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## CONSUMING AND DYING: MEANING AND THE MARKETPLACE IN DON DELILLO'S *WHITE NOISE*

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**Karen Weekes**

The title of Don DeLillo's book *White Noise* (1985) is generally interpreted using the scientific definition of this term, "a simultaneous combination of equally intense but random sound wave frequencies within a wide band width . . . producing a fairly constant sound with no pitch at all" (Aubry). This reading is definitely supported by the text and has been expounded upon by many critics. As Tom LeClair notes, DeLillo himself used the term in this sense in the earlier novel *The Names* (1982): "We take no sense impressions with us, no voices, none of the windy blast of aircraft on the tarmac, or the white noise of flight, or the hours of waiting" (qtd. in LeClair 208). The scientific term has paradoxical applications; it is both the background noise that constantly bombards us and a way for us to avoid that bombardment, as "white noise machines" create "soothing, useful sounds . . . to mask the abrasive, disruptive noises produced by certain [other] machines" (Aubry). Thus, the term "white noise" can be used in either a positive or a pejorative sense, depending on whether it refers to an unremitting noise one is trying to escape or to the sound introduced *as* escape.

Jack's introduction of sound in order to stave off his preoccupation with death is in keeping with the text's many associations of white noise and life. Babette emits "a creaturely hum" (DeLillo 15)<sup>1</sup> that is later writ large in the form of the "human buzz" in the mall (84), the "dull and unlocatable roar" in the grocery store "as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension" (36), and "the kind of low-level rumble that humans

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Karen Weekes is Associate Professor of English at Penn State University, Abington College. She is the editor of a book of quotations by women (*Women Know Everything*, 2007) and the author of numerous scholarly essays on contemporary American literature.

routinely make in large enclosed places” heard in the evacuation barracks (137). Another example of immersion in the prelinguistic world of human sound is Jack’s response to Wilder’s seven-hour crying jag. Jack describes Wilder’s lament as “large and pure” and finds that he does “not necessarily wish him to stop” once he recognizes that the child “was crying out, saying nameless things in a way that touched me with its depth and richness. . . . I began to think he had disappeared inside this wailing noise and if I could join him in his lost and suspended place we might together perform some reckless wonder of intelligibility” (78). He also notes the sounds of clothes tumbling in the dryer, the throbbing of the refrigerator, the radiator’s chirps—all mundane noises that soothe in their implication that peaceful domestic life continues.

Frank Lentricchia points out that the first section of the novel is “all about white noise, actual and metaphoric, that constitutes the setting of a postmodern life” (100), and, indeed, white noise as a trope is firmly established with the many references to this phenomenon in “Waves and Radiation,” recurrences that taper off dramatically as the book progresses. But white noise for Jack is more than setting: it is a manifestation and an integral element of his existence. Floating in this wash of inseparable sounds are the isolated words, phrases, or sentences that “tell Jack he’s not alone, allowing him to evade the feared silence” (LeClair 230). His “moment of splendid transcendence” when Steffie chants “Toyota Celica” occurs because her babble of “supranational names” that are “more or less universally pronounceable,” meaningless words that are “part of every child’s brain noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe” (155), joins him to a universal subconscious of mental processes, both verbal and pre-verbal; he is linked with life.

Many discussions of the title focus on its reflection of modern advertising and the media. As Leonard Wilcox phrases it, the “very notion of ‘white noise’ that is so central to the novel implies a neutral and reified mediaspeech, but also a surplus of data and an entropic blanket of information glut which flows from a media-saturated society” (197). This argument is supported by DeLillo’s original choice to title the novel “Panasonic” until prohibited by Matsushita Corporation (Keeseey 8). That name would indicate both the ubiquity of sound as well as its corporate associations, given the brand-recognition that the trademark name Panasonic enjoys. DeLillo argued to his editor that “‘Panasonic’ as a title is crucial” because “[t]he novel is filled with the sounds of people’s voices, with sirens, loudspeakers, bullhorns, kitchen appliances, with radio and TV transmissions, with references to beams, rays, sound waves, etc.” (qtd. in Max 66).

According to D. T. Max, DeLillo considered and rejected numerous other titles before settling on “White Noise.” This title emphasizes our culture’s saturation in sound, but encompasses other definitions as well, some of which focus on the physical properties of sound waves or the random nature of noise.

LeClair explores white noise in musicology (“the sound produced by all audible sound-wave frequencies sounding together—a term for complex, simultaneous ordering that represents the ‘both/and’ nature of systems”), and says that the working title “Panasonic” “indicates DeLillo’s concern with recording the wide range of sound, ordered and uncertain, positive and negative” (230). Timothy Aubry, in his useful and thorough discussion of “white noise,” says that “in everyday speech . . . [d]epending on the context, its scope can include any background noise that people don’t generally notice, or any background noise that they wish they didn’t notice, and the term can also be used to refer to anything—sounds, store displays, gossip—that people can’t avoid encountering but always try to ignore.” Other critics expand “white noise” into a trope for various semiotic failures, and the book’s emphasis on language and unstable meanings supports this reading as well.<sup>2</sup>

However, when examining a novel that is so obviously filled with images of and references to the marketplace, we would be remiss to ignore the thematic implications of “white noise” as a term from economics. Econometrics, the empirical research arm of economic theory, uses the phrase both in a sense similar to one previously discussed and in a quite different but also strikingly applicable one. As one glossary identifies it, “when there is no pattern whatsoever contained in the data series, it is said to represent white noise. This is analogous to a series that is completely random” (Makridakis and Wheelwright 641). This emphasis on unpredictability echoes the scientific definition of the term, which LeClair explains as “aperiodic sound with frequencies of random amplitude and random interval—a term for chaos” (230). Randomness in aperiodic sounds and series suggests the triple refrains occurring in *White Noise* (“The Airport Marriott, the Downtown Travelodge, the Sheraton Inn and Conference Center” [15]; “Krylon, Rust-Oleum, Red Devil” [159]) as well as the fragments of television programs that are scattered throughout.

A second economic definition of “white noise” is equally applicable to this text: a random event that has the potential to cause a permanent alteration in behavior, but instead results in a temporary change. For example, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, were a random shock; the event could have resulted in a long-term downturn in the U.S. economy, but instead its after-effects stabilized

relatively quickly. This lack of permanent effect makes its fluctuations a form of white noise, and some economists would term the event itself “white noise” for the same reason. One problem with white noise, especially of this type, is that it can obscure real changes in the environment; if several potential influences are occurring at once (and when are they not?), it can be hard to see the significance of a real causal agent if it is obscured by too many other factors that are short-term and relatively insignificant. This misleading feature of white noise, ironically, actually increases its importance simply through its capacity to mask or distract from real issues. *White Noise* is full of random events, but three fit this model especially well: the Airborne Toxic Event, Jack’s confrontation with death, and the final chapter’s reshuffling of items in the supermarket. The question is whether any of these are random shocks that result in real change or whether they are all merely forms of white noise.

Randomness is integrated into the book’s form as well as its content. Periodically, the narrative is interrupted by televised fragments, domestic sounds, or triplets of product names that haunt Jack’s consciousness. All of these bits of information are data, randomly interspersed into the postmodern world.<sup>3</sup> The television in the Gladney household is apparently tuned to news or public television, as every fragment reveals. Early in the book, when Jack is on his way upstairs to ponder the fleeting nature of life, he hears the television suggest, “Let’s sit half-lotus and think about our spines” (18). On another evening, he and Babette are discussing their choices of erotic literature, and a televised female voice says, “If it breaks easily into pieces, it is called shale. When wet, it smells like clay” (28). The family members argue about facts, truths (Is it raining or not? What do camels store in their humps? Is Babette taking Dylar?), not popular culture: no one wonders, nor does the television ever speculate about, who shot J. R. Although the Popular Culture Studies program is now called “The Department of American Environments” at the College-on-the-Hill, clearly at least one early-1980s domestic environ has resisted the banality of “Cheers” and the hypersexuality of MTV. Jack’s Waveform Dynamics bill charges him for “Cable Health, Cable Weather, Cable News, Cable Nature” (231). His family’s time together seems relatively commercial-free, focused almost exclusively on “factual” data, random though these fragments may be.

However, one cannot escape from advertising even when watching documentaries and news programs (and the Gladneys do watch the occasional sitcom on their Friday nights in front of the TV); the text’s lists of brand names and products illustrate the pervasiveness of

marketing, and their presentation in threes resonates with the sacredness of this number in various religions. These trinities suggest that materialism and commercialism have become a new source of meaning, an idea stated more explicitly when Jack checks his balance at an ATM and reflects, “the system had blessed my life. . . . What a pleasing interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. . . . [W]e were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies” (46). The Holy Trinity of Christianity is debunked in favor of the “existential credit” to be gained from “Mastercard, Visa, American Express” (100), and the devaluation of religion is epitomized in the nun who reveals that she simulates her beliefs.

Admittedly, in Jack’s world, this simulation is understandable because there is very little left in which to have faith. Religion has lost its resonance, the traditional working-class value of the integrity of labor has become outmoded, and academic pursuits float in an absurdly value-free theoretical realm—but capitalism and consumerism are on hand to fill the void. Murray says that he “can’t help being happy in a town called Blacksmith” (11), which is a “name that advertises old-fashioned values and country goodness” and indicates that there the Gladneys and Murray are “protected from the violence of the inner cities,” according to Douglas Keesey (135). Even death in Blacksmith should be “nonviolent, small-town, thoughtful” (76). The town seems snug and quotidian, safely dominated by “dry cleaning shops and opticians . . . tag sales and yard sales” (59), out of the “path of history and its contaminations” and the corrupting influences of the city (85). Murray makes this nostalgic leap; he sees cities as “full of situations,” including sexual imbroglios, and emanating a passionate and dangerous heat that “rises from the sidewalks and falls from the poisoned sky” (10–11). Urban dangers in the novel exist in Iron City, including Jack’s confrontation with Willie Mink (significantly, Jack has to drive into the city in order to attempt murder), the rooftop sniper with whom Heinrich plays chess, and Babette’s extramarital affair.

However, Blacksmith and its similarly named surrounding villages are neither domestic idylls nor havens from mortal danger. The first rumored death in the book occurs in Blacksmith, when a Mylex-suited worker collapses and dies while investigating the contamination of the elementary school (40), and in the search for the Treadwells, police instead find a bag containing a gun and two kilos of heroin (60). Blacksmith residents are evacuated as the Airborne Toxic Event sweeps over their homes, thus placing the town squarely

in the path of history and its literal contaminations. In nearby Bakersville, two bodies are found buried in a back yard. Watertown appears only in a news report featuring a burning sofa and a tenement (97), and in Glassboro, a man dies in a freak single-car accident, making him the victim of an “idiosyncrasy” of his particular automobile model (99). Less mortally threatening but more morally charged is the question of the sanctity of the Gladneys’ marriage, which seems, as does Blacksmith initially, to be wholesome and whole. However, despite Jack’s many assertions to the contrary, he and Babette do not “tell each other everything,” and she increasingly refuses to be the cheerful, simplistic partner that Jack insists that she be. Near the end of the novel, after a particularly snide and sophistic exchange, Jack complains, “Babette doesn’t speak like this” (301). As Emory Elliott points out, Babette does not sound like herself, she sounds like Murray—which is just one of the clues that the two may be having an affair (26–33).

Blacksmith, Bakersville, Watertown, and Glassboro are all town names that evoke a nostalgic clarity and simplicity yet are as misleading as the Amish beard framing the chin of the wiley, sexual, complicated Murray Jay Siskind. Farmington is another in this group, evoking rural plainness as the words “blacksmith” and “baker” do; but Farmington is the site of the “most photographed barn in America” (12–13), an empty simulacra in a town with a hyperreal name. The schism between the town names and their reality makes their lack of innocence all the more poignant; as Murray says, “it is possible to be homesick for a place even while you are there” (257). Just as there is no smithing in Blacksmith, these communities all evoke an outmoded labor ethic and economic simplicity that no longer exist either in the city or in the village.

This lack of respect for individual labor is also apparent in the fate of Vernon Dickey, Babette’s father. His name, “dickey,” can refer to an article of clothing that was once fashionable but is no longer in vogue, a false shirtfront or fabric insert that fills in a neckline and gives only the impression of substance. A man who has always worked with his hands, which show the effects of this life in their appearance as “scarred, busted, notched, permanently seamed with grease and mud,” Vernon now works itinerantly at odd jobs—shingling, roofing—“I moonlight, except there’s nothing I’m moonlighting from. Moonlight is all that’s out there” (245). When he suddenly drops in on the Gladneys and Babette converses with him, “the cadences of her speech changed, took on a rural tang. . . . This was a girl who’d helped her father sand and finish old oak, heave radiators up from the floorboards” in “his carpenter years” (248).

Ill and aging, Vernon still seeks to understand “techniques and procedures. Sets of special methods” (249) in fields where males work with their hands and bodies, not their brains and computers. He is not interested in understanding technology or academia, cooking or housework, but instead waits for “garbagemen, telephone repairmen, the mail carrier, the afternoon newsboy” and relishes a day spent watching a road crew “jackhammer and haul the asphalt, staying close to them as they leveled the smoking pitch. When the workmen left, his visit seemed to end, collapsed into its own fading momentum” (254–55), reflecting Vernon’s life as well. The road crew’s exit is followed shortly by Vernon’s own departure; his physical condition and the disrepair of his car make it unlikely that Babette and Jack will see him alive again.

Vernon represents a way of life that has passed as well as a gender stereotype to which Jack may not consciously subscribe but to which he is still vulnerable. Vernon threatens his son-in-law’s masculine capabilities, searching out items that need repairing in the Gladney house and seeing Jack’s “shakiness in such matters as a sign of some deeper incompetence or stupidity.” This lack brings up the question of “what could be more useless” than a man who cannot “fix a dripping faucet,” as Vernon valorizes simple items—grouting, washers, gaskets—“the things that built the world” (245). Since Babette worked with her father in her youth, she knows more about minor home repairs than Jack (Babette, not Jack, “caulks the tub and sink” [15]), who wonders if Vernon is right in his assessment. Jack’s male pride is similarly pricked when Vernon gives him a gun, Vernon introduces the gift by asking:

“In your whole life *as a man* in today’s world, have you ever owned a firearm?”

“No,” I said.

“I figured. I said to myself here’s *the last man* in America who doesn’t own the means to defend himself. . . . It’s a little bitty thing but it shoots real bullets, which is all *a man* in your position can rightly ask of a firearm.” (252–53, emphasis added)

Jack begins to see the gun as “the ultimate device for determining one’s competence in the world” and wonders, “What does it mean to a person, beyond his sense of competence and well-being and personal worth, to carry a lethal weapon, to handle it well, be ready and willing to use it?” (254). Although Jack uses the genderless words “one” and “person,” he uses the masculine singular pronoun “his”

and is depicting a stereotypically male sense of “competence and well-being and personal worth” that would manifest itself in power and the ability to commit violence. As Jack holds the automatic and ponders its import, Vernon significantly warns him not to tell Babette and to keep it out of reach of children, thus emphasizing the dangerous, masculine aspects of the power that he is conferring. However, when Jack tries to enact the omnipotent, vengeful role that his wife, his father-in-law, his colleague, and his culture (seen in the predictable scripts that he repeats to himself as he breaks in on Willie Mink) are pressing upon him, he fails completely, both by not executing his jealous rage upon the agent of his cuckolding and by being shot himself.

Rather than competence through aggression and other stereotypical masculine pursuits, an alternative basis for Jack’s sense of self is his career. Here again, the passing of an economic model favoring the nobility of the worker and his identification with, and integrity of, his labor is made clear. Founder and Head of the Department of Hitler Studies at the prestigious College-on-the-Hill, Jack has created an impressive persona that would seem to give him substance. Unfortunately, he knows all too well what a sham this identity, J. A. K. Gladney, really is, saying, “I am the false character that follows the name around” (17) and constantly fearing exposure as a monolingual English-speaker. His power in the classroom, where he electrifies students with his presentations on Hitler,<sup>4</sup> does not protect his family or himself from the Airborne Toxic Event, despite its being anomalous, in Jack’s understanding, for catastrophes to strike middle-class professionals.

With the exception of Winnie Richards, the brilliant but paranoid scientist, his fellow academics fail to inspire respect. The university itself is “trivialized by the nostalgic study of popular and youth culture” (LeClair 209), epitomized by his colleagues who have food fights in the cafeteria, read nothing more thought-provoking than tabloids or UFO magazines, and are obsessed with making sense of and proving mastery over their own pasts rather than any larger intellectual issue. Murray, the visiting lecturer, is more philosophical and insightful than the rest of his department, but he participates in this vacuum in the Department of American Environments, teaching a course on the car crash in American cinema and attempting to make Elvis into an entire field of study, as Jack has with Hitler. The conflation of Elvis and Hitler minimizes the horror associated with the latter, situating academics in a relativist world that floats free of values and mores. Hitler majors take Jack’s “Advanced Nazism” course, “designed to cultivate historical perspective,



theoretical rigor and mature insight into the continuing mass appeal of fascist tyranny, with special emphasis on parades, rallies and uniforms" (25). At no point is Hitler's violence or genocide mentioned, only his image and speeches, making "Hitler" a mere "signifier in a code that does not register the moral significance of his name, but trades him as a commodity on the academic market" (Reeve and Kerridge 307). This lack of critical thinking or contextual consideration transforms academia into a hollow, amoral shell. The college's name, resonating with John Winthrop's assertion of America's destiny as a "city on a hill," juxtaposes the puritanical, intellectual bent of academia in early America with the secular, dilettantish attitude that prevails in Jack's university. Courses, research areas, even the privileged students' postures of study in the library are revealed as just that: postures, "decorative gestures [that] add romance" (9), but no real meaning, to life. "American culture, says DeLillo, remains on its hill, but God's countenance has been withdrawn" (Coward 79), leaving another void where faith, or at least faith in education, once resided.

Religion, rural simplicity, masculinity, and intellectual pursuits are all inadequate sources for identity and significance. Consumerism, or economic fulfillment, is the only remaining element that seems able to lend meaning to Jack's existence. When Jack is caught without his academic robe and dark glasses during a trip to the hardware store, his colleague calls him a "big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy" (83). Shaken by this encounter, Jack enacts Murray's dictum that "Here we don't die, we shop" (38), and an orgy of consumption follows. The inevitable consequence of Jack's aging is negated as he acts on the other option in the tongue-in-cheek slogan that Don DeLillo posits for the US in an interview: "Consume or die." DeLillo continues, "Through products and advertising people attain impersonal identity. . . . It's as if fantasies and dreams could become realized with the help of the entire consumer imagination that surrounds us, a form of self-realization through products" (Nadotti 93). Indeed, Jack sees himself in a different light after his spree at the Mid-Village Mall, remarking that "I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed" (84). He discovers the power of discrimination, rejecting some products, stores, and brands while embracing others; the power of omnipotent benefaction, buying his family members their Christmas presents without being "bothered with tedious details" (84); and the power of consuming simply for the sake of consumption, asserting competence in the marketplace by having available the money to spend there. He "trades money for goods. The more money I spent, the less

important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. . . . These sums in fact came back to me in the form of existential credit" (84).

This credit helps to insulate Jack from both dying and his fear of dying; as Katherine Hayles points out, "shopping assures the consumer that material existence will continue" (409). Jack's experience at the mall also helps him see himself and his existence as part of a larger community, a personal domestic group and a more general capitalist culture. Thomas Ferraro explains that Jack "searches out his family, both literally and figuratively" after his encounter with his colleague and "becomes 'one' with his family, which in turn achieves its 'oneness' through the activity of shopping" (21–22). Ferraro emphasizes the use of the first-person plural pronouns throughout Jack's account of the day-long shopping frenzy, suggesting Jack's surrender of himself to yet another type of power, the "communalizing power" of commerce, which "produces what we might call an aura of connectedness among individuals: an illusion of kinship, transiently functional but without either sustaining or restraining power" (22, 20). It is the experience of purchasing that connects Jack with his family, not the specific items he buys. One could argue that an instrumental manifestation of love for his family is the locus of meaning in this event, as salient and commendable as Vernon's concern for the leaky faucets and safety considerations in his daughter's home, but Jack experiences the same fulfillment from buying things he does not need as he does in preparing for "distant contingencies" (84). As he admits, "I shopped for its own sake" (84), and this immersion in the power of the dollar and in the community of fellow consumers restores his sense of personal worth on more than a merely monetary level.

Jack's long day at the mall becomes a mock-epic quest to restore the hero's sense of competence and nobility. Just as ancient champions proved their manhood or personal worth in a coliseum, Jack finds himself in a vast agora, built on a scale that evokes the Lost Gardens of Babylon and filled with the white noise of an arena (in an oxymoronic twist, even the background music emphasizes the fact that people surround him): "A band played live Muzak. Voices rose ten stories from the gardens and promenades, a roar that echoed and swirled through the vast gallery, mixing with noises from the tiers, with shuffling feet and chiming bells, the hum of escalators, the sound of people eating, the human buzz of some vivid and happy transaction" (84). By successfully participating in the shopping activities of his family and the conspicuous consumption of his culture, Jack restores his equilibrium—lacking his academic gown, Jack replaces it by spending money, making both a literal and metaphoric

“gestur[e] in what I felt was an expansive manner” in order to impress others (84).

Jack's shopping mania lasts no longer than the sting from his colleague's comments: a thoughtless chance encounter results in a day of spending frenzy, but then Jack seems restored, ready to attend to his regular concerns and return to his normal level of anxiety. Other occurrences in the book, such as his exposure to a toxic airborne chemical and his confrontation with Willie Mink, force Jack to face his physical mortality rather than simply wound his ego, and we might expect that these experiences would modify Jack's character in some more lasting way. These events have the potential to change him, but his apparent resistance to their effects makes these random shocks also fall into the category of white noise.

The Airborne Toxic Event (ATE) certainly would be expected to make a permanent change in Jack; exposure to it gives him a prognosis of untimely death, a fate confirmed on a computer printout that dramatically features “bracketed numbers with pulsing stars” (140). The ATE is also random; although Blacksmith and its surrounding villages are not pacific idylls, neither are they toxic waste way-stations. The cloud that drifts over the Gladneys' town and eventually chases its residents out of their homes is caused by an accident in the Iron City rail yard miles away. Jack's colleague Alfonse Stompanato says that “[o]nly a catastrophe gets our attention” (66), and while the ATE is certainly that, it does not compel Jack for as long as we might think. Initially, he is stunned by his prognosis and calls himself a man with “death inside me” (150); he wants to know as much as he can about his condition, making several appointments and submitting to a barrage of tests to investigate his health. But by the end of the novel, only a few months after his exposure, he has settled back into his routine, his death-denial, refusing to answer his doctor's phone calls. He defies his doctor not because he has accepted his state and is choosing to control his own living and dying, but because, just as at the beginning of the book, he is afraid: “[Dr. Chakravarty] wants to insert me once more into the imaging block. . . . But I am afraid of the imaging block. Afraid of its magnetic fields, its computerized nuclear pulse. Afraid of what it knows about me. I am taking no calls” (325). This is clearly the same man who ignores a smoke alarm sounding in his house and who carries a copy of *Mein Kampf* as his only defense against the grim reaper in the back yard, a man grasping at the straws of ignorance and domestic bliss even as death inexorably approaches.

Although Jack dwells on it obsessively and jockeys with Babette for the position of “who will die first,” death is the ultimate random

event. No matter how much Jack worries, he cannot control its timing. Despite his having been exposed to Nyodene D. (a chemical whose name is an anagram of “deny one D.,” indicating Jack’s ultimate denial of his exposure and resultant risk of death), his death is no more certain than it had been, considering that the chemical has a life of thirty years, Jack is already fifty, and the lifespan for an American white male in 1985 was approximately 73 (Moody). Even Jack’s attempt to become a “killer,” and thus minimize his chances of being a “dier” in Murray’s false dichotomy, fails to dictate the timing of death. Instead of marking “his difference from those who die, [the shooting] ends by establishing his connection to mortality” (Hayles 412). Mr. Gray, the “staticky man” (296) who symbolizes the fear of death, cannot be obliterated as easily as that.

Death is not only the ultimate random event, it is the ultimate white noise as well. Fear of death forms the backdrop for all of Jack’s activities, and his peculiar choice of career figure especially reflects his obsession with death. As DeLillo explains,

The damage caused by Hitler was so enormous that Gladney feels he can disappear inside it and that his own puny dread will be overwhelmed by the vastness, the monstrosity of Hitler himself. He feels that Hitler is not only bigger than life, as we say of many famous figures, but bigger than death. Our sense of fear—we avoid it because we feel it so deeply, so there is an intense conflict at work. . . . I think it is something we all feel, something we almost never talk about, something that is *almost* there. (qtd. in DeCurtis 301)

Jack benefits from his immersion in Hitler in scenes such as the aftermath of his lecture on Hitler/Elvis and the approving crowd’s swell. Jack says, “Not that I needed a crowd around me now. Least of all now. Death was strictly a professional matter here. I was comfortable with it, I was on top of it” (74). This feeling of control over death is in stark contrast to his usual response, exemplified in the death sweat that grips him early in the novel and causes him to describe himself as “[d]efenseless against my own racking fears” (47).

The Zumwalt automatic that Vernon gives him as a literal defense signifies Jack’s respect for other German elements; Jack “associates German culture with order and control, the ability to keep death at bay with organization and discipline” (Muirhead). Thus, Jack named his son Heinrich, “a forceful name, a strong name” with “a kind of authority” (63), is reassured by the appearance of German shepherds in the wake of the Airborne Toxic Event, and notes that his firearm is

“German made” (254). As Jack explains, “There’s something about German names, the German language, German *things*. I don’t know what it is exactly. It’s just there. In the middle of it all is Hitler, of course” (63). Not surprisingly, Jack’s confrontation with Willie Mink takes place in an area of Iron City called Germantown, an appropriate site for facing down death. The nuns who capably handle both his and Mink’s profusely bleeding wounds are German as well, and their pragmatism is in keeping with Jack’s perception of German efficiency and competence.

Ironically enough, just as a white noise machine provides a steady drone that ultimately overpowers other random sounds of white noise, Jack’s awareness of death is the constant white noise that fills all the spaces between and around the interjections of the living world. This, “contemporary man’s deepest *expression* of his death fear, a strange and genuinely awe-inspiring response to the fear of mortality in the postmodern world” (Bonca 458), consumes his thoughts. “Who will die first?” is a question repeated through the text, as haunting and pervasive as the triplets of brand names and television excerpts. The first mention of white noise in the novel is the sound of traffic from the expressway beyond the Gladney home: “a remote and steady murmur around our sleep, as of dead souls babbling at the edge of a dream” (4). Death constantly babbles at the edge of Jack’s dreams and his waking; the only time he seems to be free of it is in the Blacksmith cemetery, set far above the highway and industrial noises of the town below, in “a silence that had stood its ground” (97). When he confronts death directly, both the white noise of life and the constant bass of his death-fear are stilled, but only temporarily.

This brief suspension of sound also occurs when, upon entering Mink’s room, he notes that Mink is watching TV with the volume off; but he gradually becomes aware of “a noise, faint, monotonous, white” (306)—not the hum of life described earlier, but a solid, electronic drone. This inescapable sound is the thrum and tenor of death, which intensifies as Jack and his Zumwalt pursue Mink into the bathroom; Jack notes that “[t]he intensity of the noise in the room was the same at all frequencies. Sound all around” (312). Mink cowers in terror, a scene epitomizing white noise both visually and aurally: “His face appeared at the end of the white room, a white buzz, the inner surface of a sphere. . . . His fear was beautiful” (312).

White noise is thus both the comforting sounds of human life at the same time as it is a more sinister undertow of death. The white noise of family, shopping, even television and advertising, is a distraction from the ugly undercurrent of mortality and fear. DeLillo calls

this undertow “the extraordinary dread...the death fear we try to keep beneath the surface of our perceptions” (DeCurtis 301), manifested in Jack’s commentary: “How strange it is. We have these deep terrible lingering fears about ourselves and the people we love. . . . The feelings are deep and real. Shouldn’t they paralyze us? How is it we can survive them, at least for a while?... How is it no one sees how deeply afraid we were, last night, this morning?” In what would seem to be a non sequitur, Babette responds, “What if death is nothing but sound?” But Jack understands her and knows that she understands him and this obsessive undercurrent. He describes the sound as “Electrical noise. . . . Uniform, white” (198), a metaphor for the continual, nearly inescapable bombardment.

Also, from an econometric standpoint, death, or at least the fear of it, is the epitome of white noise. Although experiencing one’s own death would obviously be irreversible, confrontations with death, either in the form of the Airborne Toxic Event or the attack on Mink, do not seem to have any long-term effect on Jack. Laura Barrett posits that “his near-death experience allows him to move beyond his paralyzing fear of death” (111), but I would argue that Jack and Babette end up basically unchanged from their status at the beginning of the novel. According to Barrett, the couple develops negative capability and, thus, a capacity for living with uncertainties and doubts, mirroring “the advice Jack gives earlier in the novel” after visiting the cemetery, “May the days be aimless. Let the seasons drift. Do not advance the action according to a plan” (98; Barrett 111). However, this is advice given *before* the ATE, the revelation of Babette’s infidelity, or the near-murder of Mink. Jack’s avoidance of a “plan” (in keeping with his statement that “[a]ll plots tend to move deathward” [26]) keeps him from confronting his own mortality both before and after these cataclysms. His refusal to face his doctor and his burying himself in relative domestic safety are consonant with his behavior at the beginning of the novel. In fact, by the final chapter, the family unit depicted has shrunk to “Babette, Wilder, and I,” who enjoy the suspiciously beautiful sunsets. Wilder’s six-hour crying incident is a primal outburst of existential angst, a fear and longing felt universally, that subsides into a wordless acquiescence (several mentions are made of Wilder’s unusually limited vocabulary and general silence) mirroring Jack’s denial and repression after his violent but essentially impotent confrontation with death.

The book concludes with one last scene in the grocery store, where the items have been mysteriously and confusingly reshuffled on the shelves. Barrett points out that this episode brings the novel “full circle,” with the supermarket patrons replacing the parents in station

wagons at the novel's outset, the holographic scanners' "waves and radiation, or how the dead speak to the living [326]" reflecting the "dead souls babbling at the edge of a dream [4]" (111). This circularity is significant in theme as well as structure. The customers' reactions to this reorganization show their shock: words describing their experience include "agitation," "panic," "dismay," "fragmented trance," "frozen," "anxious," "haunted," and "betrayal" (325–26). If the supermarket has been a trope for existence throughout, including the "ambient roar" of this final scene, then the confusion of life is mirrored by the confusion on the shelves, and the customers' shock but ultimate acceptance reflects our adjustment to the unpredictability and sudden difficulties of life. Good grooming is no protection from life's disasters (326), any more than were Jack's class status, profession, or preoccupation with Hitler. Every grocery category has been moved except the generic foods—thus, the only reliable source of order or meaning is in the simple, predictable, and generally unexciting features of living: children, family, the quotidian. DeLillo has said that his work exhibits "a sense of the importance of daily life and ordinary moments. In *White Noise*, in particular, I tried to find a kind of radiance in dailiness" (DeCurtis 301). The potential for discovering this transcendence is here in the supermarket, but customers are distracted by the packages, the labels, and the tabloids, which provide "everything we need that is not food or love" (326). DeLillo sets the "desperation and loneliness" of the individual "against the backdrop of brightly colored packages and products and consumer happiness and every promise that American life makes day by day and minute by minute everywhere we go" (qtd. in DeCurtis 295–96).

This clean, well-lighted promise of abundance—American life, American supermarkets—consoles both Jack and Murray on various occasions. Jack never shops alone; he and Babette want children not just in their home but in their grocery shopping, their ur-lives. The supermarket is a place of holding hands with Steffie, nuzzling Babette, meeting neighbors, losing Wilder, sharing confidences. It provides community. When Murray hears of his colleague Cotsakis's death, he tells Jack, "I found out an hour ago. Came right here" to the generic food aisle of the store (168).

If the supermarket symbolizes life, with all its entangled community and consumerism, finishing our shopping and queueing at the registers represents death: customers fill their carts with products, heeding or ignoring warning labels and expiration dates, and make their way to the checkout counters. Whether the shopping trip is confused or ordered, "the plain and heartless fact of their decline" is an

unavoidable constant as shoppers “work their way” toward the exit: “But in the end it doesn’t matter what they see or think they see. The terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly. . . . And this is where we wait together, regardless of age, our carts stocked with brightly colored goods” (326). Thus, we are a sum of all we have bought; our lives are measured and costs totalled by what is in our existential cart at the end. Rather than DeLillo’s suggested axiom of “Consume or die,” *White Noise* argues that we consume *and* die. Confronting death is a random shock that subsides into mere white noise, as our lives adjust. Our shopping may be temporarily confused, but it continues; we work our way up and down the aisles and toward the culminating registers, while the “ambient roar”—the background noise of both living and dying—rumbles on.

## NOTES

1. DeLillo, Don. *White Noise*. 1985. Viking Critical Edition. Ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Penguin, 1998). All subsequent page references are to this text.
2. See Arthur Saltzman, “The Figure in the Static: *White Noise*,” in *White Noise: Text and Criticism*, Ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Penguin, 1998), 480–97, and Cornel Bonca, “Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*: The Natural Language of the Species,” in *White Noise: Text and Criticism*, Ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Penguin, 1998), 456–79.
3. Some critics would argue that the specific placement of these lists within the novel is anything but random. For example, John Frow suggests that the triplet at the end of “I watched light climb into the rounded summits of high-altitude clouds. Clorets, Velamints, Freedent” is “not just the phonetic [movement] from clouds (perhaps ‘cloud turrets’) to Clorets but is also a circuit between the novel’s imagery of sunsets and the poetry of advertising” (“The Last Things Before the Last: Notes on *White Noise*,” *White Noise: Text and Criticism*, Ed. Mark Osteen [New York: Penguin, 1998], 428). John N. DuVall further argues for a narrative of sorts within the white noise itself; for example, “MasterCard, Visa, American Express” represents Jack’s struggle for a “mastery” over death that he’ll accomplish through an exit “visa” that will then transport him on “the American Express” (“The [Super]Marketplace of Images: Television as Unmediated Mediation in DeLillo’s *White Noise*,” *White Noise: Text and Criticism*, Ed. Mark Osteen [New York: Penguin, 1998], 440). Many of these triplets



- and other interjections require equally tortured explications in order to give them contextual coherence.
4. As Douglas Keeseey notes, Jack's "[c]lasses in 'Advanced Nazism' accustom students to murder and death. . . . These classes themselves serve to advance Nazism insofar as they encourage students to respond adoringly to Jack's lectures as if he were Hitler giving a fatally hypnotic speech at a mass rally" (*Don DeLillo* [New York City: Twayne Publishers, 1993], 134).

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