

TELLING THE TRUTH: DON DELILLO IN AN AGE OF AMNESIA AND REDRESS

Marni Gauthier

The State University of New York

Abstract:

The December 2006 Iran Holocaust denial Conference and the international excoriation of it reveal a paradox of two cultural strands that are emblematic of the legacy of the twentieth century: official denial and historical amnesia on the one hand; and (inter)national attempts at truth telling and historical redress on the other. Massive violence—and associative denial—punctuate the entire twentieth century. Yet coordinated tenacious efforts at public acknowledgment of “what really happened”—a recurrent and insistent emphasis in this context of trials, reparations, and above all, truth commissions—and concomitant historical redress for state-sanctioned crimes is a particularly recent phenomenon, unique, in fact, to the 1990s. But it is not only political readers who address what Priscilla B. Hayner, in her exhaustive study of truth commissions calls, “unspeakable truths.” This essay addresses the incongruity between the recent global concern with truth telling, official apology, memory and historical redress on the one hand—an obsession that certainly includes the US—and American amnesia on the other. It is in the interstices of these two apposite late-twentieth century phenomena—amnesia and truth telling; “history” distinct from “the truth of the past”; “official” opposed to “vernacular” memory—

Ilha do Desterro	Florianópolis	nº 59	p. 177-200	jul./dez. 2010
-------------------------	----------------------	--------------	-------------------	-----------------------

that, I argue, a new genre of historical novel develops and performs a vital cultural work: telling the truth in an age of amnesia and redress. Such novels engage the recalcitrant materials of historical experience to assert truth claims that in turn challenge nationalist histories and revise traditional mythologies. Among the foremost authors of this new “truth-telling” historical novel is Don DeLillo. *Americana*, the vital precursor to *Libra* and especially to *Underworld*, is the definitive harbinger of DeLillo’s third-century of work that writes both within and against postmodernism. In these Cold-War era novels, DeLillo ultimately moves beyond the ironized perspective of history that is the distinguishing feature of “historiographic metafiction”; his postmodern narrative techniques (from irony to looping novelistic structures and dense intertextuality) inscribe a critical distance from history only to force a raw encounter with it. As such, DeLillo exploits the tension between innocence and violence—the literally malignant legacy of the Cold War—to reveal the way in which official culture is amnesiac by definition.

Keywords: Don DeLillo; historiographic metafiction; *Americana*; *Libra*; *Underworld*.

The December 2006 Iran Holocaust denial Conference and the international excoriation of it reveal a paradox of two cultural strands that are emblematic of the legacy of the twentieth century: official denial and historical amnesia on the one hand; and public, cooperative attempts at truth telling and redress on the other. Massive violence—and associative denial—punctuate the entire twentieth century. Yet coordinated tenacious efforts at public acknowledgment of “what really happened” and of individual lived experience “as it really was” – recurrent and insistent emphases in the context of trials, reparations, and above all, truth commissions—alongside concomitant historical redress for state-sanctioned crimes is a particularly recent phenomenon, unique, in fact, to the 1990s. Martha Minow, author of *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence*, notes that “more unusual than the facts of genocide and regimes of torture marking in this era is the invention of new and distinctive legal forms of response” to systemic “unspeakable destruction and degradation of human beings” (1). But it is not only

political readers who address what Priscilla B. Hayner, in her exhaustive study of truth commissions calls, "unspeakable truths." The dialectic of amnesia and truth telling that plays out in the arena of transitional justice manifests across the humanities—in philosophy and ethics, history and anthropology, popular culture, in the cultural work of novelists and film makers, and even in the historical sensibilities of ordinary citizens.

In various fields, scholars have told versions of this issuing story. Alan S. Rosenbaum and Michel-Rolph Trouillot place in perspective such events as those in Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda, Cambodia and Haiti—and their associative forgetting—alongside Holocaust discourse and denials. Elie Wiesel, Shoshana Feldman and Dori Laub show how testimony is the literary mode particular to a contemporary "crisis of truth," in Felman's words, that proceeds from historical and collective trauma. In the wake of public diagnoses of US amnesia by cultural critics from Jean Baudrillard and Gore Vidal to Stephen Bertman, historians Michael Frish, David Thelan, Roy Rosenzweig and John Bodnar attempt to uncover the meaning of the past for common Americans. Thelan and Rosenzweig's *The Presence of the Past* (1998) documents the results of extensive and methodical surveys to impart the ways that Americans distinguish "the truth of the past" from what constitutes "history"—which citizens perceive as academic and official. This distinction, along with an acute rejection of "nation-centered accounts" of history "they were forced to memorize and regurgitate in school," corresponds to the fundamental divergence that Bodnar, in his 1992 book, *Remaking America*, observes between "vernacular" and "official" memory throughout numerous twentieth-century public commemorations.

Drawing on these recent social histories, debates about "cultural memory," and political climate, this essay addresses the incongruity between the recent international concern with truth-telling, memory and official apology on one hand—an obsession that certainly includes the US—and American amnesia on the other. It is in the interstices of these two apposite late-twentieth century phenomena—the "the truth

of the past" distinct from "history"; "vernacular" opposed to "official" memory—that a new genre of historical novel develops and performs a vital cultural work: telling the truth in an age of amnesia and redress. In this sense, the contemporary truth-telling historical novel is not only another reservoir of public memory, but—given Americans' potent distrust of history classrooms and the media as sources of information about the past—it is a salient form of cultural memory highly relevant to our era. At stake is no less than what Homi Bhabha calls "the contested conceptual territory" of the nation. Such novels engage the recalcitrant materials of historical experience to assert truth claims not only to revise nationalist histories of a particular moment but also to show the way in which national history itself becomes inscribed in our collective imagination as mythic history. Mythic history is that narrative of national identity which partially represents experience and gains particular currency in the popular imagination; that both produces and reflects collective historical imagination. It is these novels' uncommon mining of forgotten or suppressed histories together with their unique and complex narrative structures—which in themselves challenge traditional history-making—that definitively contributes to the new form they invent.

More than perhaps any contemporary writer, Don DeLillo has been keenly attuned to national mythic history from the onset of his career—as the title of his first novel, *Americana*, suggests. DeLillo's three historical novels particularly—*Americana* (1971), *Libra* (1988), and *Underworld* (1997), all of which treat the Cold-War era—scrutinize the tropes of national mythic history, working not only to expose its sins of omission and exclusion, but also its narrative processes. DeLillo, then, is among the foremost authors of this new "truth-telling" historical novel. *Americana*, the vital precursor to *Libra* and especially to *Underworld*, is the definitive harbinger of DeLillo's third-century of work that writes both within and against postmodernism. In these Cold-War era novels, DeLillo ultimately moves beyond the ironized perspective of history that is the distinguishing feature of "historiographic metafiction"; his postmodern narrative techniques (from irony to looping novelistic structures and dense intertextuality)

inscribe a critical distance from history only to force a raw encounter with it. DeLillo simultaneously invokes mythic history and unearths the forgotten contents of the past that fracture it, portraying a conflicted national identity through heterodox accounts of the national past. As such, DeLillo exploits the tension between innocence and violence—the literally malignant legacy of the Cold War—to reveal the way in which official culture is amnesiac by definition.

The titles of *Americana* and *Underworld*, metonyms of the United States, suggest this enterprise. Eponymously and in scope and content, *Americana* and *Underworld* tackle “the whole picture, the whole culture [of] America” (DeLillo, of *Americana*, in Begley 279). While these novels span the 1950s to the 1990s, connecting the consumer culture of the 1950s to various Cold War flash points, *Libra*, with its clear-minded account of the Bay of Pigs and antagonisms between John F. Kennedy and Fidel Castro, and the US and the Soviet Union, focuses the underlying political and economic tensions of the Cold War era. Taken together and viewed through the retroactive lens of *Americana*, these historical novels thrust an ahistorical American consumerism and related mythologies of American innocence and the American dream up against the actual brutal history of the nation—disclosing history as that which the marketing mechanisms of the capitalist state cannot, finally, consume.

* * *

“The Power of the Image”: Myth-Making as Amnesia in *Americana*

In *Americana*, DeLillo personifies America in a protagonist who is defined by fascination with the image and his ensuing self-conception as innocent: unadulterated by history. David Bell’s entire world consists of “the images that flicker across America’s screens, the fantasies that enthrall America’s imagination.” David Bell is at least a third-

generation legatee of the cult of the image and its innocent facade. David's father tells his son a story, told to him by his father "dozens of times." On a train, David's grandfather comes up with an advertising campaign— "McHenry—the Star-Spangled Pajamas"—that "made McHenry rich and my father famous. That's how they wrote ads in the old days, kid—sloshed to the eyeballs on the Union Pacific Railroad [. . .] that story [. . .] has a fine innocence to it [. . .] the campaign itself. The star-spangled pajamas. It has a lovely innocence to it. You could afford to be innocent in the old days" (197). In the story, David's grandfather becomes a hero: his inventive advertising campaign, concocted by recycling nationalist images from the Revolutionary battle at Fort McHenry—saves a fellow American from bankruptcy. David's father likewise profits from the industry of images and passes on the notion of the image and the mythology of innocence it engenders to his son. A successful advertising executive at a New York agency, Clinton Bell projects the commercials his agency has produced onto a basement screen for his children's entertainment; watching TV commercials is thus a primal childhood diversion for David. "All the impulses of the media," he says, "were fed into the circuitry of my dreams." He describes his 1950s childhood with an ironized nostalgia:

the dream of the good life, innocent enough, simple enough on the surface, beginning for me as soon as I could read and continuing through the era of the early astronauts, the red carpet welcome on the aircraft carrier as the band played on [. . .] as a boy, and even later, quite a bit later, I believed all of it, the institutional messages, the psalms and placards, the pictures, the words. [. . .] For [. . .] the true sons of the dream, there was only complexity. The dream made no allowance for the truth beneath the symbols, for the interlinear notes, the presence of something black [. . .] at the mirror rim of one's awareness. (130)

The lure of innocence that ensues from the postmodern montage of images can be understood in relation to Jean Baudrillard's account of "[t]he disappearance of history" wherein the "modern media create[es], for every event, story and image a simulation of an infinite trajectory" such that we "leav[e] history to move into the realm of simulation." (2) *Americana* progresses, however, to divulge American historical experiences that splinter the montage of images and confront David with "complexity" – "the dream" fraught with its discontents. The "truth beneath the symbols" moves from the periphery of David's perception to the forefront of his focus, returning him—and the reader—from the realm of simulation to the truth of history.

Both against and within the postmodern grain, *Americana*, then, is a desperate search—brimming with awareness of its futility—for genuine selfhood on David's part, and by extension for the lost innocence of American selfhood.¹ While the irony in *Americana* centers on a misplaced faith in the image as a source of redemption, the need for redemption in the world of *Americana* is absolutely genuine. David's thirst for salvation—"The city was full of people searching for the man or woman who would save them" (110)—and repeated characterization of the image as "religious" foregrounds his self-destructive worship of it. From his assertion that "Burt [Lancaster] in the moonlight was an icon of a new religion" to his promise that the trip will be "a religious journey" because "cars are religious," it is clear that David is on a spiritual quest for his self. Paradoxically, he attempts to solve "The only problem I had [of] living in the third person" by making a film of his life (58). In the process, David loses his ironic edge and becomes morosely self-critical, unflinchingly honest about both his own past and that of the nation.

As David's filmmaking and road trip progress, DeLillo weaves an atrocious underside into *Americana* that belies national innocence; wartime nightmares help fill in the representation of Cold-war history. The actor whom David casts as his father narrates the Bataan Death March, which David's father made as a POW of the Japanese during World War Two. It is an account of grotesque inhumanity that shocks a

soldier “who considered [. . .] his country the only invincible power on earth”: The Japanese behead four hundred Filipino officers—a slaughter that takes two hours—and tell the American soldiers to defecate in a ditch, “but it was full of dead bodies and the smell of the dead and dying kept most of us away. Men with dysentery couldn’t control themselves and had to defecate where they stood. Others just fell down and died [. . .]”. Throughout, David’s “father” punctuates the recapitulation with visions of home, America. Before the Japanese load the POWs on trains, he recounts, “We all looked forward to the trains, some dim and still functioning part of our minds thinking of god knows what childhood times we had spent on trains [. . .] everything is vast and wild and mysterious because you’re ten years old and America is as wide as all the world and twice as invincible” (294-7). Yet the trains transport them to Balanga, where

they forced us to bury the dead [. . .] I was throwing dirt onto the body of a Filipino when he suddenly moved [. . .] Dozens of dead men around him covered already with maggots, completely covered so that the ground, the earth, seemed to be moving, rotting bodies everywhere and the whole saddle trench about to erupt [. . .] I pointed to him, trying to rise, and then the guard [. . .] pointed his bayonet at the shovel on the ground and then at the boy in the ditch. (297-8)

In fact, this passage represents DeLillo’s heretofore unrecognized direct debt, in *Americana*, to the first written survivor’s account of the horrific WWII-Bataan Death March, recorded in *The Dyess Story: The Eye-Witness Account of the Death March from Bataan and the Narrative of Experiences in Japanese Prison Camps and of Eventual Escape* (1944). Earlier in 1944, *The Chicago Sun* had originally published Bataan survivor Lt. Col. William E. Dyess’s story as a serialized narrative. Since the War’s end, popular and academic histories of World War Two have ignored the infamous March; to date, Bataan has merited scarcely a mention in high school and college history textbooks. It appears,

however, that the 2002 Bison Books re-printing of *The Dyess Story* informed and inspired Bataan memoirists, for, strikingly, in 2004—an age of memoir and full half-century following the War—several university presses published a spate of accounts by individual Bataan Death March survivors. Writing more than three decades prior to this new-found interest in Bataan, DeLillo evidently adapts his account from Dyess' (cf. 84-86, 93 and 103).²

The Bataan survivor in David's film describes experiencing "total self-hatred," but the "self" to which he refers here is the self-as-indissolubly-American: "We didn't hate the ginks. They hadn't gotten us into this. We had, or our generals had, or our country which treasured the sacrifice of its sons, making slogans out of their death and selling war bonds with it or soap for all we knew" (297). His comments recall the McHenry pajamas campaign and David's childhood indoctrination in the image and "dream of the good life" it promises. Bell is the prototype of the DeLillo protagonist who lives in a cultural context shaped by various crises which cannot be fully explained by invoking the received precepts embodied in American media-generated myth.

While DeLillo's characters inhabit this familiarly postmodern environment, they are atypically unable to maintain an ironic distance from a history that haunts and weighs heavily on them. One of David's childhood friends, a Vietnam vet, tries in vain to escape such defining recollections: "I can feel it in my skull. The old violence [. . .] inside my head the action is constant [. . .] Davy, you don't know what it's like to lay down some 20 mike-mike on a village. See it fall apart. Come down low and strafe a hootch or two. Your cans of nape. Your 500-pounders. Your rockets [. . .]" (251-2). *Americana's* P.O.W. camps and Vietnam memories illustrate the tension between the mythic meaning of America—"invincible," "vast," "wild," "mysterious," "innocent," and "beautiful"—and the actual vicious history of the American nation that erupts throughout DeLillo's texts, producing cognitive dissonance. DeLillo depicts an American preference for myth over history—"The war was on television every night," David says of the Vietnam era, "but we all went to the movies" (5)—as well as for romantically mythic conception of

self which is generated by the media, but not sustained by it. For it is clear in *Americana* as throughout DeLillo's oeuvre that, as a character in *Great Jones Street* points out, "History is never clean" (74).

Just as later DeLillo protagonists find that, in John McClure's words, "the secret agencies dedicated ostensibly to the protection of sacred cultural values, are actually no more than subsystems of a vast criminal enterprise that encompasses capitalist corporations, and corrupt governments," David concludes that

There were many visions in the land, all fragments of the exploded dream, and some of the darkest of these visions were those processed in triplicate by our generals and industrialists—the manganese empires, the super-sophisticated gunnery, the consortiums and privileges. Something else was left over for the rest of us, or some of the rest of us, and it was the dream of the good life [. . .] Better living though chemistry. The Sears, Roebuck catalog. Aunt Jemima [. . .] To achieve an existence almost totally symbolic is less simple than mining the buried metals of other countries or sending the pilots of your squadron to hang their bombs over some illiterate village [. . .]. (129-30)

The media represents the symbolic "dream of the good life," in which the "Sears, Roebuck catalog" and "Aunt Jemima" stand for "better living." It is not simple to achieve because, as the novel reveals, the actual experience of "Americana" falls short of its mediated, or mythic, promise. *Americana* thus launches a crucial interrelationship between image and myth that becomes a set piece in DeLillo's work at least through the 1999 *Valparaiso*: it is the circulation of mass-media generated images that functions as amnesiac myth-making in America. Moreover, just as "history" refers both to the events of the past and to the representation of those events through narrative, the stories that

constitute a public mythology—in this case the content of images—are inseparable from the institutional mechanisms that produce, enshrine, and facilitate consumption of those images which inherently belie the historical real that surfaces in the novel.

In the penultimate moments of *Americana*, the indivisibility of David's personal history with the nation's is firmly established; both messy histories collide and any vestige of postmodern ironic distance from history collapses. Upon wrapping his autobiographical film, trip, David discovers an insistent longing, a powerful urge to escape his own life, to drop out of the trip for which he was the organizing force, and to continue to go west alone, into his own wilderness, "to smash my likeness, prism of all my images, and become finally a man who lives by his own power and smell" (236). He makes this solitary journey in the novel's final section, in a violent and dissolute trip westward, initiated by hitchhiking away from his companions. David's "attempt to find pattern and motive, to make of something wild a squeamish thesis on the essence of the nation's soul" (349) culminates with a bodily reverberation of "the shattering randomness of the [Kennedy Assassination]" with all of its "ambiguity and chaos" (DeLillo in Begley 299; and DeCurtis 287). David's "second journey, that great seeking leap into the depths of America," takes him to the American desert, in the speeding Cadillac of a renegade Texan who engages David in a lewd exploit of drunken debauchery that is degraded even from the modern spiritual wasteland of T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock, the mythical modernist figure to whom David likens himself in this final section of the novel.³ Despite the fact that Sullivan (David's traveling companion and one-time lover) has recently said that David is "innocent as a field mouse," in this last segment of the book David's self-delusion of innocence totally unravels, as does, by extension, the ideal of America as innocent. DeLillo has said that the idea for *Americana* first hit him when, in Maine, he glimpsed "a street [. . .] and a sense of beautiful old houses and rows of elms and maples and a stillness and a wistfulness—the street seemed to carry its own longing,"

and that he believes that in writing the novel he “maintained the idea of that quiet street [. . .] as lost innocence” (in Begley 279). David’s desert experience—a literal and metaphorical antithetic of DeLillo’s quiet Maine street—can be seen as the nadir of this American loss. David escapes an orgy of perverse sexuality and rents a car with which he drives the route of JFK’s limousine through Dealey Plaza, horn blaring the entire way. David’s final drive becomes a palimpsest upon that event which, according to DeLillo, “changed [our culture] in important ways,” by threatening “our grip on reality” (in Begley 299). David’s quest ends in a place that signifies uncertainty and violence, both in American history, and even more so within DeLillo’s fiction. Accordingly, rather than becoming illuminated as to the meaning of the nation’s soul, or of his own, David is beset by confusion and chaos.

Written nearly two decades before DeLillo’s rise to literary and popular acclaim—and his entrenchment in the postmodern canon—*Americana* imbricates quintessential American mythologies with intractable matter of the nation’s past, making it an indispensable forerunner to DeLillo’s subsequent historical novels. In the brief pages that follow, therefore, I emphasize firstly DeLillo’s unique proleptic approach to the Cold War era of each *Libra* and *Underworld*; and secondly, his rich engagement with empirical history that results in a distinct historical novel form, one that manifests a provocative dynamic between narrativity and historical referent to articulate a politics of truth. Like *Americana*, both *Libra* and *Underworld* present story lines appropriated directly from archival sources that are neither documented nor even alluded to within the pages of the texts. Each is a counterhistory that is both counter-perspective and counter-practice of historical and cultural excavation and re-interpretation. Working in a way that is incipient in *Americana*, DeLillo produces in *Libra* and *Underworld* postmodern narratives (in structure, technique, and environment) that are yet rejoinders to an ironic and distant postmodern sense of history. Asserting countermemories to defining national events, these two later novels, like *Americana*, revise national mythologies and the contours of national identity. As Frank Lentricchia has noted, *Libra* is clearly

written from a post-Watergate and Iran-Contra perspective in which criticism of the American government and public awareness of its lies, along with the plenitude of conspiracy theories ensuing from the assassination itself, makes DeLillo's politically caustic event perfectly plausible to the contemporary reader. But I am more interested in the way in which, for DeLillo, this proleptic lens results in an exploration of the Kennedy Assassination that is at least as much about the 1950s America that bred Lee Harvey Oswald as it is about the various historical Cold War forces—from the CIA to the Bay of Pigs and the Mafia—that together converged with Oswald in the Kennedy assassination. Similarly, *Underworld's* narrative proper begins in the multinational-capitalist perspective of the late 1990s and gradually winds—and, knowingly, looks—back to the 1950s, with (like *Americana*) an irony that eventually dissipates under the (literally) toxic remains of Cold-War history.

***Libra*: The Elusive Dream and its Discontents**

A decade and a half and eight novels after *Americana*, DeLillo takes up the Kennedy Assassination that his first novel echoed and prefigured. *Libra's* focus of the Kennedy assassination through Lee Harvey Oswald—whose fated role in the plot begins with his non-idyllic 1950s childhood—underscores the tension between the American dream and violence first probed by *Americana*. A member of the underclass, fatherless, unskilled and learning-disabled, Lee is troubled by the contradictions between the American dream and lived reality: "Everyone wants to love America. But how can an honest man forget what he sees in the daily give-and-take that's like a million little wars?" Beginning in his childhood, Lee lives on the fringes of what he perceives as "the forces of history," and yet believes that "The struggle is to merge your life with the greater tide of history." He imagines that "An old scratchy film" playing on his television "carried his dreams. [. . .] Lee felt he was in the middle of his own movie" (113, 87, 370). He is like David Bell both in his longing to enter human history and in his

hyper self-consciousness. Lee seizes the building assassination plot as his opportunity to merge.

Lee's conflicted ambitions reflect the tenuous fabric of the American dream. He alternately immerses himself in Marxist ideology and memorizes his brother's Marine Corps manual; enlists in the Marines and shoots himself in the arm to get out of active duty; emigrates to and applies for citizenship in the Soviet Union, tries to enter Cuba to live out his Marxist ideal and attempts to gain employment with the US government as a spy. After shooting Kennedy, Lee is at first afraid that he is "a dupe of history"; he later realizes that he has "found his life's work [...] Everybody knew who he was now" (435). That Lee sees himself both as a victim of history and its agent is symptomatic of his own schizophrenic desires that inspired the novel's title and perspective. While his astrological sign is *Libra*, the scales, Lee is the "negative *Libran* who is, let's say, somewhat unsteady and impulsive. Easily, easily influenced. Poised to make the dangerous leap" (*Libra* 315). Lee's frustrated grasp of, alternately, Marxist and American ideals, makes him prone to violence. In DeLillo's version of the Assassination, Lee becomes a "patsy." An expert marksman, a Cuban revolutionary from the Bay of Pigs who welcomes a passionate revenge, exercises the primarily responsibility for killing Kennedy; poised in a parking lot, he shoots the president from the front. Oswald becomes the fall guy in the history he so desperately wishes to influence.

While the assassination of JFK figures in the national memory bank as an emblematic tragedy of the American twentieth-century, DeLillo does not emphasize this loss. Instead, drawing on his extensive research that included the Warren Report's wealth of "factual information [about] Oswald and his wife and his mother, and Jack Ruby," DeLillo privileges Oswald's internal world. DeLillo reconstructs a psychology of Oswald and faithfully renders "the twisted syntax of Marguerite Oswald and others" from its hundreds of pages of recorded testimony (DeLillo in Connolly 26). It is this reconstruction—a proleptic resurrection of the life, language and aura of the event and era—that ultimately forecloses the irony that elsewhere informs the novel and

brings the reader close to an otherwise chaotic and distant history. For although the metafictional narrative of retired CIA analyst Nicholas Branch—who mirrors, parodies, and emphasizes the work of DeLillo's interpreting the assassination—aligns *Libra* with historiographic metafiction, Branch's voice has neither the greatest authority in the novel nor its deepest resonance. Eponymously suggesting not only the immense bureaucracy of his employer—the CIA, an institution in which data seems to multiply and mystify rather than coalesce into meaningful information—but also, by extension, the futility of his task, Branch has been hired to write “the secret history” of the Assassination. We meet Branch “in the fifteenth year of his labor,” when the anonymous “Curator” begins to send him esoteric and macabre material—“autopsy photos of Oswald [. . .] the results of ballistic tests carried out on human skulls and goat carcasses, on blocks of gelatin mixed with horsemeat” (300)—that exacerbates Branch's struggle to select and arcane the plethora of details from the past into a narrative. As John Johnston notes, Branch “explicitly represents the failures of a strictly empirically-governed account” of the event. However, “by acknowledging the inherent failure of the [Warren Commission] exhibits and heterogenous collections of data to coalesce into an intelligible pattern, Branch functions to seal off the rest of the novel from its contaminations by an unintelligible chaos by allowing *Libra* to stand ‘apart’ and complete” (92.) Indeed, isolating Nicholas Branch's retrospective sets apart the irony and enormous paranoia that ensued from the assassination, resulting in an incisive and nuanced sense of the event.

DeLillo's engagement with empirical history, in contrast to Branch's brute archive, provides several different lenses through which to decipher the Cold War, and serves to turn the chaos of the era into something not only fathomable but ultimately moving. DeLillo restores a palpability to the cultural and personal context of Oswald that the sheer abundance of data and innumerable theories and speculations about the Assassination occlude. Oswald's Historic Diary and medical records, for example, which DeLillo recovers directly from the Warren Report, illuminate the psychology of the “other” of the American era of

peace, domestic happiness, and prosperity. From Oswald's dyslexia and lack of grammar skills to his frustration in wanting a better life for himself, his Russian wife and young children, to his finding a sense of self and home in each Japan and the Soviet Union, and his longing to live in Cuba, DeLillo presents a not-unsympathetic Oswald who feels America and its government have let him down. Encountering Oswald in his 1950s boy- and young-adulthood in the Bronx, abroad, and eventually, Texas, provides a background to the early 1960s and the culture of fear and political unrest of those years. In establishing this cultural context, DeLillo deconstructs the mythology of the lone gunman against society by reconstructing the petit narrative of a gunman at the nexus of several historical and social forces. In DeLillo's hands, Oswald moves to the center of history and ceases to be the ex-centric protagonist of historiographic metafiction.

Underworld: "The Truth Beneath the Symbols"

DeLillo is no stranger, then, to the dialectic of cultural memory and forgetting; although it occupied him as early as *Americana*, it is vital not only to his excavation of the underhistory of Cold-War America in *Underworld*, but to the novel's metahistorical project of revealing the workings of mythic history. In his essay coincident with *Underworld's* publication, "The Power of History," DeLillo's explains his "entering the narrative." An initial forgetting precipitated his pursuit of the "story concerning the 40th anniversary of a famous ballgame played in New York in 1951," which he read in his morning paper. "[T]he minute I finished reading," he writes, "I forgot it all [. . .] The newspaper with its crowded pages and unfolding global reach permits us to be ruthless in our forgetting" (1). Thus it was weeks later that the event returned for the writer, such that in the basement of a local library he discovered the mated headlines of The New York Times, October 4, 1951. DeLillo's foray into the archives despite "the ruthless forgetting" inherent in the contemporary environment is

symptomatic of *Underworld's* unsheathing "the events and documents of the past [with] a clarity and intactness"—to borrow DeLillo's words—amidst its simultaneous display of the culture's drive to "disremember the past" (7).

As with the standard literary-critical appropriation of DeLillo's oeuvre for postmodernism, the almost universal critical claim of *Underworld* for "historiographic metafiction"—what Linda Hutcheon famously defined as the key feature of postmodernism—obscures the novel's articulation of a politics of truth. Incisively arguing that *Underworld* produces a critical historiography, Molly Wallace quotes Hutcheon to underscore the novel's "alternative representation" of the past—as waste—"that foregrounds the postmodern epistemological questioning of the nature of historical knowledge." Along the same lines, Kathleen Fitzpatrick categorizes *Underworld* as historiographic metafiction in that it "interacts with" historical traces in the present, and "comments on the natures of both history and narrative." As with *Americana* and *Libra*, I hope to show that DeLillo more than "foregrounds," comments on" or, in Hutcheon's own words, "problematizes the nature and status of our information about the past" (5). Both Wallace's and Fitzpatrick's critical investigations of commodified histories and "reified histories"—aspects of *Underworld's* probe of mythic history—focus on the garbage and commodities that proliferate in the novel—central concerns which have rightly been much studied.

Yet little critical attention to has been devoted to the ultimate vile legacy of poisonous Cold War waste: the deformed human bodies, whose corporeal reality is revealed in the Epilogue, is a constitutive counterpoint to the denial of the "Downwinders" in the American desert that surfaces mid-way through *Underworld*. The citizens who live downwind of the Nevada test site "have a name," as Eric Deming, a weapons designer—a.k.a. "bombhead"—puts it, "that totally defines their existence [. . .] Downwinders." Like the workers at the Nevada Test Site during the Atomic Testing Era of aboveground shots, and the atomic veterans who participated in nuclear atmospheric testing,

downwinders were exposed to fallout—that is, waste—from the test bombs. Downwinder accounts throughout *Underworld* overlap with oral histories from photojournalist Carole Gallagher's documentary book, *America Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War*, published in 1993, from which DeLillo apparently crafted the details surrounding the "secret" history of the downwinders. A former New York photographer, Gallagher spent seven years interviewing and photographing radiation survivors in the southwest US, including dairy farmers, ranchers, professors, Native Americans, housewives, soldiers, artists, and shepherds. What this diverse population has in common are leukemias, brain tumors, birth defects, diabetes, sterility, miscarriages, thyroid cancers, the death of children, medical bills, and funerals. *Underworld's* Deming correctly adds to the list "multiple myelomas, kidney failures," "great red boils [and] coughing up handfuls of blood." As Gallagher elaborates, "The more than 760 announced nuclear explosions always were detonated when the wind [was] blowing toward Utah." In one "'top secret' AEC memo," she discovers, "the people living downwind [. . .] were described as a 'low-use segment of the population'" (xxxii, xxiii). Deming narrates, "they let the fallout drift to Utah, where kids are getting born with their bladders backwards"; and Bonnie Daniels, a Test Site worker, describes her son: "His bladder is backwards" (qtd. in Gallagher 47). Of a fictional atomic veteran, Deming says, "You wake up one day a few years later, all your inner organs are fused. It's one big jellied lump" (405-10). Gallagher interviewee Grace Swarzbaugh relates the account of her husband, who "worked at the Nevada Site right from the day it opened for business": Exploratory surgery found that "his whole insides [. . .] just came together, just looked like a big bowl of solid Jello. There was nothing they could do for him" (qtd. in Gallagher 43). In 1994, the year after Gallagher's book was published, the US government declassified Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) documents from 1951-1962 that further corroborate the testimony Gallagher records.

In implicit contrast to the Western segregation of "visible history" that Nick Shay notes—from memorial parks to gleaming recycling

plants—the devastated bodies are part of the “invisible history” of the War, what a character in DeLillo’s *Great Jones Street* calls “latent history”: “events that definitely took place but remai[n] unseen and unremarked on [...] Real events that go unrecorded [which] are often more important than recorded events” (74). “[T]he latest secret” about the Cold War atomic bombs, “an old thing just now surfacing,” is, Deming says, “something that’s more or less out in the open but at the same time . . . Secret. Untalked about. Hushed up” (405). With the archival detail of radiation survivors, *Underworld* accomplish a truth-telling quite similar to that of truth commissions, that, Hayner explains, “literally record a hidden history. A truth commission effectively unsilences a topic that might otherwise be spoken of only in hushed tones, long considered too dangerous for general conversation, rarely reported honestly in the press, and certainly out of bounds of the official history taught in schools. In effect, the report of a truth commission reclaims a country’s history and opens it for public review” (25). Like extending the idea of justice in the context of personal injury law to victims of mass violence, understanding the cultural work of literary-historical truth telling in the global context of transitional justice means crossing over different lexicons of value. This work is not coequal with that of truth commissions; rather it addresses the psychological questions official truth-seeking raises but cannot answer. For DeLillo portrays not merely the “secrets” about the bomb, but the effect of those secrets on knowing citizens. As Deming presses upon his bombhead colleague Matt Shay:

“Even though huge amounts of territory were affected and large numbers of people were exposed, it remains a major secret to this day.”

“So secret it may not be true,” Matt said.

“Do you believe it’s true?”

“I believe mistakes were made [...] Do you believe it?” [...] “It’s awfully, I don’t know.”

“Of course. It’s very hard to believe. That’s why I don’t believe it” (418)

At the end of the twentieth century, "Vacated military bases are converted to landfill use" and there is "a bunker system under a mountain in Nevada that will or will not accommodate thousands of steel canisters of radioactive waste for ten thousand years" (804). Waste in *Underworld* is not simply the suppressed content of visible history; but *waste management* is a model for the containment of latent historical material and the processes by which mythic history—in this case, a certain Orwellian mentality—is created and maintained.

It is only at the novel's very end—after dismantling the traces that mythic history has left in the present, laying bare the statist perspective and complicit players in commodified histories (weapons and waste manufacturers) and deconstructing their narratives—does *Underworld* bring the reader into direct contact with human results of the fallout from "five hundred nuclear explosions at the test site" during the Cold War in Kazakhstan; rather than irony, the tone, simply, is sober: "There is a long low room of display cases filled with fetuses . . . There is the two-headed specimen. There is the single head that is twice the size of the body. There is the normal head that is located in the wrong place, perched on the right shoulder . . . there is the cyclops. The eye centered, the ears below the chin, the mouth completely missing. Brain also missing" (799). Here DeLillo "finds," as he puts it, a very particular "language that can be a counterhistory" to "forgetting." In a May 2007 public interview with DeLillo, *New York Times Magazine* Interviewer Gerald Marzorati called it "*visual*" – DeLillo's singular manner of describing images—the way something actually *looks*—whether it be a film, painting, sculpture—or human bodies ravaged by nuclear fallout. The fetus display cases are succeeded by a clinic for downwinders of the former Soviet Union; here is

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 bald-headed children . . . the man with the growth beneath his chin, a thing with a life of its own, embryonic and pulsing . . . the dwarf girl . . . the woman with

features intact but only half a face somehow . . . The clinic has disfigurements, leukemias, thyroid cancers, immune systems that do not function. (800)

DeLillo's attention in *Underworld* to the downwinders and the environment—the collateral damage of the Cold War—and the related secret political history of the Cold War era constitutes both his most sustained engagement of empirical history and his most trenchant critique of official history to date. Each of DeLillo's historical novels tender "a version of the past that escapes the coils of established history and biography⁶; and DeLillo's counterhistorical sensibilities, inchoate in *Americana* and developed in *Libra*, fully ripen in *Underworld*. Fitzpatrick also argues that *Underworld* "dismantles the genre of historiographic metafiction [. . .] working to excavate and deconstruct the traces a reified history has left in the present," it "point[s] out that many of those narratives are lies" (159). One can only deconstruct a lie, however, by countering it with truth: that is how, as Fitzpatrick puts it, DeLillo "unmakes" "the mythic structures of the Cold war itself—the epic battle between good and evil." What collapses this binary is the truth *Underworld* reveals of "downwinders" in the US and former USSR. What shows "us" to be just like "them" is our similar desert testing grounds, our paired strategies of bombing our own people. DeLillo unravels mythic history by telling the truth.

Notes

1. David Cowart also notes the sincerity of David's quest; he calls Bell "a confused seeker after the truth of his own tormented soul and its relation to the larger American reality" (611).
2. The first of many memoirs eventually to be published by survivors of the Bataan Death March over the years, *The Dyess Story* "remains the premier narrative of the Death March, the prison camps," due in part to its primacy and its revealing "the unique escape of Dyess" and two fellow soldiers. "The book has helped other writers of memoirs complete their own stories and has provided useful background

information to editors of survivor accounts and to compilers of oral histories. Writers of secondary narratives, both popular and scholarly, have all begun their research with prisoner-of-war memoirs, usually starting with *The Dyess Story*, before consulting documentary and other material" (xv-xvi).

3. David's journey in *Americana* begins in the "innocent" 1950s as a child and ends in the heart of the postmodern age, 1999, the year that David writes the story for us, and in which historical moment he compares himself to Prufrock: "I am wearing white flannel trousers," (a comparison which has also been noted by Cowart [610]). Like Prufrock, David is aging alone on the beach, and sees himself as a split man, "contemplating his celluloid adventures as a young man," and suffering the loss of romantic dreams and possibilities (DeLillo, "Notes . . ."). Prufrock is lost because he sought satisfaction in banal sensualities and in the social sphere, rather than choosing the riskier path of meaningful enlightenment. David is lost because he is never able to recover from the fragmentation of his own mythopoesis and romantic self-conception.

References

- BAUDRILLARD, Jean. *The Illusion of the End*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994.
- BERTMAN, Stephen. *Cultural Amnesia: America's Future and the Crisis of Memory*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2000.
- BODNAR, John. *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton UP, 1992.
- BHABHA, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- COWART, David. "For Whom the Bell Tolls: Don DeLillo's *Americana*." *Contemporary Literature* 37:4 (1996): 602-19.
- DELILLO, Don. *Americana*. New York: Penguin, 1971.
- _____. *Great Jones Street*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973.
- _____. *Libra*. New York: Penguin, 1988.
- _____. *Underworld*. New York: Scribner, 1997.

_____. "The Power of History." *New York Times Magazine* 7 September, 1997: 60-63.

_____. "Don DeLillo: The Art of Fiction CXXXV." Interview. With Adam Begley. *Paris Review* 128 (1993): 274-306.

_____. "An Interview with Don DeLillo." With Kevin Connolly / 1988. *Conversations with Don DeLillo*. Ed. Thomas DePietro. U P Mississippi, 2004: 25-39.

_____. "'An Outsider in This Society': An Interview with Don DeLillo." With Anthony DeCurtis. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 89:2 (1990): 281-304.

_____. "Notes Toward a Definitive Meditation (By Someone Else) on the Novel 'Americana'," *Epoch* 21:3 (1972): 327-29.

DYESS, William E. *Bataan Death March: A Survivor's Account*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press: Bison Books, 2002. Original copyright 1944 by Marajen Stevick Dyess.

FELMAN, Shoshana and Laub, Dori. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

FITZPATRICK, Kathleen. "The Unmaking of History: Baseball, Cold War, and Underworld." *UnderWords: Perspectives on Don DeLillo's Underworld*. Ed. Joseph Dewey et al. Newark, NY: U of Delaware P, 2002. 144-60.

GALLAGHER, Carole. *American Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993.

HAYNER, Priscilla B. *Unspeakable Truths: Facing the Challenge of Truth Commissions*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

JOHNSTON, John. "Superlinear Fiction or Historical Diagram? Don DeLillo's *Libra*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 40:2 (Summer 1994): 319-341.

ROSENBAUM, Alan S. Ed. *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*. Boulder, CO: Westview P, 2001.

ROSENZWEIG, Roy and Thelan, David. *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*. New York: Columbia UP, 1998.

TROUILLOT, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon P, 1995.

VIDAL, Gore. *Imperial America: Reflections on the United States of Amnesia*. New York: Nation Books, 2004.

WALLACE, Molly. "'Venerated Emblems': DeLillo's *Underworld* and the History-Commodity." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. 42: 4 (Summer 2001): 367-83.