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**Meaningful Play: Exploring the Possibilities of the Novel in Don DeLillo's *White Noise***

**Steve Quam**

**Oberlin College English Honors 2014**

The novel as a whole is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice.

—M.M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”

### **Introduction.**

*White Noise* appeared in 1985 as a novel that engaged directly with the discursive and political landscape of that time. Mid-80’s television and advertising continually work their way into the text; consumerism and Reagan-era foreign policy lurk in the background and occasionally leap forward. Many early critics of the novel focused on these qualities and used them as a natural launching point for various readings, including critiques of neoliberalism, analysis of consumer culture, and an approach to the linguistic function and power of television. A standard version of this approach would use the work of Jean Baudrillard to demonstrate the meaningless mystification enacted by television and consumerism, and would conclude roughly along the Frankfurt philosophic school perspective, distrustful of new media, while hopeful in the ability of *White Noise* to demystify its readers. Some readings take this a step further and propose that the novel may somehow allow for a radical political critique with “real world” benefits.

These various approaches offered important scholarship on *White Noise*, though a frustrating blind spot that I found among them was the lack of consideration of *White Noise*’s status as a novel. Many of these approaches use *White Noise* as a tool for opening up a discussion that did not specifically relate to the novel, leaving the import of its literariness unclear and providing little traction for appreciating the novel outside of the political and commercial world into which it was born. This approach could be extended—if in the eighties and early nineties *White Noise* was used to unmask television, why not use it in the twenty-first

century to expose the Internet? While I believe that one could use the methods of these early critics to create such a work, I think that this fact demonstrates the way in which this method misses much of what is unique about *White Noise*. I do not mean to lambast these earlier approaches to the novel, as they did provide important commentary which was responding to contemporary debates that DeLillo was concerned about, but in order to provide meaningful commentary now that can render *White Noise* more than a cultural artifact, this old approach must be acknowledged and let go.

In my approach to the novel I argue that though *White Noise* seems to be a novel about television, this thematic focus obscures the manner in which its formal techniques reveal it as a novel about the novel as an artistic form. Analyzing how *White Noise* explores the formal capacities of the novel, while never explicitly stating those capacities, I believe allows for an approach to *White Noise* that appreciates the uniqueness of what it does, rather than uses the novel as a tool to demystify a political and social reality. My approach seeks to demonstrate what about *White Noise* can still offer unique commentary nearly thirty years after its publication and starts from a literary perspective in order to gain a sense of the work's political perspective.

My central question concerns the conventions that *White Noise* adopts in its construction of meaning. My understanding of meaning focuses on the way in which it is something the novel creates rather than inherently possesses, and this focus appreciates the manner in which different forms can produce meaning in multifarious ways. This focus on meaning creation will, I hope, provide an alternative to arguments that prioritize the novel over television or the Internet as an essentially transparent window on social reality, in favor of investigating the mediums' unique tools to create meaning. In analyzing the way in which *White Noise* creates meaning I will focus

on its use of the literary conventions of various sub-genres.<sup>1</sup> *White Noise* is initially focused on the story of one family, but it engages various sub-genres in order to tell this story—an example of the novel’s non-explicit demonstration of literary meaning creation. *White Noise*’s adoption of various sub-genres grants it unity through disunity. Its unity lies in that it works as a novel that exists in the form of many attempts at unified coherency which fail to come to realization. By approaching the novel with these readings of its sub-genres, I will hope to provide a sense of the *White Noise*’s importance outside of the political circumstances from which it came.

Approaching *White Noise* by focusing on its novelistic tools allows for an understanding of how it creates meaning as a non-dominant cultural medium. Both when *White Noise* was published, and now, it existed in relation to other mediums that were more culturally central, the television and now the Internet. Thus *White Noise* could communicate meaning, but not as a revolutionary mode of representation. The history of novelistic conventions provides *White Noise* with tools to use and play with, rather than produce new forms to create meaning. This mode of representation provides complexity precisely through its non-revolutionary meaning creation, much in the way that political commentary it may provide allows for a complex perspective without providing any revolutionary prescription. My focus on the literary meaning-creation is useful because it can comment on the features of *White Noise* that are unique to it and from that understanding offer perspective on other modes of discourse including politics. Thus, after analyzing *White Noise* I will offer a framework for a notion of political perspective offered in the novel. The difference between this perspective and the political critiques of earlier critics can be understood in the difference between a perspective and prescription. I do not argue that *White Noise* necessarily shows one “where to go” politically as other critics seem to offer. My

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<sup>1</sup> The exploration of sub-genre was inspired by Tom LeClair’s essay, “Closing the Loop,” cited in my works consulted.

essay engages close readings on the novel's three sections: "Waves and Radiation," "The Airborne Toxic Event," and "Dylarama" in order to understand how the various uses of sub-genres demonstrate the creation of literary meaning, and offer a political perspective.

In my first section, "Creating a Narrative Voice," I argue that "Waves and Radiation" plays with the academic sub-genre from its famous opening line, through the section's bizarre culmination. I use the term "academic sub-genre" instead of another term such as the "college novel" because I drew much of my thought about the sub-genre from Elaine Showalter who uses the term "academic novel." In my analysis of "Waves and Radiation" I start by focusing on how the section establishes itself within the conventions of the sub-genre and progress by focusing on moment in the text when it offers particular challenges against the sub-genre. These come in a variety of forms from over-consciousness to its own status as a representation of that sub-genre, to bizarre explosion of that representation, to a corruption of the sub-genre's centralizing force. I focus mostly on the novel's narrator, Jack Gladney, as I find his narrative voice especially important in thinking about the creation of a narrative experience for the reader. Jack's academic colleague, Murray Siskind, plays an important role in the section and my analysis as he offers a counterpart to Gladney, and a unique challenge to the sub-genre.

In my second section, "Sustained Immanence," I transition to "The Airborne Toxic Event" and analyze how the novel plays with the post-apocalyptic sub-genre. This section builds upon the work of "Creating a Narrative Voice" to demonstrate how the remnants of the academic novel interact with the post-apocalyptic sub-genre to distort what the novel would seem to set up as expectations for itself. I also use the example provided in *War of the Worlds* to think about post-apocalyptic conventions. In analyzing this section I start by arguing that Heinrich, Gladney's son, challenges Gladney's narrative role through their differing responses to an

airborne, toxic disaster. Heinrich's challenge does not fully wrest narrative control from Gladney, but it starts a process of amplified narrative heteroglossia that provides an important point of analysis in "Sustained Immanence." I then examine how the section's play with representation distorts conventional portrayals of the post-apocalyptic. Finally, I analyze the deflation of the toxic event, as it becomes more and more remote to the characters and impresses upon the narration with a sense of letdown.

Finally, in "Being onto Farce" I turn to "Dylarama" and analyze how the novel moves from the let down of an apocalypse that never quite seemed to come, to a play with the existential sub-genre. In this section I use *The Stranger* to contemplate existential conventions and provide a point of comparison. I argue that Gladney's narrative deliverance finds a confused middle ground between the first two sections as he obsessively focuses on his fear of death. Gladney increasingly allows his narrative voice to be filled by that of others. A conversation with his wife, Babette, provokes Gladney to seek out a solution for his death-anxiety, and from there other voices start to dominate and manipulate Gladney's ability to narrate his own experience. Murray again plays a dominant role as he asserts more narrative confidence than Gladney. The narrative pushes towards a climactic resolution before once again dodging its own narrative expectations.

In order to aid this analysis I will think about the novel as an experience-generating phenomenon rather than a meaning-containing vessel. Sub-genres provide a useful way for approaching this experience through the tropes that they play with, and tools that they use to generate meaning. This is true regardless of a given reader's consciousness regarding the relationship of a particular work with a given sub-genre, though of course differing levels of awareness regarding sub-generic play generate different experiences of reading. Approaching

literary analysis through the formal tools that novels use to generate experience, such as sub-genre, is useful because of the ability to describe the process of reading and meaning-generation without appealing to some mode of universal reading. Analysis of how *White Noise* functions as a phenomenon can account for multiple experiences in a manner that would be impossible if one approached the novel as a meaning-containing vessel. I find approaching sub-genre in *White Noise* as a formal element that creates experience useful because conscious awareness of its presence takes a back seat to the fact that it engenders an experience for the reader. Ultimately, through this approach I will argue: by playing with and adopting various sub-genres, *White Noise* provides a many-layered and heterogeneous reading experience, which is an experience of novelistic meaning creation. By using conventions and then essentially dumping them, the novel demonstrates the ability to deliver specific blocks of meaning in an overall presentation that does not communicate anything immediately tangible, but through these blocks grants the reader opportunity for perspective.

### **Creating a Narrative Voice: Academic Narrative Creation in “Waves and Radiation”**

One can define a sub-genre as a formal approximation of the defining elements in a given set of texts, where any specific text may fit more or less well, but a rough definition of the academic sub-genre will aid in understanding what *White Noise* does at the formal level. Elaine Showalter’s important work on the academic novel, *Faculty Towers*, provides a helpful framework for thinking about the academic novel. Features that can generally be understood as part of the sub-genre include: a closed or mostly closed academic society, a focus on the relationship between either the narrator or protagonist and that society, a focus on the competitiveness and power within the academic world and how the academic world and outside world relate (Showalter). *White Noise* engages these elements in various ways and examining



this play can helpfully demonstrate the ways in which *White Noise* adopts and distorts the academic sub-genre.

The opening sentence of *White Noise* immediately places the novel in a college setting, “the station wagons arrived at noon, a long shining line that coursed through the west campus” (DeLillo, 3). This initial placement supports approaching the novel as an “academic novel” and because of its relatively straightforward nature provides a foundation upon which the novel’s later distortion of the sub-genre can stand. The first sentence of *White Noise* displays two important elements of the novel’s construction of the academic novel: place and ritual. The physical space of the campus plays an important role in determining the course of action. The campus space in *White Noise* extends beyond College-on-the-Hill to the “college town” of Blacksmith—rendering Blacksmith a similarly closed space where the action of the academic world can take place. The arrival of the station wagons, as a ritual that Gladney has witnessed “every September for twenty-one years” (3), invokes the notion of ritualistic and cyclical repetition as a driving force in the academic novel. The notion invoked here of the academic novel taking place in a defined physical space that is driven by ritual supports Showalter’s understanding of the campus as a “closed society [that] can function as a microcosm” (Showalter 3). This microcosmic setting provides DeLillo a laboratory to showcase his academic novel as well as a space out of which *White Noise* can evolve.

The opening passage, and Gladney’s narrative focus on himself in the academic world begins to demonstrate how “Waves and Radiation” uses the academic sub-genre to create meaning. The opening setting provides the novel’s internal world of meaning creation, with the specific moment of the fall move-in providing a moment of rebirth in the narrator, who the reader first knows through that scene-setting opening line. Gladney chronicles the student’s

rejuvenation, but his own energy and confidence is clear through his brisk, unwavering sentences: “I am chairman of the department of Hitler studies [...] I invented Hitler studies in North America in March of 1968. It was a cold and bright day with intermittent winds out of the east. When I suggested to the chancellor that we might build a whole department around Hitler’s life and work, he was quick to see the possibilities” (4). Gladney’s deliberate sentences bring him into being for the reader, especially through the repeated “I”: “I am chairman,” “I invented Hitler studies,” “when I suggested.” Gladney in a sense birthed this self of his in “March of 1968” as he came in with the “intermittent winds out of the East.” Gladney’s made academic self provides the literary experience for the reader through his role as narrator, and this experience is mediated through both Gladney the academic and the college setting. The opening framing of *White Noise* as an academic novel then serves to create an experience for the reader of engaging with Gladney as a narrator primarily through his academic role. This use of the sub-genre creates a meaningful experience for the reader by showing what matters in this setting: the chance at rebirth afforded by the academic cycle (a chance that Gladney seems to take through the birth of his narration), and the primacy of knowledge demonstrated by Gladney’s positive sentences as well as his subsequent role as revealer/explainer adopted within his narration.

Gladney articulates his self-created role at College-on-the-Hill through describing his troubles with the German language: “My struggle with the German tongue began in mid-October and lasted nearly the full academic year. As the most prominent figure in Hitler studies in North America, I had long tried to conceal the fact that I did not know German” (31). Gladney’s academic position of prestige relies on his difficulty with German remaining “conceal[ed]” inside him, and his “struggle with the German tongue” lasts for “nearly the full academic year” i.e. throughout the time when his academic self functions as his dominant self. Gladney

importantly is not merely a bad academic, in fact by all accounts he seems to be good at his job, but he is a false academic. Given his role as the narrator he creates a false text—seemingly one about the academy—but in actuality one that is much more complicated. He cannot provide an “authentic” academic experience but rather provides a simulacrum of one by narrating the system of the academy, not from its center, but from a far more marginal position. Gladney’s inability to learn German plays on the notion of an academic’s struggles, but Gladney does not so much struggle as he fails to acquire what ought to be a central tool for intellectual work.

This play with the academic sub-genre provides a specific demonstration of how the novel can create meaning. Gladney exists at the center as someone who is not quite what he is and in turn renders the sub-genre not quite itself. The section provides an academic sub-genre without a proper academic, who keeps pushing the novel away from what seemingly should be its academic center. The problem of Gladney as a narrator is reflected in the particular narrative formal demands of the academic sub-genre. The early images and narration *tell* the reader that they are in an academic setting in a manner that forces the reader to rely upon the narrator. This, of course, would not be equally true if this story were presented through a visual medium where the ability to *see* could wrest some control of the creation of the academic setting from the narrator. Gladney thus maintains control over the novel’s disparate voices through his act of narration. This telling (from Gladney) and hearing (by other characters) is rooted in a genre which is corrupted from the inside by Gladney’s inauthentic voice. Granting Gladney an “authentic” voice would not, however, stabilize the sub-genre, which is representative of the manner in which *White Noise* constructs the academic sub-genre through a range of disparate elements. As the novel is comprised of varying elements that in themselves seem internally

cohesive (specific voices, types of speech, etc.) *White Noise* shows the unit of the sub-genre to as well be a heteroglossified unit of significance.

Gladney's colleague and friend, Murray Jay Siskind, provides a challenge to the academic sub-genre and Gladney through his unique voice. As an older member of the College-on-the-Hill staff, Gladney at times adopts the role of mentor towards Siskind, but an undercurrent of competitiveness between the two challenges this as they attempt to establish their unique academic fields. Though Gladney helps acclimate Murray to College-on-the-Hill, Murray serves as a sort of cultural guide to the post-modern world for Gladney. Through the tension and camaraderie that Murray builds inside of the academy, he at times serves a very traditional role in the academic novel. His sense of dark irony and deadpan embrace of the hyperreal experience, however, frequently go beyond the expectations of the academic novel, through explicit academic dialogue that seems unrealistic, which does not break with the sub-genre as much as it melts the genre suddenly away and replaces it with Murray's strange world.

One such moment occurs in one of the novel's more famous scenes when Gladney takes Murray to a popular local destination—"THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA" (DeLillo 12). Here Gladney operates in his role as shepherd by showing Murray the important sites and Murray engages in his role as interpreter by explaining, "We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura" (12). Murray essentially provides a Baudrillardian interpretation of the manner in which the Real of the barn is replaced by the symbolic photographs that become the hyperreal that people actually engage with, and while this is interesting in and of itself and opens a line of criticism that many have engaged with, I appreciate this moment for the way in which it disturbs the academic sub-genre and begins to make it something more than itself. Here Murray as a professor operates in a sort

of hyperdrive, unable to engage with the outside world, except to envelop it within his interpretive capacities. The fact that at the end Murray “seemed immensely pleased” (13) supports understanding him as an almost unconscious consumer of the “real world”—Murray’s pleasure reflects that of someone after a satisfying meal. The real world is not just something that serves as a target for academic prowess then, but is consumed and potentially nullified by Murray.

If the opening scene uses the academic sub-genre to create meaning through demonstrating what “matters” most in Gladney’s narrative, the introduction of Murray uses the setting of the sub-genre to create meaning by, in essence, taking meaning too far. Murray adopts Gladney’s narrative M.O. of confident, positive speech but adds an element of analysis that is lacking in Gladney’s mostly expository language. Murray identifies and interprets the world around him with zeal. Murray’s process of consuming the outside world reveals the lack of a clear divide between academic/outside worlds by using his academic tools to interpret meaning in the supposedly outside world. This specifically constructs meaning in the context of the academic sub-genre through a sort of stretching effect. The reader experiences the academic world expanding through the unstoppable academic (Murray). Regardless of whether a reader explicitly understands this to violate conventions of the academic novel or not, the expansion of Murray’s professional world outside of the symbolic limits of that world creates a sense that the scene of Gladney and Murray at the barn is not “real” in some manner because the “real” world has been claimed by academic methods outside of the space of the academy.

Murray pushes the academic sub-genre by breaking the convention of separate and opposed academic/outside worlds, and Gladney challenges the sub-genre by threatening its internal cohesion with his role as the narrator. Absent a “true” center Gladney manages to keep

*White Noise* within the academic sub-genre through his self-described academic “aura” (74). The image of an aura as something that extends diffusely outward as well matches how *White Noise* challenges the genre and uses it to create meaning. DeLillo uses the tension between Gladney and Murray not just to dramatize the tension between characters, a typical motif in academic novels, but to demonstrate how this aura functions. In order to help grant Murray as a new professor a sense of legitimacy, Gladney visits his classroom and gives an extemporaneous speech comparing Elvis (Murray’s person of study) and Hitler (Gladney’s). To begin describing the event Gladney first accounts for the images associated with his aura: “I put on my dark glasses, composed my face and walked into the room” (70). That Gladney relies on props and his “composed” face suggests the artifice of identity as a character he recreates, which fits with his lack of an authentic academic center.

Gladney carefully crafts his presence in the room, only speaking when it can further the aura that he presents. After interjecting a comment about Hitler into Murray’s monologue on Elvis, Gladney notes, “a surge of attention, unspoken, identifiable only in a certain convergence of stillness, and inward tensing” (70). The “convergence [...] inward” provides an opposing response to Gladney’s aura which dissipates outwards, and the intensity of feeling that Gladney communicates seems to indicate that his aura has a tangible impact upon those whom it reaches. Gladney and Murray go back and forth with competing Elvis and Hitler stories before Gladney takes over the classroom with his account of Hitler. Gladney refers to Elvis as lesser than Hitler, but also implicates Murray in this comparison. Murray studies a figure with less weight and has less gravitas at College-on-the-Hill. Gladney’s speech becomes increasingly frenzied until he stops and reflects on the room that he has seemingly enchanted. Murray remains outside the enchantment and Gladney reads his appreciation of the bestowal of academic legitimacy:

“[Murray’s] eyes showed a deep gratitude. I had been generous with the power and madness at my disposal, allowing my subject to be associated with an infinitely lesser figure” (73), though Gladney’s reading may be overconfident as Murray maintains a great deal of autonomy.

Gladney’s appearance in Murray’s classroom allows him to express his academic aura in a straightforward manner—he engages in his academic self and receives support from the people and occurrences around him. Even in doing this, however, Gladney recognizes the contingency of his aura: “We all had an aura to maintain, and in sharing mine with a friend I was risking the very things that made me untouchable” (74). The collective “we” comments on the way that the room affirms Gladney’s aura and the sense of a collective academic aura. Though he understands the risk of sharing his aura with Murray he cannot fully grasp the consequences. Gladney moves from this moment—with his aura shining and the novel still playing with the academic sub-genre—into increasingly chaotic events and a definite shift in genre. Gladney’s functioning aura allows a loose play with the academic sub-genre as it keeps him and thus the narration focused, but the lack of stability of the aura prevents this focus from being maintained as the settings shift.

Towards the end of “Waves and Radiation” Gladney shops in a hardware store and encounters Eric Massingale, a College-on-the-Hill colleague. The space of the hardware store brings the novel outside of the academic setting, and where previously Gladney’s aura maintained the sense of the sub-genre in non-academy scenes through academic language and a sense of continuity in his role as an academic, encountering Massingale causes Gladney to falter. The moment in the hardware store provides a good example of how this generic continuity breaks as the narrative moment starts with Gladney delivering a pseudo-academic internal monolog on the nature of the family. Massingale provides a narrative and generic interruption

when he encounters Jack and move him out of his academic internal monologue into plain speech and out of an academic role into an exposure of Gladney's hollowness.

Immediately upon encountering Gladney Massingale declares, “ ‘You’re not wearing dark glasses, Jack.’ ” (82), presenting the reader with a body that does not match the aura (so frequently symbolized by the glasses) that Gladney attempts to project. By wresting the narrative out of Gladney's control, Massingale alters the formal structure of the narrative. Here Bakhtin's notion of heterofied speech in competition with each other can aid in thinking about the genre shift. Gladney in his academic mode before encountering Massingale narrates in a long, largely theoretical passage, which Massingale's observation disrupts. Not only does the narrative shift out of Gladney's long, internal monolog, but another voice also enters that provides a perspective which takes Gladney as its object. The reader, so used to seeing through Gladney's eyes, gets a momentary respite where they are suddenly staring into the eyes *which with they were just seeing*. This moment also provides a meta-generic reflection as the reader stares into the (literally) unmasked tools of generic construction given Gladney's role as the narrator.

After the initial encounter Gladney shops around and his narration takes a meaningful turn away from his pseudo-academic musing to vapid analysis of his own consumerism. Though Gladney has previously focused on himself as a consumer—the narrative move at this specific moment belies the generic shift occurring in the novel as Gladney never regains his aura. After Massingale unmakes him, Gladney shifts to a mode which comes easier than the maintenance of his aura—mindless consumerism. *White Noise* does not abandon the academic sub-genre altogether at this moment, but with Gladney momentarily unnerved there is a glitch in the Matrix so to speak. Here *White Noise* does not merely stretch or corrupt the academic sub-genre, but the genre takes a leave of absence. Massingale latter continues his questioning of Gladney through a



notion of consumerism: “ ‘You look different without your glasses and gown. Where did you get that sweater? Is that a Turkish army sweater? Mail order, right?’ ” (82). Here the shift from Gladney as academic to Gladney as consumer continues through Massingale’s identification of Gladney’s products/props. Massingale ends the interaction by saying, “ ‘You look so harmless, Jack. A big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy’ ” (83). Jack’s academic props distinguish him from the nebulous mass of consumer culture, but his hollow core becomes easily filled with consumerism absent his glasses or robe propping up his aura. Even with colleagues who know his role, Gladney needs the space and tools of the academic setting in order to maintain an effective aura and keep the novel playing with the academic sub-genre.

“Waves and Radiation” ends with Murray playing his standard roll, stretching the academy outside of traditionally academic spaces by taking notes of an intimate Gladney family moment—their watching the television.<sup>2</sup> As the novel moves away from this moment into “The Airborne Toxic Event” a difference in genre confronts the reader. Gladney continues to narrate, but the airborne toxic event, the release of toxic chemicals into the air caused by a train crash, prevents impacts Gladney’s ability to narrate, and this narration steps outside of Gladney’s area of expertise. Gladney’s eldest son, Heinrich, challenges him as the center of the novel through both having the most knowledge about the disaster and also by approaching it on its own terms—working with its ambiguity and mystery rather than trying to master its unknowability. Gladney remains as the novel’s narrator, but as his role changes the novelistic sub-genre follows suit. No longer narrating on his own territory Gladney narrates as a victim of events that have challenged his sense of place and the novel becomes more akin to the post-apocalyptic novel.

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<sup>2</sup> One could argue that Murray performs a traditional role in this setting by acting as an anthropologist taking notes of the culture that he studies, but I believe his role is notably different. Most distinctly, unlike an anthropologist observing the customs of another culture, Murray seems to create the culture that the Gladney’s operate in by explicitly dictating the meanings of acts to Gladney in their various conversations (see 13-14, 37-38, and perhaps most notably 289-94)

## **Sustained Immanence: The Distortion of the Post-Apocalypse in “The Airborne Toxic Event”**

In thinking of a model for the post-apocalyptic sub-genre, upon which “The Airborne Toxic Events” play can be examined, H.G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* provides a useful example. Its imagining of a Martian invasion, and first-person narration of the near apocalypse was revolutionary, and possesses a number of events that are paralleled in *White Noise*. As a model for the expectations of the post-apocalyptic sub-genre a number of facets stand out: initial presentation of normalcy; a disastrous event, around which knowledge is initially confused; chaotic response to the disaster; a more passive response during which varying tensions can be explored; and ultimately some type of resolution. *The War of the Worlds* and “The Airborne Toxic Event” both progress through all of these stages, though *White Noise* distorts how these scenes would be expected to function. The novels are also similar in how the disasters arrive: the Martians of *The War of the Worlds* arrive as a sort of airborne toxic (or at least deadly) event, and enact havoc before a natural, earthborn toxic event kills them off. *White Noise* provides a different take on disaster as it arrives as a human made product delivered by error, and leaves through human intervention, producing results that demand and defy human interpretation.

Early in “The Airborne Toxic Event” Heinrich challenges Gladney’s narration through learning of the disaster before Gladney, which forces Gladney to act as a second tier conduit. Heinrich also becomes a rational (and perhaps more confidence inducing) narrator, which causes Gladney’s still dominant narration to create a world of confusion in contrast with the world of “Waves and Radiation” where Gladney was able to function as a guide. After Gladney joins Heinrich in the attic of their house in the initial stages of the disaster he largely asks Heinrich basic questions or provides overconfident answers that betray his lack of understanding. He asks:

“What happened?” (110), “What does it look like?” (110), “What is it?” (111), and “What does it cause?” (111). His questions display a child-like curiosity regarding the disaster, and Heinrich dutifully answers his every query. Beyond that simple inversion of father/son roles Gladney seems to ask his son for a level of security, by assuming that Heinrich can communicate “the disaster” into the realm of knowability. This is especially pronounced with the question “What does it cause?” where Gladney seeks assurance regarding his safety, which demonstrates an inversion of their emotional roles—though only the process changes (Gladney asking Heinrich for assurances his safety) and not the product (Heinrich does not have to deliver emotional support) because of how the novel progresses.

Gladney’s statements to Heinrich further this inversion in a manner that changes Gladney’s narrative relationship with the reader. His overconfident repetition that the toxic cloud “won’t come this way” (110, 111) “it won’t get here [...] it won’t” (113) and that, “Nothing is going to happen” (114) promote a loss of confidence for the reader as the cloud *does* move toward the Gladney house and they are forced to evacuate. This loss of confidence comes with watching Gladney’s narrative role change as *White Noise* moves from the academic sub-genre to the post apocalyptic genre. He becomes unreliable not in the sense that he communicates untruths to the reader, but that he cannot comprehend his surroundings and he acts as if he can. His attempts to sustain his role as a professor-guide in the disaster prevent him from acting the role of a post-apocalyptic survivor.

At this point the novel moves from the academic sub-genre in a number of ways: the closed society bursts open with the disaster and forced evacuation, the disaster provides a lens for the narration of experience rather than Gladney’s academic framework and the formal chapter structures change to match their content. Whereas many chapters marked the academic

section, with each roughly containing their own episode, “The Airborne Toxic Event” has one chapter that runs from the beginning of the disaster through the return to normalcy. In that manner the structure of chapters in the two sections is similar—chapters deliver episodes in both—but “The Airborne Toxic Event” stretches out that episode far beyond any in “Waves and Radiation.” In this sense the long disaster chapter consumes the content and structure of the earlier section. The characters and tensions all transition into section two, but the disaster prevents any formal partitioning of these various elements. Though “The Airborne Toxic Event” marks a shift in sub-genre, remnants of the academic sub-genre remain in a manner that affects the presentation of the post-apocalyptic sub-genre. Gladney maintains his role as a professor, and thus distorts the post-apocalyptic genre through trying to operate in his old role.

As the importance of the disaster becomes increasingly clear, the mix of sub-genres places Gladney in a comic and confused role: “I’m not just a college professor. I’m the head of a department. I don’t see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That’s for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the country, where the fish hatcheries are” (117). Here Gladney addresses himself as if he were a character in a representation, which he of course is, and he assigns himself as being safe because of his previous self-depiction in the academic sub-genre. Gladney excludes himself from the disaster by pairing his academic self with representations of real disasters, such as those that he watches recreationally with his family, where victims often do live in lower-class areas because of the disproportionate impact of disasters. This contrasts with the literary representation of disasters where the narrator is frequently a person of a higher class, as in *War of the Worlds*, where the narrator’s writing background aids him in communicating the Martian apocalypse. Gladney’s inability to

understand himself within a literary representation of a disaster prevents him from breaking out of his academic self and creating a clean presentation of the two sub-genres.

Gladney's reference to his own representation provides a point of entrance for examining how the novel's move to a new sub-genre affects the reader's experience. Again, I do not believe that the change in readerly experience relies on consciousness in the reader regarding the specific moves that DeLillo makes. The reader need not be conscious of the sub genre's conventions to experience "Airborne Toxic Event's" literary representation of a disaster, and to experience that representation as distinct from the largely academic material of "Waves and Radiation." Further, the way that the sub-genres come into conflict in moments such as Gladney's declaration: "I'm the head of a department. I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event." affects *White Noise's* depiction of disaster through adding an element of comedy, which is derived from the difference of how representation and meaning function in the two sub-genres. Gladney refuses to take the disaster with the seriousness that he ought to because he operates under a different mode of self-representation, but instead of experiencing harm from of his lack of seriousness, Gladney's actions render him an absurd character in his own narration. In this moment it is as if the different sub-genres bump into each other before the post-apocalyptic sub-genre reasserts itself and moves the action forwards.

The post-apocalyptic genre moves forward in the text when the disaster acts upon the family and forces them to flee despite Gladney's protests. As the novel moves outside of Gladney's academic space he loses his place as the novel's locus and an increasingly heterogeneous array of sources communicate to the reader. As examined above this starts with Heinrich's role as the interpreter of the disaster, but becomes increasingly the case as the family leaves Blacksmith. The reader confronts the disaster as a new experience alongside the family,

and thus each image narrated to the reader and every sentence of dialog provide a sliver of the total narrative experience to the reader in a way that differs from “Waves and Radiation.” The fact that even in the first section Gladney cannot homogenize the disparate sources of narrative information, of course, complicates how the differences between the sections can be understood, but the narrative difference of this attempt to homogenize is palpable, as two different car scenes demonstrate.

In “Waves and Radiation” while on a family trip to the local shopping mall the family falls into a discussion that devolves into word association after Denise attempts to confront Babette about Dylar, a drug she is secretly taking for depression. The exact progression of their conversation, which moves from Dylar to various misinformed references to African geography to consumer and pop culture, matters less than the manner in which Gladney fits the conversation into the narrative at large.<sup>3</sup> Gladney follows the conversation with the blunt statement, “The family is the cradle of the world’s misinformation” (81). He does not eliminate other voices from the narrative, as the various family members’ statements and questions speak to the reader, but as a more stable narrator he colors the voices of others through his own interpretive voice. The reader, in this manner, experiences Gladney’s narrative homogenization as this attempt to impress himself upon the reader regardless of how the reader takes this attempted impression. Readers of course may respond to this impression in different manners, but this attempt to impress changes in “The Airborne Toxic Event” as different events either undercut it (Heinrich’s

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<sup>3</sup> The precise progression of the conversation is as follows: “ ‘What do you know about Dylar?’ / ‘Is that the black girl who’s staying with the’ stovers?’ / ‘That’s Dakar’ [...] ‘Dakar isn’t her name, its where she comes from,’ Denise said. ‘It’s a country on the Ivory Coast of Africa.’ / The capital is Lagos,’ [...] surfer movie [...] ‘*The Perfect Wave*’ [...] ‘*The Long Hot Summer*’ [...] ‘Tennessee Ernie Williams’ [...] “If she’s an African,’ Steffie said, ‘I wonder if she ever rode a camel.’ / ‘Try an Audi Turbo.’ / ‘Try a Toyota Supra’ [...] ‘The important thing about camels,’ he said, ‘is that camel meat is considered a delicacy.’ / ‘I thought that was alligator meat’ [...] ‘Who introduced the camel to America?’ [...] ‘Are you sure you aren’t talking about llamas’ ” (80-81).

greater knowledge) or Gladney's encountering of new events necessitates processing instead of impressing.

As the family flees the toxic cloud they enter into another conversation, this time started by Jack's concern over Babette's use of Dylar. Again the exact nature of the conversation matters less for this analysis than how it fits within the narrative, but it relates closely to the previous conversation in that it starts with something serious (Dylar/the Disaster) and then moves onward to a misinformed word association.<sup>4</sup> The conversation provides an opportunity for Jack to impress upon the reader himself as narrator, but here the disaster provides the dominating narrative lens. The narration moves out of this conversation without any comment and returns to their surroundings and the disaster: "Snow turned to sleet, sleet to rain. We reached the point where the concrete barrier gives way to a twenty-yard stretch of landscaped median no higher than a curbstone" (125). Though Gladney provides the narration he feels largely absent as he never references himself or his own unique impressions, but rather provides a seemingly objective account of the family's progression. This descriptive narration seems to place the reader on a similar plane of knowledge as Gladney—they see and hear things at the same time. Without Gladney's attempts to impress himself on the reader, the conversation and narrated sensory impressions enter the narrative as epistemologic slices that respond to the disaster (conversation happens in response to the disaster, sights are seen because of how the disaster moves people) without attempting to force a hierarchy of how they should be understood as sources of knowledge; the disaster as an agent of narrative production does not have the

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<sup>4</sup> In this instance the conversation progresses as follows: " 'But you swallowed something. I saw.' / 'That was just saliva [...]' we learned that dogs strained to sniff out Nyodene D. were being sent [...]' 'A dog is a mammal.' / 'So's a rat' [...]' 'A rat is a vermin' [...]' 'A cockroach is a verman' [...]' 'A cockroach is an insect' [...]' 'Are you people telling me,' Babette said, 'that a rat is not only a vermin and a rodent but a mammal too?' " (124-125). I find the primary similarities between the two conversations to be the easy way in which different voices slide in and out and how the conversations move, almost as if through necessity, from serious to inane.

intentionality that Gladney possesses in the first section. It would be dishonest to argue that “The Airborne Toxic Event” provides an objective narration through its heterogeneity, as Gladney necessarily provides subjective narration, but the experience of heterogeneity trumps attempts to homogenize, producing a markedly different reading experience.

At different moments during the evacuation Gladney ponders representation, referring to evacuees fleeing on foot: “The whole affair had about it a well-rehearsed and self-satisfied look, as though they’d been waiting for months to strut their stuff” (122) and in thinking about his own family: “I feel sad for people and the queer part we play in our own disasters” (126). These passages refer back to the academic sub-genre in that they provide an interpretive framework, but they do so without the same confidence i.e. they comment on representation within the disaster, but they do not sum up this representation as neatly as Gladney does in his fully academic mode with phrases such as, “The family is the cradle of the world’s misinformation.” These reflections provide another instance in which the academic sub-genre remains in the text after it had seemingly run its course and interacts with the post-apocalyptic sub-genre. They provide an especially conscious part of the overall representation and add another level of heterogeneity: various “slices” are presented to the reader on a more even epistemological field *and* within this sub-genre that provides heterogeneity different sub-genres are placed in dialog. In this manner the remnants of the academic sub-genre disrupt the post-apocalyptic sub-genre as the “Waves and Radiation” was disrupted through being overdone.

The progression of the disaster and post-apocalyptic sub-genre runs its course in a similar manner to the academic sub-genre as things peter out to the point where the sub-genre runs out of substance to keep going, and in this instance representation fails. The real thing—the airborne toxic event as a physical entity—is tangible, but it only seems to affect people through



representation. Gladney's statements make clear that people portray themselves as engaged in a disaster performance. The people that he sees appear "well rehearsed" and "self-satisfied" in how they present themselves—their ability to represent themselves in the disaster taking priority over responding to the disaster itself. Gladney feels sorry for the "queer part we play in our own disasters" referring to how his kids incorrectly represent their symptoms to the released toxins, and thus create an inauthentic representation—or one without the proper rehearsal of the evacuating family that he sees. Concern regarding representation at various levels becomes so elevated that questions of experience become unanswerable. Though the disaster starts with an actual event it gets filtered through so maybe questions of representation that its effects become largely aesthetic.

"The Airborne Toxic Event's" focus on representation and use of heterogeneous voices leaves the reader without something tangible that they can take from the disaster in a narrative sense—the novel loses no characters, it is unclear how the disaster will affect the plot going forward and the main thing that carries on into the next section, the nebulous mass that enters Gladney from Nyodene D. exposure, only increases the situation's uncertainty. The nebulous mass offers little for the reader as a knowable thing and thus, like the scenes of evacuation, the reader encounters the mass with Gladney as a new thing. Unlike the evacuation scenes, however, the reader and Gladney are pushed into divergent paths from the mass—the reader is left in a space of generic ambiguity, with the mass providing an unclear culmination of the post-apocalyptic sub-genre, and Gladney becomes a sort of wandering narrator, vacillating between the security of the academy, the ambiguous malevolence of the disaster and the uncertainty of the future.

The threat of death from the nebulous mass provides a fitting cap to the disaster— catastrophe threatens but its arrival remains mysterious. Gladney reacts to the unnerving threat of the post-apocalyptic genre by reminiscing about the clarity offered in his role as an academic narrator: “It [the mass] makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying. I wanted my academic gown and glasses” (142). The representation of death without clear impact (the mass) provokes a sense of disjointedness in Gladney as his body “feel[s] like a stranger” in relation to his conceptual dying. Gladney desires to return to his objects, the gown and glasses, which provide familiarity instead of strangeness. Yet, the disaster and disaster sub-genre have moved Gladney away from these objects and robbed them of the power that they seemed to possess. Absent objects that provide Gladney the sense of security that he desires he distracts himself by walking around the evacuee camp, filtering the various voices that come to him.

As stated above, in various ways these heterogeneous voices come to provide a decentered mode of representation for the reader, yet they also lack any internal cohesiveness, as the characters lack a means to understand their position themselves, which is disturbing for all of the voices that comprise this representation. Towards the end of “The Airborne Toxic Event” an outraged evacuee bemoans the lack of media coverage:

‘There’s nothing on network,’ he said to us. ‘Not a word, not a picture.’  
 [...] ‘Is it possible nobody gives substantial coverage to such a thing?’  
 [...] What exactly has to happen before they stick microphones in our faces and hound us to the doorsteps of our homes, camping out on our lawns, creating the usual media circus? Haven’t we earned the right to despise their idiot questions? [...] But we look around and see no response from the official organs of the media. The airborne toxic event is a horrifying thing. Our fear is enormous. [...] Isn’t fear news? (162).

The evacuee articulates his dissatisfaction in the lack of recorded voices and experience, “what exactly has to happen before they stick microphones in our faces” and the lack of a universal response which would be allowed by the media presence, “haven’t *we* earned the right” (emphasis mine). Though the evacuee phrases his complaint as universal with “we” and “our” the lack of media response prevents a universal representation and disallows a universal response by the evacuees to that representation of their experience. They cannot all feel frustrated with how their experience is portrayed and they are left alone with their own unarticulated experiences. The evacuee’s monologue provides a semblance of something that they can coalesce around, but it is less unifying than the non-existent media response, as it only expresses one response to the response to the disaster.

The section ends with a whimper—leaving the meaning of the disaster unclear. Gladney notably does not narrate the end of the disaster: “It was nine days before they told us we could go back home” (163) but rather ends the disaster with his narration. His voice moves on from the confused heteroglossia of the disaster but leaves the disaster on a note of ambiguity. What actually happened is left unsaid, with the implication that nothing happened in the “nine days” that was worth narrating. Gladney’s ending engages with the morass of voices by ending their confusion out of narrative necessity—their continuation in the ambiguity of the disaster would push the section from confusion toward meaninglessness—and in leaving the disaster *White Noise* enters a new narrative mode.

“Waves and Radiation,” plays with the academic sub-genre and focuses on Gladney as the novel’s center through his academic voice; “The Airborne Toxic Event” breaks this centralizing focus through a multiplicity of voices, introduced through a version of the post-apocalyptic sub-genre, which fail to converge around any unifying conventions of representation.

The novel's final section, "Dylarama," then combines the confused drama of the second section, with the focus on Gladney of the first to provide an attempt at the existential sub-genre.

Narratively "Dylarama" falls in between the other sections as well—Gladney's voice dominates and where other voices emerge they frequently relate to Gladney's conception of himself, providing more focus than "The Airborne Toxic Event" while demonstrating less epistemological confidence than "Waves and Radiation." "Dylarama" fits within the existential sub-genre in the arc it presents of Gladney seeking to know himself, though like the other uses of sub-genre it doesn't live up to its own expectations, creating a layered experience for the reader that operates within that sub-genre and outside as part of the novel as a whole which constantly plays with sub-genre and its own expectations.

### **Being onto Farce: Existential Play in "Dylarama"**

Albert Camus's *The Stranger* provides a useful model for examining how "Dylarama" plays with the existential sub-genre. Though Camus may have resisted the term, his novels cultural association with existentialism provides useful guidelines for what one may expect from the sub-genre. In *The Stranger* existential concerns are addressed through banal events and the display of meaninglessness in the face of traditionally very meaningful events, such as the death of a mother, murder, and execution. "Dylarama," by and large, adopts a differing approach as the search for meaning overcomes a passive acceptance of meaninglessness, but like *The Stranger* the impact of major events sways how characters interpret their own lives and impending deaths. "Dylarama" can be understood as engaging in a dialog with the archetype of *The Stranger*, especially through Murray who in some ways advocates freedom under the meaninglessness of social law, though the section ultimately departs from that engagement through a proliferation of emotion, into farce.

Early in the section Gladney confronts Babette regarding Dylar and they finally have an actual conversation about the drug and their individual, hidden fears of death. The conversation provides a glimpse at how Gladney's narrative role leads him to produce truths for himself and the reader as his misguided attempts to narrate his understanding into truth contrasts with Babette's strong, blunt voice. After Babette describes her depression to Jack he interjects with his differing version of Babette: "I've never seen you like this. This is the whole point of Babette. She's a joyous person. She doesn't succumb to gloom or self-pity" (191). Gladney essentially defines Babette as an object in relation to himself; she has a "point" for Gladney, which defines her in a role of inhuman stability and fails to recognize her existential struggle.

In the face of Jack's obtuse self-obsession Babette asserts control over narrating her own story as she responds with: "Let me tell it, Jack" (191). Later in their conversation when Gladney expresses his unhappiness at Babette for withholding her depression and sleeping with another man to gain access to Dylar, Babette again asserts her control over her story: "This is not a story about your disappointment at my silence. The theme of this story is my pain and my attempts to end it. [...] This is not the story of a wife's deception. You can't sidestep the true story, Jack. It is too big" (196-197). Babette's narration offers a story that would seem to fit neatly in the existential sub-genre. The "theme of [her] story" is her "pain" provoked by existential despair and the desperate, confused act that she was pushed to by her despair. In comparing Babette's story to *The Stranger*, Babette's rejoinder "this is not the story of a wife's deception" can be seen as both within the sub-genre offering a response to Raymond and Meursault, who focus on Raymond's lover's supposed deception early in the novel, and as an exploration of the sub-genre theme of existential pain. Yet Jack's role as narrator again distorts the genre, as he disregards

Babette's requests and cannot help but make the story one of deception and his existential confusion.

Gladney's distinct style of narration in "Dylarama" comes through in his conversation with Babette—as in his narration in "Waves and Radiation" he operates as the locus point for other's voices, but he lacks his previous confidence and other's voices undermine him. By portraying Babette's despair as something that relates primarily to himself Gladney enters her clear narration of despair into his narration of confusion. Gladney once again attempts to homogenize other voices into his own experience, yet these other voices make clear that Gladney's narration cannot capture the totality of experience. Where "The Airborne Toxic Event" provides the reader with a heterofied experience as a result of the disaster and play with the post-apocalyptic sub-genre, "Dylarama" narratively provides the reader with an experience of confusion and despair through the failed attempt to homogenize other's voices. Jack's focus on his own death and confusion cause him to act as a sort of narrative sponge—soaking up bits and pieces of others in an attempt to deal with himself.

The visit of Babette's father, Vernon, provides Gladney an opportunity to narrate Vernon's strange behavior into relation with his existential concerns. Before Vernon leaves he invites Gladney into his car and hands him a gun: "I kept staring at it, wondering what Vernon's motive might be. Was he Death's dark messenger after all? A loaded weapon. How quickly it worked a change in me, numbing my hand even as I sat staring at the thing, not wishing to give it a name. Did Vernon mean to provoke thought, provide my life with a fresh design, a scheme, a shapeliness?" (253). Here an inverse of the existential display in *The Stranger* occurs. Whereas in *The Stranger* events that are traditionally ascribed great amounts of meaning are met with an affect that treats them as meaningless, in *White Noise* Jack's existential concerns place heavy

personal meaning on an act that mostly displays Vernon's paranoia and senility. Gladney clearly does not buy Vernon's ostensible reason for giving him the gun, the need for security, as he questions "what Vernon's motive might be" which allows him to imagine Vernon as "Death's dark messenger." Gladney's comment "how quickly it worked a change in me" grants the gun power as an object, and it gains this power because Gladney appreciates its tangibility—providing a tactile and controllable manifestation of death in contrast to the nebulous mass inside Gladney. The significance that Gladney ascribes to the process of receiving the gun allows him to imagine it as a tool that can render his being more tangible as he imagines the potential of the gun in physical language: "provide my life with a fresh *design*, a scheme, a *shapeliness*" (emphasis mine).

Though the gun provides Gladney a tool through which he can imagine the embodiment of his existential angst, his increasing incoherence as a narrator and character prevents him from acting until he gains an impetus. Murray sets Gladney in motion through taking advantage of his anxious state and provoking him into action. In pushing Gladney, Murray co-opts the role of the narrator by filling Gladney's lack of confidence with his unquestioning bluntness. He acts out an Iago role as he pushes Gladney towards violence, rendering him a puppet-narrator, seemingly absent malice or anything to gain. After discussing various hopeless ways of escaping death Murray advocates killing: "there are two kinds of people in the world. Killers and diers. Most of us are diers. [...] Think how exciting it is, in theory, to kill a person in direct confrontation. If he dies, you cannot. To kill him is to gain life-credit. The more people you kill, the more credit you store up" (290). Murray's solution to the problem of dying offers Gladney tangible action to take, and a way of enacting his internal fear outwards, onto others. The binary that he sets up ("if he dies, you cannot") is, of course, false—but its appeal belies Gladney's function as the narrator at

this point in the novel. His existential dread has pushed him to the point where he does not narrate independently, but is filled by others and drives towards a confrontation with death.

Here the play with the existential sub-genre pushes the novel to provide an experience of near meaninglessness. The novel remains comprehensible, but the narrative experience for the reader has devolved to obsessive narrating through death. The reader does not have to understand the section as playing with a sub-genre so much as the reader faces a bombardment of narration that moves to death with every turn. “Dylarama” progresses towards meaninglessness through the proliferation of meaning as a result of existential concerns. Gladney’s loss of control renders him a mouthpiece for Murray’s happy-go-lucky nihilism, and as he cedes his voice to Murray, Gladney begins to act out that narration. After their conversation Gladney goes home to clean in a “vengeful and near savage state” (294) embodying the aggression that Murray implanted in him.

Murray’s co-option of the narrative role pushes Gladney to action in an attempt to solve his existential quandary. This fits well within an existential generic framework as he moves towards an act that will put him into confrontation with death, but typical of *White Noise*, the act that actually happens skirts the expectations of meaning-producing action that Gladney’s interactions with Vernon and Murray set up. After Gladney discovers the name of the man who traded sex for Dylar with Babette, Willie Mink, and armed with Murray’s existential conviction and Vernon’s tool, Gladney sets off for Mink’s motel determined to kill him. Upon arriving at Mink’s motel Gladney’s obsessed narration, bereft of almost anything but his drive to kill and existentially elevate himself, creates an impressionistic account that blurs together with Mink’s madness: “Mink appeared to grow more vivid. The precise nature of events. Things in their actual state. [... Mink:] ‘Containing iron, niacin and riboflavin. I learned my English in



airplanes' ” (310). Gladney's paradoxical language creates distance between himself as narrator and the reader as he describes things as “vivid,” “precise” and “in their actual state” without making any of that vividness clear for the reader. As Gladney seemingly gets closer to his object he leaves the reader in the lurch by narrating for himself rather than the reader. Mink's incoherent and unconnected babbling then adds to the experience of disorder for the reader as it provides words that the reader cannot connect with just as they cannot connect with Gladney's self-directed ramblings.

As Gladney arrives at Mink's motel room he creates a narrative of obsession through repeating his plan of action, in more or less the same manner five times. The repetition engages with Gladney's opaque narration as it provides meaning for him primarily—it allows him to confirm to himself what he will attempt. He mentions certain facets once, as they become immediate concerns: the approach, “drive past the scene several times, park some distance from the scene, go back on foot” (304), and the entrance, “Enter unannounced” (306). Other aspects are stated repeatedly, demonstrating the specifics of Gladney's fantasy: the “three shots in the viscera for maximum pain” (304) comes up with almost the exact same wording in each of the five repetitions. The gun appears in most of the descriptions as well, twice specifically described as a “Zumwalt” (306, 311). Gladney's fantasy of how he will portray Mink's death evolves the most in the various repetitions. The first imagination focuses on the death as retribution for having sex with Babette “find a crayon or lipstick tube and scrawl a cryptic suicide not on the full-length mirror” (304) as the “lipstick” recalls a woman's former presence on the room and Gladney imagined the two having sex in front of the mirror. The second iteration: “write semi-coherent things on the mirror”(306) moves away from the focus on sexual transgression and recognizes the incoherence of their interaction. The final version: “smear crude words on the

walls in the victim's own blood as evidence of his final cult-related frenzy" (311) takes the progression from the original, upsetting action (sex), to the confusion of the moment, to an unreal fantasy that Gladney feels enough distance from that he can label Mink a "victim" and portray the "frenzy" of the situation and something he can shape around Mink's dead body.

After repeatedly going through his plan of action, Gladney finally acts: "I fired the gun, the weapon, the pistol, the firearm, the automatic" (312). His use of five different words to describe his tool, at the moment of action, moves his act beyond language. What Gladney calls the gun pales in comparison to the feeling: "I saw beyond words" (312). The moment of the shooting, and Mink's passive response, allows Gladney to contrast himself with Mink—understanding Mink as, "too far gone to have a viewpoint" (312) and viewing himself as full of sensory perception: "I was pleased to see how well it was going. The trucks rumbled overhead. The shower curtain smelled of mildewed vinyl. A richness, a smashing intensity" (312). The "richness" and "smashing intensity" that Gladney perceives (along with his sharp identification skills: "trucks," "mildewed vinyl") seem to indicate the success of his endeavor as his ability to perceive life amplifies. After placing the gun in Mink's hand to make the murder appear a suicide, Gladney steps back to appreciate his work, and his fantasy strikes back.

Mink, still alive, shoots Gladney in the wrist: "The world collapsed inward, all those vivid textures and connections buried in mounds of ordinary stuff. I was disappointed. Hurt, stunned and disappointed. What had happened to the higher place of energy in which I'd carried out my scheme? The pain was searing" (313). Gladney notably describes his "world" as "collapsed," communicating the loss of what had seemed a state of ecstasy. The sensory elation that Gladney experienced immediately after shooting Mink disappears, "all those vivid textures and connections buried in mounds of ordinary stuff," that "ordinary stuff" being the pure

physical pain of his wound and the recalibration of his senses into that base and unplanned for pain. Gladney's notion of his "higher energy" becomes a sham, as the energetic language that he uses describes his failure, "the pain was *searing*," literally the transfer of energy to mark flesh.

As Gladney reels back from his hit: "Colored dots appeared at the edge of my field of vision. Familiar little dancing specks. The extra dimensions, the super perceptions, were reduced to visual clutter, a whirling miscellany, meaningless" (313). Again Gladney's "super perceptions" are reduced to "familiar little dancing specks," though notably here Gladney describes the move as a "whirling miscellany" and descent into something "meaningless." Gladney does not merely fail after initially succeeding, but his success and hyper-perception never existed as he could not even tell or think to notice that Mink remained alive as he wrapped the gun in his hand. Mink's shot makes a mockery of the notion that Jack could gain life-credit.

Gladney's transition from perceived clarity to cluttered confusion after being shot provides an inverse of the existential encounter in *The Stranger*. Meursault experiences an overwhelming proliferation of sensory experience: "The sea carried up a thick, fiery breath. It seemed to me as if the sky split open from one end to the other to rain down fire" (Camus 59) before he shoots the gun and shakes "off the sweat and sun" (59) after shooting. In *White Noise* the position of the gun is inverted, as it faces the narrator rather than resting in his hand. Though the moment starts as an inverted culmination of the existential sub-genre as Gladney is shot, it could function as simply a version of this sub-genre if it did not devolve into a strange farce.

Being shot shakes Gladney out of his obsession to kill Mink, and his journey to the hospital descends into the meaninglessness as Gladney feels the loss of his hyper-perception. He communicates that he, "sucked at the wound briefly, not knowing quite why, and spat out the remaining blood and pulp" (313). Later while dragging Mink to the car he attempts to give him

mouth-to-mouth in a scene that appears as an absurdist comedy: “He made spend and gasping noises, short of oxygen. I decided to attempt mouth-to-mouth [...] Perhaps he thought he was about to be kissed. I savored the irony” (314). When they finally get to the hospital they are aided by nuns who feign piety in order to comfort their patients. Gladney ultimately returns home from the strange mess where “there was nothing to do but wait for the next sunset” (321).

“Dylarama” progresses from what seems to be an existential confusion to comedic meaninglessness. The reader experiences the shattering of Gladney’s drive and a narration of the absurd. In this absurdity the comedy of the action and narration lifts the section out of the angst that it had played with and laughs at the bleeding aftermath of the existential sub-genre.

### **Conclusion**

The play with sub-genre in each individual section of *White Noise* provides a conventional tool for meaning creation, which becomes challenged through the section’s use of the sub-genre. The novel as a whole then delivers these demonstrations of convention in a procession—providing an experience that goes beyond generic play through demonstrating the flexibility of the novel. *White Noise* renders these meaning-creating conventions into tools that grant the reader an layered experience of novelistic heteroglossia: the varied voices that comprise a given section, and the different conventions that frame how these voices manifest and are understood at the moment of their manifestation. *White Noise* does not merely portray literary conventions for making meaning, but it provides an experience of how these conventions arise, interact with each other and provide something beyond the purview of any one convention. *White Noise* is not a revolutionary novel in this manner; it does not create new modes of representation, but it demonstrates how novels can provide representations with uniquely novelistic tools. As a non-dominant medium the novel does not have to hit the reader in the face

in order to provide a complex experience, it can rely on old tools, tools with which readers have previously engaged, to deliver a subtle experience.

*White Noise*'s subtly complex engagement with literary meaning creation seems to be the reason why so many critics have focused on other aspects of the novel, or on other mediums of representation altogether. The reader can consume the conventions of the novel without realizing what they are doing, which *White Noise* makes all the easier as it formally displays the tools of the novel alongside an explicit discussion of television as a representational medium. Though critics traditionally think of the title *White Noise* as referring to the static of TV, it may more aptly describe the varied noises of literary conventions, which the reader experiences en masse as white noise.

This focus on the literariness of *White Noise* that my argument has provided demonstrates the import of the novel outside of its specific political moment. It can provide specific political commentary, while engaging in a more general project of literary meaning creation. It outlives its moment by showing the characteristic, persistent value of the novel as a form after its moment of primacy has passed: in the midst of mediums that change how people relate to representation, the novel can provide unique modes of representation through playing with its specific conventions and formal qualities. My approach to *White Noise* allows it to offer varied perspectives, rather than the singular reading that the approach of earlier critics offer. If *White Noise* simply serves to demystify non-literary mediums, as earlier critics seem to believe, then it would merely provide a template to regurgitate formulaic readings. Appreciating the unique tools of different mediums for creating meaning, however, grants *White Noise* a more complex existence, as its specific devices for meaning creation can have individual relationships with other mediums, rather than generic ones. I have focused on the literary side of this relationship to investigate how *White*

*Noise* uses the convention of sub-genre to create a meaning, and this focus opens up the possibility of a more comparative work.

In a similar way to how my reading of *White Noise* offers a way out of formulaic engagements with other mediums, it offers a less prescriptive approach to politics. It cannot point the way forward now, no more than it could offer a route out of neo-liberalism in 1985, but as a reflection on the process of creating meaning it can offer perspective, and it demonstrates how the literary can engage the political through perspective. In *White Noise* conventions run their course almost to the point of meaninglessness: academics explode from a hollow core, a disaster does nothing but induce ambiguity, an existentially pained jolt to action provides a bucket of laughs, but transitions save the novel from a descent into meaninglessness each time. Meaning comes about through a play with convention; stasis within a singular mode of meaning creation becomes meaningless. Ultimately the novel moves through these conventions and offers an ineffable moment in its conclusion, at the end of “Dylarama.” Wilder, Babbette’s youngest son, rides his tricycle across an expressway, falls into a creek, and miraculously survives. The end of the existential section, and novel, teases a meaningless horror in the readers face, and ends by simply moving the narration on. After Wilder’s near death Gladney simply comments, “We go to the overpass all the time” (324) and provides a brief account of his once-again mundane life. Gladney seems to take a narrative stock of his life, and move the reader onwards. The perspective that *White Noise* offers on politics unfolds along similar lines. Singular modes of meaning creation, dominating ideologies like neo-liberalism, can drag themselves into meaningless or farce if they progress unremittingly on their own foundations. Dynamism can provide a more complex ability to create meaning, and perhaps a more just political understanding. While this literary perspective cannot create a political future, and has its own

limitations, it can offer creative possibilities for meaning, which is perhaps a greater asset than anything that purports to prescribe the future.

I pledge that I adhered to the honor code while completing this paper.

Steve Quam



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