

## Mobility and Literature: Narrative Mobility in Don DeLillo's *The Names and Americana*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article seeks to envision a new outlook toward mobility by paying greater attention to how mobility is represented and positioned in Don DeLillo's narrative works. Through close readings of *The Names* and *Americana*, I argue that shifts in the narration—from the first-person to the third-person or from the omniscient narrative to interior monologue—correspond to mobilities of people, information, and culture. I conclude that DeLillo employs literature as a medium to indicate the interconnectivity of textual interactions (transfictionality) in relation to the mobilization of people, culture, and information.

**KEYWORDS:** Culture; Mobility; Narrative; transfictionality; Don DeLillo; *The Names*; *Americana*

Then we came to the end of another dull and lurid year. Lights were strung across the front of every shop. Men selling chestnuts wheeled their smoky carts. [...] Music came from all the stores in jingles, chants, and hosannas, and from the Salvation Army bands came the martial trumpet lament of ancient Christian legions. [...] This is the essence of Western civilization.

(DeLillo, *Americana* 3-4)

Focusing on the movement of people on the street at the end of the year as the essence of Western civilization, Don DeLillo's *Americana* narrates the story of David Bell, a TV executive who goes on a quest in order to find his identity within American society. *Americana* presents "a private declaration of independence, a statement of my [DeLillo's] intention to use the whole picture, the whole culture" (DeLillo qtd. in Begley 1993). To depict American culture with all its dimensions, DeLillo acts as a socio-cultural critic and employs narrative in *Americana* in a way which "does not involve an accumulation of clear suspense-inducing events. Rather it depicts characters who are themselves trying to discern what is going on around them" (Nicol 92). In this manner, the narrator of *Americana*, as a Madison Avenue network executive, embarks on a journey through the country to investigate his and his country's past, present, and future. DeLillo presents "the frustrated quest for narrative" (Nicol 94) in one novel after another because his stories are "packed with narrative" (98), which "reminds readers of the nature of fictionality and causes them to reflect upon the process of deriving meaning from narrative" (185).

In other words, DeLillo employs narrative as a technique, mostly in a Joycean way, to represent shifts in characters' perspectives towards life, changes in living conditions, and the influences of political and economic changes. In DeLillo's novels, characters are on the move

not only physically from one place to another or one job to the next but also, they virtually are mobile in shifting their perspectives—presented mostly by switching narrative perspectives. Mobilization and narrative, in my view, are the dominant approaches that DeLillo addresses in most of his novels.

Many critics point to history, culture, society, an alternative reality, and the use of language in a Joycean way as the characteristics of DeLillo's works (Nicol; Rey; Nadeau; Kavado; Duval; Osteen; Boxall; Keese). However, the issue of mobility in relation to narrative has not been explicitly addressed and thoroughly scrutinized. I argue that DeLillo is a socio-cultural critic who writes his novels based on the motions in narrations. To present the mobilization of narrative, DeLillo conveys repetition of words, phrases and sentences (tautology of words), blending facts and fictions, and recurrences of events (tautology of time). This article proposes to study mobility in relation to narrative techniques in DeLillo's *The Names* and *Americana*.

To this end, I bring together various ideas about mobility (Cresswell; Wenderski; and Sheller) and read mobility in relation to narrative by following Urry's analysis of mobility in J.W. Goethe's idea of world literature. Grounding my hypothesis on an "eclectic approach"<sup>1</sup> as well as close readings of DeLillo's works, I examine correspondences between motions in the narrative (e.g., switching from the first-person to the third-person, or from the omniscient perspective to interior monologue) and diverse mobilities of people, information, and culture. Although DeLillo is known as a prolific author, who has written sixteen novels so far, I focus on *The Names* and *Americana* as works less thoroughly discussed in academia. Finally, I consider how DeLillo employs literature as a medium that connects cultures by presenting intertextuality or in some cases transfictionality. Tracing narrative mobility in DeLillo's oeuvre will provide an insight into the future study of narratology and a key to reading DeLillo's novels from a new angle.

## Mobility and Literature

Since its origins in the 1970s, mobility studies have mostly focused on defining what it means to be mobile in very general terms as the movement from one point to another. Thus, mobility studies have focused primarily on migration, tourism, transportation, capital, and most recently culture. Building on these studies, this article proposes a new understanding of mobility in relation to narrative. I will firstly refer to critics who define mobility in connection with other disciplines, then mention some previous studies in reading mobility in

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<sup>1</sup> Kumar notes that "the eclectic method is a combination of different method of teaching and learning approaches" ("The Eclectic Approach to Language Teaching" 1). The term "eclectic approach" refers to "a teaching approach [...] that draws on several different method principles that are made use of in practice" (Richards). This method is also used in literary analysis which refers to the combination of different methods and multi-perspectival readings of texts.

literature, and finally relate narrative to mobility as well as define transfictionality and its function in mobilizing narrative.

In *Cultural Mobility, a Manifesto*, Stephen Greenblatt points out that “mobility studies should shed light on hidden as well as conspicuous movements of peoples, objects, images, texts, and ideas” (250). In an interview, John Urry indicates that when he talks about “automobility constituting an entire culture, the implication is that it is not just as a form of travel, but also to do with literature, art, media, hotels, resource systems, and so on” (“Mobilities, Meetings, and Futures” 4). Both Greenblatt and Urry define mobility not only as a social act of movement (e.g., travel, migrations, and tourism) but also as involving other fields of study like literature and culture. In this regard, my interpretation of mobility is similar to Michael Wenderski’s argument according to which mobility “has no strict definition, and [...] encompasses a number of social and cultural phenomena.” For a working definition, Wenderski defines “cultural mobility as a multidimensional exchange of viewpoints, ideas, activities, people, etc.” (40). Furthermore, I agree with Mimi Sheller’s interpretation of the current period of mobility as blending both physical and virtual movements, so that “the new transdisciplinary field of mobilities research encompasses research on the spatial mobility of humans, nonhumans, and objects; the circulation of information, images, and capital; as well as the study of the physical means for movement” (1).

What stands at the core of mobility studies in the views of these critics are primarily physical movements, though mobility can also have a meaning for culture, information, capital, and texts. Reconsidering the role of literature and how people are connected through old as well as new media, Urry attempts to clarify or redefine Goethe’s idea of world literature. If the process of exchange constantly happens across the borders of nations and cultures, then it is possible to study culture and cultural products in relation to mobility discourses. As a result, if we look at mobility in this way, traces of mobility become visible in various issues such as politics, the economy, society, and culture.<sup>2</sup>

In sum, mobility has two dimensions: the real/physical, which forms the basis for social science and cultural studies, and the virtual/imaginative, which can be studied in relation to narrative movements within literature. Physical mobility refers to the exchange or transfer

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<sup>2</sup> In his book *Mobility* (2007), Urry attempts to broaden his perspective on mobility by considering other forms of movement as being mobile like the “movement of images and information on multiple media”(8) which in social science could be related to “the movement of people, ideas and information from place to place, person-to-person, event to event” (12) as well as “their economic, political and social implications” (12). In other words, Urry believes that mobility “enables the ‘social world’ to be theorized as a wide array of economic, social and political practices, infrastructures and ideologies that all involve, entail or curtail various kinds of the movement of people, or ideas, or information or objects” (18). This way of analysing mobility leads Urry to review his first perspective toward mobility and to introduce new “mobility-systems” which “are organized around the processes that circulate people, objects and information at various spatial ranges and speeds” (52). As a result, in his new system of mobility, culture and cultural products stand in the centre of his discussion.

of objects (e.g., books, phones, vehicles, computers, or any material object), as well as movements of people in time and place along with their values, traditions, customs, ideas, and experiences. Virtual/imaginative mobility deals with the mobilization of images, information, capital, and culture between different works of literature. This type of mobility draws on discourses like politics, the economy, culture, and psychology but is grounded in literature specifically.

As an example of reading mobility in literature, Greenblatt indicates that literary texts tend to employ known material—for example, familiar themes or actions—and present them in “a new and unexpected direction” (78). In his analysis of the play *Cardenio*, he indirectly mentions how mobility occurs through shifts in narration as “the pieces emerging fitfully in a series of accidental encounters, surprises, misunderstandings, revelations, detours, and constant interruptions” (82). Greenblatt thus considers the process of mobility in literature as not only based on the movements of people but also shifts in the narrations and changes in the characters’ perspectives (i.e., voices). Even though Greenblatt does not explicitly point to any relation between mobility and narrative, his analysis of mobility in literature is based on narrative. In this regard, mobility has long had roots in connecting various nations by transferring texts, images, words, and the likes from one culture (nation) to another one.

In addition to Greenblatt’s perspective on mobility, I relate the concept to narrative because as Roland Barthes designates,

narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting, stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversations. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives [...] narrative is international, transcultural: It is simply there, like life itself. (65)

Narrative, in Barthes’ view, is everywhere. It is mobile and connects everything. In one definition, David Herman defines narrative as a “basic human strategy” to connect with “time, process, and change” because the goal of narrative—which he considers a process—is to relate different fields of studies such as “social science”—from philosophy to autobiography—to “clinical medicine, journalism, narrative therapy and the arts” (2). Other critics further relate mobility to narrative. For instance, Porter Abbott also refers to Barthes’ quotation to emphasize that narrative is present everywhere and in every culture. However, Abbott claims that it is the adaptability and applicability of narrative with other disciplines and media forms which makes it an interdisciplinary topic.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In his *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, Abbott mentions that narrativity is an important part of human life and “We are all narrators” (6). He introduces two approaches for analyzing narrative, first “symptomatic,” referring to a variant interpretation of a text, like feminist, psychological, or political reading grounded on “repetition” with the focus on “paratextual materials”; and second “adaptation,” dealing with how one work is connected to and references another work of art (96-101). In the current

Accordingly, Paul Cobley mentions “that frequently narratives straightforwardly show or tell events and that they do so by an act of transmission from one fixed place to another” (130). He argues that in “all forms of narrative” there are narrative levels and that the “gap-filling” between those levels forms “the common transmission model” (131). Cobley introduces different levels of narratives such as the implied author, character’s thought, and the narrator’s voice. He also observes that in every story, especially postmodern ones, the narration is not linear, and it usually presents various forms or levels, such as the implied author mixed with third-person narration. There are always some gaps between these forms of narration which need to be filled in by the readers. Cobley calls filling these gaps through readings or interpretations ‘transmission.’ This notion, in my view, can be regarded as a mobile characteristic of narrative.

In Brown Thomas’ view, the narrative acts as a ‘bridge’ connecting disciplines such as philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, film studies, and literary criticism (6). According to Thomas’ analysis, Barthes introduces a new way of looking at narratives and texts by introducing intertextuality and interpreting text “as something that is always in process.” As a result, narrative is not a fixed, stable thing but always in constant movement and “being refreshed” (79). At this point, transfictionality needs to be introduced as a supplement to Barthes’ notion of intertextuality (Marciniak). In “Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality,” Marie-Laure Ryan describes “the three fundamental operations of transfictionality—expansion, modification, and transposition.” She points to transfictionality as a relation of texts with others or as “the migration of fictional entities across different texts” (366). This action usually happens in the world of written narrative, which makes constant movements in narratives possible. Providing another definition, Richard Saint-Gelais describes transfictionality as “the phenomenon by which two texts, of the same author or different ones, relate together to the same fiction, whether by reprising the same characters, continuation of a foregoing plot, or sharing the same fictional universe” (qtd. in Marciniak 3). Narrative in a transfictional reading is mobile and shifts from the perspective of one character to another, moving from one place to other locations and referring to other texts—what Marciniak calls the migration of “information between narrative spaces” that is “tightly connected with the idea of encroaching boundaries” (Marciniak 4).

While many of these approaches to mobility focus on narrative and space, it is also crucial to consider narrative and time. From this perspective, narrative mobility can be referred to as what Seymour Chatman calls “chrono-logic.” In his outlook, “narrative entails movements through time not only externally (the duration of the presentation of the novel, film, play) but also internally (the duration of the sequence of events that constitute the plot)” (*Coming to Terms* 9). Therefore, narrative, unlike its supposed fixed characteristic, is on the move and mobile.

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study of narrative, the focus is on the adaptation approach.

What all these critics agree on is the possibility of considering narrative and its study in connection with other disciplines through the framework of mobility. While some critics address the mobile characteristic of narrative through transferring texts directly (adaptation as Abbotte names it), other critics consider the transfictionality of the texts with the use of cultural codes (in Copley's reading of Barthes' views; Ryan; and Gelais). Employing both adaptation and transfictionality notions in this study, this article examines narrative mobility in the mentioned works of DeLillo. In my perspective, intertextuality, transfictionality, and adaptation refer to the mobile characteristics of narratives which is the common point in both Thomas's reading of Barthes and Copley's perspective of narrative. My brief discussion of the relation of narrative and mobility reveals that an act of transmission (referring to Copley's term) exists in any form of narrative. I argue that Copley's notion of transmission in narrative can be redefined as transfictionality or the transformation of narrative in texts. Narratives are mobile and move from one form to another; and, since mobility means (physical or virtual) movement from A to B, narrative also can be defined in terms of mobility.

### ***Americana* and Mobility**

In both subject matter and plot, *Americana* engages critically with the act of movement through shifts in narration. The protagonist and narrator of *Americana*, David Bell, is on the move not only physically but also virtually. David's physical mobility starts when he leaves his family home in Old Holly to study at Leighton Gage College, where he studied art and made a documentary titled *Soliloquy*. Then, he goes to a university in south California, comes back to Old Holly to marry Meredith (Merry), and later he settles in New York to live with his wife. Throughout the novel, David moves from one place to another either to live or to work. Another major mobile activity is when he plans to make a documentary on a Navajo reservation for his work and begins a journey from New York via Montana, Wyoming, Nevada, to Arizona. David decides to "discover all the lost roads of America" and "get it all on film" (DeLillo, *Americana* 49). All of these are examples of physical mobility in *Americana*, for the protagonist is in constant movement from one place to another.

Equally important to the novel is virtual mobility. When, on the way to Arizona, David decides that he wants to make a film about his own life instead of shooting a film about the Navajo, he starts capturing his life in the form of a documentary. He is accompanied by an artist/actress (Sullivan), a washed-up journalist (Pike), and an unsuccessful novelist (Brand). The transferring of information, contacting and encountering various cultures, and searching for his identity—all as forms of virtual mobility—occur when David attempts to picture the American Dream as well as American history by recording and showing scenes from his life. He asks the locals of each city he visits to act out scenes from his life, some factual and some imagined.

These examples of virtual mobilities relate further to shifts in narration. Even though David narrates *Americana* with the first-person perspective, there are three different “I’s” for him within the story, and sometimes David’s narration is blurred with the voice of the implied author. The first “I” is the one which David uses when he is with his co-workers and business colleagues (in his role as a chief-executive); the second one refers to the period when David spends time with his family under the influence of his father as a model figure (in his role as a psychiatrist); and the third “I” appears whenever David is with friends or talks about his film in the making, reflecting his search of his identity or the spirit of his country, America (in his role as a filmmaker, adventurer of the ‘Wild West’). These “I’s” are only revealed while he shoots his film.

The first “I,” the one who works in the business and the criteria which play a major role to be successful at work, can be seen where David tells us about how business works in the United States: “I was always very conscious of the ages of men with whom I worked. What I feared most at the network were younger men who might advance to positions higher than mine. It was not enough to be the best; one had to be the youngest as well” (7). While these may seem to be personal principles, they stand as a fact in the real world. In this example, the sentence starts with the “I” voice of David, but immediately changes into the third person “one.” In doing so, the narrative voice becomes seemingly objective by pointing out two major criteria for becoming a successful businessperson: be the best and the youngest. In a rather generalizing manner, the sentence thus suggests that talent and age are the two main factors for American employers in the trade industry, not only for David but for all Americans.

At another point in the novel, David describes himself in front of a mirror using a descriptive passage—this is the instance of the second “I” (as a psychiatrist):

I was an extremely handsome young man. The objectivity which time slowly fashions, and the self-restraint it demolishes, enabled me to make this statement without recourse to the usual modest disclaimers which give credit to one’s parents or grandparents in the manner of a sires-and-dams book. I suppose it’s true enough that I inherited my mother’s fine fair skin and my father’s athletic physique, but the family album gives no clue to the curiously Grecian perspective of my face. *Physical identity meant a great deal to me* when I was twenty-eight years old. I had almost the same kind of relationship with my mirror that many of my contemporaries had with their analysts. *When I began to wonder who I was, I took* the simple step of lathering my face and shaving. It all became so clear, so wonderful. I was blue-eyed David Bell. Obviously, my life depended on this fact. (11)<sup>4</sup>

Through this long expressive passage, David attempts to connect his physical appearance with his social identity. Acting as his own psychiatrist, he attempts to investigate the reasons for the importance attributed to the look of his face in his life (and in a broader sense for Americans). The emphasis again on the importance of physical appearance in American

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<sup>4</sup> I add colors to mark changes in the narrative perspective of the quoted texts.

society is like what Brand wanted to write about, a book whose “theme is whatever you want it to be because appearance is all that matters, man” (ibid. 205). Brand believes the book will be a great success because its theme is very interesting and appealing to Americans. However, David tries to realize why appearance matters too much for Americans through his psychological analysis. Narrated in the form of an aside or stream of consciousness, David’s comments can be taken as an example of virtual mobility (transferring of information) which is presented by shifts in narration.

While most of the description about what defines David as a character is narrated in the first-person, DeLillo uses spoken dialogue as well to reveal David’s intentions: “I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I’d like to do something more religious. Explore America in the screaming night. You know. Yin and yang in Kansas. That scene’” (10). As another instance of this “I,” David describes his intention about filming his fragmented life as a documentary in spoken dialogue (the third “I”—his role as an amateur filmmaker),

‘I want to talk about this idea I’ve got for a movie,’ I said.

‘We’re all ears,’ Pike said.

‘I’m thinking of making a long messy autobiographical-type film, part of which I’d like to do out here in the Midwest, if that’s where we are—a long unmanageable movie full of fragments of everything that’s part of my life, maybe ultimately taking two or three or more full days to screen and only a minutely small part of which I’d like to do out here. Pick out some sleepy town and shoot some film.’ (204-205)

On the one hand, the film which David attempts to shoot is a part of his quest to find his place in society. As David deconstructs the major events of his life, he discovers the sister he no longer sees because she has run off with a criminal, the effect it has had on his delicate mother and her eventual death from cancer, and the withdrawal of his father as an advertising executive. On the other hand, David’s film is also the infatuation of an American to discover the spirit of his country. When he spends a night with a group of hippies who have left their normal lives behind to live with Apaches in Arizona, David engages in a bacchanalian orgy of sex and violence, metaphorically drowning himself in the essence of what constitutes the “real America” in DeLillo’s novel. David describes an America whose beauty is “incredible” and is full of “the smoke and billboards”; for these reasons, David indicates that America is a “restless country” (111).

At this very point, the voice of David as the narrator is imploded with the voice of the implied author. Whenever there is a description of the country, America, it is not obvious whether David is informing characters in the story about his feeling of the United States, or whether DeLillo is addressing the readers directly. Consider, for example, the blurring of voices in the following two excerpts, which are both narrated in the first-person plural, leaving unclear who the “We” is that is talking:

*America*, then as later, was a sanitarium for every kind of statistic. **We took** care of them. We tried to understand them. **We did** what we could to make them well. *Numbers were important* because whatever fears **we might have** had concerning the



shattering of our minds were largely dispelled by the satisfaction of knowing precisely how **we were** being driven mad, at what decibel rating, what each-ratio, what force of aerodynamic drag. *So there was a transferred madness, a doubling, between the numbers themselves and those who made them and cared for them. We needed* them badly; there is no arguing that point. With numbers **we were** able to conceal doubt [...] **We were** all natural scientists. War or peace, we thrived on the body-count. (159, italics added)

**We desired** this sleep because **we were** twenty years old and already beginning to learn there was no such thing as invincibility. **We wished** to take what was left of our courage and hope and retire it to a dream. Beauty was too difficult and truth in the West had died with Chief Crazy Horse; a lifetime of small defeats was waiting. **We knew** this, and **we knew** that sleep was the only industry in life that did not diminish one's possibilities. (205)

In both paragraphs, characteristics of Americans are revealed, though it is not clear whether it is David, DeLillo, or an omniscient narrator sharing them. In the first passage, the pronoun “We” seems to be more objective. It designates the relationship between life and the economy—numbers representing the stock market and a capitalistic view. This objective “We” is a way to confirm the dependency of life on economic conditions: “Numbers rendered the present day endurable, heralded the impressive excesses of the future and stocked with a fine deceptive configuration our memories, such as they were, of the past” (159). In David’s view, the fate of America relies on how well “the numbers” are (i.e., the economy), with a focus on virtual mobility. On the contrary, the “We” in the second excerpt talks about the desires and wishes of people who get tired of being involved in this business, with a focus on physical mobility. The contradiction in David’s opinion, or perhaps even DeLillo’s attitude toward the country, is that because America “[i]s beautiful. It’s too much. Baby, it’s wild. It’s the strangest, wildest, freakiest country in history” (204). In the novel, the only way to escape the harsh reality of living in this country is to sleep and dream. Once the narrative voice changes, so do the values and experiences of the people as well as culture and information.

Another aspect of narrative mobility in *Americana* is transfictionality, which can be found in multiple references to films and literature. For example, David cribs from filmmakers like Yasujiro Ozu, Ingmar Bergman, and Robert Bresson, and even attempts to recreate the memorable snow scene from Akira Kurosawa’s *Ikiru* when he films his documentary. Another major example of transfictionality comes near the end of the novel, when David asks Sullivan to tell him a bedtime story (320-31). In this long scene, Sullivan seems to narrate a personal experience—an oral narrative—but ends up summarizing and referring to general themes which are dominant in human society: “I knew then that the war is not between North and South, black and white, young and old, rich and poor, crusader and heathen, warhawk and pacifist, God and the devil. The war is between Uncle Malcolm and Uncle Malcolm”—mentioning that the true war takes place inside individuals rather than having outside reasons (331). There are many further allusions to other films and novels: David compares his appearance to Kirk Douglas and Burt Lancaster (12); he compares his

quest to those of Oz (116); and he even attempts to present himself as an author—who later prefers to be an artist—when in Leighton Gage College he wanted to be known as Kinch, Stephan Dedalus’s nickname in *Ulysses* (143).

In sum, David starts his journey to discover a fact not only about his self but also about his own country because he has “an insatiable curiosity about people from all walks of life.” However, eventually, he faces the fact that “fear impels people to ask ingratiating questions. [...] It’s an intricate thing, fear. [...] There is a whole literature of fear in the libraries of the world [...]. Mystery is the white man’s enemy” (376). After having this realization, David embarks on his quest to satisfy his voracious interest in defining his identity and getting to know the unknown in his country, but he encounters obstacles called fear and mystery. He learns this only through traveling and observing actions and traditions of people from various parts of the United States. Traveling, or moving from one city to another (i.e., physical mobility) leads David to recognize his self and that of his country (i.e., virtual mobility): “I wanted to become an artist, as I believed them to be, an individual willing to deal in the complexities of truth. I was most successful. I ended in silence and darkness, sitting still, a maker of objects that imitate my predilection” (346). While the reader expects some changes in David’s behavior, i.e., to act as an individual and not to follow “the mainstream” in order to survive in the business, as he had described his job (10-12):

I got a room, shaved, showered, checked out and rented a car. I drove all night, northeast, and once again I felt it was literature I had been confronting these past days, the archetypes of the dismal mystery, sons, and daughters of the archetypes, images that could not be certain which of two confusions held less terror, their own or what their own might become if it ever faced the truth. I drove at insane speeds. [...] Then, with my American Express credit card, I booked a seat on the first flight to New York. Ten minutes after we were airborne a woman asked for my autograph. (377)

Thus, *Americana* ends by listing some of the main characteristics that have become synonymous for Americanness in capitalist New York: driving with high speed, buying gifts and using credit cards, and flying. Even though shooting the film and confronting Native Americans sounded interesting to David and was full of “mystery,” he, or DeLillo as the implied author, realizes that the truth was to be found in the city and not in nature. *Americana* ends with David reporting his journey in the form of “literature” in which he plays a part (see the second sentence in above quote). This confession—either by David as the narrator or by DeLillo as an implied author—suggests both how literature can be a medium for narrating the spirit of a country and how reality and fiction can be interwoven in real life. *Americana*, therefore, can be read as a novel based on the movement of people in search of their identity—a journey which deals with many cultural encounters as well as exchanges of experiences and values.

## **The Names and Mobility**

Focusing on the use of language and the connection between history and narrative, as well as the life of Americans outside America, DeLillo penned *The Names* in 1982. The novel begins with James Axton, a former technical writer, who is an associate director of risk analysis in the Middle East for a conglomerate known as the Northeast Group:

For A LONG TIME I stayed away from the Acropolis. It daunted me, that somber rock. I preferred to wander in the modern city, imperfect, blaring. [...] So much converges there. It's what we've rescued from the madness. Beauty, dignity, order, proportion. [...] What ambiguity there is in exalted things. [...] The ruins stood above the hissing traffic like some monument to doomed expectations. [...] One night (as we enter narrative time). (3-4)

As DeLillo invites readers to “enter narrative time,” James tells the story of a group of multinational American businessmen who live in Athens but travel daily to various assignments in Africa and Asia. The characters in *The Names* belong to the middle class. Their concerns remain centered on their flats, jobs, and families. The principal settings of *The Names* are Greece and India, but the Americans in this novel mainly live in their own time and place, a sealed compartment, “a *subculture*” (6, emphasis added). *The Names* consists of three main parts: “The Island,” “The Mountain,” and “The Desert.” As the title of each part indicates, there are not only shifts in places, but the characters are also in constant movement and travelling from place to place, indicating the initial presence of physical mobility.

The first part of the novel titled “The Island” presents James living in Athens and working in the Greek-Turkish region as a risk analyst. While James had moved to Athens to work and live near his estranged wife, Kathryn, and his son, Tap, his wife works with an archaeologist named Owen Brademas who has a great influence on her. Whereas *The Names* generally is narrated through James’ first-person perspective, it is mixed with interior monologue, spoken dialogues, “memory narrative,”<sup>5</sup> and asides (Bal 37). It also exhibits the neutral third-person voice that describes a scene, time, local places, names, gesture and objects (ibid.). As Frank Lentricchia argues, “Axton’s narration is propelled as if by a voice of multiple personalities” because when he makes conversation with other Americans or locals that he meets while traveling Greece, he talks very differently than when he is with his wife, just to change his diction once more when he is by himself, taking in the different landscapes, sights, and languages he encounters on his way (10-11). It is through James’ perspective, as the narrator, that we receive the information about other main characters: Kathryn is described either in the third person, memory narrative, or spoken dialogue; Owen is introduced through conversations and first-person narration; and, Frank Voltera, James’ friend, is presented in spoken dialogue and memory narrative. Moreover, by using “We” as a

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<sup>5</sup> It is a kind of narrating personal stories or experiences by remembering them in a form of memory. This is a kind of an “interpretative mode” of the event or condition by the character within the story (Cobley 17).

pronoun in asides and sentences in parentheses, DeLillo once again blurs the lines between the implied author and the main narrator and makes it difficult for the reader to distinguish who is talking about whom.

In one example of DeLillo's use of "we," at the very beginning of the novel, James describes his job like anyone who works as a migrant in another country, depicted in a generalized manner in the story. He also considers how these people create a new culture for themselves by mixing the culture of the working country with that of their homeland:

I flew a lot, of course. We all did. We were a subculture, businesspeople in transit, growing old in planes and airports. We were versed in percentages, safety records, in the humor of flaming death. We knew which airline's food would double you up, which routes connected well. We knew the various aircraft and their configurations and measured this against the distances we were flying. We could distinguish between bad-weather categories and relate them to the guidance system of the plane we were on. We knew which airports were efficient, which were experiments in timelessness or mob rule; which had radar, which didn't; which might be filled with pilgrims making the hadj. Open seating never caught us by surprise and we were quick to identify our luggage on the runway where that was the practice and we didn't exchange wild looks when the oxygen masks dropped during touchdown. We advised each other on which remote cities were well maintained, which were notable for wild dogs running in packs at night, snipers in the business district at high noon. We told each other where you had to sign a legal document to get a drink, where you couldn't eat meat on Wednesdays and Thursdays, where you had to sidestep a man with a cobra when you left your hotel. We knew where martial law was in force, where body searches were made, where they engaged in systematic torture, or fired assault rifles into the air at weddings, or abducted and ransomed executives. (*The Names* 6-7).

The shift of narration from "I" to "We" immediately after the first sentence demonstrates the mobilization of the experiences of one person (James) to an entire group (the American community who lives outside of America), introducing the characteristics of their "subculture". At the end of this description, the addressee suddenly turns to "you," talking directly to everyone about what they are allowed to do or not to do. Moreover, the repetition of "We knew" four times, as well as the use of verbs like "distinguish and advise," put emphasis on known information or even already accepted facts about traveling and especially air travel—transferring information to the readers. This excerpt not only discusses physical mobility (e.g., the discussion of air travel and moving from one place to another) but also addresses virtual movements by mentioning the confrontation with other cultures (e.g., Hadj ceremony and Kurdish wedding ceremony) as the sentences marked in green above show. This passage, therefore, provides an example of the mobility of people and culture as well as information happening alongside changes in the narrative voice.

Another big shift in James's view that is reflected in a shift in narration is the way he thinks about tourists. At the beginning of the novel, James describes tourists who come to Greece

in very negative terms: “Slowly, out of every bending lane, in waves of color and sound, came tourists in striped sneakers, fanning themselves with postcards, the philhellenes, laboring uphill, vastly unhappy, mingling in one unbroken line up to the monumental gateway. What ambiguity there is in exalted things. We despise them a little” (*The Names* 3). However, later he describes himself as being a tourist and its advantages with the narration changed to “You” (in his role as an adventurer):

My life was full of routine surprises. One day I was watching runners from Marathon dodge taxis near the Athens Hilton, the next I was turning a corner in Istanbul to see a gypsy leading a bear on a leash. I began to think of myself as a perennial tourist. There was something agreeable about this. To be a tourist is to escape accountability. Errors and failings don't cling to you the way they do back home. You're able to drift across continents and languages, suspending the operation of sound thought. Tourism is the march of stupidity. You're expected to be stupid. The entire mechanism of the host country is geared to travelers acting stupidly. You walk around dazed, squinting into fold-out maps. You don't know how to talk to people, how to get anywhere, what the money means, what time it is, what to eat or how to eat it. Being stupid is the pattern, the level, and the norm. You can exist on this level for weeks and months without reprimand or dire consequence. Together with thousands, you are granted immunities and broad freedoms. You are an army of fools, wearing bright polyesters, riding camels, taking pictures of each other, haggard, dysenteric, thirsty. There is nothing to think about but the next shapeless event. (43-44, italics added)

The shifts in tenses can be understood as changes in forms of reality. While in the beginning, James hates tourists and their actions, in the second part, as the tone and tenses shift, James likes to be called a tourist and acts accordingly (once more in his role as a socio-cultural critic). Like previous passages, the alternation in tenses from past to present and simple future suggests that DeLillo addresses the readers directly and points to some facts governing modern life. As Copley states, all narratives consist of “situations and characters” which connect narrative and identity and on a larger scale, also address the identity of a nation—in this example, America (35). The passage starts with “I” but shifts to “You” and mentions some facts about tourism and travel. With this change, the voice seems to move from James, the narrator, to DeLillo, the implied author narration, informing the reader about what he thinks about being mobile and on the move to gain new experiences (i.e., physical mobility). Moreover, the sentences in green—being narrated with “you” narration along with the objective voice—show how James describes his interactions as well as connections to other cultures (i.e., virtual mobility). Employing change in the narration and turning his narration to socio-cultural considerations, DeLillo—in James’ perspective—attempts to present a “universal truth” (Copley 49) about the industry of tourism. This is an instance of the mobility of people, their values and experiences, along with culture.

In another example of presenting the characteristics of American culture in the first part, “The Island,” James introduces twenty-seven features of his personality which amount to American characteristics (James’ attempt to act as a socio-cultural critic):

1. *Self-satisfied.*

2. *Uncommitted.*
3. *Willing to settle.*
4. *Willing to sit and stare [...].*  
[...]
6. *You pretend.*
7. *You pretend not to understand other people's motives.*
8. *You pretend to be even-tempered. [...]*
9. *You don't see anything beyond your own modest contentment. [...]*
10. *You think being a husband and father is a form of Hitlerism [...]. [...]*
11. *You don't allow yourself the full pleasure of things.*
12. *You keep studying your son for clues to your own nature.*
13. *You admire your wife too much and talk about it too much. Admiration is your public stance [...].*
14. *Gratified by your own feelings of jealousy.*
15. *Politically neuter.*
16. *Eager to believe the worst.*
17. *You will defer to others [...]. [...]*
18. *You have trouble sleeping [...].*
19. *You sneeze in books.*
20. *You have an eye for your friends' wives. Your wife's friends. Somewhat speculative, somewhat detached.*
21. *You go to extremes to keep your small mean feelings hidden. Only in arguments do they appear. [...]*
22. *You contain your love. You feel it but don't like to show it. [...]*
23. *Nurser of small hurts.*
24. *Whiskey sipper.*
25. *Under achiever.*
26. *Reluctant adulterer.*
27. *American. (16-17)*

These characteristics are called “27 Depravities, like some reckoning of hollow-cheeked church theologians” (17). James as the narrator attempts to determine the major features which are dominant among Americans. This part of the novel ends as James holds serious discussions about politics, capitalism, colonialism and other topics with his colleagues Eliades, the Kellers, and the Maitlands (57-77).

The second part of *The Names*, “Mountain,” is mostly concerned with James’ meetings with an old friend, the filmmaker Frank Volterra. Frank is an English man who migrated to the USA and studied film at New York University. He went to California to practice his filming skills and then met James and Kathryn in Texas. During their meetings, James and Frank talk excessively about literature and film and refer to many international filmmakers: “Film. This is what there was, to shoot film, cut film, screen it, talk about it” (109). Another example can be found in their conversation with a character named Vosdanik—a reference to Vostanik Adoyan, an Armenian American painter. The description of Vosdanik and his speech are an example of transfictionality: “Vosdanik was involved in the texture of the place, in histories, rituals, dialects, eye and skin color, bearing and stance, endless sets of identifying traits”

(150). Their encounters in Tripoli can be understood as a more general example of transfictionality in *The Names* (198-205). Most incidents in this part deal with James and Frank's visits to a cult and address the reality of making an art work and the difference between an artist and a businessman (e.g., James' effort to play the role of a language analyst—aiming at putting meaning to names).

In the third part, "The Desert," James travels to India to meet Owen who seems exhausted from some archaeological investigations in a desert. James experiences a quest of self-realization and finds clues to murders that took place in the first part of the novel (i.e., James' role as an adventurer who ends up becoming a pilgrim standing on the ruins of Acropolis). Similar shifts in narration happen at the beginning of this part of the novel but in the opposite direction, starting with **We** and ending in **I**:

In this vast space, which seems like nothing so much as a container for emptiness, **we** sit with our documents always ready, wondering if someone will appear and demand **to know who we are**, someone in authority, and to be unprepared is to risk serious things. The terminal at each end is full of categories of inspection to which **we must submit**, **impelling us** toward a sense of inwardness, a sense of smallness, a self-exposure **we are never prepared** for no matter how often **we take this journey**, the **buried journey through categories and definitions and foreign languages**, not the other, **the sunlit trip to the east** which **we thought we'd decided** to make. The decision **we'd unwittingly arrived** at is the one that brings us through passport control, through the security check and customs, the one that presents to us the magnetic metal detector, the baggage x-ray machine, the currency declaration, the customs declaration, the cards for embarkation and disembarkation, the flight number, the seat number, the times of departure and arrival. It does no good to say, as **I've** done a hundred times, it's just another plane trip, **I've made a hundred**. (253-54).

What can be comprehended from these two relatively long passages are shifts in both narration and perspectives that occur from the beginning to nearly the end of the novel. In the first passage, there is repetition of "we knew," as if James attempts to inform readers about facts of living and working abroad, transferring information as well as exchange of people's experiences in a form of virtual mobility. The second passage is a form of observation of the actual facts about physical mobility. In both passages, the major theme is movements, both physically and virtually. Both passages present the confrontation of cultures with one another—Americans with international air travelers to and within the Middle East. In doing so, both passages also demonstrate who is an American outside of their homeland: "We" who search to identify "their" identity through travel, along with different treatment of security checks in various airports (physical movement); and "We" who decide to encounter other cultures by being a witness of various ceremonies and speaking foreign languages for information exchanges (virtual mobility). While in the first paragraph, James introduces a group identity and informs us how it forms a subculture in another country, in the second one James rather represents only what he sees and attempts

to comfort himself of his experiences. In other words, the first passage, from the beginning pages of the novel, revolves around airports and travel, and mostly describes what is advisable to do and avoid when “you” travel. The second one, from nearly the end of the novel, narrates the feeling of traveling or travelers and how “you” (i.e., Americans) have been treated in airports. Both passages, therefore, present not only physical mobility (e.g., James and his colleagues traveling to various parts of the world) but also virtual mobility (e.g., exchanges of experiences, transferring information and interaction between different cultures). DeLillo uses “travel” to show the shifts in people’s values and experiences and how culture is exchanged by those who are in motion. For instance, James describes his and his colleagues’ identity by referring to air travel (in his role as a socio-cultural critic): “Air travel reminds us who we are. It’s the means by which we recognize ourselves as modern. The process removes us from the world and sets us apart from each other” (254). Once again, these passages are good examples of how changes in the narrative happen in accordance with both mobilities of people (physical) as well as information and culture (virtual).

It is noteworthy that James gradually points to the list of “27 Depravities” as the novel progresses. As the novel reaches its end, James one more time refers to the last characteristic of his list, “Americans” (328). It can be inferred that James travels a long way from Greece through the Middle East (Libya, Egypt, Israel, Turkey, and so on) to India, and that this journey represents what it means to be an American. The travels described in the novel seem to refer to the intention of its author, DeLillo, who has declared that his purpose in writing *The Names* was to depict an “American living abroad,” so that readers would “see themselves as the people around them see them, as Americans with a capital A” (*Introducing Don DeLillo* 58). The novel ends with “The Prairie,” a short excerpt from the novel James’ son Tap wrote about Owen.

As a result, *The Names* is a novel on the move that begins in a real place, Greece, and ends in an unreal place, Prairie. Not only the characters move; everything that depends on them (e.g., their homes, their jobs, their economic status) is constantly changing. Over the course of the novel, James goes from being a risk analyst to a tourist but ends up in Acropolis as some type of pilgrim—all in search of his identity as an “American” (328). For James, being a pilgrim means being on a successful quest for knowing his self—experiencing an epiphanic moment, “a mysterious sense, an intuition” (321). But, being a tourist, in James’s view, means being stupid and closing one’s eyes to reality and facts, just taking pictures of famous places and then leaving. Deciding to be a pilgrim even though he might act like a tourist, James looks for “a second life” outside of the United States and thinks the only way to see things or connect them is to “learn their names” (328). Meanwhile, there are multiple shifts in his role as an active socio-cultural critic who comments on some generally and sometimes falsely perceived facts about Americans living outside the United States, tourists, traveling, Muslim cultures, the Middle East, and many other topics. *The Names*, in sum, demonstrates how characters by “moving in and out of sight of each other” attempt to realize how big and



complicated this world is (250). For this reason, in DeLillo's words, "we don't trust ourselves to figure out anything on our own. No wonder people read books that tell them how to run, walk and sit. We're trying to keep up with the world, the size of it, the complications." And the only solution is to keep moving (323). DeLillo, therefore, concludes that contemporary people are on the move from one place to another, investigating and studying different cultures and traditions. This movement corresponds to the shifts in narrations throughout the story.

### **Conclusion: DeLillo's Narrative Mobility**

While DeLillo wrote *Americana* to demonstrate his inner zeal towards Americans and American culture within the United States by exploring the functions of language, he penned *The Names* to illustrate Americans and American culture outside the United States by employing the role of language in novel writing. Even though *Americana* and *The Names* were released ten-year apart and belong to two different epochs of DeLillo's writing, both are mostly narrated in the first-person and inform readers who counts as an American inside and outside the United States. The characters in *Americana* symbolize a nation that seeks to make sense of its mediatized society at the beginning of the new technology revolution (digital, social, and medial) in the 1960s and 1970s. Similarly, characters in *The Names* represent Americans who live with technological advancements and want to represent the role of the United States in the world. In both novels, the protagonists are individuals who search for their identity as Americans, one inside the United States and one outside.

In previous studies, critics have mainly pointed to the historical, social, and cultural background of the United States, as well as how DeLillo uses language in a Joycean way (Nicol; Kavadlo; Duval; Osteen; Boxall; Keeseey, and the likes). However, I argue that DeLillo is a socio-cultural critic who writes his novels based on fragmentation, introspection, austerity, irony, and the tautology both of time and of words. In DeLillo's works, the characters dwell in a grief zone of the unknown, dangling between life and death, impacts of trauma and lingering loss, seeking new identities, living in the complexity of putting meaning to their worlds, trapped in consumption and capitalism.<sup>6</sup> As DeLillo's narratives change in form, which is especially clear in the case of *The Names* and *Americana*, readers face the movement of people, information transfer, and cultural exchange. In *The Names*, the roles and actions of James change repeatedly, from risk analyst, to tourist, to social critic, to an adventurer or a pilgrim. In *Americana*, David is on the move from the beginning to the end changing his role from chief executive, to amateur filmmaker, to adventurer of the 'Wild West,' to psychologist, who ends up being an American. Both James and David are characters whose roles, ideas, and believes change as they gain new experiences by

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Osteen introduced some of these features as dominant characteristics of DeLillo's works in a paper titled, "The Living and the Undead: Don DeLillo's Late Style" presented at the *Fiction Rescues History: Don DeLillo Conference in Paris* held on February 18–20, 2016.

confronting various people from different nations, backgrounds, and traditions. Their movements from one role to another correspond to the shifts in narration from the first person to the third person or from a limited to an omniscient perspective.

Ultimately, DeLillo uses narrative changes in both *The Names* and *Americana* to emphasize the mobility of people and their values and experience through visiting different places, meeting various groups, and encountering diverse people practicing several religions. To present the mobility of culture and its products, DeLillo also refers in both novels to several languages, books, art, and film, whether in David's act of filmmaking and Brand's attempt to write a novel (in *Americana*) or in James' son writing a piece about Own (in *The Names*), plus many references to Indigenous oral literature. In sum, this suggests how mobility works in narrative and how literature acts as a medium for transferring ideas by interacting with other texts because what will last forever and stay in history is only names and language,<sup>7</sup> themes dealt with in many of DeLillo's explorations of narrative mobility.

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<sup>7</sup> This sentence is inspired by the end of *Libra* (published in 1988), a novel written by DeLillo concerning the story of Lee Harvey Oswald and the assassination of President J.F. Kennedy.

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