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### **Recycling Fictions in the City: Don DeLillo and the Materiality of Waste**

In a desert setting far away from the city, the first-person narrator of Don DeLillo's early novel *End Zone* (1972) encounters a heap of excrement. This sight terrifies him and sets into motion a fast train of thought on mortality and the circulation of matter:

It was overwhelming . . . shit everywhere, shit in life cycle, shit as earth as food as shit, wise men sitting impassively in shit, armies retreating in that stench, shit as history, holy men praying to shit, scientists tasting it, volumes to be compiled on color and texture and scent, shit's infinite treachery, everywhere this whisper of inexistence. (88–89)

Such concerns relating to human experience and cerebral as well as sensory excess are characteristic of DeLillo's works as a whole. More important, the passage exemplifies the scale that extends from the very particular to the universal and the combination of the quotidian and the elevated, the coupling of foul materiality with the sacred and eternal, which have typified the author's approach to American life throughout his career. Yet we might ask innocently why the mound of faeces unsettles Gary Harkness, the narrator, so thoroughly. The most elementary answer, perhaps, is that he wants his 'senses to deny this experience' (89) because he is a late-twentieth-century urban individual distanced from the practicability of human waste and conditioned to view it primarily as an object of disgust and potential pollution. Since the nineteenth century, as Mary Douglas notes in her classic study *Purity and Danger*, attitudes to dirt have been 'dominated by the knowledge of pathogenic organisms' (36).

A more specific and less wide-ranging answer is that that sensory denial, keeping filth out of sight and mind, has been the grand task of urban waste management at least since the advent of enclosed sewers. As John Scanlan puts it, ‘the basic imperative since the emergence of urban living has been to get rid of the stuff due to its capacity both for clogging up space and for clouding out the sensory environment with the oppressive force of a rank nature that easily takes on an alien aspect’ (122). The imperative has other bodily dimensions: the natural association of excrement with the inside of the body arguably blurs the body’s boundaries, provoking a grotesque experience. Yet the same ‘magical outcast ingredients of witch’s brews’ such as faeces are also ‘heavy with creation’ and can enable ‘communication with the divine’ (Harpham 4, 56). Further, in the historical perspective, as Richard Sennett reminds us, ‘[t]he very fear of handling excrement was an urban fear, born of the new medical beliefs about impurities clogging the skin’ (262). In *End Zone*, the heap also reminds Harkness, who has just meditated on nuclear war, of the organic dust-to-dust rotation of human corporeality: ‘I thought of men embedded in the ground, all killed, billions, flesh cauterized into the earth, bits of bone and hair and nails, man-planet, a fresh intelligence revolving through the system’ (89).

Literary studies has a long tradition of converting dominant themes or actions in stories into figures for writing or literature itself. For the literary scholar of a suitable persuasion, then, an author’s preoccupation with walking may become principally a textual strategy highlighting writerly choices, and descriptions of manual labour in a poem are likely to invite metaphors concerning poetic composition. When the topic at hand is the significance of waste and recycling in fictions, the possibilities for textual metaphor are exceedingly obvious. At least for the last half-century, a prominent paradigm of textuality has maintained that literary texts consist largely of rewritten and re-appropriated material, including both deliberately borrowed elements and,

perhaps more essentially, endless traces of past discourses. At a figurative level, then, the linguistic and stylistic components of literary texts circulate in the manner of organic matter in compost gardens, providing nutrients to enable the emergence of new textual flora from a fertile soil. Or, more appositely for the urban context, the ingredients of literature keep being extracted from their origins, assembled, revamped and rebound for re-entry into the market in a complicated process akin to bricolage. The literary genre that probably best exemplifies the stages of this process is the novel, as is suggested by Mikhail Bakhtin's influential characterisation of it as an amorphous and omnivorous form that 'squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, reformulating and re-accentuating them' (5).

This chapter's approach to Don DeLillo – widely regarded as a seminal figure in contemporary American literature – does not explicitly address this textual recycling; the author's works are an appropriate target for an enquiry into literary treatments of waste for several other reasons. First, his oeuvre has displayed a consistent obsession with the various dominant (im)materialities of post-1945 US life, from commodity packaging to memorabilia, from visual art to technological reproductions of iconic events. Fictional investigations of waste are a logical step in the author's career as an analyst of consumerism and consumption. 'The ascetic hates waste,' his debut novel *Americana* declares (118), meaning that a culture that values efficiency and economic gain above all else strives to minimise surplus clutter, which causes friction in the machine. DeLillo's approaches to material culture, which are often centred on the city of New York, also encompass ideas central to literary investigations of urban materialities as outlined in the introduction to this volume. The emphasis here is certainly on materiality *in* (rather than *of*) literature, but perhaps of primary importance is a particular comprehensive viewpoint on materiality mediated *through* the instrument of literature and manifest in representations of waste. The all-embracing approach to

US culture evident in DeLillo's works makes them illustrative test cases for examinations of literature's relationship with the material world.

Second, the most interesting dimensions of DeLillo's treatments of waste-related issues are revealed in the context of his early and well justified identification as a 'systems novelist' (see LeClair, *In the Loop*). As Tom LeClair summarises this paradigm, such novelists 'comprehend, represent, and critique' a universe 'largely composed of huge systems of information, both ideological and institutional, that exert power over individuals and their groups' (*Art of Excess* 14). The 'fresh intelligence revolving through the system,' the phrase quoted above from *End Zone*, is an appropriate summary of the object of interest in a systems novel. The characters employed to illustrate these processes are 'more often producers, sorters, and consumers of information than agents of action' (LeClair, *Art of Excess* 15). The production, circulation and management of waste is precisely such a system, which DeLillo has investigated by not only introducing characters invested in that process but also exploring in detail the ideologies and technologies involved, especially in *Underworld* (1997). Within certain boundaries, the systemic view tends to be inclusive: in DeLillo the relevant category of waste seems to contain everything from excrement, debris, dirt and junk to nuclear and household waste. Despite the material heterogeneity involved, my analysis here reflects the same tendency.

Third, there is a futuristic impulse in DeLillo's works that manifests itself in specific forms of prophecy, hypothesis and technological discourse. As this chapter aims to suggest, this makes some of his late novels published from the 1980s onwards conducive to readings rooted in the twenty-first-century circular economy. Nevertheless, that impulse can only be realised in meaningful relation to the technologies of the past and ways of seeing that have characterised

past paradigms of perception. A general drive toward an experience of transcendence in descriptions of futuristic propositions, as several critics have attested, is typical of DeLillo's approach to the spectacle of mediated culture. In Tony Tanner's phrase, the author could be seen as 'some kind of latter-day American urban Transcendentalist' (67; see also Duvall 19). This statement clashes to some extent with the common characterisation of DeLillo as a postmodernist. Although literary postmodernism is much too slippery a concept to define comprehensively here, it often points towards an ironic interest in unreliable surfaces and codes in language and culture, as well as relative indifference to historical fact, material reality, spirituality, and notions of truth. Since DeLillo's works also frequently circumvent the merely linguistic preoccupations typical of literary postmodernism, his status as a postmodernist writer might deserve some qualification (see also Maltby 62–65).

The tendency to embrace and simultaneously reach beyond the materiality of phenomena, as manifest in DeLillo's representations of waste and the urban, is the topic of this chapter. As a novelist whose texts have often touched on the themes of urbanity, consumerism, materialism, and waste management, DeLillo brings forward literature's potential in reflecting and engaging not only societal ideas but also the material forms of urban infrastructure and environments in their historical contexts. I will begin to explicate this vision by outlining, through the opening passages of several novels, some of the more subtle, thematic suggestions that draw forth the principles of circulating matter in DeLillo. The second half of the chapter is devoted to the meanings of the explicit descriptions of waste and waste management in *White Noise* (1985) and *Underworld*. The latter novel, in particular, has been the object of ample attention as far as the theme of refuse is concerned (see, e.g., McGowan, Keskinen, Evans, Temko, and Kavadlo). This chapter will mostly bypass the emblematic summaries of waste-related theory that tend to appear

in such studies and instead touch upon two alternative contextualisations of the waste theme that I believe to be crucial: the perspectives on materiality visible in some of the author's other novels, and the urban setting.

### **Entrances, exits and entrails**

The evolution of types of waste from excluded marginal elements into tropes of considerable importance in the western cultural imaginary has followed several interdependent societal developments. These include the emergence of the green movement and ecological consciousness, significant improvements in waste management and recycling methods, and the increased visibility of problems of environmental contamination in the media. Without losing its basic marginal and unsettling status, waste has become both a focus of art production and a point of contention within that production. Waste is not quite synonymous with dirt, filth, garbage or any word within the family of 'unclean' nouns, but all of these nouns have inspired studies that provide theoretical departures for examining narratives of waste. In the long wake of Mary Douglas's 1966 definition of dirt as the 'matter out of place' that helps create boundaries in an ordered system (36), academic work on the subject has often displayed awareness of dirt's fundamental spatiality (see e.g. Campkin and Cox; Gille 20–23). Numerous works within the humanities and geography have applied and developed further Douglas's understanding of purity and uncleanliness. Elsewhere, in the field of urban history, scholars such as Martin Melosi and Joel Tarr have provided both specific and comprehensive histories of waste management. To take one example of work that traverses the thresholds between material and imagined cities, Matthew Gandy has examined insightfully the complex ethical repercussions of urban nature's clashes with infrastructure, including waste facilities (esp. 187–227).

Any survey of relevant existing scholarship on waste would be much beyond the scope of this chapter. Yet it is worth noting that, despite the sustained general notion of filth as something to be eliminated and avoided, the complex theoretical tradition influenced by Douglas has revealed that waste is never merely a matter of exclusion and removal. From Julia Kristeva's gendered spaces of abjection and other psychoanalytical perspectives (e.g. Laporte) to economic studies of junk such as Michael Thompson's *Rubbish Theory* (1979), we have seen that what is once discarded or condemned as dirty can well become appealing, regain its value or come to exhibit great potential. These foundational studies, like the more recent books on the meanings of different kinds of dirt (e.g. Morrison, Cohen and Johnson, Campkin and Cox), recognise the intertwining of waste and space in society but place their primary emphases elsewhere – or, in Kristeva's case, in a very specific spatial entity, the human body.

From the viewpoint of the city's spatial and material system, there are intriguing parallels in the first scenes of most of the novels DeLillo published between 1982 and 2006. I will briefly sketch five of these opening sequences in order to demonstrate DeLillo's investment in the complex mechanics of urbanism and a particular *organic* emphasis in his depictions of city structure, a focus that also feeds into the representations of waste. *The Names* (1982), the first of these novels, opens in Athens, Greece. The narrator expresses his prolonged reluctance to visit the Acropolis, which 'stood above the hissing traffic like some monument to doomed expectations' (3). Driving at night with friends, James Axton enters a 'one-way street, the wrong way,' sees the Parthenon 'floating in the dark, a white fire of . . . clarity and precision' that contrasts with the 'closed shops and demolition' visible along the street, and backs out (4). The exit is not fast enough for a fellow driver who calls James 'masturbator', which elicits in the car a short discussion of the importance of knowing local 'words for sex acts and natural wastes' (4). This

passage quickly evokes the ‘high’ and ‘low’ of the urban scene, associating dilapidation and rubbish – including foul language – less with danger or displeasure than with reality itself, even necessity. One might also argue that it connects rhetorically the back-and-forth movement of the vehicle with the sexual functions of the human body, and does this in the centre of the original ancient *polis*, the looming Acropolis as its nucleus, thus evoking the traditional notion of the city as a bodily organism.

The body metaphor, of course, has served as a prominent vehicle in historical and fictional explanations of urban structure and waste management (see e.g. Morrison 77–81; Gandy 8–9). Further, it has had a number of significant consequences for urban planning, particularly the building of ‘veins and arteries’ for traffic to ensure the unblocked circulation of people, as of blood (e.g. Sennett 263–70). Yet the metaphor of the body would remain incomplete were it not extended to the channels that move matter away from the system, the intestines and orifices contributing to the excretion of matter. In addition to historical associations that range from sewage infrastructure to the removal of ‘night soil’ from cities, this idea alludes back to an extensive *literary* history of urban waste, and of the city as a body. Prime examples are nineteenth-century classics such as Dickens’ depiction of London’s filthy waters and other waste management issues in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65), Hugo’s examination of the intestines of the Leviathan known as Paris in *Les Misérables* (1862), and Zola’s *The Belly of Paris* (1873). Despite the prominence of nineteenth-century realist and naturalist works in the tradition of waste literature, Don DeLillo’s representations of urban waste have already become an acknowledged part of this canon (Dini 143–179; O’Brien 35–56).



The passage from *The Names* reveals its full significance when aligned with other opening scenes composed by DeLillo. *White Noise* begins with the September ‘spectacle’ of students arriving at the campus of College-on-the-Hill in station wagons, most of the first paragraph taken up by a long list of material paraphernalia. Adjacent to the hill campus lies the imaginary town of Blacksmith with its imitation Greek and Gothic architecture, and further away, Iron City, ‘a large town sunk in confusion, a center of abandonment and broken glass rather than a place of fully realized urban decay’ (85). The students’ collective entry into the campus is an annual phenomenon, and the massive influx of material objects that accompanies it in this manifestly post-industrial setting provides a prelude to the whole novel’s themes of consumption and disposal. The annual departure of students and their belongings from the self-contained *civitas* of the campus – where they have ‘their own food, movies, music, theater, sports, conversation and sex’ (59) – happens without fanfare in early summer, leaving the place ‘dark and empty’ (298). This implicit circulation of matter renders education, if not existence itself, in a cyclical, processual framework of entrances, life spans, and exits.

The beginning of *Libra* (1988), a novel about Lee Harvey Oswald, helps establish a more definite pattern. The brief first scene sees Oswald ride the New York subway ‘to the ends of the city,’ back and forth, spotting ‘sewer rats’ and ‘people bunched like refugees’ (3). These, as well as the ‘blind people, pickpockets [and] drunks,’ are for him ‘more compelling things than the famous city above’; some unpronounced truth about the urban system is to be found ‘in purer form in these tunnels below the streets’ (4), among whose users are the outcasts and the societal surplus of the metropolis. David L. Pike has identified the underground as essential to the modern city in both image and historical fact, and Oswald’s viewpoint here is consistent with several symbolic aspects of the subterranean, particularly its status as ‘the trash heap of the world above’ capable

of revealing hidden truths (Pike, *Styx* 2). There is a strong functional and structural parallel between underground rail networks and sewers as parts of the city's metabolism. In his book *Subterranean Cities*, Pike devotes a chapter to each and, significantly, uses Douglas's anthropological perspective on dirt as the starting point for defining the underground itself (5).

The end of *Libra*'s first chapter returns to the representation of the subway and suggests the extent to which the underground tunnels represent the entrails of the city-body:

He saw chinamen, beggars, men who talked to God, men who lived on the trains, day and night, bruised, with matted hair, asleep in patient bundles on the wicker seats. He jumped the turnstiles once. He rode between cars, gripping the heavy chain. He felt the friction of the ride in his teeth. . . . The wheels touched off showers of blue-white sparks, tremendous hissing bursts, on the edge of no-control. People crowded in, every shape face in the book of faces. They pushed through the doors, they hung from the porcelain straps. He was riding just to ride. The noise had a power and a human force. The dark had a power. He stood at the front of the first car, hands flat against the glass. The view down the tracks was a form of power. It was a secret and a power. The beams picked out secret things. (13)

Several symbolic impulses operate in this paragraph. The heterogeneity of the crowd is one: at the height of the Cold War, New York City swallows human beings of every colour and shape. Among them, the ones who are not on their way to a specific destination according to the principles of efficiency, including 'men who lived on the trains' and Oswald himself, are the metaphorical surplus, the waste that accumulates when the shape-shifting crowd passes through the city's intestines. The mobility of the train, with its noisy machinery, corresponds to bowel movements within the 'human force', the man-made city-body. But what secret is Oswald privy

to? Holding on to the bodily metaphor, I would argue that the power of the view down the tracks has an affinity with the ‘alien aspect’ of excrement mentioned above (Scanlan 122). The ‘secret things’ of the tunnels are comparable to human waste, normally carefully hidden from view in cities, particularly at the age of ‘heavy modernity’ (Bauman 113–18; see also Evans).

In some of DeLillo’s urban beginnings, waste is explicitly everywhere. ‘The narrative ends in the rubble, and it is left to us to create the counter-narrative,’ he wrote in the aftermath of September 2001 (‘Ruins of the Future’ 34). Rubble, in general, is to be seen in warzones and scenes of natural disaster. As the heavy waste consisting of fragments of the built environment itself, it may be the ultimate indicator of urban disorder. DeLillo’s 9/11 novel, *Falling Man* (2006), begins in the rubble, as collapsing towers are turning Lower Manhattan into a cityscape of ash, and the shell-shocked protagonist wanders through the devastation. Different kinds of matter-out-of-place dominate perception: ‘seismic tides of smoke’ in the streets, ‘office paper flashing past . . . otherworldly things in the morning pall’ (3). The protagonist, ‘a man scaled in ash, in pulverized matter’ (6), leaves behind the apocalyptic scene with ‘figures in windows . . . dropping into free space’ and ‘things . . . falling, scorched objects trailing lines of fire,’ as ‘paper massed in the air, contracts, resumés blowing by, intact snatches of business, quick in the air’ (4). The flying paper is one detail that makes the Dickensian subtext evident. For instance, we remember from *Our Mutual Friend* the ‘mysterious paper currency which circulates in London when the wind blows, gyrat[ing] here and there and everywhere’ (136). Victorian London, a prime site of both historical and literary investigations of urban waste matter, arguably haunts within DeLillo’s Ground Zero.

The emphasis upon the falling paper also creates a highly interesting parallel with the opening sequence of *Underworld*, which – like that of *Mao II* (1992) – takes place at a New York

ballpark. The 50-page section titled ‘The Triumph of Death’ depicts a famous 1951 baseball game at the Polo Grounds in Upper Manhattan. Towards the end of the game, the spectators engage in a collective, prolonged paper-tearing and paper-throwing exercise. The flying items are repeatedly listed in detail: there are ‘torn-up scorecards and bits of matchbook covers, there are crushed paper cups, little waxy napkins they got with their hot dogs, there are germ-bearing tissues many days old that were matted at the bottoms of deep pockets. . .’ (16). The verb form ‘falling’ accompanies most descriptions of the airborne paper shreds, among which floats a printed copy of Bruegel’s ‘Triumph of Death’ torn from a magazine. Here, in addition to Dickens, one might detect a subtle allusion to Joyce’s ‘The Dead,’ the closing paragraphs of which intertwine the protagonist’s meditative epiphany with reiterative descriptions of falling snow. In DeLillo, as well, a general sense of revelation unfolds during both the baseball game and the carnage of 9/11: ‘Everything is changing shape, becoming something else’ (*Underworld* 33); ‘He . . . began to see things, somehow, differently’ (*Falling Man* 5). These transcendental moments motivate the two scenes’ position at the beginning of their respective texts, as the two novels then continue to investigate the changed state of affairs in great detail (in *Underworld*, the decisive change in terms of the book’s handling of the Cold War period is a Soviet nuclear test conducted, ironically, on the same day as Bobby Thomson’s baseball homer dubbed ‘the Shot Heard round the World’). Essentially, the two scenes lay bare the dimension of transcendence that DeLillo’s depictions of waste frequently introduce.

### **Spectacles and catalogues**

A passage from the moment in the baseball scene when there is ‘[p]aper falling everywhere’ in the stadium, demonstrates a formal element that recurs in DeLillo’s narrated materialities. The

original version of the prologue, published as the novella 'Pafko at the Wall' in 1992, contains particularly illustrative phrasing (DeLillo edited some of the key lines here for the novel):

But the paper keeps falling. It is coming down from all points, laundry tickets, envelopes stolen from the office, rolls of toilet tissue unbolting lyrically in streamers, pages from memo pads and pocket calendars, old letters that people carry around for years pressed in their wallets, the residue of love affairs or college friendships, edges foxed and cracked, they are throwing faded dollar bills, snapshots torn to pieces, ruffled paper swaddles for cupcakes, there are crushed cigarette packs and sticky wrap from ice cream sandwiches and bond paper in a soft-white eggshell finish – every sort of thin sheet material made of cellulose pulp and derived mainly from wood and rags and grasses and processed into flexible leaves and used chiefly for writing, printing, drawing, package-wrapping, and covering your kitchen walls. (*Pafko* 61)

The pieces of paper become waste, strictly speaking, at the moment when they are released into the air – although their original function is to distract the away team, the Brooklyn Dodgers, and during the game's climax they also become confetti, tokens of celebration. The list of particular items morphs into a summary of the use and physical composition of paper, its source materials, practical and decorative functions, and production – including the recycling of 'rags' into raw material, which creates another significant connection with *Our Mutual Friend*'s London (see Tilley; see also Allen 86–114). The effect is that even in the middle of an urban sports spectacle the reader remains acutely aware of the system of circulating matter, which here follows roughly the natural analogy of rain, with a focus on the act of falling. Paper is a convenient substance for this kind of exposition because of its main ingredient, the organic plant molecules of trees, and the emphatic list is likely to remind readers of *Underworld*, especially those using a traditional printed copy, of the materiality of the book they are holding. Yet the post-event management of

all that paper waste falls outside DeLillo's representation. The most significant material residue from the spectacular event is the ball itself, the one batted to the stands for the homer, which becomes a collectors' item. However, as *Underworld* as a whole testifies, the status of such items and that of waste were not that far from each other as the turn of the millennium was approaching.

The form of the quoted passage, the list or catalogue, reflects the way in which the materiality of objects and waste items tends to be represented in DeLillo's texts. Several of the opening sequences outlined contain long lists of objects perceived. Yet the general purpose of these catalogues does not seem consistent with the functions deemed typical of literary lists, such as the ridiculing of the need for ordered patterns in postmodern writing (Alber), or the testing of narrative boundaries (Richardson). More to the point is Robert Belknap's observation that 'writers exploit or elaborate upon listing techniques to achieve a particular effect: the suggestion of plenitude, of rapid motion, or of the joyful concatenation of a number of possible mixtures of language' (3). DeLillo's lists are often organised by a common principle or shared quality of the items (the material of paper, in the current example), but they are also fundamentally random inventories within that category, emerging, as it were, out of thin air (in this case, rather literally). As such (dis)organised combinations, they contain elements from various established categories of lists. Belknap goes on to point out that lists occurring in literature can be unpredictable: even if they 'begin according to a specific principle, . . . they may show build, movement, or deviation as they progress' (7). The list of paper waste quoted here is grammatically unstable, consisting of both nominal phrases and clausal structures and eventually transforming into yet other lists, which spell out some of the raw materials and uses of paper. The main effect of such a catalogue seems connected to the aura-building impulse several critics have detected in the author's texts

(see, e.g., Duvall 19, Simmons 55). In this sense, the lists perhaps serve as vehicles in the depiction of the cultural spectacles (mass events and mediated representations of collective significance) that often play a large role in DeLillo's fictions. In their textual environment, his lists frequently highlight the materiality of the everyday, drawing attention to the sheer mass and variety of matter, including books, that accompanies the most mundane actions in American life. In other words, they highlight, as he puts it in the essay 'The Power of History,' 'the larger cultural drama of white-hot consumption and instant waste.'

In *White Noise*, the description of the initial spectacle of mass student arrival includes two long lists, the first showing an inventory of the things loaded onto the roofs of the station wagons and the second listing what is inside the vehicles. The catalogues collaborate with other similar commodity spectacles included in the novel – such as several scenes set in the supermarket – to outline the path through which matter circulates in post-industrial society. If DeLillo's depiction of materiality in general can be seen to presage the emerging age of circular economies, as I argue, *Underworld* goes further, collapsing such awareness into the perception that material commodities are *always already* waste – perhaps primarily that. The waste-managing central characters, including protagonist Nick Shay, see 'products as garbage even when they sat gleaming on store shelves, yet unbought' (121). *White Noise* develops the notion more gradually through characters who are professional academic readers of culture and Americana, though some objects among the things read, such as cereal boxes, remind readers of the novel of close affinities between textual culture and material surplus.

The decisive moment for *White Noise*'s narrator, Jack Gladney, comes when he turns to 'reading' the contents of his trash compactor for clues on his wife's medication. The 'oozing cube of semi-

mangled cans, clothes hangers, animal bones and other refuse' provokes both aesthetic and academic reactions in Jack, who marvels at the colours visible in 'layers of pressed vegetable matter' and feels 'like an archaeologist about to sift through a finding of tool fragments and assorted cave trash' (258). The passage continues through a series of impressions that combine the fundamental otherness of trash with its revelatory possibilities:

The full stench hit me with shocking force. Was this ours? Did it belong to us? Had we created it? . . . The compressed bulk sat there like an ironic modern sculpture, massive, squat, mocking. I jabbed at it with the butt end of a rake and then spread the material over the concrete floor. . . . But why did I feel like a household spy? Is garbage so private? Does it glow at the core with personal heat, with signs of one's deepest nature, clues to secret yearnings, humiliating flaws? What habits, fetishes, addictions, inclinations? What solitary acts, behavioral ruts? . . . I found a banana skin with a tampon inside. Was this the dark underside of consumer consciousness? I came across a horrible clotted mass of hair, soap, ear swabs, crushed roaches, flip-top rings, sterile pads smeared with pus and bacon fat, strands of frayed dental floss, fragments of ballpoint refills, toothpicks still displaying bits of impaled food. (258–59)

The core reason for the moment's significance, of course, is that modern Western culture has worked so hard to eliminate any need to touch or see household refuse. Urban systems of waste management have long worked on a principle of concealment, and the compactor itself is a piece of technology that facilitates the invisibility of trash. But a transition away from the absolute separation of product and waste, or value and non-value, is emerging from this foregrounding of waste items. The passage has arguably lost some of its analytical weight since the 1980s, as Western-style modernity too has been forced towards increased awareness of waste streams. Similarly, the notion of waste containing hidden evidence for a truth open to discovery is now



close to mainstream, familiar from numerous popular fictions focusing on forensic investigation. Yet Jack's – and presumably the reader's – reaction to the list of items making up the 'horrible clotted mass' is different from the way he perceives the students' commodities in the novel's opening scene. The 'oozing cube' is part of the same circulation of matter as the cars' contents, and the two lists speak to each other within the novel, but they still occupy, for the character, fundamentally different levels of experience. In this sense, *White Noise* still depicts a world in which waste is a clandestine affair and has the ability to shock.

The shock is not merely that of disgust, or transgression, but it has more profound aesthetic dimensions, which justify the seemingly innocent comparison to 'modern sculpture' as well as to notions of sublimity. The comparison between waste and art is possible, or even rather obvious, because of the widespread conception of art as unconcerned with practical uses. Of course, in the age of conspicuous consumption, and with the attendant increase of ecological awareness, trash has also long ago become appropriate material for canonical art, a fact DeLillo exploits in *Underworld*. Numerous works from H.A. Schult's *Trash People* to Damien Hirst's *Waste* vitrines and Justin Gignac's *New York City Garbage* packages testify to this artful potential of refuse, and artists such as Santiago Sierra and Chris Ofili have shown that even human and animal faeces have become relevant materials of artworks. According to Christoph Lindner and Miriam Meissner, garbage is now frequently 'transformed into a commodity and circulates in the global art market' (3). In most cases, as Zsuzsa Gille points out in a statement consistent with Mary Douglas's ideas, 'the way people external to the act of wasting know that something has been classified as waste is by looking at where it is' (22). The same is often true of art. These affinities between art and waste have been naturalised to the extent that stories of cleaners accidentally

removing displayed items from art exhibitions may fail to amuse twenty-first-century urban audiences.

### **Moments of transcendence**

*Underworld*'s prominent waste theme begins from the premise that 'waste is the best-kept secret in the world' (281). This statement is made by 'garbage archaeologist' Jesse Detwiler, whose overall project is to change that state of affairs and make sure that society's refuse is made visible. Normally, as Susan Morrison explains, '[f]or the city to maintain its identity as a well-functioning organism, filth needs to be hidden' (75). The persistence of this notion emerges repeatedly in the course of the novel – for example, in the New York City scenes set in 1974 and featuring a strike by the city's Sanitation Department (an event presumably inspired by a real such strike in 1968). Despite 'mounds of trash' stacked on the streets (*Underworld* 376), 'everyone agreed not to notice' (388). Similarly, a waste expert named Big Sims discusses the disposal of raw sewage 'in lushest detail' but insists that the whole process happens strictly under society's radar, with nobody consciously thinking about it (301). Sims explains the tendency by the repulsion felt towards excrement: 'All waste defers to shit. All waste aspires to the condition of shit' (302). All the anxieties and impressions attached to the heap of faeces in *End Zone* arguably accompany the much wider category of waste in *Underworld*, illustrating the inclusiveness of DeLillo's philosophy of refuse. In this sense, the different types of waste can become interchangeable.

According to the fictitious garbage theorist, the repression mentioned – which is consistent with the psychoanalytical potential of waste – should be resisted. With the exception of nuclear and

dangerous chemical waste, which represent ‘the banned materials of civilization’ and are to be isolated, Detwiler’s remedy to the concealment of waste and its management is simple:

But basic household waste ought to be placed in the cities that produce it. Bring garbage into the open. Let people see it and respect it. Don’t hide your waste facilities. Make an architecture of waste. Design gorgeous buildings to recycle waste and invite people to collect their own garbage and bring it with them to the press rams and conveyors. Get to know your garbage. (286)

This is the sort of moment in DeLillo that exemplifies his ‘tendency to seek out transcendent moments in our postmodern lives that hint at possibilities for cultural regeneration’ (Maltby 54). It is also consistent with some twenty-first-century approaches to sustainable development, such as Slavoj Žižek’s argument, spelled out in Astra Taylor’s thought-provoking documentary *The Examined Life* (2008), that the real ecological challenge facing urban communities is to find ways of living with and appreciating waste, aesthetically as well as pragmatically, instead of eliminating or disregarding it. Žižek thus views the instant invisibility of refuse achieved by efficient waste management as the root cause of people’s unwillingness to change their behaviour in a sustainable direction.

Jesse Detwiler, occupying in *Underworld* the role of a proto-Žižek, sees the need to foreground waste in a historical perspective that implies a moral imperative (mirrored in the grammatical imperatives of the previous quotation). If one of the meanings of the novel’s profoundly ambiguous title is primarily spatial, referring to the placing of waste systems beyond collective access, and another is primarily social, related to buried personal deeds and memories, yet another is a comprehensively spatio-temporal, alternative vision of historical cause and effect:

‘See, we have everything backwards,’ he said.

Civilization did not rise and flourish as men hammered out hunting scenes on bronze gates and whispered philosophy under the stars, with garbage as a noisome offshoot, swept away and forgotten. No, garbage rose first, inciting people to build a civilization in response, in self-defense. We had to find ways to discard our waste, to use what we couldn't discard, to reprocess what we couldn't use. Garbage pushed back. It mounted and spread. And it forced us to develop the logic and rigor that would lead to systematic investigations of reality, to science, art, music, mathematics. (287)

The view of trash as the foundation of urban civilisation is far from revolutionary when assessed in purely spatial terms, given the significance of landfill in many coastal cities, or the historical notion that, as DeLillo puts it, 'cities rose on garbage, inch by inch, gaining elevation through the decades as buried debris increased' (287). However, in placing waste at the motivational centre of an alternative, comprehensive history, Detwiler's observations are quite radical. They are also Douglasian in that they connect visions of waste to the establishment and maintenance of order, which makes garbage operate within 'a mode of reassurance' (Seale 73) – although Detwiler's historical vision actually posits garbage as the original *threat*, external to the reassuring system of organised culture while central to its impetus. The underworld of waste deserves unearthing in the same way as archaeological artefacts deserve to be displayed to the public.

Intertwined with this emphasis on the cultural primacy of garbage, *Underworld* presents a more consistent analysis of the sublime dimension of refuse that appears briefly in *White Noise*; it has become a critical commonplace to detect in the novel a sustained 'sacralization of waste' (Kielland-Lund 89; see also Salmela 87, McGowan 136). Different expressions of this aestheticised veneration recur throughout the text. Nick Shay refers to his employer's philosophy of trash as a *Weltanschauung*, using 'this grave and layered word because somewhere in its

depths there is a whisper of mystical contemplation that seems totally appropriate to the subject of waste' (282). The notion of aura, famously applied by Walter Benjamin in his analysis of the authenticity and authority of unique works of art, tends to appear explicitly or implicitly in DeLillo's key statements about issues of societal importance. Here it is attributed to garbage: 'Waste has a solemn aura now, an aspect of untouchability . . . People look at their garbage differently now, seeing every bottle and crushed carton in a planetary context' (*Underworld* 88). The reverence stems in part, then, from twenty-first century ecological concerns, including the context of globalised flows of commodities. Several scenes focused on waste management refer to a ship loaded with toxic or highly unpleasant materials and crisscrossing the oceans in search of a port to unload its cargo. The ship, perhaps inspired by the well-known New York *gar-barge* of 1987 with which the 'globalization of trash arguably began' (Klinge 488), serves as a reminder that despite the local nature of consumption its consequences are distributed worldwide. Millions of poor people in cities around the world spend their daily lives – the quotidian existence whose American version is so central to DeLillo's fiction – in or very near rubbish dumps.

Indeed, while *Underworld* dramatises the urban origins of waste (with New York City as the most frequent point of origin), it repeatedly visits sites of disposal in faraway peripheries. One of these is a new artificial crater, designed by Big Sims in the Southwestern desert, which Nick observes with reverence for both the natural scene and the technological achievement, the two intermingled in a single sentence:

The sight of this thing, the enormous gouged bowl lined with artful plastic, was the first material sign I'd had that this was a business of a certain drastic grandeur, even a kind of greatness, maybe – the red-tailed hawks transparent in the setting sun and the spring

stalks of yucca tall as wishing wands and this high-density membrane that was oddly and equally beautiful in a way, a prophylactic device, a gas-control system, and the crater it layered that would accept thousands of tons of garbage a day, your trash and mine, for desert burial. (285)

Here Shay's statement that '[w]aste is a religious thing' becomes concrete (88), the grand-scale construction project representing a temple of sorts. Educated by Jesuits, Nick is quick to perceive the spiritual dimension of the act of waste burial and the significance of precautionary measures (including prophylactic devices). The acknowledgement of sublimity is tentative ('a certain drastic grandeur,' 'a kind of greatness, maybe,' 'beautiful in a way') because Nick is yet to fully embrace the transcendental potential of his business. As befits an artificial site, the evocation of natural beauty is equally tentative and expressive of an epistemological confusion. Rather than resembling Romantic natural wonders, the site approaches what Joseph Tabbi has called the postmodern sublime, a technological and textual construct that largely does away with the separation between natural and artificial. As such, the future landfill aspires to the status of both a spiritual object and a revelatory societal artefact. The passing reference to 'your trash and mine' also seems to address the reader directly, eradicating for a moment the boundary between the text and the material world.

I will conclude my analysis with the most complete manifestation of the respect for trash in *Underworld*, with immediate importance in the material urban world. In a pivotal scene, Nick's colleague Brian Classic admires the Fresh Kills landfill in Staten Island, within view of the Manhattan skyline. The familiar ambiguities about trash are initially present, the 'terraced elevation' resembling 'an Arizona butte' (183), but the artificiality of the 'contoured and road-graded' mountain 'twenty-five times bigger' than the Great Pyramid of Giza is soon confirmed

(184). Literary precursors are again present, including the dust heaps of *Our Mutual Friend* and, perhaps, *The Great Gatsby*'s notorious Valley of Ashes, 'where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens' (Fitzgerald 29). The scene also maintains the idea of waste's social invisibility: 'no one saw it [the mountain] or thought about it, no one knew it existed . . . no one talked about it but the men and women who tried to manage it, and he saw himself for the first time as a member of an esoteric order' (184). The dump and its contents are a public secret and thus well comparable to the nuclear waste operations that lurk in the background of the novel's discussions of refuse and play a central role in the concluding scenes. The 'esoteric order' consists of 'adepts and seers,' a group of obvious spiritual promise, the ultimate objective of whose work is to 'build hanging gardens here, make a park one day out of every kind of used and lost and eroded object of desire' (185).

And a park Fresh Kills has gradually become in the world outside the text, a huge suburban recreational area to be slowly opened to the public in the course of several decades after its closure as a landfill in 2001. Whatever the ecological benefits or drawbacks of closing down the only disposal site for household waste within city limits, the dramatic process of transformation and the high-tech gloss of the project are appropriate reflections of DeLillo's vision. The park website advertises an 'unusual combination of natural and engineered beauty' (Freshkills Park Alliance), a statement that echoes several descriptions of waste sites in *Underworld*. The NYC Department of Parks & Recreation states that the park is 'a model for cities around the world for land reclamation and reuse'; its 'mounds are being capped with an impermeable plastic liner and eight additional layers of barrier material to separate the ground we touch and the landfill beneath it.' Importantly, in keeping with established waste management tradition, the authorities also emphasise that most of the piping and other systems for handling gas and leachate are invisible.

Brian Classic's thoughts in *Underworld* foreshadow the current and future state of the former landfill: simultaneously 'science fiction and prehistory,' the mountain contains the results of a wide array of 'human behaviour,' an overwhelming 'mass metabolism' channelled to Fresh Kills through 'all the great works of transport, trade and linkage' (184). This is why Classic feels 'a poetic balance' between the WTC towers looming in the horizon and the landfill (184). The end of the waste stream is an integral part of globalised commodity circulation, and the values the stinking mass reflects are urban as well as consumerist, 'the appetites and hankerings' of people living in New York City (185).

Finally, Classic's perceptual inclinations and choices in the Fresh Kills scene, combined with awareness of Freshkills Park, come close to expressing the crux of DeLillo's representations of waste and the city. The mountain is both 'impressive and distressing' (185), the vocabulary of awe and terror pointing to the kind of experience that authors such as Burke and Wordsworth saw as 'productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling' (Burke 36). In addition to this allusion to the Romantic sublime, we find a curious manifestation of what might be called, in the wake of James L. Machor, urban pastoralism. This ideal merges a 'unification of past and future' with a sense of unity between the city and 'the cultivated landscape' (Machor 14, 15), the landscaping of dumpsites being a very specific form of cultivation. Some of the character's reactions to the park-to-be, including the perception of a 'poetic balance,' resemble typical responses to a garden setting: he 'felt invigorated, looking at this scene,' 'found the sight inspiring' and 'felt a sting of enlightenment' (184).

Machor sees the urban-pastoral ideal as intertwined with the ideal of America itself (15). As appealing as that notion may be, DeLillo's work suggests a particular angle on that urban national



image. It suggests, for one thing, that the familiar metaphor of exemplary city-America might need a companion image that acknowledges the material realities of urban life. The city upon a hill, DeLillo's texts consistently argue, is also the city upon a landfill. Waste is not merely a problem to be solved by urban planners, a health hazard, or the sanitary story narrated by urban historians. It is a fundamental fact of urban civilization with its own kind of agency, its own aesthetic and metaphorical layers, and a rich allusiveness to other urban materialities. The novel, a linguistic medium free from strict adherence to the demands of historical reality, may well be the ideal vehicle to examine how the agency of different forms of waste manifests itself as part of urban society, and what role it might play in the future. This is not to say that urban historians have ignored the deeper meanings of waste but to suggest that the whole issue transgresses academic disciplines and requires imaginative visions just as much as retrospective explanations. DeLillo's texts argue emphatically that the era of the deliberate visibility of waste has arrived, and the two decades since the publication of *Underworld* have confirmed at least part of this statement.

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