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“Threshold of Revelation”: Don DeLillo, Tony Kushner, and an Epistemics of the Encounter

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ABSTRACT

Postsecular criticism has celebrated non-dogmatic postmodern mysticism as mollifying the violence of religious fundamentalist certitudes. However, postmodern literature seems equally to suggest that too undefined a spirituality can itself serve as principle of violence. Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* and Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, in response, conceptualize a mode of cognition neither too fundamentalist/totalizing nor too mystical/subjective, situating knowledge instead in direct—ontological—participation in the suffering of the human Other.

KEYWORDS

Postsecular literature;
epistemology; ethics;
ontological participation

In the wake of the recent burgeoning of postsecular literary studies, increasing attention has been directed to the religious themes operative in putatively postmodern literatures. Postsecular criticism has reshaped the very definition of the postmodern, shifting focus away as much from pastiche, irony, and play as from the deeper antifoundationalist themes associated with it. In his definitive study *Partial Faiths*, for instance, John McClure explores the ways in which Don DeLillo characters, mired in a “soul-weary nihilism, a deficiency of love and involvement” (76), progress from “moral weightlessness, anxiety, and fear in the face of their finitude and death” to a vision of the sacredness of “the living cosmos” (79). A key moment in DeLillo’s high-postmodern novel *White Noise* is when Jack Gladney finds “spiritual nourishment” under a sublime evening sunset, viewed with onwatchers at a local highway overpass. In such instances, adds Paul Maltby, “we might say that sublimity is invoked to recuperate psychic wholeness” (81). This postsecular line of criticism probes the re-enchantment of the phenomenal world in postmodern fiction, such as moments in DeLillo when language vehiculates “divine immanence”—the “Real Presence” of the divine (Hungerford 72). Whether through discourse on “postmodern belief” or “mystical linguistics”¹ or the “metaphysics of presence” or the “neoromantic sublime,”² recent themes in DeLillo criticism have redirected emphasis from the antimetaphysics of the old postmodernism toward a postsecular reading of the paradigmatic postmodern author.

In these accounts, postsecular spiritualities in DeLillo soften the potentially violent edge of such “closed systems”³ as religious fundamentalism, whose vaunted epistemic claims fuel the drive for “global conquest and control” (McClure 77). James Berger examines moments in *White Noise* when signifier and signified become unhinged, a rupture that produces in Gladney an anxious desire to restore semiological closure; and yet this desire motivates in him the violence with which the novel climaxes. The relationship between “closed” cognitive-linguistic systems and violence is an established theme in DeLillo’s fiction. In response, critics have celebrated the mollifying work of the postsecular turn to more open-ended spiritualities, which “free the person from the strictures of reason to reach a mystical relation to the material world and to what transcends the material world” (Hungerford 73).⁴ If an important part of what makes such novels as *White Noise* postmodern is that

that they undermine the hegemony of reason, what makes them postsecular is their reinstatement of the transcendent by way of mystical knowledge. This involves a weakening of knowledge:⁵ a movement from militant self-certainty—be it Enlightenment Reason, religious dogmatism, or totalizing political ideology—to such supple cognitive modes as subjective spiritual experience. The story that postsecular criticism tells, in other words, is that a strain of postmodern literature turns toward *apophasis*,⁶ the *via negativa* of negative theology and open mystical experience, and that this turn neutralizes violence. Epistemologically humble, postsecular mysticisms are pacifist, restorative, harmonizing.

But what happens when knowledge systems themselves become too weak to structure meaningful human action? When the cognitive release of apophatic spirituality, taken to an extreme as it is in *White Noise*, itself devolves into a principle of violence? In the novel's disturbing climactic scene, Jack Gladney turns murderous toward the only major non-white character in the novel, Willy Mink. I would like to argue, against various readings of the scene, that what leads to this violence is indeed the "soul weary nihilism" that John McClure describes; however, this nihilism itself arises from being immersed in a universe throbbing with sublime energy while lacking the epistemological equipment for meaningful interaction with it. The cosmos looms over Jack Gladney as a roiling sublime terror. His extreme apophatic relationship to the mystic cosmos bereaves him of the cognitive mapping necessary for meaningful ethical and existential orientation. Given the failure of apophatic knowledge in the *White Noise*, how might we imagine the novel as striving to carve a viable middle way forward—as synthesizing positive and negative epistemological frameworks, strong and weak knowledges, closed and open systems? In approaching this question, it would help to read *White Noise* side by side with Tony Kushner's 1992 stage play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, because the two texts together mark a particular imaginative achievement. Namely, they chart a course for a *via media* between the two epistemological extremes through a vision of what I call ontological participation. Where DeLillo's novel strives toward a horizon of participation but finally retracts, Kushner's play develops a knowledge that more fully grounds itself, epistemologically, in the living, breathing Other.

Apophatic Dread

The material world of *White Noise* is charged with spiritual energy, the waves and radiation of living "psychic data" (37): "Over it all, or under it all, a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension" (36). In an interview with Anthony DeCurtis, DeLillo intimates his intuition of "something extraordinary hovering just beyond our touch and just beyond our vision" (DeCurtis 63). However, in *White Noise* this sublime energy is experienced as insalubrious, even dreadful:

In *White Noise* in particular, I tried to find a kind of radiance in dailiness. Sometimes this radiance can be almost frightening. Other times it can be almost holy or sacred. [...] 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. I tried to relate it in *White Noise* to this other sense of transcendence that lies just beyond our touch. This extraordinary wonder of things is somehow related to the extraordinary dread, to the death fear we try to keep beneath the surface of our perceptions. (63)

Protagonist Jack Gladney lives in a universe alive with spiritual energy, but this energy, while invoking wonder, generates "extraordinary dread." At one moment, his wife, Babette, is at a nearby church teaching a class to the elderly, when suddenly her image appears on their television screen at home. Jack describes her as having somehow been discharged from her body and set to beam through the living room: "We were being shot through with Babette. Her image was projected on our bodies, swam in us and through us. Babette of electrons and protons,"⁸ This experience leaves Jack befuddled. This might result from the uncanny illusions of technology, but it is also something more. Coursing through the room is, somehow, Babette herself, rendered unrecognizable: "Was she

dead, missing, disembodied?” (*White Noise* 105). Was she “distanced, sealed off, timeless,” pleads Jack (104)? “[S]ome distant figure from the past, some ex-wife and absentee mother, a walker in the midst of the dead” (104), appearing from the realm of “unaccountable things” (34)? Jack’s exhaustion of his own rational and descriptive faculties in comprehending what he sees only accelerates him toward a “sense of psychic disorientation” (104).

According to Charles Taylor, the project of knowledge in the West, starting with Plato, has been first to access the “moral sources” embedded deep in the metaphysical superstructure of the cosmos, and then to render this “ontic logos” apparent to human reason. Jack is enveloped in a cosmos teeming with ontological energy. However, the nature of this outer world is so far removed from articulacy, so deeply ensconced in unknowing, that it becomes strange and disorienting, finally taking on the vertiginous aspect of “dread” that DeLillo describes in his interview. At one point there is a spill of hazardous materials that the media call an airborne toxic event and whose fallout generates a looming cloud. When Jack sees it, he says, “Our fear was accompanied by a sense of awe that bordered on the religious” (*White Noise* 127). He is dwarfed precisely because the cloud transcends rational and linguistic comprehension. As he does when he sees Babette on the television, he proliferates descriptors to grasp what he is seeing—it is “immense almost beyond comprehension, beyond legend and rumor, a roiling bloated slug-shaped mass” (157–58), “some secret festering thing, some dreamed emotion that accompanies the dreamer out of sleep” (128)—but language stacks up, leading nowhere except more deeply into befuddlement. “We weren’t sure how to react.” Then, just as he does with Babette, he relates “The enormous dark mass” to “some death ship in a Norse legend” (127). Deathly in aspect, the cloud finally toxifies Jack with a terminal illness. This floating “death ship” is no more comforting a manifestation of the ontic plenitude of the cosmos than his wife beaming eerily through the room.

The airborne toxic event moreover infuses the lethal chemicals into the atmosphere that imbrue the sky with a sense of transcendent awe. The sublime sunset under which townspeople gather is as sacred as it is sinister: “The sky takes on content, feeling, an exalted narrative life,” but “it is hard to know how we should feel about this” (*White Noise* 324). “Certainly there is awe, it is all awe, it transcends previous categories of awe, but we don’t know whether we are watching in wonder or dread, we don’t know what we are watching or what it means” (324). If there is something sublime in the postmodern sunset, its content is at least partly the chemicals of the toxic cloud that have now settled into the atmosphere. And here, just as he does when he sees Babette on his television, Jack finds himself befuddled, lacking “a secure history of response,” oscillating unsteadily between “wonder” and “dread.” “[D]on’t let us die, I want to cry out to the fifth century sky ablaze with mystery and spiral light. Let us both live forever.” “Who decides these things? What is out there? Who are you?” (103). But the radiant cosmos remains silent, first toxifying and now finally dispossessing Jack: “There’s something artificial about my death. It’s shallow, unfulfilling. I don’t belong to the earth or sky” (283).

Far from perceiving the outer mystic world as salubrious, Jack perceives it as a manifestation of “Death” (*White Noise* 41). While finding haven in a fallout shelter during the airborne toxic event, Jack marvels at a Jehovah’s Witness’s ability to envisage this death with confidence: “I wondered about his eerie self-assurance, his freedom from doubt. He was ready to run into the next world. He was forcing the next world to seep into my consciousness, stupendous events that seemed matter-of-fact to him, self-evident, reasonable, imminent, true. I did not feel Armageddon in my bones but I worried about all those people who did” (137). The religious fundamentalist is armed with the certitude to name the world and what lies beyond its material veil, but Jack finds himself mired in paralyzing incertitude. The transcendent realm of the cosmos is so radically *Other* that, for Jack to commune with it, he must become *Other* to himself in a self-negation tantamount to “Death.” The spiritual realm intensifies in him what DeLillo identifies as “the death fear we try to keep beneath the surface of our perceptions,” generating a fearsome sense of immanent annihilation: “What if death is nothing but sound.” “Electrical noise.” “You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful.”

“Uniform, white” (198). This dreadful ontic presence, Jack says, “sweeps over me,” “it insinuates itself into my mind” (198–99), threatening to engulf.

Amy Hungerford observes moments across DeLillo’s oeuvre in which elements from the phenomenal world, particularly language, channel metaphysical mystery: “Glossolalia, the Latin mass, small talk, the ritual of conversation or of the sentence,” not to mention moments such as Wilder’s vocal stream of lament,⁷ produce “an enlightenment that consists not in doctrine, but in prayer; not in instruction, but in vision; not in reason, but in rapture; not in knowledge, but in mystery” (75). “Doubt,” in Hungerford’s account of “postmodern belief,” “is not so much the sense of wondering whether something is true, though that rational uncertainty is part of it; DeLillo’s doubt is the state of consciousness that cannot be resolved by reason but demands something like the honoring of mystery as a response” (72). However, in the moments above, Jack’s response takes a quite different turn from the “honoring of mystery” that Hungerford describes. In *White Noise*, encounters with cosmic mystery paralyze, terrify, disorient: “What do I do to make death less strange?” Jack pleads. “How do I go about it?” (*White Noise* 229). For he lacks the rational capacity to translate the ontic logos into the realm of subjective cognition and articulacy. Jack’s story thus dramatizes the existential repercussions of living in an ontologically rich universe without the cognitive or discursive equipment for meaningful interaction with it: an epistemological condition producing what I call apophatic dread.

“Kill to Live”

The only way for Jack to assuage the terror of apophatic dread, then, is through violence, culminating in the near-murder scene at the novel’s climax. Ernest Becker’s *Denial of Death*, which DeLillo cites as an influence on the novel (DeCurtis 55), takes the fear of death as a “mainspring of human activity,” an “activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man” (Becker xvii). To erect a barrier against death, the human psyche produces a “symbolic action system” or culturally “codified hero system” (7) through which to “build defenses,” empowering one “to feel that he *controls* his life and death, that he really does live and act as a willful and free individual, that he has unique and self-fashioned identity, that he *is somebody*—not just a trembling accident germinated on a hothouse planet that Carlyle for all time called a ‘hall of doom’” (55).⁹ Religious ideology operates primarily in this vein to render death endurable by sublimating the psyche’s fear of it.¹⁰

But in *White Noise*, American consumer culture fails to furnish for Jack the psychic armor to press back against the “death” that “insinuates itself” upon him. Lacking the rational equipment for comprehending it, naming it, and hence controlling it, Jack becomes overwhelmed into it. His final recourse is to violence. The novel’s climactic scene, in which he guns down the racially ambiguous character Willy Mink, has been read as an example of Renee Gerard’s theory of mimetic violence (see Packer). The Gerardian framework reads violence as a re-enactment of an archaic murder that functioned to keep the social intact, a violence arising out of a larger social dynamic¹¹ equally driven by an intrinsic human tendency toward mimesis. This account overlooks the existential motives that DeLillo absorbed from Becker, however, and that play out in Jack’s anxiety-ridden response to the ontic logos. Becker imagines violence as arising from the facticity of death and the tortured human consciousness of it: “the death fear of the ego is lessened by the killing, the sacrifice, of the other; through the death of the other, one buys oneself free from the penalty of dying, of being killed” (Otto Rank, qtd. in Becker 99). Likewise Murray Siskind, Jack’s colleague, insists that the only way to conquer death, “Defending himself,” is to exteriorize it, project it outward (*White Noise* 253):

I believe, Jack, there are two types of people in the world. Killers and diers. Most of us are diers. [...] Nothingness is staring you in the face. Utter and permanent oblivion. You will cease to be. *To be*, Jack. The dier accepts this and dies. The killer, in theory, attempts to defeat his own death by killing others. He buys time, he buys life. Watch others squirm. See the blood trickle in the dust. [...] It’s away of controlling death. A way of gaining the ultimate upper hand. Be the killer for a change. Let someone else be the dier. Let him replace you, theoretically, in that role. You can’t die if he does. He dies, you live. [...] Kill to live. (290–91)

As if putting theory into action, Jack surrenders to the desublimation of rage, stealing a car, speeding through tolls, and driving into a seedy part of town where he can find Willy Mink, an enigmatic figure who has been sleeping with his wife in exchange for the drug Dylar, purported to heal the fear of death (302–03). Jack’s violence emanates primarily from a particular *epistemological* condition (apophasis), then secondarily from the resulting *existential* condition (apophatic dread). The act of hunting down Willy Mink is an attempt to exert a form of power that he lacks within this condition, seizing “control over death,” the world, the other¹²; like Hitler, who is not only an intellectual fascination for Jack but also something of a role model (288–90), Jack “seek[s] to loom” over Willy (311), dwarfing and engulfing him in much the same way the airborne toxic event loomed over him.

As he is shooting Willy, Jack enters into an experience of the surrounding field of waves and radiation, but, crucially, he can do so here without terror. With each approaching step toward his victim, he experiences “a sense of transcendence” emboldened by a sense of mastery over it. This mastery is epistemological in character, signaled in heightened forms of knowing:

I advanced in consciousness. [...] With each separate step, I became aware of processes, components, things related to other things. Water fell to earth in drops. I saw things new. (*White Noise* 304)

The air was rich in extrasensory material. Nearer to death, nearer to second sight. A smashing intensity. [...] Waves, rays, coherent beams. I saw things new. [...] I knew for the first time what rain really was. I knew what wet was. I understood the neurochemistry of my brain, the meaning of dreams. [...] Great stuff everywhere, racing through the room, racing slowly. A richness, a density (308–09).

I knew who I was in the network of meaning. (312)

There is a power to be had in domesticating transcendence within the realm of cognition. Up until now, Jack has acted on what Robert Detweiler identifies as an “impulse to control” (49)—to subdue the enveloping world and unmask its sublime mystery—but this has eluded him in definitive postmodern fashion. So Jack launches a violent overthrow of mystery. He repeats such phrases as “I knew,” “I knew for the first time,” and “I understood” because the tyranny he gains over his victim in turn emboldens his sense of epistemological conquest of the sublime: “Nearer to death, nearer to second sight.” This conquest over the surrounding realm of “Death” then further energizes his subjection of Mink to a “slow and agonizing death” (*White Noise* 312): “reduce him to trembling” (310), “fire three bullets at his midsection for maximum visceral agony” (309), “blast him in the gut,” then “put the gun in his hand to suggest a lonely man’s suicide”—“this weary pulse of a man” (306, 307). Jack now feels himself to be in control. If in DeLillo’s fiction the enclosure of consciousness in totalizing cognitive systems produces violence, what we find in *White Noise* is a radically *open* system—a pathological systemlessness—generating its own economy of violence.

The Face of the Other

The near-murder scene can be read as the novel’s cry for a “coherent precedent” or “secure history of response” (324): something, *anything*, to render the world amenable to knowledge. How, then, to enact such a return without relapsing into a closed system? If the cliff on one side is a violent epistemological positivism, and if on the other side is an equally violent epistemological negativism, then how might we imagine a middle way forward?

Jack reaches the verge of killing his victim, but at the climactic moment he is arrested from his final *coup de grâce* when Mink shoots him back. “The world collapsed inward, all those vivid textures and connections buried in mounds of ordinary stuff. I was disappointed. Hurt, stunned and disappointed. What had happened to the higher plane of energy in which I carried out my scheme?” (*White Noise* 313). As Jack is jolted out of what he now understands to be an illusory penetration into the sublime, he suddenly has a “vision” of the person in front of him, the appearance of the Other who has been there all along:

I looked at him. Alive. His lap a puddle of blood. With the restoration of the normal order of matter and sensation, I felt I was seeing him for the first time as a person. [...] Compassion, remorse, mercy. [...] This was the key to selflessness, or so it seemed to me as I knelt over the wounded man, exhaling rhythmically in the littered street [...]. Get past disgust. Forgive the foul body. Embrace the whole. (313–14)

For Laura Barrett, what is particularly postmodernist about *White Noise* is that Jack falls short of the Joycean epiphany; she reads the near-murder scene as marking the exhaustion of modernist existentialist notions of heroism. Leonard Wilcox argues similarly that “in the climactic showdown between Gladney and Gray (a.k.a. Willy Mink), DeLillo implies the exhaustion of late modernist, existentialist notions of heroism” (349).¹³ If this entire scene is about the failure of heroism and epiphany, then what is it that happens to Jack in the moment above? What is it that he is “seeing” “for the first time,” and how does this emergent seeing empower him to desist from his murder? And then how do we read his subsequent ruminations on the compassion he feels as he attempts to rescue Willy? At this crucial moment in the novel, the swirling sublimity of the surrounding world halts, and Jack leans over to “attempt mouth-to-mouth,” “breathing rhythmically” into Willy’s lungs (*White Noise* 314). Jack comes face-to-face with Willy, believing that he is “seeing him for the first time as a person” and that there is something about his humanity that is visible for the first time in the story—apparent, tangible, undeniable.¹⁴

This moment of interface between self and other speaks to Jack’s need for a secure grounding of knowledge. Jack’s encounter with Willy Mink is a moment of interpersonal reception in which, if only for a flash, he experiences an indubitable reality beyond himself. What emerges for him is a way of understanding the self and world that then motivates ethical action. This understanding does not arise from any sort of systematized framework—like political or religious ideology—but instead through simple direct participation in Willy’s suffering. Having himself been shot in the hand, and feeling for the first time the pain Willy has been enduring, Jack literally begins to get his hands dirty with Willy’s mortality, such that “[i]t was no longer possible to tell whether the blood on my hands and the clothes was his or mine. My humanity soared” (*White Noise* 315). Empowered by an emergent sense of Willy’s humanity as inexplicably consubstantial with his own, Jack administers mouth-to-mouth, picks him up, and carries him to the car and then to the hospital. This is the only form of knowledge in the novel—this brief yet intense moment of interpersonal (re)cognition—that has a salubrious effect on Jack. The “secure history of response” that Jack lacks, the larger discursive/cognitive framework he lacks, begins to take shape in a startling new way in this moment of ethical interface with a helpless victim.

This form of ethical cognition comes to light in the conversation that Jack has with Sister Hermann Marie in the hospital. “What does the Church say about heaven today?” he asks, to which she responds, “Do you think we are stupid?” “We are here to take care of sick and injured. Only this. You would talk about heaven, you must find another place” (*White Noise* 317–18). Jack is bewildered, expecting Sister Hermann to “profess real faith, real belief”: “You must believe in tradition. The old heaven and hell, the Latin mass.” “The old great beliefs” (318). If there is anyone who can be trusted to believe in a secure ideological framework in Jack’s insecure postmodern world, it would be a veiled nun. However, Sister Hermann rejects propositional belief for the immediate exigency of human need: “You would come in bleeding from the street and tell me six days it took to make a universe?” “You would come in from the street dragging a body by the foot and talk about angels who live in the sky. Get out from here” (319–20). She repeatedly jolts Jack’s gaze out of the skies of abstraction—God, angels, heaven, the transcendent—down to the bleeding body dragged in from the street. “You would talk of angels? Here?” Her insistence on “Here?” indicts Jack’s pursuit of propositional belief in a place where the “sick and injured” demand immediate urgent care. Jack is “desperate to have someone believe. But show me a saint,” she insists. “Give me one hair from the body of a saint” (318). True saints, “unchurched, untutored, and only semiliterate,”¹⁵ tend quietly on the ground level to human suffering.

Sister Hermann rebukes Jack for seeking truth in a vast discursive system, what Emmanuel Levinas calls the “those plastic forms which forever try to cover the face like a mask of their presence to perception” (qtd. in Docherty 26). Because such forms “mask” the other from view, Jack must develop eyes to see past them:

I have spoken a lot about the face of the Other as being the original site of the sensible. [...] The proximity of the Other is the face’s meaning, and it means in a way that goes beyond those plastic forms which forever try to cover the face like a mask of their presence to perception. But always the face shows through the forms. Prior to any particular expression and beneath all particular expressions, which cover over and protect with an immediately adopted face or countenance, there is the nakedness and destitution of the expression as such, that is to say extreme exposure, defenselessness, vulnerability itself. [...] In its expression, in its mortality, the face before me summons me, calls for me, begs for me, as if the invisible death that must be faced by the Other, pure otherness, separated, in some way, from any whole, were my business. (Levinas, qtd in Docherty 26)

Behind the “plastic form” radiates the face of the other, and one’s moral mandate is to learn to see the “expression” behind the “mask.” If the apophatic dread that harries Jack propels him to violence, then DeLillo’s intervention is to turn this violence around so that Jack lands on the threshold of the Other. Jack is brought into ontological interface with someone radically “exposed, vulnerable, defenseless,” and here he must confront the specter of death—embodied in the humanity before him—that he has been fleeing the entire novel. Jack’s face-to-face encounter with Willy is a moment of interpersonal awareness that equips him with the knowledge that finally brings to rest his vertiginous epistemological incertitude. Jack, I am arguing, no longer finds himself in a precarious apophatic condition. Even if for a moment, he has “seen” the Other, encountered the sublime Other as a “face” before him that calls upon him, and this in my reading is the answer to the novel’s crippled modes of knowing. *White Noise* replaces rational cognition with embodied presence, “strategies of abstraction” with incarnational awareness. The sacredness of this character, Willy Mink, is the only final “secure response,” the only epistemic certainty, available to Jack.

If this is so, then what do we make of the persistently vexing aspects of the closing scenes of the novel, such as Jack’s noisome and racially charged savior complex? One strand of DeLillo criticism points out that Jack resuscitates Willy while regarding himself as looming and grand, the knowing white savior of the needy foreigner: continuing a longer narrative tradition in which white characters extract personal enlightenment from the raced body.¹⁶ Tim Engles argues convincingly that “Jack finds himself unable to break out of the resultant habit of focusing single-mindedly on himself, even when ostensibly focusing on others” (780). However, I would argue, as Engles eventually does, that DeLillo is strategically representing Gladney in this fashion in order to chide his protagonist, revealing his need for moral maturation. DeLillo seems interested in furnishing Jack, here in the novel’s closing violence, with simply a glimmer of revelation, not a developed systematization; an initial prying-open of consciousness, not a moral metanarrative.¹⁷ If for Charles Taylor the modernist epiphany “recover[s] contact with a moral source” in the outer “ontic logos” (85), Jack has achieved a *partial epiphany* here not by looking up and out, but down. He experiences a glistening of life just beyond himself, but this is not so much the outer ontic sublime as the living, breathing other: the sublimity of the cosmos taking shape in a foreigner with an accent. Like so many of the characters that in postsecular fiction turn toward the sacred, Gladney is a beginner.¹⁸ Although freighted still with self-congratulatory superiority, he engages the humanity of another in a way that is no less real and that speaks no less to the epistemological preoccupations of the novel: producing a moment, a flash, an incipient turning away from terror and violence.

Angels in America

In the end, *White Noise* wants to remain committed to its postmodern epistemological skepticism while lurching toward a more secure cognitive arrangement. How then to return to such a secure framework without relapsing into imperial and violent epistemic systems? This question leads to

another scene, this time from Tony Kushner's stage play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (1992), that conceptualizes a ground for knowledge that asserts itself as fundamental without becoming fundamentalist.¹⁹ The "mutual dream scene" amplifies DeLillo's vision of interanimative gnosis, permitting the Other to emerge more fully as a ground for knowledge.

Angels centers on Prior, a gay male living in 1980s New York City, who endures the double heartbreak of first discovering he has AIDS and then being abandoned by his partner. Harper in contrast is a Mormon woman from Salt Lake City, Utah, whose husband has emotionally abandoned her, leaving her to the solace of Valium. The characters in the play who might have otherwise cared for Prior and Harper are caught up in cognitive structures so heady, so denatured from concrete human need—Marxist Equality, Hegelian Progress, American Justice, Mormon Redemption—as to lead almost inevitably to abandonment. The play puts these grand "Theories" on display only to interrogate their success in describing "the world." In the words of "Prelapsarianov," "the World's Oldest Living Bolshevik," "Grand Theories" structure "one all-knowing glance" at the "order of creation" (Kushner 1: 14). That is, these frameworks carry with them the epistemological guarantee of serving as a lens through which to "glance" at the "order of creation," offering the assurance of "all-knowing." But can these discursive formations also give us "Praxis, True Praxis, True Theory married to Actual Life"? Or do they, as Thomas Docherty says of ideology in general, "reduce" "the Subject" "to an engagement with and confirmation of its own rational processes rather than being committed to an engagement with the material alterity of an objective world" (8)? Do such Theories of the world give us, to reinvoke Levinas, "the face of the Other"—the radical alterity of Prior's AIDS-ridden suffering—or are they opaque, self-referential, even narcissistic frameworks of intelligibility (26)? Within Kushner's literary imagination, the final test for these "Theories" is whether or not they can render visible Prior's suffering and structure a mode of ethical response toward it.

But when asked why one would ever walk out on one's lover at his greatest moment of need, Prior's partner Louis invokes a Theory:

Maybe because this person's sense of the world, that it will change for the better with struggle, maybe a person who has a neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant historical progress toward happiness or perfection or something, who feels very powerful because he feels connected to these forces, moving uphill all the time ... maybe that person can't, um, incorporate sickness into his sense of how things are supposed to go. (Kushner 1: 25)

Louis is intellectually committed to a lofty Hegelian abstraction that fails to incorporate the immediacy of Prior's "vomit," "sores and disease," let alone the "death" these portend (1: 25). Louis' "Theory" ends in a failure not only in gnosis but also in praxis, motivating him to walk out on Prior when he discovers he has AIDS. "Big Ideas"—"Big Ideas are all you love," charges Belize; "Louis and his Big Ideas" (2: 94). Belize lambasts ideations that fail to take into account "people dying," that fail to mobilize action. "You cry," he tells Louis, "but you endanger nothing in yourself. It's like the *idea* of crying when you do it. Or the *idea* of love" (1: 83, emphasis added). After leaving Prior, Louis tries to defend himself: "You can love someone and fail them. You can love someone and not be able to..." But Prior interjects, "You *can*, theoretically, yes. A person can, maybe an editorial 'you' can love, Louis, but not *you*, specifically you, I don't know, I think you are excluded from that general category" (1: 78–79). In theory, the idea of Hegelian Progress offers "one all-knowing glance" of the world, but it fails to generate ways of seeing that lead to concrete human caretaking. In response to Louis' abstractions, Prior asks that Louis come back when he has scars: "I want to see black and blue, Louis, I want to see blood" (1: 87). For blood is precisely what Louis' theory lacks.

Kushner's play drills through these cognitive enclosures, striving to pry open life-giving forms of ethical awareness. Harper and Prior's identities could not be more ideologically oppositional, Harper being a Mormon from Salt Lake City and Prior a gay liberal male from New York City; not only have they never met, but they would have had little occasion to come within meaningful proximity to each other. Yet in the play's "Mutual dream scene" they erupt in each other's inner psychic landscapes and into miraculous interface with each other: "Prior is at a fantastic makeup table, having a dream,

applying the face. Harper is having a pill-induced hallucination. She has these from time to time. For some reason, Prior has appeared in this one. Or Harper has appeared in Prior's dream. It is bewildering" (Kushner 1: 30). This scene thrusts them immediately into an experience of mutual non-recognition: Harper: "Who are you?" Prior: "Who are you?" Harper: "What are you doing in my hallucination?" Prior: "I'm not in your hallucination. You're in my dream." Harper: "There must be some mistake here. I don't recognize you" (1: 31). The Other emerges here as a presence hailing from beyond the realm of (re)cognition: a mystery, a question, a problem.

Whereas Theory purports to expand knowledge, this encounter ultimately restricts the epistemological claims of abstract knowledge:

Harper: It's terrible. Mormons are not supposed to be addicted to anything. I'm a Mormon.

Prior: I'm a homosexual.

Harper: In my church we don't believe in homosexuals.

Prior: In my church we don't believe in Mormons.

Harper: What church do ... oh! (*She laughs*) I get it. (Kushner 1: 32)

It is telling that immediately after this, Harper engages in a nearly page-long inquiry into the limits of knowledge (concluding that the imagination can create nothing new such that "[n]othing unknown is knowable" [1: 32]). For what Harper and Prior experience in this encounter effectively weakens the epistemological certitude of their respective "Theories," or "churches." This moment of ontological interface speaks directly to what they can know and how.

If they cannot recognize, much less understand, each other through the gnosis offered by their "churches," the epistemological delimitation that follows empowers Harper to "see things ... [like] how sick you are." Much like Gladney, whose violence is stayed by an incipient ability to "see" Willy Mink, Harper and Prior enter into what they each call the "threshold of revelation" of the Other (Kushner 1: 33). "Do you see anything about me?" Harper responds. First Prior avers that "You are amazingly unhappy," but then adds, shockingly, "Your husband's a homo" (1: 33). Harper, initially taken aback by this, concedes that an extraordinary form of mutual insight is at work here, and she takes Prior's word as if it were that of a prophet. This is because "I just looked at you, and there was"—and here Harper finishes his sentence—"A sort of blue streak of *recognition*" "Like you *knew* me incredibly well" (1: 34, emphasis added). From this vantage point of deep inter-ontological "recognition," Harper gains visibility into Prior's interiority: "Deep inside you, there's a part of you, the most inner part, entirely free of disease. I can see that" (1: 34). This mystical knowledge emerges out the ashes of another, more discursively constituted, epistemic mode. In this manner, Kushner's play moves across a particular metaphysical "threshold" into a space of intersubjective "revelation."

Western Christian theology has historically been subtended by an apophatic strain underscoring religious "experience [as] mediated through representations or signs"; "humans experience a deferred or contextualized rather than absolute presence," such that "any God concept is always already a representation, a sign, not a presence" (Kevin Hart, qtd. in Neary 2). There may very well be an ontologically rich universe bustling with realities exceeding rational cognition and discourse, but that in no way diminishes the ontological *thereness* of the plenitude. Kushner's *Angels in America* suggests that such metaphysical excess is less deific in constitution than human—or somehow sublimely both. Like Gladney's world, suffused with dispersed human psychic energy (Babette vibing through the television set), the world in *Angels in America* is charged with a sublimity that is constitutively human, apparent in face of the other. Prior and Harper experience each other as engulfing metaphysical presence (they are "inside" each other), as discursive delimitation (their "churches" are stripped of exclusive truth claims), and, finally, as epistemic expansion: they are taken to the "threshold of revelation" of the other. This inter-ontological space exceeds—indeed, explodes—the comprehensive (yet uncomprehending) grasp of "Theory." Harper and Prior acknowledge that their "churches" offer cognitions inadequate to the sublimity of the human Other, and this then

propels them into a space of moral awareness that might otherwise have been subsumed into the effacing logic, the relentless “plastic forms,” of theoretical abstraction.

Ontological Participation

Although *White Noise* and *Angels in America* have been read as paradigmatic postmodernism, we find them here struggling to wrest themselves from the antifoundationalist strictures of this categorization proper. By some accounts, the modern project severed human activity from direct metaphysical relationship to what Charles Taylor calls “constitutive goods” or “moral sources” in the outer cosmos, such as the Forms, God, History, or the Good.²⁰ Yet if DeLillo and Kushner want to return to a sourcing of human action in the outer world, they locate this not in the “ontic logos”—the grand metaphysical architecture of the cosmos—but in the face of the living, breathing Other.²¹ In doing so, their stories make very strong claims upon the Real. Moreover, they evoke an epistemological argument for the human capacity to access this reality and to interact with it—with him or her—meaningfully. A certain epistemological rehabilitation arises out of ontological participation in the alterity of the Other. The implication, even imbrication, of the self in the material existence of the Other generates an awareness that can shape meaningful ethical praxis. Where grand narratives fail Jack Gladney and Grand Theories fail Prior, these stories offer instead an epistemics of the encounter.

Notes

1. See David Cowart’s discussion, in “The Physics of Language,” on “mystical linguistics” and the “linguistic sublime” in DeLillo’s fiction. Amy Hungerford likewise probes moments in DeLillo’s fiction when “meaning drops away from language” and reason becomes mute, “creat[ing] a formal space that we find filled with religious feeling, supernatural power, otherworldly communion, and transcendent authority” (xvi).
2. Extending and deepening discussions on the postmodern, Vermeulen and van der Akken identify a neoromantic emphasis in the art of the last decade: the “metamodern art work,” as they call it, “redirects the modern piece by drawing attention to what it cannot present in its language, what it cannot signify in its own terms (that what is often called the sublime, the uncanny, the ethereal, the mysterious, and so forth),” and this powers, the authors continue, quoting Novalis, “the re-signification of ‘the commonplace with significance, the ordinary with mystery, the familiar with the seemliness of the unfamiliar, and the finite with the semblance of the infinite’” (10–12). While such dimensions of reality cannot be rationally named or fully artistically rendered, their existence is nonetheless acknowledged as uncanny presence leaking through the mesh of the phenomenal.
3. See Tom LeClair for a study on the relationship between closed systems and violence.
4. For Amy Hungerford, DeLillo “imagines an enlightenment that consists not in doctrine, but in prayer; not in instruction, but in vision; not in reason, but in rapture; not in knowledge, but in mystery.” So “postmodernism belief,” as she defines it, has no rational object, allowing “the formal elements of language [to] substitute for the content of belief” (75).
5. This is something that Gianni Vattimo might call “weak ontology” (42), which is a sustained belief that a metaphysical reality exceeds language while asserting “the necessarily speculative and contestable character” of language in describing it (McClure 130).
6. John Neary helps identify two strains to postmodern thought. One is, in Carl A. Raschke’s words, “the death of God put into writing,” a radical linguistic turn that de-ontologizes the universe, rendering “the logos of all our latter-day ‘ologies,’ including theology [...] nought but a ritualistic and compulsive defense against the *kenon* (‘the void’)” (qtd in Neary 2). The other pertains to the negative-theological mode I describe here, which does not de-ontologize but simply acknowledges the finitude of our cognitive and linguistic comprehension of the transcendent. Apophatic spirituality thus emphasizes what we do not or cannot know about the divine. One thinks here of the allusion in *White Noise* to the anonymous medieval Christian devotional *Cloud of Unknowing* (290), in which experience of God emerges only as intellection dissolves through prayer.
7. Hungerford cited this episode as another such example in casual conversation at the conference “Belief and Unbelief in Postmodern Literature,” Seattle, WA, May 24, 2012. Jack’s son Wilder enters into a seven-hour fit of crying, generating “wave on wave” of “wailing noise” (*White Noise* 78) channeling transcendent energy and producing in Jack “mingled reverence and wonder” (79). “I let it break across my body.” “I entered it, feel into it, letting it enfold and cover me” (78).

8. Note the depiction of Babette here as dispersed “electrons and protons” emanating freely through space rather than as an entity solidly material in constitution. Across an array of moments such as this, the novel conceptualizes the human as structurally open, porous, and energetic. I have probed in greater depth elsewhere (see “Visioning the Body Mosaic”) the imaginative work this novel is doing, along with writings by Charles Johnson, Toni Morrison, and Tony Kushner, to project such a non-materialist anthropological vision, and to what discursive ends.
9. Cornel Bonca reads *White Noise* in light of Becker. When Wilder cries in waves, when Steffie mutters “Toyota Celica” in her sleep, when the nun sprays a stream of language in German, Jack perceives these moments as mystical because they tap into and unleash the fundamental primordial signifier all language: the fear of death. Bonca thus does not take the mystical realm to be an actual ontological reality in the world of the novel—and here I obviously depart from him—but instead reads Jack as merely perceiving it to be there.
10. Becker continues along this vein: “Traditional religion turned the consciousness of sin [and death] into a condition for salvation; but the tortured sense of nothingness of the [modern] qualifies him now only for miserable extinction, for merciful release from lonely death. It is all right to be nothing vis-à-vis God, who alone can make it right in His unknown ways; it is another thing to be nothing to oneself, who is nothing” (197).
11. For more on DeLillo and the role of sacrificial violence in maintaining the social, see Daniel Born.
12. Tim Engles accounts for the ways in which Jack racializes Willy Mink while viewing himself as standing outside of raciality, dramatizing how whiteness in America exempts itself from being understood as merely another racial category. I read Jack’s cognitive enclosure of Mink within a racial “categorical placement” (5) as a form of power-knowledge, a structure of perception that categorizes Mink as other and hence fit for violence. Discussions of race and mysticism tend to remain separate in DeLillo criticism, but I see the two as interconnected here insofar as the Other remains as far outside of the reach of cognition as does the surrounding ontic realm; hence both take on a sinister anxiety-inducing élan.
13. Wilcox reads Mink as a metaphor for postmodern culture itself rather than as a concrete racial subject. For him, Mink figures borderless ethnicity, global intermixture taken to the extreme of racial indeterminacy. Because of this, “Mink/Gray provides no focal point for an oedipal dynamic that might otherwise underpin the sort of heroic confrontation Gladney undertakes” (360).
14. For all of the psychological and epistemological motivation I seek to draw out here, Jack’s violence remains racial in expression; operating alongside the novel’s epistemological themes is an entire theory of racial identity/difference as well as racial violence. I have explored elsewhere (see “Visioning the Body Mosaic”) the form of subjectivity under construction at other moments such as this across a broader constellation of American literature. Ultimately, I argue, these representations, in their recent postmodern expression, conceptualize the self as open and porous and continuous with the other for the purpose of putting nefarious racial-identitarian categories under erasure.
15. I borrow these words from McClure’s description of spiritual seekers in recent postsecular Native American fiction (141).
16. After resuscitating Mink, Gladney “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” (*White Noise* 314–15). I want to sensitize my reading of the novel to the subtle ways in which Gladney remains locked within troubling forms of racial consciousness, “watching himself perform” grandiose acts of compassion (DeCurtis 51). For more on this, see Jonathan Little’s chapter on DeLillo.
17. Because DeLillo is hardly interested in systematizing a full-on theory here, I would read this scene as operating on the level of the “pretheoretical,” which for Pierre Bayard is a more tentative working out of complex ideas through dramatization. For Pierre Bayard, the “pretheoretical” “does not rest upon (fixed) concepts but instead upon elements of thought less structured, more labile and therefore amenable to differing rearrangements through the act of interpretation” (“ne repose pas sur des concepts, mais sur des éléments de pensée moins structurés, plus labiles et donc susceptibles de s’agencer les uns avec les autres de différentes manières en fonction de travail du lecture”) (143, my translation). In this way, literature might refrain from systematizing full-on frameworks, but it will deconstruct aspects of one or some systems (what he calls detheorization) while laying out the conceptual possibilities for the construction of new ones (pretheorization).
18. Mark Osteen explores the substitution of old-time religion with the “American magic and dread” of consumerism: in *White Noise*, “People desire containers that fulfill their spiritual yearnings, and consumer packaging fills the void created by the disappearance of traditional religious icons” (171). While Tim Engles explores Jack’s containment within a white racial cognitive frame, Osteen reveals yet another level of psychic containment for Jack: that of “the palpable belief system” of consumerism. One might argue that Jack’s ability to enter into authentic interface with otherness would require the stripping away of multiple layers of embedded consciousness, and that this process is only here beginning.

19. So far as I am aware, neither DeLillo nor Kushner have publicly commented on each other's work. I bring the two authors together on the strength of their convergence on similar culturally and historically situated preoccupations regarding spirituality and knowledge.
20. Arto Laitinen on "Taylor's notion of constitutive goods": "There is an ontological source to [moral] value. To repeat, the concept of constitutive goods presupposes there are 'features of the universe, or God, or human beings, (i) on which [everyday human] life goods depend, (ii) which command our moral awe or allegiance, and (iii) the contemplation of or contact with which empowers us to be good'" (83).
21. In this way, these texts oscillate between postmodern skepticism and modern idealism, an ambivalence that Vermeulen and van der Akken characterize as "metamodern," "a 'both-neither' dynamic" that is "at once modern and postmodern and neither of them" (n. pag.). Although Vermeulen and van der Akken identify this "metamodern" structure of feeling in the artistic practice of the past fifteen years, DeLillo's and Kushner's texts two decades earlier offer themselves to be read as stirring with similar ambivalence. "Indeed, if, simplistically put, the modern outlook vis-a-vis idealism and ideals could be characterized as fanatic and/or naive, and the postmodern mindset as apathetic and/or skeptic, the current generation's attitude [...] can be conceived of as a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism" (n. pag.). That this tempered idealism remains contained within "unfulfillableness" or ultimate "untenableness" (n. pag.) makes it no less a rejection of postmodernism's skepticism, insisting as it does on a grounding of knowledge in the moral imperatives borne out by human suffering. A similar ethical thrust seems to be driving the two texts under discussion in my article, a moral imperative resisting circumscription within either naïve modernist idealism or apathetic postmodern skepticism but rather spawning out of the conjunction/exhaustion of the two.

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