

ABSTRACT

JOHNSON, JENNIFER CAMILLE. Body Politics in Don DeLillo, Adrienne Rich, and Andy Warhol: A Study in Postmodern Culture. (Under the direction of Jon Thompson.)

For many postmodern artists, such as Don DeLillo, Adrienne Rich, and Andy Warhol, the human body and identity are constantly challenged, refigured, and re-envisioned. In this thesis, I explore to what extent each of these artists depicts the human body as disempowered or empowered in postmodern American culture. In Chapter One, "Technology, Death, and Identity in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*," I examine the ways in which *White Noise* explores the nexus between the body, pop culture, fear, and death. In Chapter Two, "Adrienne Rich: Toward an Embodied Poetics," I explore the shifts in emphasis throughout most of Rich's poetry and how she explores the fate of the female body in a capitalist, patriarchal society. In Chapter Three, "The Visual Art of Andy Warhol: Fame, Death, and Disaster in American Popular Culture," I investigate how Warhol explores the human body as image and surface that lack depth or inherent meaning and human identity as a façade manufactured by American culture. In the "Concluding Remarks," I discuss the relationship between genre and each artist's perspectives of the body while also exploring each artist's conclusions about the empowerment and disempowerment of the human body in postmodern American culture.

Body Politics in Don DeLillo, Adrienne Rich, and Andy Warhol: A Study in Postmodern American Culture

by

Jennifer Camille Johnson

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

ENGLISH

Raleigh, North Carolina

2007

Approved by:

Dr. Hans Kellner, Committee Member

Dr. David Rieder, Committee Member

Dr. Jon Thompson
Chair of Advisory Committee

DEDICATION

To Ross—

BIOGRAPHY

Jennifer Camille Johnson attended North Carolina State University as a Park Scholar and received a B.A. in Spanish, a minor in English, and a concentration in Pre-med in 2002. Immediately following graduation, she moved abroad to immerse herself in Latin American culture, to refine her Spanish language skills, and to continue her volunteer work. In 2004, she began her Masters degree in English at North Carolina State University and received her M.A. in English in 2007.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to sincerely thank the members of my committee for their continued support and expertise during the development of this thesis. In particular, I would like to thank my thesis director, Jon Thompson, whose direction these past several years has been invaluable to my graduate career, and most particularly, to my continued development as a writer and aspiring academic.

The development of the ideas in this thesis initially began during my enrollment in Jon Thompson's undergraduate Postmodernism class, in which I was first exposed to and began to be interested in postmodernism. My interest in postmodernism's treatment of the human body and identity continued to be fostered during my first semester in graduate school, and most specifically in Jon Thompson's graduate class on Contemporary Literary Theory. I would also like to thank David Rieder for creating a graduate class on the posthuman, which exposed me to contemporary theory, literature, and film that all focus on the human body and identity. Many of the texts we examined in the Posthuman class played an integral role in my understanding of the human body in postmodern American culture and in the development of my thesis topic.

Finally, I would like to thank Hans Kellner for graciously consenting to join my thesis committee as the third reader and for his role in the redevelopment of this thesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Pages
<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
Introduction: The Human Subject in Postmodern American Culture	1
Chapter 1: Technology, Death, and Identity in Don DeLillo's <i>White Noise</i>	
I. Introduction.....	5
II. Disembodiment: The Physical Body as Simulacra of Identity and Self.....	6
Names	
Identity and the Body	
Identity through Consumerism	
III. Simulated Death in American Culture and in DeLillo's <i>White Noise</i>	14
We are in Life an Imitation of Our Dead Selves	
By Living the Simulation, the "Real" Disappears	
The Affirmation of the "Real" by the Media	
Death of the Physical Body	
IV. The Physical Body in Relation to Technology in the Age of White Noise.....	21
The Body as Waves and Radiation	
The Fallibility of the Human Senses	
Relationship between the Body and Medicine	
V. Ruptures of the Simulacra of Death.....	28
VI. Concluding Remarks.....	30
Chapter 2: Adrienne Rich: Toward an Embodied Poetics	
I. Introduction.....	34
II. Focus on Women's Lives: Social Status Within Marriage and the Female Psyche.....	35
The Muted Female and the Absent Body	
Examination of the Female Psyche	
III. The Body as Site of Conflict.....	46
The Body as War Zone and the Enemy as Lover	
The Personal and Public Affect of War	
Historical Women and the Role of the Poet	
IV. The Historical Body: Diving into the Wreck and Reclaiming What was Lost.....	58
V. An Embodied Poetics.....	65
Chapter 3: The Visual Art of Andy Warhol: Fame, Death, and Disaster in American Popular Culture	
I. Introduction.....	70
II. Celebrities: The Connection between Fame and Death.....	72

III. Death and Disaster.....	77
IV. Concluding Remarks.....	82
Concluding Remarks	
I. Relationship between Genre and Perspectives on the Body.....	86
II. The Human Subject.....	90
Technology	
The Human Body as “Object” or “Subject”	
Works Cited.....	97

List of Figures

	Pages
Figure 1. “Melencholia I”	51
Figure 2. “Marilyn Diptych”	74
Figure 3. “Marilyn Monroe’s Lips”	75
Figure 4. “Turquoise Marilyn”	76
Figure 5. “White Car Burning III”	78
Figure 6. “Saturday Disaster”	79
Figure 7. “Twelve Electric Chairs”	81
Figure 8. “Tunafish Disaster”	82

INTRODUCTION

The Human Subject in Postmodern American Culture

In much postmodern¹ discourse, the traditional views of the human subject—as the autonomous, trans-historical source of truth, rationality and identity—have come under debate. For many theorists and authors, the human subject is no longer considered the center from which to articulate the universe but is, instead, a position²—something “produced in a whole range of discursive practices—economic, social and political—the meanings of which are a constant site of struggle over power” (Weedon 21). As a result of this shift from center to position, human identity is no longer considered to be pre-existing; but instead, it is a construction of the political and social culture of postwar America.

Like many postmodern artists, Don DeLillo, Adrienne Rich, and Andy Warhol examine the extent to which the human body and identity are constantly refigured, challenged, and re-envisioned. Their works explore the advent of technological innovations, the physical body is no longer only flesh but also includes technological apparatus, such as heart pacers, tooth fillings, and artificial limbs. The body’s interaction with television and cell phones, for example, result in an onslaught of waves and radiation that constantly pass through the flesh, interact with the flesh, and in part, become the flesh. Through the media, the physical body can be refigured and transformed from flesh into an image³ on a television screen, in art, or on the page of a newspaper or magazine. They see the outward appearance of the body as having become more important than one’s inner traits. Through consumerism,

¹ “Postmodernism” is a controversial concept. For further discussion, see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991); Peter Brooker, ed., *Modernism/Postmodernism* (1991); Carlo Mangardini, “The Ideology of Postmodernity” (1992).

² The human subject as “position” is explained in Michele Foucault’s *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972).

³ I will discuss the body as image in Chapters 1 and 3.

the body is objectified—becoming something to dress or present more as an image or façade than as an entity of human existence. Consumerism also affects human identity in that it shapes it with possessions: what one wears, where one lives, to what extent does one “fit” the social and political stereotypes of one’s gender all culturally determined who one is. This postmodern identity is also complicated by technology—as the dialogue of television enters our consciousness, we relate our lives more to the media than to reality *per se*; we use the media to characterize another group of people as the “enemy” or as the “other”, and we celebrate through the media and through art the body and self as image and as a cultural production, rather than as something more substantive.

For many American writers, poets, and artists, the fate of the human body and identity in postmodern American culture becomes an issue of great concern: To what extent is the human subject liberated by postmodernism? How has technology both facilitated and hindered human existence? Should a new human subjectivity be constructed, and if so, how? And to what extent does our fear of mortality and our quest for immortality play in our postmodern construction of the body and identity in relation to death?

In each of the major genres (novel, poetry, and art), the answers to these questions vary. In this thesis, I seek to examine how one canonical author from each of these genres (novel, poetry, and pop art) casts the human subject in postmodern American culture. In Chapter One, “Technology, Death, and Identity in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*,” I examine Don DeLillo, one of the most influential novelists in postwar American literature, and the ways in which in *White Noise* (1985), he explores the nexus between the body, pop culture, fear, and death. For DeLillo, the physical body has become oddly disembodied through consumerism and technology, and human identity has become based on materialism. He sees

the human subject as being further disembodied by the infiltration of death and disaster in postmodern American culture, and the human body and identity as being complicated by technology to such an extent that everything must be deciphered, even ourselves. *White Noise* explores the extremes and limits of this culture.

In Chapter Two, “Adrienne Rich: Toward an Embodied Poetics,” I examine Adrienne Rich, one of the most influential American poets of the twentieth century and a foundational feminist writer. I am especially interested in the ways in which her poetry explores the fate of the female body in a capitalist, patriarchal society. Rich asserts that, through poetry, she can evoke social and political change in how the female body and identity are viewed. Within her early poetry career, she explores, through traditional poetic forms, the telling absence of the female body in a patriarchal society and the extent to which female identity is based on one’s legal and social status within society rather than on one’s own individual talents and traits. A key concern is then the examination of the female psyche and the female struggle to deal with the absence of individuality and a sense of self. Through poetry, she envisions the female body as a site of conflict in which social, political, and gender-related issues can be explored and transformed. In her mid-career, she seeks to recover female subjectivity and to cast the female body not as an “object” but as a subject.” In relation to the poetry of her later career, I discuss how her embodied poetics—in which the rich presence of the female body and subjectivity are front and center—is a concept she has been developing her entire poetry career. Rich insists that female identity, in particular, is formed through a complicated blend of social, political, and religious forces. Therefore, for Rich, poetry is a means through which the body can be reconsidered not as “object” but as “subject” and female identity not as

something dependent upon one's legal and social status in society but on one's own subjectivity.

In Chapter Three, "The Visual Art of Andy Warhol: Fame, Death, and Disaster in American Popular Culture," I examine Andy Warhol, the most iconic and foundational artists in the Pop Art Movement, and how, through the silkscreen process, he explores the human body as image and surface that lack depth or inherent meaning and human identity as a façade manufactured by American culture. Through his representations of the human subject and its interaction with fame, death, and disaster, Warhol seeks to celebrate American popular culture's fascination with the image. For him, the image is everything: rather than painting from a position of painterly empathy, he is concerned with the representations of these bodies in the mass media and to what extent these people's identities are formed by popular culture and disconnected from the actual body and person. At the same time, Warhol's representations of the body in his art incriminate the viewers, who by looking at his paintings and barely noticing the ubiquity of death and destruction on the human subject, are participating in American culture's disembodiment of the human, fear of mortality, fascination with the image, and desire for immortality. Overall, DeLillo through the novel, Rich through poetry, and Warhol through pop art each explore the ramifications of postmodern American culture on the human subject, and together, these three artists depict through their art the fascination with and calamities of the human subject's interaction with the mass media, technology, and the reformation of human identity and sexuality in postmodern American culture.

CHAPTER 1

Technology, Death, and Identity in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

I am the false character that follows the name around.

-Jack Gladney in DeLillo's *White Noise*

*Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils
of mystery and layers of cultural material.*

-DeLillo's *White Noise*

I.

INTRODUCTION

For at least two decades, postmodern theoreticians and artists have been emphasizing the fact that the physical, human body is no longer characterized as flesh and blood and as an integral part of “being human” and “being alive.” The state-of-being that Don DeLillo depicts in his internationally acclaimed novel *White Noise*⁴ (1985) is that consumerism and technology have disembodied individuals from their physical bodies: our bodies are only shells that, through materialism, we can decorate and use to “hide” the fact that, for DeLillo, we are not “alive” inside. Some theoreticians and artists suggest that we are the living dead. The physical body is no longer the sole means to experience life and death: for them, technology redefines life, death, disease and decay. For DeLillo, the physical, human body in disembodied by consumerism and has become a simulacrum⁵ of a previously physically-

⁴ The metaphor of “white noise” is frequently characterized as the interference of communication. Specifically, in DeLillo’s novel of the same name, the “white noise” of postmodern American culture is the intersection of all of the symptoms of the postmodern condition: simulation, disembodiment, fear of death, rampant consumerism, media saturation, the possible positive effects of violence, etc. The result of this intersection of symptoms is disorientation, both in geographical and intellectual spaces, and in misidentification of or inability to decipher one’s surroundings beyond their physical/visual appearances.

⁵ According to the French theorist Jean Baudrillard, the term “simulacrum” is the produced through simulation. Simulation produces “models of a real without origin or reality: a hyper-real” (*Simulacra* 1). I will discuss the idea of simulation and the physical body as simulacrum in more detail in Part III of this essay.

based sense of self. Based on materialism, this disembodiment is further accentuated, according to DeLillo, by the fact that American culture is infiltrated by death and disaster. For him, the death and disease in technology and the environment are so acute that death itself is simulated. Moreover, DeLillo asserts that the human body is complicated and disembodied by technology: through television and radio, the physical body becomes waves and radiation, the fallibility of the human senses is stressed, and our dependency on technology's ability to decipher the human body, disease, and emotions through x-rays and other medical examinations demonstrate how, in postmodern American culture, everything is a representation that must be deciphered. However, DeLillo points out that the simulacra of death that permeate American culture can be ruptured once the fear of death becomes real and then death, or the idea of it, also becomes suddenly, strangely real.

II.

DISEMBODIMENT: THE PHYSICAL BODY AS SIMULACRA OF IDENTITY AND SELF

In *White Noise*, DeLillo emphasizes American culture's influence on the construction and simulation of people's identities. The disembodiment of a person and his/her identity is most clearly depicted by DeLillo in Jack Gladney⁶, who is both the main character in *White*

⁶ In his essay "Who Are You, Literally?": Fantasies of the White Self in *White Noise*," Tim Engles argues that the postmodern identity depicted by DeLillo in this novel centers around race, and specifically white American individualism. According to Engles, the novel "works to expose as a fantasy the notion of independent selfhood, a notion particularly encouraged by covertly racialized whiteness" (757). He argues that the character Jack Gladney's identity and sense of self results from both his "white self's ontological dependence on its reception to others, and of its reliance on conceptions of others as a way of simultaneously conceiving of itself" (757). Although my interpretation of DeLillo's novel *White Noise* is not concerned with race, Engles's assertions expose another important and influential layer of postmodern American identity.

For further discussion on the role race plays in DeLillo's *White Noise*, see Ana Louise Keating's book chapter "Reading 'Whiteness,' Unreading 'Race': (De)Racialized Reading Tactics in the Classroom" and Henry Giroux's book chapter "*White Noise*: Toward a Pedagogy of Whiteness."

For further discussion on the role race plays in contemporary American society in general, see bell hooks's *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Alexander Saxton's *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and*

Noise and the narrator. DeLillo demonstrates Jack's disembodiment through his professional name, J. A. K. Gladney, and through his physical appearance. While DeLillo suggests identity is a complicated blend of his/her physical appearance, name, habits, and personality, he ultimately emphasizes that in this land of 24-hour shopping, identity is tightly connected with consumerism: what a person buys (e.g. brands of clothing, cars, location of one's house, etc.) in many respects defines a person's identity. By characterizing an individual based on the items s/he buys creates an image constructed by these objects and their cultural meanings. This constructed identity signifies itself more powerfully than the physical self and creates a simulation of the individual based on consumerism. For DeLillo, in a comic-tragic way, identity in American culture is not primarily based anymore on the actual individual, but on a simulation of that person in which consumerism creates his/her identity.

Names

From a traditional perspective, a person's name embodies that person through language. Even people with the same name carry different associations to those who know them because a person's name is typically viewed as something more than just the name itself: it is somehow tied to the person's individual identity. However, for DeLillo, in the late twentieth century, a person's name no longer embodies an individual; instead, it can merely be an empty symbol that presents a person with an assumed identity. DeLillo demonstrates in the following lines how a person's name can disembody an individual when Jack, the foremost scholar in Hitler Studies, is encouraged to change his name in order to help his career:

Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America (1990), and David R. Roediger's *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (1994).

(...) the chancellor had advised me... to do something about my name and appearance if I wanted to be taken seriously as a Hitler innovator. Jack Gladney would not do, he said, and asked me what other names I might have at my disposal. We finally agreed on J. A. K. Gladney, a tag I wore like a borrowed suit. (16)

Here, DeLillo satirizes the “image is everything” aspect of the culture. Even Babette reassures Jack that the initials J. A. K. “intimated dignity, significance and prestige” (17). However, the fact that DeLillo emphasizes a visual difference between Jack’s old name and his new, professional one supports the assertion that identity and self in American postmodern culture are identifiable by physical/visual appearances and not by what, if anything, lies behind the façade of self.

For DeLillo, a person’s name does not have any inherent connection to the individual, to his/her physical body or self; rather, a name is “a tag” one wears “like a borrowed suit” (16). DeLillo suggests then, in American culture, names are façades: “borrowed suits” that one wears: a name is merely something someone puts on, an identity one borrows, or makes than something that is intimately connected with the individual. Furthermore, in this passage, DeLillo does not characterize a person’s name in reference to his/her body, rather he associates it with clothing (“a borrowed suit”), which are physical and visual items that both cover a person’s physical body in some capacity and can have significant effects on a person’s perceived identity. The image of a name as a suit that is borrowed rather than owed by that person further disconnects the person from the name. Although Jack may be identified by his colleagues as J. A. K. Gladney, this identity is not something he naturally assumes, but is something he constructed. Essentially, Jack’s new name is a simulacrum of his self: J. A. K. Gladney is a constructed physical presentation and a vacant symbol of his assumed identity that has no real connections to his actual identity as an individual: “I am the

false character that follows the name around” (DeLillo 17). Jack creates a new name for himself because it was advised to him by the chancellor that a new name would help his career. In other words, for DeLillo, what is lost in Jack’s new name is its sense of authenticity and “realness”: his professional name does not have any bearing on his individual identity; it is solely a presentation of an identity manufactured for professional purposes. The crucial question then for DeLillo is this: Who is Jack Gladney?

Identity and the Body

Through the character of Jack, DeLillo also illustrates how one’s identity often corresponds to one’s physical appearance, and like Jack’s assumed name, the physical body is a constructed presentation of an identity that he assumes for professional purposes:

[The chancellor] strongly suggested I gain weight. He wanted me to “grow out” into Hitler. (...) I had the advantages of substantial height, big hands, big feet, but badly needed bulk, or so he believed—an air of unhealthy excess, of padding and exaggeration, hulking massiveness. (...)

So Hitler gave me something to grow into and develop toward, tentative as I have sometimes been in the effort. The glasses with thick heavy frames and dark lenses were my own idea, an alternative to the bushy beard that my wife of the period didn’t want me to grow. (17)

In this passage, DeLillo stresses the superficiality of appearances in academic culture itself by emphasizing the fact that Jack’s professional identity as the foremost scholar in Hitler Studies is directly dependent upon his physical appearance: just as Hitler was a foreboding and influential figure in history, Jack’s physical body should imitate this “hulking massiveness.” Jack alters his physical body by gaining weight and shaving his beard, and he uses accessories, specifically the dark lens glasses, in order to “grow into and develop toward” Hitler. DeLillo does not characterize Jack as a direct imitation of Hitler the historical person. Rather, Jack changes his physical body and appearance in an attempt to become like

Hitler the popular icon⁷, not Hitler the person. Hitler as popular icon is disembodied through the reproduction of his image and life through the media: he is no longer just an influential historical figure; he is an icon. Like Marilyn Monroe, the media's popularization of Hitler gives him a "life" beyond that of his physical body; yet, his figure as icon is simulated in popular culture to an extent that his connection with murder and death no longer holds the terror Hitler as historical figure did. Therefore, when Jack attempts to "grow into" Hitler, Jack's intentions are not to imitate the historical figure but the icon, which is characterized by "hulking massiveness" and "dark glasses." Interestingly, the historical figure of Hitler was neither exceedingly overweight nor did he wear dark lens glasses. Moreover, DeLillo further emphasizes the necessity of appearances in academic culture through the fact that Jack, as the foremost scholar in Hitler Studies, can neither read nor speak German fluently. His academic authority is created and constituted by appearances. However, we must raise the following questions: Why does DeLillo choose for Jack to imitate these characteristics and how are they connected to Hitler?

For DeLillo, the underlying point in Jack's attempts to "grow into" Hitler is not the degree to which Jack does this convincingly; rather, the point is to highlight the demand in academic culture that critics have *gravitas*. For DeLillo, the emphasis on image is symptomatic of the pathology of American culture. In other words, by having Jack claim to grow into Hitler by changing his physical appearance in ways that do not correlate to Hitler himself, DeLillo highlights how the fascinations with icons in American culture (popular as

⁷ Stephen N. doCarmo asserts in his essay "Subjects, Objects, and the Postmodern Differend in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*" that an individual in postmodern American culture is caught between individuality ("subjectness") or mass culture ("objectness"). Hitler as popular icon is an example of the kind of "objectness" with which contemporary American society is fascinated. Moreover, the connotation that Hitler the historical person has with death, destruction, and totalitarianism is lost in his image as popular icon. doCarmo explains that death is further permeated in American culture through its fascination with Hitler, and in order for us to see past the image of Hitler to the significations of his icon require us to return to individuality ("subjectness"), which doCarmo points out, is not "particularly attractive in *White Noise*" (22).

well as academic) have no correlation to reality. DeLillo is critical of pop culture's emphasis on image and appearance without any regard to what lies behind the façade: however, he is also sympathetic to our fascination with popular culture icons like Marilyn Monroe or Hitler and our "desire to simulate."

By selecting dark lens glasses and a beard as ways for Jack to alter his appearance, DeLillo suggests that Jack's professional identity is disconnected from his personal identity. Both a beard and dark lens glasses are ways for Jack to conceal, or to hide, his personal "self" from the world. They are also the features that he uses to distinguish his professional self. Although people passing Jack along the street while he is wearing either his dark lens glasses or beard may not recognize him, after a while, people begin to acknowledge his new persona, which is characterized by the glasses or beard.

Through Murray's surprise at how "harmless, aging, [and an] indistinct sort of guy" (83) Jack looks in the hardware store, DeLillo points out how Jack physically appears on campus, most notably wearing his dark glasses, is influential in creating a perception about him as "massive" and important. DeLillo emphasizes that Jack's attempts to physically "grow into" Hitler are merely a professional endeavor: Jack tells Murray in this scene that he only wears the glasses on campus (82). For DeLillo, clothing and accessories become a means through which people in postmodern American culture can both hide their identities and create and re-create themselves for the world around them. The appearance of substantiality that the chancellor wanted Jack's physical appearance to highlight is again emphasized in Jack's decision to buy all the shirts he likes in the store rather than just selecting one. This emphasis on appearances, on images, on simulacra, is emphasized in

DeLillo's critique of American consumerism, which forms the subject matter of my next section.

Identity through Consumerism

According to DeLillo, in the late twentieth century, consumerism and materialism have become the mediums through which people identify one another in life as well as death. Although Jack does recognize people he knows by what they wear, and not necessarily always by the car or home they own, there are several examples throughout the novel in which his primary identification of others is through the commodity as status symbol. For example, Jack notes that he is bothered not by the Iranian man who delivers the newspaper to Jack's house but by the car the man drives: "Our newspaper is delivered by a middle-aged Iranian driving a Nissan Sentra. Something about the car makes me uneasy" (DeLillo 184). Any dislike that Jack has for the Iranian is deflected onto the Nissan Sentra. In other words, the Iranian is partially disembodied by a consumer product, namely the car he drives. Although Jack does identify the man as Iranian, the partial disembodiment occurs through Jack's deflection of his uneasiness onto an object associated with the Iranian man. DeLillo does not indicate whether or not Jack's uneasy feelings about the Nissan Sentra originate from his feelings about the Iranian man or from any negative connotations he associates with that type of car. Regardless of the source of Jack's uneasiness, DeLillo points out how we use objects and materialism to identify one another: the objects, such as the cars we drive, become symbols of our personal identities—of our professions, personalities, and economic and social statuses.

DeLillo also asserts that identification of a person by his possessions, by consumerism, is applicable even after the person's death. Ideally, after death, individuals are remembered by friends or colleagues with warm memories or characteristics of his or her personality; instead, in DeLillo's postmodern America, people begin to identify the dead person by the car(s) he or she drove, the house(s) he or she owned, and his or her profession. Jack observes, "'People notice dying better. The dead have faces, automobiles. If you don't know a name, you know a street, a dog's name. 'He drove an orange Mazda'" (DeLillo 38). In the above passage, the dead person's body is figuratively replaced by objects such as cars. The face of the individual is remembered as the face of his or her car, and his or her name is replaced in people's memories by the street name. In short, for DeLillo, even in death, a person is disembodied: his or her identity is based on economic status. The cars one drives and the place where one lives are often indicative of one's economic and social status—markers of identity ultimately based on consumerism and materialism. The physical body of the person is not remembered, even after death: his or her face is replaced by the possessions he or she bought during life.

According to DeLillo, consumerism and the need to buy permeate every facet of American life. The drive to buy and the identification of people by consumer products, for him, is synonymous with a figurative death of the individual and the self. Even after death, one's "self" is marked by one's possessions. Jack notes that in Tibet "dying is an art" but that here "[w]e don't die, we shop. But the difference is less marked than you think" (DeLillo 38). In these lines, DeLillo makes two assertions: 1) shopping and consumerism are a form of art in American postmodern culture in which the physical body becomes an object to dress, to recreate one's "identity" through appearances; and 2) consumerism, and our tendency to

identify one another by our possessions, is a figurative death of our identities based on more intangible characteristics such as personality and intelligence.

III.

SIMULATED DEATH IN AMERICAN CULTURE AND IN DELILLO'S *WHITE NOISE*

We are in Life an Imitation of Our Dead Selves

For Baudrillard, the individual in American culture is in life an imitation of his/her dead self: "The care taken of the body while it is alive prefigures the way it will be made up in the funeral home, where it will be given a smile that is really 'into' death" (*America* 35). Thus, individuals' attempts to maintain eternal youth by using anti-wrinkle creams, Botox, plastic surgery, and eating only organic foods are efforts to hide aging and to ward off death just as applying make-up to the dead and dressing them in their finest suits aim to disguise the reality. Likewise in *White Noise*, DeLillo presents a nation in which individuals in life imitate their dead selves by attempting to hide aging. In Babette's posture class, the adults who attend in the basement of the Congregational church desire to "preserve" the body and "to ward off death by following the rules of good grooming" (DeLillo 27). However, through the narrator's ironic tone in this passage and his remark that it "is the end of skepticism" (27), DeLillo implies that any attempts to disguise or to reverse the effects of aging do not illustrate the possibility of warding off death.⁸ For DeLillo, death has permeated American popular culture to such an extent that it is everywhere—on the television, in the air, in the

⁸ As Paul Connerton notes in his book *How Societies Remember* (2004), funeral practices themselves are "re-enactments of the past, its return in a representational guise which normally includes a simulacrum of the scene or situation recaptured. Such re-enactments depend for much of their rhetorical persuasiveness, as we have seen, on prescribed bodily behaviour" (72). In other words, actual funeral practices are simulacra. Although death is not imitated in these ceremonies, the fact that the ceremony itself is a simulacrum is indicative of our societies' need to deal with death.

artwork, and in our attempts to preserve our youth. For DeLillo, in postmodern American culture, death itself is simulated.

In *White Noise*, DeLillo depicts both the American home as an acknowledgement of death and of the fear of death.⁹ Jack first describes their house not as a home in which a family lives but as a place for him and his family to store things from their pasts—“dead” things from past marriages and experiences. Except for the kitchen and the bedroom, Jack characterizes their house “as a storage space for furniture, toys, all the unused objects of earlier marriages and different sets of children, the gifts of lost in-laws, the hand-me-downs and rummages. Things, boxes” (DeLillo 6). DeLillo illustrates the fear of death through the characters of Jack and Babette, who constantly discuss among one another who will die first and what the other would do as a result. As I will discuss in greater detail in the following sections of this paper, the fear of death is a result of death infiltrating almost every facet of American life and culture to the degree that death becomes a simulation.

By Living the Simulation, the “Real” Disappears

In Baudrillard’s vision of the contemporary world, death itself is a simulation imitated in life and serves as “models of a real without origin or reality: a hyper-real” (*Simulacra* 1). These models of simulation, for him, demonstrate the fact that American popular culture imitates death to such an extent that death itself has become a simulation: the

⁹ Baudrillard, like DeLillo, views death just beneath the surface of American popular culture. For Baudrillard, there are distinct connections between the American home and a grave:

All dwellings have something of the grave about them, but here the serenity is complete. The unspeakable house plants, lurking everywhere like the obsessive fear of death, the picture windows looking like Snow White’s glass coffin [...] everything here testifies to death having found its ideal home. (*America* 30-1)

The American home, for Baudrillard, acknowledges the ubiquity of death through its plants that resemble those growing in cemeteries and placed at grave stones and through its windows that allow the house’s contents to be viewed, similar to the funeral practice of an open coffin visitation before burial. In other words, the American home “acknowledges the fear of death in all of its characteristics” (Hardin 26).

real disappears as a result of living in perpetual simulation. In *White Noise*, DeLillo depicts the repeated simulation¹⁰ of death and the disappearance of the “real” through television programs, the SIMUVAC, and Murray’s seminar on car crashes.

DeLillo asserts that when disasters are depicted on television, the simulation of these events through the medium of the television creates an important distance between the individuals watching these disasters in the comfort of their homes and the real disasters themselves. For example, when Jack, Babette, and the children watch television, they are engrossed in disasters on TV: “There were floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes. [...] Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping” (DeLillo 64). This weekly Friday night ritual for the Jack family allows them to live the simulation of death and disaster in the convenience of their home. From a certain perspective, simulated death through television programs becomes a part of the family’s ritual, their conversation, their consciousness. Whether or not these programs about death and disasters are recreations of “real” events or not is irrelevant: the important point, for DeLillo, is that the media coverage of death and its depiction on television create a simulacrum of the “real” life events.

The SIMUVAC is another example of how death is simulated in American popular culture. After the toxic event in the novel, the SIMUVAC serves as a way to simulate disasters in order for people to be prepared for the real event: “The more we rehearse disaster, the safer we’ll be from the real thing” (DeLillo 205). However, the private consultant for the Advanced Disaster Management group emphasizes to the volunteers that

¹⁰ Many other critics have noted the connection between Baudrillard’s theories on simulation and the disappearance of the “real” and DeLillo’s *White Noise*: Leonard Wilcox, for example, observes that “in [the] world [of] both Baudrillard and DeLillo, images, signs, and codes engulf objective reality; signs become more real than reality and stand in for the world they erase” (346-7).

they “are here to simulate” (DeLillo 206). DeLillo’s descriptions of these simulated disasters are skeptical in tone. He illustrates this through the following dialogue between Jack and Heinrich about Steffie’s participation as a volunteer victim:

JACK: “How can pretending to be injured or dead save a person’s life?”
 HEINRICH: “If she does it now, she might not have to do it later. The more you practice something, the less likely it is to actually happen.” (DeLillo 207)

Jack’s question is significant in this passage because he is essentially questioning how simulation of death and disaster serves any viable purpose other than to further indoctrinate death and its consequences into everyone’s minds. Moreover, the simulation of death and disaster with the SIMUVAC, for DeLillo, serves as a repetition of the toxic event and more of an attempt to ritualistically re-enact it through simulation and without any actual threat to anyone’s physical safety or health. The fact that Heinrich expresses no concern over Steffie’s involvement in the simulation and that she finds the whole exercise fun indicates that the simulation of the toxic event in this scene has already begun to become a simulation of a simulation. The SIMUVAC is no longer about trying to deal with death and disaster like the town experienced during the toxic event; rather, the simulations serve their own purposes: the volunteers simulate in order to make the “real” toxic event disappear. As Baudrillard says, the “real” disappears as a result of perpetual simulation. Just as Steffie finds enjoyment in being a volunteer victim in the SIMUVAC simulations, in his film seminar, Murray and his students revel in simulations of car crashes¹¹. For DeLillo, once the “real” has disappeared and been replaced by perpetual simulation, the act of simulation itself becomes the objective.

¹¹ Murray’s seminar on car crashes and the concern him and his students have for the cars in the crashes rather than the people driving them is symptomatic of American popular culture’s fascination with technology and the extent to which it is used to identify people, even after death. Murray says, “The dead have faces, automobiles” (DeLillo 38).

Other artistic explorations of technology’s (specifically cars’) interaction with the human body are J. G. Ballard’s novel *Crash* (1994), David Cronenberg’s film adaptation of Ballard’s novel, also titled *Crash* (1996), Andy Warhol’s pop art series titled *Car Crashes* (1962-4).

The Affirmation of the “Real” by the Media

In *White Noise*, DeLillo points out that people living in postmodern American society are accustomed to simulation through television programs, the experiences with SIMUVAC, and the reified, commodified versions of American home life. As we have seen, death and the simulation of death are everywhere. As a consequence, death and disaster that occur on a daily basis are recreated by the media and turned into simulacra. As Michael Hardin notes: “The multiplicity of images of death in the media creates a scenario in which death does not exist unless it appears on television; essentially, the only ‘real death’ is that which is televised” (23). In other words, an event is not “real” unless the media is there to broadcast it. DeLillo depicts this scenario when the survivors from a plane’s “crash landing” retell their experiences onboard to a nearby crowd, but the media is not there yet to televise the survivors’ accounts:

BEE: “Where’s the media?” she said.

JACK: “There is no media in Iron City.”

BEE: “They went through all of that for nothing?” (92)

Through Bee’s surprise at the media’s absence, DeLillo points out that the “crash landing” and the fact that the passengers survived is not important or “real” until it has been televised or captured and simulated by the media. Although the survivors’ accounts to the crowd are acts of retelling, of broadcasting, the experience to the populace, there still is a close distance and connection between the crowd and the survivors: the event has not been reproduced through technology and been simulated. Bee’s concern that this person-to-person retelling of the event is “for nothing” supports Hardin’s claim that the “real” is not real unless it is on television.

Through this dialogue between Bee and Jack, DeLillo also demonstrates the nature of human experience in postmodern American culture. The survivor retelling the crash landing to nearby spectators is somehow devalued and a waste of time precisely because his image was not captured on digital media. In short, DeLillo illustrates how human experience and disasters in postmodern American culture are only worth hearing or watching if they are simulated through television; direct human to human communication of experience is no longer desired or valued.

Instead of the human body being the focus of the crash landing, technology and the simulation of the crash by the media are the primary apprehension. Bee's concern about the absence of the media further demonstrates postmodern American culture's need for simulation. The "real," that is the survivors and the crash, are only made "real" if they are televised and simulated.

Death of the Physical Body

For DeLillo, the physical body can die but the simulacrum of a person can be immortalized through popular culture. In *White Noise*, the idea of life beyond death as a cultural icon in the novel supports Baudrillard's assertion in *Simulacra and Simulation* that "[d]eath is never an absolute criterion, but in this case it is significant: the era of James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, and the Kennedys, of those who really died simply because they had a mythic dimension that implies death" (24). Although each of these individuals achieved fame and success, the brevity of their physical bodies' lives sealed their immortalization, and consequently canonization, in American popular culture. Their mythic dimension as cultural icons is perpetuated by their tragic and sudden deaths and vice versa. For Baudrillard, death and fame are connected through the erasure of the individual's physical body and his/her

reproduction in popular culture as an icon: “It is now the era of murder by simulation, of the generalized aesthetic of simulation, of the murder-alibi—the allegorical resurrection of death” (*Simulacra* 24). In *White Noise*, Baudrillard’s theory of murder by simulation is emphasized by DeLillo through his depiction of the canonization of Hitler and Elvis. DeLillo also demonstrates how the dead live through American popular culture in our televisions and radios.

DeLillo uses the iconization of Hitler and Elvis to demonstrate how these individuals are “alive” in popular culture despite the fact that their physical bodies are dead. Essentially, they are simulacra. The physical bodies of Hitler and Elvis are erased because of their mythic dimension. Jack’s fascination with these cultural icons stems from his cultural fascination with those whose life and death made them famous. However, the irony is that cultural icons like Hitler and Elvis are not only stripped of their lives through the simulations of them in popular culture, but they are also denied death. Although they both physically died, the image of them as cultural icon does not possess a physical body that can die or suffer from disease or decay: a person as cultural icon is without a physical body. As a consequence, they are immortalized in popular culture through the transformations of their images in art and through media. In short, DeLillo views the immortality of pop culture icons with both attraction and irony.

For DeLillo, the dead live in American culture: the simulations of them infiltrate everyone’s home through television, radio, newspapers, and magazines. The replication and broadcasting of an individual gives the image of him or her “immortality” in and through technology. Through replication and broadcasting, the image of these people implies a figurative death of the physical body and a birth of the immortality of the cultural image or

icon. Thus, for DeLillo, death is in the air, and the physical body is transformed by the media into waves and radiation.

IV.

THE PHYSICAL BODY IN RELATION TO TECHNOLOGY IN THE AGE OF WHITE NOISE

The Body as Waves and Radiation

For DeLillo, given this culture of simulation, our bodies are extensions of televisions and radios that break for commercials in between segments of a show. For example, when Jack is in the kitchen watching Wilder's interest in a boiling egg and talking to Steffie, he interrupts his narration of this scene with "[a] jingle for a product called Ray-Ban Wayfarer began running through my head" (DeLillo 212). The commercials run through our heads much like they run on the television and the radio shows. Technology, such as the television and the radio, are no longer objects separate from the human body but are extensions of our thoughts. The jingle that runs through Jack's head emphasizes the level of internalization that consumerism has achieved in the human psyche. The commercial for Ray-Ban Wayfarer is so ingrained in Jack's head that the thought of the ad integrates itself in a conversation he's having with members of his family.

For DeLillo, the television is the center of the American home and family. It is often the focal point of the average living room, and the shows and commercials watched on it are discussed by the family around the dinner table. For DeLillo, the television and the radio are "waves and radiation" that are the "primal force in the American home. Sealed-off, time-less, self-contained, self-referring" (51). He depicts the centrality of the television in American family life through the Jack's Friday night ritual of watching television together and through

the internalization of commercial ads into Jack's thoughts. At the same time, DeLillo also depicts the television as a "participant" in the family's conversations by inserting lines from an ad in the middle of dialogues between Jack and his children or his wife. For example, in the middle of a conversation, DeLillo inserts the following: "The TV said: 'Now we will put the little feelers on the butterfly'" (96). The television has a voice in the family conversations, whether by interjecting consumer ads during the pauses in dialogues or by infiltrating their thoughts.

DeLillo also points out that one can either feel bombarded by the amount of data and information infiltrating the American home through the television and radio or one can choose to "respond innocently and get past our irritation" in order to "open [ourselves] to the data" (51). However, in postmodern American culture, it is difficult to avoid being bombarded by "waves and radiation." For us to accept the "incredible amounts of psychic data" (DeLillo 51) coming from the television and radio necessitates that our physical bodies become receptors of these waves and radiation. Like a computer processing new information or a voice recorder being able to play back commercial ads, the human brain and psyche are forced to deal with massive amounts of information that bombard a person on a daily basis. For DeLillo, even if a person is not receptive to opening oneself up "to the data," as Murray says, it is virtually impossible not to absorb consumerism into one's thoughts. DeLillo demonstrates this point when the ad runs through Jack's mind and when the television's commercial appears part of the family conversation.

For DeLillo, the human body is also disembodied through technology when it literally becomes part of the waves and radiation being broadcasted on the television or radio. In *White Noise*, when the kids see their mother on television, Jack comments: "We were being

shot through with Babette. Her image was projected on our bodies, swam in us and through us. Babette of electrons and photons, of whatever forces produced that gray light we took to be her face” (DeLillo 105). DeLillo uses Jack’s description of Babette on television to demonstrate how her physical body is transformed from flesh into electrons and photons, into a digital and virtual image of self in which the physical body and self and the image of that person are separate and distinct. In these lines, DeLillo also points out how the digital image of a person can penetrate the human body. The waves and radiation of Babette’s image on the television pass through the family’s physical bodies. However, Wilder begins to cry in this scene because he cannot tell the difference between the real Babette and the simulated one on television; even Jack grows scared because the television means “immortalization” and that Babette is figuratively “dead” (DeLillo 104-5). Through Wilder’s tears and Jack’s sudden feelings of fear in this scene, DeLillo dramatizes the new, virtual status of the body in postmodern America—a status that is shot through with the fear and desire of and for the human body expressed in popular culture.

For DeLillo, the incident in which the plane crash survivors want to have their experience confirmed by media coverage proves the need to have the physical body and experience transformed into digital media—to become waves and radiation. People desire simulation. Indeed, DeLillo raises the concern that perhaps the bombardment of waves and radiation from technology into the physical body is harmful: “The real issue is the kind of radiation that surrounds us every day. Your radio, your TV, your microwave oven, your power lines just outside your door, your radar speed-trap on the highway. For years they told us these low doses weren’t dangerous” (DeLillo 174). Heinrich’s comments voice a concern for the physical body in relation to technology and the waves and radiation. The contrast

between the plane crash survivors who want to be transformed into waves and the radiation and Heinrich's comment about the possibility that they are harmful to the body demonstrate the debate in postmodern American culture about the role of technology and its interaction with the physical body. The question remains: Should we accept the data and become receptors of the waves and radiation or should we reject it? DeLillo does not definitely answer this question in *White Noise*. Instead, he elaborates on the dilemma in people's minds about the infiltration of technology and the simulation of death in American popular culture: at times, people are concerned about being bombarded by waves and radiation, but at other times, they yearn to be simulated and to be receptors of data.

The Fallibility of the Human Senses

For DeLillo, the human senses in postmodern American culture are less reliable than they once were before the age of waves and radiation. We can no longer solely rely on our ability to see, smell, touch, and hear things around us:

Our senses? Our senses are wrong a lot more often than they're right. This has been proved in the laboratory. Don't you know all those theorems that say nothing is what it seems? There's no past, present or future outside our own mind. (...) Even sound can trick the mind. Just because you don't hear a sound doesn't mean it's not out there. (...) And I'm sure there are sounds even dogs can't hear. But they exist in the air, in waves. (DeLillo 23)

For DeLillo, the human body's ability to perceive its environment is diminished and called into question with the advent of technological advancements that can detect the presence of microscopic organisms that the human eye or body cannot detect. For example, Jack can see the black smoke from the toxic event, but he cannot see the tiny toxins in the air around him. Therefore, he must rely on technology to tell him of their existence. In other words, the human body must rely upon technology in order to amplify its senses.

However, despite technological advancement and the ability to heighten the capability of the human senses by replacing them with technological instruments, all the information gathered by these instruments must still be processed by the human brain. Just as the human senses send electrical signals to the brain so the brain can tell the body to react, the technological data gathered must be articulated by people, and then they can choose how to act. As DeLillo points out, “There’s no past, present, or future outside of the own mind” (23). In other words, reality and our perceptions of it are still body centered. However, in postmodern American culture, it is not only our human senses that must be processed, articulated, and decided upon but also the technological data and information that, at times, questions what our senses are telling us.

For DeLillo, the inconsistency between the capability of the human senses versus that of technology can sometimes bring the human brain to question the reliability of the physical body. Moreover, the human psyche can be tricked to believe that something is “real” when it is not. For example, the technological data that Jack receives about the toxic event and the toxins in the air, coupled with his fear of being infected, lead his brain to see yellow spots. His fear of infection and later his eventual knowledge that he has been affected by the toxins trick his brain to feign symptoms: “I told Denise the power of suggestion could be more important than side effects. [...] The power of suggestion makes some people sick, others well” (DeLillo 251). In other words, without the technological data of his infection, Jack would perhaps never have felt “sick” because his human senses failed to detect the tiny toxins in the air. However, the knowledge he is given by the doctor of his infection amply his fear of death: “This is what the odor of that burning material did. It complicated our sadness, brought us closer to the secret of our own eventual end” (DeLillo 241). In other words, when

Jack smells the odor of the burning material, he associates this smell in his brain with his fear of death and the possible causes of his infection by the toxic event. Overall, DeLillo points out the dependency of the human psyche in dictating what is “real” and a threat to the human body and what is not, whether this information is provided to the brain by the human senses or by technology. In short, for DeLillo, what the brain believes to be “real” is real.

Relationship between the Body and Medicine

The relationship between the human body and medicine is similar to the tension between the human senses and technology. Although medicine can treat and cure the human body of ailments, medicine can also serve as a means to assuage the human brain of its fears of infection and death. For example, Babette begins to take Dylar pills in order to trick her brain and to assuage her fear of death:

It was the benign counterpart of the Nyodene menace. Tumbling from the back of my tongue into my stomach. The drug core dissolving, releasing benevolent chemicals into my bloodstream, flooding the fear-of-death part of my brain. The pill itself silently self-destructing in a tiny inward burst, a polymer implosion, discreet and precise and considerate. (DeLillo 211)

Pills like Dylar, for DeLillo, are tiny technological creations that the human body absorbs, like the waves and radiation emitted from the television and radio. When Babette swallows a Dylar pill, she is inserting a “drug delivery system” (DeLillo 187) into her body. DeLillo points out that pills have advanced to such a degree that they are tiny technological entities that can dissolve at a rate dictated by the pill and not by the human body.

At the same time, medicine like Dylar is also a consumer product. Babette must buy the pills in order to take them. Moreover, the pill, as a technological advancement and entity, was designed not only to treat the fear of death but, more importantly, to make a profit for the pharmaceutical companies. Therefore, from a certain perspective, when Babette swallows the

Dylar pills, her physical body is interacting with a commodity desired to treat a condition created by the culture at large.

For DeLillo, Babette's fear of death stems from the bombardment of death and disaster around her and her inability to create a safe distance between her and death through simulation. However, just as the doctor's findings create a stronger fear of death in Jack, for DeLillo, in order for the pharmaceutical companies to make a profit, they must sell the idea to people that medicine, as a consumer product, can lead the human brain to believe that it must rely on medicine. For DeLillo, what the mind believes to be "real" is real; therefore, if technological data indicates that the human body **MUST** have this or that pill in order to cope with illness, emotions, or reality in general, then people are more likely to buy into the idea that they need medicine. For DeLillo, the ads and commercials that infiltrate our brains and lead us to feel that we must buy a particular product are similar to our belief that we must buy a particular medicine in order to prevent sun damage, to loose weight, or to alleviate our fears. DeLillo is not saying that medicine is not effective in delivering the results that are advertised. However, for him, swallowing a pill in postmodern American culture is more than what it seems at first glance: the pill and the action of swallowing it represent the body's interaction with a sinister commodity culture. A specific example of the relationship between medicine and the body as a consumer transaction is demonstrated in Babette's comments about sunscreen: "'It is all a corporate tie-in,' Babette said in summary. 'The sunscreen, the marketing, the fear, the disease. You can't have the one without the other'" (DeLillo 264).

White Noise also points out that medicine also can disembody a person just as digital media can transform a person from a physical body into a simulation of that person. When Jack has tests done in order to ascertain whether or not he has been infected by the toxic

event, he comments that we are all “the sum total of [our] data” (DeLillo 141). This statement illustrates the body’s interaction with medicine and technology, such as x-rays. The body is no longer a self-evident, purely physical and tangible entity, a system that functions to give life to the individual. In postmodern American culture, the body is represented and transformed by technology. The body’s senses are no longer reliable on their own; their infallibility is proven by the brain’s belief in technology’s data, even if the information given to the brain is incorrect. Ultimately, for DeLillo, technology and consumerism are responsible for creating ailments and fears of aging, death, and disease through their advertisements. Once people absorb this information, they begin to feel sick or to fear this or that. Overall, for DeLillo, our dependency on technology’s ability to detect and to decipher the human body, disease, and emotions through x-rays and other such medical examinations demonstrates how, in postmodern American culture, everything must be deciphered, even ourselves.

V.

RUPTURES OF THE SIMULACRA OF DEATH

Although death is simulated and objectified in American culture, when the fear of death becomes real, then the death, or the idea of it, also becomes real. One is no longer able to maintain a virtual distance between oneself and death: the process of objectification fails and the fear of death gives death a reality beyond that of simulation. In *White Noise*, Jack and Babette can watch disasters on television and make them vanish by turning off the program; however, when the toxic event happens, and Jack is infected, death becomes too real for him to separate himself from the fear of death.

Therefore, in order for Jack to feel alive, he must “kill to live” (DeLillo 291): he must attempt to murder Mink in order feel compassion and to reconnect with his sense of humanity and to feel alive. Jack’s fear of death and his knowledge that he will die soon, coupled with his knowledge of Babette’s infidelity dissociates him from his self. When he shoots¹² Mink, he is suddenly reconnected with self and self-awareness: “I looked at him. Alive. His lap a puddle of blood. With the restoration of the normal order of matter and sensation, I felt I was seeing him for the first time as a person. The old human muddles and quirks were set flowing again. Compassion, remorse, mercy” (DeLillo 313). In this scene, Jack is no longer disconnected: he sees Mink as a human being, and he tries to save his life. The act of killing Mink without remorse in Jack’s mind is different than actually enacting his plan of murder. Once Mink’s blood covers Jack’s forearm and the latter “stagger[s] back, moaning, watching blood drip from the tips of [his] fingers” (DeLillo 313), death and life become tangible. Death is standing directly in front of Jack’s face: he is no longer at a “safe” distance from death by sitting in his living room watching televised shows about catastrophes and murders. So for DeLillo, all is pure representation and simulation: the real is inescapable in the presence of death. He is not watching a simulation of himself murdering Mink: the blood is real and Mink is dying in front of him. This sudden realization and return to “reality” for Jack enables him to personalize the situation and to be more “human”—to be compassionate and merciful. In this scene, DeLillo demonstrates the difference between the idea of murder and the act of it: the virtual distance between a person sitting in his or living

¹² In “Two Essays,” Baudrillard asserts that technology is “an extension of the body.” Therefore, the gun Jack uses to shoot Mink is, to use Baudrillard’s words, the “deadly deconstruction of the body—no longer a functional medium, but an extension of death” (313). DeLillo further links technology (i.e. the gun) and death to both Mink and Babette (i.e. human bodies) through the idea of penetration: the bullets from Jack’s gun penetrate Mink’s body just as Mink sexually penetrates Babette during their brief affair. The idea of dying fills Babette with fear, while Mink is literally faced with dying when he is shot.

room watching a murder on television and the actual murder being filmed is significant enough for the viewer to not feel fearful or threatened by the act being televised.

For DeLillo, Jack's efforts to save Mink's life force Jack to face the reality of death without the safety of the virtual distance of watching catastrophes on television. Jack continues to be bothered by the events of the evening even when he returns home: "But my mind kept racing, I couldn't sleep. After a while I went down to the kitchen to sit up with a cup of coffee, feel the pain in my wrist, the heightened pulse" (DeLillo 321). In these lines, DeLillo emphasizes how Jack's thoughts of the attempted murder have physical effects on his body: his wrist is in pain, his heart is racing, and he is unable to sleep. For Jack, the attempted murder drew him close to the reality of death. However, Jack's connection with the real over the simulation of the real is only temporary: DeLillo ends this chapter with the implication that the repetition and order of Jack's normal routine will disconnect him again from the final truth of the evening events. Jack says, "There is nothing to do but wait for the next sunset, when the sky would ring like bronze" (DeLillo 321).

VI.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In *White Noise*, DeLillo depicts American popular culture as immersed in "white noise." More specifically, the state-of-being for a person living in contemporary American society is one of disembodiment: the human body's interactions with technology and consumerism have altered our sense of identity and self, the way in which we communicate with one another, the reliability of our senses, and our perception and fear of death and disease to such an extent that everything must be deciphered, even ourselves. DeLillo's

ironic tone in the novel is both critical of, and receptive to, the postmodern condition of the human body and its infiltration with waves and radiation.

As we have seen, for DeLillo, there is a strong connection between consumerism and identity and selfhood in postmodern American culture. For him, the physical body is transformed into a simulacrum of itself through consumerism. We no longer know who we are, nor do we care to look past the façade created by the clothes we wear, the cars we drive, and the houses we live in. Therefore, participating in the mass culture of consumerism, such as going to the ATM, the grocery store, the shopping mall, with the purpose of buying objects, works to assuage anxieties or doubts we may feel on a daily basis. For DeLillo, the cost of mediated identity is immense: this connection signifies the loss of critical interpretation and understanding of ourselves and our environments. What is real no longer is important: the appearance or simulation of the real is much more accessible and “safe.” Contemporary American society, for DeLillo, emphasizes the quick and easy, and consumerism provides us that outlet. Ironically, it is much easier to go on a shopping spree when we feel sad or happy, as Jack does after seeing Murray in the store, than to work through our feelings of discontentment and anxiety. It is much easier to “know” one another by what we wear, the cars we drive, and the homes we live in than to take the time to know our neighbors idiosyncrasies, fears, and dreams. For DeLillo, consumerism has made everything so accessible that we no longer desire to take the time to do anything that requires us to look past the façade.

For DeLillo, the infiltration of simulated death in American popular culture is symptomatic of our obsession with consumerist practices and our desire not to face the inevitability of death. Through the simulation of death on television and throughout popular

culture, we are able to objectify people and events in order to obtain a “critical distance”¹³,” to use Fredric Jameson’s term. For DeLillo, the saturation of disasters, death, and catastrophes on television serves two purposes: to accustom people to death and disaster so the experience is not completely an unknown one and to allow people to have the “critical distance” in which to find pleasure in watching disasters. This “critical distance” between the viewers and the actual events allows them not be as affected personally by the experience of watching death as they would perhaps be if they themselves had experienced the catastrophe. For DeLillo, it is ironic for people to find pleasure in watching death and disaster—to revel in blown up body parts and diseased flesh—yet to be immobilized with fear of their own deaths. However, DeLillo warns us that this “critical distance” is often shattered, and the reality of death is suddenly before us. Thus, the danger, for DeLillo, in constantly viewing the world around us through simulation is similar to that of the façade of identity through consumerism: when actual death and disaster are staring us in the face, we are unprepared to face the reality before us. Jack’s fear of death cripples him and is not assuaged, no matter how much he tries to simulate or to obtain that “critical distance.” Only by staring death in the face when he attempts to murder Mink is Jack about to, momentarily, “see” past the façade of self to have compassion.

The human body’s interaction with technology in medicine, for DeLillo, enables us to treat and to cure diseases and to ward off death; however, at the same time, contemporary

¹³ In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Jameson claims that “critical distance” is impossible to obtain in postmodernism. He defines “critical distance” as the assumption that culture can be positioned outside of the “massive Being of capital.” My use of the word “critical distance” in reference to DeLillo’s *White Noise* does not assume that the characters, while watching death and disasters on television, are able to place themselves outside of capitalism. If anything, these characters’ participation in consumerism supports Jameson’s claim that “critical distance” is not longer possible. However, in my argument, I use his term “critical distance” to define the figurative space between an individual and the actual event or person being simulated by the media. This “critical distance” allows for the characters in DeLillo’s novel to find pleasure in death and disaster because of simulation rather than be shocked at its horrors.

society creates and cures the ailments that afflict us. Jack's fear of death is created, perpetuated, and cured by medical technology's ability to perceive airborne toxins in the air. Although technological advances in medicine, for DeLillo, are positive, technology's ability to create both the cure and the ailment is immensely problematic because it demands our dependency upon this technology over our own human senses to ascertain our own environment and well-being.

Thus, through the main character and narrator, Jack Gladney, DeLillo asserts that there are two challenges for a person living in postmodern American culture: to try to continue as a knowing self and the challenge to avoid the effacement of self through media and technology in American pop culture. However, to risk being an individual is to risk death. As the last chapter of the novel indicates, for DeLillo, it is easier for us to continue simulating, to depend on the fact that no danger will befall us because "the terminals are equipped with holographic scanners" (326). We need not look past the façade or simulation when "everything we need that is not food or love is here on the tabloid racks [:] The tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead" (DeLillo 326). And yet, DeLillo emphasizes that everyone has to meet death—the limit of reality—in the midst of all of our culture's "white noise."

CHAPTER 2

Adrienne Rich: Toward an Embodied Poetics

The will to change begins in the body not in the mind
My politics is in my body... (ll. 38-9)
 --Adrienne Rich, "Tear Gas," (1969)

I feel signified by pain (l. 1)
 --Adrienne Rich, "Contradictions: Tracking Poems," (1983-5)

I.

INTRODUCTION

"The moment of change is the only poem": for Adrienne Rich, one of America's foremost feminist and influential poets of the twentieth century, poetry is a constructed body of language that inspires political and social change. Although in many respects, she can be classified as a postmodern poet, it would do her work an injustice to categorize her based on theoretical classifications when she adamantly opposes theory. For her, art, and specifically poetry, evoke change, not theoretical assertions. Thus, Rich's poetry attempts to survey and reflect on the public and private voices of America. She does not seek to craft poems that illustrate a culture and politics of her own making; rather, her poetry is characterized by its ability to metaphorically depict the times. One of Rich's primary focuses throughout her early, middle, and late poetic career has been the politics of the body. Specifically in her early poetic career, Rich examines female identity as it is socially, politically, and legally defined by marriage. She employs a closed metrical form and rhyming scheme in order to emphasize the female body as trapped within society and within marriage. However, with the publication of her third book of poetry, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, Rich begins to psychologically and politically break away from her use of closed poetic forms and the absence of the female body. Instead, she begins to examine the female psyche and women's

struggles to deal with the absence of individuality and a sense of self. Although still in her early poetic career, she begins a second phase of focus in her poetry, one in which she uses the body as a metaphor to symbolize a Vietnamese village being bombed, a list of wounded, and her lover as the enemy, for example, in order to highlight and to offer resolutions to societal, cultural, and gender differences. Moreover, at this phase in her poetic development, she begins to recognize her role as a poet and her body as a vessel through which she can evoke change. In her middle poetic career, Rich fully employs free verse, dramatic visual arrangements, and various voices and narrative styles. Her poetic mission is to explore historical representations of women—to “dive into the wreck”—and to discover both historical women who history has forgotten and to search within herself to find her own sense of self and individuality. In her late poetic career, Rich has fully developed her poetic voice, found her sense of self, and employs an embodied poetics in which the body is the focus. For her, the body is the site in which one’s pain and suffering can be translated to the world’s pain and suffering. And moreover, for Rich, the body is the source of inspiration for her poetry and through which change is possible.

II.

FOCUS ON WOMEN’S LIVES: SOCIAL STATUS WITHIN MARRIAGE AND THE FEMALE PSYCHE

The Muted Female and the Absent Body

Rich’s first two books of poetry, *A Change of World* (1951) and *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems* (1955), employ deliberate detachment and conscious craft. *A Change of World*, in particular, displays a broad range and control of traditional meter, rhyme and form. The overall tone is detached and refined and the style is formal and impersonal. Elaine Showalter explains that many women poets, like Rich in her early career,

speak “a double-voiced discourse containing a ‘dominant’ and a ‘muted story’” (29): the dominant story centers on the male characters and the muted story on female characters. In *A Change of World*, Rich primarily highlights the muted female story; this topic continues to be one of her focal points in her early poetic career.

One of the most important and most anthologized poems from Rich’s first book is “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers”: this poem exemplifies the deliberate detachment, conscious craft, and muted story of the female characters that permeate her first two books. For Rich, the female’s muted story is a product of the invisibility of her physical body and her identity and sense of self being defined by possession. Rich explores the theme of possession in this poem in three ways: through Aunt Jennifer’s tigers, Aunt Jennifer’s fingers, and Uncle’s wedding band on Aunt Jennifer’s hand.

In the first stanza of the poem, Rich identifies the first act of possession, “Aunt Jennifer’s tigers” (l. 1), in order to connect immediately the tigers with Aunt Jennifer. The first stanza demonstrates how the tigers on Aunt Jennifer’s screen are unafraid “of men” because they are brave and certain of themselves. Rich highlights the muted female, Aunt Jennifer, in this stanza by only mentioning her name once; the rest of the stanza focuses on the tigers:

Aunt Jennifer’s tigers prance across a screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty. (ll. 1-4)

The tigers, as the focal point in this stanza, are allowed to move freely: Rich illustrates this movement through the words “prance” and “pace.” Rich implies that these “men beneath the tree” (l. 3) are hunting the tigers; however, she points out that these animals are still unafraid.

The “world of green” (l. 2), or the jungle in which they live, is symbolic of growth and life. In short, the idea of movement, life, and “chivalric certainty” are embodied in the tigers.

Although the majority of this first stanza focuses on the tigers, they are one of three significant words present in the first line. The other two are “Aunt Jennifer” and the “screen,” which are two important thematic points Rich develops throughout the poem: what the word “screen” signifies and the fact that these tigers on the screen are Aunt Jennifer’s. The “screen” in the first line can be interpreted in two ways: 1) used for Aunt Jennifer’s protection from the world around her, or 2) a tool for her to be hidden, or invisible. Although Rich intends for the screen to be interpreted both ways, the significant difference between them is the issue of control or possession. If Aunt Jennifer uses the screen for protection, then she is in control; just as the tigers on the screen are hers, the screen itself is also her possession. At the same time, the screen as an object used to hide or conceal someone or something implies that Aunt Jennifer is being controlled by someone else who uses the screen to separate her from the outside world.

Through the second act of possession, “Aunt Jennifer’s fluttering fingers” (l. 5), which appears in the second stanza of the poem, Rich highlights the invisibility of Aunt Jennifer’s body. The second stanza in general focuses on Aunt Jennifer and stands in stark contrast to the first stanza. In the first line of this stanza, Rich points out the invisibility of Aunt Jennifer’s body, except for her “fingers fluttering” (l. 5) because the rest of her is covered in “wool” (l. 5). Rich connects the image of the screen in the first line of the first stanza to the image of wool in the first line of the second stanza. Wool is a dense and heavy fabric usually worn in cold weather because of how well it insulates the body. Moreover, the wool Aunt Jennifer is handling can be used to cover or hide her body, like the screen does in

the first stanza. The invisibility of Aunt Jennifer's body is emphasized through the absence of her voice or perspective in the poem and through the absence of her physical body, with the exception of her hands.

For Rich, the muted female's voice is either unheard or unspoken because of her social and cultural position within society as a married woman who is owned by her husband. Rich points out that the male dominance, and in this poem, "Uncle," possesses such control and strength over his wife that she is rendered weak in contrast to him. Rich highlights the fact that Aunt Jennifer is weak in the following line: her fingers "find even the ivory needle hard to pull" (l. 6). Rich's use of the word "ivory," which is a sought after prize for many hunters, implies a double meaning to this line. First, the act of pulling an ivory needle through cloth with her weakened hands is not only an arduous task but one which highlights the act of sewing as a female task. Thus, her hands are weak merely from doing her household duties. Second, Rich introduces the presence of the hunters ("the men beneath the trees") in the first stanza, which can also be used to interpret the ivory as a prize from a hunt and Uncle as one of the hunters. Therefore, Aunt Jennifer is like the tigers: a sought after prize from a hunt. However, unlike the tigers and more like an elephant captured for its ivory tusks, Aunt Jennifer is weak and unable to resist Uncle, or more specifically, being married and trapped in her social role as woman and wife. In short, the first and second stanzas contrast the tigers' strength ("chivalric certainty"), lack of fear of men, and freedom of movement to Aunt Jennifer's weak and "fluttering" hands and her confinement behind the screen, under the wool, and in marriage to Uncle.

Rich also demonstrates the third act of possession, "Uncle's wedding band" on "Aunt Jennifer's hand" (ll. 7-8), in the second stanza in order to reiterate further Uncle's possession

of her as his wife and his dominance as a “massive weight” (l. 7) on her. The “wedding band” is like a shackle on Aunt Jennifer’s hand. Even when Aunt Jennifer dies, her hands “still ringed” (l. 10) indicate that she was “mastered” (l.10) until her death: there is no way out. However, in the next line of the third stanza, Rich reveals that the tigers on the screen are Aunt Jennifer’s because she sewed them: “The tigers in the panel that she made (l. 11). Since the screen depicts the tigers in their “world of green” (l. 2), the screen itself is symbolic of the freedom of movement and of life that the tigers embody. In short, the third and final stanza of the poem indicates that although Aunt Jennifer is “mastered” even unto death, her tigers “[w]ill go on prancing, proud and unafraid” (ll. 11-12). Through the final line of the poem, Rich asserts that through art and imagination, we can live freely: we can escape our bodily enslavement, which is what Rich herself is trying to do through her poetry.

For Rich, the closed form of this poem, containing three stanzas of quatrains in iambic pentameter, reemphasizes the feeling of entrapment Aunt Jennifer feels in her life. The closed form also serves as a symbolic cage that contains the imagination and artistic skill of Rich herself. Therefore, this poem thematically and structurally embodies Rich’s assertion that even if we are “trapped” in life, imagination and art can figuratively set us free: even though Aunt Jennifer is dead by the end of the poem, her tigers “[w]ill go on prancing, proud and unafraid” (l.12).

Examination of the Female Psyche

The beginning of Rich’s psychological and political break with patriarchy is first seen in her third poetry book, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law: Poems 1954-1962* (1963). *Snapshots* demonstrates an utter departure from anything Rich has written before this point in the following ways: both stylistically and thematically, through addressing the dislocation of

the world and of her own psyche, and through her aim to bring women's secrets out into the light in order for inner wounds to be healed. The poem "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" exemplifies Rich's initial resistance to patriarchy through the poem's examination of female identity, particularly as it is defined by marriage, and women's limitations within the social and political spheres of society itself and within their own family relationships. The poem's narrator speaks primarily in third person and is outside looking in, giving us "snapshots" of these women.

The poem's title is more informal than those in her first two poetry books. The word "snapshots," quick flashes of a person rather than the whole story of this woman's life, both distances and objectifies the subject (i.e. the daughter-in-law). The distance and objectification photographic snapshots implies is transformed in poetry; for Rich, these sequentially numbered series of stanzas reveal glimpses of female identity and of her social and political plight as a married woman. As we read the poem, we realize that these snapshots do not objectify the daughter-in-law but instead focus our attention on certain aspects of her life. With the word "daughter-in-law," Rich immediately identifies the female in the poem as being defined by her legal relationship with her husband. However, by focusing on female identity as it is defined socially, legally, and politically by marriage, Rich aims to provoke societal change in how we define women's identities as daughter-in-laws and vessels for childbearing by portraying snapshots of the inner struggles as women themselves.

For Rich, society often characterizes women by their physical attributes and skills (e.g. playing an instrument, senses of style, and housekeeping) that both contribute to their societal value as a "good" and "well-bred" wife. For Rich, these stereotypes and

characterizations focus primarily on what a woman can offer to her husband and to society rather than on women's talents; moreover, their identities are based on their social and legal status as married women rather than as individuals. In the first two snapshots of this poem, Rich contrasts a mother, or mother-in-law, with the young daughter-in-law. In the first snapshot, Rich assumes an accusatory tone with her use of the word "you" in the first line of the poem. She highlights society's characterization of women by their physical appearances when she describes this middle aged woman as "once [being] a belle in Shreveport" (l. 1). For Rich, it is problematic to characterize a woman by her physical body, such as her beauty and youth, because such attributes are not only transitory but also focus on women's bodies as aesthetically pleasing prizes. For example, the woman she describes in the first snapshot was "once" young and beautiful, but she is no longer. Rich also characterizes this older woman as wanting her "dresses copied from that time" (l. 3) and playing music by Chopin¹⁴ and Cortet¹⁵ (ll. 4-5) in order to illustrate how this woman's world is dominated by men; everything she does is an imitation, even the dresses she wears and the music she plays. For Rich, female identity needs to include more than one's physical attributes and the talents, such as piano playing, that society expects in a well-bred woman; instead, Rich suggests that female identity should be based on one's individual talents, such as intelligence, creativity, and sensitivity, that are unique to each woman, rather than on men's perceptions of what women should be.

In the second stanza of this first snapshot, Rich describes the woman's mind and emotions now. For Rich, the middle aged woman's mind and life now are

¹⁴ Fredric François Chopin (1810-49) was a Polish pianist and composer. Some of his best-known musical pieces are *Revolutionary Étude* (Op. 10, No. 12), the *Minute Waltz* (Op. 64, No. 1), and the third movement of his *Funeral March* sonata (Op. 35).

¹⁵ Alfred Cortet (1877-1962) was a famous French pianist.

(...) moldering like a wedding-cake,
 heavy with useless experience, rich
 with suspicion, rumor, fantasy,
 crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge
 of mere fact. In the prime of your life. (ll. 7-11)

Through the “wedding-cake” image, Rich reiterates how this middle aged woman’s life is defined by her marriage. As a “cake,” she is a decoration that is meant to be consumed. In short, this woman’s identity is based on how society characterizes her beauty and music talents, and such a “fantasy” of identity, for Rich, will easily “crumbl[e] to pieces” like a cake being sliced by a knife. Therefore, Rich’s accusatory tone in these first lines aims to point out to these women the futility in shaping their identities on the ways in which society values them, as beauties and potential mothers.

In the second snapshot, Rich portrays the inner struggle and slight attempts at rebellion of young married women as they adapt to their new roles as wives and mothers. Rich points out the frustration of the daughter-in-law as she “[b]angs the coffee-pot into the sink” (l. 14). The young woman even attempts to hurt herself physically in small ways:

Sometimes she’s let the tapstream scald her arm,
 a match burn to her thumbnail,

 or held her hand above the kettle’s snout
 right in the woolly steam. (ll. 20-23)

For Rich, these attempts by the daughter-in-law to harm herself physically signify a call for help as she succumbs to this façade of identity and self, which in the end, makes her so dead inside that “nothing hurts her anymore” (l. 24). Then, for Rich, we become like the “flat foxes’ head” (l. 32), a stuffed animal used for decoration, and a symbolic prize from a hunt or a conquest of marriage. For Rich, a wife is not only a figurative prize but her body is a literal prize: “she shaves her legs until they gleam / like petrified mammoth-tusk” (ll. 51-2). A

woman's legs, according to Rich, are like the mammoth tusks sought after by hunters and or by men seeking women to marry and/or for sexual pleasure.

Rich characterizes marriage in the sixth snapshot as a cage and women as birds who sing but "neither words nor music are her own" (l. 54): like the mother in the first section of the poem, women are more like birds in a cage, stuffed fox heads, or prizes from the hunt after marriage. Rich points out that as a wife you are allowed to move freely within the perimeters of societal and political expectations of your role; however, you are in the "cage of cages" (l. 61) because you pin yourself down through marriage and by love. For Rich, women have a certain element of choice to get married or to become an old maid, to be defined as a wife or daughter-in-law or as an individual.

For Rich, women must expect more for themselves: we are praised for "our mediocrities" (l. 99) and "our crime / only to cast too bold a shadow / or smash the mold straight off" (ll. 102-4). These snapshots aim to encourage women to cast off the mold and to discover their own identities; however, Rich points out that few women historically have been able to do this: "Few applicants for that honor" (l. 107). However, as an example of historical women who have individualized themselves, Rich incorporates female voices, such as a direct quote from Mary Wollstonecraft¹⁶ in the seventh snapshot. Wollstonecraft, as a writer and independent thinker, understood the need to have a sense of purpose:

*To have in this uncertain world some stay
which cannot be undermined, is
of the utmost consequence* (ll. 69-71).

¹⁶ Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) was a British writer and feminist who is best known for *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which she argues that women are not inferior to men but just lack education. She asserts that men and women should be treated as equals and stresses reason over emotion. Wollstonecraft is considered one of the first feminists, and much of her literary work attempts to fight for female equality. She was also the mother of Mary Shelley, who wrote *Frankenstein* (1818).

However, Rich points out that Wollstonecraft, who was married and a daughter-in-law, was criticized for her independent thinking: “she was labeled harpy, shrew and whore” (l. 76). Yet, for Rich, it is better to be a woman who “thinks” and be labeled as “sleeping with monsters” (l. 26) than to be “moldering like a wedding-cake” (l. 7).

Rich contrasts these female voices in the poem with male voices, such as the one from Diderot¹⁷: ““You all die at fifteen,”” (l. 77). This particular quote addresses the figurative death of women’s virginity as they are ushered into womanhood. Through this “death,” Rich reemphasizes her earlier image of women as dead, stuffed animals. Moreover, Rich incorporates both male and female voices in this poem in order to illustrate that both men and women can play a role in the development of female identities.

At the same time, Rich does not emphasize male domination in this poem through any direct male characters, but instead, she focuses on how women’s identities are forged and reinforced by women themselves. She points out the rift between the older generation of women (in the first snapshot) and the younger daughter-in-laws (in the second snapshot) in order to emphasize the struggles women must face with other women within their own families: “Two handsome women, gripped in argument” (l. 33). For Rich, the influence mothers have over daughters in how the latter view themselves as women, individuals, and their roles in society is enormous. In the third snapshot, Rich depicts the conflict between mother and daughter, and she warns her readers that if women are not heedful, then the “beak that grips her, she becomes” (l. 27). In other words, the mother, as a bird who holds, protects, and enforces boundaries with her beak to her young is also training them to play the same

¹⁷ Denis Diderot (1713-84) was a French philosopher and critic during the Enlightenment. In one of his letters with his lover Sophie Volland, he claimed, “You all die at fifteen”: “Vous mourez toutes a quinze ans,” from *Lettres à Sophie Volland*. This quote by Diderot is also noted by Rich as a footnote to the poem “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” and also discussed by Simone de Beauvoir in her book *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Vol. II, pp. 123-4.

role when they are parents. Therefore, for Rich, mothers, as older daughter-in-laws, play an integral part in influencing the younger daughter-in-laws; similarly, Rich warns the younger women not to become the “beak that grips” you, but to break the mold. Moreover, she encourages her readers to unite as sisters (“ma semblable, ma soeur!”) to support one another in standing up against patriarchy.

In the last snapshot, Rich proposes a new woman/daughter-in-law who is critical of “herself” more so “than history” (l. 110); she must be an independent thinker whose “cargo” many not be a “child” but a sense of identity and self that was not widely possessed by women from earlier generations. She will be a testament to other women and not be defined by patriarchy; she will symbolize what it means to be a woman who belongs to herself—to be “palpable,” to be “ours” (ll. 121-2).

The free verse, use of numbers, punctuation, italics, and third person narrator in this poem allow Rich to further emphasize her thematic agenda. Her use of free verse in this poem and longer lines is a departure from her earlier poetry, which used traditional forms and employed metrical conventions; this new expressiveness exemplifies her psychological and political break with patriarchy¹⁸ and the poetic conventions of many of her male predecessors, such as W. H. Auden, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and W. B. Yeats. Although these men contributed greatly to her mastery of poetry,¹⁹ “Snapshots of a Daughter-

¹⁸ By patriarchy, I am referring to a patriarchal society, one based upon and defined by men—one in which the female identity is characterized by her legal and social status as either a single or married woman and by her physical body’s attributes. Rich begins to reject these conventions (social, political, religious, etc.) that aim to emphasize the female body as “object” rather than as “subject.” At this stage in her poetic career, she also begins to find her own poetic voice—her female voice—rather than imitating the male poetic giants of her time.

¹⁹ Although these famous poetic figures and her father all played an integral role in her poetic development, Rich begins to realize that their influences direct her to imitate a male perspective and view of the female, rather than encompassing a female one. Her poetic voice initially was not her own, but an imitation of these great, male poets. For example, her first poetry book, *A Change of World* (1951), won the Yale Younger Poets Award and was graced with a foreword written by the most important living poet of the time, W. H. Auden. He praises her for her “good manners” and concludes that “the poems a reader will encounter in this book are neatly and

in-Law,” and more generally the poetry book by the same name, is the beginning of her departure from her male, poetic influences. Rich’s use of free verse in this poem is symbolic of her quest to find her own poetic voice that is not masked in the predominantly male poetic giants of her time. She incorporates sequentially numbered sequences not only to represent different “snapshots” but also to show a progression from a daughter-in-law’s identity based on her legal status to her husband to a new woman who is responsible for her own sense of self. Rich uses italics to emphasize her incorporation of both male and female voices in this poem: her addition of voices other than her own is the beginning of her poetry’s inclusiveness that will continue throughout her poetic career. Moreover, the speaker, although not directly either of these women in the poem, is like these daughter-in-laws and can relate to their struggles to find and to forge their own identities.

III.

THE BODY AS SITE OF CONFLICT

The Body as War Zone and the Enemy as Lover

In *Leaflets: Poems 1965-1968* (1969), Rich’s psychological and political break with patriarchy deepens further. At this stage in her poetry, Rich continues to move away from the characterization of women as “objects” and further explores the female body as a site of conflict, such as the battleground of the Vietnam War, as she continues to find and to strengthen her own poetic voice. In *Leaflets*, the female body is literally the site in which conflicts can be resolved. She focuses more on the physical body, and particularly the female

modestly dressed, speak quietly and do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by the, and do not tell fibs: that, for the first volume, is a good deal” (11). During the 1950’s, Auden’s comments about Rich’s poetry are meant to be taken as the highest praise; however, these comments, viewed years later, can be seen as condescending. Auden is praising Rich for being “a good 1950’s young woman.” She is imitating the modernist poets (mostly male) of her time, and Auden praises her and gives her first poetry book an award because of the image of the proper, good girl she seems to be. However, as Rich later realizes, this “image” of the female is one based on what societal expectations and women as “object” rather than as “subject.”

body, here than in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, in which she questions the characterization of female identity based on one's social and legal status. After "Snapshots," Rich's moves away from Wallace Stevens' notion, explained in his book *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (1951), that a poem is a "supreme fiction" of the imagination and its aesthetic design is to create "the *mundo* of the imagination in which the imaginative man delights (57-8). Thus, as Albert Gelpi notes, for Rich, "poetry has to be made to articulate what will make things happen, has to make things happen in the articulation ("Witness" 10). Through this second half of her early poetic career, Rich begins to move away from traditional poetic forms and begins to view poetry as an instrument to evoke social and political change.

In *Leaflets*, the war, particularly the Vietnam War, appears more as imagery than as direct subject. For Rich, the notion of "enemy" is connected to the notion of "other": just as the Vietnamese are considered the enemy and the other, women also have and continue to suffer the same classifications. Thus, Rich seeks to understand and love the other by forging a subjectivity that internalizes the pain of others in order to strengthen our sense of self: for her, if we can internalize the pain of war, then the war, the enemy, and the atrocities being done to human bodies will become more real to us and hopefully provoke change. Just as Rich hopes for daughters-in-law not to become "numb" to the pain of their existence, she aims in this poetry book for Americans to feel the pain of war in order for them to see the "other" not as an enemy but as another human being and to see women not as "others" but as equals. Moreover, as Elissa Greenwald points out, Rich also aims to "forge a new language that will reflect a subjective rather than 'official' version of truth" (97). For Rich, we must

not only begin to identify and to empathize with the enemy but also to view historical representation as subjective rather than objective.²⁰

In “Demon Lover” (1966) and “Nightbreak” (1968), Rich identifies with the enemy by portraying him or her as a lover. Although the tone of these poems is one of division, irreversible loss, and brokenness, she celebrates the power of sexuality and communication in a world of destruction. By portraying the enemy as a lover, Rich is able to transform the “other” into a more personal and intimate subject. Specifically, in “Demon Lover,” Rich internalizes the Vietnam War into our homes, communities and even our dreams:

I dreamed about the war.
We were all sitting at the table
in a kitchen in Chicago.
The radio had just screamed
that Illinois was the target (ll. 56-60).

In “Nightbreak,” Rich includes dream-like images and translates the battlefield of war into the landscape of everyday life by identifying with the Vietnamese and by picturing her own body as the site of war:

In the bed the pieces fly together
and the rifts fill or else
my body is a list of wounds
symmetrically placed
a village
blown up by planes
that did not finish the job (ll. 25-31).

In these lines, the poet’s body is the Vietnamese village being “blown up” and the “list of wounds”; the force of destruction is localized to her bed, which may be the place where the broken pieces are also joined. Rich’s use of spacing in “Nightbreak” and in other poems in *Leaflets* emphasizes the overall tone of division and the lack of communication that, for Rich,

²⁰ As I will discuss in more detail in section III of this essay, Rich’s mid-poetic career will focus primarily on “diving” into history and exploring the historical representation, or lack thereof, of women.

result in our use of the words “enemy” and “other.” Rich asserts that we must break down barriers, unify instead of divide, and see one another as human beings rather than as “enemies” or “others.”

Even though a division between peoples exists, for Rich, it is absurd to describe others as “the enemy”; she illustrates this by saying that there is no enemy:

The enemy has withdrawn
between raids become invisible
there are
 no agencies
 of relief (ll. 32-4).

For her, the image of two lovers is similar to the one of two countries reconciling as they both attempt to create a union among the fragments. However, she points out that communication plays a crucial role in breaking down the barriers between lovers, countries, enemies, and even genders. Just as Rich identifies the enemy as lover, she insists that we must find our capacity to love and use our creative imaginations in order to make “the pieces fly together” (l. 25). The world, for her, is deeply “cracked and flaking” (l. 36), but nightbreak is “Time for pieces / to move / dumbly back / toward each other” (ll. 42-6). As Greenwald points out, for Rich, the “true enemy” is not the Vietnamese people, women, or minorities, but the “war machine and patriarchy itself” (100). And through language, specifically effective communication, the lies told to the US public about the Vietnam War and the historical misrepresentations of women and minorities can be stripped away. Moreover, the language of poetry, for Rich, is itself an act of healing that can overcome any division, even if only imaginary, between the self and an “other.”

Thus, in *Leaflets*, Rich’s imagined body is the site of war, a list of wounds and of the dead, and one whose lover is the enemy. Through language, she focuses our attention on the

body, the power of sexuality and love, and the necessity of communication. For Rich, the female body is a political entity more viewed as “object” than as “subject.” During the war, she sees the Vietnamese as politicized in a similar way: it is much easier to hate your enemies when you refuse to see them as human beings. Therefore, by depicting the imagined body in these poems, she aims to bring the pain of the war, fear, and the celebration of language to the forefront, and as a result, to put us on the path to loving one another rather than hating, to be “subjects” rather than “objects,” to be lovers rather than enemies.

The Personal and Public Affect of War

In *The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970* (1971), Rich’s war imagery and focus on the body as the site of conflict begin to connect the present with historical events and people more so than in earlier poetry books. In “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children,” Rich connects public war with private disturbance, a similar thematic concern of hers in “Demon Lover” and “Nightbreak.” However, in “Burning,” she does not explore language as a means to move fragments “toward each other,” rather, she unveils the dual capacity of language to elucidate as well as to obscure moral truth (e.g. what actually happens during times of war on the battlefield and how it is portrayed at home).

Rich insists that we need to reexamine historical representation:

Back there: the library, walled
 with green Britannicas
 Looking again
 in Dürer’s *Complete Works*
 for MELANCOLIA, the baffled woman

 the crocodiles in Herodotus
 the Book of the Dead
 the *Trial of Jeanne d’Arc*, so blue (ll. 8-15).

For Rich, we must look again “back there”—in the library, Vietnam, history. The green Britannicas, like the jungles of Vietnam, are the war zone in which history is told in the



Figure 1. *Melancholia I* (1514)
Engraving: 9 ½ x 7 ¾ in. (24 x 18.5 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York City, NY USA

“oppressor’s language” (l. 38). She points out that many women’s accomplishments and lives are mostly recorded as “an age of long silence” (l. 28), and she encourages us to “look again” at history. For example, if we look in “Dürer’s”²¹ *Complete Works / for MELANCOLIA*” (ll. 11-12), we find one of his most famous engravings called *Melancholia I* (1514) (Figure 1). In this engraving, he depicts his icon of Melancholy²² (a woman) and the dangers of obsessive study, particularly for women. In other words, not only can ideas be dangerous, but extensive learning

in the sciences and mathematics (notice the symbols of these two disciplines in the engraving) for women can lead to melancholy²³. Rich’s reference in line 12 to the “baffled

²¹ Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) was a German painter and mathematician who is considered, along with Rembrandt and Goya, one of the greatest creators of old master prints. Most of his prints were done in series. His most famous print series are the *Apocalypse* (1498), the *Great Passion* (1498-1510), and the *Little Passion* (1510-11). His most noted individual engravings include *Knight, Death, and the Devil* (1513), *Saint Jerome in his Study* (1514), and *Melancholia I* (1514).

²² Up until the early sixteenth century, melancholy and grief were popular poetic subjects for many artists and musicians.

²³ The term “melancholy” has historically been a negative attribute and has also been depicted over the last 500 years in paintings through the female characters. According to Aristotle, there is a connection between melancholy (an excess in a person of black bile) and greatest in philosophy, politics, and poetry. He calls melancholy “the sacred disease.” Plato characterizes this condition as rage and frenzy-like behavior and connects it to the abilities to compose divine poetry, prophesize, and love truly. However, in the Renaissance, melancholy is seen as a mood and physical disturbance, or an imbalance of the four “humors.” One of the four humors, black bile, was thought to cause madness and melancholy. The association of melancholy with

woman” refers to the belief that melancholy can lead to madness; moreover, as Rich points out, with her inclusion of the word “woman” in line 12, that this condition of “melancholia” and “madness” is most often depicted through female characters, rather than male ones.²⁴

In the next stanza, Rich mentions other historical figures in order to examine further to what extent the retelling of history plays an integral role in individual’s subjectivity. Through Herodotus²⁵ and his account of the crocodiles in the Nile, various Egyptian customs and traditions were historically recorded. Although recorded history through language, or in other words, perpetuating the memory of past cultures, for Rich, is a positive endeavor. However, her mention of Herodotus in this line also implies a negative view of historical accounts. Known as the father of history, Herodotus is believed to have fabricated certain details in his historical narratives; as such, Rich questions the degree to which history can ever be deemed accurate or reliable. Moreover, just as we should remember and honor the dead, as does the Egyptian “Book of the Dead” (l. 14), for Rich, it is also important to view historical accounts with a critical eye. For Rich, the famous female martyr Joan of Arc²⁶, depicted in the book “the *Trial of Jeanne d’Arc*” (l. 15), is remembered in history; however, she was burned (just like the books during WW II, the Jews during Holocaust, the Vietnamese during the Vietnam War) to death because of political reasons. As I will discuss

creativity continued because many people still believed that the condition or mood involved cogitation and introspection. Dürer’s depiction of melancholy as a woman is characteristic of the mentality over much of the past 500 years, which saw women as being in danger of melancholy if they exerted themselves (either physically or mentally).

²⁴ For more discussion on the depiction of melancholy and madness as a feminine condition, see Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (1985) and Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961).

²⁵ Herodotus (484 BC – 425 BC) was a Greek historian and is regarded as the “father of history.” He wrote *The Histories*, a collection of inquiries into the Persian invasions of Greece, which occurred in 490 and 480-79 BC.

²⁶ Joan of Arc (1412-1431) is considered the national heroine of France and one of the saints of the Roman Catholic Church. She played an integral role in France’s fight against English domination and rule. She was eventually captured by the English, and John of Lancaster, the First Duke of Bedford, had her burnt at the stake after her conviction of heresy. Later, Pope Callixtus III reopened the case and overturned her original conviction, and she was canonized in 1920 by Pope Benedict XV.

later in this essay, Rich will again revisit historical female figures (e.g. Ethel Rosenberg) who were unjustly accused and sentenced to death because of politics.

For Rich, many women's accomplishments have not been noted historically or they have been demonized for independent thinking. Ultimately, for her, language can liberate or oppress: Native Americans "that breathed once / in signals of smoke" (ll. 34-5) were invaded by the "fanatics and traders" (l. 32) and ultimately succumbed to the "oppressor's language" (l. 38). However, Rich insists that she must speak to us through poetry, even if it is with the oppressor's language (l. 39).

Rich incorporates the image of burning in this poem in order to address both historical and present day concerns; moreover, she embodies figuratively and literally the physical body as the site of burning. We can burn inside of anger, as the speaker does in the poem when "they take the book away / because [she] dream[s] of her too often" (ll. 17-8): for Rich, ideas can be dangerous, and the fear of ideas can sometimes cause people to burn books, such as in Hitler's book burning and the children burning a book in the backyard (ll. 5-6). Similarly, people like Daniel Berrigan²⁷, a poet, priest and protestor against the Vietnam War, burn draft records both in anger and because of fear of the language written on those pages. For Rich, the physical human body is also burned in protest, anger, and fear both in the past and in the present: the historical figure, Joan of Arc, was burned at the stake as a heretic, millions of Jews were burned during the Holocaust, and hundreds of Vietnamese villages and countryside are burning during the Vietnam War with napalm. Moreover, Rich points out that the destruction of the physical body through burning, or other means, is also an act of political vengeance: Joan of Arc, the Jews, and the Vietnamese are all examples of

²⁷ Daniel Berrigan (1921-), a poet, Roman Catholic priest, and Vietnam War protestor, decided to participate in a more radical non-violent protest in 1969 in which he, and nine other activists, used napalm in order to be able to walk into the draft board in Catonsville, Maryland, and remove 378 draft files, which they then burnt outside.

people whose physical bodies were destroyed by fire for political reasons. In short, not only is the body, for Rich, a political entity, but it is one in which should be used to stop destruction and hate rather than fueling them. For her, the war zone does not only exist in history or in some far away country, but it is being fought in the present, in our communities, in our homes, in our own thoughts.

Rich explains that history repeats itself, and that we should read and learn from history in order to not make the same mistakes in the future: just as Joan of Arc, millions of Jews, and hundreds of Vietnamese were burnt to death, the act of burning out of fear or intolerance continues in our own backyards:

What happens between us
has happened for centuries
we know it from literature

still it happens (ll. 62-5).

Rich's use of the word "literature" here instead of "history" demonstrates her view of historical accounts as more of a story with particular perspectives than a completely accurate account. Rich contends that historical accounts of women are, for the most part, absent: there is only silence. However, Rich hopes to fill that silence with poetic language.

For Rich, our physical bodies and identities can be created and portrayed on the page and in the history books with ink:

words of man
in pain
a naked word
entering the clot
a hand grasping
through bars. (ll. 55-60)

The "words of man" describe the pain of existence and struggle but also the man (and woman) being portrayed by words is in pain from historical representation. For Rich, the

words are “naked” and become an ink “clot” because the writer is unable to write the words down effectively. From a certain perspective, Rich points out, that man is imprisoned by language (“a hand grasping / through bars”) because language is incapable of fully expressing the depth of any single moment. Moreover, literature and history fall short of capturing experience and feeling in their entirety, not only because of the limitations of language but also because they are politically and socially driven. For Rich, experience is necessary: “there are books that describe all of this / they are useless” (ll.71-2). Yet, even when we read of historical places and venture to see “a temple / built eighteen hundred years ago” (ll. 75-6), Rich points out that we are still unmoved. Even though the burning of children in Vietnam, the burning of books during World War II and in our own back yards is depicted in history and happening all around us, for Rich, it is better to burn paper than children. Yet, at the same time, Rich reemphasizes in the last section of this poem that we are unaware of what is happening around us. Therefore, we must burn through language in order to find the truth embodied in it: for Rich, the oppressor’s language must be eradicated and a unique language created that embodies emotion and experience. To reiterate this sentiment, Rich connects her poetic voice in the poem to Artaud’s²⁸ in protest—“*burn the texts*” (l. 82)—because

(...) In America we have only the present tense. I am in danger. You are in danger. The burning of a book arouses no sensation in me. I know it hurts to burn. There are flames of napalm in Catonsville, Maryland.²⁹ I know it hurts to burn. The typewriter is overheated, my mouth is burning, I cannot touch you and this is the oppressor’s language. (ll. 88-92)

²⁸ Antoine Marie Joseph Artaud (1896-1948) was a French playwright, poet, actor and director who wrote *The Theatre and Its Double* and called his new theatre a “Theatre of Cruelty.” According to Artaud, only by destroying accepted texts can the hidden meaning of language be released from its imperfect embodiment; therefore, he championed theater to be performed with a unique language.

²⁹ In this line, Rich references Daniel Berrigan and his other activists who use of napalm in order to obtain and burn draft records in Catonsville, Maryland in 1969.

For Rich, there is no time like the present. Now is the time for action. Although it can hurt to burn, to be angry and impassioned in protest, to physically burn for your beliefs (political or religious), Rich hopes to arouse us into action with her poetic language.

Historical Women and the Role of the Poet

In the poem “Planetarium” (1968), also published in *The Will to Change*, Rich speaks for the first time as a woman poet who identifies with the historical power and experience of other women. In order to connect her readers with the historical women who have endured the struggles for equality and freedom, Rich dedicates this poem to Caroline Herschel (1750-1848), who helped her brother, William, discover Uranus and other constellations, and Rich references Caroline in the first few lines of the poem:

A woman in the shape of a monster
a monster in the shape of a woman
the skies are full of them. (ll. 1-3)

In this first stanza, Rich emphasizes the mythological: the woman as a monster or constellation that is a danger to man, like Medusa. In these first two lines, Rich looks up to the heavens and then redirects our attention down to the body, thus connecting the two. In other words, for Rich, we may look to the heavens for inspiration, but it is important for us to ground ourselves and focus on the body.

Rich further embodies her poetic voice with that of Caroline Herschel’s own voice in the following lines:

a woman ‘in the snow
among the Clocks and instruments
or measuring the ground with poles.’ (ll. 5-8)

As a female poet, Rich aims to resurrect the voices of women who, historically, have been misrepresented or been lost among the silence. Moreover, Rich aims to connect present day

women's struggles with those who lived in the past. Therefore, she portrays Caroline Herschel as being just like other women: "she whom the moon ruled / like us" (ll. 9-10). Rich points out that Caroline is not the only woman to be characterized as "monster" or "other": there are many women who have tried to excel in their fields but have been unable to do so or who have been chastised for having careers:

Galaxies of women, there
doing penance for impetuosity
ribs chilled
in those spaces of the mind. (ll. 13-6)

Rich even connects her body and identity to a constellation in line 33 by mentioning her astrological sign, Taurus. By connecting Caroline to the "galaxies of women," including Rich herself, who participate in the struggle for individual identity, Rich aims to encourage her readers to take action because "[w]hat we see, we see / and seeing is changing" (ll. 26-7). Moreover, Rich as a poet and Caroline as an astronomer have been in the "direct path of a battery of signals" (l. 35) that both women must not only "see" and receive but also transmit.

For Rich, a position of seeming vulnerable can become one's power:

I am an instrument in the shape
of a woman trying to translate pulsations
into images for the relief of the body
and the reconstruction of the mind. (ll. 42-5)

Rich's use of the word "I" in these lines demonstrates her sense of individuality and the emergence of her female poetic voice. Her role as a poet, much like Caroline's role as an astronomer, is to be "an instrument," and through her poetry, she can translate the "untranslatable language in the universe" (l. 38) so that she may liberate the female body and identity from the "monster" and the "other."

IV.

THE HISTORICAL BODY: DIVING INTO THE WRECK AND RECLAIMING WHAT WAS LOST

In her middle poetic career, beginning with *Diving into the Wreck* (1973) and ending with *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1981), Rich aims to “dive into the wreck” of history and to discover the treasure—the historical women whom history has been forgotten. In this new stage, Rich has found her individual voice, forged her own subjectivity, and places the female body in the forefront. In her early poetic career, she addressed women’s struggles to find their own identities and sense of self and to what extent the female body is invisible or objectified. Through this first phase, Rich’s poetic voice began to emerge with greater individuality. Now, in the middle of her career, the body of the poet is the figure in the poems who leads us to rediscover history and ourselves. In the poem “Diving into the Wreck” (1972), published in the book by the same name, Rich descends into her personal life and into the wreck of history to the moment just before the distinction between men and women begins. In this poem, she aims not to “burn the texts” but to avert them completely by “diving” into history herself. For Rich, the body, the self, is the means through which one can “dive into history.” In “For Ethel Rosenberg” (1980), published in *A Wild Patience*, Rich’s poetic subject, Ethel Rosenberg, is evidence of the wreck, a female body and self, she sought in “Diving.” Thus, in this poem, Rich gives figurative life to this historically outcast and misunderstood female body/self by imagining Ethel’s thoughts, experiences, and emotions—by giving her a voice through poetry that she was denied in life.

In “Diving into the Wreck,” Rich surveys “the damage that was done / and the treasures that prevail” (ll. 55-6). As Rich has expressed in earlier poems, historical accounts of women are either nonexistent or, for the most part, inaccurate. However, in this poem,

Rich figuratively dives into the “book of myths” (l. 1)—a history that has overlooked women’s accomplishments and has inspired social and political constraints on women, such as those referenced in “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children.” However, unlike previous poems in which she references misinterpretations of women, Rich dives into history for “the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth” (ll. 62-3): she dives into history for the female body/self and not the stories or myths of it.

With her, Rich brings a “camera” (l. 2) to record the damage and a “knife-blade” (l. 3) to cut through false images of female identity, such as those she references in “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law.” However, in order to dive into the wreck, the speaker must dress her body in diving gear, a “mask,” “body-amour” and “flippers”—all of which she relates as tools Jacques Cousteau used to explore the depths of the oceans. She must use this diving gear in order to swim and breath underwater, just as she must use the oppressor’s language to write poetry. For Rich, we can communicate new purposes in old words, we can map out a new world—we can make the figure real: “The words are purposes. / The words are maps” (ll. 53-4).

For Rich to create new worlds with old words, she must first go back in history, into our consciousness, to the point when separate identities for men and women is not apparent and imposed upon by societal standards and expectations. However, it is through mythical time that Rich, the poet, travels. Thus, when she reaches the site of the wreckage, she assumes both male and female in one: she is both the mermaid with “dark hair” and the merman in his “armored body.” For Rich, we cannot begin to liberate the social, political, and religious restrictions on the female body and its ability to find a sense of self unless we travel to the mythic time in which both men and women are equal.

For Rich, the body, and most particularly the female body/self, is the wreckage; therefore, she becomes not only male and female in one but also the site of the wreck:

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
 whose breast still bear the stress
 whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
 obscurely inside barrels. (ll. 78-81)

Each of these lines represents characteristics of the wreckage of women. Line 78 refers to women, like in “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,” whose eyes are open but who are really dead inside: they cannot show expression, pain, or frustration because as the narrator says in “Snapshots,” “nothing hurts her anymore” (l. 24). Line 79 refers to the overall weight of the social and political pressures and restraints on women: for Rich, these women are pinned down, a thematic issue which Rich explores both in “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” and in “Snapshots.” The “stress” on their “breasts” also refers to the pressure on women to be mothers and to bear children and to be a sexual object for men. Line 80 and 81 refer to the rich treasure inside of women: their talents, ambitions and dreams are there inside of them, in the “barrels,” but they are hidden deep below the depths. For this reason, the speaker dives into the wreckage to recover these “treasures” that have been buried and forgotten for so long.

In the last stanza of the poem, the speaker reiterates that this wreckage is about all women and that she is us and we are her: “We are, I am, you are” (l. 87). For Rich, all female bodies, past and present, are part of this wreckage regardless whether each individual woman finds subjectivity and a sense of self during her lifetime. By uniting all women, including herself, under the same identity, she enables women to identify with one another, to realize that they are not alone in our struggles and to empathize with one another. Moreover, Rich portrays the female body, which includes all women, as the site of the wreckage to further

demonstrate the extent to which this wreckage within history plays an integral role in the formation of female subjectivity. As a result, Rich aims to inspire us to return to the scene of the wreckage, back inside of ourselves, in order to recover our sense of self. We must dive into history in order to give life back to those who are forgotten. There, amidst the wreckage, we must cut ourselves free with the “knife” (l. 91) from societal expectations and views of the female body and identity that view women as “objects” rather than as “subjects.” Rich asserts that with the “camera” (l. 91), with our memories and through language, we must “record” our findings as we delve into history, into the “book of myths / in which / our names do not appear” (ll. 92-4). For Rich, “Diving into the Wreck” is meant to lead by example: just as the poet dives into history and into herself, she hopes to encourage others to do the same.

Rich’s poetic subject, Ethel, in “For Ethel Rosenberg” is evidence of the wreck she sought in “Diving into the Wreck.” For Rich, Ethel is characteristic of many women whose identity is largely determined by their marital status: specifically in reference to Ethel, she is historically represented as being linked to espionage during the Cold War through her husband. In the poem, Rich asserts that marriage can have consequences on the female identity and how one’s fate is often linked to one’s husband. By making a connection between the speaker’s upcoming marriage and the time of Ethel’s execution,³⁰ she explores the implications of the following historical facts about Ethel: 1) Ethel, as a married woman, helps her husband by typing some documents for him; 2) the level of her involvement in espionage is still questionable, even today; 3) she was convicted as a result of helping her husband (by being married to a spy) and through her brother’s and sister-in-law’s

³⁰ Ethel Rosenberg was executed with her husband, Julius Rosenberg, for espionage in 1953.

testimonies, which later were revealed to be lies³¹. The speaker of the poem questions: “marriage itself / a question of loyalty / or punishment” (ll. 10-12). In these lines, by reading in the newspaper about Ethel’s situation, the speaker wonders how getting married to her husband may compel her to involve herself in her husband’s affairs, for good or bad. Rich points out that Ethel had aspirations to be an actress and a singer, but she had to give up those dreams once she got married: for Rich, Ethel is a prime example of a historical woman whose individual identity, after marriage, was more characterized by her status as a wife than by her own aspirations and talents. Therefore, we must ask ourselves: what is the price of marriage?

Moreover, the death of Ethel’s physical body through electrocution and burning, for Rich, is similar to other historical people, like Joan of Arc, the Jews, and the Vietnamese, where the destruction of their physical bodies was politically motivated. Therefore, by imagining Ethel—her thoughts, experiences, and emotions—, Rich is able to give her a voice through poetry and to give her a life beyond the death of her physical body.

In the poem, Rich explains that language can play a significant role in our lives. For example, language can be used to protest atrocities:

the words
scratched on wall, on pavements
painted over railway arches
Librez les Rosenberg! (ll. 3-6)

These lines demonstrate that there was, at least, some popular support for the release of Ethel and her husband. However, language also played a role in convicting her: her mother and brother testified against her (ll. 62-3). Rich points out that all the publicity of the Rosenberg

³¹ Her brother, David Greenglass, was spared execution in exchange for testimony against his sister and brother-in-law. Greenglass later admitted to his biographer that he perjured himself on the stand about Ethel in order to save himself and his wife.

trial, the use of language both as protest and conviction, not only affects the Rosenbergs themselves but also the public. The speaker wants to forget about the Rosenbergs and the image of their faces on the newspapers: she says that “it must be pushed aside” (l. 33). Rich points out that it is often easier not to challenge the social and political views that can lead to the persecution of others: it is easier for Ethel to just be that image in the newspaper and not a real person. However, Rich encourages her readers to not feel numb to the pain of the world. Just as she attempts to make the suffering of the Vietnamese, for example, real to her readers in several of her previous poetry books about war, in “For Ethel Rosenberg,” Rich also aims to awaken and to inspire her audience into action. Thus, the speaker cannot forget Ethel because she is “like so many” (l. 37) other women throughout history who have been denied careers of their own, and the only aspiration they have is to bear children: “who seemed to get nothing out of any of it / except her children” (ll. 38-9). By not only sympathizing with Ethel but also by seeing her as a “subject” rather than an “object” pictured in the newspapers, Rich points out that such a step will allow us to be more compassionate with one another.

Rich points out that some experiences are “so painful” and “so unfathomable” that people do not know how to articulate them: she demonstrates this fact through the speaker’s inability to absorb the atrocity of Ethel’s death until she had “ignored [it] for years.” As Rich points out in “The Burning of Books Instead of Children,” some experiences cannot be understood through literature, but must be comprehended instead by living. The speaker of the “Ethel” poem begins to understand how Ethel must have felt only after some time has passed, she separates from her husband (“then slowly severing drifting apart”), he dies in 1970 (“a separate death”), and she is alone (“a life unto itself”). In short, Rich acknowledges

the fact that some experiences are difficult to understand unless experienced first hand; however, she encourages us not to turn a blind eye on how each one of us is affected by the social and political bodies that comprise our reality.

Rich asserts that diving into the wreck of history and discovering Ethel's story is only the first step in forging a female subjectivity; we must also acknowledge and seek to understand the connections Ethel's story has to others before her. Rich reiterates this in the last section of the poem when the speaker connects Ethel's plight (to have burned to death and to be unjustly accused) to other women. The speaker insists that diving into the wreck and giving her a voice necessitates that we allow Ethel to "be at last" (l. 112), regardless of any differences in political views. For Rich, just because we do not have common beliefs, either politically, religiously, etc. does not give us cause to be selective on who we bring up from the "wreck." Although the speaker acknowledges that Ethel's political views are different from her own (l. 114), the fact remains that Ethel is an example of a woman unjustly accused and sentenced, a woman ensnared by the time period and social dictates in which she lived. Thus, for Rich, the power of imagination and of poetry allows the possibility of the impossible—even after her physical death, we can bring her life and give her a voice. Through language, Rich asserts that female subjectivity can be formed, and that women whom history has misrepresented or misunderstood, can be seen in a different light—one that highlights their individuality and cuts their physical bodies free from the social and political bodies that enslave them. As a result, future generations of women will be able to look back at historical women, like Ethel Rosenberg, and see beyond the newspapers' images, the ways in which language convicted her and was responsible for the destruction of her physical body; instead, Rich asserts that we must use language to re-envision these women and to

imagine Ethel living, free, and able to fill “a notebook herself / with secrets she has never sold” (ll. 123-4).

V.

AN EMBODIED POETICS

In her later poetry career, Rich focuses on an embodied poetics³², which for her not only centers on the body itself but also recognizes and explores the pain and suffering of the physical and social body. For her, the body is the source of inspiration: during her battle with rheumatoid arthritis, she discovers the intensity of physical pain; and through the suffering of her physical body, she realizes, firsthand, how her experiences fit into a larger context of the individual within the social body. As she has reiterated throughout most of her poetic career, most people may read about the atrocities and injustices in the world but because they are not directly affected, they turn a blind eye. Therefore, for Rich, language alone can fail to reiterate suffering; sometimes we must experience life in order to begin to sympathize with others. However, through an embodied poetics, one which focuses on the body and uses specific language that communicates the pain and suffering, Rich aims to awaken people so they might connect their personal pain, suffering, and experience to one on a global level; it is only then, asserts Rich, that societal change is possible on a grander scale.

³² As several other critics, including Rich herself, have noted, Wallace Stevens' poetry was influential on Rich's poetic development. However, during the middle of her early poetic career, when she began to move away from the poetic influences of the great poets of her time, Rich also began to reject the abstract and disembodied poetry of Stevens. As Jacqueline Brogan notes, Rich replaces “the overarching drive toward abstraction and bodyless-ness with ‘difficult’ details, even blooded-ness” (315). Rich notes in her essay “Voices from the air” (1993) Stevens' disembodied voice as he read his poem “The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm” over the radio. His reading causes her to ask, “What is a poem like this doing in a world where even the semblance of calm is a privilege few can afford?” (“Voices” 11). For her, there is a gap between the world of Stevens' poem and the world of the listener. Rich notes that this moment of listening to Stevens on the radio was a crucial one for her: she now began to realize and to work toward an embodied poetics, one which bridges the gaps between the poem and the world in which it exists. Rich points out that a poem cannot free “us” from the struggles and suffering of life; however, a poem can bring us closer insight into the collective “we” and how every individual body is connected to the social body around us (“Voices” 12-13). As a result of hearing Stevens' disembodied voice, Rich aims to be a poet with a body.

In “Contradictions: Tracking Poems” (1986), Rich explores the physical pain and suffering of the body. In “Tracking Poem #7,” Rich writes a letter-poem in which she addresses her own body’s pain as it literally splits and separates from rheumatoid arthritis and her splitting of self into two “Adriennes.” Rich embodies the pain and suffering of her body in this poem by characterizing the “I” as “pain”: “I feel signified by pain” (l. 1). Rich describes the pain specifically in order to relate fully to the reader how painful life is for her body. Albert Gelpi asserts that Rich aims to be “faithful to details” in order to bring emotion into poetry (438-9) so that her readers may begin to “awaken a capacity to feel” (Bundtzen 341). Through the repetition of the words “pain” and “life” in the poem, Rich implies that life can be painful.

Because of the severity of her rheumatoid arthritis, Rich must use a typewriter instead of her own hand to write (l. 4). Technology, for Rich, is not only useful to her, such as the typewriter, but a neon sign is a better signifier of the intensities and persistence of her physical pain (ll. 6-7).

Rich connects her pain to that of others in “Tracking Poem #29”:

remember: the body’s pain and the pain on the streets
are not the same but you can learn
from the edges that blur. (ll. 9-11)

She encourages her readers to “remember” that the experience of physical pain and suffering is more internalized than the pain we experience from social and political entities. For Rich, exploring one’s own physical pain is useful as a means of enhancing social awareness because the pain makes one more sympathetic and understanding to the suffering of others within the social body as they battle injustice and inequality. As Rich notes in “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children,” experience cannot be understood by reading books; sometimes

we must live in order to comprehend the magnitude of the events going on around us. Similarly, in “Tracking Poem #29,” Rich experiences suffering and physical pain, rather than merely reading about it. Moreover, for Rich, the body can serve as a site for exploring divisions among us and where we can “blur” the “edges.” For her, all human bodies can suffer, feel loss, be persecuted, or forgotten by history. Her physical pain and the experience of suffering, for Rich, connects her to all of those people in the world (dead and alive) who have also endured pain, both from their bodies and from the social body in which they live. Just as she reiterates in “Demon Lover” that we must find compassion for our enemies by attempting to see them as lovers, here she reiterates this notion of sympathizing with others, understanding their suffering, and recognizing how the social body, through injustice and inequality, is often responsible for the pain of the physical body.

Rich emphasizes poetry as an instrument of embodied experience, one which centers on the suffering of the body itself and connects personal pain with the suffering of those within the social body. Rich’s embodied poetics is a product of, as Cynthia Hogue notes, what Rich is trying to do in “Contradictions,” which is to track “her own process both of working through and resisting that notion that suffering incurs passivity” (45). In “Tracking Poem #18,” Rich resists passivity by connecting personal, bodily pain to the pain of the world, its injustice and inequality, by making the pain real. She understands that language will not allow her to make other people understand her pain, but she can share what she has learned from her physical suffering. Therefore, she aims not to transcend the body, but to reclaim it:

The problem is
to connect, without hysteria, the pain
of any one’s body into the pain of the body’s world
For it is the body’s world

they are trying to destroy forever. (ll. 4-8)

Rich points out that women must connect with their bodies' pain "without hysteria," a condition typically characterized as female, which would undermine her focus on the body and its pain as legitimate and more than a "female" malady. Instead, Rich is concerned with connecting the body's pain to that of the "body's world," or the social body in which we live; for her, the first step to finding solutions that enable us to break down social and political barriers and divisions that cause physical pain to the body, such as wars, domestic violence, etc., is to first find within ourselves our own sense of self. As Rich points out in "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" and more fervently in "Diving into the Wreck," we must search within ourselves to discover our own identities, to see ourselves as "subjects," before we can begin to make changes within the social and political bodies in which we live. After forging our own individual subjectivities, then through language, and specifically poetry, we can more readily identify the physical and mental pain in others. Yet, Rich insists it is through the "abstract worlds" (l. 12) of imagination, thought, art, and philosophy that we can survive pain and existence and ultimately find a sense of self.

Yet, where should we look, in the heavens or in the body, for these "abstract worlds"? In "6/21" (1987), Rich asserts that the way down to the physical body and the way up to the heavens become one and the same:

It's June and summer's height
 the longest bridge of light
 leaps from all the rivets
 of the sky
 Yet it's of earth
 and nowhere else I have to speak
 Only on earth has this light taken on
 these swiveled meanings, only on this earth
 where we are dying befouled, gritting our teeth
 losing our guiding stars

has this light
found an alphabet a mouth. (ll.1-11)

For Rich, the light of the stars is the light of the mind and only there can we enter the human dimension through language (“alphabet”) and speech (“mouth”). Thus, for her, the role of the poet is to use language to enlighten us by highlighting the social and political barriers that objectify the female body rather than viewing it as a subject. Through poetry, she explores the power of love and communication as a means to abolish divisions, not only between men and women, but also ones that must be present in order for an “enemy” or an “other” to exist. For Rich, there are no natural enemies, no “others”—there are only bodies, selves, subjects, human beings. Rich asserts that by internalizing pain and suffering, by seeing our enemies as lovers, by humanizing the “other,” we can learn to forge a subjectivity that allows for greater human understanding between nations, peoples, genders, races, and individuals. The body, for her, is the center of human existence—for in the body lies the mind, through which poetry and art can be conceived, the hands by which poetry and art can be forged, and the heart through which poetry and art can find meaning.

CHAPTER 3

The Visual Art of Andy Warhol: Fame, Death, and Disaster in American Popular Culture

All of my films are artificial, but then everything is sort of artificial. I don't know where the artificial starts and the real starts.
-Andy Warhol (*Andy Warhol: Supernova*, AGO, 2006)³³

It is now the era of murder by simulation, of the generalized aesthetic of simulation, of the murder-alibi—the allegorical resurrection of death.
-Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*

I.

INTRODUCTION

Warhol's representations of the body in his art comment on American popular culture and its fascination with fame, death, and disaster. For Warhol, the body is an object, an image he can create, distort, and disembody; and through art, this image can achieve immortality in American popular culture. He is not "interested" in the lives of his subjects, their frustrations, desires, or dreams. For Warhol, the image is everything, and through the image, he can explore American culture's fascination with, and fear of, mortality. Yet, is there any meaning to Warhol's portrayal of image? Does his art give the viewer any direction or opinion about American culture?

Many of Warhol's critics, like Donald Kuspit, do not see any direction in Warhol's art, and like Fredric Jameson³⁴, he sees a lack of meaning in Warhol's images:

³³ This quote by Andy Warhol is taken from the first wall of the exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in October 2006 entitled *Andy Warhol: Supernova: Stars, Deaths and Disasters, 1962-1964*. This exhibit of Warhol's visual art was guest-curated by David Cronenberg.

³⁴ In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Jameson asserts that Warhol's art in general, and specifically his painting "Diamond Dust Shoes," does not really "speak to us at all. Nothing in the painting organizes even a minimal place for the viewer, who confronts it at the turning of a museum corridor or

Warhol, simply by manipulating signs—repeating them ad nauseum and arbitrarily—makes us immune to their particular meanings and to their larger import, to the context of events from which they emerge. Warhol enforces—policies—our moronization, rather than leading us out of it. (214)

For Kuspit, Warhol denies his viewers meaning by making us “immune” to the images of death, disaster, and disembodiment he portrays. Kuspit criticizes Warhol for not guiding his viewers to a larger meaning—to a meaning beyond the aesthetic one depicted by images and paint. Other critics of Warhol’s paintings center on their disengagement with the world and almost cynical exploitation of his subjects. Robert Hughes, an advocate of this position, argues in his article “The Rise of Andy Warhol” in the *New York Review of Books* in 1982 that Warhol, as an artist, is more concerned with his own fame than with making significant works of art. However, another interpretation of Warhol’s work was offered in 1989 by the renowned critic Thierry de Duve in his essay “Andy Warhol; or, The Machine Perfected” (1989). For de Duve, Warhol’s greatest achievement is the machine-like demeanor he gave them:

To desire fame—not the glory of the hero but the glamour of the star—with the intensity and awareness Warhol did, is to desire to be nothing, nothing of the human, the interior, the profound. It is to want to be nothing but image, surface, a bit of light on a screen, a mirror for the fantasies and a magnet for the desires of others—a thing of absolute narcissism. (4)

For de Duve, this machine-like demeanor of Warhol’s paintings is significant because of their ability to testify to the events and consciousness of American culture. The capacity of Warhol’s paintings to bear witness “is neither to promise nor simply to expose; it is to attest to the reality as it is, in the past or present” (de Duve 6). Despite Warhol’s obsession with

gallery with all the contingency of some inexplicable natural object. On the level of content, we have to do with what are now far more clearly fetishes. [...] Here, however, we have a random collection of dead objects hanging together on the canvas” (8). Jameson views Warhol’s art as lacking meaning because it does not give the viewer any point of reference to a larger context, but instead, his work merely portrays “dead objects.” However, these “dead objects” are significant: for Warhol, death is objectified in American culture, and the overall content of Warhol’s art is death and how nothing lies beyond the façade, the image.

fame, both on a personal and cultural level, and his focus on the image of the body more so than the interior of human existence, his art work still stands as a reflection of the image-conscious nature of the times.

I would like to argue there is a distinct connection between fame, death of the physical body, and immortality through pop culture and mass media. His paintings of celebrities aim to celebrate their popular culture image without any connection to the real person behind of the façade. His disaster paintings assert the ubiquity of death in American culture and our apathy at the consequences of disasters on the human body. His paintings portray society's fascination with death and disaster, but it is death and disaster as image, as surface; Warhol's work cares little for what lies behind the façade.

II.

CELEBRITIES: THE CONNECTION BETWEEN FAME AND DEATH

The advent of Warhol's use of silkscreen painting coincides with his shift in subject matter from consumer goods toward the fetishization of the bodies of movie stars, such as Troy Donahue, Natalie Wood, and Warren Beatty. However, in early August 1962, when Marilyn Monroe committed suicide, Warhol focused extensively on her as a sort of memorial.³⁵ Ultimately, his paintings of celebrities' bodies demonstrate his fascination with death and his chief interest in fetishizing the body image of stars. As Jonathan Flatley notes in his essay "Warhol Gives Good Face," Warhol recognizes the connection between representation and memorialization: "Warhol saw that the poetics of publicity were also those of mourning. [...] Warhol draws attention to the homology between the face-giving

³⁵ Thomas Crow notes the funeral nature of the Marilyn paintings in his article "Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol."

that portraiture accomplishes and the work of representing or memorializing involved in mourning” (105-6). For Warhol, fame is linked to death: fame and being a popular icon ultimately strip the individual of life by replacing one’s physical body with an image, or an icon, of that person. As a result, the image of the celebrity assumes a life of its own, separate from the actual person; and through the media, the image of a person can be immortalized.

In Warhol’s *Marilyns* (thirty-seven canvases in total), the images of her demonstrate her immortalization in pop culture, which according to the French theorist Jacques Baudrillard, is not only a product of her fame and celebrity status but also the sudden death of her physical body. As Baudrillard explains in *Simulacra and Simulation*, death and fame are connected in two distinct ways. First, famous individuals who die in some notable way are immortalized in popular culture more from the deaths of their physical bodies than from their lives: “Death is never an absolute criterion, but in this case it is significant: the era of James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, and the Kennedys, of those who really died simply because they had a mythic dimension that implies death” (24). Although each of these individuals achieved fame and success, the brevity of their physical lives sealed their immortalization, and consequently iconization, in American popular culture. Moreover, their mythic dimension as cultural icons is perpetuated by their tragic and sudden deaths and vice versa. However, the irony is that Marilyn Monroe’s icon status in American popular culture also strips her of death: although her physical body died, her image through the media is immortalized.

Warhol’s painting “Marilyn Diptych” (1962) demonstrates the connection between fame and the death of her physical body, both in the icon’s immortalization and constant simulation in American pop culture. Like the repetition of her image in the mass media,

Warhol's "Marilyn Diptych" (Figure 2) *disembodies* her through his replication of her image thirty times in color on the left side of the panel and thirty times in black and white on the right side of the panel. In other words, each picture of Marilyn is more of an image of her



Figure 2.
"Marilyn Diptych" (1962)—
 Acrylic, silkscreen ink and pencil on linen
 Each panel: 81x57 in. (205.7x144.8 cm)
 Tate, London

rather than any reference to her physical head: she is disembodied because she is now an image, an icon, that is not connected to her physical body. The multiplicity of her image in this painting is indicative of the multiplicity of her image

in pop culture; the images of her on both sides of the panel differ in shading or color application in order to illustrate the variety of ways in which a pop culture icon can be interpreted in the media. Moreover, the colored side of the panel is representative of her iconization during her life, while through the black and white side of the panel, Warhol asserts that her icon status remains unchanged. Her physical death is irrelevant to her icon status in pop culture.

Warhol's paintings "Marilyn Monroe's Lips" (1962) and "Turquoise Marilyn" (1964) likewise depict the way in which death and fame can also disembody a person: Marilyn as real person is not identical to the pop culture image of her. As Baudrillard explains, death and fame are connected through the erasure of the individual's physical body and his/her

reproduction in popular culture as an icon: “It is now the era of murder by simulation, of the generalized aesthetic of simulation, of the murder-alibi—the allegorical resurrection of death” (24). In “Marilyn Monroe’s Lips” (Figure 3), Warhol again replicates, in both acrylic and black and white, an image of Marilyn. In this painting, her body and even her face are missing; instead, Warhol focuses primarily on her lips in order to exemplify culture’s fascination with Marilyn as a sex object. Thus, Marilyn the person is disembodied by the pop icon image of her: in this particular painting, her pop icon status is reduced to her symbolism as a sexual object. Warhol’s technique of simulating the image of her lips on the silk screen



Figure 3.
“Marilyn Monroe’s Lips” (1962)—
 Acrylic, silkscreen ink, and pencil on linen
 2 panels: 82 ¾ x 82 ¾ in. (210.2 x 209.2 cm) (black and white
 canvas); 82 ¾ x 80 ¾ in. (210.2 x 205.1 cm) (color canvas)
 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institute,
 Washington, D.C.

panel indicates the ubiquity of her image as a cultural icon and as a sexual object. Moreover, he emphasizes that her cultural status is immortalized, even though she is dead: he does this by dividing the panel into half in which one side is in black and white and the

other in color. The black and white half indicates her death while the color side indicates the time period after her death. The continuous replication of her lips on both sides of the panel, for Warhol, indicates that before, during, and after her death, she is immortalized in pop culture as a sex icon. And moreover, since her immortalization is also accentuated because of her early death, the colored side of the panel, which indicates the time after her death,

demonstrates that the absence of her physical body is not connected to the life of her pop icon status as object and image.

In Warhol's painting "Turquoise Marilyn" (Figure 4), he focuses on an image of her face, with no reference to her body, and applies acrylic paint to the silk screen image in order



Figure 4.
"Turquoise Marilyn" (1964)
 Acrylic and silkscreen ink on linen
 40 x 40 in. (101.6 x 101.6 cm)
 Stefan T. Edlis, Chicago

dramatize and flatten her facial features: such an effect creates a painted mask on her face that represents the split between the pop icon and Marilyn the person. His use of solid, bright colors to highlight her hair straw yellow, her baby blue eye shadow, and her crimson lip stick do not create any depth to her face. Warhol does not

use these colors in combination with one another in order to create shadows or to enhance the curvatures of her face and hair. Instead, he uses acrylic in order to flatten and dramatize her face to such an extent that she appears unreal. Nevertheless, the image of Marilyn is recognizable and is not dependent upon a realistic portrayal of her physical body. Thus, her physical body is "murder[ed] by simulation," while Marilyn as icon is, through simulation, is an "allegorical resurrection of death." In short, Warhol's *Marilyns* demonstrate Baudrillard's

assertion that fame and death are connected, and that the dead are still alive in American popular culture.

III.

DEATH AND DISASTER

In the summer of 1962, Warhol became preoccupied with the subject of mortality. Not only would he begin to paint images of celebrities who either died tragically or had near death experience, but Warhol also began to take up the word “disaster” to describe his earlier silkscreen paintings, which multiply images of death and disaster from press photos taken from magazines and newspapers. Through his images of car crashes, food poisoning, race riots, suicides, atomic bombs, and electric chairs, he is able to remove death from the subject of his images. For Baudrillard, the repetition of a sign voids it of meaning: “For the sign to be pure, it has to duplicate itself: it is duplication of the sign which destroys its meaning” (136). Therefore, Warhol’s use of repetition of the same image on a panel devalues the significance of the image itself. As Michael Hardin notes in his essay “Postmodernism’s Desire for Simulated Death,” Warhol’s paintings alter the audience’s perception of death by removing its “substance; it has been robbed of meaning by too much exposure and familiarity. It has become objectified, a cultural icon” (29). In order to portray simulated death in his paintings, which he later includes in a series call *Death and Disaster*, Warhol not only uses repetition but also particular techniques to each image, such as darkening or lightening, applying acrylic colors, and overlapping to hide details.

In “White Burning Car III” (1963) (Figure 5), Warhol demonstrates that the consequence of replicating death is the possibility of death disappearing. The burning car

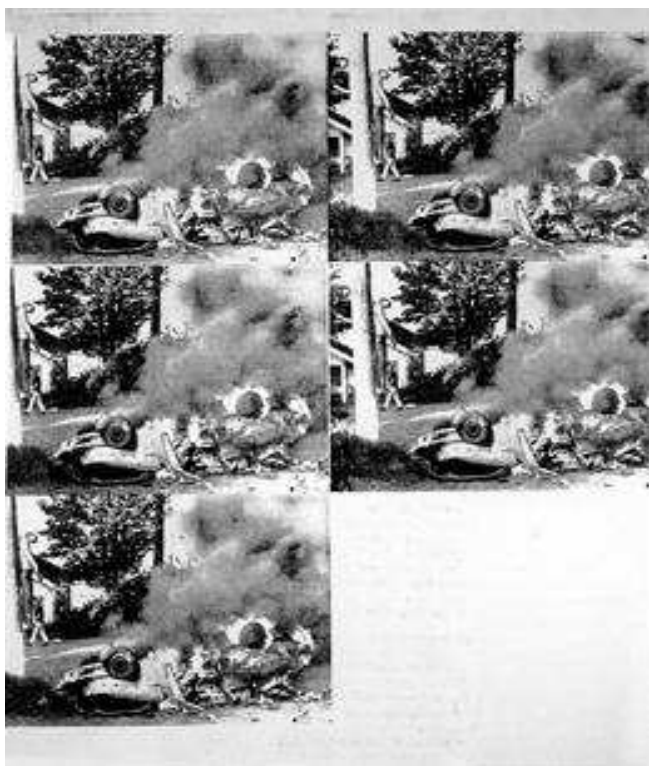


Figure 5. “White Car Burning III” (1963)
 Silkscreen ink on linen
 100 ½ x 78 ¾ in. (255.3 x 200 cm)
 The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh

directs the viewers’ attention away from the impaled man on the left side of the panel. Both the size and location of the car on the screen allow Warhol to misdirect our attention. Warhol also focuses our attention on the car by making the flames appear bright white, which create a dramatic effect. Since this painting is called “White Burning Car,” Warhol leads us to believe that any evidence of death is in the car and beyond our vision, rather than in plain sight on the left side of the panel.

Warhol also places a passerby in the distance who casually walks by, and like us, does not notice the impaled man on the pole. As viewers, it is easy to see the crash and the car burning but not to actually see the consequences of the accident. Although Warhol replicates this image five times on this panel, the space on the lower right, where the sixth image would be, is blank; this empty space on the panel demonstrates, how for Warhol, if we see death and disaster so often that it eventually can disappear.

A similar effect is created by (dis)coloring as is created by repetition. In “Saturday Disaster” (1963-4) (Figure 6), Warhol deemphasizes death and disaster by darkening and lightening the bodies and by placing them directly in front of the viewer. In this panel,



Figure 6. “Saturday Disaster” (1963-4)
 Silkscreen ink on linen
 119 x 82 in. (302.3 x 208.3 cm)
 The Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University,
 Waltham, Massachusetts

Warhol replicates the image only twice and lays them one on top of the other. The focus on detail is more obvious in these two images because of their enlarged size and the viewer’s proximity to the larger than life image. As in “White Burning Car III,” Warhol deemphasizes the consequences of this accident; however, in “Saturday Disaster,” he saturates the panel with such detail that the viewer’s eyes are not immediately focused on the two dead men’s bodies hanging from the car in the center of the panel. Warhol further blends these men into the car by white washing the bodies: the bare back of the man hanging from the car is hardly

distinguishable from the white car itself and his white shirt. Warhol muddles the face of the man on the ground by applying ink with attention to detail; therefore, the blood, his facial features, and hair blend together in one ink blot, and appear similar to the blades of grass around his head. Warhol focuses the viewer’s attention on the car by using ink to clarify

details, such as the front seat cushion to the right of the hanging male body from the car. Instead of immediately seeing these two dead bodies, we see the crashed and mangled car. Moreover, the fact that most of the panel is the crashed car indicates our concern more for the destroyed technology than for these mangled men. Warhol asserts that human bodies are an *extension* of technology in this painting by blending the whiteness of the car with the whiteness of the dead man's body and clothing. Where does the car end and the human body begin? For Warhol, there is no difference: both are objects—images—that can then achieve immortality through the mass media of American pop culture. Ultimately, the *Car Crash Series* illustrates Warhol's fascination with and critique of the violence and potential deadliness of American culture and the extent to which the ubiquity of death and mangled bodies in the media serves to accustom us to the sight of death to such an extent that, in the end, we can look at an image and no longer see death or mangled bodies in front of us. Thus, Warhol's paintings of death also demonstrate American culture's desire to abolish death not through eradicating it from the media but through mass replication.

In "Twelve Electric Chairs" (1964-5), Warhol explores objects, and in this case the electric chair, as symbols of death, responsible for the destruction of the human body. Unlike the *Car Crash Series*, the *Electric Chairs Series* do not have people in them; instead, death is embodied in the object of the chair itself, which represents potential disaster and death. Specifically in "Twelve Electric Chairs" (Figure 7), he hides the electric chair and its implications with the death of the physical body through his use of color and his omission of bodies. Warhol also replicates the image of the electric chair twelve times and applies a solid acrylic color to each image, varying the colors; this technique directs the viewer's eye to focus on the colors and their variations more so than the chair in the middle of each image



Figure 7. “Twelve Electric Chairs” (1963-4)
 Silkscreen ink and acrylic paint on canvas
 22 x 28 in. (55.9 x 71.1 cm)
 Each of 12 panels
 The Stephanie and Peter Brant Foundation, Greenwich, CT

and what it represents. Warhol applies the acrylic paint colors directly on top of the image, after it has already been applied to the silk screen; as a result, the colors dominate each image and overpower the ink that defines the image of the electric chair. Moreover, the electric chair is at a distance in each image in order to

further deemphasize its connections with and to distance the audience from its

implications with death. For Warhol, his *Electric Chair Series* illustrates the banality of death in American culture, which for him, defines itself on its ability to continually portray itself through simulation and the mass media.

Warhol's painting “Tunafish Disaster” (1963) (Figure 8) examines the effect of consumer goods, specifically sanitized packages of tunafish, as deadly to the human body. He took these images from the article in the April 1, 1963 issue of *Newsweek*, which detailed how several cans of tainted tuna fish were responsible for a number of people's deaths. Through his depiction of the tuna fish cans and pictures of two women who died as a result of the tainted fish, Warhol demonstrates how the prepackaged, glossy labeled, and sanitized consumer goods that everyone feels “safe” to eat can sometimes end in our deaths. Moreover,



Figure 8. “Tunafish Disaster” (1963)
 Silkscreen ink and silver paint on linen
 124 ½ x 83 in. (316.2 x 210.8 cm)
 Daros Collection, Switzerland

the tuna fish cans, for Warhol, are literal examples of packaged death within postmodern American society. In other words, death assumes the form of tuna sealed in a can. In reference to these two women who died, notice that their heads only shown, much like Warhol’s images of Marilyn Monroe. Although these two women from the mid-west are not celebrities, they too achieve a certain amount of fame because of the sudden deaths of their physical bodies; and their connection to one another is simply through death. Thus, “Tunafish

Disaster,” like the *Car Crash Series*, demonstrates Warhol’s obsession with the violence and potential deadliness to the human body that exists in American

culture. Technology, such as cars in the *Car Crash Series* and canned tuna in “Tunafish Disaster,” serves as innovations to facilitate human existence; however, as Warhol points out in these paintings that highlight death and disaster, technology’s interaction with the human body can also result in the body’s demise and ultimate death. However, Warhol points out that American culture is also fascinated with the potential death and violence inherent in its culture, which is exhibited in its mass replication of death and mangled bodies in the media.

IV.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

For Warhol, the image is everything: he is not concerned with the interior of human existence, nor does his art attempt to reflect the struggles of humanity. Moreover, he never

painted the human body from actual life; instead, his silkscreen images depict the image of a body. In other words, his art is a copy of a copy. Jameson argues that the silkscreen process itself is a death process: “The external and colored surface of things [...] has been stripped away to reveal the deathly black and white substratum of the photographic negative” (9). As a result, both the content and the process by which he makes his art demonstrate the death of the physical body and the immortality of the image.

For Warhol, American pop culture’s fascination with the image of the body rather than the physical body itself is demonstrated in our cultural views of fame, death, and disaster. His paintings of celebrities, like Marilyn Monroe, demonstrate the extent to which the physical body is erased and figuratively killed through fame and the mass media; moreover, the image of the celebrity replaces the physical body and is granted immortality through pop culture. Ironically, the iconic status of some celebrities in American pop culture is dependent upon the sudden death of their physical bodies, like in Marilyn Monroe’s suicide. Interestingly, Warhol only painted celebrities who either died tragically³⁶ or had a near death experience³⁷, which further proves the claim that fame and death are intricately connected in American pop culture.

Warhol’s focus on images of disaster and death taken from newspapers and magazines further illustrates his interest only in the image of a person rather than his/her physical body. Just as he only painted celebrities after their own deaths or some distinct connection with physical death, he only painted dead bodies from the media after the incident occurred. He did not stage models or manipulate media images by inserting or deleting objects or people or by including only a portion of the original image in paintings. The only

³⁶ These figures include Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Elvis, and the Kennedys.

³⁷ Warhol begins the Liz paintings following her near-fatal battle with pneumonia in March of 1961.

ways in which Warhol alters the original media images is through adding acrylic color to highlight certain aspects of the image or by replicating the image on a canvas. Ultimately, Warhol imitated the image of the body's destruction in order to participate in and to critique the mass media's multiplication and depersonalization of the human subject. The mangled bodies he depicts in his paintings on death and disaster are not "real" to him: they are images in which he can make art. Ultimately, for Warhol, the image of the body, and not the body itself, is an art form. He does not mislead his viewer's eyes by focusing our attention away from the horror of death and disaster out of consideration for his viewers. In fact, when one actually spots the mangled bodies in his paintings, most people feel a moment of shock at the graphic nature of his depictions. His purpose in diverting our attention in the first place is to point out our apathy at seeing death and disaster everywhere in our culture. How can we, as viewers, criticize the passerby in "White Burning Car III" who does not notice the impaled man on the left side of the panel when we ourselves barely notice him? In this way, Warhol implicates³⁸ his viewers by pointing out to us, how seeing images of death so frequently, allows us, after a time, to not see them at all, even when they stare us in the face. For Warhol, death is so ubiquitous in American culture that objects themselves, like electric chairs, conjure up images in the viewer's head of destruction to the physical body. The power of the image, for him, is often more powerful than the actual person the image is depicting. For this reason, Warhol omits the human body from his paintings of electric chairs: this

³⁸ In an interview with Alan Solomon during Warhol's early career, he said that he hoped some people would become "more aware of living through this sort of funny way which they are made to think about themselves [...] because it's so quick and sometimes it goes away too quickly" (qtd. in Mahsun 85). This statement by Warhol indicates that his paintings on fame, death, and disaster serve to point out to the viewer the extent to which American popular culture disembodies celebrities through the replication of their images in the mass media and the overall cultural fascination with the façade, the image as icon, rather than the actual person; to what extent American pop culture hides death by over-exposing us to it; and by making death and disaster aesthetically pleasing to look at by creating a figurative distance between the viewer and the images on the screen.

artistic move is not only characteristic of his belief of the invisibility (and death) of the physical body but also further emphasizes how, in American culture, even death or the image of it can be art.

Therefore, if today, we look back at his art work, Warhol's preoccupation with fame, death, and disaster and their role in the destruction of the physical body, are, in a sense, a documentation of American culture's obsession with immortality, the image, and their connections to mortality. Moreover, our ability to see these images, and, as Susan Sontag says, "turn away, turn the page, switch the channel" (116)³⁹, implicates us, as viewers, in our complicity, in both desiring and fearing the image—the simulation. As a result, Warhol's art, through his images of the human body and artistic techniques, serves both as a documentation of American pop culture and American consciousness, but also through its complicity of the viewer as we visually consume our own dead.

³⁹ In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag examines the extent to which the numbing effect of images of death and disaster suggests the possibility of an ethical function for the repeated viewing of photographs of horrific events: "Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality in which they refer, they still perform a vital function" (115). For Sontag, these images play a vital role in society, even in an age of apathy: "That we are not totally transformed, that we can turn away, turn the page, switch the channel, does not impugn the ethical value of an assault by images" (116).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GENRE AND PERSPECTIVES ON THE BODY

The genre or form of art in which DeLillo, Rich, and Warhol examine the human subject plays an integral part in their conclusions and perspectives on the fate of the human body and identity in postmodern American culture. Moreover, the strengths of each genre allow for each author to highlight and to explore different aspects of the human subject.

In DeLillo's novel *White Noise*, through a first-person narrator, Jack Gladney, DeLillo is able to explore in detail how this human subject interacts with technology, consumerism, and death in postmodern American culture. The first-person perspective allows DeLillo to reveal the inner thoughts of his main character and for him to highlight the extent to which Jack is aware of how technology has complicated his physical body, helped create both the awareness for and cure from fearing death, and participated in the communication between him and his family. Through character and plot development, DeLillo is able to use the novel as a means to illustrate to what extent the human subject can battle and overcome its disembodiment from technology and consumerism. Through Jack, DeLillo illustrates how this character both embraces technology and is fearful of its connections with death. Ultimately, through the genre of the novel, DeLillo aims to explore in depth how people struggle within postmodern American society to deal with the influences of technology and consumerism on how they view their physical bodies and construct their identities. Through his use of narration and first-person perspective, DeLillo points out how the human subject in postmodern American culture attempts to "narrate" or make sense of their lives, to make

connections between one's thoughts and the events happening in one's life. Moreover, the first-person perspective allows for Jack, by the act of retelling his own story, to have a figurative distance from his own life, much like the television shows he watches about death and disaster. Thus, for DeLillo, the genre of the novel allows for him not only to discuss at length the fate of the human body and identity in postmodern American culture but also to demonstrate how narration is also a way of providing figurative distance between the readers and events in the novel itself. In other words, through the genre of the novel, DeLillo creates a series of episodes, or chapters, on the life of Jack Gladney in which we, as readers, become emotionally and intellectually engaged; but at the same time, as DeLillo points in the last chapter of *White Noise*, it is much easier for the human subject to allow one's existence to seep into the "white noise" of postmodern American culture, to end the book or turn the channel on the television, than to continue articulating the consequences that pop culture, fear, and death can have on the human body and identity.

As Rich points out in her poem "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," literature can tell us about everything in life, from love to death; however, only through experience, can we begin to understand the body's pain and struggles within society and, then, realize how the body is representative of the world's pain. Therefore, like DeLillo, Rich understands that literature can achieve a degree of social and political change by inspiring and reminding us about our condition in life; however, for the readers, experience is much more useful in acquiring understanding. Then, what function does poetry serve, according to Rich, in examining the fate of the human subject, and particularly the female subject?

For Rich, poetry allows her to explore how the seemingly impossible (repositioning the female body and locating female subjectivity) can be made possible. According to

Aristotle's *Poetics*, Part IX, the function of a poet is not "to relate actual events, but the *kinds* of things that might occur and are possible in terms of probability and necessity" (59). Therefore, Rich's exploration to transform the female body from "object" to subject" and locating female subjectivity is a reality that can be made possible through poetry amidst the cultural barriers that make actual society change a more complicated task. Through her use of poetic forms, spacing, and punctuation throughout her poetry career, she has been able to emphasize women's confinement in marriage, the division between nations and within ourselves, the exploration of women in history and women's individual searches to discover their own identities, and the centrality of the body to human existence. For example, in her early career, Rich uses traditional forms of meter and rhyme in order to emphasize how the female body and identity are trapped, as a bird in a cage, within the social and legal constructs of marriage. She emphasizes the female body as missing or invisible by concentrating on other objects or male figures in the poem rather than the female one. Her exclusion of female voices in these early poems reiterates the invisibility of the female within the confines of society and within the structures of marriage and family. By the later part of her early career, she begins to write more in free verse to indicate her partial liberation as a poet from the more traditional (which includes male) forms of poetry and thematic concerns. She begins to incorporate different voices, both male and female historical figures, in her lines in order for her poetry to be more inclusive. Her use of numbered stanzas indicates a progression or possible progress toward female subjectivity. She also begins to reference historical figures in her poetry in order to emphasize the condition of the female body and identity as a product of history itself. In her mid-career, Rich begins to use spacing and pauses in her lines of poetry in order to off-set or emphasize certain words or phrases: this

artistic move is indicative of the development of her own female poetic voice and the refinement of her craft as a female poet. Her use of spacing also demonstrates the divide between the women and men, between nations, between peoples within a society that makes the terms “enemy” and “other” possible. Rich also begins to focus on individual, historical women, like Ethel Rosenberg, in order to use poetry as a means to give this woman a figurative voice and life beyond death. Rich aims for her readers to understand these women as “subjects” and not as historical representations have depicted them, as the “enemy” or as “objects.” In her later career, Rich begins to use detailed language to describe the pain and suffering of the body in an embodied poetics in order to encourage her readers to feel, to relate the body’s pain to the world’s pain. Overall, through poetry, Rich aims not to relate experience but to present a possible vision of an empowered female body and identity through poetry’s ability to make the impossible possible.

Unlike Rich, Warhol’s visual art does not aim to liberate the body: he is not concerned with freeing the body from its status as image in postmodern American culture. Rather, through visual art, and specifically through the silkscreen process, Warhol celebrates the body as image and façade and identity as a construction of American culture’s fascination with fame, death, and disaster. The fact that Warhol only paints either celebrities or ordinary Americans after their deaths, or some connection to death, demonstrates how the subject matter of his paintings are a glorification of the image over the physical body. His representations of the body were also taken from photographs or newspaper/magazine articles and never real life; this practice further demonstrates his empowerment of the image or façade over the physical body. His repetition of images indicates the multiplication of an image in the mass media and how American culture obsesses with the lives and deaths of its

celebrities and is fascinated by death and destruction. The repetition of images on a screen, coupled with the empty space where one of the images belongs, allows him to emphasize how death is so ubiquitous in American culture that, as a result, it can disappear from our vision. His use of acrylic colors on top of the ink images allows him to both divert the viewer's attention from the image being portrayed and also to demonstrate the split between the celebrity and the actual person. Through his use of detail and discoloring, Warhol is able to blend the human body with its surroundings in order to objectify it and also to divert the viewer's attention from the mangled corpses in front of us. Ultimately, through visual art, Warhol celebrates and critiques the disempowerment of the physical body and the empowerment of the image. However, through his art, he is able to interact with the viewer by implicating American culture's desire to witness, at a safe distance, death and destruction, to reveal our fear of our own mortality, but to also comfort us in the celebration of the image as our way to immortality.

II. THE HUMAN SUBJECT

Technology

The human body's interaction with technology in postmodern American society is both empowering and disempowering. For DeLillo, technology empowers the human body by allowing us to witness death and destruction on television without risking physical danger. Medicine also allows for the treatment and cure of physical ailments and emotional distresses. Weapons, as a technological innovation, allow the main character, Jack, to find a sense of humanity and reconnect with his fellow human beings, even if only for a moment.

Photographs allow for Jack and his family to remember happy moments and to connect with one another. However, at the same time, DeLillo also admits that technology can disempower the human body. The television shows that the Gladney family watches allow them to find enjoyment in the images of death but do not prepare them to face death's realities. For Jack, his fear of death is created, compounded, and cured by technology: the advancements in chemistry are responsible for the possibility of the "airborne toxic event" that spark Jack's fears of death; the advancements in radio and television communication facilitate Jack's fears by indicating that the spores are in the air and can infect people; the x-rays the doctor takes of Jack's body affirm his infection and impending death; pills aid him in fighting off the contamination, but it is the gun and his attempted assassination of Mink that ultimately help Jack face death in the face and overcome his fears of mortality. Therefore, for DeLillo, technology both creates and cures the ailments of the human body.

For Warhol, the human body is empowered by technology's ability to cast it as image and to celebrate the body as façade rather than as a physical entity. For him, the use of photography, ink applications to canvas, and the mass media, all allow the human body to achieve a certain level of immortality through image. Even the physical body's interaction with technology, such as the car, is positive if it results in the death of the physical body and the liberation of the image of that person through the media and through art. For him, human identity is forged by technology and by the mass media's fascination with fame, death, and disaster. Ultimately, for Warhol, the physical human body is disempowered in postmodern American culture because of the exonerated image of the body over the physical. Pop culture, for Warhol, celebrates the image, not the actual body itself.

Ultimately, the varying conclusions of both of these authors/artists about the interaction of the human body with technology in postmodern American culture demonstrate the extent to which technology complicates the body and human identity, for better or for worse. Both DeLillo and Warhol point out that technology's interaction with the physical body can be either empowering or disempowering, depending on one's perspective of both the body and technology. If we view the body as a "subject" and technology as an "object," then the interaction of technology with the body can be viewed as an invasion; however, if we view both the body and technology as "objects," then the incorporation of technology into the body can be seen as both positive and empowering.

The Human Body as "Object" or "Subject"

The objectification of the human body in postmodern American society is addressed by DeLillo, Warhol, and Rich, although the degree to which the body and identity are empowered or disempowered varies among them. For DeLillo, consumerism is responsible for casting the human body as "object" and forging human identity by possession of consumer goods. Through Jack's identification of people by the clothing they wear or the cars they drive, DeLillo points out the role that consumerism plays in constructing human identity through objects. On the one hand, DeLillo points out that consumerism and the body as an object to dress is empowering in that it allows for people to deal with stress in their lives: he demonstrates this when Jack goes shopping with the family after he is upset from a colleague's comments about his appearance. Moreover, viewing the body as "object," particularly when viewing television shows about death and destruction, allows for people to find enjoyment in watching rather than being emotionally distraught. However, the

consequences of viewing the body as object in relation to death, for DeLillo, lies in the moments when a person is unable to maintain the figurative distance necessary to objectify the body: when a person sees another person not as an “object” but as a “subject,” as another human being, then death suddenly becomes real. DeLillo demonstrates this point through Jack’s sudden realization that Mink is not an image of a person on television but is a real body in front of him, bleeding to death. Thus, for DeLillo, viewing the body as “object” can be empowering in that it allows for us to deal with reality; however, it is impossible to maintain that objectification of both life and death. As a result, those moments when death becomes real to us because we can no longer objectify the body are, for DeLillo, clear indications of the body’s disempowerment. Moreover, by viewing the body as “object” rather than as “subject,” DeLillo points out that it is much easier to tolerate violence and destruction on the human body, by watching it on television, for example. However, because we are accustomed to simulating, or objectifying the body and identity, that when death becomes real to us, then the body becomes a “subject” that we do not know how to deal with.

For Warhol, the body and identity are only “objects” in postmodern American culture. For him, the body and identity are empowered more as images than as physical bodies grounded in reality. The image of the body and the social construction of identity can be immortalized in popular culture through their replication in the mass media; however, the physical body and a person’s individual identity will cease to exist once the physical body dies. Isn’t the American public more fascinated with the gossip surrounding a celebrity than the actual truth? Do we care to really know the individual identities of our stars or do we yearn to see them as we, ourselves, would like to be? Therefore, for Warhol, viewing the body as “object” rather than as “subject” allows for a life beyond the physical body and for a

myriad of cultural interpretations of one's identity that, for him, provide a much more interesting "identity"⁴⁰ to any individual than the one that actual exists in real life.

Unlike both DeLillo and Warhol, Rich explores ways in which to liberate the body as "subject" from the body as "object." For her, the body as "object" or image disempowers women because of how such viewpoints limit the female body to being characterized as sex object or possession. In order to empower the body in postmodern American culture, Rich asserts the postmodern view of identity as a social construction rather than as inherent to an individual. Thus, for her, female identity and subjectivity must be something discovered within each women and also something that requires social and political change in how women are viewed. For Rich, the body is central to human existence; thus, by seeking female subjectivity, she does not aim to disempower the female body but to encourage women to re-examine how culture's perception of the female body and identity are based upon historical misrepresentations of women and by patriarchy. For Rich, the female body can only be empowered by first embracing the body as a "subject"—as the source of life and all existence—and then by beginning to forge female identity based on the individual's talents and traits rather than by her legal and social relationship to her husband and family.

This subjectivity of the human body that Rich seeks is seen in DeLillo's depiction of Jack's connection with humanity after he shoots Mink; however, for DeLillo, viewing the human as "subject" necessitates that we must come to terms with our own deaths. Therefore, it is much easier for a person living in postmodern American culture to view the body as "object." Rich, on the other hand, insists that viewing the body as "subject" rather than as "object" is the only way to privilege the female body and restore female subjectivity. Rich's

⁴⁰ For example, in the case of Marilyn Monroe, the American public is more interested in her identity as a movie star and as a sexual icon who had numerous affairs with handsome, wealthy men (including J. F. K.) than in knowing what her fears and dreams were and whether or not she ever achieved happiness in her brief life.

argument for the human body as “subject” is characteristic of the ongoing debate about the role of postmodernism, the body, and feminism.

For many feminists, like Rich, postmodernism allows for the male-female, body-mind, and man-nature dichotomies to be broken down. As a result, many feminists see this move as liberating to the female body and identity because they are no longer dependent upon their relationship to men but can be explored solely on the basis of being female. However, at the same time, postmodernism’s view of the body as “object” disregards the male/female differentiation. Thus, Rich’s argument for female subjectivity is a traditional mode of viewing the human body and identity.⁴¹ We can see the difference in perspectives on the body by comparing DeLillo’s view of the objectification of the body as more empowering than disempowering and Warhol’s view of the body as “object” as empowering with Rich’s intentions to cast the female body as anything but “object.” While both DeLillo and Warhol seek to explore to what extent postmodern American culture has changed how we view the body and construct identity, Rich, as a feminist, seeks to find female subjectivity before she can entertain ways in which to explore this postmodern shift from a human/subject-centered perspective.

Moreover, the cultural debate, even among DeLillo, Warhol, and Rich, about the fate of the human body and identity in American culture is ultimately dependent upon the extent

⁴¹ Other feminists, such as Donna Haraway, celebrate postmodernism’s shift from a human-centered perspective and do not see this theoretical discourse as problematic with feminism. Haraway insists that the body should no longer be seen as either female or male but as cyborg. For Haraway and others, the body’s interaction with technology is encouraged and viewed as empowering. Ultimately, they are interested in exploring new connections between the body and its surroundings rather than privileging one entity over the other. In short, although Rich’s quest is to empower the female body and forge female subjectivity through postmodernism, her casting of the body is at the center of an extensive critical debate within feminism itself about how to use postmodern discourse.

to which we embrace postmodern discourse. If we view the human body as “subject”⁴², then technology’s interaction with the body is more intrusive and more disempowering. If we entertain the possibilities of incorporating technology into the human body, then we begin to redefine, as many postmodern theorists have, what it means to be human and to obtain a new sense of empowerment. If death of the physical body is seen as the ultimate end to existence, then viewing the body as “subject” makes death real; however, by both viewing the body as “object” or image, then death of the physical body is irrelevant because immortality can be achieved through the mass media and through popular culture. Although these artists embrace postmodernism in varying degrees, they each bring to light the extent to which the physical body and human identity are being challenged and refigured in postmodern American culture.

⁴² Within postmodern discourse, there is also a debate about the pros and cons of the loss of human subjectivity. See Paul Virilio, *Open Sky* (1997).

WORKS CITED

- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. Stephen Halliwell. LOBE Classical Library. Ed. G. P. Goud. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995. 1-142.
- Barrett, Laura. "'How the dead speak to the living': Intertextuality and the Postmodern Sublime in *White Noise*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 25.2 (Winter 2001-2002): 97-113.
- Baudrillard, Jean. America. Trans. Chris Turner. London: Verso, 1988.
- . Simulacra and Simulation. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994.
- . Simulations. Trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983.
- . "Two Essays: 'Simulacra and Science Fiction' and 'Ballard's *Crash*.'" *Science-Fiction Studies* 18.3 (55) (1991): 309-20.
- Brogan, Jacqueline Vaught. "'I Can't Be Still': Or, Adrienne Rich and the Refusal to Gild the Fields of Guilt." *Women's Studies* 27.4 (1998): 311-30.
- Bundtzen, Lynda K. "Adrienne Rich's Identity Poetics: A Partly Common Language." *Women's Studies* 27.4 (1998): 331-45.
- Connerton, Paul. How Societies Remember. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.
- DeLillo, Don. White Noise. New York: Penguin, 1984.
- doCarmo, Stephen N. "Subjects, Objects, and the Postmodern Differend in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*." *LIT* 11 (2000): 1-33.
- Engels, Tim. "'Who are You, Literally?': Fantasies of the White Self in *White Noise*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 45.3 (1999): 755-787.
- Gelpi, Albert. "The Transfiguration of the Body: Adrienne Rich's Vision." *Women's Studies* 27.4 (1998): 431-40.

- . "The Transfiguration of the Body: Adrienne Rich's Witness." *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 25.1 (2001): 7-18.
- Hardin, Michael. "Postmodernism's Desire for Simulated Death: Andy Warhol's *Car Crashes*, J. G. Ballard's *Crash*, and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*." *Literature Interpretation Theory* 13 (2002): 21-50.
- Hogue, Cynthia. "The 'Possible Poet': Pain, Form, and the Embodied Poetics of Adrienne Rich in Wallace Stevens' Wake." *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 25.1 (2001): 40-51.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke, UP, 1991.
- Langdell, Cheri Colby. *Adrienne Rich: The Moment of Change*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004.
- Osteen, Mark. *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2000.
- Perreault, Jeanne. "'Signified by pain': Adrienne Rich's Body Tracks." *Auto/Biography Studies* 10.2 (1995): 87-103.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*. Eds. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi. Norton Critical Edition. New York: Norton, 1993.
- . *The Fact of a Doorframe: Selected Poems 1950-2001*. New York: Norton, 2002.
- . "Voices from the air." *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*. New York: Norton, 1993. 9-13.
- Stevens, Wallace. *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. New York: Knopf, 1951.
- Taylor, Charles. *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992.

Virilio, Paul. *Open Sky*. 1995. Trans. Julie Rose. New York: Verso, 1997.

Weedon, Chris. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. London: Blackwell, 1987. 21.

Wilcox, Leonard. "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of the Heroic Narrative."

Contemporary Literature 32.3 (1991): 346-63.