White Male Nostalgia in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*
CHAPTER 12

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Contemporary white men in the United States are not what they are more likely than others to think and feel they are—free-floating individuals without significantly raced and gendered identities. Don DeLillo has long been lauded for revealing pervasive contemporary threats to individualism and yet, in his depictions of protagonists who follow the dictates of middle-class white masculinity, he repeatedly exposes late-twentieth-century American hyper-individualism as a pathological sham. In his later novels, DeLillo hones in more intensively on the irony that sociohistorical forces in the Cold War era contributed to specific constructions of white male individualism, a conundrum that Daniel S. Traber succinctly terms the ‘individualism paradox’. As legal scholar Ian Haney López reminds us, ‘Fathoming the content of white identity requires a shift from thinking about races as categories toward conceptualizing races in terms of relationships. [...] It is in the elaboration of these relationships—invariably of domination and subordination, normativity and marginality, privilege and disadvantage—that white identity is given content.’ Perhaps because DeLillo is commonly grouped with other white male literary postmodernists, whose work tends to be read as if their own racial status and that of their white characters has no significance, his intricate depictions of dominant American racial identities, and the social dynamics that both form and destabilise them, have gone relatively unexamined. John N. Duvall’s description of DeLillo’s most commonly lauded ‘postmodern’ novel, White Noise (1985), as ‘a meditation on postmodernity—what it feels like to live in the age of media saturation’, holds true for many of DeLillo’s other novels as well. In Underworld (1997), DeLillo provides his most extensive dismantling not only of contemporary modes of American de facto white supremacy, but also of white male individualism’s interiorised machinations, especially the fraught feelings that simmer within the discontented core of hegemonic dominance.
In this time-hopping novel’s narrative present, DeLillo’s fifty-seven-year-old protagonist Nick Shay feels a nagging ontological uncertainty, a lonely sense of ‘quiet separation’ from his ‘phony role as husband and father, high corporate officer’. DeLillo anchors shuffling perspectives among a dizzying array of characters with a continual return to Nick’s nostalgic longings for a seemingly pre-whitened and more authentic version of himself. Nick tries to assuage his emotional distress in part by reestablishing himself as an Italian-American descendant, in both familial and cultural terms, and by reaffirming direct ties with the remaining estranged members of his immediate family, including his wife, mother and brother, as well as his own descendants. However, while DeLillo does embed decidedly modernist themes and aesthetics in this novel (which he has described as perhaps ‘the last modernist gasp’), he repeatedly dismantles Nick’s longings for lost time in postmodernist terms, by exposing them as heavily mediated fantasies—partially self-made myths that respond to quasi-historical events that to a large extent are also mediated fantasies, mostly generated in the interests of increasingly global capital. As with several of his other backsliding white male protagonists, DeLillo confronts and counterposes Nick with characters who embody the projected raced and gendered rhemes and other ways, DeLillo dissects in Underworld the individualism fetish most fully embodied by mainstreamed white American masculinity: he diagnoses as well both the external circumstances that account for this elevated identity status and the commonly resultant emotional states that not only drive his representative protagonist to reject his current life and self, but also pull him back into quiescent acceptance of the ‘phony role’ it constitutes (U, 796).

In sociohistorical terms, continually morphing conceptions of collective white American identity have depended on countervailing conceptions, and consequent abuses, of racial others. As nationalistic unity during the Second World War spurred integration among workers at home and fighting forces abroad, demands of racialised minorities for equality during the ensuing ‘Cold War’ impelled the white collective’s psychic burial of its own incriminating and ongoing abuses. Postwar celebrations of white-and-black reconciliation contributed to a feel-good façade for exceptionalist claims to an emerging American Century, but inequitable economic conditions and segregated residential and work spaces remained the norm. Underworld’s lengthy opening section, which depicts the eclipsing in the mainstream American imagination of the Soviet Union’s successful testing of an atomic bomb by a riveting baseball game, establishes the novel as an ambitious assessment of American life during the ensuing Cold War context. By beginning in 1951 with a lengthy focus on Cotter Martin, a young, gate-crashing and self-consciously black baseball fan, DeLillo establishes a probing, insightful depiction of not only a shift in American collective identity towards a relational self-conception via the emerging Soviet Union, but also new formations of the anxious and fearful white supremacy that obstinately undergirds domestic demographic arrangements.

Within the idealised ‘communitas’ of a baseball stadium, Cotter can feel a tenuous cross-racial alliance with a middle-aged white man, Bill Waterson, but a disciplinary, ever-hovering white gaze intrudes when a black peanut vendor works his way towards them: ‘Isn’t it strange how their common color jumps between them? Nobody saw Cotter until the vendor appeared, black rays phasing from his hands. One popular Negro and crowd pleaser. One shifty kid trying not to be noticed’ (U, 20). When Cotter manages to wrench the winning home run ball from the clutch of Waterson, he realizes, as a necessarily self-aware member of a subordinated race, that since the white imagination groups him with other automatically suspicious black people, running in a mostly white crowd would mark him as a thief. As Waterson then pursues Cotter outside of the stadium in an increasingly vicious chase for the ball, DeLillo allegorises a question succinctly posed about Cold War domestic race relations by Leerom Medovoi: ‘How could the United States claim to defend human freedom against its totalitarian enemies abroad while it waged a totalitarian race war at home every time it terrorized its own black (and other minority) populations?’ As Thomas Heise writes, DeLillo’s focus on the ball itself ‘immediately precipitates racial tension over the right to property at a pivotal moment in history when the city is about to fall into a period of steep decline’. A subsequent section depicting Cotter’s family and home life is encased within pages printed entirely black on both sides, a graphic acknowledgement of not only ‘white flight’, which proportionally darkened so many American cities in the years following the Dodgers-Giants game, but also of white America’s defilement-fearing and self-aggrandising consignment of darker American populations to increasingly underfunded, deindustrialised urban settings. Thus, among the novel’s many literal and figurative subterranean territories is that to which darker, and especially northern others were increasingly shuffled and contained, the gradually racialised wastelands later occupied by such make-do figures as Underworld’s graffiti artist Ismael Muñoz and his minions.
As Bill Watterson enjoys the ballgame and a pseudo-paternal camaraderie with Cotter, he reveals in reiterated adspeak chat he runs his own business, a construction firm: ‘We’re the people that build the houses that are fun to live in’ (U, 21). Despite the cozy, border-crossing familiarity that feels possible in this otherworldly ballpark space, mainstream professional baseball remained highly exclusionary in terms of race. As Duvall notes, ‘Although the color bar in the major leagues officially had been broken by Jackie Robinson in 1947, African American players [in 1951] are as much interlopers on the field as Cotter Martin is in the stands.’60

Another real-world division between the two races embodied by Cotter and Waterson also arises in the apparent slogan of Waterson’s business — these ‘fun’ houses were being built in communities that explicitly excluded black families like the Cotters:

Between 1945 and 1960, a pervasive iconography of white, middle-class domesticity circulated widely in various media and became instantiated in millions of new homes across the United States. ... [T]extual and visual representations of those houses continuously and reflexively created, re-created, and reinforced mid-century notions about racial, ethnic, and class identities — specifically, the rightness of associating white identities with homeownership and citizenship.61

As part of a rather fanciful quartet of celebrity baseball fans depicted attending together the game that became legendary, Frank Sinatra thinks of America as ‘a country that’s in a hurry to make the future’, a place where ‘the names attached to the products are an enduring reassurance’ (U, 39). A common feeling prompting this particularly white middle-class need for reassurance was not only an ongoing postwar sense of instability, but also the fear of upcoming change; as the nation seemed to hurtle into the future, many white Americans felt a racially informed sense that national stability and security were under threat, not only by the Soviet Union and its embodied communism, but also by an increasingly restive domestic African-American population. Again, this future, one that was promulgated and perceived largely through advertising, but also through radio, movies, and television shows, did not include nonwhite people like Cotter, who returns to his predominantly black neighbourhood, which is soon to become a further underworld-ed ‘ghetto’, and whose family’s story counterposes the later portrait of the implicitly white, and thus right for the era’s new suburban dream, Demings. In addition, in a scene in which Nick’s brother Matt shares memories of the 1950s that differ from those of a coworker, the adult Eric Deming, DeLillo acknowledges that while whiteness, Italian-American or not, could well have helped the Constanza-Shays into a ‘fun’ and exclusively white suburban setting, specific formations and experiences of whiteness differ, with some aligning less snugly than do others with notions of all-American-ness, but with all nonetheless joined in having been extended opportunities and perquisites denied to racialised others (U, 410).

By setting Underworld’s prologue at the outset of a new phase of collective American self-fashioning, DeLillo emphasizes not an impending shift from some actual reality, but rather the beginnings of certain heightened feelings — especially as experienced by a particular sector of the American populace — that the American past was somehow more real. As newspaper and magazine advertisements, feature articles and photos rain down on the crowd and playing field, DeLillo registers the beginnings of media-fueled nostalgia, a longing that many white middle-class Americans were already beginning to feel for times when life didn’t seem ‘phony’, as the older Nick says of his own circumstances.62 Having paid $34,500 for what he believes is the home run ball from the game, which he listened to on the radio at the age of sixteen, part of Nick’s particularly white male nostalgia is his casting of the game, and of his own ethnic past, in glowing racial terms. Unlike the white American writers analysed by Toni Morrison in her groundbreaking study Playing in the Dark, who typically use an ‘Africanist presence’ in the form of stereotypically black characters whose narrative purpose is to serve merely as foils for white characters, DeLillo unveils the fundamental dependence of whiteness on figurations of blackness, and thus ‘the parasitical nature of white freedom’.63 Underworld continually depicts American Cold War forms of binary thinking, including the mutually constitutive black-and-white simplifications of racism. As FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover muses during the game, there ‘is that side to him, that part of him that depends on the strength of the enemy.’64

And what is the connection between Us and Them, how many bundled links do we find in the neural labyrinth? It’s not enough to hate your enemy. You have to understand how the two of you bring each other to completion’ (U, 28, 51). DeLillo depicts white supremacy’s ontological symbiosis by depicting Cotter’s ‘American’ story as a parallel to Nick’s that is more than merely random. In effect, DeLillo’s depictions of black minor characters amid a cast of mostly white ones differs in a crucial way from those Morrison critiques in that, in a subdued metafictional mode, DeLillo’s very point — that ‘black’ completes ‘white’ in both social and literary senses — is basically the same as hers. Later in the novel, DeLillo depicts another agential black character, Simeon Biggs,
who more directly explains that the nostalgia exemplified so expensively by Nick's purchasing of the game-winning ball is a specifically white racial form of memory construction.

As critical whiteness-studies scholars have repeatedly emphasised, centuries of overt American white supremacy morphed in the twentieth century into more veiled forms of hegemony, to the point where the racial status of many white Americans, let alone its guiding influences on their own perspective, feelings, and behaviours, rarely ever registers for them. A common result is paradoxical and unwitting reactions and behaviour, many of which are guided by racially informed emotions—feelings that can in turn warp the formation and reiteration of individual and collective memories. Having joined a current and historically resonant white movement westward into 'the white parts of the map' \( (U, \, 422) \), the older, putatively successful Nick remembers longingly a version of himself that is not only youthfully vigorous and impetuous, but also specifically Italian. Having stepped into the corporate role of 'waste manager', Nick has tried to bury his own psychic garbage, but like the methane gas that must escape from the landfills he helps to construct, certain unresolved memories resist containment. In a way that registers both irony and sincerity, Nick imitates Italian gangster speech for his colleagues, but according to coworker Brian Glass, anything actually Italian in his background is imperceptible to others \( (U, \, 165) \). Having been influenced in part by media-generated portrayals to conceive of Italian ethnicity in aggressively masculine terms, Nick mythologises the disappearance of his father as a likely mob hit, downplaying the equally plausible story of disgraceful abandonment by a selfishly negligent father and husband. Like many descendants of European immigrants, Nick's clinging to his ethnic heritage actually reveals his stronger whitened tendencies. 'I've always been a country of one', he says at one point, 'there's a certain distance in my makeup, a measured separation like my old man's, I guess.' Having raised the spectre of his lost Italian-American father, Nick then evokes an Italian word (which, in his muddled reconstruction of his past, he also thinks might be Latin) 'that explains everything' about his own aura and feeling of detachment: 'lontananza'. Distance or remoteness, sure. But as I use the word, as I interpret it, hard-edged and fine-grained, it's the perfected distance of the gangster, the syndicate mobster—the made man' \( (U, \, 275) \). In terms of Nick's unwittingly racialised identity, the irony here is that a greater individualising 'distance' he feels and enacts springs more from his whitening residential and vocational movement, away from that which he evokes to explain his psychic and emotional distancing, his Bronx-Italian heritage.

At the same time, the depressed Nick also sees his current self as flaccidly de-ethnicised and dislocated, as evinced by a self-description he reports having often used by way of introduction: 'I live a quiet life in an unassuming house in a suburb of Phoenix. Like someone in a Witness Protection Program' \( (U, \, 66) \). DeLillo depicts Nick performing this line with wry self-effacement, likely because it registers Nick's longing for a more impressive, less whitened version of himself, and perhaps as well because it echoes the ending of a then-recent Hollywood movie about another discontentedly suburbanised mafia 'romanticizer', Henry Hill, the protagonist of Martin Scorsese's Goodfellas \( (1990) \). In the film's closing scene, the character, played by Ray Liotta and based on the actual 'half-Irish, half-Sicilian' Henry Hill, opens a suburban ranch-house door to retrieve a newspaper. In voice-over, Hill bemoans having been placed in the Witness Protection Program for testifying against Italian-American gangsters because he will have to live the rest of his life 'like an average nobody'. The parallel becomes even stronger on realising that Nick is 'half-Irish' as well—his last name is Shay because his Irish-American mother reverted to her maiden name in response to her husband Jimmy's abandonment. As I will explain, having moved ever westward and having landed in Arizona, Nick enacts what David Roediger and others have identified as a general movement for Southern and Eastern European descendants of immigrants, a movement towards a seemingly blank middle-class whiteness that also specifically and ontologically retreats from vividly imagined figurations of both ethnicity and blackness. By moving his protagonist in a decades-long trajectory from the formerly Italian-dominated, early-twentieth-century Bronx, DeLillo effectively evokes and traces the historical mobility of such whitened descendants, an ever-expanding 'white' group whose collective, fearful, identity-forming movement has always entailed a negatively relational ontology, conceiving of themselves less as white and more as 'those who are not non-white' \( .7 \)

As a middle-aged parent, Nick vaguely perceives this common white process of identity adjustment in his teenaged son Jeff, who in response to the racially enflamed riots in 1992 Los Angeles adopts various contemporary signifiers of urban blackness: 'an L.A. Raiders hat and an ultralong T-shirt that had a pair of sunglasses slung from the pocket, ... the same shy boy but physically vivid now, a social being with a ghetto strut' \( (U, \, 104-5) \). As an unremarkably white resident of suburban Arizona, Jeff appears to be an indistinct normal boy to any similarly normalised white beholder, such as his father, who thinks of the Midwestern upbringing of his wife Marian in similarly relational terms—not merely as normal, and thus
only implicitly white, but also more explicitly as different from urban and black: 'Marian in her Big Ten town, raised safely, protected from the swarm of street life and feeling deprived because of it – privileged and deprived, an American sort of thing' (U, 344). The parallel DeLillo draws in both cases is to Nick's own identity work, which he too performs in terms that contrast his currently blank, seemingly lifeless, unremarkably white suburban life with his more vivid, urban, and supposedly non-white or less-white past.

The reality of a common fantasised ethnic past like Nick's is that as a group, Italian-American immigrants quickly assumed a status that was more 'white' than it ever was non-white; indeed, the first were, in historian Thomas A. Guglielmo terms, already 'white on arrival'. While Italian immigrants like Nick's paternal ancestors were at times perceived by other white Americans in terms that amounted to racial inferiority, 'they were white just the same. They were so securely white, in fact, that Italians themselves rarely had to aggressively assert the point'. As Roediger also explains, mid-twentieth-century Italian-American descendants who sought upward social mobility were encouraged by racially preferential housing loans and job openings to leave 'stigmatized “mixed race” areas' in favour of exclusionary suburban spaces. While descendants of Italy and other (from a white American perspective) provisionally white European nations did face relatively muted forms of discrimination while living and working in urban areas, when they joined mass movements into new, 'fun' suburban houses of the sort that Bill Waterson's company would have built, they became de facto white people, with ethnic identity an increasingly and merely personal option. While the racially informed portion of Nick's imagination accurately remembers the fact itself of ethnic difference, his training into late-twentieth-century suburban, anti-urban whiteness causes him to gloss over nostalgically not only the white privilege that he and his ancestors always enjoyed, but also its conceptual reliance on figurations of an inferior, yet threatening blackness. His memory of punching a black interloper in the 1950s Bronx is more revealing of the obedience he already paid as a teenager to the dictates of whiteness than of any allegiance he felt to Italian neighborhood solidarity; his action signals how any such solidarity was already informed by white supremacist denigration of blackness, and thus by an Italian-American striving for full-fledged whiteness that formed itself against, and in many ways acted against, the spectre of denigrated blackness. This racialised conglomeration of fears and anxieties only became a more explicitly motivating force when ethnic descendants joined anti-urban expansion, as 'the white suburb's need to imagine a black, anti-neighborly, and uninhabitable city structured perceptions, even as it added to the allure of the often shoddy and drab suburban working-class subdivision and hastened the forgetting of who – and what – was left behind'.

As a roving attempt to capture psychic and emotional states engendered by late-twentieth-century white American life, Underworld also diagnoses residents seduced by the well-advertised allure of racially purified suburbs. Depicted in a series of snapshot-like tableaux, the Demings are a family welcomed, in part by dint of their whiteness, into a place where the 'trees at the edge of the lawn were new, like everything else in the area', including, in a racial sense, the residents themselves (U, 514). The mid-twentieth-century suburban white American was a deliberate racial formation, one characterised as explicitly fresh, pure, and clean not only by its positioning amid shiny new products and hypoallergenic kitchens and bathrooms, but also against the excluded conceptual impurity of urban racial blackness. DeLillo's emphasis here lies as much or more on depicting what it feels like to live in this dream, specifically as a middle-class white person who can thereby fit one of its appointed roles, as it does on satirising the product-lust of emergent American hyper-consumerism. As the chapter opens in 1957, wife and mother Erica feels down while constructing Jell-O parfait, and she realises later that the source of her discontent is the looming awareness of Sputnik, the eminence-challenging satellite recently put into orbit by the Soviet Union: 'Erica felt a twisted sort of disappointment. It was theirs, not ours.' Prior to offering to take teenaged son Eric out for a Sputnik sighting, husband and father Rick is stroking his new car in the breezeway, 'simonizing' it, which is 'something, basically, he could do forever' (U, 518, 516). DeLillo places the Demings in a 'split-level suburban house', thematically signalling a split between the staged, superficial level of both their lives and psyches and a subterranean one, where new, middle-class white anxieties, fears, and excitements lurk.

Eric is hidden away in his bedroom, 'jerking off' into a condom that excites him because its 'sleek metallic shimmer' evokes 'his favorite weapons system, the Honest John, a surface-to-surface missile that carried yields of up to forty kilotons'. Also exciting for Eric is a photo of Jayne Mansfield, even though her depicted breasts seem too 'real' to him; the success of consumer capitalism's efforts to penetrate the middle-class white psyche and implant an image of one's potential, all-American and not-so-incidentally-white staged self, and thus with the desire to become that self by buying all of the right home-filling products, is manifested by Eric's shift in desire from Mansfield's breasts to her face, which 'was
put together out of a thousand thermoplastic things. And in the evolving scan of his eros, it was the masking waxes, liners, glosses and creams that became the soft moist mechanisms of release' \((U, 514, 515)\). Since the new suburban life is so heavily conceived and lived in terms informed yet censored by family-friendly movies, TV shows and the advertising that both surrounds and suffuses such identity-forming entertainments, sexuality is both present and sublimated. Accordingly, while Rick is mesmerised in the act of stroking his new car, Mansfield's breasts remind Eric of 'the bumper bullets on a Cadillac'. Meanwhile, Erica worries in a repressed way about the potential effects of Eric's prolonged activities behind doors, where he probably isn't hitting his school books like he should be: 'He was hitting something too hard but Erica tried not to form detailed images' \((U, 517, 519)\). Again, none of the three Dennings could feel as they do without being white — properly situated in their roles, but also anxious, fearful and excited in response to external social narratives that include people 'like' themselves, and thus, themselves.

By the early 1990s, the ever-shifting contours of white supremacy continued to produce not only new racial attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, but also new neighbourhoods and work-home pathways; as non-white residents began moving into suburbs, socially aspirant white Americans continued the pattern of fearful residential flight, a movement represented by Nick's westward relocation of his family to another 'white space on the map' \((U, 529)\). Having been abandoned by his father and having impulsively shot a man as a teenager, Nick has personal reasons for attempting to bury his past, but as a member of the middle-class, ever-westward and non-white-fleeing collective, Nick enacts garbage-burying tendencies that are common among members of that collective. Since the white American past generally stinks, as it were, contemplation of it can induce white guilt and shame in any generation; in response, white-led institutions and thus most white individuals cover it over, and as they 'recycle' selected parts of the past for necessary self-constitution in the present, they sort through it, sanitising, organising and burnishing chosen scraps. In the residential setting in which Nick and his wife meticulously sort through their recyclables, he drives through a neighborhood where Native Americans are only acknowledged via street names. At another point, he and his family travel to an 'ancient ruin', where even the hired guide seems oblivious not only to any accurate sense of who the land's former inhabitants were, but also to the part that racialisation of aboriginal people as 'savages' (and thus of white people as 'civilised') may have played in their erasure. Nick finds himself more interested in the 'protective canopy' than the ruins themselves, and any relatively accurate sense of who Native peoples were and the part white supremacy played in their decimation has been either figuratively or literally paved over, landscaped into what amounts to a successful landfill that appears pleasantly and forgetfully palatable \((U, 342-43)\).

Like Jack Gladney in DeLillo's *White Noise*, Nick is fascinated by literal garbage, but also by the figurative waste of his own past, and any meanings he imposes on it are just that — imposed, and not actual.\(^24\) DeLillo suggests that like the historical recollections of nearly any American white man, Nick's are inevitably contaminated by gross abuses and by the nationalistic fantasies that gloss over and erase them. By incorporating more racially astute non-white characters, DeLillo also acknowledges that in broader, collective terms, historical memory reported from a minority perspective is often not only different, but also more accurate. That Nick's whitened perspective is also a typically impervious, resistant one is also suggested by his friendship of sorts with a black colleague, Simeon Biggs, whom Nick calls Sims. In 1978 Nick visits Los Angeles, where Sims works as a 'landfill engineer' \((U, 278)\), and the two of them spend an evening barhopping and avoiding, in a traditionally masculine way, intimate conversation about Sims' current marital difficulties. Having registered for Nick during a visit to his office the whitening demands of his corporate role ('I go to sleep black every night and come back white in the morning' \([U, 303]\)), Sims repeatedly tries to discuss racial matters, only to be derailed by Nick. Recalling a photo of black jazz legend Charlie Parker, Sims suggestively highlights Parker's 'white suit', but Nick stubbornly wonders instead what the shoes Parker was wearing are called. Sims also tells Nick about being repeatedly harassed by police as a black male driver merely because I resemble a suspect or my tail-light's out,' then adds, 'You want to be my friend, you have to listen to this' \((U, 326, 327)\). Again, though, Nick changes the topic, preferring to talk about his own graying hair. Later in the evening, when Sims recalls rumours about a barge full of garbage currently cruising the American coast and repeatedly facing refusals of entry, DeLillo's stagings of the common white refusal to address the ongoing manifestations of the waste and abuses of white supremacy come full circle. This former young tough who once hit a black kid for wandering into his 'Italian' neighbourhood is now quite willing, during his time of middle-aged existential crisis, to have dinner at a baseball game with this black colleague. Nevertheless, he fails to register the significance to his nostalgic groping towards solace of this man's more racially cognizant assessment of the collective fantasy that has arisen around the earlier
famous ballgame. As Sims, Nick and two other companions discuss the celebrity touring that a pair of players from that game have been doing for decades, Sims points out the significance of their whiteness. Even the losing pitcher can be redeemed by the collective white male nostalgia that reveres and mythologises baseball lore: 'Because he's white', Sims said. 'Because the whole thing is white. Because you can survive and endure and prosper if they let you. But you have to be white before they let you.'

As the night ends, Nick enacts his common white male tendency to resist the puncturing of racialised nostalgia by harsh truths uttered by one of America's subordinated, experienced Others when he remembers instead a vision of racial harmony — Sims's earlier reported memory that, as a child, he too succumbed momentarily to that cozy fantasy, when he ran down a street 'waving his arms and shouting that he's Bobby Thompson', 1951's victorious white home run slugger (U, 98, 100).

In such ways, DeLillo taps into what it often felt like to live as a middle-class, heterosexual white man in the late twentieth century, thereby exposing root causes of an ironically obstructed form of privileged agency. In her examination of the difficulties that those who oppose the abuses of late capitalism face in mounting an effectively collective critique, Wanda Vrasti asks, 'How do individuals become emotionally invested in social formations that betray an obvious propensity towards socio-economic and ecological crises? ... What kind of moral legitimating structures does capitalism rely on to make critique look ridiculous or exasperating? Ultimately, DeLillo's fiction repeatedly proffers an anti-individualist strategy similar to one offered by Vrasti: 'Before we can learn how to live-in-common, we first need to take a moment to examine our deepest attachments and remember how easily all the things we do to improve ourselves and the world around us are absorbed back into moral regulations and/or consumerist modalities.' In a moment that initially promises an affective rapprochement, Nick physically attacks his cuckolded colleague, Brian Glassic. However, the effort is halfhearted and unfulfilling, and a rumbling conglomeration of powerful feelings continues to roil within Nick. Like the underground nuclear explosion of post-nuclear waste that they've travelled to Russia to witness, Nick's slapping around of Brian fails to result in an above-ground, truly satisfying explosion. As a white male 'waste analyst', a role that metaphorises his gendered and racialised training, Nick's 'waste' remains internalised, its release thwarted. When he ponders and relishes the chance to wreak vengeance on Brian, he more explicitly contrasts an earlier, ethnic version of himself with a current middle-class and white version of himself; he imagines he could 'crush' Brian's face 'with five earnest blows' while emphasising the phenotypically 'white' features of his colleague: 'But we don't do that anymore, do we? This is a thing we've left behind. Five dealt blows to the pinkish face with the paling hair' (U, 796).

As Nick roams his house, sardonically located in Phoenix, he fondles his gathered, nostalgia-inducing relics, enacting again his deeper investment in objects than in people: 'I rearrange books on the old shelves and then I stand there looking ... [I] look at the things we own and feel the odd mortality that clings to every object. The finer and rarer the object, the more lonely it makes me feel, and I don't know how to account for this.' Nick's efforts to reestablish emotional and psychic connections from his past have failed, because the 'waste' of his past that he sorted through was a fantasised version, an interpretation that he imposed on it: 'They are making synthetic feces in Dallas', he repeatedly thinks (U, 804, 805). In this sense, Nick's racialised identity is also exposed as that of a constructed, script-following white person, not unlike the Demings; his fealty to ad-driven constructions of the stage-set of his life, and of his role in it, has meant attaching more meaning and value to props and well-acted roles than to anything that might feel more real. At the same time, Nick ponders a 'desperate crisis, the intractability of waste', and more specifically, how 'conference reports and newspapers', interpretations not unlike those he imposes on the waste of his own past, fail to account for the real thing and to deal with it adequately; the sheer global mass of human waste 'is not otherwise touchable somehow, for all the menacing heft and breadth of the material, the actual pulsing thing' (U, 805). As Renato Rosaldo has pointed out, historically decontextualised nostalgia from a privileged perspective 'makes racial domination appear innocent and pure'. For many middle-class white American men who follow the sentimental training that encourages 'containment' of realities that would challenge a sense of self as disconnected from its other selves and innocent of their abuse, they fail to realise the fantasy of their own autonomy and the injury they do by maintaining such right 'containment' of their emotions and their socio-historical awareness.

In this postmodern dramatisation of numerous forms of reconstituted Cold War American subjectivity, DeLillo animates not only the mutually constitutive binaries that formed racialised identity construction, but also the emotions that prompted the deflection and denial of such social realities by those who benefited the most from them as a group. In these terms, Underworld's urban-dwelling nun, Sister Alma Edgar, seems to reach a better resolution, when she takes off her disinfectant gloves...
and embraces the unwashed urban residents from whom she has habitually distanced herself; the people who have gathered to view the angelic apparition on a billboard of a murdered girl, whose death causes something approaching a communal paroxysm. Having banished himself to an emotionally deserted wasteland in the western desert, Nick instead feels 'a loneliness, a loss', which is clearly more than that of his father. As he alights with a brave kind of aging (U, 822, 808, 809). In racial terms, the subsumed white collective commonly seeks an illusory redemption in self-tying of the things we use and discard. Look how they come back to us, truths of white supremacist slaughter, forced labor-extraction and concealment of the narrating protagonist was also the word 'phony', J. D. Salinger's term that notes the racial-ethnic awareness about race and their own racial identity than [do] members of other racial-ethnic groups.' Woody Doane, 'Rethinking Whiteness Studies' in Stacey Oster (ed.), Don DeLillo: Mao II, Underworld, Falling Man (London: Continuum, 2011), 99–113; Thomas Heise, Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010); David Noon, 'The Triumph of Death: National Security and Imperial Erasures in Don DeLillo's Underworld', Canadian Review of American Studies 37/1 (2007), 83–110.


9 Heise, Urban Underworlds, 233.

10 As Eric Avila explains regarding 'white flight', as 'black' became increasingly synonymous with 'urban' during and after the Second World War, emphasis on suburban development conversely sanctioned the formation of a new 'white' identity.... The collusion of public policy and private practices enforced a spatial distinction between 'black' cities and 'white' suburbs and gave shape to what the Kerner Commission, a presidential commission appointed to assess the causes of the 1965 Watts Riots in Los Angeles, identified as two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal', Eric Avila, Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 5.

11 Duvall, 'Excavating the Underworld', 258.


13 The year 1951 also included publication of a milestone novel in the depiction of American white male identity formation, in which a signature expression of the narrating protagonist was also the word 'phony', J. D. Salinger's Catcher in the Rye (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1951).


15 As Woody Doane explains, 'The central component of the sociology of whiteness is the observation that white Americans have a lower degree of self-awareness about race and their own racial identity than [do] members of other racial-ethnic groups.' Woody Doane, 'Rethinking Whiteness Studies' in Ashley 'Woody' Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (eds.), White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism (London: Routledge, 2009), 3–20 [7].


21 For an argument that takes DeLillo to task for being unable in *Underworld* to fully imagine the consequences of the cold war for ... Native American communities in the nuclear West', see Noon, 'The Triumph of Death', 83.

