

Airwaves Populated by Noises and Voices:

Exploring Electricity as an Unthought Known in Postmodern Novels, Focused on Don DeLillo's

White Noise and Ander Monson's *Other Electricities*

by

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In Ann Arbor, the electrified buildings in which I live and study in were able to power a constant supply of thoughts and questions about my thesis and how novels figure electricity. My new ways of seeing and hearing both people and technologies as electrified mediums (foregrounding the unthought known) within this constructed environment will always be turned on. My final thanks go to a faulty outlet in my apartment; upon being electrocuted, I was provided with the perspective of briefly being a *physically* electrified person in the final days of writing this thesis.

Abstract

When a technology saturates a population's environment, it fades from the foreground to the background of the physical environment and surfaces as part of human communications. After becoming a part of the American narrative of progress and ubiquitous in domestic environments, electricity entered human communication in the form of both metaphors and physical objects for mediating experiences. In Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) and Ander Monson's *Other Electricities* (2005), televisions and radios, omnipresent electrical objects in characters' homes, fade into a background of noise that characters hear, penetrate their ways of speaking, and become extensions of the body as sensorial appendages that characters depend upon to mediate speech acts and experiences.

This thesis presents electricity as an unthought known, something that people know exists as part of culture despite failing to acknowledge or reflect upon. To explore electricity as a technology that saturates environments of postmodern literature with sounds and voices, this thesis examines two novels that reverse the unthought known and draw the prevalence of electricity to the foreground. The first chapter of this thesis argues that the presentation of nonsensical single-phrase television and radio disruptions in the narration of *White Noise* personifies electrical technologies by bringing their voices to the foreground. After constantly hearing television and radio interruptions, Jack Gladney, the narrator, and Willie Mink, another character, begin to feel and speak like the television. In an odd role reversal, the television is personified as a speaking agent and characters are depersonified as their brains and vocalizations emulate white noise.

The second chapter argues that in *Other Electricities* a single teenage boy in a small community can become an omniscient narrator by eavesdropping on radio messages and tapped phone lines. Monson's characters become cyborgian by extending their voices and ears into electrical objects and networks. Electricity provides him with the means of gathering information about the daily experiences and frequent tragedies that occur in his community, which he then visualizes and turns into a constellation of stories. A constellation is a collection of lines that humans use to link stars and create a coherent, mythologized image. As such, it illustrates the structure and process of this narrator's work, compiling a set of stories into a novel by listening to neighbors through phone lines connected on a grid. The chapter concludes with a demonstration of three different readings of the graphics of electrical circuitry and radio schematics that appear between and within stories, and hypothesizes characters might be sending the italicized messages that appear next to them through such circuitry.

After engaging with two narrative styles and print versions of electrical mediation, the conclusion to this thesis acknowledges that the texts unpacked in the preceding chapters, *White Noise* and *Other Electricities*, provide a window into literature set during a moment of history when an electrified home was the norm, televisions were omnipresent, and radios readily available, but prior to the more contemporary time in which the Internet is the predominant telecommunications system, and personal, portable computers are prevalent.

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INTRODUCTION

"Skin has become inadequate in interfacing with reality. Technology has become the body's new membrane of existence."¹

Scenes from *Oklahoma* play on loop on 12 television screens of different sizes in the state of Oklahoma while the televisions in Kansas show scenes from *The Wizard of Oz*. Seven screens flashing images of potatoes compose Idaho. Civil Rights footage of Martin Luther King Jr. plays on repeat on several screens that make up Alabama. Electrically powered images map and define this representation of the United States.

These repetitive images—repeating both spatially, with multiple screens dedicated to the distinct video representing each state, and temporally, as the video and audio footage plays on a constant loop—are part of Korean-born American artist Nam June Paik's "Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii" (Figure i). Created in 1995, the installation art piece composed of steel, neon, and electronic components, is a physical and electronic map of the United States. At 15 x 40 x 4 feet, the artwork is substantial in size. With an abundance of TV screens, the work suggests that crossing the country by highway to see the states is unnecessary; instead, a simulacrum of this experience can be achieved from the home, on the sofa. The physical materiality of "Electronic Superhighway" is visible; behind the 575 feet of multicolored neon tubing that outlines each state and the 336 televisions demanding a viewer's

¹ Nam June Paik, as quoted on: "Nam June Paik Biography and Artwork," *MetroArtWork*, Accessed 20 November 2010, <http://metroartwork.com/Nam-June-Paik-biography-artwork-m-148.html>

attention, support structures and cables remain visible, pointing to the complex and extensive systems of infrastructure that allow for televisions and lighting in households in every state.



Figure i: "Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii" by Nam June Paik (1995)

The neon outlines of the states in “Electronic Superhighway” evoke the neon lights that advertise stores, fast food restaurants, and motels along American highways. The distinct video showing, and color outlining, each state distinguishes it from the neighboring states indicating that some difference remains in this postmodern, information age—but not much. The same media, video, through the same physical conduit, television, represents each state. The viewer notices the medium of the images on the map—television—and its omnipresence across a vast space. Initially, the different images playing in each state appear as visual commotion akin to

white noise, or auditory clutter, for the eyes. To take in each of the videos as individual sights, a closer look is necessary.

In Nam June Paik's vision, televisions populate America. He redefines skin, the thin casing that protects man's fragile finitude, and says, "technology has become the body's new membrane of existence," suggesting that people are encapsulated in technologies and represent themselves to the world electronically. People who visit "Electronic Superhighway" are captured on a mini-cam and shown on one small television screen in the place of Washington, D.C. (where the artwork is installed as part of the Smithsonian American Art Museum's permanent collection). Simply by standing in the vicinity of the work, a viewer becomes a participant. Living humans are part of the same electronic network of images that replay reproductions of film and historical footage. Lived and simulated experiences from the present and the past are flattened on one colorful electronic map.

"Electronic Superhighway" shows an electronic America. In this thesis I will highlight the ubiquity of electricity by exploring two novels in which the omnipresence of electricity is brought to the foreground and characters discuss, replicate, and speak through electrical mediums. Electrical sounds and speech are so ingrained in American environments that speaking like or through electrical mediums is the only way the characters in these novels can understand and communicate their experiences or, to use Nam June Paik's words, "[interface] with reality." In this thesis, I am concerned primarily with the electrical modes of speaking and listening, the electrical communications and entertainment mediums of television, telephone, and radio, I will provide a brief history of the electrification of America centered around the spread of electrical lighting to demonstrate how electricity rapidly became omnipresent in American homes. The two texts that I focus on are DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) and Ander Monson's *Other Electricities*

(2005) because in both novels, electricity fades into background noise that characters hear, penetrates their ways of speaking, and becomes an extension of the body as something they depend upon to mediate speech acts and experiences. Set in a generic American town and written in a postmodern style, *White Noise* is nationally read and acclaimed.² Televisions and radios interrupt the narration and emerge as frequent conversation topics. Located in a small town in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, the second novel, *Other Electricities*, is written in a strange and experimental form and is less well known. It visually imitates electricity on its pages by depicting graphics of electrical circuitry, a grid showing the links between characters, a table of contents reminiscent of an owner's manual that would come with the purchase of an electrical appliance, and a cover picture of a man standing on snow at an almost even height with power lines.³

The Electrification of America: From Spectacle to Standard

After scientists on both sides of the Atlantic spent decades experimenting with electricity, the transmission of energy from one point to another, Thomas Edison seized American imaginations by inventing the light bulb in 1879. Electrical lighting blazed the way for other electrical technologies. From an electrical sign that spelled "Edison" in lights at the Paris Exposition of 1881 through the next several decades, world's fairs were the ideal playgrounds for forward-thinking people to present and visit electrified utopias. The Columbian Exposition of Chicago, the world's fair of 1893, had more electric lighting in its White City, an unlived in city

² The town that the main characters of *White Noise* live in is called Blacksmith, and it is near places called Coaltown and Iron City. DeLillo does not define his setting more specifically than those town names, which could be located near the United States' coal deposits or industrial centers in the East, Northeast, or Midwest.

³ Figures iv-viii in Chapter Two of this thesis show images of these features.

for viewing and experiencing purposes, than any city in the country at that time; only five years earlier less than one percent of American homes had electric light.⁴ The White City was “a dream city, one without the burden of reality,” and electricity reached it by unseen underground wires running from a remote location.⁵

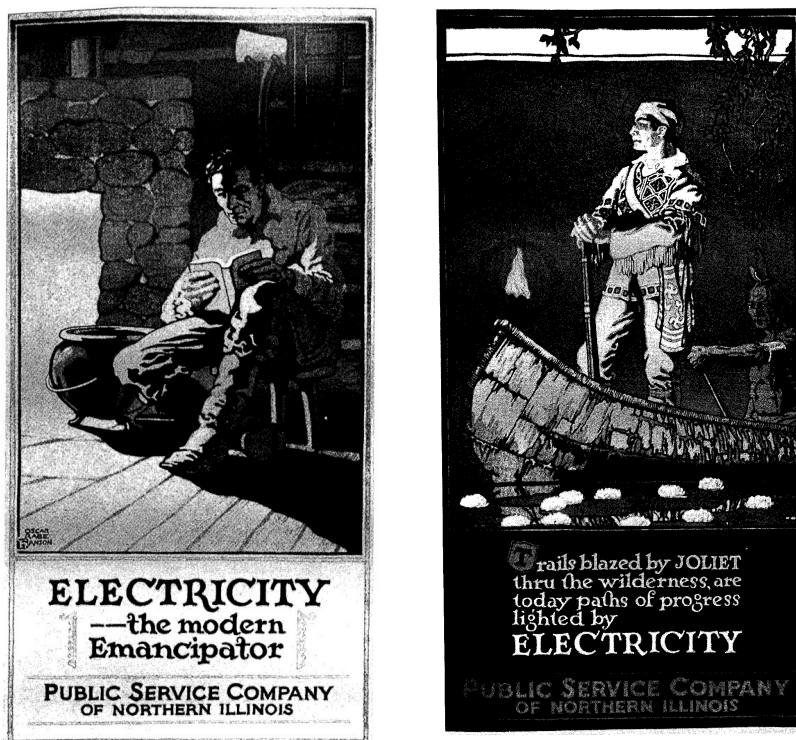
Urban centers in the North were the first to experience electrification. With electric lights, businesses had luminous means of advertising their services and products. Commercial areas recognized that they must electrify their property and surroundings or fall victim to wired-in competitors. Additionally, electrification glorified the city by drawing attention to lit, wealthy areas, leaving the still unlit poor areas submerged in negative background space. Upon returning to the United States from Europe in 1910, Ezra Pound called New York, “the most beautiful city in the world” because “it is then that the great buildings lose reality and take on their magical powers. They are immaterial; that is to say one sees but the lighted windows. Squares after squares of flame, set and cut into the ether. Here is our poetry, for we have pulled down the stars to our will.”⁶ Pound described what historian David E. Nye calls the electrified sublime, an erasure of the line “between natural and artificial sites” that “created an environment infused with mystery” (Nye 1994 152). Electricity shocked onlookers because it defied their notions of how buildings normally appeared. Moreover, the electrical sublime was awe-inspiring because it was man-made; it reflected back on the power of man.

⁴ David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994), 147. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by author, year, and page number.

⁵ Jane Brox, *Brilliant: The Evolution of Artificial Light* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2010), 131. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by author and page number.

⁶ As quoted in David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994), 192.

The darkened, marginalized, and less wealthy areas, which were mostly Southern, rural, or minority communities within any urban area, were electrified later.⁷ By 1920, electricity reached 35 percent of urban and suburban homes, but lit far fewer rural homes (Brox 172). In 1924, the Public Service Company of Northern Illinois, a division of the Commonwealth Edison Company with the mission of developing rural electrification in northern Illinois, used billboard posters featuring themes of conquest and American frontierism to advocate rural electrification.⁸



Figures ii and iii: Billboard posters of the Public Service Company of Northern Illinois, (1924) (Commonwealth Edison Company)

⁷ Now, most of the Western world takes electricity for granted, but international organizations and human rights activists use the term “energy poverty” to describe lack of access to electricity and heat that plagues nearly 1.4 billion people globally. Marianne Lavelle, “The Solvable Problem of Energy Poverty,” *National Geographic Daily News*. 21 September 2010. Accessed 14 December 2010. <<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2010/09/100921-energy-poverty-cookstoves/>>

⁸ Billboard posters of the Public Service Company of Northern Illinois, 1924 (Commonwealth Edison Company), as pictured in Harold L. Platt, *The Electric City: Energy and Growth of the Chicago Area, 1880-1930* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1991).

A poster with the slogan, “Electricity—the modern Emancipator,” features a white man reading by a fireplace in a home that is not hooked up to an electrical grid (Figure ii). Instead of modern appliances, his bare home has an outdated tool, an axe, which is useful for chopping wood to create a source of light. But when electricity is a possibility, it is a tool for unnecessary labor; flipping a switch could create a more stable and constant lighting effect. The figure, in his log cabin, represents President Abraham Lincoln, who is from rural Illinois and called the “Great Emancipator” of American slaves. The idea that electricity itself could be an “emancipator” equates not having electricity—not being connected to the grid with the latest technology—to slavery and powerlessness. To live in an electrified home, the poster claims, is a fundamental American right and freedom.⁹ Another poster depicts an explorer and a Native American in a canoe, lighting their way with a torch (Figure iii). The caption proclaims, “Trails blazed by Joliet thru the wilderness are today paths of progress lighted by electricity.” Joliet was a 17th century French explorer, although residents of Illinois observing the poster would also recognize Joliet as the name of a modern, electrified satellite city of Chicago.¹⁰ The image incorporates the ideals of rugged American frontierism, and represents them as introductions to a greater narrative of modernization, technological advancement, and “progress.” These two advertisements defined electrification as part of the American narrative.

Aggressive strides toward the ideals of progress and power evolved into an electrified nation, urban and rural areas included, with united bodies of people on grids. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, implemented in the 1930s, sped up the electrification of rural America.

⁹ In “Light Reading: Public Utility, Urban Fiction, and Human Rights,” Michael D. Rubenstein argues that Western nations, such as the United States, have set an international tone that calls access to electrical power a human right.

¹⁰ Joliet, IL is a city about located about 40 miles southwest of Chicago. It has a strong industrial history and was one of the earliest electrified cities in the United States.

Because extending power lines for light alone was less economical than fully outfitting homes with electronic appliances, the federal credit agency Electric Home and Farm Authority subsidized the purchase of refrigerators, stoves, and hot water heaters. Historian Jane Brox shows the rural population's excitement about electrification: some families held mock funerals for their kerosene lamp, and at the moment a house was scheduled to be connected to power lines, occupants would flip light switches on and off so they would be sure to experience their first moment of electricity (Brox 201-02). After electrical lighting reached homes, Americans purchased domestic appliances that could increase efficiency, starting with an electric iron that transformed the traditional female workday. In addition to the New Deal, Roosevelt took advantage of the increasing number of homes with radios to speak to his citizens in fireside chats. Radio broadcasting systems, which were also used for televisions (prior to satellite technology), transmit signals across radio waves, a type of electromagnetic radiation that requires electrical circuitry to send and receive the signals.

The "World of Tomorrow" section of the 1939 New York World's Fair showed more ways that electricity could improve the domestic and national environments, and introduced the public to the television. By this time, 90 percent of urban homes in the United States were electrified, and the "World of Tomorrow" displayed the imagined, not-so distant future of a pristine 1960. The fair served as a platform for corporations that believed their electrified visions could solve social problems and tomorrow's world would be a bright utopia of illumination and efficiency. General Electric's exhibit included a "House of Magic" which presented scientific and electrical processes as "magic tricks;" radio waves, for example, popped corn (Nye 1994

216). General Motors presented Futurama, which showed super-highways, traffic, safety intersections, and electrical lighting.¹¹

Prior to World War II, visions of electricity were spectacular constructions of a more perfect world. Then, with government programs such as those of Roosevelt’s administration, the movement out of cities into single-family homes after World War II because of the GI Bill, and the suburbanization of America, electrical lighting and appliances became the norm. No longer spectacular in the United States, electricity became expected. Electricity changed how people structured their time around work, chores, and leisure, their relationship with the natural world and daylight, and the ways people behaved with objects and each other.

A fragile electrical grid and a total lack of contingency planning resulted in the 1965 blackout when 30 million people in the Northeastern United States and part of Ontario lost their electricity. This blackout marked the shift to a time in which people expect and depend upon electricity (Brox 238). People were trapped in the subway, halted during their commute, and stranded at work. For the most part, fear subsided and people spontaneously formed communities; groups of people trapped on elevators took part in communal singing. Marshall McLuhan proposes that had the blackout lasted longer people would have realized the degree to which electricity had colonized their lives: “Were the Great Blackout of 1965 to have continued for half a year, there would be no doubt how electric technology shapes, works over, alters—massages—every instant of our lives” (McLuhan 148). As it was, the population’s awareness of

¹¹ Electricity remains part of world’s fairs today, but it became more functional than spectacular in the mid-twentieth century as the focus of fairs and the public’s interest shifted from industrialization to exchange of cultural information and the artifacts displayed began to lean more toward arts than technological innovation. In 1967, Marshall McLuhan hypothesized that future cities “[would be] very much like World’s Fairs – places in which to show off new technologies.” Companies now thrust new technologies directly into our lives; the world’s fair is no longer a launching pad. Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage* (New York: Random House, 1967), 72. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by author and page number.

how much it had come to depend on electricity only lasted one evening. No one is conscious of infrastructure—for transportation, electricity, running water—until it malfunctions: like electricity in the case of a blackout.¹² This has not always been the case; aspects of modern infrastructure were still marvels in the past two or three generations. The shift in literary and cultural trends from the modern to the postmodern parallels this moment where the expectation of an electrified world—in which electricity is naturalized as part of our human environment and it becomes so widespread that it is only observed in its absence—comes to dominate.¹³

Electricity as an “Unthought Known”

“Electronic Superhighway” demonstrates how technology spans the nation physically, but electronic media technologies do not only cover the American environment. They also enter people’s minds and ways of speaking. Often, the English language uses electrical words as adjectives and easily understood imagery. A cup of coffee “energizes” me; after consuming the caffeine I am “wired” and ready to be more focused and productive. Nye writes extensively

¹² In “The Smell of Infrastructure: Notes toward an archive,” Robbins presents the binary of networks of “public utilities” as necessary to maintaining a dazzling image of capitalism, while themselves crumbling into an undesirable and ignored sensory experience. Robbins implies that the literature he frames and references tries to provoke a demand for better utilities. He shows how infrastructure pervades fiction and dwells upon descriptions of it in order to remold a consciousness of public utilities. Elongating that consciousness to also exist when the reader casts an eye on the world around him/her, and then to stretch that to a demand for political action and accountability, is ambitious and thought provoking. I will also glean electrical moments from literature, but with a focus on the domestic and community scales, rather than examining urban areas and international differences. Bruce Robbins, “The Smell of Infrastructure: Notes toward an archive,” *boundary 2* (2007): 25-33.

¹³ The postmodern condition and culture, architecture, art, and literature react to the modern. Where the modern was concerned with meta-narratives and finding the universal experiences of being human, the postmodern values society as a diverse collage – whether that is mixed use spaces and a variety of building types in a city or varied, defamiliarizing styles of writing. As a cultural period it correlates to late capitalism, the economic period of consumer-focused, post-WWII, and globalizing capitalism.

about the proliferation of electricity in the United States, and with a keen eye for language he observes, “in a parallel process [to improvements in electrical and battery technologies and increasing electronic products], electricity [is] woven into the metaphors Americans [use] to describe themselves.”¹⁴ A stunning musical or theatrical performance can be characterized as “electrifying.” Adjectives or labels that imply working electricity indicate celebrated characteristics: a successful person is a “powerhouse;” moments of brilliance are visually depicted with light bulbs and called “bright ideas” (Nye 2010 77).¹⁵ In *Freedom*, Jonathan Franzen’s 2010 novel, an electrical metaphor does the work that Nye describes by relating a bright light bulb to hope. The narrator says, of characters waiting for an answer, “Their hopeful expectancy was like an unbearably bright light bulb.”¹⁶ On the other hand, imagery with negative connotations, such as unintelligence, employs words for failing electrical technologies. A confused or unintelligent person is called “dim-witted,” “not the brightest bulb,” and has his “wires crossed” (Nye 2010 77). Nye notes that as American speech became “saturated with expressions that suggested electricity enlivened personality [and] quickened intelligence,” electricity also became a means of conveying consciousness (Nye 2010 77). When there is a power outage, common vernacular names it a “blackout,” while a temporary loss of consciousness is also called a blackout. We, as a population of electricity users, are a population of electricity speakers that draw on such metaphors to describe ourselves, leveling our

¹⁴ David E. Nye, *When The Lights Went Out: A History of Blackouts in America* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010), 76. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by author, year, and page number.

¹⁵ In my description of electrical metaphors, it is almost impossible to avoid electrical connotations in other adjectives. The ripple effect of electrical connotations has reached the words “stunning” and “brilliant,” as well. Both words nod toward the spectacle of brightly illuminated spaces.

¹⁶ Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 224. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by author and page number.

personhood with electrical infrastructure and appliances. We have absorbed electricity in our minds and speech and use it casually without recognizing the electrical derivations of our speech's connotations.

Today, "electric" or "electrifying" would rarely be used as descriptive words to connote similar shock or excitement in a discussion of electricity as a technology. Electrical metaphors serve as evidence that electrical technologies have permeated the human environment so thoroughly that they have entered the human mind and speech. Language normalizes electricity, and solidifies its position in the background, more a part of the landscape than a part of lives, which complicates our self-awareness, dependency upon machines, and the future of the environment. The things that are most omnipresent and most observable paradoxically become the things least noticed. Electricity has become "an unthought known," to borrow a term of psychologist Christopher Bollas.¹⁷ For Bollas, the unthought known is a psychological concept that refers to our notions of how we expect the world around us to present itself based on the ways that our environment was conceived and shaped in childhood.¹⁸ Literally, an unthought known is something we know exists as part of our culture and environment, despite neither

¹⁷ My advisor, Professor Yaeger, first directed me toward this terminology that, to me, immediately seemed appropriate in a discussion of electricity. In *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990*, Professor Yaeger provides an example immediately relevant to her topic of white unseeing by recounting a 1919 scenario when leaders of a white community were shocked, in a Commission on Interracial Communication meeting with leaders from the black community, to learn that their black neighbors did not have municipal services or paved roads, despite the reality that many of these whites drove servants home through that section of town, and saw the change in conditions, daily. She addresses "the unthought known" as a method for white communities in America to leave racial issues unacknowledged. It can also be seen in terms of the history of electricity spreading through communities in the U.S. and changing from a spectacle to a norm. Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 103.

¹⁸ For the origin of this phrase and its original applications in psychology, see Christopher Bollas, *Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

acknowledging nor reflecting upon it. The term need not remain in the field of psychology, but can be part of a cognitive, linguistic, and literary context. Quinn, in Paul Auster's *The City of Glass*, a 1986 installment of *The New York Trilogy*, forgets that with electricity, he can control his environment's lighting: "He did not think of turning on the electric light, for he had long ago forgotten it was there."¹⁹ Auster chooses to qualify the light as "electric," when most of his readers will imagine that type of light fixture and are unlikely to use the adjective "electric" for an actual, electrical object. This makes the obvious imagery feel unfamiliar. I use Bollas' term for electricity because the material realities of electrical objects, systems, and technologies have become so widespread that they are essentially invisible.

In 1967, just two years after a blackout affected 30 million people in the Northeast, Marshall McLuhan published *The Medium is the Massage* on the premise, "the medium, or process, of our time—electric technology—is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life," because "societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication" (McLuhan 8). Mediums such as the telephone, radio, and television, and the ways that people use them, form the messages relayed by electrical circuitry. With respect to human reception of electrically mediated messages, McLuhan says, "information pours upon us, instantaneously and continuously . . . instant communication insures that all factors of the environment and of experience co-exist in a state of active interplay" (McLuhan 63). Concerning the impact that electrical mediums have on us given the bombardment of auditory information, he specified:

¹⁹ Paul Auster, *The City of Glass*, In *The New York Trilogy* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2006), 218.

The ear favors no particular ‘point of view.’ We are enveloped by sound... We can’t shut out sound automatically. We simply are not equipped with earlids. Where a visual space is an organized continuum of a uniformed connected kind, the ear world is a world of simultaneous relationships. (McLuhan 111)

In *Other Electricities*, characters use the equipment necessary for hearing telephone and radio messages as material “earlids”; in the sound saturated world of *White Noise* characters figuratively generate “earlids” by becoming desensitized to electrical interruptions of conversations and narration. DeLillo’s characters fail to consciously acknowledge the television’s noises, proving that McLuhan’s argument, “Television demands participation and involvement in depth of the whole being. It will not work as background,” did not withstand time, from McLuhan’s 1967 publishing to *White Noise* in 1985, over which technologies fade from the engaging foreground of attention to the background (McLuhan 125). Many of McLuhan’s arguments remain useful, but his contention that a specific medium, the television, would constantly be exciting and engaging did not recognize what time and ubiquity could do to a technology: turn it into an unthought known.

Meanwhile, the form and content of fiction writing increasingly resemble the image and advertisement constancy and rapidity of television. In his essay, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” David Foster Wallace contends that television and literature are inextricably linked, particularly in a new subgenre of pop-conscious postmodern fiction that imitates, mocks, and celebrates the mass appeal and consumerism of television. When Wallace wrote this essay in 1991, Americans were watching an average of six hours of television per day.²⁰ An abundance of

²⁰ Compare consumption of television then, five years after *White Noise* was written, to consumption of media within the home today: “at home, people consume 12 hours of media a day on average, when an hour spent with, say, the Internet and TV simultaneously counts as two

images and alternate realities on television screens makes foreign places, realities, and subjects available to viewers. To maintain relevance in a society that has a world of images available in living rooms across the nation, Wallace claims that literature used to provide readers an opportunity to become familiar with the strange, but with the extensive possibilities and images that television now offers, making the familiar strange is the current role of literature:

Realistic fiction's big job used to be... to help readers leap over the walls of self and locale and show us unseen or dreamed of people and cultures. Realism made the strange familiar. Today...when darn near *everything* presents itself as familiar – it's not a surprise that some of today's most ambitious 'realistic' fiction is going about trying to *make the familiar strange*.²¹

Because television is familiar, especially for Jack Gladney's family, DeLillo makes it strange by giving humans electronic voices and the reverse. Monson defamiliarizes the radio by making it a conduit for poetic messages from family members, including a dead mother. In postmodern fiction, I find Wallace's claims true for television and other technologies and metaphors that depend upon electricity.

In the novels by DeLillo, Monson, Franzen, and Auster, settings and events require electricity. Many other late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century texts instead gloss over electricity because it has transformed from the spectacular into the ordinary and ongoing, fading from the foreground. But whether electricity appears as part of an object in a text, takes action, or

hours." Matt Richtel, "Attached to Technology and Paying a Price," *New York Times*, 6 June 2010. Accessed 28 November 2010.

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/07/technology/07brain.html?ref=your_brain_on_computers

²¹ David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 151-194, 172. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by author and page number

is a prerequisite for a detail about a landscape or an event in a text, it is ever present, if sometimes unacknowledged, in postmodern literature.

This thesis examines the ways in which some novels challenge the status of electricity as an unthought known by depicting electricity as an agent, representing it as a technology characters depend on and mimic, and showing how, as an instrument of communication, it maintains human relationships. The following pages provide a window into literature set during a moment of history when an electrified home was the norm and televisions were omnipresent, but prior to our contemporary time in which the Internet is the predominant telecommunications system, and personal, portable computers are prevalent. DeLillo's novel was published during this cultural moment, while Monson's is retrospective. *White Noise* and *Other Electricities* are deeply engaged in mapping in literature the implications of a world in which electricity has been absorbed into the landscape and individuals. I pay attention to electricity in literature as a means of considering its contradictions, including when it is present and absent, acknowledged and unacknowledged, bringing people closer and drawing attention to distances. I turn to literature to ask how electricity affects communication (both how characters communicate with each other and how the narrator communicates with readers)? Characters, I argue, enjoy relinquishing control of their realities to the mediation of communications technologies and power contained in wires and convenient appliances; they relish the opportunity to broadcast experiences as stories and allow mediums like televisions to fictionalize their experiences. In *White Noise* and *Other Electricities*, the narrators bring electricity to the foreground. Both of these electrically infused works are exceptional in the frequent mentions of electricity and the attention given to those moments. The novels work with electrical noises and voices in disparate ways. People homogeneously indulge in electricity to experience the same cultural phenomena, such as

watching a natural disaster on television, and cultural behaviors, like talking on the phone, without physically interacting. DeLillo bombards his characters with constant sound and allows them to indulge in paranoid conversations. Monson's characters seek out electrical connections and actively speak and listen through them. The discussion and consumption of electrical energy and mediated images in *White Noise* leads to an almost total lack of action, which indicates a tragic continuation of electricity use and the consume-to-fulfill lifestyle that leads to environmental disasters like the airborne toxic event. *Other Electricities* grapples with more tangible tragedies—deaths in the community—and characters turn to radios to cope with these losses. Both electrical plotlines force readers to think about electricity consumption and its extensive use.

My first chapter focuses on *White Noise*. I argue that the presentation of nonsensical single-phrase television and radio disruptions in the narration personifies electrical technologies by bringing their voices to the foreground. After constantly hearing these interruptions, the narrator and Willie Mink begin to feel and speak like the television; in an odd role reversal the TV is personified and the characters are depersonified. In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney narrates the auditory clutter in his home, and in his single action scene he simulates electricity.

My second chapter concerns itself with how electrical technologies render physical distances irrelevant in *Other Electricities*. I argue that a single teenage boy in a small community can be an omniscient narrator by eavesdropping on radio messages and tapped phone lines. Electricity provides him with the means of gathering information about the daily experiences and frequent tragedies that occur in his community, which he then visualizes and turns into a constellation of stories. The constellation is an apt metaphor because similar to the way lines imagined by humans link stars to create a coherent image, physical phone and power lines link

members of a community and their experiences to compile a set of stories into a novel. I conclude the chapter by examining the graphics of electrical circuitry or radio schematics and hypothesizing which characters might be sending the italicized messages that appear next to them through such circuitry.

In each chapter I show that characters unwittingly mimic the speech patterns of electrical mediums, or seek to speak through such electrical mediums instead of communicating directly with others. Speaking through electricity parcels experiences into consumable and understandable stories, but the characters fail to recognize that environmental damage, or the threat thereof, is part of the electrical communication parcels. After becoming an unthought known, electricity entered human communication in the form of both metaphors and physical objects for mediating experiences. In Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and Ander Monson's *Other Electricities*, televisions and radios, omnipresent electrical objects in characters' homes, fade into a background of noise that characters hear, penetrate their ways of speaking, and become extensions of the body as technologies that characters depend upon to mediate speech acts and experiences.

CHAPTER ONE

ELECTRICAL DOMINATION OF HOME AND CHARACTER IN *WHITE NOISE*

The second chapter of Don DeLillo's 1985 novel *White Noise* ends when an electrical domestic appliance interrupts a family meal. A smoke alarm sounds from a separate part of the family's home: "The smoke alarm went off in the hallway upstairs, either to let us know the battery had just died or because the house was on fire. We finished our lunch in silence."¹ Rather than the ensuing panic readers expect, the narrator, Jack Gladney, and his family continue to eat lunch. The smoke alarm exerts agency as a human character would, entering the conversation, acting with purpose, and communicating with people. But instead of provoking a response, the alarm's call for attention silences the family. Jack acknowledges the dangerous possibilities that a smoke alarm indicates, but does not move from his lunch. This inaction implies that he and his family are desensitized toward electrical interruptions. Going "off" upstairs, the smoke alarm turns off the family's lunchtime conversation.

The smoke alarm is the first of many electrical household machines to disrupt or speak in DeLillo's novel. The smoke alarm asserts itself to force human attention—asking for a battery change—yet no one moves. The Gladneys' smoke alarm incident points to the mass consumption of electricity and the omnipresent technological system that the smoke alarm wires into because electrical noises are immediately recognized and labeled, but they are so ubiquitous that no one is concerned.² It's just another day of eating lunch in the Gladney house. In later domestic scenes

¹ Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1985), 8. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by author and page number.

² The constant hum of electrical noises is not unique to *White Noise*. Jonathan Franzen slides electricity into the text of his 2010 novel, *Freedom*, about a twenty-first century family. In one conversation, the omnipresence of forms of electricity and white noise enters conversation as an

the refrigerator, the clothes dryer, the radio, and, most frequently, the television, continue to interrupt the narration. This chapter examines the relationship between characters and interruptive electronic technologies, particularly televisions. Jack slips electronic noises into his narration, and the messages of these interruptions remain unacknowledged. These electrical technologies are personified as inhabitants of the Gladney house that speak and move from room to room. Inversely, the human characters in *White Noise* are depersonified; they speak and act like technologies.

White Noise contains an abundance of acknowledged electricities, including lighted homes, a fluorescent supermarket, and the television as both a visual entertainment object and a disembodied voice. Technologies and characters exist on the same horizontal plane. Like a person viewing “Electronic Superhighway” whose image is reconfigured and electronically played back to viewers of the artwork in Washington, D.C., Jack Gladney becomes an electrified person by living in an environment saturated with electronic disruptions, images, and noises. DeLillo’s characters are often no more human than the smoke alarm or television, participating in the same kinds of interactions and interruptions. This chapter argues that electrical noises saturate Jack’s home, affect the characters’ minds, and thereby diminish critical activity in the brain and supply the voice with words and speech. I will consider the arguments made by Jack’s colleagues and family members about brain fade, a term used in *White Noise* to reflect the mental response to information overload, and suggest that they dramatize the TV’s hilarious and

explanation of a cultural critique of fragmentation and the disappearance of “the authentic things, the honest things” (Franzen 218). The main husband character, Walter, says, “Because it’s the same problem everywhere. It’s like the Internet or cable TV – there’s never any center, there’s just a trillion little bits of distracting noise. We can never sit down and have any kind of sustained conversation, it’s all just cheap trash and shitty development” (Franzen 218). Here, the idea that electrical noise makes human interactions shallow bothers the speaker; the lack of sustained conversation is an effect of brain fade, which can be seen in *White Noise* when the Gladney’s spew informational one liners in the middle of conversations.

nonsensical interjections, turning them into matters of patriotism and cognitive disorders without actively doing anything in response. The last portion of this chapter will show that Jack Gladney and Willie Mink figuratively and behaviorally enter a lifestyle in which electronics that have dominated the environment depersonify each character.

The Constantly Electrified Home

The television injects senseless and comical one-liners into *White Noise*, but neither Jack nor the other characters acknowledge these humorous speech acts. Like the smoke alarm, the television first disrupts a mealtime, which shows the appliance's domination of the domestic environment and family's time together. After dinner Jack says, "I heard the TV say, 'Let's sit half lotus and think about our spines'" (DeLillo 18). As the novel unfolds, the TV becomes more and more vocal, and the sentence structure of the narrator's announcement that the TV speaks decays, becoming increasingly vague. Never again, with at least five more television interjections, does Jack use a personal pronoun to acknowledge hearing the TV as he does here, beginning the sentence "I heard." The TV, rather than the speaker who narrates it, becomes the subject of sentences in which it talks: "The TV said, 'And other trends that could dramatically impact your portfolio'" (DeLillo 61). As a simultaneous subject of a sentence and a speaker in the novel, the TV ceases to be an electrical object that Jack overhears; it is personified. The same holds true for the radio, which makes apparently unheard interjections: "A radio said: 'Hog futures have declined in sympathy, adding bearishness to that market'" (DeLillo 149). The primary difference in the textual announcements that an electrical apparatus speaks resides in its attendant article: *the* television is specific and individualized, whereas *a* radio could be one of many. The specificity of the announcement, which identifies the speaker as the TV or radio,

breaks down further still. Later passages fail to name the TV or radio, but take an additional step in characterizing the electrical apparatus and almost deifying it, confirming its authority and domination over the family's life as "the voice upstairs" (DeLillo 257). Because the article preceding "voice upstairs" is "the," it more likely belongs to the TV.

Each time the text announces an electrical interruption with a simple and blunt verb, "said" or "remarked," a contextually nonsensical quote follows it. The text never addresses the interruptions and moves on seamlessly as though the sentence never occurred. Readers can glance over that line and tune it out like a commercial that comes on during a regular program or a television someone else is watching. The phrases the TV spouts vary in subject matter and sometimes occur in the middle of a passage (such as an exchange between Bee and Jack in Chapter 19 about why Babette behaves unusually). At other times, the TV interruption serves as an awkward ending to an idea or passage, providing the narrator with an opportunity to jump to a new subject; nothing flows with the TV's words.

In his rare attempts to describe electrical noise, Jack employs descriptive verbs such as throb, tap, or strike. We confront DeLillo's white noise with these random vocalizations from the television and a radio, a refrigerator that "throbbed massively," and the clothes dryer that Jack listens to, hearing "the tapping sound of buttons and zippers as they struck the surface of the drum" (DeLillo 101 and 225). The noisy appliances (refrigerator and dryer) and speaking electrical apparatuses (smoke alarm, radio, and television) represent the daily static of domestic settings. Whether they are phrases or sounds that can be specified as taps or a "scratch," Jack Gladney disrupts the nature of white noise, drawing it from background to foreground (DeLillo 226). Jack communicates the disruptiveness of noise to his readers, demonstrating the way noise

slices the flow of what one listens to or thinks. By quoting the TV directly he allows electrical noise to speak for itself.

Jack transforms a noise backdrop into signals in *White Noise* as other characters discuss the pervasiveness of the media, television, and electricity. These stimulations frequently surface in conversations among academics at College-on-the-Hill where Jack works, as they spout off observations and critiques of how an environment embedded with electronic media affects the brain. One colleague, Winnie, tells Jack that her limited knowledge of the human brain and neural networks is “enough to make me proud to be an American” because brains develop in response to stimuli, and “we still lead the world in stimuli” (DeLillo 189). Her pride lies in the abundance of sounds, images, and pure sensory detail that electricity makes available. Only an affluent and technologically advanced nation could possess an extensive electricity grid and plenty of energy generated to power that grid, and Winnie is proud to identify with a nation that has those resources.³ Winnie’s pride in sheer quantity falls under fire from other college faculty. Alfonse, from the department of American environments, informs Jack over lunch, “we’re suffering from brain fade” (DeLillo 66).⁴ Brain fade results from the constant flow of stimuli, or, as Alfonse says, “the incessant bombardment of information” (DeLillo 66). For Alfonse, brain fade, unlike Winnie’s pride, is based on the concept that there can be an over abundance of stimuli. With excess, it blends and turns to fuzz, and the human mind is only shocked out of

³ The electrically powered United States can be contrasted with Georgia. When people in Kutaisi, Georgia experienced frequent power outages in 2004, they protested in the streets, shouting, “Give us light!” Michael D. Rubenstein, “Light Reading: Public Utility, Urban Fiction, and Human Rights,” *Social Text* 97 26, no. 4 (2008): 31-50. Hereafter cited parenthetically by author and page number.

⁴ DeLillo addresses brain fade by different names in some of his other novels. In *Great Jones Street* characters suffer from a condition of “sensory overload” and in *Running Dog* it is the “superabundance of technology.”

stasis in the constancy of noise when the information flow—as in the case of environmental catastrophes—is startling.

Joseph Conte, author of *Design and Debris: A Chaotics of Postmodern American Fiction*, questions Alfonse and the idea that more noise can startle a person out of the standard electrified background. After defining noise as an undesirable sensory cluttering of the background, Conte argues that white noise is absolute disorder, the epitome of entropy that fails to stimulate the mind to reoccurrence or differentiation. He considers the mass electrification and its correlating increase in noise in post-World War II to be a noise and communications technology apocalypse that occurred unnoticed in America. The suburban home complete with electronics and convenient technologies is no sanctuary: “the upper-middle class, the suburban home, which should be a refuge from the miseries that plague the less fortunate or able in late capitalist society, turns out to be ground zero in the irradiated apocalypse.”⁵ Conte does not address directly how or why this apocalypse occurred *unnoticed*. DeLillo’s answer to that mystery is brain fade. Conte compares black lung disease as an epidemic of the Industrial—or modern—Age with brain fade as an unrecognized epidemic of the Information—or postmodern—Age. Black lung disease afflicted coal miners, impairing their breathing and ability to live, while sufferers of brain fade experience the symptoms of brand name imprinting, verbal television-like outbursts of factoids, and a general numbness to stimulation.⁶ Brain fade allows for the known to

⁵ Joseph Conte, “Design and Debris: A Chaotics of Postmodern American Fiction” (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), 128. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by author and page number.

⁶ This is not to say that as a society we are beyond black lung disease, let alone coal mining. For the purpose of this thesis, I would like to point out that acquiring black lung disease, or working in coal mines, makes brain fade possible because coal is one of the most abundant resources for generating electricity, which produces the overwhelming sensory data that deteriorates into white noise. Furthermore, the town in which the Gladneys live, Blacksmith, is near “Coaltown,” which is reminiscent of towns constructed around the mining industry (DeLillo 58). When DeLillo

be unthought because the unceasing stimulation leaves no spaces between noises for people to consider or reflect about the origins and production of the sounds being consumed.

Jack initiated the conversation about brain fade with Alfonse because he was confused about why he and his children were riveted to the screen watching televised mudslides, floods, earthquakes, and volcanoes the previous night. Babette “had made it a rule” for the family to watch television together thinking, “the effect would be to de-glamorize the medium in [her children and stepchildren’s] eyes,” and “its narcotic undertow and eerie diseased brain-sucking power would be gradually reduced” (DeLillo 16). The TV was not de-glamorized, however, and, as they watch houses fall victim to the waves and currents of the sea, the family is pulled into the TV’s addictive undertow. Jack defends his family’s desire to remain glued to the TV with the words “intrigued” and “so entertaining” (DeLillo 65). With no concern, fear, or empathy for the victims of the natural disasters he fails to acknowledge that they were real events happening to people with lives and families.⁷ For Jack it is catastrophe porn. Tragic yet compelling, the

published his novel in 1985 a mention of coal might summon to mind acid rain, which primarily resulted from emissions of sulfur and nitrogen from coal power plants generating electricity. Marshall McLuhan famously said, “the medium is the message”; therefore the production of the medium is also part of every message. This means that coal miners who die or acquire black lung disease in coal mines, pollutants emitted from coal power plants, acid rain, and the danger of radioactive fallout from nuclear power plants are part of the messages of white noise, television interruptions, and electrically mediated voices. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1964), 7.

⁷ Surprisingly, when the situation is reversed and the Gladneys are subjected to a disaster, the airborne toxic event, they still demand electrical mediation – they want to be mediated and broadcast into others’ living rooms. They want to be as captivating as they were captivated. The lack of television coverage of the evacuees of the airborne toxic event incites an unnamed middle-aged man who uses a small TV with a blank screen held high in the air to draw the crowd’s attention to him and the object they would pay attention to in their living rooms for news of a disaster somewhere far away. Announcing, “there’s nothing on the network,” he is angry that television crews have not flocked to the site where they are “quarantined” (DeLillo 161). The man questions his audience: “Even if there hasn’t been great loss of life, don’t we deserve some attention for our suffering, our human worry, our terror? Isn’t fear news?” (DeLillo 162).

program transfixes him because of the degree of tragedy. Ultimately he says, “we wanted more, more” (DeLillo 66). Alfonse deduces that it is not only natural for Jack to beg for more when over abundance already surrounds him, but it is his right: “if a thing happens on television, we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is” (DeLillo 66).⁸ The only treatment for someone suffering from brain fade is a spike in stimuli. Electricity, specifically television in this instance, both causes and treats the malady of brain fade.

Alfonse says that if a television shows something, people “have every right to find it fascinating” (DeLillo 66). When does something cross from the category of luxury to that of human right? Winnie can be proud to be recognized as human and to have the access and possibilities of stimulus consumption that originate with electricity, but is something that leads to the deterioration of the mind, the malady of brain fade, a right? Heinrich suspects that electricity kills people and causes health defects. This literally is depersonification by electricity: depersonifying people by consuming their mental faculties and taking their lives.

Alfonse’s logic that watching an excessive amount of television is natural and a “right” seems suspect given that researchers outside of the novel from the National Institute of Drug Abuse compare the lure of “stimulation less to that of drugs and alcohol than to food and sex, which are essential but counterproductive in excess.”⁹ Like too much food, too much stimulation

⁸ According to Michael Rubenstein, the protesters in Georgia and characters in Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco* assume electricity “to be a right: a right to recognition beyond necessity, which is, arguably, the very moment where human recognition really begins” (Rubenstein 43-4). More critically, not only does electrical lighting allow people to be illuminated, electrical technologies such as radios and televisions also allow people to be seen and heard in distant places, extending recognition across physical spaces.

⁹ As quoted in Matt Richtel, “Attached to Technology and Paying a Price,” *New York Times*, 6 June 2010, Accessed 28 November 2010.
http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/07/technology/07brain.html?ref=your_brain_on_computers

should be counterproductive—and for the characters in *White Noise*, it might bring the danger of deeper brain fade or death. Heinrich would agree with the researchers.

At a family dinner, Heinrich shares his belief that the abundance of stimuli will cause a catastrophe within the family's home, not only in the television set. He would find Alfonse naïve for thinking that catastrophe, the only thing that gets our attention, is fine—dependable even—if it “[happens] somewhere else” (DeLillo 66). While investing himself in the food on his dinner plate, Heinrich tells his family,

“Forget spills, fallouts, leakages. It’s the things right around you in your own house that’ll get you sooner or later. It’s the electrical and magnetic fields. Who in this room would believe me if I said that the suicide rate hits an all-time record among people who live near high-voltage power lines? What makes these people so sad and depressed? Just the *sight* of ugly wires and utility poles? Or does something happen to their brain cells from being exposed to constant rays?” (DeLillo 175)

Heinrich brings up a power that is absent from Jack's narration: the infrastructure of electricity. Jack describes only the images, sounds, and human consequences that electricity produces, but Heinrich questions whether power lines are cognitively and aesthetically damaging and if their proximity has adverse health effects. He asks his family to develop a social consciousness and think: are people near power lines bearing a health burden for those that constantly electrify their homes? He rejects physical manifestations of brain fade (“forget headaches and fatigue”) to attack his family with the questions that condemn media technologies, “What about nerve disorders, strange and violent behavior in the home? There are scientific findings. Where do you think all the deformed babies are coming from? Radio and TV, that’s where” (DeLillo 175). Heinrich is self-important and inquisitive; he poses questions, challenges his family, and tries to

engage them in the issue of what might be dangerous in their immediate environment, but they retreat to factoid babble-land. They recite informational tidbits that have no contextual value, just like the speech of the TV and radio. Conte considers the garbled exchange of facts “symptomatic of the reflux or overload of information,” indicating that without processing the noise they constantly take in, the characters can do nothing but regurgitate sound bites. He relates them, “the dysfunctional family in the Information Age,” to “an overheated and error-prone communications channel” (Conte 124-25). Jack’s conversation with Alfonse during lunch with other colleagues descended into similar nonsense, a back and forth about brushing one’s teeth with a finger and memories of when James Dean died. It is easier for these characters to imitate the endless ramblings of the TV than to discuss it for long. These three conflicting voices point to the issue of the brain on electrically transmitted stimuli: Winnie’s pride in stimuli; Alfonse’s acceptance of brain fade and televised catastrophes as a way to treat it; and Heinrich’s paranoia about commonplace electricities. Jack passively receives the other characters’ ideas, listening and collecting their arguments. Like the television, the characters’ only power is communication; their acts are all speech acts. They talk about, narrate, and imitate the television.

Brain fade and white noise are the same phenomenon, except one occurs in the human mind and the other in the home. The mind adapts to be consistent with the environment, and, in this way a character can become aware of the self as part of something. Consuming electrically mediated information and narrating both one’s actions and the speech of the television is a way for characters to engage in a language of communication that locates them in a moment in our cultural history when the majority of the population had been surrounded by electrical technologies and noises its entire life. In the sections below, I show that speech acts replicate heard sounds as characters begin to speak like televisions.

Narrated Noise

The noise from the television colonized the home with its constant presence, and it induced not just brain fade, but brain colonization as well. How much agency does Jack have over his own story, compared to the technologies that dominate his environment? Critics disagree as to the degree of control Jack holds on his narration in the interrupted moments. I will present some of the different critical views and ultimately claim that Jack remains the controlling narrator throughout the book, even when that means he narrates the speech of electrical technologies.

In one critical reading of the interruptions, electrical speech easily dominates a passive Jack. He cannot resist the menace of television, so it becomes his subject and a part of his speech, and he simulates the voice of the television. In *Simulations*, Jean Baudrillard quips that we have entered a time of the “dissolution of TV into life, and the dissolution of life into TV.”¹⁰ Taking life to be personhood or character, his assertion describes *White Noise*: dissolution of TV into person, and the dissolution of person into TV. We have seen that televisions can be characterized and act like speaking human subjects; the reverse holds true as well. Human characters can sound, act, and be described as electrical objects. In addition to narrating the comments of the television and a radio, I contend that Jack disrupts his narration with nonsense phrases of his own. Before a paragraph in which he drives his family to a fast food dinner, the line, “CABLE HEALTH. CABLE WEATHER. CABLE NEWS. CABLE NATURE,” blazes across the page in capital letters (DeLillo 231). Obsessed with his own death, which may result

¹⁰ Quoted in Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000), 5.

from an unnatural environmental event (a gaseous cloud called the airborne toxic event), Jack becomes paranoid about his health—could he be expressing fear? When used as an adjective, as it is in this odd quote, cable usually describes television—instead of the nouns that Jack states—to express a system of providing images on the screen via radio frequency signals. Jack’s capitalized interjection asserts that health, weather, news, and nature are not real and immediate, instead he announces that they are made available by radio waves. He presents health, weather, news, and nature in this way to make them similar to the other omnipresent features in this book. Radio waves enter Jack, and electricity gives him content for interruptions of his narrative, spiky blips of white noise in the story he tells.

In his essay “Lust Removed From Nature,” Michael Valdez Moses disagrees and assumes it is obvious that the novel’s electrically focused and brand-oriented interjections are not part of Jack’s narration. The second critical reading of the interruptions credits the electrical objects with speech, unmediated by Jack the narrator. Rather than attributing the technological textual disruptions such as the smoke alarm, radio, and television, to Jack, Moses considers them textual interruptions in the first-person narration. In his reading, Jack shares his role of narrator with the television. Moses says, in parentheses, “It is clear that these incursions cannot be directly credited to Jack Gladney’s narrative voice.”¹¹ Instead, he calls them “the ‘white noise’ of postmodern America that envelops the Gladneys” (Moses 64). In this reading, Jack cannot even retain full ownership of his narration.

A third reading names Jack a postmodern medium, relaying the messages of electrical technologies. In this reading, Jack is a hybrid; he becomes a medium for electrical speech. The

¹¹ Michael Valdez Moses, “Lust Removed from Nature,” In *New Essays on White Noise*, ed. Frank Lentricchia, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by author and page number.

TV's message travels through multiple mediums, including the television as an object and Jack as the narrator. The white noise doesn't just "envelop" characters; it enters and becomes a part of them. Lentricchia rationalizes, "it is, of course, Jack who speaks the line ("CABLE HEALTH...") because *White Noise* is a first-person novel, and it could therefore be no one else."¹² Analyzing a recitation of credit cards and types of gas as a disruption, Lentricchia says that Jack is "possessed" and "a mere medium" (Lentricchia 102). In this interpretation, Jack internalizes the chaotic noises of his environment. The white noise that constantly floods his mind possesses Jack, and places him on the same level as the non-human "mediums" that originally produce white noise: televisions and radios that transmit the messages of the advertising, entertainment, and news industries. As an electrified person who relinquishes some of his narrative control to the power of radio waves, Jack sacrifices some of his narrative control to electricity.

By trying "to move readers to the view that the shape and fate of their culture dictates the shape and the fate of the self," DeLillo wants to make characters aware of the electrical and informational noises and signals entering their environments and speech.¹³ Lentricchia considers DeLillo an effective cultural critic "whose work is a kind of anatomy, an effort to represent (our) culture in its totality" (Lentricchia 1). Adding *White Noise* to a list of American novels – *Moby Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and the *Great Gatsby* – Lentricchia argues that Jack Gladney is the postmodern era's Ishmael, Huck, or Nick Carraway. The varying stylistic and tonal shifts of Jack Gladney as a first person narrator, including his transmission of televised messages to indicate

¹² Frank Lentricchia, "Tales of the Electronic Tribe," In *New Essays on White Noise*, ed. Frank Lentricchia, 87-113 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by editor and page number.

¹³ Frank Lentricchia, "Introduction," In *New Essays on White Noise*, edited by Frank Lentricchia (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1.

that this electronic speech defines a form of human communication in our culture. Lentricchia begins his essay by referring to DeLillo's first novel, *Americana*, and its passage stating that the television came over on the *Mayflower* to the new world. In *White Noise* television is the premier technological constituent of the postmodern, which is itself the ethos of an electronic society. Indeed, there are moments in *White Noise* in which TV is the perpetual Atlantic crossing, an experience that leads to rediscovery, but with an omnipresent roar of messaging, characters often brush aside the TV-speech disruptions.

Radio and television vocalizations are so prevalent that Jack deems their absence notable and includes that detail in a description of watching the sunset from the highway overpass. He says, "no one plays a radio," taking away the radio's agency as a subject and speaker, and returning it to the position of object, one that someone else would play. Even though humans respond to electrically mediated images and coexist with the noise of electricity, we ultimately control electricity. Characters experience electric outbursts and the narrator relays them. Discussions about electrically mediated images and the nature of electrical mediums occur. Still no one acts; at home the electrical appliances remain on, and noise remains constant. There is a single moment in which Jack turns off a vocal electrical appliance, when he realizes that "a voice" he heard is actually a "sound" coming from a television set, but within the next ten pages the set speaks again (DeLillo 249). No one takes lasting or large-scale action despite all of the discussion and concern about television and electricity; in the home it's still on.

In the Gladney house, the television set is mobile, moved from room to room. Sometimes the TV speaks from "the end of the bed" in Jack's daughter's room, characters in the kitchen often hear it, and at other times it is in his son's room (DeLillo 178). I see this as a surprising detail that gives the TV the agency to speak in all parts of the home as though it were another

family member. Characters in *White Noise* then give electricity the agency to move and speak like a human, in the form of their television set. While readers can assume that the human characters move the TV, DeLillo gives no indication that this is a considered choice or a habitual act. The Gladneys' instincts tell them to always have the white noise of the television nearby. DeLillo shows a family that allows electricity to control them by frequently appearing as part of their conversations with other characters and each other and by dominating their space with a constant flow of sensory information that they passively accept.

During the airborne toxic event, however, there is no television nearby, and the characters can do nothing to change that situation. Heinrich rants to Jack that despite all of humankind's technological progress, no one can recreate the progress or set up the electrical technologies they depend upon and desire:

“It’s like we’ve been flung back in time,” he said. “Here we are in the Stone Age, knowing all these great things after centuries of progress but what can we do to make life easier for the Stone Agers? Can we make a refrigerator? Can we even explain how it works? What is electricity? What is light? We experience these things every day of our lives but what good does it do if we find ourselves hurled back in time and we can’t even tell people the basic principles much less actually make something that would improve conditions.” (DeLillo 147)

Heinrich bemoans that even though he and Jack have “seen a hundred TV shows about science” neither of them learned any practical scientific skills (DeLillo 148). Electricity, light, and refrigerators have been part of Heinrich's domestic environment his entire life, but only when he leaves home and their extended absence seems possible, does he question what they are and how they came to be. In this tirade, Heinrich challenges Jack, forcing him to try to answer some of

these questions and defend his answers. Jack attempts and fails to keep up with Heinrich's frenzied rant. Heinrich's thesis is proved correct; characters cannot explain or create the technologies they miss. With his barrage of questions, he shows that despite depending upon and constantly being surrounded by electricity, people are unfamiliar with it; it is an unthought known. Electricity does not need to be defamiliarized in the traditional sense, because its processes and workings are already unknown; only its presence is known, and even that is unacknowledged by many of the characters until it is absent.

Electrified Personhood

The former section showed that electricity reaches objects that transcend their machine nature to become noisemaking bodies. After electronic technologies such as televisions, radios, and kitchen appliances invade the home, they transform characters into electronic people. Keeping in mind that Jack transformed electronic objects into speaking characters in his house, for two reasons it is crucial to examine Jack's encounter with Willie Mink, the man who secretly, in exchange for sex, provides Babette with Dylar, a drug meant to remove her fear of death. First, because this is the sole scene in the book in which Jack *acts* rather than simply accumulates the speech acts of colleagues and technologies, and does so without the urging of his children, and second, because Mink epitomizes the depersonification by electrical technologies.

Electronic media technologies populate *White Noise*, and in a book that brings electricity to the foreground, characters and televisions start to mirror each other. The "communicational promiscuity," or omnipresence of electronic media technologies, "leads inexorably to the hollowing out of the self – or better to say, the dispersal of the self, the generalized

destabilization of the subject in the era of networks and electronic transmission of symbols.”¹⁴

The self, however, does not remain a hollow shell. For David Foster Wallace, “Television, even the mundane little business of its production, has become Our interior” (Wallace 159).

Characters who have been consuming electric signals and voices throughout the novel start to internalize and become those signals. The electronic objects speak, and characters’ personhood becomes electronic as individuals absorb the white noise and sensory information that constantly fills their world.¹⁵ Wilcox argues, “life is increasingly lived in a world of simulacra, where electronic representation replaces direct experience,” but when Jack Gladney and Willie Mink directly interact, the reverse happens: their humanness becomes electronic (Wilcox 196). The pair directly interacts, but each individual represents an electronic medium by feeling like part of an electrical current or producing TV babble. Differences between character and appliance diminish as people adopt the voiced appliances’ ways of speaking.

Aside from pure over-exposure to electronic voices, why do these characters internalize electrical media technologies? For Jack, it may have something to do with his obsessive fear of death. Internalizing something that is nonhuman, an energy that is constantly reinforcing and powering appliances, seems to offer what Jack’s colleague Murray Siskind calls “life credit.” It gives him the opportunity to be constantly re-energizing, and re-forming as a person. Moses believes that the “greatest threat of technology is its promise of immortality...[but] for DeLillo

¹⁴ Leonard Wilcox, “Baudrillard, DeLillo’s *White Noise*, and the End of the Heroic Narrative,” *In Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*, ed. Hugh Ruppersburg and Tim Engles, (New York; G. K. Hall & Co., 2000), 347. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by author and page number

¹⁵ Lentricchia considers this internalization and electronic filling up of the body to be an antagonistic and aggressive act of electricity, referring to it as “the disturbing invasion of a self that would be autonomous” (Lentricchia 13). Moses, too, calls modern technology’s “more or less undetectable effect on the psyche” its “most sinister and insidious aspect” (Moses 71). These critics view the electrified person as a negative phenomenon because dependency upon the instruction of electrical technologies destabilizes the self by blurring the distinction between human or electronic voice.

technology is most dangerous when it presents itself with ‘a human face’” (Moses 72). When subject and object interact, they affect each other. Jack, as subject, turns the TV-object into a subject that readers must notice as part of his environment, and may therefore acknowledge as a speaker in their own physical environments, and the TV impacts Jack’s way of thinking about himself and narrating a story.

In a narrative with electricity as a constant supply of energy and noise, Jack figuratively becomes electricity on his way to Mink’s motel room by adopting those characteristics of constant energy and action. As Jack drives to the motel where Willie Mink stays, he metaphorically enters an electrical current rather than a highway; he is no longer conscious of his body: “I felt extraordinarily light—lighter than air, colorless, odorless, invisible” (DeLillo 303). Electricity, like Jack as he drives, constantly moves and continuously comes into being; he moves forward unceasingly and narrates his actions over and over. This marks a departure from his passive observation and consumption of electrical images and sounds. For the first time in the book Jack acts independently. Describing the loss of feeling human and embodied, he says, “this must be how people escape the pull of the earth, the gravitational leaf-flutter that brings us hourly closer to dying” (DeLillo 303). He describes a sensation of distancing himself from death, and this feeling empowers him to take risks. Jack runs red lights on the way to the motel; he is unstoppable and has escaped the pull of his familiar landscape; he feels more distant from earth, which is to feel less human and therefore less mortal. Figuratively and sensationally, he has become a bundle of energy rapidly crossing the network of roads and highways on his way to commit a violent act.

Just before Jack arrives at his destination, “the man on the radio said” something in his car (DeLillo 303). This marks a change in the relationship of voices and electronics. For the bulk

of *White Noise* radio and television vocalizations are the speech acts of objects. This time, a man speaks through an electrical object, which introduces the idea that humans produce the electrical voice behind technology, and not that the object develops a voice. First, electrical objects spoke. Here a man speaks through an object, and then the characters imitate object-speak without an electrical medium. Jack and Willie Mink spend most of the chapter speaking like voices of a media technology, electrifying themselves without the appliance as a mediator. Mark Osteen proposes that DeLillo's characters "can't understand their own experience without electronic mediation," so when they aren't being filmed and transmitted via electricity, they mediate their own experience with electrical voices.¹⁶ Because the characters in this novel have had so much exposure to that form of speech and narration, electrical voices are the only way that Jack knows how to narrate his book, and the only way that Willie Mink can interact with other people. Another example of this occurs when the Gladneys evacuate their home – and leave their TV behind – because of the airborne toxic event. Babette performed the television's role by voicing a trashy TV show and its commercials. She reads the wild stories of tabloids and the messages of their coupons to an audience in the absence of TV-generated white noise and ridiculous interruptions. Jack notes that her audience was "content to exchange brief and unrelated remarks, as during a break for a TV commercial," suggesting he noticed that she was interacting with people as though she was a television (DeLillo 146).

Jack recites his plan to kill Mink, outlining the story of his violent act over and over before he tries to commit it. He introduces and retells his plan five times. Each time he narrates it differently, illuminating different parts of a plan that includes making a three shot murder look

¹⁶ Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Penn Press, 2000), 181. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by author and page number.

like a suicide. The first time Jack begins—“here is my plan”—he tells readers in straightforward sentences that feel like instructions (DeLillo 304). The next time – “my plan was this” – he narrates the same story, but with entirely different details (DeLillo 305). The act of repeating the plan over and over commits it to his memory, allowing him to adjust the details until he reaches a plan that garners an adjective in its announcement – “my plan was elegant” – and breaks the blunt instruction manual form for a single sentence listing of the plan’s details (DeLillo 309). Wilcox writes, “Gladney is temporally suspended as he continues to revise his plans to kill Mink in a toneless, chant-like fashion, perpetually rewriting a present which seems without link to past and future” (Wilcox 356). But more than “suspended,” he is rewriting his script, as though he is filming multiple takes of a scene for television. The plan is a poor one, like a “bad TV movie”; Jack intends to shoot Mink three times and then place the gun in his hand as though the murder is a suicide, but no one committing suicide would shoot himself three times in the stomach (Osteen 186). Entering the motel room is like entering a television. Jack “sensed [he] was part of a network of structures and channels” (DeLillo 305). He can’t imagine this action independent of what can be seen on TV.

Meanwhile, as Jack prepares to enact his plan, Mink blabbers white noise on behalf of his television. One of the first things that Jack notices in the motel room is a TV that Mink was watching “without the sound” (DeLillo 306). Noisiness is a hallmark of television throughout the book. In Jack’s house, the TV and other electronic appliances create white noise, so without the sound of TV on in his small dump of a motel room, the room should be quiet. Jack, however, hears “a noise, faint, monotonous, white” (DeLillo 306). The white noise is not the electrical voice transmitted by the TV, but an imitation of such a voice spoken by Mink. He doesn’t need the sound of the TV when he speaks like the technology. Coexisting with the TV, but performing

its speech, Mink is what Baudrillard would call a “simulation,” a referential being that “threatens the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false’”; relationship with the TV is difficult for Jack to recognize.¹⁷ If the TV initially began as a tool for mediating or reflecting reality, by lending its voice to Mink, that mediation is perverted. He is an abstraction of the medium, not of its original message. When Jack described Mink’s noise as monotonous and white, he had Mink “confused with the real thing,” which is a TV, an object designed to produce simulations (Baudrillard 365).

Mink tells Jack that he “learned English watching American TV,” defining America by televisions as Nam June Paik does in “Electronic Superhighway” (DeLillo 308). Mink’s speech patterns demonstrate that a television tutored him. Mink spews television-babble disjointedly, making no contextual sense with phrases such as “first ask yourself what type of sleeve will meet your needs” and “the pet under stress may need a prescription diet” (DeLillo 307). The “TV said” and “it said” introductions of earlier parts of *White Noise* have become the “he said” of Mink; Mink voices the television. This electrical voice version of Mink “is almost another piece of electronic hardware through which television’s messages flow.”¹⁸ Educated by a TV, the machine shaped Mink into “the pure American product”: a television “channel” of the postmodern (Lentricchia 112, Moses 76). When Mink tosses Dylar pills at the TV and the screen begins to wobble, his relationship with the TV is revealed to be parasitic. The television is the host, and the man the parasite. In Jack’s eyes, “as the TV picture jumped, wobbled, caught itself in snarls, Mink appeared to grow more vivid” (DeLillo 310). When the image on the silent TV

¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations” In *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 366. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by author and page number.

¹⁸ John N. Duvall, “The (Super)Marketplace of Images: Television as Unmediated Mediations in DeLillo’s *White Noise*,” *Arizona Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (1994): 127-153, 9. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by author and page number.

falters, Willie Mink's language skills break down; his grammar seems to have been turned off. He verbally falters and speaks like the stereotype of a foreigner who does not know English well.

The scene earlier in the novel when Babette and Jack consider the possibility that their feared death is “nothing but sound,” just “electrical noise,” casts the encounter with Mink in a different light (DeLillo 198). Jack and Babette share a fear of death, and hypothesized that their feared death is “electrical noise.” Already the pair lives in a world with constant white noise from electrical appliances and media sources; they unwittingly live their imagined realization of their fear. In the motel that Jack describes as a “white room, white buzz” with “sound all around,” he confronts that possible iteration of death (DeLillo 312). As the villain and TV-speaker, Mink, embodies white noise, the hum of electricity. Considering Babette and Jack's metaphor, Mink embodies death. Twice, Jack fires the gun at Mink and sees red blood, a sign of humanity.¹⁹ Jack does not follow his plan of three shots nor acknowledge his second shot as part of the aforementioned plan. Instead, he “fired a second shot just to fire it, relive the experience, hear the sonic waves layering through the room, feel the jolt travel up (his) arm” (DeLillo 312). Each of these sensations that Jack pursues is an exercise in feeling more alive. He “relives” an event in which he was the primary actor; he creates and hears a noise that overpowers white noise; he physically and directly experiences the blunt force of his shot in his human body.²⁰ Jack reclaimed his humanity from the hold of death fear and pervasive electricity by acting more powerfully than Mink. Instead of escaping death, Jack creates a sonic wave of noise and the

¹⁹ On October 20, 1952, the *New York Times* reported that after going to bed, while his family watched TV, a man was so disturbed by the noise that he “stilled the television with one shot from his .38 caliber revolver.” In the motel scene in *White Noise*, Jack attempts to murder a man whose speech replicates a television's, and who embodies white noise in general. Neither Jack nor the television assassin from 1952 is penalized. Quoted in Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000), 1.

²⁰ Italics added.

greater possibility of death. Immediately, he gambles his mortality and demonstrates his human tendency to err by putting the gun in the still living and bleeding Mink's hand, showing that he is less passively paranoid about death and still human enough to make mistakes and forget his TV script.

In this chapter, I unraveled the electrical voices in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. I showed that Jack Gladney narrated the sounds of electrical appliances and media technologies' electronically transmitted voices. By introducing the voices and their non-contextual phrases as speech acts of the plugged in object, he personified the electronics. These voices, or electrical objects turned vocal characters, constantly added noise and sensory details to the environment of the human characters. By drawing the electrical voices to the foreground of the text, the omnipresence of electrical technologies in the postmodern American home were heard. Then, when he attempted to murder Willie Mink, the omnipresence resulted in the human simulation of an electrical voice: Jack narrated Mink speaking as a television. This further brings electricity to the foreground by leveling the voices of humans and televisions. When the electrical object is turned off or silenced the characters speak like it, so in *White Noise* the voice of the television always is, whether in human or technological form, still on.

Science and technology theorist Bruno Latour, asks, "Are [technologies] not our brethren?"²¹ He believes that technologies are "already anthropomorphic through and through," even before authors and narrators apply personifying qualities to them. To clarify, Latour describes a technology that automatically closes the door behind people as "already"

²¹ Bruno Latour, "Where Are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts," In *Shaping Technology, Building Society Studies, and Sociotechnical Change* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1992), 236. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by author and page number.

anthropomorphic before anyone defines it as such, for three reasons: “first, it has been made by humans, second, it substitutes for the actions of people and is a delegate that permanently occupies the position of a human, and third, it shapes human action” (Latour 235). The first and third reasons apply to electrical mediums such as the television, but televisions do not inherently substitute human actions. Unlike the machine that replaces the human labor of closing a door, the television creates the need and desire for television images and action where there was no defined space or human labor before. Latour points out that “*anthropos* and *morphos* together mean either that which *has* human shape or that which *gives shape* to humans” (Latour 235). In this chapter, I examined the anthropomorphizing of the television and looked at how this gave shape to the human characters’ narration and speech—the characters’ modes of storytelling and communicating—by saturating their environments, colonizing their minds, and offering replicable models for speech; the human characters were techno-morphized. In the next chapter I will continue to explore how an electrical-object intensive environment shapes characters and their ways of narrating stories. I will focus on *Other Electricities*, by Ander Monson, which treats audio electricities more like “brethren” than DeLillo’s nonsense-speakers. Electricity is familial and special to Monson’s narrator because it is a means of connecting him with neighbors and family members, living and dead.

CHAPTER TWO

DISTANCES, CONNECTIONS, AND MEDIATED VOICES IN *OTHER ELECTRICITIES*

Comparing two omnipresent electrical media technologies, the television and the radio, both of which speak throughout *White Noise*, Susan Douglas, cultural critic and author of *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination*, says, “When sound is our only source of information, our imaginations milk it for all it’s worth, creating detailed tableaux of images.”¹ Radios and TVs offer the listener who is physically alone a paradoxical feeling—that of being tied to a community of other people listening to the same thing at the same time while remaining spatially isolated. How minds handle and respond to the two distinguishes the electrical mediums from each other. Douglas discusses a psychology study that shows that after watching television, children better remembered action; whereas, after listening to the radio children better remembered dialogue. People use their imaginations differently with television than with the radio. While watching TV prompts viewers to imagine themselves into the action (think of Jack Gladney in his TV-environment, imagining a step-by-step action plan to murder Willie Mink), listening to the radio offers individuals creative control over visual imaging; it is “highly pleasurable to use our brains to create images” (Douglas 26). When voices, messages, and sounds cross physical distances to reach the listener’s ears, the listener fills the absences and mentally watches scenes unfold.

The first chapter of this thesis examined the roles of television babble, electrical voices, and the hum of noise and technological stimulation in the environment of Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*. Jack Gladney and Willie Mink, two characters who are saturated in the vocalizations of

¹ Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (New York: Times Books, 1999), 28. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by author and page number.

televisions, attempt a made-for-TV-style murder scene in which they challenge and figuratively become television. This chapter will focus on Ander Monson's *Other Electricities*, which visually and rhetorically depicts electricity and radios in its pages; the title alone signals to readers that electricity is multiple and varied, a source of metaphors and mystical "otherness." Through a set of "stories," Monson's book follows several characters in an Upper Peninsula community as they cope with loss, memory, radio messages, and winter weather.²

Monson is an American novelist, poet, and the editor of the online magazine *The Diagram*, and he was born in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where he locates his characters. All of his work is imaginative and experimental. In Monson's words, "Most stuff I do comes out of this basic desire to play, to hack, to open things up, whether it's language or new technologies, or the ways in which they intersect."³ Following his lead, I will play with and open up his book, looking at the intersection of narration, speech, and technology in *Other Electricities*. Monson refers to his writing as "topology," or the science of place; the setting of all of his writing is critical to the characters' development and experiences. He explains, "This is what topology has to offer us: it is abstract, about electricity or water or anything that flows equally throughout a

² I place "stories" in quotation marks because *Other Electricities* is labeled and categorized as a book of "Stories." Indeed, many of the stories were published in other sources separate from the rest of the stories/text. I will continue to use the word "stories" (hereafter without quotation marks) when writing about them; however, I have trouble viewing them as entirely separate stories and do not want them to be confused for a number of completely independent pieces that I am linking. Monson has written a series of vignettes that are best presented and read as a totality: one complete novel told by and about different members of an Upper Peninsula community.

³ "Up Front: Ander Monson," In *New York Times: Sunday Book Review*, 3 September 2010, Accessed 20 February 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/05/books/review/Upfront-t.html>

form, that moves through channels.”⁴ In this explanation, he makes electricity a metaphor for writing as language flowing through the forms of poetry and prose.

Monson has not developed a large public readership, and so there is little, if any, literary criticism about *Other Electricities*, but book reviews and awards acknowledge his unique and engaging writing. *Other Electricities* was a finalist for the New York Public Library’s Young Lions Award in 2006, and Monson received the John C. Zacharias First Book Award from the journal *Ploughshares* in 2007. Michael Martone, a professor of creative writing, calls the book a “galvanized book (that) represents a paradigm shift. The frequencies of the Novel have been scrambled and redefined by this elegant experiment. *Other Electricities* is a new physics of prose, a lyric string theory of charged and sparkling sentences.”⁵ Referring to the “frequencies” of a novel mixes imagery of electrical currents that travel at different frequencies with varying conventions of writing. Martone calls Monson’s prose “a lyric string theory,” because string theory attempts to reconcile disparate scientific laws and connect everything in the universe, and Monson attempts to connect a wide array of styles, from lyrical lines of poetry to fragments of character descriptions on a grid (Figure iv), memories of snowy nights written in prose to graphics of radio diagrams (Figures vi-viii), and sentence fragments in an index to second person instructional narration. In *The Sewanee Review*, Joshua Harmon calls this book “a collage of stories, lists, indices, instructions, radio schematics, flowcharts, abecedarians, and ‘dream obits,’” which “ultimately concern (themselves with) the difficulties of communication.”⁶ I will discuss the central character, the narrator, who connects characters in a collage-novel by

⁴ Ander Monson, “Cranbrook Schools: Adventures in Bourgeois Topologies,” In *Neck Deep and Other Predicaments* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2007), 34. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by author, year, and page number.

⁵ As quoted on the back cover of Ander Monson, *Other Electricities* (Louisville, KY: Sarabande Books, 2005).

⁶ Joshua Harmon, “Solving for X,” In *The Sewanee Review* 113, no. 2 (2005) 16-17.

imaginatively exploring communication equipment and what he hears through it by tapping phone lines and searching for the radio call signals of other characters.

One reviewer of *Vanishing Point*, Monson's non-fiction exploration of the memoir, calls his writing "Text as Rabbit Hole."⁷ The idea of a "Rabbit Hole" evokes Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, in which the protagonist falls through a rabbit hole to commence an adventure in a fantastical unknown world. The definition applies to *Other Electricities*, as well, serving as a description for Monson's experimental fiction that incorporates lists, diagrams, and images in a web of separate stories that a reader falls into and explores. While *Other Electricities* is playful in form, it is less so in subject matter. The novel is riddled with tragic holes: most significantly the physical holes in the ice that memorialize teens falling through the ice to their deaths and holes in the ground representing the now nearly abandoned boom and bust mining history of the Upper Peninsula.

Readers struggle to name Monson's work, calling it a collage, a text as a rabbit hole, a novel at scrambled and redefined frequencies, and a lyric string theory. I will call this collection of experiences and lyric messages in *Other Electricities* a constellation compiled by eavesdropping. In this chapter, I show that voices transmitted by radio and telephone in *Other Electricities* illuminate distances and maintain connections by placing a medium between speakers and listeners. Sometimes the medium fuses with the speaker to form a cyborg, a person extended into the currents, wires, and objects of electrical technologies. First, I describe how the book's prefatory material defines and abstracts electrical infrastructure, and I argue that the book relies upon electricity to tell stories. By using electrical imaging, symbols, and the narrator's

⁷ Jennifer B. McDonald, "Ander Monson's 'Vanishing Point': The Future of the Book," In *New York Times: Arts Beat*, 28 April 2010, Accessed 20 February 2011, <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/04/28/ander-monsons-vanishing-point-the-future-of-the-book/?scp=1&sq=monson&st=cse>

history of eavesdropping over telephones, electricity allows for a single member of a small Upper Peninsula community to be an omniscient narrator and piece together, with telephone lines and the lines on a diagram in the book, many stories in the different voices and tones of a wide and inconsistent cast of characters. Electricity allows the narrator to bear witness to the tragedies, such as several teen deaths, that occur in his community. Second, I consider that by extending their voices and senses through radio and telephone systems the characters act as cyborgs, part human and part electricity. Third, I show that the graphics of radio schematics can be read as constellations. Lines of constellations link stars, turning random sights into sensible, geometric images, while power lines and phone lines link homes and people in an Upper Peninsula community. I will claim that these diagrams of radio schematics elicit a similar interpretive response in the reader as in the eavesdropper: story-making. An eavesdropper listening in on phone conversations and radio voices has the words as well as the volume, tone, and cadence of a voice to create stories, but for the reader of *Other Electricities*, only bizarre images of electrical circuitry accompany the words.

Telephones, Telephony, and Cyborgs: Extending the Voice Into Electrical Infrastructure

Ander Monson's *Other Electricities* begins with prefatory pages that include a table of contents, a grid showing the characters' relationships, and a glossary of characters and terms. This presentation of information makes peoples' lives and deaths blunt and mechanical. The section called "A Helpful Guide to the Characters," subtitled, "And their relationship to danger, and an explanation of some symbols commonly found herein," functions as a glossary. The Helpful Guide diminishes symbols, such as electricity, to a few words, and both peels away complexities and invites interpretations with the same sparseness. "The importance of connection; what keeps us moving, moody" describes "Electricity" in the Helpful Guide

(Monson xviii). In the first part of the definition, electricity does not only power appliances and link humans to technologies; it also makes the connections between people important. Electricity supplies characters' relationships with a means of maintaining connections and being heard. It prevents stasis in space and time; according to Marshall McLuhan, "electric circuitry has overthrown the regime of 'time' and 'space' and pours upon us instantly" (McLuhan 16). The latter, acutely human-centric part of the definition in Monson's Helpful Guide keeps "us" moving and moody, or active and feeling, because in this novel the emotional status of a person is powered by electricity. In this way, and as extensions of human minds and speech, electricity figuratively renders the characters as humans with electrical extensions, such as telephones, infrastructure, circuitry, and radios. Because "All media work us over completely," or pervade human environments and speech acts as part of the unthought known, McLuhan says, "All media are extensions of some human faculty – psychic or physical" (McLuhan 26). Later in this section, I will look at cyborg theory to understand characters with electrical extensions for emotionally feeling, listening, and speaking.

Electricity also provides the narrator with opportunities for metaphor making because it is both recognizable and mysterious. An electrical metaphor draws electricity, something so commonplace that it has faded into the background, to the foreground. McLuhan famously said, "the medium is the message"; the ground is the formal cause of the figure, and by making electrical metaphors, the speaker calls attention to that ground, the medium.⁸ Throughout the novel, electricity becomes a metaphor for snow and weather, as well as for human bodies and characters who are dead: "snow comes through the trees in radio waves"; test patterns on

⁸ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1964), 7. In text McLuhan citations continue to be from his later text, *The Medium is the Massage*.

television screens are re-imagined as snow; the protagonist's dead mother "connects your calls that stretch overseas to radio stations," and his living father "is not himself but words in the night air encoded in shortwave radio hand-me-downs" (Monson 22, 87, and 40). In chemistry class, the teacher makes her students act collectively as a medium for electricity to transfer through; by asking them "to experience electricity firsthand by holding hands and connecting the circuit from one electric hand dryer to the other," she turns their bodies into an electrical circuit (Monson 31). The protagonist describes his relationship with grief by saying, "it fits in me like a fuse in a socket," rendering the emotion as something physical, and himself as a hole to be filled (Monson 145). To be a conduit or a socket for electricity means that power, energy, or, in metaphors catalogued above, *feeling* must originate outside of the self; it means relying on non-self and non-human sources.

The "Helpful Guide" provides readers with symbols of infrastructure to visualize for the vocal maintenance of human relationships that span physical and emotional distances. Telephony is the system of infrastructure involving telephone poles, wires, and electrical charges that connects telephones to each other and provides vocal communication across distances. The "Helpful Guide" explains telephony as "all that wire & crime & electric charge must mean something: one-way of getting out & of connection" (Monson xix). Telephony offers a "way of getting out," or an opportunity to escape a place because of the concurrent possibility "of connection," or of maintaining that vocal communication from afar. In addition to allowing people to get out, it provides a place for a voice and words about an experience to go. To clarify the crime portion of telephony's description, it references the main character's tendencies to tap

neighbors' telephone lines and illegally listen to their conversations.⁹ Telephone literally means “hearing far,” or hearing across distances. Someone can physically leave, but still communicate because electricity and telephony can move voices across distances to a point of connection.

These glossary entries about telephony and electricity indicate people are connected by the same infrastructure that links the communication technologies and noisy appliances from *White Noise*.

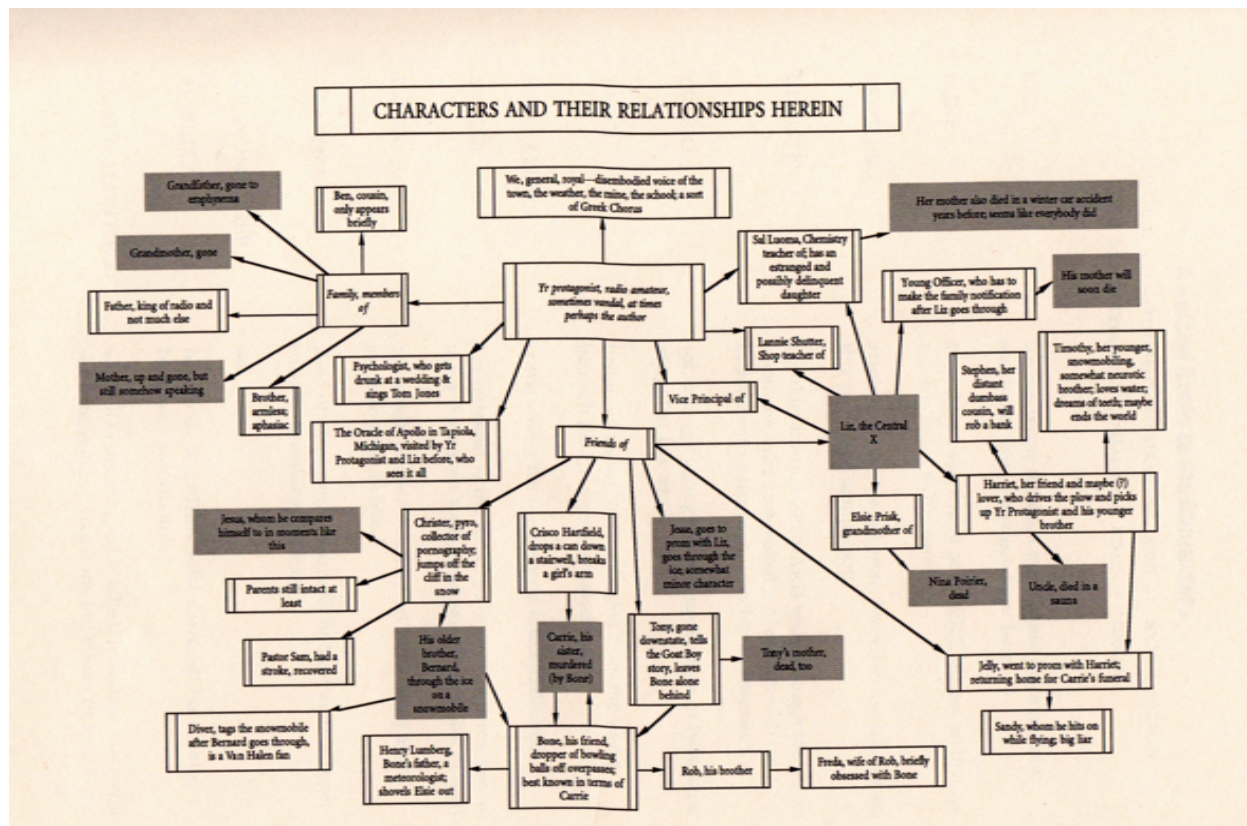


Figure iv: “Characters and Their Relationships Herein,” from *Other Electricities* (2005)

Other Electricities uses a grid, “Characters and Their Relationships Herein” (Figure iv), to metaphorically picture human systems for electrical systems by drawing lines between

⁹ The “crime” part of the plot and the definition of telephony also references Monson’s personal history. As a high school student, he was asked to leave the boarding school he attended because he was developing a criminal record. In “Cranbrook Schools: Adventures in Bourgeois Topologies,” he describes his rebellion: “For me, it was wires and phones and computer crime, synth-pop with queer-eye overtones. For me it was breaking into systems, it was listening in to conversations: it was about connection to another darker electronic world” (Monson 2007 34).

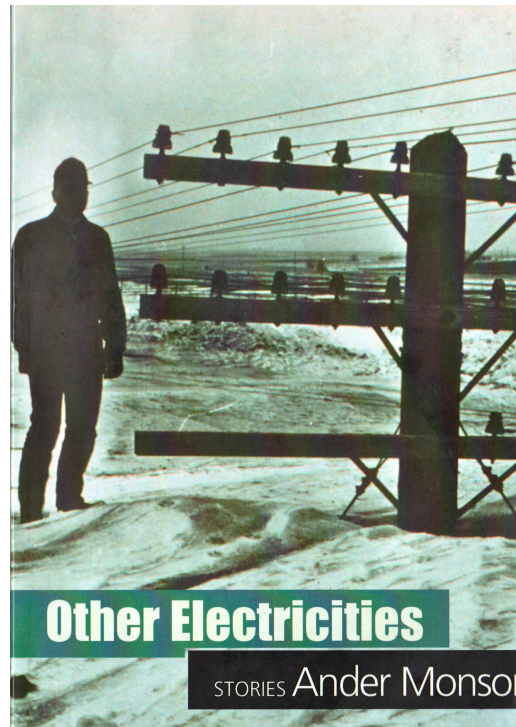
characters. The linking lines of the grid evoke power lines, which readers are primed to think of in a book with “Electricities” in the title and power lines featured prominently on the cover image (Figure v).¹⁰ The cover depicts both a man and a telephone pole as silhouettes of nearly the same height because of the snow, which diminishes the difference between the man and electrical technology; by appearing as a network of power lines, the grid performs comparable work. The grid names and describes characters in rectangular text boxes, and those that are dead or “gone” appear in grey boxes. Each character box includes an anecdotal description referencing something that will occur or will be remembered in the text to follow. The network centers on “Yr protagonist, radio amateur, sometimes vandal, at times perhaps the author” (Monson unpaginated). The “perhaps author” places everyone in a network around himself, speaking in the third person. This character gives his reader a possessive claim to him as protagonist with the use of “Yr” for “your.” When writing “Yr Protagonist,” he always abbreviates “your,” as if to mock the readers’ control and indicate that it’s not very serious.¹¹ The book includes stories about a number of different characters that are both closely and tenuously connected to Yr Protagonist, but even when he is not the central character or part of a scene’s plot, his presence is felt. Yr protagonist holds several roles: protagonist, narrator, speaker, and “perhaps author.” He hesitates to call himself the author, using “perhaps,” and not even trying to claim all of the stories, saying only “at times.” Although sometimes a different character is the speaker or more

¹⁰ A picture of a man standing on snow at an almost even height with power lines fills the front cover of *Other Electricities*. The photograph, *Jamestown, North Dakota, March 9, 1966*, was taken by Bill Koch an employee of the North Dakota State Highway Department during a blizzard that hit the Northern Plains in 1966. As pictured in “Blizzard, North Dakota, March 1966 (Image),” *National Snow and Ice Data Center: Snow Gallery*, Accessed 16 February 2011, http://nsidc.org/snow/gallery/blizzard_1966b.html

¹¹ I will continue to refer to this character as “Yr Protagonist,” hereafter without the quotation marks, as no other name is given to him and this is how he presents himself.

central to the story, Yr Protagonist is always the narrator and author, relaying the stories to his readers based on the information he gathers by listening to phones and radios.

Figure v: Front cover of *Other Electricities* (2005)



Early in the book Yr Protagonist confesses that with his brother, he would “listen in on others’ conversations” (Monson 13). He finds this immensely pleasurable: “There’s something nearly sexual about this, hearing what other people are saying to their lovers, children, cousins, psychics, pastors, debtors” (Monson 14). The communications infrastructure of a telephone network evokes images of solid physicality, able to protect a voice in the same material structures that consistently carry energy. Like something sexual, the content of a phone call is private, as though forms of telephones and wires could contain secrets even though their real role is not to contain but to carry and transport. To voice something to a telephone is to relinquish control over the words; the mediums carrying the voice – the phone, wires, and electrical currents—take over responsibility of the language.

Reading the stories and secrets of many characters in a single community feels like eavesdropping. Reading is a form of spying akin to the experience of listening in on the phone with Yr Protagonist when he picks up other people's communications. "Stop Your Crying," a later story in the book written in the second person, directly commands the reader to recreate this narrative form with a similar method of research. The directive verbs command "you" to go North, find a name similar to your own, and then,

Listen in on this conversation. Clip your handset to the junction box and become part of a family. Eavesdropping always works like this, to make you part of something... Take on everything you hear. Just don't speak or they'll know you're there. Let the tone guide you down the rabbit hole et cetera. (Monson 133)

Both reading and listening demand that the reader and the eavesdropper become part of the read or heard story by imagining correlating images. Monson's reader encounters a textual rabbit hole. By listening, an eavesdropper can fall down a technological rabbit hole into someone else's stories and adventures. This passage suggests that more than just entering the story, a listener should "become part of the family" without the family's knowledge and with the aid of electrical equipment ("clip your handset to the junction"). By imagining oneself into "everything [one] hears," the eavesdropper can feel familial connections. In *Other Electricities*, not only does Yr Protagonist listen to communications, but he also makes them stories, filling the book with the vocalizations of other characters. His method of participation interacts primarily with language and only indirectly with the subjects of his eavesdropping. He removes the telephone as a medium between himself and the stories until "Stop Your Crying." This story—his guide for how to do narrative research—gives away his secrets.

As opposed to viewers who better process what they see than what they hear, Susan Douglas claims that listeners with no visual images on which to focus better hear and digest dialogue, and then mentally picture scenes—and I agree. Contrast how Yr Protagonist eavesdrops on other telephone users to create stories with the way Jack Gladney from *White Noise* observes telephone users. Walking at night, late in the novel, Jack effortlessly gathers visual and auditory information. He describes women who are talking on the telephone in their lighted homes as “all sound, all souls” (DeLillo 273). The women’s voices serve as background noise while Jack’s mind remains on other things. Reduced to the level of sound, the women flicker in and out of his consciousness the same way that the voice of the television, the radio interjections, the throbbing refrigerator, and the noisy clothes dryer do when he stays in his own house. The qualification, “all sound, all souls,” dehumanizes characters and enters people into the constantly buzzing world of white noise. Jack fails to even attempt to imagine the lives and stories of the speaking women when he sees them, instead describing them similar to a collective set of machines. In this scene Jack is distinct from the electrical technologies, whereas by consciously connecting to mediums and treating them like extensions of himself, Yr Protagonist humanizes each character by actively seeking out and listening to their stories.

Electrical communications technologies are vibrant, cyborgian extensions of the body. A cyborg is the joining of a living person with nonliving, material technology. When Yr Protagonist instructs his reader to “clip your handset to the junction box,” he asks that the reader physically connect him or herself to a machine and become a temporary cyborg. Another moment of the text describes, “voices coded as electrical pulses” as “less encumbered, breathing easier, more honestly” (Monson 64). The materiality of the infrastructure adopts the intimacy of a voice once a voice spoken into a machine breathes life into the technology. The word “pulse”

grants electrical currents a living heartbeat; it transfers some humanness from the speaker to the electrical current while also doing the reverse, electrifying the voice. Monson's description of electricity and voice combining illustrates both McLuhan's idea of media as extensions of humans, "electrical circuitry [is] an extension of the central nervous system," the brain, and Donna Haraway's cyborg theory (McLuhan 40). Electrical circuitry that saturates characters' surroundings enters their brains, as I showed with *White Noise* and brain fade, and mediates their speech acts.¹² Donna Haraway argues that "By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism: in short we are cyborgs."¹³ One of her purposes in advocating for cyborgs is that she believes women as cyborgs can "remove the growing scandal of gender" and barriers that limit women (Haraway 178). While this feminist reading of cyborgs is hardly relevant to my arguments about *White Noise* and *Other Electricities*, her descriptions of the hybrid machine-human, or cyborg, can be understood and applied to literature in multiple ways. Her contention, "it is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine," applies to speech acts through electrical mediums in environments that are saturated by electrical sounds and voices: does electricity shape character, or does the reverse occur, and to what degree is the character's voice shaped by heard electricities and the opportunity to transmit the message through a medium (Haraway 177)? When she writes, "our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert," she refers to a passive, story-collecting narrator, such as Jack Gladney

¹² D.S. Halacy, Jr. explains that humans and electronics are compatible because even prior to cyborgian extensions into objects electricity is at work in the body: "the operation of the brain, and the nerves that join it to the rest of the body, is electromechanical in nature. The brain's structure bears many resemblances to electrical and electronic circuits." D.S. Halacy, Jr., *Cyborg – Evolution of the Superman* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), 55.

¹³ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 150.

(Haraway 152). Contradicting her idea of the passive human, Haraway says, “we can be responsible for machines...[and] responsible for boundaries,” and Yr Protagonist’s father demonstrates that responsibility when he moves to the attic of his home to be closer to, and fill his life with, radios (Haraway 180). In response to his father’s move, Yr Protagonist comments, “It was good to see [his father] controlling something” (Monson 7). By controlling, actively listening through or speaking into “communications technologies [that] depend on electronics,” characters use electricity to feel empowered by expressing their experiences and human agency (Haraway 165).

I began this thesis by quoting Nam June Paik, “Skin has become inadequate in interfacing with reality. Technology has become the body's new membrane of existence,” and I showed that electrical technologies do not just saturate our environment and encase the body, but are part of how people listen and speak in *White Noise* and *Other Electricities*. Electrical technologies act as brains and vocal cords when characters speak like the television, and as ears that gather stories from greater distances when characters interact with tapped phone lines and radios. The cyborgs of these two novels figuratively experience electricity as skin, brains, vocal chords, and ears.

A Constellation of Voices: Reading the Ambiguity of the Italicized Voice

Yr Protagonist may not have had visual images to observe along with his eavesdropping, but *Other Electricities* does provide readers with graphics. This visually foregrounds electricity for readers; Monson refuses to let electricity continue to be an unthought known for his readers. Images of radio schematics or circuitry appear in and between some of the stories. A brief, italicized, lyrical bit of text accompanies the graphics, and I will address this voice later in this chapter. The graphics (Figures vi-viii) look like reconfigurations of constellations with more

direct, geometric lines. Lines connect the small circles, or holes, in grid-like, patterned ways.

One character, Timothy, contemplates constellations:

If you looked at the diagrams of constellations in old fat books and thin, bleached magazines, it was clear that they did not make much intrinsic sense. People at some point had just projected their own images onto the stars. The pictures pushed onto stars were sharp and alien, and didn't smell natural to Timothy at all. He thought that maybe it was comforting to look at the dark wideaway blackness and see something familiar: patterns of stars. (Monson 136)

Instead of forming mythical creatures as many ancient constellations do, the constellations in the novel connote electrical grids, circuitry, or the schematics of a radio. Because electrical gadgets and systems are more omnipresent than ancient myths in contemporary lives, they are the familiar patterns that we turn into images and stories (even if we do not all know how to manipulate circuitry, it is still recognizable and a part of our environment). Walter Benjamin used the constellation as a metaphor: “ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars.”¹⁴

Constellations are the stories and lines that connect distant stars and create legible figures, so, according to Benjamin, ideas configure objects and works of art into sensible arrangements and coherent stories. In both ideas and constellations, meaning derives from the connections. Recall that electricity is “the importance of connection.” Using the constellation as a metaphor draws attention to the value of the connecting lines and the electrical mediums of connection.

Throughout the entire novel, Yr Protagonist connects himself to other characters by listening in on their lives; he is trying to connect the tragedies that surround him, his own family life, and the

¹⁴ As quoted in Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 2002), 70.

uniqueness of the snowy place he lives in to make meaning out of his life as he loses people – his mother to cancer and Liz, the girl he loves, to icy waters.

An italicized sentence fragment accompanies each of the constellation-like graphics and the identity of the speaker of these lyrical fragments remains unclear throughout the novel. The voice appears next to the graphic of electrical circuitry or a radio schematic to signify that the voice is transmitted through that technology. Each fragment begins with “Dear” as though it is a letter being sent from an unknown source, and almost every time the words that follow attempt to define or describe “distance.” The graphics invite the reader to try to make sense of their accompanying italics; as a reader, by creating explanations for the italicized voice, I act like the protagonist that eavesdrops and relays other characters’ stories or someone who makes myths about constellations. Both the first and the last italicized lines in *Other Electricities* – “*Dear, distance must begin somewhere*” and “*Dear, everything has a source / if you can find it, some / point of emanation*” – raise the subject of beginnings and origins, leading me to ask, where does this voice come from (Monson 12 and 153)? I read the italicized voice as belonging to three different speakers: the father of Yr Protagonist, the dead mother of Yr Protagonist, and Yr Protagonist himself, saying what he imagines or wishes his mother would say to him if he could tune his radio in to the dead.

The first speaker of the italics, the father, allows his obsession with radio to consume him, to the point that his son says, “It is a life, the radio. Increasingly, our father’s life” (Monson 7). His relationship with his radio redefines his paternal role because he “moved up in the attic with all the radios and the best connection to the main antenna”; he physically leaves his sons behind (downstairs) (Monson 7). He abandoned them for an instrument of communication, so they “had to have the right equipment” to hear him, including, “a couple hundred feet of

insulated wire, shortwave radios, the code books” (Monson 7). He is most alive and connected to his sons when they listen to him speak through the radio, sending signals into the night, and “(shaping) the air with his voice”; however, the signals he sends are not conveyed in the stories, which leads me to believe that the italicized words could be his messages (Monson 7).

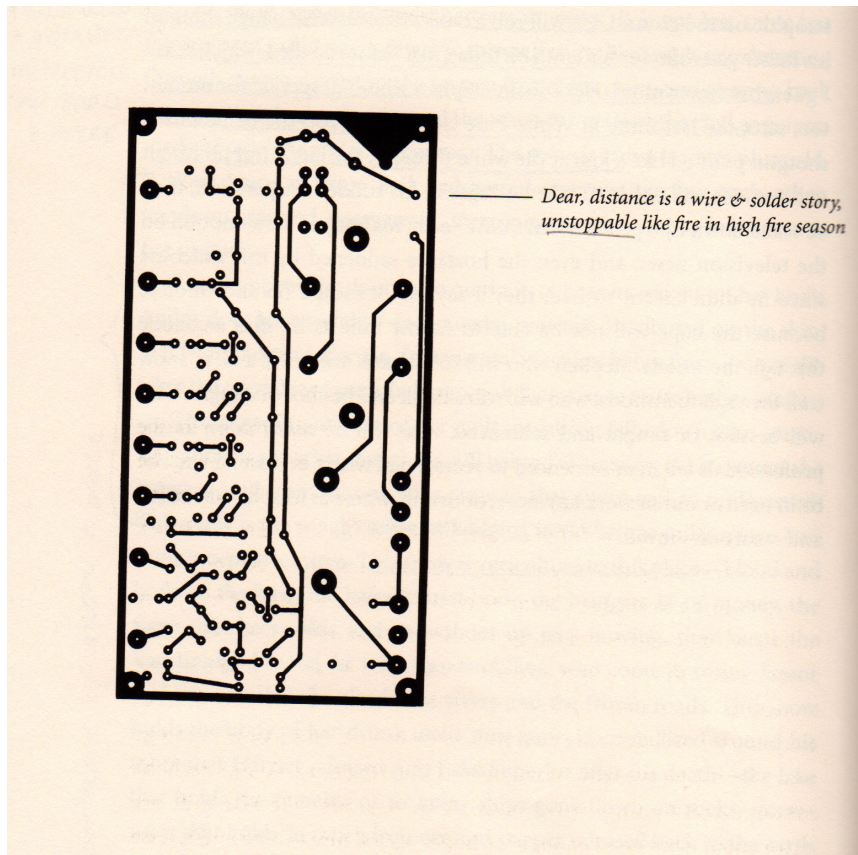


Figure vi: “*Dear, distance is a wire & solder story, / unstoppable like fire in high fire season,*” from *Other Electricities* (2005)

One graphic (Figure vi) recalls the necessity of equipment for listening to the father by referencing “wire & solder”: “*Dear, distance is a wire & solder story, / unstoppable like fire in high fire season*” (Monson 24). Here, distance is a story that travels through wires; unstoppable fires metaphorically represent the unstoppable electrical currents that travel through wires, and words that, once spoken, are unstoppable because they cannot be revoked. Physically, the

father's distance from Yr Protagonist is a mere floor in the same home, but their lack of two-way communication or physical interaction makes the distance feel much greater. The radio, the father's "life," confines him to the attic where he can relish, as a human-radio cyborg, the "best connections." Later in the novel, the line, "*Dear, distance is a long song an equation an incarceration,*" draws attention to his obsession as something that imprisons him in the attic and the airwaves.

The second way of reading the italicized speaker adds an element of magical realism to *Other Electricities*: if the italicized speaker is Yr Protagonist's mother, then a dead woman haunts airwaves. Historically, at the advent of different technologies, such as the radio, it often became a popular belief that the new technology could access a "ghostly consciousness."¹⁵ As Jeffrey Sconce details in *Haunted Media*, a social history of electronic presences in technologies from the telegraph through cyberspace, because the technology itself was so novel, some people believed that the radio could act as a medium for people who could not be located or were not living. By voicing a dead character across radio waves, *Other Electricities* recalls "the initial fascination with radio as a form of electronically disembodied consciousness, calling to earth across the voice of space or through the void of eternity" (Sconce 93). In *White Noise*, Jack also presents radio waves as a means of communication for the dead. He asserts that electrical scanners and terminals in the supermarket are the medium of the dead: "the language of waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living" (DeLillo 326). Metaphorically, Yr Protagonist places his mother in radio waves in *Other Electricities*; "she is line noise, clipping in to junction boxes. She is interference, underlying every conversation" (Monson 40). The grid that shows

¹⁵ Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000), 93. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by author and page number.

characters and their relationships at the beginning of the novel locates the mother in a grey box, indicating that she is dead, and describes her as “up and gone, but still somehow speaking” (Monson unpaginated). The only way that she could “still somehow speak” in these pages is through the electrical circuitry.

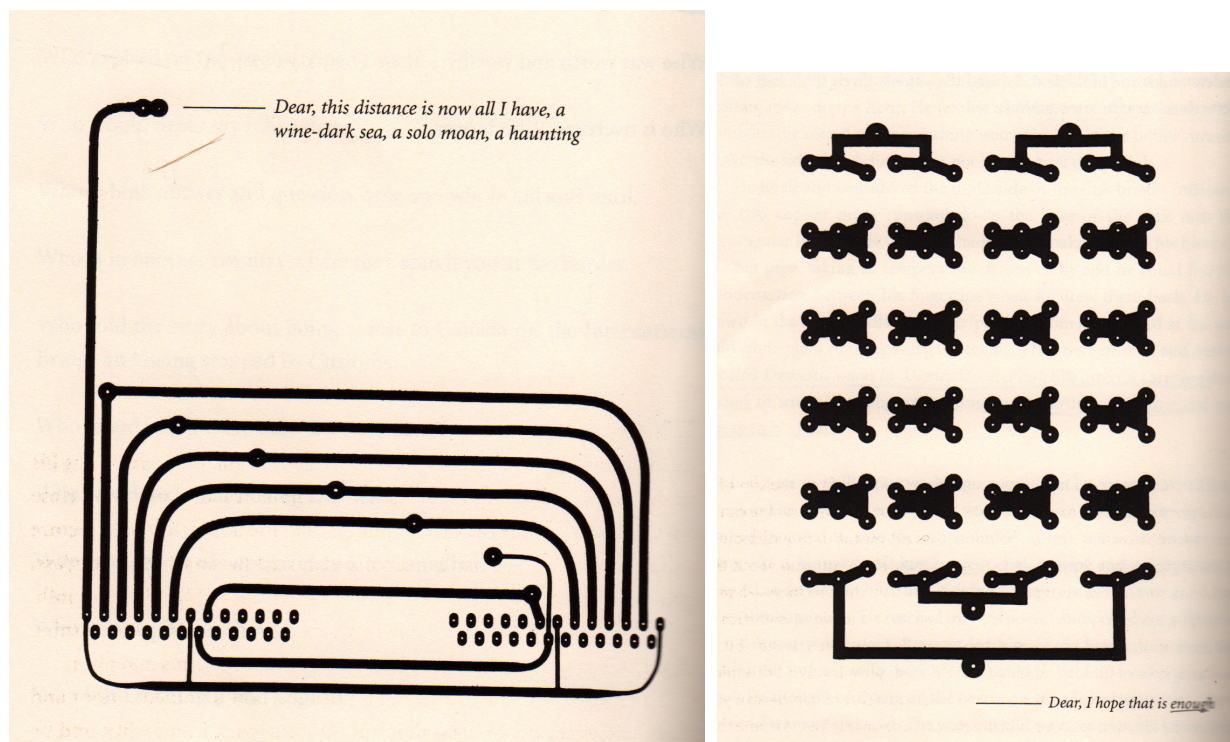


Figure vii (left): “*Dear, this distance is now all I have, a / wine-dark sea, a solo moan, a haunting,*” from *Other Electricities* (2005)

Figure viii (right): “*Dear, I hope that is enough,*” from *Other Electricities* (2005)

Consider two consecutive diagrams. The first (Figure vii) pronounces, “*Dear, this distance is now all I have, a / wine-dark sea, a solo moan, a haunting,*” and the second (Figure viii) is a follow-up in which “that” refers to the former “distance” (Monson 124). The voice accompanying this graphic urges, “*Dear, I hope that is enough*” (Monson 128). The mother can only be “a haunting,” and she can only offer her son “a solo moan,” the singly voiced speech of longing to still be alive and with her family. Without life or body, all she has as a mother is

distance from her son, and in this message she represents the distance as a “wine-dark sea.” Homer first used the image of the “wine-dark sea” as one of soulful longing and reflection when Achilles looked out to it after Patroclus’ death; the image is steeped in years of representing the expanse between the dead and the living. By calling upon Homer, Monson’s ghostly voice of the mother indicates that the message and feeling derived from loss is ancient, while the medium for communicating that sentiment, electricity, is modern. The first of these two messages focuses on the speaker, the mother, while in the second she supplicates herself to her son, praying that her haunting from afar will be enough to mother him. When the mother is the italicized voice, the “Dear,” not only indicates the start of a communication being sent, but is also a tender pet name, a way for a mother to address her son lovingly.

But perhaps these are simply messages Yr Protagonist imagines because he longs for a connection to remain with his mother across the barrier of mortality. The third way of reading these graphics is to claim that the novel’s narrator creates a fiction of what he would like to hear his parents say, or actually believes that he hears them through the airwaves. Yr Protagonist might want “*a glass of milk / delivered through the ether,*” a yearning for a maternal caretaking gesture. Another graphic correlates with the caption, “*Dear, distance is a constellation, / dead light from distant stars*”; he imagines piecing together messages from the dead to put together a constellation, or set of stories (Monson 100 and 72). Sconce writes, “Everyone has recourse to some form of fantasy to help them cope with life (and death)” (Sconce 208). Sconce excuses Yr Protagonist for hearing a dead person or imagining his mother into speech acts. His imagined messages are not harmful, and they certainly help him cope with loss.

In the final story in *Other Electricities*, which Yr Protagonist narrates a year after the events of the rest of the novel, he contemplates a conversation with his therapist:

He says I am retreating into literature.

I say then what is literature for.

He becomes annoyed. He is not so good at what he does.

What I don't tell him is that I still think she's there – not just my mother, whom I think I sometimes hear, but Liz... (Monson 148)

In literature, Yr Protagonist can have a constellation of voices. Haraway claims, “writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs”; humans and electrical objects combine to “struggle for language” (Haraway 176). He can write and retell stories of the voices he misses, memorializing them, but only with electrical technologies can he fall down these narrative rabbit holes or begin to project stories into constellations of images. By listening to private phone conversations and radio signals, Yr Protagonist crossed distances, heard many different speakers – not just his father and mother, but also his neighbors, the central characters in many of the stories in the novel – and listened to words about their lives and personal tragedies. Electrical technologies allowed him to access and connect with these people, but only through literature can he explore the possibility of them returning to him. In literature he can retrieve the dead by salvaging and recreating memories and speech acts.

CONCLUSION

In 1993, David Foster Wallace wrote that his generation of writers was unique from previous generations of writers because “[they] literally [could not] imagine life without [television...they had] *no memory of a world without such electrical definition*” (Wallace 167, italics added). His generation is no longer alone in that outlook and collective memory of electricity, but they remain unique in their experience of the omnipresence of electrically mediated sounds, images, and stories before the advent of the ubiquity of the Internet. Now, in 2011, many more sources offer electrical outlets for speech, as well as produce white noise, given the constant onslaught of YouTube videos, Facebook messages, Twitter messages, and cell phone text messages, compounding what is available at the click of a button on the television or at our fingertips on a computer. Radios and televisions are no longer revolutionary technologies. A greater number of electrical and communications technologies now mediate our experiences. This thesis provided a window into literature set during a moment of history when an electrified home was the norm and televisions were omnipresent, but prior to our contemporary time in which the Internet is the predominant telecommunications system, and personal, portable computers are prevalent.

Regardless of the cultural moment in which *White Noise* and *Other Electricities* are read, these novels force readers to think twice about the omnipresence of auditory clutter and how they communicate through technology. Why do people speak through objects? What are the environmental ramifications of a constantly electrified home or voice?¹ How do electrical

¹ This is a question for further research and another thesis. Environmental consciousness is a related and relevant topic because the production of the medium enables electrical communications, but also potentially damages the environment. During the airborne toxic event in *White Noise* a radio “talk show host said: ‘You are on the air’” (DeLillo 151). This

technologies and people mirror each other, and who is mimicking whom? Or, to rephrase that question, what is mimicking what? What if the mediums were suddenly no longer available to people? The novels *White Noise* and *Other Electricities* pull electricity from the background to the foreground of characters' narration and readers' thoughts by presenting technologies that are overheard as disruptive appliances or mediators of a family member's loss. Monson and DeLillo provide readers with observant narrators in order to make readers ask questions like these about their often unacknowledged technological appendages.

I have presented electricity as a mediator of experiences and an unthought known in American culture. Postmodern writers Monson and DeLillo explore this unthought known, highlighting how it functions as a platform for understanding our minds, ways of narrating stories, and means of communicating, but also a presence that shapes humans who interact with electricity. In this way, it serves as an "interface with reality," and as Nam June Paik suggested, a skin that allows us to sense the world around us while containing us with the challenges of turning off electric machines and interruptions.

In my first chapter, I proved that encounters, even the passive encounter of sharing a domestic space, between a subject and an object changes both parties. In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney personified his television by giving it a voice in his narration, and it depersonified him

interruption can be read two ways. First, the characters are being broadcast on the airwaves; they are being electrically mediated. Second, the characters are producing impacts on the air they breathe; the air of the natural environment is undergoing harm. Human-caused environmental disasters that occurred shortly before and after the novel's publication could be on readers' minds. In "Lust Removed From Nature" Michael Valdez Moses places the environmental incident that the characters most directly interact with in a list of real environmental disasters: "Three Mile Island. Chernobyl. The Airborne Toxic Event" (Moses 70). Both Chernobyl and Three Mile Island refer to nuclear power plants that generated electricity and were the sites of environmental catastrophes. Moses relates the airborne toxic event to these disasters that resulted from electricity production, and as I proved in my first chapter, DeLillo's novel is highly invested in electricity consumption.

and other characters by affecting their minds and ways of thinking about their experiences and speaking. Then, in my second chapter, I turned my attention to *Other Electricities* to show alternative ways of thinking and writing about, as well as interacting with, electrical mediums of communication. I showed ways in which Monson's characters used available technologies, such as radios in the attic, for cyborgian self-extension. When characters experienced deeply felt personal trials, they wanted electrical technologies there to receive the emotions and give them a mediated life of their own. In this way, electricity was not just a new body part for characters, but it embodied their feelings about their experiences, traversing space to link them with other characters.

In a recent lecture, author Jonathan Lethem proposed the deflation of technological grandiosity. He claimed that at first “each revolutionary medium changes everything! And nothing! I have radios and a fax machine in my book-lined home.”² Explaining that the same rhetoric was used in the early days of the cinema as in recent discussions of online social networks, Lethem showed that people react to novel technologies in predictable ways, believing each time that *this* technology will be the one to render all others obsolete; *this* revolutionary new medium will change how people take in information and communicate with others. To some degree, these hypotheses are true. It is hard to imagine living without electricity for anything longer than a weekend camping trip. But, as Lethem clarified, “every new technology changes our consciousness, but never as radically as anticipated”; he owns electrical technologies, but they share a home with his material books (Lethem). Older objects of communications are not rendered obsolete when new objects colonize the environment, but their uses and affects

² Jonathan Lethem, Zell Distinguished Writer in Residence: Lecture, University of Michigan, Helmut Stern Auditorium, Ann Arbor, 17 March 2011. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by speaker.

transform; the technologies adapt to an environment altered by the newest revolutionary apparatuses. In this thesis, I looked at a different moment in the timeline of technologies. Once the spectacular newness of an innovation wears off, technologies, such as the electrical mediums of televisions and radios, continue to affect the consciousness of the population. Much like in *White Noise* and *Other Electricities*, a new generation of electrically defined people emerges and incorporates the technologies that saturate their environment into their selfhood, extending their speech, consciousness, or data-collecting minds into systems of the unthought known.

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