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The Reincarnation of the Humanist Subject in Contemporary American Fiction: a New Historicist Reading in Selected Works of Don DeLillo and Richard Powers.

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this research work comes from my own efforts and exhaustive investigations. As far as I know, the thesis denies, except where due acknowledgement is made, the presence of scholarly materials formerly published by researchers in the field.

Date

08/10/2025

Signature

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'J' followed by a loop and a flourish.

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Dedication

To my mother, this is as much the fruit of your labor as it is mine,

To all the members of my family, your companionship is invaluable.

Abstract:

This research deals with the revival of the humanist subject in contemporary fiction after it was heralded dead by postmodern thinkers and writers. To do so, it compares Don DeLillo's postmodern *Americana*, *Libra* and *White Noise* to Richard Powers's contemporary *The Echo Maker*, *Orfeo* and *Gain*. The research relies on the New Historicist concept of Self Fashioning theorized by Stephen Greenblatt, through which it reads the self narrative, the agency, the authenticity and resilience of the characters within these novels. It also builds on some poststructuralist notions, such as Différance, Hyperrealism and Historiographic Metafiction in order to analyze the postmodern and contemporary cultures in which the subject is constructed. Accordingly, compared to the fragmented narratives of the characters in *Americana*, those in *The Echo Maker* are much more capable of creating coherent self narratives. In *Libra*, the subject is controlled by forces outside of his control, such that he is unable to exercise his agency and authenticity, whereas in *Orfeo* the subject manages to achieve a balance between an autonomous and authentic sense of self and external influence. Finally, in *White Noise* the characters are defeated by the alien and hostile circumstances of contemporary society, while those in *Gain* are much more resilient despite the difficulties they face. As such, the subject in *White Noise* has an anxious disposition that inhibits the formation of a solid identity, compared to *Gain* wherein the subject is able to create a resilient identity able to face challenge and project a possibility for change. In this manner, Powers engages in an intertextual conversation with DeLillo that assimilates the postmodern lessons on the representation of subjectivity in contemporary culture but attempts to move beyond it to a much more optimistic view of the subject.

Keywords: postmodernism, contemporary literature, revival, humanism, self fashioning, Subjectivity.

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Introduction

The continuous divergence from established literary traditions is a tradition in itself. From the lens of the Russian Formalists to Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence, authors break with tradition in the hopes of establishing new modes of interpretation through art. Such is the case with subjectivity. Accordingly, the depiction of the subject has departed from the rounded character of the well-made novel. Modernists and postmodernists alike seek to depart from the realist portrayal of the subject. Influenced by Marxist and Existentialist thought, modernists portray characters whose alienation leads to a search for authenticity. While the alienated character of modernism departs from the realist character that perfectly embodies social norms, it still heralds the humanism of enlightenment thinking (Miernowski xv). Humanism, in this sense, is a philosophy that ascribes rationality and autonomy to human beings (viii). However, the postmodernists influenced by poststructuralists such as Foucault and Derrida, bring an end to the humanist subject in their fiction. They depict characters whose thoughts and actions are dictated by linguistic and social systems in order to decenter the autonomous and rational subject (Helgeson 06).

The poststructuralists unveiled the reality that the subject is not an autonomous agent who is capable of understanding and communicating a single minded subjectivity. Theorists like Derrida, Foucault and Baudrillard point to language, power relations and a hyperrealist culture as inhibitors to self determinism. In *Positions*, Derrida argues that language acts as a barrier to independent thought given the fact that every word carries its cultural, social and political meaning (29). Foucault asserts in *Discipline and Punish* that authority labels the subject, assigns his role within a system and puts him under surveillance (199). And Baudrillard posits that technology has contributed to the

creation of a hyperrealist culture that replaces the substantial aspects of one's life with its mediated images on screens, which do not correspond to reality (*Symbolic* 71).

The poststructuralist paradigms of the self inspired a certain type of character in postmodern literature. Due to the disintegration of linguistic meaning, these characters lack narrative continuity. That is to say, the story of the self is fragmented and cannot be understood as a coherent whole (Timmer 20). Therefore, the lack of an integrated self narrative inhibits the postmodern character from acting from a place of assured self knowledge (Erickson 134). Thus, it loses its agency and becomes vulnerable to the control of outside forces. Furthermore, the hyperrealist culture of postmodernity disconnects the subject from reality and fosters a disorienting reliance on media images to understand oneself and the world. Such a reliance on images for identity formation not only fractures reality but also the possibility of substantial relationships with others. Although true to its cultural moment, the issue with postmodern conceptualization of the self is that it offers no solution to its dilemmas and no way forward.

In the twenty first century, contemporary attempts to move beyond postmodernism have many labels such as post-postmodernism and metamodernism. These attempts are defined by a an "oscillation" between modernist naivety and postmodern cynicism (Velmeulen and van den Akker 5). In their essay "Notes on Metamodernism," Vermeulen and Van den Akker argue that the most prominent characteristic of contemporary art is that it shares the modernist pursuit of order and the postmodern belief that disorder is part of the fabric of life (6). In this sense, contemporary art attempt to reconstruct what postmodernism has deconstructed (7). In addition, they posit that contemporary art is characterized by a return to romantic sensibilities, which are partially interested in "Bildung" (8). That is to say, contemporary art is concerned with the process of emotional, cultural and social

development of an individual (Herdt 01). Accordingly, they attempt to understand the self beyond the notion of the decentered subject of postmodernism.

Contemporary authors are dissatisfied with the cynicism of postmodernists and wish to move beyond it. Nevertheless, contemporary authors recognize the value of postmodern deconstruction of the humanist subject. Such is the case for the contemporary American author Richard Powers who engages in an intertextual conversation with his postmodern counterpart Don DeLillo. Powers maintains DeLillo's views on language, power and the media; however, he still attempts to revive the subject in his fiction. The characters in Powers's fiction are self reflexive, aware of their status as cultural, linguistic and even fictional constructs, but they insist on pursuing continuity and wholeness. In this sense, Powers creates characters that at once exhibit the fragmentation of deconstruction and a desire for continuity. In addition, despite knowing that they are bound by forces outside of themselves, these characters insist on claiming their personal decisions. Furthermore, they resist the manipulation of technology or manage to use it to their advantage as oppose to DeLillo's characters who are oppressed by it.

Most critics view Don DeLillo as a postmodernist par excellence, whose engagement with themes of fragmented personhood, the pervasiveness of technology in human lives and the role of language in constructing identity all reflect a postmodern sensibility. For instance, in his book *Don DeLillo: the Physics of Language*, David Cowart describes the protagonist of DeLillo's *Americana* as "the ultimate hollow man" for his representation of the postmodern subject whose quest for a coherent knowable identity ends in failure due to his reliance on media images for such a task (138). However, while Cowart points to the fact that David Bell uses media images to

understand himself and the world around him, he fails to realize that David begins from the understanding that these images can never satisfy his need for self knowledge.

Similarly, in his book *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*, Tom LeClair argues that David Bell is engaged in a pattern of duplication, whereby he seeks truth and understanding, of himself and others, only to escape the possibility of ever reaching them (39). LeClair's perspective does not take into consideration that David's search for understanding is but a mock-quest set to mimic the modernist quest for self understanding that the postmodern novel depicts as a futile endeavor.

In his article "Don DeLillo's Americana: From Third-to First-Person Consciousness" Benjamin Bird Argues against the previous critics who view David's quest for a coherent selfhood as a failure. While the previous critics focus on the end of the novel; wherein David returns to New York to the same cultural atmosphere of corporate greed, media images and advertisement, Bird considers the end of David's life. He suggests that Bell is able to reach a measure of selfhood despite the fact it might be wounded. He bases such an argument on the fact that at the end of his life Bell is on a remote island engaged in retrospective contemplation of his life (199). However, this argument fails to consider that through such a contemplation the novel reveals that life can never be understood as a comprehensive whole.

Some critics suggest that Don DeLillo only participates in postmodern culture in order to transform and redeem it (Boxall 13). The following thesis argues that Richard Powers, who intertextually responds to DeLillo's postmodern sensibilities, is much more successful in transforming and redeeming the postmodern perspective. For instance, in his article "Surprise Ending: Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker*, *Mystery Stories*, and *Unnatural Narratology*," Stock addresses Powers's perspective on the search for

answers within fiction, particularly, in *The Echo Maker*. He argues that Powers manages to move beyond the postmodern belief that no definite answer can be found to any given mystery. He suggests that the answers to the mysteries within the novel give rise to more questions, which points to the necessity of asking questions even if there is no promise of resolution (396-97). Nevertheless, the article focuses on the questions asked on the level of the plot but neglects the questions that the novel attempts to resolve concerning identity construction.

In his article “Writing as an Empathetic Leap to Sibling Others: Post-Postmodern Sincerity and the Novels of Richard Powers,” Hikari posits that Powers’s *The Echo Maker* exemplifies post-postmodern sincerity in its depiction of identities that are in search of coherence through the act of writing. Hikari argues that Powers depicts identity construction as a writing process, through which the individual develops empathy for others (31). Despite the fact that Hikari acknowledges Powers’s ironic stance towards the coherence of identity that accompanies post-postmodern sincerity (32), he does not devote any attention to the linguistic play with which the novel reflects the constructivist aspect of identity.

Equally, some critics focus only on the postmodern aspects of *The Echo Maker* and neglect its contemporary sensibilities. For instance, Toon Staes in his article “Minds, Mapping Minds, Mapping Minds: Reading the Complex Minds of Richard Powers’s *The Echo Maker*” relies on cognitive narratology to argue that identities within the novel are discontinuous, incoherent and unstable (4). In this sense, he posits that the novel follows a postmodern perspective on the subject but he ignores the fact that the novel still represents a hopeful stance towards achieving some measure of coherence and stability within the self despite the difficulty of such a task.

The instability and incoherence of the subject in postmodern texts is also represented in Don DeLillo's *Libra*. In his article, "History, Biography, and Narrative in Don DeLillo's *Libra*" Glen Thomas points to the fragmentation of Oswald's identity within the texts he writes about himself (111). Thomas concludes that it is impossible to write a text that carries the absolute truth about the assassination of Kennedy and about Oswald as his assassin, due to the multiple versions of the narrative that can never be assembled into a coherent whole (122). However, Thomas does not link Oswald's fragmentation within the texts of history to his loss of agency that the novel depicts.

Similarly, in "Lee Harvey Oswald and the Postmodern Subject: History and Intertextuality in Don DeLillo's *Libra*, *The Names* and *Mao II*" Thomas Carmichael argues that to use narrative in order to record the history of the self or of events is to use a system of signification that already exists within a particular social context (217). Like Linda Hutcheon in her view of the subject within historiographic metafiction, he posits that this historical situatedness does not negate the authority and order of "the lived experience of human history" (216). Yet, such a view seems to ignore the novel's representation of historiography as a controlling entity, in the case of Oswald. The only access to his life is mediated through historical texts and in their multiplicity and claim to truth strip away his authority and desire for order.

Many critics read DeLillo's *Libra* through the lens of Hutcheon's Historiographic Metafiction, such as Leonard Wilcox in "Don DeLillo's *Libra*: History as Text, History as Trauma," who posits that *Libra* questions the imposition of order through historical texts. As such, *Libra* refuses to adhere to any final claim to truth in the assassination of Kennedy (352). None of these critics, however, consider the fact that Hutcheon's assertion that historiographic metafiction merely situates the subject rather than erases it completely is a faulty assumption. Given the fact that fiction such as *Libra* depicts an

erasure of the subject whose agency is eclipsed by the historical narratives that impose their versions of the truth.

In an intertextual response to *Libra*, Richard Powers writes a novel that reflects Hutcheon's view on the subject within historiographic metafiction. Powers's *Orfeo* depicts a protagonist whose historical context restricts his aesthetic sensibilities; however, he is still able to exercise a measure of agency in the art he produces. In his review of *Orfeo*, Stephen J. Burn points to the novel's blend between traditional writing techniques and metafictional commentary as a parallel to the protagonist's struggle to satisfy a need for tradition in the wake of postmodern novelty (09). However, Burn's observation is terminated short of noting that the protagonist's ability to forge a middle ground between tradition and novelty is an example of his ability to exercise agency despite the historical context in which he finds himself.

In her article, "Novelty, Pattern, and Force in Richard Powers's *Orfeo*" Kathryn Hume argues that the protagonist of *Orfeo*, named Els, struggles against the forces that restrict his freedom, whether in his life or his art. Hume argues that Els rebels against familiar patterns to the detriment of his life and career. Such an argument neglects the longing that Els expresses towards tradition and his desire to create art that finds a balance between tradition and novelty. Hume claims that Powers proposes no "practical solution" to the issue of power and control in America, wherein Els finds himself in a power struggle with the government. Yet, the novel shows the artist's attempt to create art that reflects an authentic vision as a success in itself without the need to provide a final resolution to his struggles at the level of the plot.

Another representation of agency in the novel is its incorporation of the myth of Orpheus. For instance, in her article "Of Language and Music: A Neo-Baroque,

Environmental Approach to the Human, Infrahuman and Superhuman in Richard Powers' *Orfeo*” Fernandez-Santiago argues that Orpheus's continued singing even after his dismemberment is depicted in Els's singing with his daughter so near his possible death. The article does not acknowledge the fact that Els's reclamation of his bond with his daughter through song despite the fact that he is pursued by U.S homeland security is an act of agency that strives for the revival of the humanist subject.

In “Forecasting the Past and Recalling the Future: Lemniscate Narratives in the Work of Richard Powers” Gilmour discusses Richard Powers's Metamodernist blend between modernist and postmodernist literary techniques (04). Specifically, through the invocation of the myth of Orpheus (67) as well as the fragmented incorporation of historical narratives in the novel (69). Gilmour, however, does not take into consideration that the protagonist's interpretation of historical narratives within the novel is a testament to the novel's metamodernist project. The modern-day Orpheus of the novel is an active participant in the narratives of his culture.

Besides narrative coherence and agency in identity formation, Don DeLillo and Richard Powers share a concern with the hostilities that hamper the construction of subjectivity in contemporary society. For instance, one of DeLillo's concerns in *White Noise* is the use of consumer products for self definition. In “Fetishism and Form: Advertising and Ironic Distance in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*” Adam Szetela posits that Don DeLillo criticizes postmodern consumer culture and its erasure of a well-adjusted personhood. He argues that the protagonist of the novel seeks to define himself within this culture to no avail (2). However, the protagonist attempts to escape or veil his identity using consumer products rather than seeking definition through them. The character of Gladney is not based on a search for selfhood but on the concealment of undesirable aspect of the self with commodities.

In *White Noise*, DeLillo depicts the reach of commercialization to all aspects of postmodern culture, even to as noble a field as medicine. For example, in “The Iconic and the Symbolic: the Consumer Society in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* and Andy Warhol’s *Serigraphies*” Hidalgo mentions the commodification of medicine in a footnote (37). Yet, the article does not address in detail the dehumanization that the postmodern subject faces when met with a self interested medical field.

DeLillo’s *White Noise* is also concerned with the man-made environmental hazards of contemporary society and the fear they inspire in the individual. Accordingly, in his book *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*, Tom LeClair advances that the protagonist of *White Noise*, Jack Gladney, is disoriented, fearful and in search of safety (207). Similarly, in “Airborne Toxicity in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*” Uslu relies on Ulrich Beck’s concept of risk society to posit that the characters within the novel are fearful, uncertain and irrational due to the airborne toxic event that threatens their lives. Yet, both LeClair and Uslu neglect the fact that these characters define themselves in the shadow of this fear and uncertainty. The characters of *White Noise* live in a society that forces them to construct identities within the parameters of fear.

Technology is another force with which the postmodern subject has to contend for self definition. For example, in her book *Representation of Technoculture in Don DeLillo’s Novels*, Laila Sougi asserts that Jack Gladney is in constant hearing distance of a television set and in a perpetual state of consuming its information (40-41). However, Sougi neglects the role of computers in the novel whereby Gladney’s life history is rendered into data. The novel represents how postmodern culture replaces human life with computerized information that becomes means for capitalist ends. For instance, in her article “Postmodern Parataxis: Embodied Texts, Weightless

Information” Kathryn Hayles addresses the datafication of Gladney’s life when his medical information is analyzed by a computer (411). Yet, Hayles does not pay attention to the capitalist agenda behind the datafication of human life.

Richard Powers’s *Gain* depicts similar concerns to those within *White Noise*. For instance, in “Your Doctor Knows the Symbols”: Trans-corporeality in the Fiction of Don DeLillo and Richard Powers,” Andrew Gorman discusses how *White Noise* and *Gain* both depict the mutual effect between the environment and human bodies. He concludes that the protagonists of both novels are awakened to the toxicity of the environment and how it affects their bodies (59). However, he does not delve into the identities that are fashioned within the novels as a response to the detrimental effects of the environment on the body. Similarly, in “Nothing Risked, Nothing Gained: Richard Powers’ *Gain* and the Horizon of Risk” Aaron Jaffe reads *Gain* from the lens of Ulrich Beck’s conception of risk society. He argues that the protagonist, Laura, in contemporary society is exposed to risks that she does not understand but feels the need to investigate. Despite the fact that the article alludes to the notion that the risks in such a society redefine the parameters of identity construction, it fails to project this idea on Laura’s characterization within the novel.

Gain identifies industrial corporation as the primary culprit for the contemporary environmental hazards that threaten human life. For instance, in “Ecosickness in *Gain* by Richard Powers and *Berji Kristin: The Tales from the Garbage Hills* by Latife Tekin” Biderci Dinç examines the novel’s portrayal of the negative impact of toxic industrial waste on the environment and human lives, especially those of poor economic background (341). Equally, in “The Issue of Corporations: Richard Powers’ *Gain*” Jeffrey Williams highlights the fact that the corporation responsible for selling Laura consumer products that contaminate her body and cause her cancer is the same company

that sells her medication. In this sense, corporations have become an integral part of contemporary life to the detriment of environmental and human safety (05). Yet, both articles neglect the dehumanization suffered by Laura as a result of her illness and the subsequent resilience that she demonstrates.

Accordingly, the review of the literature reflects a scarcity of intertextual readings of the novels of Don DeLillo and Richard Powers, specifically concerning contemporary subjectivity. In addition, there is a lack of New Historicist analysis of these novels that applies Stephen Greenblatt's *Self Fashioning*. Furthermore, the research done on the subject within the fiction of DeLillo neglects some of the important details that crystalize the contours of postmodern subjectivity. For instance, important aspects of subjectivity such as agency within historiographic metafiction, or lack thereof in *Libra*, is not considered with nuance. The research done on *Americana* concludes that the protagonist is on a journey of self discovery and fails to see him as a mockery of the modernist notion that self understanding can be achieved. Similarly, while *White Noise* is considered for its portrayal of the hostilities of postmodern culture, their effects on the construction of identity is neglected.

Moreover, while the novels of Richard Powers are studied from a post-postmodern perspective, the research does not pay enough attention to the revival of the humanist subject that these novels attempt. For instance, *The Echo Maker* is appraised for its ability to move beyond postmodern ambiguity at the level of plot, but its attempt to solve the mysteries of identity construction is ignored. *Orfeo* is considered a text that blends between tradition and postmodern novelty without a link to the agency that the artist exhibits by such an endeavor. Similar to *White Noise*, the depiction of contemporary hostilities in *Gain* is analyzed without a consideration of their influence on the formation of identity and its capacity for positive transformation.

The following thesis views Don DeLillo and Richard Powers's novels from an intertextual lens, which allows for an in-depth analysis of the contemporary divergence from postmodern portrayals of subjectivity. The research compares the depiction of the subject in DeLillo's *Americana*, *Libra* and *White Noise* to Powers's *The Echo Maker*, *Orfeo* and *Gain*, respectively. Applying Stephan Greenblatt's concept of self fashioning to these novels facilitates the examination of identity formation through narrative coherence, agency and authenticity, as well as the struggle against alien entities within society. Although Greenblatt's notion acknowledges the unattainability of these humanist ideals, it highlights the fact that the human subject insists on their necessity (257).

Since New Historicists believe that literary texts shape and are shaped by their historical contexts (Montrose 9), taking it up as a theoretical dimension allows for a reading of DeLillo and Powers's texts as products of and participants in postmodern and contemporary cultures. Specifically, it allows for a study of subjectivity in the postmodern and contemporary cultures as depicted in its literary texts. Looking at notions such as linguistic attitudes, media practices, economic trends and historical sensibilities and their interaction with subjectivity is best done through the lens of new historicism. Because, it shows how these texts are influenced by their culture in their depiction of subjectivity and how they seek to influence the ways in which their culture views the subject. In addition, the focus of new historicism on power structures and how they shape the narratives of the organization of society/ cultural discourses (Hickling 55) helps in tracing the postmodern/poststructuralist logic that the subject is largely shaped by powers outside of his control and how the contemporary author tries to weed his way out of such shackles to subjectivity.

In the epilogue of *Renaissance Self Fashioning*, Stephen Greenblatt relays an anecdote wherein a man asks him to repeat a disturbing phrase and he refuses to do so on account that it felt like a violation of his own autonomy. While Greenblatt's research in Renaissance self fashioning yields the understanding that no identity is freely formed but that it is constructed through the power relations of its society, he wishes to hold on to the belief that he is responsible for the words and actions that make up his identity, no matter how illusory this belief might be (256-57). In recounting this anecdote, Greenblatt engages in a New Historicist convention of including anecdotes to illustrate historical concepts. In doing so, he represents a personal perspective in the context of a political issue such as the construction of identity (Hickling 55). Thus, this thesis reflects the contemporary desire to hold on to the illusion of self possession despite the understanding that identity is formed in its social and historical context.

According to Greenblatt self fashioning religious and literary texts of the sixteenth century are characterized by self conscious understanding that identities can be formed either by the self or by sources outside of it (02). He asserts that artists and people in the Renaissance felt like they had the autonomy to construct their own identities; however, he discovers that the subject is shaped by the power relations within his culture (256). He argues that these writers refused to relinquish the feeling of autonomous self fashioning all the while depicting the ways the self is restricted, lost or fashioned from without (257). Accordingly, the following research traces the ways in which the subject is shaped by discursive, historical and societal power relations in postmodern literature and how contemporary authors maintain their desire for autonomous self fashioning in spite of them.

Greenblatt observes a shift in identity formation in the early modern period, this change is on the social, psychological, and aesthetic level. He asserts that this change is

not without complexity and dialecticism, whereby the sought-after change is always intercepted by earlier modes of understanding and control (1-2). Such a view allows for a reading of the complex and dialectic shift from concepts of self-fashioning in postmodernity compared to those of the contemporary period. The shift is not smooth or complete; contemporary authors hold postmodern views to be valuable but still wish to move beyond them in some capacity.

Greenblatt asserts that there is no clear separation between self fashioning within literature and social life (03). Given the fact that identity is formed within certain cultural norms whereby literature reflects these norms and provides commentary on them (04). Both DeLillo and Powers represent concepts of the subject within their culture and attempt to stray away from them. Both authors reflect on aspects of their cultures that fashion identities and how they envision a departure from these understandings. This research analyzes the ways in which DeLillo departs from a modernist understanding of identity, from autonomous and consistent to a subjectivity that is fragmented and determined. Equally, it reads Powers's texts as a response to the cynicism of DeLillo to a depiction of the subject that still holds hope for his salvation.

This research relies on poststructuralist concepts alongside Greenblatt's self fashioning in order to understand the power relations that fashion the self within discourse, history and economy. A reliance on a poststructuralist view of the subject as a product of discourse in Don DeLillo and Richard Powers's novels allows for a comparison between the postmodern and the contemporary depiction of the fragmentation and coherence of self narratives. Equally, poststructuralist notions on the historical situatedness of the subject enable a reading of Don DeLillo and Richard Powers's depiction of the external control with which the subject is fashioned as well as his exercise of agency and authenticity in spite of said control. In addition, the research

uses the postmodern conception of risk society to represent the struggle for self definition in a society that presents the subject with varying hostile circumstance. The subjects in DeLillo and Powers's novels reflects varying degrees of resilience as they face an alien and hostile environments.

In her book *Do You Feel It Too? The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium*, Timmer uses the concept of self narrative to emphasize the importance of understanding and sharing feelings in order to make sense of them (304). While such a view is emphasized in *The Echo Maker*, a focus on the ability of the self to remember the past and piece it together in personalized and creative ways, albeit with the help of others, is ultimately the goal. She believes that coherence of self narratives is no longer attainable as such in the contemporary culture (304). Based on the novel analyzed, however, this thesis shows how these characters insist on building a coherent narrative as the only way to approach a viable future. The protagonist, for instance, is unable to move forward without first accounting for the gap in his memory.

Timmer draws attention to the fact that the absence of a strong tradition from which to act weakens one's agency (306). However, she does not refer to the fact that one's historical situatedness might impose certain obligations on the individual that curtail agency. Agency (and authenticity) in *Orfeo* are not reclaimed against passivity as a result of overwhelming choices but as struggle against historical/outside control. Timmer halts her analysis at the loss of tradition and its effects on the construction of a coherent self narrative, whereas this thesis goes beyond that to examine the vulnerability of the self to historical/external control when there is no solid tradition from which to act and the subsequent contemporary desire to break such a mold for character construction.

The following research relies on Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality to draw a comparison between the novels Don DeLillo and Richard Powers as it pertains to their depiction of the contemporary subject. In her essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel," Kristeva argues that the novel is a cite for dialogue among different texts. In this sense, Intertextuality refers to the inclusion of existing texts within new texts with the purpose of transformation. She asserts that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (37). Thus, relying on Kristeva's definition of intertextuality, the following research approaches the novels of Richard Powers as an intertextual response to those of DeLillo with the hope of transforming the contemporary conception of the subject.

The thesis compares the coherence of self narratives in DeLillo's *Americana* and Powers's *The Echo Maker*. It reads Powers's *Orfeo* and DeLillo's *Libra* as historiographic metafiction and compares their conceptions of agency and authenticity within such fiction. It also compares the construction of identity against the alien circumstance of contemporary life in DeLillo's *White Noise* and Powers's *Gain*. Despite the fact that this latter is published at the end of the 20th century, it reflects the 21st century longing for humanist ideals and therefore allows for a comparison between the contemporary and postmodern novel.

For the clarity and straightforwardness of the research, this thesis focuses on a single issue concerning the contemporary divergence from postmodern sensibilities, that of subjectivity in a limited number of works from Don DeLillo and Richard Powers. While it pays attention to issues such as truth and historicity after postmodernism, it only does so in relation to the subject.

This research is divided into three chapters, chapter one compares the self narratives forged in *Americana* and *The Echo Maker* by applying Stephen Greenblatt's concept of narrative self fashioning. It focuses on the ability of the subject to reconstruct a self narrative after its fragmentation in the novels. It pays attention to the linguistic construction of the self, the fabrication that engender from the linguistic play of meaning as a result and how they are portrayed differently by DeLillo and Powers. In addition, the chapter considers the importance of relationships to the coherence of the self narratives of the characters. Finally, it examines the solutions to the fragmentation of the narratives of the self within both novels.

Chapter two compares the depiction of the agency and authenticity of the subject in DeLillo's *Libra* to that in Powers's *Orfeo*. It relies on Greenblatt's understanding of authenticity in self fashioning as a directness of action that does not submit to the rules of others which allows for autonomous action. Furthermore, it looks at both novels from the lens of Historiographic Metafiction in order to analyze the degree to which the subject is able to act with authenticity and agency despite his historical situatedness. It explores the portrayal of historical documents, dominant ideologies, the restriction of truth by those in powers and their effect on the agency and authenticity of the subject within these novels.

The third and last chapter compares DeLillo's *White Noise* to Powers's *Gain* in order to assess the ability of the subject to construct a solid identity despite the hostility of postmodern and contemporary society. According to Greenblatt, the subject constructs an identity against an alien entity through which he is able to achieve an understanding of the self. It considers the ambiguities of the dangers within the risk society that confuse the construction of an identity in both novels. Furthermore, the chapter delves into other hostile aspects of postmodern and contemporary society such

as consumer culture, the commercialization of medicine and surveillance capitalism. It analyzes the ways in which these hostile circumstances dehumanize the subject and inhibit his construction of a solid identity in the novels.

Chapter One:

Narrative Self Fashioning in Don DeLillo's *Americana* and Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker*.

Postmodern authors put the notion of a coherent and continuous self narrative into question in their fiction. Influenced by Post-structuralism, postmodern literature portrays the subject as the result of the linguistic play of meaning. That is to say, postmodern subjects have unstable self narratives to reflect the instability of language as a medium of representation. While contemporary authors do not deny the fact that self narratives may vary in interpretation, they still wish to move beyond the confines of the constructivist view of the subject. In this sense, contemporary authors recognize the fragmentation of the subject due to interpretation, but still believe in the ordering power of narrative. For instance, Don DeLillo's *Americana* and Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker* represent depictions of the subject in postmodernist and contemporary literature, respectively. Characters in both novels, particularly protagonists, struggle with fragmented self narratives. However, *The Echo Maker* shows a greater willingness to rewrite a broken narrative as oppose to *Americana*, which surrenders to it.

This chapter applies Stephen Greenblatt's concept of narrative self fashioning in order to compare the depictions of subjectivity in *Americana* and *The Echo Maker*. In the concept of narrative self fashioning, Greenblatt acknowledges the inevitable fragmentation of self narratives for the multiple interpretations that they yield. However, he believes that the fragmentation of self narratives calls for their refashioning, rather than complete disappearance under the weight of interpretation (238). Therefore, this chapter argues that the subject does not dissipate into oblivion as a result of a fragmented self narrative; he rather constantly seeks to rewrite it into a comprehensive whole.

In five sections, this chapter attempts to analyze the disintegration and reconstruction of self narratives between *Americana* and *The Echo Maker*. It shows that in both novels, the characters face the fact that their self narratives are only possible through the already existing system of linguistic signification. However, in *The Echo Maker*, Mark refuses to relinquish the viability of his self narrative. The chapter also explores the notion that self narratives are creative processes that are often deceiving. While *Americana* surrenders to the fabrications of these narratives, *The Echo Maker* recognizes their necessity regardless of the falsehoods they carry. Moreover, the chapter examines the important role of self narratives in relationships. The relationships that these characters develop, with those around them or with public figures, are as consistent and stable as their narratives. The last section of the chapter investigates the solutions to the breakdown of self narratives and their degree of failure or success.

1.1. Creating Subjects Via Narratives: Going Beyond the Linguistic Curse of David and Mark

In postmodern fiction, subjectivity is depicted as illusive and unknowable partially for the reliance on language as a medium for identity construction. Accordingly, the instability of linguistic meaning leads to the fragmentation of the subject in Don DeLillo's *Americana*. The search for wholeness is relinquished in the novel; instead, the subject resigns himself to fabrications, nonsense and silence. Equally, Powers's contemporary novel, *The Echo Maker* acknowledges the fact that the only access to identity is discursive and therefore ambiguous. Yet, the protagonist seeks to constantly reconstruct his self narrative every time it disintegrates under the weight of interpretation. Thus, this section highlights the rebuilding of self narratives in *The Echo Maker* compared to their fragmentation in *Americana*.

From the lens of Post-structuralism, the subject relies on language as a medium for identity construction. Due to the fact that linguistic meaning is always in flux, the self lacks coherence and continuity. Postmodern authors, influenced by poststructuralist thought on the self, depict characters that lack stability and unity. For instance, Don DeLillo's *Americana* portrays the use of language in the construction of self narratives as fraudulent, 'babble' like and sterile. Thus, the following explores the ways in which the novel depicts the limitations of discursive subjectivity.

In *Americana*, Don DeLillo emphasizes the discursive aspect of identity formation. The novel illustrates the poststructuralist view that the self is a mere linguistic construct. According to Derrida, semiotic codes, such as language, do not emanate from an autonomous subject that exists outside the play of *différance*. Through the lens of *différance*, reference to a present situation or self is constantly deferred. Each semiotic component that one might use to convey meaning carries traces of past and future associations that lead to a fragmented picture of the subject and the world he inhabits. Such a view emphasizes the fact that meaning is never grasped but is always postponed, that the subject is not "present to itself before *différance*, that the subject is constituted only in being divided from itself" (29). In *Americana*, the protagonist is involved in deciphering the textual riddles of his past to no avail. Such an endeavor is undertaken by both a young David Bell involved in forging the scripts of his subjectivity and an old Bell in the process of examining them. Though the novel is primarily narrated from the first person point of view of young David Bell, the narrative sporadically includes the commentary of older David in a manner that suggests he is the writer of his own biography. Besides his position as a writer, David constantly makes reference to the textual aspect of his story, and therefore of his subjectivity.

In one of his commentaries, the older David uses a film he made when he was young as a metaphor for the retrospective contemplation of his self as text, he declares early in the novel that: “It’s time now to run the film again” (DeLillo 16). In addition, while looking out into the sea, he uses the white foam forming as the waves break against the shore as a metaphor for the pages on which he has written his biography: “[t]he surf is massing and rolling, uneven now, page after page of terrible wild words” (108). Like waves, the pages on which David’s selfhood is inscribed are uneven and their words wild. In this regard, the postmodern perspective holds that the self is discursively constructed, which lends it to incoherence and discontinuity (Shrag 27). As such, David’s identity comes in segments of an “unassembled past” that he refuses to make sense of and rather leaves it for “others [to] stitch together the systems” (DeLillo 108) the way they see fit. However, David does not publish his book nor show his film in theaters, which suggest that the only script available of his account is that of *Americana*. Accordingly, David is doubly trapped; both in the self made texts that mediate his identity and within the text of the novel as a constructed fictional character.

In addition to the incoherence of David Bell’s narrative, he fabricates some of its contents. The novel self-reflexively shows a protagonist who is an artist, author and film maker, whose fabrications extend to his own life story. The novel demonstrates the postmodern preoccupation with self-conscious fiction, which changes emphasis from the story as a product to the process by which such a product is obtained. The locus of such fiction is the manner in which language is manipulated to construct a narrative (Oppermann 214). For instance, the film David is making includes ambiguous moments from his life that are further obscured by their textual form. Any event in David’s life or the lives of those around him can only be communicated in the form of a story that relies on the opaque nature of linguistic meaning. One such moment comes when his

father refuses to reveal any details about his participation in World War II. Originally, David hopes for a real personal account from his father, instead of reading or watching films about the war as his father advises, “[he wants] to know what it was like for [his father], not for other people” (DeLillo 200). But the only harrowing phrase his father utters is that he “buried a man alive” (200). David resigns himself to using this single phrase to add to the plethora of texts about the war. He spins a fictional tale about his father’s experience in the Bataan Death March of WWII. In these instances, *Americana* maintains that there is no straightforward access to the past, be it personal or communal. Rather, the novel emphasizes the role of language in constructing realities and identities.

Ironically, David’s initial resistance to learning about the war from second hand accounts becomes a near obsession with language within his film. The realization that he will never fully know his father’s experiences, which prevents him from fully understanding his father’s character, leads David to a complete resignation to language games. In the film, David embraces the difficulty of knowing oneself or others in a manner that is not mediated by language. As such, the language that comprises these self narratives, including his father’s, is all that he possesses. In the scene where the actor playing his father is being interviewed about his participation in the war, it is the text of the script that takes center stage rather than the character or the story. To do so, David writes the text on the walls and has the actor read them from a paper rather than perform them, “no memory work, no preparation” needed (DeLillo 196). In this way, David centers the text instead of the subject and his experience.

David portrays the incoherence of self narratives in his film by creating incongruence between the text and the character. As he films, he does not follow the lines on the walls in accordance with the actor’s reading but rather films against them,

ahead of them or repeats them, “camera and man reading in opposite directions” (239). Furthermore, David’s reaction to the end of the scene he has written demonstrates the way in which individuals delude themselves into believing the personal narratives that they concoct. For, the end of the story comes as a surprise to David, even though it is of his own making. When he asks the actor why he has stopped reading, the actor has to remind him that: ““That’s all there is”” (243). David places his father’s burial of a man alive at the end of his story, which further explains his momentary surprise at its end; he wishes for further knowledge on the matter. Accordingly, such a reaction indicates the human tendency to believe narratives and desire their resolution despite the achievement of self awareness.

In his article, “Children of Godard and Coca-Cola: Cinema and Consumerism in Don DeLillo's Early Fiction” Mark Osteen argues that film as well as advertisement contribute to the fragmentation of the postmodern subject as exemplified by the fragmented autobiographical film that David creates. However, Osteen neglects the detrimental effect of David’s fabrications on his relationships with the people in his life. Living as an “echo” (53) of the images that influenced him destroys his ability to maintain relationships that are free of fabrications.

The novel depicts the ease with which self narratives are fabricated and believed by others. In this vein, the concept of self fashioning points to the craftsmanship, therefore deception, involved in identity formation (Greenblatt 03). David cannot relinquish his position as “fabulist” (DeLillo 53), which seeps into his representation of himself to the world. For instance, David Bell’s fables are not restricted to his art but they also extend to his personal life. When faced with his ex-wife’s “complete honesty” (52) in sharing her personal experiences, he is unable to reveal himself honestly. The self narrative that he presents to his ex-wife does not correspond to reality, as he “told

[her] nothing but lies” (52). In David’s character, the novel reveals the manipulation at the heart of identity construct, within and outside of fiction. To David, the point of self fashioning is not self discovery but in the play of possible selves. In those moments when he is dishonest with his former wife he feels that “[t]o construct one’s own reality, then bend it to an implausible extreme, was an adventure” (52). In this light, *Americana* reflects the inherently deceitful nature of self narratives. Although David attempts to “put something of [himself] into some of those stories” (53); ultimately, he is aware of the obstacles to self discovery. He is the product of his environment, language and culture. Most importantly he is but a fictional character, “[his] whole life was a lesson in the effect of echoes... [he] was living in the third person” (53). Viewed through the lens of self fashioning, David reveals his status as a carefully crafted literary character.

Postmodern self fashioning involves the abandonment of the centered subject of high modernity, whose emotional inner world can be outwardly expressed. Such is the case for David Bell who refuses to engage with emotion as a prerequisite for self understanding and revelation, he “preferred to stand aside from all this empathy and slush” (DeLillo 52). Fredric Jameson calls this phenomenon “the waning of affect” (10), in which the expression of felt emotion, suffering specifically, disappears from postmodern aesthetics. Jameson argues that the notion of outward emotional expression that dominated high modernity presupposes the existence of a self contained individual that possesses an inward emotional landscape. Postmodernism, however, heralds the death of the centered subject of high modernity and with it the death of emotional experience and expression (15). Nevertheless, David shows a momentary desire for self-knowledge and self-revelation in the conversations he has with his ex-wife. However, these desires are curtailed by his unwillingness to endure the emotional pain that they entail, he wishes to achieve “a definition of [himself] without the usual anguish such

readings entail” (DeLillo 53). As such, David’s self fashioning erases the possibility of an emotional inner being that can be honestly communicated to others; there are only fabrications.

David’s self consciousness stems from a postmodern culture that no longer believes in the ability of language to convey meaning. Accordingly, ‘babble’ is a trope that postmodernist authors employ by way of escaping the false paradigm of rational subjectivity. ‘Babble’ in this sense is the excessive use of language that makes no actual sense, which shows defiance to the idea of linguistic signification (Worthington 172). For instance, David listens to the ‘babble’ of a radio host, who calls his show: “my intemperate prattle” (DeLillo 190). The radio host talks for hours making no clear meaning. His sentences have no link, direction or apparent purpose, exactly similar to the babble of a small child. The following sentence is placed among many unconnected ones: ““This is Simon called Peter speaking on behalf of the Bumblebee tuna packers of America and wishing all of you a safe and sane ascent into heaven”” (191). When he supposedly reads the news, they are fanciful, random and implausible, he says that: ““Europe has apparently vanished. Its whereabouts are completely unknown”” (191). Such nonsensical speech obscures the opinions of the host as well as prevent the listener, David in this case, from developing his own opinions.

Americana acknowledges the fact that meaning hinges on its historical context. Consequently, the individual is unable to form any opinion that is free from the predetermined meaning that language already carries (Sontag 11). For example, David narrowly focuses on the words of the radio news and its “familiar oppressive phrases” (DeLillo 209), but ignores their meaning. As a form of ‘babble,’ this incident reflects David’s belief that the meaning of the words is independent from the speaker, rather “soon they seemed to generate an existence of their own, to demand an independence,

to live in a silhouette of meaning more subtle, more cunning than the intelligence which bred them might ever know” (209). The situation is made even more absurd and babble-like when “[t]he announcer said he had accidentally read the previous day’s dispatch” (209), making the news just read obsolete. The rational meaning making subject of enlightenment thinking is exposed as an illusion in *Americana*. Therefore, the characters of the novel have no other solution but to choose the meaninglessness of babble as a form of rebellion against the determinism of language.

Other than babble, *Americana* depicts the silence of its characters as nonconformity to the oppressive force of linguistic meaning. In her essay, “The Aesthetics of Silence,” Susan Sontag argues that contemporary artists resort to silence as a response to the historical determinism of language (11). In this sense, language carries the meaning of its historical context which prevents the artist from conveying meaning that is purely his. Postmodern authors, the likes of DeLillo, digress from the established structures of meaning by obliterating the narrative of the self. Instead, they resort to fragmented communication either through babble or resigned silence (Worthington 155). For instance, when confronted with an issue, David finds more solace in silence than in words. He draws a comparison between himself and his sister, who believes that discussing their mother’s mental health struggles could lead to a solution, “in her confusion she was comforted by the sound of voices” (DeLillo 138). However, David distrusts “the involvement of words,” insofar as they prevent straightforward “explanation” and “understanding” among individuals (138). In this sense, language is a barrier rather than a tool for communication. Thus, David prefers to escape towards “distance, silence, darkness” (138), which reflects his rebellion against discursive self narratives. Adamant on not discussing his mother’s problems, David shows that the postmodern individual no longer expects to solve the riddle of

subjectivity, for himself or others, by using language. The self cannot communicate its truth, for it does not possess a language that is free of pre-determined meaning.

The novel self consciously portrays characters who adopt the notion of emptiness as a response to the unreliability of all truth claims in postmodern culture. The refutability of every interpretative endeavor in art and philosophy leads the characters to choose silence and emptiness. However, Sontag asserts that silence cannot be literally represented within art, she argues that “the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence” (08). Likewise, neither can the human mind be completely empty but rather it may renounce the adoption of a single idea as irrefutable truth. Such is the case in *Americana*, in which DeLillo acknowledges the dialectical relation of silence to dialogue within art. For instance, one of David’s college professors confronts the difficulty of distinguishing a single philosophical interpretation as truth, thus encouraging his students to vacate the many chambers of their minds as a favorable state of being, he tells them that: “The mind is an empty box within an empty box... Emptiness is Fullness” (DeLillo 145). Insofar as the mind is concerned, emptiness cannot be total. In this sense, the individual recognizes the layered nature of his mind but does not identify with its content. Paradoxically, one is full when he allows himself to exist in a vortex of ideas without binding himself to any of them, simultaneously full and empty.

In addition, this philosophy informed the kind of art David admires and creates; art that contributes silence to the cultural dialogue. For instance, when he discovers that a novelist friend of his never wrote anything, it only strengthens his respect for him. In David’s eyes his friend is “definitely a novelist, by all means a craftsman of high talent” (DeLillo 281). Such artists inspire David to create his own empty art; he describes

silence and darkness as an integral part of his film. David makes a collage of life in which he ultimately “[dispenses] with sound” (280), and then with light as he films scenes that are surrounded by darkness on the screen. The mission of the artist according to David is to “deal in the complexities of truth” (281). However, he believes that the success of such a mission is determined by his acknowledgment that it can only end in silence, “[he] was most successful. [He] ended in silence and darkness” (281). David, similar to DeLillo, is aware that truth is too evasive for portrayal; therefore, the artist has no choice but to surrender to nothingness.

Both the film and *Americana* as autobiography written by David impart nothing to the audience in the way of truthful self fashioning. While the film is full of fabrications, the novel’s attempt at narrative coherence is considered deceptive by David as well. The concealment of seemingly innocuous details from the narrative serves as veil over David’s surely chaotic life. These details, such as an incident that caused a scar or a childhood illness, are the fabric of his identity, “in [his] mind the resonance of these distant things is sheer thunder” (DeLillo 279). However, the purpose of narrative is to create the illusion that the self can be coherently and completely known. Considering the pages of his biography he states that: “what appears on these pages represents, in its orderly proportions, almost a delivery from chaos” (279). He realizes that the book and the film he has created are meaningless objects rather than self revelations: “my book on a pinewood table... a simple object, the box-shaped equivalent of the reels which sit in my small air-conditioned storage vault” (280). Accordingly, art is no longer means to self expression but is rather recognized as another material object, the existence of which depends on the deceptive mediation of language. Reduced to a silent object, art in this light, seeks to liberate the artist, the art and the audience from traditional subjectivity that is perceived as verbal manifestations of rationality (Sontag 18).

Consequently, postmodern texts such as *Americana* portray subjectivity as illusive and unknowable. Despite David's desire for understanding himself and others, language creates a barrier between him and such a goal. Therefore, DeLillo depicts a protagonist who relinquishes the quest for self knowledge and embraces fabrication, nonsense and complete silence as appropriate responses to the impotence of self narratives to truth claims. While *Americana* accepts the fate of the postmodern subject as unknowable and discontinuous, *The Echo Maker* challenges such an erasure of the self. Similar to David, the protagonist of *The Echo Maker* confronts the fact that his only tool for identity formation is the predetermined meaning within language. However, Mark is not defeated by the disintegration of his self narrative; he rather seeks to reconstruct it. Therefore, what ensues is an analysis of the fragmentation of Mark's self narrative and his initial refusal to accept such a fate.

From a deconstructive perspective, the self is constructed by the language it uses in speech and writing. As such, the self is not autonomous in its identity formation but rather restricted by what Derrida calls the "trace" of meaning that language already carries (Bellou 93). In this regard, Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker* self-consciously emphasizes the role of language in constructing the subject and his reality. Similar to David, the protagonist of *The Echo Maker* has to reckon with the fact that he is not master of his identity outside of the mediation of language. In the novel, Mark survives a car accident that returns him to a childlike state after a coma. Upon waking up, it is language that he relies on to define himself. For instance, it is the word 'I' that he can summon first, but it is so hard to articulate that his sister cannot hear him: "*I*. The word hisses, taking so long she'll never hear" (Powers 26). Consequently, his inability to speak leaves him vulnerable to the language of others. In his nonverbal state, the words people use are oppressive and they strip Mark of his agency, in calling his name "Mark

mark mark, they make him” (47). In additions, the language bound aspect of Mark’s selfhood is indicated by the homonym that he shares with his name, ‘mark’ which can also mean ‘sign.’ Mark’s name symbolizes his status as text, as a fictional character, he is literally a mark on a page.

Upon waking, Mark is “inscribed” by the other; by sources outside of his control (Bellou 23). Instead of enabling him to recall and communicate, language inhibits Mark from remembering the details of the accident and incorporating it into a coherent self narrative. The discourse of doctors, family members and friends obscures Mark’s retrospective view, just as he starts to remember that “something in the road that ruined [him]... mending brings him back, to the smear of thoughts and words” (Powers 47). Thus impaired and burdened by the words of others, Mark is constructed from the imagination of others; a fiction, “they read him off of papers, speak him out. They merge him, move him on, make him up from scratch” (47). However, unlike David, who resigns himself to the illusiveness of language and its inability to accurately reconstruct the past, Mark shows signs of a desire to take charge of his own narrative. For example, a neurologist who is sought after to help with Mark’s illness notes his deep intrigue by the identity reconstruction that Mark is undergoing, “[h]e was just getting a rough sense of this shattered man, of Mark’s attempts to tell himself back into a continuous story” (142). Mark is determined to reclaim his self narrative and overcome the fragmentation that results from an inability to reassemble the past into a coherent narrative. In a sense, Mark is laying claim on this language that was initially oppressive.

The character of the neuroscientist in charge of helping Mark recover represents the novel’s preoccupation with questions of narrative self fashioning. Doctor Weber’s research is defined by his desire to answer the most basic questions of self fashioning

with a neurological twist: “How does the brain erect a mind, and how does the mind erect everything else? Do we have free will? What is the self, and where are the neurological correlates of consciousness?” (Powers 133). He finds an answer to these questions while treating patients with a kind of brain damage that results in the fragmentation of their sense of self. The patients all have one tendency in common, which is to construct a narrative, no matter how unlikely, in order to regain a sense of subjective coherence.

While Weber can attest to the fact that the self is not a “continuous, indivisible whole” (168), he recognizes that the subject holds on to the illusion of a self-narrative that is whole and continuous to compensate for its fragmentation. For Greenblatt, self narratives, once told, lend themselves to interpretation and therefore to possible disintegration of the initial meaning. Nevertheless, Greenblatt asserts that this process does not end in fragmentation but rather the narrative is refashioned into a new form (238). Such is the experience of Weber’s patients, their identities are mere fictional constructs or stories and “when that story breaks, consciousness rewrites it. Each revised draft claims to be the original” (Powers 181). Unlike *Americana*, *The Echo Maker* does not portray fragmentation as the final state of the self, but shows its desire to reconstruct its narrative whenever it disintegrates under the weight of interpretation.

In his book, *The Crisis of Narration*, Han argues for the healing power of narrative. He points to the fact that healing begins the moment a patient tells a doctor the story of his illness (60). In the novel, the fictitiousness of the self is not regarded as manipulative but rather as transformative. Granted, the novel allows for some criticism towards the character of Weber who helps his patients primarily through the reconstruction of their self narratives. Similar to David in *Americana*, the doctor self consciously refers to himself as a “fabulist” (Powers 226), whose research might be

disregarded for its reliance on story. The intertextual link between the novels illustrates the fact that *Orfeo* acknowledges the constructive aspect of narrative. However, Weber believes that individual case histories yield more possibility for healing than the cold and distant medicine that relies on pharmacology and testing. Self narratives facilitate healing because they allow for a continuous link between the past, the present and the future (Worthington 14), much like a fictional narrative. In this sense, “[w]e told ourselves backward into diagnosis and forward into treatment” (Powers 396). Thus, *The Echo Maker* shares the skepticism towards self narratives that *Americana* depicts, but still holds the possibility for “literary cures” (397).

The lack of clarity concerning his accident and his subsequent inability to recognize his sister prevent Mark from developing a coherent self narrative. Weber diagnoses Mark with a condition called “Capgras” in which the patient’s ability to recognize loved ones is impaired, such that “the loved one’s face elicits memory, but no feeling” (Powers 107). While the diagnosis provides a medical explanation for Mark’s memory loss, Weber insists on including Mark in the process of reconstructing his self narrative. Seeing as memories of a traumatic event emerge fractured and in disarray, narrative connects them into a coherent whole (Herman 177). In order to do so, Weber conducts an interview-style session that centers on Mark’s memory loss and how he is rationalizing it. Such an interview is similar to those that David conducts in his autobiographical film in *Americana*. However, David creates fabricated narratives, while Mark represents innocent belief in the organizing power of narrative. Initially, Mark experiences frustration with the stories that others tell on his behalf, especially his sister: ““The doctors claim I’m not exactly what I was before... she keeps telling them what I was”” (Powers 115). In this sense, Mark is fashioned through the narratives of others, until Weber asks: ““Why do you suppose this is happening?”” (117). This early

in his treatment Mark still cannot account for the inconsistencies within his story, but he refuses to let others control his self narrative.

David recognizes and participates in the deception of self-narratives; however, Mark seeks to unravel the inconsistencies of his story in order to construct a narrative that he and others may find plausible. In this light, Worthington asserts in his *Self as Narrative* that despite the deficits of narration, like its spaces for fabrication and misinterpretation, it grants the individual a degree of communicative capabilities among his fellow men (192). Mark's memory loss prevents him from constructing a self narrative that is free of fabrication, he feels "“like [he's] locked away somewhere and somebody else is living [his] life”" (Powers 243). Nevertheless, he attempts to investigate his erroneous belief that his sister has been replaced by an imposter so he could understand what happened to him on the night of the accident.

One of the features of narrative is its incorporation of time and space, which places emphasis on sequential rather than dispersed moments. In a blend of one's own memories as well as those of others, one is able to tell a self history that is based on the interconnection and coherence of past occurrences (Worthington 14). In order for Mark to put together the puzzle pieces of his narrative, he has to elicit the help of his sister. Since his own memories are impaired, he questions his sister's knowledge of their childhood memories. In this incident the novel shows the integral part of memory to one's identity as Mark realizes that if Karin remembers so much of their childhood, it "means that something of his sister is actually downloaded inside this woman. Something essential" (Powers 358). In addition, Mark uses his new found trust of Karin to gauge whether his accident was an attempted suicide. As Karin assures Mark that he was happy and did not appear suicidal, she realizes that while he might not fully accept

her as his real sister, they might be able to rebuild their relationship anew, “when her brother started to cry and she moved to console him, he let her. A thing they’d never had, before” (359). In remembering their past, Mark and Karin might be able to establish new possibilities for their relationship in the future. In this sense, the novel shows that narrative, constructed from past memories, reconciles one with the present and allows for future projections.

Similar to *Americana*, *The Echo Maker* self consciously portrays a protagonist who is not in control of his self narrative. He is made in other people’s words and texts. However, unlike David, Mark insists on finding explanations to the gaps in his memory in order to rewrite a broken narrative.

1.2. Autobiography and Confabulation as Creative Endeavors in the Construction of the Subject

This section examines the ways in which both *Americana* and *The Echo Maker* explore the fabrications of identity as creative processes. In *Americana*, the subject is as hollow and transient as the hyperrealist culture to which he belongs. The immersion within the images of film, television and commercials erases his identity. Accordingly, the protagonist discovers that self understanding through an autobiographical film is a futile endeavor. The film is a reflection of David’s identity; often doubled or completely absent. Whereas in *The Echo Maker*, the creative aspect of self narratives manifests in the way the protagonist confabulates in order to account for the gaps in his memory and narrative. In confabulating, Mark uses fabrications to overcome fragmentation. In this sense, creativity is used to maintain the illusion of narrative coherence rather than destroy it.

In a hyperrealist culture there is a proliferation of images in the media, which creates a sense of disconnection from reality. In essence, the hyperreal replaces the real with its hollow image. In *Americana*, the hyperrealist culture is shown to foster superficial concerns in the subject. The fact that David's narrative is always on the verge of obliteration reflects the precarity of a life fashioned in the likeness of media images. As such, the following reads David's autobiographical film as a failed attempt to convey substantial meaning. The novel portrays the effects of a hyperrealist culture in the images that the protagonist creates.

The belief that narrative is inadequate in providing the subject with a whole and reliable sense of self is represented in David's overreliance on images for his self fashioning. David is a specimen of a hyperrealist environment that has replaced reality with its duplicated image in photographs and advertisement (Baudrillard, *Symbolic* 71). According to Baudrillard, hyperrealism seeps into every aspect of a culture, he argues "that we are now living entirely within the 'aesthetic' hallucination of reality" (*Symbolic* 74). David's consumption of commercials, film and television turns his reality to a hyperreality, "there were times when [he] thought all of [them] at the network existed only on videotape" (DeLillo 24). Life on this video tape is so transient and precarious that its participants may be obliterated at any moment, he fears "that somebody's deadly pinky might nudge a button and [they] would all be erased forever" (24). The subjects of this culture do not possess individual identities, motivations or purposes. Rather, the lives of the people in corporate jobs feel like they have been orchestrated by a master TV programmer, "[they] seemed to be no more than electronic signals and [they] moved through time and space with the stutter and shadowed insanity of a TV commercial" (24). As such, image culture gives a sense of fictitiousness to the subject.

David is deeply implicated in a culture that erases individuality and autonomy to the point where his sense of self is assimilated into institutions of control. He not only imagines himself part of a film but he also views himself as the camera recording inside his work place, he feels like “a movie camera catching documentary glimpses of everyday life in a prison, on an aircraft carrier, in a home for the criminally insane” (DeLillo 88). Consequently, the erasure of identity through the hyperreal facilitates the control of the individual in modern institutions. According to Foucault, institutions such as psychiatric asylums, prisons and hospitals exercise controlling power over the individual and put him under constant surveillance (199). The feelings of confinement and loss of independent identity that David experiences parallel those of Mark inside the hospital suffering of impaired memory. As such, both protagonists live in a world that controls their self expression, albeit to differing degrees.

David’s lack of narrative continuity is further illustrated through his autobiographic film. The film reflects Paul de Man’s perspective on the failure of autobiography to create a complete and coherent account of the self. The reliance of autobiographical texts on figurative speech, which could be interpreted in a myriad of ways, curtails the possibility of representing a final judgment on identity. As such, within autobiography the self is reduced to mere textual construct that gives the illusion of self knowledge; hence de Man’s statement: “[a]utobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause” (930). David’s autobiographical film is a text that seeks to portray the impossibility of self understanding. He admits that the film is plot-less, he has put together a compilation of fragments to reflect his fragmented self in a ““long unmanageable movie full of fragments of everything that’s part of my life”” (DeLillo 168). The form of the movie is true to David’s de-centered subjectivity, a film without its central character, ““It’s a sort of first-person thing but without [him] in it in

any physical sense, except fleetingly”” (215). David describes his character in the film as the “confused and the dislocated” (232). In this sense, the novel reflects the futile attempt at self discovery through autobiography.

The only physical appearance David makes in the film is that of his image in a mirror, in which the film begins and ends. The image accurately depicts the fact that the little sense of self he does show is but a reflection rather than any sense of real identity. The mirror scene represents David’s doubling in mirrors, cameras and advertisements. However, despite the fact that David is trapped by empty and meaningless subjectivity, that he characterizes as “beginning and ending in darkness,” he nevertheless attempts to explain, “if only to [himself], no matter how strange a form the explanation would take” (DeLillo 168). As such, the purpose of the autobiographical film is to show David’s desire for self understanding, albeit in vain.

Similar to the interview doctor Weber conducts with Mark in order to understand his perspective; David includes a scene in his movie of an interview with an actor who plays him. The opening topic of the interview is David’s sentiment concerning the Vietnam War. The interview corroborates David’s superficial concerns about such a serious matter. First, as T.V programmer he reflects the inclination towards profit at the expense of the suffering of others that the American culture fosters. According to Christopher Lasch, in late stage capitalism, success is defined as public recognition and admiration. Hence, American participation in the Vietnam War lacked strategic concerns. Rather, America started the war to maintain its reputation in the eyes of its allies and enemies (60). As such, the American individual, the likes of David, only cares about the illusion of profit generated from advertisement shown during the news cycle reporting on the war, he emphasizes the fact that ““It’s sponsored by instant coffee among other things”” (DeLillo 232). In addition, the actor praises the racially integrated

aspects of these commercials as a representation of the racially integrated war, T.V executives at the network argued “that integrated commercials were desirable. Their argument was that the war itself is integrated” (232). Such individual preoccupation with the appearances of the war is a reflection of the American cultural motivation in waging such a war against the Vietnamese.

Furthermore, David is aware that his portrayal of the African American struggle does not reflect honest understanding, but only feigns doing so. In a clip he films during a civil rights protest in the 60s, David focuses on an image of a black man and woman and uses them to show what he saw as endurance, dignity and hope. To describe them, he uses similes such as “rock,” “pillars,” and “a hopeful message” (DeLillo 234). However, David realizes that the meaning he attempts to attribute to these people does not, and will never, come close to describing their experience. David clearly recognizes the ways the white man assigns meaning to black people at his convenience, in his opinion “[t]o be black is to be the actor. To be white is to be the critic” (234). With a cultural atmosphere such as the one through which David fashions himself, it is no wonder that it is the pretense of concern about war, racial integration and African American resistance is only done for monetary gain or personal creative expression.

The autobiographical film is faithful to David’s vision of art, life and subjectivity. The final product is a chaotic compilation of scenes that have no logical sequence, the characters are mad and it gradually moves into darkness and silence. The final scene of the interview reflects David’s confusing self narrative as the narration and the background against which David’s character stands are in opposition. The background is of the wall he wrote the story he crafted about his father, while his words are composed on the spot, “[he] sighted on [the actor] standing against the printed black words. Then [he] narrated, making it up as [he] went along” (DeLillo 252). In addition,

the film shows the deranged state of its subject that results from the over simulating American culture of the 60s, with scenes that show “demonstrations, speeches, parades, riots... newspaper stands, store windows, bus terminals” and “friends and strangers declaim their madness to the camera” (280). The film reflects David’s belief that consciousness is too expansive to be delineated in art. As he sees it, the attempt to fashion oneself in a constrained and sequential manner is bound to create fiction rather than concrete individuals: “The true play could not be found in theaters. The true play was ourselves and we needed shadows on which to chalk our light, speed to conquer sequence” (280). In this sense, the shadows and speed of the film destroy the illusion of a coherent identity. Therefore, despite its status as autobiography, the film does not portray David as whole and knowable subject, similar to DeLillo’s *Americana*. Rather, the novel, as well as the film, depicts an elusive and fragmented individual in David.

The notion that art can convey stable meaning, especially about the self, is shown to be futile in *Americana*. As any art fails to reflect the reality of the self, it can only be as chaotic, superficial and hollow as the hyperrealist culture it is a part of. In this sense, both *Americana* and *The Echo Maker* depict self narratives as creative processes, in which the self is fiction. While David reflects the creative aspect of the self in images, Mark resorts to confabulation. As a confabulator, Mark seeks an explanation for his memory loss and narrative fragmentation, no matter how implausible his ideas. Through the lens of confabulation, the subsequent analysis shows the necessity of self narratives despite the fact that they are largely fabricated.

In both *Americana* and *The Echo Maker*, the protagonists attempt to forge a self narrative through creative endeavors; David makes an autobiographical film, Mark confabulates. In *Memory Distortion: how Minds, Brains and Societies Reconstruct the Past*, Morris Moscovitch posits that Confabulation happens when memory is affected

through some sort of brain damage. That is to say, a patient invents stories as an attempt to consolidate a deficit in memory or lack of information (230). With a loss of important memories, and by extension of identity, Marks develops a “tendency toward confabulation” (Powers 130) as a way to account for the gaps in his personal narrative. In this vein, Doctor Weber believes that Mark develops Capgras “as psychological reaction to the disorientation” (132), caused by an accident he cannot remember the details of. As such, Mark’s memory loss results in a loss of self that he projects on his sister, “[h]e stops recognizing his sister because some part of him has stopped recognizing himself” (132). For Mark, the desire to uphold a consistent self narrative triumphs over logic. The delusion that his sister is replaced by a stranger allows Mark to maintain a bigger delusion; that of self continuity.

In the character of Mark, the novel reveals the human tendency to create a fictional self narrative that maintains wholeness to mask the reality of fragmentation. While Mark’s confabulation is pathological, people with no mental illness also experience instances of confabulation. Essentially, normal people are also susceptible to confabulation. Due to the fact that memory retrieval is a reconstructive process, individuals are bound to encounter memory distortion and falsification (Moscovitch 230). Contemplating Mark’s condition, Doctor Weber finds in his illness a resemblance to ordinary human actions. For, Weber finds that even people who are seemingly unscathed show signs of confabulation in order to maintain a coherent sense of self. All individuals act in ways that sustain the delusion of the self by “[l]ying, denying, repressing, confabulating: these weren’t pathologies. They were the signature of awareness, trying to stay intact” (Powers 366). Weber believes that the purpose of the fiction of the self is to ensure survival, he insists that there is “[n]o self without self-delusion” (344). In times of struggle, such as Mark’s memory loss, his sense of

narrative wholeness keeps him from complete madness, “nothing inside Mark felt changed. Improvising consciousness saw to that. Mark still felt familiar; only the world had gone strange” (290). As such, Mark is an example of how the self constantly seeks to rebuild itself in search for stability.

While *Americana*, self-consciously unveils the deception of self narratives, *The Echo Maker* acknowledges the necessity of these narratives. In the latter, Weber recognizes that despite being indisputably fragmented, the self endures the hardships of life through its illusion of solidity, whether the self is “[f]loating or broken or split or a third of a second behind, something still insisted: Me” (Powers 366). In this sense, the novel does not deny that self narratives are largely fictional, but it does not condemn the fact that “a single, solid fiction always beat the truth of our scattering” (162), it rather valorizes these fictions.

Similar to *Americana*, *The Echo Maker* self consciously portrays a protagonist that contemplates his fictitiousness. The more that Mark recognizes that his sense of self is mere fiction, the more he insists on its validity. Mark, unable to account for the disparity between his confabulations and the world he inhabits, he compares himself to online games and movie characters. Tellingly, he compares himself to the character of Truman in the movie *The Truman Show*, whose life is a fictional tale broadcasted on T.V unbeknownst to him. For instance, Mark believes that not only his sister has been replaced by an imposter but also his home, his neighborhood and the hospital, he concludes that “[i]t’s like some billion-dollar film of my life. The Harry Truman Story” (Powers 191). There is an ominous “they” he believes are responsible for this charade, he just cannot pinpoint who they might be. Mark reflects the debilitating

effects of surrendering to the notion that one's identity is mere fiction that is constructed from without.

Mark feels stuck, unable to move forward with his life and construct a future precisely for the missing pieces of information in his narrative. For, confabulating in order to account for the missing memories constantly demands more fabrication to fill in the gap between reality and fiction (Moscovitch 229). Therefore, Mark reaches a point of confabulation where he concludes that he himself might be fiction, which serves as an answer to his loss of agency. His attempt and failure to construct a coherent and plausible self narrative arrests him in the present, unable to move: ““I feel like I’ve been living in a video game. One where I can’t beat the level and advance to the next”” (Powers 291). Thus, Mark reaches a degree of confabulation that is too discrepant from reality that it hinders his ability to construct a forward-projecting narrative.

However, Mark does not relinquish his ability to provide an explanation for his condition. His final attempt at an explanation leads him to believe he must have died on the night of the accident: ““I died. I passed away on the operating table, and none of the doctors noticed”” (Powers 379). Death, in this sense, is the only explanation for the lack of agency that Mark is experiencing. As with the death of the subject emphasized by poststructuralists; individual autonomy is but an ideological illusion (Jameson 15). Nevertheless, Mark does not stop seeking self understanding through narrative, as oppose to David who surrenders to the futility of such an endeavor. As such, investigating his selfhood and its viability is where Mark's agency lies. While David does not believe self knowledge is possible despite his desire to attain it, Mark refuses to relinquish his autonomy in carving a personal narrative, no matter how far-fetched it may be.

As such, the truthfulness and coherence of self narratives is but an illusion; however, a necessary one. Both Mark and David's attempts at self revelation, either in autobiography or confabulation, have failed. Nevertheless, *The Echo Maker* insists that despite the seemingly impossible goal, the self never ceases its attempt of self discovery and revelation.

1.3. Journeys to the Self Through the Other: Narcissism and Distrust as

Sabotage to Self Narratives

The effect of a fragmented self narrative on relationships is explored in this section. DeLillo's *Americana* represents the dissolution of its protagonist's relationships as a result of his narcissism. The feeling of emptiness and the preoccupation with external validation beget an inconsistency in self narrative for David. Such inconsistency prevents him from developing substantial and enduring relationships. Similarly, Mark experiences a breakdown of his closest relationships as a result of his memory lapse. Mark's missing memories lead to an incoherence of narrative that prevents him from trusting those around him. However, the novel shows that trust can be reestablished when the construction of a self narrative is considered a collaborative process.

The lack of substance in David's self narrative is further illustrated in his relationship to others. In the novel, David exhibits narcissistic traits, such as an inner emptiness and a preoccupation with external validation, which inhibit his ability to foster reciprocal relationships. The following analysis explores how David's narcissism prevents him from developing a consistent self narrative, which makes relationships with others impossible.

In his book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch, names “a sense of inner emptiness” as a characteristic of pathological narcissism (13). David shows several traits of Narcissism, among which is a sense of emptiness. For instance, in early adulthood David starts to experience a loss of self: “[s]omething was coming to an end, not just summer but something like the idea of what I was” (DeLillo 163). This sense of loss is illustrated by a physical activity that is normally characterized by the loss of a sense of time and self. While tossing a baseball back and forth with a friend, his loss of identity is most pronounced: “I was nobody. I was instinct and speed and a memory that extended back for no more than seconds” (163). The baseball game, with its suspension of time and a relinquishing of long term memory, is a metaphor for an arrested sense of identity that is starkly similar to that of Mark in *The Echo Maker*.

In addition to inner emptiness, another narcissistic trait that David exhibits is an all-consuming desire for admiration. A lack of a solid sense of self fosters insecurity, which leads to validation seeking in others characterized by an inability for reciprocation (Lasch 40). To share one’s self is an act of generosity that the narcissistic person does not believe himself capable of. David does not possess a solid sense of self that he can share with others, he simply does not have enough to give: “I began to struggle against this disappearance; to give nothing to Jennifer Fine for fear there would be nothing left for myself” (DeLillo 163). In addition, the narcissist incorporates manipulation tactics to gain love but then develops disdain for those who fall prey to it; consequently, of Jennifer he thinks: “I had been trying, almost desperately, to make her fall in love with me. Once I was sure she had, I began my retreat” (38). This type of manipulation gives the narcissist the validation he seeks without requiring his reciprocation. In short, David is incapable of reciprocity within relationships for his lack of a shareable sense of self.

Not only romantic relationships, but David's professional relationships are also characterized by a manipulative desire for admiration. A lack of a solid personality and a chameleon-like desire of acceptance are both signs of David's Narcissism (Lasch 44). For instance, in his work environment, David has to monitor every room he enters to "find out the degree of hostility" of its people (DeLillo 08). Furthermore, David feels the need to laugh at tasteless racist jokes made by his boss for fear of being ostracized, "If you were offended by such jokes in general... you were not ready to be accepted into the mainstream" (09). Despite the lack of security in his work environment, it allows David to stay at a psychological distance from the dependence of personal relationships that he so despises. In an ironic tone, he describes the familiar things in the office that are not at all what one associates with familial love, such as how to handle tax deduction, the mail and a leak in the water carafe. But despite these impersonal things, they are all he has, because "compared to this, how much did you know, and how safe did you feel, about, for instance, your wife?" (21). As such, David's lack of substance is translated in his attachment to non-substantial things. He is extremely incapable of love that he is satisfied with simulating a quasi-familial relationship with the staplers in his office.

David's work place is a prototype for postmodern culture, in which success is predicated on the individual ability to sell an image of himself that could garner external admiration. In late stage capitalism, men are motivated by a desire for ascending the corporate ladder that requires no industriousness but a "marketable" personality that superiors can applaud and reward (Lasch 46-47). To fit in, David's individual subjectivity is completely erased; his conformity starts from his attire to his ideas. Out of fear of opposing the crowd, David starts to dress in a similar manner to his colleagues, "[s]o [he] did not hesitate to show up for work in an orange tie, but never

more orange than the orange others wore” (DeLillo 34). In addition, David learns to repress his innovation for the sake of ascending the corporate ladder, “[he] learned to distrust those superiors who encouraged independent thinking... [He] learned that new ideas could finish you” (34). The analogy that David uses to describe his mind is that of a dark room with many doors that housed his identity, but the longer he spent at his work place the more he realized he cannot open these doors and reveal any truth about himself. Initially, as a naïve beginner he “let in more light, risked the truth,” but, his environment eventually pushes him towards further fraudulence. Gradually, David becomes a shell of a person, “[i]f anyone seemed to perceive a distant threat in [his] remarks or actions, [he] closed all the doors but one. That was the safest position” (35). David’s work culture rewards narcissistic fear of rejection, that which demands the person morph into whatever is acceptable in their environment, as David advances in the ranks to a show producer in his network.

The superficial nature of David’s relationships is the outcome of his lack of a consistent self narrative. His inner emptiness and concern with admiration, due to his narcissism, curtail his ability to develop relationships of substance. David’s fear of rejection, be it in his personal or professional relationships, has the opposite of the desired effect. Instead of bringing him closer to others, it turns him into a manipulator who cannot communicate a consistent self narrative with those around him. As such, in *Americana* as well as *The Echo Maker*, the isolation of their protagonists is shown to result from a disintegrated self narrative. For Mark, the crux of his relationship problems lies in his memory loss which fuels his paranoia and distrust of others. In this sense, the novel emphasizes the necessity of a coherent self narrative for the development of relationships. Therefore, the following discussion focuses on the importance of a coherent self narrative for relationships.

Despite the fact that Mark does not suffer from Narcissism, like David, he struggles to build relationships with those around him due to his memory lapse. While David's issues stem from a fear of rejection, Mark lacks the data necessary to include other people in a coherent self narrative. The novel links the quality of Mark's relationships to a paranoid fear that his loved ones cannot be trusted. A constant need to protect one's self from outside threat is the ultimate deterrent of intimate relationships that are built on mutual trust. Without his memories, Mark is in a vulnerable position that makes him more suspicious of those around him; he feels that "They're hiding something from him, something bad... No one will tell him about the accident or the hours just before and after it" (Powers 70). Unlike David, however, Mark finds one person he can trust; Doctor Weber. The doctor ties Mark's ability to communicate his self narrative with others to his ability to trust them: "'To do anything for him, we have to learn who he has become. And to do that, we have to win his trust'" (122). In this sense, the degree to which Mark is able to share his self narrative is highly correlated with his ability to trust.

A blend between a reconstruction of the past and an envisaged future equips "life with some semblance of unity and purpose" (McAdams, "The Role" 13). Mark's compromised memories put a hamper on his ability to construct such a life story. The loss of a stable life story leads him to distrust anyone who does not agree with the confabulations he conjures in order to explain the gap in his memories. For instance, his trust in Doctor Weber is shaken when he tries to convince him that his sister has not been replaced by an imposter. To do so, the doctor brings him old family pictures that include his sister, but alas, Mark believes that she has hired actors to pose for these pictures: "'Snaps a few shots. Boom! Suddenly, I've got a whole new history. And because nobody else knows any better, I'm stuck with it'" (Powers 143). Mark's

frustration stems from the fact that the agency he possessed over his life story has been stripped away from him. Therefore, the stories told by others that do not corroborate his delusions only fuel his sense of distrust. Mark is hurt by the perceived betrayal from Doctor Weber after the family pictures incident: ““I thought I could trust you, Shrinky”” (146). Furthermore, he does not trust the Cognitive Behavioral therapist that Weber recommends and questions her motives: ““it’s weird, don’t you think? Trying to find out so much about me. Change the way I look at things”” (238). The therapist, Weber and his sister all trigger Mark’s paranoia by questioning the validity of his story and providing a different perspective.

“Personal myths” or the stories individuals construct in order to make sense of their life experiences are not made in isolation but in community and within relationships (McAdams, *The Stories* 13). In this light, *The Echo Maker* depicts the human need for trust based relationships in order to foster coherent self narratives. For, Mark seeks to rebuild trust with his sister despite the fact that he does not remember her yet. As he starts to regain some memories from the night of the accident, Mark decides to share them with Karin, “[h]e still has no idea whose side she’s on. But they’ve grown close over these months, in adversity” (Powers 249). As such, sharing such important information with his sister might bring Mark closer to a clearer and more coherent self narrative. Mark remembers that he heard someone say the phrase “go ahead” inside the car before the accident. The phrase suggests that Mark had not been alone in the car that night and whoever said those words might have the answers to the mystery of the accident. In addition, Mark seeks advice from an old friend, Daniel, when presented with a medication that might improve his condition. Mark seeks Daniel’s help to take a medication that is ““supposed to give [him] ‘clarity.’ Make [him] feel more like

[himself]”” (377). Daniel and Karin represent a gateway for Mark that could return him to a personal story that he is able to recognize and share with others.

As such, while both David and Mark struggle with broken relationships, each for his own reasons, Mark shows greater willingness to trust people in hope that it would help him account for his lost memories and recover a sense of identity.

1.4. The Disorienting Effect of Social Saturation and Para-social on the Subject in *Americana* and *The Echo Maker* Relationships

Instead of few and stable relationships, the postmodern culture fosters relationships that are many and superficial. Such relationships exacerbate the fragmentation of self narratives. For example, the proliferation of mass media has created para-social relationships between performers and audience members that give the illusion of depth despite their shallowness. This section compares the different depictions of para-social relationships in *Americana* and *The Echo Maker*. In *Americana*, these relationships blur the line between reality and fiction which creates conflict within the identities of audiences. However, *The Echo Maker* reflects the demands on the performers, which require they develop and maintain public personas even if they do not correspond to reality. In both novels self narratives disintegrate because of para-social relationships. Nevertheless, *The Echo Maker* shows that a return to a single solid relationship might help rebuild that narrative.

The social saturation characteristic of postmodern culture is the result of the excessive interconnection among individuals that technologies facilitate. Social saturation leads to the development of pseudo-relationships and a fragmented sense of self. Among these relationships is the one between the performer and the audience of a piece of media. In what is called “para-social” relationships, the audience experiences

the epitome of social saturation wherein they identify with, feel an affinity towards and often emulate a character on a screen. The following considers the para-social relationships of the characters in *Americana* and the resulted fragmentation of self narratives that they experience.

In *The Saturated Self*, Gergen argues that the postmodern cultural atmosphere is, to a great extent, the outcome of the technologies that facilitated large scale communication and social saturation (xi). The most significant change brought about by recent technological development is that it allows for an individual's simultaneous presence at multiple locations. Traditionally, one had to be physically present in order to exert influence on others or build relationships with them. However, tape and video recorders transmit people's attitudes, feelings and bodily expressions across the globe. The consumption of film allows individuals to relate to the character of any actor of their choice and fantasize about inhabiting a different world than their own (55). According to Gergen, these media technologies also widen the range of relationships available to people. Although these relationships lack physical presence and reciprocity, the connections that individuals build with media characters are no less strong (56). What used to be solid and dependable social interaction is now replaced by screens and video tapes (61). Similarly, Donald and Wohl in "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction" coined the term "para-social relationships" to describe this illusory bond developed between consumers and performers of mass media. A movie star or a T.V/radio show host could be imagined as the individual's most intimate relationship (215). The proliferation of mass media and the Para-social relationships they generate are shown in DeLillo's *Americana* to prevent characters from creating coherent self narratives

The heavy influence of cinema on David's identity is reflected in the para-social relationships he has with actors. For example, the way he describes American actors such as Kirk Douglas and Burt Lancaster reflects idolization: "These were the American pyramids... They were monumental" (DeLillo 15). The depiction of these actors as larger-than-life individuals who are capable of heroic action leads to admiration and a desire for identification not just for David but the entire American audience. David is one of many people who have been awe-struck by the survival of their hero on screen, at the end of a film he declares: "Burt lives! I carry that image to this day, and so, I believe, do millions of others" (15). For David, this influence started when he was an adolescent, "the first time in [his] life [he] felt the true power of the image" that grew more profound and more destructive with time. Thus, David's sense of self begins to fragment in the presence of the actor's image, as he wishes to eliminate the barrier between him and the admired figure, "[he] knew [he] must extend [himself] until the molecules parted and [he] was spliced into the image" (15).

Furthermore, Burt's image is worshiped to an extent that it blurs the line between reality and fantasy for David. The extreme identification with a fictional character on screen imbues David's life with a sense of illusion, after leaving the movie theater, "[he] began to wonder how real the landscape truly was, and how much of a dream is a dream" (15). Moreover, the para-social relationship David develops with Burt Lancaster extends beyond his screen presence, when he sees him in real life he thinks: "Burt was the supreme topkick" (15). The image of Burt, according to Baudrillard, belongs to the cult of Hollywood whereby he becomes a mere image "which effaces the difference between the real being and its assumption into the imaginary" (*The Evil* 26). Consequently, the unrealistic quality of para-social relationships leads to fragmentation within the reality of the self, be that of the performer or the audience member.

David is not the only character in the novel who exhibits a fractured identity as a result of the over consumption of popular media. Meredith, David's wife, experiences shifts in identity based on the films she consumes, she "was strongly influenced by British films of the period" (DeLillo 34). Similar to David, the illusions within the movies seep into Merry's reality and cause sporadic changes in her behavior. The kind of influence these movies exert on Merry is reflected in the way she sees her life through the lens of a movie camera, David observes that "[w]alking with [him] on the street she would suddenly release her hand from [his] and skip away into some fantasy sequence" (34). Her fantasies are often elaborate and extend to full movie scenes. For instance, she once asks David to buy her flowers so they could stand by the bridge and throw them in the lake at Central Park, he "could imagine a series of cuts and slow dissolves working in Merry's mind" (34). In addition, Merry changes her attire depending on the character she wished to embody on a given day; she wears "sombros, jockey caps, straw boaters, a wool seaman's hat" (35). David also regards their relationship from the perspective of his cinematic influences, wherein communication between them emulates "the old Burtian and Kirkesque characteristics, the clenched emphatic fist, majestic teeth, angry hand brushing the hair" (53). Merry's character in *Americana*, whether through her eyes or those of David, is mere collection of movie influences that does not allow her a solid identity.

The most intense description of David's identification with images comes when he moves so close to the T.V he is watching that he imagines merging with the set. David experiences a disappearance of self as it is swallowed into the projection of the television, he feels that what matters is the image but not the scene it depicts: "it drew me in and held me as if I were an integral part of the set, my molecules mating with those millions of dots" (DeLillo 40). This sense of identity loss is exemplified by the

“drunken man” metaphor David uses to describe the state he finds himself in after moving away from the television, he moves “feeling numb and sleazy, the way an awakening man feels when he realizes he passed out drunk on his host’s sofa the night before” (40). Similar to a drunken man, David has momentarily lost himself to the power of the image. It is not only T.V that dislocates David’s identity; radio seems to have the same effect as well. When listening to the radio he is bombarded with too much information from too many sources all at once: “changing stations, countries, hemispheres... fire in Melbourne, confusion in Toyko, tragedy in Athens” (190). The impact of technology on David’s psyche is so deep that he often loses himself in the maze of images and voices.

The novel culminates the depiction of social saturation and para-social relationships in a story that Sullivan tells David about the America of the future. Sullivan describes a university of the future in which most interactions between students and teachers would happen virtually. In this university, students and teachers are filmed separately, each performing their own roles. Then these videotapes are to be projected in a dark room with two television sets controlled by a computer and instead of a normal class, in these T.V sets ““the videotape of the students would then watch the videotape of the instructors”” (DeLillo 103). This scenario replaces real relationships with para-social ones, whereby a teacher-student relationship becomes a performer-audience one. This hypothetical system, which presumably would lead to the creation of a single university in America, reflects an extreme vision of the saturation of society. In this sense, *Americana* does not imagine a solution for social saturation but only an aggravation of the situation.

As such, *Americana* depicts the social saturation caused by media technologies in its characters' development of para-social relationships. These para-social relationships increase the sense of identity fragmentation. The individual seeks to identify with his favorite performers to a point where he is no longer recognizable. Ultimately, the novel portrays a point of social saturation where all relationships become para-social. Conversely, para-social relationships in *The Echo Maker* are explored from the perspective of the performer. Therefore, the following reading of the novel examines the equal fragmentation of the performer as part of para-social relationships. It also focuses on his subsequent attempt to salvage the coherence of his self narrative that he has lost to these relationships.

The Echo Maker explores the negative effects of social saturation and para-social relationships on the identity of the performer. In this sense, the technological development of the 20th century, such as communication and broadcast devices (television, computers, telephones), has led to an excess of contact among individuals (Gergen xi). In addition, the late advancement of technology increases the process of social saturation, such as those within aviation, broadcasts and computerized communication (Gergen 53). These technologies facilitate the development of countless acquaintances that lead to a slew of social roles that demand divergent versions of our selves. Such a demand hampers the possibility of cultivating consistency in individual identities (Gergen 07). This type of demand may be put on the shoulders of individuals on the other side of para-social relationship; that of the performer. Donald and Wohl believe that the viewer is encouraged to make favorable assumptions about the performer's persona, albeit incomplete, fabricated and fanciful. Hence, the spectator develops a sense of intimate knowledge of the performer based on an idealized and controlled image. An image the performer is saddled with maintaining despite the fact

that it might not be consistent with their real persona (216). In *The Echo Maker*, Doctor Weber represents the position of the performer in the para-social relationship. The novel shows how detrimental these relationships are to the identities, not only of the spectators, but also those of the performer. Hence, Doctor Weber's self narrative falters under the expectation of his audience.

Doctor Weber suffers the effects of technology; his self narrative becomes fragmented as a result of the social saturation that these technologies generate. As a neuroscientist, professor, writer and public figure, Weber receives an inordinate amount of demand to fill too many proverbial shoes all at once. For instance, when he opens his email for the first time in a while, he feels overwhelmed by the number he finds, "he was now suffocating to death under instant communication" (Powers 103). In his email he finds various advertisements and invitations to attend different professional events: "two conference invitations and another reading-tour request" (103). In addition, his readers naturally send him "the usual help-me petitions" (103) as they believe they can benefit from his expertise. Under the overwhelming influence of technology, Weber becomes a fragmented person whose different social roles require him to adopt a different persona.

One form of social saturation is the para-social relationship that Weber has with his audience. The friendliness he is met with from his readers is an indication that they feel like they know him on a personal level. While in reality, the intimacy an audience feels they share with a public figure is but an illusion created by media technologies. When a stranger on the street recognizes Weber and waves at him, he guesses it is a reader "who didn't realize that publicity photos and television were one-way media" (Powers 102). Weber acknowledges that photos create a varnished image of his

character, the fact that he looks like “a cross between Charles Darwin and Santa Claus” gives him a familiar countenance, which makes people “[greet] him as if he were their harmless grandfather” (102). Such an image is at the heart of the manipulation of the audience’s view of the doctor.

Weber can be read as a surrogate for Richard Powers who voices an author’s struggle with the social saturation caused by technology. For, Weber tortures himself by reading his book ratings online. But even public opinion is divided between two polar opposites that he cannot decide who to believe: “One star: Who Does This Guy Think He Is? Five stars: Ignore the Naysayers; Gerald Weber Does It Again” (Powers 261). The rating system of the internet is a great example of social saturation, as it lacks individual opinions that are free of outside influence, wherein “private thought gave way to perpetual group ratings” (261). The world that Weber inhabits is now exposed to constant opinions about everything at all times: “Leo Tolstoy: 4.1. Charles Darwin: 3.0” (261). Constant access to so much feedback is detrimental to a public figure’s psyche. For instance, Weber finds himself addicted to reading people’s reviews despite the negativity they spew. In addition, people’s opinions make him worry about his position relative to his colleagues, he wonders: “Was he alone in this backlash? Which of his colleagues had also fallen?” (261). As such, Weber can be read as a reflection of Richard Powers and the negative effects he might be experiencing as a result of social saturation.

In reality, Weber is the opposite of the image he projects on T.V and in pictures. When he meets Mark’s sister, she is surprised to find that “his voice didn’t match the picture on his books” (Powers 180). Instead, that familiarity is shattered with the reality of his position as a strange health professional rather than some old friend. Furthermore,

the compassion that his books exude disappears in person; in fact, the opposite is true, “the man who came to Nebraska wasn’t the author of those rich, embracing books” (180). Despite the fact that Weber preaches the importance of listening to a patient’s story, he initially falls short of that expectation when Karin presents him with Mark’s case history. In order to be able to help Mark, Weber has to take his story into account; however, “Gerald Weber failed to honor what he claimed lay at the heart of all good medicine. He didn’t listen” (180). Karin later comes to the conclusion that Doctor Weber’s character is too elusive for knowledge. Weber remains obscure to his audience as well as those of the public who have met him, such as Mark and his family, “[n]obody had seen the real Weber. Not the New York studio audience; not the three of them” (182). Therefore, Weber does not meet the expectations of his para-social relationships.

The excessive demands on Weber progressively disintegrate his identity. For instance, Weber is obliged to fly across countries and continents in order to promote his latest book. The travel exhausts him so much, he starts to experience detachment from himself as “[h]e heard his sentences growing longer and less grammatical” (Powers 224). While in *Americana* David’s attention is torn among radio stations, Weber experiences the mental strain of travel from country to country. Such technologies saturate the self to the point where cognitive function is difficult. As he travels between “Singapore. Bangkok...Tokyo” he acknowledges that “[w]hy he was there lay beyond answer” (250). In addition, the interviews and conferences he is invited to put him in a position to defend the public persona he has created through his work. Weber is accused of practicing pseudo-science as he turns cases of neurological illness into popular stories; one publication says “that he’d missed his true calling, that Gerald Weber was, deep down, a fabulist” (226). The more Weber’s professional work is questioned the

more he loses his grip on his identity, “it occurred to him that he himself might be an extremely detailed case history, a description of personality so minutely realized that it only thought it was autonomous” (226). The social saturation that Weber experiences highlights his status as text; constructed through external influence. As such, the time difference between countries, sleep deprivation, the short time span in which he had to participate in numerous interviews and the accusation of fraudulence saturated Weber to the point of disintegration.

The fragmentation in Weber’s identity is reflected in the collapse of his self narrative. His identity as a neuroscientist is no longer viable after the public has branded him as “just a popularize” (Powers 220). However, he struggles to identify as a “writer,” since he started his career as a scientist. The dissonance between who he claims to be and people’s perception of him pokes holes in the story he tells of himself: ““I’m not a writer” But perhaps he’d inadvertently given up the day job, as well” (220). Consequently, Weber begins to disappear as he feels that “there is a need to be no one” (220). The disintegration of his personal narrative leads to an inability to give an account of himself that projects to the future. The future is “[e]xactly the question that worried him. What to do tomorrow, and the day after” (220). However, Weber realizes that restoring his relationship with his wife might restore his claim over his identity. Such a decision gives him a sense of agency, while he believes that “yes, life is a fiction,” he still holds that “the fiction is steerable” (414). He wishes to find his wife at the airport with a card bearing his name, so he could start to reconstruct his personal narrative anew. On his way home, Weber encounters a person who recognizes him as “the brain guy,” to which his response is definitive: ““Not me,” Weber insists. “I’m in reclamation”” (429). Weber is reclaiming his personal narrative from the input of public opinion by returning to the most important relationship in his life. Unlike David, who is

still happy to be asked for an autograph at the end of the novel as he was at its beginning, Weber is changed by his journey to Nebraska to help Mark. In this sense, David does not mature beyond the para-social relationships of the postmodern culture, while *The Echo Maker* projects hope that Weber would be able to do so.

To summarize, *The Echo Maker* shows the disorienting effect of para-social relationship on the performer. In the character of Weber, self narrative disintegrates as he is forced to fill so many roles through a lot of mediums. Weber becomes estranged from his public persona; he is one thing but projects another. However, unlike *Americana*, *The Echo Maker* avoids the doom and gloom of extreme social saturation. For, Weber reflects a desire to rewrite his self narrative outside of public opinion. He returns to a single relationship that might help him achieve that endeavor.

1.5. Healing the Empty Self: Advertisement and Therapeutic Routes

Americana and *The Echo Maker* consider the ways in which the postmodern culture attempts to heal the emptiness of the self. On the one hand, *Americana* offers advertisement as a solution to the emptiness of the self. Instead of fixing the dilemmas of the self, advertisement perpetuates feelings of emptiness as it creates a gap between the subject and who he wishes to become. On the other hand, *The Echo Maker* depicts psychotherapy as a solution to such emptiness. Yet, therapy is portrayed as empty promises of guidance that capitalize on the vulnerabilities of patients. Nevertheless, this section highlights *The Echo Maker*'s redemption of the figure of the therapist as collaborator in the building of the self narrative of the patient.

In the postmodern culture, the individual is offered consumer products to soothe his sense of inner emptiness. Advertisement capitalizes on and helps advance the emptiness of the self, in order to maximize profit through promising an ideal image

attained by the purchase of products. In this sense, advertisement relies on people's insecurity to sell them products that can make them more attractive, richer and more socially accepted (Cushman 602). In DeLillo's *Americana*, David's sense of emptiness is aggravated by consumer culture rather than improved by it. Accordingly, the following highlights the failure of advertisement to enhance David's life and propel his self narrative forward.

The postmodern subject in *Americana* fashions himself in such a way that his physical appearance is impressive enough to cover the emptiness within his person. From a young age, David defines himself primarily based on his physical appearance that he worked hard to refine and maintain. The second chapter of the novel introduces the narration of the older David Bell, writing his auto-biography, the first description of himself is about his physical appearance: "I was an extremely handsome young man" (DeLillo 14), it reads. In seeking self discovery and understanding, while people his age seek psychoanalysis, it is his mirror image that he turns to: "When I began to wonder who I was, I took the simple step of lathering my face and shaving... I was blue-eyed David Bell" (14). Moreover, he places importance on the way others admire his physical appearance; he values the fact that "one of [his] superiors at the network, referred to [him] as being "conventionally" handsome" (14). The physical appearance of others is equally important to him; of a senior colleague he mentions that "[h]e was so tall and gray and dignified. He rounded out the group photo we carried around" (56). In putting such emphasis on appearance, David reflects a cultural obsession with external images of the self.

The source of David's obsession with appearances is the advertisement industry and its glorification of perfect images. Advertising had been a big part of David's childhood, his father worked in the industry and he involved his children in the impact

analysis of the ad on its audience. While he watched commercials in order to study their success rate, his children were allowed to give their opinion on the matter. In addition, his father clearly puts a great emphasis on his outside appearance. He created an image of sophistication and high class through the brands he adorned himself with, “[h]e bought most of his suits in England. He liked Dutch cigars and drove Italian and British automobiles” (DeLillo 126). Not only that, but he also instills in David the notion that he should base his personal value on his ability to acquire money to provide for his family: ““That’s your job as head of a family in a free republic”” (127). As such, David absorbed his role model’s emphasis on the importance of appearances and money as pillars for identity construction.

The advertisement industry exploits the notion of the American dream in order to sell its products to consumers (Marchand xviii). In the novel, commercials sell an image of an ideal life style and persona that the American consumer wishes to possess. David’s grandfather, “one of advertising’s early legends” (DeLillo 110), made his debut in advertising by creating a campaign that emphasized its owner’s “American” name. He tells the owner of a pajama company that he can use the name “McHenry” to his advantage in a “catchy advertising campaign,” as “Fort McHenry” is where Francis Scott Key wrote the American national anthem (162). The idea was to combine the American national anthem, the flag and military pride in one campaign. The design for the ad includes “a battle scene... ships, rockets, a fort, hundreds of troops and a big flag flying on the battlements” with a slogan that reads “McHenry—the Star-Spangled Pajamas” (163). David’s grandfather even suggests the pajamas should include forty-eight stars, similar to the American flag at the time, in order to appeal to the people and achieve success.

The idea that commercials use the American dream to influence one's view of identity is reiterated in David's autobiographical movie. David's movie focuses on the impact of technology, such as television, on the success of the advertisement industry in fashioning American subjectivity. His father's character in the movie explains that commercials broadcasted on T.V infiltrate the life of the American subject and his psyche. It creates an ideal image of a person that can only be achieved through the acquisition of the advertised product (Marchand xxi). So that the effect of a T.V commercial on the American subject is that "[i]t moves him from first person consciousness to third person. In this country there is a universal third person, the man we all want to be" (DeLillo 221). The "universal third person" is the product of American culture rather than the invention of the advertiser. An ideal image of personhood is part and parcel of the American dream, as "the third person was invented by the consumer, the great armchair dreamer... The country itself invented him. He came over on the Mayflower" (222). However, the purpose of a commercial is not to close the gap between the subject and his ideal image but to keep him in a perpetual state of desire. Therefore, "advertising is the suggestion that the dream of entering the third person singular might possibly be fulfilled," but it never is so that the subject continues to participate in consumer culture. In this sense, advertisement contributes to the fragmented identity of the subject.

The American dream is a cultural discourse that influences the subject's self fashioning. Such a discourse is perpetuated through the texts of the postmodern culture; its books, films and the idealized images of commercials (Jameson 02). For instance, the influence of these texts began for David "as soon as [he] could read" (DeLillo 109). As such, David's self fashioning heavily relies on the texts of the American dream, "[he] believed all of it, the institutional messages, the psalms and placards, the pictures,

the words” (109). The issue with the American dream is that it is built on the oppression and exploitation of other countries. *Americana* faults American citizens for enjoying the exploits of wars and turning a blind eye on the means with which they were acquired, more than it does the government that wages those wars. To live a life that does not question the symbols of the America dream, such as innocence, glory and patriotism, is far more sinister than bombing and stealing from other countries. David takes note of how the American dream hides the ugly reality behind its illusions of prosperity; “the dream made no allowance for the truth beneath the symbols, for the interlinear notes, the presence of something black” (109). In this sense, the individual pursues the American dream without questioning its rotten origin.

The advertisement industry further obscures the ugliness behind the shiny veil of the American dream and soothes any feelings of uneasiness that may arise from contemplating its source. In David’s movie, his father says he overcomes his apprehension of the effects of advertisement by using the brands he is sold: ““I take a mild and gentle Palmolive bath, brush my teeth with Crest, swallow two Sominex tablets, and try desperately to fall asleep on my Simmons Beautyrest mattress”” (DeLillo 224). The novel reflects the irony of trying to placate the psychological ailments of the modern subject by participating in the culture that is causing his suffering.

A characteristic of a coherent life history is the ability to imagine future prospects for oneself (Giddens 54). However, David is arrested by his hollow mirror image that he is unable to conceive of a self narrative that projects to the future. After the supposed self discovery journey he takes across America, David is in no way near self possession and clarity. For instance, at the end of the journey he cannot image his future. When he

is asked about his plan for a future residence and career, his answer is repeatedly that he ““[hasn’t] thought about it”” (DeLillo 226). David’s identity is fragmented beyond recognition that he can no longer feign normalcy at his work place again. Therefore, he believes they have discarded him as someone who cannot function in a work environment anymore, as they must have “disposed of [his] corporate remains in some file cabinet marked *pending return of soul from limbo*” (272). He is discarded as an unfinished text with no closure. For, David is as he began still heavily reliant on his physical appearance in his self fashioning.

Considering all his future options and discarding each one of them almost immediately, David is content with the endurance of his outside shell, “in the mirror, these things considered, [he] looked not bad. Indeed [he] remained David Bell” (DeLillo 273). In fact, the novel begins and ends with David being asked for his autograph by strangers who assume he is an important person simply because he has the appearance of one. At the beginning of his journey a little girl thinks he “must be somebody” (16), and at the end of it “a woman asked for [his] autograph” again (305). Thus, David does not acquire any substance to his narrative self fashioning; he starts as an empty shell of a person and remains as such.

While the supposed desired outcome of consumerism is to change one’s life and fix it to the better, it is only a shallow and none durable solution (Cushman 606). David’s sense of emptiness is perpetuated by his hyper focus on his appearance. The influence of his father and the American dream only arrest the forward development of his self narrative.

The field of psychotherapy is not any less culpable in the taking advantage of the condition of the empty self and lacking viable solutions. In his article “Why the Self is

Empty: Towards a Historically Situated Psychology,” Cushman asserts that individuals in the postmodern culture are lost and in deep need for guidance, but instead psychotherapy only scrapes the surface of the issues facing the self. In addition, psychotherapy creates a power imbalance between the therapist and the patient that might put the patient in a position of vulnerability and possible exploitation (607). In *The Echo Maker*, Doctor Weber represents the powerful position that therapists hold and the ethical questions it raises. In the novel, Doctor Weber’s exploitation of Mark helps explore the notion of the fictitiousness of self narratives and how he is only able to help Mark once he hands him the reigns of his own story.

The character of the neuroscientist, Doctor Weber, represents the field of psychotherapy. Although he is a neuroscientist, his beliefs concerning the interconnection between the mind and the brain reflect the view that it is erroneous to separate psychology and neuroscience. Mark’s Capgras is an example of Weber’s beliefs, as his illness might be caused by brain trauma but it manifests in ways that are based on personal psychology; his “individual response, personal history” (Powers 187). In this sense, neuroscience and its effort to understand the brain prove insufficient in explaining individual experiences. The novel uses this dichotomy as a metaphor for literary theory’s inability to define the self without the consideration of unique personal experiences; it is true that “[t]heory might be on the verge of describing the brain, but theory alone could not yet exhaust *this brain*” (187). This sentiment echoes the philosophy of phenomenology in understanding consciousness. In this regard, phenomenology focuses on the lived experience of the individual rather than impose on it preconceived cultural, traditional or scientific explanations; it seeks “to capture life as it is lived” (Moran 05). Powers’s *The Echo Maker* reflects a frustration with theories of identity construction that discard the perspective of individuals. Among these theories,

the poststructuralist notion of the ‘death of subject,’ that completely erases individuality.

Self fashioning in *The Echo Maker* relies on individual narratives and their interpretation in writing. In this sense, the novel views identity as a discursive process that is constantly under construction (Hall 02). Similar to *Americana*, Powers’ *The Echo Maker* is a novel that self consciously acknowledges its status as an artifact by implying that it is the product of one of its characters. Doctor Weber is referred to as a ‘poet’ a ‘playwright’ and a ‘fabulist’ for his focus on the stories of his patients at the expense of the scientific dimension of their medical cases. Mark’s case of Capgras is no exception in Weber’s career; as he thinks “Mark Schluter and his impostor sister. The book waiting for [him] to write” (Powers 187). Moreover, the stories that comprise Doctor Weber’s books reflect that there are as many interpretations as there are readers; “there was no story itself. No final judgment” (215). As such, the novel makes a statement about its own status as narrative that does not lay claim on the truth of the self but attempts a version of reality that may be disputed.

The desire for self knowledge through narrative is not conveyed without paradox within the novel. Similar to the postmodern view that the self cannot be straightforwardly known, the novel questions Gerard Weber’s ability to translate the experiences of his patients into truthful accounts. For instance, Weber is described as “exploitative” for the creative license he takes in the writing of the stories of his patients. His belief in the importance of the individual stories of his patients is reflected in his writing, as he values these stories more “than [the] prevailing medical wisdom” (Powers 96). However, Weber might be just as guilty as medicine of stripping these individuals of their agency, for “his stories border on privacy violations and sideshow exploitation” (217). The novel also points to the fictitious aspect of any self narrative in

the way Weber handles the privacy of his patients. The fact that he “combines two or more stories, to bring out a condition’s most salient features” raises the question of whether all the individuals he writes about are mere “fiction” (183).

Similar to DeLillo, Powers uses the metaphor of the mirror to depict the fact that self narratives only provide an interpretation of reality rather than give access to it. The metaphor appears in relation to one of Weber’s patients who suffers a stroke that impairs his ability to see anything that is on his left side. So the doctor conducts an experiment where he puts a necklace on the left side of a mirror and asks Neil to grab it, Neil insists it was inside the mirror because he could only see it using his right eye-sight but is not able to reach for it. Neil’s reality is trapped inside the mirror, both in the experiment and in the narrative that Weber constructs of him. Once his story is written, Weber loses contact with the patient and neither helps him nor hears from him again, “he’d left “Neil” behind in the prose looking glass, lost somewhere, off in an unperceivable direction, an unreachable place deep inside the narrative mirror” (Powers 126). In this sense, the authorship that Weber offers as means to knowing the self might be the very thing that stands as barrier to it. While Weber intends to convey the stories of his patients, he succumbs to the deception inherent in narrative.

While the novel acknowledges the possibility of fraudulence within narrative, it still seeks to uncover its redemption. Initially, Weber treats Mark in a similar way to all his previous patients as a curious case he might include in his books. Later, he decides he instead wants to collaborate with Mark to help him construct his self narrative after his injury. For, Mark’s decidedness concerning the validity of his personal narrative leads to the failure of the cognitive behavioral therapy that Weber advises at first. The cognitive behavioral therapist tries to rationalize Mark’s delusions but his story is too closely tied to his identity to be discarded so easily. For instance, his sister finds that it

is impossible to reason with Mark, for his ability to counter each argument against his delusions with a rationalization of his own, each time ““he comes up with another more elaborate theory to explain himself. How can a therapist reason him out of this?”” (Powers 203). As a result, Weber decides to help Mark in a way that acknowledges his active participation in his self fashioning; “he was obliged at least to listen and attend” (264). As such, self fashioning in the novel is attempted through collaborative efforts between the damaged self and its stable surroundings to construct a coherent narrative.

Once Weber decides to put his own interests aside, he is better able to help Mark forge a viable self narrative. Weber believes that writing Mark’s story will redeem his past exploitations, this time he plans to relinquish his detached professionalism and instead give voice to the individual; he intends to write “not a case history: a life” (Powers 265). As opposed to imposing a narrative on Mark, he now decides “to sit still and watch, not some syndrome, but some improvising being” (297). Weber’s change of heart is the novel’s expression of the dissatisfaction with the field of therapy and its self serving tendencies. The narrative that Weber intends to write will no longer carry the impersonality of his previous writings. His job now is to give voice to a whole person rather than a fragmented individual that serves the author’s agenda, “[h]e could re-create Mark Schluter, no composites, no pseudonyms, no glossed-over detail” (265). The experiencing self takes precedence over the narratives of science, in the case of Mark, where “neuroscience might finally be powerless to settle this desperately improvising mind” (288). Thus, theories offering a substitution for individual narratives are no longer desirable in the novel. Instead, Weber wants to allow Mark to write his own story; “[h]e would let Mark write the book” (Powers 290). Thus, acknowledging the role of the individual in forging an identity, despite outside influence.

The experiencing self is more important than any theory seeking to describe it for the simple fact that no theory has access to the lived experience of each individual. According to Weber, Mark's knowledge of himself is enough to construct a coherent narrative; he assures Mark that "about some things you know more than anyone else alive... You know what it means to be you. Now. Here." (Powers 297). The purpose of said narrative is not mere documentation but the creation of a trajectory that links past and present experiences to a possible future; as Weber "had come back not so much to document Mark as to help his story forward into the total unknown" (288). Accordingly, Weber represents the novel's desire for a shift from a theoretical approach to the self to an experiential one, which places importance on one's attempt to construct a stable, whole, knowable narrative.

The Echo Maker illustrates the failure of therapy in healing the empty self. While *Americana* shows the advertising industry as exploitative, *The Echo Maker* depicts Weber as a self serving doctor. His exploitation lays in the fact that he has used his patients' self narrative for profit. Eventually, however, Weber comes to the redeeming realization that he wishes to help his patient to write his own self narrative.

In conclusion, this chapter tries to compare the different depictions of the subject in DeLillo's *Americana* and Powers' *The Echo Maker*. It focuses on the notion of narrative self fashioning and how the characters of these novels approach their construction. It highlights the fact that language acts as a barrier to coherent self narratives in both texts and how *The Echo Maker* persists in believing in the necessity of self narratives to the individual, despite their deception. Furthermore, it explores the importance of self narratives to relationships and how the only path to healing the fragmentation of the self is to allow it to refashion itself back to wholeness.

Chapter Two:

Historical Situatedness and the Search for Agency and Authenticity in Don Delillo's *Libra* and Richard Powers's *Orfeo*.

Postmodern literature depicts a subject whose historical situatedness deprives him of personal agency and authenticity. However, while the contemporary text acknowledges the historical situatedness of the subject, it refuses to disregard the possibility of exercising agency and authenticity. In this regard, DeLillo's *Libra* reflects the restraint of external influence that hinders the individual from acting with mastery and consistency. *Orfeo*, on the contrary, shows that interdependence is integral to one's humanity. While complete independence from relationship and cultural influences is not possible, the protagonist of *Orfeo* seeks an understanding of oneself that maintains a measure of authenticity and agency.

This chapter compares the postmodern text *Libra* to the contemporary *Orfeo* through the lens of Stephen Greenblatt's view of agency and authenticity in self fashioning. Greenblatt equates authenticity with directness of action as oppose to submission to the rules of others. Such submission leads the individual to a loss of freedom and agency (35-36). In *Renaissance Self Fashioning*, Stephen Greenblatt concludes that there is no self fashioning independent from the rule of the cultural context of the individual. Nevertheless, he insists that autonomous self fashioning might be an illusion but one that is indispensable (256-57).

This chapter is divided into five sections that compare the ways in which DeLillo's *Libra* and Powers's *Orfeo* represent the historical situatedness of the subject and the level to which their characters are able to achieve a sense of agency and authenticity. The chapter explores the effect of external influence on identity and

whether it is possible to achieve a sense of agency and authenticity despite the influence of others. Examining the novels from the lens of historiographic metafiction allows for a comparison between the postmodern and contemporary depictions of the subject. In *Libra* the subject is shaped by his historical moment, which completely erases his agency. *Orfeo*, through the character of the artist, manages to represent the human need for agency and authenticity despite the historical situatedness of the subject. The chapter also analyzes the postmodern portrayal of historical documents as distortions of reality and subjectivity in *Libra*. In *Orfeo*, however, the subject manages to disregard documents or use them to his own ends. In addition, both novels are read as interrogative texts that question a given dominant ideology. On the one hand, *Libra* challenges the coherence of the reader's reality and identity; it leaves him with no answers to his inquiries. On the other hand, *Orfeo* encourages the reader to seek answers to the satisfaction of his curiosity. Finally, the chapter looks at whether the discovery and revelation of truth is possible under the control of power. *Libra* denies its characters the chance to speak absolute truth under or to power, while *Orfeo* maintains that truth for a particular subject must be spoken for the sake of responsibility and accountability.

2.1. Tethered Selfhood: Oswald and Els's Values between the Self and Society

This section focuses on the notions of agency and authenticity as they relate to concepts of external control in *Libra* and *Orfeo*. In *Libra*, the protagonist believes that his isolated rebellion insures a state of self command and consistency. However, the isolation proves a hindrance to the construction of a value system that relies on community and tradition. A lack of a solid value system from which to act prevents Oswald from acting with agency and authenticity. In *Orfeo*, rebellion is portrayed as erroneous and that interdependence restores agency and authenticity rather than impairs

them. The character of the artist in *Orfeo* is used to reflect the fact that “anti-rebellion” vis-à-vis the postmodern detachment from love and connection is the correct path to a well-adjust individuality. In this regard, Oswald’s search for notoriety in *Libra* only makes him an easy pawn for external plans. Whereas, Els in *Orfeo* realizes a return to a sincere connection in art and in life is necessary.

The loss of a shared sense of community and moral grounds in the modern industrial society lead to the isolation of the individual. While the absence of tradition and convention gives the illusion of freedom, it only leaves the self vulnerable to outside influences. Consequently, one lacks a solid value system which manifests as a lack of agency and authenticity. In *Libra*, Lee Harvey Oswald represents the isolated individual of the modern American culture, whose lack of agency and authenticity make him an easy target for a conspiracy against President Kennedy. Thus, the following analysis focuses on Oswald’s isolation and its detrimental consequences to his self-fashioning.

Don DeLillo’s *Libra* depicts Lee Harvey Oswald as an isolated individual. Oswald’s isolation is the result of the industrial society that changed the economy as well as the social landscape. Socially, the individual is no longer shackled to a traditional way of life or a well defined community. Presumably, this scenario gives each person the ability to freely craft a self and join a social group of his choice. However, this freedom comes with the price of isolation. Thus isolated, the individual is left vulnerable to be fashioned by the trends and relationships of the industrial society (Beck 40). The novel represents this paradox in Oswald’s apparent alignment with Marxist theory that is not accounted for in his actions. Reading *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto* provides him with a frame of reference for his place in an economic and social system that values profit above all else, he concludes that: ““If you

can't buy what they're selling, you're a zero in the system'" (DeLillo 55). These books solidify his feeling of isolation from a young age and "closed the world around him" (46). Consequently, Oswald's chosen community becomes communism and he decides that "[h]e would find a communist cell and become a member" (49). Yet, he does not act upon that decision and his isolated individualism continues.

The loss of traditional social norms in the industrial society, such as the close knit family, puts him in constant pursuit of "love and help" (Beck 40). Thus, Oswald is not only isolated from his society at large but also from his family. For instance, he does not feel the emotional resonance of his family history that his mother recounts, he hears her tales about "family, money, the past, but they did not touch his real life, the inward-spinning self" (DeLillo 50). This is what Beck in his *Ecological Enlightenment* describes as the "prison cells of the self," whereby the individual is separated from anchors of social life and left to contemplate a fragile and scared ego (40). Such isolation leads Oswald to fantasize about a life among the communists. He imagines that the communists would turn him into a mission executing hero, "[h]e would wear dark clothes, cross rooftops in the rain" (51). This fantasy is paradoxically not linked to community but to an image of the individualized hero. That is to say, despite his delusion of choice, Oswald is still fashioned by his closest influences. In addition, he does not make any effort to join the communists and instead follows in his brother's footsteps by preparing to join the Marine; "he read his brother's Marine Corps manual, to prepare for the day when he'd enlist" (56). As such, Oswald's plans are mere fantasies and ultimately, he conforms to the values of his society rather than being true to his own.

The decline of stable values generationally accrued has diminished the autonomy and permanence of the self (Dickens 188). Oswald lacks an internally motivated system

of values, which is further illustrated during his time in the U.S Marine. Thus, the fragility of Oswald's value system leads to his fragmentation. For instance, as an act of rebellion, he decides to divulge military secrets to a Japanese socialist who is hostile towards capitalist America. However, Oswald does not seem to be rebelling against his country in full conviction. He rather grows exceedingly disconnected from his initial mission that it gradually loses meaning; hence, "[t]he more he spoke, the more he felt he was softly split in two. It was all so remote he didn't think it mattered what he said" (DeLillo 115). His fragmentation is an indication that he does not possess a solid inner world from which he acts. In addition, the phrase "he let it be known" (114-15) is used twice as he is providing the Japanese socialist with information, which emphasizes a disconnection not only from himself but also from his interlocutor.

Lacking in purpose, the individual becomes "other-directed," that is, he is easily swayed by others, for his want of personal values and a solid sense of self (Dickens 188). This annihilation of the self is represented in Oswald's life in the Marine. He is treated with scorn by his superiors, given cleaning jobs and put in Marine prison, which he laments with a cell mate: "'We're a zero in the system'" (DeLillo 135). Consequently, being in the Marine requires the erasure of his identity. Similar to David in *Americana*, Oswald realizes that he has to avoid "anything that might hint at a personality behind the drone unit. The only safety was in facelessness" (138). As such, Oswald lacks agency in a system that demands his conformity as a prerequisite for his survival.

The lack of solid values becomes an interest in superficial attributes of the self for Oswald. He continues to have fantasies about rebelling against the American social and political systems. To do so, he devises a plan to defect to the USSR. However, Oswald's position in the Marine is too insignificant to be of any help as a spy for Russia. While

the professor who wishes to recruit him for defection is concerned with the information he might provide, Oswald's sole interest is a sense of importance that the idea of defection gives him. In the process, for instance, learning Russian provides him the sense of substance that he lacks, "hearing his own flat voice take on texture and dimension, he could almost believe he was being remade on the spot, given an opening to some larger and deeper version of himself" (DeLillo 144). Ironically, Oswald is looking for depth of character in really shallow avenues.

The fantasies that Oswald harbors about the identity he could fashion in Russia are shattered by reality. When he reaches Moscow he applies for a Soviet citizenship and is faced by the fact that it is the fantasy of Russia that took him there. Apprehending this fact, the official tells him he is unaware of the reality of the Soviet Union, as it "is only great in literature" (DeLillo 185). Being on the verge of deportation leads Oswald to dwell on his inconsequential existence, "[i]t was this blankness that caused his terror. No one could distinguish him from anyone else" (DeLillo 186). Oswald is drawn to Russia by the fantasy that it would give his life purpose but is confronted by the reality that his lack of a solid sense of self persists. At this point in the novel, the phrase "[a] zero in the system" is repeated (186). Therefore, the fantasy of Russia is shown to emphasize his lack of a solid identity rather than bestow it upon him.

Autonomy is defined by Dickens in his article "Dimensions of the Postmodern Self" as "the ability, or lack thereof, of individuals to be masters of their own actions" (194). Unable to exercise his autonomy, Oswald decides to relinquish the last shred of control he possesses. His want of self command is illustrated by his suicide attempt as a reaction to his pending deportation from Russia. For example, he is still overly concerned with people's perception of his actions rather than acting with purpose. During his attempted suicide he thinks of the way his story is going to be regarded,

“[he] would like to give people in the United States something to think about” (DeLillo 188). Oswald’s want of autonomy fractures his sense of identity, even in self annihilation he has “a sense of distance from the scene” (188). In this scene, Oswald has completely abandoned the possibility of being a proactive agent in his own life. In what he thinks are his final moments, he surrenders his life to those in power, he decides: “How easy to die... I’ve done all I can. Let others make the choices now” (188). Despite the fact that Oswald’s attempted suicide fails, it is a sign of his lack of agency.

Besides a lack of autonomy, Oswald lacks authenticity defined as “the consistency of one’s actions with her/his motivations or intentions” (Dickens 194). The inconsistency of Oswald’s actions turns him into an enigma for those around him. For instance, a couple of KGB agents eventually contact Oswald, but they are confused by Lee’s motives for defection and are unsure of how to use him. One of the agents, Alek, believes that Oswald wants to find his place in the world but does not have a clear vision on where that might be; “he was not yet assured of a sense of perspective” (DeLillo 202). Oswald’s idealist view of Russia scares Alek, given the fact that his decisions are not rooted in reality but in fantasy, which can easily be abandoned. The fact that Oswald does not exhibit consistency of actions and psychic state fuels Alek’s fear that Oswald would eventually turn against Russia, Alek notes that “[h]e tended toward emotional instability. Tended toward erratic behavior” (205). Consequently, Alek doubted whether he can use Oswald as an agent as he believes he lacks ‘self-command’ and ‘steadiness of will,’ on the contrary ‘[t]his boy played Ping-Pong in his head” (205). As such, Oswald does not fit the picture of a real defector who wishes to sincerely work for Russia.

Oswald’s inconsistency is illustrated by the fact that he is an amalgam of conflicting theories and testimonies in real life (Epstein 150). In the novel, he is a blend

between fact and fiction. For Example, he wants to join a false defection program set up by the U.S government in order to infiltrate pro-Russian circles. Oswald expects them to contact him given his socialist leaning politics and his profile as “victim of the American system, lonely and impressionable” (DeLillo 199). However, the irony lies in the fact that such an act would render his motives even more obscure, in this case “[h]e’d be a real defector posing as a false defector posing as a real defector. Ha ha” (199). The fantasy of such a program reflects the fact that Oswald’s main desire is to overcome his insignificant position in society rather than to really embody such political leanings.

Oswald’s inauthenticity is fueled by his desire for public recognition. For instance, in one scene he imagines himself “telling the story of his stay in a guarded apartment somewhere in Moscow to a man in a suit and tie. Maybe it is Richard Carlson as Herb Philbrick on TV. I Led Three Lives” (201). ‘I Led 3 Lives’ is a T.V series inspired by the life of Herbert Philbrick, who joined the U.S Communist Party in the 1940s as a spy for the FBI and later wrote a book of his experience with the same title: “*I Led 3 Lives*” (Kackman 98). On the one hand, Lee’s identification with the T.V show is indicative of the glory he anticipates from leading a life of multiplicities. On the other hand, the mention of the fictionalized version of Herbert Philbrick’s life reflects the self-referential aspect of the novel. That is to say, the life of Lee Harvey Oswald is closer to fiction than reality, be it in the world of *Libra* or the real world.

A lack of a consistent system of values means that Oswald readily adopts certain projects and abandons others. For example, Oswald imagines that he might finally fashion a solid identity when his wife tells him they are expecting a child. The idea of fatherhood seems like the answer to Oswald’s search for a meaningful life, “he thought his life made sense at last. A father took part. He had a place, an obligation” (DeLillo

250). He just as easily embodies the home-body figure as he abandons that of the American defector. His salvation, he discovers, is in being a homemaker, tending to household chores, “[i]t was wonderful to discover this. He had a chance to avoid the sure ruin” (252). In addition, he forgets the Marxist principles that took him to Russia. For instance, he tries to convince Marina to go to the U.S with him by praising the availability of consumer products, “[h]e told her the stores in America were incredibly well stocked, full of amazing choices” (251), his distaste for American consumerism behind him. In becoming the father figure, Oswald adopts another transient identity.

The novel implies that Oswald’s participation in the assassination of Kennedy is a response to his feelings of insignificance, isolation, inauthenticity and lack of autonomy. *Libra* overshadows the assassination as Oswald’s attempt to immortalize his name in history. Walking the streets of Dallas, where he would presumably shoot the president, Oswald contemplates his place in the world. The assassination is foreshadowed by images of “heat and light,” (DeLillo 299) the same phrase used repeatedly to describe the day President Kennedy was killed in the novel. It is in Dallas that Lee wishes to act from a place of self-knowledge and competence, “[h]e wanted to carry himself with a clear sense of role, make a move one time that was not disappointed” (300). Additionally, his feelings of isolation and loneliness strengthen his desire for recognition, “[h]e thought the only end to isolation was to reach the point where he was no longer separated from the true struggles that went on around him. The name we give this point is history” (300). To be heard he believes he has to make a sound loud enough that it is marked in history; the sound of a gun-shot.

The first plan that Oswald devises, to exert change in his society, is poorly executed. While in Dallas, he reunites with his sell-mate in the Marine, Bobby Dupard, together they decide to assassinate army general, Edwin Walker. Dupard is a black man

who is at the receiving end of a lot of racism in the 1960s in America and a white supremacist like Walker, who was inciting people against racial integration, seems like a fitting target to Oswald. To sketch his assassination plan Lee uses a small room within his apartment, “[i]t was like an airtight compartment, part of the building but also separate from it” (DeLillo 332). The room is a metaphor for Oswald; isolated from his community but is desperate to act in ways that would change the course of its history (Thomas 114). The novel also describes those who plot against the life of the president as “men in small rooms” (DeLillo 56). According to Timothy Melley in his book *Empire of Conspiracy*, these men attempt to assert agency and rebel against those in power. However, this is a failed attempt given the fact that it conforms to an image of “liberation through violence” that is perpetuated through American mass-media (155). Such is the case in Oswald’s attempted assassination of General Walker; in that his plans are inaccurate and laced with fantasy rather than reality. For instance, Lee tells Dupard he wants to shoot the general on the anniversary of the failed invasion of Cuba, “April seventeen,” only to be informed by Dupard that he confused the dates: ““This here is April ten”” (DeLillo 338). Ultimately, his bullet misses General Walker and his assassination attempt fails.

With time, Oswald’s identity grows more incoherent, wherein his lies multiply and his plans grow more hyperbolic. For example, when in search of a job he is dishonest on the application, “[h]e lied needlessly and to a purpose. He made up past addresses, made up references and past employment, invented job qualifications” (DeLillo 366). Such a web of lies eventually contributes to Oswald’s obscurity. In addition, he oscillates between returning to Russia and moving to Cuba. In Cuba he imagines he would find happiness and well-executed socialism. An example of his hyperbolism is that his plan to move to Cuba involves him hijacking a plane. The

indecision that Oswald experiences turns him into a pawn in the plans of others. As Oswald contemplates these possibilities, DeLillo again foreshadows the fateful event that will put Lee Harvey Oswald, ‘a zero in the system’ at the heart of history, “[h]e felt he was being swept up, swept along, done with being a pitiful individual, done with isolation” (386). Such confusion and constant fantasy of entering history, never fully realized anywhere, made him into a vulnerable man and an easy recruit for the assassination of President Kennedy.

Oswald is coerced into joining the conspiracy against the life of President Kennedy. As he is trying to realize his Cuban plan, one of the conspirators, David Ferrie, meets him at the train station to deter him from leaving. Ferrie insists that coming back and working with him is what Oswald “wants” to do ““you want to come back. You want to finish our work”” (DeLillo 405). By way of persuading Lee to join their plan to kill the president, Ferrie evokes Lee’s astrological sign to indicate Oswald’s loss of agency to forces outside of his control (Rizz 175). The title of the novel foretells Lee’s sign, Libra, with a salient characteristic of indecisiveness that makes him susceptible to outside influence. Ferrie mentions that the negative Libran is “somewhat unsteady and impulsive. Easily, easily, easily influenced. Poised to make the dangerous leap” (DeLillo 378). In this sense, Lee’s participation in the assassination is attributed to the control of his astrological sign, which reflects his inability to make an autonomous decision.

To reflect the strong influence that Ferrie has on Oswald, the narrator adopts the name that Ferrie bestows on him. In the chapter “6 September” where he contemplates joining the assassination plan, he is called ‘Leon’ instead of Lee. The change of name shows Oswald’s inconsistency and incoherence. Initially, Oswald still considers whether he should go to Cuba or Russia. Such indecision is illustrated when he tries to

make sense of a newspaper he reads in Mexico City, written in both English and Spanish, “[e]verything here happens in twos and his eyes constantly dart from one language to the other” (DeLillo 428). As he is applying for both a Cuban and a Russian visa in the city, the confusion created by the two languages mirrors his teetering from one decision to the other. Eventually, both embassies reject his applications, which further reinforce his feelings of worthlessness. The lack of belonging strengthens Lee’s desperate desire for continuation and stability, “[h]e wants to sense a structure that includes him, a definition clear enough to specify where he belongs” (429). In this scene, the phrase “[h]e is a zero in the system” (429) is repeated again, which acts as a constant reminder of his insignificance. Like the straw that broke the camel’s back, this is the last disappointment he endures before joining the conspiracy for killing President Kennedy.

Oswald is completely stripped of his agency after he assassinates the president. Lost on what he should do next, he follows Ferrie’s instructions to hide in a cinema, where he presumably would be flown to safety, he surrenders to “the idea of others making the choice now. He wanted to believe it was out of his hands” (DeLillo 486). Similar to the way he attempted suicide after he was denied a Soviet citizenship in order to leave his life in the hands of others. However, following Ferrie’s plan put him in prison, where his wish to enter history is fulfilled and his name is acknowledged by the public. Nevertheless, the recognition comes with a cost, he has lost all possibility of self possession, “he heard his name on the radios and TVs... Lee Harvey Oswald, Lee Harvey Oswald. It sounded odd and dumb and made up. They were talking about somebody else” (496). He is now a property of the public imagination to mold him into whatever shape they wished, not even his name belongs to him any longer.

Oswald attempts to adopt values in the hope that they would alleviate his isolation. However, his decisions always prove superficial, based on fantasy or externally motivated. Eventually, his inability to maintain stronger command and consistency in his actions turns him into a pawn in a plan devised by others. Oswald's fragile sense of self places him in the conspiracy against President Kennedy's life. As such, *Libra* shows that Lee Harvey Oswald escaped anonymity at the expense of his agency and authenticity. *Libra* depicts a man who oscillates between hyper independence and a complete surrender to the will of others. Similarly, *Orfeo* represents a character that mirrors Oswald's misplaced belief in rebellious independence, only to realize it leads to failure. In *Orfeo*, self fashioning centers on Els's identity as an artist who struggles between embracing the rebellion of postmodernism and a return to past influences. Thus, the following analysis explores a path to agency and authenticity that does not exclude human connection. It also examines the novel through the lens of 'new sincerity' and how it shapes contemporary art after postmodernism in a way that embraces love and connection despite its recognition of their potential for manipulation, because it believes human connection is necessary. In *Orfeo*, it is paramount to self fashioning.

A dominant theme in Els's life, and in the novel *Orfeo* as a whole, is finding balance between obediently following the rules and seeking boundless freedom. The novel explores this theme in relation to the reaction of contemporary literature to postmodernism. Contemporary authors question the relativism of postmodernism that sought to break with certainties of the past, such as the stability of identity (Bertens 304). *Orfeo*, in this regard, contemplates whether the artist should continuously break with tradition or look to it for inspiration. At the beginning of the novel Peter wonders whether music composition is natural and fixed or human made and therefore

malleable; “[w]as tonality out there—God-given? Or were those magic ratios, like everything human, makeshift rules to be broken on the way to a more merciless freedom?” (Powers 12). As such, asking an eternal question about human agency; should one follow a previously laid path or draw his own? At the beginning of his life, Peter’s search for independence led him to music, he felt that “[s]omething magnificent and enduring hid under music’s exhausted surface” (12). At the end of his life, however, he is unsure about whether he has truly found freedom.

Growing up in the 1940s, Peter, not unlike Oswald, does not share the same interests as those around him from early boyhood. He does not enjoy their means of entertainment; not sports, not cars, not even television. The whole of American culture is uninteresting to Els, all he cares about are math and classical music, in fact, “[b]y thirteen, Peter Els is out of sync with the whole eight-cylinder, aerodynamic zeal of America” (Powers 21). Of course, Peter’s older brother tries to convert him to more ‘normal’ teenage musical tastes, like rock-n-roll, he rallies with his friends against Peter to “force-feed him hits, sure that they can break the kid and remake him into something a little less square” (21). Nevertheless, this attempt does not change Peter’s mind; while his brother hears ‘freedom’ in this music, he “hears only harmonic jail” (22). Similar to Oswald, Els does not wish to be imprisoned in his family’s vision for him.

As he starts to create music of his own, he believes that freedom lies in rebelling against tradition. When he starts playing the clarinet, Peter goes through years of rebellion against the beauty of classical music. Orfeo creates a parallel between Peter and literary authors, whose love for the great traditional authors can only be contained in detachment and irony, Peter confesses: “Once you’ve loved like that, the only safe haven is resentment” (Powers 24). According to David Foster Wallace, American Postmodern authors believed that directing irony at the sentimental and the naïve

revealed their hidden hypocrisies. In this sense, they mocked serious sentiment in order to criticize its political and economic messaging. However, Wallace insists that irony arrests rather than frees if it becomes an end in itself, since it offers no solution (183). Thus, he believes that rebelling against postmodern irony in literature is a form of “anti-rebellion.” Authors will relinquish irony and return to sincerely portraying human struggles and sentiments, even at the risk of ridicule for being “backward, quaint, naïve” (193). In *Orfeo*, Els embodies this form of rebellion in old age after that ironic stance has taken its course, he realizes “that all he ever wanted was to move a listener the way these variations moved him” (Powers 24). *Orfeo*, thus, advances that to be moved by the beauty of art is what people really need and desire after years of postmodern detachment.

The narration alternates between Els’ early life and old age; however, a consistent theme throughout the novel is the influence of the other on the individual, whether personally or professionally. When younger, this theme manifests in Peter’s conflict between creating experimental work that does not fit public appeal and his desire for recognition. His wife points out that even if he pretends otherwise, “[*he wants*] people to come drag [*him*] out of [*his*] cave and make [*him*] play them something” (Powers 52). Both Els and Oswald waver between a deep human desire for belonging and “a mean streak of independence” a phrase that is repeated twice in *Libra* as a description of Oswald (DeLillo 259, 402). The common thematic concern of *Libra* and *Orfeo* serves as a comparison between the isolated individual of postmodernism and the contemporary desire for human connection. Indeed, despite the fact that Els suffers estrangement from loved ones, he still feels their influence in his life. For example, he is constantly surprised by how much of his life is still colored by his former wife’s brief presence in it, “[*she*] was still so present in his habits that he couldn’t believe they’d been apart now

for four times longer than they'd been together" (Powers 54). For, Peter differs from Lee insofar as he is much more tolerant of the influence of his loved ones in his life.

Professionally, Els finds the influence of the great music composers of the past inevitable. In the process of making his own music, Els cannot help but be inspired by the figures he admired; "those souls lined up in the celestial anteroom, awaiting reincarnation: all the preexisting sounds that only he might bring into being" (Powers 60). On the one hand, the metaphor of soul reincarnation reflects Peter's artistic inclination to revive the classical music he loved when he was younger. On the other hand, the metaphor serves to indicate the novel's reincarnation of the self after its death in postmodern texts. In addition, he chooses Walt Whitman's poem "Song of Myself" to set his music to, which also carries themes of reincarnation and human connection. In the novel, the quoted part of the poem reflects the idea that humans are connected by life and death: "The smallest sprout shows there is really no death, And if ever there was it led forward life" (61). This line suggests that life and death are the cycle by which humans maintain a connection rather than sever it (Hagood 31). This part of the poem aligns with Richard Powers's depiction of the self in literature as not having been lost for good at the hands of postmodern authors, but is in fact retrievable through its connection to others.

The title of the novel itself, *Orfeo*, is a reference to the myth of Orpheus, who possessed such musical genius that his severed head and lyre continued singing after his death. The myth reflects the revival of the subject as artist after his death in postmodern art. One way life is recoverable for Els is in the liberation he finds when writing music, in these moments "[f]ear lost all traction, and that current of well-being he'd experienced a few times before in life, listening to the Jupiter or stumbling into Mahler, flooded into him" (Powers 62); as if to say that it is in the enjoyment or creation of art

that man can find freedom. Nevertheless, the new found freedom is not without influence, such as incorporating some of Mahler's techniques in his music. But, *Orfeo* insists that artistic influence does not deprive the artist or his/her piece its uniqueness. While contemplating the song, Els notices that "[a]ll the individual components had a familiar air. But the thing as a whole had never quite existed before Peter wrote it down" (62). Same as with individual identity, it is naïve to assume that one can carve one independently of all extrinsic influence, but to deny that freedom would be to forego all human autonomy.

The question of whether art must strive to constantly break with tradition or embrace its influence is portrayed in the novel's consideration of the ahistoricity of postmodern art. Els is met with the challenge of whether to accept an ironic stance towards history or take inspiration from its influences. For example, Els attends an art show directed by Richard, a doctoral candidate in theater arts. The show resembles what Fredric Jameson calls 'pastiche;' characteristic of postmodern cultural products. The artist no longer strives for a unique style, as did the modernists, but looks to the past in order to combine random images and styles to create "a spectacle" (Jameson 18). The spectacle in the novel is a mixture of artistic expression, "it's something out of Dante... Bands, dancers, and actors perform on platforms throughout the space" (Powers 127). Jameson criticizes postmodern pastiche for its replacement of historicity with spectacles that are devoid of meaning (18). Similarly, Els engages in a debate with Richard about a piece that is so chaotic it cannot be durable. Peter advances that the kind of spectacle Richard is championing will be forgotten after its first night, but Richard insists that "*novelty's our only hope*" (Powers 132). However, despite Richard's attempt to change Els's mind on the state of art, Peter does not yield, "this lavish anarchy won't hurt him. He can survive, even steal from it, and fashion a new song he can't yet make out" (133).

The novel recognizes the merit of pastiche as an influential artistic progression after modernism. However, it holds fast to the conviction that the artist has a measure of agency that allows him to carve his own path. Such a sentiment echoes Powers's depiction of a character that recognizes the importance of influence without utter disavowal of personal agency.

Initially, Els's creative inclinations take him towards a desire to blend between tradition and innovation; a 'centrist' stance that Richard warns him against: "*Both sides are going to beat [you] black and blue*" (Powers 134). Consequently, Peter lets Richard influence his artistic vision insofar as experimentation and breaking the mold are concerned. The initial resistance that Peter exhibits towards Richard's interference quickly fades away, "Els's embarrassment at the hijacking turned into excitement. He expanded the score where Bonner's shambolic theater called for more" (146). Accordingly, Orfeo does not disregard the value of experimental art as long as it is not the only viable path to artistic expression. Els gains the approval of his peers, but in order to create authentic work he has to maintain his authentic artistic vision.

The novel emphasizes the influence of relationships on individual work and identity. For instance, Els's life changes with the arrival of his daughter to the world. Like Lee, in Peter's life 'a father takes part' and tending to his daughter became far more important than his profession. However, when he does return to writing music he realizes that fatherhood has changed his sensibilities: "In the wilds of stay-at-home fatherhood, music changes. His little tricks and signatures soften and expand" (Powers 172). His little daughter becomes a source of inspiration; observing her play with unbridled joy, he makes music that would make her happy. Sara might be her father's sole audience, but she teaches him a valuable lesson about taste. His daughter shifts his perspective on the kind of music this world needs:

“For years, he’s struggled to write something thorny and formidable, as if difficulty alone ensured lasting admiration. Now he sees that what the world really needs is a lullaby simple enough to coax a two-year-old to lay down her frantic adventure each night for another eight hours” (174).

The realization represents the contemporary frustration with postmodern valorization of novelty and difficulty over human connection. In this sense, Orfeo reflects the premise of ‘new sincerity’ that contemporary authors adopted by way valorizing human emotions in their novels, such as love, after they were portrayed ironically by the postmodernists (Kelly 139). Thus, Els disavows rebellion as mere ‘tantrum,’ he figures that the next generation wishes for art that is more human, “he knows that cool will give way to warm, form to feeling” (Powers 174). While he might have earned the respect of his peers by making music that rebelled against the familiar, human connection teaches Els that making art that delights and alleviates pain is a valuable pursuit.

Els has a clear vision, he wants to stand in the middle of inspiring past artists and innovative peers. When his daughter is of school age and he is able to make proper music again with the aim of performance, he recalls telling Richard about his centrist stance on music, that “[t]he method feels like a way forward, a middle path between romantic indulgence and sterile algorithms, between the grip of the past and the cult of progress” (Powers 179). This sentiment also echoes the notions of ‘new sincerity.’ For sincerity after postmodernism carries the possibility of manipulation. The artist still holds the sobering effects of postmodernism; that all claims in his work may be debunked with a deeper reading. However, he still attempts sincerity for the sake of his humanity and that of the reader (Kelly 140). In this vein, Els would reap the benefits of postmodern sensibilities, while possibly eliminating its flaws.

Despite Els's clear vision of the art he wishes to produce, the allure of audience and peer admiration sweeps him far away from it. In this regard, *Orfeo* constantly alludes to the artist's desire for belonging and approval that he loses sight of his authenticity. This kind of desire for acceptance is what enamors Peter with Richard Bonner's new proposal to work together on a film despite the fact that he does not entirely agree with his artistic vision. The kind of music Richard wants to make with Peter sounds like a postmodern text of narratives within narratives, "[h]e wants cycles within cycles... each recorded on separate tracks so the whole piece can materialize and dematerialize at will" (Powers 189). In addition, Richard refuses to make allowance for Els's leaning towards sincerity and beauty, he argues that: "We don't need beauty, Maestro. We need music" (190). Consequently, Els's participation in this project forces him to choose between authenticity and approval.

The kind of music that Peter wants to make does not agree with Richard, but he is sacrificing his values and his responsibility towards his family for the sake of fleeting moments of admiration that Richard and the general public might afford. While Peter drowns in writing music for Richard's film, his wife and daughter try to remind him of what truly matters: their bond as a family. Sara, having been used to her father's attention, does not accept his distraction easily and asks they make music together like they used to, "she came to him and demanded, *Let's make something*" (Powers 198). In addition, Maddy asks him to write a song for her in order to remind him of what he loved about writing music, what she wants is "not art. No occult noises for gatherings of alienated prestige-mongers. A tune that could play on the radio, steeped in desire and mystery. The kind that most people need and love" (199). The song serves as a reminder that if he had written music that was true to his heart's desire, he would have made a successful career out of the endeavor, "[a] dozen such tunes over the course of a career,

and he might even have saved lives” (199). That is to say, Els might have found purpose and success had he followed an authentic vision.

Maddy and Sara’s reminders eventually fail because Peter is too engrossed in Richard’s dream. Peter relinquishes his family unit and authenticity to adopt another person’s dream. At seventy years old, recalling this decision, Peter realizes that he had abandoned what was most precious; his family, for niche musical projects that gave mere illusions of grandeur, “for a chance to make a little noise in this world. A noise that no one needed to hear” (Powers 202). Despite the sacrifices that Els makes for Richard; his family and true artistic vision, Richard still feels disdain towards what he believes is below par indulgent art: “*You, my friend, will never make anything but steamy, creamy, lovely [things]. Know why? You need to be loved too much*” (208). In this sense, Els faces the ridicule that David Foster Wallace anticipates as a reaction towards artists who embrace ‘sincerity’ (193). As such, the novel illustrates the fact that ridicule and disdain towards the sincere after postmodernism might be inevitable. It shows that sacrificing authenticity for the sake of approval is a futile endeavor.

Els’s response to rejection parallels that of Oswald, wherein he isolates himself from others. He decides to leave music altogether to work odd jobs, during which he keeps away from making friends. To make matters worse, his relationship with his daughter deteriorates greatly after the divorce, “[t]hey were supposed to spend ten days together... A long week later, she was gone, and he didn’t see her again for another year” (Powers 209). Consequently, he has abandoned a family for a dream career only to lose both in one fell swoop. Unlike Lee, however, the rejections Peter receives do not lead him to suicide, rather the opposite. On one contemplative night, he realized that what he wants to do is to ““Keep living”” (210). *Orfeo*, as opposed to *Libra*, insists that life offers opportunities to fix what the individual might have broken out of ignorance,

in this sense, “[l]ife was infinitely clear, infinitely redeeming” (210). In this light, both *Orfeo* and *Libra* depict characters that respond to rejection with isolation. Nevertheless, *Orfeo* shows that isolation might lead to authentic search for self rather than self destruction.

The next few years of Peter’s life are spent in hermitage; he moves to a cabin in the woods and starts to make music that is the most true to himself. His isolation allows him to create a connection to his core self, first through physical exercise, “[h]e got stronger. He believed, for a while, in his body” (Powers 211). Later, through the honest music he creates, he starts abandon how “[h]e’d lived all his life under the tyranny of originality. Now he was free to be as derivative as he needed” (214). However, the novel negates the idea of complete independence and autonomy and rather promotes interdependence. Els comes to the realization that relationships are necessary for well being, especially after he finds that he does not have anyone to share the success of this music with. Recalling the years he spent in isolation when he is an old man of 70 years old, Els realizes that he spent his life motivated by a desire to cultivate strong ties to those he loved, with the “[p]eople who loved him, who believed he’d do good things” he muses that “[a]ll [he] ever wanted was to make one slight noise that might delight [them] all” (243). While Oswald believes that ending his isolation requires that he is recognized by the public, Els measures his success by the delight he brings to his small circle of loved ones.

Initially, Els is an example of the ambivalence with which the artists attempts sincerity. However, the novel later shows that sincerity is a valuable endeavor regardless of the consequences. Accordingly, Peter slowly reintegrates society by occupying a music teacher position at a small college and reconnecting with his estranged daughter. As all important bonds, a rekindled relationship with his daughter

proves easier to Els than he thought is possible, he finds that they are “weirdly comfortable, as if they’d gone on chatting away in their own language for all those missing years” (Powers 295). The value of the relationships Peter cultivates is clear in their positive impact on his state of mind. In this regard, the novel describes him as happy because “[h]e had the esteem of his colleagues, the respect of his neighbors, and the occasional affection of his better students” (295). As such, acceptance, connection and love are not threats to authenticity and agency but rather crucial to one’s well-being.

The novel is an attempt at a revival of the human subject in art by appealing to his most sincere desires that of love and connection. Similar to Lee Harvey Oswald, Peter Els’s search for authenticity and agency often mistakenly leads down a path of isolation. The rebellion against musical tradition he aligned himself with at the beginning of his career proves to be a dishonest pursuit, his leanings are more towards the beauty in art that could move souls and create connections. Els’s craving for authenticity and agency, unlike Lee’s, finds its satiation in interdependence, in the recognition he receives from his loved ones.

2.2. Oswald and Els in Historiographic Metafiction: Autonomous or Constrained?

This section contests Linda Hutcheon’s view that postmodern fiction does not annihilate the subject, but merely situates it in its historical context. To do so, it examines the level of agency that the characters exhibit in both *Libra* and *Orfeo*, despite their historical situatedness. The assassination of Kennedy is depicted in *Libra* as the culmination of political, economic and cultural circumstances rather than the determined execution of a person or group. To erase the agency of both Oswald and the plotters of the assassination, the novel represents the assassin as both a devised character and “a quirk of history” (DeLillo 396); a type of individual that already existed before the plotters created him. *Orfeo*, however, represents Hutcheon’s

perspective on historiographic metafiction much more accurately. While the identity of the artist and his art are clearly shaped by the shifts in his culture, the novel allows him a measure of agency. The artist might not be able to alter his historical circumstance, but he is capable of interpreting them differently in his art.

The loss of agency portrayed in *Libra* is linked to the fact that individuals are shaped by their historical context. There is no single individual or group that can exercise agency to effect change in the course of history. This section relies on Linda Hutcheon's concept of 'historiographic metafiction' in order to analyze the characters within *Libra*. The novel represents characters that possess no personal agency but are controlled by the history of which they take part. Nevertheless, Hutcheon insists that this type of postmodern fiction does not completely destroy the subject, but that the authors merely situate the subject in context (159). However, postmodern novels such as DeLillo's *Libra*, that challenge traditional notions of subjectivity, depict subjects that are embedded in history to the complete erosion of their human agency and sense of self.

DeLillo's *Libra* portrays Lee Harvey Oswald as the outcome of his historical moment and such a position confines him to places and actions outside of his control. Read through the lens of historiographic metafiction, the novel challenges the humanist ideal that the individual possesses autonomy and agency that enable him/her to generate meaning independently of his historical context. Hutcheon argues that this type of fiction emphasizes the construction of the subject by the forces of history that he cannot control, as she puts it, he is "subject to history" (172). The novel alternates between Oswald's personal history and the weaving of a plot against the life of President Kennedy starting the spring of 1963, in which Oswald is but a pawn. The master plotter, named Win Everett, plans to put together an assassin as if creating a fictional character.

He devises a life that the chosen assassin would fit into; “Mackey would, find a model for the character Everett was in the process of creating” (DeLillo 66). As such, Oswald’s lack of personal agency is reinforced in the novel; he is just a pawn in a preconceived plot rather than an agent with authentic thought and action.

The novel depicts the surrender of the subject to his historical situation and the circumstance of his particular story. For instance, Lee exhibits the most acceptance of the misfortune that befalls him as a result of being of low economic status in America while in the Marine prison. In the text, the jail cell functions as a symbol for the loss of agency that Lee experiences, when inside “[h]e tried to feel history in the cell. This was history out of George Orwell, the territory of no-choice” (DeLillo 128). In evoking George Orwell’s *1984*, another novel that deals with themes of control and subjugation (Bauman 53), DeLillo self-reflexively points to Lee as mere fictional character that lacks autonomy.

The self reflexivity of the novel further emphasizes Oswald’s position at the mercy of a constructed plot, not only at the level of the narrative but from a higher ontological level; that of the author. Lee feels that the best course of action to the sweeping power of history is to concede to it, he thinks that “[m]aybe what has to happen is that the individual must allow himself to be swept along, must find himself in the stream of no-choice” (DeLillo 128). In deciding to be swept by the direction of history, Oswald relinquishes the idea of the autonomous self; the one with independent thoughts and desires, he comes to the realization that “[h]istory means to merge. The purpose of history is to climb out of your own skin... We live forever in history, outside ego and id” (128). By conjuring classical psychoanalysis, *Libra* implements humanist ideals in order to challenge them from within. Agency, in this sense is no longer a

possibility for the human subject under the control of his historical context. His actions do not stem from his desires and reasoning but from outside control.

The assassination of President Kennedy is a plot that went amiss, which illustrates the fact that no single individual or group are in control of history. In a poignant metaphor, Everett is shown to relish his mastermind plotter identity; as he powers a little toy and provides commentary for its movements by way of entertainment for his daughter, he “described missed tackles and downfield blocks, added the roar of the crowd, became the official who signaled touchdown when the toy spun backwards into a pillow” (DeLillo 268). However, that identity is shaken by the news that Oswald possessed firearms before any of the conspirators contacted him, which “made Everett feel displaced. It produced a sensation of the eeriest panic, gave him a glimpse of the fiction he’d been devising, a fiction living prematurely in the world” (218). In this light, Everett might be read as an author, who is not in possession of the fiction he is producing. The novel does not posit a final answer to whether Oswald was an assassin that the historical moment inevitably created or that he was a fictional profile put together by the real plotters of the assassination. Either way, the subject in fiction and in reality is a construct rather than an autonomous being.

Libra speculates on whether framing Oswald for the assassination of the president was a premeditated action or that he coincidentally fit the type of man the conspirators imagined for the mission. The possibility that Oswald has been framed for the assassination is conjured by Oswald’s paranoia, “[i]t was easy to believe they’d been watching him for years, working things around him, knowing the time would come” (DeLillo 395). In this sense, *Libra* represents the postmodern view of history as a “paranoiac conspiracy-theory” (McHale 91). However, the conspirators are just as fascinated by his existence that coincidentally matches their imagination. In his

apartment, the plotters are surprised to find that while they might have devised a plan, their historical context supplied the assassin, they discover “[e]vidence that Lee Oswald matches the cardboard cutout they’ve been shaping all along. [He’s] a quirk of history. [He’s] a coincidence. They devise a plan, [he fits] it perfectly” (DeLillo 396). Such a passive position is emphasized by the tendency of the plotters to call Oswald “the subject” (218) so as to disregard his humanity. As such, agency is portrayed as an illusion in the novel for Oswald as well as the supposed masterminds of Kennedy’s assassination.

The novel casts doubt on all of Oswald’s actions that were later used during the investigation to indict him of the assassination. The plotters figure that to make Oswald’s involvement believable they have to create an elaborate story for him, one of them insists: ““We want to establish Oswald as a man that people will later remember. Someone involved in suspicious business”” (DeLillo 425). Accordingly, *Libra* postulates that not only is Oswald a work of fiction within the novel but also within government approved narratives and the American collective imagination. This plan does not require Oswald’s cooperation, as he intends to recruit multiple people to replace him: ““We create our own Oswald. A second, a third, a fourth. This plan goes into effect no matter what he does after Mexico City”” (425). The Oswald duplicates reflect the inconsistency of Oswald’s character and question every action attributed to him. The self, in this sense, is not an autonomous, coherent whole but rather multiple and unpredictable.

As the day of the assassination looms closer, Lee becomes haunted by a sense of external control. Outside control is depicted in Oswald’s paranoid search for “a message buried in the text,” (DeLillo 444) of the newspaper or television. The most salient example comes while he sits to watch television one night, Oswald feels suspicious of

the fact that it broadcasted two consecutive movies that are both based on the assassination of the president or other members of the government; Lewis Allen's *Suddenly* and John Huston's *We Were Strangers*. Oswald believes that the movies are messages sent specifically in order to influence him to assassinate Kennedy, "[h]e felt connected to the events on the screen. It was like secret instructions entering the network of signals and broadcast bands" (442). Seemingly, Oswald is aware of his lack of autonomy in the face of external control.

The solidity of Oswald's personhood is challenged in the way he projects his fantasies on the fictional assassins on screen. While watching the assassination films he feels spoken to in the darkness of his house, "[t]he house was dark except for the flickering screen. An old scratchy film that carried his dreams" (DeLillo 442). The literal flickering of the television screen within the text recalls Brian McHale's view on the metaphorical flicker of ontological worlds of postmodernist fiction that serves to question the solidity of any given reality. In this sense, postmodern fiction foregrounds its ontological concerns by juxtaposing two incompatible worlds, in order to destabilize the fictional world and therefore any illusion of a stable reality outside the text (180). Thus, if Oswald's paranoia is to be believed then the messages are transcending the ontological boundary between the world of the movies and his world, destabilizing both his world and his selfhood. Since he sees himself represented in these films, it is not hard to imagine that every time the screen goes blank due to this flicker so does his sense of self. Further lack of agency is emphasized as Oswald realizes he is in a state of passive consumption, "Lee felt he was in the middle of his own movie. They were running this thing just for him. He didn't have to make the picture come and go. It happened on its own in the shaky light" (DeLillo 442). As such, the flicker of the

television screen is a representation of Oswald's lack of a solid identity from which autonomous action may emanate.

In questioning the official narrative that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in the assassination of President Kennedy, *Libra* also questions his capacity for autonomous action. In the novel, the conspirators create the illusion that Oswald is the lone gunman, by which he is deceived as well, one of them "was sure Oswald wanted to be the lone gunman... Easy enough to make him believe it" (DeLillo 462). The plan is to position several shooters for the assassination owing to the fact that Oswald has meager target capacities. So conceived, Oswald is positioned as mere subject to historical inquiries that must be answered, "[h]is role was to provide artifacts of historical interest, a traceable weapon, all the cuttings and hoardings of his Cuban career" (462). Making Oswald into a fiction that is crafted to satiate the public need for a neatly crafted historical narrative, a notion that historiographic metafiction, such as *Libra*, strongly contest (Hutcheon 12).

From the perspective of historiographic metafiction, *Libra* adopts an ironic stance towards the humanist trust in the referential aspect of historical narratives (Hutcheon 56). It depicts the reliance on time, discourse and video documentation in order to make sense of the assassination of President Kennedy as well as the murder of Oswald. For instance, after the shooting, the president's car passes by a group of businessmen that were meant to meet him but are instead bearing witness to his death, "[t]hen they all checked their watches, placing the event in a framework they could agree upon" (DeLillo 483). The impulse to confirm the time in which an event takes place is part of the desire for historicity; to tell a coherent narrative in which events occur sequentially in time. The human dependence on narrative construction is ironically depicted again in the way news reporters try to clear the chaos that the assassination ensues, as they are

“all pushing to extract a word... With a word they could begin to grid the world, make an instant surface that people can see and touch together” (494). The generation of discourse gives the illusion that such a horrible crime could be clearly understood. However, such an endeavor is shown to be in vain as the narrator points to the fact that the truth about the victims and the accused perpetrator’s motives are beyond their reach, because “[t]he news was somewhere else, at Parkland Hospital or on Air Force One, in the mind of the prisoner on the fifth floor” (494). The information in the mind of the prisoner is soon to be lost, as he is killed by Jack Ruby two days after the assassination of Kennedy, forever silenced.

Furthermore, *Libra* questions the reliability of the footage that is filmed of the murder of Oswald, it describes the fact that “[t]he camera doesn’t catch all of it. There seem to be missing frames, lost levels of information” (DeLillo 533). However, in the video “Oswald dies unchanged” (533), as he is never allowed to speak his truth and possibly deny his position as lone gunman. As such, Oswald is permanently subjugated in historical narratives told by others, a figure who cannot tell his own story. His final loss of autonomy is captured in *Libra*’s interpretation of Oswald’s “glance at the camera before he was shot... Something in the look... tells us that he is outside the moment, watching with the rest of us” (535). He has left his body, as he has done so many times before, and became an observer of this particular historical moment a spectator in his life, unable to effect change.

Historiographic metafiction such as DeLillo’s *Libra* depicts individuals struggling to maintain a sense of agency in the face of historical determination. Neither the conspirators nor Oswald have control over the unfolding of the assassination, its inception and its aftermath. Linda Hutcheon would like to believe that such portrayal does not entail the complete destruction of the subject, but what is a self without any

measure of autonomy. Similarly, *Orfeo* can be read through the lens of historiographic metafiction for its depiction of the artist as a product of his historical moment. As oppose to *Libra*, *Orfeo* is more suited for Hutcheon's view of historiographic metafiction as it situates the subject without his complete erasure. Thus, the ensuing analysis explores the fact that the artist may be shaped by his historical context but can still maintain the agency required to create authentic art. Els and other artists are shown to acknowledge the impact of cultural shifts on their art, such as the assassination of Kennedy, but refuse to abandon their human need for agency and authenticity.

Richard Powers uses music in order to draw parallel between the historical development of music and that of the novel. In addition, *Orfeo* portrays the effects of the historical situatedness of art on the artist, the musician in this case. In the novel, Els contemplates the art that is created at a moment of great historical and cultural shifts. Considering the fact that he was born in the 1940s, his artistic career coincided with a time where modernist artistic innovations are supposedly exhausted, he likens them to a fast paced vehicle, as such "[t]he accelerating vehicle would one day have to hit the wall, and it was Els's luck to be alive at the moment of smash-up" (Powers 31). Such a view of modernism forcibly shapes Els's artistic identity towards postmodern sensibilities. However, *Orfeo* attempts to move beyond the notion that art is only valuable if it is deemed innovative.

The novel invokes and contests John Barth's conception of postmodern literature, which argues that postmodern authors should strive for innovation through the subversion and transformation of the exhausted or "used-up" techniques of modernism (Barth 64). For instance, Els regards the beauty of bird song as far more resonant than the music that insists on transgressing the established conventions of art, as he laments the fact that "[m]uch of twentieth century music had been lost to the idea that the

diatonic scale was arbitrary and exhausted... Now this feathered thing sat up in the branches, singing its triads and making a fool of him” (75). In this sense, the novel maintains that constant reach for innovation in art is foolish. Both modernist and postmodernist preoccupation with the new misses the timeless attempt of creating beauty, such as the kind found in nature.

In *Orfeo*, the assassination of President Kennedy is depicted as a pivotal moment in American culture. For instance, Els struggles to accept the general consensus of the 1960s on the constant divergence from the old for the sake of the new in the arts, such that “[music] was about learning what to disown and when to disown it” (Powers 88). However, receiving the news of the president’s death, Els realizes that the art he creates now is of paramount importance to a society that is in need of art that reflects its chaos and confusion. The assassination seems to tell him and his fellow student artists to “[m]ake what you want, now. The place is up for grabs” (89). In an article titled “*American Blood*,” Don DeLillo believes that the assassination of Kennedy “unraveled the sense of a coherent reality” which is mirrored by the literature produced henceforth; “the century’s “emptiest” literature, the study of what is uncertain and unresolved in our lives.” Similarly, a shift in Peter’s values occurs; from a longing for beauty to a joining of the chaos. His music changes to accommodate the artistic sensibilities of his cultural and historical context; a new piece starts “studious” and “reverent,” but “[t]he lines insisted on more room, more play, more heat and light. The thing turned demonic” (Powers 89). The ‘heat and light’ that infuses Peter’s piece of music is similar to the heat and light with which DeLillo describes the assassination of President Kennedy. In fact, the phrase is repeated several times in reference to the assassination within *Libra* (DeLillo 26, 67, 299). Richard Powers, in this sense, is influenced by literature written in response to the assassination; similarly, his character represents artists that were

changed by the event. As such, the intertextual relationship between *Orfeo* and *Libra* emphasizes the transformative impact the assassination of the president had on art at the time, be it music or literature.

While Els finally sees merit in following his peers in their artistic innovations, he still wishes to celebrate traditional conventions. At the time, the innovative music of the 1960s aimed for the disorientation of audience. However, Els refuses to completely disown tradition, but tries to find a compromised position between past influences and present transformations of art, “[w]eek after week, Els tried to revive the once audacious inventions of the past and make them dangerous again” (Powers 92). The struggle between tradition and innovation within the narrative is a theme paralleled by *Orfeo* as a text that belongs to a historical context that is characterized by a shift from postmodern to contemporary views on art. The position of mature revival that Els occupies, as oppose to naïve nostalgia, is similar to the one that Powers holds in the novel. *Orfeo* certainly disorients the reader in its use of postmodern techniques such as narrative fragmentation and the blend between high and low culture. However, Powers aims to revive quaint concepts such as the self, particularly that of the artist as well as the importance of art in creating beauty and appealing to people’s sentiments.

The novel engages with themes of tradition and innovation by contrasting two contemporary composers with two diverging paths. The first is John Cage, whose music conjures an image of destruction for Els, in the music he listens “[to] the explosion of [his] own quaint and laughable ambitions. To a deafening freedom” (Powers 129). The second composer is George Rochberg, who returned to classical music after the death of his son, the novel describes him as “a serious composer surrendering, turning his back on the last hundred years, and sinking into prettiness” (171). Rochberg apparently returned to more traditional influences such as Beethoven and Mahler as they allowed

him to express his grieve; “[n]ow the archaic tonality makes perfect sense” (171). The juxtaposition of the two composers reflects the notion that the freedom of innovation might rob the composer as well as the listener of the healing power of music. As such representing Peter Els as well as Richard Powers’s unwillingness to espouse the view that art must only depict “awareness and raw phenomena” (161), and rather that it recognizes human vulnerability and provides it with solace.

Orfeo self-consciously portrays the complicated relationship between historiography and fiction at the level of its plot. The novel reflects the fact that history is an interpretation of the past rather than a direct presentation of its events, be that in historical records or in their fictionalized versions (Munslow 07). To illustrate, the novel includes the different interpretations of the same historical event within art. Els and his friend Richard collaborate on writing an opera based on real historical events. Peter chooses the Münster Rebellion that occurred in 1534 as historical material for the opera. The rebellion was organized by a group of Anabaptists, a Protestant Christian group, who wanted to overthrow the government in the Catholic city of Münster in Germany, only to have their city fall under a year-long siege and their mission fail. While writing the opera, Els realizes that the event has already been fictionalized in an opera by Meyerbeer, called *Le Prophète*. However, Richard lays his friend’s worries to rest: “*Of course it’s a rip-off!... Everyone who’s ever made anything is ripping off somebody, living or dead*” (Powers 263). That is to say, history and its interpretation in art are not exclusive property of any particular individual, but different people can have diverse perspectives on the same past event.

Orfeo maintains the idea that history is the product of interpretation in the opera Els composes of the Münster Rebellion. Els ironically depicts John of Leiden; self proclaimed prophet and the second leader of the rebellion, as a playwright. The irony

lies in the fact that while John has the appearance of a competent leader, he is merely reenacting his childhood fantasies, “[h]e has wasted years writing, producing, and performing plays, acting the hero in his innermost fantasies. And now fate gives him an entire city as a stage on which to turn that fantasy real” (Powers 265). In this manner, the novel has the effect of a Russian Doll, each one uncovering a new narrative with a different writer; John spinning tales of salvation to deceive his people, Els weaving a historically inaccurate fictional narrative and Richard Powers writer of *Orfeo*, on a higher ontological level master of the fictional world at hand. Each author and narrative upholds the notion that history is a human construct in the interpretation of historical or fictional reports.

The novel portrays two similar historical events in order to reflect the fact that the artist represents the past through the lens of the present. In his book, *The Future of History*, Alun Munslow says that the historian abandons mimesis when he realizes that the history he writes is an expression of his subjective and emotional interpretations. In the novel, Els fits the profile of Munslow’s artist-historian, with an emphasis on aesthetic interpretation born from his present historical moment (Munslow 10). He combines facts and fiction in his depiction of the Münster Rebellion. Later, however, his fiction becomes a prediction of the fate of another religious sect. In 1993, a religious group called Branch Davidians falls under siege at the hands of the FBI. The incident is known as the Waco Siege and it parallels the Münster rebellion in that the Branch Davidians share the Anabaptists’ beliefs, practices and religious persecution. Nevertheless, while the Münster Rebellion ends in the capture and execution of its leaders, in Els’s opera the siege ends in a fire that kills a great number of the religious group. Els’s fictional ending becomes reality for the Branch Davidians that were caught in a fire that lead to many human casualties, the play becomes: “*Art predicting life, with*

two weeks to showtime!” (Powers 266). As such, from the vintage point of his historical context Els was able to provide an interpretation of a past event. Through the character of the artist, *Orfeo* represents the fact that the interpretation of a historical event may serve as commentary on current and future incidents.

Orfeo, like *Libra*, questions the validity of official government reports in the event of the Waco Siege. Concerning the unfortunate end of the siege, the FBI and the U.S military deny igniting the fire and rather blame it on the religious group within the compound. While critics believe that flammable tear gas and gunfire from these government officials is what caused the fire (Lynch 01). Els’s view of the event leans towards the latter possibility. His opera is called *The Fowler’s Snare*, which suggests that the besieged people were trapped and murdered on purpose where government officials “offer the citizens safe passage for surrender, then slaughter them the moment they lay down their arms” (Powers 278). Unlike *Libra*, however, *Orfeo* offers more than a metafictional questioning of a historical event. The novel depicts a character who is able to challenge a historical narrative as well as create change in his environment. For example, Els realizes that any profit the opera makes would be a capitalization on the tragedy and suffering of the people that died in the siege. He decides not to allow the opera to be performed again after its first time, under the scorn of his friend: “Art, Richard proclaimed, *didn’t take moral stands. All opera did was sing*” (292). The moral duty that Els exhibits is towards fellow human beings rather than a preoccupation with aesthetics. While in *Libra* all the characters are at the mercy of a historical narrative they cannot alter; in *Orfeo*, Els is able to question such narratives as well as exercise agency through his art.

The cultural pressure exerted upon artists to fit certain accepted molds is explored once more in the novel when Els recalls the work of Russian composer Dmitri

Shostakovich. An article that is allegedly written by Stalin and published in a Soviet newspaper criticizes one of Shostakovich's most successful operas, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. The novel quotes the article's condemnation of the opera for its turning away from populist music toward esoteric formalism, as it affirms: "Here is music turned deliberately inside out in order that nothing will be reminiscent of classical opera" (Powers 268). Out of fear, Shostakovich composes *The Fifth* to appease the dictatorship; a symphony that appeals to popular taste in technique but still evokes emotions of despair at the hands of the oppressive regime. Els contemplates the fact that the music is "simple and populist, just as Stalin commanded, and in a language whose anguish everyone recognized" (271). The piece may have conformed to Stalin's wish stylistically, but was still able to represent communal pain. Hence, Els does not agree with the view that Shostakovich conformed to the demand of the oppressive culture in order to save his life, rather "[t]hat's how Western listeners had heard the march" (271). On the contrary, he advances the idea that the artist is able to find a creative loophole through which he could exercise his agency while still using conventional tools.

The story of Dmitri Shostakovich illustrates *Orfeo's* perspective on the historical situatedness of the artist. The novel seems to posit that although the artist is influenced by his historical context, he still possesses a measure of agency that allows him to create art that reflects an authentic vision. For instance, as an older professor of music theory in college, enough time has passed since the artistic revolution of the 1960s that Els is completely demystified with its aesthetic sensibilities. He tells a young student that the period was not as glorious as she might imagine: "*We did some silly things. We thought people could learn to love anything... We had invention for every need... Then we woke up*" (Powers 306). However, Els's view of 20th century music is not of complete disdain. Despite the fact that he calls it a "failed revolution," he does not wish to

disregard the musical innovations of the century: “No: Strangeness was your voluntary and your ardent art” (Powers 344). Equally, he stresses the value of creating art that moves beyond postmodern sensibilities and acknowledges the contemporary inclination towards heartfelt creations, “these love songs, the autumnal harmonies hurting your chest? What to call it? A repudiation. A return. A hedge. A sellout. A deathbed conversion. A broadening. A diminishment... Call it nothing, then, or call it music” (344). In this sense, Els is much more concerned with creating art that is heartfelt and genuine than with following cultural trends.

Whether Els’s ‘centrist’ path between tradition and innovation will be received as a broadening or a diminishment seems less important than authentic self expression. In depicting an artist who chooses to carve his own way despite the cultural influences of the zeitgeist, *Orfeo* moves beyond the postmodern portrayal of the subject. While the novel recognizes that the protagonist is largely shaped by his historical context, it does not completely dismiss his agency. Therefore, through Els the novel upholds a ‘centrist’ view of subjectivity, as both determined and self determining.

Both *Libra* and *Orfeo* can be read as historiographic metafiction, in their self-conscious incorporation of historical material within their narratives and their depiction of characters that are subject to their stories and histories. However, *Orfeo* is set apart from the determinism of history within *Libra*. While the fate of Oswald, the president and the conspirators is sealed in ways that are out of their control, *Orfeo* acknowledges Els’s historical situatedness without completely depriving him of agency. In fact, by the end of the novel, Els’s fate is relegated to the background in order to foreground an artistic philosophy that might shape the views of the reader and the culture as a whole.

2.3. History in and Beyond its Documents: Inscribed Subjectivity in *Libra* and *Orfeo*

Historical documents cannot impart an unbiased history, given the fact that the historian collects and interprets these documents based on a specific agenda. Accordingly, this section explores the role of documents in arresting individual agency and authenticity within specific historical narratives. The case of the Kennedy assassination in *Libra* is an example of curated documents which maintain the narrative that Oswald is the lone gunman in the case. *Orfeo*, however, manages to portray the personal interpretation of documents despite external control. In both novels, documentations is shown to be the result of interpretation; yet, *Orfeo* relinquishes the pretense that these documents represent facts and rather focuses on the artistic interpretations of events.

Historiographic metafiction challenges the notion that we can straightforwardly know the past through its documents. It argues that historical documents only provide fragments of the past that then require the interpretation of the historian into a presumably factitious narrative (Hutcheon 122). A central theme in *Libra* is questioning the reliability of documents; such as photographs, diaries and official reports, in telling the unbiased history of events and people. This section focuses on the documents that tried and failed to define Oswald as a knowable and coherent subject with a clear motive. The section highlights the fact that documents are a barrier to agency and authenticity rather than a path towards them, as previously believed in traditional historiography.

As historiographic metafiction, *Libra* challenges the idea that there exists an objective and neutral historiography. It does so by emphasizing the fact that documents are not randomly chosen by the historian in the construction of his narrative, but they

conveniently serve him/her to uphold a specific perspective (Hutcheon 122). One of the most prominent documents in the investigation of the assassination of President Kennedy is The Warren Commission. The Commission determined that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone gunman in the assassination and overruled the possibility of a conspiracy against the life of the president (Epstein 74). *Libra* challenges the ‘lone gunman’ narrative by questioning the authenticity of several documents that the Commission provides as proof of the accuracy of its conclusion. The novel shows that the information provided by the Commission as ‘facts’ are interpretations. This idea is illustrated by the way a CIA agent speaks of how ‘facts’ become “intelligence”: ““A fact is innocent until someone wants it. Then it becomes intelligence... George gives us material that we promptly analyze and disseminate to other agencies”” (DeLillo 298). In this sense, information is not discovered but chosen, interpreted and propagated by agencies such as the CIA and documents like The Warren Commission. Intelligence, thus, results from the interpretation of events, rather than from the discovery of facts.

Libra insists that no document is able to provide a direct account of a past event. To do so, it portrays the subject’s failed attempt to straightforwardly convey meaning through writing. For instance, the Warren Commission included some documents presumably written by Lee Harvey Oswald. Among these, Oswald’s diary entries, that he titled the ‘Historic Diary.’ As its title suggests, the diary was an attempt to document history from a personal perspective, wherein he described his experience living in the USSR. Lee is aware that documentation bestows meaning and grants permanence to past events despite their remoteness, “[i]t validated the experience, as the writing of any history brings a persuasion and form to events” (DeLillo 256). Nevertheless, Oswald is unable to successfully communicate his thoughts in the diary, which might have been

caused by dyslexia (Thompson 90). Therefore, *Libra* uses the diary to depict the difficulty of documenting both history and subjective thought.

Oswald's possible dyslexia allows DeLillo to explore the notion that the subject does not have total command over language as a communication tool. As his dyslexia might have prevented him from finding the proper words, and even the spelling, for what he wishes to say, "[h]e could not clearly see the picture that is called a word. A word is also a picture of a word. He saw spaces, incomplete features, and tried to guess at the rest" (DeLillo 256). This is not merely the result of dyslexia but it is the effect of *différance* characteristic of language (Derrida 29). The lack of command over language poses a hindrance to Lee's record of history and accentuates his lack of autonomy and self-possession, "[t]hings slipped through his perceptions... In every direction he came up against his own incompleteness. Cramped, fumbling, deficient" (DeLillo 257). The subject, in this light, is not the autonomous communicator of knowledge, be it historical or personal. To the contrary, he is at the mercy of language that is an insufficient tool to impart clear and direct meaning. Thus, making the mission of anyone who turned to the Historic Diary for "clues to the heart and mind of the man who wrote it" (257) impossible to accomplish. DeLillo depicts this view within *Libra* in order to contest the possibility of ever reaching a full understanding of the assassination of the president or a complete history of the life of his assassin.

The real Lee Harvey Oswald is only known to the public through documents that were collected about him after his death, which corroborated the predetermined 'fact' that he assassinated the president. One such document is the picture that Oswald's wife supposedly took of him carrying a rifle that looks similar to the assassination weapon along with a Marxist newspaper, in it, his shadow is "trailing to the wooden gate and his thin smile carried forward by light and time into the frame of official memory" (DeLillo

335). The picture became one of the damning evidence against Oswald, despite the fact that its authenticity has been questioned, as many believe it was digitally altered (Farid 1731). Although the novel does not mention the real Oswald's denial of the legitimacy of the photograph in his testimony or the theories that analyze it for traces of tampering, it ironically points to the difficulty of using a still photograph as proof of Oswald's involvement in the assassination. In an ironic tone, a single photograph is described as a gateway to the truth about a possible assassin: ““It's the kind of picture a person looks at and... maybe he sees the truth about someone”” (DeLillo 348). Regarding the picture, a character calls Oswald “the poseur” (349), the double meaning of the word refers to his posture in the photo as well as his position as a patsy for the real assassins of President Kennedy. Thus, *Libra* questions the legitimacy of the photograph as proof that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in the assassination of Kennedy.

The novel destroys the illusion of a coherent identity by showing that it can be created from unrelated and inauthentic documents. Oswald is a character that is assembled from documents that he and others created. Those who plan to assassinate the president craft an assassin from documents that can be traced by police after a “team of shooters” has done the job. Everett, master plotter of the assassination within *Libra* lays out his plan thus: ““We do the whole thing with paper... We script a person or persons out of ordinary pocket litter”” (DeLillo 41). In addition, the documents that Oswald fabricates are not an indication of his autonomy. Rather, they reflect a life that is already devised by the people who plotted the assassination, “he continued to fit the outline that Everett had devised six months earlier. There were the homemade documents, the socialist literature, the weapons and false names” (364). As Everett is “constructing the illustrated history of his subject” out of fake documents, Oswald is found to have already done the same, “[h]e had variations of names. He had forged

documents... Oswald had his own copying method, his own implements of forgery” (220). Thus, Oswald was creating documents to forge an incoherent and discontinuous identity alongside the creations of the conspirators.

The contrived documents support the official narrative that Oswald acted alone in the assassination of the president. They are meant to show his socialist leanings and support for Cuba as a motive for his crime. Therefore, the authenticity of these documents is questioned in the novel. While in the process of crafting them, Oswald is creating a life history in which he attributes more value to the paper evidence he gathers than to the authenticity of his experience. For instance, during his work with the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, an activist group that supported the Cuban revolution against the United States, Oswald valorizes the documents he produces more than the actual support he shows for the country. He believes that the documents are important insofar as he is able to use them as proof that he sympathizes with the Cuban cause, he believes that “[w]hen the time came he would be able to present Cuban officials with documentary proof that he was a friend of the revolution” (DeLillo 376). Furthermore, he realizes that he does not need the support of the Committee as he is able to produce official-seeming documents on his own, “[a]ll he had to do was stamp the committee’s initials on a handbill or piece of literature. Stamp some numbers and letters. This makes it true” (376). *Libra*, as such, reflects how easy it is to create documents that seem to have official legitimacy and use them to corroborate a particular narrative.

In challenging the legitimacy of official documents, *Libra* casts doubt on the conception of identity as solid and coherent. In the novel, the assassin is a figment of Everett’s imagination that he works to materialize in documents, such as “[a]n address book with ambiguous leads. Photographs expertly altered (or crudely altered)... It would all require a massive decipherment, a conversion to plain text” (DeLillo 102).

The variety and ambiguity of these texts contribute to the obscurity of Oswald's character. The self is replaced by fabricated documents and texts; real identity displaced for a false and textualized one. Moreover, the instruments that Everett uses to construct the assassin are not only those of documentation but also those used in children's arts and crafts: "glues and pastes, a soft eraser, a travel iron. He felt marvelously alert, sure of himself, putting together a man with scissors and tape" (180). Everett produces a miniature caricature of a person that lays bare the fictitiousness of Oswald within the ontological realm of the novel and outside it. The symbolism of a caricature becomes Oswald well; whether as a fictional character within *Libra* where he is mere puppet in a larger plot or in real life where his tracked actions seamlessly and conveniently fit in the lone gunman narrative of the Warren Commission.

DeLillo self-consciously embeds the story of a man called, Nicholas Branch, a retired CIA agent charged with writing 'a secret history' of the assassination of Kennedy. Branch can be read as a historian as well as the write of the fictional world in *Libra* (Herren 49). For, the documents he has collected for fifteen years serve as source material not of an unbiased history but his personal musings as well, as he "sits in the book-filled room, the room of documents, the room of theories and dreams" (DeLillo 25). Branch is aware that the documents he is provided with to write such "secret history" (26) cannot be neutral. These documents are sent by the CIA via a curator, whose speed and firmness of response is too convenient for a historical event that is as ambiguous as that of the assassination of the president; "an area of research marked by ambiguity and error, by political bias, systematic fantasy" (25). In the ambiguity, Branch decides to create a fiction of the data he is provided with instead of a historical narrative. And so begins *Libra* from a date that Branch enters into a computer "April 17, 1963" (26) the same date in the title of the second chapter of the novel in which he

imagines that the assassination was the result of a conspiracy. In the chapter the narration descends another ontological level where Branch creates the character of Win Everett; master plotter of the crime against the president. As such, the novel criticizes historiography's claim to truth, in the loop of narrative levels in which the truth of the event is lost to its traces, to its documents that craft narratives and identities from thin air.

Libra questions the official recorded history, specifically that of the Warren Commission, by creating a parallel between historiography and fiction. According to Elisabeth Wessling in her book *Writing History as Prophet*, Postmodern fiction blurs the line between fiction and historiography in order to foreground the notion that the subjective input of the author distorts historical events (Wessling 120). For instance, Branch likens the Warren Commission to a Joycean novel for its length and excessive attention to detail. The inclusion of every detail of Oswald's life in the Commission, including that of the texture of his hair, further foregrounds his fictitious aspect within historical records. Branch expresses the obsessive attitude of the American culture with Oswald and their need to dissect every document, even if fabricated, in order to solve the riddle of the assassination, "[i]t is vital to his sense of responsible obsession that everything in his room warrants careful study" (DeLillo 222). In addition, Lee at one point reads H.G Wells's *The Outline of History* (324), a non-fiction book written by a fiction author, the subtitle of which is '*The Whole History of Man.*' The book is an inscription of human history that parallels the history and fiction that many historians and authors attempted to write about Oswald, including *Libra*. Moreover, the revisions and the additional volumes by different authors that followed the initial publication of Wells's book are similar to the constant publications that are in search for clarity surrounding the life of Oswald and his crime. As such, *Libra* compares historiography

to fiction in order to question the authority of any and all textual representations of history.

The documents that Branch analyzes carry a lot of contradictions, the biggest discrepancy of all is Oswald; Branch is unable to pin down who he truly is from all the contradictory reports he consults. The different reports on Oswald, from eyewitnesses and commission exhibits, contribute to the obscurity of his character: “He is solid, frail, thin-lipped, broad-featured, extroverted, shy and bank-clerkish, all, with the columned neck of a fullback. He looks like everybody” (DeLillo 360). Branch’s inability to paint an indisputable picture of Oswald from these accounts prevents readers from recognizing him as a solid, knowable subject. Consequently, Branch believes that his inability to understand Oswald is an indication that the world will elude him, including history. Branch is confused due to “[t]he Oswald shadings, the multiple images, the split perceptions... He concedes everything. He questions everything” including the ability “to see things as they are, recall them clearly, be able to say what happened” (360). The notion that one can exercise agency to know oneself and the world, the novel concludes, is but mere illusion.

DeLillo criticizes the notion that documents can transmit reliable information about historical events and personages. The character of Branch within *Libra* experiences the difficulty of weeding through the myriad of papers on Oswald and his assassination of the president in search of a coherent narrative of identity and event. In addition, when Oswald attempts to document a personal history, he is either unable to stitch a coherent text or succumbs to creating falsehoods. Similarly, *Orfeo* does not discard the idea that documents contain highly curated pieces of information that attempt to reconstruct historical events. However, Richard Powers endeavors to grant his characters a level of autonomy with regards to their opinions and actions vis-à-vis

historical documents. Accordingly, the following analysis looks at the dialectical relationship that *Orfeo* achieves between the little control one has over documents of public and personal history and the agency that the subject might be able to exercise. The documents in the novel are either discarded, regarded with a different perspective or molded into art.

Peter Els is no historian, but his fascination with the history of music, the particular stories that gave birth to certain pieces, makes him a historian-like character. Similar to Branch, the only access he has to the past is its documents; its texts. For instance, one such story he is interested in is that of Mahler's song cycle, called *Kindertotenlieder*. The composer was captivated by a collection of poems by Friedrich Rückert, centering on his grief for the death of his two young children. The music that Mahler composed for the poems foretold the death of his daughter and later his own, at only fifty years old. *Orfeo* focuses on the theme of death insofar as it pertains to the death of nineteenth century artistic conventions that Mahler's songs, Els's music and Richard Powers's novel wish to reverse, as Els listens to "the bare opening notes, [he] makes out the sounds of a death foretold. The death of a child he spent his life trying to revive" (Powers 35). The revival, in the novel, seeks to blend between traditional conventions of art and innovation, as *Kindertotenlieder* straddles the boundary between the nineteenth and twentieth century art forms, "[t]he orchestration, the nostalgic harmonies: everything wrapped in the familiar late nineteenth century, but laced with the coming fever dream" (35). The story of *Kindertotenlieder* represents hope after loss in the novel; the hope to revive tradition from a place of knowledge and maturity.

Orfeo strikes a balance between the cultural documents that insist on particular narrative and the individual desire to hold on to the illusion of independent self fashioning. For instance, everything written about the *Kindertotenlieder* insists that the

songs reflect despair, while Els hears hope in their final notes. Unlike Branch in *Libra*, who surrenders under the weight of confusing documentation and relinquishes the possibility of reaching a solid perspective, Els develops an opinion that contradicts the documents he reads. Similar to the way in which the contemporary novel refuses to accept the death of the subject, Els finds the possibility of revival in the songs, he believes that “the whole ensemble holds out the hope that death itself may be a brilliant light” (Powers 36). In the novel, Els’s character experiences this revival in the freedom that the Kindertotenlieder inspires, he “can still make out, in the songs’ recesses, the germ of a freedom that isn’t done with him” (37). Thus, the subject in *Orfeo* can exercise a measure of freedom in the face of a narrative that is perpetuated in documents. An instance of autonomy comes in Els’s interpretation of the gut wrenching cheerfulness at the end of the songs, that he calls a “musicbox lullaby,” despite all he has read to the contrary, as the “[y]ears passed, the articles piled up, and at last Els reached the one possible conclusion: music said only what the ear could bear to hear” (39). Therefore, Els refuses to accept the assertions of these documents and rather holds fast to his convictions.

Unlike *Libra*, *Orfeo* shows that history contains stories of agency besides those of control. For instance, a threat to Peter Els’s agency comes as a result of a government suspicion concerning his manipulation of DNA in a personal lab. To escape arrest, Els hides in his usual classroom teaching twentieth century music at a senior home. His subject matter is a history of the most note-worthy changes in artistic expression of the 20th century. The topic of this particular class is Olivier Messiaen’s Quartet for the End of Time which he composed as a French prisoner of war at the hands of Nazi Germany. The piece is analogous to Els’s figurative, and now literal, desire for freedom, as the novel quotes Messiaen describing its composition as his escape: “*What I gained most of*

all from it was that, among three hundred thousand prisoners, I was perhaps the only one who wasn't a prisoner" (Powers 115). As such, Els turns to history for examples of asserted agency despite the circumstances.

Where Oswald creates a fraudulent history out of counterfeit documents, Els finds ways to use the history of music as restorative of his personal autonomy. In telling the story of the Quartet for the End of Time, Els's agency is reflected in his ability to dispense with documentation, as he could tell the story "from memory, with his notes sealed up in a Ziploc bag on their way to a government crime lab in Philly" (Powers 116). While the authorities might be in possession of his documents, he is still able to integrate the values the story imparts into a freely crafted and personal perspective. In addition, Els feels disappointment with a student's preoccupation with documentation, as her note taking extends from the length of the lecture to the music. He wishes she would listen to the music, wherein lies her freedom: "This is it: nothing else to hear but these blocks of purple rage, this icy drunkenness. But a moment more, and Keane's pen began again" (118). Unlike Els, Keane is unable to break free from the prison of documentation.

Peter lives in the twenty first century, the age of the internet, where the documented data he needs access to is only a click away and in abundance. After the authorities confiscate the equipment of his home laboratory, he goes on an internet search that might ease his worries about a possible indictment. The search overwhelms him with data that leads him from investigations of human engineered plagues to natural disasters, "Els scanned down the long columns of related videos... Overnight, this carousel of catastrophe" (Powers 50). Absurdly, amongst these disasters Els comes across a popular music video that he feels is mocking of human suffering, "a prodigious automated sorting algorithm had inserted the bleakest of errors. Or maybe a human

curator planted the link, a sadistic joke on the theme of disaster” (51; emphasis added). The human curator that Els imagines creates another intertextual link between *Orfeo* and *Libra*. Such that the video curator is reminiscent of the fiction about Oswald that Branch’s “curator” (DeLillo 529) sends amongst other legitimate documents. In this sense, the two novels share a perspective on the notion that the individual does not possess authority over the propagated documents of a particular historical narrative.

Similar to Oswald, Els finds that the authorities might define and persecute him based on the documents he has consumed or created. The novel uses the internet as an example of the loss of identity under the weight of data (Gergen xi). As Els browses the internet, with all its abundance and absurdity, he experiences a momentary loss of self, “[t]he Web teemed with ten thousand parodies, reactions, tributes... He looked up. It was past dinnertime, and he was starving” (Powers 51). A loss that is magnified by the thought that all his books, photographs and music compositions, even this internet search, might become incriminating evidence in the hands of the authorities, “an investigator could find every incriminating title that Peter Els had read over the last ten years” (85). In so doing, the government would investigate Els as they did Oswald. They would center documents to draw conclusions about Els and his deeds, thereby denying his independent identity.

The paranoia characteristic of the American culture that Timothy Melley discusses in his book *The Empire of Conspiracy* becomes rampant in the country post 9/11. Richard Powers portrays this state of paranoia in *Orfeo* through the panic Els’s amateur biology inspires in the public. The fear stems from an infection that spreads in hospitals near Els’s home-lab. While he considers the possible causes for the infection, he is aware that the paranoia of the time is deep-seated: “Either someone had accidentally contaminated a batch, or America was under siege again. In normal times,

most people could figure the odds. But the times would never be normal again” (Powers 167). To discover more about the plague he has possibly unleashed, Els turns to the internet again; the supplier of a bottomless sea of information in the novel. His fears become reality; like Oswald, Els has people investigating his own paper-trail for damning evidence and telling blatant lies: “The online site where Els bought his custom DNA claimed he’d given them a college lab procurement number” (183). And weaved theories out of documents he left behind, such as books discussing plagues: “Someone had cherry-picked the titles, out of a thousand books in his library, for maximum fear and thrill” (184). As such, the American culture creates people like Oswald and Els if does not find them.

The novel offers art as means to self-discovery and solace in the face of external narratives. For instance, Els’s friend Richard collected articles on multiple cases of conspiracy theories in America including Els’s story, as material for a musical, they include “an article on a blockbuster film about a runaway pandemic, set to be released on September 11... And, of course, several articles about the Biohacker Bach” (Powers 320). Richard intends for them to collaborate on a performance that takes *Libra*’s Nicolas Branch as its subject matter, with a modern spin, “[i]t’s about a squad of CIA analysts—self-styled “vengeful librarians”—who spend their lives combing through several million Web posts a day” (320). The intertextual link between *Libra* and *Orfeo* reflects the cultural preoccupation with the analysis of documentation that is born out of a paranoid sense of eminent danger. Powers unlike DeLillo, however, grants his characters a proactive role in their stories that manifests in creative self-expression rather than a loss of self under an avalanche of documented data.

Similar to Branch and Oswald, Els is overwhelmed with documents that impose a certain view of the world and of himself, especially in the age of the internet. However,

unlike DeLillo's historian-like characters, Peter Els is granted a way with which he can creatively exploit the documents he is presented with.

2.4. "Somebody Will Have to Piece Me Together": *Libra* and *Orfeo* as

Interrogative Texts

This section reads *Libra* and *Orfeo* as interrogative texts that question the dominant ideologies within their cultures. An engagement with such questions results in the distortion of coherent realities and identities. In this vein, *Libra* questions the lone gunman narrative in the assassination of Kennedy but refuses to offer an alternative answer to the case. It fits a postmodern definition of an interrogative text as it posits answers to the questions surrounding the case but then refutes them. It represents and often increases the confusion surrounding the assassination. *Orfeo* depicts a crime just as ambiguous as the assassination of Kennedy, but maintains an encouraging stance towards questioning official narratives. It places value on asking questions even if arriving to the answers is seemingly difficult. In this sense, *Orfeo* differs from *Libra* in its insistence on exercising individual agency by asking questions that challenge the status-quo.

The questioning of a dominant ideology within a given culture in literature often functions to shift the reader from a passive consumer of art to a more active position. In this light, Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodern texts belong in the category of "interrogative texts." However, she advances that while postmodern texts posit questions that reveal inconsistencies within cultural views, they do not expect the reader to find answers. These texts disrupt the notion of a coherent world and subject in the fiction and the real world. In preventing the reader from making coherent sense of the fictional world, these texts foreground the discontinuity of his subjectivity and reality (221). Therefore, what follows analyzes *Libra* as an interrogative text that disrupts

subjectivity and reality within and outside the text. The disruption compromises the agency of the characters and the readers as the answers to their inquiries are obscured.

The novel reflects the confusion of the assassination by including real incidents in its fiction. For instance, it quotes a real conversation that was recorded by a police informer called William Somerset. The tape contains a conversation that occurred in Miami between Somerset and Joseph A. Milteer, an ultra right-wing extremist who hated Kennedy. It reveals that Milteer knew about a conspiracy that is being devised to kill the president mere days before the assassination (Wilkes, Jr. 03). Milteer includes accurate details such as the weapon, the position of the assassin and the manner in which he is captured, he say that: “They will pick somebody up within hours afterwards if anything like that would happen. Just to throw the public off” (DeLillo 541). The novel suggests the involvement of the secret service and the FBI in assassinating the president for not taking all possible precautions to protect him. The Secret Service did not communicate the information in the tape to Dallas officials, where the assassination occurred and “([t]he FBI questioned Milteer superficially after the assassination)” (451). Here, the novel quotes the official FBI report that absolves Milteer from any involvement in a conspiracy against the president (Wilkes, Jr. 13). Despite the clear evidence of the tape, the FBI corroborates Milteer’s denial of participation in the assassination, as it reports: ““Milteer emphatically denies ever making threats to assassinate President Kennedy or participating in any such assassination”” (DeLillo 13). Thus, the novel uses the conversation to raise suspicion over the participation of government officials in the assassination of Kennedy.

A definite answer to the assassination of Kennedy is hard to reach because his politics angered several government bodies. For instance, for people like the former FBI agent Guy Banister, may be motivated by envy towards a man who challenges their

sense of identity: ““He thinks he can make us a different kind of society... We’re not smart enough for him. We’re not mature, energetic, Harvard, world traveler”” (DeLillo 89). In addition, the support that Kennedy shows for the Civil Right Movement and his prevention of further hostilities in Cuba contradicts perspectives within the CIA, the FBI and extremist white Americans. White supremacist America especially frowns upon a white man supporting the African American cause, in this case, “[o]ne thing Guy couldn’t stand about these sit-ins and marches. When the goddamn whites get to singing” (175). In this sense, *Libra* portrays the frustration that Kennedy triggered in many Americans that had lead to the confusion of his assassination.

The novel creates further confusion around the assassination as it refutes an answer it previously posited. Initially, it suggests that the FBI assassinated Kennedy because they assumed he cooperated with Castro. Only to advance that an organization called Alpha 66 assassinated Kennedy because they blamed him for the failed invasion of Cuba in the Bay of Pigs. Accordingly, the plotters believe that ““[s]omeone has to pay for Cuba”” (DeLillo 363). In 1961, president Kennedy approved a plan to support Cuban exiles to invade Cuba and remove Castro from power, only to retreat as the plan proved weak in the face of Castro military force (Dallek 28). Furthermore, there is an association between the CIA and Alpha 66 that further implicates the agency in the assassination of the president, because “Alpha had CIA mentors... The Agency worked up a vision, then got Alpha to make it come true” (DeLillo 364). As such, the novel poses a web of questions concerning the assassination of Kennedy but commits to no certain and final answer.

Often, in postmodern fiction, the multiplicity of voices within the novel breaks the unity of the narrative and therefore eliminates the possibility of reaching a continuous and complete view of history and of the self. In addition, these disturbances at the level

of fictional worlds and identities translate into a discomfort within the reader that shakes his/her own sense of self (Hutcheon 167-69). Such is the case in *Libra*, as the narration of the assassination scene is fragmented to disorient the reader. That is, the narrative jumps back and forth from Oswald, to the other shooters that T-Jay Mackey hires, to eye-witness perspectives, which prevents the reader from assimilating a coherent narrative. For instance, the first shot that hits the president comes from Oswald's firearm, while the sequence of the second and third is told in such a way that the reader cannot discern who killed the president beyond a reasonable doubt. The narrator describes Raymo, one of Mackey's shooters, training his gun on the president's car only to move to an eyewitness's reaction to the sound of the second shot before the reader discovers that it came from Lee's gun: "Raymo eased the gun barrel out over the fence. [...] She heard a sharp noise, like a backfiring car, and realized it was the second noise she'd heard. [...] Okay, he missed the President with the second shot and hit Connally" (DeLillo 475). In this sense, the novel parallels the real investigation of the assassination that contains many inconsistencies when accounting for the number of shooters. In order to prove that there was a single shooter, that Oswald is "the lone gunman," the Warren Commission had to disregard several pieces of evidence and many testimonies (Epstein 119). Thus, the novel recreates the confusion and chaos of the assassination scene in its narrative.

DeLillo does not provide answers surrounding the assassination of the president but rather poses more questions. Oswald misses the president with his second and third shot, but where does the fatal shot come from? He fires a third time but realizes that there is another shooter beside himself and that he has been merely placed to take the fall for the crime, he imagines telling the story, "[p]ointing out the contradictions. Telling how he was tricked into the plot. What is it called, a patsy?" (DeLillo 478). However,

the reader is never explicitly told whether the second shooter, called Raymo, fires the shot that kills the president, he is described as “[h]e held on Kennedy’s head... He got off the shot. The man’s hair stood up. It just rippled and flew” (480). Does the phrase “he got off the shot” refer to the president’s removal from Raymo’s field of vision when he fired his gun or when Oswald fired his for the third time? This question is never answered. The ambiguity transports the reader into the chaos of the scene, as a mixture of images is described: “A girl ran waving toward the limousine. The noise cracked and flattened, washing across the plaza. This wasn’t making sense at all” (475). The eyewitnesses, the narrators as well as the reader cannot make sense of the scene.

In an interview with Don DeLillo, he discusses the disorienting effect of the contradictions surrounding the assassination of JFK and the identity of Oswald. *Libra* reflects DeLillo’s belief that the assassination of the president shattered people’s ability to “trust in a coherent reality. That day in Dallas changed the way we think about the world. Powerful events build their own networks of chaos and ambiguity” (Bailey). Such confusion is experienced by Oswald in the novel, once he flees the scene not even he sounds convinced of his defense story. He is at once unsure of his level of participation in the assassination as well as determined to confuse investigators, “[t]o the best of his knowledge he hit him in the upper back or somewhere in the neck area, nonfatally... Are they sure it was him in that window? It could be different than they think” (DeLillo 486). Moreover, Oswald experiences further fracture of identity in order to escape possible indictment, he wonders: “Do I look like a suspect fleeing? [...] What is my name if I am asked?” (487). In this sense, the assassination results in the disintegration of reality and identity for both the American public as well as Oswald.

The ambiguity and incoherence of identity is represented in the character of Jack Ruby, the man who killed Oswald. Part Two of *Libra* starts with a line from Jack

Ruby's testimony: "Somebody will have to piece me together" (DeLillo 260). Such a statement reflects the obscurity of Ruby and the level of his involvement in the assassination plot against the president. Ruby enters the narrative plot of *Libra* in the same manner that he became part of the assassination plot; without a previously established context. The novel includes his story in parallel to that of the assassination as it first introduces him as a failed business owner. *Libra* hints at Ruby's ambiguous position at the level of both plots, that of the novel as well as the assassination, when he reflects on the sense of insignificance that his failure stirs in him: "This kind of gloom made him feel anonymous. Who was he? Why should anyone care about him?" (418). The novel also mentions Ruby's connection to several government bodies that might have used him to perform the final act of the plot. For example, he might be an informant for the FBI; one of the characters describes him as a "[p]otential criminal informant. You informed a little bit here, a little bit there" (307). In addition, he owed tax money to the IRS that threatened the failure of his business, a weakness that will later be used to blackmail him into murdering Oswald.

DeLillo insists on depicting confusion in *Libra*, including the circumstances of Oswald's murder. Jack is portrayed as a man whose distressed state makes him an easy target for emotional and financial blackmail. The novel posits that the conspirators promised to forgive his debt and that the murder of Oswald will make him a national hero, "[i]n other words this Oswald is an aggravation. He knows some little iffy things. He has some names he's playing around in his mind" (DeLillo 514). The fact that Jack Ruby's way to the murder of Oswald at the police station is not obscured by anyone further corroborates the possibility that he is part of the conspiracy, as he reflects that: "If I get in this easy, it means they want me to do it" (519). However, *Libra* denies such an easily assimilated answer to the assassination. In the final pages of the novel

Nicholas Branch refuses to accept the notion that the assassination of Kennedy has any coherence, that a plan could have been devised and executed to perfection, “[h]e has learned enough... to reach a determination that the conspiracy against the President was a rambling affair that succeeded in the short term due mainly to chance. Deft men and fools, ambivalence and fixed will and what the weather was like” (527). As such, DeLillo rejects the agency that the conspiracy theory affords an individual or a group of people.

Despite the fact that *Libra* questions the lone gunman conclusion of the Warren Commission it does not posit a definite answer for the possibility of a conspiracy against the president. It shows characters who ask questions about their realities and identities and failing to reach the answers. Therefore, disorienting the reader, who can no longer believe in the existence of an indisputable fact that can be reached through the exertion of agency in the search for answers. However, read through Catherine Belsey’s view of “the interrogative text” (qtd. in Hutcheon 220), *Orfeo* encourages the reader to pursue the answers to the questions that it puts forward. The dominant ideology that *Orfeo* interrogates is that of terrorism fear mongering that pervaded American culture after 9/11. It does so through the character of Els, whose level of involvement in crime is unclear. Thus, the following reading explores how the novel suggests that the reader follow his curiosity in order to understand not only the ambiguities of the novel but also that of the world and his place in it.

Orfeo, like *Libra* creates confusion in its depiction of a crime and its perpetrator. The Joint Security Task force questions Peter Els for manipulating the DNA of dangerous bacteria, called ‘*Serratia marcescens*.’ Els insists that he has not been using the bacteria with malicious intent and that his work is just a hobby. Yet, the officer is not convinced and still questions Els’s motives: “*You’re not a biologist?... But you’re*

manipulating the DNA of a toxic organism?” (Powers 46). In a post 9/11 cultural climate, the officers’ paranoia increases as Els mentions the fact that manipulating genetics is less difficult than learning Arabic by way of comparison. In addition, he owns a picture of an old system of musical notation written in Arabic, which is more indicting evidence in the eyes of the officers; the picture has similarities with “the scalloped arches of a Sinan mosque. Each niche was emblazoned in flowing Arabic” (47). In the beginning, the novel does not offer a clear answer to whether Els is mere hobbyist or that the paranoia that the officers feel is justified.

Similar to *Libra*, *Orfeo* blends between fact and fiction, in order to question the validity of any given scenario presented as “truth” in a criminal case. For instance, the novel includes a real case of infections caused by the bacterium ‘*Serratia marcescens*’ in Alabama in March of 2011 (Gupta et al 01). In the novel, the authorities accuse Els of spreading the infection and the novel quotes real statistics released at the time of the infection: “*Nineteen people in hospitals across Alabama have been infected with [his] strain. The CDC says nine people dead*” (Powers 166). After investigation, it was discovered that the infections were the result of a neglect to comply with the norms of sterilization on the part of a pharmacy that supplied the IV drips to the hospital. However, the investigation was limited given the fact that the patients were already suffering an illness which made it difficult to gauge the “degree of contribution of *S. marcescens* infection to case patient outcomes, including death” (Gupta et al 07). As an interrogative text, *Orfeo* encourages the reader to investigate the ambiguous history of the bacterium. When Klaudia, friend of Els, asks him to “*google*” (Powers 167) the infection caused by the bacterium, the novel does not show him doing so which leaves the task to the reader. When done, the research yields that the pathogenicity of *Serratia marcescens* in U.S history is unclear, this makes it difficult to discern the criminality of

its use. For instance, the Navy released the bacterium in San Francisco in 1950 for an experiment that was suspected to have caused several infections and one death, but the government insisted that the experiment did not cause the infections (Balcom 01). This case parallels the ambiguity and the government narrative control of the assassination of Kennedy. The agency here lies in questioning any official narrative that is presented as truth.

The doubt that surrounds *Serratia marcescens* is used by the authorities to induce fear in the public. Despite the fact that the infection is revealed as the result of negligence in the handling of IV bags, the authorities do not eliminate the possibility of malicious conduct at the pharmacy, they are “*advising increased vigilance at similar facilities. Giving the all clear, while asking everyone to stay terrified*” (Powers 221). To illustrate this state of paranoia in the American culture post 9/11, the novel depicts media coverage about the case. Part of said coverage includes a radio interview with two opposing interviewees on each side of the debate on amateur biology. While they contemplate the panic that Els has spread among the public, one of the two interviewees insists that paranoia has become a thorny issue in America after 9/11: “*The nation has been panicked for ten years. And if spreading panic is the measure, every news anchor is a terrorist*” (255). Thus, *Orfeo* uses the theme of paranoia to criticize the fear mongering of the authorities and the media.

While the novel does not offer answers to whether Els is captured in the end, it focuses on the agency that his experiments afford him. Peter’s fate could very well have been the same as Oswald’s, a man accused and murdered for a crime he may not have committed. Peter’s former wife fears such an outcome: “*Peter. They’re going to use you. Make a lesson out of you*” (Powers 288). However, the novel shows that he worked on bacteria in order to inscribe music data into its DNA, in his eyes there is “[n]o

storage medium longer-lasting than life” (317). Els, in this sense, wants a life well lived and he finds that in creativity. In the predictability of chemistry he might have found a medium that provides a middle ground between restriction and freedom, “[h]e’d heard a way that he might redeem, if not the past, then at least his youthful sense of the future. Making things felt strange again, and dangerous. Patterns might yet set him free” (317). The juxtaposition of ‘danger’ and ‘pattern’ within art has been a central theme in *Orfeo*; the novel straddles the line between ambiguity and predictability in order to engage the reader in inquiry. Thus, the novel is not didactic in its approach to the mysteries of the world but rather leaves the reader with a sense of responsibility to understand the world and oneself.

Libra as well as *Orfeo* raise questions that challenge the dominant ideology within their culture. In addition, the questions they put forward threaten the coherence of the personhood of the reader. However, *Libra* leaves its readers with as much questions as it started with, if not more, while *Orfeo* empowers them to seek answers for the mysteries of life and their place in it through artistic expression. Seen as such, the postmodern interrogative text upholds the notion that there are no definite answers to certain questions; while contemporary texts believe in the application of agency to acquire answers, their acquisition or lack thereof notwithstanding, the answer must be in the attempt.

2.5. Attempts of Speaking Truth to Power in *Libra* and *Orfeo*

Giving a truthful account of oneself is impossible given the fact that such an endeavor comes as a response to the address of a powerful entity. When addressed, the individual shapes and changes his account to fit the expectations of those in power. The truth of the self cannot be separated from power dynamics, therefore restricting the agency of the individual. In *Libra*, all the characters tailor their claims to truth based on

the expectations of power or their conceptions of such expectations. Thus, attempts at truth telling continuously fail, are distorted or aborted throughout the novel. However, *Orfeo* maintains that an attempt to articulate the truth as the individual sees it is necessary for his humanity; it allows him to take responsibility for his mistakes and seek redemption. This section compares the different depictions of truth in *Libra* and *Orfeo* and their impact on the agency and authenticity of the individual.

In her book, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler questions whether the individual as social being, subject to powers beyond his control, necessarily deprives him of his agency (85). She links individual agency to the ability to construct and deliver a truthful account of oneself in spite of and in response to power. According to Butler, a desire to understand power stems from being required to give a truthful account of the self. That is to say, what one chooses to divulge is in direct relation to the powerful entity demanding the truth, their expectations and the consequences of granting or withholding the truth (124). Therefore, the power relations of the modern subject prevent him from achieving a rewarding sense of self knowledge. For, while the subject may lay claim to the truth as he believes it to be, he cannot sever his speech from the influences of power, nor can truth help him escape its shackles (130). Thus, the following analysis focuses on the attempts of subjective truth-telling in *Libra* and how they are restrained or completely eroded by power. The erosion of truthful accounts of the self lead to the gradual fragmentation of these characters along with the disappearance of their agency.

In *Renaissance Self Fashioning*, Greenblatt argues that self fashioning occurs in relation to a powerful entity such as the court (09). The first attempt of self-reflexive truth-telling within *Libra* comes from Oswald's mother to an absent judge. An account of Lee's life and struggle is dispersed throughout the novel from the first person

perspective of Marguerite Oswald, which she addresses to a judge, as if in defense of Lee's crime. The judge that she speaks to never actually makes any statement nor is there any description of her being in a courtroom, which makes her continuous reference to someone as "your honor" (DeLillo 21) a symbol of power in the shape of the government as well as the court of public opinion. Marguerite starts by describing the difficulties of Oswald's childhood, such as becoming an orphan and being bullied. She paints an image of Oswald as a child whose father died and left him in the care of a poor mother: "It is Marguerite and Lee ever since. We are a mother and son. It has never been a question of neglect" (21). In a way, she is also telling the story of a mother who refuses to take the blame for a crime she did not commit, and possibly neither did her son. Instead, she points to poverty and a lack of a father figure as contributing factors that put Oswald in a vulnerable position.

Marguerite insists on telling the full story of Lee Harvey Oswald; the truth does not lie in a single event but demands the inspection of a whole history. She plans to write books in which she uncovers the truth of the assassination of JFK, including the life of the assassin: "Your honor, I cannot state the truth of this case with simple yes and no. I have to tell a story" (DeLillo 537). Marguerite advances the suspicion that her son has been selected for the assassination ever since he was a little boy. She suggests that her child was a mere innocent boy, who was chosen for the assassination and made to fit a preconceived narrative, such as the USSR defector: "He used to climb the tops of roofs with binoculars, looking at the stars, and they sent him to Russia on a mission" (539). From Marguerite's perspective, Oswald is the victim of a conspiracy to murder the president and create a narrative in which her son is the lone gunman.

By the end of the novel, despite Marguerite's attempt to articulate the truth, Oswald is as distorted and unclear to her as he is to himself and to the American people:

“Did they really kill him? ... How tall is Lee? What are his scars?” (541). These questions are never answered and what she is left with after his death is his name, “[t]he true and lasting power of his name. It belonged to her now, and to history” (545). The name is detached from its bearer and is attached to a myriad of narratives. As such, the novel represents the complete disintegration of Oswald’s identity, whereby his mother and historical records may assign as many different meanings to his name as they wish.

In moments where Lee is put in a position that demands he tells the truth, he always finds a way to evade or distort it. When he returns from Russia he expects the police to question his motives for leaving, to which he has prepared two different answers that depend on how they approach him. He would plead innocence if they seemed ready to accept that version of events. But if they seemed hostile, he is equally ready for a confrontation, he is ready to “[s]tand up to them, mock them, look right in their squeezed policemen’s eyes and tell them who you are” (DeLillo 260). Thus, the novel suggests that the truth that Lee tells of himself is wholly dependent on the powerful entity addressing him and the consequences of their interaction.

Similarly, when he is apprehended by police after the assassination of the president, he thinks of all the possible versions of the story he could give the authorities, as “[h]e could play it either way. It all depended on what they knew” (DeLillo 495). He contemplates telling interrogators that he is completely innocent. But then considers telling them he has been tricked into participating in a conspiracy against the president; that he is a patsy, “he was only partly guilty, set up to take the blame for the real conspirators” (499). But then, he changes his mind again and figures he could tell them he acted alone, that “he was the lone gunman” (508). This final consideration corroborates the lone gunman narratives of the Warren Commission; that he is a struggling man who supports Cuba and has a Marxist political agenda. However, as

previously discussed in this chapter, none of these possibilities have enough evidence to approve their claim to truthfulness, which foregrounds the difficulty of grasping the truth of a particular event or individual.

In the novel, the truth of the assassination becomes so obscure not even Lee is able to grasp it, so he decides to spend the rest of his life in search for it. In what he calls “the reconstruction” of his crime, Lee intends to analyze evidence not only to understand the assassination of the president, but his position in it as well. He decides that the time he will spend in prison is “[t]ime to grow in self-knowledge, to explore the meaning of what he’s done” (DeLillo 519). Like Marguerite, he wishes to study the assassination and record his findings like a historian in search of the truth, to write books about it, as such, “[h]is life had a single clear subject now, called Lee Harvey Oswald” (520). He has become a mystery even to himself, which he decides to solve. This decision shows Oswald’s desire to exercise a modicum of agency.

Alas, Oswald is never allowed to find or speak his truth. For example, at the police station the chaos is louder than his voice, “[t]he reporters wouldn’t stop shouting. The prisoner tried to answer a question or make a statement but no one could hear him” (DeLillo 499). The narrator calling him the “the prisoner” in this passage further emphasizes his loss of agency inside the police station. He is later killed by Jack Ruby, without a trial or a chance to speak. As he was dying “[a] man spoke close to him, saying if he had anything he wanted to say he was going to have to say it now” (526). However, he is unable to speak and a glance he directs at the camera the moment he is shot puts him among the confused audience wondering what has happened; the truth forever out of reach.

Likewise, Jack Ruby faces the slippery nature of truth after his crime, as he struggles to articulate the motive behind his murder of Oswald. For instance, in his jail cell he writes of the difficulty to speak of his crime after an inconclusive polygraph test: “you are weak in what you want to tell the truth about” (DeLillo 531). Furthermore, Ruby wishes to tell the truth about how he was used in the conspiracy against the president, but like Oswald he is not allowed, “[h]e believes people are distorting his words even as he speaks them” (531). In addition, Ruby wishes to tell the story of his life so that his crime can be understood in the context of his struggle: “Does anyone understand the full measure of his despair... to be fed the message of your nothingness every day for all your days, down and down the years?” (532). As if to say, like Marguerite, the truth of a single action cannot be grasped without full knowledge of one’s history and identity. In order to understand Jack’s actions, the reader has to have access to his history, which the novel maintains is impossible to communicate.

However, as Ruby is in jail awaiting retrial his link to the assassination of the president through his murder of Oswald deprives him of a sense of self that is separate from Oswald; he and the assassin have become one. Similar to Marguerite whose address to power is a judge, Ruby addresses Chief Justice Warren, the head of the investigative commission in the assassination of Kennedy: “You have lost me, Chief Justice Warren... Jack Ruby has stopped being the man who killed the President’s assassin. He is the man who killed the President. Oswald is inside him now” (532). In desperation, Ruby seeks self annihilation by attempting suicide several times before he dies of cancer in jail awaiting for his retrial, the truth dies with him.

The lack of agency that the characters experience in *Libra* is depicted in their inability to find or articulate the truth. The attempt to speak truth to power in the novel is often thwarted; characters fail to grasp and articulate the truth of their actions and

identities. Marguerite, Oswald and Ruby express a desire to know and reveal the truth but those in power either distort or prevent it. While *Orfeo* acknowledges the ways in which power imposes restrictions on one's ability to speak the truth, it allows its protagonist to act with agency and authenticity regardless. Butler advances that giving an account of oneself in response to an outside address constitutes the humanity of the individual, which calls on his sense of responsibility and even if he falter and errs he will be granted forgiveness (163). Such is the case for Els, despite restrictions, he manages to speak to an audience and loved ones, towards whom he feels a sense of responsibility. As such, Richard Powers's *Orfeo* depicts the demand to give a truthful account of oneself within social relations not as a burden but as a chance to take accountability and receive forgiveness.

Orfeo is told from a third person perspective, except for a series of sentences that are scattered across the narrative that are in the first person. Later in the novel, these sentences are revealed to be published on a social media site by Els as an attempt to tell the truth of his actions. Unlike Oswald, Els takes responsibility for his actions and the medium through which he speaks his truth. Through his publications, Els explains that he has indeed manipulated bacteria, but his intentions were not criminal but purely educational, with life and his place in it as subjects of inquiry: "I wanted to remember how life really worked and see if chemistry still wanted something from me" (Powers 15). Moreover, in these posts Els enumerates all the ways in which his actions are not at all unusual nor are they particularly criminal. In addition, he points to the fact that bacterial infection is a part of life: "Life is nothing but mutual infection. And every infecting message changes the message it infects" (91). Such a view stands as a metaphor for the mutual change effected between people and their culture, especially through art. Ultimately, an understanding of the truth behind Els's actions depends on

an understanding of his mission as an artist: ““I heard music in the voices all about me, and tried to notate it . . .” That’s all that I tried to do, as well” (141). His mission is to be changed and effect change through art.

Despite the fact that telling the truth might cost Els his life, his friend encourages him to do so regardless of the consequences. In one instance, Els literally evades death by car accident with his online confession unfinished, instead, “he rises from the dead, pulls out the smartphone, and tweets again... One flick, and a new wave of messages heads out into the world’s largest auditorium” (Powers 336). Els shares the ways in which he made music by manipulating the DNA of bacteria. Thus, he has a chance to speak the truth of his conduct that Oswald is never granted. As previously discussed, the novel depicts the perils of the internet, and how much an online presence aggravates the issue of the fragmentation of identity. However, *Orfeo* acknowledges the liberation the internet can afford the individual to publicize a personal version of the truth. His final message consists of the emotions behind the musical piece he encoded in the DNA of the bacterium, he likens it to “the porous edge between hope and fear” (341). Likewise, *Orfeo* portrays the tension between fear and hope; the fear of losing oneself to modern day power dynamics and the hope that art might offer the individual a space to give voice to an authentic sense of self.

Els’s version of the truth is that his actions have been twisted by the authorities who are paranoid and afraid of another terrorist attack in America, the real forgiveness he seeks is from his loved ones. At the end of his escape journey, Els first apologizes to his former wife for leaving her and their daughter. As it follows, Els is granted his wish of forgiveness that redeems his past mistakes: “*It was a good piece, Peter. The two of us. I’d sing it again... We’re good, she said. Really.* Then she opened the passenger door and flooded the little remade past with light” (Powers 291). Next, it is his daughter

he apologizes to by playing her a song on the piano like he did when she was a child, while playing he feels redeemed: “Your fingers say: Love, let’s not give sadness any more ground... After a few stumbles, it comes back. Resurrected” (349). The theme of resurrection depicted again at the end of the novel, here to reflect a return of the sincerity that recognizes that relationships can be seen as more than inhibitions and demands but are at the crux of one’s humanity.

In “Beyond Postmodernism: Towards an Aesthetic of Trust,” Ihab Hassan relies on Nietzsche to acknowledge the fact that while universal and capitalized Truth should be challenged, he makes an appeal for truth as individual “processus in infinitum, an active determining” (qtd. in Hassan 309). That is what Els is engaged in throughout the novel, not a universal Truth about the self, but truth as “an active determining” of the meaning of his life and art. The novel reflects the self fashioning of an artist who lost and found himself several times but remained committed to exercising his agency and authenticity until the end.

Libra portrays characters whose desire to learn and reveal the truth of themselves is denied by those in power. However, *Orfeo*’s stance on speaking the truth to power is not hindered by one’s relationship to the other but rather facilitated by it, given the fact that it is through these social bonds that one is held accountable and may be forgiven in case of erroneous conduct. Accordingly, *Orfeo* departs from *Libra*’s view that communicating the truth of the self is impossible and rather emphasizes the fact that the human connection may facilitate such a task.

In summary, postmodern fiction and theory perceive the subject as lacking agency and authenticity in a world that imposes its social norms, social strata and power dynamics. While contemporary attitudes towards subjectivity do not naively assume

individuals possess total control, they allow for some measure of agency and authenticity. For instance, DeLillo's *Libra* portrays characters as puppets, whose actions reflect no command or consistency. While Powers's *Orfeo* recognizes the protagonist's situatedness within his historical context, he manages to cultivate a personal philosophy and exert influence on his culture. Furthermore, the mysteries in the plot of both texts challenge the agency of the reader, but *Orfeo* encourages he seeks answers for his inquiries no matter how obscure they might be. For, the contemporary unlike the postmodern text locates the value of human agency in the pursuit of truth rather than acquiring it. It is important to note that *Orfeo* does not advocate for a return to the modernist search for order in a disordered world. The novel recognizes the postmodern assertion that there is no such thing as universal order. Nevertheless, it insists that through agency and authenticity the individual can achieve a particular and situational order.

Chapter Three:

Defining Oneself against Contemporary Hostilities in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and Richard Powers's *Gain*.

Both the postmodern and contemporary novels depict subjects that have to define themselves against alien circumstances. In this regard, Don DeLillo's postmodern *White Noise* portrays characters whose identity construction is burdened by the hostilities of postmodern life. Equally, Richard Powers's contemporary *Gain* represents the physical and emotional disintegration of the subject. Yet, the characters of *Gain* reflect resilience and a desire to create personal change despite the hostility of their environments.

This chapter compares DeLillo's *White Noise* to Powers's *Gain* through the lens of Stephan Greenblatt's *Self Fashioning* and the role of alien entities in identity formation. Greenblatt argues that "self fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange or hostile" (09). Such is the case in both novels, as characters must define themselves against the alien forces of consumerism, environmental hazards and technological encroachments on humanity.

In five sections, this chapter considers a few alien and hostile aspects of postmodern and contemporary life that the subject must face for self definition. The chapter compares the identities fashioned in DeLillo's *White Noise* and Powers's *Gain* as they relate to hostile environments. It looks at the enigmatic aspect of modern risk society and how a lack of understanding of the forces threatening human lives compromises self fashioning. Furthermore, the chapter examines the abstract and concrete issues faced by the self in a culture dependent on consumerism. In addition, the chapter looks at the commercialization of the medical field which dehumanizes the subject and stunts his/her self fashioning. The chapter also analyzes the role of

surveillance capitalism in the dehumanization of the subject and the struggle to create a life beyond its digital data. The final section of the chapter the postmodern subject is burdened by anxieties induced in a hostile culture that hampers his self fashioning, whereas the subject of the contemporary novel strives to create an identity with a positive view on the future despite the difficulty.

3.1. “Risk Society” in *White Noise* and *Gain*: Between Confusion and Understanding

Risk society creates a plethora of threats against which the subject has to define himself. In DeLillo’s postmodern novel, *White Noise*, risk society presents its subjects with dangers that are beyond their comprehension which creates confusion and disarray in the identities they fashion. Equally, Richard Powers’s contemporary novel, *Gain*, depicts a protagonist whose self fashioning involves facing the dangers of risk society. However, the protagonist in *Gain* attempts to understand how economic, biological and industrial systems generate risks that interfere with her construction of identity. Thus, this section examines self fashioning in risk society as depicted in Powers’s *Gain* and DeLillo’s *White Noise*, and their divergent representations of subjects and their ability to understand the alien forces against which they must fashion themselves.

The following analysis reads *White Noise* through the lens of risk society and its effects on postmodern self fashioning. Risk in this sense is understood as the health and environmental threats that result from over industrialization. These risks contribute to the uncertainties against which the postmodern subject seeks self definition. In *White Noise*, the release of a toxic chemical in the air exacerbates the characters’ suggestibility, ignorance, pretense and state of denial. In addition, the diverse responses of the characters show a disintegration of subjective unity in postmodernity.

In his book *The Risk Society*, Ulrich Beck argues that industrial overproduction in modern society puts humans and the planet in danger. Don DeLillo's *White Noise* depicts the postmodern concern with the uncertainty that modern risks foster. *White Noise* represents what Beck calls "risk society," in which the risks are imperceptible to the naked eye but come in the form of toxic chemicals in the air, water and soil (21). The events of the novel center on the response of its protagonist and his family members to the spillage of a toxic chemical in his town. Initially, it foreshadows the event by describing random symptoms at a school, in which "[n]o one knew what was wrong" (DeLillo 47). The symptoms varied and were seemingly unrelated, "[k]ids were getting headaches... A teacher rolled on the floor and spoke foreign languages" (47). The cause is unknown and attributed to several toxic possibilities by investigators, they might have been caused by "the ventilating system, the paint or varnish... the cafeteria food, the rays emitted by microcomputers" (47). The issue, however, is at the heart of a postmodern life that generates too much toxic waste in the name of convenience and profit, the protagonist figure that it is "perhaps something deeper, finer-grained, more closely woven into the basic state of things" (47). As such, the novel describes the plethora of threats to the life of the postmodern individual as well as his ignorance and helplessness in the face of it all.

The imperceptibility of risks within risk society; their causes and consequences hard to grasp, makes it difficult for the individual to make sense of his plight within them (Beck 22). The toxic emission that comprises the main event in the novel creates confusion for the protagonist and his family. The emission comes from a tank car that derails and releases a chemical it was carrying called "Nyodene Derivative," (DeLillo 118) creating a dark cloud of smoke. First, the radio does not provide clear information about the gravity of the emission. Gladney's son wonders at the discrepancy between

the look of chemical release and the radio news description of it, it looks ““Like a shapeless growing thing. A dark black breathing thing of smoke. Why do they call it a plume?”” (118). In addition, they provide contradictory information about the health hazards that the toxic chemical causes humans: ““At first they said skin irritation and sweaty palms. But now they say nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath”” (118). Accordingly, the characters within the novel do not have a reliable source of information to clarify the nature of the threat and how to protect from it.

Ignorant, confused and uncertain, the subject becomes vulnerable to the suggestions of others. For instance, Gladney’s daughter and step-daughter experience different symptoms whenever the radio announces a change. First, they experience “sweaty palms” but once the radio news mentions vomiting as a symptom, Denise starts to “retch incompletely” (123). The girls do not experience the symptoms in real time but only after they have been announced in the news, “Heinrich told [Denise] she was showing outdated symptoms” (123). To ease their confusion, they are willing to believe any voice of authority that claims knowledge (Reeve and Kerridge 316). In this sense, risk society creates disorientation in its members by exposing them to health hazards that escape understanding.

DeLillo links the confusion of the risk society to that of the hyperrealist culture in which copies have no originals. Such is the case when Gladney’s girls experience the new symptom “*déjà vu*” (Barrett 97). Consequently, risk society not only creates real but imagined suffering as well. In this instance, their state of illusion is doubled; they experience an illusion within an illusion. On the one hand, they imagine experiencing the new symptom caused by the toxic chemical. On the other, *déjà vu* is already an illusory state of having experienced a given moment once before. Gladney wonders if there is a difference between real and imagined suffering, “[he feels] sad for people and

the queer part we play in our own disasters. Which was worse, the real condition or the self-created one, and did it matter?" (DeLillo 131). Thus, risk society creates individuals that suffer the consequences of their ignorance before they experience any real damage to their health.

Besides ignorance, the characters of *White Noise* reflect denial of the dangers of the risk society. Hence, the initial reaction of Jack Gladney to the toxic emission is that of denial. He insists on reassuring his son that the cloud will not come their way nor will it affect them. Jack's reasoning is that he belongs to a social stratum that is inherently protected from life threatening disasters, he believes that "'Society is set up in such a way that it's the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters'" (DeLillo 120). He trusts that his position as college professor will grant him immunity from the atrocities that befall those who are less fortunate: "'Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods?'" (120). It may be true that the poor bear the blunt of natural disasters in disproportionately higher numbers (Nixon 04). However, Beck asserts that no country or social class is safe from environmental disasters, "[e]ven the rich and powerful are not safe from them" (23). Accordingly, the sense of protection that Gladney imagines his social standing affords him does not hold in the face of the risks of postmodern society. In this sense, ignorance of the nature of these risks leads Gladney to a denial of their effects on all members of society.

The inability to understand the forces of modernization results in feelings of insecurity within the individual, the "forces before which the human imagination stands in awe" (Beck 20). DeLillo's *White Noise* depicts the postmodern response to the enigmatic risks of modernization. Gladney and his family represent the insecurity of the postmodern individual facing danger he cannot comprehend. For instance, as the toxic

chemical nears closer to their home Gladney and his family sit down for dinner and ignore the sound of sirens in what he describes as “decorous hysteria” (DeLillo 124). Not knowing how to react, the whole family starts “avoiding each other's eyes as a way of denying that something unusual was going on” (124). Furthermore, the authorities react with panic and confusion, given the fact that the event is not the usual fires and explosions, rather “[t]his death would penetrate, seep into the genes, show itself in bodies not yet born” (122). Additionally, Gladney doubts his own decision to flee the toxic cloud when compared to those that decide to stay put, he feels that “[i]n a crisis the true facts are whatever other people say they are. No one's knowledge is less secure than your own” (126). Thus, no one knows the best course of action in the face of postmodern ecological disasters, not lay men nor authorities.

The extremity of such events creates a desire for coherence that the individual is willing to spread and believe rumors. In the camp where the people hide from the toxic chemical, the clarity between truth and fiction ceases to exist, “[a]s people jolted out of reality, we were released from the need to distinguish” (DeLillo 134). The individual values coherence albeit fabricated, such as the rumors; in the camp “[t]here was a growing respect for the vivid rumor, the most chilling tale... We began to marvel at our own ability to manufacture awe” (156). Gladney marvels at the human ability to conjure explanations to ambiguous phenomenon. These explanations did not only have the purpose of bestowing an illusion of clarity but also raise emotion. In this sense, the novel emphasizes the individual inability to understand the risks of modernization that he succumbs to sensationalized fabrications.

The individual might seek to define himself by making life choices that protect him from the risks of postmodern society. Identity in this sense becomes self reflexive, “[o]ne even has to choose one's social identity and group membership, in this way

managing one's own self, changing its image" by way of self protection (Beck 136). Accordingly, Gladney's son manages the uncertainty of their fate by crafting an image of an expert in the details of the event. For instance, while the entire Gladney family is worried and confused, Jack's son shows signs of confident expertise. Jack wonders if his son is searching for an identity in the midst of disaster: "Did he seek distraction from his own small miseries in some violent and overwhelming event? His voice betrayed a craving for terrible things" (DeLillo 128). Jack's son, mere teenage boy called Heinrich, adopts the character of a guru who imparts enlightening information to the masses.

Gladney watches his son become a different person as he tells a group of people about the nature of the toxic chemical and the harm it may cause. Jack wonders if this persona Heinrich is constructing is for the benefit of others: "Was he finding himself, learning how to determine his worth from the reactions of others?" (135). Eventually, Jack surrenders to the notion that his boy has found a sense of self, albeit pretentious, in disaster and he decides: "Let him bloom, if that's what he was doing, in the name of mischance, dread and random disaster" (136). Heinrich has found a protective exterior in the expert persona to shield him from the uncertainty of postmodern risk. As such, the individual might use moments of uncertainty to create a persona that might camouflage his helplessness.

Conversely, another response might be to surrender to helplessness in the face of incomprehensible disaster. Despite the fact that the toxic chemical is manufactured by man, Gladney feels a sense of danger that cannot be controlled, because "[their] helplessness did not seem compatible with the idea of a man-made event" (DeLillo 133). In fact, Jack is described as "[h]aunted, ashen, lost" (164) as a result of the toxic event. In addition, his daughter participates in a simulated evacuation later on in the

novel. It startles Gladney to see his daughter playing the role of the victim: “Is this how she thinks of herself at the age of nine-already a victim, trying to polish her skills?” (199). He marvels at the ease with which she embodies a victim stance: “How natural she looked, how deeply imbued with the idea of a sweeping disaster” (199). The people running the simulation even give instruction on how to act as proper victims: “Victims, go limp. And remember you're not here to scream or thrash about... Soft moans will suffice” (201). The loss of control experienced by these characters in the risk society may translate into a loss of agency. Thus, the confusion of the situation might lead to a complete relinquishing of an identity beyond that of victimhood in a society that thrives on risk.

White Noise depicts the uncertainty and fragmentation that the postmodern individual has to contend with in order to fashion an identity in the risk society. Gladney and his family each adopt a different identity as a response to a threat to their health and environment. Their diverse chosen identities reflect the fragmentation of postmodern subjectivity characterized by ignorance, denial, pretense and victimhood. Like *White Noise*, Richard Powers’s *Gain* shows how risk society exposes the individual to health issues that are devastating to the point of reality and identity disintegration. However, *Gain* differs from *White Noise* in its protagonist’s response to her illness. Instead of confusion, Laura seeks understanding of the causes behind her cancer diagnosis and realizes it might be the exposure to chemicals from an industrial company in her town. Thus, what follows investigates the life altering encounter with a health crisis and a woman’s realization that the rich and powerful might be shaping her identity and her bodily relationship to nature.

Richard Powers’s *Gain* focuses on a woman’s plight with a cancer diagnosis that the novel blames on the toxicity of risk society. Through the deterioration of Laura’s

health, the novel highlights the fact that subjectivity is altered “by the recognition that the very substance of the self is interconnected with vast biological, economic, and industrial systems” (Alaimo 95). Accordingly, the illness strips Laura of her life and personality. As she starts to undergo chemotherapy she loses her job and is unable to fulfill her role as a mother. The medicine affects her memory to the point where she can no longer be the mother they are used to be, she is no longer “Laura Bodey: the person who remembers for everyone” (Powers 120). The smallest of activities, like walking become extremely difficult, she takes “baby steps everywhere, as if she’s 84 Method-acting a geriatric” (85). The reference to “method acting” reinforces the notion of her becoming a different person. In an extreme scenario, she even loses her voice, as she opens her mouth to laugh at a joke on T.V she finds that no sound comes out, in this way “[s]he surrenders her responses wholesale, to the statistical averages of the studio audience” (85). While the world continues to spin, her world has fallen apart, which emphasizes the fact that her illness has separated her from real life.

As Laura observes other people who are seemingly healthy, she realizes how a health crisis can halt normal life: “[h]ow disorienting: here, now” especially for those who are unaware of the harm that risk society is inflicting on their bodies “all these weird familiars. Nobody sees, so regular is life. Nobody knows what’s blossoming inside him” (Powers 85). This is a reference to the fact that cancer is an insidious illness caused by the environment in covert ways. One may be living his or her normal while carrying a disease that will bring all the familiarity to a halt. The reality of the individual is shattered by illness brought on by the economic, biological and industrial structures of risk society that he cannot fully identify or comprehend.

The irony of modern medicine is that it uses toxins as a “cure” to conditions that are caused by toxins. In the case of cancer, chemotherapy is a cocktail of chemicals that

attack both the cancerous and the benign cells of the body. The novel criticizes the medical practice that creates these toxins and then injects them in patients without extensive experiments. While undergoing chemotherapy Laura notes about her treatment: “The ingredients multiply without limit, most of them less than a month and a half old” (Powers 113). The novel mentions that these chemicals include ‘Cisplatin’ and ‘Platinum’ that are inflicted on patients despite their dangers. Laura is well aware of their dangers, because these are “[t]he kind of stuff they’d sue you for letting within ten miles of the village water supply. But here they’ve worked her up a private hip flask” (114). In this sense, toxins have seeped deep into the contemporary environment that they infiltrated the one field that is supposed to protect from them; that of medicine.

Modern medicine even uses something as natural as tree bark to make such toxic medicine. The novel compares modern use of the natural ingredient to its nontoxic use in the past: “The Native Americans used to make all sorts of things out of tree bark. Canoes and houses. Mighty medicines” (Powers 112). This one natural resource can clearly be used in nonharmful ways, but current culture with its focus on fast paced profit has managed to turn it into a harsh chemical. Thus, modern life poisons the individual by weaponizing his environment.

While Gladney falls prey to the made up stories about the toxic event, Laura decides to discover the source of her illness despite its ambiguity. At first her curiosity is hampered by distraction. When she asks her doctor about the cause of her cancer she’s unable to follow his answer, “[s]he tries to pay attention. But she has a fair amount on her mind” (Powers 99). In addition, she denies the possibility that her cancer might be caused by toxic chemical release from a factory near her home. When her daughter presents her with a newspaper article discussing the case, she refuses to believe her: ““Mine’s not like that. Dr. Jenkins said they don’t know what causes

ovarian. It's probably genetic'" (193). However, this is mere initial reaction; later, Laura becomes more interested in finding the truth.

Laura finds herself saddled with pain she does not understand or know how to handle, but she slowly leans towards learning more about her condition. The novel describes Laura as "Slow. Not always accurate. But persistent as the day is long" (Powers 103). The same can be said of the human species, persistent despite its fallibility. Laura's persistence is illustrated by her search for answers concerning her condition. She starts by looking in the library computer, where typing a few words yields the information she needs: "ovary, carcinoma, causes—and the computer gives them back not only titles but whole pages. Actual information" (205). Among these, she finds an article titled "'Cancer Tracks Chemicals, Not Chance, Workers Claim'" (216) in which 3 cases of the Clare company workers report cancer diagnoses. While initially Laura is depicted as self centered and ignorant, her illness might be her way to understanding the world and how it works.

The Clare company, manufacturers of health, beauty and agricultural products, are responsible for the toxins that are causing cancer in Laura's town. In addition, Laura learns that Clare sells "cheap materials" to the company that provides chemotherapy for cancer patients (Power 151). As such, the company stands to benefit from creating the illness then providing its supposed antidote, making them truly evil money grabbers. In her book *Bodily Natures*, Stacy Alaimo argues that power structures, such as capitalism, are responsible for the toxicity that changes the relationship of the human to his environment (78). In the novel, a friend of Laura tells her that the toxins that Clare uses in its products have become deeply ingrained in their lives: "'it's in the air and in the water, and now it's in the ground'" (Powers 202). Similar to the toxic chemical released in DeLillo's *White Noise*, the evil power in *Gain* creates an atmosphere of toxicity for

its workers as well as the general public. While in *White Noise* the individual does not confront those responsible for his plight, *Gain* points to the wrong doers and the part they play in modern toxicity. In fact, a civil action and a class action law suit are filed against Clare, in which the people and the workers demand compensation for the harm inflicted upon them by the company. Despite the fact that Laura is interested and wishes to “keep up with stories about this suit” (226), she still refuses to join the plaintiffs. At this point in her self-fashioning she is still afraid to fully embrace her potential.

Both *White Noise* and *Gain* represent the individual construction of identity against the hazards of the risk society. On the one hand, *White Noise* focuses on the confusion and denial that risk society fosters within the individual. On the other, albeit reluctantly, *Gain* depicts a protagonist who is on the verge of discovering that her illness and subsequent identity shift is the responsibility of industrialization. In *White Noise* industrialization is dealt with tacitly, while *Gain* identifies a culprit in a big evil company.

3.2. “The World was a Series of Fleeting Gratifications”: The Abstract and Concrete Damage of Consumer Culture

Capitalism relies on consumer culture to perpetuate the notion that identity can only be purchased. The protagonist of *White Noise* relies on consumerism to construct an identity that the novel shows as doubled, fraudulent and eventually lost to consumption impulses. In addition, the novel shows that consumer culture cajoles the anxieties of modernization such as environmental hazards. In *Gain* these anxieties are not cajoled but are brought to the forefront when they become concrete issues such as illnesses and damaging industries. Therefore, this section compares the abstract issues of consumerism faced by the subject in *White Noise* to their concrete counterparts in *Gain*.

In *White Noise*, the characters define themselves within the parameters of consumer culture. Consumerism is used by Gladney and his family members to escape insignificance and give their lives coherence. Thus, the following analysis focuses on the ways in which the consumer relies on products to forge an identity. Furthermore, the section emphasizes how consumerism works to divert individual attention from the anxieties of modernization.

In order to keep the capitalist wheel spinning, consumerism promotes the notion that one has to “buy” his way into a respectable identity. Accordingly in *White Noise*, DeLillo turns character construction on its head when he describes the appearance and name of its protagonist as acquired commodities. Jack Gladney is a university professor of “Hitler studies” (DeLillo 07), who is advised to acquire a new name by his chancellor “if [he] wanted to be taken seriously as a Hitler innovator” (29). His name in the eyes of the chancellor is not distinguished enough, so they “agreed that [he] should invent an extra initial and call [himself] J. A. K. Gladney, a tag I wore like a borrowed suit” (29). The “borrowed suit” analogy can symbolize the over sized fit of the name on Gladney. Though it signifies “dignity, significance and prestige,” Gladney feels like he is “the false character that follows the name around” (30). In this sense, his character is something he puts on as if it were a purchased piece of clothing; a commodity. In addition, the chancellor suggests he grows in body size, given the fact that he has a “tendency to make a feeble presentation of self” (29). As such, he gained weight and started wearing big glasses to give an air of “hulking massive-ness” (29). Furthermore, Gladney has been concealing the fact that he does not know German despite being specialized in Hitler. Consequently, the novel unveils the character construction of Gladney that reveals his fabrications not just as fictional character but as fraudulent man

who believes that pretense is the only way he can achieve respectability in his environment.

In *Risk Society*, Beck argues that modernization replaces traditional source of identity, such as family and religion, with institutions of the labor market (131). One such institution is education that, like consumerism, Gladney uses to gain legitimacy. Gladney assumes that in defining his work and life through Hitler, he would protect himself of the feebleness of the individual in postmodernity. His friend points to the fact that Gladney uses Hitler to center himself, he “wanted to use him to grow in significance and strength” (DeLillo 274). When this fake identity starts to crumble, he refuses to leave it behind for lack of an alternative. For example, although the glasses he wears for the job start to affect his vision, he fears not wearing them would cost him his career. While his wife thinks these glasses are “stupid and useless” he insists that change is not to be considered: “[he] may not understand all the elements involved [in his fake identity] but this is all the more reason not to tamper” (115). Despite the fact that he does not fully understand the disguise, he fears the consequences of renouncing it.

When Gladney’s fraudulent identity as an intellectual proves difficult for him to fully embody he resorts to picturing another fake identity. For example, when he fails to fully adopt the identity of a German speaker, he wishes to embody an identity institutionalized by the media; that of the dangerous gunman. He wants to lead a life of a secret agent of menace similar to those depicted on television screens. The shame of hiding from his German speaking colleagues reminds him of a weapon he has been given and its secret potential: “What a sly device a handgun is... An intimate and cunning thing, a secret history of the man who owns it” (262). In this sense, Gladney

reflects what Beck calls the institutionalization of biography, whether through education or media images (131).

The supermarket is the epitome of consumer culture in DeLillo's novel. In *White Noise*, the supermarket symbolizes the doubling of identity and the gradual loss of sanity that the individual experiences in consumer culture. While at the supermarket with his daughter, Gladney notices that the mirrors behind the fruit display create a doubling effect that the shoppers confuse for more fruit, as "people accidentally punched [the mirrors] when reaching for fruit in the upper rows" (DeLillo 48). Metaphorically, the doubling is similar to that which the individual experiences inside the supermarket. For instance, when one of Gladney's colleagues says he looks "harmless and indistinct" without his "glasses and gown" (93), he feels an instant desire to shop, not for new attire but for a new personality to replace the previous fraudulent one. His shopping spree gives him a sense of rejuvenated identity: "I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed" (94). And the doubling is again symbolized by the reflective surfaces on which he and his family appear, as their "images appeared on mirrored columns, in glassware and chrome, on TV monitors in security rooms" (94). In this sense, the novel links shopping centers to the doubling of identity that the purchased items bestow.

Other characters in the novel also experience the sense of identity that comes from commodities. Gladney's stepdaughter, Denise, constantly wears a hat wherever she goes, she wears it to school, the dentist, even the dinner table, because "[s]omething about the visor seemed to speak to her, to offer wholeness and identity" (49). In addition, Denise shows a desire to maintain constancy in an inconstant world by clinging to items from her childhood, which is "a way of fastening herself to a life"

(112). As such, the novel reflects the consumer's need for wholeness and stability that in postmodernity can only be achieved through consumerism.

The other extreme of identity construction in consumer culture is the complete disappearance of the subject under the weight of his impulse. Hunger is shown to erase the identities of Gladney and his family, as they sit in the car to eat. In such a confined place "[they] wanted to fill [their] stomachs and get it over with. [They] didn't need light and space" (DeLillo 223). They renounced social interaction with each other and others, "[they] were content to eat facing in the same direction, looking only inches past [their] hands" (223). In addition, Gladney describes their eating in what can only be called "animalistic" as they were "ripping into chicken parts with [their] hands and teeth" (223). "This is how hunger shrinks the world" (223), notes Gladney after he feels that consuming the food has made his family and their world smaller. As the consumer is engrossed in satisfying his appetite, he completely loses his sense of humanity and succumbs to his most animalistic impulse.

Gladney oscillates between a desire to immerse himself in the oblivion of consumerism and the need to rid himself of consumer goods. Watching his youngest son shop, he envies how easily he adopted and discarded certain attractions, to him "[t]he world was a series of fleeting gratifications. He took what he could, then immediately forgot it in the rush of a subsequent pleasure" (DeLillo 168). However, on a whim, Gladney feels the need to throw away all the products he has collected in his life time. The urge overcomes Gladney after he learns that the toxic chemical has affected his health and might cause his death. He seems to assume that discarding things will make his life lighter and bring him peace, after doing so "[he] sat on the front steps alone, waiting for a sense of ease and peace to settle in the air around [him]" (251). No

description of peace follows and the novel continues to describe the pacifying effect of consumer goods on the characters.

In fact, the novel insists that after the toxic event, the individual seeks organization from the chaos of life in the supermarket. In a return to consumer culture, the checkout line provides coherence, “[a] slowly moving line, satisfying, giving us time to glance at the tabloids in the racks” (308). The tabloids provide another distraction from the self and the chaos it lives in. Indeed, while the streets and houses in town showed signs of neglect and abandonment, the supermarket becomes better and more efficient. Accordingly, Gladney feels comforted as he believes that “[e]verything was fine, would continue to be fine, would eventually get even better as long as the supermarket did not slip” (169). It seems that consumer culture subdues the individual that he may not pay too much attention to the destruction left behind by the toxicity of industrial chemicals.

Gladney and his family have to construct identities through capitalist institutions. The only tools available to them for identity construction are consumerism and education. In addition, these institutions contribute to the ignorance that the family must maintain in order to survive in postmodern or late stage capitalism. In this regard, corporations benefit from maintaining a consumer culture that is built on a desire to maximize profit regardless of the harm done to the planet and its inhabitants. In Richard Powers’s *Gain*, the protagonist has to face the fact that consumer culture and advertisements have negatively shaped her life. Her battle with a terminal illness crystallizes the false promises of security fed to her by advertisers that sell the illusion of life style change as the answer for a better life. Thus, the following analyzes how *Gain* portrays individual awakening to the harm of consumer culture.

In *Gain*, consumerism is explored through a corporation that monopolizes the industry of a small town. The company contributes to all businesses in the town, “[it] cuts every other check, writes the headlines... It staffs the hospital” (Powers 06). To reflect the evil ways of such a company, the novel quotes Ambrose Bierce’s definition of a corporation, which is “[a]n ingenious device for obtaining individual profit without individual responsibility” (qtd. in Powers 159). In line with this definition, Joel Bakan in his book *The Corporation* argues that the corporation is solely motivated by its own interests “regardless of the often harmful consequences it might cause to others” (02). In this sense, the novel points to the capitalist erasure of individual responsibility for the sake of profit. These corporations destroy the environment and public health for monetary gain, as is indicated by the title of the novel. Laura’s illness is an example of the destructive nature of the corporations and their wide reach. The company becomes part and parcel of the fabric of Laura’s town that life beyond it cannot be imagined. For instances, her children do not notice the pervasiveness of company, hence her former husband’s remark: “You grow up with a divisional headquarters in your backyard, and you think everyone does” (254). Thus, individual life has been colonized by greedy corporations that take advantage of and harm people and their environment.

Annie Leonard in her book *The Story of Stuff* defines consumerism as a way to grow in self identity and satisfy emotional and social needs (145). *White Noise* and *Gain* both contemplate the fact that the subject accumulates objects in order to compensate for his/her fragility. In *Gain*, Laura faces the instability of life and identity when she is diagnosed with a terminal illness that turns all her possessions into mere objects rather than the security blanket she took them to be, “[a]ll this space... all her carefully coordinated furniture: so cozy a nest once. Now lifeless twigs, the rotted rigging of a ship in a vacuum bottle” (Powers 84). As a result, her response resembles that of

Gladney, she wishes to renounce consumer culture altogether. She wishes to “sell everything” (84), including her house and car. She feels the absurdity of owning all these things that were meant to protect her but failed to do so. Furthermore, she realizes that her cancer might have been caused by the products she has been using and although she vows to get rid of them all, she acknowledges the fact that they have infested every part of her life with her consent, they are “[t]oo many to purge them all. Every hour of her life depends on more corporations than she can count” (304). In this sense, Powers’s *Gain* is an intertextual response to DeLillo’s *White Noise* and its criticism of consumer culture. However, Laura shows more understanding of how deeply ingrained consumerism is in shaping her life, as oppose to Gladney who waits for peace that never comes from ridding himself of “stuff.”

Furthermore, *Gain* dives deeper than *White Noise* into the issue of the supermarket and its impact on the individual. Laura is made aware of her position as a consumer whose choices have an effect on the planet when asked if she wants a paper or plastic bag for her groceries at the supermarket. The issue is not as simple as a choice between paper and plastic, but between “Right or wrong? Good or evil?” (Powers 27). The paper and plastic both pose a threat to the environment and therefore a moral dilemma: “The one kills trees but is one hundred percent natural and recyclable. The other releases insidious fumes if burned but requires less energy to make” (27). After some hesitation she lets the cashier decide for her, given the fact that neither choice will save the planet from sure ruin. The novel in this sense draws attention to ethical consumption but stops short of a political response to the policy changes necessary for sustainable businesses. In *The Story of Stuff*, Leonard argues that ethical consumption is not sufficient and advocates for the protection of endangered forests and enforcement of strict laws for logging in other forests in order to “restore climate stability” (253).

Accordingly, the novel opens the door to an investigation of solutions to environmental crises beyond ethical consumption.

The individual is also inundated with advertisements that are supposed to solve his modern day problems. For instance, *Gain* includes an ad to a soap that is meant to cure several dermal issues, “including, but not limited to, pimples, Salt Rheum, freckling and discoloration, Etc” (Powers 131). In this way, the advertising industry lures the individual to make purchases. They bombard Laura with junk mail enticing her to buy this or that item to improve her life style. Laura also suffers the wrath of the diet industry that sold her remedies and diet plans for weight loss that she needs to reverse after the chemotherapy left her emaciated, she “[h]as to throw out the old tapes and pills and buy a whole new, opposite lineup” (228). She is completely demystified with the advertising and the diet industries for their capitalization on human weakness to make money. She realizes that trainers and hospital sources sell the same supplements with different labels in order to appeal to their target demographic. The trainers label their food “high energy” while those sold to cancer patients are called “high calorie” (228), which points to the deception involved in these industries to take advantage of individuals.

Both *Gain* and *White Noise* deal with consumerism and its impact shaping individual lives. *White Noise* seems to halt at a diagnosis of the abstract problems created by consumerism, like the doubling or disappearance of identity in a world that worships commodities. However, *Gain* brings attention to the concrete damage of consumer culture on the subject as exemplified by terminal illness and irrevocable environmental damage.

3.3. The Commercialization of Medicine and its Detriment to the Self: *White Noise* and *Gain* In/Beyond Health Care

This section examines the commercialization of medicine and its detrimental effects on identity construction. The self serving attitude of physicians and medical facilities dehumanize the patient, which keeps him in a position of inferiority and ignorance. Don DeLillo's *White Noise* depicts a dehumanized subject whose fear and ignorance lead to illusory suffering. The doctors' exacerbation of suffering is also represented in *Gain*. Such is the case for the protagonist who suffers a cancer diagnosis as well as the vulnerability to the cold treatment of doctors. However, *Gain* allows the subject to explore other avenues of human connection outside of the doctor-patient relationship, such as nurses, colleagues and fellow patients.

The following analysis focuses on the exploitative nature of the medical field in American postmodern culture and its impact on self definition. In *White Noise*, the medical field treats its patients as dehumanized subjects that serve its interests. In the aftermath of his exposure to the toxic chemical, Gladney experiences the commercialization and dehumanization of the medical field. The inferior and fearful position that Gladney finds himself in is dramatized in the novel to create imaginary and unnecessary suffering for the individual.

The medical field is just as untrustworthy and as exploitative as consumerism in postmodernity. The myth of benevolence and invincibility of the medical system in America started to crumble around the 1980s, for its dehumanizing and brutalizing tendencies (Hawkins 05). In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney shows distrust of doctors and the information they impart, "[d]octors' offices depress [him] even more than hospitals do because of their air of negative expectancy" (DeLillo 87). In addition, Gladney and his wife both feel like they cannot understand doctors nor can they be understood by

them and she confesses: “‘I’m never in control of what I say to doctors, much less what they say to me. There’s some kind of disturbance in the air’” (87). They both admit they lie to doctors even though they do not know their motivation for lying. Furthermore, when talking to a doctor about his exposure to the toxic chemical he feels that to protect himself from bad news, he should praise the doctor as that should keep him safe: “I was prepared to be servile and fawning if it would keep him from dropping casually shattering remarks about my degree of exposure and chances for survival” (143). In this sense, the novel depicts the health care system as an evil institution wherein individuals feel like they have no control over their health and its outcome so they resort to lying or fawning for self protection.

The commercialization of the medical field in the United States has resulted in the loss of physician professionalism. Doctors now are more likely to value their personal profit more than the well being of their patients and societies (Relman 2668). Gladney feels that doctors are selfish, condescending, cold, business owners who do not care about his pain. When interacting with doctors the human subject is treated like an object that can be traded or discarded. In this regard, Gladney contemplates the fact that senior doctors often give younger doctors their least important cases, “‘[o]nce you’re shunted from the older doctor to the younger doctor, it means that you and your disease are second-rate’” (DeLillo 176). Such treatment puts human suffering on a rating scale that is dehumanizing. Furthermore, the expertise of a doctor is used by certain patients to signal high status in their community. One of Gladney’s colleagues assures him that the concern is not just that of health but an inability to fend for oneself in a status game: “‘You are meant to feel inferior and doomed not just because your inner organs may be trickling blood but because you don’t know who to see about it, how to make contacts,

how to make your way in the world”” (211). As such, the subject is at the mercy of an esoteric group who takes advantage of him at a time of need.

Another example of a cold medical field is reflected in how the Gladney family doctor is dismissive of the struggles that Jack and his wife experience. He criticizes them for coming to him with a child that would not stop crying, he complains that they ““would come to a medical doctor who is a private corporation and ask him to treat a child for crying” (177). While a child’s crying is a sign of distress and possible illness, the doctor sees his practice as a business that should not be inconvenienced by such concerns. In this way, the novel criticizes the focus on profit that has turned doctors from the healers of the community to just another service with a capitalist spirit.

The dehumanization of patients creates a barrier for conversation between the doctor and his patients, which result in the doctor taking all the authority when it comes to sharing information and decision making (Katz xvii). In the aftermath of his exposure to the toxic chemical, Gladney’s doctor refuses to clarify his condition for him. The doctor first asserts his authority over Gladney by assuring him that his status as patient does not cease to exist once he leaves the doctor’s office. That is to say, patients are perpetually inferior to doctors, even outside of the doctor’s surgery: ““you are all permanent patients, like it or not. I am the doctor, you the patient”” (DeLillo 249). Furthermore, the doctor notices high levels of potassium in Gladney’s blood test and withholds clarification on what it means, insisting: ““There's no point your knowing at this stage”” (249). The doctor creates further confusion by telling Gladney that this may or may not be a sign of something dangerous. He tells him that there are true and false elevations and that it is difficult to discern between the two but refuses to provide further explanation: ““There isn't time to explain... This is all you have to know””

(250). The doctor even says that “the less [Gladney] know the better” (251), in order to keep him an inferior position of ignorance.

The analysis facility that Gladney visits to learn more about his elevated potassium is an impersonal corporation that is meant to lull the subject into submission. Gladney first notices that the name of the organization is deceptive; he wonders whether the name “Autumn Harvest Farms” is “an attempt to balance the heartlessness of their gleaming precision equipment? Would a quaint name fool us into thinking we live in pre-cancerous times?” (DeLillo 263). Medical facilities such as these capitalize on the dangers of the modern world but want to create the illusion that they can protect the individual. In addition, identity is erased inside the facility; the patients are wearing identical, indistinct clothes and nonverbal, Gladney sees “faceless fellow patients in the mazelike halls, crossing from room to room, identically gowned. No one said hello” (263). He goes through the process of erasure as well; he is dressed in the hospital gown as everyone else and given a wristband for identification. He is turned into a nameless, faceless subject whose body is objectified and analyzed, “[t]hey sent [him] down narrow corridors for measuring and weighing, for blood-testing, brain-graphing, the recording of currents traversing [his] heart” (263). The place is devoid of “human furnishings” (263) and connection, given that each task is performed by a different technician, which does not allow Gladney to form any solid connections. This place is the epitome of postmodern organizations that empty the self of its substance in order to control it.

The facility is a representation of the medical field losing its humanity in the postmodern world. For instance, the results of Gladney’s analysis come from a computer rather than from the doctor, which takes him aback: ““I thought we were here for a general discussion. The human part. What the machines can't detect”” (DeLillo

264). Moreover, Gladney renounces his own humanity as he gives up his knowledge of his symptoms to the data that the computer generates. When asked how he feels, he does not fully trust his answer: ““In my own mind, in real terms, I feel relatively sound, pending confirmation”” (264). Gladney waits for the technology to decide his fate for him. For example, when asked about his appetite he says he “could go either way” on this question and he wants to know “what the numbers say” before he gives a definite answer (265). Despite the fact that his initial desire was to build a human connection with the doctor to ease his worries, he seems to instantly relent to the conclusions of machines. Thus, the human subject in the medical context is completely erased and replaced by distant medical professionals and computerized data.

The difference between Gladney and Laura is that her suffering is real while his is imaginary. Like Laura, Gladney has been exposed to what the doctor describes as “industrial contaminant” (DeLillo 266). The doctor says that exposure to the toxin “Nyodene Derivative” might cause a growth of a “nebulous mass” (266-67). While Laura experiences the difficulty of a cancer diagnosis and the aftermath of chemotherapy, Gladney is told there is only a possibility of tumor growth. He points out that initially there was confusion on what the toxin causes the human body and although the doctor says that they have new information that suggest it causes a tumor, his wording is still confusing: ““We have some conflicting data that says exposure to this substance can definitely lead to a mass”” (267). The doctor’s words are contradictory; if the data is “conflicting”, how can it be “definite”? In addition, the doctor says the tumor results in death, which is a crude answer to a health issue. He does not name an illness or a remedy, this mass is vague, ““[i]t’s called a nebulous mass because it has no definite shape, form or limits”” (267). The tumor is as vague and shapeless as Gladney’s suffering; compared to Laura it is all based on illusions and fear. Thus, the

novel criticizes the medical field for keeping Gladney ignorant and scared to the point of illusory suffering.

Capitalism has infiltrated even noble professions such as medicine. As a result, doctors serve their own interests and no longer treat patients with compassion and dignity. In *White Noise*, Gladney realizes that in a medical setting he is inferior of knowledge and status. Such a position not only fails to reach solutions to health problems but also exacerbates fear and ignorance that lead to delusion. The following analysis explores the commercialization of medicine and its dehumanizing consequences on the patient as depicted in *Gain*. Much like Gladney, Laura experiences the impersonality of doctors and their self serving tendencies. As a result, Laura becomes disconnected from herself and reality within the medical space. However, *Gain* differs from *White Noise* in that it explores avenues of human connection beyond the medical setting.

Doctors in *Gain* are viewed through the same lens as *White Noise*; they are portrayed as cold businesses that no longer care for the wellbeing of their patients. For instance, Laura recalls that her son's expensive visit to the hospital and feels empathy for those less fortunate: "How can people out west of the tracks live? Just going to the dentist must ruin them" (Powers 27). In addition, doctors make sure to protect themselves from any possible accusation of malpractice by maintaining plausible deniability. Before she went through surgery to determine whether her tumor is cancerous, the doctors told Laura there is "nightly eight percent" (38) she does not have cancer; those 2 percent of possibility are their safety net. While doctors cannot know for sure, this kind of language is used to protect the doctor in case her tumor is cancerous, their words "[c]heerful, meaningless, and unprosecutable. That's what you get when your whole health care business is driven by fear of malpractice" (38). Similar to *White*

Noise, doctors conceal information from patients to preserve their status, “the doctors’ job was to maintain their edge by keeping us in ignorance” (160). The doctors in *Gain* are just as heartless and self serving as those in *White Noise*.

The most prominent issue in the medical field is its dehumanizing tendency when treating the patient as a carrier of disease rather than a human with needs (Hawkins 12). Laura experiences the same cold atmosphere in the hospital as Gladney does in the analysis facility. She feels confined and isolated in her hospital room while recovering from her first surgery, as she inspects the clock “[i]n squared red bars, it reads: 3:08 AM. Around her mechanical bed hum meters and dials, each one cold with purpose” (Powers 51). The description of the numbers and the room likens it to a jail cell. Laura does not feel the ease that is supposed to accompany a hospital stay, on the contrary, she senses the oppressive nature of the hospital.

Unlike *White Noise*, *Gain* acknowledges the fact that hospitals, especially waiting rooms, put people on an equal social status. Laura’s husband describes the hospital waiting room as “[a] great social equalizer, this room. Farmer, college counselor, banker, the whole factory gamut from fork operator up to division manager” (64). While Gladney’s colleagues believe that the quality of their doctor should ensure their social standing, Laura’s husband believes that most people are equal within the walls of the hospital except a few at the very top of the social ladder. The heartlessness of the medical field is also illustrated in the way the doctor delivers the news of Laura’s cancer, “[s]he smiles at the three of them, asking, “Is there anything else you need to know for now?” The way the pretty cashier at the Style Barn cocks her head and says, “Will that be all today?”” (Powers 65). Both *White Noise* and *Gain* portray a cold and heartless hospital environment, but *Gain* shows that patients have a shared human vulnerability when dealing with illness.

In the hospital, Laura's sense of reality and identity is stripped away from her. As she wakes up from the anesthesia, she is extremely disoriented, "[s]he hasn't the faintest idea of where she is, or what she is, or why" (Powers 66). Her sense of disconnection from reality is further illustrated by her experience of *déjà-vu*, "[t]he concoction left her with a continuous sense of micro—*déjà vu*. She heard the word "cancer" a good two seconds before the surgeon pronounced it" (71). Both experiences of *déjà-vu* in *White Noise* and *Gain* are an illusion, which makes them illusions within illusions that emphasize the sense of unreality within a medical setting. Anesthesia, the news of her cancer and her inability to take care of her immediate needs after the surgery leave Laura feeling helpless. Even her agency is compromised when her pain relief is controlled by cold machinery. While she is supposed to be able to press a button and receive a pain killer from her IV, she quickly realizes that the machine decides how much medicine she receives, it is "[p]atient-administered, but machine approved" (72). Inside the hospital, the individual is confused, disconnected and helpless.

Similar to Gladney, Laura's doctor dismisses her humanity when discussing her case. When speaking of the possibility of having cancer cells still left in her body after the surgery, the doctor does it in an objectifying manner. The novel criticizes the distance that doctors adopt towards their patients that sees them as "systems" (Powers 74) rather than human beings. Laura feels dehumanized by the way she is spoken about by the doctors, she "isn't keen on having her system referred to in the third person while she's still in the room" (74). In addition, she is frustrated with the doctors' conflicting answers about what might have caused her cancer. When she asks if the cause might be genetic, the doctor hesitates between two answers that leave her exasperated: "'Which is it? Sometimes, or Nobody knows?'" (76). The lack of answers turns Laura's future opaque, "[s]hould she quit her job? Forget about building that deck?" (88). She is also

confused by the different opinions on what stage of cancer she has, the different numbered possibilities make her feel like “she will drown in numbers” (99). As such, Laura’s humanity is lost in the cold impersonality and ambiguity of the hospital.

In his book *The Silent World of Doctor and Patient*, Jay Katz argues that medicine is an art just as much as it is a science. Katz asserts that practicing the art of medicine entails a constant recognition of the patient’s humanity by showing understanding and empathy (Katz xx). Although Katz is speaking of physicians, *Gain* portrays the nurses in the hospital as the group of medical staff who are capable of treating the patients with humanity. Laura describes the first nurse that administers her chemotherapy as “super competent” (Powers 112). The nurse is also friendly and supportive; she makes sure to give Laura enough encouragement, she even shortens her name for endearment: ““you’ll do fine, Mrs. B”” (112). When Laura starts to struggle from the side effects of medication, the nurse makes sure to offer her more empathy than no doctor has offered so far: ““Almost done, Mrs. B. You’re in the homestretch now”” (114). Furthermore, Laura notices that the nurses are far more competent and friendly than the doctors “[b]y now Laura knows that the oncology nurses will do all the work. They welcome her back like old friends” (128). Another nurse, Alan, tells Laura that there is a better nausea medication that the insurance companies do not allow the doctors to prescribe for its high price, unless the case is really dire. The fact that Alan does not have a material stake in the matter means he is able to empathize with Laura’s pain, as she expresses her need for a stronger medication for nausea. Compared to doctors in *Gain*, nurses show a greater desire to understand the patient’s pain and lend substantial support.

Other than the nurses, colleagues and other patients all show empathy and a desire to help Laura. For instance, a colleague comes to Laura’s side for help, although she “never speaks to her, shows up with a case full of herbal remedies” (Powers 135). And

although Laura is unsure of how much help these remedies are, she feels a psychological boost, “this stranger’s concern works its own medicine” (135). In addition, another patient gives Laura the companionship she needs and reminds Laura of the pleasure of company. The friendship that Laura strikes with Ruthie lightens the burden of her time at the hospital, “[r]eassuring, too. Like nobody’s going to come to any lasting harm while Ruthie is around to keep them entertained” (150). As she looks at the IV drips that they both have to endure, Laura marvels at the connection she feels with a fellow patient: “What intricate tubes tie the two of them together... What precarious cocktails we all are” (130). The connections that Laura is able to foster inside the hospital are a far cry from faceless and speechless patients that Gladney meets at the testing facility.

Meeting another woman whose husband suffered from cancer, Laura can notice the difference between those who try to exploit her condition and a genuine connection with a fellow human. The conversation benefits her, as it is “[j]ust talk, to a real human who sees she’s sick and isn’t selling anything” (188). This contrast is felt more when Laura realizes that the woman is asking questions about her symptoms that imply understanding and empathy, that not even her doctors have asked her, “[t]his stranger has asked her more questions in three minutes than her doctor has in three months” (189). The interaction with fellow humans, be they cancer patients or not, benefits Laura greatly and reminds her of the humanity.

Gain depicts the formulation of traumatic experience, a cancer diagnosis in this case, into a meaningful experience (Hawkins 24). Her battle with cancer helps Laura bring new meaning into her life by building connections with others. While she might not have noticed how many people are battling cancer in her community, after her diagnosis she recognizes many other ill individuals, “[t]hey give her that silent salute,

eyes held a fraction too long in regrettable kinship” (Powers 213). In this light, she benefits from people’s empathy and is able to feel it in return. In a sense, the fact that doctors could not care for Laura properly allowed her to find care and connection with other members of her community. In addition, she learns that she lives in a time and place where cancer is more common than she previously supposed. As such, Laura understands the world and those around her better in large part due to her struggle with cancer and the mistreatment of doctors.

While both Gladney and Laura suffer the cold and condescending treatment by doctors due to their capitalist self serving attitudes. *Gain* allows Laura to find support with nurses and loved ones. In addition, she is able to connect with other people that share her experience with illness. *Gain* in this sense departs from *White Noise*’s cynical view of human connection while also recognizing the loss of professionalism in medicine in a capitalist society.

3.4. Surveillance Capitalism and the Technological Domination of Human Lives: the “Datafication” of the Subject in *White Noise* and *Gain*

The dehumanization of the subject is not only the result of the commercialization of medicine but it also results from technological advancements. Technology, in this sense, feeds the capitalist machine by collecting data on humans in order to modify their behavior in what is called surveillance capitalism. In *White Noise*, surveillance capitalism uses technology to collect and use data at the expense of individual independence, creativity and identity. *Gain*, however, depicts a subject who is much more aware of the reasons behind the mining of her data, such as advertisement. In addition, she experiences feelings of guilt and lamentation over her participation in such a culture as oppose to Gladney’s resigned acceptance. Thus, this section analyzes how surveillance capitalism interferes with self fashioning and the contemporary novel’s

attempt to restore the humanity of the subject by equipping its protagonist with a critical view towards technology.

Besides the detrimental effects of the industrial civilization on the planet and its inhabitants, *White Noise* depicts how the information civilization leads to a loss of humanity. The novel depicts a postmodern subject who is unable to exercise his humanity under a capitalist regime lead by technology. In this sense, the advent of technology facilitated the capitalist project by studying and modifying human behavior to profitable ends. Thus, the following examines Gladney's loss of independence, creativity and identity to the machines that penetrate every part of his life.

In her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Shoshana Zuboff argues that technology is a capitalist tool used to generate profit at the expense of humanity. Zuboff laments the fact that in order to participate in a society effectively the individual must accept the constant surveillance, analysis and behavioral alteration exerted by technology (21). In *White Noise*, Gladney is dependent on technology to function in a postmodern society. For instance, he is aware of the legitimacy that the bank automated teller machine bestows on him. When trying to extract money, he feels like it is not money that the machine "authenticated and confirmed" but his sense of self, "[t]he system had blessed [his] life. [He] felt its support and approval" (DeLillo 57). The approval that Gladney receives is juxtaposed with the deranged man that is "escorted from the bank by two armed guards" (57). The man represents the consequences of rejection from the banking system which engenders a shunning from society as a whole. In addition, the system is laced with uncertainty; the approval of today might be the rejection of tomorrow. As such, Gladney acknowledges the fact that he has the "accord" of the banking system "for now" (58) and could lose it at any point. He might lose his accord with the system if he were to break the rules of his ATM code: "Do not carry

your code on your person. REMEMBER... Reveal your code to no one. Only your code allows you to enter the system” (280). In this sense, the individual has to conform to the terms and conditions of surveillance capitalism and its technologies in order to maintain his humanity in the postmodern culture.

In the novel, technology erases the subject; it either renders him useless or arrests him in time and place. For example, Heinrich brings his father’s attention to the fact that despite knowing how to use technology, man would not be able to reproduce it. He compares the postmodern individual to that of the Stone Age and Ancient Greece, who were able to survive in and understand the world through interacting with its elements. While Gladney’s life is made easier by technology, it reduces his creativity and ability for innovation. Contemplating the comforts of electricity, light and refrigerators, Heinrich wonders “what good does it do if we find ourselves hurled back in time and we can't even tell people the basic principles much less actually make something that would improve conditions” (DeLillo 150). The individual, in this sense, is at the mercy of the comforts of technology without the ability to recreate them.

Another example of technological effacement of the individual is Babette’s appearance on T.V. The appearance surprises Gladney and gives him a sense that she is trapped inside the T.V set rather than appearing on it willingly: “What was she doing there, in black and white, framed in formal borders?” (112). The description recalls a prison cell in which Babette is arrested within her own image, her real identity erased, “[i]t was but wasn't her... Babette of electrons and photons, of whatever forces produced that gray light we took to be her face” (113). The prison bar metaphor is similar to that in *Gain*, in which Laura feels imprisoned in her hospital bed. As such, technology, like the hospital, reduces and confines the human experience.

Surveillance Capitalism renders human experience into data, in what Zuboff calls “datafication,” which reduces human life to mere symbols that serve the capitalist machine (301). For instance, when Gladney is exposed to the toxic chemical, the doctor relies on the computer to figure out the damage done on his body. The fact that the doctor says he has access to Gladney’s “history” on the computer feels invasive: “What else did he know? Did he know about my wives, my involvement with Hitler, my dreams and fears?” (DeLillo 144). In addition, having information uploaded on the database of the computer reduces the individual to mere data, ““you are the sum total of your data. No man escapes that”” (145). The technology in this sense comes between Gladney and his death and by extension his life. The probability of Gladney’s life and death is automated to a computer, reduced to symbols on a screen, almost fiction, it “is televised so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself” (145). As a result, Gladney experiences the need to reconnect with the identity he initially created to counter the alienation that technology creates: “It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying. I wanted my academic gown and dark glasses” (145). In this sense, the “datafication” of Gladney’s life brings to mind the double life he is leading at the university and he wishes to return to it as a far more stable ground than that created by the computers.

Leading an effective life in a postmodern culture requires surrender to capitalism and its technologies. Although these technologies seemingly make life easier, the cost is human independence, creativity and authentic experience. In this light, the protagonist of *White Noise* feels helpless in the face of exploitative technologies. The following examination focuses on the reasons behind the dehumanization of individuals that surveillance capitalism generates for profit. In *Gain*, the collection and analysis of human data is used to accurately advertise consumer products or to create subjects who

blindly participate in a capitalist system. In addition, it examines the awareness that the protagonist shows towards the individual participation in the capitalist agenda to the detriment of humanity.

Similar to Gladney, Laura experience the loss of her humanity caused by technological advancement. For instance, she images a future in which the human experience as we know it is replaced by machines, “we’ll all be disembodied. Mobile microcomputer puppets doing our shopping and socializing. Human heads pasted onto modem bodies” (Powers 30). The disembodiment is illustrated by the billboard that her company uses for advertisement. On the billboard Laura’s face is on a fairy godmother’s body “complete with wings and magic wand” (30). The image is meant to convey her ability to make real-estate dreams come true. Metaphorically, Laura’s disembodiment process has already begun as she becomes an image that “sells dreams” for the capitalist machine. However, while Gladney passively accepts the invasiveness of technology, Laura considers the price of her participation in a capitalist agenda. She experiences a sense of guilt at the price of showcasing her billboard on a store front, “[t]he store’s \$25 annual screening fee nags at her conscience, but there’s just no cheaper place” (30). While *Gain* does not present a naïve escape from capitalism and its exploitative technologies, it manages to reflect the subject’s concern about becoming a pawn in a capitalist system.

Richard Powers’s *Gain* paints a sharper picture of the capitalist interests behind the use of technology to collect and analyze the data of individuals. In this sense, surveillance capitalism is depicted as a data collecting system that allows for “targeted advertising,” whereby people receive ads that match their previously demonstrated interests (Zuboff 441). The novel shows how capitalism relies on technology to peek into the minds of people and follow them into their homes. For instance, Laura arrives

home to advertising messages on her phone answering machine: “two solicitations for cash from humans and one from another computer” (Powers 127). In addition, Laura’s former husband is paranoid about the information collected on him based on his purchases, he asserts to Laura that: ““Every time you order anything, you’re giving every stranger with a database a thousand more conclusions to draw about you”” (127). However, Laura is convinced that there is nothing special about her to warrant notice: “The sum of all her silicon data files must type her as a “casual”” (199). That is the crux of the data collection of these capitalist technologies, they are meant to reduce her to an innocuous entity that exists only to consume.

Technology is also used to create miniature world dominators, in the shape of video game players. Laura watches her son play a game in which he is meant to compete with other boys his age by building a dominant civilization, “boys who have never met each other, racing one another to ever-higher levels of domination and mastery” (Powers 202). In order to pray him away from the game, Laura suggests they go to the library given the fact that ““libraries are major civilization advances”” (203). While her son agrees, he wants to continue playing rather than join her, which drives the conclusion that technology has replaced life, “[e]ndless civilization advances, and we can do everything but live” (203). In this sense, she laments the loss of individual life to the temptation of virtual realities. While Laura cannot effect much change in her surroundings, the novel depicts a critical perspective towards capitalist use of technology rather than passive acceptance.

While *White Noise* represents the dehumanizing effects of surveillance capitalism, it fails to contemplate the reasons behind such dehumanization. *Gain*, however, shows how such dehumanization serves the purpose of turning the human into mere consumer. The capitalist machine, as such, does not regard the human as an

individual but as collections of data to be mined for the profit of the market. In this regard, *Gain* depicts concern for the state of humanity rather than the apathy that Gladney in *White Noise* represents.

3.5. Responses to Hostile Environments: From Impotence to Resilience in *White Noise* and *Gain*

The postmodern subject is unable to face the hostilities of modernization, such as environmental damage, surveillance capitalism and consumer culture. Accordingly, *White Noise* depicts the anxieties that the subject struggles to quell in such a hostile environment. The novel portrays characters that, in a postmodern skeptical culture, lack the resources necessary to overcome the challenges of advanced modern life. As such, Gladney and his family are ignorant, impotent and anxious in the face of modern day disasters. *Gain* depicts characters that are living in environments that are equally hostile; yet, they aspire for a better future by seeking knowledge and collaborative work for change. Therefore, this section examines the different identities fashioned as a response to the hostilities of modernization in *White Noise* and *Gain*.

In the following analysis, the focus is on the subject's response to postmodern hostilities. It first considers the ignorant stance of the characters of *White Noise* that results from a skeptical postmodern culture. This culture debunks all grand narratives, such as progress, but offers no alternatives. In this light, the novel depicts the harm done to nature and humanity under the guise of progress. Yet, the subject lacks the ability to stand against those harming him and his planet, which leads to a sense of defeat, ignorance and inaction. As such, the subject struggles for self definition in a world that induces feelings of anxiety that he attempts and fails to quell.

Postmodern criticism is characterized by a loss of certainty in scientific knowledge, claims to truth and modern notions of progress (Storm 209). In *White Noise*, such skepticism disorients the subject and leaves him with no tools to face the hostilities of the postmodern society. For instance, Gladney contemplates his self defeating response to hostilities such as the toxic environment, the untrustworthy medical field as well as technological incursions: “Were we a fragile unit surrounded by hostile facts? Would I promote ignorance, prejudice and superstition to protect my family from the world?” (DeLillo 104). He feels that ignorance, prejudice and superstition are the correct responses to a world that seems to put the life of the individual in danger. His superstition manifests in his belief that living without a clear plan would protect him from anything unexpected that might derail it: “May the days be aimless. Let the seasons drift. Do not advance the action according to a plan” (107). For Gladney, reducing his life to complete inaction and invisibility would protect him from the dangers of postmodern life.

Gladney and his wife show ignorance when they dismiss their son’s concern about the effects of toxic and cancerous chemicals as well as power rays on human psychological health. First, they dismiss his claims as invalid. When he presents them with more information they change the subject by reminiscing on their own education at a younger age: ““What happened to civics, how a bill becomes a law? ... Who won the Lincoln-Douglas debates?”” (173-74). Both Gladney and his wife mention useless information that does not take Heinrich’s concerns into consideration and silence him altogether. Putting their heads in the sand like ostriches and refusing to act or learn seems to be the answer the characters of *White Noise* give to postmodern hostilities.

In his book *Liquid Modernity*, Zygmunt Bauman discusses how postmodern environmental hazards, consumer culture and technological advancement erode the

individual's sense of certainty, safety and security. He argues that the individual is unable to protect himself against these powerful and dominant sources of uncertainty which induces feelings of anxiety that he/she directs to an obsession with immediate concerns such as bodily safety (181). In *White Noise*, Gladney's wife reflects an anxious desire to protect herself against bodily harm. Her fear intensifies after the air-born toxic event, which Gladney notices in her altered temperament. She would disengage mid conversation to gaze out of windows at snowfalls and sunsets, but she does not seem interested in the scenery either, "[t]his private gazing was a form of estrangement not only from those of us around her but from the very things she watched so endlessly" (DeLillo 181). Her anxiety separates her from her present experience to have her focus on a worry for survival.

The toxicity of the environment intensifies Babette's anxiety around her physical safety. Like Laura, Babette attempts to do research in order to understand her psychological state and how to overcome it, "[t]he theme of this story is [her] pain and [her] attempts to end it" (188). When her research yields no viable solution, she resorts to trying an experimental medication that is meant to cure her fear of death. However, Babette is scammed into taking a medication that sounds like science fiction: "They isolated the fear-of-death part of the brain. Dylar speeds relief to that sector" (195). As it transpires, the medication does not work. Similar to Laura, the company that made the medication exploits her pain for profit. Laura is offered chemotherapy that contributes to deteriorating her health and Babette is given a medication that does not work. In this sense both characters are unable to protect themselves from the harm of postmodern society. On the contrary, their anxiety and pain are capitalized on to make further profit for a capitalist system that created these issues.

The anxiety that Gladney experiences turns into a sense of disembodiment and impotence in the face of the danger that he cannot understand or overcome: “I have no body... I'm too weak to move. I lack all sense of resolve, determination” (DeLillo 193). He tries the same strategy of relief that his wife attempted, despite knowing it does not work. He tells his step daughter that he is willing to take the medication that is supposed to protect him from fear of death no matter how foolish that might seem: ““This is what happens, Denise, to desperate people”” (242). When the escape plan does not work, Gladney attempts to gain control by becoming the instigator of violence. Therefore, he starts to carry a gun that allows him to create an alternate life, in which he has control, “[t]he gun created a second reality for [him] to inhabit... It was a reality [he] could control, secretly dominate” (281). This is an instance in which Gladney tries to hide behind another fake identity.

Gladney's fantasy of power collapses when he is injured and his pain reduces him to human weakness that he thinks of as “meaningless” (296). The importance that the instigation of violence would bestow turns out to be mere lofty delusion, “[he] was disappointed. Hurt, stunned and disappointed” and wonders “[w]hat had happened to the higher plane of energy in which [he'd] carried out [his] scheme?” (296). Eventually, the man he attempts to murder survives, he is unwell “[b]ut he wouldn't die either, which gave him the edge on [Gladney]. The drive home was uneventful” (303). As such, Gladney attempts to regain control on a chaotic postmodern world and discovers that all his attempts to escape are futile. His plans are unremarkable failures that emphasize his impotence against the hostilities of postmodernity.

White Noise reflects the inability of the subject to overcome the hostilities of postmodern life. The novel depicts how the subject, having lost all grounds for certainty, becomes ignorant, impotent and anxious. All attempts at quieting these

anxieties fail and leave the subject vulnerable to further exploitative harm. Similarly, *Gain* acknowledges the hostility of the postmodern society. Nevertheless, it depicts individuals who are willing to overcome the challenges they encounter. Thus, the following analysis examines the ways in which the characters of *Gain* do not fall prey to ignorance and despair. On the contrary, the protagonist and her family realize that there is hope for a better future. The characters seek knowledge and collaborative action that they might become bearers of positive change in their environments.

Initially, Laura shares Gladney's experience of disconnection from her life as a result of her illness. The illness robs Laura of her normal life that she feels like a stranger in it, "[h]er life. *Her life*, Laura keeps telling herself. But the thing feels like nothing she's ever visited" (Powers 119). In addition, Laura loses command over her actions, which makes her feel as if "[s]he's perched on her own shoulder, watching her puppet body" (119). The puppet metaphor is apt for the toll that the illness takes on her body as well as her mind. All motivation to participate in life disappears for Laura. She feels like she is slowly dying as she loses her desire to go about her daily routine, "[s]he dies the day [she] wakes up and doesn't want coffee. Doesn't want to look at the morning *Post-Chronicle*" (199). Consequently, Laura feels "light, insubstantial, emptied" (200). Like *White Noise*, *Gain* depicts the destructive effects of postmodern ailments on the individual.

As oppose to Gladney however, Laura is open to learning about postmodern hostilities and how they've caused her illness. Like Gladney, Laura's daughter tries to explain that the correlation between her mother's illness and the capitalist corporations responsible for it. While Gladney does not heed his son's concerns, Laura seriously considers her daughter's perspective, "[s]he feels her daughter's brassy strength, the strength of seventeen, and wants to deliver herself to its care" (Powers 214). Laura

wants to understand the cause of her illness, whether it is linked to reckless industries and this is not just “scapegoating” (214). She is much more interested in understanding the world she lives in and its consequences than Gladney who would rather the ignorant position for his deep-seated belief that he cannot affect change.

Laura shows the resilience and strength in dealing with her illness that Gladney lacks. She relies on her community and family to deliver her from the pain of her illness. For instances, as she looks around at the people attending a communal bonfire, she is comforted by the annual tradition, “[w]hatever happens from here on, tonight excites her. Now feels warm upon her face” (Powers 217). The tradition grounds her in the present rather than some distant fear of the future. In addition, looking at family photos, Laura feels as though happy memories of her children can single handedly cure her cancer. As she flips through the picture album, “[b]y the fifth little flap she is certain of it. No cancer in the world could survive such blasting” (241). Furthermore, Laura imagines her children’s future; their graduations and jobs, which gives her a boost of determination to survive her cancer battle, “[s]he wants to make it. She’s gotten into the habit of existing. She likes being here” (243). Laura, as oppose to Gladney, manages to find ways to resist the gloomy finality of her illness.

Laura’s former husband, Don, feels compelled to exercise the same violence that Gladney has on those responsible for his pain. In *Gain*, the enemy is much clearly defined than it is in *White Noise*. The cancer that riddles the mother of his children and the rest of the town is the industrial corporation that is releasing toxic chemicals into the atmosphere. So, Don decides to pay the compound of the corporation a visit and possibly destroy it in what is described as “[t]he anarchist’s dream: fifteen feet away from being able to change things forever” (Powers 256). But after contemplation, he realizes that even if he could bring down this one corporation he would not end the

capitalist system that fuels it, because “there is no ground zero. Nothing an anarchist could ever hit, even in imagination” (257). The endeavor is fool’s gold, as the hustle and bustle of company does not prove easy to inspect for wrongful conduct on a world wide scale, “[d]id he think he could see the leak from here? Some liquid spill back in the corner that he could photograph for evidence?” (257). While *Gain* shows a more specific target to blame for modern ailments, it shares the view in *White Noise* that no single entity can be held accountable but a whole economic system.

Participating in the lawsuit against the company might be the avenue through which Laura can give meaning to her pain. Initially, Laura feels like she is not the suitable person for such a serious matter as suing a massive industrial company: “They need someone else... Someone who can say what everybody in this town is feeling” (Powers 282). She is convinced that her contribution is too insignificant for any real change, she doubts that her ““joining or not joining will have any bearing on the outcome at all”” (285). However, she contemplates joining the lawsuit once Don reminds her of the compensation that her children could benefit from, “[h]is words set off her worst fear, her primal hope” (287). Laura’s motherly instinct that she fears has lost at the beginning of the novel appears to be intact at the end of it.

Besides the possibility of providing a stable future for her children, Laura finds herself desiring of definite answers concerning the cause of her illness, she “[wants] to know, know something, while knowing is still a going proposition” (292). She learns that she might have developed cancer from the Clare herbicides she has been using for her garden, which gives her the final boost she needs to join the lawsuit, “[s]ue them, she thinks. Every penny they are worth. Break them up for parts” (320). As oppose to the ignorance that Gladney seems comfortable with, Laura realizes that protecting her children and providing for them necessitates learning and taking proactive action.

Laura does not survive her cancer battle but her children learn and grow through the difficult experience. For instance, Laura's daughter starts learning to garden for her mother who is bed ridden, "[h]er daughter, wearing her boots and gloves, jumping clumsily on the heel of the shovel" (Powers 318). At seventeen, the girl shows incentive to help her mother accomplish a task she has not been interested in previously. Moreover, the garden can be read as a metaphor for growth, Laura's illness pushes Ellen to do better by her mother and the world. Furthermore, Laura struggles to speak as her condition gets progressively worse, but Ellen is speaking for her. Ellen crashes the local news broadcast to burn Clare cosmetic products on air by way of retaliation, which makes her silent mother proud, "Laura finds herself, searches for Good girl, but pain annihilates even those syllables" (242). In addition, Laura's illness shapes the futures of her children positively. Armed with knowledge, Ellen discovers she has ovarian cancer at an earlier stage than her mother, which helps her prognosis. Laura's son, Tim, becomes a cancer researcher and decides to use the settlement money from the lawsuit to advance his research with a team, "Tim suggested that it might be time for the little group of [his colleagues] to incorporate" (355). Using the money and creating a corporation that is meant to conquer evil rather than perpetuate it represents the hopeful view of the novel.

Gain represents the contemporary departure from the ignorant position of the subject in *White Noise*. While *Gain* shares *White Noise*'s perspective on the systematic nature of postmodern hostilities, such as industrial health hazards, the novel allows the subject to affect change in his immediate environment. The characters of *Gain* are able to stand against the menace of postmodernity by seeking knowledge and collaborating with others.

In conclusion, this chapter is an examination of the hostile circumstances in which the postmodern and contemporary subjects have to define themselves. Through the concepts of risk society, consumerism, surveillance capitalism and the commercialization of the medical field, the chapter analyzes the struggles faced by the contemporary subject when engaged in self fashioning. As it expires, both the postmodern *White Noise* and the contemporary *Gain* acknowledge the difficulty of clear self definition in a dehumanizing culture. However, Powers's *Gain* manages to humanize its characters by affording them the dignity of critical thinking, fulfilling human relationships and the ability to strive for change.

General Conclusion

This study analyzed the portrayal of the human subject in selected works of Don DeLillo and Richard Powers from the lens of Stephen Greenblatt's *Self Fashioning*. The research compared Powers's *The Echo Maker*, *Orfeo* and *Gain* to DeLillo's *Americana*, *Libra* and *White Noise*, respectively. The comparison revealed that Powers engages in an intertextual dialogue with DeLillo in order to revive some aspects of the humanist subject. As part of the contemporary project to revive the humanist subject after it was pronounced dead by poststructuralist thinkers and postmodern authors alike, Powers creates characters that reflect some humanist ideals. Nevertheless, Powers's characters represent the legacy of postmodern characterization; in their fragmentation, struggle against external control and battles with the mysteries of contemporary society. Powers takes postmodernist authors, DeLillo in particular, as a blue print for his characters, while attempting to move beyond a cynical and doomed view of the humanist subject within fiction and society.

The research was divided into three chapters. Chapter one analyzed the representation of the subject in Don DeLillo's *Americana* and Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker* in postmodernist and contemporary literature, respectively. The chapter concludes that the characters of both novels struggle with fragmented self narratives. However, *The Echo Maker* reflects the willingness of its protagonist to rewrite a broken narrative as oppose to *Americana*, which surrenders to it. The chapter relied on Stephen Greenblatt's concept of narrative self fashioning in its comparison of the characters in *Americana* and *The Echo Maker*. As it follows, Greenblatt acknowledges the fact that self narratives cannot escape fragmentation. However, he argues that fragmented self narratives are constantly refashioned, rather than complete abandoned to the manipulation of interpretation (238). Accordingly, compared to *Americana*, the subject

in Powers does not disappear as a result of a fragmented self narrative; he rather constantly rewrites it into a coherent whole.

The chapter argued that the characters in both novels acknowledge that their self narratives are the result of pre-existing linguistic signification. However, in *The Echo Maker*, Mark insists on the legitimacy of his self narrative. In addition, the chapter explored the deception of self narratives due to their status as creative processes. In *Americana*, the fabrications self narratives are embraced, while *The Echo Maker* reveals the need for these narratives even if they include falsehoods. Furthermore, the chapter examined the important role of self narratives in relationships. The relationships of these characters with others, personal or public, are only consistent and stable if their self narratives are equally so. The last section of the chapter investigated the solutions to the breakdown of self narratives in both novels and their degree of failure or success. In this case, advertisement fails to offer the protagonist in *Americana* a solid sense of self, while *The Echo Maker* proposes therapy as a collaborative endeavor that helps the individual construct a coherent and future projecting self narrative.

Section one of chapter one examined the post-structuralist belief that the subject relies on language as a medium for identity construction. As a result of the notion that discursive meaning is never stable, the subject lacks coherence and continuity. Influenced by poststructuralists, Postmodern authors portray characters that lack stability and unity. In this sense, Don DeLillo's *Americana* depicts the fraudulent, 'babble' like and sterile use of language in the construction of self narratives. The section concludes that while *Americana* accepts the postmodern subject as unknowable and discontinuous, *The Echo Maker* challenges such an erasure of the self. Similar to David, the protagonist of *The Echo Maker* faces the challenge that discursive meaning

poses to identity construction. However, Mark is not discouraged by the dissolution of his self narrative; he rather seeks to reconstruct it.

Section two of the chapter looks at the hyperrealist culture that creates a sense of disconnection from reality due to the flooding of the senses with media images. As such, the hyperreal replaces the real with its empty image. In *Americana*, the hyperrealist culture is shown to give rise to superficial concerns in the subject. For instance, David's narrative is always on the verge of disintegration as result of his focus on images as material to fashion a life. As such, the section read David's autobiographical film as a failed attempt to reflect meaning. Accordingly, *Americana* questions the notion that art can convey stable meaning, especially about the self. Art, according to the novel, reflects the chaotic, superficial and hollow hyperrealist culture in which identity is constructed.

Both *Americana* and *The Echo Maker* depict self narratives as creative processes, in which the self is but a construct. While David reflects the creative aspect of the self in images, Mark resorts to confabulation as a creative endeavor. As a confabulator, Mark is comforted by the explanations he conjures for his memory loss and narrative fragmentation, no matter how far-fetched they are. Seen through confabulation, the analysis showed the necessity of self narratives despite the fact that they are mostly fabricated.

Section three of the chapter examined the narcissistic traits that David exhibits, such as an inner emptiness and a preoccupation with external validation, which hinder his ability to cultivate reciprocal relationships. His weak relationships further illustrate the lack of substance in David's self narrative. In *Americana* as well as *The Echo Maker*, the protagonists are isolated as a result of a disintegrated self narrative. For

Mark in *The Echo Maker*, his relationship problems lie in his memory loss which adds to his paranoia and distrust of others. In this sense, the novel highlights the need for a coherent self narrative for the development of strong relationships.

Section four of the chapter inspected the social saturation characteristic of postmodern culture in DeLillo's *Americana* and Powers's *The Echo Maker*. Social saturation results from the excessive interconnection among individuals through technology. The section examined how social saturation leads to the development of pseudo-relationships and a fragmented sense of self. One example is the relationship between the performer and the audience of a piece of media. In what is called "para-social" relationships, the audience feels the extreme of social saturation, as they love and feel a sense of kinship and familiarity with a character on a screen. The section concluded that the para-social relationships of the characters in *Americana* resulted in the fragmentation of their self narratives. In *The Echo Maker*, para-social relationships are analyzed from the perspective of the performer. Thus, the section examined the depiction of the equal fragmentation of the performer as part of para-social relationships in Powers's novel. It also focused on his attempt to save the coherence of his self narrative that he has lost to these relationships.

The last section of the chapter investigated the solutions of postmodern culture to the ailments of the empty self, such as advertisement and therapy. In *Americana*, advertisement is shown to capitalize on and help aggravate the emptiness of the self. In this sense, advertisement sells an ideal image that can only be attained by the purchase of products. In the novel, this sense that one's ideal self is always out there and never fully achieved worsens David's sense of emptiness. Accordingly, the section emphasized the failure of advertisement to enhance David's life and drive his self narrative forward. The field of psychotherapy is equally culpable in the taking

advantage of the condition of the empty self and not offering real solutions. In *The Echo Maker*, Doctor Weber represents the powerful position that therapists hold and the ethical questions such power raises. Doctor Weber is shown to exploit Mark in order to write profitable books, which helps in exploring the fact that self narratives are largely fictitious and how he is only able to help Mark once he allows him to construct his own story.

Chapter two compared the postmodern and contemporary depictions of personal agency and authenticity. It focuses on DeLillo's *Libra* and Richard Powers *Orfeo*. In *Libra*, the restriction of external control on the subject curtails his agency and authenticity. However, *Orfeo* represents a sense of interdependence rather than complete restriction or independence. The subject in *Orfeo* is not fully independent from relationships and external influence but manages to create a balance between them and a sense of agency and authenticity. The comparison is carried through the lens of Greenblatt's view of agency and authenticity in self fashioning. Agency and authenticity are interrelated according to Greenblatt, who views authenticity as directness of action that does not submit to the rules of others thereby maintaining agency (35-36). The chapter relies on his conclusion that self fashioning depends on one's cultural context; however, maintaining that autonomous self fashioning is a vital illusion (256-57).

The chapter compared the historical situatedness of the subject in DeLillo's *Libra* and Powers's *Orfeo* and how it affects the agency and authenticity of characters in each novel. As such, the chapter explored the effects of the historical context of the subject in these novels and whether it allows for the achievement of a sense of agency and authenticity. To do so, the novels were examined from the lens of historiographic metafiction. The chapter argued that Linda Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction is more suited for contemporary rather than postmodern fiction. For, *Libra*

depicts a historical situatedness of the subject that erases his agency, while *Orfeo* manages to fit Hutcheon's definition where such situatedness does not equal the complete disappearance of the subject as an agent. Moreover, historical documents, questions over dominant ideologies and the possibility of truth under power are examined in the novels to show the discrepancy between postmodern and contemporary representation of these issues. While *Libra* depicts a subject whose agency and authenticity disappear as a result of historical narratives that are imposed by dominant ideologies, *Orfeo* strikes a balance between these narratives and the subject as an authentic agent. In this sense, the novel depicts a subject who is able to speak a personal truth to power in order to take accountability and responsibility for his actions.

Section one of chapter two explored the loss of a shared sense of community and moral grounds in the modern industrial society. Such a loss leads to the isolation of the individual. The absence of tradition and convention leaves the self vulnerable to outside influences and only gives the illusion of freedom. The section concluded that the lack of tradition results in weak individual value systems and that can be observed in a lack of agency and authenticity in persons. In *Libra*, Lee Harvey Oswald is the prototype of the isolated individual of the modern American culture. His lack of agency and authenticity make him a pawn in a conspiracy against President Kennedy.

The section also examined in *Orfeo* a path to agency and authenticity that does not exclude human connection. In the novel, self fashioning centers on Els's identity as an artist who tries to strike a balance between the rebellion of postmodernism and a nostalgia for past influences. It read the novel through the lens of 'new sincerity' and how it shapes contemporary art after postmodernism. From the perspective of new sincerity love and connection are embraced in the novel despite their potential for

manipulation. The novel reflects a belief that human connection is necessary to self-fashioning despite its likely manipulative influence.

Section two of the chapter linked the loss of agency portrayed in *Libra* to the fact that individuals are shaped by their historical context. In this sense, individuals and groups cannot exercise agency to effect change in the course of history. The section relied on Linda Hutcheon's concept of 'historiographic metafiction' in order to analyze the characters within *Libra*. Hutcheon's concept helped analyze the characters in the novel who possess no personal agency but are controlled by their historical context. The section challenged Hutcheon's view that this type of postmodern fiction does not completely destroy the subject, but that the authors merely situate the subject in context (159). However, the section concluded that postmodern novels such as DeLillo's *Libra*, and its focus on destroying traditional notions of subjectivity, depict subjects that are fixed in history to the point of complete eradication of their human agency and sense of self.

Equally, the section read *Orfeo* through the lens of historiographic metafiction as it depicted the artist as a product of his historical moment. As oppose to *Libra*, *Orfeo* fits Hutcheon's view of historiographic metafiction as it situates the subject without his complete disappearance. Thus, the analysis explored the fact that the artist may be shaped by his historical context but is still able to maintain the agency necessary to create authentic art. Els and other artists are shown to hold fast to their human need for agency and authenticity while acknowledging the impact of cultural shifts on their art, such as the assassination of Kennedy.

Section three of the chapter looks at the challenge that historiographic metafiction poses to the notion that the past can be straightforwardly known through its documents.

It argues that historical documents only provide fragments of the past that then require the interpretation of the historian into a presumably factitious narrative (Hutcheon 122). Likewise, *Libra* questioned the reliability of documents; such as photographs, diaries and official reports, in telling the unbiased history of the Kennedy assassination and people involved in it. The section focused on the documents that attempted to define Oswald as a knowable and coherent subject with a clear motive but failed to do so. As oppose to the beliefs of traditional historiography, the section highlighted the fact that documents are a barrier to agency and authenticity rather than a path towards them.

Orfeo also maintains the notion that documents contain highly curated pieces of information that tell a specific version of history. Nevertheless, Powers depicts characters that possess some autonomy in relation to their opinions and actions towards historical documents. Accordingly, the analysis concluded that *Orfeo* achieves a dialectical relationship between the lack of control over historical documents and the agency that the subject might be able to exercise in their interpretation. The documents in the novel are either rejected, looked at from a different perspective or made into art.

Section four of the chapter analyzed *Libra* as an interrogative text that disturbs subjectivity and reality within and outside the text by questioning dominant ideologies and narratives. In such texts the agency of the characters and the readers is eroded as the answers to their inquiries are never attained. Conversely, *Orfeo* encourages the reader to actively seek answers to his queries. Thus, the section explored the suggestion of the novel that the reader follow his curiosity in order to decipher not only the inconsistencies of the novel but also that of his position in his unique world.

The final section of chapter analyzed the attempts of subjective truth-telling in *Libra* and how they are restrained or completely eroded by power. The erosion of

truthful accounts of the self resulted in the gradual fragmentation and erasure of agency for the characters in *Libra*. While *Orfeo* acknowledges the ways in which power restricts one's ability to speak the truth, it allows its protagonist to act with agency and authenticity. Despite restrictions, Els manages to speak to an audience and loved ones in a way that signals accountability. *Orfeo* depicts the demand to give a truthful account of oneself in a social context as a chance to take accountability and receive forgiveness rather than a burden.

The third and final chapter considered the hostility of contemporary life and its effects on the subject in DeLillo's *White Noise* and Powers's *Gain*. In *White Noise*, the process of identity construction is burdened by the alien and hostile circumstances of postmodern life. Similarly, *Gain* depicts the ways in which the subject is emotionally and physically destroyed by contemporary life. However, the latter novel portrays characters that are resilient and wish to achieve personal change regardless of the hostile environment they inhabit. Again, the comparison between the two novels was carried through Greenblatt's argument that self fashioning occurs in relation to external circumstance that is "perceived as alien, strange or hostile" (09). In this light, the chapter argued that the characters in both novels must define themselves against the alien forces of their environments. Such as consumerism, environmental hazards and technological encroachments on humanity.

The chapter examined some alien and hostile aspects of postmodern and contemporary life that the subject must face in the process of self fashioning. Based on the comparison between DeLillo's *White Noise* and Powers's *Gain*, the chapter concludes that both the postmodern and contemporary subject have to define themselves within an alien and hostile environment. Yet, the contemporary subject of *Gain* is more capable of creating a character that is resilient in the face of hostility compared to that

of *White Noise*. To reach this conclusion, the chapter considers modern risk society, consumerism, the commercialization of medicine, surveillance capitalism and their dehumanization of the subject in both novels. As it follows, *White Noise* depicts characters whose self fashioning is hampered by anxiety, while the characters in *Gain* construct identities despite these hostilities in order to project a positive view of the future.

Section one of chapter three analyzed *White Noise* through the lens of risk society and its effects on postmodern self fashioning. The postmodern subject seeks to define himself against the uncertainties that over industrialization produces. The environmental and health risks that the subject has to recon with in the novel leads to his suggestibility, ignorance, pretense and denial. All of these diverse responses also represent the disintegration of subjective unity in the risk society. Similarly, Richard Powers's *Gain* depicts how risk society disintegrates the reality and identity of the individual under the weight of health risks. However, Laura tries to understand the causes of her cancer and comes to the conclusion that it might be the exposure to chemicals from an industrial company in her town. Thus, the section concludes that the protagonist of *Gain* is more capable of understanding how risk society affects her identity construction than those in *White Noise*.

Sections two of the chapter looks at how the characters in *White Noise* define themselves within the parameters of consumer culture. Consumerism is used by Gladney and his family members to escape insignificance and give their lives coherence. Thus, the analysis focused on the ways in which the consumer uses products to construct an identity and placate their anxieties. In *Gain*, the protagonist faces the fact that consumer culture has only sold her a dream that does not hold when met with

terminal illness. In this sense, *Gain* portrays an individual that is much more awakened to the harm of consumer culture.

Section three of the chapter focused on the exploitative nature of the medical field in American postmodern culture and its impact on self definition. In *White Noise*, the medical field treats its patients as dehumanized subjects that serve its interests. The inferior and fearful position that Gladney finds himself in is dramatized in the novel to create imaginary and unnecessary suffering for the individual. Much like Gladney, Laura experiences the impersonality of doctors and their self serving tendencies in *Gain*. As a result, Laura becomes disconnected from herself and reality within the medical space. However, the section concluded that *Gain* differs from *White Noise* in that it explores avenues of human connection beyond the medical setting.

Section four of the chapter analyzes a postmodern subject who is unable to exercise his humanity under a capitalist regime lead by technology. In this sense, the advent of technology facilitated the capitalist project by studying and modifying human behavior to profitable ends. Thus, Gladney loses independence, creativity and identity to the machines that penetrate every part of his life. The second half of the section focused on the reasons behind the dehumanization of individuals that surveillance capitalism generates for profit. In *Gain*, the collection and analysis of human data is used to accurately advertise consumer products or to create subjects who blindly participate in a capitalist system. In addition, it examined the awareness that the protagonist shows towards the individual participation in the capitalist agenda to the detriment of humanity.

The final section of the chapter analyzed the subject's response to postmodern hostilities. It first considers the ignorant stance of the characters of *White Noise* that

results from a skeptical postmodern culture. This culture debunks all grand narratives, such as progress, but offers no alternatives. In this light, the novel depicts the harm done to nature and humanity under the guise of progress. Yet, the subject lacks the ability to stand against those harming him and his planet, which leads to a sense of defeat, ignorance and inaction. As such, the subject struggles for self definition in a world that induces feelings of anxiety that he attempts and fails to quell. Similarly, *Gain* acknowledges the hostility of the postmodern society. Nevertheless, it depicts individuals who are willing to overcome the challenges they encounter. The protagonist and her family realize that there is hope for a better future. The characters seek knowledge and collaborative action that they might become bearers of positive change in their environments.

To conclude, the research has taken a few selected works of Don DeLillo and Richard Powers in order to analyze the revival of the humanist subject in contemporary fiction. The research yielded that Powers engages in an intertextual dialogue with DeLillo in order to contest the postmodern view of the subject as permanently fragmented, controlled and weak. Powers clearly takes a page from DeLillo's work, quite literally, in his depiction of the subject. In this sense, the characters in Powers's fiction are aware of the illusory aspect of an autonomous, coherent and resilient self fashioning in contemporary culture. However, they insist on refashioning their identities into autonomous, coherent and capable ones, no matter how provisional or illusory.

This research focused on one subject area and a limited number of works from these two authors for the sake of clarity and brevity. As such, it would be interesting to read further research that traces an intertextual link in other novels by DeLillo and Powers. Not only where it comes to the self, but with regards to other aspects of

literature and culture, such as, their shared concern for the environment, the economy and the cultural discourse surrounding these topics.

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الملخص

يركز هذا البحث على إعادة إحياء الأنسنة في الأدب المعاصر بعد نفيها من طرف مفكرين وأدباء ما بعد العصرية. لتحقيق هذا الهدف، يقارن هذا البحث بين روايات دون ديليلو *أميريكانا*، *ليبرا*، *والضوضاء البيضاء* وروايات ريتشارد باورز *صانع الصدى*، *أرفاير والريح*. يعتمد البحث على مبدأ ستفن غرينبلات لصياغة الذات حسب التاريخية الجديدة. عن طريق هذا المبدأ تتم دراسة القصص الذاتية، الاستقلال الذاتي، الصدق الذاتي والصلابة الشخصية لشخصيات هذه الروايات. كما تعتمد على بعض مبادئ ما بعد البنيوية كالاختلاف اللغوي، ما وراء الحقيقة، والأدب التاريخي الميتافيزيقي لتحليل الثقافات فيما بعد الحداثة والمعاصرة التي تصوغ الشخص. توصل البحث إلى أن الشخصيات في *أميريكانا* لا تتحلّى بقصص ذاتية موحدة بينما الشخصيات في *صانع الصدى* تمتلك القدرة على توحيد قصصها الذاتية. وفي *ليبرا* لا يمتلك الشخص حرية التصرف باستقلال وصدق ذاتي مقارنة بالشخص في *أرفاير* الذي يستطيع أن يجد توازنا بين الاستقلال والصدق الذاتي والتأثير الاجتماعي. أخيراً، تهزم الظروف الغريبة في المجتمع المعاصر الشخصيات في *الضوضاء البيضاء*، بينما تتحلّى الشخصيات في *الريح* بالصلابة رغم الظروف. حيث الشخصيات الفلقة في *الضوضاء البيضاء* لا تستطيع بناء هويات صلبة بينما الهويات في *الريح* تتحلّى بالصلابة التي تمكنها من مواجهة الصعاب وتصور مستقبل أفضل. بهذا الشكل، يوجد تناص بين باورز وديليو حيث يقوم باورز بتطبيق دروس كتاب ما وراء الحداثة فيما يخص الذاتية في الأدب ولكن يحاول أن يرسم منظورا أكثر تفاؤلا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ما بعد العصرية، الأدب المعاصر، إعادة إحياء، الأنسنة، صياغة الذات.