

Master's thesis

Living in Dangerous Times: Identity, Volition and Anxiety

in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Falling Man*

By

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The thesis is carried out as a part of the education at the Master's program at The University of Agder and is therefore approved as such. However, this does not imply that the University answers for the methods that are used or the conclusions that are drawn.

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“I’ve always felt that my subject was living in dangerous times.”

Don DeLillo¹

1. Introduction: the deepening postmodern pessimism of Don DeLillo

The above quote by Don DeLillo encapsulates a dominant theme in the works of this important novelist. Most, if not all, of his novels portray characters involved in leading their lives in what may be called physically, as well as psychologically, “dangerous” times. DeLillo has always been concerned with contemporary life, and his works show a concern with postmodern ideas, particularly a preoccupation with identity as an affect of discourse. It has been remarked that he does not offer his readers any “‘individuals’ who are not expressions of – and responses to – specific historical processes” (Lentricchia, “New Essays” 2).

DeLillo’s work engages issues of contemporary American society; he has dealt with toxic spills, consumerism, mass media, terrorism, conspiracy, paranoia and more. His work has been said to exhibit a “prophetic reach” (Engles and Duvall 1), anticipating developments in society with uncanny precision. *White Noise* was released just after the Bhopal disaster in India where thousands of people died; but it was written months, if not years, before disaster struck. *The New York Times Book Review* called *White Noise* “DeLillo’s premonition of national apocalypse” (Rich, “The Clear Blue Sky” n. pag.). Other novels have also seemed to contain prophetic elements. The cover of *Underworld*, published in 1997, features Andre Kertesz’ famous photograph of the World Trade Center; a black bird is flying toward one of the towers. In DeLillo’s fifth novel, *Players*, one of the central characters works in a grief counseling firm located in one of the World Trade Center towers, because “where else would

¹ Binelli, “Intensity of a Plot” n. pag.

you stack all this grief?” (18). After 9/11, this resonates deeply for readers living in a world where the World Trade Center really seemed to be stacked with grief on that sunny September morning in 2001.

The two novels this thesis considers, *White Noise* and *Falling Man*, engage closely with contemporary life. American consumerism, particularly the supermarket, is a large part of the novel and of society in the eighties, as well as concerns about the influence of mass media. The character Murray Jay Siskind wants to immerse himself in “American magic and dread” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 19),² which seems as good a designation as any on the subject matter of *White Noise*. *Falling Man*, published in 2007, tackles 9/11 and its aftermath. There is an uneasy consensus among critics that DeLillo is a postmodern writer,³ and he has also used the themes of conspiracy and paranoia as both subject matter and as undertones in many of his novels. Although he does not mind being called “the chief shaman of the paranoid school of American Fiction,” he states: “I don't consider myself paranoid at all. I think I see things exactly as they are” (Connolly 37).

There might be more obvious choices of novels to consider if one were to focus on studying conspiracy theory in DeLillo's body of work; still, *White Noise* and *Falling Man* are well suited for my purposes. I am more interested in the undercurrents of conspiracy and paranoia and its effects than the concrete conspiracy theme of for example *Libra*. *White Noise* and *Falling Man* both exhibit what Peter Knight has called “an everyday low-intensity paranoia” (45). The conspiracy (if, indeed, there is one) in *White Noise* is abstract and slippery, whereas the conspiracy subjacent to *Falling Man*, is a well-known one.

² Subsequent references in parentheses will be shortened to *WN*.

³ Lentricchia, Knight, Cowart, McClure, Osteen, among others. John N. Duvall, in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, even claims that DeLillo's work “shows us nothing less than how America became postmodern” (2).

The body of criticism concerning *White Noise* is substantial, so my inquiries will be of a narrower scope than those into *Falling Man*. There is little scholarship on *Falling Man*; to my knowledge only two articles (Linda S. Kauffman, Marco Abel), therefore enabling a more open interpretation of the novel. *White Noise* was DeLillo's "breakthrough" novel and his largest commercial success at the time. It won him the National Book Award in 1985 and it is widely read and often included in syllabuses in colleges and universities. Influential critics, like Lentricchia, LeClair, Cowart, Osteen, and Keeseey among others, have all contributed greatly to critical understandings of DeLillo's work. A large number of scholars has expertly penned studies of specific books, and edited volumes covering a variety of subjects.

One might say that all criticism is reductive, because in attempting to uncover textual clues to one's critical area of interest, there might be a temptation to disregard some of the richness of the text at hand. However, in all the different approaches to DeLillo's works scholars expound and examine a wealth of textual clues in his novels. I am of course indebted to earlier critical views, but have chosen to deemphasize some well-known critical viewpoints. Approaching *White Noise* through systems theory and cybernetics, for example, has been done admirably by LeClair, in his *In the Loop*. Critics such as Lindner, Lentricchia, Wilcox and Cowart have seen DeLillo's work in connection with consumerism, media, simulacra and language. Arnold Weinstein places DeLillo in the context of other American writers, as do other critics, among those LeClair and Lentricchia. The intertextual echoes between novelists, and developments in structure and style, are outside the scope of this thesis, as is approaching DeLillo's works from a standpoint of gender or race (Nel, Engles).

White Noise and *Falling Man* show intersecting thematic concerns, and in both novels DeLillo criticizes developments in contemporary society. I aim to show that the two books exhibit a development of ideas and a broadening of scope; they dialogue with each other, and this illuminates aspects of both novels that might otherwise have remained in the background.

Juxtaposing *White Noise* with *Falling Man* will suggest how the novels reinforce or contrast each other, and also how DeLillo's ideas have developed during the last twenty years. A trajectory becomes visible through a comparison between *White Noise* and *Falling Man*; DeLillo becomes increasingly pessimistic about the possibility of healthy identity in a world where discourse is supplanting reality.

A central issue in both novels is the role society plays in shaping identity. DeLillo is concerned with the postmodern idea of the subject as an affect of discourse, and the consequences it has for individual identity. The characters in the novels experience control of, and intrusions into, their identities and bodies, and their reactions range from apathy to violence; they are either "killers" or "diers," as Murray Siskind explains in *White Noise* (290). These novels seem to force the issue to a choice between *them* or *us*, though this is seldom unambiguous.

2. Theoretical approach: postmodernism, identity, and agency panic

Postmodern theory came to the fore in the 20th century, when increasing globalism, mass media, and new technologies of power and science changed how the world was viewed. From Lyotard's call for skepticism toward master narratives in *The Postmodern Condition*, to Fredric Jameson's claim of ahistoricism in *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, postmodern theoreticians have struggled to make sense of an age of disillusion and change. Postmodern thinking includes skepticism to accepted truths, a displacement of values, fragmentation of historical narratives, and reconsiderations of identity and selfhood. Many have questioned the belief that all master narratives are repressive structures. In fact, the call of skepticism to master narratives may itself become a master narrative. Still, it is undeniable that in the postmodern era a characteristic stance has been one of skepticism – to just about

everything. This stance has been evident in literature, with authors commenting on and critiquing society through their work.

Conspiracy theory and paranoia are typical postmodern themes, expressing a deep skepticism and distrust of societal influences. Richard Hofstadter's seminal essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" attempted to explain the far right's paranoid ideas as results of flawed political thought, and paranoia has since Freud's analysis of Daniel Schreber often been looked upon as pathological. Fredric Jameson considers conspiracy theory to be "the [information] poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system" (qtd. in Mason 40). John McClure considers "[t]he conventional narrative of counterconspiracy a version of those grand narratives of enlightenment and liberation whose collapse Lyotard identifies with the postmodern moment" (257).⁴ Timothy Melley, in his *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, also sees conspiracy theory and paranoia as acting as a replacement master narrative, and adds that they propose a "highly adaptable vision of causality" (8) through intimations of faceless structures and hidden agendas at work in society. Still, the use of conspiracy and paranoia as an explanatory device for skepticism to "official truths" has been popular in (post)modern literature. However, postmodern rejection of master narratives and stable truths may leave the artist in an quandary; how does one critique modern society through art? Is it possible to engage in postmodernism as well as criticizing it?

Postmodern thinking challenges older ideas about the individual. American society was built on Lockean liberalism, in which man is viewed as born free with full control of his own actions. Liberal individualism assumes that people are autonomous beings, that they

⁴McClure defines "counterconspiracy narratives" as narratives where the conspiracy is unmasked and eliminated, e.g. like in a conventional detective story (259).

contain a protected core of memories, desires, and ideas that make them unique individuals (53).

Timothy Melley, Peter Knight, and John McClure's theoretical perspectives are valuable tools for analysis of the novels of this thesis. Timothy Melley's concept "agency panic" is useful in connection with texts which deal with tensions between the individual and the collective, the intrusive force of social conditioning and new fears of contamination and infection of the body. Peter Knight's term "body panic", as well as his division between "secure" and "insecure" paranoia further illuminate Melley's agency panic paradigm, and is therefore included here. McClure's idea of "forgetting conspiracy" can be juxtaposed with Timothy Melley's views on strategies for resistance to social conditioning, with the result of bringing out different aspects of the texts valuable for analysis.

A panicked response – agency panic – may result when the postmodern view of the subject as a core-less affect of discourse clashes with liberal individualism's view of the individual as an autonomous being. In *Empire of Conspiracy* Melley describes agency panic as "intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control – the conviction that one's actions are being controlled by someone else, that one has been 'constructed' by powerful external agents" (12). These external agents can be government agencies, the media, large bureaucracies, corporations or other faceless structures with a more sinister reputation, for example government agencies. This anxiety has two features, one of which is "a nervousness or uncertainty about the causes of individual action", the other a "sense that controlling organizations are themselves agents" (12). Agency panic is a Lockean response and a defense of the individual, a paranoid reaction to a belief that one is being controlled by outside forces. According to Melley, these forces and their impact on the individual are often expressed through "a rhetoric of interiority and exteriority, an imagined penetration, invasion, and occupation of the individual's formerly private and protected interior" (53). Thus, the

individual is experiencing an attack from the outside, the difference between outside and inside being delineated by the epidermal border.

Melley bases his views on different sources, among these sociological studies. These studies tell the story about a changing society, increasing globalization and the growth of large companies and bureaucracies. Melley also considers the development in post-WWII technologies, new theories of communication, scientific discourses, systems theory, and postmodern thinking about subjectivity as contributing factors in tensions between the individual and the collective. These changes and developments contribute to a feeling that the individual is being controlled from without, and thus gradually losing her agency. Therefore, Melley believes an aspect of agency panic to be “nervous acknowledgement, and rejection, of postmodern subjectivity” (15). The subject attempts to defend “an old, but increasingly beleaguered concept of personhood:” the liberal individual (viii).

In addition to feeling controlled by large structures, individuals experiencing agency panic not only experience a depletion of agency, but also feel that the structures themselves are agents with motive and individuality. Melley sees this as inducing a “*post-modern transference* in which social regulation seems to be the intentional product of a single consciousness or monolithic ‘will’” (13, emphasis in original). Agency is thus transferred from the individual to the system. An individual experiencing agency panic considers social conditioning as a result of a conscious design to deplete his individual agency and target him for control, a Manichean world view. This contrasts with a world view where the universe is seen as chaotic and unpredictable, with no explicit “will” behind it that governs what befalls the individual and when; things just happen. Melley sees agency panic as a self-defeating way of viewing the individual (23). The paradox inherent in agency panic is that on one hand it expresses an anxiety about the influence of social conditioning on individuality and agency,

and at the same time insists on a liberal humanist view of identity (14). How can the individual be controlled by outside forces if he is an autonomous and rational being?

Agency panic as discussed above relates to the individual, and also to individual *bodies*. Melley states that “[w]hile the earlier tradition imagines the mechanism of control to be a constraining environment, the post-war narrative imagines a bodily violation, and *introjection* of the social order into the self” (33, emphasis in original). Melley does not use the concept of body panic directly, but it is an extension of his ideas surrounding agency panic. The term “body panic” comes from Peter Knight’s *Conspiracy Culture from Kennedy to the X files*. Knight discusses changes in the perception of the body as a site of control, infiltration, penetration and abduction, and sees these changes in the light of paranoia.

Knight differentiates between “secure” and “insecure” paranoia, with the latter assigned to the post-Cold War anxieties and paranoia in which there is “no longer a single recognizable enemy or indeed a clear sense of national identity” (175). This insecure paranoia is a result of the “dissolution of the physical body as the stable ground of identity“ (179). “Secure” paranoia, however, refers to the “tense, yet clear geopolitical division between *self* and *other*” (175, emphases added). Melley also considers this distinction important, because it is a part of a larger argument about the struggle to preserve the liberal individual with a “strict metaphysics of inside and outside [...] the self must be a clearly bounded entity” (162-63). This paradigm of secure and insecure paranoia – whether one can clearly identify the source of paranoia or not – relates to liberal individualism and postmodern views of subjectivity. Secure paranoia can be seen to correspond to a liberal individualist view of the body, where there is a clear border separating the self from the other, and insecure paranoia to a postmodern view of a self, where identity is viewed to be a product of unclear influences and control.

Characters experiencing agency panic or body panic try to deal with their anxiety in several ways. According to Melley, they attempt

to locate the agency that is threatening them; by refusing to make social commitments of one kind or another; or by “acting out” their capacity for unconditioned behavior, sometimes through violence. In most of the cases, the effect of the panic response is to consolidate the self – or rather the concept of self – against the forces that threaten to undo it. (197)

Instead of struggling against what is seen as threatening, characters sometimes retreat into apathy and/or amnesia as a defensive strategy. John A. McClure suggests that novels “saturated by conspiracy” by writers such as DeLillo and Pynchon “tend to rehearse and confirm many of the aspects of the ‘official narrative’ of conspiracy” (255), while at the same time questioning it. To resist, he claims, “we must learn, paradoxically, to forget [conspiracy]” (255). Struggling, it may seem, perpetuates conspiracy rather than combating it; our struggles are “expressions of that total conspiracy against which we are attempting to struggle” (263). The very strategies utilized to fight trap those who attempt to resist.

McClure discusses Fredric Jameson’s view that in postmodern conditions subjects can achieve no distance from the system (262). Our minds and bodies have been colonized, and that leaves us with no space of our own. “Forgetting” about conspiracy is a strategy to reclaim some of that lost distance to the system. In the confusion of the fragmented existence of postmodern life, some find relief in “surrender, stillness, and silence” (263). This, McClure argues, is not simply giving up, but an attempt at distancing oneself from the system and stepping out of the confusion one feels. McClure seems to be suggesting a Zen perspective on conspiracy, wherein the characters retain a sense of self through their surrender which enables them to care for that self (272). Although McClure states that “forgetting” conspiracy needs to be “partial and strategic” to access “resources for survival and resistance,” his call to “turn

away and in” (272) means giving up agency. His approach presents a dilemma; if you “forget” about conspiracy, there is no recourse to action.

Timothy Melley’s approach in *Empire of Conspiracy* does at first seem to be very different from what McClure suggests, but on closer examination, there are similarities. Yet, Melley’s approach is more nuanced than McClure’s. The concept of the liberal individual seems to have an almost mythical hold on the psyche, since characters are seen to be fighting threatening structures (Melley 201). Melley sees a danger in this resistance, as it might morph into antisocial activity and work against collective resistance (202). To view the individual as either totally autonomous *or* completely constructed through discourse is a mistake, according to Melley. The answer lies in a form of compromise: “If we could come to see ourselves as self-regulating systems existing within, and open to, a web of larger communicative systems, we [...] could begin to theorize modes of resistance aimed at specific ideological targets – rather than the social order as a whole” (202). Therefore, instead of constantly living in a state of paranoia because of a felt intrusion into our lives and bodies, Melley advocates a middle road where we leave, in fact – forget that which paralyzes us to negotiate individually with oppressive forces rather than seeing impenetrable, forbidding structures forcing their will on us.

In the following two chapters, *White Noise* and *Falling Man* will be analyzed according to the theoretical framework set up in this chapter. Similarities and developments in the two novels will be pointed out, and DeLillo’s consideration of postmodern identity and anxiety emphasized. The characters in the novels search for personal retrieval and a connection with reality through what they perceive as acts of volition, paradoxically reinforcing societal scripts that undermine their individuality.

3. *White Noise*: identity under construction

The first words of Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* carries echoes of a past where migrant wagon trains travelled across the plain to a better future in the West; "The station wagons arrived at noon" (3). Of course, they are not covered wagons but station wagons, and the rest of the sentence ("west campus") determines the setting to be academia, not the frontier. The people are conscientiously suntanned, the women "crisp and trim" (3), certainly not sunburned pioneer women; the men are massively insured and well-to-do, a far cry from the rugged individuals who staked their claim to new territory. By hinting at such a well-known American myth, tongue-in-cheek, DeLillo introduces his reader to the postmodern world of Blacksmith, U.S.

White Noise is narrated by Jack Gladney, a Hitler scholar from College-on-the-Hill. His wife Babette teaches classes in correct posture in the basement of a local church and reads tabloids to the blind. Jack has been married five times to four different women; his marriage to Babette is his fifth, while Babette is on her third marriage. Between them they have seven children, none with each other. Much of the novel is focused on how society shapes identity in a postmodern world, as well as on Jack and Babette's fear of death and their strategies to deflect that fear. Jack and his family are evacuated due to a toxic spill in the area, and Jack is poisoned by exposure to Nyodene D. while refilling his car with gas. Jack's eldest is a skeptical fourteen-year-old named Heinrich who doubts the official story about the chemical spill. Murray Jay Siskind, scholar and ex-sportswriter, and Winnie Richards, a neurochemist, both become involved in Jack's attempt to deal with his own mortality. Babette sleeps with Willie Mink in exchange for Dylar, a pill designed to relieve fear of death. When Jack finds out, he tries to kill Mink, but they both end up wounded at the emergency room, being treated by atheist German nuns.

DeLillo aims to critique how society influences and shapes identity. He pokes fun at, un.masks, and criticizes postmodern society through his “terrific comedy” (Lentricchia, “New Essays” 1). DeLillo wants us to see the tragic in the pathetic, even while we are laughing at his humorous dialogue and descriptions of the characters’ private and public lives. Mark Osteen claims that DeLillo satirizes from within the forms of the postmodern culture, and argues that DeLillo’s “dialogue with contemporary cultural institutions respects their power but criticizes their dangerous consequences” (3). Theron Britt takes a different stance and claims that for both DeLillo and his readers “the troubling question has become how the individual, if socially constructed, can be a source from which to critique the culture of which it is a part. [...] [H]ow can any work situated in such a horizon generate a ground from which to offer a critique?”(110). One of DeLillo’s strategies for criticism is presenting the reader with characters anxious about the influence society has on their identities. They feel constricted and false, and try to find strategies for autonomous action. DeLillo also criticizes through pointing out the consequences resulting from a postmodern view on reality and individuality: alienation, isolation, and an *us* vs. *them*-perspective that may have devastating results. Paul A. Cantor suggests that DeLillo “wavers between criticizing postmodernism and practicing it” (60), but in this dialectic lies what John N. Duvall claims makes DeLillo “one of the most important novelists since 1970;” a “repeated invitation to think historically” (2). In *White Noise*, DeLillo asks the reader to do just that. DeLillo’s insistence of the importance of thinking historically is another facet of his criticism of postmodern society; he often presents the consequences of not doing so. Duvall goes on to point out that DeLillo does this through “teas[ing] out the ways in which our contemporary world bears the traces of such crucial events from the mid-twentieth century as the rise of Adolf Hitler’s fascism, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and Cold War brinkmanship” (2). Through Jack Gladney’s

involvement in Hitler studies, DeLillo does invite the reader to think historically, and examines significant characteristics of postmodern society that influence individual identity.

DeLillo deliberately scatters references to various forms of conspiracy thinking throughout *White Noise*. Gladney's previous wives are all capable of conspiring; they have "ties to the intelligence community" (WN 6). Janet Savory, an ex-wife, has "a talent for stealth" (87) and involved Jack in a suspicious investment scheme. Tweedy Browner, another ex-wife, is a contract agent for the CIA (48); Malcolm Hunt, her new husband, is a diplomat working under deep cover (87). The tabloids Babette reads out loud explain the deaths of Howard Hughes, Elvis and Marilyn Monroe through a conspiracy narrative; they were supposedly murdered by a KGB assassin called the Viper. The name of the company that produces Dylar, Gray Research, is another of DeLillo's gestures toward conspiracy thinking and paranoia; the name is reminiscent of shady characters operating in the gray areas of society, carrying out secret plots and schemes. In addition, a "grey" is another word for alien: "a member of any of various supposed species of grey-skinned, humanoid, extraterrestrial beings" (*Oxford English Dictionary* n. pag.). The pills Babette takes to overcome her fear of death are "more or less flying-saucer-shaped" (WN 184), an additional nod to a paranoid UFO subculture. The papers also announce that UFO's are about to invade the country or raise the city of Atlantis (144-46), and there are numerous UFO sightings all over Blacksmith (234).

The effect of these references to paranoia is to destabilize the narrative of the novel, to provide an undercurrent of skepticism and anxiety; in short, a postmodern attitude. DeLillo shows the reader how the characters inhabit a world of uncertainties – the ground under their feet is unsteady; he utilizes paranoia and conspiracy thinking to communicate the mindset of the postmodern world. In contrast to other of DeLillo's books,⁵ the conspiracy in *White Noise*

⁵ e.g. *Players*, *Running Dog*, *Libra*, *Mao II*, *Underworld*

lies under the surface; it is not an obvious one, and there doesn't seem to be anyone who is deliberately conspiring to cause harm to the characters. The only overt conspiracies in *White Noise* are Jack Gladney's own; he conspires (with himself) to kill Mink for sleeping with Babette, as well as with Murray: they enter into a form of plot to position Murray in Elvis studies at the College-on-the-Hill.

Through these various intimations of conspiracy and paranoia, DeLillo presents the reader with characters troubled by what Peter Knight has termed "insecure paranoia" This amorphous sense of paranoia, as opposed to the Cold War's secure paranoia, according to Knight, "plunges everything into an infinite regress of suspicion" which leads to "a permanent uncertainty about fundamental issues of causality, agency, responsibility and *identity*" (4, emphasis added). Lentricchia, in *New Essays on White Noise*, observes that DeLillo's work "is a kind of anatomy, an effort to represent [his] culture in its totality; and [...] desire[s] to move readers to the view that the shape and fate of their culture dictates the shape and fate of the self" (1). In *White Noise*, DeLillo has created an anatomy of life in 1980s America, where he draws attention to and critiques how society shapes the selves of the characters.

In *White Noise*, the characters' identities are repeatedly shown to be influenced and shaped by society. As has been pointed out by several critics,⁶ mass media intrudes constantly into the lives of the characters of *White Noise*. TV and radio "noise" invade the characters' minds and determine their choices and values. As a result of influence from mass media, the characters think about product jingles and mutter product names in their sleep, and one of the children thinks the sun's corolla is a car (WN 212, 155, 233). Frank Lentricchia views Jack's tendency to note the brand names of products everywhere as Jack's "unconscious epistemology of consumption" ("Tales" 105). They have been implanted into his unconscious

⁶ Wilcox, Lentricchia, LeClair, Osteen and others

through a continuous stream of mass-mediated signals. The slogans the characters repeat at night are distorted versions of signals they have received. In addition, the shopping habits of the Gladney family are products of the messages they have received from external sources, thus evidencing how the mediated signals the characters receive penetrate their minds and impact their lives, constructing their identities as consumers.

On the surface, the characters do not seem to be overly bothered by these influences, but DeLillo shows that many of them are indeed anxious and paranoid. Their reactions testify to DeLillo's attempts to critique the influence exerted upon the individual by society. According to Timothy Melley, paranoid interpretations may be a sign of agency panic (23), and an effort to protect oneself from what is seen to be influences threatening individual agency. Existence in the Gladney family is qualified by underlying fear, what Knight describes as "low-intensity" paranoia (45). They believe "something live[s] in the basement" (*WN* 27); Jack listens with "paranoid apprehension" to various household appliances seemingly turning themselves on or off (Lentricchia "Tales" 99-100). When the grade school is evacuated, Jack speculates that what might be causing the headaches, eye irritations and metallic taste in people's mouths is "something deeper, finer-grained, more closely woven into the basic state of things" (*WN* 35). Anxiousness seems indeed woven into the lives of the characters; it is seemingly their default mode.⁷ Babette's suspicious comments regarding the commercial interests tied to the danger of sun exposure are typical of the paranoid mindset of the characters: "It is all a corporate tie-in. [...] The sunscreen, the marketing, the fear, the disease. You can't have one without the other'" (264).⁸

⁷ DeLillo remarked in an interview with *The Daily Princetonian* that being an American in the 21st century has a new meaning. "It means to be worried, perhaps as never before" (Pell n.pag.). This is exactly what the characters do: they worry.

⁸ Douglas Keeseey even suggests the possibility that SIMUVAC might have created the dangerous situation of the toxic cloud to have material for their simulation (144) – a corporate tie-in.

Jack Gladney experiences agency panic in connection with his academic persona. On one hand, he is the chair and founder of Hitler studies, a respected scholar. On the other hand he feels like he is “the false character that follows the name around” (17), having invented an extra initial in his name (on the chancellor’s advice) in order to “be taken seriously as a Hitler innovator” (16). He has put on weight, also on the chancellor’s suggestion, refrained from growing a beard on the advice of a previous wife and always wears academic robes and “glasses with thick black heavy frames and black lenses” (17) to strengthen his image as scholar whenever he is on campus. His professional and social environments have constructed his image to counteract “his feeble presentation of self” (17). He is the country’s leading scholar of Hitler, but does not even speak German. To hide this fact, he compiles a list of words that sounds roughly the same in German and English and uses it to give the introductory speech at the conference hosted by the College-on-the-Hill (274). The disparate elements of Jack’s identity leave him feeling like a fraud. His anxiety stems from the fact that he recognizes the influences exerted upon his identity, yet feels powerless to resist it.

The frail and tenuous quality of Jack’s identity is further emphasized when he runs into Eric Massingale at the hardware store. Jack is without his uniform, his robe and glasses, and the “Turkish army sweater” (82) he wears cannot provide him with the authority he needs. Massingale remarks: ““You look so harmless Jack. A big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy”” (83). The encounter threatens to expose Jack’s insecurities and he turns to a typical American past-time: shopping, trying to replace his missing powerful image through assembling the parts of another. He is using the signifiers of culture to create an identity, and feels a change occurring as he spends his money: “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” (WN

84).⁹ As long as he is spending money, he has an awareness of being part of a community, but this does not anchor him in a “true” identity either, only a persona formed through a cultural formula of consumption. Upon returning home “[w]e went to our respective rooms, wishing to be alone” (84); the “connection” only lasts for as long as it takes to spend his money, afterwards he is still the same J.A.(K.) Gladney. The postmodern subject (Jack) is shown by DeLillo to be an affect of discourse; from the media, academia, family, friends, and society around him. What he believes are acts of volition, are really *reactions* following familiar societal scripts.

Not all characters *White Noise* struggle with their identity in the same way that Jack does. Murray Jay Siskind, Heinrich Gladney, and Winnie Richards all accept their integration in a vast system of influences. Murray finds this exhilarating and takes the stance of the observer and cataloguer of postmodern existence. Like Jack, Murray has constructed his persona as an academic professor. He wears corduroy everywhere, and takes up smoking a pipe as a means to fit into the image of a scholar. He is manipulating the image to fit his needs, knowing its power established through the pipe and clothes. This is made clear in an exchange between Jack and Murray: “‘You’re smoking a pipe,’ I said. Murray smiled sneakily. ‘It looks good. I like it. It works.’ He lowered his eyes, smiling” (282). Murray also relishes the influence of TV, while Jack realizes that TV affects his life more than he would like it to and sees it as a problem. Murray enthuses: “Find the codes and messages,” and; “TV offers us incredible amounts of psychic data. [...] [I]t welcomes us into the grid. [...] The medium practically overflows with sacred formulas if we can remember how to respond

⁹ Leonard Wilcox suggests that when Jack is shopping, he is “drawn toward occasions of existential self-fashioning, heroic moments of vision in a commodified world” (199). He sees Jack as a “modernist displaced in a postmodern world” (197), who attempts to preserve an authentic subjectivity that is being replaced by “a Baudrillardian euphoria or ‘schizophrenia’ which characterizes the experience of the self in the space of the simulacrum” (198). By trying to achieve purposeful action, to make sense of it all, Jack invokes modernist sensibilities. Applying Baudrillard’s notion of the simulacra to *White Noise* is a valid and interesting way of interpreting the novel, but one that is outside the scope of this thesis.

innocently and get past our irritation, weariness and disgust” (50-1). For Murray, television is a “primal force” (51), mythical and appealing, a system to be discovered and studied. He has the ability to make sense of it all, and takes a modernist approach to the broken images of postmodernism. Heinrich Gladney and Winnie Richards both believe that so-called individual volition and action are predetermined by the chemicals in the brain and are untroubled by the prospect (45,189) For Jack this is unendurable, and he resists it – he prefers to believe in the fiction that he has control over his emotions and choices (200).

Perhaps more than any other single factor, Jack’s identity is dependent on his relationship with his wife. He believes in love as a constituent of an identity that is trustful enough to confide all: “[l]ove helps us develop an identity secure enough to allow itself to be placed in another’s care and protection” (29). For this to work, it is important to Jack that Babette does not keep any secrets from him. They tell each other everything, or so Jack believes. For him, it is believing that he knows *everything* about Babette that makes him feel secure. In her full disclosure, he can find a safety and a connection to reality that he cannot find in himself. Teresa Heffernan comments that “[a]lthough Jack is plagued by doubt, he needs to read Babette as true, transparent, exposed” (178). It is disconcerting for him to discover that she has opaque, hidden areas in her life. For his identity to be secure, he needs her to conform to the comforting image of the solid, dependable wife.

Jack and Babette have a running conversation about who is going to die first, designed to keep their *real* fear of dying a secret – they speak of everything except this (30). However, their closeness is an illusion. In DeLillo’s view, all closeness is an illusion in the postmodern world, which alienates and isolates. Although they both long for connection, to each other and to reality, their fear of death separates them, as will death itself. This fear of death triggers agency panic; death is the ultimate loss of control. Jack wonders if death might be hearing white noise forever, which is like a boundary-transgressing dispersal of the self (198).

Fear of death characterizes and shapes the identity of both Babette and Jack, but they handle their fear in different ways. Babette's deception comes as a result of her attempts to deal with her fear of death. Babette tries medication, secretly acquiring an experimental drug that influences the part of the brain where fear of death is located. She involves herself with a shadowy Mr. Grey and even agrees to sleep with him in exchange for Dylar. Her addiction to Dylar leaves her with the side-effect of memory loss. Memory has conventionally been viewed to be of great importance in the formation of identity; the liberal humanist assumption is that identity is the product of a "protected inner core of beliefs, desires and memories" (Melley 14). Memory loss threatens this concept of individuality, demonstrating a self that is not insulated and protected from influence. Thus, Babette's memory loss might be one reason that Jack complains that she is not the Babette he married. Jack sees Babette's identity shifting and she no longer conforms to his image of her. One of Jack's strategies designed to insulate himself from his fear of death is his field of scholarly research, Hitler studies. DeLillo stated in an interview: "Gladney finds a perverse form of protection. The damage caused by Hitler was so enormous that Gladney feels he can disappear inside it and that his own puny dread will be overwhelmed by the vastness, the monstrosity of Hitler himself" (DeCurtis 63). Murray's comments echoes DeLillo: "'Some people are larger than life. Hitler is larger than death. You thought he would protect you. I understand completely'" (WN 287).

Through Jack's involvement with Hitler and Hitler studies, DeLillo enters into a discussion of not only individual memory, but also memory in an institutional context. The educational discourse of schools and universities influence the identity of their students. Taking into account that memory is an important component of identity, it is vital that educational institutions preserve the integrity of historical memory. College-on-the-Hill's Hitler studies are an example of academic discourse that does the opposite; they deflate the atrocities of the Hitler regime in search of a successful academic niche. Memories of real

human suffering have been co-opted, not only by the media, as is often the case, but by academia as well.

Jack's invention of Hitler studies seems to have been met with admiration and interest, and DeLillo never mentions any opposition to "Gladney's Hitler" (11). Jack's academic colleagues comprise "[a] scholarly world so open-minded that it can now accommodate any subject without evidently blinking an eye" (Cantor 40). Jack himself says that the question of Hitler is "not a question of good and evil" (*WN* 63), a relativistic postmodern attitude. In fact, the Holocaust is not mentioned at all.¹⁰ Jack's views are not those of DeLillo, but the novelist employs Jack's views in his criticism of society,¹¹ pointing to the consequences of avoiding thinking historically. Paul Cantor notes that "[i]n *White Noise*, Hitler does not seem to evoke the moral indignation and even metaphysical horror that have become our standard cultural response to the *Führer*" (40, emphasis in original), and that is precisely the point DeLillo is making. The fact that someone as horrible as Hitler becomes only an interesting figure for study, and the atrocities perpetrated by his regime stimulating discussion points in an academic setting, says something about society, and it is not very flattering. An example of this uncritical "open-minded" attitude comes in Jack and Murray's joint lecture. By the juxtaposing Hitler and Elvis, DeLillo uses a Warhol-esque technique; they are turned into interchangeable cultural icons. Through Murray and Jack's comparisons, Hitler and Elvis are reduced to flat images, fraternal twins, who adored their mothers, prone to excess, self-destructive, adored by the masses (71-3): Pop Art.

¹⁰ Tim Engles also points this out in "Who are you, literally?": Fantasies of the White Self in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, and comments on the unusual relationship between Jack Gladney, a Hitler scholar, and Murray Jay Siskind, a Jewish American (181). Cantor's description of academia as an approximation of "the bloodless heart of postmodernism" seems an apt comment (47).

¹¹ Paul Cantor remarks that Bruce Bawer, in his criticism of DeLillo's use of Hitler in *White Noise*, confuses DeLillo's views with those of his character (39-44).

Gladney's Hitler studies are only academic subjects, with little relationship to material reality or historical memory. When Gladney proposes to the chancellor that they could "build a whole department around Hitler's *life and work*" (4, emphasis added), Gladney's perspective suggests, in spite of the historical connotations, that Hitler is presented as analogous to a literary figure with *textual* works to study. The heinous cruelty of Hitler's regime is reduced to a course on "Advanced Nazism, three hours a week, restricted to qualified seniors, a course of study designed to cultivate historical perspective, theoretical rigor and mature insight into the continuing mass appeal of fascist tyranny, with special emphasis on parades, rallies and uniforms, three credits, written reports" (25). The screenings of "background footage" (25) Jack organizes feature a wall of sound, drowning out individual voices; a metaphorical erasure of individual human fates: "Only chants, songs, arias, speeches, cries, cheers, accusations, shrieks" (26). That this is being taught as a subject at a university, influencing young people about to embark on their lives in society, suggests a reinforcement of this particular type of cultural amnesia. Thus, as DeLillo emphasizes, academia as a cultural institution is in danger of shaping identities lacking a crucial awareness of historical memory.

Jack's fear of death intensifies when he is exposed the toxic cloud of Nyodene D. Knight's body panic paradigm is supported by Jack's reactions to the computer readouts indicating the presence of the poison in his system. The SIMUVAC technician has symbolic power over Jack through his command of the hidden information in the computer. Jack has lost control over his body and his agency; his identity has become a product of (computer) discourse, an indication of the problematic postmodern subjectivity criticized in *White Noise*. Jack is informed that it is not just the exposure time of two and a half minutes that is the problem, but the technician informs him that it is his "whole data profile. I tapped into your history. I'm getting bracketed numbers with pulsing stars" (140). The insecure paranoia Jack

feels toward the abstract threat of the computer symbols makes him want to protect himself with his “academic gown and dark glasses” (142). He is reaching for his image to protect him, trying to assemble a defense of his fragile identity. It is of no use; he knows that “[d]eath has entered. [...] A network of symbols has been introduced, an entire network of symbols has been introduced, an entire awesome technology wrested from the gods” (141). The abstract computer discourse is death to his physical body. The borders of his body have been breached, by the poison and also by the computer signals. More than ever, he realizes that he does not have any control over the intrusions into his identity and body, and he is suffering from both agency panic as well as body panic.

The medical treatment Jack receives exacerbates his body panic. New technology and diseases have made the division between self and other less and less distinct. The body is routinely x-rayed, cut into, poked and prodded to enable physicians to accurately diagnose diseases that might be the result of invisible viruses, poisons, germs and other microorganisms penetrating the epidermis. Still, advances in medical technologies have not always contributed to alleviating fears. In fact, the opposite has often been true; “[p]aranoia about the body now seems to arise less from a lack of medical knowledge about the body [...] than an excess of contradictory and often highly technical information” (Knight 182). As Jack’s body is probed and scanned, x-rayed, and his blood is tested, he is left feeling out of control and anxious. The technology frightens him and he is suspicious and even feels like the machines are making him sick: “I could easily image a perfectly healthy person being made ill just by taking these tests” (*WN* 277). His attitude reinforces Knight’s point above; the technical information is overwhelming and his body is vulnerable, open, and defenseless against hostile interpretations of his “facts,” which worsens his body panic.

The fact that he sees the toxic cloud as “some death ship in a Norse legend” (127) shows that (at least on one level) he thinks of the cloud itself as having some form of agency.

A ship presumably has a captain steering it. By passing so close to him and poisoning him, his agency has been taken away and transferred to the cloud, which now has power over him. The technological equipment used to analyze Jack's data is also inscribed with a form of impersonal agency and consciousness. It has a "pulse" and Jack is afraid of "what it knows about [him]" (325), and refuses to go back for further testing. Jack's feeling of powerlessness towards the cloud and the machine indicates what Timothy Melley calls a "postmodern transference" (13), in which an individual's agency is felt to have been transferred to a controlling system, intruding on his agency and identity. By showing Jack's reaction as anxiety, DeLillo criticizes the influence exerted on the identity of the individual by cultural discourse.

Reactions to agency panic take various forms in *White Noise*; through rationalizing, shopping, purging, searching for religion, forgetting, and through violence characters attempt to grapple with their anxiety. Babbette rationalizes – her classes in posture are an example of trying to "change a harmful condition by reducing it to its simplest parts" (WN 191). Jack's shopping spree and his frenzied purging are both examples of shoring up his fragile identity against the ravages of agency panic. After Jack has thrown away everything he can, he sits down on the front steps "waiting for a sense of ease and peace to settle in the air around [him]" (262). This does not work; ridding himself of physical baggage does not address the psychological baggage he carries; his fears about his identity are still present. He searches for religion to alleviate his fears, and as a true postmodern, Murray counsels Jack to just pick something to believe in (286), but there seems to be nothing – not even the nuns have faith anymore, they just pretend to believe (318). John McClure suggests that Jack and Babbette's trips to the overpass to watch the sunsets are attempts to distance themselves from what is threatening them and enter "states of stillness, silence, and unknowing" (269), leaving their fears behind in communal awe and contemplation. This contrasts with Melley's view that it is

necessary to have a nuanced view on societal influence and control; to understand that “self-control is not an all-or-nothing proposition” (Melley 202). This would enable the individual to understand and negotiate controlling structures, instead of retreating into silence. However, DeLillo indicates that the overwhelming force of the system evacuates the individual to the point of emptiness, where there is little recourse to autonomous action.

Toward the end of *White Noise*, Jack Gladney acts out his agency panic through violence. His “death sentence,” the helpless feeling he has when encountering doctors, his insecurity toward his own identity exacerbated by Babette’s unfaithfulness, culminate in an attempt to kill Willie Mink. His plot to murder Mink is another strategy to insulate himself from his fear of death. Murray’s explanation that “violence is a form of rebirth” (WN 290) whereby one accumulates strength through violence, is a form of magical thinking supposed to empower Jack. In plotting to kill Mink, Jack tries to escape from the insecure paranoia of his agency/body panic to the secure paranoia of *us vs. them*. It is an attempt to “consolidate the self” (Melley 197). He is trying to be a killer rather than a dier, to revoke his death sentence by inflicting one on another. Of course his attempt at self-determination is only the result of another influence; he has internalized society’s conditioning script “the path of homicidal rage” (WN 269). What he thinks is self-realizing and strength-accumulating is just a *theory*, a myth, but a powerful one. In reality, by acting according to this myth, this script, his agency is further depleted; it is another intrusion into his identity. Furthermore, Jack does not fit the role of the avenger either, and ends up wounded and pathetic in a motel where Mink is babbling and wailing. DeLillo positions Mink as an extreme expression of a subjectivity constructed by external impulses, control and mediated messages, a warning of the consequences of a subjectivity constructed entirely by discourse. Mink is “a voice without a center [...] the pure American product” (Lentricchia, “Tales” 112).

DeLillo, characteristically, refuses to give clear answers to the questions raised in the book. In the end Jack finds no clear resolution to his anxieties, neither do the other characters. Mark Osteen draws attention to the fact that the three last scenes of *White Noise* all comprise the end of the novel (188-9). The three scenes are Wilder's bicycle-ride across the interstate, Jack and Babette's trips to watch the sunsets, and the closing scene in the supermarket: a postmodern triptych. There were no heroics involved in Wilder's survival, there are no epiphanies in the contemplation of the sunset, and people depend on tabloids to satisfy their need for everything except "food or love" (WN 326). The last scenes leave the Gladneys almost where we found them, but there are also redemptive elements. Wilder survived to contemplate another oven, Jack and Babette find *some* peace in the sunsets, and although the shelves have been rearranged in the supermarket, the generic food has not changed place. Some continuity in life still exists. The tabloids in the racks function almost like non-denominational sacred texts; here you go, choose something to believe in – anything. Postmodernism's finest hour.

4. *Falling Man*: postmodern subjectivity in (the) ruins

"What is a prophet once his fiery word becomes deed? What does he have to say? What is left of the paranoid style when all its suspicions come true?" (O'Hagan n. pag.). *Falling Man* came out to mixed reviews; the jury is still out as far as the book's literary qualities are concerned. However, to date it stands as perhaps the most intense expression of the perils of postmodern subjectivity in DeLillo's entire opus. *Falling Man* is what a "prophet" produces when his predictions have come true. DeLillo wrote in an essay published in *Harper's* in December 2001 that "[t]here is something empty in the sky. The writer tries to give memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space" ("In the Ruins" 39). It seems like DeLillo *had* to write a novel about September 11; in some ways, it is what he has been writing

throughout his whole career. In *Falling Man*, DeLillo continues and expands his concern with the consequences of a subjectivity constructed by discourse, presenting an increasingly pessimistic outlook on the possibilities of healthy human identity in postmodern society.

The spatial void left by the towers is echoed in the omissions within the novel, and the novel is interesting as much for what it does not contain as for what it does. The treatments of the well-known symbols of 9/11 have been stripped of their typical societal connotations: there is no heroism (Keith “saves” a briefcase), no patriotism as such, and little mention of official reactions to the attacks. There is also no mention of the date 9/11. Contrary to the Morandi paintings discussed in the novel, *Falling Man* does not reject “extension or projection,” it projects outward, not “down and in” (111); it concerns 9/11 and its victims, but also the postmodern condition and its “victims.”

Falling Man begins in the rubble of 9/11 and covers a period of about three years, circling back to the morning of the attacks as the novel ends. Keith Neudecker, a lawyer working in the north tower of the World Trade Center, escapes from the tower. He comes back to live with his estranged wife, Lianne, and their son, Justin, and they struggle to piece their identities back together in a changed world. Keith has a brief affair with another survivor, Florence Givens, and starts traveling to Las Vegas to gamble, eventually spending much of his time away from his family, a new separation. Lianne, a freelance editor, leads a writing group for Alzheimer patients who attempt to retain their memories through composing stories from their lives. The theme of memory is also present in the performance artist known as Falling Man, whose falls from various structures in New York brings to mind the people who fell to their deaths from the towers. Lianne’s aging mother, Nina Bartos, is a retired art history professor whose lover, Martin Ridnour, is a German art dealer and previous member of the 1960s communist collective Kommune One. DeLillo suggests that Ridnour may have

had a connection to terrorism, but the issue is never settled. In addition, the narrative of Hammad, one of terrorists of 9/11, intersperses the three sections of *Falling Man*.

As in *White Noise*, references to paranoia are scattered throughout the text. The terrorists half expect to be arrested by the CIA anytime, and believe that they are “probably being watched, phones tapped, signals intercepted” (DeLillo, *Falling Man* 81).¹² The terrorists’ secure paranoia (they know who the enemy is) contrasts with the insecure paranoia infusing the other characters’ lives. Lianne and Isabel, the mother of two of Justin’s playmates, worry about the children’s activities behind the closed doors to their room: “‘They sort of conspire.’ ‘Yes, and sort of talk in code, and they spend a lot of time at the window in Katie’s room, with the door closed’” (17). The children believe that Bill Lawton has the “power to poison what [they] eat” (74). Every time Keith boards a plane he looks at people, “trying to spot the man or men who might be a danger to them all” (198). “[P]aranoid truth movements” hand out leaflets at a protest rally, and there is even a reference to a book, authored by “the Unaflyer” that seems to predict 9/11 through its meticulous analysis of “interlocking global forces” (139). By inserting references to paranoia, DeLillo stresses the disequilibrium of postmodern life as he did in *White Noise*.

Further intersecting concerns in *White Noise* and *Falling Man* are preoccupations with the influence of “signals” and “noise” in the construction of identity. The children, Justin, Katie, and Robert, talk about someone called “Bill Lawton,” their jumbled version of bin Laden. It is clear that the children have received a scrambled signal that has shaped their understanding of reality. “Robert thought, from television or school or somewhere, that he was hearing a certain name. Maybe he heard the name once, or misheard it, then imposed his version on future occasions. In other words he never adjusted his original sense of what he

¹² Subsequent references in parentheses will be shortened to *FM*.

was hearing.’ ‘What was he hearing?’ ‘He was hearing Bill Lawton. They were saying bin Laden’” (73). The signal Robert received was scrambled by “noise” which re-shaped the identity of bin Laden in his mind, and which he then passed on to the other children, who accepted it.

The children’s conviction that the World Trade Center towers did not fall also illustrates DeLillo’s concern with the influence of mass media on the identity of the characters. The children did not see the towers fall on television, and thus do not believe that they did. They search the skies for planes that will finally collapse the towers. Lianne and Keith’s explanations do not convince Justin. “‘The only thing I got out of Justin. The towers did not collapse.’ ‘I told him they did.’ ‘So did I,’ she said. ‘They were hit but did not collapse. That’s what he says.’ ‘He didn’t see it on TV. I didn’t want him to see it. But I told him they came down’” (72). The material reality of the towers is trumped by (absent) mediated reality. This preoccupation with mediated reality is shaping the children’s identities, as they are dependent on transmitted signals instead of sense-impressions of the real world. An event in *White Noise* indicates a similar concern with the influence of mass media. A discussion between Jack and Heinrich emphasizes the point that mediated reality contends with material reality. Heinrich remarks that the radio forecasts rain in the evening. It is, in fact, raining, but when Jack points this out, Heinrich refuses to acknowledge this fact; “‘Look at the windshield,’ I said. ‘Is that rain or isn’t it?’ ‘I’m only telling you what they said.’ ‘Just because it’s on the radio doesn’t mean we have to suspend belief in the evidence of our senses.’ ‘Our senses? Our senses are wrong a lot more often than they’re right. This has been proved in the laboratory’” (WN 22-3). By demonstrating, both in *White Noise* as well as in *Falling Man*, that characters are influenced by signals, even to the point of trusting mediated messages more than sense impressions, DeLillo again draws attention to and criticizes how society shapes the identity of the characters.

Not only is identity shaped by present influences, it may also be shaped by what is absent. In *Falling Man*, DeLillo shows how the identity of the characters is influenced by absence. The most conspicuous absences in *Falling Man* are the World Trade Center towers. Even though the towers are no longer there, they loom over the lives of the characters. Scenes from Keith's escape from the towers open and close *Falling Man*, grounding the narrative in loss and devastation. The aftermath of the attacks on the towers shapes the consciousness of the characters as they attempt to grapple with life *after*, as Lianne remarks: "These are the days after. Everything now is measured by after" (*FM* 138). Lianne's musings on a haiku by Bashō illustrate the shaping force of absence: "She didn't remember the second line. *Even in Kyoto—I long for Kyoto*. The second line was missing but she didn't think she needed it" (32, emphasis in original). As Lianne walks in downtown New York, the familiar hustle and bustle casts a reassuring veil of normalcy and sameness over the city. Yet, the appearance of the performance artist Falling Man is a jarring reminder of the human cost of the attack; Falling Man and what he represents is the missing line from the "poem" of New York. The line absent from Bashō's poem is "hearing the cuckoo's cry—" (Bashō n. pag.). In Japanese mythology, the cuckoo is a "messenger between the world below and the world beyond" (Bonney 277),¹³ and this connotation with death resonates through *Falling Man*. Lianne realizes that the poem's missing line, and by extension, what was lost in the attacks, is of vital importance. "Even in New York, she thought. Of course she was wrong about the second line of the haiku. She knew this. Whatever the line was, it was surely crucial to the poem. *Even in New York—I long for New York*" (*FM* 34, emphasis in original). That which is missing shapes consciousness and identity.

¹³ Hope B. Werness comments that the cuckoo can also represent unrequited love, but goes on to state that "[i]t was regarded as a guide to the underworld – perhaps symbolizing the triumph of love over death" (123). Thus, her view is in accord with Bonney's.

The theme of absence in *Falling Man* is also echoed in the structure of the novel. The section names call our attention to what is absent, ambiguous and unknown. *White Noise* and *Falling Man* are both divided into three main sections, but where in *White Noise* section names point to the primary theme of each section, in *Falling Man* they emphasize what is missing. The sections carry male names: Bill Lawton, Ernst Hechinger and David Janiak. Bill Lawton is an absence underlining a presence in the section bearing his name. As previously mentioned, Bill Lawton is the children's scrambled version of bin Laden. In fact, there is a double absence in this section; not only is Lawton rarely mentioned – bin Laden's name is mentioned only once in the book (73), but the identity of the characters are shaped by the attacks by terrorists associated with him. Ernst Hechinger is the real name of Martin Ridnour. He may have been a terrorist or a sympathizer of the left-wing Kommune One, which later developed into the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group. Hechinger, but not Ridnour, is also largely absent from the narrative: the name is present on only two pages (148, 194), and his past role is never identified conclusively. Neither Lianne nor Nina attempted to find out the truth about his identity; there is a metaphorical gap where Ridnour / Hechinger's real identity should have been (194). David Janiak is the name of the performance artist known as Falling Man; by identifying him, DeLillo insists on the necessity of remembering in order to be able to form healthy identities, and simultaneously asserts the difficulties inherent in doing so. He represents the missing victims: "Falling Man" is an iconic picture from 9/11 of an unknown man falling to his death. Lianne finds it on the Internet, but can hardly bear to look at it: "[D]ear God, he was a falling angel and his beauty was horrific. [...] She looked away, into the keyboard" (222). In the most well-known picture of him, the unknown man is in the pose of *Falling Man*'s Falling Man: upside-down, arms at his side, one leg bent. He is the embodiment of memory; his falls from various structures in New York is analogous to

traumatic memories of 9/11, surfacing at unexpected moments, forming identities from absence and loss.

In *Falling Man*, DeLillo expands his concern with memory and identity: he is concerned not only with individual memory or memory in an institutional context like in *White Noise*, but broadens his scope to include collective memory. Memory is essential in solidifying identity, and thinking historically enables forming a sound identity. DeLillo explores this partly through juxtaposing the terrorists of 9/11 with the ambiguous Martin Ridnour, and also through the Alzheimer patients. DeLillo points out the connection between terrorism of the past and terrorism of the present by calling our attention to the only “art” Ridnour / Hechinger keeps in his apartment: a wanted poster of nineteen German terrorists. The poster, as pointed out by Linda S. Kauffman, is the poster of the nineteen Baader-Meinhof members wanted for various crimes in the seventies (361). There were also nineteen terrorists responsible for 9/11, their pictures released by the FBI; a parallel of which DeLillo surely is aware. Thinking historically about terrorism is vital for collective and individual identity; through presenting Ridnour as a successful art-dealer, his past forgotten, DeLillo criticizes this form of amnesia that may undermine healthy identity.

The link between Ridnour, Baader-Meinhof and the theme of memory becomes clearer in light of DeLillo’s short story “Baader-Meinhof,” published in April 2002 in *The New Yorker*. In the story, as in *Falling Man*, DeLillo stresses the ambiguities in the identity of a “terrorist.” The title of the short story refers to Gerhard Richter’s cycle of paintings called “Baader-Meinhof,” on display at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. DeLillo calls attention to the blurred quality of the paintings, which are rendered “in nuances of obscurity and pall” (“Baader-Meinhof” 78). The identities of the persons in the pictures are obscured; they could be anybody: there is little difference between *them* and *us*. This line of thinking is carried over into *Falling Man*. Lianne’s thoughts brings out the uncomfortable fact of

Ridnour's possible connection to terrorism: "Maybe he was a terrorist but he was one of *ours*, she thought, and the thought chilled her, shamed her – one our *ours*, which meant godless, Western, white" (*FM* 195, emphases added). Lianne's thoughts illuminate a common mindset: that there is a difference between "our" and "their" terrorists. However, by viewing the character of Ridnour in light of both "Baader-Meinhof" and *Falling Man*, the connection between past and present terrorism emphasizes similarities, rather than differences. Ridnour advocates a historical perspective on the terrorist attacks in discussions with Nina; he does not agree with her claim that the terrorists invoke God as a convenient cover for their bloodlust. Ridnour states: "Don't you see what you're denying? You're denying all human grievance against others, every force of history that places people in conflict" (112). Ridnour indicates a connection between events of the past and contemporary identity, for terrorists as well as victims; catastrophes like 9/11 do not happen in a historical vacuum.

DeLillo's concern with collective memory is also explored through the Alzheimer patients. DeLillo uses individual memory and identity to make a statement about collective memory and identity. Lianne's remarks about the patients' mental deterioration emphasize the importance of healthy memory for individual identity; their minds are "beginning to slide away from the adhesive friction that makes an individual possible" (30). Two incidents further illuminate this thematic concern: Rosellen's confusion when she cannot remember where she lives and Keith's disorientation when he stumbles out of the rubble. Rosellen's loss of memory leaves her "separated from everything" and she begins to "lose her sense of clarity, of distinctness. She was not lost so much as falling, growing fainter. Nothing lay around her but silence and distance" (94). Keith exits the ruins of the World Trade Center towers to something that is "not a street anymore, but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night. [...] This was the world now" (3). Keith cannot "find himself in the things he [sees] and [hears]" (246), and in the same way as Rosellen, experiences that everything

around him is “falling away” (246). The confusion and chaos that results from various forms of amnesia – individual as well as collective – personal as well as cultural - shape identity in a society of disconnection and emptiness.

Through the character of Lianne, DeLillo continues to dwell on the importance of memory as an invaluable component of identity. Lianne’s father committed suicide when he realized he was becoming senile, and Lianne sees a doctor to determine if she has any early signs of dementia. When her tests show “normal morphology” (206), she is relieved, because she is afraid of losing her identity through losing her memories. The fact that healthy memory is what ensures a stable identity, is underlined in *Falling Man*: “The grandparents hold sacred office. They’re the ones with the deepest memories” (218). Lianne realizes that she, along with her generation, will need to bridge the gap between the older generation and the younger; “the child is yet to grow into the deep shadow of his own memories” (218). Lianne is the link between the generations; “[s]he herself, mother-daughter, is somewhere midway in the series” (218). The memory of the attacks is one anchor for Lianne’s identity; she knows that “one memory at least is inescapably secure, the day that has marked her awareness of who she is and how she lived” (218). This linking of generational identity indicates the importance of remembering; for individual identity as well as collective. When Lianne realizes that her identity is secure in her body through memories, it brings her a peace she has not experienced since the attacks, and it is simultaneously a rejection of reality as discourse: “It was just her, the body through and through. It was the body and everything it carried, inside and out, identity and memory and human heat. [...] She was ready to be alone, in reliable calm, she and the kid, the way they were before the planes appeared that day, silver crossing blue” (236). The identity she finds inside herself enables her to continue living her life even though she now exists in a world that will always be “after.”

In his portrayal of the terrorists, DeLillo explores another facet of his preoccupation with identity. By positioning Ridnour as a possible terrorist and portraying different types of 9/11-terrorists, DeLillo emphasizes that the identity of a terrorist is polymorphous, not uniform. According to Walter Laqueur, “[i]t is impossible to provide a psychogram or an Identikit (composite) picture of the typical terrorist, because there never was such a person. There has been no ‘terrorism’ per se, only different terrorisms” (79). This is a position stressed in *Falling Man*. Hammad, narrating three brief sections in *Falling Man* from the terrorists’ viewpoint, is a somewhat reluctant and uncertain terrorist. Hammad is, like the rest of the characters in *Falling Man*, living in a postmodern world. His identity is constructed by influences around him, and he struggles with the identity he needs to adopt if he is to become one of them. He is not sure that he wants to give his life for the cause, and on certain occasions dreams of marrying his girlfriend and having babies (*FM* 82). He sometimes does not pray at all (173), and realizes that he is filling a role, trying to fit in: “He had to fight against the need to be normal. He had to struggle against himself, first, and then against the injustice that haunted their lives. [...] He was becoming one of them now, learning to look like them and think like them” (83). At a training camp in Afghanistan Hammad realizes he can establish a connection to reality through Islam: “It was all Islam, the rivers and streams. Pick up a stone and hold it in your fist. This is Islam. God’s name on every tongue throughout the countryside” (172). It is an awakening for Hammad, who realizes that “he was a man now, finally” (172). Thus, he makes a choice of giving up his individual identity to become a part of the collective identity of the terrorists; this brings coherence to his life as well as a connection to reality. Mohammed Atta, or Amir, is the fanatic: “Amir was electric, dripping fire from the eyes” (172). Amir states: “The others exist only to the degree that they fill the role we have designed for them. This is their function as others. Those who will die have no claim to their lives outside the useful fact of their dying. Hammad was impressed by this. It

sounded like philosophy” (176). Hammad may have been conflicted but holds on to his personal choice of entering into the mission, convinced by Amir’s “philosophy” (76).

Atta’s words are the Muslim equivalent of postmodernism, and reduce subjects to discourse. Terrorism, then, is an act of discourse that has the potential to shape identity, which is what the terrorists want. If terrorism is a discourse, then the “usefulness” of the victims’ deaths is that they are effective plot devices that will make a forceful and convincing “story.” DeLillo has elaborated on this idea of terrorism as discourse in interview with Vince Passaro: “There is a deep narrative structure to terrorist acts, and they infiltrate and alter consciousness in ways that writers used to aspire to” (84). In addition, DeLillo iterated the point in his essay “In the Ruins of the Future:” “Terror’s response is a narrative that has been developing over years” (33). In viewing terrorism as a narrative act, DeLillo accepts the postmodern notion of reality as discourse, at the same time as he criticizes it by emphasizing the destructive consequences of an extreme world view resulting from supplanting reality by discourse.

The terrorists experience agency panic, and the attacks on the World Trade Center towers may be viewed as responses to this panic. One reaction against agency panic is “a violent attempt to conserve individual identity and volition” (Melley 155). The terrorists’ view of the West reinforces Melley’s view: that agency panic is triggered by a belief that a conspiracy is in place to deplete individual agency, as well as a belief that the controlling forces are agents themselves (12). The terrorists see the West as an embodied entity with a will to destroy Islam: “Everything here was twisted, hypocrite, the West corrupt of *mind and body*, determined to shiver Islam down to bread crumbs for birds” (*FM* 79, emphasis added). Their attempt at volition is an effort to defend their individual identities as well as the collective identity of Islam against what they see as the “all-enfolding *will* of capital markets and foreign policies” (80, emphasis added). Their agency panic paves the way for a simplistic world view where everything is black or white, good or evil, *us* vs. *them*; they know exactly

who their enemy is. Their “secure paranoia” (Knight 175) should insulate them from agency panic, but paradoxically, it does not. This is in keeping with Timothy Melley’s statement “that ‘paranoid’ interpretations are often complex and self-defeating attempts to preserve a familiar concept of subjectivity” (Melley 23). In addition, their actions are no more acts of volition than Jack Gladney’s are in *White Noise*. As Melley points out, “the model of liberation through violence is *itself* a generic, mass-mediated construction” (155, emphasis in original). Their attempts at solidifying their identity are self-defeating and ineffective.

Keith Neudecker’s attempts at establishing his identity are also largely ineffective. His struggle with his identity is an example of DeLillo’s preoccupation with the perils of a cultural discourse that penetrates the self and shapes identity. Through the character of Keith, an increasingly pessimistic view of the individual emerges; he is a constructed and alienated subject, unable to connect to others, disconnected from reality, and suffering from extreme agency panic. This panic results in attempts at resistance to the constraining forces, but also apathy. This, DeLillo suggests, is the result of overwhelming influences relentlessly bearing down on the individual, leaving the individual isolated and evacuated: a voice without a center, like Willie Mink.¹⁴ The presentation of the anxiety Keith feels is an example of the way DeLillo criticizes the way society shapes the individual.

Nevertheless, DeLillo presents the reader with Keith’s attempts to recover his identity in various ways. Keith has never been particularly introspective, but DeLillo makes it clear that his approach to life has shifted:

It was Keith [...] who was going slow, easing inward. He used to want to fly out of self-awareness, day and night, a body in raw motion. Now he finds himself drifting

¹⁴ I am borrowing the phrase “a voice without a center” from Lentricchia’s description of Willie Mink (“Tales” 112).

into spells of reflection, thinking not in clear units, hard and linked, but only absorbing what comes, drawing things out of time and memory and into some dim space that bears his collected experience. (*FM* 66)

Keith is gesturing towards forging an identity from his experiences and memories. However, he is “drifting” and “absorbing” without consciously analyzing. He feels increasingly estranged, and realizes that he has always felt that way without really noticing: “Nothing seemed familiar, being here, in a family again, and he felt strange to himself, or always had, but it was different now because he was watching” (65). This discovery does not prompt him to reflect; he retains only a “whisper of self-disclosure” (66). Keith is still alive, but his life is still and isolated. In situations where Jack Gladney would fret and worry, Keith is vacant. Of course, Keith is traumatized from the events of 9/11; but more importantly, this emptiness is a symptom of his constructed identity.

Keith’s identity is affected by the attacks; his perception is literally and metaphorically changed. When he goes back to his apartment after a few days, “[t]he windows were scabbed in sand and ash and there were fragments of paper and one whole sheet trapped in the grime. [...] Some light entered between splashes of window grit” (26). What Keith sees, he sees in the after-light: “He saw the place differently now” (26). On the surface he is unaltered, however, DeLillo suggests that his identity has been changed; in the apartment, Keith thinks about “the man who used to live here” (27). The “narrative” of the terrorists has influenced his identity. A comparison with “Baader-Meinhof” sheds light on the change in Keith: the woman in the short story experiences a shift in perception comparable to Keith’s after a man invades her territory and frightens her. “She saw everything twice now. [...] Bastard. Nearly everything in the room had a double effect - what it was and the association it carried in her mind” (“Baader-Meinhof” 82). The man is gone, but his absence of the man in her apartment metaphorically contains his presence. This is also true for *Falling Man*: the terrorists are dead,

but the memories of the attack are everywhere; dust and debris from the (absent) towers cover the city and shape identity.

In the tower, Keith's *bodily* borders are also breached; first by glass, then by his colleague Rumsey's blood. After a glass partition shatters and pierces his face, "a hundred pinpoint fires," he tries to lift Rumsey and feels "his face warm with the blood on Rumsey's shirt" (*FM* 242-43). As he makes his way down the stairs, this commingling is underlined: "He smelled something dismal and understood it was him, thing sticking to his skin, dust particles, smoke, some kind of oily grit on his face and hands mixing with the body slop, paste-like, with the blood and saliva and cold sweat, and it was himself he smelled, and Rumsey" (244). This produces body panic, but Keith's reaction is an apathy resulting from overwhelming anxiety.

An indication of Keith's apathy comes when he goes to the hospital to remove glass fragments from his face. The doctor tweezing the glass out of his skin starts talking about a deeply unsettling injury that might result from standing in the way of a suicide bomber: "'The bomber is blown to bits, literally bits and pieces, and fragments of flesh and bone come flying outward with such force and velocity that they get wedged, they get trapped in the body of anyone who is in striking range. [...] They call this organic shrapnel'" (16). The possibility of an injury resulting from organic shrapnel further informs Knight's body panic paradigm; the abject body, borders transgressed, suggests a merger of self and non-self. The vulnerable body physically penetrated metaphorically speaks of the self's vulnerability to penetration. Keith seemingly does not react at all to the doctor's description, his lack of anxiety is conspicuous; it is the reader who recoils in horror. In fact, some time later Keith is standing at a window and the expression comes back to him: "He thought of something out of nowhere, a phrase, *organic shrapnel*. Felt familiar but meant nothing to him. Then he saw a car double-parked across the street and thought of something else and something else again" (66, emphasis in

original). By reiterating Keith's impassiveness, DeLillo critiques postmodern society's construction of subjects that become alienated and isolated.

Although Keith is attempting to establish his agency, he is often depicted as drifting unconsciously through life. He becomes involved with Florence because she is there, alone in a room with him, and because she was *there*, in the tower; “[t]here was sex, but not romance. There was emotion, yes, but generated by external conditions he could not control” (166). Yet, in his need to speak to her about what they both experienced in the tower, he attempts to hang on to the “tracings of memory” (91), demonstrating some effort at personal retrieval. When Keith hits a man for what he believes is a derogatory comment about Florence, he is again showing a lack of reflection about his actions: “Keith was happy to stand and watch and then he wasn’t. He walked over there and punched the man” (133). He acts according to his pre-scripted role of “protective boyfriend” without much conscious thought: “Because if anyone said a harsh word to Florence, or raised a hand to Florence, or insulted her in any way, Keith was ready to kill him” (133). After their affair has ended, it does not occur to him to see her again even though he thinks about her almost every day. He does not have to react to anything she says or does anymore, and therefore she fades into the background of his life (227).

Keith's disconnectedness is also visible in connection with his relationship to other characters, especially his wife Lianne. Their relationship is a result of societal influences on their identities. What could be a close connection has become distance and isolation as a result of postmodern alienation. Lianne wants to “ask, examine, delve, draw things out, trade secrets, tell everything” (105). Lianne, like Jack Gladney in *White Noise* is anxious for a connection, and seeks a secure identity in the family: ““Times like these, the family is necessary. Don’t you think? Be together, stay together? This is how we live through the things that scare us half to death.’ ‘All right’” (214). Keith's non-committal answer hints at his

detachment. Rather than wanting the comforts of family life, he wonders if he is destined to be alone (128). However, he does establish a connection to reality by being present in the moment: “He began to think into the day, into the minute. [...] He began to see what he was doing. He noticed things, all the small lost strokes of a day or a minute” (65). Through the character of Keith, DeLillo suggests that a tenuous connection to reality is all that is possible in post-9/11 postmodern life; a deeper connection to self, reality, or others, is impossible.

Keith’s search for immediacy is contrasted with Lianne’s yearning for a deeper connection. Lianne turns to religion in her search for identity and comfort: she attends church and muses over the concept of God. She wonders:

But what’s inside form and structure? This mind and soul, hers and everyone’s, keep dreaming toward something unreachable. Does this mean there’s something there, at the limits of matter and energy, a force responsible in some way for the very nature, the vibrancy of our lives from the mind out, the mind in little pigeon blinks that extend the plane of being, out beyond logic and intuition. (232)

She recognizes the theoretical possibility of an identity solidified through belief; the first line of the Koran is tempting, but unsatisfactory in its call to complete surrender; “[t]his Book is not to be doubted” (233). Her identity has been constructed through a postmodern discourse of skepticism to master narratives, of which religion is one; “[s]he was taught to believe that religion makes people compliant. This is the purpose of religion, to return people to a childlike state. Awe and submission, her mother said” (62). The claim to faith is therefore unfamiliar and she worries that believing will consume her; nevertheless she finds the thought of God comforting (232-35). For Keith the idea of God is “too abstract” (92) and he blanks out when he hears the name of God. Keith needs a tactile immediacy, which he finds in gambling, and eventually he leaves for Las Vegas. Lianne ponders their relationship and communication on one of his visits to New York; “[w]ords, their own, were not much more

than sounds, airstreams of shapeless breath, bodies speaking. [...] He was self-sequestered as always, but with a spatial measure now, one of air miles and cities, a dimension of literal distance between himself and others “(212). This distance is also an iteration of the postmodern disconnection DeLillo is concerned with; when Keith calls Lianne from his hotel room in Las Vegas, there is a “double distance” (207) between them: spatial and emotional.

In choosing to send Keith to Las Vegas, DeLillo again touches upon the myth of the West, as he did in *White Noise*. Contrary to the idealized West, the West of *Falling Man* is postmodern Las Vegas. Instead of lighting out for the territory to assert his individuality, Keith arrives in a parody of civilization. Las Vegas is only surface: a cacophony of lights, noise, glitter and architectural styles: Keith walks “through crowded hotel lobbies under hand-painted Sistine ceilings” (198), and the city is “a feverish sprawl of light so quick and inexplicable it seem[s] a kind of delirium” (226). As Keith watches a waterfall in the lobby of one of the casinos, he cannot decide if the waterfall is real or simulated, underlining the artificiality of Las Vegas and of Keith’s existence.

Placed in postmodern Las Vegas, outside history and memory, Keith’s connection to the world outside is erased. DeLillo emphasizes Keith’s isolation in Las Vegas; he makes a point not to be interested in others and only occasionally talks to people, wanting only “fragments of life outside” (226). He rarely listens to what is going on around him, usually he moves “in a tide of noise and talk” (230). He sometimes speaks with Terry Cheng, one of his previous poker buddies, but prefers to avoid him. Keith wants the anonymity of being a part of a crowd, of “lives that had no stories attached” (204). He lives his life in the casinos and in soulless hotel rooms that represents postmodern isolation, and he fits right in: “He was never more himself than in these rooms, with a dealer crying out a vacancy at table seventeen” (225). The sense of belonging Keith feels in Las Vegas, a city of surfaces, corresponds to the

shallowness in Keith's postmodern identity. DeLillo suggests that since a true connection to reality is out of reach for Keith, a tenuous connection to a surface may be the replacement.

Keith, like Jack Gladney, feels like he is being shaped by society, but seemingly does not react with anxiety and panic as Jack does. Keith feels like he is "fitting into something that was made to his shape" (225) and wonders "if he [is] becoming a self-operating mechanism, like a humanoid robot that understands two hundred voice commands, far-seeing, touch-sensitive but totally, rigidly controllable" (226). Although Keith is outwardly placid, these are indications that he is in the throes of the extreme agency panic of postmodern existence. Timothy Melley states that agency panic is a reaction against controlling forces (12), and while on the surface it might seem that Keith does not react to the shaping force of society, his attempts at volition reveal otherwise.

Exercising his hand, going to the gym, and gambling are all strategies that Keith employs to "consolidate his self" (197). The first time Keith is shown doing the exercises, we are told that "[t]hese were the true countermeasures to the damage he'd suffered in the tower, in the descending chaos" (*FM* 40). It is his effort at control. He has no avenue open to him where he can *do* something about what happened. His effort is not directed at physical healing, it is to control the memories of "chaos, the levitation of ceilings and floors, the voices choking in smoke" (40). Keith is alone in a hotel room in Las Vegas, and DeLillo emphasizes that the exercises are not for his wrist: "There was no problem with the wrist. The wrist was fine" (235). By stressing Keith's isolation and the largely pointless repetitiveness of the exercises, DeLillo underlines Keith's powerlessness. Using the rowing machine at the gym is also one of Keith's attempts at exerting himself against the system of control he experiences. It is a solitary exercise, again underlining Keith's isolation, and through the inertness of the machine, his helplessness: "He half hated the thing, it made him angry, but he felt the intensity of the workout, the need to pull and strain, set his body against a sleek dumb

punishing piece of steel and cable” (226). He feels compelled to go, but does not know why, nor does he attempt to find out. The lack of introspection speaks of a disconnected postmodern subject: “He stopped going after a while but then went back, setting the level higher still, *wondering only once* why this was a thing he *had to do*” (229, emphases added).

Keith’s gambling is also an example of his attempt at volition and control; he is trying, metaphorically, to be a “killer” rather than a “dier,” as Murray Siskind applies those terms in *White Noise*. Despite the fact that he survived 9/11, he is a dier: “‘The dier accepts [death] and dies. The killer, in theory, attempts to defeat his own death by killing others. He buys time, he buys life’” (WN 291). Lianne recognizes Keith’s need for violence: “‘You want to kill somebody,’ she said. She didn’t look at him when she said this. ‘You’ve wanted this for some time,’ she said. ‘I don’t know how it works or how it feels. But it’s a thing you carry with you.’ [...] ‘Too bad I can’t join the army. Too old,’ he said, ‘or I could kill without penalty and then come home and be a family’” (FM 214). Keith wants a violent resolution to his feeling of powerlessness and helplessness, to accumulate strength through killing others, but that avenue is closed to him.

DeLillo establishes a metaphorical connection between gambling and violence in *Falling Man*. Keith’s gambling is not about making money; it is about establishing an identity as a killer, not a dier:

He wasn’t making enough money to justify this life on a practical basis. But there was no such need. There should have been but wasn’t and that was the point. The point was one of invalidation. Nothing else pertained. Only this had binding force. He folded six more hands, then went all-in. Make them bleed. Make them spill their precious losers’ blood. These were the days after and now the years, a thousand heaving dreams, the trapped man, the fixed limbs, the dream of paralysis, the gasping man, the dream of asphyxiation, the dream of helplessness. (230)

By winning, Keith is metaphorically killing the other players. A scene in *Falling Man* where Keith and Justin are watching poker on television further connects losing to dying: “He reached over and knocked on Justin’s head, knock, knock, to alert him to a revelation in the making as the camera located the hole cards of a player who didn’t know he was *dead*. ‘He’s *dead*,’ he told his son” (117-18, emphases added). Keith’s wins in the casinos metaphorically stores up life-force for him through “killing” the other gamblers.

Gambling is a gesture of volition for Keith; he believes that he is “the agent of *free choice*” (211, emphasis added). Keith is experiencing a feeling of control and the act of choosing is *in itself* an anchor for identity: “always, in the crucial instant ever repeated hand after hand, the choice of yes or no. Call or raise, call or fold, the little binary pulse located behind the eyes, the choice that reminds you who you are” (212). In playing poker, Keith establishes a point of tangency with reality. Keith watches horse racing on television, but he has no interest in gambling on an image; in poker, the choice belongs to him, “not to a horse running in the mud somewhere in New Jersey” (212), where he can do nothing to influence the result. Televised poker is also uninteresting to him; “[i]t wasn’t poker, it was television” (117). Playing poker is the most abstract relationship Keith has, but simultaneously the most concrete. The chips in his hands are tangible: “He was playing for the chips. The value of each chip had only hazy meaning. It was the disk itself that mattered, the color itself” (228). Keith is striving for some kind of immediate contact with reality and attempting to gather the dispersed shards of his identity.

At the same time as Keith believes to be the agent of free choice, he is performing a role. He is the “falling man” of *Falling Man*: He has fallen away from almost every connection in his life. Refusing social commitments of one kind or another is a sign of a response to agency panic, according to Timothy Melley (197). This is what Keith has done, he has refused the roles of husband, father and friend because of his agency panic, but takes

seriously the role of “the anonymous gambler.” He is down to two meals a day and five hours of sleep a night and is careful with alcohol (*FM* 197-98) to be most effective. Keith is immersing himself in cultural signifiers, but they do little to solidify his fragile identity. Gambling is surface, calling forth only surface: “These were the times when there were nothing outside, no flash of history or memory that he might unknowingly summon in the routine run of cards” (225). An image of Keith, asleep with his eyes open, reinforces memory as essential for identity and emphasizes Keith’s evacuated personality: Lianne asks him: “‘What happens after months of this? Or years. Who do you become?’ He looked at her and nodded as if he agreed and then kept nodding, taking the gesture to another level, a kind of deep sleep, a narcolepsy, eyes open, mind shut down” (216). The image of Keith asleep with his eyes open is DeLillo’s pessimistic depiction of the postmodern subject, constructed by influences from society around him; a voice without a center.

The characters in *Falling Man* struggle with the suspicion that society intrudes on their lives, and they react in various ways. Keith’s gambling, Lianne’s search for religion, and the terrorists’ attack on the World Trade Center towers can all be seen as reactions to the agency panic the characters feel. Their actions are attempts at volition, although it is obvious that their actions are really *reactions*. Keith’s metaphorical and the terrorists’ literal attempts at being killers rather than diers are reenactments of familiar scripts. Still, DeLillo hints at the anchoring effects of *making* a choice in a world of limited alternatives. However, the characters’ attempts at a connection to reality are tenuous and fail to address the complexity of (postmodern) life post-9/11. As pointed out by Timothy Melley, “self-control is not an all-or-nothing proposition” (202). Coming to terms with being part of a complex system of influences would make it possible to arrive at new strategies of resistance (202). However, Keith and Lianne, as Jack and Babette, are forgetting, choosing a life outside of struggles against the forces that seem to constrain them. This is because of the overwhelming power of

the system; in a manner reminiscent of McClure's suggestion they "[turn] away and in" (272), but without his Zen perspective.

As usual, DeLillo does not give the reader any clear or easy answers. In the closing pages of *Falling Man*, Lianne searches for religion to address the confusion and anxiety she experiences, but ultimately rescinds spirituality and finds that the only connection she has to reality is the identity she finds in her memories and the corporeality of her body. Keith recites "fragments from the instruction sheet" (*FM* 235) like verses from a sacred text and repeats his wrist exercises endlessly. He is alone in a sterile hotel room, concentrated on his wrist, a postmodern subject isolated from reality. Metaphorically, his wrist exercises are an attempt at reversal, to put things back the way they were before 9/11, but it is useless; his wrist is fine, it is his identity that has changed, whether he wants it to or not. DeLillo intimates that Keith's attempts at immediacy, at in-the-moment connection, is the best he can hope for in a postmodern world, submerged in vast systems of influence. DeLillo has shored up the fragments of the ruins of 9/11, and found that the postmodern identity is constructed by absence, disconnection and emptiness; "*Even in New York – I long for New York*" (34, emphasis in original).

5. Conclusion: voices without centers

Don DeLillo has not shied away from tackling difficult subjects during his career as novelist. He is a true author of our times, whose writing continually touches upon and criticizes important aspects contemporary society. In a world where discourse is replacing reality, the subject is isolated and confused as he becomes a theoretical perspective without the possibility of autonomous action. DeLillo's contribution to the literary exploration of the formation of identity in a postmodern world has been and is of vital importance.

DeLillo might not consider himself a postmodern writer,¹⁵ but his work certainly grapples with postmodern ideas and their impact on reality and identity. *White Noise* and *Falling Man*, while published more than twenty years apart, are close in thematic considerations. Questions regarding individual and collective identity, anxieties about the possibilities of autonomous action, and concerns about individual and collective memory can be found in both novels. The premise of disaster is also common for the two novels, although the scope of *Falling Man*'s disaster is far greater in its devastating potential than the "airborne toxic event" of *White Noise*. *Falling Man* mourns the victims of 9/11; and perhaps just as importantly, it mourns the "victims" of postmodernism; fragmented and hollowed out, voices without centers. Through the characters in *Falling Man*, DeLillo makes visible, and critiques, the alienation from reality resulting from postmodern subjectivities constructed by discourse.

Undercurrents of paranoia in both novels reflect societies in precarious balance, where characters' uncertainties are brought to the fore. DeLillo's presentations of the characters reactions to social conditioning: anxiety, panic, and apathy, are part of his strategy of critiquing postmodernism from the inside. Reactions to cultural influence may produce an *us* vs. *them*-perspective where the complexities in life disappear into plots to combat this control. Paradoxically, characters often act out their agency panic through self-defeating actions; what is designed to reclaim agency is what ultimately reinforces their powerlessness when they act out familiar cultural scripts, myths and roles.

Falling Man demonstrates a far more pessimistic attitude toward the possibilities of consolidating individual identity and establishing contact with reality than *White Noise*. Society's influence on individual identity, and the individual's anxiety about and reactions to such influence, is a main theme in both *White Noise* and *Falling Man*. In the twenty years

¹⁵In an interview, DeLillo responded to a question of how he felt about his novels being described as post-modern: "I'd prefer not to be labeled. I'm a novelist, period" (Nadotti 115).

since the publication of *White Noise*, DeLillo's ideas about individual identity have developed. The ending of *White Noise* leaves open the possibility of a connection to reality; Jack and Babbette connect in a small way to reality through the gatherings at the overpass where they gaze at the sunset. They do not know how to feel, but there is a connection when "something golden falls, a softness delivered to the air" (WN 325). It is not until they disperse, that they are "restored to [their] separate and defensible selves" (325). In contrast, *Falling Man* opens and closes with Keith's exit from the north tower of the World Trade Center, and DeLillo emphasizes the confusion he experiences. In this changed world Keith and Lianne search for a connection to reality and tries to forge authentic identities, but DeLillo repeatedly underlines their isolation and disconnectedness. However, there are small, somewhat redemptive elements in the connection Lianne finds to reality through her body and memories, and in Keith's efforts at being present in the moment. Still, DeLillo is worried about the diminishing possibilities of developing healthy identities under postmodern conditions. In the development visible through Jack's feeling of inauthenticity, via Mink's unedited channeling of media discourse, to Keith's open-eyed narcolepsy, DeLillo shows a deepening pessimism and concern.

The trajectory of increasing pessimism also comes out in the tone of the novels. *White Noise* an often comic exploration of postmodern society and subjectivity; in *Falling Man*, the tragic elements of this exploration are emphasized. There is no catharsis to the "tragedy" of *Falling Man*, and this underlines this overarching trajectory visible between the two novels.

White Noise and *Falling Man* are literary works but relevant to the world at large. The situations and dangers they describe emerge not from the novelist's overactive imagination, but are recognizable as aspects of the world we live in. Postmodern views on reality affect all of us, whether we recognize them as postmodern or not. To state that 9/11 has changed the way we view the world is a cliché, iterated endlessly through mass media. Still, perhaps it has

not so much changed our view of the world, as it has confirmed our skepticism. The terrorist attacks seemed on one hand incomprehensible and on the other they seemed unavoidable.

Voices without centers, constructed by discourse, alienated and disconnected and living in an incoherent world appears to be the extreme end result of a postmodern view of human identity. However, in *Falling Man*, it is perhaps not only the terrorists' narrative that ended in the rubble, but also the narrative of postmodernism. Could a Phoenix emerge from the ashes?

“The narrative ends in the rubble and it is left to us to create the counternarrative.”

(Don DeLillo)¹⁶

¹⁶ “In the Ruins” 34

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