

THINKING THE BODY TRANSCENDENT:
RACIAL VIOLENCE AND THE MYSTICAL IMAGINARY IN CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Twentieth-century literature and theory have offered no shortage of challenges to the unity of personal identity. What these undertakings leave largely unquestioned, however, is the prevailing understanding that personal identity is sealed within the confines of the physical body—the final uncontested frontier of Cartesian identity. Emerging from a matrix of recent American literature—by Don DeLillo, Charles Johnson, Tony Kushner, Toni Morrison, among others—is a counter-argument to the notion that the materially bounded self is separate from other such selves in space. For the “individual” to take shape as such, it must locate itself within a specific social identity, disavowing its connection with those who identify themselves differently: a process, these texts suggest, that can unleash racial and ideological violence. My dissertation explores six late twentieth-century American novels and plays (1982 to 1998) that both dramatize this violent process and propose an alternative through images of humans dislocated from their bodies and fusing metaphysically with other open selves across space. Whereas

critics have shown how global magic realist literatures use images of the non-unified self to represent the split consciousness resulting from colonial domination, my project explores how recent American texts religiously inflect such images and then through them imagine the transcendence of racial divisions. Challenging the notion of the human as a material isolate, images of the open body represent a literary vision for more expansive inter-racial identifications and more actively inclusive social solidarities for twenty-first century America.

Dedication

*For my mother Evelyn,
Who taught me to see the extraordinary,
Think and feel the beautiful,
And touch the transcendent.*

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Introduction
Transcending Bodies

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

—Emmanuel Levinas

In a way that typifies a thematic that has recently burgeoned within American letters, Saleem Sinai, of Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* (1980), defines his personal identity in terms of a field of surrounding living human phenomenology. "Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me." "I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine" (440). "[E]ach 'I' ...contains a similar multitude," such that "to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world" (441). However, in the novel this relationship reaches a critical extreme as this multitude, "crowds without boundaries, growing until it fills the world" (532), eventually turns around to swallow *him*:

I am alone in this vastness of the numbers, the numbers marching one two three, I am being buffeted right and left while rip tear crunch reaches its climax, and my body is screaming, it cannot take this kind of treatment any more, but now I see familiar faces in the crowd, they are all there.... [W]atch me explode, bones splitting breaking beneath the awful pressure of the crowd, bag of bones falling down down down...only a broken creature spilling pieces of itself into the street, because I have been so-many too-many persons.... Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust...suck[ing me] into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes. (532-533)

Critics have not known exactly what to do with this scene of corporeal disintegration.

Wendy Faris blurbs on it as representing the "idea of multiple or mobile identity"

(*Ordinary Enchantments* 25). Santiago Juan-Navarro insightfully reads Saleem in the tradition of the third-world hero whose personal biography parallels that of the state; for him, this scene depicts Saleem falling out of this allegorical relationship to India and thereby losing the larger cohesive template for his symbolic identity, hence falling under these centrifugal disintegrative pressures. But why then, we might ask, is he subsumed in this way into a mass of surrounding *humanity*? Rushdie is deliberate to flesh Saleem out, so to speak, as constituted in the materiality of other living humans, from which he derives (“I have been so-many too-many persons”) and to which he returns (“Yes, they will trample me underfoot”). This question becomes all the more pressing when we consider that within the field of contemporary American literature, a constellation of similar scenes are emerging: representations of human beings expanding or disintegrating on the level of the corporeal, losing their coherence and being progressively absorbed into more expansive matrices of being, such as the bodies of surrounding humanity, or the broader panorama of planetary life that couches the human. Whereas critics might define Saleem’s “dissolution” as simply “a surrender to a larger and less containable significance” (Sterne 98), we might press the issue further to ask: in both Saleem’s case as well as in the others that are preoccupying a handful of contemporary American writers, what is the “larger” “significance” into which these characters are absorbed? How have novels and plays taken this idea up within recent decades, and to what political, ideological, and conceptual ends?

Such representations figure within an archive of recent American literature and assert themselves to be read as indeed significant. In Don DeLillo’s novel *White Noise* (1984), for instance, protagonist Jack Gladney is in the act of gunning down the sole non-

white character in the novel, Willy Mink; just when Mink is about to die, Gladney enters into an experience of gradual unselfing in which he discovers his personal identity as a field of ambient “waves and radiation” vibrating diffusely beyond the boundaries of his body, “white noise everywhere.” As I discuss in chapter one of this project, this discovery has the consequence of impelling Jack to desist from his murder attempt and to make reparation for his violence. In chapter two, I go on to explore the ways in which, in Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale* (1982), Andrew Hawkins, a half-black, half-white slave in the antebellum South, strives to authenticate his identity as “black.” His identification is, however, painfully spurned by the slave community as much as it is by white America. The novel deals with his resulting psychic fracture (*what can I be if neither black nor white?*) through a scene in which Andrew sees himself as an expansive “body mosaic” morphing into and out of animal/human/planetary life that he had long considered to be “outside” of himself and thereby other. The surrounding world, as it does Jack Gladney and Saleem Sinai, swallows him into itself as he expands outward, losing his sense of himself as a discrete unitary being.

In chapter three, I show that such representations of bodies opening and interfusing are not confined to novels; Tony Kushner’s stage play “Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes” (1992) represents angels whose bodies are alive with an erotic electrical energy that vibes through space and penetrates into the bodies of others, igniting their sexual arousal. Only in a world in which the body is more than opaque matter can a gay New York male and a Mormon Utah woman, perfect strangers, enter into each other’s dreamscapes and experience a mutual identification that carries them beyond their pernicious stereotypes. And in Toni Morrison’s novel *Paradise*

(1998), as I discuss in chapter four, a group of women living in a defunct convent address traumatic memories through certain mind-body practices that draw them out of themselves and into mystical communion. Their open and merging bodies form the template for an affective identification that empowers them to heal violent rifts in their pasts, and to envisage a moment of intense—and reparative—belonging.

Singing the Body Electric

These open and porous bodies have a longer history in American letters. A brief sketch of it might begin by differentiating it from two homologous literary traditions to which it might be easily, if erroneously, compared. One of these is a transatlantic modernism that represented the psychologically split subject through a poetics of narrative fragmentation, of which William Faulkner might be among the most salient American example (Toni Morrison, whose writing perhaps best exemplifies the open body I am discussing, wrote her Masters thesis on Faulkner and sees herself as in many ways both building upon and differentiating herself from him [Jaffrey 1]). Even if modernist writers represented “human nature” as “elusive, indeterminate, multiple, often implausible, infinitely various and essentially irreducible” (Bradbury and McFarlane 81), Brian McHale reminds us, however, that their emphasis on fragmentation played out particularly on the level of the psychic, constituting a set of epistemological concerns. Through modernist representational strategies, writers such as William Faulkner, Ford Madox Ford, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf attempted both to represent the split psyche through a narrative “emphasis on fragmentation” (80) while attempting to imposing “order” upon it through the cohering power of art (92). In contrast, the contemporary American writers

whom I explore are less concerned with the non-unity of human nature as a problem to solve as they are to re-imagine this open structure, to quote Toni Morrison, as “opening doors to all sorts of things” (Jaffrey 1). Furthermore, these more recent American writers exemplify a shift from what Brian McHale calls the “epistemological dominant” of modernism to the “ontological dominant” of postmodernism. They are less concerned with the structure of the psyche and knowledge than they are with the body and human being, which they depict not as fragmented like a Picasso painting but rather flexible, open, and flowing in porous continuity with the outer living world. In DeLillo’s and Johnson’s novels, characters’ bodies fade and selves flow outward; in Morrison’s novel and Kushner’s play, characters become porous, enabling them “step into” one another’s “inner” landscapes. And this, as I will show a little later, is not a problem to solve or a fate to endure, as fragmentation was for the modernists, but serves as indeed the solution to pressing existential and ethical problems that face these characters.

Another prominent tradition against which my texts counterpoise themselves is an international magic realism with its roots in the 1960s Latin American “boom.” Like my texts, works in this tradition also represent the self as open and split, but with a difference. In Julio Cortazar’s magic realist short story “Axolotl” (1967), for example, the protagonist stares into the cage of an axolotl in a Paris zoo and sees mirrored, in the eyes of the lizard, both the Aztec peoples wiped out through colonization as well as a reflection of himself. These identifications intensify until, eventually

I was an axolotl.... He was outside the aquarium, his thinking was a thinking outside the tank. Recognizing him, being him himself, I was an axolotl and in my world. The horror began—I learned in the same moment—of believing myself prisoner in the body of an axolotl, metamorphosed into him with my human mind intact, buried alive in an axolotl, condemned to move lucidly among unconscious creatures. (9)

This scene deploys the “fantastical” representational strategies afforded by a magic realist poetics—in which a human can morph into and find himself transmigrated into the body of a lizard—to figure, specifically, the experience of Latin American colonial domination—the self as arising out of a colonial space of “symbiosis, mutations, vibrations, *mestizaje*” (Faris and Zamora 98). (Salman Rushdie uses similar techniques to analyze split subjectivity in postcolonial India.) Magic realist literature, especially in its more “fantastical” or science-fictional modes, is not interested in describing humans “as they are” but rather in figuring the irreducibly unrepresentable experience of colonization within a richly metaphorical literary tapestry.

In contrast, Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, and Tony Kushner are explicit about their respective projects to describe, in more translucent mimesis than magic realist writers, the “reality” of human embodied experience. To this end, they deploy religiously saturated images, mystical concepts and hybrid sacred vocabularies to describe a world that they want to re-present as in fact real. Charles Johnson, for instance, is a committed Buddhist and has written extensively, as he does in *Turning of the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing*, on the liberatory benefits of the Buddhist path. The bodily opening that his character Andrew Hawkins undergoes in *Oxherding Tale* is thus a sort of case study of Buddhist enlightenment—its instantiation within a peculiarly American context to deal with peculiarly American problems. Toni Morrison, whose characters in *Paradise* experience a therapeutic unselfing, explains in an interview that the forms of knowledge circulating in the African-American community of her upbringing “formed a kind of cosmology that was perceptive as well as enchanting.”

Even though this would not be considered legitimate knowledge within “public and scholarly life” (“Memory, Creation, and Writing” 385), the “black people I knew [growing up] had visitations and did not find that shocking and they had some sweet, intimate connection with things that were not empirically verifiable. It not only made them for me the most interesting people in the world—it was an enormous resource for the solution of certain kinds of problems” (qtd. McClure 104). In her novel *Paradise*, Morrison explores this level of mystical phenomenology and strives to mobilize its power to serve as a “resource” to “certain kinds of problems” facing the American project, which the novel allegorizes. Tony Kushner, I argue, deliberately structures his play so as to show that magic and miracles are as much a property of the world beyond the stage as they are of the world onstage. And Don DeLillo tells Anthony DeCurtis in an interview:

In *White Noise* in particular, I tried to find a kind of radiance in dailiness. Sometimes this radiance can be almost frightening. Other times it can be almost holy or sacred.... Our sense of fear—we avoid it because we feel it so deeply, so there is an intense conflict at work.... I think it is something we all feel, something we almost never talk about, something that is almost there. I tried to relate it in *White Noise* to this other sense of transcendence that lies just beyond our touch. This extraordinary wonder of things is somehow related to the extraordinary dread, to the death fear we try to keep beneath the surface of our perceptions. (DeCurtis 52)

In this way, these texts shift away from the epistemological concerns of modernism toward a predominant preoccupation with the ontological: the human—its being, structure, and relationship to the outer world. They also assert themselves, in contrast to magic realism’s fantastical modalities, as a more direct mimesis of the “extraordinary wonder of things” irreducible to lived human experience.

As such, I would argue that they fall more in line with a tradition of countercultural spiritual practice and literary production in America which had its first

flowering among the nineteenth-century Transcendentalists and which has persisted until now in America through such institutional vehicles as California's Esalen Institute. Like the novels I read, this American countercultural tradition 1) has committed itself to conceptualizing and practicing the human body as open and porous with respect to the outside world, and 2) has engaged in the work of conceptualizing this body through the vessel of the literary arts. While this is no place for a full-on genealogy of the body I explore in my texts—which would surely extend back to Orphic imaginaries arising out of ancient Greece and Rome—it might illuminate my study to lay out a brief sketch of its more immediate past in American letters. The literature I deal with is part and parcel of a set of religious discourses sustained along the margins of American culture under various banners, such as the “New Age” movement, the human potential movement, neopaganism, the occult, Wicca, among other designations. According to Jeffrey Kripal, these disparate subcultures are equally indebted to a certain level of cultural legitimation that emerged through the intellectual activity taking place at the Esalen institute in the 1960s. Another element holding these subcultures in common is their proposed ways of imagining and living in the body, which take it to consist of occult energies that exceed as much the borders of a strict materialism as the borders of the flesh itself.

But we could go even further back before the sixties, if we wanted, to say that the body that we see in DeLillo, Johnson, Morrison, and Kushner first sprouted from the soil of Walt Whitman's writing, most notably *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Harold Bloom hails Whitman as the first prophet of the “American Religion” insofar as he infused Gnostic and Eastern mystical worldviews with the élan of a peculiarly New World individualism. Whitman celebrated the body as alive with energies tantamount to divinity itself: “I have

said that the soul is not more than the body, / And I have said that the body is not more than the soul, / And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's-self is" (21). The energies that teem throughout this body form not only an energetic continuity between it and the outer cosmos, but between it and other human bodies as well: "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles." "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars." "Nature without check with original energy" vibrates throughout "the body electric," interconnecting it with other living bodies such that Whitman can say, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (21). Making resource of this Transcendentalist vision of selfhood through explicit reference to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Tony Kushner, in "Angels in America," writes his angel as a "divine emanation" whose "Utter Flesh" emits powerful sexual energy, an "infinite aggregate myriad entity" (2:46), "four divine emanations...manifest in One" (1:3). The angel's subjectivity is diffuse, unendingly plural and unconfined to the apparent unity/solidity of the body. Quoting Emerson, she warns: "Hiding from Me one place, you will find me in another. I I I I stop down the road, waiting for you" (2:46). (If we want her again, might we look for her under our bootsoles?) Sarah Pike also reminds us of medical discourses that preceded the Transcendentalists, from which they were in part drawing. Anton Mesmer had already "taught that spirit and matter are not separate; humans, nature, and the divine are all connected" through certain fluids that permeate all living things (Pike 46). Mesmer and Emmanuel Swedenborg, among others in eighteenth century Europe, had already been conceptualizing the body as constituted in a material energy / an energetic materiality that

served as medium of interconnectivity across humans and nature. Again, sprawling as a full-on genealogy of the energetic body would be, suffice it for our present purposes to highlight Whitman as looming in the deep background of this body as it comes to us in mid-twentieth century American spiritualist countercultural discourse.

This body, as it took discursive shape at Esalen in the 1960s, was seen as constituted in a field of energy, which it both materializes and channels, that connects it to the earth and living humanity. Some examples of defining texts might illuminate the convergence of my authors with the broader cultural activity happening in this area. F.W. Myers, for instance, imagined the human brain as a kind of biological television or radio that transmitted energy across space—an energy that could persist long after the body has perished, dispersed into the outer world (Kripal 443-5). Albert Hofmann repeated this “transmission thesis” in his 1983 lecture, delivered at Esalen, “The Transmitter-Receiver Concept of Reality.” As it was nurtured across the last four decades of the twentieth century at Esalen and other New Age think tanks, this form of thinking fused together with Hindu and Buddhist views of the universe as a “concrete manifestation of the divine energy of the godhead.” Practitioners of this body mysticism experimented with Hindu Tantra, which they finessed with emergent sexual liberatory politics, to imagine ways in which they could direct this bodily energy toward channels of “liberation” (19). The “Tantric turn” in American religious culture looked “to the sexual body as the most potent site of spiritual enlightenment and occult energy” (19), hailing the “deification of the flesh” (38).

Esalen founder Michael Murphy’s occult novel *Jacob Atabet* (1977), for instance, argues that we are at a moment in our evolution as a species in which we can more fully

cognize and more deeply tap into and unleash the energies locked into the very smallest particles of our embodiment (297-300). It is through this “enlightenment of the body” that Fritjof Capra, as he describes in the wildly popular *The Tao of Physics* (1975), experienced the “Dance of the Shiva, the Lord of Dancers worshipped by the Hindus” (302). On a beach one afternoon, Capra claims to have seen “cascades of energy coming down from outer space” and experienced “the atoms of the elements and those of my body participating in this cosmic dance of energy; I felt its rhythm and I ‘heard’ its sound, and at that moment I *knew* this was the Dance of the Shiva, the Lord of Dancers worshipped by the Hindus” (304). This way of imagining the energetic dimensions of the cosmos vibrating into the body, and the body vibrating a similar energy back, did more than just provide American spiritualists an alternative from the more rigorous doctrines of mainline religion. It went further to configure the relationship of the self with respect to the “outer” world in a particular way, undermining the Western dualisms separating the two. Capra imagined a constitutional holism to the universe, a dynamism in which there are no “objects” per se but only continual unified “radical flux” (305). This is a “mysticism [that] admits no boundaries whatsoever, not even the minimal interface between self and other” (212).

This way of writing the body is still very much alive in American arts. In the 2004 film *I (Heart) Huckabees*, Bernard and Vivian Jaffe initiate two young men, trapped in largely materialist and self-centered habits of mind, into an awareness of “universal interconnectivity,” which the film uses special effects to depict through characters physically disintegrating into tiny pixels that blur together—undermining the “minimal interface between self and other.” In my project, I spend considerable time describing

how this body plays out in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. Protagonist Jack Gladney's wife Babette teaches a course on posture at a local church basement, and to his surprise, one of these courses is being televised on a local cable station. Her image is cast into the unearthly realm of "Waves and radiation. Something leaked through the mesh. She was shining a light on us, she was coming into being...as the electronic dots swarmed. We were being shot through with Babette. Her image was projected on our bodies, swam in us and through us. Babette of electrons and photons, of whatever forces produced the gray light we took to be her face" (105). Even though her body *qua* material object is physically far away, it is bursting energy into the air, and this energy is channeling through technology. As if echoing F.W. Myers' and Albert Hofmann's "transmission thesis," which they unveiled the same year in which DeLillo was writing *White Noise*, Gladney asks: "Was this her spirit, her secret self, some two-dimensional facsimile released by the power of technology, set free to glide through wavebands, through energy levels, pausing to say good-bye to us from the fluorescent screen?" (104).

Indeed, my writers' representations of the open body reverberate with an entire field of literary production that conceptualizes the body in this manner. Babette's open and flowing being is strikingly similar to what Esalen luminary George Leonard conceptualized in his novel *The Silent Pulse* (1978), in which he imagines that modern technology will someday enable us to detect the vibrational "pulse" or "silent pulse of perfect rhythm" of the human that is in tune with the universe (Kripal 217); for, in this literature, at the core of the body is not solidity but only the dance of atoms and energy. "Isn't it all a question," DeLillo's *White Noise* similarly asks, "of brain chemistry, signals going back and forth, electrical energy in the cortex?" "The deeper we delve into the

nature of things, the looser our structure may seem to become” (81-82). Again repeating the turn toward Buddhist and Tantric mysticisms I discuss above, Jack Gladney repeats a mantra, repeats it over and over again, and this inducts him into an experience in which his inner “electrical energy” leaks into the atmosphere around him as he loses his sense of his body as his ground of being. The original working name of DeLillo’s novel was *American Book of the Dead*—a direct reference to the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and its Buddhist articulation of the self as constituted in energy that manifests itself across sequential lifetimes. The novel carries Gladney from a strictly secular understanding of the world into a world arrayed with similar mystical phenomena as the Esalen writers were busy imagining in the 1960s and promulgating through their own literature. Gladney undergoes an unselfing that ends in the dispersal outward of the body’s energies, an encounter of himself as “Waves, rays, coherent beams” in which “I saw things new.” “I knew for the first time what rain really was. I knew what wet was. I understood the neurochemistry of my brain, the meaning of dreams...Great stuff everywhere, racing through the room, racing slowly” (308-309).

Not only Don DeLillo, but Charles Johnson, Toni Morrison, and Tony Kushner, are each in individual ways conceptualizing a body whose aliveness is bound up with that of both the outer world and the human other. Their representations speak out of and back into discourses of the mystical body alive in American spiritualist counterculture, which found their first germination in Walt Whitman. (Even Toni Morrison’s representations in *Paradise*, while drawing from the African-American Christianity of her childhood, finesses this both with the Brazilian possession religion Candomble and, in true Whitmanesque fashion, a Gnosticism indexed upon the Nag Hammadi library of Gnostic

texts.ⁱ⁾ *In toto*, this recent literature marks the evolution of the mystical American body that, according to Kripal, “begins in the 1950s, explodes in the ‘60s, develops in the ‘70s, and matures in the ‘80s and ‘90’s” (20). I would place the texts I analyze in this project, written between 1982 and 1998, directly in this line. Given their conviction, as I described earlier, that the world itself actually vibrates with this energy, we might properly then describe my authors as participating in a literary tradition that Esalen founder Michael Murphy, in 1992, called “mystical realism.” For, as I have already suggested, my texts are not thinking about psychic fragmentation in the same way that earlier-century modernists were but, instead, are illuminating the body as a materially expansive phenomenon (or epiphenomenon of the outer living world); and moreover their claims at mimesis are markedly stronger than those of a proper magic realism. A different mode of representation from magic realism, “mystical realism” purports to describe the mystical world *as it is*. We might think of Don DeLillo, Charles Johnson, Toni Morrison, and Tony Kushner as prolonging a recent American “mystical realism,” then, to the very edge of the twentieth century. We might see them, also, as writing this body to a more general audience as we move into the twenty first. Each of these authors has been notably successful in the U.S. (least so Charles Johnson). As a result, there is little that can be seen as “occult” or “countercultural” about a writer whose fiction has figured consistently in Oprah’s Book Club, as Toni Morrison’s has. Or a novel that the *New York Times* recently legitimized on the World Wide Web as one of “the single best work[s] of American fiction published in the last 25 years”ⁱⁱⁱ and which figures prominently on college syllabi, as DeLillo’s has. Or a play that saw not only commercial success but has since also been turned into an HBO mini-series, as Toni Kushner’s has.

As the open energetic body moves into the twenty-first century, it moves closer to the American mainstream.

(E)rasing the Human

And it also becomes racialized. Not only are DeLillo, Johnson, Morrison, and Kushner prolonging this American literary tradition, but, by virtue of the particular social and political agendas motivating them, they are also critiquing it. Put plainly, this countercultural tradition was nursed in the cradle of a nearly exclusively white, upper-middle class, highly educated segment of the American population. Jeffrey Kripal, who enthuses over the role of California's Esalen institute in this tradition, and whose history of it is also a heartfelt homage, asks: within this tradition, "whose body is to be enlightened?" (462), to which he responds, perhaps a little preemptively, "every body." The forms of thinking behind these body mysticisms implicitly include people of all races, classes, and genders. But certain incontrovertible realities loom over the history of this tradition in America, such as that "Colored bodies are not well represented on the [Esalen] grounds," or that "most bodies simply cannot afford an Esalen massage or a trip to Big Sur" (463), or that the spiritual leaders of this counterculture have been overwhelmingly white, educated, and male (289).

In October of 1975, *Harper's* magazine put out a critique of the human potential movement as "The New Narcissism." Here, Paul Marin indicts the new "mystagogues" as wrapped up in a "world view" "centered solely on the self and with individual survival as its sole goal" (45). He describes what he accounts for as a "deification of the self"—the body and its deific energetic—and points out that this mysticism, rather than

structuring forms of political praxis leading to social justice, swaddles its practitioners within a narcissistic worldview that eclipses the humanity of the other. “In the worship of the self,” Marin writes, “life also gives way to an abstraction” in which “The web of reciprocity and relation is broken. The world diminishes. The felt presence of the other disappears, and with it a part of our own existence” (48). There is no denying that the energy mysticisms which Marin critiques conceptualized a human interconnectivity that, in theory, took into view the presence of all sorts of others: a deep and powerful interconnectivity across all humans that, *in theory*, transcended social and economic differences. However, the problem, as Marin sees it, is that this is an interconnectivity on the level of the mystical/energetic/ontological that does not translate necessarily into a view of interconnectivity that is socio-economic, political, and material (in the Marxian sense). As Kripal concedes, “the mystical is not ethical,” necessarily (288). A more engaged understanding of this “web of interconnectivity” might include those, for instance, who harvest in unspeakably inhumane conditions the coffee and sugar we take in the mornings—a “simple act” we in America perform on a nearly daily basis that “immerses us immediately in the larger world” (56). The social and racial “narcissisms” structured by the deification of self perhaps explain the reaction spray-painted at the entrance sign of the Esalen institute in 1990: “Jive shit for rich white folk” (Kripal 400).

In much the same way, the characters I explore are landlocked within opaque structures of mind, failing, spectacularly, to recognize the equal humanity of those who suffer around them. Characters in Tony Kushner’s “Angels in America” are caught up in narratives so abstract and heady—a Hegelian Progress, an adherence to American-style democracy as tantamount to Justice, the tight-knit worldview of Mormonism—that they

fail to countenance the suffering of the character Prior, who is dying of AIDS. Also, Jack Gladney, DeLillo's protagonist, aims his gun at the novel's sole raced character in a moment of failed recognition: "What kind of name is Willy Mink?" "Did he speak with an accent?" (305). "His face was odd, concave, forehead and chin jutting" (306). Whatever he is, he is not someone Gladney can recognize as a fellow white American: "His nose was flat, his skin the color of a Planter's peanut. What is the geography of a spoon-shaped face? Was he Melanesian, Polynesian, Indonesian, Nepalese, Surinamese, Dutch-Chinese? Was he a composite?...Where was Surinam?" (307). Gladney here operates within a cognitive structure that shuts closed his capacity to envisage Willy Mink as a fellow and equal human, and this failure of recognition in part galvanizes Gladney's attempt to murder him.

This is to say, the texts I analyze in this project are also, as if in collusion with the critiques of Paul Marin, thinking about the structures of re/cognition in which a white American energy mysticism lives, moves, and has its being. How have these "mystagogues," like Gladney, been "blind" toward the racial and socioeconomic other? What forms of racial-cultural "narcissism" does this purportedly all-inclusive countercultural spiritualism structure? DeLillo, Johnson, Morrison, and Kushner together constitute both a prolongation, critique, and revision of the tradition of the open energetic body in America that Jeffrey Kripal outlines. They repeat the figure of the enlightened body, with a difference. In short, the texts in question in this project aim to represent the body as open and integrative for the express purpose of thinking through various fictive scenarios dealing with race, racial violence, and racial inclusion/exclusion. A rejoinder to the discourses carrying the open body in America since the 1960s, these texts avail

themselves of the body's open structure to imagine the transcendence of its racial particularity: to think the self across the boundaries of the raced body and thereby to conglomerate diffuse and expansive forms of selfhood *across* racial categories. The mystical becomes ethical.

Take for instance, Charles Johnson's depiction of the open body in *Oxherding Tale*, which I treat in my second chapter, "Visioning the Body Mosaic: Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*, Buddhism, and the Problem of Racial Belonging." Johnson's protagonist Andrew Hawkins, a half-black, half-white slave in the antebellum South, strives to authenticate his identity as "black" within the slave community, but this community rejects his identification and spurns him as racially impure. When Hawkins escapes from slavery and discovers how to "pass" for white, he remains equally incapable, however, of identification with white America. He consequently enters into a state of psychic dehiscence predisposing him to violence: for in the antebellum South, black and white identities hold in mutual antagonism, so that, to become "white," Andrew must painfully disavow his core African identifications; and if he ascribes contrarily to a "black" racial identification, he must painfully disavow his white identifications (along with all of the civil liberties that come with them). Johnson deals with Andrew's resulting tortured fracture by channeling the Buddhist view of *anatman* (i.e., discrete objects in the world are *samsara*, or illusion), representing Andrew's body as a living "mosaic" morphing into and out of animal/human/planetary life that he had long considered to be other. Hawkins looks upon the body of the phantasmic Soulcatcher, there to find that his

intricately woven brown tattoos presented...an impossible flesh tapestry of a thousand individualities no longer static, mere drawings, but if you looked at them long enough, bodies moving like Lilliputians over the surface of his skin.... [E]ven the tiniest of

these thrashing within the body mosaic was, clearly, a society as complex as the higher forms.... [I]n this process of doubling, nothing was lost in the masquerade, the cosmic costume ball, where behind every different mask at the party—behind snout beak nose and blossom—the selfsame face was uncovered at midnight, and this was my father appearing briefly in the dead boy Moon as he gave Flo Hatfield [Andrew’s nymphomaniacal former slave owner] a goodly stroke and, at the instant of convulsive orgasm, opened his mouth as wide as that of the dying steer [that the Soulcatcher] slew in his teens, was that steer, then several others, and I lost his figure in this field of energy, where the profound mystery of the One and the Many gave me back my father again and again, his love, in every being from grubworms to giant sumacs, for these too were my father and, in the final face I saw in the Soulcatcher, which shook tears from me—my own face....I was my father’s father, and he my child. (*Oxherding* 175-176)

In this astonishing imaging-forth of the relationship of living beings to one another, Andrew gazes upon an image of himself colluding with these other living beings in what appears to be a larger life-flow. The beings on the Soulcatcher’s body are on the one hand “individualities” while on the other they emerge one out of the other—body unfolding out of body—in this “process of doubling.” Andrew identifies with this image of himself as open, flowing, and additive, and now uses this ontological template as the basis for a renewed racial self-concept. This has the effect of carrying him beyond his obsessional need to identify himself, once for all, as *either* black *or* white: for he can now release his striving to pin down his racial identity once and for all, and can release himself into the perpetual flux of open integrative being. What Johnson offers here is a reorientation of the discourse of the open body toward the particular concerns and problematics of race in late twentieth-century America. For Hawkins’ discovery of his body as open and integrative has the effect of healing the psychic fracture resulting from his failed racial identifications, empowering him to see himself as more capacious and expansive, on a metaphysical level, than either “black” or “white” racial designations can each encompass on their own. As if in response to Marin’s indictment of an American

mysticism that lacks a vision of social justice, what Johnson offers is a *fin-de-siecle* literary re-instantiation of the energetic body serviceable to contemporary discourses on racial politics and identity.

In this way, the writers I deal with in this project reposition discourses of the American open body to confront issues of social justice and racial equality. In light of the larger critiques dealt to that tradition—critiques of its body as white, upper-class, and male—we might read DeLillo, Johnson, Morrison, and Kushner as breaking these discourses out of their social and ethical “narcissisms”: out upon a vision of interconnectivity not merely ontological but social: a web of *socioeconomic*, *political*, and *inter-racial* reciprocity. What we have here are not bodies opening upon colorless metaphysical space but rather interconnecting, in social space, through and beyond the racial/ideological/religious differences that concretely alienate them. The open body explodes categories of domination.

Discourses of Violence

What all four writers, from Charles Johnson to Tony Kushner, meditate upon in their writing is the power of racial identification to divide, to produce an other, a not-me, who then subsequently becomes the object of one’s aggressivity. All of the texts at hand represent race as premised upon a differential structure in which accession to a particular identification structures an oppositionality. The energetic-material continuities metaphysically uniting humans are hereby subsumed into a logic of difference. As Foucault describes concerning the state’s production of race in the nineteenth century, “*Telle est la premier fonction du racism: fragmenter, faire des cesures a l’interieur de ce*

continuum *biologique auquel s'adresse le pouvoir*" (*La Naissance du Racism* 53)

("Such is the primary function of racism: to fragment, to create rifts in the interior of this biological continuum to which power addresses itself" [translation mine]). This produces the racial "Us," whom the state functions to care for, and the racial "They," whom the state omits from its purview of care, allowing it to die. Race functions to divide a comprehensive "biological continuum" into fragments, "*selon le principe que la mort des autres c'est le renforcement biologique de soi-meme en tant que l'on est membre d'une race ou d'une population*" (56) ("according to the principle that the death of others is the biological reinforcement of oneself insofar as one is a member of a race or a population" [translation mine]). Race fragments humanity into "Us" and "Them," structuring a disavowal of the fundamental "biological continuum" uniting humans. While Foucault thinks about the dynamic of the production of the racial self on national terms, Diana Fuss ruminates over the power of particularist identity, here sexual identity, to structure a form of difference that ends in a more forceful—inimical—disavowal:

To the extent that the denotation of any term is always dependent on what is exterior to it (heterosexuality, for example, typically defines itself in critical opposition to that which it is not: homosexuality), the inside/outside polarity is an indispensable model for helping us to understand the complicated workings of semiosis. Inside/outside functions as the very figure for signification and the mechanisms of meaning production.... The homo in relation to the hetero...operates as an indispensable interior exclusion—an outside which is inside interiority making the articulation of the latter possible, a transgression of the border which is necessary to constitute the border as such. (2-3)

In this structure, what Jacques Derrida calls the "freeplay" of signifiers is brought to arrest under the sign of a central hegemonic identity—here heterosexuality—which constitutes and reconstitutes itself obsessively as a space of semiological purity. This

purity comes about through the “indispensable interior exclusion” of “contaminated and expurgated insides” (3): a forcing outward of constitutive identifications that results in what Judith Butler calls “gender melancholia”—a disavowal of the human sameness that exists through and beyond the “inside/outside” monolith of sexual identity (Butler 198). “Identity,” as Vicky Kirby says in her discussion of structuralist theory, “is always divided from itself, constituted from a difference within (and between) itself; a difference that at the same time determines its difference from another, supposedly outside itself” (30). This structuration works in the very same way with regard to race: the consolidation of an identity around a particular race puts in operation a set of mandatory racial-identificational renunciations, the production of the racial self through a renunciation of the racial other that results in what David Eng aptly calls “racial melancholia.” In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Franz Fanon describes the profound and painful psychic rift that ensues when, in France, a child looks up at him and shouts, “Look, a Negro!”: “What else could it be for me but an amputation,” he mourns, “an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood? But I did not want this revision, this thematization. All I wanted was to be a man among other men” [110]. In similar manner, in Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale*, Andrew, who is racially mixed, cannot identify as both black and white—in the antebellum South he must choose one—and this results in a melancholic split. This turns Andrew in Johnson’s novel, as it did Fanon in France, both anxiously self-hating as well as hostile toward the blacks and whites with whom he fails to identify.

In *White Noise*, *Oxherding Tale*, *Paradise*, and “Angels in America,” this disavowal of a shared human ontology under the particularizing pressure of race results

in a psychic dehiscence that generates violence. It is in this way that Jack Gladney targets Willy Mink as an object of murderous violence; that Andrew Hawkins' efforts to "pass" for white become psychically unendurable, giving him thoughts as much of ending his life as of burning down a peaceful white family's home. It is under these same pressures that the town of Ruby, in Toni Morrison's novel, unleashes a violent massacre upon a group of woman who do not conform to the town's strict racial and religious identitarian strictures; and that Prior's friends, in "Angels in America," are too blindly committed to their own political-identitarian commitments to be able to admit Prior, who is dying of AIDS, within their purview of ethical caretaking. In each of these narratives, the particularizing power and exclusivist structure of a social identity—first and foremost race, but also gender, politics, and religion—either directly motivates violence or implicitly structures it by denying crucial life-giving care to those who need it.

How then to "deconstruct" race? How then to think through and beyond its power to alienate living beings, to structure forms of cognition that are narcissistic, and to enclose them within identities that exclude, repel, disavow, destroy? How then to conceptualize identities that trespasses or transcend these identitarian categories? On one level, we could say that the rise of poststructuralism in the middle of the twentieth century mobilized attempts to deconstruct such identities as contingent social constructs—the socializing effect, as Louis Althusser might say, of the state ideological apparatus. However, as Terry Eagleton points out, the overall *élan* of these attempts, as they have played out within recent decades in the West, has been committedly anti-foundationalist; with the exception of efforts within eco-criticism to think identity in terms of broader matrices of biological symbiosis, much of the academic criticism of the

past 60 or so years has focused generally on deconstructing contingent social identities while resisting new foundationalist or essentialist frameworks for thinking/writing/speaking the human. While Eagleton's attempts at positing such a foundation/essence in biology may be as yet nascent, not yet useful, he does lay out a similar set of concerns as the ones that haunt the writers I examine in this project. If there is a way to think through and beyond the confines of racial identity, without relapsing once again into foundationalist hegemonies, the open integrative body, my writers want to contend, might be a way to go. This open body might better facilitate the move into thinking "post-white America"ⁱⁱⁱ in the twenty-first century while avoiding both the violent hegemonies of Western humanism^{iv} *and* the violent nihilisms of the post-humanist theory that has more recently contested it.

For Foucault, modern Man is a product of pure discourse, and in the act of the deconstruction of that discourse we "can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (387). My writers supplement this erasure with a vision of expansion that translates into broader trans-racial coordinates of identification. As I show in chapter one, this expansion empowers Jack Gladney to envision himself as porous and participatory, flowing across the world and others; this experience "awakens" him to his interconnectivity with Willy Mink, the novel's sole non-white character whom Gladney has shot and wounded, motivating him to make reparations for his violence. In chapter two, I argue that this expansion empowers Andrew Hawkins to understand his embodied being as a living "mosaic" that morphs into and out of animal/human/planetary life that he had long considered to be other—through and beyond such racial categories as "black" and "white." This heals his psychic rift, pacifying his violent affects, enabling

him to see himself as intrinsically beyond race. Shifting my discussion to Tony Kushner's play "Angels in America" in chapter three, I show how this ontological expansion fashions for the AIDS patient Prior a community of healing through and beyond the racial, political, and religious grand narratives that only exclude him from much-needed circuits of care. Closing my study with Toni Morrison's *Paradise* in chapter four, I show how this expansion enables the multi-racial women at the Convent to confront the "demons" that haunt them by "stepping into" one another's inner psychic landscapes, and, there, to battle these demons with and on behalf of one another. What all of these discussions foreground is a form of *mystical deconstruction*, at play in recent American literature, that leads us not yet again into the anti-essentialisms of much poststructural thought, but rather toward what Prior calls "More Life": deeply and expansively "human" forms of interconnectivity that lead to healing, reconciliation, and caretaking.

"Kinda Subversive, Kinda Hegemonic"

To be sure, I celebrate these texts and their discursive project. For on the one hand, the metaphysical and ethical vision they propose is one that is, I believe, of incredible imaginative and conceptual resource to the ways in which we think, write, and speak not only personal identity but, more pressingly, racial belonging in twenty-first century America. However, while my project is on the one hand a celebration of the literary vision these texts offer, the final upshot of my project lurches toward a critique. I do not want to discuss these texts without paying attention to the ways in which each sets up a problematic ambivalence between its effort to *think* this inclusivity and the ways in which

it concretely performs the latter's representation. That is to say, the texts strive toward a horizon of radical inclusivity through the representational technology of the open body, but then ultimately retract from this horizon, relapsing back into similar racial hegemonies from the ones from which they are so anxious to escape. It could be argued that *White Noise*, for instance, continues a longer narrative tradition in which white characters extract personal enlightenment from the raced body, perpetuating in ways the "narcissisms" that Paul Marin invokes. In *Oxherding Tale* Charles Johnson uses representations of "transcendent racelessness" ultimately to privilege, I argue, white American identifications; Andrew Hawkins finally disavows his black identity and family's African history on the grounds that, because he exists intrinsically beyond race, he loses nothing in assuming the white persona "William Harris." I argue, against Johnson, that he loses far too much. Finally, Eve Sedgwick seems to have captured the problematic politics of "Angels in America" with her designation of it as "kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic" (Savran 32). In my own reading, the community of care that forms around Prior at the end of the play is ostensibly integrative of characters with conflicting identifications; however, I show, this little congregation is itself structured around the "indispensible interior exclusion" of its own "contaminated and expurgated insides": characters, such as one woman's son, whose identifications and politics remain dissident and therefore unfit for inclusion. With the exception, perhaps, of Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, these texts in different ways re-enclose the radically inclusive potential of the open body within persisting hegemonies.

Again, I think this critique should play out alongside my celebration, for it is my argument that these texts are all *striving*—noteworthy—toward a horizon of inclusivity

through the expansion of the body. However, hegemonic pressures largely outside of the individual writer press downward upon these novels and this play—downward upon the exercise of literary fabrication. For instance, much has been written about the novel as a literary form and its rise in tandem with the bourgeois individual. As Ian Watt and others have shown, the historical rise of the novel form, far from being a technology of subjective diffusion, is in fact indissociable from the modern consolidation of individual consciousness. Nancy Armstrong, among others, have shown that the novel form is implicated in the formation of a consciousness that is not only punctual but moreover gendered. And neither is theater free from its own hegemonic pressures. Contemporary playwrights such as Tony Kushner, as David Savran has pointed out, undertake the process of dramaturgical creation in the full knowledge that American theatergoing audiences have been in steady decline recently and that, if a play is going to sell tickets, it must resonate with certain popular sensibilities that will have been shaped, inexorably, by prevailing cultural hegemonies. It is arguable to what extent Kushner's play would have seen such popular Broadway success, let alone have been released as an HBO mini-series, if it had not in some way remained thus complicit. Indeed, as I write this, New York City's Signature Theater Company is preparing to revive the play under Michael Grief's direction in the fall of 2010 (Healy): it is not going anywhere, and continues to resonate culturally.

In this project, I want to exercise a critical alertness that would enable me to circumscribe my celebration of these texts and to critique the ways in which they fall short of what Kushner calls "the hard law of love"; and yet, I want simultaneously to circumscribe this circumscription by attributing the troubled politics of these texts to the

larger material forces at play: to the invisible hand of the theater markets, to the epistemological constraints intrinsic to the novel form itself, or to the broader forms of cultural “narcissism” from which certain writers, like DeLillo, are striving, if only feebly and with partial success, to think beyond. Perhaps the writer who negotiates these pressures best is, in my estimation, Toni Morrison. In her novel *Paradise*, she makes no pretenses of having arrived upon a utopia in which everyone, of all races and creeds, can mesh together in perfect ethico-mystical unity. She represents a group of inter-racial women living in a former convent on an Oklahoma plain who achieve this utopia for only a fleeting moment, when it is violently overrun by men of a nearby town who despise the racial impurity they represent. The utopian quality of this vision of the open body is underscored by its evanescence—its unendurability in a world in which humans recognize themselves most readily not in deep communion but in what DeLillo calls their “separate and defensible selves” (325). And yet, this moment of beatific interconnectivity *does* shimmer within the novel, if only for a moment. And even after the women’s community is gone, the mystical energy of their experience continues to seam the world of the novel. The women—their “ghosts?”—return at the end, flitting in and out of the world of humans who persist in their separate and defensible bodies. And the remaining characters, like Reverend Misner, who might otherwise cling too strongly to their racial and religious identities, learn the lesson that the women’s coming and going silently teaches: that they should hold on to their ideologies and identities, yes, but never too strongly; for humans in their plenitude are far too expansive for such restraints, and adhering to them too strongly leads only to a liquidation of ethical considerations in the face of psychic fracture and, indeed, outward violence.

Chapter One
Beyond the Subject of Death:
Don DeLillo's *White Noise* at the Limits of the Secular Body

Reflects Babette Gladney in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* (1985): "The theme of this story is my pain and my attempts to end it" (192). This pain arises from her inescapable awareness of death. It is a "sound," "you hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful." "Uniform, white" (199). Babette's husband Jack Gladney attempts to outrun his body's terminal illness, but finds instead that death "sweeps over me.... Sometimes it insinuates itself into my mind, little by little" (141). He resists—"Not now, Death"—but medical doctors insist: "Death has entered. It is inside you" (141-2). Death scorns the human aspiration to actualize into something more substantial and enduring than brute animal mortality makes possible. And this gives way to profound psychic pain, for, in the imaginary of the novel, despite my drive to make of myself something that exceeds death, vanquishing it, I am at the end of the day nothing more than the biblical vapor that appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away. Or, as Ernest Becker rephrased it, I am "a god that shits." The characters in DeLillo's novel remain bereft of functional resources for "conceal[ing] the terrible secret of our decaying bodies" (285).

"Nothingness is staring you in the face," Jack's colleague shocks him. "Utter and permanent oblivion. You will cease to be. *To be*, Jack" (290-291). This is the existential condition of an animal being that dies without consolation or overarching purpose:

"There's something artificial about my death. It's shallow, unfulfilling. I don't belong to the earth or sky" (283).

This is less some transhistorical existential problem, in the novel's estimation, than a specifically modern one. *White Noise* locates itself within a larger discursive network that construes "Western modernity" as coming to light through the rejection of universalizing religious forms of making meaning of death—a reorientation from what Hardt and Negri call "the plane of transcendence" toward the "plane of imminence."^v For Ernest Becker, whom DeLillo references as a direct inspiration to *White Noise*, modernity brought on "the eclipse of secure communal ideologies of redemption" (193), leading to the decomposition of the "immortality ideologies" (190) previously structuring the human understanding of death in the West. These religious ideologies functioned to sublimate the human terror of death, symbolizing it in such a way as to render it livable: "Traditional religion turned the consciousness of sin [and death] into a condition for salvation; but the tortured sense of nothingness of the [modern] qualifies him now only for miserable extinction, for merciful release from lonely death. It is all right to be nothing vis-à-vis God, who alone can make it right in His unknown ways; it is another thing to be nothing to oneself, who is nothing" (197). According to this dominant modern-scientific discourse, the fantasy of God, pleasant as it may be, leads only to the opiate songs of a stupefied mass ("O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" [*King James Bible* 1 Cor. 15:55]). The modern thinker faces the secular world with unclouded scientific clarity: with what Charles Taylor calls the "heroism of disbelief" (Taylor 404)—an unflinching confrontation with our animal spiritless life and death: the reality that this death equals absolute ontological oblivion.

Don DeLillo cites Ernest Becker, whose account of modernity I am outlining here, as the greatest influence upon his writing of his *White Noise*, and it is evident from the

novel that reading Becker helped stimulate DeLillo's imagination surrounding the effects of a secularizing modernity upon the human psyche. The psychic pain of his characters, and their attempts to end it, could be read, on one level, as a putting-into-action of the death terror that Becker outlines. But, more specifically, it could be read as a putting-into-action of a particular, namely modern, kind of human. This is a biological animal whose aliveness is constituted in the empiricity of its internal organic activity. As represented in the novel, this internal "life" is pastored over by the medical scientist, who administers the sacrament of pharmaceutical medication, the miraculous laying-on-of-hands of the X-Ray machine. What Max Weber called the "disenchantment of the world" could be localized, then, to the human body, which, shorn of religious immortality enchantments, finds itself in this particular existential quandary. The modern-scientific "human being" suffers, vis-à-vis its pending death, in a way that previous humans, comforted by religious consolations, did not. The urgency of the entire problematic outlined here presses through the pages of the novel: "Men shout as they die, to be noticed, remembered for a second or two [as they] die suddenly...on a rainy Wednesday afternoon, feverish, a little congested in the sinuses and chest, thinking about the dry cleaning" (39).

This pain presses through the pages of the novel, in a way that dramatizes its explosive ethical ramifications on the level of race. Bereft of religious symbolic mechanisms, the novel's characters make recourse to modern culture and technology to integrate and sublimate their death-terror. And these fail them grandly. Their ensuing pain takes on aggressive manifestations: the psyche's inner resistance against death exteriorized as an outward resistance against the other: one's (bodily) death tagged

projectively onto the (body of the) other. This defense enables Jack Gladney to feel agency over his death rather than terminal subjection to it. And here we zero in on the central problem of my discussion. The final object of Gladney's projective violence is the only prominent non-white character in the novel, a dark raced sexualized foreigner—Willy Mink—who roams along the abject outskirts of white-American suburbia. In a scene depicting Gladney's violent attempt to murder him, we see the text doing work along two lines and conspicuously not along a third. Along one line, the text does work at racing Willy Mink, depicting him as non-white, bearing strange raced features—i.e., “his nose was flat, his skin the color of a Planter's peanut.” Along a second line, the text does work to construct Willy Mink as fit subject for sadistic homicidal aggression and “maximum pain.” He is a charlatan selling a sham drug that he claims can heal a person neurologically of the fear of death. He is sexually voracious, a social deviant who is screwing Gladney's wife. Gladney enters in upon his victim's dwelling, shooting him repeatedly, making him cringe and jump and dodge, “this weary pulse of a man.”

However, while racing and abjecting Mink along these two lines, along the third and most important line, the text does little apparent work to critique this racial violence. This scene's rhetorical jocularly is no less disturbing for being “postmodern” in its irony. DeLillo criticism glosses over the murder scene on the grounds that the novel's irony effectively keeps DeLillo's distant from it—*of course* he's not serious. But there is something that exceeds this irony, this jocularly, in Willy Mink's cringing bleeding body. Moreover, as Cunningham points out, critics discount this racial violence as ironic while privileging the novel as a mimesis into contemporary American life. No wonder *White Noise* abounds on American college syllabi. A display case at the famous Strand

bookstore in New York City exalts *White Noise* atop a bookstand, hailing it as an insightful representation of “contemporary American life.” As one college professor is reported to have recently told his students, “I think you’ll all enjoy our next book, *White Noise*. We’re finally going to read something about ourselves.”^{vi} And, still, the problem of Willy Mink’s bleeding dying body demands an interrogation of the cultural valuation of this book. What kind of racial ethics is being purveyed here to an American reading public by the book the *New York Times* hails as one of “the single best work[s] of American fiction published in the last 25 years”?^{vii}

Gladney’s and Mink’s death-riddled bodies are violent in a way that critiques the racial ethics of “contemporary American life” that the novel represents. This religiously desymbolized body is destined toward death, and its awareness of this boils into a problematic racial violence that is vying for attention. That is, while the novel offers no head-on critique of its racial violence, I would like to read *White Noise* as situating this violence within a larger epochal horizon—a secular modernity—and then critiquing *this* episteme as its primal cause. For this epoch of knowledge subjugates all modes of speaking and thinking the subject that range beyond bare empirical constraints: those making resource, for instance, of elements non-Western in character, of mytho-religious symbols and imagery, of things non-empirical though taken to be nonetheless *real*. Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* mourns over the hypersecularization of the material modern animal, envisaging it as a shivering, death-bound, death-driven creature. The images of Gladney facing Willy Mink, “fir[ing] three bullets into his viscera for maximum slowness, depth and intensity of pain,” tell enough of the story of how this modern body becomes, for us, an ethical problem. Written at the very end of the millennium that saw

the emergence of this empirical-material self and the institutional vehicles perpetuating it—the hospital, the modern academy, the secular state—*White Noise* demands: need this persist as the only official, dominant way of thinking/speaking/producing the human on into the new millennium?—given especially the inter-racial violence with which this construct has seethed: seethed not only on the level of theory, but in the very praxis of twentieth-century history as well? “There are times when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all” (Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* 189). If the modern subject *par excellence* is a secular one—shorn of religious meanings—then what would a *postmodern, postsecular* subject look like? Striving to imagine this, Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* first exerts a certain deconstructive pressure on this construct that Foucault calls “modern Man,” crushing him like an empty shell, allowing the crumbling pieces to reveal a form of selfhood that remains entirely unimaginable within the modern imagination. What emerges is a conceptualization of the human that integrates death, rendering it livable not only on the personal level of the psychic, but in a way that opens this human to the racial others with whom it shares the wide world.

The “Prestige and Dimension” of Modern Death

“Modern death” has a structural correlate without which it would be unthinkable. DeLillo’s novel is grappling with its most basic conceptualization as *life*, defined by *Miriam-Webster* as “the quality that distinguishes a vital and functional being from a dead body.” Death within this binary becomes, correlatively, the “permanent cessation of

all vital functions: the end of life.” Notice how this modern conceptualization of life and death structures itself around the physicality of the body, the stage on which life and death present themselves, make themselves known to human knowledge. This concept is basic common sense to modern understanding: any particular human being is living when its *body* is functioning. *White Noise*, however, seeks to parochialize this common-sense “life-and-death” by revealing the artificiality of its construction. Jack Gladney and a colleague bring this out in dialogue: “Isn’t death the boundary we need? Doesn’t it give a precious texture to life, a sense of definition?” Death gives us “knowledge...of a final line, a border or limit” (228-229). On this side of the line—the side of the vitally functioning body—lies everything we can know and talk about concerning human life. Everything else falls on the other side. This structuration foregrounds human life as the space awaiting the conquest of modern knowledge and technology, but it simultaneously problematizes death in a peculiar way. As his colleague illustrates, an approaching grizzly bear “gives you a renewed sense of yourself, a fresh awareness of self—the self in terms of a unique and horrific situation....You are lit up for your own dismemberment” (229). So dependant is the modern definition of human life upon its negation that the more sharply the negation looms the more sharply it throws life into relief. Death here becomes the existential negation that takes away everything we can speak of and know pertaining to selfhood—everything we know and are familiar with in the land of the living. This configuration *produces* “modern death” as a distress, indeed a horror, to human life (150). Death erupts from the modern dialectic “a grizzly bear, enormous, shiny brown, swaggering, dripping slime from its bared fangs,” “electrifyingly strange” (229).

But modernity offers poor resources, then, to quell death's terrors. In the novel, the modern pastors over the life of the *soma* are medical doctors, who chart out its forces and activities, its behaviors and patterns, attempting to protect the living body from death. Jack Gladney is dying from a mysterious terminal illness. He and his wife Babette seek out a gamut of medical technologies to cure their death-fear, which his illness has intensified. But medical cures fail them, redoubling their terror. They seek out the hi-tech drug Dylar, purported to interact with the fear-centers of the brain to allay their anxiety, but it only leads character Willy Mink into a state of addicted mental delirium. Doctors insert Gladney's body into sophisticated machines, but they interpret his illness as a "network of symbols" that only "make you feel like a stranger in your own dying" (142). Rather than integrating death, rendering it livable, medical science estranges death the more. The "greater the scientific advance, the more primitive the fear" (161). Modern science is, in sum, "what we invented to conceal the terrible secret of our decaying bodies" (285). Its life/death binary forecloses an assimilation of death into human life—human knowledge and technical and symbolic practice—positing death as precisely what negates these. The *life of the bios* becomes the sole terra incognita given to the modern scientific mind to conquer—and with morose consequences:

"This is the nature of modern death," Murray [Gladney's colleague] said. "It has a life independent of us. It is growing in prestige and dimension. It has a sweep it never had before. We study it objectively. We predict its appearance, trace its path in the body. We can cross-section pictures of it, tape its tremors and waves. We've never been so close to it, so familiar with its habits and attitudes. We know it intimately. But it continues to grow, to acquire breadth and scope, new outlets, new passages and means. The more we learn, the more it grows. Is this some law of physics? Every advance in knowledge and technique is matched by a new kind of death, a new strain" (150).

Modern knowledge objectifies death, distances it from life, alienates it. And despite its scientific compensatory attempts to “cross-section” death—to capture it, hold it still, and reign it in—“modern death” magnifies with monstrous “prestige and dimension.” It re-erupts in the novel as a Chernobyl-like disaster, an “airborne toxic event” infecting Gladney and countless others with the lethal chemical Nyodene D. If death is defined in negative terms—it being where life isn’t—then death, whatever “it” is, takes on its distressing psychological character as a result of the very modern aspiration to conquer it. Gladney continues to plead, “What do I do to make death less strange?” How do I go about it?”

But modern scientific knowledge can offer no livable prescription. Neither can the other aspects of modern Western culture that promise a cure, such as self-realization through consumption, fame, or personal heroism. It is important that DeLillo in his interviews points to Ernest Becker’s *Denial of Death* as an influence upon his conceptualization and writing of *White Noise* (DeCurtis 55), for Becker takes the fear of death to function as a “mainspring of human activity”—“activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man” (Becker xvii). This casts culture as a “symbolic action system,” the “codified hero system” (7) through which we seek to inscribe ourselves as something more than mortal dying bodies. Jack Gladney acts out his own illusory “*causa-sui*” (or self-causal) project at the College-on-the-Hill, where he sustains a respectable identity as director of the Hitler Studies Department, which he founded and for which he has gained worldwide renown. Gladney dons his scholarly garb knowing that “people put on a uniform and feel bigger, stronger, safer” (63). For as much in Hitler’s case as in his,

“Helpless and fearful people are drawn to magical figures, mythic figures, epic men who intimidate and darkly loom” (287). For Becker, a person avoids the despair of mortality by “building defenses; and these defenses allow him to feel a basic sense of self-worth, of meaningfulness, or power.” These defenses constitute the modern self: a self-creation needing nothing other than itself for ontological fullness and symbolic grandeur and personal power. These constructs “allow [him] to feel that he *controls* his life and death, that he really does live and act as a willful and free individual, that he has unique and self-fashioned identity, that he *is somebody*—not just a trembling accident germinated on a hothouse planet that Carlyle for all time called a ‘hall of doom’” (55). But, as Jack Gladney’s case exemplifies, the “vital lie” doesn’t work for everyone. In spite of his professional packaging,^{viii} he can’t fully erase from consciousness “the false character that follows the name around” (17). Far from “magical,” a “helpless and fearful” Jack Gladney shivers beneath the façade. *This* creature doesn’t know German, and will have to present itself at an upcoming Hitler Studies conference before cadres of other fawning Hitler scholars who revere Gladney’s vaunted persona, unaware of what lies beneath. Culturally mediated defenses fail. There’s something about Gladney’s bodily mortality that persists within consciousness, irrepressible; “you hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful.” “Uniform, white” (199). “Sometimes it sweeps over me.... Sometimes it insinuates itself into my mind, little by little. I try to talk to it. ‘Not now, Death.’” (141). But to no avail. “The theme of this story is my pain and my attempts to end it” (192). The pain is shaper than ever, but what, where, is the remedy?

“What Kind of Name is Willy Mink?”

But the stakes are even higher than existential meaning. The death terror of the modern individual spills over into the domain of the ethical as well. Gladney’s colleague Murray Siskind insists that the only way to conquer death, “Defending himself,” is—at least theoretically—to exteriorize it, project it outward (253). To kill someone else.

I believe, Jack, there are two types of people in the world. Killers and diers. Most of us are diers....[But] nothingness is staring you in the face. Utter and permanent oblivion. You will cease to be. *To be*, Jack. The dier accepts this and dies. The killer, in theory, attempts to defeat his own death by killing others. He buys time, he buys life. Watch others squirm. See the blood trickle in the dust....It’s away of controlling death. A way of gaining the ultimate upper hand. Be the killer for a change. Let someone else be the dier. Let him replace you, theoretically, in that role. You can’t die if he does. He dies, you live....Kill to live. (290-291)

Ernest Becker quotes Otto Rank in the same vein: “the death fear of the ego is lessened by the killing, the sacrifice, of the other; through the death of the other, one buys oneself free from the penalty of dying, of being killed” (99). Violence, for as much Becker as DeLillo, is a problem “result[ing] from the fusion of the biological level (animal anxiety) with the symbolic one (death fear) in the human animal” (99). That is, within this theoretical construct, violence arises from the human’s desire to transcend its mortality on the level of the symbolic by transforming itself into something—*someone*—more-than-animal. If the human being existed solely on the level of the organismic, it wouldn’t trouble itself over death (animals don’t ruminate over death but rather seem to “think” about it only at the precise moments at which it threatens). If on the other hand the human existed solely on the level of the symbolic, it would float free from bodily mortality altogether. It is, however, the clashing of the two domains—the material-

organismic and the symbolic-cultural—that implodes pain into the psyche and that then explodes outwardly into violence.

This problematic thus constitutes the animal body in violence. “Let’s examine the nature of the beast, so to speak,” says Siskind. “The male animal. Isn’t there a fund, a pool, a reservoir of potential violence in the male psyche?” (292). This echoes Gladney’s wife’s earlier ruminations on how “A male follows the path of homicidal rage. It is the biological path. The path of plain dumb blind male biology” (269).^{ix} This “death wish” emanates from a “conservative wish-fulfillment, a yearning for naïveté” (217-218)—words that echo Freud’s articulation, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, of the death instinct as a conservative wish to return to an earlier state of things, realizable only by a diffusion of instinctual tension back into a state of undifferentiated equilibrium with the totality of nature. “Freud said so” (289); the human “animal’s” yearning for return evidences itself in outward violence. It is a “homicidal rage” emanating from a constitutive “nostalgia,” continues Siskind: “The ruin is built into the creation...which shows a certain nostalgia behind the power principle....The more powerful the nostalgia, the closer you come to violence....Nostalgia is a product of dissatisfaction and rage...War is the form nostalgia takes when men are hard-pressed to say something good about their country” (258). This pressing “nostalgia” for an unknown return-to-nature turns into group “dissatisfaction,” which catalyzes an outward “rage”—a stance of “war”—toward those who lie outside of one’s “country.” This is “The path of plain dumb blind male biology.”

Perhaps unbeknownst to himself, DeLillo here theorizes the racial violence at work in his own novel. For at the end of the story, Gladney projects a frightening death-

anxiety toward the only character in the novel (with the exception of a glancing or parodic mention or two to the contrary) who lies outside of his country's dominant race: Willy Mink. He is the underground dealer of the drug Dylar, which he claims can manipulate the functioning of the brain so as to cure the fear of death. Gladney's wife, Babette, has been in consultation with him for free doses, the payment he exacts from her being unwilling sex. Willy Mink is a dark, sexually voracious figure living in a hotel room in an "area [that] was deserted, a spray-painted district of warehouses and light industry," at the seedy fringes of peaceful American suburbia (304). He is racially unplaceable to Gladney: "What kind of name is Willy Mink?" "Did he speak with an accent?" (305). He is something of a racial conundrum: "His face was odd, concave, forehead and chin jutting" (306). Whatever he is, he is not someone Gladney can recognize as a fellow American suburbanite: "His nose was flat, his skin the color of a Planter's peanut. What is the geography of a spoon-shaped face? Was he Melanesian, Polynesian, Indonesian, Nepalese, Surinamese, Dutch-Chinese? Was he a composite?...Where was Surinam?" (qtd in Cunningham 105). These strange racial features of Mink's "scooped-out face" (310) are set against Gladney's blank whiteness, as when Mink asks, "Why are you here, white man." "To buy." "You are very white, you know that?" (310). All in all, Willy Mink is dark, raced, lascivious, and has been sleeping with Gladney's wife and illegally selling a drug that does not work: and serves, therefore, as fit object for Gladney's death projection. Perfect person to kill to live, "this weary pulse of a man" (307).

"The killer, in theory, attempts to defeat his own death by killing others.... It's away of controlling death....Be the killer for a change. Let someone else be the dier. Let

him replace you, theoretically, in that role. You can't die if he does. He dies, you live....Kill to live" (290-291). Jack equips himself with a Zumwalt automatic pistol and ventures into Mink's dwellings to put Siskind's doctrine of violence into practice, putting into operation the "homicidal rage" emanating from the "plain dumb blind male biology" of his fearing body:

Here is my plan. Drive past the scene several times, park some distance from the scene, go back on foot, locate Mr. Grey under his real name or alias, shoot him three times in the viscera for maximum pain, clear the weapon of prints, place the weapon in the victim's staticky hand, find a crayon or lipstick tube and scrawl a cryptic suicide note on the full-length mirror, take the victim's supply of Dylar tablets, slip back to the car, proceed to the expressway entrance. (304)

This is "the nature of the beast," Siskind reminds us. "The male animal. Isn't there a fund, a pool, a reservoir of potential violence in the male psyche?" (292). Gladney unleashes and channels outward this "rage" to prolong "biological" life by projecting its threat—death—onto the other. So the more gruesome and pathetic Mink's suffering, the fuller the assuaging of Gladney's death anxiety. That's why Gladney repeats over and over to himself to "reduce him to trembling," to "fire three bullets into his viscera for maximum slowness, depth and intensity of pain" (311), "for maximum visceral agony" (309). There's more than just catharsis at work here; this act of murder will be Gladney's personal redemption from death. In this way, Gladney moves closer to the final moment in which he pulls the trigger, which he experiences as a deeply aesthetic moment, one verging, even, on mystical transcendence:

I fired the gun....The sound snowballed in the white room, adding on reflected waves. I watched blood squirt from the victim's midsection. A delicate arc. I marveled at the rich color, sensed the color-causing action of nonnucleated cells. The flow diminished to a

trickle, spread across the tile floor. I saw beyond words. I knew what red was, saw it in terms of dominant wavelength, luminance, purity. Mink's pain was beautiful, intense.

Willie Mink, I emphasize, is the only prominent non-white character in the novel. There are other non-whites, but, as John Cunningham spends pages describing in painstaking (painful) detail, references to them are merely "disseminated throughout the Gladneys' landscape as a kind of 'white noise'" (102). Cunningham does vigorous work to analyze passages no less disturbing than the ones I cite above, textual moments that at best reduce the novel's raced characters to an amusing "sideshow," and at worst regard them with outright hostility and scorn (95-110).

This is a form of racial violence—both a perceptual violence, as well as a blatantly physical violence—that goes uninterrogated within wider American critical circles, which tend heartily to acclaim the novel as a contemporary literary accomplishment. Such as the *New York Times*, which hails *White Noise* as one of "the single best work[s] of American fiction published in the last 25 years"?^x And the almost unanimous reception of this novel within critical circles as representative of "our" contemporary American experience—from Lentricchia's claim that *White Noise* represents "universal" contemporary American experience, to Osteen's claim that it represents even a deeper, anthropological, need for spiritual meaning in this consumerist, hyper-technological American milieu.

What do we make of all this? It is one thing to accept Siskind's argument that our "plain dumb blind" "animal" constitution seethes with a certain "rage"—this is a certain biological argument that can serve as a beginning thesis for larger discussions on group behavior and ethics. But it is a separate matter altogether to use this thesis as a pretext

for racial violence—violence poured out on a person who becomes fit object for it because “his nose was flat, his skin the color of a Planter’s peanut.”

The Body of Death

Critics such as John Cunningham read DeLillo as being locked into a structure of perception that takes whites to be regular humans and regular humans to be whites, while regarding non-whites as lying outside of this field normativity. Cunningham argues DeLillo to be almost blissfully ignorant of his malignant racial representations. However, whatever its success in doing so, I discern in DeLillo’s novel an effort to think through and beyond the racial violence it represents. It is trying to think, more precisely, through and beyond the animal body, the theoretical “beast” that serves as originary ground for the violence represented in Gladney’s murder attempt. As Siskind says, this body seethes with a “homicidal rage,” boiling out of a deeper, psychosomatic “fund, a pool, a reservoir of potential violence” (292). “It is the biological path. The path of plain dumb blind male biology” (269).^{xi}

I would argue that DeLillo is putting this body in the mouth of his character Murray Siskind in order to target it for the novel’s interrogation and deconstruction. If Gladney acts out an ethically problematic racial violence that goes otherwise uncritiqued, the novel itself digs into the primary ground from which it springs: the scientifically determined biological body. Reading Becker *Denial of Death*, DeLillo learned about a human animated by a single overwhelming instinct. It is an instinct grounded in the body that determines human activity from beginning to end. It is the instinct to live, to remain alive, to deny the inevitability of death, and to fabricate as many illusions as possible

regarding the transcendence of death and the eternalization of the self. From this arises human culture, work, romance and relationships, ideals, life pursuits: all results of the body's constitutive instinct to preserve its life. This is a body that has been naturalized into current thinking/speech by modern scientific discourse, the larger conceptual river out of which Becker's writing both streams and back into which it ultimately feeds. Is there any further point of departure from it?

To be sure, Becker got this body directly from Freud, merely revising it to subsume Freud's death drive under the totalizing force of the life drive. For Becker, then, violence does not arise out a constitutive death instinct (as it does for Freud), but out of a life instinct that can turn aggressive, even violent, toward external threats. It is this body's life drive, more problematically, that can turn even against those others who do not threaten, but who are simply weaker. For "[t]he killer, in theory, attempts to defeat his own death by killing others.... It's away of controlling death.... You can't die if he does. He dies, you live.... Kill to live" (290-291). In the near-murder scene with Willy Mink, DeLillo puts into operation a living being seeking to transcend its own mortality through the expression of violence toward someone who, raced, is weak, and also fit object for this projection. That is, DeLillo is putting into operation a body he got from Becker, who got it from Freud.

Precisely what kind of human being is this that DeLillo is putting into operation (or to use Bersani's words, testing the life-and-death possibilities of)? It is, for one, a human being determined in its deepest thoughts and every action by its constitutive corporeal instincts, as we see dramatized in the novel. This is the human as biological animal, as construed by scientific discourse across the past few centuries. Within the

scientific discourses that DeLillo is both addressing and testing, this biological entity serves as cornerstone of modern human ontology; all other aspects of the human—the psychic, the affective, the cultural—spring out of the irreducible primary ground of the *soma*.^{xii} But need this be so? Perhaps this body is too commonsensical to think twice about, and certainly this dissertation can hardly serve as venue for its reconceptualization. But pausing for a moment to bring this body into view might help appreciate more fully how DeLillo is both testing and striving, if only in frail lurches, to think outside of it.

This body is one that was constructed through modern scientific discourse. On the one hand is the hard empiricism that arose out of a modern affirmation of “the materiality of existence along the “plane of immanence” (Hardt and Negri 74).^{xiii} Across the 1600s and early 1700s, shows Ed Cohen, “the body” came to replace “the soul” as the locus of political subjectivity (“A Body Worth Having?” 5). And as Eric Schmidt observes in the early-American context, the primacy of the body arose hand-in-hand with an ocularcentric epistemology that subordinated the authority of all the other senses, audition especially, into less-reliable modes of knowing. This all results in the ontological primacy, within the modern disciplines, of the human as biological physiological entity: a being that can be seen and touched, a discrete material object in space given to modern knowledge and practice to gaze upon with the eye, to pry open with the hand (71). This is the anthropological construct that Foucault calls a “strange empirico-transcendental doublet” (318). “Modern Man” is in this sense empirical. But he is also “transcendental,” and not in the sense that his ontology or identity is grounded in the soul, God, Ideas, or anything else constituting the “transcendental apparatus” organizing premodern thought (Hardt and Negri 74-75). Rather, he is transcendental in

the sense that the empirical locus of his body instantiates the basic principles animating all biological life itself, unfathomable in its totality, transcending any one body's particularity. This speaks directly to the Beckerian body that DeLillo is putting into operation and testing. We could say that Becker's empirical observation of human biological activity leads him—and those who operate within the modern scientific episteme—to posit on the level of biological totality an irreducible instinctual principle that he calls the life drives. It is by this “transcendental presumption”—that is, the totalizing positing of an irreducible Eros—that enables Becker to make sense of the particulars of human activity. In this manner, as Foucault says, “empirical contents are given life”: It is by means of this “empirico-transcendental doublet” that

an attempt is made to make the man of nature...serve as the foundation of his own finitude. In this Fold, the transcendental function is doubled over so that it covers with its dominating network the inert, grey space of empiricity; inversely, empirical contents are given life, gradually pull themselves upright, and are immediately subsumed in a discourse which carries their transcendental presumption into the distance. (*The Order of Things* 341)

Specifically within the context of the Beckerian biological animal that DeLillo is putting into operation, we find that the empirical organism is the privileged site for understanding all of nature as a field animated by drives toward self-perpetuation: what Becker calls, after Freud, Eros. Through direct empirical observation of this organism, modern thought such as Becker's and Freud's seeks to cast knowledge into the transcendent totalizing distance, abstracting it as Nature itself. And the body becomes the vaunted gateway.

R.C. Lewontin recounts an intriguing variant of this trend in modern genetics. Geneticists attribute the structure of the social world as a whole to infinitesimal genomes

buried in the materiality of the body. They “regard the gene as determining the individual, and the individual as determining society,” so that it is through “our genes [that] we know everything that is worth knowing about us” (51). But this entire proposition comes with a crucial caveat: that it is the geneticist alone that can plumb these mysteries buried in the depths of the body. To use Foucault’s words, within this epistemic arrangement, “empirical contents are given life” and the visible body achieves its modern apotheosis as gateway to all life, biological *and* social. If the premodern was characterized by the predominance of the Divine as guarantor for human knowledge, then the modern displaces one church’s credo for another: “And so we find philosophy falling asleep once more in the hollow of this Fold; this time not the sleep of Dogmatism, but that of Anthropology. All empirical knowledge, provided it concerns man, can serve as a possible philosophical field in which the foundation of knowledge, the definition of its limits, and, in the end, the truth of all truth must be discoverable” (*The Order of Things* 341). Far from being the absolute ground zero of human ontology—what we were before we became anything else, what we eternally all go back to—we find that the category of the empirical body is nothing more than the necessary correlate of a rather arbitrary, and recent, mode of articulating human being.^{xiv}

If, to use Leo Bersani’s words again, we read Jack Gladney’s violent outpour onto Willy Mink as the novel’s *testing* of the racial-ethical potentiality of the modern body, our verdict on it should not be affirming; its potential on the level of racial ethics is bleak. “Kill to live.” Gladney’s attempted murder spectacularizes—disturbingly—this body’s ethical disposition. If this is so, then we can read Gladney’s violence as a vehicle for critique of the body in question. For to use Ed Cohen’s words, it is not “A Body Worth

Having.” It is a killing machine. In this manner, the murder scene puts into operation what Pierre Bayard would call a “*détheorization*”—the literary dramatization of elements of a given theoretical system “pour en montrer les déficiences ponctuelles” (in order to demonstrate their precise deficiencies) (146). The murder scene tests and contests the ethical/existential limits of this body, asking whether Freud/Becker’s life drives need to be taken as part of the body’s deep constitution to begin with. “There are times when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all” (Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* 189). Interrogating along these lines, Žižek wonders of the contemporary technological etherealization of the body does not offer a lesson worth heeding: that there never was an actual body directly accessible to thought. For “the ultimate lesson of cyberspace is [a] radical one: not only do we lose our immediate material body, but we learn that there *never was* such a body—our bodily self-experience was always-already that of an imaginary constituted entity” (55). Hence, “is not the Freudian eroticized body, sustained by libido, organized around erogenous zones, precisely the non-animalistic, non-biological body” proposed in modern scientific discourse (55)? So what if the human’s animating life drives are not bound up in the materiality of the body? What if this deeper animating energetic is in fact dissociable from the body and that which makes us who we are lies beyond this thing—that we call body—that lends itself so easily to empirical observation?

Jack Gladney assumes his Zumwalt automatic and ventures into the seedy fringes of town, there to shoot Willy Mink’s body dead: never imagining what will become of his own.

Waves and Radiation

The climactic murder scene of *White Noise* detheorizes the empirical animal body on different levels. 1) It puts it under erasure as a solid skin-encapsulated object that “contains” (interiorizes) all the contents—like the life drives—constituting the human. The scene blurs the boundaries of the body, releasing into the outer ontic atmosphere what in the biological body lies buried in its material fabric. This figures what McHale would call a representation of “ontological opening” along corporeal lines. 2) It puts concomitantly under erasure the scientifically determined, corporeally embedded life-drives that Becker theorizes and that DeLillo puts into operation in the novel: once these “life” drives are unlocked from the body, the body loses its motivation for violence, and lurches toward a more ethical disposition. While the success of the imaginative effort is up for question (I’ll be dealing with it in my conclusion), the effort itself offers a conceptual framework for imaging an alternative body to the one DeLillo inherits from Becker, the one we inherit from the modern project in which we think and perceive ourselves and the world.

Gladney focuses his inner thanotic energy upon his pending victim by putting into play certain mantric verbal practices. First, Gladney maps out his plan and reiterates it: “Here is my plan. Drive past the scene several times, park some distance from the scene, go back on foot, locate Mr. Gray under his real name or his alias [Willy Mink], shoot him three times in the viscera for maximum pain, clear the footprints....walk home in the rain and fog” (304). In Buddhist practice, the repetition of the mantra releases the mind from its containment in an illusory world of discrete objects.^{xv} Reminiscent of this practice, Gladney repeats his plan over and over, lapsing into a sort hypnotic mental detachment.

“I advanced in consciousness. I watched myself take each separate step. With each separate step, I became aware of processes, components, things related to other things. Water fell to earth in drops. I saw things new” (304). The mantra defuses Gladney’s thanotic death-fear, desublimates outward in the form of violence as he approaches Mink, gun raised. He begins to lose himself in its ebb and flow. It carries him aloft into a different consciousness of the world around him. Gladney’s capacity for vision and audition are carried beyond the palpable limits of the empirical world. “I sensed I was a part of networks of structures and channels. I knew the precise nature of events. I was moving closer to things in their actual state as I approached a violence, a smashing intensity. Water fell in drops, surfaces gleamed” (305). The sight of the eye gives way to a semi-transcendent visuality, a sight as much sensory as supersensory. Most Buddhist sects take the world of empirical material reality to be the effect of random neural activity inherently non-objective in structure;^{xvi} Gladney “sensed the molecules active in my brain, moving along neural pathways” (306). An illusory objectivity unravels into its sparse neural threads, undermining the epistemological primacy of physical vision. Concrete vision also gives way to dispersed audition: “I heard a noise, faint, monotonous, white” (306). “Auditory scraps, tatters, whirling specks. A heightened reality. A denseness that was also a transparency. Surfaces gleamed. Water struck the roof in spherical masses, globules, splashing drams. Close to violence, close to death” (307). He begins to see beyond the limits of the physical eyes, hear beyond sensory acoustic data, perceiving a level of reality foreclosed to empirical sensuousness.

The mantric repetitions, this intensification of thanotic energy, moves him “Close to death, close to the slam of metal projectiles on flesh, the visceral jolt”: the thanotos

unleashed from his body carries his perception beyond the limits of his physical sensorium, out to where “The air was rich in extrasensory material. Nearer to death, nearer to second sight. A smashing intensity.” “Waves, rays, coherent beams. I saw things new.” Approaching Willy Mink, pointing the gun, Gladney “continued to advance in consciousness. Things glowed, a secret life arising out of them. Water struck the roof in elongated orbs, splashing drams. I knew for the first time what rain really was. I knew what wet was. I understood the neurochemistry of my brain, the meaning of dreams...Great stuff everywhere, racing through the room, racing slowly. A richness, a density” (308-309). His enclosure in empirical bodily perception opens, freeing him to register data in the surrounding atmosphere normally barred from human awareness. In this remarkable scene, the expansion of perception undermines the body as exclusive locus for knowledge.

This scene also decenters human ontology from the body. The above images reference an entire catalogue of such images at play throughout the novel, in which human ontos is released from the body, freed to radiate into the outer atmosphere as disembodied psychic energy. Gladney’s wife Babette teaches a course on posture at a local church basement. To Jack’s surprise, one of these courses is being televised on a local cable station. At first, Babette’s image is unrecognizable to him, cast into an unearthly realm of “Waves and radiation. Something leaked through the mesh. She was shining a light on us, she was coming into being...as the electronic dots swarmed. We were being shot through with Babette. Her image was projected on our bodies, swam in us and through us. Babette of electrons and photons, of whatever forces produced the gray light we took to be her face” (105). Gladney senses something more-than-material

in these visual data. Modern empirical knowledge would take his perceptions to be non(-)sense, self-assured that the television is emanating waves and radiation constitutively distinct from Babette herself—meaning her material body, which is miles away in a church basement. Modern knowledge acknowledges such foundational differences between representation and reality, signifier and signified. But Gladney asks: “Was this her spirit, her secret self, some two-dimensional facsimile released by the power of technology, set free to glide through wavebands, through energy levels, pausing to say good-bye to us from the fluorescent screen?” (104). The television is in some mysterious way channeling *Babette herself*: something of her ontos not simply vehiculated through television transmission but emanating *as* televisual transmission. “I tried to tell myself it was only television—whatever that was, however it worked—and not some journey out of life or death, not some mysterious separation” (105). To be sure, the novel has been questioning the unity of the subject all along: “Isn’t it all a question,” asks Gladney’s son Heinrich, “of brain chemistry, signals going back and forth, electrical energy in the cortex?” Isn’t the vaunted ego really just “neurons firing,” the “self” merely “an accidental flash in the medulla” (45). “The deeper we delve into the nature of things, the looser our structure may seem to become” (81-82). Within the terrain of this deconstructed subjectivity, it makes perfect sense that mental-energetic flashes of Babette would “leak through the mesh” as she “com[es] into being...as the electronic dots swarmed.” “We were being shot through with Babette”—dispersed shards of her psychic ontos flashing across space. In a manner that exceeds empirical comprehension, rational cognition, and scientific representation, Babette’s animating ontos is channeling

beyond her body as part of an entire world shot through with human “waves and radiation.”

For indeed, the novel defines these waves and radiation as “*psychic data*” (36-37, 51). This energy seems to radiate through/from a realm “Sealed-off, timeless, self-contained, self-referring” (51), but it is not ontologically de-natured from the human, not what Brian McHale would call heterocosmic, or belonging to a world separate from our own as humans (3-12). These are *human* waves and radiation: a form of human life vibing just beyond bodily-empirical perception. Siskind gives Gladney a lesson on Lao Tse’s thought regarding the living presence of the dead: “The power of the dead is that we think they see us all time. The dead have a presence. Is there a level of energy composed solely of the dead? They are also in the ground, of course, asleep and crumbling” (98). Notice the decentering of human ontos from corporeality, its persisting presence apart from the body buried in the ground. This is not a doctrine of Christian souls, ghosts reft from the body but nevertheless retaining coherent identity. “The dead” here become “a level of energy” composed of disembodied dispersed “*psychic data*” released into the surrounding ontic atmosphere: “Death is in the air...It is liberating suppressed material” (150). Continues Siskind: “Dying is a quality of the air. It’s everywhere and nowhere” (38). The dead are not really “dead” then, in the empirical sense; they retain the psychic animation that once operated in/out of/around their vitally functioning bodies. The dead persist as imminent psychic life teeming just beyond the epistemological limits of empirical perception. As Siskind concludes, “There is no difference between the quick and the dead. They are one channel of vitality” (150). So death takes on new meaning here. Modern science articulated it as the ceasing of the

vital functions of the body. And now, in a manner that rewrites the modern definition, death becomes the “material” “psychic data” constituting human being. In fact, Gladney registers Babette’s televised psychic *life* as *death*: “Was she dead, missing, disembodied?” (104).

I stated earlier my main interpretation of these representations as culminating in a detheorization of the modern-empirical body. But, critics retort, aren’t these representations mere metaphor? Or aren’t they mere examples of DeLillo’s (sometimes outrageous) irony, which for Lentricchia and others makes it nearly impossible to tell where DeLillo is really being serious in what he writes and where he is not^{xvii}? Such critical rejoinders cover over the theoretical implications of this scene with what I call a hermeneutics of de-literalization. Mark Osteen does this by rewriting the novel’s references to a surrounding “unlocatable roar” into *mere symbol* for the human yearning for meaning, satisfied by the “roar,” figuratively speaking, of consumerist culture (171). In this hermeneutic vein, the images of Babette as “waves and radiation” read as mere symbols for the popular media’s function in contemporary society as surrogate parental guide (174). In their reading of the novel’s images of “waves and radiation,” these critics replace the transparency of mimesis with the opacity of metaphor. This lets us effectively off the hook: we need not envisage these images as a rewriting of modern bodily selfhood at all. These readings characterize the general trend of magic realist criticism, which according to Wendy Faris, interprets representations of the supernatural as metaphor for realities otherwise unrepresentable (167-172). (For instance—and I would agree with Faris here—in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’ *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, we are not expected to take as real, or realistic, the images of Remedios the

Beauty walking around with butterflies fluttering all about her [Marquez 249]. These are merely intended to symbolize the libidinal anxiety generated by her spellbinding gait.)

But DeLillo, in his interviews, states point-blank that he is serious about the realm of psychic life that he represents in his novel:

In *White Noise* in particular, I tried to find a kind of radiance in dailiness. Sometimes this radiance can be almost frightening. Other times it can be almost holy or sacred.... Our sense of fear—we avoid it because we feel it so deeply, so there is an intense conflict at work.... I think it is something we all feel, something we almost never talk about, something that is almost there. I tried to relate it in *White Noise* to this other sense of transcendence that lies just beyond our touch. This extraordinary wonder of things is somehow related to the extraordinary dread, to the death fear we try to keep beneath the surface of our perceptions. (DeCurtis 52)

The novel's discursive work resists the sort of critical de-literalizations we find in Osteen, hermeneutic maneuvers absorbing the novel back into the very episteme it is struggling to break out of. Far from being sealed off into what Brian McHale would call the heterocosm of the novel's separate fictional universe, DeLillo's depictions of freeform disembodied psychic energy "I think [are] something we all feel, something we almost never talk about" but that lurks just "beneath the surface of our perceptions."

What would it mean to give full elaboration to the ideological work this text wants to perform, then, upon the modern body?—especially given that it figures as just one among an entire constellation of contemporary novels eager to do so, all taking seriously their ideological work, all resisting de-literalization? First, to summarize, the novel is seeking to amplify our modern notions of what it means to be a human. Modern science takes humans to be all inside: what constitutes a person lies inside his or her corporeal terrain, beginning at the skin and extending inward, far down into soul, psyche, nature, genetics—or whatever deep core is taken to animate the whole construct.

However, *White Noise* reconceptualizes the modern human whose skin functions as boundary between “inside” (me) and “outside” (not-me). Babette’s psychic ontos is indeed identified with her body but also channels energetically and freely through technological media in the outer world. And all throughout the story, we find characters whose mental/psychic energy casts a mystical glow, zaps across space to influence the thoughts and feelings of others—whose psychic energy courses freely in, out of, and through the body. The novel hereby undermines the body as exclusive locus for subjectivity. By doing so, it also, more importantly, performs a discursive deconstruction of *life and death* as mutually alienated modern categories. Modern death, as I showed above, is the absolute negation of human life. That is why, originally, Gladney’s perceptions of death were morbid: “you hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful.” “Uniform, white” (199). It was this distressing perception that incited thanotic anxiety, his “killing to live.” In the DeCurtis interview, DeLillo proposes that “This extraordinary [supersensory] wonder of things is somehow related to the extraordinary dread, to the death fear we try to keep beneath the surface of our perceptions.” In the near-murder scene, however, as Gladney’s physical body fades, he becomes aware that death is not a grizzly threat to life, but is itself a wider form of trans-subjective ontic *life*. Death is rewritten, via the opening of the body, into this form of outer psychic life, a gesture that collapses the two poles of the modern-scientific binary. In the final analysis, the novel deconstructs the scientific binarization of life and death, eliding the two into each other.

As I discussed above, this has important racial ethical consequences. The subject’s life in the body, rather than opposing itself to death, becomes co-ontological with it—for death now figures as a form of life. Death figures no longer as some

invincible threat to life, generating anxieties leading to violence. For to step into “death” is to step into a vast form of ontological community beyond bodily selfhood. This serves, I will argue, as the novel’s answer to the very racial violence it represents in Gladney’s attempted murder of Willy Mink. Death loses its biologically driven violent character. His violent anxiety to some extent allayed, Gladney discovers, gun in hand, something of the porousness of human being; that perhaps he and this racial conundrum, Willy Mink, are continuous in some way he failed to perceive before, united by a common ontic ground(lessness) in a field of human waves and radiation.

Willy Mink lies now on the ground, bleeding, dying from gun wounds, awaiting the novel’s *coup de grace*.

Toward a Postsecular Ethics

I looked at him. Alive. His lap a puddle of blood. With the restoration of the normal order of matter and sensation, I felt I was seeing him for the first time as a person.... Compassion, remorse, mercy....This was the key to selflessness, or so it seemed to me as I knelt over the wounded man [administering mouth-to-mouth resuscitation], exhaling rhythmically in the littered street....Get past disgust. Forgive the foul body. Embrace the whole. (313-314)

Whence this redirection of Gladney’s first-degree murder of the dark, raced Willy Mink?

The matrix of Jack Gladney’s ethical perception is altered through his experience of psychic life teeming just beyond empirical materiality. He re-inhabits this body with an altered perception of Willy Mink: “I was seeing him for the first time as a person.”

Gladney puts Siskind’s Freudian-Beckerian theory of selfhood into practice, revealing it to be unlivable on the level of both the existential (personal suffering) and the ethical (the projection of personal suffering onto someone who is racially different). The novel

places the modern body-bound subject under erasure, unraveling it open toward a universe evidencing nothing whereby to differentiate one raced individual from the other. Intermingling psychic energies to the point of undifferentiability, the novel undermines the seeming alienation of selves from other selves under the scientific regime of the empirical modern body. This detheorization gives way to what Bayard would call, then, the “*préthéorisation*”^{xviii} of a body that unites, ontologically, with that of the other. A body that, more importantly, unites with the *racial* other in such a way that undermines the raced differences separating them. Says Gladney of Willy Mink: “His face was odd, concave, forehead and chin jutting,” “What is the geography of a spoon-shaped face?” Says Willy Mink of Gladney: “You are very white, you know that?” But the climax of DeLillo’s novel makes a compelling theoretical gesture with the image, cited above, of Gladney’s body merging with Mink’s in the act of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Their blood blurs into a muddle of undifferentiability, their racial bodily differences overcome through the figure of a sort of co-corporeality. Two bodies join at the mouth, breathing in and out of each other, organisms verging toward merger: the pretheoretical figuring of a racial ethics in which “This [is] the key to selflessness: Forgive the foul body. Embrace the whole” (314). How might we read this as the novel’s attempt to think through and beyond the problematic racial violence it represents?

What the novel is trying to de-theorize, in short, is the violent ethical disposition of the modern biological body. It is important as we track this de-theorization that we keep in mind, as Foucault proposes, that modern Man is a theoretical innovation of relatively recent date, and that we “can certainly wager that man [will eventually] be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” when its utility has been served

and transcended (387). According likewise to Charles Taylor, in the West, the “localization” of human being into a discrete, physical body was not always as we imagine it to be now. Seeking to explore imaginative resources for thinking the body outside of recent scientific thought, Taylor recounts that, for Plato, the Good was imbued ontically across the entire cosmos in the form of the Ideas. The human soul was continuous with the outer cosmos as well as with the souls of others. In this mode of thought, the task of human “rationality” was to achieve “a correct vision of the order” of the “englobing” cosmic whole, to come into alignment with it (Taylor 122, 186-188). Bruno Latour similarly describes this premodern world in terms of an ontic continuity among God, nature, and man: a triunity that modern thought disarticulated into discrete objects in open, empty space. The modern project effectively severed human knowledge from this direct intuition of the outside world, separating God, man, and nature into discrete, mutually opaque objects of knowledge. To compensate, modern thought aimed then to proliferate conceptual “hybrids” to reintegrate them, to reintroduce them as somewhat mutually knowable, yet independent actants/objects in the world.

Gladney, after shooting Willy Mink, is himself shot through with “remorse” and “compassion,” and, thus moved, kneels over Mink’s bleeding dying body to administer mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. This is a powerful image that deserves more attention than I’ve seen it given in DeLillo criticism. *It represents the corporeal enmeshing of Gladney with his racial nemesis Willy Mink.* Gladney directs his forgiveness toward Mink’s dying rotting body; he not only physically embraces this image of *death* here, but puts his mouth onto it, breathes into it. His blood and Mink’s blur into a muddle of indistinguishability.

This representation of the blending of bodies serves as foundation for Gladney's new-found capacity to "Forgive the foul body," embracing its death, an act that then flourishes forth into an ethics of "compassion," "remorse," and into an "Embrace [of] the whole."

How does this closure of the distance separating the two bodies pretheorize an ethics of compassion? Adam Smith went a long way to theorize the ethics of mutually alienated bodies—the very ethics that *White Noise* is seeking to think beyond. What gets lost, ethically speaking, in this traditional view of humans as corporeally discrete and separate from one another? How does the enmeshing we see above work beyond these limitations? Smith takes the individual to be a discrete skin-encapsulated monad—a unitary being distinct and separate from other like unitary beings in the outer world. This entity begins and ends at the skin, the terrain of selfhood, "ground" of its property.^{xix} And it is this rending of one being from the other that leads to the reduction of the one man's concerns to its own estate:

The administration of the great system of the universe ... the care of the universal happiness of all rational and sensible beings, is the business of God and not of man. To man is allotted a much humbler department, but one much more suitable to the weakness of his powers, and to the narrowness of his comprehension: the care of his own happiness, of that of his family, his friends, his country. (386)

Reminiscent of Brough Mcpherson's idea of "possessive individualism"—in which the modern individual was taken to "possess" his body in much the same way that he possessed his personal property—for Adams, the individual's ethical concerns extend only so far as does the terrain of his body and its abstraction in land, kin, and the national "body politic." What, then, is the psychological basis on which self-encapsulated self-interested individuals behave ethically toward their others? Or, in Latour's words, how

does Smith then “proliferate hybrids” across subject and object so as to reintegrate them ethically? Smith conceptualizes a psychological mirroring in which one man uses his imagination to *think with* the other man suffering apart from him. Notice his dual effort both to keep the one man—his body, his psychology, his ethical feeling—ontologically distant from the other’s, but to insist on that man’s ability, nevertheless, to think ethically across empty space:

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is on the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination, we place ourselves in his situation. (47-48)

The ethical man is stuck in his own material-sensorial body. So is the suffering man wracked across empty space. Our ethical feeling “never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person,” such that compassionate self-transcendent feelings come to realization “by the imagination only”—inside the internal perceptual world of the “impressions” rather than by direct epistemological access to the other human. The distinction being made here is between the inner sensational world animated by thoughts and feelings, and the outer objective world in which “our brother,” over there, suffers on the rack. An ontic void lies in between. Ethical feeling is sealed hermetically inside the subject. This is, in the final analysis, a solipsistic ethics of the self to the self, in which “we *place ourselves* in [the] situation” of someone else. A Latourian “hybrid” seeks here to reintegrate subject and object—sundered and isolated across empty space—through a

psychological prosthesis: something—anything—to keep these men civil toward each other as competitors in bourgeois-capitalist British civil society.

This is precisely the interiorized, alienated ethical subject that DeLillo's novel puts into operation—tests—in his novel. *White Noise* figures as part of a bevy of recent American texts seeking to articulate an ethics apart from this modern ontological divorce. These texts seem to find the space of objective alienation unlivable, indeed thanotic. So they make resource of conceptual languages operating outside of the parochialism of modern Western subject-object distinctions such as those exemplified in Adam Smith. *White Noise* in particular draws its breath from an imaginative atmosphere Tibetan-Buddhist in character, one rich with words, concepts, and images with potential to signify differently.

It is telling that one of DeLillo's working titles for the novel was *The American Book of the Dead* (LeClair 228), for Siskind makes various references to the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* in his attempt to describe death as a part of life. Whereas modern American culture remains bereft of totalizing symbolic systems to make death more livable, "Dying is an art in Tibet" (38). The main strands of Tibetan Buddhist teaching integrate death fully into the definition of life. Recall Gladney's keynote inquiry, "What do I do to make death less strange?" "How do I go about it?" Siskind, the novel's theoretician, contests despiritualized Western notions of death through recourse to Tibetan Buddhism:

Tibetans try to see death for what it is. It is the end of attachment to things. This simple truth is hard to fathom. But once we stop denying death, we can proceed calmly to die....We can do so with clear vision, without awe or terror. We don't have to cling to life artificially, or to death for that matter. We simply walk toward the sliding doors. Waves and radiation....Dying is an art in Tibet. (38)

The universe that Gladney lives in is one in which there is no need for fear, but one that is all the more riddled with this fear for its sustaining commitment to the life of the individual. So in the Buddhist “end of attachment to things” the first “thing” to go is the most precious of all in modern thought, selfhood. In terms of basic doctrine, the Buddhist self must learn to “simply walk toward the sliding doors” of death, “without awe or terror.” Modern scientific understandings take the life of the body—the *bios*—to stand in diametrical negation to its harrowing nemesis: an attacking grizzly bear that “gives you a renewed sense of yourself, a fresh awareness of self—the self in terms of a unique and horrific situation”(229). This, I discussed above, is what the novel calls “modern death.” But DeLillo’s novel, thinking in Buddhist terms, proposes that the entire network of differences structuring our dualisms—like life and death—are only constructs of the mind, illusions that produce suffering, or *duhkha*. For within this dualistic imaginary, life *produces and reinforces the power of death over the consciousness of the individual*. The individual’s franticness to sustain its own life by sustaining its individuality produces death as the negation to life. By holding on to selfhood, one holds on to death, magnifies it, intensifies its monstrosity. Obversely, as David Loy points out, “*our repression of death represses life*” (xiii). The impulse to flee death renders life joyless with fears, the neurosis of meaningless pursuits, even violent anxieties. The novel offers a Buddhist solution, which it puts into Siskind’s mouth: “Self, self, self. If death can be seen as less strange and unreferenced, your sense of self in relation to death will diminish, and so will your fear.” David Loy continues along the same lines: “Like the matter and anti-matter of quantum physics, [life and death] arise together in relation to each other, and therefore they should be able to disappear together

by collapsing back into each other” (95). The consequence of this on the level of selfhood is simple: “*The way to integrate death is to become truly dead*” (96): to allow selfhood to unravel, its individuated enclosure opening out upon a wider engulfing world.

“What do I do to make death less strange? How do I go about it?” At first the novel gives Gladney a modern answer: “Kill to live.” And this killing is articulated as a highly problematic racial violence. But then when he undertakes this effort, through some *dues ex machine* the novel reconstitutes his racial violence into an energetic that surges him toward a vision of united psyches: what were once selves—with hard defenses, lofty self-claims, and thanotic fears—dissolved into a mystical whole that unites him radically to “this weary pulse of a man.” Gladney then returns to his bodily sensorium. “I looked at him. Alive. His lap a puddle of blood. With the restoration of the normal order of matter and sensation, I felt I was seeing him for the first time as a person. The old human muddles and quirks were set flowing again”—but this time, these are directed at the raced figure once marked for violence, flowing now as “Compassion, remorse, mercy” (313). The Buddhist-inflected dissolution of this skin-bound biological individual brings Gladney to the verge of borderless ontological community in which there *is* no outsider, no racial other. In this dynamic, personal identity, like the body, extends outward to include others as extensions, or inherent parts, of the self. “This was the key to selflessness,” claims Gladney. This key understanding, or awareness, is in both the ontological openness of the “self” and its material continuity with the racial other.

This is a Buddhist-inflected intervention into the understanding of “compassion” we have inherited as Western moderns. For Gladney’s usage of the idea of “compassion” falls outside of the Smithian terms in which we are used to thinking about it. Recall that

the ethical jurisdiction of Smith's individual ends at the borders of the "self"—the self being defined as the physical body and its jurisdictional extension to include personal property. Everything roaming outside these borders, "The administration of the great system of the universe ... the care of the universal happiness of all rational and sensible beings, is the business of God and not of man." These externalities and others lie *outside* of the domain of one's selfhood and hence outside of one's ethical responsibility.

Smithian "compassion" results when one tries to imagine, inside the enclosure of one's head, how some other sufferer, across empty space, *must* be feeling. But the Buddhist concepts deployed in DeLillo's novel helps us imagine how this self-enclosed, self-interested individual could possibly open out upon those strange externalities and outsiders in a way barred by modern scientific thought. Within the Buddhist articulation of selfhood we find performed in the novel, what constitutes the self equally co-constitutes those strangers on a deep ontic level, undermining, even effacing, surface differences. Indeed, one of the driving goals of Buddhist thought and practice is to open the self-enclosed individual upon an awareness of his or her *non-individuality*, upon his or her co-extensiveness with all the other putative "individuals" and seemingly discrete objects in the world. As David Loy states, "Every... 'individual' is at the same time the effect of the whole and the cause of the whole, the totality being an infinite body of members each of which is sustaining and defining all others" (90). This leads directly to an expansion of the terrain of one's deliberate ethical concerns. This is what Gladney means when he uses the term "compassion" at the end of the novel, and captures precisely the type of intervention into modern ethical thought that the novel is daring. "To forget oneself and become nothing is to wake up and find oneself in or as a

situation—not confronted by it but one with it.” For, continues David Loy, “if one is not self-preoccupied then meaning arises naturally within that situation.” “According to Buddhism, to become enlightened is to forget one’s own suffering only to wake up in or one with a world of suffering.” This form of compassion seeks to replace the de-ontologized empiricism of Smith’s with a palpable corporeal “experience,” as Loy says of Buddhist ethics in general, “not [of] sympathy or empathy but compassion, literally ‘suffering with’” (Loy 126).

This represents a rearticulation of mystical Buddhist understandings of compassion into a contemporary American context—a radical ethical (re)vision indeed. But how does it ultimately transcend the brutal racism of which *White Noise* has been accused?

Erasing Subjects

The “other” to whom Gladney is connecting in this experience of Buddhist-inflected “compassion” is Willy Mink: a raced subject. What we ultimately might discern here is Buddhist thought brought directly to bear upon a problem within the domain of American racial ethics. The problem has a particular urgency: for *White Noise* is an American novel representing a white man attempting to kill a dark raced salacious creature, and the vast majority of our American readerly public either laughs in response—*oh it’s just irony*—or, worse, hails the novel a masterpiece of contemporary American writing. Both the novel’s representations and their broader American reception constitute a deeply disturbing phenomenon. And my reading of the novel joins together with the other dissentient readings, all of them together taking its jocular violence as symptom of a

persisting perceptual problematic within white American racial consciousness. So on the one hand, I would exhort readers of the novel to take a meta-ironical stance on the novel's irony, and to stand aloof, a little cynical, of its broad critical celebration as a mimesis of "American experience."

But on the other, I find it equally urgent—and I say this as a non-white subject myself—that we sensitize ourselves to the subtler, deeper theoretical work the novel is striving to accomplish. The ontological opening of the subject represented here offers powerful conceptual tools for thinking racial ethics in contemporary America. However, I believe the novel fails to see this racial ethics all the way through to its end in ethical practice. DeLillo lurches—strives—toward a vision of humans so thoroughly united on the level of deep ontology that their racial differences melt away like dross. It pushes toward the brink—"White Noise everywhere," "I saw thing new"—verges upon its edges, then retracts into a material immanence, the human entrapment within a body of death. At the novel's closing scene, spectators gather under a local highway overpass to gaze at a blazing sunset, a communal experience that draws their attention upward and outward to a "sky [that] takes on content, feeling, an exalted narrative life" (324). "The sky is under a spell, powerful and storied." "What is there to say? The sunset lingers and so do we" (325). In this silence, together, they experience a communal intensity that transcends any one of them, cohering all of them under the spell of an ontological sublimity—irradiating through the blazing sunset—that unites them in a way that exceeds their knowledge. But what comes of it, as DeLillo's characters once again arrive at the brink? "It is not until some time after dark has fallen, the insects screaming in the heat,

that we slowly begin to disperse, shyly, politely, car after car, *restored to our separate and defensible selves*” (325, italics mine).

Where else is there to go? The novel lurches toward radical, ontological intersubjectivity, having pushed us as far as it can possibly go within modern thought. To the brink of transcendence, but no further. We are too deeply entrenched in the materialism of Smith and our modern forefathers to cast ourselves fully beyond it—beyond the brink, to a place where self and other are *one* and their differences, racial, ideological, gendered, etc., become of no matter. All in all, Gladney is white, Willy Mink is other, their bodies touched and mingled in a moment of compassion, but they soon return to their “separate and defensible selves,” back into their dying bodies. Gladney in the hospital: “I...asked if Willy Mink would be all right. He wouldn’t, at least not for a while. But he wouldn’t die either, which gave him an edge on me” (320).

Gladney, like the novel as a whole, has gone as far as he can, which I would argue is, in the final instance, not far enough.

Chapter Two
Visioning the Body Mosaic:
Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*, Buddhism, and the Problem of Racial Belonging

"He is, in a sense, a refugee-homeless and groundless....He is alone with others who are also refugees or tourists who no solid basis for security, and nothing permanent in this world"

--Charles Johnson

"My final prayer: O my body, make of me always a man who questions!"

--Franz Fanon

The work of sustaining an identity inheres a subtle but no less pernicious form of violence. To ascribe to a particular identity is to repudiate, sometimes forcefully, anything that this identity is not. When I say that I am a "Latino male," I am saying, by implication, that I am *not* "white American," *not* "Filipino," *not* "Latina female": I distance myself from the array of identity positions lying outside of the specific one in which I articulate myself. This is so fundamental a dynamic of identity formation that we tend not to think about it—except when it goes awry. As it does for Andrew Hawkins, the main character of Charles Johnson's novel *Oxherding Tale* (1982). Andrew is a half-black, half-white slave in the antebellum South. Within this larger socio-historical context, white stands opposed to black, black stands opposed to white. As a result, Andrew is rejected equally by both racial spheres. On a plantation in South Carolina, for instance, the other slaves deny Andrew the equal status of "folks" (of being black) at the same time that they illustrate his racial dilemma: "'You ain't folks or white.'" "You fresh meat, boy" (36). Facing hostility from both blacks and whites, Andrew finds himself bereft of the resources by which to reconcile these two identities within himself. The result is a sort of living death: "The only reason I don't kill myself is because it doesn't seem worth the effort" (109).

And escaping from slavery does not help either. Even as Andrew flees the South Carolina plantation of his upbringing and learns to “pass” as white, his existence as the respectable “William Harris” only unhinges him further from a coherent identity: “My life was a patchwork of lies,” he says. “My personality whipstitched from a dozen sources” (139). The internecine conflict he experiences inside himself—these two identities at civil war—generates a violence that comes to seethe throughout his thoughts and actions. But what alternative is left him? Rejected by the white world, is Andrew to re-embrace his black social identity (the “Africa” of his father’s nostalgic adoration), returning to the lash of slavery? Returning also to the threatening eye of the other slaves who see him as “fresh meat”? The drive behind Johnson’s narrative is toward a resolution for Andrew’s dilemma, and to this end the narrative takes a journey through the very structures of identity itself. By what confluence of elements and forces does one come to understand “who” or “what” one “is”? For instance, in present-day America, the antagonisms separating black from white are different from their specific configuration in the antebellum South, such that, if Andrew were alive today, his dilemma would take on this different character as well. This observation, although obvious, suggests the extent to which Andrew’s identity—its fracture—is grounded in the racial discourses of his immediate social context. So to probe the problem of Andrew’s identity, the novel must probe the role of social discourse in the structuration of personal identity. The novel is thus rich with scenes and dialogue examining the extent to which these larger racial discourses constitute Andrew, lock him in, keep him feeling “trapped” as he does—indeed “enslaved.” On this level, the novel rehearses a familiar conversation on discourse and identity. But what fascinates me, and what I would like to discuss in the

present chapter, is the novel's speculative venture into the "I" lying behind said discourse.

Oxherding Tale is rich with references to philosophers across Western history who have grappled with this problem, that of the *cogito*; Johnson is keenly aware that this question is freighted with a long history in the West. The novel presents itself as a tiny encyclopedia on this tradition, elaborating, short of alphabetized entries, the philosophy of key modern Western figures. The novel invokes Descartes' *cogito*, his definition of personal identity as an autonomous "thinking thing" that enjoys its own integrity as consciousness.^{xx} The novel recalls for us John Locke's version of this "I," which Charles Taylor calls the "punctual self," a self with the capacity to stand apart from, outside of, itself, to look in upon itself reflectively (*Sources* 171). Citing Hume's *Treatise*, Hobbes' *Leviathan* (with an eponymous chapter name), and Cartesian consciousness, Johnson inserts his novel directly into dialogue with this larger tradition and its centuries-long elaboration of what Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen would call "the Modern Self." But it becomes clear, upon first glance at the title, that the novel will not be speaking into this tradition without recourse to ideas, images, and vocabularies lying altogether outside of it.

Johnson in his tale is seeking to reconceptualize Andrew Hawkins' sense of his personal identity, of his "I," so as to enable him to solve the problem of his internal violence: the painful tearing apart of this "I" across mutually antagonistic racial identities. So what, for Johnson, *is* this "I"? What constitutes it, defines it, makes it present? Let me start by outlining what, for Johnson, it is not. The foremost feature of the "modern self" that Johnson wants to critique—a feature which is foundational to all

of its modern-Western variants—is its localization within the bounds of the physical body. So the solution that Johnson devises pushes further outside the modern conceptual parish than we may find initially comfortable. For Johnson’s project takes its conceptual footing outside of this tradition through a simultaneously serious and playful engagement with Buddhist ideas. Accordingly, the solution the novel devises for Andrew has something to do with the de-localization of his “self” beyond the boundaries of his physical body: the expansion and ontological integration of this “self” into the living energy of the world “outside” of him. In a stunning rewriting of Lacan’s mirror stage, Andrew has his physical image reflected back to him in a near-mystical moment that enables him to see himself anew. What he sees here is far from the unified, coherent “thing” he previously thought to be contained within his body. This scene represents Andrew’s body opening outward, centrifugally, onto a larger mystical horizon of living energy. This literary representation of the Buddhist concept *anatman* (no-thing-ness) contests the “self” that under modern Western rubrics is taken to be an embodied delineable object-in-the-world. Johnson is clear in his non-fiction writing about the Buddhist underpinnings of his own thinking:

The word nirvana means “to blow out” (nir ‘out’; vana ‘blow’). In other words, when the mistaken belief in a separate “self” is extinguished like a candle’s flame, the experiential realm of suffering and illusion, *samsara*, which so often is created and conditioned by our notions and concepts about life, is replaced—as a mirage might be or the shadows in Plato’s cave—because underneath it all, *underneath it all*, is a perception of being that has always been present, like dark matter, though hitherto it was obscured by the illusion of the ego. (*Turning* 11)

In this line of thought, the human mind is under the illusion—*samsara*—that the world is filled with discrete individual people and objects, all distinct and separate from one

another: a perception of the world that, not unlike an optical illusion, belies an unplumbable ontological continuity uniting all living beings. The modern Western tradition to which Johnson speaks is the crowning achievement of such a mode of perception. But the concept of a self co-extensive with the rest of the living world challenges this tradition of thought at the same time that it functions, importantly, to enable Andrew Hawkins to resolve his painful bi-racial dilemma. For how can Andrew, such an ontologically diffuse being, ever be pigeonholed to any *one* identitarian subject position, black *or* white? “The emphasis in Buddhist teachings on letting go of the fabricated, false sense of self positions issues of race as foremost among samsaric illusions, along with the essentialist conceptions of difference that have caused so much human suffering and mischief since the eighteenth century” (*Turning* 10). In Johnson’s nonfictional writing, he states that he seeks to bring this brand of conceptualization to bear on the material racial injustices that endure in present-day America; this way of thinking, he believes, can “free one from the dualistic models of epistemology that partition experience into separate, boxlike compartments of Mind and Body, Self and Other, Matter and Spirit. [T]hese divisions, one sees, are ontologically the correlates of racial divisions found in South African apartheid and American segregation and are just as pernicious” (54). The main thrust of Johnson’s fictional and non-fictional work, then, is to think and to write what Brian McHale would call the “ontological opening” of the individual; and then, on the strength of this opening, to imagine ways to neutralize the violent mutual antagonism of such racial constructs as “black” and “white,” masking as they do the ontologically enmeshed relationship of living beings to one another, “underneath it all.”

All in all, Andrew Hawkins, “underneath it all,” is *neither* “black” nor “white”: or, we could say, *both* “black” and “white.” He is, in fact, more than what he realizes: continuous indeed with the air he breathes, the birds in the trees, the white woman he marries, even—and here Johnson’s intervention becomes almost scandalous—the slave driver who beats him. Under interrogation here are our very notions, Western and empirical, of the where the “self” ends and the “other” (the not-self) begins. And the stakes in this reconceptualization are high for Andrew: for his fractured “I” is untenable, unendurable for him, keeping him in a posture of antagonism both internally and with respect to those around him. The stakes in Johnson’s reconceptualization are equally high for the larger American social scene as well: for we continue riddled with antagonisms surrounding racial identity, politics, and belonging, a dynamic in which racial groups the more fiercely define themselves based on who they are *not*—based on whom they expunge, repudiate, sometimes even detest. Perhaps we can consider ways not to undermine these differences, but to reinforce our sense of what unifies us as living beings. All in all, Johnson’s project is not a proselytizing championing of Buddhism; we could productively read *Oxherding Tale* instead as simply proffering a conceptual resource—figured in the opening of Andrew’s body—that might enable us to think, speak, and feel the deeper continuities that make out of many a radical one: an intriguing (indeed mystical) re-imagination of the American motto *E pluribus unum*.

I will seek to mine Johnson’s Buddhist writing, primarily *Oxherding Tale*, secondarily his non-fictional work, to elaborate the contributions his ontological thinking might make both to the field of critical race studies and to larger discussions concerning racial politics in the contemporary American scene. But I will also identify the limits of

Johnson's Buddhist thinking in these respects as well, especially as regards his blithe dismissal of Andrew's black heritage as an expendable "illusion" that he may cast off in the name of spiritual enlightenment. That is, Johnson uses his Buddhist notions of an ontologically expansive and integrative self to endorse Andrew's final rejection of his black heritage and his assumption of the white identity "William Harris." Andrew, finally enlightened beyond the illusion of race, can freely let go now of his black identity. For as Johnson asserts, "one need not cling to 'positive' images [of blackness] either, for these, too, are essentially empty of meaning" (*Turning* 55). This is Johnson's final solution for Andrew. Although I find incredible resource in the concepts with which Johnson seeks to intervene into contemporary and historical conversations about race and identity, I find this final solution fiercely problematic. There is nothing illusory about the material world-historical disadvantages suffered by African-Americans and other minorities. How workable, then, is this denial of Andrew Hawkins' "compulsion" to affirm his blackness? How might we subsume racial differences under an understanding of larger interconnective identifications, while also devising a workable ethical program for living and acting in a world where race matters all too much; where race matters continue to riddle our American democratic project, intractable as ever. How might we make Johnson's figure of the ontologically open body speak to this milieu—fancies of "transcendent racelessness" aside?

Samsaric Identities: Personal Alienation

In the antebellum South that sets the stage for Andrew Hawkins' life, black and white racial identities hold in mutual antagonism to each other. In terms of racial identity, a

person is either black or white. This larger social world admits of no harmonic admixture across them. Roaming across this identitarian terrain is the irreducible datum of Andrew Hawkins' racially uncategorizable body. Given the failure of the South's social world to accommodate it, Andrew is set adrift with no particular identity to call his own, to grow into, to *become*. This condition, we will see, is an unlivable one, a place—or lack of place—that does violence to Andrew's sense-of-self, bereaving him of a workable synthetic identity that might more fully reflect his half-black, half-white physical make-up. This larger historical black-white antagonism plays out painfully in Andrew's own psychological dilemma as one who, racially mixed, can ascribe to neither identification with the exclusivity that his larger surrounding society would demand of him.

On the one side of the racial divide is his father George Hawkins, who acts as the novel's voice piece for the sort of racial militancy, symbolized in the 1960's black aesthetics movement, with which Johnson takes issue in his other writing *Turning of the Wheel*. Johnson, in his nonfiction, dismisses this black militancy as dangerously polarizing, merely reversing the us/them, good/evil structures of white American racism. In the novel, George sets his African heritage over against the white Western races. Considering himself "one of the avant-garde of the African Revolution" (22), he rejects the "white-man Devil" (24). He pleads with Andrew to commit himself likewise to "the world-historical mission of Africa:" for "You know Africa *will* rise again someday, Hawk, with her own queens and kings and a court bigger'n anythin' in Europe" (21). Accordingly, George insists on expunging from his family those vestiges of white American culture that contaminate it. The tutor at the plantation house begins, at one point, conferring his enlightened knowledge surrounding diet and nutrition upon

George's wife (Andrew's mother) Mattie, who comes to adopt his line of thinking that animals are unethical to eat. She finally removes meat from her cooking regimen. George erupts into an "explosion of violence" (23): "You want me to eat these funny lookin' roots and raw tubers, eh?" (24). Identifying these grains with the dietary regimes of "Western Civilization" (25), he exclaims, "Soybeans ain't hardly food!" (25). His wife Mattie tries to explain to him that "we" know that "we" cannot eat eggs because doing so is bad for the body's basic digestive processes. To which George retorts: "Which we you talkin' about?" "Whitefolks-*we* or blackfolks-*we*?" (25). "Walking around naked in the woods eating plants is" for "white people." Why can't Mattie just "cook like a black woman" (26)? He resents the plantation house's tutor for infecting his wife with "Too much imagination," which, "he decided, was unwholesome. And white" (23). What is at issue here for George concerns indeed more than the content of their diet; he frames it instead as an issue of the untranscendable *difference* separating "Whitefolks-*we*" from "blackfolks-*we*?" His language leaves no conceptual space for a possible hybrid "we": for any construal of identity lying outside of the fierce mutual exclusivity at play within the two opposing identities. To him, Mattie is a "black woman" simply and contradictorily behaving like a white woman: an inherent structural contradiction, like talking about going north and south at the same time.

George cannot think beyond this racial dualism. "My father kept the pain alive. He *needed* to rekindle racial horrors, revive old pains, review disappointments like a sick man fingering his sores....[H]e *chose* misery" (142). He is unrelentingly committed to this racial-categorical "grillwork—the emotional grid—through which George Hawkins sifted and sorted events, simplified a world so overrich in sense it outstripped him." He,

moreover, goes even further to claim Andrew for “the world-historical mission of Africa”:

“No matter what *anybody* tells you, ‘specially Master Polkinghorne, you Mattie’s son, and mine....[Y]ou blood. You belong with us....You wouldn’t never pass for white, would you?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“You know ain’t nothin’ as beautiful as yo own people?”

“Yessir.”

“You know Africa *will* rise again someday, Hawk, with her own queens and kings and a court bigger’n anything in Europe?”

“Yessir....I hope it will.”

“And you belong there?”

“Yessir.”

“You *could* pass,” he said, “if you wanted to. But if you did, it’d be like turnin’ your back on me and everythin’ I believes in.”

“I’d never do that.”

“Don’t,” he said. “Whatever you do, Hawk—it pushes the Race forward, or pulls us back. You know what I’ve always told you: If you fail, everything we been fightin’ for fails with you. Be y’self.”

“I will,” I said. “I promise.” (21)

George passes the burden of his own world-historical mission on to his son. This, for Andrew, figures as the burden, finally, to choose one racial identification to the extreme disidentification of the other. Even though he is half white, his father is asking him both to “Be y’self” and, contradictorily, to deny his bi-racial make-up.

Andrew’s Buddhist intuition, betrayed here and throughout his narrative, that linguistic categories such as black and white amount to empty labels, without referent, should, one would think, help him envisage the possibility of daffing these categories altogether: of finding a way to cast himself beyond their conceptual containment, to some mystically empty space beyond (Johnson has imagined this novel, after all, to be a Buddhist parable of sorts). But his father’s injunction restrains him. Andrew promises to cling to his blackness and to disavow his whiteness because, “More than anything else, I

wanted my father's approval." But, still, "No sooner than I said this [agreeing to his father's call-to-arms] I felt wrong. Concerning George's "obsession with the world-historical mission of Africa," Andrew cries out: "I didn't *want* this obligation!" (21).

He does not want this obligation partly because the larger slave community in the surrounding antebellum south will not accept him into its restrictive categories of race. Even if he wanted to "become" African, the displaced denizens of that continent would fail to recognize him as their own. When Andrew moves on to the plantation called "Leviathan" he is rejected by the slaves there for being impure, racially unidentifiable. One slave demands, "You *folks*, I say, or white people?" "'Oh folks,' I assured him. 'Definitely folks.'" The slave's retort thematizes not only Andrew's racial undefinability, but also the hostility that this generates among the slaves on the plantation: "'You ain't folks or white,' he snorted. His eyes studied me. 'You fresh meat, boy'" (36). Other slaves direct a similar hostility toward him (42), not accepting that he could be *both* black and white, but rather relegating him to a no-man's-land of racial non-identity. This turns Andrew into the object of their aggressivity, "fresh meat." Eventually Andrew feels he must "abandon what appeared to be a no-win struggle for happiness in the Black World" (70). Since he cannot fully "become" black—this communal identity lacking the space within its network of meanings and understandings fully to accommodate one such as Andrew—he eventually escapes from the Leviathan plantation, from slavery altogether, and assumes a life passing for white. He fails as a black man, try as he might—so he will become white.

But even here, on the other side of the racial divide, he cannot construe a coherent racial identity that he can take on, own, make his own and present coherently to the

world. A “free” man, Andrew’s—or, now, “William Harris’s”—white performativity only sets the stage for profound intra-psychic pain. For similar to his situation as a “black” slave at Leviathan, passing, he cannot fully “become” white either. In the white world, he is prohibited from trafficking himself as a person of mixed race who has merely chosen to identify as white. The white world will not accept this compromise, this co-optation: he must traffic himself in it as uncompromisingly white: with no reference to his black African heritage, in complete disavowal of his parentage. Either that, or he will end up in shackles again, if not killed. But this disavowal proves as painful as it does simply unthinkable. He cannot, on a psychic level, *become* white. When facing the prospect of falling in love with and marrying a white woman, he feels keenly the reality of his non-identity: “I was not the ideal husband for Peggy Undercliff. My life was a patchwork of lies. My personality whipstitched from a dozen sources” (139). But he decides to marry her regardless, to plunge further into his “loss of identity.” On into this marriage, his former life as a slave returns with uncanny brutality, tossing him into vertiginous identitarian amnesia. For instance, he passes by a public slave auction one day, there chancing on the woman from Polkinghorne plantation, Minty, whom he had previously intended to marry. She is on the block, severely withered, being sold off. He is tempted to buy her, to flee his life as William Harris, his white wife, and to move north with her. He feels he cannot stay where he has been, in his white life with his white wife. “How could I? I had blundered into manumission, milked the Self’s polymorphy to elude...springtraps that killed [fellow slave] Patrick, crippled my father, destroyed (probably) Reb, and now—as we neared the cabin—would, I feared, take Minty” (159). He puts a down payment on her and takes her home. Upon walking through the door, she

calls him by his former name, Andrew. And “in her speaking the name I was called in the quarters, she gave me a nature that broke my mastery over the cabin [where he lives now] forever” (159). Whatever “mastery” he attains within and over his identity as a white man has been under constant menace by his hidden identity as a black slave, the “former” identity that never fully submits to the force of his psychic disavowal: lurking under and around his performance of/as William Harris, threatening constantly to disrupt it. Says he about the complacency with which *real* white people enjoy their lives: “I can’t *fake* that kind of belongingess, that blithe, numbed belief that the world is an extension of my sitting room. Or myself. I’ll make mistakes, slips; I’ll say or do something wrong, and we’ll cook little chicken wings” (109). This fear bound up in the identity of *Andrew the slave*—in the entire matrix of memories and affects constituting his former identity—returns with brutal reality when Minty utters the name. She does so as they walk into his cabin home. “I stood stock-still: the sweaty fieldhand, a machete between his teeth, who has crawled through his master’s window. Minty’s scent was *still* on me. The smell of the [slave] quarters. An old, earthy odor of dirt floors. Woods” (160). His home, this cabin over which he has of late presided as master William Harris, plunges into non-recognition: master Harris immediately becomes the slave Andrew, who is now breaking and entering into a white man’s domain, wearing this other man’s fine clothing, copping his privileged identity. Tentatively pacing through the cabin that was once “his,” he senses this (white) world not only estranged from him, but lashing out violently against him:

The furnishings no longer felt familiar. I touched things hesitantly like a guest, uncertain if this was the broken chair we propped against the wall and never used: a room of tables that threw out wooden legs to trip me, hanging plants that bent lower to bump my head, tools that suddenly under my boots, bumped me from behind, and felt,

I swear, as if they'd been shaped for an alien from—creatures *built* differently than I, with more (or fewer) fingers, no thumbs, or body parts I did not possess. In this Martian parlor dropped [his white wife] Peggy, also a Martian. “William?” [she calls]....[S]he stumbled back to bed, and I followed: the first Earthman on the Red Planet....The only Earthman stranded on a strange world....[W]hy were Martian beds *rectangular*? (160)

The world of his white identity—the identity of his white world—fades into estrangement: it becomes another person's—a “Martian's.” This goes as much for the cabin as his very body, his wife, his name, his race, his bed, etc. But more even strikingly, within this terrifying frame of mind, his cabin takes on near sentience, and, failing to recognize *him*, trips him, bumps him, seeks to expurgate him from its racially sacrosanct interiority, not recognizing him as one of its own. Hostile toward this alien “Andrew,” turning on him, the entire spatiality of his white identity—what William Harris has been calling home—rises against him. It turns him out.

There is, indeed, a violent incompatibility between his mixed-race identity and this larger white world. From the moment he first escapes from slavery (Leviathan), he feels himself lost between two mutually exclusive worlds. On the one hand, he frees himself from “feeling that I had betrayed the Race, my father's dream of freedom.” He has betrayed and rejected his father's African legacy, and moreover, as we saw above, the black world does not accept him as its own. But even as he re-creates himself as white, he fails to integrate the white world and the white world fails to integrate him. Right after escaping from Leviathan, he sneaks up to the house of a white family and peers through their side window, there to witness their unreflective complacency: their “warm, dumb domesticity...—so sophisticated, so urbane—that we dismissed as *beneath* our sensitivity: the quiet, dull, heroic life of the property holder too busy making biscuits...to

ask the tedious question, ‘Why am I here?’” (107-8). It is this white world—its habits, its perceptions, its structures of feeling—that he can never fully integrate and come to rest in. Not only does this world enact a sort of violence upon him, but his inability to integrate, internalize, and *become* its codes engenders its own sort of internal violence within him. Immediately after he describes the unattainable complacency of the white family making biscuits, he seethes: “I was thinking about setting their barn on fire” (108). He exposes the motive of those violent feelings later that day: “I can’t *fake* that kind of belongingness, that blithe, numbed belief that the world is an extension of my sitting room. Or myself. I’ll make mistakes, slips; I’ll say or do something wrong, and we’ll cook little chicken wings” (109). To which he can only respond: “The only reason I don’t kill myself is because it doesn’t seem worth the effort” (109). This existence is a living death—one boiling with its own particular internal violence.

Discourse and Violence

There is an unnamed psychic violence unleashed in Andrew’s effort to disavow his African heritage and to become the white man William Harris. The black world repudiates him, the white world lashes out at him: and even when he pulls off his performance as William Harris, he feels its lacerations. Andrew’s failure at dual-identification takes effect, the novel suggests, as a result of the very nature of identity as a linguistic construct. Identity is constituted first and foremost in language, which structures the perceptions of the mind and the racial categories we occupy.

If the linguistic nature of identity is a worn topic of conversation within Western academic halls, Johnson’s intervention may be seeking to offer a reviving touch. How

does it talk about language and identity? In a fashion typical of Buddhist thinkers, Johnson takes language to be materially concealing of what exists “underneath it all” (*Turning* 11). Language produces categories in the mind that have no correlate in the world. Andrew, working as a schoolteacher, is grading a paper one evening and comes across the misspelling *tranquility*. Confused as to the actual spelling, he consults a dictionary. The question immediately then comes up in conversation with his wife concerning the secession of Alabama from the Union. If Alabama secedes, will America continue? This leads then to Andrew’s musings on the question of “America,” this being construed first and foremost as a *name* rather than a place. Names hold the power to create the objects/places/persons we perceive. His wife Peggy asks,

“What happens to *us* if the country breaks down?”

I look up. *Tranquillity*?

[Andrew continues,] “Wife, you’re thinking in *essences* again. Giving nouns the value of existence. People endure. Not names. There are no ‘Negroes.’ Or ‘women.’ There are no ‘nations.’ We tear down one shop sign, *America*; we put up another, *Atlantis*. And we blunder along as usual. Patching up the house. Misspelling *tranquility*.” I push back my chair. “Where the hell’s that *Webster’s* I brought from school?” (146)

Underneath the lexicon of “nouns” we mistake for material objects, there are no discrete *things* out there. Our labels simply produce them in the mind. It is interesting that

Andrew finesses this issue onto that of identity—there are no “Negroes,” “women,” or “nations” except for those that we “name” into existence. For this seems to answer

Peggy’s initial question concerning what “happens to *us* if the country breaks down?”

The question of “*us*”—what constitutes us, what that precise object is that his label

denominates—comes under the same deconstructive pressure as the “shop sign *America*.”

When America has, like Atlantis, sunk into the sea, we will just give it another name and

“blunder along as usual.”^{xxi} “Patching up the house” of language, which endures without any necessary correspondences to things in the world.

If beyond the linguistic field of labels there is no hard “transcendentality” or “presence” that we can know directly (to use Derrida’s words [“Structure, Sign and Play”]), then that means that the racial categories splitting apart Andrew’s identity are empty signifiers without referent. As Foucault says on the matter, “discourse is really only an activity, of writing in the first case, of reading in the second and exchange in the third. This exchange, this writing, this reading never involve anything but signs” (228). But because there is nothing beyond this web of signs that Andrew can know, let alone ground his racial identity in, he is *stuck* in language, one could say. What is it about his containment in language that makes it so unlivable for him? Note that Andrew calls language a “house” that we keep “patching up,” recalling the earlier “house” of complacent white people that he yearned to burn down, recalling the image earlier still of the house that rages against him to cast him out. John McClure has suggested that this image harkens back to a similar one in the Lotus Sutra of a house that, while perpetually on fire, never burns: sacred imagery referring to the construct of language perpetually heated by desire but never destroyed.^{xxii} What is it about the constitution of his identity in language—or as Foucault calls it, discourse—that flames without burning, alienating him both to itself and to *himself*, bereaving him, finally, of any identity at all?

The novel seems to be staging a problem that Diana Fuss theorizes eloquently as the intrinsically expulsive, negating dynamic of identity formation. Although her discussion uses as its examples issues concerning sexuality, we could overlay them directly onto issues of race involved in Andrew’s quest for identity. Doing so should

serve to illuminate the psychic pain and existential disorientation Andrew experiences.

Fuss seeks to deconstruct both the naturalized opposition between hetero- and

homosexual and their mutually exclusive difference:

To the extent that the denotation of any term is always dependent on what is exterior to it (heterosexuality, for example, typically defines itself in critical opposition to that which it is not: homosexuality), the inside/outside polarity is an indispensable model for helping us to understand the complicated workings of semiosis. Inside/outside functions as the very figure for signification and the mechanisms of meaning production....The homo in relation to the hetero. . . operates as an indispensable interior exclusion—an outside which is inside interiority making the articulation of the latter possible, a transgression of the border which is necessary to constitute the border as such. (2-3)

In the dynamics whereby a particular identity (here heterosexuality) takes shape semiotically as discourse, it will exteriorize those contents that negate it. These expunged signifiers cohere into their own, separate discursive identity. In Fuss's account here, for instance, "Homosexuality is produced *inside* the dominant discourse of sexual difference as its necessary outside" (4, emphasis mine). Fuss here undermines the outsideness—the spatialization of subversion—of homosexual political identities, rewriting them as in fact the “negative interiorization” of a dominant heterosexuality, the latter's “contaminated and expurgated insides” (3). Ostensibly subversive identity discourses ultimately intensify and “reinforce” the hegemonic configuration “as the center that must be resisted and subverted” (5). The homosexual subject that is thus “out” finds itself in fact contained *inside* “the realm of the visible, speakable, the culturally intelligible” (4). This subject invests itself in the borrowed clothing of the hegemon: the vestments by which the dominant can identify this subject as representing its own “lack.” And the dominant purges itself compulsively, reconstituting itself obsessively as a space

of identitarian purity and wholeness. Emerging out of this is a potential analytic for the psychic fracture that Andrew experiences.

To “become white” successfully, Andrew must force into motion the expurgation of the signifiers constituting his blackness: which would be an easy accomplishment if they did not prove impossible to let go, impossible to expunge finally from his sense of racial identity. He experiences violent repercussions from this effort. Peering into the white family’s complacently blissful home, he confesses: “I was thinking about setting their barn on fire.” The prospect of having to forget the meanings, signifiers, and habits constituting his blackness (“I’ll make mistakes, slips”) proves psychically dehiscing: “The only reason I don’t kill myself is because it doesn’t seem worth the effort” (109). Even when he arrives at the place where he thinks he has completed the mental work of becoming white, Minty will call him Andrew, and, immediately, he will become “the first Earthman on the Red Planet....The only Earthman stranded on a strange world”: a black slave tossed willy-nilly into a world not his own. But problematizing this estrangement further is his inability to “return” to his former life as a slave. In the antebellum South black and white racial identities remain in a state of violent mutual exclusion, and Andrew is caught in the crossfires, disabled from establishing his identity solidly in either one or the other.

Mouffe and Laclau’s account of the containment of discourse is no more optimistic. They deny that the “coherence” of discourse “can have a rationalistic status of a superhard ‘transcendentality,’” as it is both an infinite play of differences and the limitation, or holding in stasis, of those differences. Discourse expresses “the attempt to limit that play, to domesticate infinitude, to embrace it within the finitude of an order.

But this order—or structure—no longer takes the form of an underlying essence of the social; rather, it is an attempt—by definition unstable and precarious—to act over that ‘social,’ to *hegemonize* it.” A hegemonic discourse is anchored, continues Cunningham, by a “central nodal point” that “affirms the positivity of the entire formation in contradiction to, or better, by negating, the ‘outside,’ which in its turn, reciprocally negates the former’s identity. Through this double act of negation, the antagonistic nodal point provides coherence to both its own discourse and its constitutive outside by defining them as polarities” (10). For all of these critics, to embrace the discourse of an identity—*any* identity—is to participate in a dynamic of interiorization/exteriorization, identification/disidentification: the semic infrastructure of self and other, love and hate.

Andrew remains trapped in this dynamic. So what forms of subversion are available to him? Does he have a way out? Cunningham makes a compelling argument for how to pave a way out of this dynamic through the strategic proliferation of “antagonistic nodal points.” He offers a concrete example. How might we think of Andrew’s capacity to use language against itself to achieve this form of subversion? Cunningham writes that “Latino identity”

may be said to operate as [an] antagonistic nodal point, for it overdetermines all other nodal points through its negation of the exteriority of “Whiteness” or “Angloness,” which, through racist articulatory practices, reciprocally negates it. The adjective “Latino” and “White/Anglo” gain their meaning through their negative relationship to each other. The strength of the condensation around the term “Latino” is proportional to the degree of negativity, exercised by both verbal and material practices, directed at those defined as Latinos. As the antagonistic pressure of White domination increases, signifiers of non-racial difference lose their “literal” meaning and are aligned through their ability to stand in as substitutions for the term “Latino”—that is, symbols of resistance to White supremacy (“brown skin” thus becomes not a simple marker of color, but metaphorizes “Latinoness” in its opposition to white skin, Spanish language symbolizes antagonism to White hegemony, etc.). (10)

What Cunningham suggests here is a strategy for discursive interventions into contemporary culture based on the proliferation of “antagonistic nodal points.” Andrew echoes a similar line of thinking to assert that racial identity is not an intrinsic reality in the world (what he calls “Being”) but that race holds together within the realm of signifiers as, simply, a “meaning”: “the wretchedness of being colonized was not that slavery created feelings of guilt and indebtedness, though I did feel guilt and debt; nor that it created a long, lurid dream of multiplicity and separateness, which it did indeed create, but the fact that men had epidermalized Being. The Negro—one negro at Leviathan—was needed as a meaning” (*Oxherding* 52). However, while Andrew, like Cunningham, takes race to be nothing more than a discursive meaning-construct, he remains painfully bereft of the psychic and linguistic resources for the sort of proliferation of meanings that Cunningham urges. For Andrew is disabled from moving beyond the “deadening feeling that our particularities limited us, closed us in—created a ceiling low enough to break your neck.” The multiplication of Cunningham’s antagonistic nodal points, in Andrew’s world, only further and more oppressively closes him in. Through its logic of “multiplicity and separateness,” *discursive formations in every instance produce an excluded middle term*. Even if discursive nodal points proliferate to the point of near undifferentiability, there will remain those interstices—the semiologically vacuous space of the neither-nor—produced in the differentially structured chain of identity positions. It just so happens that the antebellum world in which Andrew lives reveals this in an obvious and horrific way, failing to accommodate the middle-term of his racial hybridity. For Andrew to affix his identity around the central nodal point of “Whiteness” demands the antagonistic negation of the very thing

he cannot let go: that matrix of meanings, memories, and affects constituting his black identity, which persists throughout his white life, clamoring, disruptive, unwilling to die. But it is closer to Johnson's Buddhist thinking (as reflected in his other writings) to go a step further to argue that language itself inexorably dualizes in this manner. Andrew laments: "Women and men." "Black and whites." "Black and Blacks" (i.e., mixed blacks versus self-identifying "pure" blacks). "[T]hings," he continues, "were becoming too dense. Everything seemed to create its own cancellation. I wanted this movement to go on no further if, as the Coffinmaker said, someone would wind up on a cooling board" (50). Indeed, the proliferation leads not to subversion and semic expansion but to a sort of symbolic death.

And this leads to the final and more troubling characterization of language that the novel, again drawing upon Buddhist concepts, wants to account for: that the antagonistic "movement" of the "cancellation" of identities through discourse sets into play a form of violence that acts upon Andrew. The cabin he calls home comes against him. At another point, he laments, this "dream, if this was a dream (so it seemed),^{xxiii} was remarkably thorough—a spectacle staged so often I could not, at first, truly feel that I, as an individual, mattered in the least. We were fed, I thought, into a form that flattened out our humanity" (139). There is something about the field of discourses in which he finds himself—or fails to find himself—that not only sets into play the internal violence of identification/disidentification (*I am This, not That*), but moves toward "canceling" him, "flatten[ing] out" his very sense of personhood under its pressure. "You start feeling that goodness and beauty are for other people. For men, if you're a woman. Whites, if you're nonwhite. Even the simple things—especially the simple things—like being wanted for

yourself. To keep from feeling like waste, or destroying yourself, you have to destroy them. Deny them *here*.' She touched my chest" (143). The person voicing these final words are not another raced character, but another subjugated subject of the time: a woman, Andrew's wife. She too—like Andrew, like the black slaves that reject Andrew, like the larger white world, and even, by implication, the rest of living humanity—is similarly contained, constituted, and flattened by language.

Transcending Discourse: The Mystical Opening of the Body

The novel thematizes two points that I have been seeking draw out: the constitution of identity in discourse, and the extent to which this discourse structures an internal psychic violence. However, while discourse works across individual humans to cohere them into groups, beneath this discourse is the irreducible datum of the physical raced body. When we say that Andrew is half-black, half-white, we take the pronoun "he" to be coterminous with the physical *thing* of the body. Studies such as Ed Cohen's in "A Body Worth Having?" analyze a piece of the historical genealogy of the body in the West, showing how the conflation of "self" with "body" is the product of long-wrought social and legal discourse in the West. Yet the conflation remains bedrock to hegemonic modern-Western discourses on personal identity. Who else *am* "I" but this thing that is my body and everything constituting it? *Where* else am I or could I ever be but here—(inside) my body? But for as commonsense as this may sound, the view of the body as metonymic with selfhood remains, the novel suggests, problematic. It is a conflation that structures the sort of othering we examined above, turning the physical body into an exteriorizing enclosure, just as discourse is. Just as discursive identity is structured along an

inside/outside dynamic, so is this modern corporeal notion of personal identity: *I am (located) inside my body; everything not-me lies outside my body.*

To be sure, my project does not aspire to reveal the genealogy of this way of thinking—how and to what ends this way of thinking was both constructed and historically disseminated. This is too massive a project for the smaller literary questions at hand. While I do not think that Johnson, either, is setting out to do this, his project performs the more modest, but no less urgent, work of speculating how selfhood could simply be imagined other than that it presently is in modern Western empirical thought. Through the representations in his novel, Johnson attempts to dissolve the physical boundaries of the body enough to release (our understanding of) selfhood from its physical confinement. On the level of Andrew's dilemma of racial identity, the novel seeks to deal with this problem not by first and foremost trying to prize open the discursive enclosures that alienate him. It does not, for instance, seek to theorize some racial hybridity—like Ellison's ten drops of black liquid blended into "pure white" paint in *Invisible Man*. Rather—more radically—Johnson seeks to deconstruct the fundamental unit of enclosure roaming among the alienating discourses I describe above: the body, which delimits "selfhood" itself, exteriorizing the wide outer world and turning it into the not-me. By opening this body and rendering it ontologically continuous with other living beings—including ones racially different from itself—Johnson, in *Oxherding Tale*, imaginatively ventures a restructuration of personal identity to include otherness *within* itself, potentially bridging the gap alienating discursive identities. The ontological continuity achieved by this body extending outward unites "self" and "other" and undermines their status as fully discrete, fully differentiable objects. This then forms the

basis for a re-conceptualization of discursive identity, admittedly difficult to imagine, that *has no outside*. As bodies of different racial identifications blur ontologically into one another, the racial-discursive identities that once contained them will not be able to hold shut in quite the same way.

In his extensive non-fictional writings, Johnson propounds a Buddhist conceptualization of selfhood. Buddhist thinking regarding selfhood has to do with the concept of *anatman*. In *Turning of the Wheel*, Johnson lays out this doctrine as involving the idea of “dependent being,” the “ontological stance” that Thich Nhat Hanh called “inter-being.” This is the idea that there is no individual; human beings are composed of five skandas (bodies, feelings, perceptions, mental states, and consciousness) that are never the same from one moment to the next (8-9). These skandas are strands of energy that are intertwined only loosely; intertwined not only with one another, but with and into the skandas of the surrounding living environment. This intertwining of living energy enmeshes the “individual” with the “others” around it in a way belied by the palpable solidity of the body. Johnson quotes Thich Nhat Hanh on this: “Non-self is also interpenetration, because everything contains everything else....Each thing depends on all other things to be” (12). As Johnson continues, “This thing we call ‘self’ is, depending on the spiritual angle from which it is viewed, everything. And nothing. It is empty, possessing no essence or intrinsic reality; it is, at best, a *process* dependent each and every moment on all other beings. A verb, not a noun” (*Turning* 10-11). The processes we call “selfhood” are indistinguishable from those simultaneously animating “all sentient things: animals, plants, the universe as a whole” (80): such that this “thing” we imagine is nothing more than a name we tag onto what, in the Buddhist view, is no-

thing at all. At least nothing that can be sliced apart and posited as existing separately from the processional dynamism of, indeed, the universe. David Loy quotes Alex Kennedy on this doctrine: “the basic nature of all reality is that ungraspable oneness which is called Emptiness....It is not a blank nothingness but such a plenitude that all our ordinary categories of thought diminish and belittle it” (30-31). This open selfhood extending outward into the world is the basis upon which Johnson imagines subject and object as “ontologically twinned and inseparable, nondualistic; the one incapable of existing without the other” (38), keeping them “caught,” to use Dr. Martin Luther King’s expression of it, “in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny” (9). “Every such ‘individual’ is at the same time the effect of the whole and the cause of the whole, the totality being an infinite body of members each of which is sustaining and defining all others” (Loy 90).

This conceptualization of the self as everything yet nothing leads, for Johnson, to a certain existential condition: this person is, “in a sense, a refugee—homeless and groundless....He is alone with others who are also refugees or tourists who have no solid basis for security, and nothing permanent in this world” (*Turning* 24). This could certainly be used to describe Andrew’s existential condition as one who perpetually fails to locate his identity either in his racially uncategorizable body or in the field of discursive group identities of his society at large. A refugee, homeless, when he first escapes from Leviathan, he peers into the windows of a family home, longing for that identitarian complacency (feeling, resentfully, like setting their house on fire). And even later, when he establishes his life as William Harris, the home over which he comes to think of himself as master turns against him violently. That is, this condition of racial-

identitarian homelessness inheres alienated suffering. Buddhist critics such as David Loy take this “ontological lack,” and its resulting existential condition, as on the one hand the source of human suffering. But on the other hand, they take it to be the condition of possibility for profound psychic and existential liberation. In Buddhism this is a matter of perspective: the enlightened *arhat* is able to embrace this ontological condition, having conditioned himself beyond the compulsion to ground himself in a particular identity. In the novel, Andrew, by trying to ground himself in a particular discursive identity, enslaves himself to the tortured psychic and existential condition I describe above. This is because Andrew’s search for freedom throughout the novel is negatively determined (freedom *from* slavery, freedom *from* a suffering existence). But his liberation from these traps fails then to lead to what Loy calls the “freedom [that] comes from realizing my place in Indra’s Net [the total enmeshed web of being] which entails my interdependence with all other phenomena” (108). “With the end of lack, the long-sought freedom from becomes the concrete *freedom to*. To forget oneself and become nothing is to wake up and find oneself in or as a situation—not confronted by it but one with it—and if one is not self-preoccupied then meaning arises naturally within that situation” (126). Thus, “The greatest freedom comes from losing self-preoccupation and assuming responsibility for all things: not just for our family or nation, but for the whole of Indra’s Net” (109).

This, to be sure, is a generic bit of Buddhist doctrine, one that Johnson lays out in his non-fictional writing. But it is in the novel, I would argue, that he articulates it in a manner that speaks most directly to our traditional notions, in the West, of personal identity. How does Andrew find this liberation and what is it about the novel’s unique portrayal of it that can add to our way of talking about racial identity in contemporary

America? The novel deals with the problem of racial identity and the alienation it produces in Andrew is by positing *the exclusionary body* as its first cause. That is, to define selfhood around the body is to enclose selfhood within an exclusionary dynamic: to draw the boundaries of the self along the contours of the skin is to create an inside that then structures an outside that must repulsed and disavowed—much like the fierce exteriorizations that Fuss attributes to discourse. Like discursive identity, personal identity is an inside/outside structuration. Anything lying *inside the body* lies within the domain of the “self.” Anything outside of it falls within the realm of the “not-me,” the other. For the novel to disassemble the tight matrix of discursive enclosure—answering Fuss’ call for the formulation of more complex, less exclusionary, discursive formations—it first seeks to imagine a form of selfhood in which the self is not interiorized into an exclusionary body. The body is being re-imagined here as ontologically porous, continuous with the “outer” world. In an astonishing scene at the very end of the novel, the Soulcatcher finally catches up with Andrew, knocks on his door—a fantasmic slave-catcher that Johnson uses to elaborate his Buddhist thinking on race. One night, the Soulcatcher, after years of pursuit, finds Andrew. But instead of killing him, as he does every slave he catches, he instead lifts his shirt. Andrew sees, on the Soulcatcher’s torso, a mystically fantasmic scene in which he himself appears disintegrating into the bodies of other living beings, entering into a dynamic ontic collusion with them:

intricately woven brown tattoos presented...an impossible flesh tapestry of a thousand individualities no longer static, mere drawings, but if you looked at them long enough, bodies moving like Lilliputians over the surface of his skin....[E]ven the tiniest of these thrashing within the body mosaic was, clearly, a society as complex as the higher forms.... [I]n this process of doubling, nothing was lost in the masquerade, the cosmic costume ball, where behind every different

mask at the party—behind snout beak nose and blossom—the selfsame face was uncovered at midnight, and this was *my father* appearing briefly in the dead boy Moon as he gave Flo Hatfield [Andrew’s nymphomaniacal former slave owner] a goodly stroke and, at the instant of convulsive orgasm, opened his mouth as wide as that of the dying steer [that the Soulcatcher] slew in his teens, was that steer, then several others, and I lost his figure in this field of energy, where the profound mystery of the One and the Many gave me back my father again and again, his love, in every being from grubworms to giant sumacs, for these too were my father and, in the final face I saw in the Soulcatcher, which shook tears from me—my own face....I was my father’s father, and he my child. (*Oxherding* 175-176, emphasis added)

In this astonishing imaging-forth of the relationship of living beings to one another, Andrew gazes upon an image of himself colluding with these other living beings in something appearing like a larger life-flow. The beings on the Soulcatcher’s body are on the one hand “individualities” while on the other they emerge one out of the other—body unfolding out of body—in a “process of doubling.” In this scene, occurring at the very end of the novel and figuring Andrew’s final liberation (the chapter’s name is “Moksha,” meaning liberation from the illusion of selfhood), Andrew enters into a visual economy that reveals to him who “he” “really” “is.” Or, more to the matter, what he is not. What he is not is an isolated individual ontologically cut off from other living beings. Strikingly similar to Lacan’s mirror stage, Andrew *looks outward* upon a reflection of himself back to himself, internalizing this image as his sense-of-self. In a way that both parallels and explodes Lacan’s story of the infant gazing into the mirror, Andrew identifies with this external image of himself and uses it as the basis for his renewed self-concept.

Why the comparison to Lacan’s mirror stage? Borch-Jacksen reads Lacan’s story as the crowning achievement of modern thought concerning bodily selfhood—producing the isolated subject *par excellence*. But this longer tradition and its Lacanian

radicalization remain fiercely problematic on the level of both the psychic/existential (pain) and the ethical (violence). I will return to the extended quote above treating the images that Andrew sees on the Soulcatcher's body, discussing how this rewrites the isolated Lacanian subject. But before I do, it is worth pausing to gaze more intently into the isolationist construction of selfhood that Johnson wants to reconceptualize. For as I have argued, he does not seek to disassemble exclusionary identitarian *discourses* but by way of a more fundamental opening of this sealed-in, isolated *body*. We have to work through and beyond the problematicity of this body before we can imagine discourses that include rather than expel, deny, and destroy.

Johnson's Soulcatcher scene and Lacan's mirror stage both depict the subject looking out upon a visual image, there to locate an image of itself with which to identify and to internalize as "the self." But the parallel stops there. For whereas Johnson's variant, as we see above, leads to the *opening* of Andrew's body, and its blurring and blending together with an entire "society" of living beings (his father, a former slave owner, even a steer), Lacan's story ends in the radical corporeal isolation of the gazing subject. For, says Lacan, "The *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation—and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic." The infant's psyche forms its ego based on the coherent bodily image it sees in the mirror, capable from then on to image/imagine itself as a discrete object, a "totality," delineable and distinct from other such objects in the world. The infant's ego forms around the image in the mirror, as the infant comes to conceive of itself, literally to *see* itself, as an

object in space. This is a visual and psychic “dialectic of identification” with the mirror image. However, this image remains constitutively “other”—out there, apart from the baby: a visual object trapped in the mirror, isolated in space:

This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infant* stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject (4).

Borch-Jacobson argues that Lacan’s theory is a radical instantiation of a “Modern” “onto-photo-logy” (56), in which selfhood concretizes itself around the visual image of the body, “objectified” in the mirror image. This longer tradition privileges, in its definition of the self, the physical body-in-space that the eye can perceive and that the hand can touch. Borch-Jacobson’s brief summary of the longer history of this material-empirical body helps illuminate Johnson’s attempt to imagine selfhood *across* these physical units.

Even as far as Descartes, says Borch-Jacobson, “the certitude of the *cogito* derives from its visibility.” For instance, “*cogito* means *Vor-stellung*,” the representation of consciousness to itself, what Hegel would later envisage as the “ex-posing” of consciousness before itself through the process of “reflection” (both visual and cognitive), its “speculation” (the visual *speculum* and the cognitive process). The ego thus “pro-pos[es] itself to view” (53).

The Cartesian “subject, therefore, is primarily an eye (as Lacan very consciously repeats in his first seminar: “The eye is here...symbolic of the subject. The whole of science [Borch-Jacobson means Cartesian-Galilean science] is based on reducing the subject to an eye, and that is why it is projected in front of you, that is to say, objectivated” (1988a, 80/95). But, above all, this eye that is the subject sees itself in

everything it self-ob-jects by way of the *Vor-stellung*. Thus it takes possession of everything it sees, through inspection and the scrutinizing gaze (54-55).

Far from exploding the Cartesian ego, Lacan “prolongs” and “completes the modern problematic of the subject”: “the ego is outside itself from the very first, always already represented and ex-posed in front of itself” through “the transparency of [a] mirror” (57). For Lacan, who continues this tradition, subjectivity is thus borne out of a visual economy that ends in the transformation of the living being into a visual object in space and in the perceptual solidification of everything else it perceives into an isolated object-in-space. The infant sees its reflected body in the mirror as an armature detached from other objectively coherent bodies in the world, and hereby the infant enters, as Lacan says, upon the “threshold of the visible world.” And *this entrance into the visible world brings about the infant’s perception of physical detachment from other such objects-in-space*. Accordingly, Lacan continues, the mirror stage concludes in “the assumption of the armour of an *alienating* identity”—“the statue in which man projects himself” (emphasis mine). For Borch-Jackobsen, “The erection of the ego is always the erection of a statue that I *see*, over there—triumphant, unshakable, fixed for eternity.” This sense-of-self is “alienating” in that it is construed *over there*, in the mirror—is frozen, alienated in empty space, ontologically severed from the other living bodies in the baby’s world. Every love object from here on out, continues Borch-Jackobsen, will be “a false object, a decoy, a trap in which the ego pursues its own image...in that adorable other who presents it with the mirage of its own omnipotence” (49). Lacan’s mirror stage is the theory *par excellence* of the ego objectified and isolated in space. It culminates in a form of thought that has become profoundly naturalized within our modern horizon of

though: *I am here inside my body. You are there, inside yours. Empty space separates us.* Identity is coincident with the body such that it would be utterly counter-rational to say, *I am (in) your body, and you are (in) my body.*

But this verges upon precisely what Johnson seems to want to say. If the modern episteme undergirding Lacan's mirror stage leads to the radical isolation of individual identity, then the episteme undergirding Johnson's enables his reconceptualization of individuality as ontologically open. For what I see going on in this text is a theory of mystical unselfing; not Lacan's modern-Cartesian individuation, but a mystical dis-individuation that seeks to resist a "Modern" "onto-photo-log." Andrew looks out not to find himself carved out of the field of living being as a separate entity—like the Lacanian body—but rather ontologically interfused into other living beings, all held together in a mystical "society as complex as the higher forms." On the Soulcatcher's body he sees "individualities no longer static, mere drawings," but instead "bodies moving" and "thrashing within [this] body mosaic," unfolding and emerging out of one another "in this process of doubling." Recall from the lengthy quote above that, in this process, "nothing was lost in the masquerade, the cosmic costume ball, where behind every different mask at the party—behind snout beak nose and blossom—the selfsame face was uncovered at midnight." No strand (*skanda*) of human energy/being, indeed "nothing, was lost in the masquerade." The image of his father appears "in the dead boy Moon" while he penetrates Flo Hatfield's body, who in turn opens her mouth so that out of it can emerge a steer. Humans, insects, animals, and plant life morph in and out of one another in "this field of energy, "this profound mystery of the One and the Many." Even Flo Hatfield herself, driven throughout the novel nymphomaniacally to escape her painful bodily

incarceration, is figured here as imbricated corporeally into other living beings. Rather than looking out to see himself, as Lacan's baby does, terminally severed from other living beings and objects in space—a statue—Andrew looks out to find himself only fleetingly distinguishable from this perpetual unfolding of being. Whereas Lacan's baby introjects an ego alienated in space, Andrew finds his ego only to release it into a larger ontic dynamism. In this vision, he cannot distinguish himself enough from his former slave master Flo Hatfield, the antagonistic fellow slave Moon, or even a steer, to be able to construe his identity as entirely differentiable from theirs. They are all too deeply interfused ontologically. This speaks directly to and against Western notions of the individual that give primacy to the latter's visible material corporeality and delimits its subjectivity within these confines.

The need for Johnson's intervention arises from the strange problematicity of the "Modern" embodied subject. Like discourse (as we noted above in relation to Diana Fuss' *Inside/Out*), this subject is enclosed and isolated from other objects/subjects. And, again, like discourse (as we discussed above in relation to the mutual hostility of black and white identities), the processes of exteriorization and expulsion of the self from others can intensify outwardly into violence. Take for instance Johnson's character Flo Hatfield, the owner of a slave plantation called Leviathan, where Andrew works. In the chapter of the novel entitled "In the Service of the Senses," Flo takes Andrew on as a sex slave, commanding him to remain at the beck and call of her every insatiable whim. Aided by opium, her sexual practices aim to "expand the skin's sensitivity to the point where the body's edge vanished and blended with other bodies, objects" (63). She lusts insatiably after sensations of transcendence from her body, from its confining walls: a

“clairvoyance” into “the interior of objects” and into the soul of others (63). That is, there is something about sex, for her, that she believes will usher her into a deep, affective experience and knowledge of the other: “there being...something of the pursuit of truth in a good lay, an epistemological edge in exposing a woman stitch by stitch to the lamplight, as if knowledge had an affective tone (*Begriffsgefühl*^{xxiv}), was somehow *delicious*, and the lover as sincere after wisdom as any physicist” (72). But these attempts at mystically unifying knowledge of the other through sexual ecstasy all fail. Even after Andrew gives Flo countless “goodly stroke[s],” she finds herself caught ever more deeply in the alienation of her individual body: “I stay dissatisfied,” she moans (38). Instead of coming into a mystical union with the other that “extinguish[es] the ego” (64), all she feels after Tantric sex is “Me....I feel my own pulse. My own sensations.’ She laughed. ‘I have a pulse everywhere” (53). Sex provides an explosion of somatic sensation that seems to evidence out-of-body union with the other; but ultimately, these sensations prove terminally intransitive: an experience *of the self*. Her experience is alienated from the other, confined within the nervous circuitry of the body, an internal chemical explosion of sensation: “Flo began to rub against me in a raw, hard way. It was,” thinks Andrew, “like using me as a kind of scratching post.” Andrew’s subjectivity is not present to her in the act. So ultimately, “despite Flo Hatfield’s noisy eroticism, or because of it, she was lonely” (44). Flo’s attempts at ecstatic union with Andrew end in solipsism, her sexualized erasure of his otherness. And notice how powerfully this generates violence in him:

What [Flo’s] action said was: What good are you? You have failed to arouse me. Be still while I satisfy myself. And ever she did this the pain was quick, the insult deep, the self-hatred more complete, and I did not, as she worked toward

detumescence, truly exist. Suddenly, I wanted to hurt her. My fist shot up without telling my brain what it had in mind—these things happen—then smashed five times, straight from the shoulder, into Flo Hatfield’s nose, which flattened like soft clay—I watched all this in a daze, distant—and the next thing I knew I was standing across the room, wringing my hands. (73)

Her attempts at bodily release and mystical union end in Andrew’s erasure. In spite of her claim to love him, she does psychic violence to Andrew’s otherness. And this psychic violence translates directly into physical violence on Andrew’s part.

Johnson here critiques the modern view of the self as an embodied isolate, thematizing the ultimate unlivability of its existence on the level of the psychic/existential (the pain its isolation creates) and on the level of the ethical (the violence this pain generates). But whereas Lacan’s story ends in the radical isolation of human identity (*I am [in] my body*), Johnson’s ends in its radical deconstruction. If Lacan remains steadfastly within the “modern onto-photo-logical” episteme (to use Borch-Jackobsen’s phrase), Johnson is seeking to reach outside of and beyond it. Borch-Jackobsen places Lacan in a scopophilic tradition—an empiricism—dating back to Descartes; Johnson, however, is seeking to conceptualize personal identity outside of this tradition’s categorical rubrics concerning embodied individuality. Johnson’s experiments with Buddhism offers a conceptual resource originating outside of the “modern onto-photo-logical” vein that breeds the violence under question. Ultimately, Johnson’s is a theory not of subject formation but of subject de-formation, figured in the opening and centrifugal dispersal of Andrew’s embodied identity. On the Soulcatcher’s body, “intricately woven brown tattoos presented...an impossible flesh tapestry of a thousand individualities no longer static, mere drawings, but if you looked at them long enough, bodies moving like Lilliputians over the surface of his skin,” “ thrashing within the body

mosaic...in this process of doubling.” The figures are hardly static; they are set into motion along a process of doubling that disseminates them forward, outward, each being shooting through and emerging out of a multitude of others. There is a kinetic dynamism uniting the “self” to the entire outlying panoply of living being. This opening of the body is tantamount not to the erasure but indeed to the *opening* of selfhood: a rewriting of the self into a living being ontologically continuous with the “objective world” surrounding it, breaking down the very distinction between inside/outside circumscribed by the body. This pierces through “the delusive sense of separation between that-which-is-grasped and that-which-is-grasped-at-it.” As David Loy elaborates the concept of *anatman*, “If I am the object, however, it makes no sense to understand it as an object. When there is no sense-of-self that is supposed to be inside, there is no outside” (Loy 99). That is why, in the Soulcatcher’s presence, Andrew “perceptions” are “freed from the private, egoistic interests that normally colored my vision; I could hear—*was*—the sound of a raincrow’s song ringing in the tree we approached, the bird’s voice disclosing it ” (*Oxherding* 172). This mystical scene of ego-formation—or de-formation—opens Andrew to incorporate into his personal identity elements that he would formerly have taken to be separate from himself, lying outside the realm of his selfhood. As David Loy says elsewhere of the experience of unselfing: “I am that star, that mountain, that sound” (80). “Evacuating consciousness to the point of realizing I am nothing is equivalent to identifying with the world as my own body, as the Tao Te Ching puts it” (Loy 81).

Here our discussion makes full circle back around to the problem of racial enclosure I discussed in my first section. Johnson’s intervention seems to postulate the rewriting of the modern subject as the necessary passage-way into more expansive

notions of discursive group racial identity. This blurring of corporeal boundaries, this collapse of inside/outside distinctions, has direct impact on the discursive enclosures that alienate Andrew. As I described above in my discussion on Diana Fuss, if the discourse surrounding blackness is mutually opposed to that surrounding whiteness, then Andrew's identitarian dilemma leads to a relationship of mutual alienation from both black persons and white alike. *But how can racial-identitarian discourses remain in a relationship of mutually alienating self-enclosure when the living body opens upon a relationship of ontological indistinguishability with all others? Just as this thing we call a "self" is merely a holding-in-stasis of a processional dynamism animating all of life in the cosmos, then race must too be an equally fictitious construct masking deeper human continuities.*

This seems to get at what Johnson is trying to imagine. Immediately when Andrew visions the "body mosaic" on the Soulcather's body, he weeps because he realizes that, even on into his life as William Harris, he was still, so to speak, a slave: "slavery"—"I had never escaped it—it was a way of seeing, my inheritance from George Hawkins: *seeing distinctions*" (172). His thinking was still bound up, that is, in racially dualistic forms of thinking:

I cried because the woman I had sought in so many before—Flo Hatfield, Minty, Peggy—was...Being, and she, bountiful without end, was so extravagantly plentiful the everyday mind closed to this explosion, this efflorescence of sense, sight frosted over, and we...became unworthy of her, having squandered to a thousand forms of bondage the only station, that of man, from which she might truly be served.^{xxv} (172)

As we might glean from Diana Fuss's analysis, racial discourse cannot capture or contain this "explosion, this efflorescence of sense." In Johnson's terms, racial identity, bound up in discourse, itself produces "sight frosted over": discursive constructs encoding skin

color with signifiers that constitute a dominant inside, producing the concomitant *outside* of racial othering. It is through such discursive identitarian constructs that “men had epidermalized Being,” tearing into pieces the unified totality of life through, as Andrew’s friend Reb says, this “lurid dream of multiplicity and separateness,” producing the many “particularities” that “limited us, closed us in” (52). And once these epidermal dreams take over, there is no escaping them. “Again and again, and yet again, the New World said to blacks... ‘You are nothing.’ Predictably,” continues Andrew, “we fought this massive assault on the ego, even *inverted* the values of whites—anything to avoid self-obliteration.” Recall the charge that Andrew’s father lays on him: “‘If they say hup, Hawk, it’s gotta be down.’ He stood [the white] world on its head...inverting Big House values at every turn” [24]. But even inverting the values of whites only intensifies mutually antagonistic thinking about racial identity: the idea that humanity can be sectioned off into little segments that exist in imagined autonomy from one another. This way of taking life on our planet, objectifying it through language, taxonomizing it through discourse, and hierarchizing it through hegemony, belies the incomprehensible unity of what Johnson calls “Being,” this explosion of sense that destroys all our categories of meaning.

In a final gesture, Johnson’s mystical rewriting of the mirror stage enables Andrew to locate his long-lost father and even to recuperate his long-lost identification with him. Recall that in order to sustain his identity as a white man, Andrew had painfully to disidentify with his father and his legacy of African pride. This novel’s mystical reiteration of the mirror stage does more than return Andrew’s father to him: it mutually reintegrates Andrew and his father in a way that the discursive configurations of

the world around him had firmly barred. His father appears and reappears in the image of the people Andrew knew throughout his life; persons morphs into other persons, who morph in and out of various and sundry creatures, who are imbricated in yet others, ad infinitum. “In this field of energy” his father’s “love” returns, glistening in each of these other creatures, “for these too,” he says, “were my father.” In this final moment of mystical reintegration, Andrew can recuperate into his self-concept the very identity that he felt forced to disavow in order to sustain his “white identity”: “and, in the final face I saw in the Soulcatcher, which shook tears from me—my own face...—I was my father’s father, and he my child.” All throughout the novel, both father and son have been subject to a “self-inflicted segregation from the Whole” (142). It is to this whole that both gain some sort of (mystical) entry in this scene, George having died and returned to it, Andrew at the initial moments of a Buddhist enlightenment into it.

So Andrew, at the novel’s coda, is able to re-enter the world around him “freed,” in a sense, of the delusive and ever elusive need to identify once and for all time as white or black. He need not grasp on to either identity because both are signifying configurations that, while internally coherent, correlate to no fixed referent in the outer world. Johnson states that the goal of the Buddhist is to achieve a state of enlightenment: “He is, in a sense, a refugee—homeless and groundless....He is alone with others who are also refugees or tourists who have no solid basis for security, and nothing permanent in this world” (*Turning* 24). This homelessness describes Andrew’s search for his identitarian home in whiteness. What causes his turmoil is his belief that his search promises an achievable end: a fixed racial identity. But the sort of “enlightenment” the final scene of the novel offers him is an acceptance of his ontologically nomadic

condition, and letting-go of his restless search. One has no racial essence of “blackness” or “whiteness” or even “black-white hybridity.” For the unity of selfhood assumed in such fixed identities is misconceived. The unity of selfhood is perpetually undermined by one’s trans-corporeal extension outward: one’s processional extension outward into a living world in which “the self” figures as merely an evanescent strand of energy.

A Troubling Transcendence

As my tone probably betrays, I find rich conceptual resource in this way of thinking and talking about personal identity. And I agree with Johnson that it offers us useful concepts and terms with which to think and speak racial politics in contemporary America.

However, while all of this seems to work fine in theory, in actual practice—in terms of its application to the tear and grind of racial politics—I find it wanting. For instance, if the ontological dispersal of the individual defies racial-discursive categorization, and if Andrew comes into an “enlightening” recognition of this, then why does he ultimately continue to embrace, on into the end of the novel, his *white* identity as William Harris? On the level of his lived-out racial identity, what happened to Andrew Hawkins, son of George Hawkins, whose lineage goes back to Africa? Recall that George had originally asked him:

“You know Africa *will* rise again someday, Hawk, with her own queens and kings and a court bigger’n anything in Europe?”

“Yessir....I hope it will.”

“And you belong there?”

“Yessir.” (21)

Unlikely as it is that such a historical return would take place within Andrew's lifetime, one still hopes that it would take place in some modified, personalized fashion in Andrew's lived life. Indeed, the vision on the Soulcatcher's body represents Andrew's father "returning" to him on a mystical ontological level. But what about his father's African *discursive* identity—the linguistically configured codes, markers, and meanings of his disavowed blackness? If Andrew's entire effort to "pass" requires a repudiation of his father's African discursive identity, then one would think that Andrew's *ontological* recuperation of his father in the Soulcatcher scene would entail some reintegration of his father's African *discursive* identity as well. But he achieves nothing of the sort. And this is so notwithstanding his enlightened and enlightening revelation into the ontological openness of his body: his incipient awareness that his living being, ontologically co-extensive with living otherness, defies any and all discursive-identitarian confinement. Even after the Soulcatcher scene, William Harris, having let go of the illusion of racial identity, nevertheless returns to his place within his white life, by his white wife, in a white world. And the novel heartily approves of this.

Oxherding Tale offers no social/discursive formation that might accommodate the sort of hyper-corporeal, pan-identitarian being that Andrew supposedly discovers in the Soulcatcher scene. The novel offers us a conceptual resource for thinking and speaking the ontological opening of the individual. But this piece of Buddhist thinking about individual identity can be difficult to apply in terms of concrete racial politics, so far does it venture outside of the parish of Western secular thought. In ethically responsible pieces of imaginative fiction, such ventures into alternative mystical thinking should, I

believe, strive to think/speak/act conciliatory resolutions to mutually hostile identitarian configurations in our racially diverse American milieu.

Jonathan Cunningham likewise criticizes Johnson's entire oeuvre for aiming consistently to "think away" the concrete racial injustices in our American context through the deployment of Buddhist concepts. In just about every representation of "transcendent racelessness" (47) in Johnson's work, Cunningham argues, he seeks to portray a divestiture of identitarian particularity that leads, in the final instance, to an embrace and privileging of *white* identitarian configurations—*Oxherding Tale* being no exception. Cunningham argues this out compellingly, analyzing Johnson's work story by story (an analysis that need not be repeated here). In all the stories, Johnson's Buddhist vision fails to lead to the final deconstruction of racial opposites; rather it repeatedly privileges white hegemony insofar as "Johnson's alternatives to race-conscious thinking have relevance to, and thus value for, only the rarest, most privileged, lightest-skinned, Black men, and virtually no Black women" (64). Continues Cunningham: "It is simply untrue that slaves could pass out of slavery by attaining self-knowledge, that they could escape from the slavecatcher or a lynching mob by renouncing the 'Self.' Likewise, contemporary African Americans cannot create jobs and opportunities out of Buddhist, Allmuserian, phenomenological, martial arts, or any other style of transcendental thinking. As Johnson demonstrates clearly in his fiction, these practices are beneficial only to those African Americans who already have escaped the more serious material and physical hazards of racism" (65)—as William Harris has (and, let us not forget, Johnson himself). Unfortunately, concrete racial oppression cannot merely be "thought away."

Johnson criticizes the Black Aesthetics and Black Power movements for simply reversing the terms of oppression, usurping white supremacy with black-African supremacy; these reversals, he insists, stand against Johnson's own efforts to achieve a racial non-dualism (see "Ghettoization of Black Intellectuals"). This non-dualism will lead, he believes, beyond DuBois's dualistic "double-consciousness," on to a more open "polyconsciousness" that will free black thinking and writing from its self-inflicted "ghettoization" (Little 14-15, *Turning* 85-93). But in spite of Johnson's efforts in his stories to bring to fruition the racial non-dualism of his Buddhist commitments, his work repeatedly relapses into racially dualistic thinking. For as Derrida reminds us in "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," binary thinking does not set up relationships of equivalence across the two terms, but rather inexorably privileges one over the other.

Which leads us to our final concern. Although Buddhism posits a non-dualistic universe beyond our empty discursive-linguistic constructs, Johnson's work evidences that we still speak in and through such formations and cannot apart from them. So how, then, can we fashion discourse better to reflect the unities that may, beyond language, cohere us as a human community? Problematically, even an identity constituted around racial hybridity itself would contain an inside and a concomitant outside—itself could accrete too much power to itself. This, I would argue, is precisely the problem in Johnson's thinking: it apotheosizes a mystical ideal of racial integration, but in doing so ends up expunging—indeed, discursively oppressing—mono-racial discourses on blackness. In thinking about the history of what he calls a Western metaphysics of presence, Derrida argues, "We have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is

alien to this history; we cannot utter a single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest” (“Structure” 24). Derrida’s metaphysics of presence is no different from Fuss’s discursive enclosures (which are their own systems of metaphysical presence); in trying to break free from these enclosures, language only relapses into other ones. Even if the possibility of escape can be thought, its articulation into language—into novels and stories that represent it in discourse—remains steadfastly elusive.

Johnson’s work does not bring to fruition the full potential of Buddhist non-dualistic thought in terms of real-time identity politics and the processes of discursive formation. I am not arguing that Buddhism does not simmer with potential for this type of progressive, deeply democratic thinking, but merely that the present novel does not go as far as it could and, I think, should. It is hard at this point not to lend at least some credence to Žižek’s scathing critique of the West’s appropriation of Buddhist thought to replace a more ideologically oppressive and exclusivist Christianity (14-15). Buddhism, it would seem, would be the perfect religious complement to efforts at non-totalizing, non-ideological thinking and democratic practice in present-day America. Although Žižek’s assessment is far too totalizing itself to take seriously, it does point out the extent to which Western Buddhisms may end up acting as a fetish: a replacement object, like a “relic of a dead person,” that enables us to hold on to the original object after we have lost it, “embodying the belief which we officially renounce,” through which the original object “magically continues to live.” In this manner, our Western “post-ideological cynical era” renounces belief in totalizing, ideologically exclusivist religion, while holding on to it through its embrace of “Western Buddhism,” which “enables you to fully

participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist game while sustaining the perception that you are not really in it, that you are well aware how worthless this spectacle is—what really matters to you is the peace of the inner Self to which you know you can always withdraw” (14-15). While I would not say this for all forms of Western Buddhism, I would soften Zizek’s critique to note that certain Western efforts to translate Buddhist theory into practice can themselves become nettled in local ideological narcissisms.

I believe Buddhist thinking serves as a truly rich conceptual resource for non-totalizing, discursively pluralist thinking. Which is why it concerns me that many of its Western instantiations and imaginative articulations, such as Johnson’s (and, as I argue in my other chapters, DeLillo’s and Kushner’s), fall short of bringing to fruition this potential for the opening of racial identity. These texts represent a fascinating ontological opening—the bodily individual opening upon a vast living world—but then become vexed when pressed to reflect this sublime interconnectivity into a discourse-identitarian field that best incarnates it. What would this field look like? Perhaps this is where I should step aside and allow the novels I discuss in my next chapter to attempt an answer. All we can say for now is that a discursive identity that reflects ontological continuity across human beings would a) mutually reconcile identitarian opposites (like black and white), b) without effacing and subsuming crucial differences (like Andrew’s blackness, which is absorbed in the name of non-dualism into a white identity construct). The question is a difficult one, and while Johnson’s innovations may offer us a useful imaginative technology for constructing more integrative identity communities, we will need to supplement them with the work of some other writers who are thinking across identity lines in equally fascinating but perhaps more useful ways.

Chapter Three
“More Life”: Knowledge, Ethics, and Mystical Body
in Tony Kushner’s “Angels in America”

Tony Kushner’s stage play “Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes” (1992) ruminates over the capacity of the mind to know. What enables or limits knowledge of the self, the other, and world? The character Hannah Pitt suggests, “You can’t live in the world without an idea of the world, but it’s living that makes the ideas. You can’t wait for a theory, but you have to have a theory” (2:145). She illuminates the tension inherent in confronting the world with a pre-made idea of it while remaining receptive and amenable to aspects of the world that might defy this conceptual framework. In asserting that “it’s living that makes the ideas,” she goes on to imply that an idea of the world must remain open, additive, and amenable to revision; and as the rest of Kushner’s play shows, if not, the consequences can be devastating.

As they are for Prior, the play’s protagonist, who is suffering keenly in mind and body from AIDS in the 1980s, when this sickness asserted itself as a scientific conundrum and when the few medical resources devised for its easing were being channeled only to the most privileged. The play lays out an array of “theories” of the world—such as Marxist Equality, Hegelian Progress, American Justice, and Mormon Redemption—and interrogates how accurately or successfully each describes the content of “the world.” Do these theories account for enough of the objective reality of the surrounding world to legitimate them as cognitive systems and draw our allegiance toward them? Or do they, as Thomas Docherty says of the effects of ideology in general, “reduce” “the Subject...to an engagement with and confirmation of its own rational processes rather than being committed to an engagement with the material alterity of an

objective world” (8)? Do such theories of the world give us “the face of the Other” in its alterity—*das Ding*—or are they merely opaque, self-referential, ultimately narcissistic structures of cognition (26)? Within Kushner’s literary imagination, the final test for these frameworks of intelligibility is whether or not they can make intelligible sense of the tragedy of Prior’s decaying body and pending death.

“Angels in America” calls attention to a panoply of what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls the “grand narratives” of the West; although various terms have been devised for this idea, the play calls them summarily “Theories,” and, respecting this nomenclature, so will I.^{xxvi} Not least of these Theories (both for Lyotard as well as for Kushner) is Marxism. The play’s character Prelapsarianov describes this “Grand Theor[y]” as having been formulated in the “Classic Texts” (1:14) by Karl Marx himself and then translated into practice in the former U.S.S.R. The title of the second part of Kushner’s play, *Perestroika*, joins the historical incidence of communism’s demise with the sense, evoked by the title of the first part, *Millennium Approaches*, that the world is entering a new era. *Perestroika* opens with “Prelapsarianov,” “the World’s Oldest Living Bolshevik,” announcing that whereas the “Red Blooming gave us Praxis, True Praxis, True Theory married to Actual Life,” the present “Sour Little Age” lies bereft of the “Grand Theories” that might structure a conceptual map or “idea” of the world that might mobilize “Change” (1:14). These “Grand Theories” structure “one all-knowing glance” at the “order of creation” (1:14): a lens through which to “glance” at the “order of creation” that gives one the assurance of being “all-knowing.” Such grand narratives as a secular Hegelian notion of Progress, a right-wing Reaganite political conservatism, and a late-1980s brand of liberal progressivism fashionable among New York City’s gay scene,

each comes with its own comprehensive script of the world and a related set of political priorities. And yet, again, amidst all of these structures remains a suffering existent, Prior, who faces the glowering ineradicability of his pending death. These structures fail to hear his cry for “More Life.” American Justice, with Ronald Reagan at its helm, failed to mobilize national resources for the cure of AIDS sufferers in general; and Louis, Prior’s lover, abandons him because his own Grand Theory—an inevitable modern humanistic Progress—cannot account for let alone speak to the Prior’s suffering.

Given the crisis of knowledge that the plays wants to dramatize, what other forms of cognition does it then underwrite? In interrogating the legitimacy of the grand narratives of the West, to be sure, the play is doing nothing new; it merely repeats a longer line of interrogation operative across various levels of culture in the West (operative, as various historians of ideas would have it, from Nietzsche on, or from Horkheimer and Adorno on, or from the 1960s on, etc.). However, I would like to argue in this chapter that Kushner’s play is making a particular intervention in this larger deconstructive history, one that goes beyond merely pointing out the limits that discourse places on human cognition. In the play, these Grand Theories crumble, and, as they do, so do concomitant representations of the body. The play proliferates images of bodies bursting apart—crushed, wounded, punctured, pulverized. Theory structures a knowledge as much of the self as of the world, and one way to read these images of the body symbolically would be to suggest that, as these structures of knowledge disintegrate, so do the bodies to which they give coherence, meaning, and form. And yet, the play also wants to imagine forms of gnosis that arise out of the resulting non-cohesive body. If Theory provides self-sure epistemological girders for a knowledge of the self

and world, then what other forms of knowledge become thus enabled as Theory—its world and body—fragments into pieces? In my reading, Tony Kushner is both mourning over the broken bodies that lie scattered across his play while finding among them the condition of possibility for more mystical, direct ways of knowing operative apart from Theory: a gnosis that arises in the absence of Theory. These modes of knowing supplement the cognitive function of Theory with a gnosis that, exceeding discourse and rational cognition, emerges as bodies first split open, but then go on to fuse, interfuse, commune, and finally enter into moments of powerful recognition. The deep intersubjectivity that results—not communism, Mormonism, American justice, Hegelian Progress, or 1980s gay rights—is what structures for Prior the community of healing and care that might answer his cry for “More Life.”

Beautiful Theories

“Angels in America” puts into play a set of classic metanarratives, or what Prelapsarianov calls “Grand Theories,” and tests their ability to do two things: 1) to render the world knowable, and, thereby, 2) to render the world better. Leo Bersani might rephrase this second criterion by asking the extent to which the represented Theories are more “complicit with life or with death” (179) as regards Prior, who is afflicted with AIDS. Louis, Prior’s partner of eight years, is overtaken with a sense of the world as driven by the historical dialectics that unfold inexorably upon Progress. This is his Theory, his grand narrative of the world. When he intimates to some Orthodox Rabbis that he fears he will abandon his partner, they ask, “Why would a person do such a thing?” he responds,

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

This Theory sets out to render the world knowable through its description of it (gnosis) and to inform, therefore, a set of practices that might make it better (praxis). A narrative of Hegelian Progress gives Louis "one all-knowing glance" whose structure of knowledge cannot, ironically, incorporate Prior's level of sickness. Louis' "sense of the world" cannot incorporate the brutal reality of Prior's "vomit," "sores and disease," and the "death" these portend (1:25). This Theory demonstrates a failure not only in gnosis but in ethical praxis as well. It fails to inform Louis' actions so that they contribute to Prior's search for "More Life"; a way of knowing the world organized around Hegelian progress effectively hands Prior over to his worst fear—abandonment. "It's 1986, and there's a plague," relays Prior, "half my friends are dead and I'm only 31, and every...morning I wake up and I think Louis is next to me in the bed and it takes me long minutes to remember...that this is real, it isn't just an impossible, terrible dream."

Belize, a former lover and close friend of Prior's, accuses Louis' imagination of being animated with "Big Ideas"—"Big Ideas are all you love," "Louis and his Big Ideas" (2:94). It is precisely the failure of these ideas to incorporate the irreducible elements of human suffering and death that cause it to fail on a practical ethical level. America, to Belize, is "just big ideas and stories, and people dying, and people like you" (2:94). Belize lambasts the forms of abstraction that fail to take into account "people dying" and that therefore fail to mobilize action. "You cry," he tells Louis, "but you

endanger nothing in yourself. It's like the idea of crying when you do it. Or the idea of love" (1:83). When Louis, after leaving Prior, seeks to defend himself and explain his actions, he contends, "You can love someone and fail them. You can love someone and not be able to..." But Prior interjects, "You *can*, theoretically, yes. A person can, maybe an 'editorial' you can love, Louis, but not *you*, specifically you, I don't know, I think you are excluded from that general category" (1:79). "Theoretically," Hegelian Progress renders the surrounding world legible and cognizable—offering "one all-knowing glance" of the world and human life—but it fails, tragically, to produce ways of seeing that register the suffering of Prior and ways of being that lead to its practical caretaking. Prior, hearing Louis' justifications for his abandonment, tells him to come back when he has scars, "I want to see black and blue, Louis, I want to see blood"—evidently what Louis' Theory lacks (1:87).

To put it in Leo Bersani's words, a modern-Hegelian notion of Progress is, in the balance, more complicit with death here than with life, lacking the capacity to mobilize the caretaking demanded by the specificity of Prior's sickness. But if a positivist Hegelian Progress fails to lead to positive ethical caretaking, so does a certain brand of religious fundamentalism. Joe and Harper are a Mormon couple who move to New York City from Salt Lake City, displaced from Mormonism's cultural center of gravity. Joe discovers, along the course of the play, not only that he is gay but that he is either incapable or unwilling to continue the tortured labor of suppressing it. As Joe spends more time outside the house, walking through the park at night, observing New York's late-night cruising culture from its periphery, Harper becomes increasingly disconnected with reality and sinks into a Valium addiction that induces intense, life-like

hallucinations. By a dramatic turn of events, Joe meets Louis (Prior's ex-lover) at the courthouse at which they both work, and they begin a romantic love affair that draws Joe even further way from Harper. Symmetrical to each other this way, both Louis and Joe abandon their respective partners, if only emotionally. Their respective views of the world fail to take into account the specific phenomenon of both Prior's and Harper's suffering.

They leave their partners to die. In his untranslated lecture "*Faire Vivre et Laisser Mourir: La Naissance du Racisme*" ("To Make-Live and Let-Die: The Birth of Racism"), Michel Foucault argues that up until the eighteenth century, state power over life and death was realized in its ability to kill the subject: the power to "make-die." If one were a good citizen, one were left alone and allowed to live. If one were a bad subject, one was made to die. However, he argues, the function of the state in the West transformed in the nineteenth century into a bio-political structure that reversed this logic, now articulating the power to "*to make-live or to let-die*" (39). While Foucault is thinking specifically of the function of race in the segmenting of society—delineating whom the state will make-live and whom let-die—we could abstract his language here usefully toward our reading of the function of Theory in "Angels in America." Louis' "sense of the world" does not incorporate Prior's suffering such that it motivates Louis effectively to abandon Prior. In Mike Nichols' HBO film production, Prior is figured in one scene alone in his apartment, on the floor, unable to stand and defecating on himself (1:47-48). Joe's abstract ideas regarding Mormon morality likewise strip him of the practical energy to address the psychological and emotional suffering of his wife Harper. At one point, the police find her in the park at night, wandering and lost in a

hallucination, eating away at a tree “like a beaver.” As regards Prior’s suffering existence, modern Progress as well as Mormonism both, rather than make-live, “let-die.”

Moreover, the play specifically dwells on the Reagan administration’s flat non-response to the AIDS epidemic, a catastrophic governmental failure spurred on by the rise of Moral Majority and a renewed right-wing antagonism against gays (Fisher 12). The closing scene of the play is set at Central Park’s Bethesda Plaza, a location that evokes both the biblical story of the Bethesda angel, who healed the sick, and also Bethesda, Maryland, where the National Institute of Health is located: the governmental instrumentality through which the secular healing of research and medical funding should flow. But, as Prior sees it, in 1980s America, a gay is “just a parody...of someone who counted. We don’t count; faggots; we’re just a bad dream the real world is having, and the real world is waking up” (1:168). “A Gay Fantasia on *National* Themes,” the play is thinking specifically of the ways in which America, the nation, leaves its own to die. Accordingly, Belize tells Louis, “‘America’ is what Louis loves. Well I hate America, Louis. I hate this country. It’s just big ideas, and stories, and people dying, and people like you” (1:94). As the character Roy Cohn echoes on his death bed, “Americans have no use for the sick. Look at Reagan: He’s so healthy he’s hardly human....That’s America. It’s just no country for the infirm.”

The AIDS-afflicted gay American population was not, Kushner felt, considered part of the citizenry of the U.S. population to which America’s collective-governmental caretaking extended. Roy Cohn is one of a very small number of power brokers who attain a special dispensation of the experimental HIV drug AZT. But Roy is very clear that he “labels” himself so as to create a viable political identity for his own survival: as

he says of himself, “Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man...who fucks around with other guys” (1:46); he does not have AIDS, he has “liver cancer.” The all too real gay American population with AIDS, however, remained within a realm of political invisibility from which the play was an effort, on various levels, to make it emerge. Hence Prior’s insistence, at the end of the play, that “We won’t die secret deaths anymore.” “We Will be Citizens” (2:146). This calling-forth into the space of political visibility reminds us of Giorgio Agamben’s observation that, within the modern state, “the so-called sacred and inalienable rights of man prove to be completely unprotected at the very moment it is no longer possible to characterize them as rights of the citizens of a state” (125). Prior cries out for “More Life” at the same time that he affirms that “We will be Citizens,” suggesting that part of the play’s cry is for the recognition of the gay American population as part of the citizenry entitled to adequate governmental funding. The idea of “citizenship” as political subjectivity persists as an *idée fixe* across Kushner’s entire body of speaking and writing (as when, for instance, he charged the graduating class of 2002 at Vassar College to create a place for themselves as “Citizens of the World” [Mock]).

Kushner’s project to usher the gay population into political visibility (a project that includes gay marriage, etc.) revolves around the understanding that large-scale metanarratives—from Mormonism, to Hegelian Progress, to the “idea” of America—strip away the visibility of whole segments of humanity, expelling them from internal circuits of ethical attention and practical care. “America,” as Belize points out, is only so many “Big Ideas” that float “Up in the air,” “too far off the earth to pick out the details” of Prior’s open wounds. Louis’ secular Progress “can’t,” as he says, “incorporate sickness

into his sense of how things are supposed to go.” Joe’s Mormonism fails to legitimate his connection with Harper as a fellow human who sins: “maybe what I really love in her is the part of her that’s farthest from the light, from God’s love;” “I loved it that she was always wrong...like one step out of step. In Salt Lake City that stands out. I never stood out, on the outside, but inside, it was hard for me. To pass” (1:53). Although Mormonism claims to offer its adherents “one all-knowing glance” of life and the world—a comprehensive gnosis—it is on the basis of this Mormonism that Joe disavows his “spiritual” connection to Harper. Theory remains, here, inadequate to concrete human need.

Not only do the play’s grand narratives structure a sort of ethical blindness, but they breed mutual hostilities across political-identitarian differences. For instance, Joe and Louis, each having abandoned their respective partners, develop a romantic affair in spite of the fact that Joe’s Mormonism and Louis’ progressive liberalism could not be more at odds, ideologically.

Louis: But the Republican party...

Joe: Responsible for everything bad and evil in the world.

Louis: Throw Reagan in the pile and you’re not far off.

Joe: If people like you didn’t have President Reagan to demonize where would you be?

Louis: If he didn’t have people like me to demonize where would *he* be?

Joe tries then to initiate a form of thinking that transcends their political-ideological difference, to little effect:

Joe: I’m not your enemy. Louis.

Louis: I never said you were my...

Joe: Fundamentally, we both want the same thing.

Louis: I don’t think that’s true. (2:71)

Joe appeals to their common humanity—that fundamentally they both want the same thing as human beings—but Louis trumps this identification with the re-assertion of their differences along the lines of political and religious identity, calling him a “married probably bisexual Mormon Republican closet case.” When it later comes to light for Louis that Joe had written a judge’s decisions to a set of cruel hyper-conservative court decisions, their sense of political-ideological difference heats, boils, and foment into a full-on fist fight. They break up. Later in the play, the same conservative/liberal, left/right divisions join race to motivate Roy Cohn to call Belize “The Negro night nurse, my negation,” to which Belize responds, “Everything I want is in the end of you” (2:75). Roy Cohn is a Jewish hyper-conservative, and Belize is a liberal black-Puerto Rican: here race overlays political-ideological difference, producing a mutual “negation” in which the other becomes an object of aggression, even extermination. Belize, perhaps the most sensitive and humane person in the play, is driven by these differences to want the “end” of Roy.

What these scenes demonstrate is that the grand narratives of the play—from the ideologies of progressive liberalism to those of Mormonism, from the political codes of the left to those of the right—exist first and foremost in a state of mutual epistemological blindness and ethical denegation. As Foucault reminds us in “A Discourse on Language,” the world does not present us with an immediately “legible face.” Rather, what he calls “discourse” invests subjectivity with a network of meanings—“an activity [consisting] of writing in the first case, of reading in the second and exchange in the third” (228)—that produce this outlying world in a certain way. Kushner’s Prelapsarianov cries, “Show me the words that will reorder the world” (1:14). The words

he seeks are ones that will “order” the world, for this is precisely what “words” do. Both this opening scene, as well as the dramatic unfolding of “Angels in America,” convey the sense that the “words” constituting the “Beautiful Theories” of the West function to render the world both cognitively recognizable and linguistically namable. At the same time that they serve this cognitively and linguistically positive function, however, they serve a cognitively and linguistically negative function as well. These discourses establish what Foucault usefully calls a “framework of intelligibility”—the parameters of acceptable knowledge and what is excluded from this. As such, in its “will to truth,” discourse operates on a logic of both inclusion and exclusion. Insofar as it excludes, discourse constitutes the epistemological “violence that we do to things, or, at all events...a practice we impose upon them” (219).

Kushner’s play is similarly thinking about the limits of these larger frameworks of intelligibility and the forms of “violence” they do to things. “You who live in this Sour Little Age cannot imagine the grandeur of the prospect we gazed upon: like standing atop the highest peak in the mighty Caucasus, and viewing in one all-knowing glance the mountainous, granite order of creation. You cannot imagine it. I weep for you” (2:14). Communism, with its “Classic Texts” that project a world consumed in alienation and objectification, laid out indeed the geography of meanings of the entire “order of creation.” Standing atop the mountain of this Theory, Prelapsarianov had once been empowered with “one all-knowing glance” of the surrounding world: an epistemological certitude that renders the world legible, knowable, and navigable. However, as history has shown us, communism’s comprehensive gnosis failed to account for the basic rights of segments of humanity whom it treated savagely under the sign of Equality. It is upon

this denegated, exteriorized content that Theory enacts both epistemic and concrete “violence.”

In Kushner’s play, what do the depicted “Grand Theories” take into account? What do they denegate, exteriorize, and violate? To use Leo Bersani’s words, what are their “life and death possibilities,” their “complicity with life or with death”? In “Angels in America,” such “all-knowing glances” as Republicanism, Liberalism, Mormonism, Orthodox Judaism, Communism, and Hegelian Progress each in its way omits from within its field of visibility whole segments of humanity that it constitutes as other. For Louis, this is Prior’s suffering body. For Joe, it is his wife’s and his own iniquitous humanity. For Roy Cohn, it is his “Negro night nurse,” anyone associated with the political left (like Ethel Rosenberg, whom he helped bring to execution). And for America as a nation, it is an entire segment of humanity that, in the 1980s, was dying with AIDS without governmental support. The play’s “Beautiful Theories” all, in nightmarish collusion, deprive Prior of the care that will answer his plea for “More Life.” All of these grand narratives of the world, together with the political and religious identities with which they invest their adherents, are in the balance more complicit, we might say, with death than with life.

Disintegrating Bodies of Theory

As a result of the ethical and moral failures of these Theories, “Angels in America” is shot through with a sense that they are crumbling apart. By extension, it is also shot through with imagery of the planet losing its spherical integrity and protective layering in consequence. Prelapsarianov makes a direct correlation between the “words that will

reorder the world” and that “world” being left “naked, prey to the forces of chaos”:

“Show me the words that will reorder the world....If the snake sheds his skin before a new skin is ready, naked he will be in the world, prey to the forces of chaos. Without its skin he will be dismantled, lose coherence and die. Have you, my little serpents, a new skin?” (2:14). A Theory functions to englobe the world within language and hence cognition—an understanding of the world that might give it a legible face. Without this epistemic “covering,” the world, as the play depicts it, is subject to centrifugal forces tending toward disintegration and chaos. The play in this way figures Theory as a sort of skin, a membrane that encloses and ensures integrity and coherence; Theory supplies this to the mind, as skin does to the body. In Kushner’s play “Slavs!” a girl asks: “And what sense are we to make of the wreckage? Perhaps the principles were always wrong. Perhaps it is true that social justice, economic justice, equality, community, end to master and slave, the withering away of the state: These are desirable but not realizable on Earth” (183). She lists recent Western metanarratives of progress only to highlight their ultimate “wreckage.” “How are we supposed to proceed without Theory” now that we know that it is “desirable but not realizable on Earth”? “What System of Thought have these Reformers to this *mad swirling planetary disorganization*” (“Angels” 1:14, italics mine). Kushner here supplies imagery of the world stripped of Theory and, consequently, swirling centrifugally apart.

This disintegrative imagery scatters all across “Angels in America.” Ethel Rosenberg’s ghost returns to remind Roy Cohn that “History is about to crack wide open” as the “Millenium approaches” (2:118). Harper is consequently overtaken by an obsessional preoccupation with the hole in the ozone layer of the earth,

“imagining...beautiful systems dying, old fixed orders spiraling apart”; “everywhere, things are collapsing, lies surfacing, systems of defense giving way” (1:16-17). Harper tells her hallucinated friend, Mr. Lies, that “The end of the world is at hand” (1:233); he tells her at another point about how he “Tore a big old hole in the sky” (1:151). The angel that erupts into Prior’s world likewise invokes the cosmic “edifice awry [that] we sink plumb and straighten” (1:62). These images of global deterioration and disintegration remind one of Frederic Jameson’s assessment of the postmodern moment as one bereft of the “cognitive maps” that might give shape to cognition. He takes the interior of the Bonaventure Hotel in Chicago to be a space that “transcend[s] the capacities of the human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (25). This maplessness gives way to what he calls a “hyperspace,” a measure of time/space that is, as Prelapsarianov puts it, “mad swirling planetary disorganization”: the coherence of the external world swirling apart into so many disparate unrelated fragments.

Theory, however, not only gives coherence to the world but also to the very self, functioning similarly to give coherence to the body, to give it protective “skin”: as Theory disintegrates, so does the body. Prelapsarianov invokes this epidermal imagery and its cohering function for the self: “If the snake sheds his skin before a new skin is ready, naked he will be in the world, prey to the forces of chaos. Without its skin he will be dismantled, lose coherence and die. Have you, my little serpents, a new skin?” (2:14). To this question, the rest of the play replies negatively. It does so by making the classical equation between the earth and the body, such as is implicit in the Hebraic name Adam (“earth”). Prior at one point is visited by two ancestors of his family’s lineage who

together chant a Hebrew prayer that includes the phrase “Ha-adam, ha-gadol,” which translates as “the large man, the large earth” (1:88), a homology between body and globe implying that the disintegration visited upon one likewise visits the other. On the strength of this homology, the Angel compares Prior’s “Battered heart, Bleeding Life,” with a “Universe of Wounds” “dissolving of the Great Design” (2:118, 134).

Harper at one point makes the body/earth homology explicit: “People are like planets, you need thick skin” (1:17). The thick skin of the planet is its ozone layer, “a pale blue halo, a gentle, shimmering aureole encircling the atmosphere encircling the earth....Danger from without....[G]uardian angels, hands linked, make a spherical net, a blue-green nesting orb, a shell of safety for life itself” (1:16). However, this imagery gives way to the forces of chaos that ensue when the Theories that cognitively englobe the world give way. There is no new Theory to comprehend the world, such that the body/globe are “collapsing, lies surfacing, systems of defense giving way” (1:17). “Skin burns, birds go blind, icebergs melt. The world’s coming to an end” (1:28), giving way to the “cosmic searing of skin” and “boiling of blood” (2:52).

The grand Theories represented in the play disintegrate, dismantling cognition, we discover, not only of the world but also of the self. As a result, the play proliferates images of punctured, bleeding bodies and a punctured, bleeding earth. One of the grand narratives of the West that has been of especial preoccupation to Kushner is Mormonism (in fact, “Angels in America” first germinated as a poem about the Mormons who would hand out literature on the Freeman Street station by Kushner’s 1980s New York apartment [Mock]). The play develops the theme of Mormonism and its falling-apart as a system that can order Joe’s reality, and this discursive unraveling is figured through

imagery of corporeal pulverization. Joe describes his temple garments as a “second skin” in which he invests himself with a Mormon identity (2:163). However, Mormonism’s uncompromising heteronormativity crushes him: “Does it make any difference?” he asks Harper. “That I might be one thing within, no matter how wrong or ugly that thing is, so long as I have fought, with everything I have, to kill it. What do you want from me, Harper? More than that? For God’s sake, *there’s nothing left, I’m a shell*. There’s nothing left to kill” (1:40, italics mine). This evisceration of Joe’s insides takes physical form in an ulcer that strikes him (Kruger 162-163). The Mormon identity that should function as “Protection,” “Second skin” (2:69), is corrosively hollowing out his interiority, leading, moreover, to fantasies of pulverization. Joe says, “I pray for God to crush me, break me up into little pieces and start all over again.” Harper, too, suffers from the effects of her failure to “measure up” to Mormon identity and imagines herself being “batter[ed] away...till all my joints come apart, like wax, and I fall into pieces” (1:37). This implosive bodily violence, which plays out on the stage of the body, leads Joe to want to divest himself of the garments of his Mormon identity—“To shed your skin, every old skin, one by one and then walk away, unencumbered, into the morning” (1:72-73).

Without a comprehensive Theory of the world that might concomitantly invest the self within a coherent, solid identity, the body becomes punctured, crushed, pulverized. However, while on one level bodily disintegration results from Theory’s crisis of legitimation, another the punctured body functions, in “Angels in America,” as its first cause. I am speaking specifically of the AIDS-ridden body. When Prior finds out he has this sickness, he imagines his body as the earth under attack: “I feel like something

terrifying is on its way, you know, like a missile from outer space, and it's plummeting down towards the earth, and I'm ground zero" (1:98). As Jan Zita Grover remarks in "AIDS, Keywords, and Cultural Work":

A significant number of people I've known with AIDS and HIV infection have talked about their jarring sense of no longer feeling themselves as an integrated self, but instead as a container for the virus. I've sat with people who just stare at their arm and say, "I know what's going on in there, it looks just the same but there's this thing in there, this universe in me, that's eating me out from the inside"—this really jarring, disorienting sense that you are now merely an encasement—you are inhabited by a world, by a universe, the swarm. (qtd. in Geis 204)

The play's "beautiful" Theories are seeing their dissolution, and, with them, the unity of the body. However—lest we see this disintegration as causeless—the angel of death wreaking this dual demise is the AIDS virus itself.

The Open Body

So far, I have discussed representations in "Angels in America" of Theory's cognitive structures disintegrating and concomitant images of the pulverization and unraveling of both the planet and human body. I want now to turn more specific attention to the latter—the play's representations of identity and the body. Theory falls under erasure as a solid foundation for the construction of coherent subjectivity in Kushner's play. And the play, to be sure, mourns this circumstance. The characters above are suffering, each in different ways, from the gradual loss of the larger structures of meaning that might render the self and the world—and the self-in-the-world—"legible," comprehensible. Indeed, subjective disintegration is very much at the heart of Kushner's project in "Angels in America." In the "Afterword" to "Perestroika," for instance, Kushner

considers that “Americans pay high prices for maintaining the myth of the Individual” (2:149). He refers to the era in which he writes as one that proffers a fuller sense of the costs of sustaining the myth of the Individual; “And maybe in this spacious, under- and depopulated, as yet only lightly inscribed country, the Individual will finally expand to its unstable, insupportably swollen limits, and pop” (2:150). He then goes on to refer to one of his greatest literary influences, Bertolt Brecht, whose *Lehrstucke* (“learning plays”) treat “the painful dismantling, as revolutionary necessity, of the individual ego. This dismantling is often figured, in the learning plays, as death” (2:151). Similarly, “Angels in America” represents the “dismantling” of the individual through imagery of physical disintegration, and this is, on the one hand, a form of “death,” loss.

However, on the other, it is, for Kushner, simultaneously the condition of possibility for an important gain. Brecht’s drama depicted “the process of loss involved in letting go of the richness, and the riches, that accompany successful self-creation” (2:151). Likewise for the characters I describe above, the process of unraveling is indeed one of “loss” and “letting go of the richness” of a coherent self-identity; however, it is equally the beginning point of a salutary process of “self-creation.” The process of subjective disintegration Kushner is representing here gives way to something profoundly productive on the level of selfhood and identity. It is this dimension of the play that most powerfully bespeaks its efforts to think through and beyond the destructive power of Theory. The splitting-apart of the physical body is the condition of possibility for a form of intersubjectivity that is of particular conceptual resource to Kushner. He intimates this in his “Afterword” by affirming that “The smallest indivisible human unit is two people, not one; *one is a fiction*” (2:155, italics mine). Although no doubt the images I lay out

above are profoundly ones of loss, they together constitute Kushner's aim to put the "singularity" of the "Individual" under erasure and to reconstitute them into the "two."

Charles Taylor describes the notion of selfhood that prevailed before the seventeenth century as "porous." This was a self whose "inner" mental content was inextricably bound up in an enchanted world teeming with spiritual forces, both good and evil—demons, angels, spells and incantations, holy relics containing spiritual power; these "external" phenomena interacted directly with the "inner" human spirit in a way that rendered our modern "inside/outside geography" at that time unthinkable. The more recent, secularized definitions of selfhood emerging in the seventeenth century, what Taylor calls the "buffered" self, were spatialized around the boundary of the body, which served as a material buffer demarcating the new "inner" content of mind from the new "outer" content of world (31-43). Kushner here is trying to evoke a self that is not "buffered" but rather "porous," open and connected in an ontologically substantive way not only to the outer world but also other living humans. On the one hand, the images of bodily disintegration I describe above lead to "loss" and "death"; but juxtaposed to these depictions are others that proceed out the idea that "one is a fiction" and into Kushner's vision for the interconnected "two."

Joe and Louis intimate an intuition of such interconnectivity, even if they fail to realize its potential to unite them across their political-identitarian boundaries. "Freedom is where we bleed into one another," Joe tells Louis. Their similarity as equally free human beings creates a space for them to think beyond such political dyads as "Right and Left. Freedom is the far horizon where lines converge" (2:37). However, when Joe tries to initiate a form of thinking that transcends their political-ideological difference, he does

so to little effect, and they rebound back into their mutually exclusive personal/political identities:

Joe: I'm not your enemy. Louis.

Louis: I never said you were my...

Joe: Fundamentally, we both want the same thing.

Louis: I don't think that's true. (2:71)

Joe appeals to their common humanity—that fundamentally they both want the same thing as equally free human beings—but Louis trumps this unifying connection with the re-assertion of their differences along the lines of political and religious identity, labeling Joe a “married probably bisexual Mormon Republican closet case.” At another point, Louis suggests a continuity on a more material, corporeal, level, invoking the ways in which, through smell, we internalize the molecular materiality of the other. “We have five senses, but only two that go beyond the boundaries...of ourselves.” Smell, for instance, is “made of the molecules of what you're smelling. Some part of you, where you meet the air, is airborne.” “Little molecules of Joe...Up my nose” (2:30). Louis prevails upon this logic to make a sexual advance on Joe, eroticizing this interconnectivity; yet they fall short as a couple of the *ethical* potential of this interconnectivity: its potential, that is, to unite them through and beyond their political-identitarian differences—to get them to see that “Fundamentally, we both want the same thing.” Their differences erupt in a fist fight and, ultimately, their break up.

The resource denied them that enables other characters to reconcile their differences is precisely the “porous” body that I have invoked. The play proliferates images of individual bodies constituting pluralized, diffuse, and “porous” subjectivities. The angel, first and foremost, that appears to Prior announces, “You are Mere Flesh. I I I

I am Utter Flesh” (2:39). Her “Utter Flesh” is the site of a libidinal energetic that differentiates her from human “Mere Flesh.” She differentiates herself by saying, “Not Physics but Ecstasies Makes the Engine Run” (2:39). Jeffrey Kripal describes 1960s American countercultural spirituality and the discourse it produces around the “enlightenment of the body”; it conceptualized the body as the site of energies divine in nature and continuous with those of the vibrational energy spanning the earth as a whole. Kripal describes the “energy mysticism” of this American counterculture as divinizing these human/planetary emanational phenomena. Prior’s visiting angel likewise interfuses the divine with the erotic in such moments as when she “contacts” Prior even before she breaks into his apartment in bodily form, causing his body to respond in sexual arousal. Mike Nichols’ film version depicts the angel later drawing Hannah up into the air with “a long, hot kiss,” inducing in her an “enormous orgasm.” (2:118). Provocatively, in the film their bodies never physically touch, it being presumably “Ecstasies” that, “Mak[ing] the Engine Run,” bridges their two bodies through libidinal-energetic interaction. This sexual energy vibes across physical space, drawing the sexually repressed Hannah into intense libidinal interaction with the angel. This suggests that this ecstatic sexual spirituality is not confined within the spatiality of the angel’s body.

“Utter Flesh,” the angel’s libidinal-energetic constitution is further evolved than Hannah’s or Prior’s. Tellingly, for the mid-century Tantric practitioners whom Kripal describes, the body is evolving across the ages into a vehicle for enlightenment, drawing humans progressively toward a realization of their divine inner powers, which are libidinal in nature. In the same manner, the angel is a “divine emanation” (1:3). For the angel, “The Body is the Garden of the Soul” (2:40), such that the soul, here explicitly

libidinized, cultivates the organic materiality of the body without being in any way confined *within* it. Her subjectivity is diffuse, unendingly plural and unconfined to the apparent unity/solidity of the body. Throughout the play, her invocation of herself as “I I I I” calls forth a multiplicity of subjectivity, a plurality of being, within the space of her “Flesh.” This constitutes her as an “infinite aggregate myriad entity” (2:46), “four divine emanations....manifest in One” (1:3), that are a unified “entity” yet diffuse and plural, even hermaphroditic. As a result of this subjective diffusion, she takes on a presence that is elusive and present at multiple locations at a time: “Hiding from Me one place,” she warns, “you will find me in another. I I I I stop down the road, waiting for you” (2:46).

That she is fleshly in the same way that humans are—divinely sexual / sexually divine—suggests an analogy between the play’s angels and its humans. They are united by an ontological continuity that suggests that humans are more divine, and angels more human, that has been traditionally understood within Judeo-Christian thought. The angel repeatedly coughs, and, further evincing her humanity, announces, “I have torn a muscle in my thigh” (1:117). According to Prior, “they’re sort of fabulous and dull at once” (1:172), fabulous in their transcendent divinity, dull in their human-like fleshliness. It is telling that Prior will later look out upon the audience and close the play with “You are fabulous creatures, each and every one,” attributing the angelic stature of divinity outward to the human audience members. This blurring of the fabulous and dull is repeated in the blurring of the realm of theatrical illusion and the “real world” of the audience; in the forward to “Perestroika,” Kushner says that the staging should reveal that this is “*theatrical* illusion—which means it’s OK if the wires show, and maybe it’s good that they do, but the magic should at the same time be thoroughly amazing” (2:7).

Although the theatrical performance retains its illusory character, sealed off imaginatively from the space of the audience, the play's nature *qua* illusion constantly reasserts itself—pierces into the “real world” of the audience—in the form of exposed wires and raw stage-design infrastructure. Here again, the imagined distinction between illusion/audience, structured against the distinction between the fabulousness of the angelic and dullness of the human, falls under erasure. When the angel bursts in upon Prior's life, “A membrane has been broken” (2:8), the ontological membrane, that is, sustaining the distinction between these two orders of being. Prior closes the play with the final consequence of this: “You are fabulous creatures, each and every one.” Humans are “fabulous” as angels.

They are, as a result, as multiple, diffuse, and open. As Louis cries, “There's some sort of profound displacement going on here” (2:64), and this displacement refracts through Kushner's directions regarding casting, which call for a small cast of eight actors to play all 21 roles in the play. Although this may have in part had to do with funding restraints at the Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum, where the play was first produced, Kushner did not change these directions when the play was produced under a much larger budget at the Eureka Theater, or when the play was turned into a high-budget HBO mini-series. The same actor playing the angel also plays an anonymous homeless “Woman in the South Bronx.” When Hannah leaves Salt Lake City for New York City, leaving behind the angels of Mormonism in search of her son, the first person she comes in contact with is the displacement of an angel into homeless woman—resonating with the biblical idea that “we have entertained angels unawares.” This displacement of the angel echoes her warning that “Hiding from Me one place, you will find me in another. I

I I I stop down the road, waiting for you” (2:46). Furthermore, the same actor playing Belize, Prior’s faithful friend, also—oddly—plays Mr. Lies, the “imaginary friend” (1:4) whom Harper, her mind unsteadied by Valium, hallucinates. There is a thin membrane indeed separating the character who is perhaps the play’s truest “angel” in America—a figure of compassion and caretaking—and the deeply private brainchild of Harper’s psychic interiority. The play’s casting has the same actor osmote out of the hospital in which Belize works and into and out of Harper’s inner psyche, breaking down the barriers separating what Charles Taylor calls the “inside/outside geography” of human subjectivity. Finally, personal identity is further displaced by the way the play overrides the physical space separating its characters, bringing them into ever closer interpersonal proximity. Hannah gets a part-time job at the Mormon Visitor’s Center in Manhattan, and Harper, having left her apartment to wander the streets, camps out there. Prior sits with Harper viewing a diorama depicting the Mormon migration west. Louis and Joe appear magically in the diorama having a conversation that is taking place elsewhere. Yet this physical distance collapses as the two scenes—the Mormon diorama and Louis and Joe’s conversation—interfuse. Louis and Joe appear in the diorama itself, faintly visible and audible to Harper and Prior, who are in turn faintly audible to Louis and Joe (2:61-64). In “Angels in America,” individuality as a category undergoes a certain slippage resulting from the re-appearance of actors “down the road” in the guise of other characters; moreover, the spatial boundaries separating these characters from one another become increasingly porous as individuals merge into one another’s lives, creating a sort of interpenetrative universalism in which human relational proximity undercuts the discreteness of the “one.”

To what end is the play doing all this subtle work to open subjectivity? And how does this opening relate back to the crisis of knowledge arising out of the dissolution of Theory?

Threshold of Revelation

I opened this discussion analyzing the function of Theory in the play, the ways in which it both gives coherence to human knowledge, especially as regards cognition of the world and the human body. As a result of this relationship, insofar as the play's "Grand Theories" disintegrate in an era so deeply suspicious of the master narrative, so too does the play's metaphorology for the planet and the body. As regards specifically the body, there are two types of unraveling taking place in the play—a negative, destructive one, and positive, productive one. The negative one is riddled with imagery of pulverization and crushing and centrifugal disintegration. The positive one conveys itself as a re-imagination of the human subject taking shape across different lines: through the material porousness and diffusion of the body (dispersive molecules of one's odor), the libidinization of the body such that its erotic energy is an "ecstatic" that exceeds physical corporeal boundaries, the erosion or multiplication of identity that takes shape in the recurrence of the same actors in different character roles, and, finally, the osmosis of characters in and out of one another's "interior" psychic landscapes. As Theory crumbles, so does the body, but what I would identify as a crucial imaginative undertaking of the play is its efforts to enter into the space of this open, deconstructed self and there to discover the condition of possibility for a more expansive redefinition of subjectivity. This is an *open, metaphysically porous* model of subjectivity emerging from

the dissolution of the body-encapsulated self. Its specific purpose involves the conceptualization of forms of knowledge operative outside of the cognitive structures of Theory.

Discourse produces structures of cognition by which the subject can positively know the world. But in the wake of the dissolution of such discourses, or “Theories,” in “Angels in America,” another form of knowing emerges. And it has to do with the direct metaphysical interconnectivity mobilized by the opening of the self. This is no more apparent than in what Kushner in his stage directions calls the “*Mutual dream scene*. *Prior is at a fantastic makeup table, having a dream, applying the face. Harper is having a pill-induced hallucination. She has these from time to time. For some reason, Prior has appeared in this one. Or Harper has appeared in Prior’s dream. It is bewildering*” (1:30). The directions shape the scene so that it is difficult if not virtually impossible to tell who is in whose dream—whether Harper in Prior’s or Prior in Harper’s. That is, there is no central subject, no center of Cartesian subjectivity—be it the body, or the ego, or what Freud calls the “bodily ego” (*The Ego and the Id* 20). By decentering consciousness and its perceptual apparatus, this scene ushers both Harper and Prior into a disorienting experience of non-recognition: Harper: “Who are you?” Prior: “Who are you?” Harper: “What are you doing in my hallucination?” Prior: “I’m not in your hallucination. You’re in my dream.” Harper: “There must be some mistake here. I don’t recognize you” (1:31). The deceptiveness of appearances is echoed by Prior’s failure to recognize himself in the mirror as a “majest[ic]” “queen”: “I look like a corpse. A corpse. Oh my queen: you know you’ve hit rock-bottom when even drag is a drag” (1:31). Failing to recognize himself in his own body, he both invokes the idea of

Lacan's mirror stage and its "alienating identity" at the same time that he evinces the disorienting awareness that he does not know *where* his body is located right now: whether it is indeed in front of the "makeup table," or in his bedroom sleeping, or if all of this is located in fact within Harper's psychic hallucinatory dreamscape (if Harper can hallucinate the same actor playing Belize, then why can't she also hallucinate Prior?). From the outset, this scene confounds the coordinates by which we can imagine one character's individuality beginning and ending, the coordinates by which we can imagine the spatialization of subjectivity with respect to the other: who is inside *whose* self, where one ends the other begins. That is, a rupture of personal identity leads to a failure of recognition: recognition of both the self (who/what/where am I?) and of the other (who/what/where is he or she?).

Whereas Theory purports to expand knowledge—to give it a positive grasp on the self and world—the opening of the self here functions to restrict knowledge. We have called the play's Theories, after Jameson, cognitive maps, descriptions of the world that frame cognition and orient practice. Moreover, they outfit the subject in an identity that enables him or her to personalize the Theory, take it on, become part of it and live it out. But the open and porous self functions explicitly in this mutual dream scene to undermine the positivist cognitive claims of Harper's and Prior's respective identities:

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

Prior: I'm a homosexual.

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

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

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

It is telling that immediately after this, Harper engages in a nearly page-long monologic inquiry into the nature of the psyche, the nature of “the real world,” and the limits of *knowledge* (concluding that the imagination can make nothing new, so that “Nothing unknown is knowable” [1:32]). For what Harper and Prior experience as their own ontological porousness effectively “weakens” the positive forms of cognition laid out by their respective “churches.” This is something that Gianni Vattimo might call “weak ontology” (42), which is a sustained belief that a metaphysical reality exceeds language while asserting “the necessarily speculative and contestable character” of language in describing it (McClure 130). Prior and Harper release the self-assured knowledge of their respective “churches” here in a way that renders that knowledge tentative and semi-provisional. The open body “weakens” Theory.

Stanley Fish describes this weak knowledge as having two seemingly contradictory dimensions. Within what he calls the “postmodern” state of knowledge,

(1) I believe X to be true and (2) I believe that there is no mechanism, procedure, calculus, test, by which the truth of X can be necessarily demonstrated to any sane person who has come to a different conclusion....In order to assert something and mean it without qualification, I of course have to believe that it is true, but I don't have to believe that I could demonstrate its truth to all rational persons. The claim that something is universal and the acknowledgement that I couldn't necessarily prove it are logically independent of each other. The second does not undermine the first.... The problem is not that there is no universal—the universal, the absolutely true, exists, and I know what it is. The problem is that you know, too, and that we know different things, which [leaves us] with universal judgments that are irreconcilable, all dressed up and nowhere to go for an authoritative adjudication (Fish 34, 37).

Harper and Prior accede that each of their “churches” takes a certain moral stance against the other, but, caught in a state of epistemological befuddlement in this “mutual dream scene,” neither has a sufficient basis on which to argue whose “church” is right. It is as if

there were a silent acknowledgement that there is no purely objective ground upon to which to adjudicate the matter, so they let it go and move on with the more urgent work of relating. This release of absolutes happens, is indeed enabled, within the space of mutual interpenetration into which they enter through the gateway of the open body.

The ideologies to which Harper and Prior adhere hold in mutual antagonism. However, in order for them to be able to see far enough beyond the horizon of their respective Theories to encounter and experience each other as living breathing beings cut of the same human cloth, a certain release of positive knowledge becomes necessary. Both Mormonism and a late 1980s gay-liberationist politics functions not only to configure thought pertaining to the self and world, but also to mark its adherents with a social identity, one in which they invest themselves just as Joe does his temple garments—what Lacan calls “the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity,” which “will mark” the subject with its “rigid structure” (4). Hannah, Harper, and Joe are “Mormons,” Prior is a “homosexual,” Louis is a “gay liberal Jew,” Roy is a “right-wing Reaganite conservative,” and so on. Moreover, as I suggested earlier, the play’s Theories construe identities that hold in mutual exclusion, as they do Louis and Joe, as well as Roy and his “negation” Belize. However, in this mutual dream scene, Kushner strives to think through and beyond the Theories that enclose the human within an identity that alienates it as much from itself as the other. He foregrounds the cognitive limits of the ideologies that enclose the human within a social identity. My contention is, more specifically, that he is striving to avail upon the open and diffuse structure of the human for the purpose of theorizing an intersubjectivity that transcends the identitarian differences configured by the play’s grand narratives. Literally entering in upon each other in this inexplicable,

mystical manner, Harper and Prior each release their conviction that *their* respective “churches” are the one true church, able now to envisage each other in a new way.

The weakening of knowledge, as Vattimo points out, “allows me...to accept a measure of ‘myth’ in my life, which need not necessarily be translated in rational terms—ultimately reason too must be secularized in the name of charity” (93). The weakening of dogma into “myth” entails the secularizing “dissolution of metaphysical reason, of its claim to grasp true Being once and for all” (86): and this then can carve a wider path toward “charity,” which for Vattimo, a committed Catholic, is manifest in the virtue of love. And more to the point of my project in this chapter, this “weakening” of belief arises directly out of the opening of the human subject. It is precisely because Prior and Harper are “knowing” each other here in a way that presses them beyond their rational capacity that they can experience each other outside of the exclusive enclosures formed by Theory, religion, sexuality, identity politics, etc.

Put another way, while Harper and Prior’s ontological opening forecloses one type of knowledge, it amplifies another. A Theory structures one’s views, affects, and biases, particularly on a moral level. For instance, later in the play Prior meets Harper’s mother-in-law Hannah, a Mormon who has just moved to New York from Salt Lake City.

Prior: I’m sorry but it’s repellent to me. So much of what you believe.

Hannah: What do I believe?

Prior: I’m a homosexual. With AIDS. I can just imagine what you....

Hannah: No you can’t. Imagine. The things in my head. You don’t make assumptions about me, mister; I won’t make them about you.

Prior: Fair enough....I wish you would be more true to your demographic profile. Life is confusing enough. (2:102)

This for Prior, like the mutual dream scene, is cognitively “bewildering” and “confusing.” There are certain surface “demographic” codes of recognition by which Prior, a gay male living in 1980s New York City, can identify another person as Same or Other. Here as in the mutual dream scene with Harper, this cognitive capacity is terminally foreclosed: “No you can’t. Imagine. The things in my head,” the middle-aged Utah Mormon insists. The cognitive maps that guide Prior’s thinking cannot guide him into a direct knowledge of Hannah’s interiority (what is in her “head”), which remains opaque to him. On the other hand, while this scene shuts down the capacity of the mind to know let alone moralize upon and judge the other, the mutual dream scene adumbrates a direct, even mystical, knowledge of the other that illuminates deep empathic knowledge. It takes both Prior and Harper, in other words, right to “the very threshold of revelation” (1:33). As this mutual dream scene drives toward its climax, Prior and Harper become as affectively/ethically invested in each other as they are, at this moment, ontologically enmeshed in each other. Harper intuits that Prior is “really sick,” showing the extent to which at this “threshold of revelation” “You can see things...[like] how sick you are. Do you see anything about me?” she inquires (1:33).

Prior avers not only that “You are amazingly unhappy” but that “Your husband’s a homo.” While she is initially taken aback by this, she concedes that a powerful form of knowledge is at work here. Prior says that “I just looked at you, and there was....” Harper then finishes his sentence, their combined syntactical form reflecting the continuity they are experiencing in the moment: “A sort of blue streak of recognition...Like you knew me incredibly well” (1:34). Then, at this, Harper reveals an insight into Prior: “Deep inside you, there’s a part of you, the most inner part, entirely free of disease. I can see

that” (1:34). At this “threshold of revelation,” she enters into a knowledge of Prior that goes beyond his “demographic profile” and its constitutive socially constructed identities. Woven throughout this scene are meditations on the limits of knowledge, and yet this entire discussion is subsumed into Harper’s final revelatory insight: an insight that drives Harper into a more direct knowledge of the space “Deep inside” Prior, “the most inner part, entirely free of disease.”

This is a form of direct mystical knowledge unfolds through the very foreclosure of another, more self-assured form of rational cognition. According to Kevin Hart, Christian theology has historically been subtended by a “negative” strain that underscores religious “experience [as] mediated through representations or signs”; “humans experience a deferred or contextualized rather than absolute presence,” such that “any God concept is always already a representation, a sign, not a presence’ (qtd. in Neary 2). There may very well be a metaphysically and spiritually rich universe filled with energies and realities exceeding the confines of rational cognition and its linguistic prosthesis; the cognitive delimitation insisted upon by negative theology in no way denies the *thereness* of that metaphysical presence. In these scenes, “Angels in America” seems to be suggesting that such metaphysical excess is not deific but rather human. For Prior and Harper experience each other as engulfing metaphysical presences (they are “inside” each other), as immediate metaphysical presences (proffering “revelation”), and as metaphysical presences that confound rational cognition (Harper’s inconclusive ruminations on whether this is “real” or not). And yet, resonating with Vattimo’s “weak” knowledge, and a history of Western subversive “negative theology,” this mutual human connection and the inter-ontological space into which it ushers them exceeds the

comprehensive maps laid out by Theory. Harper and Prior accept that their own “churches” offer maps of the self/world inadequate to the sublime irreducibility of the human other, and the resulting delimitation of knowledge opens the space for an ethical “charity” (to use Vattimo’s word) that might otherwise be subsumed into a logic of ideological/identitarian difference.

There is an excess at the very core of the human. Whereas in “Angels in America” the failure and dissolution of Theory leads, as I showed in my first section, to the disintegration of the self—characters losing their skin and falling apart—what this mutual dream scene proposes is a form of opening of the self that has deeply ethical results. On the one hand, the dissolution of Theory that the play depicts—from communism to Mormonism to Hegelian progress—has an unraveling, dissolving effect on the self. However, here we see the play availing itself of this open and dis-integrated subjectivity to imagine a type of *intersubjectivity* otherwise unthinkable. Prior and Harper are brought into radical ontological proximity—he is inside of her or she is inside of him, “*It is bewildering.*” And this has the effect of bringing these two characters into a space in which their respective Theories and identities can give way to open interconnectivity and mutual identification that exceeds the precincts of both Harper’s and Prior’s respective discursive “churches.” In this way, the open ontology of the human empowers the transcendence of ideology. It moreover leads these characters to the very “threshold” of a knowledge that is direct and mystical. In this way, open ontology leads to open epistemology. Lastly, Prior, suffering with AIDS and abandoned, is here viewed by Harper to be “entirely free of disease”—as if, on the threshold of

revelation, she had heard his cry for “More Life.” In this way, the openings of ontology and epistemology are ultimately ethically empowering.

The Bethesda Congregation

This human metaphysical excess serves as well to structure a form of community that goes beyond what Kusher calls the “two”: to structure larger constellations of identification and belonging. I described earlier the extensive work the play does to establish a homology between the earth and the body; in the wake of the collapse of Theory, both are now subject to the forces of “chaos,” the earth aggressively stripped of its protective ozone layer, spinning into a “mad swirling planetary disorganization” (1:14), and the body stripped of its protective skin. At the end of the play, Harper, while airborne on a plane, re-invokes this imagery in order to imagine a way in which both earth and body can discover a new form of protectedness and covering. The plane she is in has reached the “tropopause,” “As close as I’ll ever get to the ozone.”

I dreamed we were there. The plane leapt the tropopause, the safe air, and attained the outer rim, the ozone, which was ragged and torn, patches of it threadbare as old cheesecloth, and that was frightening...

But I saw something only I could see, because of my astonishing ability to see such things:

Souls were rising, from the earth far below, souls of the dead, of people who had perished, from famine, from war, from the plague, and they floated up, like skydivers in reverse, legs all akimbo, wheeling and spinning. And the souls of these departed joined hands, clasped ankles and formed a web, a great net of souls, and the souls were three-atom oxygen molecules, of the stuff of ozone, and the outer rim absorbed them, and was repaired. (2:142)

Harper presents imagery of souls in clusters of three who join hands to form these micro-communities. These micro-communities function to fill in the “frightening” “patches” in

the “threadbare” ozone layer. Each person in these little clusters is a trinity of atoms “wheeling and spinning” around one another. Provocatively, Charles Williams describes the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as a “coinherence” across the three persons of the Godhead, a doctrine in which he riffs on the much older theological concept of the “perichoresis,” which John of Damascus in the first century imagined as the circular interpenetration of the three persons of the Trinity in their mutual indwelling. Harper conceptualizes something of the same coinherence across deceased yet living human souls. Rather than imagining the perichoresis in an overarching, all-encompassing deity, she imagines it across “nets of souls” that together protect and cover the earth. These are souls who, free from the physical buffer of the body, can presumably enter into similar forms of mutual interconnectivity that Harper herself experiences with Prior. At the beginning of the play, Harper argues that “People are like planets, you need thick skin” (1:17). However, here her imagery suggests a shift in thought. The remedy for disintegrating earth and bodies are these micro-communities of mutually interpenetrating humans, here “join[ing] hands” and “clasp[ing] ankles” and “wheeling and spinning.” As Kruger points out, the sensation of losing her skin and bodily integrity, which Harper bemoans throughout the play, here serves as condition of possibility for the salutary replenishment of the earth’s skin and its planetary integrity (160). This effectively transforms the open structure of the body from an ontological problem (recall the violent imagery of bodies being pulverized) to the condition of possibility of a human community that can, at least as Harper imagines it here, save the world.

As Kushner echoes in his “Afterword,” “From such nets of souls societies, the social world, human life springs” (2:155). In Kushner’s play, the opening of the

individual human structures a form of ontological interconnectivity that then translates into concrete ethical community. Although in the passage above Harper describes the souls of the deceased coming together, the very next scene of the play—the final epilogue—goes on to give Harper’s dream of disembodied souls actual flesh on the stage. The play closes with the “*Prior, Louis, Belize and Hannah sitting on the rim of the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park*” (2:143). This scene presents characters representing different, even clashing, Theories joined together in a sort of “net” around Prior, serving as the community that pulls him up from his abandonment (his only consistent companion, since he discovers he has AIDS, has been Belize). To be sure, this is an interesting motley crew, ideologically speaking, of characters; each represents a Theory and accompanying identity that stands in sharp, even antagonistic, contrast with the others. Hannah is a middle-aged Mormon woman from Salt Lake City, Utah; if the politics of her son are any indication, she comes from a Mormonism that is staunchly conservative, rightwing, and pro-Reagan. Louis is an equally staunch liberal left-wing, anti-Reagan thirtysomething urban gay male. And Belize (Norman Arriaga) is a black-Puerto Rican former drag queen whose political views, while evidently left wing, differ sharply from the brand of white bourgeois intellectual liberalism that Louis represents; Louis’ brand of liberalism, according to Belize, soars, like the high note on the word “free” in the national anthem, far above the political exigencies of the nation’s minorities. As might be expected, “*Louis and Belize are arguing*” (2:143).

Even though these four people have come together, their ideological differences persist—Louis and Belize open the scene with their contentious arguing and continue it through to the end, there being no indication it will end. However, what crucially marks

this community are three things, all of which issue from the opening of the subject that I describe above: 1) they accede to the narrowness of cognition itself, to the sheer incapacity of Theory to describe the world; 2) this epistemological weakening opens them up to an awareness of their interconnectivity as humans; and 3) they finally replace the totalization of Theory with a more modest view of the self/world that they, along with Gianni Vattimo, can comfortably accept as “myth.” What I am trying to describe is a movement from the epistemological assurances proffered by Theory, through the opening and interconnection of the human, to a salutary weakening of knowledge. We see this movement borne out in the characters’ dialogue around the Bethesda fountain. Whereas Prelapsarianov opened the play with a monologue about the fall of communism and the perils of life without a unifying Theory, the play ends in a dialogic thrashing-out of this same topic within Prior’s community, who view the dissolution of communism as an opportunity to lurch toward a chastened, less cocksure form of gnosis:

Louis: Whatever comes, what you have to admire in Gorbachev, in the Russians is that they’re making a leap into the unknown. You can’t wait around for a theory. The sprawl of life, the weird...

Hannah: Interconnectedness...

Louis: Yes.

Belize: Maybe the sheer size of the terrain.

Louis: It’s all too much to be encompassed by a single theory now.

Belize: The world is faster than the mind.

Louis: That’s what politics is. The world moving ahead. And only in politics does the miraculous occur.

Belize: But that’s a theory.

Hannah: You can’t live in the world without an idea of the world, but it’s living that makes the ideas. You can’t wait for a theory, but you have to have a theory.

Louis: Go know. As my grandma would say. (2:144-145)

These characters observe the recalcitrance of the “sprawl of life” to an all-encompassing Theory, and attribute this recalcitrance to the “sheer size of the terrain” that Theory

purports to map out and describe. The object to be explained outstrips Theory's explanatory power. This defies the fundamentalist's urge to enclose what Terry Eagleton calls "the sheer sprawling gratuitousness of the material world" within a "ramshackle structure...of first principles, fixed meanings and self-evident truths" (214). As a result, Prelapsarianov's "Grand Theory" here becomes a modest "theory." Even though the discussion these characters have is on the "world," the "sprawl of life," and the modus of its description (Theory), it also restates the delimitation of cognition I describe above. Belize says that "The world is faster than the *mind*": the object to be explained outstrips not merely Theory but more fundamentally human cognition itself. This requires that we approach life, as the Soviets have after 1989, by "making a leap into the unknown," for the terrific "sprawl of life" itself remains, ultimately, unknowable in its totality.

There is an essential unknowable dimension to reality that renders Theory ipso facto limited and contingent. Hannah places this unknowability, the "sprawl[ing]" dimension of "life" that extends beyond the borders of cognition, under the sign of "Interconnectedness." Kushner's language here is reverberant with various theories of late capital, or postmodernity, such as Frederic Jameson's account of the "incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational networks in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects" (44). For Jameson, what "transcend[s] the capacities of the human body to...cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world" is an interconnectedness related specifically to the movements of capital along heretofore incomprehensible transnational circuits. While Kushner's evocation of "Interconnectedness" in the Bethesda scene resonates with Jameson's view, Kushner adds another sense to it that pertains specifically

to human being. The interconnectedness Hannah invokes refers to the info-technological “world,” as well as the forms of ontological interpenetration structuring Harper and Prior’s mutual dream, as well as the micro-communities (“nets of souls”) Harper envisions. We see this interconnectedness play out additionally in the re-appearance of the actor playing Belize into Harper’s hallucination, as well as in the opening of the angel’s bodies toward an ecstatic libidinal union with humans. The play has done a significant amount of work to conceive of humans as positively, even metaphysically interconnected, and so Hannah’s evocation of the idea of “Interconnectedness” accretes to itself, I would argue, this altogether new horizon of meaning.

An interconnectedness fundamentally human underwrites a delimitation of knowledge that acknowledges that “It’s all too much to be encompassed by a single theory now.” As Vattimo points out, a weak ontology “allows me...to accept a measure of ‘myth’ in my life, which need not necessarily be translated in rational terms—ultimately reason too must be secularized in the name of charity” (93). That is, reason must be “secularized” in that it must be stripped of the transcendental metaphysical apparatus that exalts it into Reason and authorizes it to propound Theory. Rather, interconnectedness transforms Theory into myth. Prior, “*turning off the sound*” of his friends’ discussion, immediately cuts from the discussion cited above and shifts into narrating the biblical “story” of the angel Bethesda, who touched the ground once a year in the Temple square in Jerusalem. Where her foot touched earth, the story goes, a fountain shot up from the ground. Prior steps aside and allows Louis, Belize, and Hannah, each in turn, to withdraw from their ideological cacophony and to harmonize together in the narration of this myth. Belize: “If anyone who was suffering, in the body

or the spirit, walked through the waters of the fountain of Bethesda, they would be healed, washed clean of pain” (2:145). “Hannah: The fountain of Bethesda will flow again. And I told [Prior] I would personally take him there to bathe. We will all bathe ourselves clean.” Whereas “So much of what [Hannah] believe[s]” was once “repellent” to Prior, “preposterous” to him (2:102), now he can integrate this mythic aspect of her Mormonism into his own thought as an imaginative resource. But this story marks a reintegration that Louis is making as well. At the beginning of the play, he visits a group of Orthodox Jewish rabbis to confess to them his pending sin of abandonment, and they respond that the Torah has nothing to say of such a person. Whereas the fiercely secular-minded Louis at that time then turns away from Judaic teaching—it having nothing to say to him and he having nothing to say to it—I take his participation in the narration of the Bethesda story here to signal his (partial) reintegration of Judaic learning; this story, rendered ecumenical here by being stripped of its New Testament references to Christ, straddles both Christian and Jewish traditions, and becomes integratable as much by Prior, Hannah, Belize, as by Louis himself.

Tellingly, the softening of Theory into “myth” bears the ultimate purpose of giving shape to concrete ethical compassion. Whereas none of the Theories that govern the play were capable of offering Prior the healing or community he needed—more than that, they even had a crushing effect upon individual characters—here in the end, myth becomes a flexible discourse with multiple interweaving speakers that form a net of care around Prior. Whereas, previously, positivist Theories detracted from Prior’s mental and physical “life,” a more modest “myth” here unfolds upon Prior “More Life,” subserving the demands of what Vattimo calls “charity.” Belize in this vein argues that “Justice is

simple. Democracy is simple. Those things are unambivalent. But love is very hard. And it goes bad for you if you violate the hard law of love” (1:100). Belize is laying out a movement from such abstractions as Justice and Democracy—all part of the play’s panoply of grand Theories—to the silent concrete praxis of “love.” Crucially, and more to the heart of this paper, this movement takes effect by way of an opening of the human on the very level of its materiality. This opening gives shape to the “net of souls” that Harper dreams of: the spiraling interconnected net that takes final shape in the play’s closing community of ethical care at the Bethesda fountain.

My argument is that this Bethesda congregation represents a form of intersubjectivity fundamentally shaped by the ontological opening experienced by characters like Prior and Harper in the mutual dream scene: a mutual ontological imbrication that weakens Theory and enables characters to see through and beyond its enclosures of thought. As we saw earlier, the dissolution of Theory gives way to the disintegration of the body, but then the play avails itself of this open, fragmented human as condition of possibility for a larger network of human interconnectivity. This interconnectivity, as Prior and Harper experience it, empowers them each to see beyond the cognitive horizon of their respective “churches” to envisage the ultimately inexplicable otherness of the other. The play’s final Bethesda congregation renders concrete the mystical intersubjectivity that the play has been exploring. This deep intersubjectivity transcends the capacity of the eye to detect and the mind to describe, yet it allows the individual characters—Louis, Hannah, Belize, and Prior—to think/see/feel beyond the precincts of the Theories that enclose them. Those ideas persist here at the end of the play, still bubbling with contentious energy, but these ideas also now figure as

open and porous as the selves that hold them. Just as Harper could look “Deep inside” Prior and see that he is ultimately “free of disease,” so now Harper’s “story” further empowers Prior to envisage a day when he, along with these committed friends, will all “bathe ourselves clean.” Mormonism, progress, and a late-twentieth-century left-wing liberalism—each in various ways weakened—here collude toward the concrete praxis demanded by what Belize calls the “hard law of love.” Louis at one point asks, “How can a fundamentalist theocratic religion function participatorily in a pluralist secular democracy?” (2:63). The weakening and release of strong ideology figured here at the end, and its resulting interconnectivities, seem to be the play’s response. (It is telling that while Louis is asking this on the beach with Joe, he is simultaneously and unbeknownst to himself appearing to Harper and Prior in a Diorama at the Mormon Visitor’s Center in Manhattan: as if this porous and spread ontological structure were speaking to Louis’ very question, the play’s ironic answer to it). Although different critics in different ways have pointed out the ideological pluralism represented in the play’s closing scene, my contribution to this critical discourse is an analysis of the specific function of the human body—the opening and dispersal of human being—and the body’s representation and re-conceptualization.

Re-enclosures

It could be argued, on one level, then, that the only theory that the play consolidates and seeks to propagate is this that Belize calls “the hard law of love,” an ethos of ethical care borne out in a small, ideologically eclectic and deeply interconnected community. And given the wider horizons of ethical concern that it fosters, this law would seem preferable

over a more severe, ideologically self-enclosed Mormonism, say, or Hegelian Progress. However, I would like to close with a final observation on the structure of the Bethesda community. Even though the play stages the metaphysical mechanisms by which a softening of ideological belief might come to light, David Savran points out the extent to which the resulting conceptualization—the “harmony-in-diversity and diversity-in-harmony” (31) figured at the Bethesda fountain—itsself emblemizes a liberal-pluralist American ideology. Savran discusses the extent to which this vision of a unified pluralism has been at the very heart of the American democratic imagination and its vision of utopia—*e pluribus unum*. “Angels in America,” far from contesting this prevailing American ideology, “sets forth a liberal pluralist vision of America in which all, not in spite but because of their diversity, will be welcomed into the new Jerusalem” (29). So for Savran, the play subserves a “fundamentally conservative and paradigmatically American politic—dissensus, the ‘hermeneutics of laissez-faire,’ such that, as Eve Sedgwick puts it, the play is in the final analysis “kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic” (32). An index that Savran smartly uses to point out the hegemony of the play is the phenomenon of its popular success; the play has gathered huge theatergoing audiences at a time when theatergoing is on the steady decline, and it has even enjoyed wider, more popular success as an HBO mini-series. This has to do, for him, with the play’s ultimate affirmation of the “ideology that has become the *new* American religion: liberal pluralism” (27).

I would only add that this ideology bears its own features of Theory—its own “framework of intelligibility” and its own exclusivities. Although Savran speaks of liberal pluralism in the abstract, I would narrow the play’s defining discourse as a *1980s*

New York liberal pluralism—one arising from within this particular historical and cultural milieu. Accordingly, the stage directions indicate that “*Hannah is noticeably different—she looks like a New Yorker, and she is reading the New York Times*” (2:143). The Mike Nichols production for HBO has her not only in a black turtleneck, an elegant grey shawl, and black leather gloves, but it has her holding her copy of the *Times* for the camera to capture. This community operates within very specific codes of recognition. The codes are sartorial (Hannah’s new fashion sense) and discursive (she is read up on the *Times*). These codes also presumably determine who lies outside by failing to conform. Roy Cohn, the play’s figure for a sort of nihilistic political will, is an obvious candidate for exclusion (indeed, even though the play finally sends him to a place that is either “*Heaven, or Hell, or Purgatory,*” it is one burning with “*volcanic, pulsating light,*” and where “*a basso-profundo roar, like a thousand Bessemer furnaces going at once,* [resounds from] *deep underground*”; Roy in is an infernally “*smoldering pit*” [2:140]). However, one wonders why Joe is excluded from the Bethesda congregation, even though he makes the same attempts as Louis does to atone for his own sin of abandonment. Critics have described this congregation as a family, a metaphor that illuminates the problematicity of the ostracism of Hannah’s son from the play’s final gathering. If it is a “family gathering,” why is Hanna’s son excluded? Last but not least, Harper is cast far away from the Bethesda congregation; the play closes as she takes a night flight to the west coast.

The play’s final congregation follows its own Theory, and it is not one fully describable in terms of Belize’s “hard law of love.” It is one with its own American history, its own political, economic, and discursive structures of hegemony. And, finally,

here in the Bethesda congregation, it defines the criteria for inclusion and exclusion. It is telling that, for David Savran, the play garnered such large American audiences precisely because it speaks within a hegemonic framework of intelligibility; as such, we could identify it as operating within its own logic of blindness and exclusion toward those who do not fit within it: i.e., Joe, Harper, and Hannah's former Utah-esque persona. "Angels in America," as do the other works of literature I read in this dissertation, puts into operation the opening of the human subject and strives to imagine its dispersal and expansion beyond the empirical confines of the physical body. But this play, as do the other works of literature I critique, ultimately reabsorb the potential of this open body to first extend us beyond ideology, then to plunge us *back* into ideology's enclosures. I read Prior and Harper's "mutual dream scene" in this chapter with such enthusiastic attention because I see in it rich conceptual resource for thinking beyond the confines of the self as determined by ideology. And yet I find it unfortunate that "Angels in America" re-encloses this potential, even if only partially, back within an ideology that is immediately recognizable and—here I agree with David Savran—steadfastly hegemonic. Tony Kushner's play operates according to a fundamental ambivalence in which it strives to think the transcendence of ideology—humans ontologically interconnected—but it shrinks back into the discursive vehicle of a late 1980s, post-Stonewall liberal pluralism with no place for a failed gay Mormon (Joe), for a mentally imbalanced/visionary post-Mormon (Harper)—or Republicans *at all* for that matter.

While part of me, a liberal leftist minority living in New York City, is gladdened by the exclusion of these characters, another part of me—one drawn to the deeply inclusive and perhaps utopic potential toward which Kushner's play strives—feels the

brunt of the exclusion of characters who, by virtue of their non-conformity, are sent away, either to the other end of the country (Harper), or to anywhere but here (Joe), or straight to hell (Roy Cohn).

Chapter Four
The Rapture of Holy Women:
Violent Identity and Transcendent Bodies in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

The Crusades, the Inquisition, jihad, the events of September 11, 2001: religious fundamentalism has had a notoriously long and vexed history of violence. Western secular thought has thus remained perplexed by the question of the role that fundamentalism should play within a contemporary progressive politics. For some, like Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, such religiously sanctioned violence as we beheld on September 11 testifies once again that “Revealed faith is...[d]angerous because it gives people unshakeable confidence in their own righteousness. Dangerous because it gives them false courage to kill themselves, which automatically removes normal barriers to killing others. Dangerous because it teaches enmity to others labeled only by a difference of inherited tradition” (“Has the world changed?”). Three years before the World Trade Center attacks, Toni Morrison released a novel that opens with a massacre similarly executed in the name of God and racial hatred. *Paradise* (1998) suggests, in contrast to Dawkins, that religion cannot be simply reasoned away, that as a cultural phenomenon on the world stage it will persist, for better or worse, as a shaper of identity and praxis. Morrison’s novel accordingly joins cause with similar intellectual undertakings to imagine how the world’s religions could be seen to thrive in our world while not obstructing but rather contributing to a modern democratic pluralism. One thinks, vis-à-vis Morrison’s novel, of Cornel West’s advocacy of religion as a bulwark against nihilism and violence in the African American community (11-20), or of Gianni Vattimo’s defense of a Catholic tradition that promotes social justice, stripped of its

potentially bellicose metaphysical underpinnings (84-98); one is here also reminded of Nancy Armstrong's rejection of a monotheistic god used "to give egotism a sacred seal of divine approval"—her call to a return to the "God of the mystics" ("Going Beyond God" 2). What unifies these projects is a common effort to amplify the dimensions of religion that promote a progressive politics of care while deconstructing those that glower toward the world with a face of dogmatism, exclusivism, and violence.

Paradise locates for Morrison a unique place within the constellation of ideas concerning what she calls "the violence that accompanie[s] the construction of a religious community" ("Toni Morrison"). Thinking specifically about how religion and race work together to produce this exclusion, the novel depicts a small town in Oklahoma, at whose entrance a sign reads, "Ruby Pop. 360" (45). Ruby's 360-degree circumference is immured by strict identitarian standards: the town's Christian fundamentalist profession and the uniformly dark "8-Rock" skin color of its residents. Strict religious and racial discourses both enclose the consciousness of the town and structure a violent perception toward outsiders. Seventeen miles outside of Ruby resides a group of women in what was once a Catholic convent. Unlike Ruby, these women are scandalously inter-racial and together represent, as John McClure says of postmodern religion in general, a "creolized idelect" of sacred practices ("Postmodern/Post-secular" 152): practices resonant with the Brazilian religion Candomble, which admixes African and Catholic religious elements (McClure, *Partial Faiths* 115), a Tantric body- and earth-positive spirituality whose mid-century popularization across American counter-cultural religion is documented by historians such as Jeffrey Kripal, and a syncretic Gnosticism. The

novel both opens and closes with the Ruby patriarchs massacring these women, “God at their side” (18).

Paradise contrasts Ruby’s self-enclosed fundamentalism with the Convent’s open-ended spirituality—a dichotomy that takes shape in order to lay out a particular field of investigation. What is it specifically about religious dogmatism that, undergirded by a mighty “transcendental apparatus” (Hardt and Negri 78), joins together with race to emanate violence? How might we rethink the religious in order to recover its salutary dimensions while arresting these more murderous expressions? The particular way in which Morrison is rethinking the religious involves what Brian McHale’s elsewhere calls “ontological opening.” McHale shows how various postmodernist fictions construct a central “real world” alongside which they situate alternate/parallel planes of reality. Ontological opening has to do with the opening of one dimension of reality upon another, a proliferation or mutual collision or interpenetration of ontic domains undermining the exclusivity of any single one (McHale 24-25). Morrison’s *Paradise* engages in a similar opening, but on the level of the body. Critics have illuminated the ways in which Morrison depicts open subjectivities in both this novel and others; however, precious little has been said about how she uses these representations—humans released from their bodies and entering into mystical communion with one another—as a vehicle to rethink religious exclusivity beyond its violent dogmatic enclosures.

I will read the function of the open body in *Paradise* as Morrison’s speculation for how racial/religious communities can take shape apart from the psychic, social, and semiotic dynamics of violence. The temptation in engaging in such a reading might be to construe the novel as condemning religious fundamentalism in favor of an open-ended

mysticism unfettered from denomination, foundational text, and centering ideology. I think a more sensitive analysis, however, would attune to the subtle work *Paradise* is doing to differentiate itself as much from religious hatred as from hatred of the religious. The novel is thinking synthetically across Ruby and Convent. Indeed, the climactic massacre scene suggests that the Convent, for as dazzling a utopic vision as it may be, remains impracticable in a world in which violence is a *de facto* reality. Within the novel's imagination, religious ideological systems such as Ruby's need to be supplemented with a more expansive vision—such as we see at the Convent—of humans interconnected across the particularity of the body and, as a result, across and beyond the particularities of race and religion. In this way, the novel uses representations of open and interconnected selves in an effort to break apart fundamentalist dogmatism, softening religion's violent exclusions and infusing it with a sense of mystery, innovation, and self-critique. However, in the novel's integrative vision, the Convent's open-ended spirituality itself demands more concrete discursive and theological definition, one that might give it durability in a world in which, one morning, any morning, men from a neighboring town might appear on the doorstep, rifles in hand, their "God at their side."

Ruby

Paradise opens with Ruby's patriarchs, particularly the sons of the powerful Morgan family, breaking open the doors of the Convent seeking out women whom they perceive to be principles of moral degradation. What they see when they arrive, "warm with perspiration and the nocturnal odor of righteousness" (18), is a "mansion" "float[ing] dark and malevolently disconnected from God's earth" (18). "What they see is the

devil's bedroom, bathroom, and his nasty playpen" (17)—“not a convent but coven” (276) in which “graven idols were worshipped” (9). “God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby” (18). That is, they take aim on behalf of Ruby, to protect its townspeople from the Convent's moral influence, which extends far enough outward to cause still births among Ruby's mothers, inducing its men to lose their moral restraint (277-8), corrupting its ladies, “now doomed to extinction by this new and obscene breed of female” (279). Indeed, Ruby was “changing in intolerable ways,” and the patriarchs “did not think to fix it by extending a hand in fellowship or love. They mapped defense instead and honed evidence for its need” (275).

Ruby was founded by fifteen families that, set adrift after emancipation, were rejected by all of the towns in which they tried to settle because of their extraordinarily dark skin color—rejected by white and black towns alike. Ruby memorializes its founding trauma as the “Disallowing,” a narrative that enables the town to see itself as strong against an unaccepting world “Out There” (16). With this narrative, Ruby residents take themselves to be favored and chosen by a God who leads them, as he did the ancient Israelites, to their own promised land in Ruby, Oklahoma. On the basis of this privileged status, they reverse the terms of racial oppression to assert their darker skin color as in fact superior to all others. These founding religious and racial self-definitions seal in their identitarian self-enclosure, structuring a fundamental us/them divide in which everything moral and good and pure is assimilated into the “us,” and everything threatening to dismantle this is mapped onto the “them” “Out There.” This is “why neither the founders...nor their descendents could tolerate anybody but themselves” (13), why “All of them maintained an icy suspicion of outsiders” (160).

When Ruby's patriarchs drive out to the Convent, rifles in hand, what they go to attack is "detritus: throwaway people that sometimes blow back into the room after being swept out the door" (4). These "unredeemed" "Bodacious" "Eves" (18) threaten not only their town's Christian stronghold, but its racial purity as well. For the Convent women's racially mixed constitution (the novel makes reference to Connie's green eyes and indicates that on the morning of the massacre "They shot the white girl first" [3]) scoffs at Ruby's racial homogeneity. The novel invites us to probe the inner generative structuring of the men's identitarian enclosure and the violence it unleashes. Diana Fuss, thinking specifically here of hetero- and homosexual identity positions, offers us a helpful resource for talking about this violence:

To the extent that the denotation of any term is always dependent on what is exterior to it (heterosexuality, for example, typically defines itself in critical opposition to that which it is not: homosexuality), the inside/outside polarity is an indispensable model for helping us to understand the complicated workings of semiosis. Inside/outside functions as the very figure for signification and the mechanisms of meaning production.... The homo in relation to the hetero...operates as an indispensable interior exclusion—an outside which is inside interiority making the articulation of the latter possible, a transgression of the border which is necessary to constitute the border as such. (2-3)

An identity, in the dynamics whereby it takes discursive shape, exteriorizes negative elements. These expunged signifiers then cohere into their own discursive identity apart from their hegemonic origin; in this sense, "Homosexuality is produced inside the dominant discourse of sexual difference as its necessary outside" (4). In Morrison's novel, Ruby purges itself of elements that it construes as impure, an activity that "constitutes its borders as such" and by which the town thrusts its "detritus" of significations outward—out upon the Convent women. Fuss's configuration enables us

to see that what Ruby takes to be “Out There” is not properly *out* there. One of the women at the Convent seems to intuit this in terms that reverse Ruby’s moral spatiality: “Scary things not always outside,” she warns. “Most scary things is inside” (39). However, the dynamics whereby a group’s “contaminated and expurgated insides” (3) take shape in a reprehensible “Out There” seem to go undetected in Ruby. This misrecognition motivates the patriarchs to purge their world through violence.

In Ruby, Reverend Pulliam gives this psychic and semiological structure a Christian theological articulation. The eldest and most powerful figure in Ruby’s theocracy, Pulliam propounds a discourse centered around a distant, inaccessible God. His theology functions twofold to cast God far outside of the realm of human experience and knowledge, and to install in the intervening space the religious and racial codes that enclose Ruby from the world “Out There.” On the Oven that stands at the center of Ruby, the town’s founding fathers long ago had written a motto whose opening words have since eroded, leaving the fragment, “the Furrow of His Brow.” Textual wars ensue in Ruby as to what the initial missing word must have been; Pulliam brings textual closure to the various speculations with his declaration: “*Beware* the Furrow of His Brow.” Pulliam’s choice of words articulates a God looming over anxious humanity, severe and unappeasable. This theology plays out equally in the sermon he delivers at a wedding: “You do not deserve love regardless of the suffering you have endured.” “There is nothing in nature like it.... Love is divine only and difficult always.” “You have to earn God. You have to practice God.... And if you are a good and diligent student you may secure the right to show love.” “How do you know you have graduated? You don’t.” “God is not interested in you.” “God is interested only in Himself which is to

say He is interested only in love” (141-142). This religious discourse dramatically distances divinity from humanity, burdening the latter with the task of “graduat[ing]” into God’s distant realm of self-love (142). Pulliam postures this sermon against the theology of the younger, more progressive Reverend Misner, making it “A stone to crush his colleague’s message of God as a permanent interior engine that, once ignited, roared, purred and moved you to do your own work as well as His—but, if idle, rusted, immobilizing the soul like a frozen clutch” (142). According to Pulliam, there is no engine “interior” to human nature that contains or reflects the divine. Ruby’s theology, as articulated by Pulliam, distances Ruby from the Christian God.

I would like to argue that it is this distancing that structures Ruby’s violence insofar as it opens the space in which Ruby’s exclusivist ideologies take shape, endoming the town in a system that demarcates us from them, inside from out. Kenneth Reinhardt elucidates what he calls the “political theology of sovereignty,” a closed governing system whose laws cohere around a “sovereign” who stands both at the center of the law and outside of it. The sovereign has the power to suspend or break the law, “the power of exception.” In a manner reflected by Pulliam and the Morgan-family patriarchs, the sovereign’s “word both violates the rule of the total state and promises it *totality*, closure, drawing a line between the inside and outside, the native and the stranger” (56). According to Pulliam, the religious and racial discourses constituting Ruby’s identity originate in a God who, from afar, imbrues the patriarchs with the power both to pronounce the law and to break it. Pulliam’s sermon implies that he himself has “graduated” beyond Ruby’s enclosed system enough to be able to access this God—the

townspeople cannot—arrogating to himself and the patriarchs the power of “sovereignty.”

Positioning themselves both inside regulative law and above it, both subject to “Thou shalt not murder” yet far enough outside of it to be able to discern when God wants them, and only them, to break it, the patriarchs accrete the authority to articulate violence. The “act of war,” Reinhardt continues, is “the exception that proves the political rule” for the purpose of defining and enforcing “the self-identity of the state” (16). In Morrison’s novel, for Ruby to cohere its identity as God’s chosen, we could say that it needs an external object of moral execration; as Michael Warner says of discourses of the perverse in Renaissance England, “‘The City on the Hill’ demands a Sodom on the plain” (107). In this way, “The Friend and Enemy form the twin *imagos* for the national and subjective ethos, figures of positive and negative political ontology by which the interior ‘we’ (the ‘I’ and its friends) is identified as such, as distinguished from the exterior ‘they’” (Reinhardt 16). The Convent functions to prop up the psychic and semiological structure of Ruby’s “self-identity,” insofar as “the mirroring relationship between Friend and Enemy provides a form of stability” (17). So as Giorgio Agamben says of the *homo sacer* in ancient Roman society, the Convent women are both outside Ruby’s law and simultaneously under its “spell” (43) insofar as their lives are subject to sacrifice for its vindication.

We discern a causal relationship forming in *Paradise*: ontological enclosure leads to identitarian enclosure, which unleashes violence. That is, Ruby’s self-enclosure from a distant God opens a space for the proliferation of identitarian discourses that require ruthless enforcement. Construing the causality of violence in this manner will help us

think through the subtle ways in which Morrison is trying to theorize identities beyond violence. What alternatives to Ruby is she offering, and how do they transcend the exclusivist formations that release such violence?

The Convent

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* answers Ruby's violence with strategic representations of ontological opening. In a particularly provocative interview that Morrison gave *Salon* in 2008, in which she discouraged interpretations of her novel as "feminist," she invoked similar spatial tropes—inside/outside, opening/enclosure—as she uses in the novel:

Paradise has been called a "feminist" novel. Would you agree with that?

"Not at all. I would never write any 'ist.' I don't write 'ist' novels."

Why distance oneself from feminism?

"In order to be as free as I possibly can, in my own imagination, I can't take positions that are closed. Everything I've ever done, in the writing world, has been to expand articulation, rather than to close it, to open doors, sometimes, not even closing the book—leaving the endings open for reinterpretation, revisitation, a little ambiguity. I detest and loathe ['ist' categories]. I think it's off-putting to some readers, who may feel that I'm involved in writing some kind of feminist tract. I don't subscribe to patriarchy, and I don't think it should be substituted with matriarchy. I think it's a question of equitable access, and opening doors to all sorts of things."

Because the book has so many women characters, it's easy to label.

"Yes. That doesn't happen with white male writers. No one says Solzhenitsyn is writing only about those Russians, I mean, what is the matter with him? Why doesn't he write about Vermont? If you have a book full of men, and minor female characters."

No one even notices. No one blinks that Hemingway has this massive problem with women. (Jaffrey 1)

As readers of *Paradise* we cannot, in our critique of Ruby and enchantment with the Convent, reverse and thereby reify the same us/them, good/evil dynamics that Ruby puts into operation. Suggesting this, Morrison's interview emphasizes certain spatial tropes by which she thinks of herself as steering her novel clear of particularizing "isms." "[In]

my own imagination, I can't take positions that are *closed*.” “Everything I've ever done, in the writing world, has been to *expand articulation*, rather than to *close* it, to *open* doors”—“sometimes, not even *closing the book*” (emphasis mine). She intimates that there is something crucial at stake for her in the undertaking to “open doors to all sorts of things”: to prevent the bringing-to-closure of significations that need to remain perpetually open and alive in what Derrida might call “freeplay.”

One of the ways in which *Paradise* executes this project of opening is in how it depicts ontology at the Convent. The women there have each in turn been the object of violence throughout their lives. Mavis is bereaved of her children and is now being pursued by her alcoholic husband. Pallas is impregnated at the age of sixteen then abandoned; one passage suggests that she was the object of the sexual predation of various men (163). Seneca is emotionally dependent upon a man who is in jail for infanticide (133-134). Sweetie too has lost her children, and thinks she hears them crying, here and there, as she goes about (129-130). Connie has an alcohol problem and sleeps in the Convent cellar, drunk. The benighted world that Pulliam posits is the same one that eats away at the Convent women. But this is also the world that Morrison is striving to reimagine by “opening doors to all sorts of things.” The Ruby men barely notice that it is raining outside, for

The rain's perfume was stronger north of Ruby, especially at the Convent, where thick white clover and Scotch broom colonized every place but the garden. Mavis and Pallas, aroused from sleep by its aroma, rushed to tell Consolata, Grace and Seneca that the longed for rain had finally come. Gathered in the kitchen floor, first they watched, then they stuck out their hands to feel. It was like lotion on their fingers so they entered it and let it pour like balm on their shaved heads and upturned faces. Consolata started it; the rest were quick to join her. There are great rivers in the world and on their banks and the edges of ocean children thrill to water. In places where rain is light the thrill is almost erotic. But those sensations bow to the rapture of holy

women dancing in hot sweet rain. They would have laughed, had enchantment not been so deep. (283)

The women orient themselves with “upturned faces” toward the rain falling around them, releasing themselves into its “enchantment.” For this rainfall is a “balm” teeming with spiritually therapeutic energy; it is a sacred water that, like the “great rivers in the world” (the Ganges), heals the devotees on whose “banks” and “edges” “children thrill to water.” In this erotic dance with the earth, the women enter into unmediated connection with a sacred enveloping divinity. Jeffrey Kripal, in his cultural history *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, describes the countercultural earth- and body-positive spiritualities that erupted in 1960s America. Such practitioners took the psychic and sexual energies of the body to be continuous—of the same energetic substance—as those emanating from a living earth. This was the medium of an erotic bond between earth and body that formed the basis, for such devotees, of an experience of the sacred. Notice the similar interfusion of the terrestrially sacred and the bodily erotic in the Convent scene above: “In places where rain is light the thrill is almost *erotic*. But those sensations bow to the *rapture of holy* women dancing in *hot sweet rain*. They would have laughed, had *enchantment* not been so deep” (emphasis mine). Unlike the ontological space that Ruby occupies, alienated from access to an inaccessible deity, the open space into which the Convent women enter is suffused throughout with immanent divinity. This effectively closes the distance between the women and divinity, collapsing the space in which Ruby-style dogmatisms form.

Moreover, the women enter into an experience of opening that plays out not only across vertical ontological domains—between the human and the divine—but

horizontally as well—across one another as human beings. Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age*, says that, in contradistinction to the pre-modern “porous” self, which was open to outer spiritual forces such as possessions and spells and augurs and prophetic voices, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought shaped a self materially “buffered” against the exterior world (35-43). *Paradise* is striving to imagine the Convent women as porous and open not only toward the outer living cosmos but also toward one another, across their material bodies and isolated autobiographies: an opening that re-enchants their world without re-enclosing it into violent religious systematization. For, far from leading the women to violence, the opening of their bodies actually empowers them to recuperate aspects of themselves that a violent world has torn away. In the Convent, Connie transforms into “Consolata,” now “in charge, like a new and revised Reverend Mother” (265), and leads the women through practices to which the novel refers as “loud dreaming.” The women enter into trance-like states from which they can access traumatic memories and give them articulation in “Half-tales and the never-dreamed escape from their lips to soar high above guttering candles”—utterances “no different from a shriek” (264). Previously, the women engaged in constant bickering, even fist fights; frustrated, they were unable to understand the nature of one another’s traumas and resulting violent psychic dispositions. Here in the cellar, however, the opacity of the self gives way to a mutual transparency in which “it was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning” (264). As each woman in turn verbalizes her own traumatic memories, the category of individual autobiography falls under erasure. Notice how as Mavis recounts the traumatic experience of leaving her twins in a hot car to find

them dead upon return, the women all “step easily into” identification with her, Mavis’ singular subjectivity multiplying into a plural “they”:

In spite of or because their bodies ache, [the women] step easily into the dreamer’s tale. They enter the heat of the Cadillac, feel the smack of cold air in the Higgledy Piddledy. They know their tennis shoes are unlaced and that a bra strap annoys each time it slips from the shoulder.... They inhale the perfume of sleeping infants and feel parent-cozy although they notice one’s head is turned awkwardly. They adjust the sleeping baby head then refuse, outright refuse, what they know and drive away home.... Saying, “They don’t seem to want to wake up, Sal. Sal? Look here. They don’t seem to want to.” (264)

The women become co-protagonists in Mavis’ re-experiencing of her memory. Stepping into her tale, they enter into the entire sensorial matrix of her trauma, reliving what she felt, thought, and said when she discovered her children dead. This passage slips directly into Pallas’ own narration of her traumatic past, the boundaries separating “individual” experience falling further under erasure. The women suddenly find themselves with Pallas in a lake one night in the distant past, hiding themselves with her from sexual predators. Pallas, who had initially endured this experience by herself, helpless to both these pursuing men as well as myriad underwater life-forms, is now reliving it anew with the other women, together forming a collective subject: “*They* kick *their* legs underwater, but not too hard for fear of waking fins or scales also down below. The male voices saying saying forever saying push their own down *their* throats. Saying, saying until there is no breath to scream or contradict” (264, emphasis mine). All of the Convent women experience Pallas’ traumatic memory together, “until there is no breath” among them “to scream or contradict.” As the passage continues, individual identity dissolves even further as the reader is left with scarcely any textual cues by which to discern which woman is narrating when. All the text indicates is that “Each one” is experiencing

memories together in this moment of collective identification. “Each one,” the passage ends, “Yelps with pain from a stranger’s penis and a mother’s rivalry—alluring and corrosive as cocaine” (264). The dissolution of individuality that occurs here is so radical as to leave the women *together* “exhausted and enraged” (264).

Practices of loud dreaming subvert dominant understandings of the human as a materially buffered inside/out structuration. And this subversion opens the possibility for the women to regain parts of themselves they had previously lost. The women lie down on the cellar floor of the Convent and draw outlines of their bodies. These

templates drew them like magnets. It was Pallas who insisted they shop for tubes of paint, sticks of colored chalk. Paint thinner and chamois cloth. They understood and began to begin. First with natural features: breasts and pudenda, toes, ears, and head hair. Seneca duplicated in robin’s egg blue one of her more elegant scars, one drop of red at its tip. Later on, when she had the hunger to slice her inner thigh, she chose instead to mark the open body lying on the cellar floor. They spoke to each other about what had been dreamed and what had been drawn. Are you sure she was your sister? Maybe she was your mother. Why? Because a mother might, but no sister would do such a thing. Seneca capped her tube. (264-5)

The template serves as a doorway into Seneca’s psychic interiority. The other women can see what she has lost through the painted image in the template. Furthermore, this drawing gives Seneca a target onto which to deflect her compulsion to “slice her inner thigh”: a deflection outward of the violence that has long lived inside of her. And as the narrative unfolds, these “templates” turn into doorways into the women’s future biographies as well. The passage just above continues: “Gigi drew a heart locket around her body’s throat, and when Mavis asked her about it, she said it was a gift from her father which she had thrown into the Gulf of Mexico” (265). At the end of the story, after the massacre, the women reappear epiphanically to their loved ones; when Gigi

visits her father in prison, the heart locket is now around her throat. The templates are portals into the re-creation of the self. As Morrison says elsewhere: “Because so much in public and scholarly life forbids us to take seriously the milieu of buried stimuli, it is often extremely hard to seek out both the stimulus and its galaxy and to recognize their value when they arrive. Memory is for me always fresh, in spite of the fact that the object being remembered is done and past” (“Memory, Creation, and Writing” 385). What Morrison suggests through her depictions of “loud dreaming” and bodily “templates” is that one of the principal means by which “public and scholarly life” denies the “galaxy” of mental life is through a particular interiorized conceptualization of the human: a subjectivity defined by and contained within the sealed materiality of the body. *Paradise* offers a counter-argument to this construction. In the scene above, the templates figure the opening and extension outward of human embodied particularity. The novel describes the templates as co-extensions of the women’s physical bodies, so much so that the women “had to be reminded of the moving bodies they wore, so seductive were the alive ones below” (265). There is a reciprocally ontological relationship between the two, such that what is creatively etched into the template takes animate form in the moving physical body. “Pallas had put a baby in her template’s stomach,” and when she returns at the end of the novel, she bears a child. These practices of unselfing unleash a deep therapeutic energy upon their collective “mental life,” so much so that, “unlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted” (266).

These scenes figure humans emerging from what Charles Taylor calls the “buffered” materiality of the body. Philip Page reads these images as representing forms of “intuitive knowing in the merger of self with others [that] requires ‘the transference of

ourselves into another's psychic life' (6). While Page persuasively reads this transference as Morrison's argument against the rationalist knowledge represented in such characters as Ruby's Patricia, I would add that it also speaks to Ruby's theology of violence. As we saw earlier, Ruby's ontological self-enclosure (its severance from God) leads to identitarian enclosure (the production of the racial and religious other), which leads to violence. Reinhardt's analytic enabled us to see how Pulliam and the patriarchs accrete the power, through the declaration of war, to pronounce the "word [that] both violates the rule of the total state and promises it *totality*, closure, drawing a line between the inside and outside, the native and the stranger" (56). In the Convent, however, there is no central transcendent figure of the "sovereign" that brings religious language and racial identity to definitive closure. Consolata guides the women through exercises of "loud dreaming" and the creation of "templates," but, unlike Pulliam, she does not function as a go-between across the women and a distant divinity. Rather, she shows the women that, in the world Morrison is constructing, such a distance does not exist. *There is no empty space separating the women from divinity in which violent hegemonies can take shape.* The women, each equidistant to the divine, are "holy women" in a space suffused throughout with divinity. Without a central "sovereign" figure to affix the law, the collective identity of the Convent women becomes as open, as porous, as the selves that constitute it. Whereas Ruby postures itself against those lying outside its 360-degree circumference, the Convent's theological/identitarian boundaries dissolve under the influence of ontological opening. Anyone can just show up at the Convent's doors, as the women do, unannounced, and will be welcomed in. The space Morrison is trying to theorize is, to adapt Alain Badiou's language, one in which "there is no boundary, no

difference, between the inside of the thing and the thing itself” (qtd. Reinhardt 66)—no inside or outside. Morrison is thus laying out a trajectory, a movement from Ruby’s

ontological enclosure → identitarian enclosure → violence

to the Convent’s

ontological opening (cosmos/body) → identitarian opening → boundless community.

Morrison is putting into play the mystical opening of the body in order to give shape to social arrangements that do not structure racial and religious violence, as Ruby’s do. Ashish Nandy explores how similar images of the “mystic healer” and “exorcist” function in Third World literature as “symbol of resistance to the dominant politics of knowledge” (265) represented by metropolitan colonial centers. He argues that such “openness” involves the notion of a “shared self which transcends nation-states, communities, and perhaps even cultures themselves” (276). I would argue that the “shared self” that the Convent community achieves transcends the state-like power represented in Ruby. However, arguing that another dimension of this shared self is “A direct, sharp awareness of man-made suffering, a genuine empirical feel for it,” Nandy goes on to offer an astonishing parenthetical caveat: “(Philosophers who say that we cannot feel the toothache of others may be right, but we *can* cognize the ache and use that cognition as the *reducio* of our conceptual frames)” (272). Nandy, by re-asserting the distance between sympathizer and the sufferer, re-encloses subjectivity back within the confines of the body: crushing the function of the “mystic” back into the European episteme that his postcolonial writers are trying so vigorously to deconstruct. Just as I

might question whether these writers would cede their mystical figures so easily, I would also contend that, while Morrison may or may not be advancing such actual practices as “loud-dreaming,” she is in all cases pointing up the limits of a certain dominant (“public and scholarly”) knowledge: one that has historically undermined such modalities of seeing and being as have long animated the African American imagination. Morrison explains in an interview that the forms of knowledge circulating in the African-American community of her upbringing “formed a kind of cosmology that was perceptive as well as enchanting.” The “black people I knew [growing up] had visitations and did not find that shocking and they had some sweet, intimate connection with things that were not empirically verifiable. It not only made them for me the most interesting people in the world—it was an enormous resource for the solution of certain kinds of problems” (qtd. McClure 104).

The mystical bodies mobilized by her novel’s enchanted “cosmology” serve as “resource for the solution” of the particular “problem” of religious and racial violence. It is the precise operation of ontological opening at the Convent to dissolve political inside/outside configurations, collapsing the psychic and semic spatiality of violence. How, first of all, can sovereign figures such as Pulliam position themselves closer to the divine, and hence above regulative law, when all humans in the novel stand within equal reach of divinity in an open cosmos? How, then, can Ruby think of its enemy as located outside of the circumference of the “we” when indeed *we* and *they* are ontologically continuous in a manner that exceeds the ambit of rational knowledge? *Paradise* represents its humans as metaphysically interconnected through and beyond the racial and religious-identitarian demarcations that divide social demographics. The opening of

the self in these texts functions not to recuperate outside figures into the totalization of the “We” (this being the effort that leads Ruby into violence) but rather to reveal the nefariousness of such inside/outside, us/them, configurations to begin with. Without them, humans have no basis upon which to imagine themselves as a “group” boundaried and differentiable from other such “groups” “Out There.” This text is gesturing toward boundless collective identification.

Exposure to the World

How then can we think and practice collectivity without the dynamics of violence that have historically driven religious and racial group formations? My reading of *Paradise* suggests that, for Morrison, this involves “opening doors to all sorts of things.” As Reinhardt puts it, “Either we can point to our objective differences, the things that separate us from the world, the differences that wall off an inside from an outside, or we can expose ourselves to the world” (67). What does it mean to “expose ourselves to the world” in this way?—especially when the forms of openness depicted in the Convent do not lend themselves to praxis, when they lead, in fact, to massacre? Ontologically open, the Convent lacks the defensible boundary needed to protect itself from the attackers who appear at its doorstep one fateful morning. As John McClure argues concerning Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, “the antinomian and ecstatic spiritualities of love that are in many respects the healthy alternative to fundamentalism can produce their own sort of enclosure, not within an iron cage but within a dangerous dream of fully achieved redemption” (107). While Morrison is advocating the openness of the Convent women

over the enclosures of Ruby, she wants equally to suggest that for such an ethos to be sustainable, it needs an apparatus of functional delimitation.

Here we arrive at the heart of Morrison's project in *Paradise*, which I believe is to theorize a way to render the Convent's ontological openness sustainable through the forging of a boundary that is thin enough to allow human otherness to radiate through, yet strong enough—like Ruby's—to filter out the concrete harms of a potentially violent world. The character whom Morrison claims to identify with most in the novel (Jaffrey) serves as voice piece for this softened yet durable boundary. Reverend Misner speaks at the same wedding as his colleague Pulliam. This younger, more progressive Ruby minister takes a very different approach at sermonizing, however; he stands in front of the church and, without speaking, holds aloft the central icon of Ruby's African-American Christian tradition. This is the

mark of a standing human figure poised to embrace. Remove it, as Pulliam had done, and Christianity was like any and every other religion in the world: a population of supplicants begging respite from begrudging authority; harried believers ducking fate or dodging everyday evil; the weak negotiating a doomed trek through the wilderness; the sighted ripped of light and thrown into the perpetual dark of choicelessness. Without this sign, the believer's life was confined to praising God and taking the hits. The praise was credit; the hits were interest due on a debt that could never be paid. Or, as Pulliam put it, no one knew when he had "graduated." But with it, in the religion in which this sign was paramount and foundational, well, life was a whole other matter. (146-147)

It is crucial to Morrison's project of functional delimitation that Misner articulates his Christian theology through silence. Recall that Ruby's racial/theological system installs itself in the space opened by the distancing of God into an inaccessible transcendence. No one can access the mind of God but the Ruby patriarchs, who then articulate it in

codes that delimit good from evil, us from them. Misner, in contrast, silences religious ideological articulation altogether, asking through his silence, “See?” “See how this official murder out of hundreds...moved the relationship between God and man from CEO and supplicant to one on one?” (146). Misner “stood there and let the minutes tick by as he held the crossed oak in his hands, urging it to say what he could not: that not only is God interested in you; He *is* you.” “Would they see? Would they?” (147). Misner here sermonizes silently of the infusion of divinity downward into Ruby and outward to all of its people, giving shape to a Christianity that incorporates the best parts of the Convent’s spirituality.

However, this iteration of the Convent’s spirituality also significantly modifies it. In contrast to the Convent’s escape from ideology tout court, Misner articulates his vision of an immanent God from within the discursive precincts of an African-American Christian tradition. The solution to religious violence seems to rest, for Morrison, at the intersection of Ruby and Convent. For Misner locates himself inside a specific Christian tradition yet keeps himself from becoming so utterly endomed in it as to fail to see what lies beyond it. This is a Christianity that, unlike Pulliam’s fundamentalism, is rendered structurally porous by its dogmatic silence. Reverend Misner and his fiancée Anna Flood stand in the middle of a field, where

they saw it. Or sensed it, rather, for there was nothing to see. A door she said later. “No, a window,” he said, laughing. “That’s the difference between us. You see a door; I see a window.”

Anna laughed too. They expanded on the subject: What did a door mean? What a window? focusing on the sign rather than the event; excited by the invitation rather than the party. They knew it was there. Knew it so well they were transfixed for a long moment before they backed away and ran to the car.... Anything to avoid reliving the shiver or saying out loud what they were wondering. Whether through a

door needing to be opened or a beckoning window already raised, what would happen if you entered? What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be? What on earth? (305)

Recall Morrison's *Salon* interview: "I think it's a question of...opening doors to all sorts of things." Or does she mean windows? Retracting from the impracticable openness of the Convent's spirituality, Misner and Anna Flood think together through the semantic niceties of an ideological structure that is flexible and open to "What would be on the other side." Misner and Anna's playful equivocation between "door" and "window" points up the limits of religious knowledge and, as a result, religious language; apertures to the divine can be either doors *or* windows, relative to the viewpoint of both an ordained minister and an "unordained, unrobed, untensored" woman (as Morrison describes Baby Suggs in *Beloved* [87]). This view of the divine resonates with Kevin Hart's characterization of "postmodern" theology, which emphasizes that religious "experience is mediated through representations or signs, that humans experience a deferred or contextualized rather than absolute presence." This theological perspective far antedates postmodernism, though. Genealogies of it can be traced back to a longer history of Christian negative theology, which "emphasizes the fact that any God concept is always already a representation, a sign, not a presence" (qtd. in Neary 2). Within this tradition, "one gains 'knowledge' of God by successively abstracting God from images of Him," guaranteeing "that human speech about God is in fact about *God* and not a *concept* of God." Morrison's novel is keenly aware of the tendency of fundamentalism to "focus on the sign rather than the event," to get excited by the linguistic-discursive "invitation" rather than the metaphysical-transcendent "party." So in circumscribing the descriptive power of language, Morrison invokes a longer subversive negative-theological tradition

in order to critique the features of Ruby's Christianity that render it violent. In this way, her synthetic project in *Paradise* jettisons neither the Christianity of Ruby nor the anti-establishmentarian spirituality of the Convent; rather, it mutually integrates these two into a vision of a profoundly inclusive religious expression, a system that, with doors and windows open to all sorts of things, remains "exposed to the world."

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* gives shape to a dream of a religious expression freed from the exclusivities structured by "isms," and one of its key strategies is that of a body opened as much toward the outer world as toward the full panoply of human beings filling it. This literary project becomes all the more curious given that actual bodies across the United States are reading Morrison's novels in local book clubs and pleasure-reading circles, and that her novels figure prominently on secondary and post-secondary English curricula. This is the result of a stardom in America catapulted as much by her receipt of the Nobel prize for literature in 1993, as by her dramatically commercializing promotion by media mogul Oprah Winfrey (Young)—as by her celebration by the *New York Times* as the author of the best work of American fiction within the last 25 years ("What Is the Best Work?"). As the novel takes on its own life within the American body politic, we could view its ideological work as involving the shaping of an ethical imagination of human interconnectivity—one that transcends racial and religious divisions. It is as if Morrison were holding aloft her open bodies to let them speak of such ethical understandings as might promote the building of more inclusive inter-religious and inter-racial arrangements, identifications, and affiliations. Differentiating herself from the more nihilistic strains of philosophical deconstruction that have been en vogue in the

West for some time now, in *Paradise* she supplements the deconstruction of power systems with ethical gestures toward ontological reconstruction: she aims at the psychic and semiological weakening of power structures that produce violence, but then, in the wake, offers the conceptual resource of humans positively—powerfully—interconnected.

Notes

ⁱ For instance, the epigraph in the front matter of *Paradise* is taken directly from the Nag Hammadi library of Gnostic texts.

ⁱⁱ See “What Is the Best Work of American Fiction of the Last 25 Years?” *New York Times*. 10 Dec, 2006. <<http://www.nytimes.com/ref/books/fiction-25-years.html>>.

ⁱⁱⁱ All across the news and opinion media have proliferated discourses on the “post-white America” into which we are now stepping. See, for example, Hua Hsu piece in the *The Atlantic*, Ross Douhat’s (enraging) Op-Ed piece for the *New York Times*, or Zadie Smith’s essay for the *New York Review of Books*.

^{iv} For an account of the violence implicit in the humanism of early twentieth-century European thought, see Stefanos Geroulanos.

^v See Hardt and Negri, Chapter 2.1: “Two Europes, Two Modernities.”

^{vi} Cited in Cunningham 95.

^{vii} See “What Is the Best Work of American Fiction of the Last 25 Years?” *New York Times*. 10 Dec, 2006. <<http://www.nytimes.com/ref/books/fiction-25-years.html>>.

^{viii} Self-creation figures in DeLillo’s novel in what Mark Osteen identifies as a packaging motif. Just as mass marketing is premised upon the right packaging and re-packaging of the same product, so self-packaging is enacted with obsessive, almost religious devotion throughout the novel in order to update and reinvent the self. Through the activity of shopping, Gladney confirms for himself the reality of the self. In the act of consumption, “I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I’d forgotten existed” (84). He grows in “existential credit.”

^{ix} It is problematic indeed that Thanotos is gendered; that, in discussing what constitutes and motivates human aggression, these characters evoke gendered rhetorical references such as “male animal” and “male psyche.” I am at a loss to explain what comes across as the ultimately *machista* ascription of death instinct to the “male” animal—a move that seems akin, for instance, to Freud’s denial of a superego to women.

^x See “What Is the Best Work of American Fiction of the Last 25 Years?” *New York Times*. 10 Dec, 2006. <<http://www.nytimes.com/ref/books/fiction-25-years.html>>.

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^{xii} Note the primacy that Jean Laplanche gives to the biological within the life of the psyche: a “biological stimulus finds its delegation, its ‘representation’ in psychical life as a drive” (*Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* 13). That is, the “representations” in the mind that we can observe, denominate, and catalogue as a drive all find their origins in the bedrock instinctual operatives at work in the *bios*. Laplanche follows Freud’s own definition of instinct as “the psychical representative of an *endosomatic*, continuously flowing source of stimulation”—“a measure of demand made upon the mind for work” by the *soma* (*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* 34).

^{xiii} Foucault uses the term “modern” to designate the moment in the history of ideas inaugurated by Kant in the eighteenth century (342), whereas Hardt and Negri use it to designate the moment coming into evolution between 1200 and 1600 (70). They both agree, though, that modernity constructed the body as immanently empirical.

^{xiv} For further reference, see Part II of Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*, which elucidates the extent to which modern selfhood was premised on a rejection of the invisible—an independently thinking soul and the “ontic logos” of the outer universe. Also see Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, which explores how the West buried the truth of human ontology in sex, the body of desire (77-79). The empirical sexual body was taken to hide a deeper transcendent truth to human ontology/nature (see specifically 154-158).

^{xv} For readable discussions of general Buddhist practice—including the function of the *mantra*—see Robert Thurman’s “Wisdom” chapter and Huston Smith’s chapter on Buddhism in *The Religions of Man*.

^{xvi} See Thurman and Smith.

^{xvii} Nicol in *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel* usefully outlines irony as one of the latter’s main features.

^{xviii} For Bayard, “pretheorization” “*ne repose pas sur des concepts, mais sur des éléments de pensée moins structurés, plus labiles et donc susceptibles de s’agencer les uns avec les autres de différentes manières en fonction de travail du lecteur*” [pretheorization does not rest upon (fixed) concepts but instead upon elements of thought less structured, more labile and therefore amenable to differing rearrangements through the act of interpretation] (143, translation mine). The title of Bayard’s study asks, *Peut-on appliquer la littérature à la psychanalyse?* It then goes on to affirm that literary texts indeed can and do engage with theoretical systems, seeking to revise them. Literature might refrain from systematizing full-on frameworks, but it will deconstruct aspects of one or some systems (detheorization) while laying out the conceptual possibilities for the construction of new ones (pretheorization).

^{xix} For a discussion on the legal articulation of the body on terms homologous to the ownership of personal property—first and foremost land—see Ed Cohen’s “On Having a Body.”

^{xx} The type of thinking that Johnson engages with most resonates with Descartes’ discussion, for instance, in his *Meditations on the First Philosophy*.

^{xxi} For more examples of how language creates the objects we perceive in the world, see Johnson’s *Middle Passage*. The Allmuseri are Johnson’s fictional representative for a possible Buddhist language. Ren hates personal pronouns: “the Allmuseri had no words for *I, you, mine, yours*. They had, consequently, no experience of these things, either, only proper names that were variations on the Absolute. You might say, in Allmuseri, all is *A*. One person was *A*[subscript1], the next *A*[subscript2]. (These are Western analogues. Don’t make too much of them)” (97).

^{xxii} John McClure has pointed out to me a famous Buddhist verse, quoted without citation in “Seeking the Heart of Wisdom,” by Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, which goes as follows:

I wandered through the rounds of countless births
Seeking but not finding the builder of this house.

Sorrowful indeed is birth again and again.
 Oh housebuilder! You have now been seen.
 You shall build the house no longer. . . .
 Achieved is the end of craving (83)

^{xxiii} The “dream” he is referring to in this particular instance is that of the wedding ceremony taking place around him. But it references as well the “long, lurid dream of multiplicity and separateness” that ends in the “epidermalization of Being.”

^{xxiv} *Begriffsgefühl*: (Ger. Literally, conceptual feeling) The faculty of eliciting feelings, images or recollections associated with concepts or capable of being substituted for them. Sometimes, the affective tone peculiar to a given concept.

^{xxv} I find problematic Johnson’s feminization of “Being” and nature here. In the last section of this chapter, I address Johnson’s own unreflective implication in discourses that exclude and abject others.

^{xxvi} I allow the play to articulate its own concept of Theory while using other terms resonant with this idea but formulated within different discursive contexts: Foucault’s “discourse,” Lyotard’s “metanarrative,” Althusser’s “ideology.” Although at times I give them all the status of interchangeability, I ultimately emphasize that the play wants to assert its own, unique way of theorizing “Theory.” That is why throughout my analysis I adhere predominantly to this term.

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Curriculum Vitae

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- Ph.D., English, Rutgers University, May 2010
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EMPLOYMENT

- *Rutgers University* (2002-2009). Doctoral Fellow, Teacher's Assistant, and Lecturer in English.
- *Bryant Adult Alternative High School* (1998-2002). English teacher, grades nine through twelve.
- *Bethlehem Academy* (1996-1998). High-school English and Spanish teacher.

PUBLICATIONSAcademic

- "Lovers Unbound: Sado-Masochism and the Search for Intersubjectivity." *Exit 9: The Rutgers Journal of Comparative Literature*. Volume VI, *Psychoanalysis and Violence* (2004): 115-128.

Non-Academic

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