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**“WHO ARE YOU, LITERALLY?”:
FANTASIES OF THE WHITE SELF
IN *WHITE NOISE***

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Don DeLillo's *White Noise* can be read as a novel about the noise that white people make. As in many whitened communities in America, unless one pays strict attention, the brief presences of racialized others can be difficult to detect. Isolated for the most part from daily contact with people who are not “like” themselves, people like Jack Gladney who live in such communities tend to experience a certain unease when encountering unfamiliar “types” of people.¹ Appearing as sporadically and momentarily as they do, the differences that such people represent have yet to intrude much on the presumptions of middle-class whiteness to universality. However, as DeLillo's novel prophetically indicates, these presumptions have increasingly come under fire with the new immigration patterns that are reconfiguring American demographics. Thus Jack notes of his German tutor, for example, that “his complexion was of a tone I want to call flesh-colored,” without pondering further why he hesitates to go ahead and call it “flesh-colored” (DeLillo, *White* 32). A person such as Jack would most likely hesitate because he dimly realizes that such a term has been rendered problematic by the gradual encroachment of people who have flesh of different hues, different from that of the “flesh-colored” (“white”) people.

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In many ways, while DeLillo depicts the unmarked details of “ordinary” (white, middle-class) American life, he also suggests that in an increasingly diverse society, the white self’s troubles of this sort are just beginning. White people are becoming increasingly marked as white, and their status as exemplars of ordinary American subjecthood threatened.²

Missing from almost all critiques of DeLillo’s portrayals of post-modern identity formation is analysis of the persistent whiteness of his protagonists.³ Given the relative unimportance to most white Americans of their racial status, as well as their relative ignorance about the significance of race in their daily lives, critical disinterest in such aspects of DeLillo’s work is not surprising. Nevertheless, as DeLillo’s main characters consistently demonstrate, being racialized as white plays a tremendous part in how one responds to the environment. As anthropologist Ruth Frankenberg points out in her wonderfully nuanced account of the influences race has on the lives of white American women, “White people are ‘raced,’ just as men are ‘gendered’” (1). She argues that “there is a cultural/racial specificity to white people, at times more obvious to people who are not white than to white individuals” (5).⁴ In regards to literature, while most contemporary authors who describe ordinary white characters display little direct interest in the influences of race on their characters, American racial formations still affect their literary creations in an array of traceable ways. In DeLillo’s case, his considerable interest in contemporary threats to autonomous selfhood is inextricably tied to the whiteness of his protagonists. In *White Noise*, DeLillo illustrates the forces in ordinary life that threaten individual autonomy, but he also develops a subtextual portrait of white American modes of racialized perception. In particular, DeLillo demonstrates with the case of Jack Gladney that the notion of individual autonomy is itself a fantasy, and that middle-class white men are especially apt to harbor this particularly American form of self-delusion.

(White) American Individualism

Explicating this racialized subtext in *White Noise* calls for discussion first of a particular result of America’s continued reliance on race as a primary method for categorizing people. Such middle-class whites

as the characters in this novel usually live in a social environment in which whites constitute the numerical majority. As a result, white people within such a setting tend to be regarded by others not in terms of their racialized group membership, but rather on an individual, “case by case” basis. Their membership in the “white race” seems to them to have little impact on their daily lives, and indeed, the fact of their racial whiteness rarely occurs to them.⁵ As DeLillo’s depiction in *White Noise* of an identity quest undertaken by the highly self-reflective Jack Gladney suggests, white individuals tend to conceive of themselves in more individualized terms than do people “of color.” On the other hand, the racialized difference signified by “non-white” people is often immediately registered within predominantly white settings, rendering these individuals representative members of their racial groups.⁶ Ross Chambers describes this phenomenon:

Whereas nonwhites are perceived first and foremost as a function of their group belongingness, that is, as black or Latino or Asian (and then as individuals), whites are perceived first as individual people (and only secondarily, if at all, as whites). Their essential identity is thus their individual self-identity, to which whiteness as such is a secondary, and so a negligible factor. (192)

Consequently, as Chambers adds, “whiteness itself is [. . .] atomized into invisibility through the individualization of white subjects” (192). As a white American author, DeLillo might be inclined to create works that join a lengthy tradition of literary paeans to American individualism by describing the efforts of protagonists who eventually achieve a hard-won sense of personal autonomy. However, in each of his novels he has opted to do otherwise. In *White Noise*, DeLillo works to expose as a fantasy the notion of independent selfhood, a notion particularly encouraged by covertly racialized whiteness. He does so by depicting in Jack Gladney the irony of both the white self’s ontological dependence on its reception by others, and of its reliance on conceptions of others as a way of simultaneously conceiving of itself. After establishing early on the novel’s interest in the ironically dialogic nature of white identity-construction, DeLillo goes on to depict contemporary difficulties faced by the white self. As a series of closely described encounters between Jack Gladney and various “non-white” characters suggest, the

increasing presence of racialized others challenges certain racial and cultural presumptions commonly held by middle-class white Americans.

Don DeLillo, (White) American Author

The American emphasis on the individual's inherent freedom and autonomy has, of course, a lengthy history grounded in particularly western notions of the individual as an independent entity. Renowned American individualists who still resonate as such in the mainstream cultural imagination include Benjamin Franklin, who constructed a thoroughly practical self in his *Autobiography*; Huckleberry Finn, who decides to stand apart from the culture of his upbringing (and ultimately to "light out for the territory" [281] alone); and Hemingway's protagonists, who stoically construct their own ways to live. The celebrity status accorded contemporary examples of "self-made" individualists—Ross Perot, Steve Jobs, Donald Trump, Bill Gates—demonstrates the persistent appeal of the rags-to-riches mythology, promulgated perhaps most famously in Horatio Alger's novels, that such wealth is potentially available to any American. One could list innumerable manifestations of mainstream America's fantasy of itself as a meritocracy, in which any individual who works hard will succeed as much as his or her talents allow. I want to focus, though, on the largely unremarked whiteness at the root of this myth, and then go on to show that, as DeLillo's depictions of whiteness in *White Noise* illustrate, this conception of the autonomous self is a myth, as well as one to which whites are particularly susceptible.

Crucial to the iconographic resonance of the figures just listed is their commonly unremarked race and gender. When their status as "white males" is highlighted, their stature as representatives of an "all-American" notion of ideal selfhood becomes problematic: the exemplary significance of such "self-made" individuals, even those of today, is entirely contingent upon their being both white and male. The American myth of unfettered individuality, both at the level of upliftingly representative figurehood and at the level of everyday life, requires that for those white males who do attain notable success, these two forms of group membership remain unremarked. On the other hand, those heroic individuals who are differently racialized

and/or gendered tend to become *representatively* heroic, their group membership firmly affixed to them, largely because they are perceived as having fought against forces that oppress their particular group.

On the level of everyday social interaction, as DeLillo's depiction of Jack Gladney illustrates, middle-class white Americans are also rarely confronted with their own racialized status. This fact contributes to their tendency to think of themselves as individuals largely responsible for their own actions, and for having achieved whatever gains they have made largely on their own. Members of racialized minorities in America who live within a dominant culture that encourages the subordination of communal interest to self-interest may also think of themselves in these terms. However, as minority writers often suggest, daily life tends to impress upon people "of color" a continual awareness of their supposed membership in a racial and cultural group. On the other hand, since representative American normality remains largely white and middle class and unremarked as such, most middle-class whites are by and large taken as autonomous individuals, discouraging inclusion of the privileges afforded by their classed and racialized group membership as conscious components of their identities.

In regards to literary authorship, the ramifications of this phenomenon are traceable in DeLillo's case, particularly in terms of race and ethnicity. Born in the Bronx to Italian immigrant parents, DeLillo faced at the beginning of his writing career the choice of identifying himself as an Italian American author by writing about markedly Italian American characters and themes. In some of his earliest stories, published in the 1960s, DeLillo did describe such characters within the setting of his childhood. Like such writers as Phillip Roth and Mario Puzo, who are ethnically marked because most of their fiction contains explicitly ethnic characters and issues, DeLillo could have become marked as an Italian American writer if he had chosen to focus on Italian American characters, as he finally does at various points in *Underworld*. Two of his first stories do contain markedly ethnic protagonists, complete with broken English and strong accents. In "Take the 'A' Train," for instance, his second published story, one man in a "garlic-and-oil Bronx tenement" shouts to another, "'Hey, Caval [. . .] Ima joost on my way to calla the cops. Noomber one, eighty-five dollar I gotta comin' from you. [. . .] You pay me now, or I calla the cops'" (22–23). Another early story concerns the efforts of two men, speak-

ing “mainly in Italian,” to decide what they would eat if they could “only have one thing to eat” for the rest of their lives (“Spaghetti” 244); one settles on a dish that is also the title of the story, “spaghetti and meatballs” (248). By going on to write instead about ethnically unmarked protagonists, DeLillo has in effect become an unremarkably white writer, exercising in the process an ethnic option far less available, and perhaps not available at all, to American writers “of color.”⁷

As Daniel Aaron has observed, nothing in DeLillo’s novels prior to *Underworld* “suggests [even] a suppressed ‘Italian foundation’; hardly a vibration betrays an ethnic consciousness. His name could just as well be Don Smith or Don Brown” (68). DeLillo’s own consequent, generally unremarked whiteness has contributed to the widespread reception of his work as that of an individualist who goes against the crowd, an impression that DeLillo has repeatedly fostered by declaring himself “an outsider in this society” (“Outsider” 50).⁸ Unlike explicitly racialized writers, who tend to write about racially marked characters and are usually read as representative spokespeople for their racial group, DeLillo tends to write in opposition to conceptions of group membership. In *Mao II*, for instance, perhaps his most extended meditation on this topic, DeLillo characterizes the highly individualistic writer Bill Gray (clearly modeled after such literary recluses as J. D. Salinger and Thomas Pynchon) as having worked in carefully guarded isolation for decades. After realizing that writers have lost the influence they once had on “mass consciousness,” Gray emerges from his seclusion, only to die a grim, symbolically anonymous death (significantly, a pickpocket steals from his corpse the wallet containing his identification papers). As the narrator of *Mao II* intones in a statement that many critics have since read as representative of DeLillo’s persistent concern about contemporary threats to individuality, “The future belongs to crowds” (16).

DeLillo’s assumed status as a white writer might be expected, then, to foster in his work an expressed faith in the possibility of individual autonomy. However, as *White Noise* in particular demonstrates, he counters the white male authorial tendency to create autonomous, individualistic protagonists.⁹ Beginning with the novel’s opening scene, DeLillo complicates white identity by foregrounding recognition of the countervailing, fundamental relationality of identity-formation, thereby countering the particularly white fantasy of autonomous individualism.

He does so by carefully detailing the tendency of his characters to place others into various reliable categories, a process by which they simultaneously place and define themselves as well.

The Ironically Relational Foundations of White Identity

As the novel begins, narrator and protagonist Jack Gladney describes an annual “spectacle” at the college where he works as a professor, “the day of the station wagons” (DeLillo, *White* 3). As he closely observes a long line of cars driven by parents dropping off their children, Jack detects among these people a sense of community grounded not in common values or interests, but rather in mutual recognition of familiar attitudes and poses: “The students greet each other with comic cries and gestures of sodden collapse. [. . .] Their parents stand sun-dazed near their automobiles, seeing images of themselves in every direction. The conscientious suntans. The well-made faces and wry looks. They feel a sense of renewal, of communal recognition” (3). DeLillo immediately highlights here the narcissistic nature of the connections the people in this novel tend to register between each other. The people in this scene would seem content merely because they are among others who are like themselves, but Jack recognizes more precisely the foundations of their sense of community. These parents and their children actually appreciate the presence of others who are like themselves because, in looking at these familiar others, they see themselves. As Jack recognizes, they also base their “sense [. . .] of communal recognition” on a flood of products, including the “bicycles, skis, rucksacks, English and Western saddles, inflated rafts, [. . .] the stereo sets, radios and personal computers; small refrigerators and table ranges, [. . .] the junk food still in shopping bags—onion-and-garlic-chips, nacho thins, peanut creme patties, Wafelos and Kabooms, fruit chews and toffee popcorn; the Dum-Dum pops, the Mystic mints” (3). Jack’s use of the definite article here signals his weary familiarity with these objects, and with this “spectacle,” which he has “witnessed [. . .] every September for twenty-one years” (3).¹⁰ But the familiarity of these items is crucial to the communal bond among these people, for, in seeing others who also own them, they can categorize such people as like themselves, thereby categorizing them-

selves as well. Indeed, as Jack notes, because so much is on display here, this “assembly of station wagons, as much as anything they might do in the course of the year, more than formal liturgies or laws, tells the parents they are a collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation” (4).

DeLillo thus establishes immediately the novel’s interest in the relational, dialogic nature of identity formation, showing that our perception of others necessarily relies on categorical placement in relation to categorical placement of oneself. Subsequent examples of this phenomenon include the implicit assertion of the white self via the explicit recognition of “non-white” others; such moments show that in order to assert themselves, implicitly white individuals, like members of other, more marked categories, rely symbiotically for their conceptions of self on the categories of people that have developed in this country. DeLillo eventually demonstrates that in racial terms, members of the “white race” tend to rely on racialized categories for “non-whites” when regarding them, but not when regarding other whites. They thus seem to escape such categorization themselves when regarded by the dominant (that is, white) gaze (and certainly not, much to their probable surprise, when regarded by the gaze of an overtly racialized other).¹¹

Of course, as time goes by and American racial formations continue to mutate, generational differences in habitual deployment of racial categories evince themselves. DeLillo’s portraits in *White Noise* of variously aged characters periodically reflect such changes. At one point, Jack and his fourteen-year-old son Heinrich demonstrate such a difference in their perceptions of an apparently “non-white” other, Heinrich’s friend Orest Mercator. As the three of them chat together on the front steps of the Gladney home, Jack is befuddled by Orest’s plans to enter the record books by sitting for sixty-seven days in a cage full of poisonous snakes. Heinrich is struck with admiration, and he seems not to mind that his friend’s skin is distinctly darker than his, nor that his race is difficult to discern. Jack, on the other hand, tries to get a fix on this “older boy [. . .] of uncertain pigmentation” by attempting to insert him into familiar racial categories (DeLillo, *White* 206). “What kind of name is Orest?” Jack wonders, studying his features: “He might have been Hispanic, Middle Eastern, Central Asian, a dark-skinned Eastern European, a light-skinned black. Did he have an accent? I was-

n't sure. Was he a Samoan, a native North American, a Sephardic Jew? It was getting hard to know what you couldn't say to people" (208). Jack's colloquial usage of an indefinite "you" here refers implicitly to a white audience. His complaint acknowledges that white people accustomed to easily categorizable others are often at a loss in the face of the contemporary influx of immigrants, who could be from almost anywhere. As part of a gradual awakening to his habitual reliance on perceptual categories, Jack becomes vaguely aware, as he is here with Orest Mercator (whose cartographically resonant name evokes "the rest of the world"), of the eroding reliability of traditional American racial categories. Nevertheless, Jack has been raised as an implicitly white person in a culture bolstered by iconographic celebrations of heroic white men acting out their individualized roles against a backdrop of "inferior," racialized others. Thus, he eventually reverts to habitual uses of racialized others, casting them as bit players within his own similar enactments of a received, white male fantasy of selfhood. Prior to portraying Jack doing so, DeLillo establishes his protagonist's more general reliance on habitual categories to conceive of others, thereby implicitly registering a relational, falsely individualistic conception of himself.

Formations of the White Self

In Jack's opening description of "the day of the station wagons," his wry observations demonstrate not only his insight into the narcissistic nature of materialistic display, but also his own unconscious, reflexive tendency to categorize others. That is, he believes he knows the people populating this scene, not because he knows any of them personally, but rather because he has decided what type of people they are. Thus he assumes, for example, that as fathers who can afford to send their children to a private college, the men in this crowd are "content to measure the time, distant but ungrudging, accomplished in parenthood, something about them suggesting massive insurance coverage" (DeLillo, *White* 3). Significantly, however, Jack subtly indicates as he describes these people, and as he discusses them later with his wife, Babette, that in identifying them in certain ways, he simultaneously registers a conception of himself.

As Jack wearily views this "spectacle," the identificatory distance

he feels from its participants is signaled by the physical space between them and himself (he watches, apparently unseen, from his office window), and by the mildly derisive tone with which he assesses the scene's elements. Jack then returns home and reminds Babette that she's missed the show. Babette says,

"It's not the station wagons I wanted to see. What are the people like? Did the women wear plaid skirts, cable-knit sweaters? Are the men in hacking jackets? What's a hacking jacket?"

"They've grown comfortable with their money [. . .]. They genuinely believe they're entitled to it. This conviction gives them a kind of rude health. They glow a little."

"I have trouble imagining death at that income level," she said.

"Maybe there is no death as we know it. Just documents changing hands."

"Not that we don't have a station wagon ourselves."

"It's small, it's metallic gray, it has one rusted door."
(DeLillo, *White* 6)

It might seem that Jack and Babette are merely comparing notes in an offhand manner here, but DeLillo carefully portrays as well the Gladneys' simultaneous recognition of themselves as they consider these others. As Babette wonders what the people are wearing, for instance, she registers her own unfamiliarity with "their" clothing; Jack's response vaguely marks his own income-level by noting "their" higher level of income, a difference Babette then acknowledges as well with her mention of "death at that income level." Babette's eventual reminder that the Gladneys also have a station wagon indicates her polite awareness that their mutual assessment of this group of people has gone too far toward marking a separation between "them" and the Gladneys. Jack, however, is finally quick to note sardonically the *relative* shabbiness of the Gladney station wagon, thereby solidifying the difference between his family and these other families that he has been perceiving since the book's opening sentence.

While Jack and Babette enact here a common tendency to register mundane features of their self-conceptions while ostensibly assessing others, Jack's inclinations toward asserting his individual difference

are particularly markable in both racial and socioeconomic terms. If pushed a bit further, he would probably identify the categorical difference he detects here as a difference in class. Jack does not explicitly identify himself as a member of the middle class, a class whose relative lack of wealth separates its members from the sort of people who send their children to such places as “the College-on-the-Hill,” where Jack works. Yet Jack’s inclination toward declaring his individual difference rather than his group membership is largely due to his membership in both the “white race” and the “middle class.” Because the white middle class constitutes the representative majority, particularly in the media, its members tend not to foreground either of these group affiliations within their self-awareness. As a consequence, and as Jack repeatedly demonstrates, they are apt to adopt the mainstream American emphasis on individuality by thinking of themselves in individualistic terms. Ironically, however, when regarding others they must do so in categorical terms, registering them as this or that type (friend, co-worker, man or woman, “black” or “white”). As they do so, whites, like everyone else, categorize others as either like or unlike themselves, thereby asserting in the process who and what they themselves “are.” Accordingly, Jack continually resists being pigeonholed as this or that type, but he does so himself by identifying other people as members of a category to which he does not belong, thereby, inadvertently and unavoidably, placing himself into an *opposite* category.

Later in the novel, as the “Airborne Toxic Event” threatens the Gladneys after a train wreck releases a cloud of pesticide by-products, Jack again enacts what amounts to a class-based mode of self-assertion. When it becomes evident that the chemical cloud is approaching his family, Jack is reluctant to leave town. He explains his reluctance to his increasingly restless family, enacting once more his tendency to assert who he is by marking his difference from those in another apparent category: “These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. Society is set up in such a way that it’s the poor and uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters” (DeLillo, *White* 114). Later he continues, “I’m not just a college professor. I’m the head of a department. I don’t see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That’s for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the county, where the fish hatcheries are” (117). Jack has no doubt seen televised news footage of flood victims who live in

mobile homes. He has trouble imagining himself as the victim of a similar disaster because, like his children, he often relies habitually on categories of others supplied by the media, his conceptions of whom implicitly define who he is by defining who he is not. In this case, Jack's conception of himself as different from the members of a lower class does not result in his overt placement of himself into another group, the middle class. His placement in this class is implied rather than stated because the middle class is another default category rendered invisible by its supposed ubiquity, and by the media's implicit positing of it as the norm.¹²

Aside from asserting his own identity by perceiving the nonracialized differences of other (white) people, Jack also demonstrates the relational nature of identity-formation when he briefly encounters various racialized others. As he does so, he demonstrates that, as Frankenberg puts it, "whites are the nondefined definers of other people" (197). That is, while he never explicitly relies on the category of "white" to conceptualize other white people, nor himself, he relies immediately on racial categories in his conceptions of apparently racial others. One such incident occurs after the Gladneys are evacuated to a campground outside of Blacksmith during the "Airborne Toxic Event." As they mill about among the others there, Jack and Babette encounter a family of Jehovah's Witnesses "handing out tracts to people nearby" (DeLillo, *White* 132). This family also has differently colored skin, and Jack immediately categorizes them in terms of this difference: "We were next to a family of black Jehovah's Witnesses" (132). Of course, Jack does not mention as well that his own family is "white," but he has nevertheless implicitly done so by identifying these people as "black." Again, as Jack repeatedly demonstrates, while whites tend to use race as a means for defining others as different from themselves, they tend not to use it for defining other whites as similar to themselves. When white individuals encounter either white or "non-white" people, they tend in both cases not to register racial whiteness. When confronted with people of indeterminate ethnicity, as Jack demonstrates during his first encounter with Orest Mercator, the white self can become frustrated and vaguely anxious, unable to insert them immediately into familiar racial categories. Jack most fully enacts this frustration when he confronts the visibly "foreign" Willie Mink.¹³

All of this is not to say that ordinary white people like Jack are

overt racists, but they nevertheless demonstrate the common American tendency to foreground race in their conceptions of other people by immediately conceiving of racialized others in racial terms. People such as Jack and Murray would no doubt reject immediately the suggestion that they themselves are racists. Indeed, at one point, as Jack discusses with Murray whether or not the latter's landlord is a "bigot," they simultaneously distance themselves from overt racism. Murray tells Jack,

"He fixes things eventually. [. . .]. Too bad he's such a bigot."

"How do you know he's a bigot?"

"People who fix things are usually bigots."

"What do you mean?"

"Think of all the people who've ever come to your house to fix things. They were all bigots, weren't they?"

"I don't know."

"They drove panel trucks, didn't they, with an extension ladder on the roof and some kind of plastic charm dangling from the rearview mirror?"

"I don't know, Murray."

"It's obvious," he said. (DeLillo, *White* 33)

As is often the case, Murray reveals nothing "obvious" here, aside from his own classist bigotry regarding "people who fix things." More significantly, however, in positing in someone else the presence of extreme racism, Murray implicitly defines himself as distanced from it. Nevertheless, in a fundamentally racialized society, as Jack often demonstrates, it is often tempting for whites who would resist being labeled as racists to fall back on supposedly reliable racial categories when confronted with darker-skinned people, thereby habitually employing racist patterns of thought.

By thus illustrating in several instances the white self's tendency to resort to categorical habits when regarding other people, DeLillo establishes in *White Noise* a subtextual interest in the submerged racial dimensions of middle-class white American lives. He also deepens this portrait by suggesting the historical underpinnings of the general white American disinterest in racial issues. By interspersing racially inflected moments throughout his portrait of a professor of Hitler Studies who

teaches his subject without ever mentioning what most people now consider the most memorable result of Nazism, “the Holocaust,” DeLillo prompts consideration of a similar severance of contemporary America from its own racialized past. Murray and Jack are both satiric depictions of narrow, overly professionalized academics, but their glaring neglect of “the Holocaust” invites certain questions. How could it be, for instance, that a Jewish American like Murray could find entirely unobjectionable his colleague’s blithe indifference to Hitler’s treatment of Jews? Further consideration of their relationship could also raise the question of how it came to be that a white professor like Jack could unblinkingly welcome a Jewish colleague like Murray, something virtually unthinkable until fairly recent times.¹⁴ Jack and Murray display no historical awareness that could prompt discussion of these issues between them. Also, within the novel’s setting of relatively isolated whiteness, none of the characters seems to wonder how it is that an environment saturated with white people ever came about. Indeed, in a social landscape where the only object of monumental significance is a barn that memorializes nothing more than its own fame, an awareness of the past as in any way significant to the present is entirely absent. The novel eventually suggests that such phenomena are logical results of the initial establishment of a superior “white race,” whose contemporary members must repress the genocidal tendencies of its racialized past in order to believe in the fiction of a racially harmonious, equitable present.

The Present Absence of the History of Whiteness

DeLillo prompts consideration of the lost history that has led to current racial configurations by inserting into Jack’s seemingly aimless narrative a visit to a place conspicuously labeled “THE OLD BURYING GROUND.” Upon entering the graveyard, Jack sees that the headstones are “small, tilted, pockmarked, spotted with fungus or moss” (DeLillo, *White* 97). As he struggles to read the “barely legible” names and dates on the neglected grave markers, Jack begins to feel isolated, listening in vain for something that could assuage his growing fear of death. In the silence that fills this one place in Blacksmith that is not infused with the circumambient buzz of white noise, Jack’s isolation signals the severed connections of the white self from an historical narra-

tive that could account for its formation. In coming to live in Blacksmith, Jack has moved away from any direct familial connections he may have once had to the past. None of his own ancestors are buried in this cemetery, and his psychic distance from them is suggested by his neglecting even to mention them. As a result of his ancestors having become “white,” Jack also finds himself cut off from their ethnic origins. DeLillo suggests here this bleaching out of ethnic affiliations and of the past by emphasizing the whitest thing in nature, snow: “I stood there listening. The wind blew snow from the branches. Snow blew out of the woods in eddies and sweeping gusts. [. . .] I stood and listened” (97–98). Jack finds no comfort here, and a certain uneasiness prompts him to utter what amounts to a contemporary, middle-class, white American prayer: “May the days be aimless. Let the seasons drift. Do not advance the action according to a plan” (98). Having achieved a comfortable, self-gratifying material success, and encouraged by absorption into the “white race” to cast off its ancestral and cultural past, the middle-class white self finds honoring its ancestors less important. Of course, subsequent “Americanized” generations of explicitly racialized people tend to lose cultural ties as well. However, the process is particularly exacerbated for whites by the emphasis implicitly placed on the seemingly autonomous, unmarkedly white self, shorn of racial affiliations.

Another significant, howling absence in this scene, of course, is religion. As a thoroughly secularized American, Jack formulates his own prayers and seeks no solace from higher authority. Death itself thus takes on an emptiness, a quality contemplated by Jack and Babette after they admit to each other their mutual fear of dying. Babette asks,

“What if death is nothing but sound?”

“Electrical noise.”

“You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful.”

“Uniform, white.” (DeLillo, *White* 198)

In *White Noise*, which DeLillo has described as a novel “about death on a personal level” (qtd. in Moses 86), whiteness is repeatedly intertwined with the notion of death. At another point, for instance, Jack is awakened just before dawn by his son Wilder, who gestures for him to look out a window. When Jack does so, he notices “a white-haired man” sitting in their backyard. Having been exposed to Nyodene-D,

Jack has become increasingly superstitious; he wonders, for instance, if he's been awakened at an "odd-numbered hour," odd numbers having come to remind him of death. Half-awake and in a dream-like state, Jack is gripped by the chilling thought that he has died, and that this mysterious apparition has come to get him:

Was he as old as I'd first thought—or was that hair purely emblematic, part of his allegorical force? That was it, of course. He would be Death, or Death's errand-runner, a hollow-eyed technician from the plague era, from the era of inquisitions, endless wars, of bedlams and leprosariums. He would be an aphorist of last things, giving me the barest glance—civilized, ironic—as he spoke his deft and stylish line about my journey out. [. . .] I was scared to the marrow. (243)

Eventually, Jack manages to shake off the sense that his last moment has arrived. Before he does so, he repeatedly describes himself as "white" for the only time in the novel: "I felt myself getting whiter by the second. What does it mean to become white? How does it feel to see Death in the flesh, come to gather you in? [. . .] I moved quickly through [the children's] rooms on bare white feet" (244–45). Teetering on the edge of the void, Jack returns from intimations of an empty, white death into ordinary life; after hiding for a while in the bathroom and clutching his copy of *Mein Kampf*, he steps outside and discovers that this specter is only his father-in-law, Vernon Dickey.

As DeLillo's repeated conflation of whiteness and death suggest, one cause of the white self's lack of self-awareness as white may be a certain emptiness in whiteness itself, a blankness unable to support sustained consideration, not unlike that brought to mind by the idea that death itself may be nothing more than nothing. In its dramatization of Jack's representative tendency to recoil from the emptiness of whiteness, *White Noise* recalls another, more direct literary contemplation of the topic. In a chapter entitled "The Whiteness of the Whale," Herman Melville's Ishmael ponders the associations that have gathered around this hue. After offering a compendium of examples of the positive connotations whiteness has had in many cultures, Ishmael wonders (enacting with a pun his own tendency to intertwine the comic with the horrific) why "it was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 163). In DeLillo's

slightly eerie confluences of “white noise,” a bleached-out, “white” American existence led by unspokenly white people, and a series of associations between death and whiteness, he creates the same sense Ishmael describes, a sense that “for all [the] accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet, and honorable, and sublime, there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 164).

Moby-Dick and *White Noise* both suggest that to turn away from whiteness because its very emptiness strikes a “panic to the soul” is a natural, even primitive response. In addition, both texts are also readable as meditations not merely on the color itself, but on what has been *made* of the color, particularly the racial deployment of it.¹⁵ A specific terror both novels evoke is that of the construction of the “white race” and of the driving forces that led to its construction. In these terms, the blankness of racial whiteness signals the absence from white consciousness of an historical awareness that would account for its formation as “white.” Facing up to this past and its connections to one’s own whiteness is indeed discomfiting, so much so that generations of whites have repressed it to virtual irrecoverability. Thus, when Jack hears only silence in the deathly white cemetery, evoking nothing from the past, he suggests the contemporary white severance from history itself. As in his contented conception of Blacksmith as a place that is “not smack in the path of history and its contaminations,” Jack enacts the white self’s separation from a history that is lost because, when the white self looks at it for long, it tends to feel a “contaminating” culpability (DeLillo, *White* 85). History no longer speaks to the white self because to contemplate the historical results of the establishment of a “white race” would require acknowledgment of the part that one’s own whiteness has played in America’s own versions of “the Holocaust.” As several historians have recently noted in their efforts to re-envision history from this perspective, conceptions of the “white race” necessarily included conceptions of other racial categories.¹⁶ The result of the white establishment of Other, “inferior races” was the eventual ruthless exploitation of those races. Subsequent formations of white cultural identity have included a gradual repression of these ugly facts because closely attending to America’s past would reveal the heart of darkness at the heart of whiteness.

Like Melville, then, DeLillo evokes the white tendency to turn away from the sense of horror that this history of whiteness can inspire. In addition, DeLillo subtly portrays some of the innumerable ways that this history still shapes the conception of the white self, even as the white self denies its affiliations with whiteness in a continual conception of itself as merely an autonomous individual. At one point in his account, for instance, Jack reflexively reaches back into the historical underpinnings of whiteness to reassert himself when he faces exposure as an ordinary, undistinguished face in the crowd. While shopping with his family in “a huge hardware store at the mall,” Jack is recognized by a university colleague, Eric Massingale (DeLillo, *White* 82). Having never encountered Jack off-campus, Massingale is struck by how different Jack looks when unadorned by sunglasses and a gown, his symbolic projections of a professorial self. Asking twice for Jack’s promise that he “won’t take offense,” Massingale tells him, “You look harmless, Jack. A big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy” (83). As one “average” guy to another—meaning one white, middle-class male to another—Massingale hesitates to make this observation because, being such a man himself, he intuitively senses that being subsumed into the homogenous, unvariegated ordinary counters the white self’s conception of its own individual autonomy. “Why would I take offense?” Jack asks, “hurrying out the door” (83). He obviously is offended by having his membership in the ordinary pointed out, and his response is to assert himself in a distinctly contemporary way, by shopping.

Jack conceives of himself while shopping in a particularly white, male way, by selectively reaching back into history to retrieve narrative elements for the construction of a setting that is especially suited to a white man’s assertion of self. Jack has laid some of the groundwork for this setting by describing the enormous hardware store, in which he notes a “great echoing din, as of the extinction of a species of beast” (DeLillo, *White* 82). This peculiar sense he has of something wild about this space continues to guide his description, prompting him to note “power saws that could fell trees,” “sacks of peat and dung,” rope that “hung like tropical fruit”; in addition, flickering at the margins like the “colored spots” he repeatedly glimpses at the peripheries of his vision, are people who speak “Hindi, Vietnamese, related tongues” (82). As a character observes in DeLillo’s first novel, *Americana*, “To consume in

America is not to buy; it is to dream” (270). By depicting Jack’s search here for a way to assert himself against the facts of his membership in the unremarked, white, American ordinary, DeLillo portrays in him a white tendency to resist categorical inclusion and to assert instead a fantasized version of autonomous selfhood.

As Jack and his family move out into the mall’s “waterfalls, promenades, and gardens” after his demeaning encounter with Massingale, Jack inserts himself into the role of an aggressive, plundering white adventurer, sampling and grabbing from an international array of exotic “goods,” paternalistically directing his family members like underlings on an expedition:

When I said I was hungry, they fed me pretzels, beer, souvlaki. The two girls scouted ahead, spotting things I might want or need. [. . .] I shopped with reckless abandon. [. . .] I traded money for goods. The more money I spent, the less important it seemed [. . .] I was the benefactor, the one who dispenses gifts, bonuses, bribes, *baksheesh*. (DeLillo, *White* 83–84)

Jack does describe the excited participation of his family members here, but mainly in reference to himself. His primary focus is his own satisfying sense of self-enlargement: “I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I’d forgotten existed. [. . .] I felt expansive” (84). The irony here is that while Jack seeks in his empowering conception of a shopping self a distinguishing difference from his membership in “the ordinary,” he unwittingly marks himself as white by enacting the particularly white habit of asserting one’s individuality, and by inserting himself into a role that relies on the conception of an exotic, racialized environment.¹⁷

Hovering at the margins of this scene, as throughout the book, are the absences of death and history. The various racialized peoples evoked by Jack’s description of foreign “tongues” recall the subjugated others forced to make way for colonizing whites. After establishing in several scenes this connection between Jack’s white reliance on racialized others in order to conceive of himself, DeLillo more fully evokes in another hushed scene the repressed presence of these peoples buried deep within the white psyche. Having become increasingly desperate to quell his anxiety over his impending demise, Jack searches for

his wife's supply of Dylar, the white pills supposedly designed to "speed relief" to the part of the brain that harbors the fear of death. When Jack's daughter tells him that she threw the pills away, Jack goes to the kitchen compactor and braces himself, then pulls out an "oozing cube of semi-mangled cans, clothes, hangers, animal bones and other refuse" (DeLillo, *White* 258). In a scene that prefigures DeLillo's extensive deployment of garbage imagery and motifs in *Underworld*, Jack takes this cube out to the garage, then gingerly pokes it apart with the handle of a rake.

Jack soon realizes that the garbage contains no Dylar, but he keeps poking through it anyway, feeling like a "household spy" as he does so. In depicting at length Jack's careful consideration of what he finds here, DeLillo gradually builds on the subtle connections he has established between racial whiteness and its forgotten past. Unable to find the symbolic "white" pill that would suppress his awareness of death, Jack confronts instead "product colors [that are] undiminished in color and intensity" (DeLillo, *White* 258). In a novel so infused with aural, visual, and cultural whiteness, the moments of vivid color are highlighted by contrast, and thus rendered suggestive. As part of a racial subtext, DeLillo's account of the predominantly white setting of this novel continually registers the presence of racialized Others flickering at the margins, including the occasional "foreign tongues" at the shopping mall, Orest Mercator, the "Iranian" who delivers Jack's newspapers, and finally, Willie Mink.

When considered within the novel's constellation of racialized colors, the product colors here become racially encoded as well. Jack invokes the sense of a search for lost human remnants when he notes that he "felt like an archeologist about to sift through a finding of tool fragments and assorted cave trash" (DeLillo, *White* 258). As Jack confronts this brightly colored "cube" of garbage, he describes it as sitting "there like an ironic modern sculpture, massive, squat, mocking," and inviting interpretation (259). Reluctant at first to confront the "full stench" that has hit him "with shocking force," Jack eventually does just that: "I picked through it item by item, mass by shapeless mass, wondering why I felt guilty, a violator of privacy, uncovering intimate and perhaps shameful secrets" (259). Prying into any unpleasant subject that is habitually ignored is bound to inspire this sensation that one "shouldn't" be doing so, be it the family garbage or the "white" past.

Indeed, in light of the color-encoded connections made here to the novel's subtextual interest in American racial formations, Jack's actions suggest the response of the contemporary white person who would attempt to face the buried, repressed history of whiteness.

So fully has mainstream American culture repressed the unpleasant aspects of its past that to look back at it would be like being hit with the "full stench" of the garbage that assaults Jack. For most whites, acknowledgment of the white past is particularly unpleasant, to say the least, so middle-class whites often regard bringing up this past as something like an invasion, and a particularly impolite one at that. Most white people asked to consider the connections of their own whiteness to such a past are likely to *feel* as Jack does here, as if they are being confronted with "shameful secrets." In addition, if generations of whites habituate themselves to avoiding such subjects for long enough, and to dissociating themselves from their own racial status by thinking of themselves instead in individualized terms, they eventually forget how to "read" such aspects of the American past. Jack's own avoidance of even glaringly evident racial atrocities in the past has already been indicated by his position as a professor of Hitler Studies who studiously avoids the "white" Nazi decimation of the racialized Jewish other. Unsurprisingly, then, he is finally mystified by the "signs" and "clues" that he suspects are here. Similarly, a full account of America's fundamentally racialized past is virtually beyond recovery for most whites, leaving them with a sense of history no fuller than the broad reveries of populist patriotism. As the novel progresses, Jack's enactment in this scene of the white self's turning away from the collective past of whiteness finally coalesces with brief portrayals of the ironic white tendency to rely on others to assert a supposedly unique self. Eventually, in the novel's climactic anti-climax, Jack makes a last-ditch, racially charged effort to assert himself by shooting Willie Mink.

The Deathliness and the Death of the White Self

In Jack's typically wayward manner, he opens one chapter with a veiled description of a suppressed white anxiety: "Our newspaper is delivered by a middle-aged Iranian man driving a Nissan Sentra. Something about the car makes me uneasy—the car waiting with its headlights on, at dawn, as the man places the newspaper on the front steps.

I tell myself I have reached an age, the age of unreliable menace. The world is full of abandoned meanings" (DeLillo, *White* 184). In another attempt here to parse out his feelings in a world he often has trouble recognizing, Jack experiences a characteristic drift into abstraction, unable to say just why this sight troubles him. It seems to me that what prompts this insecurity in Jack is not only this markedly foreign car, but also the driver's apparent ethnic status as an "Iranian." Jack can hardly admit, even to himself, the racist underpinnings of such fears, having adopted the polite middle-class reluctance to consider an overtly racialized individual in overtly racist terms. Thus he transfers his anxiety to the Iranian man's car, finding himself as a result unable to explicate his uneasiness. Writing in the early 1980s, DeLillo clearly evokes here the media-generated associations of Iranian men and Japanese cars with threats to American security. The "Iranian Hostage Crisis" had recently occupied much of America's attention, as had the media's focus on a series of incidents that contributed to the general stereotype of Middle Eastern men as potential terrorists. Also alluded to here by Jack's discomfort with the "Nissan Sentra" is the gradual incursion into American markets of Japanese products, an incursion marked most explicitly as an invasion by the attention the media paid to Japanese sales of that most American of products, the automobile.¹⁸ Again, Jack would be unlikely to consider himself a racist. Thus, the negative associations swirling auratically around this man may be too clearly racist for Jack to acknowledge them fully, so he registers instead a vague unease inspired by the generally threatening "age" in which he lives.

Severed as he is from the realities of the history leading to his own racial invisibility, Jack has nevertheless inherited that history's legacy, including a predisposition toward making potentially threatening Others a more reliable "menace" by placing them into pre-established, predictable categories. As Jack says here, "the world is full of abandoned meanings," and these include the old, reliable categories of race, ethnicity, and nationality (184). As American demographic patterns continue to decrease the majority status of whites, and as people of innumerable apparent types continue to intermingle, the reliability of the traditional categories will continue to erode. DeLillo subtly prophesizes as well that the increasingly frequent presence of other people who look, talk, behave, and think differently from "normal" (middle-

class white) ways will gradually expose middle-class whites and culture as but one group of racialized people and one culture among many others.¹⁹

Jack most fully enacts his habitual use of racialized others to establish his own, unmarkedly white autonomy when he inserts himself into a revenge plot against Willie Mink, another man of markedly “foreign” ethnicity. As Jack heads for Iron City after learning where to find Mink, he has constructed a carefully arranged, cinematically inflected revenge plot in which he means to play a role. As many critics have noted, DeLillo’s satiric depiction of abject, postmodern suggestibility culminates in this scene, particularly in the bizarre characterization of Willie Mink. For Dylar-addled Mink, the difference between reality and media-generated representation has virtually collapsed, as evinced by his tendency to intersperse his scattered, spoken thoughts with snatches of TV-speak: “Dylar failed, reluctantly. But it will definitely come. Maybe now, maybe never. The heat from your hand will actually make the gold-leafing stick to the wax paper” (DeLillo, *White* 308). Mink also takes words themselves for the real thing; when Jack says, for instance, “hail of bullets” or “plunging aircraft,” Mink cringes and cowers in terror, as if the words themselves are real. As his revenge plot progresses, Jack also demonstrates his dependence on the simulacrum-like categories of perception encoded in words, including racial ones.

As Jack enters the motel where Mink resides, he believes that he sees “things anew. [. . .] I was moving closer to things in their actual state as I approached a violence, a shattering intensity” (DeLillo, *White* 304–05). Ironically, though, Jack again resorts to reliable categories in which he inserts a perceived Other in order to construct an appropriate backdrop for his assertion of an individualized self. DeLillo emphasizes Jack’s particularly white reaction to racialized others by again depicting him as frustrated by the poor fit of his old racial categories with a new figure, Willie Mink: “Did he speak with an accent? His face was odd, concave. [. . . W]as he Melanesian, Polynesian, Indonesian, Nepalese, Surinamese, Dutch-Chinese? Was he a composite?” (307). Jack’s white American maps for a handsome, male appearance also do not apply to such a figure, so he feels sorry for Babette because in order to get Dylar, she had to “kiss a scooped-out face” (310). DeLillo confirms that the jutting features of a white male still constitute mainstream American standards of attractiveness by having Mink admit that

when Babette visited him incognito, she kept a ski mask on “so as not to kiss my face, which she said was un-American” (310). The logical outcome of this persistent, paradoxical need of the white self that Jack demonstrates here—the need to mark others as “Other” so that it can implicitly define itself—is tyranny, the present absence in Jack’s teachings of “Hitler Studies.” Just as the Nazi notion of Aryan whiteness depended on a contrasting notion of racialized Others, so the white self needs to establish definitions of Others in order to define itself.

Jack has hunted down Mink for entirely tyrannous, “selfish” reasons, and he carries out his meticulous plan in a particularly white way. Jack has long been obsessed with his own death, bolstering his sense of himself by appropriating the aura of whatever strikes him as “death-defying,” including Hitler, the German language, and things Germanic in general. His exposure to the “Airborne Toxic Event” has accelerated this self-interest, leading up to this absurd effort to affirm his life by taking that of another. By continuing to intermingle images of whiteness and death in this scene, DeLillo suggests that a gnawing fear of death is the logical outcome of the American obsession with self, and that this obsession is especially encouraged in white individuals by their lack of conscious racial affiliation. In addition, DeLillo emphasizes a blind spot in this sense of self by showing that in order to *have* a sense of self, the white self must nevertheless rely on a conception of how the presentations of that self are perceived by others.

Jack’s whiteness is repeatedly challenged here in two ways: its invisibility begins to dissipate as Mink verbally marks Jack’s racial whiteness, and Jack’s habitual efforts to get a fix on this apparent racial “composite” by resorting to familiar categorical templates are again frustrated. Mink, on the other hand, has no trouble pigeonholing Jack in racialized terms, noting upon first seeing him, “I see you as a heavy-set white man about fifty” (DeLillo, *White* 308). The white colonial past, when the white man was visibly marked as such by contact with the racialized others he sought to exploit, is more concretely evoked by Mink when he asks, “Why are you here, white man? [. . .] You are very white, you know that?” (310). When Jack finally chases Mink into cowering behind a toilet, he describes himself moving forward, “seeking to loom. [. . .] I loomed in the doorway, conscious of looming, seeing myself from Mink’s viewpoint, magnified, threatening” (311–12).

Jack also notes that Mink's "face appeared at the end of the white room, a white buzz. [. . .] He sat wedged between the toilet bowl and wall, one sandal missing, eyes totally white" (312). By thus highlighting whiteness as Jack shoots Mink, DeLillo dramatizes the ultimate outcome of the white fetishization of self, its denial of its particularly parasitic dependence on others for the establishment of itself. If the white self can only establish itself in individualistic terms by establishing what others supposedly are (thereby establishing what it itself is not), then the white self has no answer to Willie Mink's sudden, odd question: "Who are you, literally?" As historian David Roediger sums up this central insight in regards to the broader context of American history, "Whiteness describes, from Little Big Horn to Simi Valley, not a culture but precisely the absence of culture. It is the empty and therefore terrifying attempt to build an identity based on what one isn't and on whom one can hold back" (13). In this sense, aside from the symbols the white self adopts to project and represent itself on the basis of how others are expected to interpret those symbols, white racial identity, the white conception of itself, is "literally" nothing.

To note this fact, however, is not to say that the hyperreal notion of the autonomous, unmarkedly white self is any more absolutely inescapable than those generated by the media. We can turn away from the radio and the television and become more aware of the influences of the media-generated simulacrum, and whites can become aware of the dependence of their self-conceptions on categorized conceptions of others (racialized and otherwise). Doing so would also constitute a step toward an awareness of the constitutive facts of white communal membership. DeLillo finally suggests as much, a conversion from self-interest to an interest in others, when Jack's willfully selfish conception of himself dissolves as he realizes what this self-centeredness has led him to do. When he sees after shooting Mink that his victim's focus has changed from fear of a gun-wielding white man into self-absorbed pain, Jack's engorged self-conception begins to deflate, dependent as it is on Mink's fear of that self: "I tried to see myself from Mink's viewpoint. Looming, dominant, gaining life-power, storing up life-credit. But he was too far gone to have a viewpoint" (DeLillo, *White* 312). Jack's racialized fantasy completely dissipates after he attempts to set up a suicide scene by putting the gun in Mink's hand. Mink shoots Jack in the wrist, and Jack finally learns what he "literally"

is, after all—just another human body, not unlike Willie Mink: “The world collapsed inward. [. . .] What had happened to the higher plane of energy in which I’d carried out my scheme?” (313). Jolted by the sight of his own blood out of conceiving of himself and Mink as players in a staged, racialized plot, Jack is moved to conceive of Mink as more like than unlike himself.

Suddenly infused with the “old human muddle and quirks [. . . like c]ompassion, remorse, mercy,” and feeling that he is “seeing [Mink] for the first time as a person,” Jack turns from a killer to a rescuer, doing what he can after shooting Mink to keep him alive (DeLillo, *White* 313). As he turns to his own wound first, Jack explains that “[b]efore I could help Mink, I had to do some basic repair work on myself” (313). Unfortunately, this turn back inward continues. Aside from literally stanching the flow of his own blood, Jack also halts the flow of his selfless sympathy toward Mink by again focusing on himself as he carries out another pre-scripted set of actions. While Jack would seem to have broken free from his fantasized focus on himself, his self-conscious habits are finally too entrenched for his newfound sympathy to remain truly centered in another person. As he drags Mink out into the street in search of help, Jack soon constructs another scenario in which he again acts out a media-induced, life-affirming sense of himself:

I felt virtuous, I felt blood-stained and stately, dragging the badly wounded man through the dark and empty street. [. . .] There was a spaciousness to this moment, an epic pity and compassion. [. . .] Having shot him, having led him to believe he’d shot himself, I felt I did honor to both of us, to all of us, by merging our fortunes, physically leading him to safety. (314–15)

As a member of a race whose middle-class, male members are particularly discouraged from constructing their identities in raced, classed, and gendered terms, Jack finds himself unable to break out of the resultant habit of focusing single-mindedly on himself, even when ostensibly focusing on others. Such may not seem to be the case as he drops Mink off at a hospital and closes his account by describing the people and scenery of Blacksmith.

Jack’s wider perspective in this final section frames his account by recalling in its cinematic sweep his initial, distanced observation of “the

day of the station wagons.” He describes in careful detail the near-death experience on the highway of his son Wilder, the awe-struck gatherers before the “postmodern sunset,” and the befuddled older shoppers trying to find their ways amidst the rearranged supermarket shelves. But while this sudden outward orientation might suggest that Jack has reintegrated himself into a community, DeLillo indicates that it is anything but the traditional, interconnected notion of such a collective entity. Instead, Jack’s description highlights how the traditional connections between various representative members have been severed. The shouts of an elderly pair of women trying to call attention to Wilder’s dash across the highway go unheard, suggesting a lack of generational contact depicted throughout the novel, most particularly during Jack’s visit to the Blacksmith cemetery. In addition, the people who have gathered for the “stunning” sunsets, which have become more breathtaking since the “Airborne Toxic Event,” turn away from each other to absorb the spectacle on their own. As the anxiety-ridden older shoppers fumble about in the rearranged supermarket, the unmoved, unnamed centrality of whiteness is suggested by the location and appearance of the unmarked food: “Only the generic food is where it was, white packages plainly labeled” (326). The novel’s racial subtext is completed in the image of suggestive, “brightly colored packages” that swirl around generic whiteness. The people “of color” evoked by these colors will continue to challenge the universalizing presumptions of whiteness, befuddling those who insist on trying to label them with outmoded racial categories. In his depiction of Jack Gladney’s inability to wrest himself from his white modes of self-assertion, DeLillo finally suggests that if the notion of a “white race” is ever to loosen its obdurate grip on cultural centrality, people labeled (yet not labeled) as “white” will have to look at themselves as supposedly “white” people, thereby attaining a truer sense of cultural identity, and coming a step closer to relinquishing the fantasy of autonomous selfhood.

Notes

1. The absent, excluded other from middle-class white communities is usually conceived as a racialized Other, race being the major marker of difference in the U.S., but the category also includes members of other

economic classes, such as those often labeled “white trash” or “the homeless.”

2. For a discussion of these demographic changes as depicted in *White Noise* within a broader context of “globalization,” see Thomas Peyser.
3. In *Underworld*, DeLillo carefully explores, for the first time, the racial and/or ethnic identities of several African American and Italian American characters.
4. Feminist critique in general has long argued that the cultural centrality of men has resulted in the apparent universalization of unspoken male standards and norms, and thus in the common assumption that such a topic as “gender studies,” and indeed any interest in gender issues, is by and large concerned with women. Such assumptions are homologous, of course, to the common white assumption that race and racial problems are something that people “of color” have. For further discussion of this analogy, see Peggy McIntosh and Mike Hill.
5. As McIntosh writes, while describing her own upbringing in which she was rarely encouraged to think of herself as a white person, “I was taught [instead] to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual will” (78).
6. Dean MacCannell notes, in his illuminating discussion of the “nouvelle racism” faced by racialized others living within a contemporary, predominantly white community,

The minority individual begins to feel that the reputation of the entire ethnicity is riding on every detail of his or her behavior, diction, attire, condition of the lawn, appearance of the car and the living room, comportment of the children, the dog, and so on. [. . . A] black professional learns to accept that her white neighbors consistently call her by the name of the other black woman on the block. (103–04)

7. DeLillo has thus exercised what Mary Waters usefully delineates as a choice particularly available to those who can be taken as “white.” Waters writes in summary of her extensive study of this option:

Census data and my interviews suggest that [for middle-class whites] ethnicity is increasingly a personal choice of whether to be ethnic at all, and, for an increasing majority of people, of which ethnicity to be. An ethnic identity is something that does not affect much in everyday life. It does not, for the most part, limit choice of marriage partner (except in almost all cases to

exclude non-whites). It does not determine where you will live, who your friends will be, what jobs you will have, or whether you will be subject to discrimination. It matters only in voluntary ways. (147)

8. DeLillo has also said regarding the writer as an individualist: "We need the writer in opposition, the novelist who writes against power, who writes against the corporation or the state or the whole apparatus of assimilation. We're all one beat away from becoming elevator music" (qtd. in Begley 290).
9. The unmarkedness of DeLillo's racialized, authorial status as a writer is vigorously contested by John Kucich, who argues that DeLillo does not write "strenuously engaged political fiction" because he accepts as a given outcome of recent debates over identity politics the contention that a marginalized social status is necessary if one is to challenge authority, because the white male position is always already an authoritative position (329). Thus, Kucich claims, DeLillo's fictional portrayals of protagonists who are perpetually frustrated in their attempts to challenge authority express his agreement that "in aesthetic practice [. . .] the marginal or aggrieved social position of the speaker [. . .] guarantee its political legitimacy" (333). As this chapter will in part indicate, I would argue that while DeLillo does depict in Jack Gladney an effort to resist larger social forces that ultimately he is rendered impotent. This depiction need not be read as DeLillo's own authorial declaration of impotence, and particularly not as a declaration grounded in recognition of the political illegitimacy of his own position as a white male. For an excellent discussion of John Updike's depictions of white American masculinity in his *Rabbit* novels, see Sally Robinson.
10. Frank Lentricchia also notes, "The key cultural marker in [Jack's] list [. . .] is the innocent little definite article: He says the stereo sets, the hairdryers, and the junk food ("The station wagons arrived at noon" is the way the book begins) because he's evoking generic objects and events, things seen everywhere and all the time" ("Tales" 95).
11. As Frankenberg writes, "Whiteness, as a set of normative cultural practices, is visible most clearly to those it definitively excludes and those to whom it does violence. Those who are securely housed within its borders usually do not examine it" (229). In her discussion of "Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination," bell hooks has noted of her white students:

Usually, white students respond with naive amazement that black people critically assess white people from a standpoint where

“whiteness” is the privileged signifier. Their amazement that black people watch white people with a critical “ethnographic” gaze, is itself an expression of racism. Often their rage erupts because they believe that all ways of looking that highlight difference subvert the liberal belief in a universal subjectivity (we are all just people) that they think will make racism disappear. They have a deep emotional investment in the myth of “sameness,” even as their actions reflect the primacy of whiteness as a sign informing who they are and how they think. (168)

12. As Barbara Ehrenreich remarks, mainstream culture has a “tendency to see the middle class as a universal class, a class which is everywhere represented as representing everyone” (4). She elaborates, “[I]n our culture, the professional, and largely white, middle class is taken as a social norm—a bland and neutral mainstream—from which every other group or class is ultimately a kind of deviation” (3).
13. As Jack speaks to the father of this “black” family over the course of several pages, the novel’s racial subtext briefly rises to the surface, suggesting connections to other themes in the novel. For instance, as this man speaks to Jack, DeLillo renders him as vaguely “black” in his use of English (“He doesn’t have showy ways is how you know a saved person” [DeLillo, *White* 136]), and in his bodily movements (“He squatted easily, seemed loose-jointed and comfortable” [135]). These slight differences from the discourse and bodily hexis of Jack bring to mind for DeLillo’s protagonist, and perhaps for his readers, vaguely primitivist associations; indeed, Jack cements such associations in his sudden question, “Why are we talking to each other from this aboriginal crouch?” (137). DeLillo thus ties this scene to many other moments in which Jack makes a connection between such technological advances as the chemical death that threatens the Gladneys and a human response of primitive fear to them. Jack explicitly states this connection in response to a rumor sweeping the campground that synthetic organisms have been deployed to consume the toxic cloud: “The greater the scientific advance, the more primitive the fear” (161). DeLillo has made virtually verbatim comments in interviews, and he may be working to enhance this connection in this scene by suggesting associations that linger within the white imagination between blackness and the primitive. At the very least, this scene recalls in such ways the more explicit statement regarding such associations made by David Bell, the narrator and protagonist of DeLillo’s first novel, *Americana*, as he listens to jazz: “I felt this music had been in me all along, the smoky blue smell of it. [. . .] I pleased myself by thinking, as white men will do, that some Afro-instinct burned in an early part of my being” (*Americana* 144–45).

14. For further discussion of the systematic, pre-World War II efforts of American universities to exclude Jews, see Karen Brodtkin Sacks, who writes, "The Protestant elite [at major American universities] complained that Jews were unwashed, uncouth, unrefined, loud, and pushy" (82). See also Takaki, 304–07.
15. For further discussion of Melville's meditations on racial whiteness, see Valerie Babb and Toni Morrison.
16. See in particular David R. Roediger, Alexander Saxton, Theodore W. Allen, and Noel Ignatiev.
17. Members of an explicitly racialized category could no doubt seek self-assertion through shopping in such a space as well, but if they were to describe themselves doing so, they would be likely to construct the setting and describe their experiences in entirely different ways. Many African Americans, for example, might tell of the suspicious, watchful stares of clerks and managers, or of being repeatedly asked for further identification while using a credit card, or of entering an elevator and watching white shoppers protectively clutch their bags and purses. While Jack's whiteness leads him to conceive of a shopping mall as an exotic backdrop for individualized action, such a place can be an unpleasant and even distinctly hostile environment for an explicitly racialized American. For further discussion of black experiences while shopping, see Austin. For discussion of the privileges she enjoys as a white woman while shopping, see McIntosh.
18. As MacCannell writes, "While negative ethnic stereotyping is guarded against in European and American public life, and seems to be on the decline, it recurs more or less automatically, even in public settings, whenever an 'ethnic' group stands as a barrier to the unfettered economic pursuits of whites. 'Ethnicity' was invented in the first place for use on such occasions" (138).
19. See Waters and Alba, who both note a resurgence since *White Noise* was published in white reclamations of ethnic identity, largely as a response to the increasing presence and claims of racialized others.

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