

Wallowing in the “Great Dark Lake of Male Rage:” The Masculine Ecology of Don DeLillo's White Noise

Jeanne Hamming (Centenary College of Louisiana)¹

Abstract

This essay explores Don DeLillo's White Noise in terms of Jack Gladney's crisis of masculinity, which is bound up in a longing for the protagonist to return to nature, which figures in the novel as the last bastion of authentic masculinity. As critics of White Noise have clearly established, Jack suffers from a discernible cultural malaise—a sense of profound dislocation in the midst of technological hypermediations of self and reality. I extend this reading of the novel by arguing that this cultural malaise prompts in Jack nostalgia for an imaginary moment when masculine subjectivity was constituted by and through an intimate relation to pre-technological nature. This conception of nature as the site of pristine masculinity, as is indicated by Jack's preoccupation with pre-modern warriors like Attila the Hun and Genghis Kahn, draws on a host of conceptual affiliations between nature and masculinity—immediacy, authenticity, corporeality, essence—that have long been mobilized in the recapitulation of American masculinity. Ironically, the novel enacts Jack's refusal of a culturally-mediated (even technologically-mediated) sense of self through his reliance on cultural nostalgia for a more “authentic,” more “natural” reality. This nostalgia ultimately incites violence as Jack retreats into essentialist conceptions of masculinity that appear, to the main character at least, as his only defense against the artifice and uncertainty of postmodernity.

I see contemporary violence as a sardonic response to the promise of consumer fulfillment in America. Again we come back to these men in small rooms who can't get out and who have to organize their desperation and their loneliness, who have to give it a destiny and who often end up doing this through violent means. I see this desperation against the backdrop of brightly colored packages and products[...]
Don DeLillo [1]

¹ Jeanne Hamming, PhD Department of English Centenary College of Louisiana 2911 Centenary Blvd Shreveport, LA 71134-1188 jhamming@centenary.edu

Early in *White Noise* Don DeLillo describes a suburban highway as a constant stream that "washes past, a remote and steady murmur...babbling at the edge of a dream" (4). This superimposition of suburban cultural landscape over a once wild nature appears throughout *White Noise*, for instance, in this passage: "Babette and I and our children by previous marriages live at the end of a quiet street in what was once a wooded area with deep ravines" (4). This image and others in the novel, point to the rampant suburbanization that has transformed nature, a "wooded area with deep ravines," into culture, a middle-class neighborhood at "the end of a quiet street." Yet this transformation impacts more than the landscape; protagonist Jack Gladney, the novel suggests, has also been domesticated by the conversion of a once wild nature into suburbia.

This essay explores *White Noise* in terms of the crisis of masculinity so central to the novel yet frequently overlooked by critics. This crisis is bound up in a longing for the protagonist to return to nature, which figures in the novel as the last bastion of authentic masculinity. As critics of *White Noise* have clearly established, Jack suffers from a discernible cultural malaise—a sense of profound dislocation in the midst of technological hypermediations of self and reality. I extend this reading by arguing that this cultural malaise prompts in Jack nostalgia for an imaginary moment when masculine subjectivity was constituted by and through an intimate relation to pre-technological nature. This conception of nature as the site of pristine masculinity is indicated throughout the novel by Jack's preoccupation with pre-modern warriors like Attila the Hun and Genghis Kahn. Jack's idolizing of these figures draws on a host of conceptual affiliations between nature and masculinity—immediacy, authenticity, corporeality, essence—that have long been mobilized in the recapitulation of American masculinity. Ironically, the novel enacts Jack's refusal of a culturally-mediated (even technologically-mediated) sense of self through his reliance on cultural nostalgia for a more "authentic," more "natural" reality. This nostalgia ultimately incites violence as Jack retreats into essentialist conceptions of masculinity that appear, to the main character at least, as his only defense against the artifice and uncertainty of postmodernity. These "essentialist retreats," signified by repeated articulations of nature as the site of authentic masculinity as well as by representations of Jack's wife, Babette, as a maternal "earth mother" figure in whom Jack seeks refuge, reflect a larger complex of American masculinity marked by violence, domination, and nature-escapism. In this respect, *White Noise* operates as a nostalgic elegy for a sufficient masculinity imagined as having once been found in nature but is now disappearing in the midst of technological encroachments on a previously impervious masculine corporeality. [2]

Jack's crisis of masculinity is posited in the novel as a side effect of his successful academic career at the "College on the Hill," his bustling suburban home, and his tendencies toward rampant consumerism through which he seeks "replenishment" and "well-being" (20). All of these characteristics operate as part of the larger complex of the "feminine and urban," to use John Frow's term, that alienates Jack from traditional categories of masculine behavior that rely on images of the male body as rugged, hard, and impenetrable. Even the name of the college, through its allusion to John Winthrop's early American "City Upon a Hill," reminds the reader that Jack's everyday existence is defined in terms of its (feminizing) civility and cultivation, a stark contrast to the unbridled wilderness that early American settlers looked upon with such enmity and fear but which later became invested as the last bastion of rugged frontier masculinity.

This image of rugged masculinity is reiterated in the culture of nineteen-eighties America through the mass-media's popularization of manly-man action films. In fact, Jack's crisis, his response to the daily bombardment of mass-mediated images of the male body, corresponds historically with what Susan Jeffords has dubbed the age of "male rampage films": *First Blood* (1982), *Commando* (1985) and *Die Hard* (1988) (15). According to Jeffords, the hard bodies that burst out of their shirts and on to the screen in Reagan's eighties--Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger--exemplified a masculinist response to 1970s liberal feminism and the "new age sensitive guy" that threatened to soften the heretofore rigid boundaries of gendered identities in American cultural life. The "remasculinization of America" during the Reagan era perpetuates a version of masculinity defined in essentialist, and we might even say nostalgic, terms. [3] Recall Robert Bly's mythopoetic cult of masculinity, which invited men to tap into their inner "wild man" that had been repressed by the feminizing effects of civilization. [4]

In an ironic twist, these Hollywood hard bodies who became mass-media emblems of Bly's "Iron John" are themselves products of an American culture addicted to the voyeuristic technologies of film and television: "CABLE HEALTH, CABLE WEATHER, CABLE NEWS, CABLE NATURE" (DeLillo 231). Eighties action heroes, augmented by technological embellishments such as steroids, make-up, lighting, special effects, and trick photography, popularized muscle-bound ex-military men like John Rambo (Stallone in *First Blood*) and Col. John Matrix (Schwarzenegger in *Commando*). These technologically manufactured celebrities point quite blatantly to the hypermediacy of hard body masculinity while, at the same time, they offer audiences ideologically purified narratives of anti-modern masculinity.

These films, in which masculinity is constituted through the hero's association with nature, corporeality, and violence, are also mediated through the cultural and technological mechanisms of Hollywood film, which produce impossible ideals of American masculinity. By comparison, Jack fails to measure up. His body, unlike his Hollywood hard body counterparts, is soft, corpulent, and exposed. The closest Jack comes to the traditional world of men is to participate in "pissing contests" with colleagues. But even these contests amount to little more than absurd academic debates about the "culture of public toilets" (68). One colleague muses,

"These are the things they don't teach," Lasher said. "Bowls with no seats. Pissing in sinks. The culture of public toilets. All those great diners, movie houses, gas stations. The whole ethos of the road. I've pissed in sinks all through the American West. I've slipped across the border to piss in sinks in Manitoba and Alberta. This is what it's all about. The great western skies. The Best Western motels. The diners and drive-ins. The poetry of the road, the plains, the desert. The filthy stinking toilets. I pissed in a sink in Utah when it was twenty-two below. That's the coldest I've ever pissed in a sink in." (68)

Here DeLillo blends images of the open road and "great western skies" with commercial icons like "Best Western motels." Nostalgia for a simpler, more rugged past is situated within and produced out of a postmodern consumer landscape. These "pissing" contests fall considerably short as demonstrations of masculine bravado, especially when they are compared to Stallone suturing his own flesh wounds in *First Blood* or Jesse Ventura's famous line in *Predator*: "I ain't got time to bleed!" Even Babette's aging and broken-down father, Vernon Dickey, with his hands "[s]carred, busted,

notched, permanently seamed with grease and mud" and his innate knack for home repairs, seems, to Jack, an indictment of his own failed manhood (245).

Each instance of Jack's failed masculinity foregrounds DeLillo's cynicism and, I think, a larger cultural cynicism about the ideological fantasy of a violent, primitive masculinity perpetuated through the very technologies of the mass-media such versions of masculinity supposedly refuse. "Cynical reason," as Slavoj Žižek explains, "with all its ironic detachment, leaves untouched the fundamental level of ideological fantasy, the level on which ideology structures social reality itself" (*Sublime* 30). Defined by Žižek as the "paradox of enlightened false consciousness," cynicism offers insight into how *White Noise* both critiques and maintains essentialist notions of masculinity. This cynicism is demonstrated through the numerous scenes in which Jack's efforts to live up to a rugged, natural masculine identity are undercut. Take, for instance, this passage in which Jack attempts to evacuate his family during the airborne toxic event by trailing an SUV filled with rugged outdoorsmen:

Not ten yards away a group of men proceeded calmly to a Land-Rover. They resembled instructors in jungle warfare, men with lean frames and long boxy heads. They drove straight into dense underbrush, not only away from the dirt road but away from all the other cars attempting shortcuts. Their bumper sticker read GUN CONTROL IS MIND CONTROL. In situations like this, you want to stick close to people in right-wing fringe groups. They've practiced staying alive. I followed with some difficulty, our smallish wagon jouncing badly in brush tangles, up inclines, over hidden stones. Inside five minutes the Land-Rover was out of sight. (157)

As this tongue-in-cheek passage suggests, DeLillo is well aware of the absurdity of such rugged iconography that attests to a nostalgia for an imaginary, hypermasculine past. At the same time, however, *White Noise* appears to uphold the cultural fantasy of a primitive masculinity predicated on violence as the underlying driving logic of the plot: "All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plots, narrative plots" (26). Violence compels Jack to attempt murder; despite his short-comings as a rugged "manly-man," he still feels compelled to resort to violence and murder to defend his masculine ego, as if such actions were "only natural."

By focusing on the soft-underbelly that is rejected by these manly-man images, DeLillo seems cynical about such absurd portrayals of hypermasculinity. Yet this cynicism doesn't amount to an outright rejection of these images either. Rather, the novel presents a version of male hysteria, characterized by Jack's striving to live up to this impossible masculine ideal, predicated on both an implicit recognition of these hypermediated images as the standard *and* a refusal of the very mass media so central to these images' cultural delivery. Paradoxically, if authentic masculinity is determined by the materiality of the body and the *naturalness* of the male form, then hypermasculine media-representations set the standard even as they operate as the antithesis of authentic masculinity.

Because Jack experiences himself more as "the sum of [his] data" than as a whole person, he feels estranged from his own body, which has been invaded by a foreign and unnatural toxin (140). Confused by a SIMUVAC volunteer who informs Jack that his personal data profile reveals "bracketed numbers and pulsing stars," Jack complains, "A

network of symbols has been introduced, an entire awesome technology wrested from the gods. It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying" (141, 142). Take, for another example, this later scene in which Jack attempts to jog across the college campus:

It felt strange to be running. I hadn't run in many years and didn't recognize my body in this new format, didn't recognize the world beneath my feet, hard-surfaced and abrupt. (186)

In these passages, Jack's sense of estrangement from his body--his becoming "a stranger in [his] own dying"--is scaled up so that he also feels out of place in the physical world. Jack's inability to map himself within what he perceives as an inauthentic, hypermediated reality perpetuates his obsession with mortality and his desire to access the "real," the "hard," "abrupt" surface from which he feels cut off. In fact, throughout *White Noise*, Jack suffers from "death sweats," moments of overwhelming anxiety that situate his fear of mortality within a more generalized framework of estrangement, from his own body but also from the traditional world of men.

Jack's fear of dying is perpetuated by the disconnection he feels from the natural world. The *unnatural* suburban community in which he lives is plagued by strange odors, airborne toxic events, and chemically-induced, "postmodern sunsets." In this way, the novel's postmodern landscape becomes the technologically-saturated backdrop to Jack's crisis. His fear intensifies when his body is exposed, even penetrated, by the toxic chemical by-product, Nyodene D. Exposure to the chemical leaves Jack feeling self-alienated and out of control. In a related scene, Jack is confronted by the possibility that newly developed scientific treatments could cure human emotion by affecting one's brain chemistry. He responds almost hysterically.

"Are you telling me that a whole tradition of human failings is now at an end, that cowardice, sadism, molestation are meaningless terms? Are we being asked to regard these things nostalgically? *What about murderous rage? A murderer used to have a certain fearsome size to him. His crime was large.*" (200; italics mine)

In this passage, the advances of science stand in for technology as a whole which mediates "human nature," producing, in response, a primitive anxiety, a nostalgia for a less advanced, more immediate relation to the Real when violence was imagined as a natural consequence of biological processes.

Early in the novel we learn that Jack carefully cultivates his larger-than-life persona to disguise his lack of a "certain fearsome size" (17). In order to "grow into and develop toward" Hitler, Jack changes his name to J.A.K. Gladney, gains weight, and wears dark-framed glasses along with a black, billowing robe (17). Nonetheless, Jack remains the "false character that follows the name around" (17). Jack's fascination with Hitler indicates the severity of his masculine anxiety. He says to his stepdaughter Denise,

"Look at it this way. Some people always wear a favorite color. Some people carry a gun. Some people put on a uniform and feel bigger, stronger, safer. It's in this area that my obsessions dwell." (63)

Foreshadowing the violence that occurs at the close of the novel ("Some people carry a gun"), this passage reveals the relationship between Jack's incessant attacks of anxiety and his need to feel "bigger, stronger, safer." Jack even feels compelled to name his son "Heinrich Gerhardt" to endow him with a Nazi-like masculinity:

"I thought it had an authority that might cling to him. I thought it was forceful and impressive and I still do. I wanted to shield him, make him unafraid. People were naming their children Kim, Kelly and Tracy." (63)

The authority supposedly lent to Jack's son can hardly go unnoticed for its refusal of more androgynous names, such as "Kim, Kelly and Tracy." Jack's act of naming, and his previous act of renaming (from "Jack" to "J.A.K."), marks the substitution of the thing (a stable, authentic identity) with an image (Jack's disturbing association of a strength, authority, and authenticity with Nazi Germany). Such a substitution invokes essentialist notions of gender in order to cover over the fact that these images (and thus masculinity itself) are themselves imaginary.

Likewise, Jack attempts to purchase masculine authority at the local mall. When his ego suffers a serious blow after a colleague catches him without his academic costume and remarks, "You look so harmless, Jack. A big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy" (83), Jack takes to heart the consumer-capitalist maxim, "You are what you buy," and whips himself into a consumerist frenzy, buying item after needless item:

I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed. Brightness settled around me...The more money I spent, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. These sums poured off my skin like so much rain. These sums in fact came back to me in the form of existential credit. I felt expansive, inclined to be sweepingly generous...I gestured in what I felt was an expansive manner. I could tell they were impressed...I myself was not to be bothered with tedious details. I was the benefactor, the one who dispenses gifts, bonuses, bribes, *baksheesh*. (84)

Through this and other moments of consumerism, Jack attempts to regain a sense of patriarchal authority and entitlement defined by rituals of benefaction or "baksheesh." Yet these traditional patriarchal rituals, conceived of by Jack as originary and authentic, are themselves perpetuated by a consumerist logic that relies on contingent identity categories like *husband*, *father*, and *patriarch* for its momentum and penetrability into the everyday lives of consuming Americans. Jack's enthusiastic participation in a cultural heritage defined by traditional and hierarchical categories of gender links him to figures like Hitler and Attila the Hun who represent for Jack a lost era of masculine stoicism. At the same time, Jack's shopping spree reinscribes him into a culture of consumption defined in the novel as inauthentic and therefore, according to Frow's reading, feminizing, thus trapping Jack within the circular logic of consumerism that requires him to purchase masculine authenticity as a "form of existential credit" (84). Jack's reliance on consumerism as a means to shore up his masculinity reflects the masculinity movements of the eighties and nineties. These homosocial retreats that offered white, middle-class males hyperreal, simulated spaces in which to enact their masculinity, relied on images of the untamed wilderness and overvaluations of violence (hunting, martial games) for their articulations of a rugged pre-modern manhood. More

importantly, as Michael Kimmel points out, these men's retreats amounted to cultural appropriations of "Native American and nonindustrial ritualism" (317).

The search for the wild warrior within leads men's movement scions to wander through anthropological literature like postmodern tourists, as if the world's cultures were arrayed like so many ritual boutiques in a global shopping mall...This is all slapped together in a ritual pastiche—part Asian, part African, part Native American. And all totally decontextualized. (Kimmel 319).

These rituals extended beyond the boundaries of the woods through consumerist activities, namely men's outdoor clothing trends and the explosive popularity of Sport Utility Vehicles like the Land Rover (Kimmel 310-311).

In his discussion of cultural nostalgia, Baudrillard writes that when reality is subsumed within the social realm, our desire for authenticity intensifies. Or, to return to the language of DeLillo's novel and its preoccupation with technological mediations of Reality, "[t]he greater the scientific advance, the more primitive the fear" (DeLillo 161). As Baudrillard points out, nostalgia is not a longing for a sense of immediacy that once was "real" and is now abolished. It is a longing for a subjective relation to reality that never existed in the first place, but is itself a mediated and mediating fantasy structure. This structure is, in turn, linked to a materiality associated ideologically with nature. Put somewhat differently, nostalgia for a primary Reality is an ideological process, a primitivist fantasy that covers over our realization that there is no such thing as primary Reality.

In DeLillo's novel, images of primitive or prehistorical nature occupy the same conceptual space as primary Reality, and both signify an authenticity that is always already revealed as a fantasy structure, as a symptom of cultural nostalgia for a simpler, anti-modern past. It is a past idealized for its supposed simplicity, stability, and tradition. This fantasy of an idealized past is articulated in the novel through images of hybrid spaces where nature has been reconstituted as a kind of postmodern technopastoral. In such scenes a grid of consumer products produces a *second nature* as the hypermediated site of a postmodern Golden Age of ease and abundance made possible through technological innovations in agriculture, refrigeration, transportation, and marketing. The supermarket stands as the most notable site of this reconfiguration because it collapses all of nature's bounty into one brightly-lit consumer space where "[e]verything seem[s] to be in season, sprayed, burnished, bright" (36). Packaging and mass marketing strategies work to perfect and purify nature, so that "irregular peanuts," "round, cubical, pock-marked, seamed...broken-peanuts" are devalued and relegated to the unworthy status of "generic" (19). This scene signals a cultural substitution of perfected and orderly forms for the imperfect and disorderly world of nature made even more disorderly by technological interventions and intensified production which strain material resources and upset ecological systems. In this sense, imperfect, "pock-marked" foods relegated to the lowly status of "generic," become emblematic of an overly-stressed nature unable to keep pace with our consumer demands.

The hybrid space of the supermarket collapses spatially and temporally the boundaries of a pre-modern golden age and a postmodern consumer society, presenting an example of what Svetlana Boym calls the "cinematic image of nostalgia,...a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images--of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life" (xiv). One memorable example in the novel of this double

exposure shows the Gladney family huddled together in the kitchen like modern-day hunter-gatherers foraging for their supper in the midst of pre-packaged, processed food:

The mood was one of deadly serious anticipation, a reward hard-won. The table was crowded and Babette and Denise elbowed each other twice, although neither spoke. Wilder was still seated on the counter surrounded by open cartons, crumpled tinfoil, shiny bags of potato chips, bowls of pasty substances covered with plastic wrap, flip-top rings and twist ties, individually wrapped slices of orange cheese. (7)

If not for the mounds of artificially preserved foods and non-biodegradable garbage, DeLillo's portrait could easily be a scene of a primitive tribe hunched over freshly killed prey, a scene one would expect to find in fantasy novels like Jean Auel's popular 1980 novel *The Clan of the Cave Bears*. The juxtaposition of these two contradictory images of (an imaginary) pre-modern space and a technologically saturated postmodern space reveals Jack's underlying nostalgia, his intense desire to reconnect with nature as a means to authenticate his own existence.

Take, as another example of this cultural nostalgia for a pre-modern past, the "most photographed barn in America." In this frequently-cited passage, a crowd of picture-snapping tourists gathers around a barn conveniently nestled in the rural American landscape among white picket fences, cow paths, and apple orchards. [5] Through this commentary on photography as a medium of cultural nostalgia (tourism), DeLillo illustrates the dissolving boundary between object and image that characterizes hyperreality. Murray remarks in celebration of the scene, "Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn" (12). The tourists' inability to see the barn except through the mediating gaze of cultural nostalgia is precisely what Slavoj Žižek refers to as the "double-reality" of a subject's relation to the objective world, which, like the barn, "is nothing at all, just an empty surface" (*Looking* 8). This double-reality marks the difference between seeing an object, in this case the barn, "as it really is" and seeing it through a gaze distorted by subjectivity, by our desires and anxieties, in this case masculine anxieties of authenticity. Žižek writes, "[I]f we look at a thing straight on, matter-of-factly, we see it 'as it really is,' while the gaze puzzled by our desire and anxieties ('looking awry') gives us a distorted, blurred image." But, he continues,

if we look at a thing straight on, i.e., matter-of-factly, disinterestedly, objectively, we see nothing but a formless spot; the object assumes clear and distinctive features only if we look at it "at an angle," i.e., with an "interested" view, supported, permeated, and "distorted" by *desire*. (11-12)

Reality does not exist for an "objective" gaze. It is always already distorted by subjectivity, the necessary precondition of desire. In other words, desire only exists for the subject who experiences an absence he *desires* to fill. The objective "reality" of the barn is dissolved in its movement through the mediating process of cultural nostalgia; in the barn scene the dissolution of objective reality occurs through the technology of photography that mediates the tourists' relationship to the barn.

Žižek describes this distortion of the object (the barn) as the "embodiment," the "materialization," of desire (*Looking* 12). The "materiality" of the distorted object--to take

nothing and make it into the object of our desires--transforms first nature (as it really is) into second nature (the materialization of our desire). Such transformations are even suggested in the novel by the name of the college's popular culture department, officially known as the department of "American Environments." This semantic slippage between "culture" and "environment" suggests that mass culture has come to stand in for nature, reconfigured rhetorically as environment (9). [6] The barn stands in for an idealized ruralist past, and offers yet another reference to the traditional world of masculine work—farming. But more importantly, the masculinity to which this agrarian past refers no longer exists (except as simulation) in the same way that the nature to which the barn refers no longer exists. Rather, it operates as an *absent presence* which, as Žižek points out, indicates an absence constituted by and through subjectivity. That is, the object of nostalgia takes on the appearance of the thing imagined as lacking. In this example, what appears to be lacking is nature, which becomes in the novel the locus of an authentic masculinity.

Jack's experience of a lost masculine identity is driven by the fantasy of an impossible movement to a primal state constituted through the masculine imaginary of a media-saturated society. His nostalgia for the primitive and authentic is linked to a cultural heritage of masculine violence, represented in the novel by such figures as Adolf Hitler, Genghis Kahn, and Attila the Hun, who become for Jack models of masculine stoicism. [7] Take, for instance, Jack's mental image of Attila the Hun dying heroically while lying "in his tent wrapped in animal skins," a scene rendered through cinematic references:

This is how it ended for him, with his attendants cutting off their hair and disfiguring their own faces in barbarian tribute, as the camera pulled back out of the tent and pans across the night sky of the fifth century A.D., clear and uncontaminated, bright-banded with shimmering worlds." (99, 100)

This deeply ironic passage presents an idealized image of man-in-nature: Attila the Hun reconfigured as Hollywood action hero. As if in a touching scene from a blockbuster film, Attila dies nobly under a pre-industrial sky, a time when one can still see the stars "shimmering" in the unpolluted night sky. Paradoxically, Jack's fantasy here is mediated by popular cultural representations that provoke nostalgia for an unmediated masculinity. The more Jack experiences his own masculinity as a cultural construct the more he relies on mediated images of unmediated (read: authentic) masculinity, such as Adolf Hitler.

Toward the end of *White Noise*, Murray says to Jack, "Some people are larger than life. Hitler is larger than death. You thought he would protect you" (287). In this and a previously quoted passage in which Jack seems to valorize "murderous rage," we see Jack's unhealthy preoccupation with Hitler and his nostalgia for a domain of masculinity predicated on violence as two heads of the same monster. According to Paul Cantor, Jack's obsession with Hitler, and by extension Nazism, a political movement that gained momentum in Germany in the midst of a "spiritual void," functions as a turn away from modern technology, as an expression of anti-modernity (and therefore also of anti-postmodernity) (49). As an anti-modern movement tapping into "the primitive strata of the psyches of its followers," Cantor argues, Nazism relied heavily on, not only technologies of warfare, but also on technologies of the mass media (50). Jack's quest for masculine authenticity, articulated through parallels to Hitler's rise to power, is constantly undermined by the mediating forces of science (the airborne toxic event) and

technologies of mass media (television, advertising, film). Jack's obsession with Hitler, furthermore, is linked to nature (Cantor's "primitive and authentic") and masculine violence (the "great dark lake of male rage," and the "homicidal path of dumb blind male biology") (292, 269).

Following Jack and Murray's discussion of mankind's repressed fear of mortality as the "natural language of the species," Murray expounds on his "theory" that violence offers Jack a means to stave off death:

"I believe, Jack, there are two kinds of people in the world. Killers and diers. Most of us are diers. We don't have the disposition, the rage or whatever it takes to be a killer. We let death happen. We lie down and die. But think what it's like to be a killer. Think how exciting it is, in theory, to kill a person in direct confrontation. If he dies, you cannot. To kill him is to gain life-credit." (290)

This passage bears an uncanny resemblance to a passage from the eleventh chapter of *Mein Kampf*, in which Hitler attempts to deploy the "iron logic of Nature" to justify Nazism—the "inner segregation of the species"—through violence:

The one who wants to live has to fight, and the one who does not want to stand up to the eternal struggle of life does not deserve to live. (317) [8]

In fleshing out the connection between Jack's obsession with Hitler and his personal crisis of masculinity, we come to see them as variations of the same anti-modern response to man's alienation from nature: violence. As a resolution to his overwhelming feelings of alienation and inauthenticity in the midst of a hypermediated society Jack resorts to violence as a testament to his masculine authority. Perhaps Murray says it best when he remarks, "The more powerful the nostalgia, the closer you come to violence. War is the form nostalgia takes when men are hard-pressed to say something good about their country" (258). In an act that seems like a throwback to an earlier, chivalric era, Jack resorts to violence to defend his masculine honor after he discovers Babette's affair with Willy Mink. But more than merely an act of jealousy, Jack's attempted murder of Mink appears also as a literalization of Jack's anti-modern nostalgia—his rage against the culture of consumer capitalism, a juggernaut fueled by the popular media, which, by the conclusion of the novel, has taken on the physical form of Willy Mink, a.k.a Mr. Grey, who is described as a television: "The image was hazy, unfinished. The man was literally gray, giving off a visual buzz" (214).

Jack's violence against Mink is linked in the novel to Babette, who occupies the center of Jack's fantasy of immediacy, not only because he is responding to her infidelity, but because Jack's entrance into Mink's room—"There is an unwritten agreement between the person who enters a room and the person whose room had been entered"—refers the reader back to an earlier scene in the novel when Jack and Babette discuss, as a kind of foreplay, the rhetoric of erotic literature which insists on describing intercourse as a man "entering" a woman.

"I will read," she said. "But I don't want you to choose anything that has men inside women, quote-quote, or men entering women. 'I entered her.' He entered me.' We're not lobbies or elevators." (29)

Jack's "entering," both of Babette and of Mink's room, is equated to a violence that brings Jack closer to "a death," but also to a rebirth—"a heightened reality" (307). In this conceptual intersection, then, of Jack's violent rejection of Mink as an emissary of both popular media and science and his desire for Babette, we see Jack's crisis of masculinity enacted as a violent reinvestment of a primitivist nature. More importantly, this nature to which Jack imagines himself returning is figured as a woman: Babette.

Babette is consistently positioned in the novel as equivalent to nature, described in corporeal, earth-mother images to the extent that she figures not as a subject but as a symbol of the nature to which Jack seeks to return. According to Phillip Nel, Jack's acceptance of Babette as slightly overweight amounts to a rejection of the "starving-model paradigm" and therefore a feminist critique on DeLillo's part (Nel 423). Nel writes,

Jack's advocacy of a heavier ideal helps counteract the debilitating effects of a culture that persuades women to strive for a too thin body. Inasmuch as a compulsion to diet undermines women's sense of self, Jack's arguments against dieting encourage Babette to feel comfortable with her body image—and with herself. (423)

I find this interpretation particularly puzzling considering that numerous passages from the novel situate Babette at the center of Jack's identity crisis as his ideological anchor to the natural world. He calls her "[his] strength, [his] life-force" (199). Throughout the novel Babette is defined in opposition to Jack's previous wives who "[have] a tendency to feel estranged from the objective world--a self-absorbed and high-strung bunch, with ties to the intelligence community" (6). Unlike these women and Jack, who feels alienated from his body and from nature, Babette is described as less intellectual and therefore grounded in her body and in nature. Jack thinks of himself, "I have no body. I'm only a mind or a self, alone in a vast space" (198). As a striking contrast, consider these descriptions of Babette:

Babette is tall and fairly ample; there is a girth and heft to her. (5)

I suggested there was an honesty inherent in bulkiness if it is just the right amount. (7)

Babette was moist and warm, emitting a creaturely hum...Babette talks to dogs and cats. (15)

Through this association of Babette with the plump and heft of the material/maternal body of nature, Jack's relationship to her comes into view as a manifestation of his longing for masculine authenticity found in relation to nature, figured here as a woman. The novel's equation of nature and woman offers a stern reminder of how women's subjectivity continues to be repressed in order to perpetuate essentialist fictions of masculine stability supposedly found in relation to nature. In *The Lay of the Land*, Annette Kolodny historicizes this figuration of the American landscape as a woman. She describes this mythic fantasy as a perceived

harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine—that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification—enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction. (4)

In *White Noise*, we see this same fantasy functioning in reverse: as the object of Jack's sexual desire, Babette (and the material/maternal body she symbolizes) is posited as a place-holder of the absent-present nature he seeks to inhabit. She is also posited as a maternal figure, a womb in which Jack seeks refuge as part of his infantilization—his fantasy of regression toward a primitive state. Hence, he frequently babbles and coos like an infant, calling his wife "Baba" as he nuzzles her "voluptuous" breasts:

A two-syllable infantile cry, *ba-ba*, issued from the deeps of my soul.
(104)

In bed we lay quietly, my head between her breasts, cushioned as if against some remorseless blow...Her body became the agency of my resolve, my silence. Nightly I moved toward her breasts, nuzzling into that designated space like a wounded sub into its repair dock. I drew courage from her breasts, her warm mouth, her browsing hand, from the skimming tips of her fingers on my back. (172)

"Baba," I whispered between her breasts, that night in bed. (176-177)

My head was between her breasts, where it seemed to be spending a lot of time lately. (296)

In "Don DeLillo's Primal Scenes," Lentricchia quotes *The Great Gatsby* to describe consumer America as it appears in DeLillo's fiction as the "fresh, green breast of the new world" (414). I think, though, this passage resonates more clearly not as a description of consumerism, which Jack ultimately recognizes as "totally false and mechanical," but as a description of Babette who functions as Jack's only physical connection to the objective world, his refuge against the bombardments of daily life. While words like "fresh," "green," and "new," describe a pristine, prelapsarian *material* nature, they also describe a *maternal* nature, signaled most overtly by the word "breast" (296).

As if these Freudian overtones, from the infantile utterances of "ba-ba" to Jack's "wounded sub" in Babette's "repair dock," were not enough, DeLillo further incorporates a version of the ideal subject of nature in the character of Wilder. As his name implies, especially in the context of Jack's constant suckling of Babette's breasts, Babette's infant son (Jack's step-son) signifies Jack's longing to become "Wilder," to exist closer to nature and therefore become a holistic, integrated subject: in Murray's words, a "total

ego" (289). That this total ego is conceived of in the novel as inherently masculine, as what Klaus Theweleit calls the "omniscient male ego," should come as no surprise.

According to Theweleit, in his psychoanalytic inquiry into the masculinist fantasy structure of Nazism, the male ego craves violence because this violence allows him to experience himself in a regressive or "wilder" state. War, writes Theweleit,

allows him to achieve identity with his alien, 'primitive,' 'bestial' interior, while at the same time avoiding being devoured by it. Or to put it another way, only war promises to animate the dead within him. War is rebirth, resurrection... (23)

In this respect, then, Jack's double-fantasy, his desire to return to nature through violence and his preoccupation with Hitler and Nazism, comes into view as his desire to return to a state of being which he perceives as primitive, essential, even elemental, and therefore more truly masculine. Drawing on Nietzsche's anti-humanist conception of the "perfect moment," which rejects "urban epiphany," Svetlana Boym points out the pastoral thrust inherent in nostalgic longings such as Jack's. "Haunted by the burdens of history," Boym writes, the subject of nostalgia longs for a "prenostalgic state of being" which forces him to confront the irony of his circumstance, which always already "displaces [him] from his own vision" (26). The conclusion of *White Noise*, which offers a rather anti-climactic variation on Nietzsche's "perfect moment," ironizes Jack's primitivist longing. In the midst of his epiphanic experience--his attempted murder of Willy Mink--Jack believes he has finally achieved an instance of oneness with the world, a moment when he has come to know "the precise nature of events." "I was moving closer to things in their actual state as I approached a violence, a smashing intensity" (305). He misrecognizes this moment of violence as immediate experience that brings him closer to a state of nature, defined in the Hobbesian sense by violence and war.

This misrecognition, moreover, is preconditioned by the cultural mediations that have surfaced throughout the narrative and that have defined masculinity in violent, primitivist terms. Recall that in an earlier scene Jack and Murray theorize about the "male animal" bound biologically by "a reservoir of potential violence...[a] remnant of some prehistoric period when dinosaurs roamed the earth and men fought with flint tools" (292). Returning us once again to a prehistoric, "Attila the Hun" version of masculinity, this scene points to the mediated and mediating *nature* of the masculinity through which Jack seeks to define himself. In the final, violent moments of *White Noise*, Jack appears to have confronted the *nature* of his own masculinity, yet he fails to measure up to the culturally constituted "great dark lake of male rage" that binds him ideologically to a traditional world of masculine violence. Jack searches for an unmediated reality that exists "as it really is" in order, as the fantasy goes, to find himself there. What Jack discovers, however, is something quite different. As he comes closer to "things in their actual state"--Jack's sense of "heightened reality" is unveiled as yet another fiction: violence does not make Jack more of a man; images do not correspond with actual things, and, in an ultimate deconstruction of the Primary, essential Reality Jack seeks, nuns no longer believe in God but merely pretend to for the benefit of society. What Jack discovers as the "precise nature of events" is meaninglessness: pure static--"white noise." In his final epiphanic moment Jack realizes that the authentic, primitive site of real masculinity he seeks is always already a hypermediated construct and that pure essences, including masculine essence, are cultural fictions.

By understanding Jack's fantasy of an idealized nature and the novel's overall articulation of anti-culture, anti-technology escapism motivated by an anxious recognition of failed masculinity, we recognize the persistence of the myth of "natural masculinity" in America. Moreover, I think we come to see how critical examinations of this myth allow us to confront and challenge the values and assumptions of contemporary ideologies of both nature and gender. We begin to ask important questions. What are the consequences, for men, women, and the environment of seeking authentic masculinity in nature? What are the consequences of seeking authentic masculinity through reversions to violence against other men, against women, and against nature? To what degree do cultural appropriations of nature, including postmodern wilderness tourism, perpetuate the fantasy of an authentic, pristine nature as man's true home at the same time that such appropriations allow us to dismiss the value of our urban and suburban environments or the people living in them? These and other questions that reside at the conceptual intersection of ecology, culture, and masculinity seem particularly relevant in a culture so clearly beset by anxieties about our environmental health and our gendered identities.

Notes

[1] Excerpted from "Interview with Don DeLillo" by Anthony DeCurtis (57, 58).

[2] Critics have devoted considerable attention to the relationship between mediation and ecology in *White Noise*, yet have been less concerned with how DeLillo uses this relationship to advance a cynical critique of American masculinity as dependent on hyperreal images of primitive nature. In "Don DeLillo's Primal Scenes" and again in the introduction to *New Essays on Don DeLillo's White Noise*, Frank Lentricchia focuses on the dehumanizing effects of media ("we are a people of, by, and for the image") that erase "nature itself," and replace it with a "landscape" of images--an "environment-as-electronic-medium" ("Primal Scenes" 415; "Introduction" 14). Lentricchia suggests that, in the novel, the dehumanizing qualities of media alienate man from the natural world. It should also be pointed out that Jack's reaction to his feelings of alienation seems particularly masculine: he reverts to acts of violence and retribution as ways to recuperate his masculine self-worth. Reading Jack's fascination with Hitler and Attila the Hun as cultural nostalgia for "an authentic form of hero," Paul Cantor demonstrates the trend in DeLillo's fiction to disrupt our expectations by substituting moments of "the primitive and the authentic" with "postmodern simulacrum" (60). Strikingly, though, these and other critics stop short of analyzing such concerns about mediation, inauthenticity, and alienation in terms of gender, despite the fact that Jack's idols clearly indicate idealized conceptions of pre-modern masculinity. John Frow demonstrates how DeLillo uses "typicality," media-produced stereotypes of traditional gender norms, to depict the simulated world of postmodernity. He refers to a scene in which Jack, seeing a female crossing guard in a yellow rain slicker, is reminded of a soup commercial:

A woman in a yellow slicker held up traffic to let some children cross. I pictured her in a soup commercial taking off her oil-skin hat as she entered the cheerful kitchen where her husband stood over a pot of smoky lobster bisque, a smallish man with six weeks to live. (DeLillo 22)

Reading this scene as a reversal of "typical gender roles" (Frow presumes that the "real" fisherman in the "original" soup commercial is male), Frow argues that DeLillo substitutes

"the urban and feminine for the premodern world of masculine work" (421). But *why* would DeLillo replace the traditional "world of masculine work" with the feminine and the urban in order to demonstrate the *inauthenticity* of postmodernity *unless* these two qualities function in the text in contradistinction to *authenticity*? That is, masculinity and the "world of masculine work" are posited, in the novel and in Frow's argument, as remnants of the "real" in their associations with an imaginary moment when America was populated by rugged men performing physically strenuous, outdoor labor. Frow overlooks the cultural link between masculinity and an imaginary "pre-modern" nature that is so foundational to American definitions of manhood. As William Cronon points out, American males' attraction to the primitive, defined by a rejection of an "overly refined and civilized modern world" was embodied in the "national myth of the American frontier" (Cronon 76). "In the wilderness," Cronon writes, "a man could be a real man, the rugged individual he was meant to be before [the feminizing tendencies of] civilization sapped his energy and threatened his masculinity" (78). The myth of the frontier, which continues to influence contemporary conceptions of masculinity as independent, rugged, and pioneering, exists in *White Noise* just beneath the surface as a spectral object, a ghosted image of a repressed pastoral past, or as Dana Phillips puts it, an "absent presence of which the characters are still dimly aware" (237).

- [3] Many critics have read *White Noise* in the context of the nineteen-eighties. I would further emphasize the influence of the Reagan era and its ambivalent vision of America as a society defined by romanticized media representations of the nation and of American masculine identity contingent on a ruralist fantasy of immediacy with nature. Reagan and the "rugged individual" iconography of his administration effectively fused two conflicting visions of the nation--the "Good Old Days" of the American frontier and the "Brave New World" of technoculture (Wills xxiii). Certainly this double-vision is recapitulated with almost transparent nostalgia by the most recent Bush administration, with its images of Texan ranch life on one hand, and its over-reliance on technology as the solution to environmental and terrorist threats on the other. Reagan's self-proclaimed longing for an individualist American past found not in history but in Hollywood was, as Reagan biographer Garry Wills points out, a key component of his presidential campaign as a media-savvy "cold war cowboy" and, more importantly, as the masculine Hero hell-bent on saving America from the "evil empire." Following Reagan's mediocre career on screen, he acted as the spokesperson for General Electric, and became identified as the spokesperson for a technologically progressive American society. By bringing together in his presidency the tough guy of western films and the technocultural futurism of General Electric, Disney's Tomorrowland, and later his "Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI)," Reagan ushered in an era of hypermasculinity disguised by his conservative "good guy" demeanor. One way to view Reagan's administration is as an effect of an American society swept up in a wave of cultural nostalgia for a fantasy nation conceived in terms of a by-gone era embodied by the American actor turned political leader. In the Reagan era we witness the emergence of the first hyperreal politician made into a viable presidential candidate through the replacement of reality by the hyperreality of popular American media in the nineteen-eighties.
- [4] For more on the history and cultural influence of American men's movements, see Michael Kimmel's book *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* as well as Matthias Regan's article "Leaping into the Wilderness: The Landscapes of the Men's Movement." Some notable texts of the men's movement, in addition to Bly's *Iron John*, are Sam Keen's *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man* (1991) and the more recent Christian articulation of the men's movement, *Wild at Heart: Discovering a Life of Passion, Freedom, and Adventure* by John Eldredge (2001).
- [5] DeLillo anticipates a very real phenomenon of cultural nostalgia for rural America in this scene, as is suggested by the Smithsonian Institution's "Museum on Mainstreet" program, which sponsored "Barn Again! Celebrating an American Icon," a traveling exhibit featuring these "monuments in the American landscape." <<http://www.museumonmainstreet.org/>>

- [6] Timothy Luke suggests that this rhetorical shift from "Nature" to "Environment" indicates the degree to which nature has been reduced to "a system of systems that can be dismantled, redesigned, and assembled anew to produce its many 'resources' (79). Among other things, the ideological transformation of "nature" into "environment" makes possible the fragmentation of wildlife habitats and the conversion of complex ecosystems into so much real estate. It paves the way for suburban developments such as the ones described in *White Noise*, while assuaging any guilt suburban consumers might feel by instituting an abstract and impossible-to-locate space--the "Environment"--as that which merits preservation, and encouraging them to disregard the repercussions development might have for the actual indigenous flora and fauna being plowed over.
- [7] DeLillo's own intellectual fascination with masculine violence is indicated by his preoccupation with men like Hitler, Charles Manson, and Lee Harvey Oswald. Lee Harvey Oswald's life becomes the topic of DeLillo's first novel after *White Noise*, *Libra* and in 1989 DeLillo publishes *Silhouette City: Hitler, Manson and the Millennium* in *Dimensions*, a publication of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith.
- [8] "Wer leben will, der kämpfe also, und wer nicht streiten will in dieser Welt des ewigen Ringens, verdient das Leben nicht" (Hitler, 1943 317).

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