (p. 121). For Rumsey, the idea that he may one day encounter a foot with a differing number of toes is a source of profound significance and wonder. Keith questions what would happen if 'you count and count again, and there are nine digits, or eleven'. Rumsey replies, 'I would ask her to marry me [...] Because I would understand that I was cured, like Lourdes, and could stop counting now' (p. 123). Rumsey likens this mythical encounter to the Catholic holy site. But in Rumsey's miracle the role of the body is reversed. Pilgrims visit Lourdes to be cleansed of sin and cured of their ailments. The hoped-for miracle is that the individual will shed their disease or deformity and be made 'whole' once again. Difference will be erased as they are granted a healthy, normative body. In contrast to this movement, from 'flawed' to healed, the miracle that will cure Rumsey of his compulsive behaviour is an instance of bodily difference. Mathematics is a mode of comprehending the world that originates in the body, confirmed in the act of counting on our fingers and thumbs, and this method relies on anatomical sameness; that the digits of our hands number ten¹³. Rumsey relies on his compulsive counting, but at the same time yearns to be free of it, attributing a myth-like significance to

¹³ In *Ratner's Star*, Billy Twillig ponders this bodily origin: 'What predated the base of sixty? Calendric notations on bone tools? Toes and fingers?' (1976, p. 8).

an imagined woman with an irregular number of toes¹⁴. Rumsey's personal ritual seems to be constructed as a way to maintain a sense of control, but also contains within it the pull of difference: Rumsey describes the counting of toes as securing a sense of safety in sameness, but he also feels desire for the absent body part. This detail suggests that the drive towards order and control, that we see in the character of Keith, is in fact not a stable or reliable framework through which to relate to the world. A system predicated on bodily integrity is troubled by the existence of difference, of other kinds of bodies that exist outside this legible frame.

Barring the imagined miracle and its shattering of the terms of the ritual, Rumsey's compulsion to count meets a need for a sense of containment; in the sameness of the feet, in the consistency of the act of counting, and in the feeling of safety and stability that it brings. When Rumsey counts ten toes, 'something holds, something stays in place' (p. 122)¹⁵. The detail of Rumsey's compulsion is significant in terms of its emphasis on control, in the way that the perceiving subject makes sense of the world, and of bodies in particular. In the novel's climax, Rumsey's body becomes incoherent, uncountable as 'one', prompting a breakdown of stable categories of body/world. This sense of a loss of boundaries is key to the horror that Keith experiences in the tower, finally revealed to us at the novel's climax. There is a levelling of matter in which human bodies merge with building wreckage. The scene is full of parallels between body and environment; jet fuel 'oozing', bile 'trickling'. The shaking of the building is a 'spasm'. The 'bare framework, truss bars, where the ceiling had been' mirrors the wound on Rumsey's head, 'an indentation, a gouge mark, deep, exposing raw tissue and nerve' (p. 241). Keith tries to lift Rumsey to carry him out of the building, but the man dies in his arms. Leaving his friend behind, and joining the throngs of people making the long walk down the stairs to escape, Keith 'smelled something dismal and

¹⁴ While Prince Charming sought out the one woman whose foot fit the glass slipper, for Rumsey's elusive Cinderella figure for whom he searches in parks and on subways, it is a non-normative body that holds the key to true love.

¹⁵ This sense of absent or concealed body parts that are charged with libidinal energy is also expressed in *Americana*. Protagonist David watches his friend Sullivan at a party, as 'She slipped her right foot out of her shoe and then, with exquisite nonchalance, tucked her leg way up behind her against the wall so that it disappeared, storklike, behind the shroud of her trenchcoat. She remained that way, on one leg, a cryptic shoe moored beneath her. [...] I was drawn to her, terribly' (pp. 7-8).

understood it was him, things sticking to his skin, dust particles, smoke, some kind of oily grit on his face and hand mixing with the body slop, paste-like, with the blood and saliva and cold sweat, and it was himself he smelled, and Rumsey' (p. 244). Keith walks away with minor injuries, but his selfhood is contaminated by the chaotic abjection of the scene. He hears the tower fall, but feels that he is still 'back there' among 'all those writhing lives' (p. 4). He is immersed in 'the stink of fuel fire' and the 'steady rip of sirens [...] stratified sound collecting around them' (p. 4). The disorienting atmosphere seems to confound spatial logic, making escape impossible as 'he walked away from it and into it at the same time' (p. 4)¹⁶. Reeling at the fact that he has survived, Lianne describes his appearance falteringly: 'not possible, up from the dead [...] [l]ike gray soot head to toe, I don't know, like smoke, standing there' (p. 8). Keith similarly cannot comprehend himself as a subject, thinking '[m]aybe this is the way things look when there's no-one there to see them' (p. 5). He 'tried to tell himself he was alive but the idea was too obscure to take hold' (pp. 5-6). The horrors that he witnesses are alluded to in small narrative eruptions; two women watch the burning towers, 'sobbing, faces in collapse' (p. 4), and later Keith regards the 'mutilated remains' of a cookie (p. 54).

¹⁶ This disorientation continues throughout the text. Keith is having an affair with Florence, a fellow survivor. He leaves her apartment but 'was still back there with Florence, double in himself, coming and going, the walks across the park and back, the deep shared self, down through the smoke, and then here again to safety and family' (p. 157). In both instances, he manoeuvres his body through space successfully, but his subjective experience trails behind his physical location.

Part One

Narrative uncertainty, illegible texts

In the tower, the body of Rumsey, a man who finds a kind of libidinal comfort and reassurance in counting women's toes, seems to dissipate into its environment, a person disintegrated into 'shambles'¹⁷. Attempting to carry his friend out of the building, Keith 'looked at Rumsey, who's fallen away from him, upper body lax, face barely belonging. The whole business of being Rumsey was in shambles now' (p. 243)¹⁸. In this colloquial, dismissive statement, Rumsey's death is characterised with economy as a loss of personhood. He slides into anonymity, and, no longer named, 'the man opened his eyes and died' (p. 243). This detail calls back to the novel's opening passage; having escaped to the street, Keith is handed a bottle of water, and '[h]e closed his eyes and drank' (p. 5). The act of drinking, 'feeling the water pass into his body taking dust and soot down with it' is expressed as carrying both life and death within it. The gestures of dying and survival are exchanged, the dead man with his eyes open, the other with eyes closed. This connection across the novel's opening and closing passages is an exchange that binds victim and survivor together, and Keith's recovery is an attempt to extricate himself, to become distinct once again. The breaking down of boundaries that we see in the tower is key to understanding Keith's attempted recovery. The abject merging of matter is present throughout his stilted attempts at psychic healing. He resolves to visit his old apartment, near the site of the fallen towers. As he makes his way through the wreckage, there is 'a stink in the air that infiltrated the skin'. He senses that '[t]he dead were everywhere, in the air, in the rubble [...] They were settled in ash and drizzled on windows all along the streets, in his hair and on his clothes' (p. 25). More horrible than bodies of the dead among wreckage, there is a confusion of

¹⁷ The term 'in shambles' is reminiscent of the way bodies/texts are described elsewhere, as I will discuss in Chapter Two. The monstrous novel in *Mao II* 'dragging through the house', 'creeping feebly' (1991, p. 55; p. 92) and DeLillo describes his debut novel *Americana* as 'shaggy', in disarray (DeLillo, cited in Alter, 2010, n.p.).

¹⁸ This remark invokes the conversational, dismissive tone of the refrain we find in the novel's opening, 'whatever that means' (2007, p. 5).

categories here. Every part of the environment is suffused or covered with the dead, a presence that is insubstantial but overwhelming¹⁹. In details such as 'a skeletal remnant of the tower' and 'windows [...] scabbed in sand and ash', the environment itself takes on bodily qualities, furthering the breakdown of distinctions between body and world (p. 25; p. 27)²⁰. Keith returns to his apartment to try and salvage key texts of self verification: 'his passport, checkbooks, birth certificate and a few other documents, the state papers of identity' (p. 27). He has to persuade police to let him pass into the restricted area, and invents a story that his child is very worried about the family cat, and that he must return to his apartment to search for it. Unsuccessful, he tries another checkpoint and augments the story; 'there were cats he had to feed, three of them, and if they died his children would be devastated' (p. 24). The cat is now multiple cats, the child has become children. Questioned once more as he approaches his apartment, he again 'mentioned the cats and the children' (p. 25). The officer who does let him pass performs a revision of his own, stating 'if you're stopped down there be sure to tell them you went through the Broadway checkpoint, not this one²¹' (p. 24). In this exchange, both people revise the version of events. Keith's story is a fabrication that imitates a coherent need, intended to provoke empathy and achieve a desired result. He repeatedly proffers 'proof of address and picture ID' and 'the splint on his left arm' as a further credential (p. 24). When he reaches his apartment he sheds these necessary stories of identity, noting 'there were no cats' (p. 27), as though the status of the cats as fictional needs to be re-clarified. Keith cites these real and invented details—a home,

¹⁹ Details of the scene bring ideas of abjection, waste, and contamination to the fore. The cleanup operation is characterised as an attempt to contain the all-consuming 'shroud of sand and ash', the 'stink in the air that infiltrated the skin' (p. 24). The wreckage is mixed with everyday waste, 'garbage bags stacked high at curbstones and against the slides of buildings' (p. 24). The entrance hall of Keith's building 'reeked of garbage' (p. 26) and he 'walked down to the lobby, smelling the garbage coming closer with every step' (p. 27). Keith passes 'a convoy of dump trucks and sanitation sweepers moving south through the parted sawhorse barriers' (pp. 23-24). There are 'workers in respirators and protective body suits scouring the sidewalk with a massive vacuum pump' (p. 26). The words of a passerby are 'muffled' and 'smothered' by his mask (p. 25). In contrast to these protective measures, Keith has lost his own sense of bodily integrity.

²⁰ This adoption of body terminology continues elsewhere in more innocuous details, such as a description of 'the anatomy of race cars' (p. 41).

²¹ Keith tries to shape other people's identities and environments in the same way: he comments to his affair partner, 'I see you with a cat, definitely. There ought to be a cat slipping along the walls' (p. 107).

three cats, devastated children, a wounded arm—as props that bolster his story, but they conceal the reality of a shattered subject:

The windows were scabbed in sand and ash and there were fragments of paper and one whole sheet trapped in the grime [...] At the window the intact page stirred in the breeze and he went over to see if it was readable. Instead he looked at the visible sliver of One Liberty Plaza and began to count the floors, losing interest about halfway up, thinking of something else [...] maybe he was thinking of the man who used to live here and he checked the bottles and cartons for a clue. The paper rustled at the window and he picked up the suitcase and walked out the door, locking it behind him. [...] He said, 'I'm standing here', and then, louder, 'I'm standing here'. (p. 27)

Keith is severed from his past in a way that makes self-narration impossible; he can only wonder at 'the man who used to live here'. Revisiting this site, looking for connections to self and to home, he tries distractedly to find a legible message in the objects around him, but gleans nothing from the bottles and cartons, or the single sheet of paper. He speaks the phrase 'I'm standing here', as if to will himself into being²². With this basic declaration of material reality, Keith tries to ground himself as an embodied subject, but this is in fact an act of imitation. He adopts the phrase, spoken by a man he encountered in the street moments earlier. These attempts at taking stock—counting the floors of a building that remains intact among the wreckage, seeking out identifying documents, declaring 'I'm standing here'—resound with Derrida's reading of 'September 11' as an empty signifier. Faced with inarticulate trauma, language 'admits its powerlessness and so is reduced to pronouncing mechanically a date, repeating it endlessly, as a kind of ritual incantation' (Derrida, cited in Borradori, 2003, p. 86). Elsewhere, in 'In the Ruins of the Future', DeLillo makes more explicit the status of possessions and documents as hollow and meaningless, rather than reifying a secure identity. He imagines the terrorist in training 'waiting, taking flying lessons, making the routine gestures of community and home, the credit card, the bank account, the post-office box' (2001a, n.p.). Yet these gestures are 'tactical', intended to conceal and

²² The identities of the suicide bombers are similarly disrupted: Lianne reads a newspaper article the which features rows of names and photographs. Here the terrorists seem to be coming into being for the first time: 'Only one of nineteen seemed to have a face at this point' (p. 19).

protect the true, murderous intentions of the man who holds no empathy towards his intended victims: 'there is no defenceless human at the end of his gaze'.

Keith experiences the trauma of the attacks as a spatial and temporal dislocation. When the tower falls in the novel's opening, Keith experiences a troubled relation between himself, his friend's body, and the building itself; he asserts that 'that was him coming down, the north tower' (p. 5). In a crucial moment of confusion, the uncertainty of the subject here, the ambiguous 'him' indicates the loss of clarity with which Keith struggles throughout the novel. The breakdown of Rumsey's 'broad and squarish body' (p. 121) has effected an essential loss of coherence. In the weeks and months following the attacks, Keith develops his own bodily ritual, repeating therapeutic exercises designed to help his hand heal. Yet his attention is drawn to anything but the physical experience, and he defers instead to external frameworks. Repeating a set of prescribed actions, he focuses on the attendant texts and terminology as much as the actions themselves, as 'He read the instruction sheet. He curled the hand into a gentle fist' (p. 40). 'In deep concentration, working on the hand shapes', Keith feels that '[i]t wasn't the torn cartilage that was the subject of this effort. It was the chaos, the levitation of ceilings and floors, the voices choking in smoke'. This seems to suggest that psychic recuperation is possible, but the ritual does nothing to address Keith's sense of dislocation. He dwells on the words 'gentle fist', not his but 'their term [...] the rehab center's term, used in the instruction sheet'²³. Here language distracts, pulling Keith away to other trains of thought rather than directing him towards his own bodily movements and sensations. He engages in 'the counting of repetitions', his body parts dislocated and anonymous: he observes his arm resting on the table, 'left forearm placed along the near edge, hand dangling from the adjoining edge [...] the wrist extensions, the ulnar deviations

²³ Keith's estrangement from his body is particularly apparent in a medical context. In the hospital after his escape from the tower, Keith is told 'things he could not absorb about a ligament' (p. 15). The reading of his body by a medical authority is incomprehensible to him, as useless as 'babble' (*White Noise*, 1984, p. 292), and bears no relation to his subjective reality. His inability to 'absorb' biological and anatomical information resurfaces at a key moment: in the tower he describes 'something' trickling out of Rumsey's mouth, 'like bile. What's bile look like?' (p. 241). Elsewhere Lianne's mother undergoes a scan that is an unpleasant and painful experience. Here the emphasis is not on treatment and cure; instead medical intervention disrupts embodied experience and impacts it in a strongly negative way.

[...] the use of the uninvolved hand to apply pressure to the involved hand' (p. 40). The act of counting as a means of taking stock is prioritised above the embodied experience, as are other aspects of the ritual; 'the counting of seconds, the counting of repetitions, the times of day he reserved for the exercises, the ice he applied following each set'. Keith attends to anything but the body at the centre of these efforts²⁴. Such a process of rehabilitation relies on the subject feeling and responding to bodily cues of pain, which communicate wounding and, by their absence, healing. The sense of displacement, that the body is not the 'true subject' of this ritual, means that Keith cannot access the embodied knowledge of recovery. The act is perpetually dislocated from the body. Keith continues these exercises years after the event, long after his hand had healed, a healing that is only noted, not felt. Earlier, Keith proffered his bandaged arm as evidence, a prop to support his argument that he be allowed into a restricted area. Here, exercising his damaged hand, he does not approach the act in terms of sensation, attending instead to other aspects of the ritual. His reliance on 'the instruction sheet' and the words 'gentle fist' place the focus on the language of healing, not on the experience itself. Meanwhile, Lianne experiences something very different, a powerful sense of self-knowledge that originates in her body:

[O]ne late night, undressing, [...] [she] yanked a clean green T-shirt over her head and it wasn't sweat she smelled or maybe just a faint trace but not the sour reek of the morning run. It was just her, the body through and through. It was the body and everything it carried, inside and out, identity and memory and human heat. It wasn't something she smelled so much as knew. It was something she'd always known. The child was in it, the girl who wanted to be other people, and obscure things she could not name. (p. 236)

In comparison to Keith's reliance on various texts and narrative objects (his passport, his wounded arm, the medical instruction sheet) as a means of regaining his 'grip' upon the world, Lianne here experiences an embodied self-knowledge that asserts itself simply and

²⁴ Lianne notes that 'even the program of exercises he did for his postsurgical wrist seemed a little detached [...] an odd set of extensions and flexions' (p. 59). In contrast, their son Justin 'could toss a baseball all day and be purely and inexhaustibly happy, unmarked by sin', joyfully immersed in the simplicity of 'Throw and catch'. Later Rumsey, playing ice hockey, his 'body crashing the boards' could be 'free of aberrant need for a couple of happy shattering hours' (p. 122). In these cases, strenuous physical activity is associated with virtue and with uncomplicated joy.

powerfully; 'just her, the body through and through'. As we will see, Lianne's access to this mode of being sheds light on Keith's attempts at self-knowledge, revealing his reliance on narrative coherence and bodily integrity to be misguided.

The compulsive habits of Keith's friend Rumsey are not confined to counting toes. They extend to a more general desire to amass information: 'He counted parked cars in the street, windows in a building a block away. He counted the steps he took, here to there' (p. 121). Following his escape, Keith attempts, with limited success, to recover a coherent relation to the world in terms of his relation to objects, particularly through counting. We see this as he tries to reckon with the altered skyline by beginning 'to count the floors' of a building but is quickly distracted, 'thinking of something else' (p. 27). Trauma is manifest as a confounding of space and boundaries, and Keith is unable to comprehend himself as 'standing here' and Rumsey as 'back there' (p. 27; p. 4). In both men's habitual counting, we encounter a ritualised and neurotic way of taking stock of the world. They belong to a type of character that features often in DeLillo's fiction: individuals who amass information as a means of gaining a perceived control. In *Libra* (1988), CIA archivist Nicholas Branch dedicates his life and career to collating and studying an unending wealth of material relating to the Kennedy assassination. In *Mao II* (1991), Scott, assistant to the writer Bill Gray, methodically collects and organises Bill's extensive notes and revisions, a bulky collection that contrasts the slim output of his single published novel. Towards the end of DeLillo's debut novel *Americana* the narrative jumps forward, and the protagonist David, now an old man, explains that he is the author of the story we have been reading up until that point. There is an emphasis on the materiality of the text which he refers to as a 'fond object':

I like to look at it, pages neatly stacked, hundreds of them, their differences hidden from the eye. Every so often I move the manuscript to another room in order to be surprised by it as I enter that room. It never fails to be a touching thing, my book on a pinewood table, poetic in its loneliness, totally still.
(1971/1990, p. 346)

The imagined end point of these painstaking endeavours is the deriving (or imposing) of narrative order from textual chaos. In the opening scenes of *Falling Man*, documents are

dissipated among the debris of buildings and bodies, 'paper massed in the air, contracts, resums blowing by, intact snatches of business, quick in the wind' (2007, p. 4). Scattered among the wreckage, these textual fragments interrupt any expectation or hope of an overarching narrative cohesion. The attacks seem to have precipitated a breakdown between language and its objects, as '[t]he witness wonders what has happened to the meaning of things, to tree, street, stone, wind, simple words lost in the falling ash' (p. 103). Returning to the passage set in Keith's apartment, we see that among 'fragments of paper' there is 'one whole sheet trapped in the grime', resonating with Rumsey's desire for order, the sense that 'something holds, something stays in place' (p. 122). Here the page is a stable object, held in place by the grime that covers every surface, but Keith is a distracted and traumatised would-be reader. As 'the intact page stirred in the breeze', he walks over 'to see if it was readable'. He is then distracted by the 'visible sliver of One Liberty Plaza' and begins to count the floors. As he leaves, 'The paper rustled at the window and he picked up the suitcase and walked out the door' (p. 27). Demonstrated in his failed relation to the unexamined sheet of paper 'trapped in the grime', Keith's subjectivity, which is in disarray, cannot meaningfully relate to the suggested stable text. Casting about him, he has only a momentary curiosity in the page and the message it possibly carries. This breakdown of the relations between text and reader illustrates Keith's failed and redundant attempts to regain control, to narrate himself as a continuous subject.

DeLillo engages with problems of narrative representation by including a number of fragmented and unintelligible texts in the novel. As we follow the characters' various attempts to come to terms with the profound, rupturing events of 9/11, language is depicted as an insufficient tool, imperfectly wielded by unreliable narrators²⁵. Lianne runs a support group for

²⁵ The sense of a narrative that throws doubt on itself is not particular to the task of writing 9/11. Furthermore, It would be endorsing a problematic American exceptionalism to suggest that the trauma and tragedy of 9/11 is unique within the breadth of human experience. As a through line in DeLillo's fiction, human experience is expressed as inherently chaotic, and resistant to our attempts to infer or impose a coherent narrative. DeLillo, perhaps unavoidably, takes a U.S.-centric approach, particularly in his perspective on historical shifts, prioritising the Kennedy assassination as 'the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century' (*Libra*, 1988, p. 181), but it could be argued that in *Falling Man*, DeLillo is using the events of 9/11 as a vector to say something about problems of language and violence more generally. Alan Marshall usefully lays out the problems with viewing 9/11 as an incomparable tragedy in his essay 'From This Point on it's All About Loss' (2012).

people experiencing the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, setting reflective writing tasks for its members whose memories are beginning to falter. She is also mid-way through editing a book on 'ancient alphabets [...] typed on an old manual machine with textual emendations made by the author in a deeply soulful and unreadable script' (p. 23). She later longs to abandon the project, 'a text so webbed in obsessive detail that it was impossible to proceed further' (p. 155). Justin, Keith and Lianne's son, sharpens his collection of pencils, including some 'from a Soho shop that were inscribed along the shaft with cryptic sayings from Tibet' (p. 38). To Lianne the pencils, souvenirs of the parents' international travels, seem out of place in the child's room. They carry messages that are 'cryptic' to begin with, and which will progressively disappear as the pencil is sharpened. Elsewhere, Justin holds secret discussions with a friend, speaking in code, 'semi-gibberish' (p. 17) about the shadowy figure 'Bill Lawton', constructed from a mishearing of the name 'Bin Laden' that they hear repeated on the news²⁶. With this boogey-man like invention, DeLillo calls the veracity of storytelling into question with pathos²⁷. 'Bill Lawton' is also the title given to the first section of the novel, elevating this, a myth that carries 'the wrong name' (p. 74) from a minor textual detail. Using this misnomer as a title suggests that, as readers, we should attend to ideas of misreading and misunderstanding. DeLillo's fictional account of 9/11 is one that signals its own nature as inevitably partial and limited. With each flawed account, from the faltering narrations of the Alzheimer's patients to the childrens' construction of the mythical Bill Lawton, DeLillo asserts the gap between word and the thing itself that we seek to represent. In the same manner that Keith struggles with his self-image, the terror attacks are rendered as a shifting and elusive subject that escapes our attempts to impose narrative meaning.

²⁶ The fact that, in hearing the unfamiliar name Bin Laden, they adapt it to the Westernised 'Bill Lawton' invokes the American perspective of the attacks as perpetrated by a foreign, incomprehensible Other. As Judith Butler argues, nearness is a condition for encountering and knowing the Other. We are bound by ethical relations to those in our community, 'those who we can see, whose name we can know and pronounce' (2011, n.p.).

²⁷ These elements jostle for space in a narrative that features a number of textual and artistic responses to the attacks. The abundance of texts, works of visual art, and other signifying objects compounds the sense of confusion, and makes it impossible to prioritise any one as uniquely meaningful or accurate.

Several of DeLillo's fictional engagements with historical events feature an implicit connection between the idea of 'grip' and sense-making. In *Libra* (1988), Nicholas Branch regards the massive collection of documents relating to the Kennedy assassination. He views the accumulation of information as means of regaining control:

The assassination of President Kennedy. Six point nine seconds of heat and light. Let's call a meeting to analyze the blur. Let's devote our lives to understanding this moment [...] We will build theories that gleam like jade idols [...] We will follow the bullet trajectories backwards to the lives that occupy the shadows [...] an aberration in the heartland of the real. Let's regain our grip on things. (p. 15)

Suggesting that within the mass of information there exists a definitive, irrefutable account of the events, Branch declares 'let's regain our grip on things'. Arriving at this singular narrative is expressed in terms of a material purchase; Branch evokes the idea that we can hold the perfect, authoritative account in our hands, that we can grip it securely. Historical accuracy is characterised as a stable, tangible entity that we can reach out for and grasp. Throughout *Libra*, we are shown the hubris in Branch's misguided drive towards a singular "truth", using various texts to reconstruct and recover the inner lives of 'actual men who moan in their dreams' (p. 15). This attempt cannot succeed, and DeLillo gives voice to the futile human search for stable narrative elsewhere, through the character of Murray Jay Siskind in the earlier novel *White Noise* (1984). Siskind states that '[t]o plot is to live. [...] We start our lives in chaos, in babble. As we surge up into the world, we try to devise a shape, a plan. There is dignity in this. Your whole life is a plot, a scheme, a diagram. It is a failed scheme but that's not the point. To plot is to affirm life, to seek shape and control' (pp. 291-292). Here, the need to 'plot' our lives is fruitless, but nevertheless vital. Whereas these texts suggest that narrativizing our lives into a coherent form is an impossible but necessary task, in *Falling Man* ideas of narrative legibility and control break down entirely. The novel asks that we look instead to the material body as a carrier of meaning. As we have seen, Keith's experience of trauma is characterised as a profound dislocation, 'a figure floating in reflected light, Keith in pieces' (2007, p. 126). He is unable to locate himself in relation to his past self, his

possessions in his old apartment, or in relation to his own body. The attacks enact a chaotic merging, in which the body of his friend Rumsey becomes indistinct from building wreckage. Keith carries this essential loss of distinctions with him, and although he escapes the tower, as Lianne states 'He was not quite returned to his body yet' (p. 59). We eventually learn that in Keith and Rumsey's final interaction, Keith attends to Rumsey's hand, and loosens Rumsey's grip on an object: 'He unbent Rumsey's index finger and removed the broken mug' (p. 242).

Much existing criticism has taken up the idea of failures of language in response to the events of 9/11, but we can see that, for DeLillo, this idea has its roots in an earlier period. This sense of human endeavour as an ongoing drive to impose narrative order upon chaos becomes newly resonant in the post-9/11 climate of uncertainty. While anxieties of capitalism and global conflict are brought violently to the fore by the 9/11 attacks, in DeLillo's account of U.S. culture there is no comfortable 'before' period. DeLillo uses a corporate setting to stage profound human anxieties in his first novel, *Americana*. In his office within a skyscraper, the protagonist is 'comforted by familiar things'; 'there was the belief that you were secure here [...] you could not walk among those desks for two thousand mornings, nor hear those volleying typewriters, without coming to believe that this was where you were safe' (1971, p. 20). This safety is shattered as a construction worker working on the outside of the building falls to his death, a violent reminder of the precarious and contingent nature of our survival. While within the structure of the building the office workers' lives are not under literal threat, they are subject to a psychic threat that is inherent to the culture of which they are a part. The falling construction worker becomes apocryphal, a story on which *Americana's* protagonist relies to bolster his own perceived safety, and prompts a small obliteration of his own: 'what could you do but go quickly to a dark bar and drink three burning whiskies?' (p. 16). David's recollection of this event signals the sense of instability and threat inherent to DeLillo's engagement with American culture, early in his debut novel. Decades later, in *Falling Man*, DeLillo contends with an event in which this ideological precarity asserts itself materially, in the terrorists' repurposing of capitalist totems - the jumbo jet, the skyscraper.

His earlier novels are preoccupied with similar concerns, particularly his 1977 novel *Players*, which features a character who works in the World Trade Center and the plotting of a terrorist attack on the nearby New York Stock Exchange, which has been noted for its eerie foreshadowing (Wilcox, 2010, p. 40). In light of these earlier works, DeLillo's treatment of the attacks of 9/11 can be seen as a culmination of ideas already addressed in previous fiction, rather than the expression of a brand new paradigm. DeLillo's characters have always feared for their lives, in both a literal and a more obscure psychic sense.

As we have seen, in *Falling Man*, Keith strives to regain control and to recover a coherent, chronological sense of self. Elsewhere in the novel, in the character of Lianne, we encounter a very different mode of relating to the world. In contrast to Keith's reliance on perceptions of containment and bodily integrity, Lianne's sense of self is much more dynamic, and she experiences her interactions with the world as exchanges in which she absorbs and transforms external meaning into herself. In an early passage Lianne receives a postcard, an unstable signifying object:

She glanced at the message, a standard scrawled greeting, sent by a friend staying in Rome, then looked again at the face of the card. It was a reproduction of the cover of Shelley's poem in twelve cantos, first edition, called *Revolt of Islam*. [...] The card was from the Keats-Shelley house in Piazza di Spagna and she'd understood in the first taut seconds that the card had been sent a week or two earlier. It was a matter of simple coincidence, or not so simple, that a card might arrive at this particular time bearing the title of that specific book. (p. 8)

What the postcard signifies has been transformed while en route to its recipient. The subject of Shelley's poem is made newly prescient, resonating with the terrorist attacks on American landmarks coordinated by Islamic State²⁸. We have seen that Keith attempts to mobilise documents and objects as markers of a stable narrative of self, to mask the fact that his identity is in disarray. In contrast, Lianne is attuned to the changing status of objects in flux. She perceives both the original, innocuous image that the postcard carried, and its

²⁸ This shift between 'before' and 'after' that is registered in the object of the postcard resonates with the temporal disruption that is a key characteristic of trauma; as Caruth explains, the reality of the traumatic event is available only in its 'delayed appearance and its belated address' (1996, pp. 3-4).

transformation as it is newly oriented towards the recent attacks. Lianne is repeatedly cast as the viewer of artworks, which she acknowledges as carriers of dynamic and plural meanings. Reflecting upon her mother's art collection, Lianne turns to '[w]hat she loved most', two still life paintings by Giorgio Morandi. They depict 'groupings of bottles, jugs, biscuit tins, that was all, but there was something in the brushstrokes that held a mystery she could not name' (p. 12). The artist is 'a painter her mother had studied and written about', but Lianne's approach to the paintings is private and deliberate: 'These were matters she hadn't talked about with her mother. Let the latent meanings turn and bend in the wind, free from authoritative comment' (p. 12). Later her mother's partner Martin, an art collector, calls Lianne over to look at one of the paintings. He is troubled by what he sees, telling her 'I keep seeing the towers in this still life'. Then, as '[t]hey looked together [...] She saw what he saw. She saw the towers' (p. 49). Here the image is newly charged with signification, in the same manner as the postcard from Rome. When Martin explains what he sees, the image of 'seven or eight objects [...] huddled boxes and biscuit tins' is transformed. While here Lianne absorbs Martin's viewpoint and adopts it as her own, her initial response to the works, a sense of joy tied up with an unnameable mystery, remains intact. Years later, towards the novel's end, Lianne visits an exhibition of Morandi's work. Studying a set of drawings, she experiences the act of looking as a transformation, an exchange between herself and the work: '[s]he was passing beyond pleasure into some kind of assimilation. She was trying to absorb what she saw, take it home, wrap it around her, sleep in it. There was so much to see. Turn it into living tissue, who you are' (p. 210). Here, the relationship between the work of art and the viewer is characterised as an active, dynamic and material process, as though Lianne is consuming and assimilating the work. Her physical presence, the status of her body as 'living tissue', is key to this interaction²⁹. Henry Veggian helpfully explores Lianne's

²⁹ Elsewhere DeLillo formulates the relationship between the viewer and television and film footage in a similar way. In *Americana*, David Bell idolises Burt Reynolds, 'a crescendo of male perfection' on the cinema screen, and states that 'I knew I must extend myself until the molecules parted and I was spliced into the image' (1990, p. 13). In *Point Omega* (2010), a man in a gallery views '24-hour Psycho', Hitchcock's 1960 film played in extreme slow motion. The man 'separates himself from the wall and waits to be assimilated, pore by pore, to dissolve into the figure of Norman Bates' (p. 148). Elsewhere, 'thinking into the film' he wonders if the interaction is the other way around: 'was the film thinking into him, spilling through him like some kind of runaway brain fluid?' (pp. 138-139).

interactions with artworks. In his reading of the novel, he explains the relationship in this way: 'As the scene concludes, the reader is left with the impression that the still life was alive, or coming to life, and that it was Lianne who made it so. Meaningful art does not appear from transcendent ideals; it is a restless point that stands out from a process of dialogue, thought, and deliberation' (2015, p. 78). It is this openness, and her resolve to suspend interpretive authority that allows Lianne's plot to progress, and makes processing and healing from trauma possible, in contrast to the stunted, truncated quality of Keith's experience. The body of Falling Man, '[t]hat nameless body coming down', is 'hers to record and absorb' (p. 223).

In her reading of *Falling Man*, Linda Kauffman explains that 'ever since she was a little girl [...] [Lianne] has imaginatively absorbed the sensations around her, as if her body were a permeable membrane' (2011, p. 136). During her separation from her husband, Lianne travels across New Mexico with a man who tells her that he loves her body 'down to the knobby extremities [...] twists and ridges, which he named after geologic eras' (p. 23). At the time she takes pleasure in this playful naming, but on recalling this she wonders whether she was in an altered state, her laughter due to 'the altitude at which they were screwing, in the skies of the high desert' (p. 23). She is able to indulge the association of her body parts with ancient rock, and to experience an alien and potentially transformative climate, her sense of pleasure unchallenged. She recalls this encounter as she crosses a street in New York carrying her dry cleaning. Returning to the present, '[r]unning toward the far curb' to avoid traffic she feels 'like a skirt and blouse without a body [...] hiding behind the plastic shimmer of the dry cleaner's long sheath'. Lianne experiences this moment as a temporary evacuation of her body, and wonders at 'how good it felt' (p. 23). This momentary joy is quite different to Keith's troubling appearance, apparition-like, after escaping the tower, 'like smoke, standing there' (p. 8). Lianne recalls Keith, indistinct and distanced, 'in the shower this morning, standing numbly in the flow, a dim figure far away inside plexiglass' (p. 23). While Keith is obscured behind the shower door, insulated from his family, Lianne experiences a moment of power, holding the plastic 'sheath' of the clothes as though it can

ward off traffic. In the novel, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, misplaced clothing contributes to the sense of chaos; the spectral remainder of an empty shirt floats to the ground, and Keith notices that fellow survivors ‘had shoes in their hands, a woman with a shoe in each hand, running past him’ (p. 3). These articles of clothing convey an elemental wrongness, the topsy-turvy detail of ‘a shoe in each hand’ suggesting that conventions have been turned on their head³⁰. In contrast, Lianne’s sense of play allows her to respond to a fantastical element of an everyday object, the ‘plastic shimmer’ of the dry cleaning bag, a shield or a talisman which ‘she held at arm’s length, between her and the taxis, in self-defense’ (p. 23). Lianne’s interactions with her environment are active and imaginative, and she also articulates a desire to keep the work of interpretation an open and unfixed endeavour. As we have seen with the Morandi paintings, she resolves to ‘let the latent meanings turn and bend in the wind, free from authoritative comment’. She sees oblique significance in the brushstrokes, a ‘mystery she could not name’ (p. 12), and is not troubled by her inability to articulate its precise nature. Her decision not to impose authority or control upon the work chimes with a similar argument in *Cosmopolis* made with regards to the body: ‘let it express itself’ (2003, p. 45). Returning to the moment where Lianne crosses the street, she wonders what made her recall the encounter in the desert. She notes without resistance that this is ‘a question probably not answerable in a book on ancient alphabets’ (2007, p. 23), referring back to the book that she is currently editing. This free-flowing train of thought is typical of Lianne’s subjective experience, part of the swift passage of ‘ordinary thoughts’.

The ‘chief shaman’ speaks: DeLillo’s authorial persona

Falling Man contains various attempts to impose narrative meaning upon unknowing and chaos, an endeavour which must inevitably fail. At the same time, the novel itself represents

³⁰ Keith hears that Rumsey’s mother ‘took one of his shoes and [...] a razor blade [...] whatever she could find that might contain genetic material, like traces of hair or skin’, to try and find a DNA match to identify her son’s remains (p. 204). Here, the single shoe is loaded with significance, the potential to lead back to its owner. We have seen that Rumsey’s fascination with women’s toes depends on the containing context of the sandal, and here Rumsey’s own shoe is dislocated and separated from its pair, a token of his identity that carries a failed hope that his remains will be recovered.

one such attempt, and must self-reflexively comment upon its own failings. The novel features a number of negative descriptions: having no word to adequately describe something, we must revert to describing what it is not. The horrific sight of Rumsey's wounded body simply 'didn't look like Rumsey' (p. 241). The significance of the empty shirt floating down among the debris is similarly expressed as a lack in the novel's closing words: 'Then he saw a shirt come down out of the sky [...] arms waving like nothing in this life' (p. 246). As Keith exits the tower and emerges into the street in the novel's opening, '[t]here was something critically missing from the things around him. They were unfinished, whatever that means. They were unseen, whatever that means, shop windows, loading platforms, paint-sprayed walls' (p. 5). Not only is there a sense of absence here, the narrative falters in describing it; this is a problem not only with the environment itself but with Keith's powers of perception and description. The repetition of the phrase 'whatever that means' signals the narrative voice struggling with the attempt at representation and momentarily giving up. The words evoke a repeated, exasperated shrug, a rejection of narrative responsibility³¹. In a novel that attempts to reckon with the events of 9/11, we are made aware from its opening pages that our available tools of expression—the novel form, language itself—might be insufficient to the task.

Many of the elements of my reading of the novel depend upon the idea of context. Keith has lost the context of self; a relationship to his belongings, a sense of being present when standing in his apartment, a sense of connection to his past self. As we will see, Lianne's experiences of viewing the performance artist known as Falling Man focus on context: location, positioning, spatial relation between performer and audience, while she perceives herself as standing apart. The image on the postcard Lianne receives is transformed by the new context in which she receives it. In the same way, when Lianne sees

³¹ Later in the novel, from Lianne's perspective, we learn that 'Keith stopped shaving, for a time, whatever that means. Everything seemed to mean something. Their lives were in transition and she looked for signs' (p. 67). The persistent repetition of the phrase 'whatever that means' in DeLillo's fiction transforms it from the offhand remark of one character to an oeuvre-wide refrain. DeLillo's texts are united in their uncertainty and their faltering narrators. I am grateful to Michael Naas, who spoke compellingly on the role of this repeated phrase throughout DeLillo's work at the 2016 'Fiction Rescues History' conference.

'the towers' in the Morandi still life, these images are newly oriented towards the fallen towers; they are 'about' them. For Rumsey, 'The toes meant nothing if they were not defined by sandals. Barefoot women on the beach were not about their feet' (p. 122). Through all of these details, we are reminded that meaning cannot be lifted out of its particular context and presented as universal. As such, DeLillo cannot provide us with an authoritative version of the events. As Kacper Bartczak explains, using the work of philosopher Richard Rorty;

[T]here is no neutral ground from which to argue [...] We cannot step outside the discourse and summon a proof whose source would be located beyond it. All we have is descriptions competing within the discourse to which they should be admitted indiscriminately. (2002, p. 6)

More broadly, there is a network of thematic connections throughout the narrative, and Keith's actions are made meaningful within this contextual framework. Keith 'stopped shaving for a time', which Lianne describes by taking up the term of dismissal familiar from the novel's opening, 'whatever that means'. Keith's facial hair carries parallels with one of the terrorists, who is named Hammad. He is part of a terrorist cell in Hamburg, who, in a detail that makes radicalisation seem superficial and performative, 'were all growing beards', (p. 79). There is also an interesting sense of a retroactive altering of belief, tradition and identity: one of the men encourages his father to grow his beard as well, a decision that makes some of the others uneasy. Finally, in preparation to board the flight without attracting attention to themselves, Hammad visits a barber and emerges clean shaven³². The process of radicalisation is expressed as a deliberate narrowing of perspective to an extreme, at the expense of all else. Plot 'drew them together more tightly than ever', and 'closed the world to the slenderest line of sight' (p. 174). On the name of a town they are staying in, Hammad wonders 'what does it matter? Let these things fade into dust. Leave these things behind even as we sleep and eat here' (p. 174). This calls to mind Lianne's desire to 'let the latent

³² The significance of beards and shoes surfaces again in the mythical 'Bill Lawton', a children's construction of the alien Other. He has a long beard, and goes 'everywhere in bare feet' (p. 74). Reading the novel with an attention to these kinds of connections is a fascinating, but seemingly unending task. The dense links between different elements seem to be present on every page. Like the book Lianne edits, 'webbed in obsessive detail', the sense is that no matter how dedicated the reader, the totality of this web evades us: there are always more connections to be found (p. 155).

meanings turn and bend in the wind', but the terrorists' mindset is one of deliberate evacuation. Narrowing the range of thought allows the victims to become nothing: 'there were no others', they 'exist only to the degree that they fulfil the role we have designed for them [...] Those who will die have no claim to their lives outside the useful fact of their dying' (p. 176). The end point of this narrowing of scope is to 'Let go of this thing called the world'. Finally, the man evacuates his own body; sitting in a barber's chair, he 'looked in the mirror. He was not here, it was not him' (p. 175). This deliberate, methodical process of disappearance later becomes supernaturally charged, as 'He believed he could see straight into the towers even though his back was to them [...] he could see straight out the back of his head' (p. 238). The progression of Keith's struggle to come into being following the attacks, and the inverted movement of the terrorist's narrowing and eventual loss of selfhood in preparation, is a resonance that is available only to us as readers, not to the characters. Details such as Keith's facial hair are made meaningful to us by this context, but also serves to convey the pathos in the objectivity that he seeks, his drive to comprehend the world through the use of objects and texts. His is a desire to comprehend his life on an unattainable scale, to impossibly 'step outside the discourse' (Rorty, 2002, p. 6)³³. In light of this inaccessible framework of resonances, Lianne's assessment, 'whatever that means' seems the best that we can do to gesture to an imagined set of meanings that exist beyond our reach.

The ways in which *Falling Man* lacks narrative closure relates to broader conversations about the responsibilities of fiction, and how we view the relationship between author, text, and reader. Many critics have asserted the prescience of DeLillo's subject matter, and noted the ways that his work consistently anticipates and foreshadows events of

³³ This acknowledgement, that it is impossible to stand 'outside the discourse' also relates to my reading of DeLillo's novel. In *Falling Man*, whatever the arguments for visual art and against narrative achieve, they do so through language. I think that it is important to keep this contradiction in mind: DeLillo consistently gestures to the unknowable, the unsayable, and the limited scope of language, human understanding, and narrative and artistic responses to the world, but he does so from within the conventions of the novel form. DeLillo's work insists that our place in the world is incomprehensible, but communicates this through artfully crafted prose. He is concerned with the insufficiency of systems of language when dealing with loss and mourning, but uses language itself to express its own limits.

cultural significance. Citing conspiracy theory in *Libra* (1988), government cover-ups in *White Noise* (1984), the Cold War in *Underworld* (1998), and 9/11 in *Falling Man* (2007), Michiko Kakutani, in her review for the *New York Times*, stated that ‘No writer has been as prescient and eerily prophetic about 21st-century America as Don DeLillo’ (2007). Indeed this relevance, rather than fading with time, seems to be ongoing and cyclical; for example, anxieties surrounding contamination in the ‘Airborne Toxic Event’ in *White Noise* (1988) are reanimated and made urgent once again in light of the current Coronavirus crisis³⁴. DeLillo’s insight is variously characterised as intelligent attunement to and reading of the culture he inhabits, and as a supernatural insight. In 1988, Robert Towers wrote that DeLillo ‘has [...] supplanted both Pynchon and Mailer as chief shaman of the paranoid school of American fiction’ (n.p.). This tendency to regard DeLillo as an exceptionally gifted arbiter of American culture and to place him on a pedestal of relevance led to an expectation that he write a 9/11 novel, as subjects addressed in his work including terrorism, global conflict, and capitalist totems—aeroplanes, skyscrapers—were climactically and tragically manifest in that event. John Freeman wrote that upon *Falling Man*’s publication ‘the book was largely—and understandably—read as an example of what happens when a paranoid sorcerer’s prediction comes true. Indeed, DeLillo has been writing of terrorism for 30 years. 9/11 was the apotheosis of that paranoia’ (2007, n.p.). Beyond Freeman and Kakutani’s positive assessments of *Falling Man*, the novel’s mixed reception would seem to undermine this casting of its author, but if we attend to the ways that the narrative deliberately undermines itself, we can see that the novel interrogates the reader’s expectations rather than simply failing to meet them. John Duvall (2011) argues that *Falling Man* fails to satisfy the reader in terms of plot. In his reading, rather than a narrative payoff, the return to the events in the tower leave the reader with a sense that we have arrived back where we started in a redundant loop. Elsewhere, Linda Kauffman critiques DeLillo’s writing on 9/11. She explains

³⁴ Adam Begley identifies the cyclical nature of DeLillo’s fiction: “‘Then we came to the end of another dull and lurid year.’ That’s how he begins, with the first sentence of *Americana*, hinting at last things, final days’ (1997, p. 478).

that in the 2001 essay 'In the Ruins of the Future', DeLillo 'pays tribute to 9/11's victims. His helplessness and grief—for them, the city, the nation—is profound' (2008, p. 357). Kauffman goes on to assert that 'Words fail him [...] Although [he says] that language itself is not diminished, he seems to protest too much, as he tries 'desperately' to imagine the unspeakable'. In contrast, I find that in *Falling Man*, through the featuring of various fragmented and illegible texts, and through Lianne and Keith's differing modes of relating to the world, the limits of narrative are explicitly and self-consciously thematised. DeLillo mounts a challenge to the reification of the author figure that we see in much existing critical work, and undermines the search for an authoritative narrative voice that will deliver a singular interpretation of the trauma of 9/11, what it signifies, and how we might properly and effectively process it. Setting up and then confounding the expectations of the reader is a tactic with which DeLillo resists his role and throws it into question, unseating himself as a high priest who must guide us through the onset of the twenty-first century and the shattering violence that came with it.

Through written and spoken word, DeLillo's voice acknowledges a playful relationship to authorial persona. DeLillo made a rare public appearance at the 2016 Paris conference 'Fiction Rescues History' dedicated to his work. An audience member stated that it was an honour to be present in the room with such a prestigious and accomplished writer, and DeLillo's response was 'How do you know it's really me?' (cited in Boxall, in Da Cunha Lewin and Ward, eds., 2019, p. 160)³⁵. This dance of authority and self effacement also plays out in the archival materials at the Harry Ransom Center. In selecting the materials that might give us an insight into his processes of writing and research, DeLillo undergoes a process of self-curation. DeLillo even explicitly defers to the archive as a more reliable source than himself. Interviewed by James Naughtie for the BBC Radio 4 Bookclub series, he was questioned on the choice of title for *Underworld*. He states 'I don't know how I ended up with *Underworld* and I don't even remember how many possible titles I had. I'd have to go

³⁵ DeLillo has made this joke before: when accepting the National Book Award for Fiction for *White Noise*, he gave the following speech: 'I'm sorry I couldn't be here tonight, but I thank you all for coming' (DeLillo, cited in Caesar, 2010, n.p.).

to the archive in Austin, Texas where all my papers are' (2016a, n.p.). The archive, then, contains insights into DeLillo's writerly processes, for DeLillo himself as much as for scholars and other visitors. DeLillo's access to this information is much the same as ours, and depends on the same material circumstances; the answers are located in Texas. This interview came during an unusual flurry of public activity for DeLillo, including speaking engagements in Paris and London, accompanying the publication of *Zero K*. The rarity of the event leads us to hope for significant and profound insights, but DeLillo has outsourced this material. An interview in *The Wall Street Journal* similarly plays on this disruption of authority, entitled 'What Don DeLillo's Books Tell Him' (Alter, 2010)³⁶. In the case of *Falling Man*, the text acknowledges its own necessary failure and exposes the futility of our search for universalising closure and comfort in a work of fiction. Meanwhile, DeLillo performs his own dislocation; he declines to embody the role that is offered to him by the audience member: that of a great author, with whom it is an honour to share the space. DeLillo's playful self-effacement throws his proximity to the author figure, the 'chief shaman', a 'paranoid sorcerer', into question.

The sense that DeLillo toys with convention, forcing us to reflect upon our own practice as readers, is also apparent in *Falling Man*. Early in the novel, the awful material reality of a suicide bombing is expressed in a compact combination of terminology, in which human flesh is transformed into shrapnel. A doctor examining Keith explains the term to him:

[T]he survivors [...] develop bumps, for lack of a better term [...] small fragments, tiny fragments of the suicide bomber's body. The bomber is blown to bits, literally bits and pieces, and fragments of flesh and bone come flying outward with such force and velocity that they get wedged, they get trapped in

³⁶ At other times during the Paris conference, DeLillo repeatedly responded to queries about specific passages in his works along the lines of, 'I don't remember'. He was, perhaps, tired of hoary questions about 'what you really meant when you wrote...', wary of an audience made up mostly of academics, for whom he has often expressed a dislike, and genuinely unable to provide any insight about specific word choices that he made in novels written many decades ago. The much-challenged idea that authorial intention is paramount to our understanding of a work fails to acknowledge that the view of the author themselves is not constant and fixed, and that the responses of the various readers forms a powerful and dynamic field of significations that transforms and enriches the work. By asking 'how do you know it's really me', DeLillo forces us into awareness of the figure that we hold in mind, who we name 'DeLillo', and to acknowledge the distance between that figure and the man who presumably, after the conference ends, returns to his home in upstate New York.

the body of anyone who's in striking range [...] little, like, pellets of flesh, human flesh that got driven into the skin. They call this organic shrapnel.
(p. 16)

As Judith Butler asserts that 9/11 forces us to reckon with 'a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life', here DeLillo seems to manifest this idea at the site of the body, in an image loaded with signification (2004, p. 29). In this reference to a real world symptom, the horror of the attacks seems to converge in a compelling and violent bodily exchange. Yet crucially, this term, which effectively ties together the physical and psychic violence of the event in a horrible detail, is undermined. The doctor goes on to describe this phenomenon as occurring 'Where there are suicide bombings, in those places where it happens', and tells Keith 'This is something I don't think you have' (p. 16). When Keith later recalls the phrase 'out of nowhere', it has become empty and hollow: '*organic shrapnel*. Felt familiar but meant nothing to him. Then he saw a car double-parked across the street and thought of something else and something else again' (p. 66, original emphasis). This moment typifies Keith's distracted and self-alienated trains of thought. First the gruesome symptom, and then its name, become irrelevant and meaningless. The reader is denied this bodily detail which carries powerful metaphorical meaning. It is located not in Keith's body but displaced to abstract, faraway bodies, in 'those places'. With this act of othering, the doctor's words indicate the failure to assimilate the attacks into the self-image of the U.S., and the narrative impact of this bodily exchange *qua exchange* is withheld.

DeLillo performs the same movement, channelling an enormous subject into a single body in his later work *Point Omega* (2010). The character Richard Elster has been grappling with the idea of the Omega Point: 'transcendence, paroxysm, the end of human consciousness', but is later consumed with worry for his daughter who is missing and may have been murdered. He reflects that '[i]t seemed so much dead echo now. Point omega. A million years away. The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as it enters a body. All the man's grand themes funneled down to local grief' (p. 124). Here, once again, the idea that 'grand themes' can be wholly contained in a single, meaningful body is

first suggested and then undermined. In the faltering conclusion of the thought, Elster's daughter fades into obscurity, 'one body, out there somewhere, or not' (p. 98). In the same way Keith, in his experience of the traumatic events in the tower, is forced to reckon not with 'organic shrapnel' but with abject, incoherent 'body slop' (2007, p. 244). This breakdown of signification is also reflected in DeLillo's description of American ideology as the true target of the September 11 attacks: 'It was the thrust of our technology [...] the blunt force of our foreign policy [...] the power of American culture to penetrate every wall, home, life and mind' ('In the Ruins of the Future', 2001a, n.p.). This characterisation of American culture is violently masculine, and the breakdown in self-image that Keith experiences in *Falling Man* mirrors what DeLillo depicts as a breakdown in the self-image of the U.S. as a forceful, masculine actor. Boundaries, and an understanding of who acts and who is acted-upon, are confused, as 'Our world, parts of our world, have crumbled into theirs'. In both *Falling Man* and *Point Omega* we are confronted with bodies that are unstable and resistant to neat allegorical meanings, and through the figure of the Falling Man, DeLillo offers us a version of embodiment that acknowledges and centres the productive capacities of this messiness, as we shall see next.

Part Two

David Janiak: Recovering the Falling Man

In *Falling Man*, in several passages that punctuate the narrative, performance artist David Janiak stages his response to the terrorist attacks of September 11 in various locations around New York. Suspending himself above the city, he imitates the posture of the figure in the well known image by Associated Press photographer Richard Drew (2001), first published in the *New York Times* on September 12, which captures a man in mid fall framed against one of the towers. The subject of Drew's photograph is wearing black trousers and shoes, and a billowing white shirt, or perhaps a chef's jacket. His head and torso are fully inverted and his legs are slightly bent. One of numerous photos that Drew took of this and other victims, the posture of the man seems strangely calm and deliberate; there is none of the desperation of flailing limbs here. The backdrop of the tower fills the frame and bisects the image, the left hand side filled with one wall of the tower in shadow, the right with a wall illuminated in sunlight. The vertical body of the falling man lines up with the corner of the tower, dividing the light and dark halves of the photograph. This positioning is a split-second coincidence that lends an eerie sense of composure to the image. In DeLillo's novel, Lianne sees one of the falls of the performance artist who responds to the photograph, mimicking its subject:

A man was dangling there, above the street, upside down. He wore a business suit, one leg bent up, arms at his sides. A safety harness was barely visible, emerging from his trousers and fastened to the decorative rail of the viaduct. [...] He'd appeared several times in the last week, unannounced, in various parts of the city, suspended from one or another structure [...] He'd been seen dangling from a balcony in a hotel atrium and police had escorted him out of a concert hall and two or three apartment buildings with terraces or accessible rooftops. (p. 33)

The appearances of the performance artist, who becomes known as Falling Man, have a profound effect on Lianne when she happens to view two of his staged falls (p. 33; p. 159). Near the novel's end she reads the man's obituary in the newspaper and is compelled to

search online to learn more about him. What is revealed to us of the performance artist gives us only a glimpse into his inner life. We are held at a distance in the position of witness (p. 222). Rather than looking for motive, whether compulsive or calculated, his actions are better understood as part of a response to trauma that is communally and affectively felt. In *Falling Man*, while we see DeLillo engage with the trauma of 9/11 as globally understood, a continuation of ideas expressed in his essay 'In the Ruins of the Future' (2001a), in the novel he works through the events as predominantly localised, relegating a sense of national or global scale to a more minor position in the text. As John Duvall argues, '[f]ocusing on the specific trauma of New Yorkers, DeLillo is aware that the destruction of the towers, broadcast live to the world as it was, psychologically scarred millions of viewers, but he resists the notion of a new American identity based on collective trauma' (2011, p. 152). For Duvall, the most important strand of DeLillo's narrative is its central relationship between Keith and Lianne. Our hope for them to reconcile and repair their marriage, a hope that is not fulfilled as they eventually separate once again, denies us a 'happy ending that will offer a kind of symbolic healing of the wound of 9/11' (Duvall, 2011, p. 152). Duvall's reading emphasises the scale of the narrative as focused on a few key players, and the *Falling Man*'s performances communicate a similar prioritisation of the local. The locations of his falls—first outside Grand Central Station, then from an elevated subway track near the Projects—mark out the vicinity of the site of the fallen towers, drawing our attention to the nuanced character of the city as experienced by its inhabitants³⁷. Lianne's experiences of the falls prioritise the spatial relationship between performer and viewer. Passersby who happen to be within range become spectators, and the placement of bodies is central to Lianne's experience of the second fall. She watches the man in preparation and struggles to identify where he is directing his performance and who his intended audience will be. She wonders why he has appeared in a relatively obscure setting, away from crowds, and then realises he

³⁷ In 'In the Ruins of the Future', as Kauffman explains, DeLillo is interested in the 'counter-narrative', an alternative to the political and media representations which 'transformed the tragedy into spectacle' (2008, p. 353) The counter-narrative includes a range of meaningful objects: 'crosses, flags, flowers, and posters of the missing - all the ephemeral tokens of grief' (p. 354).

is waiting for a subway train to pass, to make the passengers the audience to his fall (pp. 158-168). These settings confront the viewers with the reality of the attacks as occurring 'here', not in one of 'those places' (p. 16), on another continent, in another ("third") world, and communicate DeLillo's sense of grief as deeply personal, located in the everyday, intimate environs of the city. Given that the mediation of reality by its representations is a recurring concern throughout DeLillo's novels, it is striking that his account of 9/11 features little mention of the footage of the burning towers that overwhelmed news networks and has come to dominate our perception of the attacks. David Foster Wallace's response, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, conveys this idea through the perspective of a Midwest city's residents. Separated by geographical distance, the events seem to be taking place in an oblique, blurry version of New York that exists primarily on television:

I end up [...] explaining to Mrs. R— where midtown is. It thereupon emerges that none of the people here I'm watching the Horror with – not even the few ladies who'd gone to see *Cats* as part of some group tour thing through the church in 1991 – have even the vaguest notion of Manhattan's layout and don't know, for example, how far south the financial district and Statue of Liberty are; they have to be shown via pointing out the water in the foreground of the skyline they all know so well (from TV). (2001, n.p.)

While DeLillo's novel features performance art, painting, and poetry, the medium of news footage and the relationship between terrorism and mass media is largely unexamined. In contrast to Wallace's account this is a notable absence, and through the use of various, less iconic locations around the city, DeLillo plays out the aftermath of the events within specific local contexts³⁸. This grounding of the events relates to DeLillo's own lived experience and through the use of various, less iconic locations around the city, DeLillo plays out the aftermath of the events within specific local contexts. Having lived in, or near, New York City his whole life, he writes from a position of immersion, confronted by the immediacy of the attacks.

³⁸ DeLillo was born in the Bronx and spent his childhood there, lived in Queens, and now lives in Westchester County, a suburb in upstate New York north of Manhattan.

Cathy Caruth, building on Freud's model of trauma as 'an experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs', argues that fiction has the power to 'ask what it means to transmit and to theorise around a crisis that is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness' (1995, p. 5). This idea, that the traumatic event is a problematic object of witness, is manifest in Janiak's falls. The tableaux of DeLillo's fictional performance artist restage a potent symbol of the horror of 9/11. As Laura Frost (2008) explains, it is an image that was quickly excised from print media in the aftermath of 9/11, and so holds a dual status; iconic, yet taboo³⁹. Hamilton Carroll (2013), in his analysis of the novel, writes:

At the time of the photograph's publication in The New York Times on September 12, 2001, many commented on the aesthetics of the image and read heroic poise in the attitude of its subject. Within days, however, images such as Drew's became touchstones in the struggle for meaning that followed the terrorist attacks and were quickly suppressed in the mainstream media. As some of the most graphic depictions of September 11, images of people falling from the towers defined the limits of the debates about representation—over what the events would mean and how they would mean it—that arose in the aftermath of the attacks. The photograph in the title of DeLillo's novel, therefore, foregrounds this contested terrain and signals [...] not the events of September 11 per se but their representation [...] the novel is concerned, primarily, with charting the limits of representation in the face of the seemingly unrepresentable. (pp. 107-108)

According to Carroll, this crisis of representation is enacted through the photographs of falling bodies, first widely circulated and then suppressed. In *Falling Man*, Lianne makes the connection between Janiak's falls and the source material, recalling seeing Drew's photograph once, but does not dwell on the image, in contrast to meaningful encounters she has with artworks elsewhere in the text, particularly the Giorgio Morandi paintings owned by her mother. Researching Janiak, Lianne finds that 'If this photograph was an element in his performances he said nothing about it when questioned by reporters after one of his arrests' (p. 222). Janiak's falls, then, refer to an image that exists outside the text, invoked but

³⁹ Frost explains that while '[d]isturbing', 'images of 9/11's falling bodies have emerged as a significant concern in art and literature, fiction and non-fiction, from poetry to prose and from documentary film to sculpture' (2008, p. 182). She also notes that viewing the footage of falling bodies was a key indicator of whether a person experienced PTSD in the wake of the attacks (p. 180).

unseen, that we implicitly call to mind as we read⁴⁰. While it is true that any image in the text is available to us only through description, it is significant that the photograph is described only briefly, reflecting the interesting place that it occupies in cultural memory, both iconic and concealed. Both the bodies themselves, and images such as Drew's, carry this contradiction, which is echoed in other works such as Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers*. It is said of one character that '[h]e is haunted now by the images he didn't witness [...] people tumbling to the streets below' (2004, p. 5). In Aaron Mauro's 2011 study of 9/11 and the aesthetics of falling, Mauro describes Richard Drew's photograph as a product of 'unnatural vision': 'Due to the motion blur of the towers, the artificial proximity attributed to the 200mm zoom lens, and the closure of the shutter that obfuscates the image at the very moment of exposure, Drew could not see the moment as it flit past. What does this photograph reference if this witnessing is artificial and not experienced directly?' (p. 588). Mauro shows us that here photography is not capturing something visible, mimicking the gaze of the spectator, rather it is a medium that extends beyond the range of our senses, acting as a kind of prosthesis. For Mauro, the performance artist is a metonym and a way of containing the traumatic event, as the 'easy reiteration of the falling man suspends Lianne's confrontation with the horror of the image until it can be understood' (p. 595).

Other writers have chosen to incorporate images in their responses to 9/11, such as Johnathan Safran Foer, whose novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2006) features photographs throughout, and concludes with an image of a falling man (a different image to the Richard Drew photograph)⁴¹. Meanwhile, DeLillo declines to feature printed images in his novel, even though this is a strategy that he has used elsewhere, in the photographs that form the title pages of sections of *Mao II* (1991). In *Falling Man*, DeLillo thus interrogates the efficacy of different frameworks, critiquing speech and the written word alongside painting and performance art, but he does not break the conventional bounds of the novel form by

⁴⁰ This sense of the absent presence of an art object is a key concern of existing criticism on ekphrasis (Webb, 1999).

⁴¹ Foer's novel ends with a set of photographs tracking an individual's fall serialised into a flip book style, but in reverse, so that we see the figure rising through the air.

including the Falling Man photograph. With this absent, but crucial visual element, DeLillo plays upon the complex status of the image itself.

As viewers of the Richard Drew photograph, we know that, for its subject, survival is impossible. The person is moments away from a kind of violent death that is a complete dissolution of form, leaving not a corpse but a 'residue of smashed matter' (p. 246). It is this image of a body in a moment of critical precarity that DeLillo's performance artist, in 'stationary fall, ten days after the planes' interrogates (p. 34). Janiak's performances imitate the technology of the photograph, artificially prolonging a moment in time. We are confronted with a body in free fall that impossibly 'stays in place' rather than falling towards the ground (p. 122)⁴². In the novel more broadly, there are a number of acts and gestures that, in a similar way, fail to 'land'. The sense of interrupted narrative is reflected in the real world response in the days that followed the attacks. The massive mobilisation of emergency services to search the wreckage was confounded, first by the lack of survivors, and then by the lack of intact bodies that could be recovered from the rubble. This is another way that the image of the Falling Man is suffused with absence; the nature of the violence denies those left behind the closure of a grievable body. The breakdown of narrative coherence is also present in another real world detail: the large numbers of people, in New York and across the country, who took part in a blood donation drive, a well-intentioned but largely fruitless act.

Around 36,000 units of blood were donated to the New York Blood Center in the days after September 11 [...] New Yorkers, desperate to do something, encouraged by newscasters and community leaders, and gratified to make some sacrifice, rushed to local blood banks. ('Blood', 2011, n.p.)

This response indicates that the call for donations met a need on the part of Americans to act in support of the victims of the attack. However, '[b]y the time of the congressional blood drive, there were no survivors in need'. Lifesaving blood becomes waste, and the image of a

⁴² The suspension of Janiak's body relates to the text at the level of plot - As Duvall argues, when we return to the morning of the attacks in the novel's end, we are back where we started; there is the sense of an ending that is perpetually withheld.

stockpile of donated blood, left to expire and then discarded, is another material sign of the traumatic event's disruption of coherence, in this case, of narratives of community and philanthropic support. In the novel, as Lianne learns from researching the performance artist, he was supposedly planning one more performance without a harness; a fall that would be fatal (DeLillo, 2007, p. 223). However, the closure of this final fall is interrupted by the actual, sudden death of the performer from a heart attack, an 'apparent coronary event' (p. 222). This severing of the trajectory and narrative arc of the performances echoes the jolt of the performer's body, in the arrested motion of each fall. Here, narrative closure is again denied, as, with the novel's central relationship, DeLillo refuses to offer a 'symbolic healing of the wound of 9/11' (Duvall, 2011, p. 152). As we have seen, in the detail of 'organic shrapnel' (DeLillo, 2007, p. 16), we are offered an allegorical encounter between bodies which is then undermined. Through these elements of the text, we can see DeLillo employing refusal as a deliberate narrative strategy, as opposed to failing to deliver "*the 9/11 novel*" that was expected of him⁴³. We can better understand this by looking to another writer who engages with the problem of closure in the face of trauma, the poet Wislawa Szymborska. Her poem 'Photograph from September 11' describes one of the photographs of bodies falling from the towers. It opens: 'They jumped from the burning stories, down /—one, two, a few more', but then interrupts this action by shifting to the frame of the photograph: 'A photograph captured them while they were alive and now preserves them / above ground, toward the ground. / Each still whole' (Szymborska, cited in Frost, 2008, p. 18). As Laura Frost explains, the shift from past tense to continuous present 'resists the narrative progression from a jump to a fall' (p. 180). The poem concludes; 'There are only two things I can do for them /—to describe this flight / and not to add a final word' (p. 181)⁴⁴.

Frost offers this reading:

⁴³ Jenn Brandt (2014) argues that the novel 'thematically and stylistically captures the disjointed consciousness of a post-9/11 America', through the very elements of the text that have been most widely critiqued.

⁴⁴ This final stanza has been translated elsewhere as 'I can do only two things for them—/describe this flight/and not add a last line.' (Szymborska, translated by Cavanagh, 2005, n.p.). In both cases, we are confronted by the impossibility of a poem missing its last line or final word; the poem gestures beyond the limits of what is possible of the form. The final line of *Falling Man*, 'like nothing in this life' similarly gestures to the limits of description (2007, p. 246).

Szyborska implies that following the 'flight' through to its end, acknowledging mortality or adding some idea of what these figures 'mean', would be disrespectful. [...] The punctuating 'final word' is also specifically *not* a final word; it is at the same time a presence and an absence: a suspension. The story has no end and no beginning, but only a perpetual middle. These haunting figures remain forever falling but never having fallen. (p. 181, original emphasis)

We can, then, understand the poem's ambiguity from an ethical standpoint, as a refusal, rather than a failure, to offer a singular interpretation. If imposing meaning upon the subject matter is a disrespectful act, then we can read the lack of closure to the performances of DeLillo's *Falling Man*, and the lack of closure in terms of Keith and Lianne's relationship, as DeLillo declining to offer a less ambiguous message in the narrative on ethical grounds⁴⁵. The reception of Szyborska's poem also relates back to the status of the falling body as both iconic and concealed. Frost (2008) explains that the poem was put forward for inclusion in a memorial in the new 7 World Trade Center, but was rejected for fear that it was too graphic and 'would bring back images that people might want to forget' (Silverstein, cited in Frost, p. 181). This reflects a broader movement, which Butler identifies as 'a growing acceptance of censorship within the media in the wake of September 11' (2004, p. 1). Frost details other examples of artistic representations of the falling bodies that were removed from public sight:

One of the first major works of public art about 9/11, Eric Fischl's bronze sculpture *Tumbling Woman*, depicted one of these figures to great controversy; the piece was removed from its scheduled display in Rockefeller Centre when people complained that it was offensive. [...] Another artist, Sharon Paz, displayed silhouettes of falling people on the windows of the Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning; these were also removed because of viewers' objections. (Frost, 2008, pp. 182-183)

In the same way, Richard Drew's photograph, an 'obscene representation' (Mauro, 2011, p. 584) of a dying man, centres the body of a victim rather than the spectacle of the burning

⁴⁵ Philipp Schweighauser and Adrian Wisnicki expand on this idea as it relates to DeLillo's fiction more broadly in 'The End of Resolution? Reflections on the Ethics of Closure in Don DeLillo's Detective Plots' (2010).

towers⁴⁶, and this image was met with a similar response as explained in *Time* magazine: 'The photo was published in newspapers around the U.S. in the days after the attacks, but backlash from readers forced it into temporary obscurity' (Drew, 2001, n.p.). These artistic representations of the victims attempt to make their deaths visible and meaningful, to reckon with the trauma on a local scale, but the negative responses they drew led them to be removed from view. The spaces left by these absent bodies mark out a localised radius of trauma, carrying traces of the 'howling space' left by the fallen towers (DeLillo, 2001a, n.p.). In the same way, the absent referent of the Richard Drew photograph haunts DeLillo's novel.

In the *Falling Man*'s performances, there is bodily harm inherent to what appears to be an artistic representation of violence. This detail is key to the novel's grappling with the material body at the centre of the trauma of 9/11. Janiak's "falls" are executed with the use of a safety harness that arrests his fall and allows him to adopt an inverted position, hanging above the city. As we come to learn from his obituary, his falls cannot be easily categorised as a simulation: they 'were said to be painful and highly dangerous' (p. 222). While Janiak's safety harness preserves his life, the impact of each arrested fall damages his spine, causing further, irreparable harm to his body. This marks each performance as distinct, as do the various settings. It is not the same work performed a number of times, but a series that has an overall progression. Each carries the performer further along an entropic process, and his capacity to repeat it lessens each time. Like the bodies falling from the towers, Janiak is similarly engaged in falling towards death, albeit in a slower process of delayed, episodic stages. The works, 'not designed to be recorded' (p. 220), are not subject to further mediation. The actual violence of the falls is a forceful interaction between body and environment, in contrast to Rumsey's death which, as we have seen, is characterised as a loss of coherence and of distinctions between body and world. Janiak's falls, through the lens of Lianne as observer, generate meaning even as they cause the material body to be

⁴⁶ Falling bodies were visible in the news footage that was broadcast, and, while indisputably traumatic to witness, they appear only as momentary specks, difficult to distinguish from falling debris. Both Drew's photograph and DeLillo's novel seek to recover the body and place it at the centre of the traumatic experience.

violently broken down. The clarity of the distinction between performer and spectator, body and world stands in contrast with Keith, who, following Rumsey's death, struggles to comprehend himself as a survivor, grounded in the material present. Janiak's performances make an obscene, traumatic image visible. As Laura Di Prete writes of another performance artist in DeLillo's *The Body Artist* (2001), they 'force trauma into representation' (2005, p. 484). Only after the revelation of the Falling Man's injury and death is the narrative able to return back to the towers, to flesh out Keith's as yet inaccessible experience of the attacks. The violence of the performances, of which we learn near the novel's end, marks them as transgressive; not only are these unsanctioned works that break trespassing laws and anger their spectators, they cross the boundary between life and art⁴⁷. The works are site specific, his audience made up of whichever passersby happen to be in view, and unrepeatable in a gallery setting⁴⁸. We see Janiak reject offers of patronage that would enfranchise his work, literally bringing it into a sanctioned sphere. The performer of outsider art is invited to take up residency at the Guggenheim, but does not accept (p. 222). We remain at a distance from the inscrutable subject; 'He had no comments to make to the media on any subject'.

The falls, which cause irreparable harm to Janiak's body, are simultaneously recuperative, as they reestablish a coherent body-world relation, as well as forming an object of witness, making possible the varied emotional responses of the onlookers. Bataille's understanding of human sacrifice as 'life's necessary games with death' (Elisabeth Arnould-Bloomfield, 2016, p. 99), can help us to understand the double nature of Janiak's performances; they are both violence and enactments of violence. The crowd rejects the subject who is condemned to death, cast out. In Bataille's formulation, violence must be brought into our sphere in a controlled, ritualised manner, to reinforce its status as taboo and transgressive. Sacrifice, then, is an act that seeks to expel violence outside the bounds of our culture, as a means to preserve our social codes. It is cleansing for the inhabitants of

⁴⁷ Peter Boxall goes into this idea in greater detail, productively linking the falls to their broader cultural context. He reads the staged falls as a reflection of the postwar climate, a blurring of life and art in which it becomes impossible to view them as distinct (2010).

⁴⁸ It also exists only in the moment of witnessing - the performances were 'not designed to be recorded' (p. 220).

New York to be confronted with performed, sacrificial falls - it situates violence once again safely beyond the bounds of everyday life. The falling body, the impossible object of witness, is momentarily stable and visible here, but also requires us to accept its status as perpetually suspended, defying our desire for an ending, for an illusion of closed, fixed, authoritative meaning. It is through Lianne's perspective that we view the falls of the Falling Man, and her attitude of relinquishing interpretive control allows us to see them free from 'authoritative comment'; her response is one of embodied empathy. As Janiak 'jumps or falls' Lianne 'felt her body go limp' (p. 168). Lianne's lack of clear boundaries is here expressed as a positive means of relating to the world, and suggests that only when we acknowledge our radical dependence on the other can we process meaningful experiences, of both terror and beauty, in their fullness.

Conclusion

While the horror and loss to which *Falling Man* seeks to give form to cannot find full representation using the tools we have at our disposal, speech and writing, Janiak's falls bring us back to the body. We are confronted with a spectacle that recapitulates the violence of the event, rather than safely restaging it. Janiak's falls are contaminated by the violence of their subject matter, and the unwitting passersby in New York are witness to an episodic sacrifice, both staged and real, as the performer repeatedly throws himself on the funeral pyre⁴⁹. Through Janiak's site-specific falls, grief is characterised as local and situated. The works exist only temporarily, as a direct material confrontation between bodies in the moments of witnessing. A deliberate act of de-forming becomes generative, in contrast to the loss of distinctions in the ruined tower. When Keith first escapes the tower, 'There was glass in his hair and face, marbled bolls of blood and light' (p. 3). Like the 'bolls' of blood (the

⁴⁹ This links into DeLillo's other portrayals of artists who are compelled to subject their bodies to physical trauma. Self-destructive impulses and self-violence are expressed as generative and loaded with meaning, particularly for Bill in *Mao II*, for whom the act of fiction writing is a deadly process, yet essential to self-understanding. Bill states that 'I write to survive now, to keep my heart beating', but writing is simultaneously 'the reason I'm dying' (1991, p. 48; p. 128). For a more positive account of embodied exertion, see my reading of *The Body Artist*, in which Lauren is able to mobilise her body as a tool of self expression through performance art.

seed capsule of a plant), and Keith taking a drink of water 'taking dust and soot down with it', the performances of the Falling Man are at once destructive and creative (p. 3; p. 5). There is bodily harm inherent to what appears to be an artistic representation of violence, which is key to the novel's grappling with the material body at the centre of the trauma of 9/11. The insistently material, bodily nature of the trauma asserts itself into any framework of understanding that deals in abstractions, the material asserting itself into the ideational. The thinking of the event in terms of psychic and cultural trauma fails to account for its materiality, and Keith's struggle to gain clarity is expressed as a spatial disembodiment, as he strives to understand himself as distinct from the ruins 'back there' (p. 16). The hopeful suggestion, in the novel's climax, that psychic recovery may be possible, is contained in a simple detail. As Keith tries to help his friend, he sees a body fall past the window, 'twenty feet away, an instant of something sideways, going past the window, white shirt, hand up, falling before he saw it' (p. 242). Moments later, as Keith joins the people trying to escape, he recalls this: 'For an instant he saw it again, going past the window, and this time he thought it was Rumsey. He confused it with Rumsey, the man falling sideways, arm out and up' (p. 244). Here, moments after leaving Rumsey's side, Keith's spatial understanding is in disarray and, the bodies he encounters confound logic. Moments later, as he continues the long walk down the stairs of the tower to escape, he is suddenly able to recall and distinguish between the body falling past the window, and the body of his friend. He regains the clarity that 'Rumsey was the one in the chair. He understood that now' (p. 245). Here he is able to place Rumsey as distinct from the falling body, and also comprehend these bodies as distinct from his own.

In his debut novel *Americana*, DeLillo insists upon the vital primacy of embodied experience, and gives voice to a tension between the formal and structural conventions of narrative and the uneven, chaotic reality of lived, embodied experience. David, the protagonist, reflects upon his autobiographical writings, and bemoans the fact that he imposed a coherent narrative shape upon events, at the expense of crucial experiences which have been left out.

What appears on these pages represents, in its orderly proportions, almost a delivery from chaos. Too much has been forgotten in the name of memory. There is no mention of the scar on my right index finger, the white medicine I took as a child, the ether visions of my tonsillectomy. In my mind the resonance of these distant things is sheer thunder, outlasting mortal books, long and short wars, journeys to other planets. (pp. 345-346)

Here embodied experience outlives the text and prevails beyond it. These details are asserted as vitally significant, and together form an alternative kind of narrative that is rooted in the body. In *Falling Man*, Keith considers his own actions and sensations as being “about” something else. When he carries out his hand exercises, and feels that the events in the tower, ‘the chaos, the levitation of ceilings and floors’ are the true ‘subject of this effort’, he overlooks the bodily reality that might make psychic healing possible (2007, p. 40).

The sense of an absence that is incomprehensible and unspeakable suffuses the text, particularly in the image of the empty shirt, a symbol that reflects in turn the altered skyline, the missing towers (p. 4; p. 246). Much existing theory and criticism that seeks to come to terms with the attacks of 9/11 grapples with the events in terms of a lack, a blankness, a resistance to frameworks of comprehension. While producing a meaningful fictional response seems impossible under these conditions, the narrative of *Falling Man* is a novel that self-consciously draws attention to the limitations of narrative, and offers an alternative: a body that, free from ‘authoritative comment’ might ‘express itself’ (2007, p. 12; 2003, p. 45). Keith’s drive to return to his body, to comprehend himself as ‘standing here’ contrasts with Lianne, who willingly undergoes various imaginative and emotionally resonant transformations. In Lianne’s experience, indulging the sense of permeable boundaries between self and other affords her experiences of rich, authentic feeling. Keith and Rumsey pursue the idea that we may comprehend the world in its fullness and heterogeneity, in the same manner that we regard our bodies as knowable and whole, a certainty suggested in the act of holding our hands in front of us and counting ten digits. *Falling Man* advances many challenges to this supposed certainty, and insists that we are bound up in much more complex and ambiguous relations to our bodies and to the world beyond. Keith, who clings to

ideas of control and singular, authoritative meaning has a stilted recovery of coherence, struggling to count himself among the remnants of the buildings, the 'last standing things' (p. 25). Keith cannot comprehend himself as a subject distinct from the falling towers, and this lack of vantage point is key to his stilted psychic recovery throughout the novel. Uncertain of the boundaries of his selfhood, and estranged from his past self, he casts about for a coherent narrative⁵⁰. Lianne's worldview represents something more positive: a relinquishing of control, and a way of seeing that accepts the unnameable. While formlessness, for Keith, is a source of profound anxieties, Lianne represents a kind of embodied subjectivity that can withstand imaginative shifts and transformations, an alternative to abject 'body slop' (p. 244). Meanwhile Janiak, impossibly in 'stationary fall' recovers the body as a meaningful object of witness (p. 34). The actual bodily damage that Janiak inflicts upon himself is integral to the work: in the *Falling Man* we are presented with a body breaking down meaningfully. DeLillo employs multiple art objects in the novel, and their significations are mutable, plural and dynamic. The pervading sense that these objects of scrutiny carry unfixed and diverse meanings helps us to get at the difficulty of experiencing or narrating trauma, which poses a challenge to conventions of perception and representation. In a detail that resonates with depictions of trauma in critical thought, there is no 'simple knowledge' of an originary experience to be recovered here (Caruth, 1996, p. 5). The attempts of DeLillo's characters to come to terms with the traumatic events of 9/11 are expressed through the body, as a drive to reestablish the body-world relation. Lianne experiences emphatic joy as she views the Morandi paintings. She relates positively to an inscrutable art object, and to a momentary, imagined evacuation of her own body, and her experiences of joy depend precisely on the uncertainty and extralinguistic mystery that Keith fears. Bodies carry an inscrutable power, as, for Rumsey, the idea of a woman with an uneven number of toes holds the power to heal

⁵⁰ The blank and unmoored nature of his inner experience, described as a disruption of time, is evocative of our current experience of the global pandemic and lockdown. The advice blogger Captain Awkward responds to a letter writer who gives voice to this sense of living through trauma as suspension and stasis: 'thank you [...] for expressing a very relatable thing for many people in this Plague Year, where the BeforeTimes™ and the AfterTimes™ feel equally distant. It's all middle, somehow. It's all February, all the way down. Those of us who have survived this long are grateful for it, but maybe we don't feel particularly grateful, and then we're guilty for feeling ungrateful, and then we're mad again' (Jennifer Peepas, 2021, n.p.).

and to relieve him from his obsessive methods of relating to the world around him. He would be 'cured, like Lourdes, and could stop counting now' (DeLillo, 2007, p. 123).

DeLillo honours the status of the traumatic subject matter of 9/11 as massive, complex, and heterogeneous, and asks us to reckon with our misguided desire for a singular, overarching account that will contain and safely transmit the trauma back to us in a distilled form. DeLillo admits the idea of 'organic shrapnel', an encounter between bodies that seems to powerfully evoke the horror of the attacks, and then expels it from the narrative. When the term is displaced to 'those places' (p. 16) and then becomes meaningless to Keith, DeLillo denies us the satisfaction of a bodily exchange as an allegory for the way the Other is violently thrust into our experience by the attacks. The organic shrapnel is a potent symbol that ultimately fails to 'land'. Instead, through the body of the performance artist, DeLillo emphasises the chaotic and heterogeneous nature of the body's communicative capacities, and through the character of Lianne asserts the need to observe and to witness, rather than to describe and diagnose. Through the appearances of the Falling Man, we approach the novel's traumatic subject matter through a series of performances that transgress boundaries and that, ultimately unfinished, defy narrative convention.

The disruption of ideas of narrative coherence is usefully contained in the object of the souvenir: the postcard that Lianne received from Rome, and in the pencils in her son's room, souvenirs from around the world. These objects ostensibly act as a stable representation of an experience, an event that, once the traveller is separated by time and distance, the object acts as a prompt, a shorthand for the particular time, place and context. This relation is disrupted, as the objects refer to a number of things simultaneously. The deceptively simple postcard and its 'standard scrawled greeting' (p. 8) gives way to resonant and troubling associations. In the same way, the Morandi still lifes depict 'groupings of bottles, jugs, biscuit tins, that was all' (p. 12), but quickly exceed this definition. The pencils similarly prompt multiple responses from Lianne; fascinated, admiring, she watches her son methodically sharpen them, 'a ritual more thorough and righteous than the formal signing of

some document of state by eleven men with medals' (p. 39). At the same time, the pencils invoke complex feelings relating to privilege. Lianne notes 'It was awful in a way, all these fragments of status washing up in some little kid's room' (p. 38). Lianne embraces this multiplicity, and is able to experience the falls of the Falling Man, responding with an embodied empathy. In contrast, Keith fails in his attempts to regain a 'grip' on his lived experience as a singular, coherent, and stable narrative. In relation to the Morandi still lifes in her mother's apartment, Lianne's emotional response is prioritised above regarding the works as objects of critical interrogation, and her acceptance of the unnameable mystery they contain exists comfortably alongside her love of the paintings, allowing us to rethink the binary opposition of structure and formlessness. The mystery they hold is not regarded as a problem to be solved, whereas Keith, looking to various texts and objects in his attempt to recover a coherent sense of self, is compelled to search for 'clues'⁵¹. Keith's worldview echoes the assertion in *White Noise* that 'To plot is to live [...] to seek shape and control' (1984, p. 292). In contrast, Lianne's subjective mode can help us to understand the significance of the Falling Man's performances, in terms of a refusal of narrative closure, the preservation of mystery, the attitude of dangling.

⁵¹ Elsewhere, Keith examines the contents of a briefcase that he mistakenly carried with him out of the tower. The contents include 'an imitation leather folio with a blank notebook in one of the pockets' (p. 36).

Chapter Two: Unstable bodies in *Mao II* and *The Body Artist*

Critical interest in the role of the body in DeLillo's fiction has grown in recent years, particularly in response to the centrality of the body to his work since *The Body Artist*. Scholars such as Laura Di Prete (2005), Anne Longmuir (2007a), Russell Scott Valentino (2007), and Linda Kauffman (2011) have all worked to theorise the ways in which DeLillo's latest fiction envisions the conditions under which the body exists in the new century. My central proposition here is that these bodily concerns exist in DeLillo's fiction before the turn of the century, albeit in a more nascent form; by taking *The Body Artist* (2001) together with *Mao II* (1991), I suggest a way of understanding the idiosyncratic and compelling figurations of the body that permeate his oeuvre.

Mao II and *The Body Artist* mark the end and the beginning of two very different styles of fiction in DeLillo's oeuvre. While the former feels very much of a piece with what critics have called his "middle period", or "major DeLillo", the latter leaps into something rather more spare; the sort of 'late style' that DeLillo himself describes as 'bare-skinned' in his interview with Peter Boxall (Da Cunha Lewin and Ward, eds., 2019, p. 160). Yet, in spite of their palpable differences, the protagonists of each share a core similarity: both *Mao II*'s novelist Bill Gray and *The Body Artist*'s performance artist Lauren Hartke are preoccupied with how subjectivity relates to and is maintained by the body and its processes. Gray views his body's emissions and his writing as one and the same: gas pains, skipped heartbeats and mucus represent his 'true biography' (1991, p. 135). Equally, Hartke, as she struggles to shore herself up against the uncertainties of her environment and the figures she encounters in the wake of her husband's death, inspects and maintains her body, reimagining it as a tool of expression. In the relationship each has with the body and embodiment, it is possible to see that Gray and Hartke are not two opposing poles in DeLillo's oeuvre; rather, they are thematically entwined. This chapter thus builds upon an article by Katrina Harack, in which she explores the interrelation of body, space and time, reading *Falling Man* alongside the

earlier *White Noise*⁵². Looking at an example of both a “late” and “major” text, Harack describes DeLillo as ‘invoking an embodied ethics that examines the individual’s relationship to place, to the body, and to others’ (Harack, 2013, pp. 304-305).

So how does the body work in each text? Wherein resides the significance, for DeLillo, of Gray and Hartke’s struggles with embodiment? Both seek solace in the routine and repetition of bodily functions and movements, as the everyday experience of the worlds they inhabit is imbued with the sense of terror they detect as an integral part of the fabric of existence⁵³. The attention that both pay to the body’s boundaries resonates with Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, in which selfhood is expressed as an ongoing process of othering, and with Paul Schilder’s definition of body-image. In conjunction with their analyses, we can begin to understand DeLillo’s discourse on the body as key to the uncertainty with which his characters navigate their worlds.

Within a psychoanalytic framework, the body is both communicative and troubling; bodily processes and symptoms are viewed as expressions of the psyche, and much of psychoanalysis is concerned with the struggle to correctly or generatively interpret these signs. Kristeva, in her famous psychoanalytic treatise *Powers of Horror*, outlines a theory of abjection that speaks suggestively to the recent turn to the body in scholarship on DeLillo’s fiction. The term ‘abjection’ refers literally to a condition that is low or downcast; for Kristeva, the ‘object’ is that which is expunged from subjectivity in order to make life manageable – that which is so traumatic as to disrupt the very stability and coherence of the embodied self. Indeed, she explains that it is ‘not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). Imagining an encounter with a corpse, Kristeva likens the object to being faced with the presence of death – ‘what I permanently thrust aside in order to live’ (p. 3). As suggested in this image, matter expelled

⁵² Philip Nel provides another useful inroad into addressing the body in DeLillo’s earlier fiction, in his 2001 article ‘Amazons in the Underworld: Gender, the Body, and Power in the Novels of Don DeLillo’.

⁵³ Bill, for example, asserts that ‘Stories have no point if they don’t absorb our terror’, while Lauren’s husband warns her of ‘the terror of another ordinary day’ (1991, p. 140; 2001, p. 12).

from, or thrust aside by, the body is bound up with the abject; not only does it provoke feelings of horror and repulsion, but it troubles the distinction between the body and the external world; between the self and the other. In Kristeva's formulation, bodily fluids and wastes act as signifiers of death and disease, reminding us of the permeability and porosity of our bodies. To manage this disruption, the subject must be engaged in a continuous process of othering, expelling what is 'not me', to maintain a stable sense of selfhood (p. 2).

Kristeva's conception of selfhood as at once embodied and defined by its capacity to process and expel that which it is not, provides a suggestive framework within which to understand how DeLillo figures the concerns of Gray and Hartke, both of whom experience a troubling of subjectivity that is grounded in the stuff of the body. Importantly, this frame for understanding the relationship between subjectivity and embodiment insists that whatever is excluded and designated 'not me' remains part of the self; to borrow from psychoanalyst Paul Schilder's theory of body-image, 'whatever originates in or emanates out of our body will still remain a part of the body-image. The voice, the breath, the odour, faeces, menstrual blood, urine, semen, are still parts of the body-image even when they are separated in space from the body' (Schilder, 1950, p. 213). Just as Harack examines how DeLillo's embodied subjects deal with trauma and strive for stable identity, we will see that the role of abjection is central to DeLillo's conception of the self and embodiment. The protagonists of *Mao II* and *The Body Artist* are engaged in a struggle to attain, and maintain, a stable subjectivity rooted in the material body, but such stability is illusory, and the bodies in the texts defy attempts to control or contain them.

Mao II: The novelist and the monstrous body

Bill Gray has completed two short works of fiction in his lifetime. Living in self-imposed isolation and dogged by rumours of his death and his disappearance, he struggles to complete his long delayed third novel. Trapped in anxious inaction throughout the narrative, Bill constantly revises—or puts off revising—his stagnated text, later abandoning it completely. As he reflects on the unfinished work it becomes personified, taking form in his

mind as a grotesque, near-human being: 'He looked at the sentence, six disconsolate words, and saw the entire book as it took occasional shape in his mind, a neutered near-human dragging through the house, humpbacked, hydrocephalic, with puckered lips and soft skin, dribbling brain fluid from its mouth' (DeLillo, 1991, p. 55)⁵⁴. Bill's work is manifested as a bizarre and horrifying creature that stalks the corridors of his home. Its monstrosity lies in its list of ailments, which together form a picture of a body with multiple flaws and failings. The novel, perpetually unfinished, is composed of lines of text that Bill is 'always whitening out and typing in' (p. 55), and his anxieties towards it are rendered visible in the shape that it assumes, a monstrous composite of malformations and symptoms. In a rambling answerphone message, Bill elaborates on the form in which it appears to him:

I keep seeing my book wandering through the halls. There the thing is, creeping feebly, if you can imagine a naked humped creature with filed-down genitals, only worse, because its head bulges at the top and there's a gargoylish tongue jutting at a corner of the mouth and truly terrible feet [...] A cretin, a distort. Water-bloated, slobbering, incontinent [...] It tries to cling to me, soft-skinned and moist, to fasten its puckery limpet flesh onto mine.
(p. 92)

This description of the being reveals in further details of its emissions—moist, slobbering, incontinent—forming a picture of an unbearably leaky being⁵⁵. In this strange and incomplete

⁵⁴ David Foster Wallace describes the monstrous novel as '[t]he best metaphor I know of for being a fiction writer'. He explains that DeLillo

describes a book-in-progress as a kind of hideously damaged infant that follows the writer around [...] dribbling cerebro-spinal fluid out of its mouth as it mewls and blurbles and cries out [...] it captures the mix of repulsion and love the fiction writer feels for something he's working on. The fiction always comes out so horrifically defective, so hideous a betrayal of all your hopes for it – a cruel and repellent caricature [...] (Wallace, in Blythe, ed., 1999, n.p.)

⁵⁵ A detail in William Gaddis's 1955 novel *The Recognitions* offers a clue as to the genesis of this image. DeLillo has praised the novel as 'a revelation' (DeLillo, 2003a, n.p.), and, as Gerald Howard has noted, *Mao II* and *The Recognitions* 'similarly attempt to grapple with the subterranean history of postwar American life' (Howard, cited in DePietro, p. 123). In *The Recognitions*, a character mocks the desire to meet admired writers and artists, declaring 'What is it they want from a man they didn't get from his work? [...] What's any artist, but the dregs of his work? The human shambles that follows it around. What's left of the man when the work's done but a shambles of apology' (1955, pp. 95-96). Here the artist is emptied out by the act of creation, as the sheer effort of production reduces them to 'dregs'. *Mao II*'s 'near-human' creature, 'creeping feebly' echoes Gaddis's 'human shambles'. My thanks to Dr Adam Rounce for pointing out this connection.

form, the integrity of the material body seems to be under threat. DeLillo repeatedly refers to its flawed boundaries, as its body expresses fluids uncontrollably. The presence of this trope seems to suggest that Bill's creativity has become bound up with that which is rejected – that it has become abject. Indeed, it evokes Kristeva's focus on bodily fluids and wastes, and her attention to the body's border.

Kristeva describes an ongoing process of othering which is necessary to maintaining a stable sense of self:

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay . . . refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadare, cadaver*. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. (1982, p. 3, original emphasis)

Kristeva's emphatic foregrounding of the need to 'thrust aside' death, bodily wastes, and symptoms of disease carries a striking resonance with Bill's inner reflections. Bill's self-understanding is grounded in the monitoring of his own excretions, his attention directed inward to his body's material processes, and in his ruminations, bodily wastes are strongly aligned with creative work:

He lay in bed open-eyed in the dark. There were intestinal moans from his left side, where gas makes a hairpin turn at the splenic flexure. He felt a mass of phlegm wobbling in his throat but he didn't want to get out of bed to expel it, so he swallowed the whole nasty business, a sick syrupy glop. This was the texture of his life. If someone ever writes his true biography, it will be a chronicle of gas pains and skipped heartbeats, grinding teeth and dizzy spells and smothered breath, with detailed descriptions of Bill leaving his desk to walk to the bathroom and spit up mucus [...] He walked down the hall to piss or spit [...] His book, smelling faintly of baby drool, was just outside the door. He heard it moan solemnly, the same grave sound that welled in his gut. (DeLillo, 1991, pp. 135-136)

Here Bill is preoccupied with his body's processes. As he strives to isolate himself completely from the outside world – to secure the boundaries of his self-identity – these details are brought into sharper focus, as 'in the solitary life there was a tendency to collect moments that might otherwise blur into the rough jostle, the swing of a body through busy streets and rooms' (p. 136)⁵⁶. His sphere of experience is narrowed to the production of writing and the production of bodily wastes. He expels gas, phlegm, and urine in the same manner as the 'spray of ideas', the 'shitpile of hopeless prose' (p. 159). This kind of considered attention to the expression of matter invokes Kristeva's formulation of selfhood as an ongoing process of exclusion, expelling what is 'not me' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2).

Yet we see that, in Bill's formulation, this matter occupies a central space within the body-image, rather than being successfully cast out from it⁵⁷. Schilder gives voice to this difficulty by describing the ambiguous position of urine and faeces, stating that 'what has once been part of the body does not lose this quality completely [...] psychologically they remain a part of ourselves. We are dealing with a spreading of the body-image into the world' (1950, p. 188). Beyond the pairing of writing and bodily wastes, Bill's attention to his own bodily functions is further complicated in relation to his monstrous novel, as the creature is met with a response from within his body, when he sneezes onto the page in front of him, 'noting blood-spotted matter', and as he 'heard it moan solemnly, the same grave sound that welled in his gut' (DeLillo, 1991, p. 55; p. 136). When Bill beholds his monstrous novel, he is confronted with an extreme, exaggerated reflection of his own small signifiers of disease.

The creature recalls a particular trope of the monstrous abject that is a mainstay of horror

⁵⁶ The trope of the novelist as a man alone in a small room is loaded with gendered expectations. DeLillo seems to avoid an overt misogyny in his discussions of the role of the writer, but the idea of a life narrowed down to writing and making trips to the toilet does raise questions of who supports and sustains them to make this possible. Elsewhere, in the case of Philip Roth, we see this dynamic reflect a hateful and sexist attitude. In Blake Bailey's biography, Roth's partner is 'a pain in the ass', who 'was forever expecting him to drop everything and take her to the hairdresser or some such'. As Laura Marsh explains, Bailey writes that Roth's wife "couldn't resist" interrupting her husband's work "on the thinnest of pretexts ('Could you go out and get half a pound of Parmesan cheese?')". Meanwhile in a bizarre detail, in line with Bill Gray's reverence towards his own body functions, Bailey 'reports his delight at overhearing the "muffled streams" of "our greatest living novelist" peeing' (Marsh, 2021, n.p.).

⁵⁷ This sentiment is echoed with humour in *The Body Artist*, in Lauren's reflection that 'There's nothing like a raging crap [...] to make mind and body one' (2001, p. 35).

films; as Rina Arya explains, ‘the monster that is archetypally abject and occupies interstitial states between different categories thereby [transgresses] the idea of a discrete boundary’ (2014, p. 15). The monster in *Mao II* plays into this confounding of categories of human and non-human, and furthermore presents a visceral challenge to the skin as a boundary separating inside from out. As Bill strives to maintain control over his own sense of self by paying attention to his bodily functions, he is pursued by this monstrous archetype of abjection, in which the body’s conventional boundaries have broken down.

Pain and selfhood

While *Mao II*’s narrative centres on Bill’s isolation, orbited by the subplots of the characters he encounters, it is broken up by depictions of crowds at recent historic events, such as at the Hillsborough disaster and the funeral of Ayatollah Khomeini. These events are juxtaposed with Bill’s solitude throughout the novel, setting him in direct conflict with the ominous proclamation, in the novel’s prologue, that ‘the future belongs to crowds’ (1991, p. 16). *Mao II* opens with an account of a mass wedding of members of the Unification Church, a spectacle in which the participants seem to become a new unit of being, or a kind of monstrous form. The anxiety attached to ideas of bodily integrity that we have seen in the figure of the monstrous body similarly emerges here, as

the music draws them across the grass, dozens, hundreds, already too many to count. They assemble themselves so tightly, crossing the vast arc of the outfield, that the effect is one of transformation. From a series of linked couples they become one continuous wave, larger all the time [...] They’re one body now, an undifferentiated mass’ (p. 3).

This is the first of the crowd scenes that punctuate the narrative, and in these portrayals of mass gatherings experiences of fear, religious feeling and grief are collectively felt. The opening wedding ceremony is told in part from the perspective of Karen, one of the participants. The ‘thin-boundaried’ Karen strives to transcend distinctions between self and other, immersed in ‘these chanting thousands [...] in the middle of their columned body [...] immunized against the language of self’ (p. 119; pp. 7-8). Karen longs for an imagined

transformation in which discomforts, 'all the small banes and body woes, the daylong list of sore gums and sweaty nape and need to pee, ancient rumbles in the gut' are excised from experience (p. 8). Yet, as we later learn, she is unable to achieve any such state, as she cannot escape the prevailing experience of pain. Wrestling with her participation in the Church, Karen 'began to think she was inadequate to the strict plain shapes of churchly faith. Head pains hit her at the end of the day. They came with a shining, an electrochemical sheen, light from out of nowhere, brain made, the eerie gleam of who you are' (p. 78). Despite her desire to experience 'the body common', here Karen glimpses the intimate meshing of personal identity and sensation, the connection upon which Bill relies in his attempts to make sense of his experiences (p. 77). The body's sensations assert themselves, and Karen's 'eerie' headache is made strange, imbued with a mystical quality of its own, its oddly enticing 'sheen' and 'gleam' drawing her away from her affiliation with the Church.

In opposition to the menacing movement in the text towards crowds of collective being, Bill strives for solitude. His stalled project is aligned with his selfhood, which in turn is clearly linked to the matter of his body. In the mundane activities of maintaining that body—spitting up mucus, expelling gas—he works to maintain a stable sense of self, through processes that are key to Kristeva's formulation of subjectivity. Bill's relationship to his novel is one of a strange double bind, at once life-sustaining and deadly. As he explains, 'I write to survive now, to keep my heart beating'; yet writing is simultaneously 'Killing work', 'the reason I'm dying' (DeLillo, 1991, p. 48; p. 75; p. 128). As we have seen, the disfigured body of Bill's monstrous companion acts as an externalized representation of two ideas which are intimately connected: Bill's anxieties about his work as a fiction writer, and his struggle to maintain a sense of self as a distinct individual. As *Mao II*'s plot progresses, the ambiguity of Bill's body and the matter it expels, at once suggesting disease and indicative of the body's fight against that disease, leads into a more extreme set of contradictions. Bill becomes embroiled in the plight of another writer who is being held hostage in Beirut, and in working to secure the man's release he becomes a target of the terrorist group responsible.

As he narrowly escapes a targeted explosion, the detailing of unpleasant yet harmless sensations gives way to violence:

Bill felt a stinging pinpoint heat, a shaped pain in his left hand, bright and slivered [...] [he] picked a fragment of glass out of his hand. The others watched. He understood why the pain felt familiar. It was a summer wound, a play wound, one of the burns and knee-scrapes and splinters of half a century ago, one of the bee stings, the daily bloody cuts. (p. 129)

In this peculiar formulation, Bill experiences the wounding of his hand as a fulfilling and grounding process that binds him to a sense of self. A shard of glass acts as a kind of Proustian madeleine, evoking the knee scrapes of childhood play and providing a link between pain and personal history. Bill later embarks on an ill-fated journey to Beirut, lapses into heavy drinking and is struck by a car. His response to the collision, which causes a fatal laceration of his liver, is once again jarringly positive; he felt 'joined to the past, to some bloodline of intimate and renewable pain' (DeLillo, 1991, p. 196). Sensations that bring Bill back to a sense of being-in-the-body are experienced as a renewal, even as they indicate the body being wounded and destroyed, in a striking departure from the characterization of pain in critical thought. Elaine Scarry asserts that pain is fundamentally inarticulate and uniquely isolating for the sufferer, because it is impossible to relate the experience through language, and because it literally extinguishes language, as the subject is reduced to inarticulate cries (Scarry, 1985, p. 3), and it is in this context that the solace and nostalgia experienced by Bill, in an apparent misreading of his body's signals, are made all the more strange. The isolating nature of pain is reformulated in Bill's experience as a recuperative force. For him, any sensation, even that of a fatal blow, brings him back to the body, providing a vital counter to visions of collective being and the loss of the self in the crowd.

The Body Artist: Body artistry and body-image

The Body Artist, while primarily concerned with speech and bodily movement rather than writing, resonates with *Mao II* in terms of its preoccupation with the body's communicative capacity. The narrative follows Lauren Hartke, whom we encounter as she attempts to

process the suicide of her husband Rey. Sparsely plotted, the text follows her grieving process as she isolates herself in the home they once shared. As she tries to process her trauma she carries out 'bodywork', a 'regimen of cat stretch and methodical contortion' that she uses to prepare her body for performance art (DeLillo, 2001, p. 36). While she intends to grieve in solitude, Lauren encounters a strange man whose presence is unexplained and with whom she is unable to communicate in a conventional sense. The man, whom she names Mr. Tuttle, engages in eerie mimicry, speaking her own words back to her and then seeming to repeat fragments of conversation once spoken by her late husband. Tuttle's speech is stilted and incomplete; one of his more cogent statements reads 'I know how much [...] I know how much this house. Alone by the sea' (p. 48). As Lauren listens, 'she began to understand what she was hearing [...] It wasn't outright impersonation but she heard elements of her voice, the clipped delivery, the slight buzz deep in the throat, her pitch [...] She wasn't sure it was her voice. Then she was' (p. 51). Later, as she attempts to process this, she similarly recognizes ghostly echoes of her husband: 'she kept hearing the voice and seeing the hand gesture, unmistakably Rey's, two fingers joined and wagging' (p. 53). In the figure of Mr. Tuttle we are presented with a disruption of the speaking subject, as words seem to come from the wrong body. This sense of displaced voices reverberates throughout the text, for instance, when Lauren compulsively calls a friend's answering machine to hear the recorded message, 'words [...] not spoken but generated' by a disembodied voice (p. 71). Though Andrew Bennett notes that 'speech is held to be natural, immediate, unmediated, living, present and meaningful' as opposed to the 'deferred, unnatural, supplementary, even dangerous' qualities of the written word, Tuttle's voice is eerie in its very lack, spoken by a subject who does not appear to understand language as a vehicle for meaning (Bennett, 2015, p. 74). Voice is divorced from a speaking subject, and the supposed unity of the body-image is undone. Does the voice still belong to Lauren's husband, to Lauren, to Tuttle? Or, alternatively, can voice really belong to anyone, or does it disavow the concept of "ownership" the moment it passes from inside to outside? To Lauren, Tuttle engenders a supernaturally charged transcendence of selfhood, confounding the

delineation of 'me' and 'not me' that is vital to Kristeva's formulation of the subject. The connection between her late husband and Tuttle is expressed not as mimicry but something more profound. Regarding Tuttle, Lauren refers to 'the material place where Rey lives in him, alive again, word for word, touch for touch' and concludes that 'He violates the limits of the human' (DeLillo, 2001, p. 108).

This sense of disruption in the text extends beyond the problematized role of voice, as Lauren misidentifies a collection of objects as a man with a personality and a history. It is worth quoting this section at length:

She was in town, driving down a hilly street of frame houses, and saw a man sitting on his porch, ahead of her, through trees and shrubs, arms spread, a broad-faced blondish man, lounging. She felt in that small point in time, a flyspeck quarter second or so, that she saw him complete. His life flew open to her passing glance. A lazy and manipulative man, in real estate, in fairview condos by a mosquito lake. She knew him. She saw into him. He was there, divorced and drink-haunted, emotionally distant from his kids, his sons, two sons, in school blazers, in the barest blink.

A voice recited the news on the radio.

When the car moved past the house, in the pull of the full second, she understood that she was not looking at a seated man but at a paint can placed on a board that was placed between two chairs. The white and yellow can was his face, the board was his arms and the mind and heart of the man were in the air somewhere, already lost in the voice of the news reader on the radio. (DeLillo, 2001, pp. 74-75)

In an image that she misreads as a body, Lauren conjures a rich narrative of a stranger, which in the next moment is revealed as artifice. The sudden negation of this life creates pathos in her certainty that 'She knew him. She saw into him. He was there'. As in her interactions with Mr. Tuttle, wherein Lauren tries and fails to understand where he came from and how he came to be in her home, here the idea of failed connection is taken to an extreme, as the figure into whom she invests so much nuance and poignancy slips away entirely. Lauren's momentary empathy towards a subject of her own imagining serves to undermine the possibility of understanding bodies as stable signifiers, rendering the attempt ridiculous. The individuals to whom she struggles to relate are not stable identities; they are disrupted as they shift under her gaze, speaking the words of others or disappearing entirely.

In her readings of these problematic bodies, she exposes a deep uncertainty as to how a body is constituted or made whole.

The Body Artist features details that unsettle identity, disrupting the boundaries between selves. Mr. Tuttle is bound to Lauren and to her late husband through the voice, and Lauren views him as a kind of transcendent being, operating outside time (DeLillo, 2001, p. 68). As Philip Nel asserts, Mr. Tuttle is 'a man with transparent ego boundaries' (Nel, 2002, p. 747) through which he cannot come into being: 'He had no protective surface. He was alone and unable to improvise, make himself up [...] Maybe he was just deranged [...] A nutcase who tries to live in other voices' (DeLillo, 2001, p. 96). In Lauren's words, Mr. Tuttle 'falls [...] he slides into her experience', and 'laps and seeps, somehow, into other reaches of being' (p. 88; p. 98), invoking Kristeva's comments on the status of the self when confronted with the disintegration of the imagined border:

How can I be without border? That elsewhere that I imagine beyond the present, or that I hallucinate so that I might, in a present time, speak to you, conceive of you – it is now here, jetted, abjected, into "my" world [...] I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders. (1982, p. 4).

In his apparent lack of self, Mr. Tuttle challenges Lauren to acknowledge her own fragile sense of how the 'self' might be meaningfully constituted, and by revealing the precarity of markers of selfhood, DeLillo confronts the troubling uncertainty that lies in every exchange between bodies. This uncertainty, however, is challenged by the way that Lauren uses her body; in contrast to Bill's sedentary reflections in *Mao II*, she not only employs it as the primary medium of expression but also as the only canvas for her art. Though her interest in documenting the particular details of her body is similar to Bill's, her attention is more ritualistic, found in methodical grooming: 'She studied her fingers and toes. There was a way in which she isolated a digit for sharp regard' (DeLillo, 2001, p. 81). Using a pumice stone on the soles of her feet, there is a sense that her body is primed for movement and exertion, 'coiled in a wholeness of intent', in contrast to Bill's litany of 'skipped heartbeats', and while we have seen Bill derive a positive comfort from sensations of pain, for Lauren the same

effect is achieved by scraping at a callus on her foot with 'the kind of solemn self-absorption that marks a line from childhood' (DeLillo, 1991, p. 135; 2001, p. 80). Lauren carries out the work of maintaining her body's boundary, her ritual grooming located at the surface of the skin. In completing and performing her piece 'Body Time', not only is her artistic project more successful than Bill's, but she actively engages with, and enacts, the possibilities and limitations of her body. In the piece, Lauren transforms herself into a figure that resembles Mr. Tuttle. By putting her body to use, consciously and explicitly performing another's mannerisms and movements, she in fact recapitulates her own body's status as a carrier of meaning. Lauren demonstrates her body's expressive capabilities, and while, in the performance, she works to embody a succession of different characters, her success relies not on her body's capacity for imitation, but on its status as a singular object. As Longmuir notes, 'Lauren's art exemplifies the resistant semiotic or bodily aesthetic. It is conflated with her bodily presence and is hence unreproducible by the dominant order' (Longmuir, 2007a, p. 532).

As Louise Steinman writes in *The Knowing Body*, 'Performance is a path towards knowledge [...] [it] is a live form, by which I mean enlivening. In the energy exchange between performer and audience there is potential for a tremendous amount of learning, potential to stir up powers beyond evident human capacity' (1986, p. vii). It is these enlivening qualities which Steinman celebrates that enable Lauren to emerge from her grief, while Bill is condemned to a journey towards death. Bill believes that meaning lies in observation of the body's sensations, and that simply being aware of them enables access to a kind of embodied reality. In contrast, the medium of performance art allows Lauren to engage her body in creative labour. She does not simply narrate her embodied experience, rather she uses her body to create a narrative, which, in contrast to Bill's fate, carries the possibility of change and redemption.

Conclusion: 'The language of self'

In *Mao II*, Bill Gray is engaged in a struggle against multiple threats to his stability. He strives to complete his novel, which in its unfinished form is monstrous and menacing. He simultaneously struggles to comprehend his identity as an individual, rooted in a body, and to remain distinct from the collective. Writing is expressed in tandem with the body, particularly through the strange form that the unfinished novel takes on, and through Bill's reflections on his own sensations and bodily functions as his 'true biography'. The monstrous novel is a striking example of DeLillo's investment in problems of the body: its systemic workings, its boundaries, the matter it is made up of and the matter that it expels. *The Body Artist*, meanwhile, is concerned with a disruption of subjectivity, and the possibility that the embodied practice of performance art can counter such a disruption. The bodies in these texts, which, as we have seen, elude stable meaning when considered by the protagonists, are similarly slippery to us as readers, resisting neat theorization. What does clearly emerge from both works is that thematic anxieties are consistently enacted at the body's contested border: in the monstrous novel and the ineffective boundary of its leaky body; in Bill's flesh, as his wounded hand acts as a carrier of childhood memory, pain connecting him to his personal history; in Mr. Tuttle, a figure with 'no protective surface' who 'violates the limits of the human' and the mismatch between his voice and his unformed identity (DeLillo, 2001, p. 96; p. 108). Meanwhile in Lauren's activities, most explicitly in her habitual, meditative exfoliation, we can see an attempt, through embodied practice, to resist the slippages that Tuttle represents. DeLillo returns repeatedly to a troubling of bodily and subjective boundaries and a concern with, in Kristeva's words, the 'other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3). For Bill Gray, in *Mao II*, abjection presents itself as the promise of stable identity, but this promise is revealed as false, as his attempt to embody the role of the novelist in an age of mass culture becomes increasingly and detrimentally focused on his abject monster-novel, leading inexorably to his death. Conversely, for *The Body Artist*'s Lauren Hartke, abjection functions as a means to an end, as her encounters with Mr. Tuttle enable her to come to terms with her husband's death

and to express something like the 'language of self' that Bill and Karen desire, but never achieve. Where Bill's writing takes on a fantasized body of its own, Lauren works out her trauma through a performance that is a kind of writing with, or on, her body. These bodies are able to tell us something of ourselves that language cannot, and by tracing the evolution of DeLillo's formulations of embodiment, from *Mao II* to *The Body Artist*, so too can we trace the possibilities for creative and critical thought that the body manifests across his oeuvre.

Chapter Three: Obscenity and Transgressions in *Americana*

DeLillo's writing of the body, and particularly the grotesque and abject aspects of his fiction are key to his delineation of American culture, an element which has been largely overlooked in existing criticism. We have seen that in *Falling Man* (2007) DeLillo engages with the unspeakable/incomprehensible events of September 11, 2001 through a protagonist whose sense of self has come undone. The traumatic events are expressed as a material breakdown, as body parts and building wreckage are crushed together, as well a breakdown of narrative itself as a framework of comprehension. In *Falling Man* DeLillo explores embodiment as an alternative register to language, through which his characters might be able to access and process their trauma. In *Mao II* (1991), DeLillo shows a strong interest in grotesque bodies and bodily wastes, which he uses to characterise the uneasy relationship between a novelist and their work. The writer Bill Gray has a deeply ambiguous relation to his own body's functions and to his unfinished novel which takes the form of a monstrous, near-human creature. Here Bill's identity is intimately linked with his bodily wastes, and in a key finding of the thesis, DeLillo expresses a strong link between pain and the continuity of personal history. When Bill is injured, the experience allows him to access a continuous sense of self, so much so that he puts himself in harm's way, taking pleasure in the way that pain binds him to his past experiences even as his health deteriorates. In *The Body Artist* (2001), Lauren Hartke similarly struggles with an uncertain and untethered sense of self as she grieves her husband's suicide. Her performance art allows her to actively work through these concerns, and with greater success than Bill Gray: here the protagonist is able to use her body as a tool of expression through which she can begin the process of healing.

In these three texts, characters grapple with a disrupted sense of self and a disrupted relation to the external world, and each of their struggles is expressed at the site of their bodies. Existing criticism on the body in DeLillo's fiction has focused on the later works, particularly *The Body Artist* (2001), where the body as subject is declared most explicitly, and *Falling Man* (2007). Yet such concerns, specifically with grotesque and unruly bodies,

are clearly apparent throughout the oeuvre, and are announced in DeLillo's 1971 debut novel *Americana*. DeLillo's investment in the body does not correspond with the tendency to group his work into an 'early' and 'late' period with distinct styles and concerns; rather it is sustained throughout his career from his first novel to the present day.

Julia Kristeva outlines a theory of abjection in her famous psychoanalytic treatise *Powers of Horror* (1982). As we have seen in the previous chapter, for Kristeva 'abjection' is that which is referred to as low or downcast. The 'abject' is that which must be cast out from subjectivity, lest it disrupt the very stability and coherence of the embodied self. It is 'not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (p. 4). To encountering the abject is to be faced with the presence of death: 'what I permanently thrust aside in order to live' (p. 3). Abject matter causes distinctions of body/world, self/other, to break down. Subjectivity is maintained through expelling what is 'not me', in a continuous process of othering (p. 2). These concerns repeatedly resurface through DeLillo's fiction, in his characters' anxieties relating to bodily wastes and more generally to the borders of the body. *Americana* heavily features explicit language and sexually explicit material in comparison to his other work, and the grotesque bodies in the text act as a manifestation of the distasteful aspects of the nation itself. One character gives voice to the way national identity is tied up with abjection, using the phrase 'American as a slice of apple pie with a fly defecating on it' (1971/1990, p. 47)⁵⁸. This sense of distaste at the heart of the culture runs throughout the novel, but as we will see, the explicit language and subject matter through which DeLillo engages with America's abject body politic is cut down during the novel's repeated revisions. The sense that, in *Americana*, DeLillo is investigating an unseemly and unpalatable undercurrent to the culture is reinforced by the development of the text itself, as DeLillo pares down explicit material during the editing process, evidenced

⁵⁸ I cite the revised 1990 edition of *Americana* (1971/1990), published by Penguin, unless I am referring to material that only appears in the 1971 first edition. When referring to the first published edition of the novel I actually cite the 1973 Simon and Schuster Pocket Books edition (1971/1973), which is a reprint of the original 1971 text published by Houghton Mifflin. The text of the 1971 and 1973 versions are identical but the editions have different page numbers.

in the changes that are made through the drafts housed at the Harry Ransom Center, the first published version of the novel of 1971, and the revised edition published in 1990. The distasteful underside of American culture is manifest in the text through grotesque and abject bodies, and the journey of the novel to publication in which this material is revised and cut brings an added dimension to the tension between seen and unseen, or lewdness and concealment, which operates in the novel. *Americana* also offers another key engagement with the body: DeLillo explores the relationship between embodiment—particularly felt experiences of pain—and narrative, an idea to which he repeatedly returns and which he develops in later novels, as I have explored in *Mao II* (1991). As we have seen with Bill Gray in *Mao II*, DeLillo explores the connections between narrative, embodied experience, and identity, and looking back to *Americana* we can see the origins of this key line of enquiry.

Part One

Editing *Americana*, cutting obscene material

The plot of *Americana* follows David Bell, a television executive who takes an impromptu road trip across the American west and attempts to make an avant-garde film that deals with his identity and the identity of the nation. He describes the journey in grand terms as a 'great seeking leap into the depths of America, wilderness dream of all poets and scout-masters, westward to our manifest destiny [...] westward to match the shadows of my image and my self' (DeLillo, 1971/1990, p. 341). He is sent by the television network to film a documentary about a group of Native Americans belonging to the Navaho tribe, but decides to abandon the work assignment to make a more personal project. The novel's central journey, then, is an act of othering, as David, motivated by self-absorption, rejects the documentary's planned subjects). David enlists his friends and people that he meets along the way to act in his film, which restages key scenes from his life. His journey ends in a motel room in a small town in Kansas, where he recreates a troubling childhood memory in which he and his mother seem to share a moment of unspoken incestual desire.

DeLillo has described his debut novel, first published in 1971, as 'overdone and shaggy', and took the unusual step of returning to it two decades after publication to make further edits (DeLillo, interviewed by Alexandra Alter, 2010, n.p.). In 1989, DeLillo cut around eleven pages' worth of material from the novel (adding no new content), for a revised paperback edition published in the UK by Penguin in 1990. At this time DeLillo returns to the text from a very different context, having found mainstream success and critical recognition in the intervening years⁵⁹. The cuts do not have a big impact on the novel's overall progression of plot, character and theme: David Cowart describes them as paring down 'instances of rhetorical overkill' (1996, p. 602). However, the nature of the material that is cut

⁵⁹ In the period 1971-1989 DeLillo wrote nine more novels (I include the pseudonymous *Amazons*) and found a larger audience, as well as critical attention with *White Noise* (1984), which won the U.S. National Book Award for Fiction. The first monograph on DeLillo, Tom LeClair's *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* was published in 1988.

is significant⁶⁰. The changes have the effect of lessening the “obscene” elements of the text, specifically sexually explicit terminology and descriptions of sex acts which, even in the final version, feature more heavily than in DeLillo’s later works. Given DeLillo’s own assessment that he was a younger, inexperienced writer who had not yet developed the necessary skills to edit his own work, the text’s explicit elements could be read as an early, experimental misstep⁶¹. In Cowart’s reading, ‘the gains in economy improve the novel’, and comparing the 1971 and 1990 editions ‘afford[s] the reader a glimpse into a gifted writer’s maturing sense of decorum and understatement’ (Cowart, 1996, p. 602). And yet, looking to *Americana*’s first published version, and further back to the drafts of the novel housed in the Harry Ransom Center’s archives, the material that was cut—designated excessive and unruly—represents an important insight into DeLillo’s writing of America’s abject body politic. I studied DeLillo’s drafts and typescripts, housed in the Harry Ransom Center’s archives, to determine how DeLillo revises and excises material relating to obscenity and the body, and to investigate how the presence of taboo language and themes develop through these different iterations. Attending to the progression of the novel, through its various iterations, reveals a set of concerns that are laid unusually bare in the text’s earlier and less “understated” forms. As Kristeva explains, abjection does not simply denote the presence of matter that provokes fear and disgust; it refers to the process in which the subject is compelled to cast out and reject it (1982). The ongoing process of othering, through which the subject strives to maintain their ‘clean and proper body’ (p. 101) is invoked repeatedly in DeLillo’s fiction, in

⁶⁰ Elsewhere we can see DeLillo attempt to manage and curate his body of work and his authorial persona: A notable example is his disavowal of the 1980 novel *Amazons*, co-authored and published under a pseudonym, which he has asked to be excluded from official biography. The acquisition of the DeLillo Papers by the Harry Ransom Center archive is also particularly interesting as an act of self-curation. The papers are a collection of DeLillo’s research materials, drafts and typescripts, and correspondence. The author’s relationship with the archive (how the materials are transformed between the private and public sphere, the associations of exclusivity, monetary and research value, and reputation that comes with inclusion in the collection) is necessarily an act of self-curation, even if DeLillo does not organize the materials themselves with an audience of researchers in mind.

⁶¹ In 2013 DeLillo states that ‘I was working on my first novel, *Americana*, for two years before I ever realized that I could be a writer [...] I had absolutely no assurance that this book would be published because I knew that there were elements that I simply didn’t know how to improve at that point’ (DeLillo, interviewed by Ron Charles, 2013, n.p.). Here, and in his 2010 interview with Alexandra Alter, DeLillo expresses the idea that his capabilities as a writer were exhausted and that outside help was needed, describing the work as a collaboration with his editors (Alter, 2010, n.p.).

scenes where his characters encounter, and are horrified by, bodily wastes. Abjection also operates in a broader and more abstract sense, as characters who are variously engaged in producing the nation's cultural and aesthetic representations (*Americana's* protagonist David, a television executive, his friend Sullivan, a sculptor, *Mao II's* Bill Gray, a novelist, the performance artists of *The Body Artist* and *Falling Man*) grapple with their subject matter. In *Americana*, David and his colleagues at the television network determine what should be included and what left out of their sanitised version of the culture. Representations in film and television are purged of bodily difference (David idolizes Hollywood movie stars who look like him; white, male and conventionally attractive) and lack the acts of abjection that are an everyday bodily reality (through strict rules regarding bodily functions and even the suggestive site of the bathroom). In a conversation at the television network where David works, executives discuss the rules and guidelines that regulate programming⁶². One man declares:

What I want to know [...] is why we can't show the toilet bowl in the effects-of-solitude prison thing. We can show toilet bowls in prime time. Why not in the afternoon [...] Just once I'd like to see somebody on TV take a tremendous steaming piss [...] If we could just get that sound on the airwaves, just once, I honestly think we could take credit for expanding the consciousness of our nation to some small degree.
(*Americana*, 1971/1990, pp. 65-66)

These negotiations at the boundary of seen/unseen, acceptable/obscene, echo DeLillo's treatment of the text's key transgression, the implied and unconsummated incestuous relation between David and his mother. Here the toilet and the bodily functions associated with it are considered indecent. Urination (both the sound and the visual) is declared outside the sphere of acceptable broadcast material, and the breaking of this formal taboo is imagined as a liberating act. The television executive's desire to broadcast a 'tremendous steaming piss' enthusiastically challenges this boundary. The network's sanitised depiction of

⁶² FCC Federal law regulates broadcast media, prohibiting material deemed 'obscene' and restricting 'indecent and profane' content unsuitable for children to late night programming. Within this framework, 'grossly offensive language' and 'sexual or excretory organs' are subject to selective censorship, permitted yet regulated (FCC, 2015, n.p.).

human life is an extension of the way that society processes its waste. Not only must excrement be quickly dealt with and removed from sight through the flushing of the toilet, the site of the bathroom itself is designated as taboo. These conventions ask the viewer to be complicit in idealising a shared fiction that none of us need to use the toilet, and causes these activities to be made secret and covert, to be imbued with shame and distaste. The same goes for the implications of the marital bed: In response to the Hays Code of 1934, married couples in popular American television shows were shown sleeping in twin beds, their bodies separated by a strategic nightstand (Hinds, 2019, p. 2). In this context, bodies urinating, defecating, or engaged in sex acts are so taboo that the parts of the home and the furniture that might indicate such acts occurring are too vulgar to show.

The idea of television and censorship resurfaces in a detail in a draft of the novel: a member of the Navaho tribe that David eventually visits is upset that he was originally chosen as a subject of the documentary but then replaced, as ‘They were afraid my hair would show outside the loincloth’ (Don DeLillo Papers, container 2.8)⁶³. The novel is set in the 1970s, and the selective picture of American identity is set against a particularly urgent and timely threat to bodily integrity: the Vietnam War. David’s idolisation of a prior age of Hollywood masculinity, ‘men of action, running, leaping, loving with abandon’ (p. 12) is a fantasy of an indestructible body that stands in contrast to the multiple and horrible ways that the bodies of soldiers in conflict are destroyed and broken down⁶⁴. As we will see, grotesque bodies, carrying the awful legacy of the Vietnam War, erupt into the text. In an ironic detail, David explains that he was excused from serving in the conflict (in which those who fought were disproportionately of ethnic minority status, displacing the deadly threat onto those already othered bodies) due to his own bodily difference. Minor ailments—‘a trick knee’, a

⁶³ Fear of pubic hair features again in *Ratner’s Star*, and the young Billy Twillig’s fear of ‘female hair down there’ (1976, p. 314).

⁶⁴ The duality of the nation’s identity (wealth and prosperity/violent oppression) is ‘dull and lurid’, both underwhelming and overwhelming to the senses, a contradiction that is announced in the novel’s opening sentence: ‘Then we came to the end of another dull and lurid year’ and sustained in the hateful taboo of the ‘gleaming mudcunt’ (p. 3; p. 119). It is invoked in the shiny ‘chromium smiles’ of Hollywood, Kirk Douglas and Burt Lancaster, ‘men of action, running, leaping, loving with abandon’ (p. 12), icons of masculine power and fantasies of bodily integrity who never need to use the toilet, set against Sullivan’s sculptures, through which she engages directly rather than covertly with abjection.

‘chronic cyst’—render his body just flawed enough to excuse him from combat, while able to maintain his self-described status as ‘an extremely handsome young man’ (p. 35; p. 11). David later jokingly attributes his exemption from the draft to ‘terminal dandruff’ (p. 284). Beyond the novel’s treatment of the Vietnam War, DeLillo also critiques the systematic oppression and othering of the Native American population. In David’s role as an arbiter of U.S. culture, or the stories it tells about itself, we see cultural abjection at work, as he assumes a homogenous white male bourgeois identity and appearance as the norm. At the same time, as we will see, David’s transgressive and troubling uses of his own bodily wastes, and the grotesque and abject bodies in the novel, mirror the violence that is suppressed but always present within the cultural imaginary. There is a tension between ‘lewd’, explicit material, and concealment, which operates at the site of the individual’s body (regarding bodily functions and sex acts), as well as regarding narratives of American identity (relegating systemic racism and sexism and a legacy of violence to an unspoken undercurrent). Looking more broadly to the novel’s drafts and its first published edition (1971/1973), we can see a similar tension in the development of the text itself. Revisions and cuts show that DeLillo deliberates over just how explicit his account of America’s abject body politic should be: what material is suitable for publication and what should be cast out from the narrative. Woven through the fabric of the novel a concern with distaste, obscenity, and with ‘lewd’, explicit material is expressed in tension with ideas of concealment, privacy, and shame. The material that is cut throughout the text’s development brings an added dimension to this tension, between what is seen and unseen. Deciding how to approach the different published versions of the novel leads us into interesting territory concerning DeLillo’s self-curation. In the DeLillo papers at the Ransom Center, we (that is, those with the privilege of time and funds to travel there) have access to every draft of DeLillo’s novels, from *Americana* (1971) to *Point Omega* (2010). DeLillo describes the body of work casually, rather than acknowledging the associations of value and prestige that accompany the archive: ‘I ran out of space’ (DeLillo, cited in D.T. Max, 2007, n.p.) This belies the careful, systematic precision of the collection itself, and the sanctified status of the objects (to be

touched only with gloves in a silent room). DeLillo's own attitude to his work is particularly interesting in the case of *Amazons* which is the most explicitly cast out from the canon.

While material relating to *Americana* and *Amazons* are included in the Harry Ransom Center, we know that DeLillo requested that *Amazons* not be included in official biography, and both *Amazons* and the 1971 version of *Americana* are inaccessible through scarcity, expensive and relatively difficult to source. Here we can see a certain degree of effort on DeLillo's part to revise his body of work, at least to the more casual reader. The 1971 text has not been deliberately taken out of circulation, but its rarity makes it more difficult and expensive to source.

Strikingly, bodily tropes to characterise the texts themselves are a common feature in the reception of DeLillo's work too. Matthew Sharpe and David Cowart both explore the ways that DeLillo has 'anatomized' American culture (2010, n.p.; 2012, p. 31)⁶⁵. Don Anderson, in his review of *Underworld* in the *Sydney Morning Herald* focuses on the size and density of the book, describing it as a giant, a 'colossus, whose toenails I have barely scraped' (1997, n.p.). In another striking example, Kim Echlin similarly emphasises the weighty object of the book itself. She explains that '[i]f a reader holds *Underworld* on its side and looks at the cut pages, they will see a book divided by three thin sections marked off with black pages. The effect is one of a fine black skeleton on which hangs the body of the book' (2005, p. 149, see Figure 2). *Underworld*'s length is obvious from its size but, as Echlin explains, its structure is also unusually apparent, as the pages that are printed entirely black and mark off the different sections can be seen from a glance at the closed book⁶⁶. For Echlin, these pages form a skeleton which supports the body (flesh, muscle, organs, viscera) of the novel and

⁶⁵ According to Matthew Sharpe (2010), with his novel *Libra* DeLillo 'anatomized' the Kennedy assassination. David Cowart (2012) similarly states that DeLillo has 'anatomized the disquiet experienced by Americans in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries [with] subtlety and intellectual brio' (p. 31). Both writers liken DeLillo's subject matter to a human body which needs to be examined, or perhaps dissected.

⁶⁶ The black pages are an interesting choice which speaks to the maximalist, encyclopedic nature of the work: rather than separating sections with the visual silence of a blank page, the pages are covered completely with ink, filled to capacity with the medium in which DeLillo's words are transmitted to us. This resonates with DeLillo's approach to writing, and to *Underworld* in particular: to use 'the whole picture, the whole culture' (Begley, 1993, n.p.). The default of the text is 'all' rather than 'nothing', a black rather than a blank page.

renders it structurally sound. This is most strongly apparent with the original 1997 US Scribner edition, and the 1998 UK Picador edition and 1999 reprint. In the UK 2015 Picador Classic edition the pages are coloured grey; the effect is less striking but still apparent. This reading of the text as material object invokes an idealised sense of bodily integrity⁶⁷. In the same way, as we will see for the protagonist of *Americana*, the size and weight of his typed autobiography brings him peace and is crucial to the power it holds.

The strong boundary of a black page that clearly delineates *Underworld's* sections, announcing a break between different settings, time periods and characters, stands in contrast to DeLillo's assessment of *Americana* as formally messy; as 'shaggy' (Alter, 2010, n.p.). Upon *Americana's* first publication Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, in his mixed review, similarly assumes bodily integrity as the ideal, critiquing the text in terms of its flawed anatomy. Lehmann-Haupt calls it a 'loose-jointed' and 'somewhat knobby' novel (1971, n.p.). He praises the writing, stating that DeLillo 'had me soaring on his moods [...] the language soars and dips', but also cites 'unoriginality and amateurish plot construction' in determining that "“Americana” is very much a first novel'. He also discusses the text in terms of its 'virtues', a strange word choice particularly given the "profane" subject matter of the text (*New York Times*, 1971, n.p.). DeLillo's decision to make further edits to the text almost two decades after it was first published is unusual and significant: this act designates the text as an excessive and unruly object. The gestation of the novel is unusually long (DeLillo reports that it took him four years to write (Passaro, 1991, n.p.). Furthermore, the point at which the text is "born" and becomes separate from the author becomes messy and indistinct; it is a protracted and difficult labour. These concerns later become a subject of DeLillo's fiction: he writes about the difficult relation between a writer and their work in *Mao II*, in which novelist Bill Gray is pursued by his monstrous, perpetually unfinished novel (1991). In *Mao II*, DeLillo asserts a strong connection between abject body matter and the creative process. Bill's

⁶⁷ Boyd Tonkin gleefully plays upon the size of the text in a short thinkpiece, which begins "“Size does matter” bellows the Great (or at least Thick) American Novel'. He goes on to assert that '[f]etted US fiction of the forest-guzzling kind has started to thump heavily into these shores again', and that '[f]ictional obesity survives as the only kind Americans can tolerate' (2011, n.p.).

nighttime trips to the bathroom are paired with 'the shitpile of hopeless prose' (p. 159). The novelist's life is reduced to two kinds of output; the writing that he produces and his 'true biography' of trips to the toilet and 'gas pains' (p. 135). Here, Bill seems to successfully manage his own body's functions, detailing a routine attention to bodily fluids that he variously expels or re-consumes: 'he swallowed the whole nasty business'. By contrast, the body of his unfinished novel is a monster of horror movie tropes, diseased and abjectly unboundaried. It has a catalogue of deformities, 'humpbacked, hydrocephalic, with puckered lips and soft skin, dribbling brain fluid from its mouth' (p. 55), and relentlessly pursues and seeks to contaminate Bill's own body, 'to cling [...] to touch and fasten' (p. 92). The horror of the monstrous novel reflects Bill's inability to finish it, and the writer's psychic distress eventually leads to his own bodily downfall, precipitating his self-neglect and eventual death (he begins to drink heavily, and does not seek medical attention after being struck by a car). The near-human creature which stalks the corridors of Bill's home is one of DeLillo's most explicitly abject figures⁶⁸, through which he characterises the task of the novelist as dangerous and even deadly⁶⁹. *Mao II* was first published in 1991, which means that the cuts DeLillo made to *Americana* likely took place in the same time period that he was thinking through the formulation of an unruly novel as a grotesque body (*Libra* was published in 1988, *Americana*'s second edition in 1990, and *Mao II* in 1991). It is significant that DeLillo was writing about the turmoil of a novelist unable to finish their book, during the same period that he returned to his debut to pare it down to a less unruly form. This resonance casts *Americana* as a perpetually unruly text that DeLillo never quite manages to get under control. Christopher Lehmann-Haupt describes *Americana* as a fragile body, 'weak at the knees', a novel 'all of whose parts do not fit together and some of whose parts may not

⁶⁸ While both Bill Gray and David Bell's works are compared to the emissions of their bodies, Bill's writing is likened to his ailing health, and phlegm in particular, 'smothered breaths and dizzy spells'. In contrast, David's output as a filmmaker is masturbatory, as he describes trying to film in poor lighting as 'spilling seed', and as, in his final act after abandoning the project, he ejaculates on the motel bed (Don DeLillo Papers, container 3.1).

⁶⁹ At the Harry Ransom Center the archival materials can be literally dangerous: new acquisitions are quarantined, so that the archivists can search for signs of mould and deal with infestations that might cause harm to staff and researchers, and possibly spread to other collections. Here the material object becomes at once precious (requiring careful attention to preserve it), and threatening ('Bugs, Mold, and Conservation', 2012).

belong at all' (1971, n.p.). By cutting material from the novel in 1989, DeLillo condemns parts of the text as transgressive. These become aberrations, disrupting the flow and structure of the work and distracting from what DeLillo has described elsewhere as the 'meat and potatoes' of the text⁷⁰. The task of DeLillo in 1989 is to differentiate hearty, palatable matter, suitable for the reader to consume, from excess material; gristle, sinew, and other waste products to be removed. The qualities of *Mao II*'s monster, an ailing, leaky being, warn of the dangers of failing in this task.

The narrative of *Americana* is suffused with bodily anxieties. The protagonist David and his colleagues frequent a bar called the Gut Bucket, which has spittoons for the patrons (DeLillo, 1971/1990, p. 17). For social gatherings, David and his ex-wife Merry would make 'a huge creamy bowl of the drink-dessert we had concocted, the Spontaneous Abortion—gin, vodka, scotch, rye, brandy and a half gallon of cherry vanilla ice cream' (p. 34). At an office party David observes a drunk colleague as, 'as if to demonstrate the excellent craftsmanship of her digestive tract, its grinding and juicing abilities, she heaved all over a cluttered desk' (p. 92). Details such as these persistently suggest a sense of embodiment as volatile and precarious. One element of the text invokes Kristeva's work on abjection particularly forcefully: the sculptures made by David's friend Sullivan. Her works are solid, carved from wood, but imitate abject matter and attendant feelings of disgust: David states that 'the smoothness of her shapes and the dull blunt colors she used seemed to suggest a horrible softness, that of slugs or worms [...] she said her highest ambition was to give people the feeling that they were eating small live wet amphibians'⁷¹. In a similar vein, he describes three of her sculptures as 'carefully handcrafted afterbirth' (p. 106).

⁷⁰ Adam Begley describes the process of interviewing DeLillo, 'a series of tape-recorded conversations' which were then transcribed. 'DeLillo returned the final, edited manuscript with a note that begins, "This is not only the meat but the potatoes"' (Begley, 1993, n.p.). Elsewhere Martin Levin uses a similar image to less positive ends, critiquing *Americana* as a 'heaping mass of tossed word-salad' (Levin, 1971, n.p.).

⁷¹ This sense of distaste at consuming abject matter is a recurring detail throughout DeLillo's works. In one example from *Falling Man*, a member of the Alzheimer's support group brings unfamiliar food to the meetings: 'Benny T. hated to write, loved to talk. He brought pastries to the meetings, large jellied bladders that no one else would touch' (2007, p. 31).

Kristeva describes the visceral disgust of an encounter with abject matter, using the example of skin that forms on the surface of milk:

When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk [...] I experience a gagging sensation and, still further down, spasms in the stomach, belly; and all the organs shrivel up in the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. (1982, p. 2)

This visceral bodily rejection of abject matter is reflected in *Americana*. Kristeva's image of skin on milk specifically resonates with the 'creamy bowl' of cocktail. The crude joke by which David and his wife name the sickly-sweet concoction, the 'Spontaneous Abortion' characterises the drink not only as distasteful but as provoking an extreme bodily response, similar to Kristeva's visceral symptom: 'all the organs shrivel up in the body' (p. 2). This detail, along with Sullivan's sculpted 'afterbirth' characterises abjection as gendered, specifically pathologizing the womb and pregnancy as precarious. As we will see later on, this reflects David's troubled relation to his own mother, which is a central concern of the text.

DeLillo has been gently dismissive of his prolific 1970s period, stating that 'I knew I wasn't doing utterly serious work, let me put it that way' (Binelli, 2007, n.p.). Descriptions of bodies and sex acts that are edited down in *Americana*'s 1990 version seem to correspond with a movement away from "bad taste" elements and towards a more profound and serious treatment of American culture. However, it is clear in his later work that his investment in scatology, grotesque bodies, and abject matter has far from abated. This is particularly evident in one of DeLillo's most well-known pieces of writing, the prologue to *Underworld* (1997). In the novel, which is often cited as DeLillo's most significant work, a profound interest in spit, vomit, shit, and piss is strongly apparent. *Underworld*'s prologue details a day in which two momentous events coincide: a famous baseball game between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers, and the testing of a nuclear warhead by Russia which precipitated the onset of the Cold War. The climactic moments of the game are accompanied by the comedian Jackie Gleason, who is in attendance, vomiting copiously: he emits a

bizarre 'aquatic bark [...] Then the surge of flannel matter. He seems to be vomiting someone's taupe pyjamas' (p. 44). Later in the novel the character Marvin Lundy travels through Eastern European countries under Communist rule. He makes 'an emergency trip to the hotel toilet, where he unleashed a firewall of chemical waste. The smell that surrounded him was infused [...] with geopolitics' (pp. 311-312). Throughout the trip, he observes '[t]he deeper into communist country, the more foul his BMs' (p. 311). Here the pervasive threat posed by the nuclear arms race between nations, a defining element of American life in the latter half of the twentieth century, is expressed through strange and fantastical bowel movements. While absurd, the passage is significant not simply as toilet humour: the fear of the communist other is effectively expressed through Lundy's violent and uncontrollable defecation, and the magnitude of the subject is not undermined by the invoking of a "base" body function⁷². In *Underworld* (as I will explore in the next chapter), these bodily functions perform an important literary function. They are not comic relief from DeLillo's writing of profound elements of American experience. Rather, as Slavov Žižek states, 'shit casts its shadow even at the most sublime moments of human experience', so that the two are inextricably bound together (Žižek, cited in MIT Press, 2021). This relates to DeLillo's fascination with waste, and more broadly to his resistance to a hierarchy of 'high' and 'low' culture, sacred and profane: for DeLillo the two are inseparable. For DeLillo, our understanding of human activity must acknowledge the role of waste. Dominique Laporte in his book *History of Shit* (1978) similarly argues that our approaches to managing human waste profoundly shape our cities and our lives. The ongoing process of 'casting out' our waste forms the foundational act upon which civilisation is built. Through his attention to the body's waste products, DeLillo asserts that his characters' self schemas are constructed through a process of othering, just as a city relies on its sewers.

The vivid depiction of vomit in the novel's Prologue, 'laggard gobs of pinkoid stuff from deep in Gleason's gastric sac', signals the onset of an era suffused with apocalyptic

⁷² Slavov Žižek, in his endorsement of Dominique Laporte's *History of Shit* (1978), states that 'Far from being a theoretical joke about the unmentionable "that"', the book 'confronts the most fundamental issues of what it means to be human' (Žižek, cited in MIT Press, 2021).

threat, and the 'chemical waste' that issues from Marvin Lundy's bowels similarly manifests the fear of nuclear warfare and the awful legacy of nuclear waste⁷³ (p. 312). Described as 'pinkoid stuff' (p. 46), the specific texture of Gleason's vomit even invokes the threat of the Communist other, bodily wastes deeply implicated in and tied up with the defining concerns of the culture. In these descriptions, the nuclear threat is inextricable from the experience of being in the body. The impact of social and political developments is expressed at the site of the body, and collective concerns are made deeply personal as one character declares about the 'winding down' of the Cold War: 'This makes it hard for you to breathe [...] All the power and intimidation of the state will seep out of your personal bloodstream' (p. 170). Here once again bodily integrity is the ideal, the subject supported within a historical moment which, while it is defined by threat, provides a sense of defined meaning, of identity predicated on the division of 'us' and 'them'. The loss of these stable categories leaves the body deflated and vulnerable, as 'other forces will come rushing in, demanding and challenging' (p. 170). These details can help us to see that, rather than seeking to tone down the "bad taste" elements of his aberrant debut novel, DeLillo is consistently invested in writing encounters that leave a bad taste in the mouth. The grotesque and obscene elements of *Americana* are not unnecessary excess in need of trimming: they are a fundamental part of DeLillo's writing of American culture, an unruly, concealed undercurrent that the author strives to make visible.

Processing abject matter/America's abject body politic

DeLillo expresses a tension between explicit, 'lewd' material and a contrasting movement towards concealment, secrecy and silence. At one point David describes the two as expressions of the same impulse, regarding Sullivan during a long-awaited sexual encounter:

She was covered now, even her breasts, and lying rigid [...] How much she knew about that moment, and taught me, in her absurd concealment; that the

⁷³ Towards the end of *Underworld* we see this legacy manifest in the bodies of victims of radiation (1997, p. 800).

true and best lewdness, that is to say the ugliest, is nothing more than modesty so fanatic it cannot bear to move for fear it might touch itself.
(p. 319)

In this description, the body is so erotically charged that the subject is frozen in place: contact even with one's own body is prohibited, and makes any movement dangerous. Here sexuality is strongly linked to fear and disgust, and the female-coded body is so dangerously sexualised that any incidental touch is forbidden. This fear of sensation, that the body might 'touch itself' makes simply existing in a body into an encounter with abjection. This resonates with the fear of contact, for Kristeva 'When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk' (1982, p. 2), and for Bill in *Mao II*, when his monstrous novel tries 'to fasten its puckery limpet flesh onto mine' (1991, p. 93). David's description of the 'fanatic' modesty that he reads in Sullivan's body reflects his own distaste at actual sexual contact. His fixation on the missing thread of the leg/the mother finds an uneasy conclusion, when he finally has sex with the mother-surrogate Sullivan. David seems to find the actual encounter too explicit, too distasteful, as he insistently repeats the words 'lewd' and 'abomination' (pp. 319-320; pp. 322-333)⁷⁴.

A twinned concern with lewdness and concealment runs throughout the novel. There is an ongoing negotiation at the boundary of seen/unseen, palatable/obscene, which resonates with the development of the text itself (the repeated editing and cutting of material evident in the novel's drafts, and its first and second published editions). The protagonist David wrestles with a complex grief for his mother, which centres on an ambiguous encounter between them in the pantry of their home when he was a teenager, which seems charged with incestuous desire. David observes:

⁷⁴ Actual sexual contact seems repulsive, and images of danger and contamination recur throughout the novel. David, explaining the hierarchy and internal politics of the television network, warns that 'new ideas could finish you unless you wrapped them in a plastic bag' (p. 36). Sullivan strives to capture the sensation of eating 'small live wet amphibians' (p. 106). The horror of contact is also expressed in *Mao II*, as Bill flees the monster that 'tries to cling to me, soft-skinned and moist, to fasten its puckery limpet flesh onto mine' (1991, pp. 92-93). In a deleted detail, the character Wendy Judd is described as promiscuous in strongly misogynistic terms that associate sex with distaste (in the same way that David repeatedly condemns of sex with Sullivan as an 'Abomination'): Wendy is 'the kind of eager bitch who dredges for foulness in her men and laughs when she finds it' (Don DeLillo Papers, container 3.1).

My mother was in there. The refrigerator door was open. She was wearing just one shoe. The other was on the floor, a black shoe, upright, near the wall. She held a tray of ice cubes in her hands and she was spitting on the cubes. She disappeared behind the refrigerator door and I could hear her open the freezer compartment and slide the tray back in. (p. 195)

The teenage David is reeling at the terrible revelation of his mother's cancer diagnosis, but the encounter seems to point to something deeper and unspoken between them:

I did not move. I felt close to some overwhelming moment. In the dim light her shadow behind her consumed my own. I knew what was happening and I did not care to argue with the doctors of that knowledge. Let it be. Inside her was something splintered and bright, something that might have been left by the spiral passage of my own body. She was before me now, looking up, her hands on my shoulders. The sense of tightness I had felt in my room was beginning to yield to a promise of fantastic release. It was going to happen. Whatever would happen. The cage would open, the mad bird soar, and I would cry in epic joy and pain at the freeing of a single moment, the beginning of time. (pp. 196-197)

The 'fantastic release' is anticipated but never arrives. The pair are interrupted as David states simply 'Then I heard my father's bare feet on the stairs. That was all' (p. 197). The image of his mother at the refrigerator contains two key details which resurface elsewhere in the text. Early in the narrative, at a party, David observes his friend Sullivan who stands in a posture where only one of her legs is visible, her empty shoe on the floor:

She slipped her right foot out of her shoe and then, with exquisite nonchalance, tucked her leg way up behind her against the wall so that it disappeared, storklike, behind the shroud of her trenchcoat. She remained that way, on one leg, a cryptic shoe moored beneath her [...] I was drawn to her, terribly. (p. 7)

Sullivan, who is older than David, becomes a proxy upon whom he projects his incestuous desire, and this image resonates with the empty shoe of David's mother in the pantry. The link between them becomes more explicit when David casts Sullivan in his film, to play his mother in the reenactment of the 'erotic pantry scene' (Herren, 2016, n.p.). When, as an adult, David observes Sullivan across the room, the empty space where her leg should be itself becomes the object of desire. Repeated and painstaking revision is characteristic of

DeLillo's writing process, but in the case of *Americana* this process exceeds the space to which it is usually confined, continuing after the novel's publication. In the same way, in the novel, libidinal desire is not confined to the object of the body, but is also directed towards empty space.

As Peter Boxall usefully explains, Sullivan's empty shoe, described in the novel's opening pages, has an 'absent referent' in the mother's own shoe, a connection of which the reader is unaware until David details his memory of the pantry encounter much later in the novel (2006, p. 32). The reader carries this image with them until they eventually encounter the other half of the pairing. Through the image of the empty shoe, the unfulfilled and unspoken incest taboo resurfaces throughout the narrative, and the withholding of the original (the mother's shoe) serves to further characterise this subject matter as distasteful, to be concealed from view and referred to only obliquely. Furthermore, the object of the empty shoe itself signifies concealment, as the leg that should logically occupy it is hidden from view. This absence, the missing limb of the mother's body, reflects David's unthinkable desire: his desire for the mother is the ultimate taboo, and so is displaced onto empty space. As the reader learns of the mother's death, this focus on empty space also conveys the seeming impossibility of David's task: to process his relationship to another person who is no longer there⁷⁵. During the party, after David observes Sullivan standing against the wall, he finds himself in the kitchen. He cannot find Sullivan and suspects that she has left with another man. He manifests his anger in a bizarre act, reporting 'I opened the refrigerator door and took an ice tray out of the freezer [...] I brought up phlegm from my throat and spat on each of the cubes, separately. Then I slid the tray back into the freezer and shut the refrigerator door' (p. 10). In the same way that Sullivan's shoe has an 'absent referent' of which the reader is unaware for much of the novel, David spits on the ice cubes in a gesture that, we later learn, is copied from his mother (Boxall, 2006, p. 32) who spits in the ice cube

⁷⁵ At the outset of this encounter David covertly watches his mother, who believes that she is alone and unobserved. In this detail, desire is predicated on the transgression of a boundary (the voyeur imposing upon the reality of the unsuspecting subject) and relies on the object of desire being both seen and unseen. David's film, in which he restages and seeks to process episodes from his own life, culminates with this pivotal moment with his mother in the pantry.

tray and returns it to the freezer in her own home (DeLillo, 1971/1990, p. 195)⁷⁶. David and his mother do not consummate their desires through physical touch, but the dysfunction of the family unit is manifest here: in this disgusting detail the mother's bodily fluids are re-circulated and consumed by the other members of the household⁷⁷.

David repeatedly uses abject matter in disruptive and transgressive ways. At another dinner party he contaminates the conversation by declaring to the host 'There are water bugs in your bathtub'. The guests are then plagued by the image of 'quick black creatures nesting in every scoop of rice in every bowl' (DeLillo, 1971/1990, p. 105). In the motel room where his film project culminates, David watches a housekeeper as she changes the sheets and vacuums his fingernail clippings, noting 'My fingernails in the machine. The hair of my belly and balls curled in the hallway' (p. 335). Leaving the motel room, he leaves behind the detritus of the project (writing scrawled on the walls, discarded film equipment), and leaves a final mark, reporting that 'I masturbated into the clean sheets, feeling an odd and emptying joy' (p. 341). Both of these acts—spitting on the ice cubes, masturbating onto the motel bed—echo the tension between seen and unseen contained in the missing leg: both acts are initially concealed and secret, followed by an obscene violation, as the victim is confronted with, and even consumes, abject matter.

David's actions stand in contrast to a number of episodes elsewhere in DeLillo's novels, in which characters react to body wastes with horror and disgust. In *End Zone* (1972) Gary Harkness has a terrifying encounter with a mound of excrement in the desert, a place for solace and reflection supposedly empty of human life (p. 83). In *Point Omega* (2010), Jim Finley tries to comfort Richard Elster, whose daughter is missing and presumed dead. Elster coughs up a 'blob of phlegm' onto his trouser leg and sits staring at it, as Finley repeatedly

⁷⁶ Peter Boxall explains that 'The empty shoe that lies beneath Sullivan's raised leg, that is connected to her body by an evocatively missing thread, has to wait for nearly two hundred pages for its absent referent to arrive, in the discarded shoe of the deranged mother, spitting on her own ice cubes' (2006, p. 32). Graley Herren states of the way the 'cryptic' shoe and the ice cube tray are belatedly connected to the mother, '[i]n retrospect, it becomes clear that the entire novel is constructed as a hall of mirrors leading to and from this primal scene' (2016, n.p.).

⁷⁷ His mother's transgression is contained in the sphere of the family unit; the party guests have left, and the ice cubes are intended for David and the rest of his family. In contrast, David's act is directed at partygoers: acquaintances and strangers.

tries to cover it with a handkerchief (pp. 122-123). Here Elster's grief for his daughter seems to have overridden the distaste learned in childhood, and Finley is compelled to act upon his own squeamish response on behalf of his friend⁷⁸. In these examples the subject is compelled to turn away in disgust when confronted with such matter. In *White Noise* (1984), a faculty member at College-on-the-Hill refers to the testing and establishing of bodily boundaries that takes place in childhood. He questions his colleagues: 'Did you ever spit in your soda bottle so you wouldn't have to share your drink with the other kids?' and 'When you bite dead skin off your thumb, do you eat it or spit it out?' (p. 215). In *Underworld* (1991) J. Edgar Hoover longs for an untouched bathroom, as Jackie Gleason vomits on Frank Sinatra's shoes (p. 46). In *Mao II* (1991) Bill Gray swallows a mass of phlegm, a 'sick syrupy glop' (p. 135). Here the negotiation of the boundaries of the body, and how to deal with its waste products, is an ongoing concern. It is precisely these limits that, in *Americana*, we see the adult David transgress, deliberately subjecting others to his bodily fluids. He carries out a kind of repurposing, or recycling of abject body matter that should be concealed and disposed of⁷⁹. His acts of spitting and ejaculating are motivated by an aggressive, wounded masculinity (responding to a perceived rejection and his abandoned film project).

As *Americana*'s title reflects DeLillo's declaration to use 'the whole picture, the whole culture', the novel's central relationships are used to investigate broader questions about American identity (DeLillo, cited in Begley, 1993, n.p.). As DeLillo declares in a parodic comment on the novel, the incest taboo is an allegory for blind, unquestioning patriotism. In the article 'Notes Toward a Definitive Meditation (By Someone Else) on the Novel "Americana"', DeLillo explicitly states the connection that runs throughout the novel, between the mother and the motherland, asserting that 'baseless patriotism is an elaborately psychotic manifestation of love for mother country' (1972a, p. 327). The relationship between

⁷⁸ Elster's response mirrors the traumatic loss of his daughter, which is itself expressed as a lapse into uncertainty where categories break down. His daughter becomes a body, 'out there somewhere, or not' (p. 124).

⁷⁹ David employs his own body parts in ways that play upon the tension between lewdness and concealment that features throughout the novel. He notes that, when alone in his office, 'I unzipped my pants and took out my cock. I walked around the office like that for a while. It felt good' (p. 22). Here he transgresses a boundary of propriety but goes unseen by his colleagues.

David and his mother, then, has broader implications as a comment on national identity and the responsibilities of America's citizens to face up to the distasteful elements of the nation. David's comfortable, privileged life and his everyday activities—work, bawdy parties, a litany of affairs—are suffused with an undercurrent of dread and terror that contaminates the everyday⁸⁰. At a party David overhears a man detailing the 'ritual terrors' of his life (1971/1990, p. 9). The tension between seen and unseen, then, does not only relate to the incest taboo, but is used to express the hidden and rotten underside of David's materially rich but emotionally barren life. The way that he and his fellow television executives regard a tribe of the Navaho Indians as a documentary subject is troublingly ignorant, but also points to the darker legacy of systematic oppression and brutality upon which the nation is founded. They are unsure where the tribe that they wish to film are actually located: one man announces confidently 'It's out around Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and/or Colorado [...] I happen to know that for a fact' (p. 69). They hope that the reservation is located somewhere that has blizzards, to bring drama to the piece, and so they can report how well the tribe are adjusting to their new climate. Considering that they are speaking of a people who have been literally displaced, this ignorance becomes something grotesque. Meanwhile, David idolises the cowboy and the soldier of Hollywood lore (specifically Burt Lancaster, who repeatedly played a cowboy in Westerns, as a world war two soldier in *From Here to Eternity*). If we continue to read David's journey as a broader commentary upon American identity, basic elements of the novel's plot become similarly charged: David is tasked with travelling to film the documentary, but along the way decides to abandon the project and instead make his avant-garde film (which is largely about himself). This narcissism takes on a broader significance in relation to the Navaho tribe, whose lives remain unseen and untold⁸¹. David's film seems to satisfy a self-serving, masturbatory impulse, rather than an

⁸⁰ This is announced in the novel's opening passage, as 'The santas of Fifth Avenue rang their little bells with an odd sad delicacy, as if sprinkling salt on some brutally spoiled piece of meat' (p. 3).

⁸¹ David similarly reveals his own egocentrism when, during sex with Sullivan, he imagines he can hear her thoughts. In a detail present in the 1971 text, he refers to their body parts as 'voovoo' and 'coocoo' (1971/1973, p. 317). This babytalk only serves to reaffirm David's own infantilised role in the encounter: his attempt to identify with his partner instead highlights his self-absorption.

intimate exchange with another. In a draft version, filming the key scene in the pantry, David is frustrated that he is shooting carelessly in bad light. He wonders if ‘maybe this was the best way, obliterating memory by mocking it, no power at all, spilling seed ~~or wine or fruit juice~~ into the uncaptured light’. The sentence appears in this way, with the text crossed through in pencil (Don DeLillo Papers, container 3.1). The sexual connotations of ‘spilling seed’ are made more direct by deleting the rest of the list, and place it more directly in conversation with the moment where, after filming has completed, David ‘masturbated into the clean sheets’ (1971/1990, p. 341)⁸². David’s deliberate transgressions are significant because they cast him in the role of aggressor. If we consider David’s incestuous love for his mother as an allegory for the patriot who holds an unquestioning love for the mother country, then the vindictive nature of David’s actions casts the patriot not as an innocent participant in a fantasy of national supremacy, but as complicit in the atrocities that they minimize or overlook. Within this framework, the broader significance of seemingly harmless or insignificant details of David’s life come into clearer focus.

Early in the novel, watching construction on a nearby building, David recalls an incident where a construction worker fell to their death. Another executive comments ‘Most of the high-steel men in this city are Mohawks [...] They all live in Brooklyn someplace. There’s a whole colony out there. They specialise in the high dangerous stuff’ (p. 66). This othering statement brings a racialized dimension to David’s sense that the office meets a need to ‘be comforted by familiar things’, and that ‘you could not walk among those desks for two thousand mornings, nor hear those volleying typewriters, without coming to believe that this was where you were safe’ (p. 20). His belief that ‘you were secure here, in some emotional way, that you lived in known terrain’ is an ignorant dismissal of the material safety and privilege he is afforded, and ignores the dependence of his societal stratum upon an oppressed labour force to literally construct the floor upon which they stand. In one detail the building under construction takes on a bodily quality, and the construction workers are

⁸² David’s film is further linked to self-pleasure: we learn that the film exists only as untouched footage in David’s home that no-one watches, and similarly the text of the novel which is, as it turns out, an autobiography authored by David himself, now sits in his home, a ‘fond object’ which goes unread.

responsible for the integrity of its structure: 'Men in yellow helmets were working on a building that was going up across the street. They weaved in and out of its hollow bones, shooting acetylene, and catwalked over shaky planks' (p. 16). Here the task of propping up the body politic falls to a marginalised group⁸³. The death of the construction worker at the beginning of the novel becomes a dramatic anecdote among the executives, and is only of momentary interest to David. His impulse is towards a smaller obliteration of his own in response, before returning to business as usual:

Strangely they did not seem to move with any special caution. Perhaps they had come to terms with the fear of falling. They had probably seen others fall and despised those deaths for the relief that followed the shock, a relief that must have risen with the wind, floor to floor, up the raw spindling shanks of the building. What could you do but go quickly to a dark bar and drink three burning whiskies? (p. 16)

America's contentious role in the Vietnam War is similarly present in the novel, as a grotesque undercurrent that seeps into experiences of daily life. DeLillo repeatedly invokes grotesque body matter as a reflection of the rottenness beneath the glossy veneer of American culture. Beyond the gleaming 'chromium smiles' of David's Hollywood idols, the reader is faced with images such as a tattoo of 'a pair of copulating dogs' belonging to David's friend Brand, an army veteran and heavy drug user, a far cry from David's hero playing a U.S. army soldier in *From Here To Eternity* (p. 12; p.114). The romance and heroic poise of Burt Lancaster as 'He stood above Deborah Kerr on that Hawaiian beach [...] Burt in the moonlight [...] a crescendo of male perfection' finds its counterpoint in a dirty joke that plays out upon the surface of the body: when Brand 'tensed and untensed his forearm in rhythm [...] the tattooed dogs seemed to be moving' (p. 231). Elsewhere the horrors of the Vietnam War are alluded to in surreal depictions of anatomy. As a college student David returns to his family home and watches a friend of his parents having a conversation on the other side of the room. David observes

⁸³ As we will see, his sense of the crucial stories that must be told concern his own childhood illnesses and operations, David's reflection upon his memories, indignant that his experiences of childhood illness are missing from the narrative, ties into his skewed picture of the culture and the undercurrent of violence that he chooses to overlook.

I was watching his face when he laughed. His features stretched and quivered. He looked extraordinarily ugly. I imagined a small explosion in his head. He was laughing in an exaggerated manner, overdoing it, creating the laugh as if with ceramics, and I watched his head come apart in slow motion, different sections tumbling through the air, nose-part, ear-part, jaw with lower teeth. (p. 193)

Here a forced laugh is manifest as a surreal dismantling of anatomy. The man's exaggerated, insincere gesture becomes grotesque. This image of the man's head coming apart echoes the pervasive sense of threat in the novel, through which everyday activities become 'ritual terrors' of daily life (p. 9)⁸⁴. The dismantled head also anticipates the key encounter between David and his mother in the pantry, which takes place shortly after, and represents a moment of profound undoing: 'some overwhelming moment [...] the promise of fantastic release'. David occupies a materially privileged and secure position, but his experiences, particularly at the bawdy, excessive parties he attends as an adult, are suffused with grotesque imagery. Later in the novel, in a passage which details the horrors of the Vietnam War, an act of violence is described in jarring terms. In a brief but vivid description, a veteran who is recounting his experience recalls a moment during a forced march where a prisoner attacks a guard: 'he straddled the guard and started tearing at his throat. I don't think he particularly wanted to kill the guard. He just wanted to get inside him, open him up for inspection' (p. 295). This incident is expressed in a calm tone as a curiosity about the body, rather than a desperate act of violence. David expresses a similar idea regarding his father, wondering if true meaning can only be got at by investigating inside the body: his father 'taps his elbow when making an important point' and David 'wondered whether the significance of his remark might be fully uncovered only by opening up the elbow and picking with a delicate surgical instrument among its connective tissues' (p. 82). Meanwhile, bodies are dismantled and separated out into their constituent parts in radio advertisements for 'hair

⁸⁴ Mother America—the 'mamaland'—is characterised as vicious from the start: David articulates his desire to '[e]xplore America in the screaming night' and describes the thrill of 'the first days of a long journey on wheels into the slaving mouth of an incredible and restless country' (p. 231; p. 10; p. 111).

restorers, makers of artificial limbs, ear-piercing shops', and David's friend shares long streams of consciousness on scatology, sex and violence on a late night radio show (pp. 93-94). In the detailing of abuses during the Vietnam War, prisoners are loaded into boxcars: 'We were cattle now [...] stepping in puddles of our own liquid shit' (p. 297). The horrors of warfare, referred to in episodes where prisoners are transported like cattle, and another in which David's father recalls being forced to bury a man alive, spill over into the stuffy atmosphere of a dinner party and the forced, obnoxious laughter of a guest. The mood of everyday life (suffused with horror) and the horrors of warfare (oddly light-hearted) are tied together by these instances of bodies coming apart.

Part Two

Bodily taboo

The novel expresses a tension between explicit and hidden material, beginning with the missing body part—the leg of Sullivan, proxy for the deceased mother, hidden behind the ‘shroud’ of her trenchcoat (DeLillo, 1971/1990, p. 7). There are many explicit details that are present in the earlier versions and then cut, the tension between lewdness and concealment reflected in the development of the text itself⁸⁵. The following details are present in the 1971 edition and absent from the 1990 edition: David fixates on the mouth and breasts of a woman (at least twice his age, one of the many proxies for his mother) whom he illicitly watches through a window (1971/1973, pp. 186-187). During a long-anticipated sexual encounter with Sullivan, David’s inner monologue regresses to babytalk, imagining the act from her perspective: ‘In my voovoo. His cocoo in my voovoo’, and his climax prompts the thought of ‘Tape-sperm swimming upstream’ (p. 317). During the same encounter, David imagines himself as ‘Soldierboy flagged in fuck with mothercountry. Optional spelling of third syllable there.’ (p. 317). This conversational aside is in fact a compact expression of a key theme of the novel. The mother is linked to the word ‘cunt’, implied but unwritten, and with the nationalist implications of the soldier and the mother country. As David Cowart has helpfully explained, the implied incestuous desire between David and his mother functions as an analogy for a total and unquestioning love for the U.S—the ‘mamaland’—by its citizens (Cowart, 1996, p. 619; DeLillo, 1971/1990, p. 231). Blind patriotism is likened to an incestuous love between mother and son. Cowart states that

⁸⁵ In a draft version housed at the Harry Ransom Center, in the scene where Sullivan and a teenage boy recreate David’s encounter with his mother in the pantry, David notes that he asked the boy, and not Sullivan, to remove his shoes. He wonders why he did this, and notes that in terms of the outcome it is irrelevant, as neither actors’ feet are visible in the shot. Once again the image of bared/concealed feet and associations of vulnerability and desire is at play, and this detail is doubly obscured: in the draft David muses on how this detail is not visible in the final film: in the novel the detail about their shoes is absent altogether (Don DeLillo Papers, container 3.1). In another detail in a draft, bodily difference, specifically asymmetry, is expressed as a source of desire, extending beyond the image of a woman standing on one leg. A taxi driver says ‘the women in a Picasso canvas have their nose out of joint and lopsided tits. That appeals to me’, in contrast to a description elsewhere of ‘pink Renoir tits’ (Don DeLillo Papers, container 3.1; DeLillo, 1971/1990, p. 95).

[T]he mother [David] repeatedly violates is more than flesh and blood. DeLillo conflates and subverts a familiar icon of American nationalism: mother and country [...] DeLillo suggests that the real violation occurs in an oedipal drama of almost cosmic proportions: not in the encounter of European man with the tender breast of the American land but in the violation of that mother by their oedipal progeny. (1996, p. 619)

As we will see, the cutting of material during the novel's revisions makes this "distasteful" theme less explicit, but the role of the incest taboo as a critique of patriotism remains. In his 1972 article DeLillo plainly sets out this theme. Under the heading 'Subtext 1: Patriotism as incest' (1972a) he declares:

The author evidently constructed two planes of incest in 'Americana'. One is based on relations (or near-relations) between the protagonist and his mother. The second might be called political incest—the notion that baseless patriotism is an elaborately psychotic manifestation of love for mother country. ('Notes Toward a Definitive Meditation (By Someone Else) on the Novel "Americana"', p. 327)

DeLillo writes this extra-textual description in the third person despite being named as the article's author, both suggesting a 'definitive' account of the novel and pretending to be someone else. A similar unsettling of the speaker also occurs within David's inner experience in the novel: he asserts that 'my whole life was a lesson in the effect of echoes, [...] I was living in the third person' (1971/1990, p. 58). The incest taboo, and its unspeakable nature, can only be approached at varying levels of remove, which manifests in framing devices and deferrals, and in the various ways that David uses proxies for his mother as outlets for libidinal desire. The existence of the article implies that the reader of *Americana* might find its subject matter too obscure, too well concealed, and require a "plain" explanation outside the text to defer to (in contrast with the progressive paring-down of the novel itself). At the same time, DeLillo parodies literary criticism itself with prescriptive headings such as 'Subtext 1'.

We have seen that David perceives a sense of safety within the structure of his office building, and in a more abstract sense within a framework that centres himself and rejects all difference; women, Native Americans, men he categorises as unattractive are all ridiculed

and undermined, othered and cast out of his schema. The construction workers are reduced to “man power” and women’s bodies are dismantled into their constituent parts; an ‘all-American ass’, ‘classic and twinkling’, the ‘secret grotto’ behind the knee (p. 60; p. 90). David’s desire to be held within structures is expressed in a number of different ways. He declares ‘I was an extremely handsome young man’ (p. 11). He is troubled by scars and other distinctive marks, and compares himself favourably to ‘a number of Hollywood stars known for their interchangeability’ (p. 93)⁸⁶. He declares of his idols Kirk Douglas and Burt Lancaster ‘These were the American pyramids [...] they were monumental’ (p. 12). In his fantasy, his likeness to his idols enables a dissolution of self. He longs for the act of identification to become a transformation, allowing him to become one with the iconic figure on the television or cinema screen, as ‘the molecules parted and I was spliced into the image’ (p. 17)⁸⁷. This vision of masculinity is figured as all-encompassing, a containing structure in which he might take refuge. David’s dream of anonymity, of exchanging with the figure on the screen, relies on the fact that he identifies with his heroes: they look like him. This surreal fantasy of shapeshifting once again alludes to a grotesque undercurrent to David’s worldview. David’s upholding of ‘Burt and Kirk’ as icons of heroic masculinity is an act of identification that indicates the selective and whitewashed nature, in film and television, of the stories America tells about itself. His characterisation of the image of Burt on screen ‘like a city in which we are all living’, large enough that ‘there was room for all of us’ (pp. 12-13) assumes an ‘us’ made up of people who fit within a narrow set of categories. David notes that Burt Lancaster is famous for playing the cowboy, archetypal adversary to the “Indian” of the mythologised Wild West. As a television executive David is himself an

⁸⁶ In contrast, David’s colleague Strobe Botway is ‘a small, barely humanoid creature’ who is intrigued by Humphrey Bogart’s ‘mystique’ and imitates the way he holds a cigarette. David declares that ‘Strobe hated me because I was taller and younger than he was’, and notes that he ‘seemed to admire the physical imperfections of people, their lisps, scar tissue, chipped teeth; in his view these added up to character, to a certain seedy magnetism’ (p. 12).

⁸⁷ In a similar image of merging, David is engrossed by his television screen:

[I] found myself in a chair about a foot away from the set, watching intently [...] Sitting that close all I could perceive was that meshed effect, those stormy motes, but it drew me in and held me as if I were an integral part of the set, my molecules mating with those millions of dots. (p. 43)

arbiter of these stories, determining the kinds of bodies that are shown on screen, and his casual expression of disgust at bodily difference reflects the problems with a narrow worldview that he presents as though it were universal. Meanwhile, the constant degradation of the women in the office further contributes to this sense of selective dehumanisation.

David notices a secretary in the supply closet 'leaning over a bottom drawer' and declares 'There is no place in the world more sexually exciting than a large office. It is like a fantasy of some elaborate woman-maze', a 'lewd tableau' (p. 26). Later in the novel the featureless, identical rooms of a motel offer a dream of transcendence similar to the cinema screen.

David muses that

Repeated endlessly on the way to your room, you can easily forget who you are here; you can sit on your bed and become *man sitting on bed* [...] It embodies a repetition so insistent and irresistible that, if not freedom, then liberation is possible [...] you move into thinner realms [...] and become, if you choose, the man on the bed in the next room. (p. 257, original emphasis)

The cinema screen, television set, and the motel room are at once a refuge and an escape, making possible 'the pleasure of being other and none' (p. 261)⁸⁸. These shapeshifting fantasies play on an absolute anonymity; David in the motel exchanging with interchangeable others, or melding with the iconic bodies on screen, absorbed into something larger than himself. The painful feelings that David struggles with throughout the novel explain the appeal of these disappearing acts: the ultimate safety that he seeks is a return to the womb. This is reflected in the art studio of his friend Sullivan, which is insulated in a 'membranous chemical material', a structure built by a former tenant called the Cocoon (p. 108)⁸⁹. David, awaiting Sullivan's return, curls up to sleep in this space. It is here that his mother's looming, threatening presence in David's subconscious becomes clear. Waking

⁸⁸ The 'motel in the heart of every man' is an image of transience and escape. In a draft housed in the archive, the description of the motel is initially more explicitly strange, and emphasises its impermanence: David explains that one might 'push a button and wings will appear', or might return to find that it had been 'reclaimed by the swamp' or 'towed away' (Don DeLillo Papers, container 3.1).

⁸⁹ This seems both biological and synthetic, echoing a dream of the landscape reduced to '[s]traight lines and right angles', a 'Megamerica' of 'Neon, fiber glass, plexiglass, polyurethane, Mylar, Acrylite' (p. 118). This combination of biological and synthetic material is reflected in a term that is revised in a draft. The characterisation of David's inner experience becomes more explicitly weird, as a reference to 'my nervous system' is replaced with 'the circuitry of my dreams' (Don DeLillo Papers, container 3.1).

from a dream, he states that ‘my body stank of cold sweat, liquor and fear’, and mistakes the returning Sullivan for his mother: ‘A shape in the shape of my mother was forming in the doorway’ (p. 110). When, immediately after this, they begin their road trip, Sullivan’s presence continues to be associated with the mother, the womb-like studio replaced by the ‘wrap-around fallopian coziness’ of David’s red Mustang (p. 111)⁹⁰.

The explicit language in this first novel is key to the themes that DeLillo is exploring, and that these are concerns that he continues to develop in his later work. If we look closely at three examples in the novel where he uses explicit language, we can see that they contribute to the argument DeLillo is making, rather than simply being gratuitous.

i) The ‘terrible gleaming mudcunt of Mother America’

At one point in their journey, David asks Sullivan to tell him a bedtime story. She responds, ‘I have just the thing’, and tells him a story about a man named Black Knife, ‘a wise old holy man of the Oglala Sioux and what he said to me once on a moonlit night’ (p. 117)⁹¹. David, incredulous, asks if she is making up the story as she goes along. She replies, ‘this is for real’ (p. 117). In the story, Black Knife speaks of a secret desire to ‘destroy the forests, white saltbox houses, covered bridges, brownstones, azalea gardens [...] blast all the fine old things into oblivion and replace them with tasteless identical structures. Boxes of cancer cells. Neat gray chambers’ (p. 118). Sullivan reports:

That’s what we really want, Black Knife told me. We want to be totally engulfed by all the so-called worst elements of our national life and character. We want to wallow in the terrible gleaming mudcunt of Mother America. (That’s what he said). (p. 119)

⁹⁰ At eighteen, David imagines the fate of his friend Leonard in similar terms. Nicknamed Young Man Carbuncular; Leonard was ‘a fat and lonely boy with furious purple inflammations all over the back of his neck’. David declares, ‘Chronic boils and obesity eliminate all possible illusions; snuggle up to loneliness and make the library your womb-home and chapel’(p. 143).

⁹¹ Lehmann-Haupt captures the strange, evocative nature of the story, describing Sullivan as ‘a tall sculptress who tells David fantastic, lyrical bedtime stories about a Sioux mystic who outpredicts McLuhan (in jazzier language)’ (1971, n.p.).

Sullivan conjures a vision of America's desire for the destruction of difference. Here the true ideals of America's citizens do not include a cure for deadly diseases; rather the new environment mimics the disease to which David's mother succumbs, 'rows of cancer cells'. In this fantastical environment, death is not deferred or prevented but processed more efficiently, the death drive enthusiastically manifest through technology: 'Monolithic fifty-story machines for disposing of the victims of automobile accidents without the bother of funerals and the waste of tombstones or sepulchres' (p. 118). In this future scenario the nation's inhabitants have not processed the 'terror' of the everyday and found relief from it, rather cities are structured around the efficient processing of dead bodies. Sullivan's story remains unchanged in both published versions (the 1971 and 1990 editions), but a draft of the novel in the Harry Ransom Center archives reveals that the term 'mudcunt' replaced the original choice of 'mudhole' (Don DeLillo Papers, container 3.3)⁹². In this case, the word choice becomes *more* explicit, but its impact is mediated by a framing device which defers to the original speaker. Within Sullivan's retelling of her conversation with Black Knife, likely a story of her own invention, she reminds us that these are not her words, interjecting 'Black Knife told me' and the qualifier, in parentheses '(that's what he said)'. Despite her insistence that the story is 'for real', Sullivan distances herself. This perhaps serves to temper the sense that she is saying the unsayable, both in the explicit language and the subject matter, invoking an incestuous relation to the dual image of mother figure and nation. The taboo of this language and concept is conveyed at a level of remove from its speaker. In a similar movement, DeLillo describes the novel's incest theme most explicitly outside the bounds of the text, in the strange piece of writing in which he performs a similar act of distancing, 'Notes Towards a Definitive Meditation (by Someone Else)...' (1972a). The novel's explicit language is aligned with disenfranchised characters: Sullivan attributes the term 'terrible

⁹² This version of the term does appear in the published novel; in Sullivan's second bedtime story she calls back to Black Knife and the desire to 'wallow in the terrible gleaming mudhole of God and country' (p. 328). In this story the term is mirrored in the landscape. On a sailing trip with her Uncle, a sunset is an 'appallingly beautiful wound in the sky' and a fjord is a 'seven-mile gash in the high bluffs of the island' (p. 325; p. 328). Sullivan's modification of the description supports the idea that she will not speak the word without qualifying it or quoting another's words.

gleaming mudcunt' (p. 119) to the 'wise man' Black Knife, taking pains to point out that she is repeating his words, and later, as we will see, an anonymous sex worker is made monstrous, as David's friend declares 'her cunt had teeth' (p. 374)⁹³. Here the distasteful aspects of the text are relegated to the margins, displaced onto othered groups.

ii) 'Optional spelling of third syllable'

As we saw earlier, while having sex with Sullivan, David imagines himself as 'Soldierboy flagged in fuck with mothercountry. Optional spelling of third syllable there' (1971/1973, p. 317). This instance of crude wordplay that asks us to read 'mothercountry' as 'mothercuntry' is cut from the novel's revised edition (1971/1990)⁹⁴. When David points out to us the homophone of 'cunt' and 'country' the vicious term is not spelled out on the page: we are asked to consider that it is covertly present, sounded out in the word 'country', which enforces its status as taboo. This linking of the mother to the nation through an invented obscenity does not add much to the reader's understanding; these connections have already been made elsewhere in the text. The detail is cut from the 1990 version of the novel, but the thematic connection remains within Sullivan's story, as we have seen, in a much more striking and evocative description, the 'terrible gleaming mudcunt of mother America' (p. 119). The deletion of this detail is a small but significant change to the text. David's aside asks the reader to collaborate in sounding out the invented term, alluded to as though it is a private joke between himself and the reader. This suggests a camaraderie, and implicitly casts the reader as male⁹⁵. The reader is assumed to share in othering the symbolic mother/mothercountry in their reading of the sex act. This detail resonates with the sense of shared, knowing, yet veiled misogyny that is present elsewhere in *Underworld's* prologue. In the broadcasting booth from which Russ Hodges narrates the game, an engineer tells a

⁹³ Here DeLillo invokes the myth of Vagina dentata which has its origins in folklore. It is variously used in stories that warn against rape, and the dangers of unknown women.

⁹⁴ David Cowart, noting this change, states that 'the whole passage is in dubious taste' (1996, D. Cowart, personal communication, April 27, 2010).

⁹⁵ This sense of obscenity as a male domain resonates with an episode in *Underworld* which I explore in Chapter Four, where Marvin Lundy is horrified that his new wife will be forced to experience his bathroom habits, harming her delicate sensibilities.

crude joke. A man on his honeymoon in Mexico fears that the legendary Speedy Gonzales will have sex with his new wife. To try and prevent this ‘he’s got his middle finger plugged up her snatch’ but it is too late: Speedy Gonzales has already snuck into the marital bed and exclaims ‘Sen-yor-or, you got your finger up my a-ass’ (1997, p. 35). In this highly gendered space, the joke characterises bodies coded as female as uniquely and inevitably vulnerable to penetration. The man tells the joke in the commentary booth but out of range of the microphones. Like the advertising executive in *Americana* who longs for a ‘tremendous steaming piss’ to be broadcast on television, the body’s orifices here exist on the edges of perception, excluded from cultural output but remaining at the margins (1971/1990, pp. 66). In the same way that David, as a television executive, is an arbiter of America’s cultural representations, the men narrating the baseball game shape a significant cultural moment, a group of men for whom the othering of people by racialized and gendered categories is casual and commonplace⁹⁶. The enforcement of racist and sexist tropes through humour occurs at the edges of the commentary, just out of earshot (akin to “locker-room talk”), present but not quite explicit, as in *Americana* the “mothercuntry” is alluded to but does not appear on the page. While the other explicit terms, which remain in the text, are more straightforward (literally spelled out), the deletion of this detail means that the reader is no longer asked to be complicit in sharing David’s troubling worldview. In this way, the novel can be said to demonstrate DeLillo’s maturing sense as a writer, but not in terms of a general shift towards ‘decorum’ and a rejection of “bad taste” elements (Coward, 1996, p. 602). DeLillo does not turn away from the novel’s distasteful subject matter, but this change suggests that he edits the text with a more diverse readership in mind⁹⁷.

⁹⁶ In *Underworld*, the atmosphere of the stadium is overwhelmingly male: details such as a player spitting on the ground—‘the freest thing he does’—and attendees visiting the communal urinal—‘pisses in their untold millions’—contribute to the rich, bustling texture of the scene (1997, p. 25; p. 21). These are described in a celebratory tone but do not make it into the radio commentator’s narrative of the game.

⁹⁷ In the early versions of *Americana* the routine sexism of the everyday is strongly apparent, which was also, crucially, evident in literary discourse, such as the provocative criticism of Norman Mailer. In later iterations the novel distances itself from this, via its representation of David as a would-be all-American man, but also repeats it. In U.S. literature of the post-war period up until the mid-1970s the implied reader is always male, but this changes with the developments of second wave feminism.

iii) 'Her cunt had teeth'

For David, the womb that he idealises as a space of refuge, of safety and containment, is never safe. This becomes more explicit as the extent of his complex relationship with his mother becomes clear: for example, his anger at her cancer diagnosis is compounded by the knowledge that she suffered sexual assault at the hands of the doctor who diagnosed her. David wonders if, by his own birth, he is responsible for the disease that originates in his mother's cervix and eventually takes her life: 'Inside her was something splintered and bright, something that might have been left by the spiral passage of my own body' (1971/1990, p. 196). David grapples with the knowledge of his mother's own unruly body: the discomfort and shame of incestuous feeling, the pain and trauma of her sexual assault, and the illness itself, 'cells expanding, running wild' (p. 300). David longs for a transcendent melding between himself and his mother, as Graley Herren asserts in his reading: 'The most salient feature of David's encounter with Ann in the pantry is their direct confrontation and the fantasy of merger that it conjures for David—a merger that regresses farther back than oedipal sexuality to pre-oedipal identification, spiraling his way back into the maternal imago' (2016, n.p.). Having failed to fulfil his desire, to repair the primal splitting of birth and become one with his mother once again, David turns finally to a new kind of abject configuration in the novel's final pages: the sloppy, delirious swapping of partners and fluids in a drunken, half-hearted orgy. After consummating his relationship with Sullivan and abandoning his film project, David's cross-country trip finally culminates in a Bakhtinian carnival, a disjointed and chaotic encounter between David, his friend Clevenger, three of his male friends, and two nameless women hired as sex workers. The group variously drink to excess, laugh, fall down, urinate and vomit, all while engaging in sex acts with each other. In a drawn-out passage that details the scene, David states that

I turned and saw the fat one pouring beer all over Dowd. Peewee was standing now with a length of pipe between his legs and they all laughed. [...] Lump pissed against the wall. Dowd got up and put his arms around the fat one and threw up again. She punched him in the face, twice, hurting him, and

everybody laughed. Peewee was out of his clothes now and crawled over to the young one and put his head under her dress. (1971/1990, pp. 373-374)

Here, towards the novel's end, the image of the 'terrible gleaming mudcunt' in which we might 'wallow' gives way to another explicit and violent image: David's friend warns him about one of the sex workers: 'Clevenger told me to watch out for the fat one. Her cunt had teeth' (pp. 373-374). This description remains the same in both editions of the novel. The seed of this image is planted in the machinery of Sullivan's studio, 'hungry tools with teeth and claws, the radial-arm saw and saber saw' (p. 108)⁹⁸. This messy encounter revels in the stuff of the body and features a violent symbol of castration anxiety, the vagina dentata of the sex worker. The scene degenerates further, as David relates

I went to the girl sitting in the tire, pushed her dress up around her hips and buried my face between her legs. Her thighs parted and then closed, wet against my ears, and I tried to put my tongue higher into her, feeling again as though I were about to pass out [...] The other one pushed me to the ground, straddled me [...] and I realised she was pissing all over my belly and chest. [...] She got up finally and sat on the running board and drank some beer. [...] Then I threw up. (p. 374)

The blunt materiality of the scene is an extreme rejection of censorship and concealment, seen in the taboo attached to bodily functions at the television network, in which a toilet bowl is deemed indecent by association. The careful vetting of television footage stands in stark contrast to the activities of the characters in the novel's final passages, where the grotesque undercurrents of the text finally burst through and flood the narrative. The tone is similar to the passage in which David consummates his relationship with Sullivan, as Joseph Dewey explains: 'graphically rendered [...] the scene never touches the transcendent or even the erotic [...] but stays unappealingly fleshy' (2006, p. 22). This base fleshiness is reflected in the strange names of the characters 'Lump' and 'Peewee', and this emphasis in the novel's final pages makes the consummation of desire into something farcically unpleasant. Daniel

⁹⁸ This space also links to David's infantilisation when he and Sullivan have sex: The womb-space of the 'cocoon' is echoed in David's reference to his 'coocoo' (the term preserved in the 1971 published novel but not appearing in the 1990 version), extending the roles of adult and child established by the format of the bedtime story. Their sexual relationship is repeatedly linked to David's infantilisation: Sullivan tells David a second bedtime story in the lead-up to them having sex (1971/1990, p. 320).

Aaron (1991) similarly describes the way that DeLillo's writing of sex is explicit but not erotic: 'The sexual episodes in his novels, of which there are a good many, are at once "explicit" and lust-chilling. He charts the curves, angles, declivities of entangled bodies with a topographical exactness, but the lovemaking itself is usually a joyless and unrevelatory business' (Aaron, in Lentriccia, ed., 1991, p. 68). The negotiation of lewdness and concealment finally devolves into this explicit, abject scene, steeped in sex, violence, and body wastes.

Pain and the limitations of narrative

The tensions in *Americana* that I have explored in this chapter concern propriety: how much of the seedy underbelly of the culture can or should be shown. At the same time, the text expresses another distinct problem. *Americana*'s protagonist indignantly states that, try as he might, he cannot fully express his embodied experience within the text. The issue here is not one of decorum, but of the capacities of narrative itself; the limits of what is possible of the form. David bemoans the failure of the text as a chronicle of his embodied experiences. *Americana* concludes with a framing device where David, now an old man, seems to be in self-imposed exile in an unnamed location off the coast of Africa (p. 347). The text of the novel thus far is revealed to be David's autobiography. His trip across the American west is documented both in the film footage that he captured, and the manuscript that he wrote. Reflecting on the book, David declares that

Too much has been disfigured in the name of symmetry. Our lives were the shortest distance between two points, birth and chaos, but what appears on these pages represents, in its orderly proportions, almost a delivery from chaos. Too much has been forgotten [...] There is no mention of the scar on my right index finger, the white medicine I took as a child, the ether visions of my tonsillectomy. In my mind the resonance of these distant things is sheer thunder, outlasting immortal books, long and short wars, journeys to other planets. (pp. 345-346)

The idea that felt experiences of pain are at once crucial to self-knowledge and impossible to capture in narrative is one that DeLillo returns to repeatedly and develops in later works, as Bill Gray imagines his 'true biography' would be a story of 'gas pains' and 'dizzy spells' (*Mao*

II, 1991, p. 135). Meanwhile a shard of glass embedded in his hand connects Bill's experience to his childhood self: 'the glass fragment [...] glinted like sand, the pebbly greenish swamp sand that belongs to childhood, to the bruises and welts, the fingers nicked by foul tips' (p. 130). Throughout his fiction, DeLillo grapples with the idea that the written word pales in comparison to the felt experience of pain. This sentiment is remarkably unchanged as it appears in his novels across many decades, as we saw in my analysis of *Mao II* (1991). In *Americana*, in a narrative frame that asks the reader to imagine that they are standing outside the text and are being addressed by its author, David states that 'the scar on my right index finger' is impossible to contain in its fullness within the narrative. Details such as these are sacrificed in the service of narrative cohesion: the text in its 'orderly proportions' might represent a 'delivery from chaos', but crucial embodied experiences are missing. The scar takes on a contradictory quality, as David tells the reader that there is 'no mention' of it (yet of course it appears in the text in this very statement). The text gestures towards embodied experiences but is unable to fully represent them. This idea is further manifest in the development of the text itself: changes that were made to the text compound the idea of bodily sensation as an absent presence. In an early draft of the novel housed in the Harry Ransom Center's archives, the description of the scarred hand is much longer⁹⁹. Both versions of the passage function in much the same way: in the published

⁹⁹ Initially figured in a draft as a memory of 'shattering clarity' David recalls the minute details of a scarred, aged hand holding a cigarette. The passage in the draft reads:

Blood glowing at fingertips when he gripped the lighter, bruised poise of three fingers holding the cigarette, thick nails curving back and pinching into flesh, a patch of nicotine, a halfmoon scar, large sad freckles on the back of the hand, cup returned to the table, cigarette ash appending itself, fist disappearing, blistered mounds at the base of each finger, something like clay lodged beneath the nails, something old like clay, drunken hand silently furling, smoke rising from the scar of the index finger, petrified white hairs clumped between knuckles, hand opening, rain skating down the windows, a hundred miles of lines crosshatching his palm.
(Don DeLillo Papers, container 2.8)

This whole passage is crossed through with a pencil 'x' and does not appear in the novel. I believe that David recalls the hand of his father in this description. The 'scar of the index finger' forms a part of this detailed description. David insists that the minutiae of his father's hand including the 'scar of the index finger' must be significant, as he recalls them with 'shattering clarity' (Don DeLillo Papers, container 2.8). In the novel the scar is transposed onto David's own finger. Rather than simply noting the way bodily details embed themselves in memory, the scar becomes part of a larger conversation, about how embodied experience cannot be captured in narrative. The idea that 'there is no mention of the scar' makes sense according to the logic of the novel - we are asked to consider the narrative up

novel David declares that 'In my mind the resonance of these distant things is sheer thunder, outlasting immortal books' (1971/1990, pp. 345-346). In the draft he expresses a similar sentiment: 'If these things are meaningless, why do we recall them with such shattering clarity?' (Don DeLillo Papers, container 2.8). The main difference is the space given over to exploring this idea in the text. This revision shows us DeLillo's process of paring down the bodies in the novel, and this drive to edit the text mirrors the very idea that David expresses: that narrative cohesion comes at a cost, as unruly and excessive bodily elements must be left out. Elsewhere in the drafts, a number of grotesque, troubling anecdotes that are cut from the published text further reflect this idea. A character named Puma recalls his time with a carnival, rooming with a circus performer, the Johnstown Giant, a 'poor kid' with a 'glandular disorder', 'slightly misshapen [...] like an eight-foot dwarf' who 'used to like to touch me'. Puma states, alluding to his homosexual desire 'I guess he was a latent' which he also attributes to 'the gland trouble'. Puma says that he felt sorry for the Giant because girls avoided him, while they were happy to spend time with 'the guy who swallowed rats and regurgitated them up'. There is the story of a vet who 'used to cut up live canaries and hold their warm inner organs in his hand for a moment. Claimed it gave him a sense of the universe'. In another childhood memory, a character recalls spying on a butcher named Zimmerman 'making indecent advances' and then 'violating a side of beef' (Don DeLillo Papers, container 2.8). A grotesque image of the American Dream is removed, in which 'some berserk cousin of the great dream squats like an incubus' (Don DeLillo Papers, container 3.1).

Studying *Americana*'s different versions, then, is not only productive for what it reveals about DeLillo's processes as a writer, but actually connects to the novel's themes. The idea that the body cannot be fully expressed in narrative is manifest in these depictions of bodies that are cut from the text. In another example found in a draft, the aura of Burt

until that point as the book that David has written, and to step outside that narrative to hear David reflect on it. In a narrative shift that asks us to imagine we are standing outside the text, David states that 'the scar on my right index finger' would be impossible to contain in its fullness within the text. In this sense the scar does go without mention, and the deletion of the description of the hand delineated thoroughly and in careful detail, forms another kind of absence.

Lancaster on screen, shimmering with a silvery glow, is contrasted with live theatre and the immediacy and proximity of actors' bodies, 'men with sweaty armpits' (Don DeLillo Papers, container 3.1, see Figure 4). David declares that, in contrast with the iconic body of the cinema screen, 'the real body walks and shits'. This line has been amended by hand and reads 'The real body ~~walks and shits~~' (Don DeLillo Papers, container 3.1, see Figure 4). This declaration about the materiality of the 'real body' progressively disappears, partially crossed out and then entirely absent from the published novel (1971/1973). Once again the idea that lived, embodied experience cannot be captured in narrative is enacted through the cuts made to the text. The assertion that the body 'walks and shits' is missing from the published novel, manifesting David's assertion that embodied experience is absent¹⁰⁰. This sense of absence relating to the material body also connects up to the central loss with which David grapples throughout the novel, his deceased mother, whose absent presence is expressed through an empty space: the space where a leg should be.

Reflecting back on his manuscript, David asserts that it cannot capture the 'sheer thunder' of his embodied experiences, which exceed the capacity of the written word and narrative form, and the text itself becomes meaningful for its bulk and heft, not for what it contains: 'It is a fond object. I like to look at it, pages neatly stacked [...] Every so often I move the manuscript to a different room [...] It never fails to be a touching thing, my book on a pinewood table, poetic in its loneliness, totally still' (1971/1990, p. 346). There is a sense of comfort here, of a life successfully contained in a stable, authoritative object. This is derived from the material object of the text, in the same way that we have seen *Underworld* praised as a 'colossus' (Anderson, 1997, n.p.) and the troublesome text of *Americana* itself cast as unruly; 'shaggy' and imperfectly formed (Alter, 2010, n.p.). Regarding his own writing process, DeLillo has repeatedly focused on the text as a material object. In an explanation

¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the television executive's discussion of censorship is originally longer and more invested in the stuff of the body; speakers cite 'Blood and guts [...] Toilet bowls', 'cleavage' and 'twitching buttocks', and imagine the shock of the viewers at 'stuff they'd never expect to see on a Sunday afternoon' (Don DeLillo Papers, container 3.3, see Figure 3). In the extended conversation about the toilet bowl, 'shits and pisses' is amended to the more comical and euphemistic 'does number one and two' (Don DeLillo Papers, container 3.3).

that reflects his own process as much as that of his protagonist, DeLillo states of *Americana* that 'Many ideas, themes and characters were struck from the hulking manuscript (higher than a small radio) as the author blundered his way through the process of turning out what is called a publishable work' (1972a, p. 327). Regarding his 1998 novel *Libra* he once again focuses on the materiality of his process, describing the 'awesome accumulation, the gross tonnage, of first draft pages. The first draft of *Libra* sits in ten manuscript boxes. I like knowing it's in the house. I feel connected to it. It's the complete book, the full experience containable on paper' (DeLillo, cited in Begley, 1993, p. 281)¹⁰¹. This emphasis on pages stacked in piles or collected in boxes also reflects DeLillo's expansive body of work (including his drafts, typescripts, research materials, correspondence) now contained in the archive. The materiality of the text, its size and weight, seems to be reassuring proof of its exhaustive content. Yet as David insists, the profound importance, the 'sheer thunder' of embodied experience cannot be fully captured in narrative. As the scholar Richard Elster asserts in *Point Omega*, 'An eight-hundred-page biography is nothing more than dead conjecture' (2010, p. 21). Narrative form has a deadening effect: the body cannot be successfully "frozen" in the text and then reanimated by the reader. The vibrant and heterogeneous nature of embodied experience is lost in translation. The idea that such experiences can be contained in a text, rendered 'totally still', is an illusion. This idea, as well as repeated references to ice in *Americana*, connect up to DeLillo's wary assessment of cryogenic freezing in *Zero K* (2016). Already in *Americana*, DeLillo wryly undermines the idea that we can "[p]ut the body on ice in a plastic bag [...] Once we figure out how to thaw the sons of bitches, we'll have mass resurrections from coast to coast" (1971/1990, p. 301). Like insects preserved and pinned to a board for display, like the prisoner of war who kills a guard 'to get inside him, open him up for inspection' (p. 295), like the vet who would 'cut up

¹⁰¹ If the bulk of the text (which we have seen elsewhere is related positively to bodily integrity) represents reassuring, authoritative meaning, then by 1989, editing *Americana*, DeLillo has a dramatically different vantage point: he stands upon his body of work from an extremely productive period, over half his oeuvre to date was published in the period 1971-1988: *Americana* (1971), *End Zone* (1972), *Great Jones Street* (1973), *Ratner's Star* (1976), *Players* (1977), *Running Dog* (1978), *Amazons* (1980), *The Names* (1982), *White Noise* (1984), and *Libra* (1988).

live canaries and hold their warm inner organs in his hand' to gain 'a sense of the universe' (Don DeLillo Papers, container 2.8), like a body frozen and stored in a cryogenic pod, like saliva frozen into an ice cube, embodied experience is fundamentally resistant to preservation. Dissecting a body also destroys it, as consigning materials to the archive both preserves and freezes them, rendering them static. Beyond this idea that the act of writing flattens and deadens the material, one of DeLillo's characters suggests that the act of prolonged study has a similar effect, in a sentiment that we might map onto the act of reading and interpreting the text itself: '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 wordless shock. Love it and trust it and leave' (*Underworld*, 1997, p. 83).

In *Americana*, David takes comfort in the bulk of his manuscript as a reassuring presence, but the sense of totality, of containment that it gives off is illusory: the text cannot contain or relate embodied life in its fullness. This illusory sense of the perfect text (its material weight conveying its total authority) reflects David's blinkered view of the culture he inhabits: for David, the white, male, 'extremely handsome' body (p. 11) is instated as the aesthetic ideal, and there is a corresponding denial of difference, of othered bodies (the Native American construction workers, the women in the office who double as secretaries and affair partners). This idealisation of sameness is reflected in David's assessment of his autobiography, 'pages neatly stacked, their differences hidden from the eye' (p. 346). In the novel, DeLillo navigates between narrative convention (messy experience "cleaned up" in an attempt to wrangle order from chaos), and exposing grotesque elements of the culture. The bizarre and troubling instances of violence and sexual abuse in the drafts further reveal the messy realities of lives that do not fit or cannot be told. In a draft version of the passage in which David reflects upon the manuscript he has written, DeLillo develops the emphasis on the material object. In the typed draft, David describes the 'pages neatly stacked', and DeLillo then adds a number of details handwritten in pencil. He adds the description of the text as 'a fond object', and of it being 'Cezannesque in the timeless light it emits' (Don DeLillo Papers, container 2.8). These comments on the nature of the physical properties of

the manuscript seem only to have arisen once DeLillo was actually interacting with the text as a stack of pages. That is, DeLillo could only appreciate the importance of the text as material, its bulk and heft, once it actually sat before him. DeLillo is able to see and comment on this only when confronted with the material bulk of the draft, qualities unavailable to him when typing upon one single sheet of paper at a time. This progressive coming-into-being of the text as it grows in size and stature comes with a corresponding lessening of the bodies in the narrative.

David's subject is both America and its mythologies: the landscape is inextricable from and merges with its representations, 'the profusion of images by which America represents itself' (Cowart, 1996, p. 604). The 'great unwinding mystery of this deep sink of land', 'prairie truth and the clean kills of eagles' are of a piece with 'the thick paragraphs and imposing photos, the gallop of panting adjectives' (DeLillo, 1971/1990, p. 349). He details a mix of images that includes strange, anatomically inflected details: 'the desert shawled in Navaho paints, images of surreal cinema, of ventricles tied to pumps, Chaco masonry and the slung guitar, of church organ lungs and the slate of empires'. David describes his impulse to write as an attempt to derive order from chaos:¹⁰²

[W]hat I was engaged in was merely a literary venture, an attempt to find pattern and motive, to make of something wild a squeamish thesis on the essence of the nation's soul. To formulate. To seek links. But the wind burned across the creekbeds, barely moving the soil, and there was nothing to announce myself in the way of historic revelation. (p. 349)

David asserts that he cannot capture this rich texture in a 'merely [...] literary venture', and the pairing of the words 'squeamish' and 'thesis' (particularly impactful when sounded together) suggests that the author is compelled to turn away from distasteful aspects of lived experience, omitting the details of childhood accident or illness, of scars and operations. It is significant that David specifically describes the failed attempt to capture the 'nation's soul' in narrative as a 'squeamish thesis'. For all his insistence that his experiences of pain and

¹⁰² DeLillo repeatedly expresses this sense of human activity as an attempt to impose order upon chaos that must fail. In *End Zone*, for example, American football is termed 'a benign illusion, the illusion that order is possible' (1972, p. 112).

illness are of profound importance, he does not or cannot include them in the text: the squeamish writer is compelled to turn away. The framework of a 'literary venture, an attempt to find pattern and motive' seems fundamentally incompatible with the 'wild' subject matter of self and nation. In this formulation, narrative order is confounded by the chaos of lived experience. In the same way, the nation that David seeks to understand by unraveling its mythologies, and by creating his own, is completely evasive in its enormity. As 'the wind burned across the creekbeds' the world continues, indifferent to his attempts to define it. This simplest detail of his environment confounds David, offering no clear meaning or neat signification, and he is at a loss to describe it. David recognises this failure, stating '[e]ven now, writing this, I can impart little of what I saw' (p. 350). In David's manifesto the writer's task is strongly defined by order; to 'find pattern and motive', 'to formulate', 'to seek links'. But through this process of sense-making we can arrive at only a 'squeamish thesis'. As we have seen Murray Jay Siskind assert in *White Noise*, 'Your whole life is a plot, a scheme, a diagram. It is a failed scheme but that's not the point' (1984, pp. 291-292). If narrative is aligned with sense-making and order, then experiences that bring us back to the body, particularly pain and wounding, re-establish our existence in the realm of chaos. While the text does feature explicit language, bodily fluids, and 'lewd' behaviour, DeLillo's narrator asserts that crucial embodied experiences are missing. The impossible task of the writer is to capture the messy heterogeneity of embodied experience within a narrative framework.

Conclusion

Studying the different iterations of the text, through drafts and publications, we have seen that the 'real body' progressively disappears from the text, as the text itself grows in status as a material object. As well as studying the novel itself, the drafts can help us to further understand the role of transgression and of explicit content in the novel. The changes that DeLillo made when revising the text show that he paid close attention to the specific word choices and their impact, and included many strange and grotesque anecdotes. As the novel's different versions have shown, DeLillo's editing process does not uniformly tone

down explicit language. The incest taboo functions as an allegory for the relationship between a nation and its blindly patriotic citizens within the context of the Vietnam War, and this idea is subject to careful and repeated reworking. The edits show that the novel's transgressive themes are developed carefully throughout the editing process, with an attention to their impact, rather than simply being removed to make the text more palatable¹⁰³.

DeLillo's protagonist is complicit in maintaining an illusory veneer that conceals the distasteful aspects of the culture, and carries out secret acts of transgression that mirror the concealed, grotesque elements of American life. While, across the novel's different iterations this central dynamic remains, the changes to obscene language fine-tune where the narrative lands on the continuum between lewdness and concealment that it navigates. David longs to be held and contained within a robust structure, whether that be the hierarchy of the television station, the powerful aura of a specific Hollywood masculinity, the postmodern space of the motel, or the various womb-spaces which he encounters. These structures are repeatedly characterized as large, strong, and structurally sound, as Burt Lancaster is 'monumental', a 'city', one of the 'American pyramids' (p. 12). The origins of David's desire stretch back beyond being held by the mother as an infant: he seeks out a series of replacements for the womb in which he might 'wallow'. This investment in size and bulk can also be seen in David's treatment of the text he has written, a 'fond object' 'pages neatly stacked'. Towards the novel's end, he protests that he has not succeeded in capturing particular embodied experiences from childhood, lamenting his failed attempt for the text to contain everything, all of himself and the sum total of his experiences. This emphasis on containment extends out to reception of DeLillo's novels, as we have seen critics and reviewers focus on *Underworld's* bulk and structure; here the text's power seems linked to its robust anatomy. While in *Americana*, David strives to capture his ruminations on self and nation, both in the manuscript which goes unread and the abandoned film project. We see

¹⁰³ For example, an early draft housed in the archive indicates the reordering of 'gleaming terrible mudcunt' to 'terrible gleaming mudcunt' (Don DeLillo Papers, container 3.3).

something similar in the development of the novel itself, as DeLillo's edits render it not a monument or a colossus, but an abject, leaky being similar to the unfinished novel in *Mao II*, a 'water-bloated, slobbering, incontinent' creature (1991, p. 92). David finds that the 'terrible gleaming mudcunt' is not a space of refuge but something monstrous, the 'cunt [with] teeth' threatening his fragile masculine identity (1971/1990, p. 119; p. 374). The dangerous, unruly bodies that he encounters—specifically women's bodies—find a parallel in the structure of the novel as whole, as DeLillo repeatedly struggles to wrangle its excesses into something coherent and self-contained. David's fantasies of containment reflect the illusory self-contained text.

Like the 'evocatively missing thread' of the leg, abjection is not excised from the text (Boxall, 2006, p. 32). It becomes less explicit but no less central to DeLillo's account of American culture. Given the prominence of unruly bodies and bodily functions in later works, particularly in *Mao II* and *Underworld*, the grotesque and abject elements of DeLillo's debut novel do not represent a young writer "getting it out of his system"; rather they give an important insight into a concern that is developed throughout his oeuvre. Integrity and self-containment come into play regarding the texts themselves, and the bodies in the texts. The tension between lewdness and concealment operates both at a narrative level, and in the way explicit material is transformed and cut during the process of editing the text. DeLillo has stated that the task of the novelist is to write from the margins, standing apart from the culture in which they write rather than immersed in it (DePietro, ed., 2005; Caesar, 2010). I find that DeLillo's work is situated 'at the margins' in another important sense: DeLillo constantly attends to that which is marginalized within human experience: those bodily wastes that we designate as other and cast out (emissions/omissions). As we have seen argued convincingly by Žižek and Laporte, this is not merely a societal convention but a foundation upon which civilisation is organized¹⁰⁴. In my analysis of *Americana*, meaning is located in the unusual anatomy of the novel, and the unruly bodies in the text. By reading

¹⁰⁴ David describes humanity as essentially debased when he sums up the life cycle as 'job, mate, child, desk, drink, sit, squat, quiver, die' (p. 174).

these elements, I offer an alternative to the rejection of explicit language as simply a symptom of DeLillo's underdeveloped early style. I suggest the transgressive elements of his debut novel are not an aberration, later corrected, but a signalling of the importance of bodily anxieties. The abject, and its attendant affects—distaste, horror, repulsion, fear, dread—form a key strand throughout DeLillo's fiction, and we cannot dismiss these as deviations from a central project of looking at the “significant” aspects of American experience¹⁰⁵. From the gore and grotesque in *Mao II* (1991), to *Underworld's* sustained engagements with scatology (1997), we can see that these body wastes are not distasteful matter to be got out of a young writer's system, but a crucial aspect of his writing of American culture. DeLillo consistently reminds us that his characters inhabit unruly bodies which emit urine, faeces, vomit and spit, and even the abject merging of ‘shitpiss’ (*End Zone*, 1972, p. 24; *Ratner's Star*, 1977, p. 7). Having failed to be reabsorbed, to ‘wallow’ in the womb of mother/nation, David seeks refuge in a sense of containment that is always illusory. David is never safe from the ‘ritual terrors’ of daily life, and the novel gives form to the unspeakable incest taboo through proxies and absent body parts (p. 9). By separating DeLillo's use of language from the moralistic frames of ‘decorum’ and the rejection of “bad taste”, I read the engagements with “indecent” anatomy on a continuum with various formulations and approaches to the body that I identify through the whole oeuvre.

As we have seen throughout the thesis so far, ideas of bodily integrity and vulnerability form a key strand in DeLillo's fiction. In an element which unites my readings of the novels, DeLillo's characters draw upon an idealised sense of bodily integrity, which is upheld as the key to self-knowledge and control. Yet this idea of a whole and complete body that houses a certain and stable selfhood is variously and continually challenged and broken down. Rather than DeLillo working through his interest in abject bodies in *Americana*, before taking up the mantle of ‘utterly serious’ writer, DeLillo brings abject, othered bodily matter to

¹⁰⁵ I suggest that we may productively read DeLillo within a tradition of American literature invested in shock and catharsis - writers such as Kathy Acker, Dennis Cooper, William Burroughs, and Chuck Palahniuk - who have embraced obscene and transgressive writing much more explicitly. DeLillo's subject matter of Hitler porn deserves a mention here (*Running Dog*, 1978).

the fore throughout his works, and I perform a similar movement by drawing attention to it (Binelli, 2007, n.p.). The careful negotiation of explicit material, between seen and unseen in *Americana* represents a significant insight into DeLillo's writing of abjection and the grotesque. DeLillo does not strive towards a more sanitised account of the culture he writes, rather he engages with the attempts to mute and cover over the grotesque and abject elements of the nation's history. Rather than prioritising the 1990 iteration of *Americana* as the (finally) finished text, the cuts that were made interact with the novel's subject matter in interesting ways. The situating of taboo themes and terms at the edges of the narrative and character's subjectivities echoes the shape of the novel in its published form. The novel itself is subjected to a similar impulse, as excessive, abject matter is othered and cast out from the text, until the novel's final confrontation with abjection in the unpleasant, sloppy sex scene. Society's designation of abject waste requires that the subject both reject their waste and conceal it, in opposing gestures of casting out and of containing, holding and covering to ensure that it remains unseen¹⁰⁶. The designation of genitals and bodily wastes as "private", elements of life that should be concealed behind closed doors, requires that the subject manage their own body's functions, while regarding the process as distasteful and embarrassing. David's acts of transgression repurpose bodily wastes that are conventionally hidden from view and disposed of. The uses that he makes of his saliva and semen, together with the many grotesque and abject elements in the novel, create a sense of distaste which runs through the lives of the characters. As we will see next, in *Underworld* (1997) DeLillo once again makes use of the body's waste products, but to quite different ends.

¹⁰⁶ Laporte gives voice to this contrary motion with reference to edicts on dealing with waste, which dictate that to maintain the clean appearance of streets, the city's inhabitants must confine their waste—'refuse, offals, or putrefactions'—within their houses, and periodically carry it beyond the city limits to dispose of it (1978, pp. 4-5).



Figure 2: The reassuring 'skeleton' of *Underworld* (1998).

He's deafen than he
Special news section, having fantasias about
being himself a gold mohair dinner
jacket.

Re: Theodore Francis Warburton

It is always a sad occasion to lose an old and trusted employee. Theodore Francis (Ted) Warburton was more than that. He was a valuable friend, an advisor, an uncompromising advocate of the basic decency of man. Such qualities are rare today. I, for one, consider his passing a great personal loss. It is not often that we come across a man who possesses Ted's humanistic approach to the problems of our ~~times~~ age. His untimely death diminishes all of us. I know everyone at the network joins me in wishing his widow Wilma Warburton the very deepest of sympathies. No man is an island. We owe God a death. The torch has been passed. Ave atque vale.

"Let me ask you this," Mars Tyler ^{said.} "Who are we gearing it to?"

"We're gearing it to the Sundays," Walter Faye said. "They're sitting

there with 27 pounds of ^{the Sundays} New York Times spread all over the floor. He's about 37, wears glasses, claims he wouldn't read a bestseller if his life depended ^{he buys a paperback book that costs less than two and a quarter} on it. She's sitting there with the magazine section, wondering

why the fuck somebody doesn't them call them up and invite them over for whiskey sours because it's so goddamn boring hanging around the house reading about ghettos and ^{urban sprawl. That's the vegetable kingdom} ~~the~~ ^{Those are the Sundays.} You have to ^{reach} grab them with something ^{important} different and dramatic. Not a panel discussion or some half-ass ~~mix~~ college quiz show. That's too much like the newspaper they're reading."

"A point well taken," Weede said.

"All right then," Let me ask you this. How do you ^{reach} grab them ^{specifically?}

"You grab them with some gutsy stuff they'd never expect to see on a Sunday afternoon. Listen to the way this script begins. Open on interior of county jail in small town near Mexican border. Dolly in ~~XXXX~~ on cell where MANUEL HERNANDEZ sits ~~XXXX~~ playing his guitar. Cell is stark and

^{cleavage + twitching buttocks}

^{"Blood and guts. Controversy. Toilet bowls."}

"Blood and guts. Controversy. Toilet bowls. Stuff people never expect to see on a Sunday afternoon. Low-budget experimental stuff pleased to be vegetable kingdom but with enough ~~enough~~ to reach the ~~as well~~ as well."

Figure 3: Draft revision page for *Americana*.

An example of chaotic, grotesque content in the margins: Handwritten additions include 'cleavage + twitching buttocks', 'Blood and guts', and 'Toilet bowls'.

Don DeLillo Papers, container 3.3, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

is bound by its own ~~body~~ arms
and legs

and
seats were hard. Everything was painted black or grey. The ceiling
low and parallel to the floor.

was ~~no more than a dark night~~

Nevertheless I yawned.

The ~~teacher's~~ ^{teacher's} eternal ~~message~~ message was sleep. Almost all of what
it reproduced of the world ~~was~~ remained offstage. What was left

were ~~words~~ the mouths of ~~actors~~ ^{players}, words locked in death, gestures

~~disappeared by~~ disappearing in the stale breath of firstnight, entire ~~philosophical~~
philosophical systems vanishing in the open ~~mouths~~ ^{mouth} of the balcony.
There was no image ~~in which to dwell~~ in which to dwell. The real body
~~walks and sits~~ and there was no flickering immortality flowing
out of the lights.

~~It was~~ no wonder Burt Lancaster stayed away from Broadway.
It's

Confronted by nothing more than the alphabet, which was no longer
enough, we ~~unloosened~~ ^{would unloosen} our ties and ~~went~~ ^{so} to sleep.

Everything that happened
on the stage, which was
almost nothing,

It was a place
which ~~was designed~~
to ~~arouse and challenge~~
to arouse and challenge
the audience; we were
there to be
fueled by
men with
sweaty armpits.

drinks of the
faces in the
~~back~~ balcony.

Figure 4: Draft revision page for *Americana*.

Line ten of the typed text reads 'The real body ~~walks and sits~~'. Handwritten edits include 'men with sweaty armpits' at the bottom of the page.

Don DeLillo Papers, container 3.1, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

Chapter Four: ‘massive inner shiftings’: Embodied knowledge and bodily functions in *Underworld*

DeLillo's attention to bodies can be understood on a continuum: we see an attention to the borders of the body and the matter that passes in and out; elsewhere the body becomes wholly indistinct from its environment. With DeLillo's engagement with trauma in *Falling Man* we see the body break down into indistinct 'body slop', and the performance artist struggles to resituate the cultural wound of 9/11 at the site of the body, to make it legible (2007, p. 244). Elsewhere, the protagonists of *Mao II* (1991) and *The Body Artist* (2001) turn to embodied sensation, which is vital to their own reckonings with selfhood and suffering. In *Americana* (1971), unspeakable sexual desire and the nation's grotesque foundation of violence are expressed through transgressive bodily fluids. To varying degrees, the borders of these bodies break down, and characters variously attempt to police and maintain these borders. We have seen that Kristeva's work on abjection has been very useful to understanding this dynamic. However, taken together, the encounters in DeLillo's novels conjure a more ambiguous relation between body and world—and significantly, between the subject and their bodily wastes—than Kristeva's model, which regards those wastes as signifiers of abjection and death. In *Underworld* (1997) in particular, as we will see, bodily wastes play a compelling and strangely positive role. A diverse picture begins to emerge, in which characters relate to their bodies in various ways. At times, characters are subjected to uncontrollable exchanges between body and world, try as they might to shore their bodies up and maintain them as whole, self-contained, and safe from contamination (we will see a striking example of this in the character of J. Edgar Hoover). Elsewhere, complicating this idea, encounters with bodily matter and exchanges between body and world are undertaken willingly and experienced positively. In *Underworld*, we will see DeLillo's writing of bodily 'stuff' at its most explicitly weird, and see an alternative to the portrayal of waste as distasteful, abject matter that must be quickly processed and cast out from experience. In *Underworld*, social and cultural developments that impact the mood of the nation, particularly

the concerns of the Cold War, are present in the bodies in the text, in a more complex way than the body as metaphor or metonym for the nation or the body politic. As we will see, broad cultural concerns are expressed at the site of the body, and specifically located in the acts of consuming food and drink and excreting wastes. There is a strange and fascinating interaction between body and world, as the ideological dread of the Cold War era is manifest in bodily symptoms.

What makes DeLillo's portrayals of wastes in *Underworld* so unusual is that they seem to be joyfully included in the schema of individual and national identity. In *Americana* (1971/1990) DeLillo wrote about how, to produce a sanitised version of the culture, grotesque elements must be concealed. In that novel, distasteful bodily wastes appear as an undercurrent that bursts through into the text. While bodily wastes carry a vital, urgent energy, they are excised from experience, as we see when a television executive longs to push the boundaries of the medium, 'to see somebody on TV take a tremendous steaming piss [...] [to] get that sound on the airwaves' (p. 66). By contrast, in *Underworld's* prologue bodily fluids, specifically urine, spit, and vomit, are foregrounded and expressed in celebratory terms. Compelling depictions of bodily wastes assert the unavoidable primacy of matter to lived experience. Rather than body wastes representing 'nullity [...] final matter voided'—as we see in *End Zone*—in *Underworld* identity is expressed in and through this matter, and it forms part of the texture of the game, and DeLillo's expression of the event's communal feeling and historical importance (1972, p. 85)¹⁰⁷.

Both in the dense and evocative prologue, and throughout the rest of the novel, the body and its functions variously and compellingly channel their cultural contexts. In *Underworld* (1997), material excess and bodily 'stuff' is front and centre¹⁰⁸. The prologue details a momentous historical moment, the onset of the Cold War, and the reader is immersed in the rich texture of a baseball game, party to all the embodied elements that are

¹⁰⁷ In *End Zone* Gary, a philosopher misfit among football players, ruminates on a new, unprecedented kind of mass death heralded by the invention of the Bomb, and has an archetypal encounter with abjection when he comes upon 'excrement, a low mound of it' in the desert (p. 85).

¹⁰⁸ At times DeLillo refers to the body's emissions vaguely; in *Cosmopolis* Eric Packer refers to 'the stuff he sneezes when he sneezes' (2003, p. 207).

missing from the radio commentary, details that 'live in the spaces of the play-by-play': 'drag coefficients', 'trailing vortices', 'muscle memory and pumping blood and jots of dust' (p. 27), 'All the fragments of the afternoon [...] Shouts, bat-cracks, full bladders and stray yawns, the sand-grain manyness of things that can't be counted (p. 60)'¹⁰⁹. There is a proliferation of detail and a wealth of sensations: a player feels the 'flair of pulled tendons', two people in the crowd separately have heart attacks (pp. 37-38)¹¹⁰. The radio commentator Russ Hodges lights a cigarette, despite feeling 'an overworked larynx and the makings of a major cold' (p. 15). The overwhelming, heightened atmosphere of the event and the mass stress and excitement of the crowd is invoked through these references to bodies pushed to their limits. Hodges feels that the events of the day, 'The surge sensation [...] that bolt of noise and joy when the ball went in' will become body memory: Fans will tell the story of that day to their grandchildren when they are 'gassy old men [...] with medicine breath' (p. 60). The immediacy and primacy of these physical details is reinforced by the singular status of the event: it takes place in a pre-televised era, and radio broadcasts of games were not routinely recorded. Hodges similarly invokes an embodied register when he declares that 'This is the people's history and it has flesh and breath', 'This is the thing that will pulse in his brain come old age and double vision and dizzy spells' (p. 60)¹¹¹. As we will see, the specific concerns and timbre of the culture are contained in, and expressed through, bodies. Importantly, DeLillo's linking of the individual to the collective suggests that it is ultimately impossible to conceive of 'grand themes' untethered from embodied experience. This sense of an inevitable return to the body is present across DeLillo's fictional excursions into American life. In two notable examples from his later work, Eric Packer realises that his subjectivity cannot be assimilated into the abstract register of the stock market: his unique experiences of pain

¹⁰⁹ Katrina Harack insightfully reads material concerns across several of DeLillo's novels, exploring the ways that memory is 'embedded and embodied' in the texts (2013).

¹¹⁰ DeLillo himself, upon re-reading *Underworld* in 2010, marvels at 'the range and scope of it' and 'the exuberance, the extravagance, I don't know, the overindulgence' (DeLillo, interviewed by Ed Caesar, 2010, n.p.).

¹¹¹ In *Underworld*'s prologue body 'stuff' is at its most centered and explicitly weird. In *Mao II* (1991) and *Players* (1977), as discussed elsewhere, monstrous bodies are framed within the containing context of fantasy. By contrast, in *Underworld* (1997) these concerns are immediate and unmediated.

and discomfort such as his 'strangely achy knee' are 'not translatable to some high sublime, technology of mind-without-end' (*Cosmopolis*, 2003 p. 208). Meanwhile in *Point Omega* (2010), the attempt of two men to conceive of 'the end of human consciousness' is made suddenly unimportant, as one learns that his daughter is missing, perhaps murdered. Here, in the face of deeply personal suffering, speculating on the apocalypse becomes 'so much dead echo', and 'all the man's grand themes [are] funneled down to local grief', 'the point of a knife as it enters a body' (p. 124). In these examples, musings on posthuman possibility and apocalypse are interrupted and undermined by unavoidably material bodies.

Underworld's prologue

In the novel's prologue, DeLillo fictionalises a real world event that he chose for its dual significance. As has been well documented, he was prompted by the *New York Times* issue of October 4, 1951, which had the twinned headlines, 'Giants Capture Pennant' and 'Soviet's Second Atom Blast in Two Years Revealed by U.S.'. The newspaper gives equal billing to a baseball game in which the New York Giants win the World Series, and the detonating of an atomic bomb at a test site in Russia which escalated the nuclear conflict, leading to the onset of the Cold War. In addition to the spatial juxtaposition that sparked DeLillo's interest in the events—headlines sharing the space on the newspaper's front page—Rachel Kushner notes that they have a dual material core: the baseball and the radioactive core of a nuclear reactor, objects of roughly the same size (*Guardian*, 2015, n.p.). DeLillo characterises the baseball game as an event of communal being and innocence, the nation on the brink of a new era of fear and uncertainty. The drama of the game culminates with the 'Shot Heard Round The World' as Bobby Thompson hits a home run, winning the season for the Giants, and the event passes into legend in the following decades as detailed in the novel (1997, p. 95; p. 669). There is a sense of excess, revelry, and carnival in the bustling atmosphere of the afternoon. The climactic moments of the game and the ensuing celebration, from the point of view of the radio commentator Russ

Hodges, typifies the surging, communal energy of the crowd and the emphasis on sensation in the scene:

Russ feels the crowd around him, a shudder passing through the stands, and then he is shouting into the mike and there is a surge of color and motion, a crash that occurs upward, stadium-wide, hands and faces and shirts, bands of rippling men, and he is outright shouting, his voice has a power he'd thought long gone—it may lift the top of his head like a cartoon rocket. He says, "*The Giants win the pennant*". (p. 42, original emphasis)

A group of celebrities attend the game, including Frank Sinatra, director of the FBI J. Edgar Hoover, and the comedian Jackie Gleason. While the men chat to each other and to fans, Jackie Gleason eats and drinks to excess, and the final moments of the game are accompanied by a gleefully odd description of the man vomiting. The scene is filled with material intensity, from when Jackie first 'takes a breathless bite of his hot dog and begins to cough and choke' (p. 18). This sense of uncontrollable energy felt in the body is sustained throughout the scene. When fans celebrate the Giants' victory, there are 'People with their hands in the air, holding in their brains' (p. 46). Russ Hodges, amidst the 'swelling bedlam' 'can't stop shouting, there's nothing left of him but shout [...] The thing comes jumping right out of him, a jubilation' (p. 43). As Bobby Thompson celebrates, 'his breath comes so fast he doesn't know if he can handle all the air that's pouring in' (p. 44)¹¹². Significantly, even the stadium toilets are characterised as a site of celebratory participation in a historical moment: 'The old ballpark's reek and mold are consolidated here, generational tides of beer and shit and cigarettes and peanut shells and disinfectants and pisses in the untold millions' (p. 21). Here the act of urinating into a communal 'trough' is imbued with a sense of community and historical weight. Spectatorship is portrayed as a meaningful tradition, passed down through generations and contained in the mass of waste generated by the fans. Meanwhile, the narrator celebrates a player spitting on the ground, declaring 'This is the freest thing he does, spitting in public. His saliva bunches and wobbles when it hits the dirt, going sandy brown' (p.

¹¹² DeLillo discusses the place of the novel within literary movements in similarly visceral terms. Explaining that he does not consider *Underworld* to be a postmodern novel, he states 'Maybe it's the last modernist gasp' (DeLillo, cited in Williams, *Guardian*, 2019, n.p.).

25). Here, acts that are conventionally relegated to a personal and private realm are made communally significant, specifically in the context of male sport. We see this elsewhere in the context of American football in DeLillo's earlier novel *End Zone* (1972). Similarly, bodily functions bring about a positive sense of camaraderie: the football players hold a pissing contest, and throwing up from nerves before a game is taken as a mark of commitment to the team (p. 95). In *End Zone*, bodies are parsed into height, weight, and speed. The mass of the players' bodies is of tantamount importance: weighing 300 pounds carries a 'devout vulgarity' and is regarded as a source of spiritual awe (1972, p. 47). The players construct a system that includes and repurposes pissing and vomiting, assigning value to these acts as signs of communal belonging. This sense that the body and its functions can be wholly contained protects against the dangers beyond, but bodily functions are ultimately a source of horror when Gary encounters a mound of shit, at once excessively signifying and representing death/annihilation, a 'whisper of inexistence' (p. 85). The sense of safety in containment—in this case within the rules and limits of the game, and social mores regarding body functions—is once again revealed to be illusory. The idea of a body image in which everything is included and nothing is abjected is revealed to be impossible. Gary is confronted by 'something that terrified me [...] excrement, a low mound of it', 'shit' which signifies 'nullity in the very word' (p. 85). In *Underworld*, the artist Klara Sax reflects on the struggle to comprehend the atomic bomb.

The poets wrote long poems with dirty words and that's about as close as we came, actually, to a thoughtful response. [...] They didn't even know what to call the early bomb. The thing or the gadget or something. And Oppenheimer said, It is merde. [...] He meant something that eludes naming is automatically relegated [...] to the status of shit. You can't name it. It's too big or evil or outside your experience.
(1997, pp. 76-77)

This difficulty is enacted as Klara speaks with a 'wobble in her voice' (p. 77). Here the atomic bomb is associated with obscenity and shit, as a marker of that which is desolate, beyond language. For Kristeva, bodily wastes signify death, the unthinkable realm, as she asks 'how

can I be without border?’ (1982, p. 4). DeLillo’s characters variously work to process the excremental remainder, shit that returns from the ‘chaotic netherworld’ to which it is consigned, and which ‘threatens to engulf us’ (Žižek, in Fiennes, 2006, n.p.). The development of the atom bomb, a tool of unprecedented mass death, can only be understood in these terms, as belonging to the realm of the incomprehensible, the unnameable. Here language fails in the face of the unrepresentable, and the closest we can get to it is to gesture to it through ‘shit’, the material manifestation of abjection in our world. Elsewhere in *End Zone*, a player tries to spit on the ground but the saliva lands on his leg and ‘hung there, glistening, full of exuberant bubbles (1972, p. 51). As with attendees urinating into a communal ‘trough’ (p. 21), these public acts are gendered. Marvin Lundy gives voice to this idea, that freely expressing bodily fluids is a male domain, later in the novel. He feels the need to believe that his wife must be protected from the smell of his shit, so that he can continue to see her as ‘pink and innocent’ (p. 315). This process of exclusion can also be seen in the racist and sexist joke about Speedy Gonzales that an engineer tells in the commentary box. Klara Sax describes the image of Long Tall Sally painted on the nose of a plane, a ‘charm against death’: she imagines that the men who flew the bombers inhabited a world of ‘high alert and distant early warning [...] the edge of everything’, and, through the painted woman, they reinforce their sense of safety within a containing ideological structure: ‘they lived in a closed world with its particular omens and symbols and they were young and horny to boot’ (p. 77).

In contrast to the figuration of abject ‘body slop’ that we encounter later in *Falling Man*, in *Underworld* there is a sense of joyful, willing immersion in a materially “sloppy” environment. In *Underworld*’s prologue, details invoke a sense of the body as biological, vulnerable, and volatile. In the stands, Frank Sinatra sees ‘slick pages’ torn from *Life* magazine floating down through the crowd, including advertisements for ‘laxatives and antacids, sanitary napkins and corn plasters and dandruff removers’ (p. 44). These products invoke a catalogue of ailments, in addition to the economical yet evocative descriptions of characters’ pain such as Hodges’ ‘overworked larynx’ and a fan feeling a tightness in his

chest, the beginnings of a heart attack (p. 15; p. 38). Seemingly incidental details, such as a baseball player spitting on the ground or feeling the strain of a pulled muscle are not overlooked in favour of engaging with the day as a significant historical moment. Rather, the momentous day is made up of a wealth of these very experiences, as, elsewhere in *Mao II* Bill Gray declares that 'dizzy spells' and 'a mass of phlegm wobbling in his throat' make up the 'texture of his life' (1991, p. 135). Among the magazine pages, Sinatra is confronted with 'a full-page ad for something called pasteurized process cheese food [...] a color picture of yellowish pressed pulp melting horribly on a hot dog' (pp. 38-39). This calls to mind depictions of similarly disgusting matter elsewhere: in *Point Omega* (2010) Richard Elster, whose daughter is missing, coughs up a blob of phlegm and regards it 'wobbling' and 'pulsing' in his hand, while his companion tries vainly to conceal it with a handkerchief (pp. 122-123). In *Falling Man* (2007) a man in the early stages of Alzheimer's brings pastries to a meeting, 'large jellied bladders that no one else would touch' (p. 31). In *Underworld* (1997), the people in the stadium do not turn away from this matter in disgust: the hot dogs that the fans eat are equally unpleasant. At the hot dog stand a 'line of mostly men' stand, 'jaws working at the sweaty meat and grease bubbles flurrying on their tongues' (p. 13). Later, Gleason's vomit is likened to the glossy advertisement, Sinatra wryly noting that it is 'liquidly smooth in the lingo of adland' (p. 44). The hot dog, offered up as a desirable product in the glossy pages of a magazine, is already grotesque, and is just as disgusting as after it has been consumed and regurgitated. Distasteful matter is part of the busy texture of the event and fans happily inhabit this space, grease bubbles flying, spit wobbling on the ground. Frank Sinatra notes the packed and unbounded nature of the crowd, in contrast to the 'ritual distances' separating him from his fans to which he is accustomed (p. 24). The lack of fundamental distinction between the nature of the matter that is ingested (the hot dog) and ejected (vomit) is striking: if foodstuffs are already disgusting before they are consumed, then there is no profound difference between what is consumed and what is expelled. Bodily wastes thus lose their power as markers of abjection, as, for example, in *End Zone* shit

terrifies, and carries a 'whisper of inexistence' (1972, p. 85)¹¹³. In *Underworld's* prologue there is an emphasis on flow and liquidity throughout the whole scene, a lack of boundaries communicated through the 'generational tides of beer and shit and cigarettes' (1997, p. 21). To Edgar Hoover 'the rough assurance' of his companions 'seems to flush from their pores' (p. 29). Jackie Gleason vomits not in the privacy of a bathroom but all over his companion Frank Sinatra's shoes. For Sinatra 'that this should happen here, in public, in the high revel of event' prompts 'a puzzled wonder that exceeds his aversion' (p. 46).

As Jackie Gleason eats and drinks to excess, he feels 'a rancid sweat developing, his mouth filled with the foretaste of massive inner shiftings' (p. 39). He senses the 'imminent discharge of animal, vegetable and mineral matter' (p. 42)¹¹⁴. Finally he 'utters an aquatic bark [...] [t]hen the surge of flannel matter. He seems to be vomiting someone's taupe pyjamas' (pp. 39-44). Here the vomit itself is multiplicitous, invoking a range of different imagery. At first likened to flannel pyjamas, Frank Sinatra looks down at the 'spatter across his shoe tops in a strafing pattern and the gumbo puddle nearby that contains a few laggard gobs of pinkoid stuff from deep in Gleason's gastric sac' (p. 46). The naming of the gastric sac suggests a technical, biological aspect to the act, while also suggesting a sci-fi, otherworldly quality to Gleason's body¹¹⁵. Termed as 'gobs' of matter and as 'stuff', the vomit at once prompts multiple comparisons, and defies description. 'Pinkoid' suggests that the matter is a colour similar to pink, but lacking a precise descriptor. This might have been communicated with a more common term like 'pinkish', but 'pinkoid' achieves something else as well: it specifically invokes the pejorative term for a communist sympathizer, "Pinko".

¹¹³ The pool of vomit is figured as 'gumbo puddle': here it resembles a foodstuff once again, which takes the levelling of matter even further, as though it might be re-consumed. DeLillo suggests something similar elsewhere when Billy Twillig considers his own spit with glee, declaring 'there were few things more pleasantly disgusting [...] than watching his own spit hit the dust' (1976, p. 363). The matter is described as a 'tiny spoonful of drool', as though it has been measured out to be ingested. As we have seen, such encounters are expressed both positively and negatively, as in *Mao II* Bill Gray swallows a 'syrupy glop' of his phlegm which he regards as the true 'texture of his life', and in *Americana* David taints a tray of ice with his spit (1991, p. 135; 1971/1990, p. 10).

¹¹⁴ Later Marvin Lundy's bowel movements are similarly depicted as totalising, containing all the matter of the world as 'he grunted on the seat until all the elements issued—earth, air, fire and water' (p. 311).

¹¹⁵ Elsewhere, in *Americana*, David observes a colleague 'put one ample haunch on the corner of my desk, the upper part of his thigh flattening and spreading', which makes him think of 'a science fiction organism pulsating menacingly in some neglected corner of a laboratory' (p. 88).

Meanwhile the 'strafing pattern' invokes a technique of bombing from low-flying aircraft. In these details, the depiction of the vomit channels its broader cultural context. In this lingering and bizarre description, the specific concerns of the historical moment are located at the body's border, in the acts of ingesting and expelling. As we will see, the impending era of nuclear threat is not one of messy and overwhelming material violence, as in the spectacle Edgar Hoover regards on a page from *Life* magazine featuring Pieter Bruegel's painting 'The Triumph of Death', after which the Prologue is named, a macabre scene of apocalypse featuring 'a gaunt dog nibbling the baby in the dead woman's arms [...] boneyard hounds beset by parasitic mites, by dog tumors and dog cancers [...] 'meatblood colors and massed bodies [...] a census-taking of awful ways to die' (p. 50). Rather, the Cold War will be experienced in insidious and ideological terms, as a constant and overwhelming threat of annihilation. For America's citizens, this threat is all-encompassing but ultimately unrealised, as 'the bombs were not released [...] The missiles remained in the underwing carriages, unfired. The men came back and the targets were not destroyed', and the conflict ended not with a climax but a 'winding down' (p. 76; p. 170)

Gleason vomiting coincides with the crucial moment of the game in which Bobby Thompson hits a home run, winning the World Series for the Giants. J. Edgar Hoover alone is aware of the day's historical significance: on the eve of the Cold War, he regards the fans as 'sitting in the furrow of destruction' (p. 28). He is also alone in his disgusted response to Gleason's vomit. When Gleason sprays fragments of hot dog from his mouth, 'sending quidbits of meat and bread in many directions, pellets and smithereens, spitball flybys' (p. 18), Hoover is 'dismayed' by 'the unseeable life-forms' and 'he faces away from Gleason and holds his breath. He wants to hurry to a lavatory, a zinc-lined room with a bar of untouched oval soap, a torrent of hot water and a swansdown towel that has never been used by anyone else'¹¹⁶. Among the masses of people Hoover's germ phobia is pronounced: he

¹¹⁶ Similarly, the toilet in J. Edgar Hoover's home is 'raised on a platform, to isolate him from floorbound forms of life' (p. 560). Fear of contamination becomes urgently prescient when, in later passages in the novel, DeLillo details the nun Sister Edgar visiting disadvantaged people during the AIDS crisis. While rooted in a very real threat, Sister Edgar's cleaning becomes obsessive and ritualised. Edgar's association with strict boundaries continues throughout the novel in a number of

imagines himself being subjected to 'an all-pervading medium of pathogens, microbes, floating colonies of spirochets that fuse and separate and elongate and spiral and engulf, whole trainloads of matter that people cough forth, rudimentary and deadly' (pp. 18-19). *Underworld's* prologue oozes with excessive, flowing, liquid imagery, and here body wastes express the concerns of a specific historical moment. Elsewhere, DeLillo similarly invokes a type of matter that is viscous, neither solid nor liquid, unpleasant, sticky and amorphous. In *Mao II* he refers to phlegm as 'glop' (1991, p. 135), and in his short story 'In the Men's Room of the Sixteenth Century' he refers to being 'knee deep in the gick of the ages', perhaps using the term 'gick' in the knowledge of its use as an Irish slang term for excrement (1971a)¹¹⁷. In *Underworld's* prologue, within the overflowing carnival, J. Edgar Hoover's fears anticipate a new era of boundaries and fear of contamination, a national identity that is bounded and oppositional: 'Us' and 'Them'. Rejecting the communality of the crowd and longing for privacy, Edgar Hoover's desires mimic the divisions of the impending Cold War era, a shift from innocence to experience.

The Cold War: Boundaries/contamination

In a defining characteristic of the Cold War era, the nation's identity is defined in opposition to the other. The strongly bounded distinction of 'Us and Them' is reflected in DeLillo's depiction of the Demings, who typify the nuclear family, who are portrayed with a humorously exaggerated attention to boundaries. The Demings resemble 'a full-colour product brochure with a bomb-shaped shadow darkening its pages' (Rachel Kushner, *Guardian*, 2015, n.p.).

The Cold War conflict contaminates every aspect of domestic life: the mother Erica

interesting ways: he is thematically paired with the nun Sister Edgar, who wears rubber gloves when visiting homeless people during the AIDS crisis, and obsessively cleans her tools (the scourer, the bleach bottle) as well as her own body. His closeted homosexuality has a limited, controlled outlet in a secret sculpture garden of male nudes.

¹¹⁷ With the overwhelming materiality of *Underworld's* prologue, DeLillo strives to reanimate a historical moment and immerse the reader in it, figuring it as viscous matter. He similarly invokes body wastes as a 'sick syrupy glop' (1991, p. 135), subjectivity as 'self in the soft wallow of what it knows' (2010, p. 79), and history as 'the gick of the ages', in which we might immerse ourselves 'knee deep' (1971a, n.p.). Kristeva describes abjection in terms of 'the repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck' (1982, p. 2), but DeLillo suggests an alternative, as matter represents our 'true biography' (DeLillo, 1991, p. 135).

constructs elaborate desserts made from consecutive layers of jelly. While in the prologue we saw vomit 'splashing freely', here Erica transforms liquid jelly into something formally elaborate and regimented in structure, a series of surfaces: she uses a number of jelly moulds to achieve different shapes, and creates a dessert with successive, geometric layers by carefully balancing the jelly at an angle in the refrigerator to set and then repeating the process. The teenage son Eric has developed a specific private ritual: concealed behind closed fibreglass curtains he masturbates to a photograph of Jayne Mansfield. Eric fixates on layers of artifice; the glossy products covering the woman's face, the surface of the photograph itself. The subject of the photograph is herself defined as an imitation, 'fake Marilyn' (DeLillo, 1997, p. 474). The way that Eric pleasures himself is similarly mediated: his grim ritual involves masturbating into a condom and then washing it to be used again¹¹⁸. Boundaries and shiny surfaces are key to Erica and Eric's elaborate undertakings, which suggest that these rituals are closed and self-contained. However, the condom reminds Eric, 'with its metallic sheen, of a surface-to-surface missile with a 40-kiloton warhead'¹¹⁹. Jayne Mansfield's breasts remind him of the 'bumper bullets' on the family Cadillac. Meanwhile, Erica feels a vague unease about a particular jelly mould which, she realises, seems to resemble Sputnik (p. 517). As sex, consumerism, and conflict are bound together through these interconnecting images, the domestic sphere is contaminated by the political sphere, which the family vainly struggle against by attending to boundaries and surfaces. The nuclear family and the character of J. Edgar Hoover are written with an overwhelming emphasis on surface and containment: Erica hopes that by casting out the offending jelly mould from the home she might erase her knowledge of the Soviet threat in the sky. As we have seen, Hoover, carrying the knowledge of the imminent conflict, 'longs for an untouched bathroom' (p. 46).

¹¹⁸ Elsewhere penetrative sex is linked to war. Condoms are described as 'Technology they wanted to wrap around my dick', made of 'mass-produced latex they used to paint battleships (p. 110). Marvin was 'a quartermaster handing out condoms for D-day that the troops fixed to the muzzles of their rifles to keep out sand and water' (p. 314).

¹¹⁹ Indeed, Eric later becomes a 'bombhead' and Matt Shay's coworker (p. 411).

As we see throughout DeLillo's work, there is no such thing as an untroubled or uncontested boundary, and safe containing structures are always illusory. We see an enigmatic troubling of borders elsewhere in the novel. In a later time period, we see the ways in which poverty breaks down physical boundaries of the home and associated ideas of privacy, and the boundaries of the body, in the occupants of 'the inner ghetto, a slice of the South Bronx' referred to as 'the Wall': here a supposed boundary becomes a liminal space. Poverty and disenfranchisement are expressed through the inhabitants' variously ailing bodies. The Catholic nun Sister Edgar visits 'Two blind women who lived together and shared a seeing-eye dog', and 'a prostitute whose silicone breasts had leaked, ruptured and finally exploded one day, sending a polymer whiplash across the face of the man on top of her' (p. 246). Towards the end of the novel the nuns learn that Esmerelda, a vulnerable young girl 'who forages in empty lots for discarded clothes, plucks spoiled fruit from garbage bags behind bodegas' has been raped and murdered (p. 810). The murderer himself (as he transgresses a boundary of human behaviour) 'drifts in and out of the wall' (p. 817). In the midst of the AIDS crisis, Sister Edgar tries to guard against this suffering, maintaining her own boundaries through obsessive cleaning. Elsewhere in *Underworld* we see the effects of radiation upon the body, the nuclear threat finally manifest. In a story that passes into legend among soldiers in Vietnam, 'the Ballad of Louis Bakey', a B-52 flies over a test site in Nevada while a nuclear bomb is detonated below to test the effects of the radiation on the crew. The bodies of the men are transformed by the flash, as a crew member reports:

[T]he world lights up. A glow enters the body [...] Louis can see the bones in his hands through his closed eyes [...] I move my head, there's whole skeletons dancing in the flash. The navigator, the instructor-navigator, the sad-ass gunner. We are dead men flying [...] skeleton men with knee bone connected to the thigh bone, I hear the word of the Lord. (pp. 613-614)

Illuminated by the flash, Louis sees through his eyelids and his flesh to the bones of his hand. Measures taken to protect the crew are ridiculous: the windows of the plane are shielded by curtain pads covered with 'Reynolds Wrap', calling back to Erica's kitchen and

her jelly moulds¹²⁰. The men hold pillows over their eyes, 'Little nylon pillows that smell [...] intriguingly like a woman's underthings', which links to the talismanic painting of the pinup Long Tall Sally on the nose of a bomber (p. 613; p. 78). In these objects the idea of a protective boundary is undermined with hubris. As his body image is undone, the speaker is reminded of a spiritual song that lists, in turn, how the body's component parts fit together¹²¹. In the novel's final passage the narrator wonders at the impact of the Bomb, emphasising the childlike associations of the song, referring to 'Whole populations potentially skelly-boned in the massive flash' (p. 826). The crew member recalls the lyrics 'knee bone connected to the thigh bone', and after viewing 'the mushroom cloud [...] boiling and talking and crackling like some almighty piss-all vision [...] so big and wide and high above us [...] popping and heaving like nothing on this earth', returns helplessly to the next line: 'Thigh bone connected to the hip bone' (p. 614). The song 'Dem Bones' concerns the prophecy of resurrection told by Ezekiel, in which bodies will be reassembled and God will bring them back to life. The image of skeletons dancing, illuminated by the nuclear blast, is not an image of rebirth but of undoing, as Louis recounts the lasting effects of the nuclear test: 'In a few years I lost my handwriting skills. Can't write my name without wobbles and skips. I pee in slow motion now. And my left eye sees things that belong to my right' (p. 614). Here the body and its relation to the world begins to break down¹²². Here, an act which many of DeLillo's characters uphold as an affirmation of selfhood, the act of signing one's name, begins to become illegible. Similarly, the act of urinating, which in the prologue was a manifestation of group belonging,

¹²⁰ We have seen a similar emphasis on containment in *Americana*: David, describing the politics of his workplace, explains that it is dangerous for junior members of the team to express new ideas 'unless you wrap them in a plastic bag' (1971/1990, p. 36). Meanwhile, the womb-like 'cocoon' of Sullivan's art studio is insulated with a 'membranous chemical material' (p. 108).

¹²¹ As discussed in my chapter on *Americana*, *Underworld's* bulk is sustained by an unusually visible structure. The closed book is not a uniform stack of pages, 'their differences hidden from the eye' (1971/1990, p. 346). Rather its 'skeleton'—the black pages marking out the sections—is apparent without opening the book. These divisions imply an organised, methodical quality to the text, and while the narrative jumps across decades are clearly demarcated by the section breaks, emphasising a break or a division for the reader (asking us to pause and catch our breath), these boundaries are constantly transgressed by interconnecting themes, which together form the 'neural labyrinth' of the text (1997, p. 51).

¹²² We see elsewhere that, for DeLillo's characters, acts such as writing autographs and signing cheques are satisfying confirmations of identity: for Lyle in *Players* they are 'an accumulation of self', as we will see in my analysis in Chapter Five (1997, p. 75).

is transformed into something uncanny. In Bruegel's vision of the Black Death, you can see the skeletons carrying out various creative atrocities upon the bodies of their victims. In the B-52 bomber the dancing skeletons belong to the crew themselves, and the impact of the blast is realised as a delayed and gradual process of dis-location.

In another kind of troubling of boundaries, the impact of the atomic bomb is insidious and prolonged, extending beyond immediate casualties and manifest in the bodies of future generations. In the novel's epilogue, the novel's main protagonist Nick Shay visits patients who are suffering the effects of radiation, near a former Soviet testing site in Kazakhstan. He lists the people that he encounters: 'The boy with skin where his eyes ought to be, a bolus of spongy flesh, oddly like a mushroom cap, springing from each brow', 'the man with the growth beneath his chin, a thing with a life of its own, embryonic and pulsing', 'the woman with features intact but only half a face somehow, everything fitted into a tilted arc that floats above the shoulders like the crescent moon' (p. 800). The impact of nuclear warfare is embodied in these strange and otherworldly disfigurements, and the bodies of the victims also represent an ideological kind of disfigurement, as, with technological advances in warfare, the relationship between perpetrator and victim of violence becomes increasingly abstracted and indirect. Nick is associated with waste throughout the novel. Through his work in 'Waste Containment', he considers how society's waste products, as well as the toxic legacy of nuclear waste, might be managed and processed. Confronted with a catalogue of deformities, the terms 'waste containment' and 'waste management' are undermined. The bodies of the victims of nuclear radiation serve as a reminder, or an unassimilable remainder, and the idea that the material effects of nuclear conflict can ever be meaningfully managed, contained, or processed, is revealed as fantasy. Here the impact of the Bomb extends beyond the bounds of the explosion itself, as radioactive material remains in the upper atmosphere as residual "fallout". The 2010 documentary *Into Eternity* grapples with the problem of storing nuclear waste, and wonders how we might communicate a warning to people far in the future that the site is dangerous and not to be investigated. Nuclear waste remains dangerously radioactive for so long that it is anticipated to remain so long after our

current language ceases to be recognisable. Any symbol that tries to communicate a warning may well have the opposite effect, of drawing attention to the location as containing something of value. As such, this matter exceeds and exists outside our experience, as it transcends all existing frameworks of human thought.

Reorganising/repurposing waste

In *Underworld*, the processing of society's waste is not othered but features as one of the many underworlds of the novel, an 'underhistory' (p. 791). J. Edgar Hoover fantasises about an environment in which he is completely safe from contamination. But as we see throughout the rest of the novel, waste is such a central facet of civilisation that it can never fully be cast out and forgotten. Through Nick Shay, the novel's main protagonist, we see household waste conceived at both an individual and collective scale, as he visits waste processing plants and landfills for his job in 'waste containment', and pays meticulous attention to recycling in his home. He regards products and packaging as material for recycling, even when they are new and unopened on supermarket shelves (p. 102). This idea of consumer product and waste product as interchangeable suggests a system in which waste is never really waste, as packaging diligently recycled by the consumer feeds back into the cycle and is repurposed once again into an object of value. This idyllic sense quickly falls apart as we are confronted with the excess of societal waste matter, which it is Nick's job to wrangle. The comfort Nick derives from separating and collecting his household waste amounts to a superstitious ritual in the face of the processing plants that he visits: he is confronted with 'stupendous amounts of garbage' (p. 288)¹²³. Nick encounters a man named Jesse Detwiler, a self-proclaimed 'waste theorist', who asserts that

Civilization did not rise and flourish as men hammered out hunting scenes on bronze gates and whispered philosophy under the stars, with garbage as a noisome offshoot, swept away and forgotten. No, garbage rose first, inciting

¹²³ Elsewhere identity is linked to intimate possessions. In an airport, Nick wonders at the 'microhistory of toilet articles and intimate garments, the medicines and aspirins and lotions and powders and gels, so incredibly many people intersecting on some hot dry day at the edge of the desert, used underwear fist-balled in their bags' (p. 105).

people to build a civilization in response, in self-defence. We had to find ways to discard our waste, to use what we couldn't discard, to reprocess what we couldn't use. Garbage pushed back. It mounted and spread. And it forced us to develop the logic and rigor that would lead to systematic investigations of reality, to science, art, music, mathematics. (p. 287)

Far from Nick's vision of waste as safely containable, here Detwiler asserts that waste has a foundational material presence, and that all of civilisation is built upon and in response to it. The paradox of waste as underpinning civilisation and signifying oblivion is articulated elsewhere in *End Zone*, as for Gary 'excrement' represents both 'void', and a wealth of human activity: 'wise men sitting impassively in shit, armies retreating in that stench [...] holy men praying to shit, scientists tasting it (1972, p. 85). In *Underworld*, through the character of Detwiler, household waste is portrayed as a marker of identity: the man was 'a fringe figure in the sixties, a garbage guerilla who stole and analyzed the household trash of a number of famous people' (1997, p. 286)¹²⁴. Here matter that is cast out—household waste—is still connected to the person that rejects it, as in the prologue discarded scraps of paper carry a 'selfness', a 'shadow identity' (pp. 44-45). Detwiler is eventually 'arrested for snatching the garbage of J. Edgar Hoover from the rear of the Director's house' (pp. 286-287). Speaking to Nick decades later, the once transgressive figure cites his role in the academy to lend credence to his theory concerning the primacy of waste: 'I believe it. I teach it at UCLA' (p. 287). Here waste is assigned value as a subject of academic inquiry.

Nick is similarly invested in the primacy of waste, one of 'the Church Fathers of waste in all its transmutations' (p. 102). Nick imagines that there will be a future tourism of toxic waste, a dangerous by-product transformed into an attraction complete with 'bus trips and postcards' (p. 286), and that eventually, uncovered by archaeologists, the waste processing plant will be understood as being of equal importance to the city. Dominique Laporte, in his idiosyncratic philosophical treatise *History of Shit* (1978) similarly argues that society is built around our response to waste, and is fundamentally shaped by it: 'the

¹²⁴ Elsewhere in the novel Marvin and Eleanor, exploring San Francisco late at night, find a district with strange shops. One shop sells autopsy photos and movie stars' garbage, 'the actual stuff deep-frozen in a warehouse' (p. 319). Here the detail of celebrities' garbage preserved in freezers calls back to Jesse Detwiler, who was arrested for stealing J. Edgar Hoover's rubbish.

management of human waste is crucial to our identities as modern individuals—including the organization of the city, the rise of the nation-state, the development of capitalism, and the mandate for clean and proper language’ (MIT Press, 2021, n.p.). Laporte usefully connects material aspects of social life (the development of sewers, legislation that dictates citizens dispose of their chamber pots beyond the city limits) to ideological beliefs (social processes of othering, abjecting, and casting-out).

Household waste and nuclear waste, then, are accorded a central role in DeLillo’s characterisation of American culture. Far from Nick’s utopian vision of a perfect system of recycling, in which waste is neatly recirculated, waste matter takes on massive size and stature: ‘pyramids of waste’, ‘refuse heaped many stories high’ (p. 104). Visiting a landfill, Nick is confronted with ‘A scene that is medieval-modern, a city of high-rise garbage’. Waste takes on value, not as it is repurposed, as recycled cardboard might be transformed into new packaging, but because it is valuable *as waste*. Critics have responded to this sense of an architecture of waste, and the idea of waste having its own force and agency. In “‘What We Excrete Comes back to Consume Us’: Waste and Reclamation in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*”, (2019) Rachele Dini reads waste in the novel as multifaceted, unstable, and historically resonant, and explores the relationship between waste and value. Waste as one of the many underworlds of the novel has been productively explored by a number of critics. The characters Nick Shay and Klara Sax are concerned with the management of waste. Klara creates a work of art made up of repurposed war planes, ‘transforming and absorbing junk’ (p. 103), and Nick deals with the logistics of processing waste as a waste management consultant. Mary Foltz explores the role of ‘waste as weapon’ and uses the term ‘fecal bombing’ to investigate the relationship between waste and conflict (2020). Ruth Helyer reads the character of Nick and his association with waste as subverting the norms of the masculine hero archetype (1999)¹²⁵. Meanwhile, the novel charts the onset of the Cold War

¹²⁵ Elsewhere, in ‘Taking Out the Trash: Don DeLillo’s “Underworld”, Liquid Modernity, and the End of Garbage’, David H. Evans explores the novel’s ‘social anatomy’ in terms of theoretical frameworks of modernism and postmodernism (2006).

as a shift from innocence to experience through bodily wastes, an aspect of the text which has not yet been explored.

As we have seen in the prologue's attention to 'pisses in their untold millions', bodily wastes, like other societal waste products, are situated within the narrative rather than cast aside as a distasteful, 'noisome offshoot' (p. 287). One strand of the novel concerns the character Marvin Lundy, who obsessively searches for the baseball used in the winning moments of the game and attempts to trace its journey through its successive owners. Marvin has a deeply ambiguous relationship to what he obliquely terms his 'personal output', and in the language of a field doctor, his 'BMs' (p. 312). He recalls a trip that he and his wife Eleanor made as newlyweds in the years following World War Two. Travelling east through Europe towards Russia, 'the smell of his bowel movements 'grew worse, deeper, it acquired a kind of density' (p. 309), and 'the stuff came crashing out of him, noisy and remarkably dark' (p. 310). In Czechoslovakia, 'the toilets flushed so weakly that he has to flush and wait and then flush some more and he opened windows and waved towels, feeling guilty and trapped'. This desperation is twinned with 'something cold and hard in the streets, a breathable tension, many arrests, people on trial' (p. 310). Later 'His BMs grew steamier', and Marvin is 'surprised by the heat in the little room, the steamy aura he'd established there [...] heavy and humid, an air mass of sweltry stench' (p. 310). He realises, as 'the strain of evacuation grew worse', that 'The deeper into communist country, the more foul his BMs' (p. 311). At one point Marvin gets into an argument with a 'dedicated communist' who 'spat little word-flecks of contempt at the U.S.' (p. 311) and that night he makes 'an emergency visit to the hotel toilet, where he unleashed a firewall of chemical waste'. Here, he notes 'The smell that surrounded him was infused [...] with geopolitics, and he waved a towel for five minutes and propped open the window' (p. 312). Finally on the way back to Western Europe towards Switzerland, 'a normal neutral place', 'his system slowly returned to normal, branny BMs, healthful and mild' (p. 313)¹²⁶. The unremarkable experience of an upset stomach while

¹²⁶ This wholesome description carries associations of Christian virtue and purity, of the 'holy infant so tender and mild'.

travelling abroad becomes something much more significant. It seems that, trying to inhabit the space of the Communist other, Marvin's body cannot tolerate the hostile setting. The threat of political difference is manifest in his bowel movements which overwhelm and disrupt his experience, and dominate the narrative of the trip in his memory. He endures a dramatic bodily response to the hostile political and ideological landscape, and rather than being figured as an external threat, these concerns are communicated to the reader through the workings of Marvin's own body. The experience of the newly married couple, in the first stages of navigating a life together, is recounted by Marvin as a desperate attempt to conceal his shameful bodily reality from his new partner. Marvin admits to himself that his attitude to Eleanor is a gendered fantasy, meeting his need to see her as 'pink and innocent even if she's not' (p. 315)¹²⁷. He views her as delicate and naive as he watches her sleep: 'she came from a gentle rural place and could easily perish from his reek' (p. 312)¹²⁸. His actions (opening windows, fanning the air with a newspaper) are rituals intended to preserve the imagined purity of his new wife; that she might be protected from the smell of his shit and the 'geopolitics' that it signifies. While Marvin struggles with this unexpected aspect of cohabitation, bearing 'the other's smell' is described as an aspect of married life that must be tacitly accepted and tolerated. Marvin realises, but is unable to accept that

This was probably a normal part of every early marriage, smelling the other's smell, getting it over and done with so you can move ahead with your lives, have children, buy a little house, remember everybody's birthday, take a drive on the Blue Ridge Parkway, get sick and die. (p. 310)

Here the entirety of a life shared with a partner is condensed into a glib series of events: the first is to come to terms with the smell of shit, the last is to 'get sick and die'. While the activities in between invoke a quaint and idyllic existence, the list ultimately links body wastes to mortality. The conventional markers of a meaningful, successful life as summed up

¹²⁷ It also implies a belief that Eleanor has never smelled another man's shit, and indeed that her own shit doesn't stink.

¹²⁸ Marvin's recollection of his honeymoon is prompted by the smell of a cargo ship docked at a pier, 'a faint sort of stinkhole odor' (p. 306). While his wife reacts by 'clutching up the mouth and nose, beading the eyes against the sight of criminal matter at the source', the smell 'moved him in strange ways, one of those smells that traces back through memory' (p. 309; p. 307).

in the scathing passage—having a family, owning property, diligently celebrating special occasions, taking vacations—only become possible once the couple accept the distasteful reality at the heart of this life: smelling the other's shit¹²⁹. As, for Žižek, 'shit casts its shadow even at the most sublime moments of human experience', this picture of the lives of the typical American family is essentially debased (Žižek, cited in MIT Press, 2021, n.p.). For Marvin and Eleanor shit is not safely beyond the bounds of the home: here the containing structures of domesticity, family, the physical structure of the home, do not ensure safety: the smell is coming from inside the house. The smell of shit returns us to an animalistic sense, as 'According to Freud, the decline of the olfactory sense was an inevitable outgrowth of the civilizing process, set in motion when man adopted an erect posture' (Laporte, x). In *Underworld's* prologue, shit and the sublime are juxtaposed in *Life* magazine, glossy ads alongside a graphic image of beheaded prisoners. Later in the novel Nick looks for a copy of *Time* magazine, to him already figured as recycling, one of the 'magazines that stacked and nagged and finally went to the sidewalk on the designated day' (p. 252). He finds it in the bathroom, and notes that the 'glossy fashion books—every shadow brushed to an anatomical polish, contoured against crumble and waste' are 'Just the thing to browse when your body is squatted and your pants are down' (p. 252).

Conclusion

The new framework of violence brought about through the technology of the Cold War causes the conflict to become invisible and unintelligible. Characters attempt to perceive themselves as 'safe' through acts that take on a superstitious, ritual quality. Condoms and rubber gloves, which guard against very real fears of contamination, are put to bizarre uses. The talismanic painting of Long Tall Sally on the nose of a bomber is an attempt to take on the unthinkable horror of the conflict through the body, 'putting our puny hands to great weapons systems [...] to find an element of felt life, and maybe there's a sort of survival

¹²⁹ In contrast, Edgar Hoover's extreme disgust at bodily wastes reflects his adherence to strict boundaries of behaviour in his life as a closeted homosexual. In his experience, the shared smells that form a part of intimacy cannot and must not be tolerated.

instinct here, a graffiti instinct—to trespass and declare ourselves’ (p. 77). In the prologue, sport and spectatorship are offered up as a safe framework within which bodily wastes might be repurposed as markers of positive feeling rather than abjection. ‘Shit’ as a signifier of abjection is specifically precipitated by the technology of the Bomb. Klara Sax declares that ‘long poems with dirty words’ were ‘about as close as we came [...] to a thoughtful response’ to the technology of mass death, and the Bomb becomes ‘merde’, as ‘something that eludes naming is automatically relegated [...] to the status of shit’ (p. 77)¹³⁰. DeLillo’s characters are immersed in ‘gick’, and reckon with ‘glop’ and ‘stuff’ from within their own bodies (1971a, n.p.; 1991, p. 135; 1997, p. 46). They strive to delineate the world in spatial, material, and relational terms, as the Cold War ideology seeks to differentiate an ‘Us’ from ‘Them’, and one character parses human activity into spatial relations: pilgrims gathered at Mecca become primarily a matter of bodies ‘turning and bending’, and history becomes ‘the angle at which realities meet’ (1972, p. 44). In *Underworld* the nuclear family, with its gleaming car and its shiny appliances, works to shore up the domestic sphere as a safe haven from the world beyond, rather than a key front on which the Cold War is fought (appliances representing ideals of convenience and comfort, an idyllic picture of American life). Erica wrangles formless, liquid jello into elaborate shapes, and Eric chooses to mediate his own touch when he masturbates, carrying a soiled condom to the bathroom to wash and reuse. As we will see in the next chapter, the ‘crisper’ drawer of the refrigerator in particular functions as an emblem of safe containment, holding and preserving, suggesting a sense of immortal produce that never breaks down into crumble and ruin.

Throughout DeLillo’s fiction, we are repeatedly confronted with the unavoidable bodily reality that forms the texture of lived experience. In *Underworld*’s prologue, the exclusionary male fantasy of sport and spectatorship is only the temporary illusion of a perfect system, in which every aspect of material life is included and made meaningful¹³¹.

¹³⁰ The Bomb and the inconceivable destruction it brings merely acts as a manifestation of the connection between shit and oblivion, rather than newly forging this connection.

¹³¹ The willing inclusion of a bizarre ‘tide’ of bodily wastes itself relies on the exclusion of female-coded bodies, as we see in the joke about Speedy Gonzales, which casts a female body as uniquely vulnerable and features the penetration of a male body as a subversion of gendered expectations to

Fans are described as ‘tearing up letters they’ve been carrying around for years pressed into their wallets, the residue of love and college friendships’. This ‘happy garbage’ communicates ‘the fans’ intimate wish to be connected to the event, unendably, in the form of pocket litter, personal waste, a thing that carries a shadow identity—rolls of toilet tissue unbolting lyrically in streamers’ (p. 45). The falling litter is ‘a form of fan commonality’ that has ‘a softness, a selfness’ (p. 44). Here we encounter another kind of matter through which communal feeling is manifest, like the ‘tides of shit’ and ‘pisses’. The celebratory streamers of toilet roll themselves become a text, preserved as memorabilia. Visiting a collector’s shop decades after the game, Marvin wonders at what he might find:

the surging mass of old paper that was going chemically brown [...] scorecards and newspapers [...] All that twilight litter. Maybe some of it was sitting here today, preserved by the stadium sweepers and eventually entering the underground of memory and collection, some kid’s airplaned scorecard, a few leaves of toilet tissue unfurled in jubilation from the upper deck, maybe autographed delicately by a player [...] (p. 321)

The scraps of paper from the baseball stadium are collected and preserved here, even the toilet paper streamers. The idea that a player might have autographed a sheet of toilet paper draws together the connections between shit, value, and narrative¹³². Here once again, waste is not cast out in an ongoing process of othering, but is held onto as an object of value, as with the shop that sells ‘movie stars’ garbage [...] deep-frozen in a warehouse’ (p. 319). Ideas of waste and value are explored through physical structures in the novel. Nick Shay recalls an eccentric building from his youth, a ‘Jazz cathedral’ built of ‘steel rods and broken crockery and pebbles and seashells and soda bottles and wire mesh’. Here repurposed waste becomes a landmark, as with Klara’s sculptures from junk. These constructions prompt us to consider ideas of waste and value. ‘Junk’, repurposed, becomes

form its punchline. This sentiment ripples out through the text, as a character later marvels at hearing the joke told in a foreign language by a Russian soldier.

¹³² Elsewhere shit is similarly linked to identity and to the text. For Bill Gray in *Mao II*, DeLillo pairs the two kinds of “expression”, bodily wastes and the ‘spray of ideas’, the ‘shitpile of hopeless prose’ (1991, p. 159). In *Underworld*, Marvin Lundy recalls toilets in Europe, ‘the public toilets in rail-road stations, a stranger in the next stall with his own autobiography of foreign foods and personal smells’ (p. 309). Elsewhere Nick Shay asserts that ‘every bad smell is about us’, ‘something we’ve been carrying all our lives’ (p. 104).

an object of interest. There are parallels to the archive itself, as in the Harry Ransom Center, DeLillo's "discards" are brought back into the sphere of "worthy" material and accorded value as an object of study. Details that DeLillo left out of his published works take on importance, and this waste material is valuable to the researcher, representing a rare, exclusive insight. The poet whose work we looked at in relation to *Falling Man* in Chapter One has made an interesting comment on waste, value, and the text: 'Someone once asked the poet Wislawa Szymborska why she published so little. Her response: "I have a trash can in my home"' (Jennifer Banks, Twitter 2021, n.p.). DeLillo wryly makes his process entirely about material concerns, declaring that he agreed to send his papers to the archive because 'I ran out of space', as though he sees the process as an opportunity for decluttering (DeLillo, cited in D.T. Max, 2007, n.p.).

In *Underworld's* prologue DeLillo expresses the concerns of a specific historical moment through the bodies in the text. We see this again with the ending of the Cold War. Paradoxically, the threat of mass death brings a stability and meaning to people's lives that gives way to a new and worse (because unknown) threat. In a passage set decades later, Marvin declares to his old friend Brian:

You see the Cold War winding down. This makes it hard for you to breathe. [...] You need the leaders of both sides to keep the Cold War going [...] when the tension and rivalry come to an end, that's when your worst nightmares begin. All the power and intimidation of the state will seep out of your personal bloodstream [...] [and] other forces will come rushing in, demanding and challenging. (p. 170)

Here as the Cold War draws to an end, living in the shadow of the Bomb, the 'furrow of destruction' is perceived as a safe place to be. In the prologue, we saw the excitement of the baseball game expressed through bodily responses. The drama of the season brings the city to a 'strangled rapture' (p. 14). About to vomit, Gleason's body warns of 'massive inner shiftings'. Bobby Thompson, celebrating in the moments after the win, feels that 'his breath comes so fast he doesn't know if he can handle all the air that's pouring in' (p. 44). Here, in Marvin's description, the ending of the Cold War is, in turn, figured as an urgent

challenge to bodily integrity. The significance of the baseball game was expressed through a communally experienced, biological response. Here a historical turning point once again stops the breath in the body. The force of the Cold War conflict, the oppositional categories of 'Us' and 'Them', are here interwoven with the body's biology: the conflict literally sustains the body and holds it together.

This characterisation of the global conflict as a life support system is another fantasy of bodily integrity. Throughout the novel there are strange and persistent entanglements between the external world and the inner workings of the body. In *Underworld's* prologue, weird body stuff is explicitly integrated into the narrative, and is key to the bustling heightened atmosphere and texture of the day. Jackie Gleason's vomit plays a central role in the prologue, and in the rest of the novel other body wastes, and society's waste products, are integral to DeLillo's engagements with American life. In the same way that society's waste amassed in landfills is 'far from 'a noisome offshoot' (p. 287), Marvin Lundy's bowel movements are integral to his narrative, both as an allegory of the Communist other and as a source of personal shame, an unpleasant reminder of the essential debasement at the heart of intimacy and domestic life. The acts of pissing, spitting, and vomiting that are centred and celebrated in *Underworld's* prologue represent a sense of joy and communal feeling, and prompts the commentator Russ Hodges to imagine that 'this midcentury moment enters the skin more lastingly than the vast shaping strategies of eminent leaders [...] a thing like this keeps us safe in some undetermined way (p. 60). In *End Zone*, the college football players imagine a body image that includes the body's fluids and emissions as meaningful rather than disruptive (vomiting and pissing figured as acts of belonging and camaraderie), and in the same way, in *Underworld's* prologue, the sense of shared identity and collective feeling in the male space of the baseball game seems all-encompassing. In the way that matter is characterised, there is little to distinguish the archetypical American products (a beer and a hotdog) from the waste products (shit, piss and vomit): all of this matter is dually distasteful and fascinating, a symbol of death/oblivion as well as carrying a much more diverse thematic resonance. The rich texture of the afternoon, depicted in

sustained and elaborate detail, seems to form its own self-contained ecosystem in which every detail carries meaning and value, including those pertaining to the body's waste products. J. Edgar Hoover, one of the first people to learn of the Soviets escalating nuclear testing, is aware they are on the precipice of a new era. This historic turning point, as yet unknown to the crowds in the stadium, is manifest in the act of Jackie Gleason vomiting. The 'foretaste of massive inner shiftings' foretells of an era defined by boundaries, the threat of the other and fear of contamination: the Cold War, and later the AIDS crisis. Moreover, there is to be no return to a prior state of (perceived) safety and integrity: the ending of the Cold War brings a new and unknown set of anxieties, as 'All the power and intimidation of the state will seep out of your personal bloodstream [and] other forces will come rushing in, demanding and challenging' (p. 170). The threat of annihilation, it turns out, has paradoxically been supporting and sustaining the bodies of America's citizens. Marvin Lundy recognises that the uncontaminated body, seen in 'germ-free Edgar' is a fantasy. Elsewhere in the novel, during the Vietnam war Matt Shay, Nick's brother, works studying 'the take from aerial recon, an endless series of images sucked up by the belly cameras of surveillance planes' (p. 462). In this context "intelligence" becomes nonsensical: trying to decipher the images, Matt studies a dot on the film which might be 'a truck or a truck stop or a tunnel entrance or a gun emplacement', or just as easily 'a family grilling burgers at a picnic' (p. 463). Here, as with the baseball game, a characteristically American leisure activity is inseparable from warfare. Technology that aims to make warfare remote and automated distorts bodies to the point that they are unrecognizable¹³³. The Bomb is not simply a new method of death: it has the capacity to undo prior categories of meaning thought to be innate and unchangeable¹³⁴. In the see-through hand of the airman we are confronted with an

¹³³ Here scale makes bodies in warfare incomprehensible, as, in *End Zone*, Gary is preoccupied with terminology that describes the impact of a nuclear explosion, but which refers to violence on a scale incomprehensible to him. He lists the terms, unable to connect them up to what they describe: 'Blast area. Fire area. Body-burn area' (p. 86).

¹³⁴ Slavov Žižek discusses the role of the bathroom in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Francis Ford Coppola's 1974 film *The Conversation*. In both films the bathroom is the site of a murder. Norman Bates cleaning blood from the bathroom in *Psycho* demonstrates the 'importance of 'keeping at bay [a] chaotic netherworld that threatens to explode anytime and engulf us'. Žižek asserts that Hitchcock's films enact something profoundly destabilizing: 'it is not simply that something horrible

otherworldly transformation, which makes him think of the child's song, an essential undoing of how the body is put together. In *Cosmopolis* (2003), in a resonant detail, protagonist Eric Packer is told by his doctor that he has an asymmetrical prostate. He is troubled by this knowledge and wonders what it might mean. In the novel's final confrontation, Packer's murderer Benno Levin reveals that they share this biological quirk. Levin suggests that Packer should have looked to his own body as a clue to reading the stock market; he should have been looking for 'misshape' rather than 'balance' (p. 200). This idea, that the key to massive wealth or financial ruin was contained in Packer's body, is similar to the way that messages are contained in bodies in *Underworld*. In old age a doctor informs Marvin that he has a 'mushroom-shaped tumor', mirroring the mushroom cloud of the nuclear explosion (p. 192; p. 563). The mushroom cloud in turn refers back to a different body part, figured at one point as 'that weird peeled eyeball exploding over the desert' (p. 51). Elsewhere in the novel Sister Edgar encounters 'a man who'd cut his eyeball out of its socket because it contained a satanic symbol, a five-pointed star [...] finally flushing the eye down the communal toilet outside his cubbyhole' (p. 247). Connections such as these run throughout the text forming a consecutive line of anatomy, in the same manner as the 'knee bone connected to the thigh bone' is detailed in the song recalled by a crew member during the nuclear test (p. 614).

In *Underworld*, and throughout the other texts we have explored so far, there is a tension between structure and formlessness, boundaries and chaos. The prologue represents a temporary stability, in which everything seems to be meaningfully included. Shit and piss are not cast out, rather they form a 'generational tide', connecting the act of urinating up to identity and familial belonging. Beyond the bounds of *Underworld's* prologue, shit is both a stable, productive signifier and a marker of chaos and oblivion. The advent of the Bomb is characterised as an event that seems to exist outside the scope of intelligible experience. Breaking bounds in this way, historical shifts are experienced as visceral bodily reactions, leaving DeLillo's characters nauseated, gasping for breath. Looking forward to the

happens in reality: something worse can happen which undermines the very fabric of what we experience as reality' (Žižek, in Fiennes, 2006, n.p.).

final chapter, *Players* features more and different illusions of containment, specifically gendered structures of behaviour. Consumption is expressed as similarly distasteful (particularly through the grotesque figure of Mister Softee) but conveys the specific anxieties of a different period, namely the emptiness of life under capitalism in the late 1970s.

Chapter Five: Containment and consumption in *Players*

DeLillo's 1977 novel *Players* is a grimly evocative account of life under capitalism as barren, flat, and devoid of joy. The protagonists Pammy and Lyle live affluent but emotionally barren lives. Activities that might be salacious or scandalous are boring. We see this when the theme of incest, the big taboo that haunted DeLillo's first novel, is alluded to briefly. Lyle imagines that if other people were suddenly able to hear his thoughts, they would be shocked by their disorganised and chaotic nature, not by the subject matter. He refers to his darkest thoughts as 'some routine incest variation' (p. 22). The unspeakable taboo that ran through DeLillo's debut novel has here become mundane and predictable, dealt with in a throwaway comment. This detail typifies the flat, evacuated quality of the world of the novel. The couple live in Manhattan and occupy iconic centres of wealth: Pammy works in the World Trade Center, Lyle as a trader in the New York Stock Exchange. They cast about for meaningful endeavours to relieve their malaise. Pammy and Lyle are friends with another couple, Jack and Ethan, and Pammy begins an affair with Jack. Meanwhile Lyle becomes involved with a group of terrorists who plan to target Wall Street, and has sexual encounters with two women who are also involved in the plot. The novel culminates with the sudden and horrific suicide of Jack. Alison Tetreault argues that DeLillo's earlier novels adhere to particular genres, 'the domestic, the thriller, and the pop novel', and that DeLillo partially fulfils the tenets of genre fiction, setting up expectations for a particular kind of resolution, and then denies us a satisfactory plot conclusion. This is a strategy that, Tetreault argues, leads us to question the reliability of other, broader narratives that permeate our lived experience, in particular the ideologies of consumerism and patriarchy¹³⁵. David Cowart makes a similar argument, regarding a reference to the biograph (an early piece of film technology that functions as both camera and projector) and the nickelodeons (an early version of the cinema) in the novel's opening. Cowart states that, '[t]hough not old enough to

¹³⁵ Anne Longmuir (2007) similarly and convincingly argues that *Players* dually upsets conventions of gender and genre.

have actually attended a nickelodeon and heard the naive music, readers know its sound and the stock situations it accompanies' and finds that 'romance, comedy, suspense [...] all figure, in sardonically twisted form, in the narrative to come'. Meanwhile 'This music and the images it once accompanied are part of a seemingly inconsequential cultural past' (Coward, 2002, p. 44).

The novel ends with the character Jack's inexplicable suicide, and this unexpected turn leaves the central 'players' unmoored from the containing structure of genre, the novel thereby transgressing the bounds of genre and plot convention. As I will show, the novel closes with another loss by which the narrative further departs from convention; the disintegration of Lyle as a character and a distinct subject. Pammy works at a 'grief management' firm, a service which suggests that the most profound human suffering can be "managed" and processed, parsed into copy for brochures and material for seminars (p. 18)¹³⁶. Pammy primarily experiences emotions of fear, embarrassment and boredom. At one point

She remembered what had been bothering her, the vague presence. Her life. She hated her life. It was a minor thing, though, a small bother. She tended to forget about it. When she recalled what it was that had been on her mind, she felt satisfied at having remembered and relieved that it was nothing worse.
(p. 32)

In the same way that incest fantasies have become 'routine', Pammy's unhappiness is a trifling annoyance that she takes for granted, one of the small revelations that occurs in the passage of everyday thoughts. In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant sets out the paradoxical relation between neoliberal desire and the pursuit of happiness. Pammy's passing recollection of despair invokes Berlant's explanation of 'crisis ordinariness'. As Berlant argues, crisis is not a rare or exceptional state, limited to key moments of rupture in personal and historical narrative: rather it is a process embedded in the ordinary and woven into our experience of everyday life (p. 9).

¹³⁶ The character Ethan, critiquing a brochure that Pammy wrote as 'a classic of dispassion and tact', declares that while '[d]eath is a religious experience [...] [i]t is also nuts-and-boltsy. Something fails to work, you die. A demonstrable consequence' (p. 63).

Pammy and Lyle both seek illicit sexual encounters, transgressing the bounds of their supposed monogamy. These are experienced in the same dulled, flat manner as the rest of their lives: infidelity is characterised as a trite and uninspired endeavour¹³⁷. Critics have noted that DeLillo's fiction often eschews rounded characters with full inner lives. Joshua Ferris states that he does not read DeLillo's work for character and plot, but 'for its sentences' (2016, n.p.). Others note the detached tone of characters' speech and find that their voices are indistinct from one other and from the narrative voice, resulting in a sense that Philip Nel identifies, in DeLillo's pre-2000 fiction, as 'characters speaking essays to one another' (2002, p. 736)¹³⁸. While these critics correctly identify this strange and characteristic aspect of DeLillo's prose, attending to characters' relationships to food and sex in *Players* can allow us to see that characters are richly delineated and, crucially, embodied. As we will see, the specific circumstances of Pammy and Lyle's malaise are expressed through distorted and troubled experiences of hunger and sexual desire. Through the embodied experiences of the Manhattan elite, the tenets of late capitalism are expressed through ideological frameworks which offer the promise of a safe containing structure. We have encountered similar frameworks again and again throughout the texts. In *Americana*, David believes in the office of the television network, as bringing about a reassuring sense that 'you were safe', and a grotesque national identity is figured as a horrible misogynist image: 'we want to wallow in the terrible gleaming mudcunt of Mother America' (1971/1990, p. 119)¹³⁹. In *Underworld*, safety is expressed as belonging to a homogenous and closed group, an 'Us' set against the Communist other; 'Them', and the sense of this group as emphatically closed and contained is reflected in J. Edgar Hoover's germ phobia. DeLillo, then, characterises human drives and desires through various tropes of immersion and containment. Turning finally to the 1977 novel *Players*, we encounter the setting of the stock

¹³⁷ David in *Americana* describes his first affair as his entry point into 'the vortex of the cliché', notable only for its logistics: 'in many ways that first affair of mine was a dullard's dream; it differed from most only because I was not a commuter and did not have to adapt my orgasms to the disciplines of a train schedule' (p. 38; p. 37).

¹³⁸ At the same time, DeLillo's dialogue carefully reproduces the repetitious and stilted quality of everyday speech, which brings a realism to character's interactions, countering the sense that they are simply mouthpieces for ideas.

¹³⁹ For David, various illusions of containment ultimately mimic a return to the womb.

market and the bounds of a romantic relationship as frameworks which are similarly posited, troubled, and undermined.

As Anne Longmuir argues, in *Players* DeLillo charts 'a perceived shift in American culture, from the stability and certitudes of the 1950s to the epistemological uncertainty and indeterminacy of post-Vietnam America (2007, p. 128). John Updike similarly identifies the novel's 'disdain of last year's emotional guarantees' (*Players*, DeLillo, 1977, front matter). This sense of a nation lapsing into ideological uncertainty is manifest through the bodies in the text. Lyle tries to meaningfully interpret the presence of homeless people in the financial district, 'people without shoes, amputees and freaks [...] living rags [...] trailing vomit on their feet': in his obnoxious analysis, he notes that '[t]he use of madness and squalor as texts in the denunciation of capitalism did not strike him as fitting here [...] It was something else these men and women had come to mean' (pp. 27-28). He has a similar kind of partial insight of his affair partner Marina, insisting that '[h]er body was "meaningful" somehow', in a way 'that [he] could not interpret' (p. 188). This is an abridged kind of understanding in which bodies carry obscure messages, their meaning perceived but remaining oblique. Lyle, attempting to fit these people into a schema, can only settle on the conviction that they mean 'something'.

We see a similar idea expressed in *Underworld*: the sense of containment by which Marvin Lundy characterizes the era of Cold War conflict is felt but cannot be fully articulated, as Klara Sax asserts that 'Power meant something thirty, forty years ago' (1997, p. 76). Here a massive socio-political shift is felt in the body overwhelmingly and with certainty, but the terms with which Lundy describes it are inexact. Here the emphasis is on the body registering the timbre of the culture, rather than the individual usefully conveying or interpreting this information. In *Cosmopolis* (2003) Eric Packer has an interaction that indicates the same abridged understanding:

He said, "My prostate is asymmetrical".
She sat back in thought, looking at him with some concern.
"What does that mean?".

He said, "I don't know".
(pp. 119-120)

Here a bodily anomaly stands out, asserting itself as something that cannot be ignored but cannot be meaningfully interpreted either. Occupying an abstract register of technology and market data, Eric can only reflect on his body in a limited way: the body does not fit within this framework, as we ultimately learn that it is untranslatable into data (p. 207).

In *Players*, Lyle's involvement with a terrorist group, whose own motives are unclear, is an attempt to break out from stagnation, motivated by a desire to feel engaged in something emotionally resonant rather than stemming from any particular ideology. This characterization of violence as being for its own sake, serving cathartic rather than political ends, severs action from context or motive, and this sense continues throughout the narrative, most strikingly in the unexpected and inexplicable suicide of Jack near the novel's end. Similarly, At one point Lyle reflects that pornography is an inevitable consequence of the invention of film. Proximity replaces motive, and, as a person being filmed is compelled to take off their clothes, sex and violence result from material relations between bodies and objects. A bombing is described as resulting from the will of the technology itself; 'we thought they bombed villages, killed children, for the sake of technology' (*Players*, 1977, p. 104). The actions of the 'players' resonate with an idea that DeLillo raises elsewhere, in which violence is characterised as purely circumstantial, coming about as a result of the placement of bodies. Speaking of the Kennedy assassination and other acts of political violence that followed, DeLillo posits that they represent a shift to a 'new kind of violence'. Speaking at the time of *Libra*'s publication, DeLillo describes the assassination as arising from a network of 'dreams' and 'intuitions', rather than a legible series of events motivated by specific ideologies. Within this dreamlike framework, DeLillo imagines an assassin deferring to pure cause and effect, an idea which he sums up with the declaration 'if he is there, I will shoot him' (DeLillo, cited in Mehren, 1988, n.p.)¹⁴⁰. Here actors are moved into place by forces

¹⁴⁰ In *End Zone* bodies in motion are similarity prioritised over inner lives: Gary declares that 'History is [...] the placement of bodies' as 'A million pilgrims face Mecca. Think of the power behind that fact. All turning now. And bending. And praying' (1972, pp. 43-44).

beyond their control or understanding. This version of violence specific to the assassination of 1963 and its aftermath resonates with a broader lapse into ideological uncertainty, and in *Players*, Pammy and Lyle respond to this loss of certainty, variously casting about them for meaningful frameworks.

Formal structures, given limits

The financial district is depicted as a dense and pressured unit, in which ‘the tight high buildings held things in, cross-reflecting heat’ (DeLillo, 1977, p. 27). It is here that Lyle encounters the people that he terms ‘outcasts’ and ‘living rags’ He regards these people as contaminating the centre of wealth: ‘infiltrators in the district. Elements filtering in’ (p. 27). For Pammy, these disenfranchised people are similarly an inconvenient feature of the landscape; her clumsiness becomes apparent when undertaking ‘complicated movements [...] package-carrying or the skirting of derelicts’ (p. 17)¹⁴¹. In Lyle’s reckoning their presence seems to carry significance, the nature of which eludes him. Meanwhile, within the stock exchange itself, no such interpretive work is required: ‘It was all worked out. There were rules, standards and customs. In the electronic clatter it was possible to feel you were part of a breathtakingly intricate quest for order and elucidation, for identity among the constituents of a system’ (p. 28). This passage once again evokes *Americana*’s David Bell, who finds a similar comfort in his workplace: ‘you could not walk among those volleying typewriters [...] without coming to believe that this was where you were safe’ (1971/1990, p. 20). Lyle experiences the floor of the exchange as a containing structure and takes comfort in the register of the stock market, which transmits a safe and legible version of the world beyond. His colleague Frank McKechnie makes reference to ‘the outside world’, a place of ‘total decay’, and Lyle replies ‘Is it still there? I thought we’d effectively negated it. I thought that was the upshot’ (p. 23). They reinforce this through their own catechism, a call and response:

¹⁴¹ This resonates with an incident in Bret Easton Ellis’s novel *American Psycho* in which Patrick Bateman brutally murders a homeless man, an episode that epitomises the brutality and ruthless self-interest of neoliberalism (1991, p. 123).

"Where do I want to be, Lyle?"

"Inside".

"Correct", McKechnie said.

(p. 158)

McKechnie asks Lyle if he has seen a new secretary, and states 'I understand it walks and talks' (p. 23). Through this act of objectification the man seeks an illusory simplicity, paring down a woman into an automaton-like novel object. It suggests relief from the messy reality of intimacy and love in the world beyond, as the man waits fearfully for test results that may confirm his wife has cancer¹⁴². Lyle views the camaraderie of the traders with a similar emphasis on structure. Men on the trading floor act within given limits, so that humour and misbehaviour are bounded and performative: 'Floor members were down-to-earth. They played practical jokes. They didn't drift beyond the margins of things' (p. 28). Lyle performs part of a standup comedy routine learned by rote from a recording. He takes pleasure in strictly copying the cadence and timing of the original and 'He could read their delight at his self-containment' (p. 64). The emphasis on spatial organisation here seems to push back against a sense of postmodern loss. Fredric Jameson (1991) finds that within the cultural logic of late capitalism spatial clarity is lost, which leaves us unable to orient ourselves. He states that 'our now postmodern bodies are bereft of spatial coordinates' and that the subject is left 'incapable of distantiation' (pp. 48-49). 'Submerged' in information, the distance needed for clarity (in this case of the body-world distinction) disappears, and understanding of the body's schema breaks down.

The comfort found in these bounded and prescribed activities is starkly at odds with the reality of the trading floor. It is actually a place of urgent danger, as early in the novel Lyle witnesses a colleague shot to death, and this danger only intensifies when he later becomes embroiled with the terrorist organisation responsible. While Lyle is not safe from literal violence, he depends on an ideological sense of containment in which an individual's actions are made meaningful within a contextual framework. Within the exchange, Lyle perceives

¹⁴² McKechnie, trying to sum up 'outside', gestures inarticulately to '[t]hings that happen and you're helpless' (p. 65).

himself as insulated from the world beyond. Doubly insulated within his booth, located on the trading floor which has windows of bulletproof glass, he receives his '[r]ange for the day' (p. 64). When DeLillo returns to the world of finance capital in *Cosmopolis*, the methods of delivery (the 'tele-screen', the manually operated board) have given way to more advanced, interactive technology, but the nature of the medium as a drive towards abstraction, currency untethered from the material world, is much the same. We see the contrast between cyber space and 'meat space' in protagonist Eric Packer's fleeting desire to return to the body: 'There were days when he wanted to eat all the time, talk to people's faces, live in meat space. He stopped looking at the computer screens and turned to the street' (2003, pp. 63-64). In *Players* (1977), Lyle strives to escape this unruly, fleshy register of 'meat space'; to him, the market makes it possible for biological transmissions of information, 'nerve impulses', to be liberated from the material body, and reside in the numbers and symbols on computer print-outs. The market provides an enticing escape for the traders, 'their way of continuing on through rotting flesh, their closest taste of immortality' (p. 107). The alternative, embodied reality, is marked by decay and distasteful emissions. Lyle reflects that 'He knew that people want to see their own spittle dripping from the lacy openwork of art' (p. 70). For Lyle, bodies are fed into the market and digested into something more straightforward and palatable.

DeLillo emphasises the way that Lyle's work codifies information into a specialist format. A series of numbers that Lyle reads on a computer printout is replicated on the page:

V.R. GM—12.33 2524

106.400

10.10 69

12.30 70

10.12 68 1/2

12.33 + 70 + 1½

(p. 64)

The listed series of numbers emphasises the distinct and specialist register of the stock market, and alienates the reader from this sealed world. Lyle welcomes this escape into

abstraction, finding relief from the 'competitive mechanism of the world, of greasy teeth engaging on the rim of a wheel' (p. 70). Preceding this, Lyle notices a woman who is observing the floor from the visitor's balcony.

Attractive woman standing behind the bulletproof glass. He looked at the print-out as he walked back to his booth. Range for the day. Numbers clicked onto the enunciator board. Eat, eat. Shit, eat, shit. Feed her to us in decimals. Aggress, enfoul, decrete. Eat, eat, eat. (pp. 63-64)

The traders react to the appearance of the woman with a 'clubhouse cheer' (p. 63), and Lyle imagines this misogynist camaraderie as a desire to consume her. Lyle imagines the woman's body as a stream of information, and in the instruction 'feed her to us', hunger and sexual desire are one indistinct impulse¹⁴³. The traders are rendered as primal beings, their body's functions reduced to a binary of 'eat' and 'shit', in the same way that the exchange parses the entirety of human activity beyond its walls into commodities that can be processed in one of two ways: 'buy' and 'sell'. Here the woman is regarded in the same manner as the movements of the stock market; material to be parsed into data and fed to the traders. The stock exchange, locus of global capital, is rendered as a machine-like organism that systematically consumes and excretes. Lyle imagines that he might become absorbed into it and adopt the same register as the technology he uses, his thoughts reduced to a single inarticulate sound: 'he thought: bip-bip-bip-bip' (p. 107). The inclusion of the list of numbers serves to emphasise the exchange as a specialised and closed world, and this alien sense is bolstered by unusual usage of terms 'aggress, enfoul' and the archaic 'decrete'.

The emphasis on the stock market as a closed and self-contained structure is mirrored in small acts through which Lyle reifies his identity. He declares that '[t]o pay a bill was to seal off the world. The pleasure here was inward-tending, an accumulation of self [...] Putting stamps on the envelopes was the decisive point. Stamps were emblems of

¹⁴³ Lyle's association with consuming women's bodies continues elsewhere: in a sexual encounter with a woman named Rosemary he regards her 'flesh, her overample thighs [...] he gripped and bit at her, leaving spit everywhere [...] He wanted to scratch at her flesh, to leave teeth marks' (p. 91).

authentication' (pp. 74-75). While Lyle takes pleasure in the way that signing cheques and paying bills confirms his identity, Pammy dislikes these tasks: a bank teller asking for identification makes her feel guilty and anxious, a 'suspect', as though she will be found out as an imposter even as she signs her own name (p. 52). This foundational uncertainty extends to the way she relates to her environment, and she is caught up in narratives that are not her own. Crossing the street, she realises that a taxi driver is watching her and masturbating, and her inner experience is co-opted completely: she experiences this violation as if he had dragged her into his car, driven her to his home and assaulted her (p. 25). The stock market is figured as a system that consumes women, and here we see this gendered power relation from the other side. In the case of Lyle's colleague, the man's illusory sense of safety seems to depend on objectifying a woman and denying her agency and personhood. Pammy is similarly subjected to the sexual aggression of a stranger, her experience co-opted entirely by this brief interaction.

Her office is located in the World Trade Center, an environment which remains persistently alien. She struggles to distinguish between the North and South towers, and making the long journey up in the elevator, she suddenly realises she is in the wrong building (p. 14).

Pammy thought of the elevators in the World Trade Center as "places". [...] Elevators were supposed to be enclosures. These were too big, really, to fit that description. These also had different doors for entering and leaving, certainly a distinguishing feature of places more than of elevators [...] She felt abstract terms were called for in the face of such tyrannic grandeur. (pp. 23-24)

For Pammy, this 'place' lacks all of the characteristics that would make it recognisable as an elevator. It confounds her expectations, and fails to provide the expected sense of physical containment¹⁴⁴. The architecture of this capitalist icon communicates wealth and decadence,

¹⁴⁴ The Twin Towers of course take on a whole new status following their destruction in the terrorist attacks of 2001, and Randy Laist performs a useful reading of DeLillo's treatment of the buildings, that encompasses earlier and later works (2009). Pammy's discomfort in the novel anticipates the profound destabilization of the building's collapse in *Falling Man*, where the ground shifts under Keith's feet.

but is disorienting for the subject who occupies it: Pammy feels unmoored here, echoing Frederic Jameson's reading of the Bonaventure hotel in Los Angeles as a profoundly postmodern space (1991)¹⁴⁵. Pammy's disorientation and disrupted relation to place serves to undermine the sense of containment that Lyle and his colleagues strive to enact, and the financial district becomes a threatening environment, rather than a manifestation of ideological strength and certainty. The flatness and dullness of the character's lives, which Pammy perceives as a pronounced boredom, actually harbours cruelty and violence with regard to the body. This is apparent when Lyle regards the homeless people on the street, 'trailing vomit on their feet' with a dehumanising impulse that turns their corporeal suffering into a symbol of 'something' (DeLillo, 1977, p. 27). This moment lays the groundwork for the deadly acts of terrorism in which Lyle later becomes implicated.

Food and gendered logic

Within Pammy and Lyle's partnership, their playful rejection of gendered norms is articulated through their relationship to food.

Pammy bought fruit at a sidewalk stand. She loved the look of fruit in crates, outdoors, tiers of peaches and grapes. Buying fresh fruit made her feel good. It was an act of moral excellence. She looked forward to taking the grapes home, putting them in a bowl and letting cold water run over the bunches. It gave her such pleasure, hefting one of the bunches in her hand, feeling the water come cooling through. Then there were peaches. The earthly merit of peaches. (p. 32)

Pammy temporarily inhabits the role of doting partner and provider, bringing home an abundance of colourful fruit. This gesture is alien and mystifying to Lyle, who asks 'what's in that big wet funny bag' (p. 32). Its appeal is quickly undermined, as he complains 'You'll come home with fruit by the gross weight and announce it grandly and wash it with songs of ritual washing and put it away in the box below and it shrivels and rots every time' (p. 57)¹⁴⁶.

¹⁴⁵ Jameson's reading similarly uses a spatial disorientation as a figure for late capitalism (1991, p. 38).

¹⁴⁶ While, in *Genesis*, Eve was tempted by the fruit from the tree of knowledge, Pammy's interest fades after the stages of acquiring and preparing it. The primal drive to eat is dulled and disrupted. *Amazons'* Cleo Birdwell similarly confounds her casting as an Eve figure, in a passage that engages

The nurturing act of washing the fruit to make it safe to eat becomes entirely ritualised and performative. The shrivelled fruit serves to subvert Pammy's association with fertility: the notion of Pammy 'bearing fruit' herself is dismissed with economy in a passing joke, in which Lyle states that he got a vasectomy for her birthday (p. 52)¹⁴⁷. Pammy imagines the ruined produce as mirroring her own body: breathless from exercise, Pammy calls herself '[w]ay out of shape' and announces 'You wouldn't believe what's inside this body. What a little old dried-up crone' (p. 56). Reinforcing the symbolic connection between fruit and fertility, Lyle continues to chastise Pammy; 'You never eat any. You eat a little bit when you take it out of the bag and then that's it, Chiquita [...] In the fruit bin to shrivel up like fetuses' (p. 33)¹⁴⁸. Meanwhile Lyle is characterised as an emasculated figure, through details such as his lack of chest hair and his 'middling implement of sex' (p. 196)¹⁴⁹. Here, through Pammy and Lyle's playful interactions, the traditional organisation of the family unit—a heterosexual couple who bear children—is undermined. The strange, experimental nature of their conversations, in which they frequently take on different roles and build imaginative fictions, creates instead a kind of intimacy that is deeply personal and specific to the whims and nuances of the characters.

The significance of Pammy and Lyle's relationship to food, and specifically their discussion of 'the fruit thing'—the drawer of the refrigerator intended to store fruits and vegetables—can be better understood by placing it in relation to DeLillo's treatment of a

with the Bible story in a consumerist context. Filming a television commercial, she is asked to recline in a whirlpool bath, showing her cleavage, eating an apple, and is accused of being prudish for refusing (1980).

¹⁴⁷ Moreover Pammy is ambivalent towards her family of origin, indicated by the discomfort and guilt she feels regarding her distant relationship with her father (p. 55).

¹⁴⁸ Elsewhere refrigerated fruit is depicted as a delicious and tempting contraband, in William Carlos Williams's poem 'This is Just to Say' (1934). The plums in the ice box are 'delicious/so sweet/and so cold', so enticing that the speaker cannot resist eating them. Williams' poem communicates the intimacy of a relationship as a series of accords and understandings; the speaker has performed a small act of betrayal, breaking an unspoken agreement by eating the plums, and asks for forgiveness. For Pammy and Lyle the performative preparation of fruit is a process which ends with waste, not enjoyment or sustenance, starkly at odds with the lush temptation of the plums in the ice box.

¹⁴⁹ Longmuir's reading focuses on details such as his lack of chest hair as signaling his emasculation (2007, p. 27). Elsewhere in *Mao II* a grotesque body, Bill's 'neutered near-human' similarly stands for emasculation, and Brita, *Mao II*'s photographer who makes Bill the subject of the gaze, joins the women—Klara Sax, Lauren Hartke—who are taking over as the image makers (*Underworld*, 1997; *The Body Artist*, 2001).

domestic space of an earlier historical moment. In *Underworld*, in the novel's Cold War section, a passage on a typical nuclear family is deeply preoccupied with tropes of containment, expressed through the shiny surfaces of kitchenware and the family Cadillac. In the housewife's joyful relation to the 'crisper', the era's emphasis on domestic luxury and wellbeing is channelled into the compartment for chilled produce (1997, p. 516). In this section of *Underworld* DeLillo returns to an earlier period, prior to *Players*' 1970s setting. However, the publication of *Underworld* comes chronologically later, so that, if we read through the novels in order, Pammy and Lyle's conversation in which the symbolic power of the 'crisper' has been lost, predates and anticipates DeLillo's portrayal of a lost era of certainty in *Underworld*. As we see in *Underworld*, such illusions of safety are never left unquestioned for long, and the dismantling of the role of the crisper in *Players* serves as a further expression of ideological frameworks as always illusory and vulnerable to collapse.

In *Players*, the couple have a unique shared vocabulary, full of inarticulate sounds, unfinished sentences and nonsense words, but Pammy challenges Lyle when he refers variously to the 'fruit thing', the 'fruit bin', 'A bin', and 'a fruit compartment'. Pammy insists, 'It's a fucking crisper, you asshole' (p. 57). Pammy's irritation about naming the crisper correctly resonates with its role in *Underworld*. Here Pammy clings on to a vestige of a lost era of clarity, typified by chilled produce, bounded roles and shiny surfaces¹⁵⁰. However, the crisper has become a receptacle for old, inedible fruit, representing the couple's alienated, wasteful consumption. Prior certainties have been lost, and Lyle is uncertain of the compartment's proper name. In trying to defend her purchase, Pammy can cite only aesthetic value; 'I think fruit's pretty' (p. 32). The disagreement alienates the couple from one another as well as from the fruit; Pammy tries to argue that Lyle enjoys eating it, but he disagrees. The filling of the crisper has become a vacant gesture unrelated to the food that the couple actually eat. Pammy's rituals of preparation are pleasurable, but her desire to provide for and sustain the household is misplaced. Later that night she reflects; 'She wanted pizza. It made

¹⁵⁰ Erica invokes the crisper as though the term itself has magical qualities, as if speaking its name, the invention of a marketing team, might guarantee the eternal freshness of fruits and vegetables.

her feel guilty not to want fruit. But she'd worked all day, taken elevators and trains. She couldn't deal with the consequences of fruit, its perishability, the duty involved in eating it. She wanted to sit in a corner, alone, and stuff herself with junk' (p. 35). The 'moral excellence' of buying fresh fruit thus becomes an unbearable burden at the point of eating it. Her desire for the immediate gratification of convenience food is a source of guilt, and the food that Pammy craves is aligned with waste; it is 'junk'. Pammy and Lyle order 'sandwiches and envelopes of soup' at a local diner (p. 15). They raid their fridge impulsively for rich, insubstantial foods—cheese, crackers, brandy snaps—that carry none of the moral weight of fruit (p. 53). They order from Dial-A-Steak and a prepared dinner is delivered, each item sealed in a separate foil package (p. 37). The radiant crisper that Erica Deming idolises in *Underworld* no longer contains the food that will sustain the household. Replaced by an overabundance of choice, the crisper has become an artefact, holding the produce that Pammy buys habitually and to no purpose. This breakdown in signification also reflects what Fredric Jameson (1991) describes as a loss of connection to history. According to Jameson, within postmodernism the present is reduced to pastiche; a series of hollow stylisations, emptied of significance and severed from the historical past. This ahistorical drive can be seen in Pammy and Lyle's troubled relation to objects and environments.

Further to the couple's departure from convention which is expressed through a disrupted relation to food, Pammy and Lyle construct their own kind of local, intimate framework through the medium of play, subverting gendered expectations of familial and sexual roles. The implication of the novel's characters as 'Players' might be understood as a signal to read their actions as performative. By refocusing the term to refer to the couple's imaginative exchanges, 'play' comes to suggest a sense of active and intimate exchange, rather than the determinacy of actors speaking lines within the mediating framework of a play. Within the bounds of their romantic relationship, Pammy and Lyle experiment with controlled transgressions. At one point Lyle deliberately bursts into the bathroom while Pammy sits on the toilet (p. 52). They toy with gendered expectations, as Pammy's impulse to buy fruit for the home casts her as the provider. Similarly, returning home from work, she

asks Lyle 'where's my beer?'. They create their own expectations and rules of behaviour, contained within a collaborative framework, as Richard Gruneau asserts that rules in games serve to 'insulate the activity from the society at large' (1980, p. 68). Their relationship as a whole is experienced as a process of narrowing down: as their life together proceeds 'their range diminished' (DeLillo, 1977, p. 15). At one point their conversation descends into a mock fight, a back and forth which enables a playful transfer of power between the couple. Lyle tries to bite Pammy's head, declaring 'I bite heads for a living' (p. 36). Pammy retaliates by scratching him lightly, and Lyle performs an exaggerated choking fit, now making Pammy the aggressor: 'He made gulping sounds [...] He evolved chokes and gasps out of the original sound. He began to drown or suffocate, making convulsive attempts to breathe'. The internal logic of the play fight communicates the intimate, shared private world of the couple. Of the two, Lyle would seem to be comparatively more secure in his self schema, but he is troubled by the fact that his appearance and habits do not seem stable and fixed. He is troubled by his colleagues' inability to remember his features. He is often asked if he recently started wearing glasses, and whether he took up his smoking habit only recently. A colleague asks 'You're sure you're married' (p. 30). While this is a joking response to Lyle speaking of marriage in a positive light, it serves to further challenge his identity. In the home, presented with the bag of fruit, Lyle narrates himself asking a question: "'Do I like cantaloupe, he said", Lyle said' (p. 33). Within the context of their relationship they try on different personas, and here Lyle is able to safely explore uncertainty, acting out his indistinct personhood. Their conversations feature many nonsense words and imaginative exchanges. At one point Pammy interjects, 'Kidding aside, let's talk' (p. 36). But their playful kind of exchange *is* the substance of their intimacy; as 'They chattered and made sounds a while longer [...] this the commonplace aim-lessness of their evenings, a retreat from stress lines and language' (p. 57).

An early passage in the novel details Pammy and Lyle, in their bedroom after having sex:

It grew darker. She sat at the foot of the bed, dressing. The rain slackened. She heard the Mister Softee truck down in the street. It announced itself with recorded music, a sound she hated, the same cranked-out mechanical whine every night. She couldn't hear that noise without feeling severe mental oppression [...]

"There really is a Mister Softee".

"I believe", she said.

"He sits in the back of the truck. That's him making the noise. It's not music on a record or tape. That's his mouth. It's coming out of his mouth. That's his language. They speak that way in the back of ice cream trucks all over the city. I won't say nation yet. It hasn't spread".

"A local phenomenon".

"He sits back there dribbling. He's very fat and pastelike. He can't get up. His flesh doesn't have the right consistency".

"He has no genitals".

"They're in there somewhere". (pp. 35-36)

The jingle of the Mister Softee truck provokes a strong negative response from Pammy. Soft serve ice-cream, created through a process 'which added air, lowered quality and raised profits', is a reflection of tenets of capitalist production (Fromson, 2013, n.p.). To Pammy, the truck's music is troublingly synthetic, and in the couple's exchange of make-believe this unnatural sound is re-embodied, coming from the mouth of 'Mister Softee' himself. Pammy's discomfort with Mister Softee stems from the 'mechanical' jingle of the truck, which alludes to the nature of the product; mass produced, processed, a foodstuff made possible by advances in automation. Subverting the smiling icon of the brand, they construct his 'fat and pastelike' body as the locus of Pammy's distress. Their version of Mister Softee seems to have a body that is almost human but lacking the texture of flesh; 'fat and pastelike', unable to support its own weight¹⁵¹. The grotesque figure of Mister Softee renders a fat and immobile body distasteful. Its genitals obscured by body fat, it also represents a discomfort with indeterminately sexed bodies, in the same way the monster in *Mao II* is depicted as a 'neutered near-human' with 'filed-down genitals' (1991, p. 92; p. 55). The figure of Mister

¹⁵¹ The actual logo that adorns the ice cream trucks shows a smiling, human-ice cream hybrid wearing a suit and bow tie. The cone is his face, and a thick coil of ice cream sits on the top of his head. The implication of its inviting expression is that it wants to be eaten; a sacrament of consumerism. In contrast to this figure, Pammy fights back when Lyle announces he is going to eat her.

Softee solidifies the characters' pervasive and unnameable fears in markers of bodily difference.

DeLillo's use of grotesque matter here is familiar: We have seen that, in *Underworld*, Jackie Gleason eats hot dogs that are both greasy and synthetic, and drinks beer to the point of vomiting. At the heart of the scene in *Underworld*'s prologue there is a grotesque image of voracious consumption. The all-American foodstuff of the hot dog is unpalatable and nauseating, 'sweaty meat and grease bubbles' (1997, p. 13). We have repeatedly encountered this sense of distaste at the heart of American life, as in *Americana* a troubled veteran is 'American as a slice of apple pie with a fly defecating on it' (1990, p. 47). DeLillo thus repeatedly invokes the idea of eating abject matter: In *Americana*, David contaminates ice cubes with his spit, and Sullivan strives through her sculptures 'to give people the feeling that they were eating small live wet amphibians' (p. 106). In *Falling Man*, a member of the Alzheimer's support group 'brought pastries to the meetings, large jellied bladders that no one else would touch' (2007, p. 31). There are Erica's horrible jelly desserts and elsewhere in *Underworld* the 'gumbo puddle' of Gleason's vomit is aligned with food, as though it might be re-consumed (p. 46).

We have seen that Pammy derives joy from buying and preparing fruit, and her negative reaction to the Mister Softee truck links to her feelings of guilt and shame surrounding 'junk'. The qualities of the 'pastelike' figure play upon the texture of soft serve ice cream. This foodstuff resonates with a number of instances where DeLillo invokes viscous matter of a troubling, indeterminate texture. Neither solid nor liquid, it escapes precise description: in *Underworld* shit becomes 'stuff', in *Mao II* phlegm becomes 'glop' (1997, p. 310; 1991, p. 135). In some cases bodily wastes are mixed together and become indeterminate 'shitpiss' (*End Zone*, 1972, p. 24; *Ratner's Star*, 1977, p. 7). The invented term 'shitpiss' is particularly interesting for the way that it renders human waste as indeterminate. We have seen that a number of DeLillo's characters place importance in counting as a means of making sense of the world, and in this term the body wastes that DeLillo euphemistically refers to elsewhere as 'number one and two' become indistinct (Don DeLillo

Papers, container 3.3). Like the monstrous body in *Mao II*, the figure of Mister Softee is troubling because of its uncertain form and permeable boundaries. As *Mao II*'s monster is 'hydrocephalic, with puckered lips and soft skin, dribbling brain fluid from its mouth' (1991, p. 55), Mister Softee is immobile and unable to support its own weight. In both of these examples, anxieties about the border of the body are made explicit through fantastical bodies, but both are framed as imaginative inventions, rather than encroaching on the realism of the text. Within his characters' imaginative excursions, DeLillo has a greater experimental freedom to express the body's border as troubled and uncertain. In this context, a body made entirely of a soft, gooey liquid, that is unable to support its own weight or stand unaided, is an image of horror, a loss of bodily integrity. As we will see next, Pammy and Lyle place an importance on the integrity of their own bodies.

Despite Pammy and Lyle's playful deviations from gendered norms, they place an importance on PIV sex. Sex between Pammy and Lyle is expressed as contact between two distinct bodies. Here Pammy desires the 'conflict of surfaces, the palpable logic of his cock inside her' (1977, p. 35). The 'logic' of a heteronormative framework is tangible here: the couple's sexual roles are manifest, enacted, in the act of penetration. Contact between bodies during sex, the 'conflict of surfaces' contrasts with the horror of Mister Softee, its immobile form, indistinct features, its genitals 'in there somewhere' (p. 36). Pammy and Lyle thus operate within a normative framework of gendered expectations relating to the physical characteristics of bodies and the power relations of sexual desire. The ways in which they variously occupy and resist this framework reflect specific and timely anxieties within the broader context of American life, precipitated by the breaking down of gendered categories previously held to be innate and unchangeable. The couple's freedom to act somewhat outside gendered norms is characterised as a loss of stable categories, as their needs, desires and ways of relating to the world become illegible and incoherent. The dynamic of Pammy and Lyle's relationship is complicated by a number of other involved parties. Jack and Ethan, a gay couple, are longtime friends of the pair, and Pammy begins an affair with Jack. Pammy and Jack walk along the beachfront to a meadow, where they have sex. Here,

Jack's body resonates with the description of the movie scene in *Americana*, in which David venerates the 'monumental' sight of Burt Lancaster in *From Here to Eternity* (1953): 'He stood above Deborah Kerr on that Hawaiian beach and for the first time in my life I felt the true power of the image' (DeLillo, 1971/1990, pp. 12-13). In *Players*, Pammy turns away from Lyle's slight, hairless body and towards Jack's which carries conventional markers of masculinity:

Jack stood up to undress. She liked seeing him against the sky, defined that way, clear and unencumbered, flesh tones a perfect compensation, a wry layered grade, for that extravagant blue. Trite, she thought. Muscled body against sky. Soft-core fascist image, Ethan would say. But what the hell, folks, it's fun to mythologize. (1977, p. 165)

In *Americana*, David's encounter, while charged with libidinal energy as he identifies with the female viewer, is primarily an act of identification with the male body, a longing to become one with the image. Here Pammy's gaze, by contrast, is one of sexual desire, but expressed with a wry detachment. She gains agency here; she appreciates the aesthetics and composition of the scene but the icon of masculinity has here become 'trite'. She brings a critical eye to the image and even steps outside the exchange, commenting on how she imagines Jack's partner Ethan would respond to it. The overwhelming, transformative power of Burt's body has given way to a body that is subjected to an analytical female gaze. Pammy understands that Jack's body, symbolically loaded in that moment, invokes only a myth of masculinity. She regards the 'muscled body against sky' as a derivative and outmoded symbol, but she takes pleasure in it nonetheless, while implicating us as readers, as though we agree to indulge this myth: 'what the hell, folks'. This knowing address to the reader stands in contrast to the speaker in *Americana*, who, in the novel's first edition, asked the reader to consider the word 'mothercountry' and the 'optional spelling of third syllable' (1971/1973, p. 317). Here Pammy's aside asks us to share in acknowledging the masculine body as a false idol. Pammy's self awareness in this passage contrasts with David's fantasy of transformation in *Americana*, in which he is 'spliced into the image' on the cinema screen,

and also paves the way for the destruction of both Jack and Lyle, and Pammy's survival, in the novel's climax¹⁵².

Pammy further gains agency through a shift in the novel's expression of hunger and consumption. Pammy's disgust prompted by the Mister Softee truck and the shame she feels at desiring fatty processed foods give way to something else, when she experiences hunger as a compelling, unadulterated desire later in the novel (1977, p. 206). In contrast, Lyle is subjected to an act that prompts his psychic disintegration. In a surprising detail, Lyle's affair partner unexpectedly emerges from the bathroom 'with a plastic phallus harnessed to her body' (p. 197). The appearance of his affair partner Rosemary, who is also embroiled in the terrorist plot, disrupts the meaning that Pammy and Lyle sought in a conventional heterosexual framework. The legible, 'palpable logic' of the phallus is lost, as Lyle regards the sex toy with a babyish chant; 'Dil-do', and this encounter seems to precipitate Lyle's regression and dissolution of self (p. 211). Earlier, as we have seen, Lyle playfully tries to bite Pammy and announces 'I bite heads for a living' (p. 36). We see her develop a resistance to a troubling gendered relation, no longer the object to be consumed. The novel ends with two startling images of emasculation, which challenge the novel's prior 'logic' of gendered power relations delivered via the phallus and the muscular male body. Jack's burned body is discovered in a waste dump, and it is learned that he committed suicide through self-immolation. In a strange breakdown of the narrative voice's descriptive powers, Lyle becomes an anonymous figure 'propped' on a motel bed (p. 212). These images are significant as portrayals of abridged, stunted masculinity, which undermine the novel's prior frameworks of understanding: the stock market, characterised through voracious and misogynist consumption, and the framework of heteronormative desire, which privileges the 'muscled' male body and the phallus as acting upon the passive, female-coded body (p. 165). The challenge posed by these images is significant, as here DeLillo offers a counter to the ideologies of a string of obnoxiously egocentric and misogynist protagonists. DeLillo

¹⁵² In later works female characters gain agency through art: Lianne in *Falling Man* (2007) by viewing the Morandi paintings, Lauren in *The Body Artist* (2001) through her own performance art.

rightfully expresses tenets of capitalism, particularly warfare and the movements of money, through awful men, delineating the connection between the worst elements of late capitalism and patriarchal structures. While DeLillo's characters struggle within these frameworks, he suggests that meaningful change might be possible through female characters, who increasingly appear as complex characters with agency.

In *Players*, leading up to the novel's climax, the image of the burned body is anticipated through strange details: In a surreal passage, a fire breaks out in a restaurant but the diners do not respond; 'Smoke seeped into the main room but nobody left' (p. 68)¹⁵³. Through details such as this DeLillo constructs a world in which appropriate responses to threat and danger have been forgotten, in the same way that Pammy's experiences of hunger are complicated by an overabundance of choice. A passage of transformation prefigures Pammy and Jack's sexual encounter, in which Pammy wishes that 'I wanted an aggressive suntan [...] like your skin is so parched and bronzed it's almost verging on black. That baked-in look. Like you feel tremendously healthy and good but you resemble this creature, like who's this dug-up thing with weird wrinkles' (p. 164). This image is realised at the novel's end: Jack's body is found at a landfill site, and it is evident that he has set himself on fire. Jack's suicide can be read as an act of desperate guilt, implying strong love and empathy for his partner, but the reader can only guess as to these motives. Within the logic of the novel, with little insight into the character's motive or inner life, the act seems significant in a broader sense, as a manifestation of the madness endemic to the world the characters occupy. References to fire that accompany Jack's presence throughout the novel are realised here in a horrible and spectacular act of suicide, the body consumed by fire, 'shriveled and discolored, burned right through, down to muscles, down to tendons, down to nerves, blood vessels, bones' (p. 198)¹⁵⁴. Earlier, as we saw, viewing Jack's naked body

¹⁵³ This fire resonates with Bruegel's *Triumph of Death*, which as we have seen is 'a census-taking of awful ways to die', and which has a burning building at its centre (*Underworld*, DeLillo, 1997, p. 50). Meanwhile the fire in *Players* also invokes the perpetually burning house in Charlie Kaufman's 2008 film *Synecdoche New York*, and the popular meme where a cartoon dog, sitting at a table surrounded by flames, declares 'this is fine'.

¹⁵⁴ Elsewhere the terrorists discuss their plans for a suicide bombing at the stock exchange, a spectacular 'fireball'. Pammy travels to the beach with Jack and his husband Ethan. At one point Jack views strange lights in the sky, and they wonder if it is the weather phenomenon known as 'St Elmo's

above her on the beach sparked a pleasurable train of thought for Pammy, a willing immersion in a framework of sexual roles that she recognises as a construct, as 'myth'. Faced with Jack's burned body among refuse, seated with arms and legs crossed in a pose which seems ceremonial, she is compelled to turn away (p. 198)¹⁵⁵.

We have seen that, in *Americana*, David subscribes to a masculinity which is figured as containing structure, a city, a framework of sameness within which he is safe. In *Players* these structures are dismantled. The body of Jack, the clichéd 'muscled body against sky', is reduced to a 'stump' that carries associations of castration (p. 197)¹⁵⁶. A suicide note instructs Ethan where Jack's body can be found and confirms his identity, which otherwise would be impossible to verify (p. 198). The body is no longer legible and a text, a signature of authentication, is needed. Following the discovery of Jack's body, and Lyle's encounter with the 'plastic phallus', Lyle is subject to a different kind of destruction: psychic disintegration. These seem to precipitate an undoing of the 'palpable logic' of the cock within the context of a heterosexual relationship. Lyle senses that he is becoming disembodied. His memory of a recent trip becomes a story, 'half myth [...] as though he'd overheard descriptions of these areas, never having been there, physically, himself, scratching his ribs, a little dry in the throat'. He searches in vain for 'a sense of texture and dimension' (p. 158). While Jack's body is violently destroyed, Lyle's fades into obscurity, losing all defining characteristics. Lyle's body, at first strictly bounded, 'devoid of excess', now becomes insubstantial (p. 27). The novel ends with Lyle waiting, sitting on the bed in a motel room:

The whole room, the motel, is surrendered to [a] moment of luminous cleansing. Spaces and what they contain no longer account for, mean, serve as examples of, or represent.

fire' (p. 172). Pammy, Jack and Ethan play at being hunter-gatherers: Pammy, referring to their open fireplace, instructs them 'Fire come [...] Make big for heat the body', jokingly highlighting its primal resonance and the contrast with their affluent lives, in which earning money, ordering food to be delivered, and eating it are separated out into discrete and unconnected tasks (p. 136). Once again Pammy articulates her alienation from the essential needs for heat and food.

¹⁵⁵ Pammy marvels at the self control that must have been necessary to remain in the sitting position, perhaps alluding to her own lack of discipline to remain faithful to a partner, to resist decadent food (p. 198).

¹⁵⁶ Self-immolation appears again in *Cosmopolis*, at once a spectacular act of violence, and a tired trope: one observer declares 'it's not original [...] it's an appropriation' (2003, p. 100).

The propped figure, for instance, is barely recognizable as male. Shedding capabilities and traits by the second, he can still be described (but quickly) as well-formed, sentient and fair. We know nothing else about him. (p. 212)

Here the motel, an anonymous space, always in the process of becoming, contains a similarly anonymous subject¹⁵⁷. Identity is once again expressed as a tactile, gloopy mass: in *Point Omega* DeLillo refers to 'self in the soft wallow of what it knows' (2010, p. 79), and in *Players* DeLillo invokes 'the animal glue of physical properties and functions' (1977, p. 212) and refers to the substance of an idea as 'the edible flesh of this concept' (p. 210). Lyle loses purchase on the material world and lapses into blankness, adopting the indistinct quality of his environment, neither alive or dead but 'lost', as in Laura Tanner's formulation (2006). He becomes a puppet-like 'propped figure', like the helpless and ill-formed Mister Softee, immobile and 'barely' male (p. 36; p. 212). This is a manifestation of castration anxiety that is alluded to as Lyle carefully zips his fly, careful to avoid 'the primal snare' (p. 53). Lyle's fate is an absolute 'shedding' of identity, consigned not to death but to nothingness, a profound loss of selfhood¹⁵⁸. Tanner explains in her reading of *The Body Artist* that 'the dying body makes us flinch and look away, struggling not to see what we have seen' (2006, p. 2), which describes exactly Pammy's reaction to Jack's burned body: after glimpsing it she carefully ensures that she keeps an object between herself and the body, to conceal it from view (p. 197). In contrast, 'the lost body disappears from cultural view, buried along with the sensory traces of its corporeal presence' (Tanner, 2006, p. 2). Elsewhere, Jessie's body in *Point Omega* can be seen to occupy this ambiguous, 'lost' state, defined by uncertainty; 'one body, out there somewhere, or not' (2010, p. 124). This uncertain state of the 'lost' body is a kind of disappearance. And yet, in contrast, Pammy's sense of being-in-the-body becomes stronger, when she feels an uncomplicated hunger freed from guilt, and when she knowingly indulges the 'myth' of a forbidden dalliance on the beach, an encounter that in *Americana* represented

¹⁵⁷ In *Americana* the motel is a similarly transformative space, representing 'a repetition so insistent' that '[r]epeated endlessly on the way to your room [...] you can sit on your bed and become *man sitting on bed* [...] and become, if you choose, the man on the bed in the next room' (p. 257, original emphasis).

¹⁵⁸ In the same way, in *Falling Man* Rumsey, in dying, becomes 'the man' (2007, p. 243).

the pinnacle of the masculine body as powerful and desirable. Laura Tanner (2006), regarding the protagonist of *The Body Artist*, argues that the emergence of the supernatural during the grieving process 'reflects a rupture that emerges under the pressure of loss' (p. 133). This rupture is a result of 'irresolvable tensions that result from the culture's construction of artificial boundaries that divide the body from the embodied subject and displace the experience of grief from the culturally sanctioned language of loss'. The disintegration of Lyle as a character seems to be another kind of slippage, a break from reality and narrative coherence, in the face of inarticulable loss.

Conclusion

Alessandra De Marco argues that Pammy and Lyle 'participate in the fictitious vaporisation of social materiality that finance produces and structure their existences upon the workings of the medium of speculative capital in which they are immersed' (2013)¹⁵⁹. By contrast, I offer a new understanding of the novel, attending to the importance of materiality, and reading DeLillo's depictions of hunger and sexual desire as means of resisting and escaping confining ideological frameworks. We have seen that, in *Players*, the characters seek containment in everyday activities, from envelopes of soup to the act of signing a cheque, seeking relief from alienation and ennui. Pammy and Lyle's lives are suffused with a pervasive, inescapable meaninglessness, and their attempts to access experiences of emotional resonance through food and extramarital affairs fall flat. Immersed in the 'electronic clatter' of the stock exchange Lyle feels that he is 'part of a breathtakingly intricate quest for order and elucidation, for identity among the constituents of a system' (p. 28). This sense of a containing context is revealed to be illusory, in the same way as, in *White Noise* (1984), a character asserts that '[y]our whole life is a plot, a scheme, a diagram. It is a failed scheme but that's not the point' (pp. 291-292). DeLillo enacts an emasculating impulse through the destruction of male bodies. Jack's body first becomes the object of the female

¹⁵⁹ Elsewhere, this early and lesser-studied text tends to be read for its portrayal of terrorism, an early iteration of a theme that DeLillo develops in greater detail, and which takes on a more urgent significance, in *Mao II* (1991) and *Falling Man* (2007).

gaze, and then undergoes a horrific transformation. Gender roles are linked to consumption, and to the moral associations of “soft” versus “hard” bodies. In the novel, there is a dismantling of the cultural totem of the muscly, masculine body, and the 1970s era is characterized as a lapse into uncertainty which is reflected through food and tropes of consumption. The idealised masculine body is first proffered, and then consumed by fire. Tempting fruit is replaced with distasteful ice cream. The plot, affairs and terrorism, features bizarre acts and obscure motives. As Pammy and Lyle seek sexual fulfilment, the novel examines the post-Vietnam dismantling of categories previously held to be stable and meaningful. Consumerism and patriarchal masculinity are dismantled. The smiling figure of Mister Softee, face of the brand of soft serve ice cream, masks an obese, grotesque figure concealed in the truck¹⁶⁰. The tempting fruits brought home by Pammy are desirable only in the act of buying. The materiality of sex is no longer safely contained and sanctioned within legal and religious frameworks. The loss of these structures leaves the characters to fend for themselves, and to seek out their own kinds of fulfilment, that can be boiled down to an appetite for destruction and chaos, culminating with a horrific suicide, inexplicably transplanting an awful and spectacular act of political protest to a bourgeois context. If it is a protest, the message is unclear within the context of the lives and infidelities of affluent New Yorkers. Lyle finally loses his grip on selfhood entirely, and becomes anonymous in the novel’s final passage, ‘propped’, invoking the body of Mister Softee, unable to support his own weight, and ‘barely male’, reflecting the ‘stump’ of Jack’s burned body. As Lyle ‘sheds’ his identity entirely and becomes indistinct, he slips into total anonymity, Pammy is able to escape her passive role as a body to be consumed, an object to be acted upon, and it is her affair partner’s body that is finally consumed by fire. At one point Pammy attends a tap dancing class which brings temporary comfort, as for a moment she seems joyfully grounded in her body. Once again sense-making is connected to numbers and the act of counting, but here, crucially, Pammy’s relationship to her body is sensible and clearly articulated, as she

¹⁶⁰ In the same vein as the Gilded Age and the Big Apple, an emphasis on glossy surface belies the rottenness below.

revels in 'One's sense of the body as a coordinated organism able to make its own arithmetic' (p. 79)¹⁶¹.

¹⁶¹ While this moment only serves to highlight Pammy's negative relationship to body and space throughout the rest of the novel, it also lays the groundwork for female characters in later works, who attain agency and are able to render their experiences legible through artistic and embodied practice, in particular *Underworld*'s Klara Sax and Lauren of *The Body Artist*.

Conclusion

We can better understand the need for critical focus on the body in DeLillo through the proxy of David Foster Wallace, and Peter Sloane's monograph *David Foster Wallace and the Body* (2019). Sloane proceeds from his finding that Wallace 'foregrounds the corporeal, the condition of being awkwardly but irredeemably bound to a frequently wayward body' (p. 4). Sloane reads the opening of Wallace's first published work alongside the ending of his final work, and finds in both a preoccupation with bodies. Placing the two together evidences a development of these concerns across the oeuvre, of a 'more evolved awareness of and sensitivity to the wider physical and metaphysical implications of embodiment' (Sloane, 2019, p. 2). Sloane's aim is 'seeing embodiment, deformity, disability [...] not simply as facets of or supplements [...] to [Wallace's] pervasive concerns about the post-industrial neo-liberal condition, but as his defining and most persistent literary and personal preoccupation'. In doing so, Sloane works to address a gap in a field of Wallace criticism that tends to focus on 'language, communication, metafiction and contemporary writing, "ideas", the mind/body problem, popular culture, mass media, solipsism, loneliness', and Wittgenstein alongside a number of other philosophers. Sloane sees these concerns as united in their 'focus on the cerebral' and their 'intellectual inflection' (p. 6), and identifies a need to correct this; to proceed, in Wallace's words, 'at the level of the body'. Sloane's book-length elucidation of textual representations of the body in Wallace's work is a successful example of what insights can be generated from studying literary and philosophical engagements with embodiment. It is evident that the bodily concerns that Wallace explores across his fiction are stimulated by his well-documented fascination with bodies in DeLillo's oeuvre. Working back from Wallace's explicit debt to DeLillo, and Sloane's acknowledgement of the bodily concerns that shape Wallace's fiction, the gap in existing DeLillo criticism becomes visible. It is this gap that I seek to address. In terms of future directions for study, it is clear that bringing such questions to bear on the fiction of contemporary writers has important implications for understanding the precarious status of American culture. Exploring bodily

concerns in DeLillo's fiction opens up a particularly rich area of enquiry, because of the sheer breadth and variety of fiction that carries the mark of his influence. As Charles Finch states at the time of *Zero K*'s publication:

Now that we're some distance from his earlier career it seems increasingly clear that no writer of his era—not Pynchon, not Morrison, not Roth—has had anything close to his influence on American fiction. You see his fingerprints on the most diverse set of authors, from Jonathan Franzen to Rachel Kushner to Jennifer Egan to Adam Johnson to Colson Whitehead to Deborah Eisenberg. Any time a writer in the last 30 years has addressed mass culture or irony or late capitalism, DeLillo has been lurking (2016, n.p.).

In the case of *Falling Man* (2007), we have seen the ways in which DeLillo undermines the stability of language and the novel form, in his self-reflexive reckoning with the trauma of the September 11 terrorist attacks. Through the novel's two protagonists he portrays conflicting modes of thought: Keith clings on to words and numbers in search of a lost certainty, while Lianne embraces experiences that are at times inarticulable, and that that are felt in the body. The doubt which is cast upon the capacities of narrative form in the novel is not simply a response to an event that confounds understanding: rather it allows for an alternative register to emerge, in which trauma is engaged with and might be processed, through motion, gesture, and sensation. This suggests an ethical duty on the part of the writer, that they must refuse the temptation to offer an authoritative 'final word'. Looking to David Janiak, the performance artist known as Falling Man, we can see that his reenactments, or rearticulations of a falling body offer a new way of engaging with the event. He returns to a split-second image of a body, invisible to the naked eye, and prolongs and repeats the tableau, in re-stagings that cause the performer great physical harm. Here the actual violence of an artistic response seems to suggest the limited power of 'safe' artistic representation, as DeLillo undermines the use of allegory in *End Zone*: 'football is not warfare. Warfare is warfare'. The body of the Falling Man allows the recuperation of meaning through an embodied register.

The protagonists of *Mao II* (1991) and *The Body Artist* (2001) attempt to reckon with the destabilizing effects of anxiety and trauma by focusing on the processes of their bodies. In *Mao II*, author Bill Gray views gas pains, skipped heartbeats and mucus as his 'true biography'. In *The Body Artist*, performance artist Lauren Hartke is shored up in a time of grief and loss by bodily performance. Both protagonists are concerned with their body's processes and boundaries, as Bill pairs his creative "expression" with bodily wastes, and Lauren prepares for her performance art by methodically scrubbing her skin and trimming her nails. Both are confronted with a troubling undoing of categories, as Bill is pursued by a monstrous manifestation of his unfinished novel, and Lauren encounters the unboundaried Mr. Tuttle. Bill experiences pain as a strange and compelling force, which connects him up to his lived history. Through the struggle of both characters to maintain themselves as stable, embodied subjects, DeLillo gestures towards an alternative and unique 'language of self', and expresses the necessity of abjection in negotiating the mutual incommensurability of our subjectivities and our unstable bodies.

The body's emissions run throughout DeLillo's debut novel *Americana* (1971/1990) as a distasteful and suppressed undercurrent. Part one looks closely at the relationship between abject matter and America's abject body politic, while part two revisits and develops our understanding of the relationship between pain and identity in DeLillo's fiction. In *Americana*, waste matter at once represents the taboo of incestuous desire, and the grotesque elements upon which the nation is founded. These wastes are partially or improperly disposed of, as David contaminates an ice cube tray with his spit, and ejaculates onto a freshly made motel bed. These transgressive acts disrupt conventional societal processes, manifesting the threat that Žižek sums up as the 'ultimate horror', as

In our most elementary experience, when we flush the toilet, excrement simply disappear[s] out of our reality into another space [...] a netherworld, [...] and the ultimate horror of course is if the flushing doesn't work, if objects return, if excremental remainders return from that dimension.
(Žižek, in Fiennes, 2006, n.p.)

In *Americana* (DeLillo, 1971/1990), David's refusal to reject and cast out these wastes also disrupts Kristeva's model of abjection. Kristeva figures selfhood as an ongoing process of casting-out, expelling what is 'not me' (1982, p. 2), but David repurposes his bodily fluids to transgressive ends. This troubling of the bounds of matter and the categorization of waste anticipates DeLillo's broader attention to society's waste products in *Underworld*, not a 'noisome offshoot' (1997, p. 287), but a central material presence and tenet of civilisation, to which all of human activity occurs in response. The role of body matter as both excessive and concealed in DeLillo's debut novel paves the way for a more explicit 'scatological glee' (1971/1990, p. 94) which we see articulated in *Underworld* (1997). In *Underworld* DeLillo offers a different formulation of bodily wastes, in which the 'meditative pissing' in which Bill found comfort is made into a public enactment of group belonging. In the carnivalesque prologue, the onset of the Cold War is accompanied by a bizarre torrent of vomit. Striking portrayals of bodily wastes, which in *Americana* must be concealed, feature in an era of innocence soon to be lost, in which all human activity, including 'shit' and 'pisses' are meaningfully included. The onset of a new era of threat, then, is signalled by body wastes becoming distasteful matter to be cast out. The baseball game represents a dream of a prior age, in which a 'historical tide' of body wastes signifies connections of community and heritage. The fear of death in the form of the nuclear threat is imagined as a wholly new paradigm, in which bodily wastes become abject for the first time.

In these works, we have repeatedly seen a drive to manage excessive and chaotic lived experience within various 'safe' containing structures. In the 1977 novel *Players*, we see DeLillo working through a set of concerns familiar from the other texts. Here, through the characters of Pammy and Lyle, frameworks of finance capital and gendered power relations are troubled, and begin to symbolically break down. This disruption paves the way for the ongoing—at times quiet and subtle, at others explicit and impassioned—ways that DeLillo undermines and questions structures of thought, and suggests new ways that we might configure the frameworks by which we live. At the same time, these concerns are made specifically bodily, expressed through Pammy and Lyle's experiences of hunger and sexual

desire. Together, the novels engage with bodies that are unruly, excessive, joyfully or disgustingly leaky, resistant to technological frameworks, and impossible to fully capture within narrative. The body is a vulnerable and unstable entity, but also carries vital and prolific meaning. Consideration of the body cannot be separated from ‘man’s grand themes’, as, in *End Zone*, the bulk of a football player’s body is itself a source of almost holy wonder (2010, p. 124; 1972, p. 47). In *Underworld*, Russ Hodges narrates the baseball game, noting ‘Drag coefficients’, ‘trailing vortices’, ‘muscle memory and pumping blood and jots of dust, the narrative that lives in the spaces of the official play-by-play’ (1997, 27). We might understand DeLillo’s task as similarly attending to embodied experiences that are conventionally left ‘in the spaces’ or at the margins of narrative.

In the case of DeLillo’s most recent novel-length work, *Zero K*, we find that, strangely for a text that seems to promise a ‘leap out of our biology’ with its subject matter (*Point Omega*, 2010, p. 67), posthuman possibility in the novel is no more advanced than in the interactions of the body and technology in *Cosmopolis* (2003). As such, while *Zero K* (2016) certainly has details that would make for interesting analysis—it features mannequins and the naked bodies of subjects in their cryogenic pods—I have not selected it for sustained reading in the thesis. As Kavadlo states, the technological aspects of *Zero K*, and likewise of DeLillo’s most recent publication *The Silence* (2020), are a ‘misdirection’ (2020, n.p.). In the latter DeLillo imagines a worldwide shutdown of technology, but does not actually engage at any length with the implications of such an event, or detail how it would play out. Instead he focuses on a small cast of five characters as they attempt to get to grips with their new reality. In this sense *The Silence* ‘largely ignores its premise’, and in the same way *Zero K*, a novel ‘ostensibly about cryogenics’ is not offering new formulations of posthuman becoming, as its setting might suggest (Kavadlo, 2020, n.p.). Donna Haraway, in her influential 1985 essay ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’ uses the figure of the cyborg as a means to explore the rejection of rigid boundaries which separate categories, particularly human and animal, human and machine. I have argued that the leap to posthuman or transhuman modes of being is considered in DeLillo’s fiction, but never quite made: as we have seen, the indulgence of

posthuman possibility is firmly and repeatedly curtailed. This apparent wariness or reluctance to engage with the posthuman is an interesting aspect of DeLillo's work that warrants further study. The approach of the novelist when faced with developments in technology is ethically loaded, as we saw with the writer's task when taking on great tragedies, with DeLillo's writing of 9/11. If DeLillo elected to indulge his fictional billionaires (Eric Packer, Ross Lockhart), and to take us along with them 'into the future tense', then we would be required to overlook the fact that new technologies, and the drive towards immortality that they bring, are starkly at odds with the realities of life for the majority of Americans. The dystopian, sci fi trope of extreme social division and inequality resonates starkly with the current organisation of wealth in the U.S., and as a result there is an ethical need for DeLillo's chronicle of American culture to remain firmly fixed on material bodies. A stark lack of social and economic support networks means that large parts of the population live under the constant threat that their bodies, vulnerable to injury and disease, will fail to work properly, and they will be unable to survive. To imagine escape from these conditions as anything other than a fantasy, preserve of the very richest, would undo DeLillo's commitment to showing us the contours of everyday life.

'The Itch', *The Silence*

In contrast to the shattering moments of violence we have encountered through America's recent history, such as the events of 9/11, signified by a name which takes on the quality of a 'ritual incantation' (Derrida, cited in Borradori, 2003, p. 86), Jesse Kavadlo identifies of our present moment that

one of the most difficult aspects of 2020 is that unlike other, singular, dated catastrophic events in the US—Kennedy's assassination, 9/11—we have nothing specific to point to, no "where were you when..." elegies. We were all home or went home. Everything changed, and nothing happened.
(2020, n.p.)

Kavadlo reads *The Silence* as foreshadowing this sense, primarily a work in which 'nothing happens'. The Coronavirus pandemic represents a new kind of historical development, not a

sudden breach, like the 'seven seconds that broke the back of the American century' (*Libra*, 1988, p. 181), but a more ambiguous movement, a worldwide crisis which is, for long stretches, experienced as stasis and boredom.

Within the stark and bare setting of *The Silence*, the forces that manoeuvre a body into a room are thrown into sharp relief, for example in the way that characters differently occupy a chair: Max 'was accustomed to being sedentary, attached to a surface, his armchair, sitting, watching' (p. 19). In contrast, the younger man Martin 'barely occupied a chair, seemed only fitfully present' (p. 22). The font of the text, published in hardcover by Picador, mimics that of a manual typewriter. The unusual choice of typeface gestures towards a re-embodiment of the 'hammers striking the page' (Bachner, 2011, p. 123)¹⁶². The force and effort required to press the keys of the machine is central to Sally Bachner's reading of DeLillo, and she relates his use of the typewriter to a 'violent politics of language'. Henry Veggian asserts that '[t]he "typescript" look of *The Silence* suggests [an] optimism. The older mechanical technologies won't fail us when the screens stop emitting signals' (2020, n.p.). This reading suggests that storytelling will prevail beyond the rise and fall of technology, an emphasis on a return to concrete interactions and material objects that is reflected in the epigraph of the short text: DeLillo opens with a quote from Albert Einstein, stating that 'I do not know with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones'. This emphasis on the material is seen to prevail, no matter how spare and minimal the text. In *The Silence*, amidst an apparent global failure of technology, Jim and Tessa survive when their plane crash lands: while suspended as 'Man' and 'Woman' aboard the plane, they come into being on the ground. They visit a clinic seeking medical help for Jim's head wound, and have sex in the bathroom, before 'crudely wip[ing] each other with tissues from the dispenser adjacent to the mirror' (p. 57). A receptionist at the hospital declares 'I have nothing to do with actual human bodies. No look,

¹⁶² In the final days before submitting my PhD I have a pronounced ache in my arm. I am typing on a laptop and I can only imagine the pain and the developing muscles in the hand that must come from typing such volumes on a manual typewriter. In this sense DeLillo's particular method of working takes on an almost religious quality, as penance, self-flagellation.

no touch. I will send you to an examining room [...] where a trained individual will either treat you or send you to someone else somewhere else' (pp. 58-59). Yet, noticing Jim's injury, she declares 'okay I see the wound and I can say without hesitation that you need to go down the hall, third room on the left' (p. 62). A medical framework leads not to understanding and relief here, but absurdity. Elsewhere, in *Ratner's Star*, we see a humorously vain attempt at summing up the wealth of human sensation, with a list of possible ailments that concludes with a deceptively simple alternative: 'other' (See Figure 5). The plane in its crash landing is figured as 'A wobbling mass of metal, glass and human life, down out of the sky' (p. 37). But in surviving, the couple seem to emerge from the abject configuration unscathed. In the aftermath, trying to decipher the blur of events leading up to the crash, Tessa wants to touch the cut on Jim's forehead, 'a laceration [...] maybe she thought this would help them remember' (p. 38).

In *Falling Man*, we saw Keith attempt to recover order from chaos by deferring to the authority of texts and documents, and recoup a stable relation to the world through counting. Standing in his ruined apartment, he looks at the building opposite and 'began to count the floors, losing interest about halfway up, thinking of something else' (2007, p. 27). In 'The Itch' (2017), the protagonist Robert carries out a similar act, in which his environment is itself likened to a text:

In the office he sat at his desk, left wrist in the prime of its morning itch, and he looked out the window, his eyes sweeping across the face of the building in the semi-distance, revisiting the horizontal pattern of the windows. He looked left to right, reading the windows like a book, line by line. (n.p.)

Robert is 'forty-four years old, trapped in his body. Arms, legs, torso'. He suffers from an inexplicable itch which migrates across 'both thighs, the crook of each elbow, left ankle, then right'¹⁶³. Scratching meets 'a creaturely need. The right hand on the left forearm [...] at first he uses his fingertips to ease the itch but in time the hand is in motion and the fingernails are

¹⁶³ Robert also resorts to counting, in a further similarity to Keith: 'He decided to climb the stairs to his office, eleventh floor, [...] Halfway up the first flight he began counting the steps and then decided that he needed to go back to the bottom step and start over, properly, from one' (2017, n.p.).

digging in like an earthmoving machine'. Medical intervention, 'the ointments and hypoallergenic creams, the super-high-potency corticosteroids', seem to have no effect. Similarly to *The Silence*, world events are menacing but nonspecific, alluded to as 'the current situation, non-stop global turmoil', 'men firing guns nationwide', a speaker 'naming countries and circumstances' (2017, n.p.). These vague terms, juxtaposed with the nature of Robert's job, 'the delivery of home-health-care services to disabled consumers of illegal drugs' implies a societal sickness. Robert attempts to rationalise the itch as 'sense data from the exterior, caused by some outlying substance, unanalyzable, the air in the room or on the street or in the atmosphere itself, a corruption of the planetary environment'. His suffering, 'belly down in bed, a raw body in cotton pajamas, awash in creams and lotions, trying not to scratch or rub', offers an anguished counter to Lauren's careful scraping and scrubbing (*The Body Artist*, 2001, p. 80). Robert's friend Joel, an amateur poet, states 'I think of the itch in world history and my mind goes blank'. He feels the need for resonance, 'a context that you can work with. A famous statesman scratching in secret [...] [o]r Biblical [...] You might find that you're part of a great narrative, thousands of years'. He strives to understand 'the itch as a symbol'. Meanwhile Joel wants to discuss Robert's itch and not his own poetry, in a contrasting aversion to interpretation: 'Joel would not discuss the lines. They were just the lines. The spacing, also, was simply what it was. The space breaks, the word breaks, the dangling word'. Robert seems content to accept the itch with a similar absolving of interpretive control, as we have seen in Eric Packer, who is instructed to release his anxiety about a plug of sebum, and to 'let it express itself', and like Lianne's resolve, viewing the Morandi paintings, to 'let the latent meaning turn and bend in the wind, free from authoritative comment' (2007, p. 12).

Robert sits across from the woman he is seeing, 'marooned in his slanted body posture'. Meanwhile he is transfixed by his partner's body, 'not an erotic set of curves but something even more wondrous, the basic body, the primitive physical structure':

her body, here, in the chair across the table, the human, the person, the mass of flesh and blood ascendant over hundreds of thousands of years or more, millions of years, a body no different, essentially, in its sheer bodiness, from the humped and half-crawling forms that preceded it. (2017, n.p.)

Here the body is an archive. While Lauren's 'solemn self-absorption' with which she scrapes a callus on her foot 'marks a line from childhood' (2001, p. 80), for Robert, the body of his partner contains and conveys not only an individual identity, but the entirety of human history. We encounter a companion to Bill's 'shitpile of hopeless prose' (1991, p. 159):

There were times, standing over the toilet bowl at home, when he heard what sounded like words as his urine hit the water in the bowl. [...] He heard the semblance of a tiny voice saying a word and then maybe another word. Joel declares "*Zaum*. Transrational poetry. A hundred years ago. Words that have shapes and sounds". (2017, n.p.)

A character in *The Silence* refers specifically to the importance of the archive, the beauty of Einstein's handwriting. This is reminiscent of DeLillo's discussion, in interview, of the shapes of words on the page, as he notes the pleasing detail that the word 'bed' resembles a bed.

Returning to 'The Itch', Robert muses on his partner's name:

Her name was Ana with a single "n", and this was a fragment of information that interested him. The fact of the missing "n". He liked to scribble the name, pencil on notepad, large "A", small "n", small "a". In the office he entered the name on his desktop device in different fonts, or all caps, or upside down, or cursive, or boldface, or in the characters of remote non-Roman alphabets. (2017, n.p.)

For Robert, being embodied is unbearable, pathological, and the story ends with the man consumed by the itch, 'funnelled into himself, no past or future, the living itch, man-shaped, Robert T. Waldron, thinking incoherently, a body in a bedsheet'.

Please refrain from smoking out of consideration for the driver of this vehicle, who suffers from:

<input type="checkbox"/> Hypertension	<input type="checkbox"/> Walking pneumonia
<input type="checkbox"/> Tuberculosis	<input type="checkbox"/> Smoke-related allergies
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Asthma	<input type="checkbox"/> Labored breathing
<input type="checkbox"/> Bronchial asthma	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other

Figure 5: Checklist of medical conditions from *Ratner's Star* (1976)

While Kristeva asks, 'How can I be without border?' (1982, p. 4), literature enacts this very impossibility, dissolving borders between the text and the reader, asking us to think, impossibly, into the 'true life' of another. It is in this act of wilful, creative transgression, a crossing of boundaries on the part of both the writer and the reader, that the unique power of fiction lies, to convey the various textures of human experience rather than simply seek to describe them, in a way that theory and philosophy cannot. DeLillo continuously draws our attention to the nature of language as an imperfect and limited tool, but beyond this self-reflexive assessment his narratives offer us something much more hopeful. DeLillo allows us to glimpse 'the shock, the power of an ordinary life [...] a thing you could not invent with banks of computers in a dust-free room' (1997, p. 308). These words are spoken by Marvin Lundy, on the search for the baseball through its previous owners, and are reworked a few pages later as 'the shock of lives unlike your own [...] the bone cancer kid [...] the woman with the chipped tooth'. Marvin Lundy muses on these ailments, both minor and profound, as he notes his own: 'stomach acting up again' (p. 317).

Lianne in *Falling Man*, who is confronted with the falls of the performance artist, defers to the wordless power of the artwork, to meanings that might 'turn and bend [...] free from authoritative comment' (2007, p. 12). DeLillo's texts defer to prelinguistic babble, and finally to silence. DeLillo navigates the precarious, contrary position of spelling out meaningful, powerful ideas in his narratives, and at the same time reminding the reader of the limitations of the form. DeLillo insists that 'Every lost moment is the life' (p. 79), and that

'The true life is not reducible to words spoken or written, not by anyone, ever' (p. 21)¹⁶⁴. In *Americana*, the 'sheer thunder' of a memory, of a hand holding a cigarette, cuts through the narrative and seems for a moment to put DeLillo's fictional project to shame. My attempt to track and interpret these concerns must, finally, be acknowledged as having its limits, an attempt to freeze DeLillo's body of work, as unsatisfying as an attempt to halt the chaotic heterogeneity of lived, embodied experience, and to preserve it in full so that it might be reanimated at a later date: to 'put the body on ice in a plastic bag', like the archival materials that are literally frozen to kill microscopic insect life. The unruly texts must in the end, be left to speak for themselves.

DeLillo's subjects imagine order triumphing over chaos, through frameworks such as sport and medical discourse, but mainly and repeatedly through language. *End Zone*'s characters strive for order through straight lines and circles¹⁶⁵. Elsewhere characters are repeatedly troubled by symptoms, a tumour in the shape of a mushroom, an asymmetrical prostate, which seem to carry a significance that medical frameworks cannot account for. In *Cosmopolis* Benno Levin, the man who murders the protagonist Eric Packer, declares that 'He is dead, word for word', but this equivalence breaks down along with the speaker's authority: 'There was a brief sound in his throat that I could spend weeks trying to describe. But how can you make words out of sounds? These are two separate systems that we miserably try to link' (2003, p. 55). We encounter different kinds of transformation throughout the novels, through bodies that break down and are remade. *Point Omega* ponders an alternative formulation, articulating humanity's death drive: 'matter wants to lose its self-consciousness [...] we want to be the dead matter we used to be' (2010, p. 64). The technology of violence of the Iraq War represents 'a leap out of our biology' and climax of human development, after which; 'Back now to inorganic matter. This is what we want. We

¹⁶⁴ 'Every lost moment is the life. It's unknowable except to us, each of us inexpressibly, this man, that woman. [...] It's what we call self, the true life, he said, the essential being. It's self in the soft wallow of what it knows, and what it knows is that it will not live forever' (*Point Omega*, 2010 p. 79).

¹⁶⁵ In *End Zone*, the complexity of human life is condensed down to a single act: a player running in a straight line (the home run of *Underworld*'s prologue, in which the batter makes a complete circuit of the bases, is a movement that carries a similar sense of completion and self-containment).

want to be stones in a field' (p. 67). This apocalyptic return echoes the fear of an earlier period. In *End Zone*, Gary imagines mass destruction as an image imitating the 'roadkill' he sees on the way to the college: 'men embedded in the ground, all killed, billions, flesh cauterized into the earth, bits of bone and hair and nails'. Yet this grisly imagery represents a new formulation, humanity reborn as 'man-planet, a fresh intelligence revolving through the system' (1972, p. 84). In Gary's musings, this brings with it a new utopian language, in contrast to the excessively signifying shit. It would be possible 'To begin to reword the overflowing world. [...] To re-recite the alphabet. To make elemental lists. To call something by its name and need no other sound' (p. 84). Here Gary yearns for a delivery from chaotic embodied experience. The terror in Gary's encounter with an anonymous mound of excrement points to the capacity of abject matter to profoundly challenge the body schema: here, the excrement represents the ongoing exchange of matter between body and world, prompting a disintegration of the imagined 'clean and proper' body (Kristeva, 1982, p. 101), secure in its boundaries and wholly distinct from the external world. DeLillo's oeuvre is an elucidation of a U.S. culture over the span of several decades marked by several historical ruptures, events of shattering and confounding violence. DeLillo's prose is at once verbose, eloquent, a carefully crafted celebration of excess, and yet defers to the unspeakable, to resonances that remain beyond language and to which narrative can only gesture¹⁶⁶. At the heart of this investigation, as readers of DeLillo we encounter the material body and its realities, both dull and radiant, commonplace and astounding.

¹⁶⁶ This contrast is particularly apparent when we consider the very long texts in juxtaposition with the very short works and the ascetic prose characteristic of his later style. Ed Caesar declares that '*Point Omega* and *Underworld* do not read like the work of the same author. One is a carnival, the other a chess game' (2010, n.p.). Scholars have noted this duality, following DeLillo's articulation of 'magic and dread', the principle by which Osteen organises his 2000 monograph, or 'a kind of radiance in dailiness' (DeLillo, cited in Decurtis, 1988, n.p.). This phrase is recapitulated in DeLillo's short play, 'The Mystery at the Middle of Ordinary Life' (2000). A character in *Players* describes a similar duality to embodiment: 'Death is a religious experience [...] it is also nuts-and-boltsy. Something fails to work, you die. A demonstrable consequence' (1977, p. 63). In *The Body Artist* grief is articulated as 'lurid ruin' (2001, p. 116). I find a similar duality in the transgressive elements of *Americana*, which are both joyful and hateful, as in the pairing of 'dull and lurid' and the 'terrible gleaming mudcunt'. In the same way, humour and violence are never far apart, as in *Americana* a character states that 'We are the only nation that has funny violence' (1971/1990, p. 364).

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