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“SAVED? WHAT IS SAVED?”: THE POTENTIALITY OF BAKHTINIAN
ECOLOGY IN DELILLO’S *WHITE NOISE*

A Thesis Presented

by

Kelly Gray

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The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

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Thesis Examination Committee:

Eric Lindstrom, Ph.D., Advisor
Adrian J. Ivakhiv, Ph.D., Chairperson
Sarah Turner, Ph.D.
Cynthia J. Forehand, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College

ABSTRACT

Within Cartesian dualism's traditional nature/culture divide, nature today proves uncanny: both in the uncanny return of human impact through anthropogenic climate change and in the uncanny recognition that that which was other was never really other at all. Contemporary ecocriticism, in theorizing the breakdown of this nature/culture divide, is thereby "post-naturalist." Ecocritic Timothy Morton speaks toward this denaturalization in his work *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. Drawing upon object-oriented ontology, Morton proposes hyperobjects, or objects massively distributed in time and space, as a means of reconceptualizing climate change as distinct from its manifestations in ecological crises. The imaginative challenge, Morton explains, is then in thinking connectivity, or, more specifically, in thinking ecology beyond nature and climate beyond weather. Similarly, environmentalist Amitav Ghosh argues in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* that societal faith in the "regularity of bourgeois life" informs our uniformitarian expectations within the Anthropocene, or the geological era defined by the predominance of human impact upon our natural systems. The modern novel, Ghosh argues, relies on a scaffolding of probability and thereby conceals the improbable reality of anthropogenic climate change today.

Following Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) as an exemplary case of ecological crisis and its concealment within the modern novel, my thesis project explores the relationship between the post-naturalist environmental imagination and the anthropocentric, or "human-centered," belief in the ordinary's bourgeois regularity. Tracing the anthropocentric subject's interface with anthropogenic climate change as hyperobject within the novel, I then propose Bakhtinian ecology as a means of understanding ecological crisis within the ordinary as already ordinary. As a subversive thinker of both societal disruption and structural denaturalization, Mikhail Bakhtin's importance to ecocriticism within the Anthropocene is self-evident. Further contextualized within *White Noise*, the Bakhtinian potentiality is multifold: in ecological dialogics' epistemological renegotiation; in the carnivalesque denaturalization of societal structure in crisis; and, in grotesque realism's uncanny connectivity. Respectively, these three Bakhtinian threads map onto the three sections of DeLillo's novel: "Section I: Waves and Radiation"; "Section II: The Airborne Toxic Event"; and, "Section III: Dylarama." Through this reading, I track how privileged protagonist Jack Gladney is forced to confront the uncanny connectivity of post-naturalist ecology; and, in his later attempt to distance himself from the crisis through racial othering, I argue that the ordinary's reliance upon othering crises enables a concealment of environmental racism already present within the global ecological crisis.

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I formally began this project in the spring of 2019, when I first began to conceptualize environmental crises in their connective ecology. Now, in the spring of 2020, we find ourselves amidst a global pandemic. While not itself ecological, this manifest crisis through COVID-19 effectively lays bare the already ordinary cruelty of the healthcare system in the United States. Even more, within a pandemic, you are only ever as safe as the least insured person, thereby posing a fundamental connectivity for communities. This contemporary confrontation to our sense of the ordinary and its parallels in my reading of *White Noise* together provide a striking reminder of the ways in which struggles for justice are inextricably linked. Now and always: solidarity forever.

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**CHAPTER 1: THE ECOLOGICAL OTHER:
BAKHTINIAN ECOLOGY IN THE ANTHROPOCENE**

Yet because there is nowhere to stand outside of things altogether, it turns out that we know the truth of “there is no metalanguage” more deeply than its inventors.

—Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects*

In fact, carnival does not know floodlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators.

—Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*

When news reports in the United States first warned of Hurricane Sandy’s approach in 2012, the looming catastrophe proved unimaginable to many people in quaint New England towns that would soon find themselves affected. Making landfall first as a Category 2 hurricane in Jamaica and then growing into a Category 3 hurricane at its peak intensity in Cuba, Sandy then took a “left turn” and became the largest Atlantic hurricane on record off the coast of the Northeastern United States (Gibbens). In its perceived improbability, Sandy’s turn defied both meteorological models and the expectations of the United States’ social imaginary. The disaster was horrifically uncanny, forcing privileged communities along the New England coastline to reconsider their understandings of security. In *Storm Surge: Hurricane Sandy, Our Changing Climate, and Extreme Weather of the Past and Future* (2014), meteorologist Adam Sobel tracks Sandy’s unprecedented storm path and from it argues that human beings are fundamentally unable to prepare for the improbable; however, in his ecocritical work *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), environmentalist Amitav Ghosh critiques the epistemic foundations of Sobel’s sense of probability.

Toward Sobel's claim against preparedness, Ghosh asks, "But has this really been the case throughout human history? Or is it rather an aspect of the unconscious patterns of thought— or "common sense"— that gained ascendancy with a growing faith in "the regularity of bourgeois life"?" (25). A societal belief in uniformitarianism and the uniformitarian expectations that this entails, Ghosh counters, has simply supplanted human awareness of catastrophes.

Moreover, within the Anthropocene, or our contemporary geological era defined by the dominant role human-activity plays in impacting Earth's ecological systems, anthropogenic, or human-caused, climate change effectively collapses the distance in Cartesian dualism's nature-culture divide; that is to say, nature is now as culturally impacted as culture is naturally impacted. Consequently, as Ghosh explains, "[...] in the era of global warming, nothing is really far away; there is no place where the orderly expectations of bourgeois life hold unchallenged sway" (26). In his foundational text *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), Lawrence Buell famously articulates this imaginative challenge by writing, "If, as environmental philosophers contend, western metaphysics and ethics need revision before we can address today's environmental problems, then environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity's relation to it" (2). As proposed by Buell, this environmental imagination must then overcome its traditionally binary thinking to understand the totality of climate change today. In regards to New York's uniformitarian expectations toward Hurricane Sandy, Ghosh remarks, "as Sobel notes, [that] it was generally believed that "losing one's life to a hurricane is . . .

something that happens in far-away places” (he might just have said “dithyrambic lands”)” (26). This admission, on privilege and othering, and its disruption, through thwarted expectations on bourgeois regularity, together speak toward the need in contemporary ecocriticism to reconcile a post-naturalist understanding of connectivity in ecology with an intersectional politics of location, cognizant of both privilege and societal positioning. Moreover, given the global scale of both ecology and ecocriticism, this initial approach is therefore also necessarily limited in its critique, focusing in on the privileged, Western social imaginary, specifically here as it manifests in the United States and its belief in the ordinary’s opposition to crisis.

In its attempt to disrupt this binary mode of thinking, post-naturalist ecocriticism calls “nature” as a societal construct into question as well as the very practice of othering, which Cartesian dualism relies upon in order to render ecological catastrophes as distant and distinct. As first famously argued by environmentalist Bill McKibben in *The End Of Nature* (1989), a “post-natural” world does “not mean the end of the world. The rain will still fall and the sun shine, though differently than before” (McKibben, 7). For McKibben, “nature” here means “a certain set of human ideas about the world and our place in it” (7); and, in deconstructing this anthropocentric, or human-centered, construct, McKibben’s post-naturalist thought facilitates what object-oriented ontologist Timothy Morton has called an understanding of ecology beyond nature, as well as an understanding of climate beyond weather. By this, Morton refers to the “nonlocality” of anthropogenic climate change as being distinct from its manifestations (1). As senior climatologist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research Kevin E. Trenberth

explains it, “The answer to the oft-asked question of whether an event is caused by climate change is that it is the wrong question. All weather events are affected by climate change because the environment in which they occur is warmer and moister than it used to be” (Trenberth, 283). Therefore, for ecocritics like Ghosh, Hurricane Sandy functions similarly as a synecdoche for the larger theoretical and existential challenges anthropogenic climate change poses toward the privileged environmental imagination in “first world” countries like the United States. In how individual ecological catastrophes together constitute the totality of the climate crisis, post-naturalist ecocriticism provides a means toward theorizing connectivity wherein the distances between nature and culture collapse alongside those between the here and there of Sobel’s privileged self against the far-away other.

In this reconceptualization of ecology, post-naturalist ecocriticism also importantly enacts a return of the ecologically repressed within the environmental imagination. That is to say, the uncanny affectively structures anthropogenic climate change’s reordering of the ordinary. As articulated by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, the uncanny is a psychological experience or structure of affect wherein the subject encounters or experiences something as strangely familiar or strange in its familiarity. For ecocriticism, this uncanny recognition, or returned cognition, is twofold: first in understanding nature’s primacy over the anthropocentric belief in bourgeois regularity and then in recognizing the consequences of human actions in their returned impact. Toward the first of these affective experiences, environmentalist George Marshall explains, “Climate change is inherently uncanny: Weather conditions, and the high-

carbon lifestyles that are changing them, are extremely familiar and yet have now been given a new menace and uncertainty” (95). About the latter, McKibben argues that the “awesome power of Mother Nature [...] is [now] the awesome power of Mother Nature as altered by the awesome power of man, who has overpowered in a century the processes that have been slowly evolving and changing of their own accord since the earth was born” (51). Through this uncanny return of the ecologically repressed, anthropogenic climate change then effectively denaturalizes the ordinary’s sense of bourgeois regularity as an anthropocentric ideology, whose societal construction entails real consequences. For an antiracist ecocriticism that actively accounts for the ways in which societal positioning factors into embodied experiences with and under anthropogenic climate change, a politics of location is also imperative to this critique of bourgeois anthropocentrism. Put more bluntly, ecocriticism, in its claim to understanding connectivity, is and must be antiracist in recognizing the ways in which anthropogenic climate change disproportionately affects marginalized individuals, lest we allow connectivity to conceal the differences in how ecology is already experienced in its uncanny return.

Therefore, in order to disrupt the societal belief in bourgeois regularity in our time of improbability, we must begin, as an intersectional politics of embodiment¹ mandates, where we are; and, as Ghosh proposes, we, here meaning the Western social imaginary, are stuck in a state of mass delusion. Addressing the contemporary struggle toward accountability regarding anthropogenic climate change, Ghosh argues that the era of the

¹ See Adrienne Rich’s “Notes toward a Politics of Location” (1984).

Anthropocene “will come to be known as the time of the Great Derangement” (11). Anthropocentric ideology, in its reception and perpetuation through culture as a fantasy of noncontradiction, then corresponds with what Ghosh identifies as the contemporary practice of narrative concealment through propelling forward the myth of bourgeois regularity (10). The concealment of crisis in the ordinary, deemed improbable by uniformitarian expectations, functions in the modern novel through a self-perpetuating cycle. That is to say, in order to craft a believable narrative, an author must enforce a judgement on believability, thereby perpetuating the practice of concealment toward that which is perceived as improbable. "This, then," Ghosh argues, “is the first of the many ways in which the age of global warming defies both literary fiction and contemporary common sense: the weather events of this time have a very high degree of improbability" (26). In his critique of this imaginative delimitation, Ghosh continues “the modern novel, unlike geology, has never been forced to confront the centrality of the improbable: the concealment of its scaffolding of events continues to be essential to its functioning. It is this that makes a certain kind of narrative a recognizably modern novel” (Ghosh, 23). Therefore, for an anthropocentric society wherein those in power profit off climate change denial, it follows that anthropogenic climate change must remain improbable within the environmental imagination. In this way, narrative concealment enacts the social repression of the ecological that the ecologically uncanny serves to disrupt. To maintain this repression, the literary canon must then work overtime to safeguard the ordinary against that which it sanctions improbable and therefore unimaginable. In this way, the ordinary is a flexible field informed by anthropocentric ideology; and, in order

to understand crisis, we must first examine the ways in which we understand the ordinary against and through it.

Widely regarded by ecocritics and environmentalists alike as the origin of the Anthropocene, the 1945 Trinity Test deployment of the first atomic bomb and the Great Acceleration, or the exponential increase in human “progress” and its corresponding ecological impact that followed in and after WWII, coincides with this mass denial. While cli-fi, or climate change science fiction, has grown more recently as a speculative genre in response to this crisis, twentieth century American literature of the ordinary remains deeply embedded within this cultural matrix of concealment; and, within the politics of the canon, that which is deemed “ordinary” is often synonymous with that which is normalized and thereby privileged by hegemonic ideology. That is to say, the literary ordinary within American culture is a rigid category feverishly maintained within the social imaginary as white, straight, male, cis-gendered, able-bodied, upper middle-class, and so on. In order to understand this literary genre and how it automatically assumes the “normal” position within Western discourse, one must then also understand the process of othering which the literary ordinary relies upon in order to define itself against and through the other. For an antiracist ecocriticism, this deconstruction of the ordinary is then imperative. That is, to realize the ways in which the ordinary is coupled with privilege is then the first step toward realizing the ways in which the canon’s genre binary consequently conceals already lived environmental racism as existent only outside of the societally sanctioned literary ordinary.

Furthermore, in how this literary ordinary is maintained, a new binary emerges within the Anthropocene toward environmental depictions in literature of the ordinary and climate fiction. As Richard Kerridge warns in his essay, “Ecothrillers: Environmental Cliffhangers,” the danger that speculative fiction within this rigid binary poses for ecocriticism lies in its potential for “ambivalence, flirting with catastrophe while remaining sure of security, [in how it] sets a pattern for our responses to real ecological crisis” (246). While cli-fi does succeed, as Andrea Whiteley et. al. proposes in “Climate Change Imaginaries? Examining Expectation Narratives in Cli-Fi Novels,” in depicting climate change as “a lived experience rather than a scientific projection,” twentieth century American literature of the ordinary, as an already ideologically informed field, remains the predominant genre of this privileged cultural concealment (35). This is also not to suggest that intersectional ecocritical fiction does not exist. In fact, there has been a long tradition of environmental fiction in global literature, as Ghosh refers to in his discussion of the Indian epic’s nonhuman literary tropes (64); however, as Ghosh explains, “it could even be said that fiction that deals with climate change is almost by definition not of the kind that is taken seriously by serious [Western] literary journals: the mere mention of the subject is often enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction” (7). In this way, an antiracist ecocritical critique toward the contemporary literary canon’s construction of a new binary opposition— between literature of the ordinary and cli-fi narratives of apocalypse— and the hegemonic implications that this opposition implies is necessary in order to effect change within our social ordinary.

Just as post-naturalist ecocriticism has pushed beyond the false binary opposition presented by Cartesian dualism's nature-culture divide, we must now carry the same praxis forward toward literature in pushing beyond this false opposition maintained in the social imaginary. That is to say, ecocriticism's traditional deconstruction of Cartesian dualism is not enough; the post-naturalist imagination must now also address its unexamined anthropocentric ideology in how it conceives of the ordinary so that it may then effectively address crisis. In "Environmental Apocalypticism," Buell speaks toward this current imaginative impasse through his notion of master metaphors. Our environmental imagination, Buell contends, already operates through metaphors, to include "an economy (from the Greek *oikos*, household), a chain or scale of being, a balance, an organism, a mind, a flux, [and] a machine" (280); and, these metaphors are consequential for how society envisions its relationship toward and within ecological systems. For the literature of the Anthropocene, Buell then concludes, "Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal" (281). Contrastingly, affect theorist Lauren Berlant reframes the relationship between trauma and the ordinary in her foundational work *Cruel Optimism* (2011). In exploring relationships of cruel optimism, or what she deems as affective impassivity at societally maintained impasses, Berlant instead suggests that affective postponement in want of the good life enables the societal perpetuation of hegemonic structures. "Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness," Berlant explains, "but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming" (10). For a post-naturalist reading practice then, the binary opposition

between the ordinary and apocalypse must then collapse as well, lest postponement allow us to impassively negate the ways in which anthropogenic climate change affects the world today. That is to say, to reframe the ordinary as already apocalyptic is to push beyond the literary canon's falsely constructed binary and realize the ways in which the ordinary, as a construct, is sustained as a position only against the fantasy of total apocalypse.

Moreover, for depicting our own already lived ecological crisis, object-oriented ontologist Morton shifts attention within the structure of ecological representation away from the subject's anthropocentrism and toward interobjective relationships in his book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (2013). Object-oriented ontology, or "OOO," largely explores this form of speculative realism in how it attempts to address the reality of objects outside of their relation to humans, thereby decentering the anthropocentric subject from ontology in the Anthropocene. Hyperobjects, Morton explains of this new ontology, are "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans," meaning that "any "local manifestation" of a hyperobject is not directly the hyperobject" (Morton, 1). Within this ecocritical framework, anthropogenic climate change as a hyperobject only exhibits its effects interobjectively, or "in a space that consists of interrelationships between aesthetic properties of objects" (1). Just as Morton here adopts Lacan's famous line that "there is no metalanguage" to see the totality of anthropogenic climate change from a position outside of it, he also argues that "situatedness is now a very uncanny place to be" in how subjective perceptions serve as litmus tests for hyperobjects in their manifestations (5).

For an ecological understanding of the crisis ordinary, hyperobject's nonlocality then importantly provides a means for theorizing the anthropocentric subject's interface with anthropogenic climate change; that is to say, Morton here provides a means for the subject to experience the apocalyptic both within and as the ordinary. In fact, Morton is explicit on this point in his repeated declaration: "The end of the world has already occurred" (7); however, as an object-oriented ontologist, Morton maintains his critique of anthropocentrism here in asserting that this end of the world does not rely upon human recognition of it to have occurred. For post-naturalist ecocriticism, Morton's work in denaturalizing the anthropocentric ordinary in both space and time then enables a further denaturalization of anthropocentric ideology and its corresponding belief in bourgeois regularity. Diverging here from OOO's rejection of the ideological subject as a perpetuation of anthropocentrism, a post-naturalist intervention into the ideological superstructure built upon the Anthropocene's material base is imperative to understanding anthropocentrism itself. That is, while OOO acknowledges the subject's inability to *see* anthropogenic climate change, a post-naturalist intervention into anthropocentric ideology attempts to understand that which is blinding. In this way, the end of the world also marks a potential point of ideological liberation for the anthropocentric subject.

By virtue of this liberating potentiality, the anthropocentric subject's ideological renegotiation in interfacing with anthropogenic climate change is then also inherently Bakhtinian. As a theorist of subversive epistemology and democratizing disruption, Mikhail Bakhtin's work recommends itself to ecocriticism first through its attention

toward denaturalization. More specifically, Morton's interface between the anthropocentric subject and anthropogenic climate change's manifestations presents itself as a moment of ecological dialogics in how ideological understandings may be denaturalized and thereby renegotiated through this mutual interaction. In his post-naturalist reconceptualization of Cartesian dualism's nature-culture divide, Bakhtinian theorist Patrick D. Murphy's notion of ecological dialogics speaks toward this active renegotiation in how nature as culturally-affected and culture as naturally-affected together constitute an ongoing dialogue today. In his essay "Ecofeminist Dialogics," Murphy introduces this concept through applying Mikhail Bakhtin's democratic linguistic theory toward humanity's placement within ecological systems. In "On Meaning and Understanding: A Dialogical Approach," Mika Lähteenmäki explains this linguistic system as a system of communication "not approached from the point of view of transmission of information, but seen as an interactive process in which both speaker and listener play an active role" (78). For the subject engaged in dialogue, knowledge is never simply transmitted from speaker to listener; but, rather, dialogue serves as an epistemologically "joint project in which meanings are mutually constructed" by the dialogic participants (Lähteenmäki, 78). For Murphy, Bakhtin's notions of centripetal or hegemonic, and centrifugal or subversive, social forces provide "a means of countering totalization, so that any totality is continuously recognized as already a relativized, temporal centripetal entity in need of centrifugal destabilizing" (194). Therefore, for anthropocentrism as a centripetal entity, Murphy proposes that ecological dialogics can destabilize its Cartesian ordering by reminding humanity of the uncanny role nature plays

as an active agent within our dialogic relationship. Gary Paul Morson articulates this also in his preface to his Bakhtinian anthology, *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work* (1981):

[...] perhaps Bakhtin's most radical contribution lies in his rethinking of traditional oppositions: of the individual to society, of self to other, of the specific utterance to the totality of language, and of particular actions to the world of norms and conventions [...] His constant concern is to show that analytic categories have been mistaken for social facts and that, in fact, apparent opposites are made up of the same material: dialogics “words” (and actions) in the whole complex field of answerability.

(Morson, xi)

For Murphy’s ecological dialogic, these dialogic words and actions map onto ecology’s connectivity in post-naturalist ecocriticism. That is to say, an ecological dialogic provides the post-naturalist methodology for reconceptualizing humanity’s relationship in and to ecological systems following Cartesian dualism’s binary’s collapse in the end of the world.

From its first articulation in Murphy’s ecological dialogic, Bakhtinian ecology as an active methodology of denaturalization and renegotiation then enables a post-naturalist ecocriticism to both realize climate change as a hyperobject and to disrupt anthropocentric monologism, an ecocritical adaption of Bakhtin’s dialogic critique of privileged, single-voiced discourse. Beyond an ecological dialogic’s linguistic renegotiation, Bakhtinian ecology also expands out to encompass Bakhtin’s philosophical

and aesthetic notions in the carnivalesque and grotesque realism through their ecocritical resonances. Respectively, these concepts refer toward momentary societal upheaval and its corresponding aesthetic reformulation in a connective degradation. As Krystyna Pomorska articulates it in her foreword to Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1965), the study in which he famously develops many of these ideas, "Dialogue so conceived is opposed to the "authoritarian word" (*avtoritarnoe slovo*) in the same way as carnival is opposed to official culture" (x). For a post-naturalist ecocriticism, this subversive aim enables a critique of anthropocentric ideology's predominance within the Anthropocene. Moreover, just as Morton recalls Lacan's claim that there "is no metalanguage" to understand hyperobjects from outside of their manifestations, Bakhtin argues in *Rabelais and His World* that "the carnival does not know floodlights" in how centrifugal disruption toward a relativized centripetal entity marks a moment of complete ideological breakdown through denaturalization (Morton, 6; Bakhtin, 7). In this manner, Bakhtinian ecology provides a means toward theorizing the potential ideological rupture for the anthropocentric subject's interface with anthropogenic climate change as a hyperobject.

In returning to Ghosh's reading of the modern novel as a form of concealment in and of the ordinary, particularly in regards to representations of privileged societal positioning, Don DeLillo's 1985 canonical novel *White Noise* arises as an exemplary case of literature of the ordinary's active ecological repression. DeLillo, in satirizing the anthropocentric subject's uncanny interface with anthropogenic climate change, introduces his protagonist Jack Gladney through his insistent claim to ordinariness; and, within a novel of and on dialogue's role within the Anthropocene, Jack's insistent

monologues are uniquely fitting in establishing anthropocentric monologism's maintenance of the ordinary. Even more, Jack's family and friends speak similarly, feigning dialogues without ever listening to each other. For instance, as the department chair of Hitler Studies at the College-on-the-Hill in the mundane suburbia of Blacksmith, Jack is the singular voice of authority on Hitler discourse, which he then renders mundane. In effect, Jack has made his livelihood from hollowing trauma out of the traumatic. A colleague named Murray Jay Siskind from the popular culture department speaks to Jack's success in dominating this discourse by declaring, "You've established a wonderful thing here with Hitler [...] He is now your Hitler, Gladney's Hitler" (DeLillo, 11). As DeLillo's satirical take on the academic within the campus novel genre, this colleague then tells Jack that he hopes to accomplish the same feats with Elvis (12). After establishing this ordinary and its thinly veiled concealment of historical trauma, *White Noise* then takes a left turn toward the "improbable" through the "Airborne Toxic Event." In this human-caused ecological crisis, Jack's anthropocentric ideology is punctured through interfacing with the crisis ordinary of anthropogenic climate change; however, even as he faces the existential threat of ecological crisis, Jack refuses to imagine himself vulnerable:

"These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. Society is set up in such a way that it's the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters. People in low-lying areas get the floods, people in shanties get the hurricanes and tornados. I'm a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat

down his own street in one of those TV floods? We live in a neat and pleasant town near a college with a quaint name. These things don't happen in places like Blacksmith." (DeLillo, 114)

Through this admission, Jack echoes Sobel's comment regarding New York during Hurricane Sandy. The uncanny, post-naturalist realization that comes of Jack's experience with the Airborne Toxic Event in 1985 foreshadows that of New England in 2012: that which was othered was never really other at all. For a post-naturalist ecocriticism, ecological crises then cannot be thought of as distinct or distant instances of disaster; rather, they must be recognized as the linked manifestations of anthropogenic climate change as a nonlocal hyperobject to thereby realize the fundamental connectivity in ecology.

Moreover, in Jack's ecological interface with anthropogenic climate change as a hyperobject, the Airborne Toxic Event denaturalizes Cartesian dualism's nature-culture divide within the Anthropocene and thereby presents a post-naturalist means of countering the centripetal force of anthropocentrism as a relativized entity. As a Bakhtinian disruption, the ecological crisis is subsequently repressed in its aftermath within Blacksmith's social imagination in order to maintain the binary opposition between the ordinary and the apocalyptic upon which the ordinary relies; however, in how the disruption denaturalizes anthropocentric logic, the return toward the ordinary for the Blacksmith community cannot be total. In fact, Jack, after having consumed Nyodene D, or the toxic element released in the chemical spill responsible for the event, is even physically changed by the crisis. The ecologic dialogic presented through this

consumption then also reveals the larger dialogue at play theoretically between nature's uncanny return and the anthropocentric subject's belief in bourgeois regularity.

Bakhtinian ecology, as a means of understanding this disruption, can then retroactively follow Jack throughout the novel: first through his initial privileged monologism in anthropocentric ideology; then in his sudden dialogic confrontation with climate change as a denaturalizing carnivalesque disruption; and, finally, in his experience of grotesque realism's uncanny connectivity as he struggles to reconcile his societal belief in the regularity of bourgeois life with the improbable reality of ecology today.

In how *White Noise* can be understood through Bakhtinian ecology, "Section I: Waves and Radiation" begins with Jack's privileged and unchallenged anthropocentric monologism. This ordinary, as constructed through the Anthropocene in binary opposition to the apocalyptic, is maintained through the societal belief in the regularity of bourgeois life. That is to say, the belief in the ordinariness of regularity naturalizes the construction of the ordinary itself as a category within the Anthropocene against that which is deemed extraordinary. The perpetuation of this societal belief informs the uniformitarian expectations of the citizens of Blacksmith, including Jack at the novel's opening as he watches how the "station wagons arrived at noon" on move-in day at the College-on-the-Hill, just as they do and he does every year (DeLillo, 1). Within the mundane rhythm of his life, Jack goes to work, goes to the grocery store, and comes home again to his wife and family. As part of this rhythm, the Gladney family also gathers around the television on Friday nights, "as was the custom and the rule," with take-out food to watch documentary streams of natural disasters, including "floods,

earthquakes, mud slides, [and] erupting volcanos” (DeLillo, 64). In later discussing this experience with his colleagues, the professors all agree that watching disasters can be pleasurable, but only if “they happen somewhere else” (66). As one professor remarks, “For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set” (DeLillo, 66). For Jack, he and his family then live in the ordinary “here” of Blacksmith, which he defines against the “there” of disaster. Just as post-naturalist ecocriticism problematizes the binary opposition maintained by Cartesian dualism’s nature-culture divide, Bakhtinian ecology can here problematize the process of othering upon which Jack relies in constructing his sense of security. For the connectivity of language itself, Lähtenmäki explains:

[...] the function of an utterance or its meaning that emerges in a given social context cannot be reduced to the relations between the word, the speaker, and the object the speaker refers to: ‘no living word relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same objects.’ (Lähtenmäki, 78)

That is to say, to define oneself against the other is to define oneself through the other. For Jack, this anthropocentric monologism ultimately then begins to evidence its own practice of narrative concealment of the already apocalyptic within the crisis ordinary.

As the novel takes its left turn toward improbable crisis in “Section II: The Airborne Toxic Event,” Jack’s refusal to imagine his own vulnerability then reveals both the failure and breakdown of anthropocentric ideology and monologism within the text.

This dialogic encounter with the real of anthropogenic climate change as hyperobject disrupts Jack's traditionally held binaries— between nature and culture, ordinary and apocalyptic, and here and there— through an uncanny return toward their false constructions; however, first, DeLillo dramatizes Jack's refusal to reimagine the ecological other for fear of what it might reveal about himself. In his frantic conversations with his family, Jack's monologism becomes desperate if not also absurd in his curt responses. To his son Heinrich, Jack snaps that the smoke rising from the derailed tank car "won't come this way" (DeLillo, 110-111). When asked how he could possibly ensure this, Jack responds that "It just won't" and "I just know" (110). The family, surrounded as always by radio transmissions, continues to receive live updates concerning the wreck and the ecological crisis unfurling in their town; however, Jack insists that they remain within their home even as the wind shifts in their direction because of his deeply held belief that "these things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas," and therefore not him (114).

As the news evolves, Jack's children enact Bakhtin's linguistic theory in their understanding that each utterance is the penultimate utterance within a dialogic interaction. Through their epistemological repositioning, the Gladney children then effectively undermine their father's monologism as the sole voice of authority within their renegotiated family structure. This Bakhtinian subversion, moreover, exposes Jack's anthropocentric ideology as fallacy. Echoing the radio updates, Heinrich tells Jack first that, "The radio calls it a feathery plume," and then, soon thereafter, that, "They're not calling it a feathery plume anymore" (DeLillo, 111, 113). As understandings of the crisis

are actively renegotiated between corresponding intelligence agencies, information shifts its source from the neighborhood community to a weather center outside Glassboro. In correspondence with these rapid developments through an ecological dialogic, the “feathery plume” is renamed as a “black billowing cloud” (113). To this, Jack responds, “That’s a little more accurate, which means they’re coming to grips with the thing. Good” (113); however, this information again proves insufficient. The then “Airborne Toxic Event,” like any true theoretical event, represents a paradigmatic shift for Jack as an anthropocentric subject. The uncanny return here is multifold: through the ecologically repressed, through anthropogenic climate change as the product of human’s action, and through the understanding that anthropocentrism as a centripetal totality was only ever a relativized entity in need of centrifugal disruption.

Moreover, as the crisis develops and the family is forced to evacuate to an abandoned boy scout camp for safety, Jack encounters the carnivalesque societal upheaval of anthropocentric logic’s momentary breakdown. While fleeing, Jack first notices this centrifugal disruption when he looks up from his car at the faces of those watching from their home windows just outside of Blacksmith. “It made us feel like fools,” Jack explains, silently narrating the crisis to himself. “In a crisis the true facts are whatever other people say they are. No one’s knowledge is less secure than your own” (DeLillo, 120). When they arrive at the center, this breakdown of anthropocentric ideology and its belief in bourgeois regularity becomes even more glaringly obvious. Rather than finding security in the univocity of authority, the Gladney family instead encounters the true carnivalesque nature of crisis in how social order is completely turned

upside down and thereby denaturalized for the duration of the disruption. “As opposed to the official feast,” Bakhtin explains in *Rabelais and His World*, “one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (10). Moreover, within this centrifugal denaturalization, a new form of “communication, impossible in the ordinary life, is established” (Bakhtin, 16). Within the carnivalesque confines of the Airborne Toxic Event, this subversive communication reveals both the truth of ecology’s uncanny improbability and the failure of anthropocentric ideology to conceal this crisis ordinary within its uniformitarian expectations.

More specifically, this upheaval occurs at both the societal and familial levels for Jack as traditional voices of authority fail within this newly emerging dialogic. As he wanders throughout the evacuation center, Jack realizes this renegotiation of power and knowledge most poignantly when he notices “small crowds collected around certain men” as “sources of information and rumor” (DeLillo, 129). In this frantic epistemological project, Jack notes how “As people jolted out of reality, we were released from the need to distinguish” between sources in their presumed credibility (129). Furthermore, amidst this breakdown of traditional authority and the carnivalesque heteroglossia, or a multitude of voices and perspectives engaged in dialogue, Heinrich is then able to successfully reposition himself within the reorganized societal structure. Jack, desperately attempting to hold onto his anthropocentric positionality, is

dumbfounded in recognizing this renegotiation of authority as he approaches one of the larger crowds to see strangers gathering around his son:

People listened attentively to this adolescent boy in a field jacket and cap, with binoculars strapped around his neck and an Instamatic fastened to his belt. No doubt his listeners were influenced by his age. He would be truthful and earnest, serving no special interest; he would have an awareness of the environment; his knowledge of chemistry would be fresh and up-to-date. (DeLillo, 13)

Heinrich's newfound authority within the temporality of the carnival here reveals the carnival's unique forms of relationality, as well as its denaturalization of traditional power structures. Crisis here effectively mirrors the carnivalesque in how, as Bakhtin writes, "While [the] carnival lasts, there is no life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom" (7). As with Morton's denaturalization of the crisis ordinary in space and time through recognizing anthropogenic climate change as a hyperobject, the carnivalesque upheaval in crisis here marks a point of potential ideological liberation for Jack as an anthropocentric subject.

Lastly, in the return toward the concealed crisis ordinary in "Section III: Dylarama" following the crisis, Jack discovers the truth of grotesque realism's uncanny connectivity in degradation. That is, Jack discovers that he cannot return fully to his initial positionality as a subject of anthropocentric ideology after the Airborne Toxic Event. The grotesque here, as a main motif of the carnival, instead bridges the Cartesian gap between mind and body to reconnect them through degradation. Consequentially,

Jack is forever changed by the crisis. The novel ensures this material difference through Jack's consumption of Nyodene D, which he happened to have accidentally consumed amidst the chaos of the event. More specifically, Jack consumed this toxin when he was forced to stop for gas mid-evacuation. The mundanity of this action amidst the crisis speaks here toward their inextricability within the crisis ordinary of anthropogenic climate change; and, further, this act then foreshadows how Jack is unable to return to this mundane ordinary as he had originally conceived of it. Through breathing in the chemical in an ecological dialogic, Jack became forever connected to the event itself, thereby rendering futile his later attempts at repositioning his identity again against crisis. As Bakhtin writes in *Rabelais and His World* on the power of grotesque realism, "The unfinished and open body (dying, bringing forth, and being born) is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects" (26-7). In this manner, the anthropocentric subject's interface with anthropogenic climate change is not only a moment of dialogic interaction, but also an opening itself.

While this interface does represent a moment of potential ideological liberation, Jack instead responds through doubling down on his belief in anthropocentrism. If he can no longer reaffirm his positionality through the binary constructions of Cartesian dualism's nature-culture divide or the social imaginary's ordinary-crisis divide because of the ways in which the Airborne Toxic Event collapsed both distinctions, Jack will instead turn toward that which he has studied most as the head of the Hitler Studies department: racial othering. In order to reaffirm the regularity of bourgeois life and his corresponding

anthropocentric belief in self-agency, Jack makes the horrific decision to kill Willie Mink, the man of color with whom his wife has had an extramarital affair for drugs. After tracking him down, however, Willie Mink's racial ambiguity instead complicates Jack's attempt at racial othering. Looking at him, Jack wonders, "Was he Melanesian, Polynesian, Indonesian, Nepalese, Surinamese, Dutch-Chinese? Was he a composite?" (DeLillo, 307). Jack's frustrated logic is here reflexive: he cannot define himself through the other if he cannot first define the other. Toward Jack and in a haze of his own drug use, Willie Mink then comments, "I see you as a heavysset white man about fifty. Does this describe your anguish? I see you as a person in a gray jacket and light brown pants. Tell me how correct I am" (DeLillo, 308). In this act of identification, Willie Mink effectively refutes Jack's racist attempt at identifying as white *against* anguish. In this ending, *White Noise* is very clear: a post-naturalist ecocritical liberation from anthropocentric ideology must be actively antiracist, lest it reaffirm the very process of othering which it claims to disavow.

As is revealed through the evolving treatment of the ordinary in *White Noise*, Bakhtinian ecology provides an important methodology to understanding ideological disruption; and, in recognizing the ecological dialogic underlying the Anthropocene, a post-naturalist ecocritical disruption must begin in reframing the ordinary as already apocalyptic. Following DeLillo's 1985 novel as an exemplary case of an anthropocentric subject's interface with anthropogenic climate change as hyperobject, the Bakhtinian potentiality is multifold: in ecological dialogics' epistemological renegotiation, in the carnivalesque denaturalization of societal structure in crisis, and in grotesque realism's

uncanny connectivity. Ultimately, to return toward Ghosh's reading of the modern novel as a form of concealment in and of the ordinary, Bakhtinian ecology's centrifugal reading practice effectively makes strange the "normal" through the uncanny familiarity of the "strange" itself. Therefore, through examining anthropocentric ideology's treatment of the ordinary in, against, and through environmental crises, a Bakhtinian intervention enables a post-naturalist confrontation of the global ecological crisis already occurring.

**CHAPTER 2: *WHITE NOISE* IN CONTEXT:
THE “AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTS” OF POSTMODERNITY**

As one of the foremost critically acclaimed texts from the late-modern or “postmodern” canon, DeLillo’s *White Noise* notably occupies a position of self-awareness within its surrounding postmodern discourse. “Postmodernism” will be used here within the context of this thesis as it commonly is used today to refer toward late-modernist literature and theory following 1945. While never actually a term used by the theorists it claims, postmodernism purports to break from modernist thought through its disavowal of unifying master narratives². In this postmodern shift, the rejection of universal truth fosters two opposing camps: what can be called a “post-historical” school of thought that embraces a nihilistic relativism and a reparative school that instead poses an existential potentiality. For the latter of these approaches, critical theory offers a means to revitalize postmodernity’s fragments and, from the pieces, form a postmodern community that believes in something. The difference, in short, is respectively between two opposing notions: the relativist nihilism that there is no truth and the reparative existentialism that there is no singular universal truth, but rather multiple, subjective truths that may come together. DeLillo’s protagonist, however, is an academic conversant in the former of these versions of postmodernity.

Alongside his colleague Murray Jay Siskind from the popular culture department, known officially at the College-on-the-Hill as “American environments,” Jack Gladney

² Ironically, this fundamental resistance toward unifying narratives makes even defining “postmodernism” a challenge.

engages in the very same theoretical dialogues that together constitute the postmodern American environment; however, as a satirical novelist, DeLillo goes beyond simply illustrating this theoretical landscape. DeLillo, in his campus novel's parody of the postmodern academic, here also critiques the post-historical faction of postmodern thought. In this manner, DeLillo also points toward the critical potential of a reparative postmodernity, revitalized through critical theory. Following a similar trajectory in its critical reception, the novel was initially read and revered as a postmodern object itself. Only more recently has DeLillo's depiction of postmodernity been acknowledged in its satirical tone, and only then has the novel been read through reparative critical theories. This contemporary resurgence reveals the longstanding importance of the novel itself as well as the continued potential of postmodernity and its texts, once rescued from a post-historical context.

In the more traditional postmodern reading of the novel, scholars have located several points of focus within the text, including its treatment of history. In adopting this critical approach, Paul Cantor writes extensively on the novel's reckoning with historical trauma in his essay, "Adolf, We Hardly Knew You." In this work, Cantor begins by focusing in on Jack's status as the chair of Hitler Studies at the College-on-the-Hill and how this position is characterized within the academic environment. Murray Jay Siskind remarks on his rank first by noting, "You've established a wonderful thing here with Hitler. You created it, you nurtured it, you made it your own. Nobody on the faculty of any college or university in this part of the country can so much as utter the word Hitler without a nod in your direction, literally or metaphorically" (DeLillo, 11). In his reading

of the scene, Cantor critiques Jack and Murray's flippancy in how "this situation results in the distinctively postmodern attitude toward history as a kind of museum, or, better yet, a supermarket of human possibilities, where people are free to shop around for their values and identities" (41). Postmodernism, for Cantor, is then "post-historical," rather than serving as a reckoning with history itself.

In how Jack is both able and enabled to take a relativist stance toward his consumption of history, Cantor argues that he effectively renders "a horrifying phenomenon like Hitler [...] into a commodity," without him ever having to make the historical connection between Hitler and the Holocaust (44). "In a world where truth is now generally thought to be relative," Cantor explains, "Hitler often seems to stand as the lone remaining absolute: the incarnation of absolute evil" (39); however, here, Gladney treats Hitler as just "another subject of academic discourse, arousing no special passions" (Cantor, 30). Pointing toward this parody of the postmodern academic within the campus novel genre, Cantor then argues that DeLillo is able to effectively critique the postmodern ability "to trivialize even the most significant of historical phenomena" (47). Within this satirical display of post-historical relativism, Murray then infamously equates Hitler with Elvis as he informs Jack that he hopes to accomplish a similar academic feat in establishing a Presley Studies department. While at once a joke about the rise of the Culture Studies department and the breakdown of "high" academia, this moment within the text also importantly establishes DeLillo's parody of post-historical relativism, and, within a text of crisis, this relativism will prove disastrous.

Moreover, several days into the text's initially meandering timeline, Murray and Jack visit "THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA" (DeLillo, 12). As what is arguably the most discussed episode in the text, this scene stands in for what the traditional postmodern reading finds as the text's central message on the hyperreal postmodern landscape. As Leonard Wilcox writes in "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative," Jack's world is here "characterized "by a "loss of the real" in a black hole of simulation and the play and exchange of signs" (346). As Murray says of their experience viewing the most photographed barn in America, "We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura" (DeLillo, 12). By this, Murray points toward how the material reality of the barn is secondary to the idea of the barn, as Baudrillard articulates in his notion on the precession of simulacra. Within this postmodern hyperreality, Wilcox then argues that "simulation has become the ground for the real" (351). As one of the most iconic scenes from "Section I: Waves and Radiation," the barn's relation to the hyperreal foreshadows the plot to come in how the town addresses the "real" of crisis. That is, as "Section II: The Airborne Toxic Event" poses a real threat toward the community of Blacksmith, simulation is quick to conceal over the real within postmodernity. As Cantor notes, the SIMUVAC response team, itself short for the "Simulated Evacuation" team, is quickly sent into the evacuation camp where Jack and his family take shelter. Consequentially, the Airborne Toxic Event is processed first and foremost as an idea, rather than as the actually lived ecological crisis that it is for the people of Blacksmith. Just as Murray argues that they are no longer able to see the material barn past the idea it represents

within the social imaginary, the townspeople of Blacksmith are forced to understand the ecological disaster they encounter through the mediation of the state's controlled narrative.

Adopting a similar postmodern approach in his essay "Tales of the Electronic Tribe," Frank Lentricchia builds upon Cantor's critique by arguing that postmodern relativism, or that which Cantor describes as "post-historical relativism," lends itself toward proto-fascism, particularly through the reduction of events to spectacles. On the loss of the real experienced within the text, Lentricchia writes, "The question he poses in all but words is, What strange new form of human collectivity is born in the postmodern moment of aura, and at what price?" (Lentricchia, 92). In response, Lentricchia posits two forms of community as being possible within DeLillo's postmodern American landscape: either through what he calls "an electronic tribe" or through totalitarianism. The first of these, Lentricchia explains, is a community formed through consumption, represented best in the text through the image of the Gladney family gathered weekly around their television on Friday nights, "as was the custom and the rule, with take-out Chinese" (DeLillo, 64). For the latter, Jack articulates what he himself sees as the appeal of fascism in one his class lectures for "Advanced Nazism," a course he designed for senior Hitler majors on the "continuing mass appeal of fascist tyranny, with special emphasis on parades, rallies and uniforms" (DeLillo, 25). "To become a crowd," Jack argues, "is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone. Crowds came for this reason above all others. They were

there to be a crowd” (DeLillo, 73). Lentricchia, writing on this continued appeal of proto-fascism, then asks:

Would we prefer that Jack give up the supermarket, the mall, his family, the nights gathered around the TV, for another, chilling guarantor of community, who lurks in the background of *White Noise*, as in the background of a number of modernist literary monuments – the specter of the totalitarian, the gigantic charismatic figure who triggers our desire to give in, to merge our frightened selves in his frightening authority? Hitler, another kind of epic hero, voice of national solidarity, is the object of Jack’s awe. (Lentricchia, 112)

Within the context of postmodernism’s reckoning with master narratives, Lentricchia’s observation on Jack’s preference for consolidating figures, like Hitler as a voice of authority, is important; and within the further context of the novel’s ecological crisis, postmodernity’s need to reckon with the authority of discourse is highlighted.

Similarly, John N. Duvall, in his essay “The (Super)Marketplace of Images: Television as Unmediated Mediation in DeLillo’s *White Noise*,” argues that DeLillo’s Americana is itself constituted by this tendency toward proto-fascism. The post-historical relativism of Jack’s American environment, Duvall argues, “functions in what Frederic Jameson has identified as the cultural logic of multinational or late capitalism in which the social, the political, and the aesthetic flatten out into what Jean Baudrillard calls the simulacrum” (170). That is to say, televised spectacles of crises effectively empty the respective mass traumas of the traumatic in how they are consumed at large. Ironically,

when ecological crisis does come to Blacksmith, the evacuees find that their own experience is not being televised and thereby lacks the mediation of relativism. Upon this realization, one man asks the others within the evacuation center, “No film footage, no live report. Does this kind of thing happen so often that nobody cares anymore?” (DeLillo, 161-2). On this, Duvall writes, “what empties experience of meaning for the evacuees is not the mediation but the absence of mediation” (172). For the postmodern reading of the novel, this critique on mediation lays bare the lived cost of relativism.

Zooming outward, Matthew J. Packer speaks toward the novel’s status as a now postmodern object itself within the literary canon in his essay, ““At the Dead Center of Things” in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*: Mimesis, Violence, and Religious Awe.” Marking a divergence from past postmodern interventions, Packer begins by posing the question: “Has Don DeLillo’s supermarket satire, *White Noise*, passed its own use-by date?” (648). Referring to ecocritic Dana Phillips, Packer notes how Phillips suggests “that the work’s contribution to our understanding of postmodernism has been thoroughly examined” and, drawing from the language of fuel economies, that the novel now “is a resource all but depleted” (648). In his response to this claim, Packer points toward the iconic barn scene as well as to the analyses written on it by adding, “A feeling of belatedness marks the commentary, as though *White Noise* now has become like its own “most photographed barn in America” (12). Arguments about this and the novel’s other scenes of simulacra have made this passage the “most discussed passage in DeLillo”—and suggested both it and the novel can no longer be experienced directly” (Packer, 648). While Packer does here admit to the exhaustion surrounding postmodern criticism for

White Noise, his work still concedes its foundational status within the canon; further, through articulating this postmodern stasis, Packer then also points toward the new possibilities of interpreting the novel through new theoretical vantage points. In how the novel has been received historically and contemporarily, the main and newly emerging strands of analysis and debate surrounding the novel respectively include its traditional postmodern readings as well as new analyses into its depictions of whiteness through critical races studies and its depictions of anthropogenic climate change through ecocriticism.

Within this more recent and revitalized scholarship, Tim Engles' work best represents the intervention exercised by critical race studies. In his essay, "'Who are you, literally?': Fantasies of White Self in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*," Engles argues that the novel can be understood as "a novel about the noise that white people make" (171). By this, Engles suggests that as "white people are becoming increasingly marked *as* white and their status as exemplars of ordinary Americanhood [becomes] threatened," DeLillo's novel can be interpreted as a critical whiteness satire on Jack's attempt to cling to his fantasy of individual autonomy (171). More specifically, as the novel's narrative accelerates, Jack finds himself suddenly vulnerable through his experience in the Airborne Toxic Event and his ingestion of the toxic chemical Nyodene D. Despite his racist and classists beliefs that "These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas," Jack is still affected and must therefore renegotiate his understandings on identity and security, meaning his sense of privilege and the prior sense of security it had afforded him (DeLillo, 114).

In his final attempt to return to the ordinary, Jack comes to the horrific conclusion that the only way for him to secure his sense of autonomy is to assert it through murdering Willie Mink. When he finally confronts Willie Mink, or the “Mr. Gray” who had been both having an affair with and supplying the experimental drug “Dylar” to his wife, he is unable to categorize him racially; consequentially, Jack is also unable to build his own identity in relation to him through what Engles describes as “the ironically relational foundation of white identity” (175). Through his reading, Engles argues that this murder plot is then also an attempt at racial tyranny, with Engles explaining that the “logical outcome of this persistent, paradoxical need of the white self that Jack demonstrates here- the need to mark others as “Other” so that it can implicitly define itself – is tyranny, the present absence in Jack’s teachings of “Hitler Studies” (189). In this critical intervention, Engles engages with the text historically, as he relates the histories of Nazism and American racism together by writing, “Just as the Nazi notion of Aryan whiteness depended on a contrasting notion of racialized Others, so the white self needs to establish definitions of Other in order to define itself” (Engles, 189). Altogether, Duval’s work effectively repositions *White Noise* within literary discourse by revealing the need for further critical race scholarship on racial relativism within the postmodern canon.

Furthermore, critics have long noted the ecological foundation of the novel. For instance, Cantor, in his analysis of postmodernism, highlights the importance of the supermarket within the text as a pillar of the postmodern American environment. Everything, Cantor writes, “no matter how exotic or rare, is equally available, from all

over the world, and indeed seemingly from all eras of history” within the domain of the supermarket (43). Within the town of Blacksmith, the supermarket then functions to facilitate this postmodern form of consumption as it relates to post-historical relativism. In its satire, however, the novel’s depiction of postmodern relativism effectively conceals over that which is fundamental to its plot: ecological crisis. As ecocritic Richard Kerridge writes in his essay “Small rooms and the ecosystem: environmentalism and DeLillo’s *White Noise*”: “If postmodernism means pluralism and the absence of any grand, unifying narratives, then postmodernism's repressed Other in the most general sense is totality: that which leave no space for ironic difference, no room for a retreat to the position of a naturalist or TV audience" (Kerridge, 189). As is highlighted both within *White Noise* and in its early reception, postmodernity’s resistance toward unifying narratives has blinded it to the fundamental connectivity of ecology already experienced within the Anthropocene. More so, thinking this ecocritical connectivity also entails thinking intersectionality in how marginalized individuals are disproportionately affected by anthropogenic climate change today.

As exemplified by Dana Phillips’ in his essay, “Don DeLillo’s Postmodern Pastoral,” the traditional ecocritical approach toward *White Noise* begins as a critique of the postmodern. Writing on the Airborne Toxic Event within the novel as a man-made ecological crisis and Jack’s own consumption of Nyodene D, Phillips writes, “This suggests that the much-bewailed runaway consumerism of postmodern society is not the whole story: there are other kinds of exchange taking place that do not necessarily have to do with economics alone. The cash nexus is certainly economic, but the chemical

nexus is both economic and ecological; the economy of by-products, of toxic waste, is also an ecology” (241). In how postmodernism fundamentally marks a resistance toward any totalizing or overarching metanarrative, Phillips here points toward the ecological problem of connectivity. “In *White Noise*,” Phillips writes, “all knowledge is local knowledge, but one must understand how shaped by the global the local has become” (Phillips, 240). Further, the popular culture department’s formal title of “American Environments” is notable here in how culture has both literally and metaphorically paved over nature. The department title, in short, serves as a nod to post-naturalist ecocriticism, as is most widely known through Bill McKibben’s notion on the “end of nature.” Phillips, here noting the inextricability of nature and culture through anthropogenic climate change, points toward the universality in Murray Jay Siskind’s personal New York roots: “We’re all from New York” (Phillips, 240). Through this ecocritical approach, Phillips concludes that postmodernism is unable to conceptualize either the fundamental connectivity promised by ecology or the overarching narrative presented by anthropogenic climate change at its global level. In this theoretical gap, postmodern relativism is revealed also as a privileged refusal of accountability.

As the totality posed by anthropogenic climate change looms over postmodernity’s fragmented discourse, scholarship must now begin to better understand the very process of othering upon which this Cartesian dualist system relies; and, further, for creating an antiracist ecocriticism cognizant of the ways in which positionality factors into experiences of this totality, this scholarship must also understand how the other is always already one with the self. This theoretical challenge requires us, as subjects of

anthropocentric ideology, to critically analyze our understandings of nature and our relation both within and toward it in order to think ecologically. In this subversive renegotiation, Bakhtinian theory proves imperative. As proposed by ecocritic Patrick Murphy, the Bakhtinian notion of dialogics enables an understanding of post-naturalist ecology; however, an ecological dialogics can also be useful in regards to thinking about the ways in which we conceive of nature ideologically. Within this ecocritical pursuit, Bakhtinian theory effectively presents a means toward understanding the social imaginary's dialogic relationship, as well as toward understanding both the centrifugal denaturalization enacted in crisis and the connectivity posed in ecology. In how Bakhtin's work on dialogics, the carnivalesque, and grotesque realism all respectively relate toward ecocriticism, we may begin to realize the theoretical import of Bakhtinian ecology as a subversive methodological tool for rethinking anthropogenic climate change.

**CHAPTER 3: “WAVES AND RADIATION”:
THE MONOLOGISM OF THE ANTHROPOCENE**

“What *is* rain anyway?”
“It’s the stuff that falls from the sky and gets you what is called wet.”
“I’m not wet. Are you wet?”
“All right,” I said. “Very good.”
“No, seriously, are you wet?”

—Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

3.1 Blacksmith’s Bourgeois Regularity

Beginning in section one as novel of the ordinary, “Section I: Waves and Radiation” depicts the town of Blacksmith’s meandering maintenance of what Ghosh deems as the myth of bourgeois regularity and the uniformitarian expectations that this entails. On what Jack fondly refers to as “the day of station wagons,” the annual “caravan” of families arrive at noon to move their children into the dormitories at the College-on-the-Hill for the start of the fall semester (DeLillo, 5). Jack, watching this procession from afar, silently narrates: “I’ve witnessed this spectacle every September for twenty-one years. It is a brilliant event, invariably” (DeLillo, 3). The students and parents alike, Jack notes, “feel a sense of renewal, of communal recognition” (DeLillo, 3). Within the rhythm of maintaining this sense of the ordinary, the “assembly of station wagons, as much as anything they might do in the course of the year, more than formal liturgies or laws, tells the parents they are a collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation” (DeLillo, 4). This is to say, the relational underpinning of identity is reaffirming within this setting of the crowd; and, further, within the predominantly homogenous community of white, upper-middle class individuals attending the College-on-the-Hill and their suburbanite families, this reaffirmation of a lived sense of the

societal ordinary forecloses upon the possibility of understanding any underlying crisis in the fabric of their ordinary.

Here in the opening pages and throughout the first section of the novel, an anthropocentric monologism, or a single-voiced discourse pertaining toward humanity and its dominance over nature, can be understood to structure and thereby perpetuate the experience of and belief in a sense of bourgeois regularity. Bakhtinian ecology, in how it understands the active renegotiation of anthropocentric ideology in its interface with anthropogenic climate change, here builds upon Murphy's initial notion of ecological dialogics. While at first referring only toward the material and mutually-impactful relationship in which nature and culture engage within a post-naturalist sense of ecology, an ecocritical dialogics can now also expand outward to encompass ideological renegotiation. That is to say, anthropogenic climate change calls into question both the claims and authority of the societal discourse purporting climate change's nonexistence. For Jack, the singularity of anthropocentric monologism at play in the social imaginary effectively reaffirms his belief in bourgeois regularity, thereby discouraging him from engaging in a more democratic dialogue on climate. Consequentially, in "Section I: Waves and Radiation," Jack remains largely unchallenged in his beliefs and therefore unprepared for the ecological crisis to come. Dialogism, within the Anthropocene, thereby poses a subversive connectivity, the likes of which threaten to undermine traditional sources of authority and knowledge.

The narrative concealment Ghosh refers to as constitutive of the modern novel is at play directly here, as the students arrive carrying their weight in commodities, or items

understood independently from their inextricable and environmental connections toward the problematic capitalist structure of consumption within a postmodern America. That is to say, the manifest culture of consumption attempts to present itself within the text as disconnected from both the connective ecology of economy and the economic connections within ecology. “Culture generates desires,” Ghosh argues in *The Great Derangement*, “—for vehicles and appliances, for certain kinds of gardens and dwellings—that are among the principal drivers of the carbon economy” (10). Jack, in witnessing this cultural desire within his postmodern American environment, takes inventory:

The roofs of the station wagons were loaded down with carefully secured suitcases full of light and heavy clothing; with boxes of blankets, boots and shoes, stationary and books, sheets, pillows, quilts; with rolled-up rugs and sleeping bags; with bicycles, skis, rucksacks, English and Western saddles, inflated rafts. As cars slowed to a crawl and stopped, students sprang out and raced to the rear doors to begin removing the objects inside; the stereo sets, radios, personal computers; small refrigerators and table ranges; the cartons of phonograph records and cassettes; the hairdryers and styling irons; the tennis rackets, soccer balls, hockey and lacrosse sticks, bows and arrows; the controlled substances, the birth control pills and devices; the junk food still in shopping bags—onion-and-garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut crème patties, Waffelos and Kabooms,

fruit chews and toffee popcorn; the Dum Dum pops, the Mystic mints.
(DeLillo, 3)

In this actual monologue, Jack's anthropocentric monologism here maintains commodities as separate entities, distinct from their productions. As Ghosh says of the pristine front lawn or of the speedy convertible in their respective purposes, commodities also function culturally as representations of specific desires, as "an expression of a yearning" (10). "The artifacts and commodities that are conjured up by these desires," Ghosh concludes, "are [...] at once expressions and concealments of the cultural matrix that brought them into being" (10). Within the ideology of the Anthropocene, this cultural matrix then effectively conceals the post-naturalist dialogic between culture and nature; and, further, anthropocentric ideology's insistent monologism functions here through othering against nature, apocalypse, and an understanding of a distinct and distant "there" to uphold the anthropocentric prioritized notions of culture, the ordinary, and "here." For the students at the College-on-the-Hill, Jack's unbroken narration on their cultural commodities then functions precisely as the expression of concealment within and on the ordinary and its relationship toward ecological crisis.

3.2 Ecological Othering

Through Bakhtinian ecocriticism and its attention toward a post-naturalist dialogic, the ecocritical othering comprising the opening section of the novel proves futile. Within the Anthropocene, Ghosh argues, the earth "is precisely a world of insistent, inescapable continuities, animated by forces that are nothing if not inconceivably vast" (62). For anthropogenic climate change as a hyperobject, the

nonlocality of this ecological connectivity marks the post-naturalist breakdown of the traditional Cartesian dualism; however, as loyal subjects of anthropocentric ideology, Jack and his family instead cling toward their denial of connectivity through an ecocritical othering— against nature, apocalypse, and that which is out “there.” DeLillo’s satirizes this willful ignorance most pointedly in his depiction of the family consuming media accounts of ecological crises early on within the novel. On Friday nights, Jack narrates, the family regularly gathers around the television to watch footage of “floods, earthquakes, mud slides, [and] erupting volcanos” (DeLillo, 64). As they sat in silence, “watching houses slide into the ocean, whole villages crackle and ignite in a mass of advancing lava,” Jack confesses: “Every disaster made us wish for more for something bigger, grander, more sweeping” (DeLillo, 64). The irony of this relativist consumption is articulated best by ecocritic Timothy Clark in “Nature, Post Nature,” in how he explains that the Anthropocene effectively represents a “loss of externality” in that there is neither space nor time outside of crisis (82). The uncanny connectivity across the binary oppositions—nature/culture, apocalypse/ordinary, and there/here— upheld by anthropocentric monologism is here also the uncanny recognition of an already present underlying crisis; or, more poignantly, the uncanny foreshadowing present within the scene marks that which will be concealed again later on, after the town experiences its own post-naturalist breakdown in ecological crisis.

Moreover, within the safety of the American environments department, Jack asks his colleagues on the ethics of his media consumption. “Why is it, Alfonse,” Jack poses, “that decent, well-meaning and responsible people find themselves intrigued by

catastrophe when they see it on television?” (DeLillo, 65). To this question on what we might now call “disaster porn,” the group reassures Jack of the normality of this experience, and one colleague insists that it’s a natural response to “suffering from brain fade. We need an occasional catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information” (66). By this, the colleague refers bleakly toward the affective consequences of postmodern relativism, or what he deems as the “wrong kind of attentiveness” (67). To watch something with gravity, he argues, is to break up the otherwise omnipresent ennui of relativism, which has “reversed the relative significance of these things” (67). As Jack’s colleague Alfonse remarks:

“The flow is constant [...] Words, pictures, numbers, facts, graphics, statistics, specks, waves, particles, motes. Only a catastrophe gets our attention. We want them, we need them, we depend on them. As long as they happen somewhere else. This is where California comes in. Mud slides, brush fires, coastal erosion, earthquakes, mass killings, et cetera. We can relax and enjoy these disasters because in our hearts we feel that California deserves whatever it gets. Californians invented the concept of life-style. This alone warrant their doom.” (DeLillo, 66)

Through this reflection, Alfonse here explicitly refers toward the contingency of the societal ordinary upon catastrophes. That is to say, the ordinary is sustained as a notion only as the other to the totality of catastrophe, just as the ordinary livelihoods of the people of Blacksmith are sustained against the notion of the extraordinary lifestyles of other people in California. For Alfonse, this relational underpinning is even pleasurable

in how catastrophes elsewhere reaffirm the bourgeois regularity of his own settings. More so, Alfonse effectively reels in the speculative safety of the sublime into an even more insulated, consumerist safety. “For most people there are only two places in the world,” another colleague concludes; “Where they live and their TV set. If a thing happens on television, we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is” (66). Through this binary construction, between viewer and viewed, anthropocentric monologism reasserts its singularity; or rather, anthropocentric monologism here admits toward the primacy of concealment as a social function in foreclosing upon the possibility of a dialogic breakdown in binary oppositions.

3.3 Environmental Racism

As a primary example of the dangers of relativism within DeLillo’s satire, Jack’s position as the chair of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill is held by critics as a scathing critique of post-historic postmodernity; however, within a novel of ecological crisis, Jack’s relativist approach toward Nazism’s fundamental racial othering points also toward the prevalence of environmental racism and its concealment within the social ordinary. As exemplified through his and Murray Jay Siskind’s combined lectures on the similarities they respectively track between Hitler and Elvis Presley, Jack ironically articulates the relationship between othering and the ordinary best by mistake, as he reduces Nazism toward spectacle alone:

“But wait. How familiar this all seems, how close to ordinary. Crowds come, get worked up, touch and press—people eager to be transported. Isn’t this ordinary? *We know* all this. There must have been something

different about those crowds. What was it? Let me whisper the terrible word, from the Old English, from the Old German, from the Old Norse. *Death*. Many of those crowds were assembled in the name of death. They were there to attend tributes to the dead. Processions, songs, speeches, dialogues with the dead, recitations of the names of the dead. They were there to see pyres and flaming wheels, thousands of flags dipped in salute, thousands of uniformed mourners. There were ranks and squadrons, elaborate backdrops, blood banners and black dress uniforms. Crowds came to form a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone. Crowds came for this reason above all others. They were there to be a crowd.” (DeLillo, 73)

Much as in the opening crowd of families dropping their children off at the College-on-the-Hill, Jack here describes the crowd within Nazism as a means toward reaffirming the social ordinary and thereby concealing underlying crisis. In ““Who are you, literally?”: Fantasies of the White Self in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*,” Tim Engles speaks toward this racial othering within Jack’s deeply problematic post-historical relativism by writing, “By interspersing racially inflected moments throughout his portrait of a professor of Hitler Studies who teaches his subject without ever mentioning what most people now consider the most memorable result of Nazism, “the Holocaust,” DeLillo prompts consideration of a similar severance of contemporary America from its own racialized past” (Engles, 181) Further contextualized within the Anthropocene, wherein

marginalized individuals are the first affected by ecological crisis, this racial othering effectively aligns itself alongside ecological othering in their shared reliance upon the concealment of structure. Given the nonlocality of anthropogenic climate change as hyperobject, itself an object Morton explains as being “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans,” the myth of bourgeois regularity within the ordinary is thereby sustained against the othered notion of total apocalypse (1); consequentially, already lived experiences of environmental racism by marginalized individuals are concealed and thereby dismissed as being extraordinary through othering. As Jack himself reflects, “Death was strictly a professional matter here” (DeLillo, 74). Within his privileged anthropocentric monologism, Jack effectively here distances real tragedy toward an othered “there,” only for it to then be later consumed through a relativist reaffirmation of the manifest “here.” Anthropocentric monologism here both conceals and is concealed; however, as in post-naturalist ecocriticism, the inevitable and dialogic connectivity across binary oppositions threatens to denaturalize the structure of concealment itself.

3.4 Postmodern Monologism

Moreover, anthropocentric monologism becomes further complicated within a postmodern American environment through its definitive resistance toward unifying narratives or totalities. Consequently, anthropocentric monologism manifests within the postmodern moment as a cacophony of fragmented monologist discourses, refusing concession toward understanding post-naturalist ecology’s fundamental connectivity or even toward engaging in a collaborative dialogue. That is to say, the simultaneous resistance toward metanarratives and prioritization of the anthropocentric voice informs a

postmodern relativism that actively refuses accountability. As Dana Phillips refers to in his ecocritical reading of the novel, the indulgent consumerism informing the bourgeois regularity of the town of Blacksmith relies upon societal and narrative concealment to ignore the “economy of by-products, of toxic waste” that a dialogic understanding of connectivity would otherwise recognize (241). In how anthropogenic climate change marks both the uncanny return of nature and the recognition that that which was other was never really other at all, only ever concealed, anthropocentric monologism then finds its limitations in interfacing with anthropogenic climate change as a hyperobject. As a novel of the ordinary interrupted by sudden ecological crisis, the culture of consumption presented as a relativized centripetal entity within “Waves and Radiation” forms a deeply unstable grounding for the town of Blacksmith’s sense of bourgeois regularity. In this way, the perseverance of the culture is entirely contingent upon societal and narrative concealment.

As an exemplary moment of the cacophony of anthropocentric monologism in conversation, the scene early on wherein Jack drives his son Heinrich to school speaks toward the failure of postmodern relativism to effectively conceptualize anthropogenic climate change. Their debate here begins innocently as Heinrich notes the weather prediction for rain later on that night, and Jack corrects him: “It’s raining now” (DeLillo, 22). From there, the two form a monologist dialogue wherein both sides speak at each other on whether or not it is actually raining. As part of postmodernity’s fragmentation, monologist dialogue here refers toward the multiplicity of singular voices speaking to one another without each actually listening to the other; or, as it is depicted within *White*

Noise, a monologist dialogue manifests as an exceedingly pretentious pantomime of conversation, wherein Jack and his son each respectively internalize anthropocentric monologism. In their discussion of nature, they then both ironically lack an ecological sense of dialogics, or an understanding of connectivity in nature as well as in understanding. DeLillo's satire on relativism is here at its strongest, as the two reduce ecology to a topic so disconnected from an understanding of connectivity that they can barely even communicate.

From there, Jack takes up a postmodern suspicion toward the presumed objectivity of authority by arguing that a radio prediction "doesn't mean we have to suspend our belief in the evidence of our sense" (DeLillo, 22). In response, Heinrich takes up an opposing postmodern suspicion toward the presumed objectivity of subjective perceptions, asking, "Don't you know about all those theorems that say nothing is what it seems? There's no past, present or future outside our own mind. The so-called laws of motions are a big hoax" (23). Jack in turn then asks, "What if someone held a gun to your head? [...] He holds a gun to your head and says, 'Is it raining or isn't it? All you have to do is tell the truth and I'll put away my gun and take the next flight out of here'" (23); however, Heinrich rebukes this argument by questioning the meaning of truth itself, asking, "What truth does he want? Does he want the truth of someone traveling at almost the speed of light in another galaxy? Does he want the truth of someone in orbit around a neutron star? Maybe if these people could see us through a telescope we might look like we were two feet two inches tall and it might be raining yesterday instead of today" (23). In this retort, Heinrich here also speaks toward the trouble of understanding

anthropogenic climate change as a hyperobject in its nonlocal totality from its local manifestations in our interfaces with them. Responding accordingly, Jack locates his question toward his son's postmodern subjective truth locally by clarifying, "He's holding the gun to *your* head. He wants your truth" (23). Again, Heinrich dismisses the validity of the question, responding, "What good is my truth? My truth means nothing. What if this guy with the gun comes from a planet in a whole different solar system? What we call rain he calls soap. What we call apples he calls rain. So what am I supposed to tell him?" (23). Jack clarifies further, answering, "His name I Frank J. Smalley and he comes from St. Louis" (23). In this way, Jack attempts to reel in understandings of ecological totality into an ultra-specific standpoint, albeit that of an imaginary man from St. Louis, in order to conceptualize the anthropocentric subject's relationship toward ecology.

Eventually, in his relativist refutation of truth and rain, Heinrich snaps back, "You're so sure that's rain. How do you know it's not sulfuric acid from factories across the river? How do you know it's not fallout from a war in China? You want an answer here and now. Can you prove, here and now, that this stuff is rain? How do I know that what you call rain is really rain? What *is* rain anyway?" (24). Throughout his argument, Heinrich effectively demonstrates both that connectivity cannot be effectively conceptualized from a position of relativism and that, when forced to confront the concealed crisis posed by anthropogenic climate change's connective ecology, relativism cannot account for the consequences of concealment. That is, when faced with the uncanny threat of post-naturalist ecology, the relativist position shrugs off responsibility,

thereby allowing the same problematic structures to perpetuate. Put more bluntly, Jack or Heinrich's differing conceptions of rain are of little importance when contrasted with the connective truth of global climate catastrophe. As Jack himself remarks, this display of anthropocentric monologism is "First-rate, [...] A victory for uncertainty, randomness and chaos. Science's finest hour" (24). In concealing the post-naturalist dialogic already present between humanity and nature, anthropocentric monologism is here satirized as a delayed reaction, only ever as effective as denying the rain as it is already falling.

3.5 The Supermarket

Furthermore, as part of anthropocentric monologism's narrative concealment through a culture of consumption, the supermarket takes on an important function within *Blacksmith* as a site of consolidated abundance. That is, the regularity with which the Gladney family joins in among the crowd of customers at the local supermarket informs their larger sense of bourgeois regularity and the uniformitarian expectations that it entails. Jack articulates this feeling of reaffirmation that he derives from the supermarket by narrating:

It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight and size and number, the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls—it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not

known to people who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around
lonely walks in the evening. (DeLillo, 20)

As with the other binary oppositions Jack perpetuates through ecological othering, Jack here effectively maintains a sense of security, specifically as it relates to regular access to food, through the abundance of the supermarket only against the precarity experienced by others. In how the supermarket also presents an abundance disconnected from production, Jack remains unchallenged in his consumptions by the economy of ecology or the ecology of the economy; consequentially, his privileged sense of anthropocentric monologism sustains itself. Murray Jay Siskind, on reflecting upon the role of the supermarket within the postmodern American environment, comes to a similar conclusion: “This place recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it’s a gateway or pathway. Look how bright. It’s full of psychic data” (37). Likening the supermarket to Tibetan Buddhism’s notion of death as a transitional time, as “the end of attachment to things,” Murray continues, “The place is sealed off, self-contained. It is timeless. Another reason why I think of Tibet [...] Here we don’t die, we shop. But the difference is less marked than you think” (38). In this way, Murray refers toward the active maintenance of the idea of security within the ordinary through the reaffirmation derived from the spectacle of plenitude within the supermarket. For the supermarket to exist outside of time within this analogy is therefore for it to exist outside of death itself as an ending.

Despite this concerted effort at narrative concealment, an underlying death anxiety persists throughout this opening section, as well as throughout the rest of the novel. Jack and his wife Babette articulate this shared fear only in secret, revealing

privately how consumed they are by the prospect of death amidst the culture of consumption structuring their ordinary lives. “Who will die first?” Jack wonders in private, narrating the ordinariness of his extraordinary anxiety, “This question comes up from time to time, like where are the car keys. It ends a sentence, prolongs a glance between us” (DeLillo, 15). Similarly, Jack’s German instructor Howard Dunlop confides in him his own experience of hopelessness. Explaining how he turned toward meteorology to regain a sense of regularity and control in his life, Howard admits:

“My mother’s death had a terrible impact on me. I collapsed totally, lost my faith in God. I was inconsolable, withdrew completely into myself. Then one day by chance I saw a weather report on TV. A dynamic young man with a glowing pointer stood before a multicolored satellite photo, predicting the weather for the next five days. I sat there mesmerized by his self-assurance and skill. It was as though a message was being transmitted from the weather satellite through that young man and then to me in my canvas chair. I turned to meteorology for comfort. I read weather maps, collected books on weather, attended launchings of weather balloons. I realized weather was something I’d been looking for all my life. It brought me a sense of peace and security I’d ever experienced.” (DeLillo, 55)

Within this interaction, Howard effectively derives the same sense of reaffirmation that Jack derives from the supermarket; however, unlike the supermarket, anthropocentric monologism cannot here actually regulate weather. That is to say, weather cannot be concealed. Even the mundane conversations on weather that Howard speaks of— “Nice

day.’ ‘Looks like rain.’ ‘Hot enough for you?’— prove uncontrollable within post-naturalist ecology (55). Within our age of hyperobjects, Morton argues, “You can no longer have a routine conversation about weather with a stranger. The presence of global warming looms into the conversation like a shadow, introducing strange gaps” (Morton, 99). Furthermore, Morton continues, “A hyperobject has ruined the weather conversation, which functions as part of a neutral screen that enables us to have a human drama in the foreground” (99). Anthropocentric monologism, within this context, can only conceal that which has already ended, as Morton argues in proposing this collapsing as signifying the end of the world.

A Bakhtinian approach functions here as DeLillo’s own voice does in this opening section: as a critique of “both relativism and dogmatism [that] equally exclude all argumentation, all authentic dialogue, by making it either unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism)” (Morson, ix). That is to say, “Waves and Radiation” can be understood to satirize postmodern relativism in the face of ecological crisis, a “wicked problem” that requires totalizing thinking to conceptualize the fundamental connectivity of ecology. While Bakhtin advocates for a dialogics that “takes responsibility for what is says,” anthropocentric monologism here instead refuses accountability through reaffirmation, a perpetual process of othering crisis to reaffirm the ordinary and thereby conceal the underlying crisis already present within it, especially as experienced by marginalized individuals (Morson, ix). This relativist refusal, however, proves futile, as the inevitability of connectivity illuminates the uncanny connectivity already present within the cycle of a relativized centripetal entity, awaiting centrifugal disruption.

CHAPTER 4: “THE AIRBORNE TOXIC EVENT”:

CRISIS AS CARNIVAL

“[...] the nature of the utterance [is] conceived as the place where struggles between centrifugal and centripetal forces are fought out in miniature.”

—Clark and Holquist, “Theory of the Novel”

4.1 Dialogic Confrontation

As *White Noise* progresses into “Section II: The Airborne Toxic Event,” the manifest ecological crisis of the text marks a point of ideological disruption toward the anthropocentric monologism maintained in “Section I: Waves and Radiation.” It is here, amidst the ordinary sense of bourgeois regularity within the town of Blacksmith, that a man-made ecological disaster reveals the concealed crisis of post-naturalist connectivity within the Anthropocene. That is, within the actual ecology of the event, Murphy’s notion of ecological dialogics breaks down the Cartesian dualist notion of the nature-culture divide by showing their inextricability through anthropogenic climate change as hyperobject; however, an ecocritical dialogic also plays out ideologically here, as the crisis enacts a centrifugal disruption toward anthropocentrism and its uniformitarian expectations as a relativized centripetal entity. In the preface “Perhaps Bakhtin” to his anthology *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work* (1981), Morson articulates this potentiality in dialogic renegotiation, explaining: “Bakhtin’s most radical contribution lies in his rethinking of traditional oppositions: of the individual to society, of self to other, of the specific utterance to the totality of language, and of particular actions to the world of norms and conventions” (xi). Furthermore, through this dialogic confrontation of and within crisis, anthropocentric monologism also encounters the carnivalesque

nature of structural denaturalization. As Bakhtin explains in his introduction to *Rabelais and His World*, “through all the stages of historic development feasts were linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man. Moments of death and revival, of change and renewal always led to a festive perception of the world” (Bakhtin, 9). For Jack and his family, the airborne toxic event, through its dialogic disruption and its centrifugal carnival, presents a point of potential liberation from anthropocentrism.

Beginning first as a “heavy black mass hanging in the air beyond the river, more or less shapeless,” the ecological crisis, by virtue of its existence within the town of Blacksmith, defies the logic of the novel’s ruling anthropocentric monologism (DeLillo, 110). Heinrich, watching this chaos unfurl from afar and listening attentively to the radio broadcast, encounters this verbal incapacity early on as he begins relaying updates to his family. “The radio said a tank car got derailed,” Heinrich explains. “But I don’t think it derailed from what I can see. I think it got rammed and something punched a hole in it. There’s a lot of smoke and I don’t like the looks of it” (DeLillo, 110). In his latter remark’s deviation from the official account being broadcasted, Heinrich here signals an initial break from anthropocentric monologism’s act of concealment; regardless, the true details of the man-made ecological crisis remain shrouded throughout the novel, as the truth itself forms a sort of “heavy black mass” looming more or less shapelessly in the background. In her foreword to Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*, Krystyna Pomorska articulates this linguistic renegotiation best by explaining, “Dialogue so conceived is opposed to the “authoritarian word” (*avtoritarnoe slovo*) in the same way as carnival is

opposed to official culture” (x). For Jack and his family, the event’s dialogic confrontation functions similarly here as a carnivalesque disruption of anthropocentric monologism’s binary oppositions. That is to say, the anthropogenic crisis catalyzes a dialogic renegotiation— between culture and nature, the ordinary and apocalypse, and here and there— through disrupting the very process of othering upon which the position of anthropocentric monologism relies. As Jack attempts to deny this dialogic and cling toward his privileged sense of security within what he perceives as Blacksmith’s bourgeois regularity, DeLillo here effectively warns against the dangers of a discourse of denial in the face of dialogic crisis.

As the event grows and Jack attempts to reject its impending relation toward him and his family, anthropocentric monologism proves unable to effectively distance crisis through othering. Attempting to distance the event first after Heinrich spots the black clouds above the train yard, Jack authoritatively declares, “It won’t come this way” (DeLillo, 110). To this, Heinrich asks “How do you know?” and Jack again declares, “It just won’t” (110). Within an hour of this first conversation, Heinrich returns to the attic with his binoculars and their conversation repeats itself, with Jack declaring, “Well, it won’t come this way.” When Heinrich again asks, “How do you know?” Jack holds fast to his stance, answering him, “I just know” (111). Throughout the event, Jack repeats this claim several times over, each time in a simple declarative statement to silence his children or wife in their anxious dialogue, to the point of a darkly comedic effect as the crisis unfurls around them. In its combined effect, Jack’s statements here represent an attempt at othering the crisis as a distant and distinct event, separate from their lives and

the uniformitarian expectations they hold within the bourgeois regularity in Blacksmith as an ordinary town; however, as an anthropogenic ecological event within the post-naturalist ecology of the Anthropocene, that which is distant is never truly distinct. As Jack's daughter Steffie asks about the possibility of forced evacuation, she also attempts to draw connections between ecological events, asking, "Remember how we couldn't go to school?" In his dismissal of connectivity, Jack responds, "That was inside. This is outside" (112). In what is his most succinct expression of anthropocentric monologism's function through othering, Jack also clarifies his binary thinking later on, explaining, "The important thing is location. It's there, we're here" (117). All throughout this insistent repetition, Jack makes evident how his anthropocentric monologism relies upon othering and, in that process, an idea of the other.

4.2 Monologist Othering

Within the relational underpinning of identity, Jack's sense of himself— as someone securely living within an ordinary here— is contingent fully upon the other— someone out there, experiencing crisis. Through this othering, Jack is effectively able to reaffirm his own position of ordinariness and all the uniformitarian expectations that it entails within his sense of bourgeois regularity. Arguing for his own invulnerability to his family, Jack makes clear how societal positionality factors into a sense of privileged ordinariness through arguing that "these things happen to [the] poor" and "the uneducated," and therefore not to him (DeLillo, 114). Through this running commentary, Jack here reveals how the ordinary, as a bourgeois ideal, exists as a privileged concealment of lived crisis, particularly as already experienced by marginalized

individuals, within the crisis ordinary. Consequentially, the binary opposition between the ordinary and apocalypse is maintained through the myth of total apocalypse; as Morton suggests in his argument that the end of the world has already occurred, the power of reading the ordinary as already apocalyptic is in the nuanced understanding of post-naturalist connectivity it provides (Morton, 2). Moreover, within the unfurling crisis of the novel, Jack clings desperately to this preconceived notion of security. Even as the wind threatens to change and forced evacuation seems imminent, Jack dismisses Heinrich's worry by arguing, "I'm not just a college professor. I'm the head of a department. I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That's for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the country, where the fish hatcheries are" (DeLillo, 117). Following this dismissal, Jack insists that he and his family sit down for dinner as usual; however, they are quickly interrupted by air-raid sirens, loudly proclaiming the official order to "Evacuate all places of residence. Cloud of deadly chemicals, cloud of deadly chemicals" (119). In response, Jack is awe-struck, narrating how it is, "Amazing to think this sonic monster lay hidden nearby for years" (118). In his silent surprise, Jack's comment speaks toward the dialogic event's disruption to anthropocentric monologism's othering as well as to the larger realization of the ordinary's concealment of a connective, underlying crisis, already present but hidden nearby for years.

4.3 Dialogic Evolution

Moreover, DeLillo similarly satirizes Jack's insistent anthropocentric monologism through the evolving terminology used to understand the crisis as a dialogic

confrontation. In his essay “Meaning and Understanding: A Dialogical Approach,” Bakhtinian scholar Mika Läähteenmäki articulates dialogics as a linguistic system based in evolving understanding, explaining, “In dialogical philosophy of language, communication is not approached from the point of view of transmission of information, but seen as an interactive process in which both speaker and listener play an active role” (78). That is to say, each utterance is presumed the penultimate utterance in a continuous dialogic. Contextualized both within Murphy’s ecological dialogic— or the post-naturalist dialogic between nature and culture in their ecological interaction— and an expanded ecocritical dialogic— between subjects of anthropocentric ideology and the ways in which they conceive of nature theoretically— evolving understanding presents a break from anthropocentric monologism’s claim toward authoritative discourse. Consequentially, this dialogic presents a potentially subversive means of renegotiating understanding within and of the Anthropocene. As Läähteenmäki explains, “Understanding is not viewed as a process whereby a listener finds out the thought behind a speaker’s words; rather it is regarded as a joint project in which meanings are mutually constructed” (78). For Jack and his family, evolving understandings here pertain toward the evolving ecological event and how it is continuously redefined, both within the expanding discourse and within their relation to it.

As this dialogic emerges, DeLillo effectively critiques anthropocentric monologism by showcasing its inability to keep pace with the unfurling ecological event. Beginning with the first broadcast coverage of the event, Heinrich notes the discrepancy between the ecological crisis and the language meant to contain it. “The radio calls it a

feathery plume,” Heinrich relays. “But it’s not a plume” (DeLillo, 111). As Morton argues, Heinrich’s subjective positionality here, in his interface with anthropogenic climate change as a hyperobject, serves as a sort of litmus test, particularly in how his experiences differ from those declared by authoritative monologism. “My situatedness and the rhetoric of situatedness in this case is not a place of defensive self-certainty but precisely its opposite,” Morton explains. “That is, situatedness is now a very uncanny place to be, like being the protagonist of a Wordsworth poem or a character in *Blade Runner*” (Morton, 5). For Heinrich, the uncanny manifests here in his realization of anthropocentric monologism’s concealment of an already present ecological dialogic, and the loss of a defensive sense of “self-certainty,” enabled by the myth of bourgeois regularity, presents for him a potential for a subversive epistemology. Jack, in his own response, instead clings toward anthropocentric monologism for the sense of security it has provided for him as a privileged man living within what he would deem as an ordinary town. “Air time is valuable,” Jack dismisses. “They can’t go into long tortured descriptions” (DeLillo, 111). Through defending the radio coverage, even as it undermines its own voice of authority through self-correcting, Jack here makes clear the vulnerability of monologism within moments of dialogic confrontation.

As the event continues to evolve, so too does the language used to describe it. As Babette receives a phone call from the Stovers, a neighboring family, she informs everyone that, the other family “spoke directly with the weather center outside Glassboro” and that “They’re not calling it a feathery plume anymore” (DeLillo, 113). As an active renegotiation of epistemology, this chain of information serves to undermine

both Jack's symbolic authority as the father within the traditional family structure and authoritative monologism at large. Regarding the dialogic evolution in terminology used to describe the event, now deemed a "black billowing cloud," Jack remarks, "That's a little more accurate, which means they're coming to grips with the thing. Good" (113). In his comment, Jack here speaks toward language as a means of containment; however, in how the event evolves from the "feathery plume" to "black billowing cloud" to its eventual title as the "airborne toxic event," DeLillo makes clear how anthropocentric monologism itself is always already a belated act of concealment. As Heinrich attempts to update Jack again, Jack notes how his son was "not meeting my eyes, as if to spare himself the pain of my embarrassment" (115). Despite this, Jack again attempts to regain control, claiming the latest evolution was "good" because "It means they're looking the thing more or less squarely in the eye. They're on top of the situation" (115). The dramatic irony of Jack's attempted composure becomes clear to him immediately after this declaration, as he climbs out the window and onto the ledge of his house with "an air or weary decisiveness" to better judge the unfurling event (115). Looking through his son's pair of binoculars, Jack is confronted by the growing gravity of the ecological crisis:

Beneath the cloud of vaporized chemicals, the scene was one of urgency and operatic chaos. Floodlights swept across the switching yard. Army helicopters hovered at various points, shining additional lights down on the scene. Colored lights from police cruisers crisscrossed these wider beams. The tank car sat solidly on tracks, fumes rising from what appeared

to be a hole in one end. The coupling device from a second car had apparently pierced the tank car. Fire engines were deployed at a distance, ambulances, and police vans at a greater distance. I could hear sirens, voices calling through bullhorns, a layer of radio static causing small warps in the frosty air. Men raced from one vehicle to another, unpacked equipment, carried empty stretchers. Other men in bright yellow Mylex suits and respirator masks moved slowly through the luminous haze, carrying death-measuring instruments. Snow-blowers sprayed a pink substance toward the tank car and the surrounding landscape. This thick mist arched through the air like some grand confection at a concert of patriotic music. The snow-blowers were the type used on airport runways, the police vans were the type to transport riot casualties. Smoke drifted from red beams of light into darkness and then into the breadth of scenic white floods. The men in Mylex suits moved with a lunar caution. Each step was the exercise of some anxiety not provided for by instinct. Fire and explosion were not the inherent dangers here. (DeLillo, 115-6)

Through the ecological dialogic of the event itself, Jack is here confronted by the post-naturalist truth of connectivity. No amount of othering could effectively distance this event as something distinct from his ordinary life; instead, he briefly realizes the ordinariness of crisis itself within the crisis ordinary of anthropogenic climate change as an all-encompassing hyperobject, distinct from its local manifestations. Narrating this understanding, Jack admits to himself, “This death would penetrate, seep into the genes,

show itself in bodies not yet born” (116). In this fleeting moment, Jack here effectively understands himself as othered through an imagined, future other in their shared and sustained relation to the event.

4.4 Déjà Vu

As the crisis escalates and evolves into the Airborne Toxic Event, Heinrich informs Jack and the rest of the Gladney family of a newly discovered symptom of consuming Nyodene D, or the toxic chemical “Nyodene Derivative” released during the crisis: *déjà vu*. Within their combative dialogue, Heinrich informs Jack on this recent fact after his father defensively argues, “You want me to say it won’t come this way in a million years. Then you’ll attack with your little fistful of data. come on, tell me what they said on the radio while I was out there” (DeLillo, 116). To this, Heinrich reveals that the chemical “doesn’t cause nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath, like they said before,” but rather now causes “Heart palpitations and a sense of *déjà vu*” (116). By affecting “the false part of the human memory or whatever,” Nyodene D, like ecology itself, is experienced affectively as an uncanny recognition of a returned understanding (116). The uncanny operates ecocritically on multiple levels: as the anthropogenic return of anthropocentric structuring; as the uncovering of crisis amidst the ordinary *as* the ordinary; and as the realization that that which was other was never truly other at all. Contextualized within an ecocritical dialogic, the uncanny here also entails the carnivalesque disruption of centripetal force as just a relativized entity, awaiting centrifugal disruption.

For the Gladney family, uncanny experiences of *déjà vu* amidst the Airborne Toxic Event begin to occur after they are forced to evacuate their homes. Within the mass exodus of traffic leading out of the town, the Gladney family passes silently by the site of a car crash, after one car “had skidded off the incline and barreled into a vehicle in our lane” (DeLillo, 122). Echoing this scene of “injured people, medics, smoking steels, all washed in a strong and eerie light,” they soon afterwards pass by “the scrap-metal burial mound of a Winnebago and a snowplow” (122, 125). Upon seeing this second “huge and tortured wreck,” Steffie exclaims, “This happened once before. Just like this. The man in the yellow suit and gas mask. The big wreck sitting in the snow. It was totally and exactly like this. We were all here in the car. Rain made little holes in the snow. Everything” (125). At this remark, Jack is left confused, as another broadcast update had informed him that *déjà vu* “was no longer a worker symptom of Nyodene contamination” (125); however, the true experience of *déjà vu* within this scene occurs in repeated narrative concealment, as Jack readily dismisses his daughter’s drawn connections between two real accidents just as his insistent anthropocentric monologism had attempted to do toward the event itself. As Jack himself narrates, “I feel sad for people and the queer part we play in our own disasters” (DeLillo, 126). The dramatic irony here is therefore in how Jack plays an important role in narrative concealment within his family discourse. Similarly, at the site of the evacuation camp, Murray Jay Siskind later offers his own theory of *déjà vu* to Jack. Speaking toward the uncanny return of connectivity in crisis, Murray explains, “Because death is in the air, [...] It is liberating suppressed material. It is getting us closer to things we haven’t learned about ourselves. Most of us have

probably seen our own death but haven't known how to make the material surface. Maybe when we die, the first thing we'll say is, 'I know this feeling. I was here before'" (151). In this way, Murray articulates the ways in which the Airborne Toxic Event marks a dialogic confrontation with the underlying crisis always already present within the Anthropocene's contained ordinary.

4.5 Carnavalesque Restructuring

Moreover, within this uncanny disruption, crisis also takes on a carnivalesque temporality in its fleeting renegotiation of hierarchy. As Michael Holquist argues in his prologue to Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, "Bakhtin, like Rabelais, explores throughout his book the interface between a stasis imposed from above and a desire for change from below, between old and new, official and unofficial" (Holquist, xvi). The carnival of crisis, in its momentary restructuring as within the evacuation center in the novel, represents the subversive reclamation of power by a dialogic discourse; and, in its uncanny denaturalization of Anthropocentric ideology as a relativized entity, the carnivalesque also serves to illuminate the ways in which societal structuring is socially constructed and therefore mutable. As the airborne toxic event first forces Jack and his family to evacuate, Jack admits his own fears regarding the stability of authority privately to himself, narrating, "What people in an exodus fear most immediately is that those in positions of authority will long since have fled, leaving us in charge of our own chaos" (DeLillo, 120). As the family drives out of their town, Jack's awareness of a new subversive epistemology, emerging both outside of and in direct critique of anthropocentric monologism's claim to authority, grows alongside his concern. "Well-

lighted men and women stood by the huge window looking out at us and wondering. It made us feel like fools, like tourists doing all the wrong things,” Jack narrates. “They knew something we didn’t. In a crisis the true facts are whatever other people say they are. No one’s knowledge is less secure than your own” (120). As part of this renegotiation of knowledge and authority, Jack is also here forced to renegotiate his relation toward others as he watches others watching him. Echoing back to his own consumption as an idle spectator of horrific catastrophes before and amidst the ordinary days in *Blacksmith*, Jack here must recognize himself as vulnerable in a way that uncovers the crisis underlying the ordinary itself.

At the evacuation center, this carnivalesque denaturalization of Anthropocentric ideology and societal structure continues, as Jack encounters crowds of people “collected around certain men” (DeLillo, 129). Within the emerging dialogic afforded by the carnivalesque crisis, Jack notes that the forming crowds “were the sources of information and rumor. One person worked in a chemical plant, another had overheard a remark, a third was related to a clerk in a state agency. True, false and other kinds of news radiated through the dormitory from these dense clusters” (DeLillo, 129). As Bakhtin articulates in *Rabelais and His World*, the “carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (Bakhtin, 10). As a time of “becoming, change, and renewal,” the carnivalesque nature of the crisis is here in how anthropocentric ideology is drawn back to reveal the truth of post-naturalist ecology and of the underlying crisis to the ordinary within the Anthropocene (10). Offering a

“completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations,” the renegotiated hierarchy within the evacuation center then also hosts a revolutionary potentiality (Bakhtin, 5). In witness to this subversive restructuring, Jack is shocked to find his son as a pivotal voice within the camp’s discourse as a group of people gather around to listen to Heinrich speak on Nyodene D. This newfound relationality, wherein a young outcast like Heinrich can contribute toward a communal dialogue as part of a collaborative epistemological project just as much as his respected father, speaks toward the totality of carnival while it lasts. As Bakhtin articulates it, “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom” (Bakhtin, 7). Through the totality of this disruption, DeLillo here again satirizes the postmodern resistance toward thinking in totalities; that is to say, DeLillo here likens the fundamental connectivity of post-naturalist ecology toward that of ruling ideology.

Within the connectivity of the crisis, Heinrich also warns of the post-naturalist connectivity to come. Speaking on the chemical properties of Nyodene D as he had learned about them in school, Heinrich warns:

“Once it seeps into the soil, it has a life span of forty years. This is longer than a lot of people. After five years you’ll notice various kinds of fungi appearing between your regular windows and storm windows as well as in your clothes and food. After ten years your screens will turn rusty and

begin to pit and rot. Siding will warp. There will be glass breakage and trauma to pets. After twenty years you'll probably have to seal yourself in the attic and just wait and see. I guess there's a lesson in all this. Get to know your chemicals." (DeLillo, 131)

In his speech, Heinrich here reveals his understanding of the gravity of the situation; however, as part of DeLillo's satire of postmodern relativism, Heinrich also takes noticeable pleasure in this newfound connectivity as a realization of the gravity of meaning. That is to say, Heinrich takes pleasure in how the event fights against the postmodern, post-historical relativism that Jack and his colleagues jokingly diagnosed amongst themselves as "brain fade." As Jack watches this development within his son within the reorganized societal structure of the crisis, he notes how Heinrich "spoke enthusiastically, with a sense of appreciation for the vivid and unexpected. I thought we'd all occupied the same mental state, subdued, worried, confused. It hadn't occurred to me that one of us might find these events brilliantly stimulating" (DeLillo, 123).

Furthermore, watching Heinrich "go on about something with such spirited enjoyment," Jack is astounded to find his son "practically giddy" (123). "He must have known we could all die," Jack narrates. "Was this some kind of end-of-the-world elation? Did he seek distraction from his own small miseries in some violent and overwhelming event? His voice betrayed a craving for terrible things" (123). As the crisis continues on within the evacuation center, Jack encounters a similar pleasure being taken by a religious pamphleteer. Pointing toward the event as evidence of the coming apocalypse, the man asks Jack, "Floods, tornados, epidemics of strange new diseases. Is it a sign? Is it the

truth? Are you ready?" (136). His pleasure, like Heinrich's, is in how the connectivity of crisis here *means* something in its gravity. Toward Jack, he then offers a religious guide titled "Twenty Common Mistakes About the End of the World" (137). As part of DeLillo's dark satire, this man and Heinrich's strange pleasure both point toward relativism's "brain fade" as an incapacitating state for dealing with the totality of climate crisis.

4.6 Narrative Concealment

Within the reorganized societal structure of the evacuation center, Jack also encounters traditional voices of authority as they struggle to contain the event. In representing anthropocentric monologism, the scrambling authority figures mark the failure of narrative concealment, or the failure to restructure a sense of the ordinary within crisis over crisis. Contextualized within a postmodern American environment, DeLillo satirizes the attempt at containment through SIMUVAC, described by one state worker as being "Short for simulated evacuation. A new state program they're still battling over funds for" (DeLillo, 139). This organization, in its response to the lived crisis in Blacksmith, attempts to reclaim the ordinary through pushing crisis into the speculative realm; however, as Jack himself argues back, "this evacuation isn't simulated. It's real" (139). Furthermore, when asking how the simulated evacuation running over the real evacuation is going, the worker responds:

"The insertion curve isn't as smooth as we would like. There's a probability excess. Plus which we don't have our victims laid out where we'd want them if this was an actual simulation. In other words we're

forced to take our victims as we find them. We didn't get a jump on computer traffic. Suddenly it just spilled out, three-dimensionally, all over the landscape. You have to make allowances for the fact that everything we see tonight is real. There's a lot of polishing we still have to do. But that's what this exercise is all about." (DeLillo, 139)

In his response, the worker makes clear how concealment fails amidst crisis for those already living within it. That is to say, the dialogic disruption of crisis toward anthropocentric monologism effects an ideological denaturalization amidst the temporary reorganization in societal structure; and, further, after the temporality of the dialogic carnival and in the return toward anthropocentric monologism, there is an "excess." This excess comes in the realization that the return toward "normalcy" is a return with a difference in how structures previously conceived as natural within a society are forever denaturalized. This excess is best articulated by the worker in the advice he offers Jack for how to return to his everyday life within the ordinary: "I wouldn't worry about what I can't see or feel [...] I'd go ahead and live my life. Get married, settle down, have kids. There's no reason you can't do these things, knowing what we know" (141). The knowledge the worker refers toward here is that which Jack has obtained through the crisis: the post-naturalist knowledge of connectivity. As Jack himself narrates after seeing an X-ray revealing a "star-shaped hole at the center of one of my vital organs," "Death has entered. It is already inside you" (141). Through his consumption of Nyodene D, Jack is now inextricably bound to the airborne toxic event. Though he was always already

linked within post-naturalist ecology's fundamental and inevitable connectivity, Jack now here understands that he always will be.

Within DeLillo's satire of authority's anthropocentric monologism, the Airborne Toxic Event's concealment also finds an odd resonance in Murray Jay Siskind's actions at the evacuation center. While talking with Murray outside of the center, Jack witnesses a sex worker agree to Murray's solicitation. "It's none of my business," Jack inquires, "but what is it she's willing to do with you for twenty-five dollars?" (DeLillo, 152). To this, Murray answers back: "The Heimlich maneuver" (152); however, Murray goes on to clarify, he doesn't actually expect the woman "to lodge a chunk of food in her windpipe" (153). Explaining this to Jack, Murray exclaims, "What? No, no, that won't be necessary. As long as she makes gagging and choking sounds. As long as she sighs deeply when I jolt the pelvis. As long as she collapses helplessly backward into my life-saving embrace" (153). Murray, in this explanation, suggests that the pleasure he will derive through his heroic performance is contingent upon the concealment of the context in which the event arose. In his cutting prose, DeLillo here satirizes performative heroism as being illicit, if not also perverse. Contextualized within environmentalism, this critique then regards figures of authority in their response toward anthropogenic climate change. DeLillo's joke is here that there is no truly heroic response available to those who played a role in the construction of the crisis itself. Put bluntly, pantomiming heroism while, at the same time, financing the crisis simply screws us all indefinitely, in an ongoing act without completion. In regards toward the ordinary's relation to crisis, accountability then must not play into the self-perpetuating cycle of reaffirmation.

As Jack and his family are once again forced to flee at the end of the chapter to a new evacuation center, the subversive potential within the carnivalesque structure of the crisis reaches a near breaking point. In the chaos to avoid the shifting winds and, with them, the Airborne Toxic Event, Jack sees “running men, tents wind-blown into trees, whole families abandoning their vehicles to head on foot for the parkway” (DeLillo, 156). The noise of the commotion is comprised of “motorcycles revving” and “voices raising incoherent cries” (156). Jack, amidst the breakdown here, likens the scene toward “the fall of a colonial capital to dedicated rebels. A great surging drama with elements of humiliation and guilt” (157). Furthermore, when they arrive at “Kung Fu Palace,” a karate dojo in Iron City being used as a new evacuation center, they realize their own concealment. As one man carrying a tiny TV set proclaims, “There’s nothing on the network [...] Not a word, not a picture. On the Glassboro channel we rate fifty-two words by actual count. No film footage, no live report” (161). To this, the townspeople of Blacksmith are left to wonder why. The man delivering a speech poses several questions on this point: “Does this kind of thing happen so often that nobody cares anymore?”; “Do they think this is just television?”; and “Don’t they know it’s real?” (162). Following a round of applause for his speech, the man then turns toward Jack and takes pause. After a moment’s shock, he comments, “I saw this before” (162). In this return toward *déjà vu*, the man effectively answers his own questions. The Airborne Toxic Event, nearing its close, is refused coverage in order to conceal it within the ordinary. In this way and in the *déjà vu* experienced throughout, DeLillo makes clear the uncanny realization that the ordinary always already was a crisis ordinary.

CHAPTER 5: “DYLARAMA”:

CONNECTIVITY IN GROTESQUE REALISM

“As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthly, or independence of the earth and the body. We repeat: the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people’s character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized.”
-Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*

5.1 The Aftermath

As the Airborne Toxic Event comes to its close at the end of the second section, Bakhtin’s notion of grotesque realism finds its theoretical opening. As he writes in *Rabelais and His World*, “The unfinished and open body (dying, bringing forth and being born),” as a symbol of the grotesque, “is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects” (26). Contextualized within an ecological crisis, the connectivity of the open body, in its relation toward its environment, thereby also interfaces with climate change as a hyperobject in its nonlocality. Consequentially for Jack, the grotesque body within the ordinary is then always already connected to crisis, and “Death is here always related to birth; the grave is related to the earth’s life-giving womb” (Bakhtin, 50). Within his experience of embodiment and as *White Noise* progresses into “Section III: Dylarama,” Jack cannot then fully return toward his sense of the ordinary as bourgeois regularity; instead, Jack is forever connected to the Airborne Toxic Even and what it reveals of the ordinariness of crisis within the Anthropocene as a result of his consuming Nyodene D.

Moreover, to return to the moment of Jack's initial ingestion, his otherwise mundane actions amidst the surrounding crisis are revelatory of the ways in which the ordinary is contingent upon crisis and its concealment. The Gladney family, while evacuating from their town by car and fleeing from the Airborne Toxic Event, runs out of gas. Spotting a gas station, Jack narrates, "I drove in, jumped out of the car, ran around to the pumps with my head tucked under the raised collar of my coat. They were not locked, which meant the attendants had fled suddenly, leaving things intriguingly as they were, like the tools and pottery of some pueblo civilization, bread in the oven, table set for three, a mystery to haunt the generations" (DeLillo, 127). In his analogy, Jack here speaks toward the sudden interruption the anthropogenic event poses to the anthropocentric subject, as well as to the ordinariness of concealment itself in its aftermath. At this moment of narration, Jack's sense of the ordinary is itself forever interrupted when he breathes in Nyodene D. "The little breath of Nyodene has planted a death in my body [...]," Jack later reflects. "I've got death inside me. It's just a question of whether or not I can outlive it. It has a life span of its own. Thirty years. Even if it doesn't kill me in a direct way, it will probably outlive me in my own body. I could die in a plane crash and the Nyodene D. would be thriving as my remains were laid to rest" (DeLillo, 150). Through the ecological dialogic of this crisis, Jack is here no longer able to understand himself comfortably in relation toward crisis through othering; rather, the distinctions he had previously drawn between nature/culture, ordinary/apocalypse, and here/there all effectively collapse, both amidst the nonlocality of the crisis as hyperobject and within himself in his interface with the event. Furthermore, Jack's latter point in his

comparison, on crisis becoming “a mystery to haunt the generations” in how it is remembered, is especially notable in how the true details of how the Airborne Toxic Event came about are never revealed throughout the text; in fact, no one in the town even thinks to question it in its aftermath. For Jack, this form of narrative concealment over lived crisis only provides so much comfort.

While consulting with a SIMUVAC worker in the evacuation center, Jack is first forced to renegotiate his sense of security in his positionality toward crisis. As the worker informs him, Nyodene D as a chemical “has a life span of thirty years,” or, more specifically, “Forty years in the soil. Thirty years in the human body” (DeLillo, 141). As Jack reflects inwardly, “Death has entered. It is inside you. You are said to be dying and yet are separate from the dying, can ponder it at your leisure, literally see on the X-ray photograph or computer screen the horrible alien logic of it all” (DeLillo 141). In how Jack here understands his own changed body through grotesque realism, he also professes an understanding of the inextricability of the crisis to his enduring sense of the leisurely ordinary, despite its attempt at concealment. As Bakhtin articulates, “The last thing one can say of the real grotesque is that it is static; on the contrary it seeks to grasp in its imagery the very act of becoming and growth, the eternal incomplete unfinished nature of being” (52). This unfinished nature of being, in the aftermath of the crisis, then manifests through Jack’s private knowledge of his own vulnerability. That is to say, Jack can no longer effectively separate himself from crisis or those who experience it after internalizing crisis himself. On the inevitability of connectivity here, Bakhtin writes, “The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all

that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (19). For anthropocentrism as an abstract ideology, the grotesque body in its interface with anthropogenic climate change as hyperobject then frames degradation as potentially liberating.

5.2 Supermarket Consolidation

Despite this potentiality, Jack instead attempts to reconsolidate his sense of security through increasingly desperate means; and, as "Section III: Dylarama" opens, Jack begins this series of attempts through returning toward the symbol of security itself within the societal ordinary: the supermarket. In its sheer and steady abundance, the supermarket within the town serves to reassert a narrative of invulnerability; however, as Jack wanders through the aisles he is instead confronted by Murray and his grim news on their colleague. "Cotsakis, my rival, is no longer among the living" Murray exclaims. "[...] Lost in the surf off Malibu. During the term break. I found out an hour ago. Came right here" (DeLillo, 168). Interrupted in his mundane routine by this reminder of the death he himself carries within him, Jack is shaken, narrating:

I was suddenly aware of the dense environmental texture. The automatic doors opened and closed, breathing abruptly. Colors and odors seemed sharper. The sound of gliding feet emerged from a dozen other noises, from the sublittoral drone of maintenance systems, from the rustle of newsprint as shoppers scanned their horoscopes in the tabloids up front, from the whispers of elderly women with talcummed faces, from the steady rattle of cars going over a loose manhole cover just outside the

entrance. Gliding feet. I heard them clearly, a sad numb shuffle in every aisle. (DeLillo, 168)

In his sudden awareness, Jack here betrays an understanding of the active maintenance of the ordinary in its concealment of the crisis already embedded within it. The “sad numb shuffle” of this ordinary concealment, however, cannot fully drone out the “dense environmental texture” of lived crisis and its contexts. Furthermore, othering proves ineffective in the context of this connectivity, despite Murray’s claim that “It’s better them than us” (DeLillo, 169). As Jack notes afterwards while moving through Blacksmith, “Some of the houses in town were showing signs of neglect. The park benches needed repair, the broken streets needed resurfacing. Signs of the times. But the supermarket did not change, except for the better. It was well-stocked, musical and bright. This was the key, it seemed to us” (170). Following the Airborne Toxic Event, the role of the supermarket takes on an even greater importance, as Jack and Murray’s privileged sense of the ordinary begins to rely upon the supermarket’s outward depiction of security. As Jack articulates, “Everything was fine, would continue to be fine, would eventually get even better as long as the supermarket did not slip” (170). In this way, Jack here attempts to regain a sense of control following the crisis through consumption.

5.3 Enduring Crisis

Outside of the supermarket’s ordered sense of regularity and within the larger town of Blacksmith, however, the Airborne Toxic Event lingers. “German shepherds still patrolled the town, accompanied by men in Mylex suits,” Jack explains. “We welcomed the dogs, got used to them, fed and petted them, but did not adjust well to the sight of

costumed men with padded boots, hoses attached to their masks. We associated these outfits with the source of our trouble and fear” (DeLillo, 173). As a regulating social function, the ordinary proves itself here as a flexible entity in expanding the category of probability to include the roaming German shepherds. As Jack also conveys, the persisting presence of the men in Mylex suits works conversely as a visible indication of othering. That is to say, the juxtaposition between Jack’s exposed body, itself the open and becoming symbol of grotesque realism, and the anonymous state workers in Mylex suits suggests a newly drawn distinction against the affected other, now extraordinary to the ordinary sense of bourgeois regularity being reclaimed. In how this othering function redraws its lines, Jack is thereby divided as an extraordinary figure of the grotesque othered to himself as a subject to the ideological ordinary. In acclimating to this shifting field of probability, Babette adapts and instead argues, “This is what they wear on duty” and that “it doesn’t mean we’re in danger. The dogs have sniffed out only a few traces of toxic material on the edge of town” (DeLillo, 173). By this, Babette here returns toward the initial binaries posed by anthropocentric monologism. More specifically, Babette here reclaims the ordinary “here” of Blacksmith against the traces of apocalypse out “there” on the edge of town; however, in doing so, Babette instead reveals her own ignorance on her husband’s compromised position through Nyodene D.

In his response, Heinrich challenges both his mother’s and the state’s projected anthropocentric monologism through a dialogic rebuttal, replying, “That’s what we’re supposed to believe [...] If they released the true findings, there’d be billions of dollars in law suits. Not to mention demonstrations, panic, violence and social disorder” (173).

Following the carnivalesque structure of crisis in the Airborne Toxic Event, Heinrich here holds onto the subversive epistemology he gained within the reorganized social order of the evacuation camp. To this, Babette responds by clinging to an elastic sense of the ordinary, saying “Every day on the news there’s another toxic spill. Cancerous solvents from storage tanks, arsenic from smokestacks, radioactive water from power plants. How serious can it be if it happens all the time? Isn’t the definition of a serious event based on the fact that it’s not an everyday occurrence?” (174). Ironically, Babette here reflects the ordinariness of crisis always already existent within the Anthropocene’s ordinary, thereby reaffirming the post-naturalist stance on the end of the nature.

Following this logic, Heinrich replies, “The sooner we forget these spills, the sooner we can come to grips with the real issue” (174). Zooming outward, Heinrich here echoes Morton’s notion on the nonlocality of anthropogenic climate change as a hyperobject, or that “any "local manifestation" of a hyperobject is not directly the hyperobject" (1).

Continuing on, Heinrich explains, “The real issue is the kind of radiation that surrounds us every day. Your radio, your TV, your microwave oven, your power lines just outside your door, your radar speed-trap on the highway. For years they told us these low doses weren’t dangerous” (DeLillo, 174). In this final comment, Heinrich gestures toward that which is all-encompassing; and, contextualized within the Anthropocene, the threat posed by the surrounding radiation is concealed by the surrounding ideology of anthropocentrism. In his response, Jack replies, “Terrifying data is now an industry in itself. Different firms compete to see how badly they can scare us” (DeLillo, 175); however, internally, Jack concedes his own vulnerability, narrating, “I wanted to argue

with him [...] But what could I say, considering my condition?" (175). In this confession, Jack effectively admits his own loss of control to himself.

5.4 The Whole Point of Babette

From there, Jack attempts again to regain a sense of control in his life through regaining a sense of control within his marriage after Babette admits to both her reliance upon "Dylar," an experimental drug used to treat "fear of death," and the extramarital affair she was having with a "Mr. Gray" in order to obtain said drug. In her series of confessions, Babette here also frustrates Jack's sense of his own identity and its relational underpinnings by challenging the ways in which he had previously understood her. Responding particularly to her vocalization on her fear of death, Jack defiantly argues back, "This is the whole point of Babette" (DeLillo, 191). By "this," Jack refers to his understanding of her as someone secure and how that sense of security informed his own within the bourgeois regularity of the ordinary in *Blacksmith*. "I'm afraid to die," Babette later continues. "I think about it all the time. It won't go away" (196); and, to this, Jack replies, "Don't tell this to me. This is terrible" (196). In this critical remark, Jack means to cling toward his sense of security and to distance vulnerability by denying its presence within his own wife. Pointing to Babette's ability to "conceal such a thing from a husband and children," Jack attempts to suggest that there instead "must be something else, an underlying problem" to explain away death itself (197). Babette, however, answers him with her own question: "What could be more underlying than death?" (197). Within this conversation, Babette and Jack reveal what they already know to be truth: the underlying death anxiety they share is the same underlying crisis

underpinning their sense of the ordinary; or, crisis is always already ordinary within the Anthropocene. Speaking toward the concealment of this crisis, as a conscious decision or otherwise, within the social imaginary as it is subjected to anthropocentric ideology,

Babette reflects:

“How strange it is. We have these deep terrible lingering fears about ourselves and the people we love. Yet we walk around, talk to people, eat and drink. We manage to function. The feelings are deep and real. Shouldn’t they paralyze us? How is it we can survive them, at least for a while? We drive a car, we teach a class. How is it no one sees how deeply afraid we were, last night, this morning? Is it something we all hide from each other, by mutual consent? Or do we share the same secret without knowing? Wear the same disguise.” (DeLillo, 198)

In this commentary, Babette reveals the uncanny nature of post-naturalist anthropocentrism, especially as it is experienced by those attempting a return toward the ordinary following the carnivalesque restructuring and ecological dialogic of crisis itself. That is to say, after anthropocentrism is denaturalized by centrifugal forces as only a relativized centripetal entity, the return to its ideological ordinary is one of silencing the democratic dialogic underlying authoritarian monologism. Consequentially, the potentiality in a subversive epistemology persists, but only as a “lingering” fear, easily brushed aside by others as anxious naïveté, concerning all things ordinary that are supposed to provide comfort.

After learning about Babette's reliance upon Dylar, Jack attempts to regain control in his relationship through controlling her relation to the drug. He does so in multiple ways, many of which involving his paranoid search for the concealed bottles of Dylar he believes to be hidden around their house. In one such example, Jack goes as far as to dig through the garbage disposal, ten days since his daughter Denise had admittedly compacted the bottle. "That particular round of garbage had almost certainly been taken outside and collected by now. Even if it hadn't, the tablets had surely been demolished by the compacted ram" (DeLillo, 258). Yet, all the same, Jack begins "casually thumbing through the garbage" (258). In what soon becomes a meditation on postmodern consumption, Jack reacts first in shock to the stench of the trash, asking, "Was this ours? Did it belong to us? Has we created it?" (258). Contextualized within his experiences in the Anthropocene, these same questions echo his and his family's earlier dismay regarding the Airborne Toxic Event as it first materialized as the anthropogenic return of anthropocentric actions. As Jack continues digging, he narrates:

I picked through item by item, mass by shapeless mass, wondering why I felt guilty, a violator of privacy, uncovering intimate and perhaps shameful secrets. It was hard not to be distracted by some of the things they'd chosen to submit to the Juggernaut appliance. But why did I feel like a household spy? Is garbage so private? Does it flow at the core with personal heat, with signs of one's deepest nature, clues to secret yearnings, humiliating flaws? What habits, fetishes, addictions, inclinations? What solitary acts, behavioral ruts? [...] Was this the dark underside of

consumer consciousness? I came across a horrible clotted mass of hair, soap, ear swabs, crushed roaches, flip-top rings, sterile pads smeared with pus and bacon fat, strands of frayed dental floss, fragments of ballpoint refills, toothpicks still displaying bits of impaled food. There was a pair of shredded undershorts with lipstick markings, perhaps a memento of the Grayview Motel. (DeLillo, 259)

In his exhaustive list of what he finds, Jack here parallels his earlier narration of products at the opening of the novel from when he watched the caravan of college students arrive to campus. DeLillo, in this cyclical movement, effectively likens commodities with waste within the ecological system of consumption. That is, DeLillo reveals a fundamental and material connectivity, regardless of its concealment, within the grotesque realism of this scene. Following this frustrated attempt at regaining control, Jack decides to get another physical from his doctor; and, at the doctor's office, Jack is told how "nice it is to find a patient who regards his status seriously" (260). Explaining further, the doctor continues, "His status as patient. People tend to forget they are patients. Once they leave the doctor's office or the hospital, they simply put it out of their minds. But you are all permanent patients, like it or not. I am the doctor, you the patient" (260). For Jack, the message is clear: even within the return toward "normalcy" following the event, Jack is still inextricably bound to the Airborne Toxic Event.

As "Section III: Dylarama" progresses and SIMUVAC simulations cover over the lived crisis experienced in the Airborne Toxic Event, another ecological threat manifests briefly in another airborne episode in Blacksmith, only now from a "noxious

odor.” As Jack notes, there were at first “SIMUVAC vehicles were everywhere” to run a simulated evacuation from a hypothetical threat (DeLillo, 270). “Men in Mylex suits patrolled the streets, many of them carrying instruments to measure harm. The consulting firm that conceived the evacuation gathered a small group of computer-screened volunteers in a police van in the supermarket parking lot” (270). A few days following this simulated crisis, “an actual noxious odor drifted across the river” (270). In response:

A pause, a careful thoughtfulness, seemed to settle on the town. There was no sign of official action, no jitneys or ambulettes painted in primary colors. People avoided looking at each other directly. An irritating sting in the nostrils, a taste of copper on the tongue. As time passed, the will to do nothing seems to deepen, to fix itself firmly. There were those who denied they smelled anything at all. It is always that way with odors. There were those who professed not to see the irony of their inaction. They’d taken part in the SIMUVAC exercise but were reluctant to flee now. There were those who wondered what caused the odor, those who looked worried, those who said the absence of technical personnel meant there was nothing to worry about. Our eyes began to water. (270)

Within this inaction lies the true challenge toward anthropocentrism; that is, even after living through the Airborne Toxic Event and being forced to dialogically understand themselves as vulnerable, the townspeople of Blacksmith here attempt to cling toward anthropocentric monologism by concealing the reality of crisis around them in both monologist dialogue and in silence. As Jack narrates, “About three hours after we’d first

become aware of it, the vapor suddenly lifted, saving us from our formal deliberations” (271). In how ordinarily the noxious odor drifts in and out of Blacksmith, Jack is here reminded of the stark contrast between concealment and containment.

5.5 The Plot Against Willie Mink

Finally, as the narrative nears its conclusion, Jack decides upon the most egregious method in his attempts at regaining a sense of control: racial othering. While Jack cannot successfully maintain the rigid binaries between nature/culture, ordinary/apocalypse, or here/there in his attempt at constructing a sense of security, Jack’s post-historical, relativist consumption of Hitler studies offers what he believes to be a more direct method at reaffirming his sense of self. Within a theoretical discussion, Murray muses similarly that murder provides a means “of controlling death” (DeLillo, 291). Continuing on, Murray elaborates, “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. See how marvelously simple” (291). This logic follows then to suggest that if Jack murders someone already racially other—an other like the racially ambiguous Mr. Gray providing his wife Dylar for sexual favors—it would reaffirm not only his being alive, but also his sense of security and privilege as a white man living within the ordinary “here” of Blacksmith’s perceived bourgeois regularity. “Besides, it’s part of the universal experience of dying,” Murray concludes. “Whether you think about it consciously or not, you’re aware at some level that people are walking around saying to themselves, ‘Better him than me.’ It’s only natural. You can’t blame them or wish them ill” (294). In this manner, Murray effectively

reaffirms the worldview Jack held prior to the Airborne Toxic Event. That is, anthropocentric monologism's reliance upon othering the apocalyptic crises experienced by racial others in distinct and distant "there's" reaffirms the ordinary here's sense of security; through posing apocalypse as something other itself, one can thereby effectively conceal the ecological connectivity posed by anthropogenic climate change as a hyperobject and experienced disproportionately already by marginalized individuals. Simply put, Jack believes he must kill Mr. Gray in order to save himself.

As Jack sets out to murder Mr. Gray, he is struck by the man's racial ambiguity and by his unusual name: Willie Mink. Unable to comfortably identify him on first glance, Jack asks, "What kind of name is Willie Mink?" And, in response, Willie answers, "It's a first name and a last name. Same as anybody" (DeLillo, 305). Unable to ethnically identify him, Jack, in desperation, then wonders to himself, "How was my plan progressing?" (307). In this manner, Jack's plot is both revealed and frustrated. Through the relational underpinning of identity, Jack is thereby reliant upon Willie's racial othering in order to establish himself in contrast; and, without knowing Willie's racial identity, Jack's plot stalls. Contrastingly, Willie poses the question to Jack: "I see you as a heavysset white man about fifty. Does this describe your anguish?" (308). Throughout their confrontation, Willie continues to racially identify Jack, thereby highlighting Jack's inability to do the same, with Willie commenting, "Why are you here, white man?" and then "You are very white, you know that?" (310). Eventually, Jack shoots Willie, and, when he does, Jack narrates that he "saw beyond words" (312). In this comment, Jack believes himself to be escaping dialogic renegotiation, and he reflects similarly on the

security he believes himself to derive from establishing their relation, explaining, “I tried to see myself from Mink’s viewpoint. Looming, dominant, gaining life-power, storing up life-credit” (312). Through his actions, however, Willie “was too far gone to have a viewpoint” (312). Looking down at him, Jack reflects, “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. The old human muddles and quirks were set flowing again. Compassion, remorse, mercy” (313). In this moment, Jack realizes his reliance upon Willie in order to establish himself and decides he must then save the man he has just attempted to kill. For his plot, Jack is then ultimately unable to establish the relationship he believes and wants to believe exists between his whiteness and a sense of security against and through Willie.

Turning toward an emergency ward with a neon cross hanging above the entrance, Jack drags Willie in by the foot. As he himself is treated for the gunshot wound he received in turn during the altercation, Jack asks the nun working, “What does the Church say about heaven today? Is it still the old heaven, like that, in the sky?” (DeLillo, 317). To this, the nun asks back, “Do you think we are stupid?” Continuing on in his belief in her beliefs, Jack then poses the question, “Then what is Heaven, according to the Church, if it isn’t the abode of God and the angels and the souls of those who are saved?” And, in turn, the nun questions back, “Saved? What is saved? This is a dumb head, who would come in here to talk about angels. Show me an angel. Please. I want to see” (317). Clinging toward his guiding sense of anthropocentric monologism, Jack is frustrated in his attempt here to identify a nun within the context of a church organization. “But you’re

a nun,” Jack argues. “Nuns believe these things. When we see a nun, it cheers us up, it’s cute and amusing, being reminded that someone still believes in angels, in saints, all the traditional things” (317). The nun, however, rejects the distance drawn between his sense of logic and the distinct faith he carved out for her in his imagination, as she later answers, “The nonbelievers need the believers. They are desperate to have someone believe. But show me a saint. Give me one hair from the body of a saint” (318). Echoing his conversation with Babette before, Jack is dismayed at the prevalence of death and comments finally, “I don’t want to hear this. This is terrible” (319). To this, the nun replies, “But true” (319). As the scene closes, Jack has nothing to do but return home with blood still pooled in the rear seat of his car. As his wife and children sleep on in their respective beds, Jack, restless, eventually sits at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee, with “nothing to do but wait for the next sunset, when the sky would ring like bronze” (321). Traumatized, and with his and Willie’s blood mixing together in a layer across himself and his belongings, Jack here is forced to realize the inextricability of crisis and the ordinary. That is, grotesque realism within the Anthropocene ends here as it should: with the suburb aware of itself on the precipice.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION: DENATURALIZING NATURE

In the final chapter of *White Noise*, Jack's narration focuses in on his and Babbette's youngest son Wilder, as the opening scene begins, "This was the day Wilder got on his plastic tricycle, rode it around the block, turned right onto a dead end street and pedaled noisily to the dead end" (322). Following the failed plot against Willie Mink wherein Jack attempted to take control of his future in order to distance himself from the past, this opening line instead collapses time to a continuous now. This sense of temporality is notable here in the ecological connectivity that it poses, especially given how the preceding chapter closed on Jack sitting in wait "for the next sunset, when the sky would ring like bronze" (321). Furthermore, within this scene, "our reconstruction yields to the awe-struck account of two elderly women watching from the second-story back porch of a tall house in the trees" (322). This shift in viewpoint echoes back toward the renegotiated epistemology within the Airborne Toxic Event's carnivalesque disruption; however, here, Jack's own monologism is the sole voice of authority being challenged.

From their vantage point, these women then watch on as Wilder pedals toward the expressway. The narration continues, "Hey, hey, they said, a little tentative at first, not ready to accept the implications of the process unfolding before them" (322). The unfolding process referred to here concerns the crisis of Wilder proceeding headfirst into danger, despite how the women look on, "empty-mouthed, each with an arm in the air, a

plea for the scene to reverse, the boy to pedal backwards on his faded blue and yellow toy like a cartoon figure on morning TV” (322). In this short summation of events, DeLillo’s cutting satire here likens their spectatorship to crisis as “empty-mouthed” bystanders to that of those watching the Airborne Toxic Event unfold before them. That is, DeLillo’s depiction of crisis here, though different in its manifestation, maintains a disconnected spectatorship as an essential element of crises as they are allowed to perpetuate. This critique is clearly articulated when Wilder begins crossing lanes of traffic, and the narration continues, “The drivers could not quite comprehend. In their knotted posture, belted in, they knew this picture did not belong to the hurtling consciousness of the highway, the broad-ribbed modernist stream” (322). The post-naturalist problem posed in anthropogenic climate change’s fundamental connectivity, DeLillo here suggests, lies in the struggle toward accountability. While the women do yell for Wilder to stop as he nears the expressway, they “were silent by now, outside the event, suddenly tired” when the real crisis begins (323). Ironically, to rethink the ordinary as already apocalyptic then presents a means of fighting against this fatigue; to stay with the trouble of climate change enables an understanding of how the trouble stays with us all.

However, Wilder’s survival of this event enables the spectators to quietly tuck the memory away within a repressed sense of crisis underlying their shared social ordinary. As the Gladney family visits the overpass to look on with the crowds of Blacksmith residents at the lingering sunsets, vibrant only because of the Nyodene D released in the Airborne Toxic Event, a similar repression occurs. As Jack comments on their shared sense of confusion, “The sunsets linger and so do we” (325). From a Bakhtinian

ecological perspective, this repression marks the failure of Jack to successfully integrate his experiences with crisis into his worldview on Blacksmith's sense of the ordinary. Despite how his experiences with crisis occurred within and through the ordinary, Jack effectively conceals the Bakhtinian denaturalization within his own psyche. Instead, he attempts to forget, and, when that doesn't work either, he waits. "The supermarket shelves have been rearranged," he later narrates. "It happened one day without warning. There is agitation and panic in the aisles, dismay in the faces of older shoppers" (325). While the shoppers attempt to "discern the underlying logic" of the supermarket, Jack here speaks toward the ordinary as a flexible field within the contemporary social imaginary. That is to say, even after anthropocentric logic and societal structures are denaturalized through the carnivalesque disruption of crisis, Jack's sense of the ordinary sustains itself against the notion of apocalypse and persists through concealment of crisis already present within the confines of the ordinary.

As previously explored, the contradictory logic of anthropocentric ideology relies upon a fundamental othering, especially against those perceived as extraordinary in experiencing distant and distinct crises out "there" that thereby reaffirm the ordinariness of the privileged "here." To summarize this logic in how it is played out within this Bakhtinian ecological reading of *White Noise*, this othering function begins on a local level, as the social ordinary of Blacksmith's "here" is sustained against the extraordinary sense of crisis out "there." Jack and his family are explicit in this act, as they consume constant televised streams of ecological catastrophes in order to reaffirm their own sense of security in "Section I: Waves and Radiation." From there, "Section II: The Airborne

Toxic Event” marks the post-naturalist breakdown of Cartesian dualism’s traditional nature/culture opposition. That is, anthropogenic climate change is understood in Morton’s sense of it as a nonlocal hyperobject, thereby ensuring a fundamental connectivity through ecology. Ecological crisis, therefore, cannot be conceived of as distinct or distant crises; even more, the social imaginary’s sense of the ordinary can no longer be sustained against a notion of total global apocalypse when anthropogenic climate change already poses a global existential threat. To maintain the ordinary as a field outside of crisis as an extraordinary event, as Jack attempts to do in “Section III: Dylarama,” is then to conceal the ways in which the ordinary is already apocalyptic, particularly for marginalized individuals being disproportionately affected by climate change today. While reframing the ordinary as already apocalyptic will not materially address climate change, this subversive reframing within our discursive social imaginary will effectively stage an intervention into anthropocentric ideology’s claim toward the security of the ordinary. Even more, reframing the ordinary as apocalyptic as an antiracist ecocritical move, cognizant of the ways in which societal positionality factors into embodied experiences in interfacing with anthropogenic climate change, will also ideally inspire the solidarity needed within the environmentalist movement to ensure accountability from those in positions of power.

In proposing Bakhtinian ecology as a methodological tool for the post-naturalist ecocritical imagination, I refer toward this dialogic renegotiation of the ways in which we conceive of nature and our relation toward it. Ecological dialogics, as first proposed by Murphy and here expanded to encompass ideology, provide an important means of

understanding the subversive and democratic dialogue needed to challenge the singular anthropocentric voice of authoritative concealment perpetuated by global capitalism. Moreover, Bakhtin's notions of carnivalesque disruption and denaturalization of social structures are similarly imperative in how we conceive of the temporary totality of crisis. As demonstrated by Jack in *White Noise*, the unrealized potentiality in thinking this disruption is in thinking the possibility of a new structure moving forward; to return toward the same anthropocentric ordinary following crisis, as Jack attempts to do following the Airborne Toxic Event, is not only impossible but also the exact derangement Ghosh posits is definitive of our era. To truly challenge what Ghosh argues is our societal belief in "bourgeois regularity," we must then pursue a Bakhtinian sense of grotesque realism to realize the fundamental connectivity of crisis today. In this sense, the Bakhtinian push to denaturalize nature is then also the push to denaturalize our divisions, or a push toward solidarity.

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