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Rewriting the Human: Death Anxiety and Posthuman Vision in Literature Since 1945

by

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Abstract

The technology-driven years following the close of World War II provided a new lens through which the human subject could be rethought and, theoretically, improved: no longer did physical and mental shortcomings have to limit the capacity of the individual. The atomic bomb and Colossus computer, though destructive forces, pushed scientists and philosophers to consider new models of the human, including flesh/machine amalgamation and reinscription as downloadable, digital information. While these posthuman constructions promised to distance the human from its material shortcomings, especially its vulnerability to bodily decay and death, they encountered significant resistance in the twentieth century.

By analyzing critical assessments of the posthuman in literature since 1945, this study evaluates the twentieth-century conviction that the human body is inviolable in the face of its increasing malleability. This critical assessment explores the hope for a rewritten, invulnerable human subject as well as the resistance that the emerging theoretical constructions encountered. In general, this resistance revolves around a fear that to be posthuman is to forego subjectivity, an idea born out of a nostalgia for the body as a closed off, single biological unit. Because it exposes the body as sets of distinct and programmable systems and subsystems, posthumanism threatens a presumed tradition of human exceptionalism. While the posthuman project appears to have failed in the twentieth-century—bodily rearrangability remains largely hypothetical—this study also briefly engages early-twenty-first-century estimations of its pending success.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

For know, death is a debt we all must pay.
—Euripides, *Alcestis*

In *The Night of the New Moon*, Laurens van der Post, an Allied soldier who spent

three-and-a-half years as a Japanese prisoner during World War II, reflects on the force

that the atomic bomb had on his and subsequent generations. He explains that the United

States intended the unprecedented and unrecognizable power of this new technology to

"strike [the Japanese], as it had us in the silence of our prison night, as something

supernatural."[1] Alex Goody, author of *Technology, Literature and Culture*, argues that

"[t]he speed, force, aggression and power of technology...came to a culmination in the

application of technology in war," and the delivery of President Harry Truman's promise

to Emperor Hirohito—prompt and utter destruction save the nation's unconditional

surrender—was certainly among the more astounding demonstrations of technological

might in the twentieth century.[2] Like Henry Adams, who states that "his historical neck

[had been] broken by the sudden irruption of forces totally new" after inspecting the

electric dynamo and Radium during the Exposition Universelle of 1900, Van der Post

recognizes that atomic detonation in 1945 marks an epochal rupture, the moment at

which men and women of pre-war generations "translated [themselves] into a new

universe which had no common scale of measurement with the old."[3]

Regardless of whether or not the bomb was necessary to bring an end to World War II—or if it was moral for the United States to exercise such extreme force—detonation indicated the beginning of an era that would come to be driven by increasingly powerful technology. "[F]rom the First World War to the terrorist anxieties of the century's end," Goody notes, this "technology was bound up with death, destruction and human conflict."[4] While this observation is attentive to the immediate effects of the military industrial complex's technologies, it may overlook the dual nature of such developments. Though destructive, they also offered scientists and philosophers the means to explore theoretical ways of overcoming human mental and physical shortcomings via technological amalgamation—the possibility to reinvent the human subject. As Paul Fussell states in "Thank God for the Atom Bomb," atomic weaponry of World War II had a life-saving quality despite the destruction it caused: "We were going to live. We were going to grow to adulthood after all. The killing was all going to be over, and peace was actually going to be the state of things."[5] While Fussell's celebration is focused specifically on the way the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki replaced "Operation Olympic," a proposed invasion of Tokyo in which his unit had been scheduled to participate, it corresponds to an idea that emerged out of mid-century technological development: such advancements have the power to prolong life, and no longer will people have to die. Despite this technology's existence as a herald of destruction, it also has a life-saving function: it suggests the possibility of bringing the human closer to somatic utopia, a theoretical reinvention unbound from material shortcomings, most notably vulnerability to bodily decay and death.

The airplane, tank, and machine gun changed the nature of warfare in World War I, but these early-twentieth-century developments were primarily mechanical. "The Second World War," Goody insists, "is marked by its dependence on information and informatics systems."[6] In addition to the arrival of the atomic bomb, British code breakers introduced the Colossus machine as an electronic device capable of solving complex mathematical equations. Ten of these early computers were successfully decoding encrypted Axis messages by the end of the war, in effect revealing that "technology had…developed beyond the capabilities of the human individual."[7] Since prior to World War II "the term 'computer' referred to a human individual who carried out computations," the introduction of information processing technology had equally important cultural effects as the human was redefined after 1945.[8]

Conscious of this emerging technological paradigm, Donna Haraway describes the period immediately following World War II as "a pivotal moment in U.S. history...when changes in speed and communication were forcing technologies of control into a reorganization that would result in the computer revolution."[9] According to N. Katherine Hayles, it was during this climacteric—following the detonation of the atomic bomb and the invention of the computer, when "the cold war loomed large in the national consciousness"—that "cybernetics was beginning to change what counted as 'human.'"[10] The project to reassess of the state of the human in the late-twentieth century, a movement that fostered resistance toward human exceptionalism as well as speculation regarding the possibility of machine/flesh integration or the disembodiment of the human subject via reinscription as digital information, came to be called posthumanism in the 1960s and gained critical weight as philosophical thought in the mid-1990s.

As Cary Wolfe explains in *What is Posthumanism?*, this discourse marks a rupture in thought that decenters previously accepted notions of the human subject, particularly "its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks [that have grown] increasingly impossible to ignore."[11] Out of this historical moment, which a number of theorists trace to the close of World War II, comes a "development that points toward the necessity of new theoretical paradigms (but also thrusts them on us), a new mode of thought that comes after the cultural repressions and fantasies, the philosophical protocols and evasions, of humanism as a historically specific phenomenon."[12] In particular, this discourse questions the humanist tradition of exceptionalism (especially the way it privileges rationality), and challenges its claim to the centrality of historical thought.

Michel Foucault performs a comparable critique in the closing paragraphs of *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences.* "As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date," he argues, "[a]nd one perhaps nearing its end."[13] Foucault theorizes that the human subject may soon undergo a fundamental change, and claims that the succeeding posthuman form could be unrecognizable when compared to that which has preceded it:

> If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility—without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises—were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.[14]

Because the Macy Conferences on cybernetics, a series of interdisciplinary conventions held from 1946 to 1953 that led to the invention of systems theory, had already provided a "new theoretical model for biological, mechanical, and communicational processes that

removed the human and *Homo sapiens* from any particularly privileged position in relation to matters of meaning, information, and cognition," the human subject's erasure, as predicted by Foucault, may have already been underway by the mid-1960s.[15]

In recent history, the term "posthumanism" has gained stock as its ideas permeate popular culture as commonplaces. Andrew Kimball, observing changes in linguistic patterns regarding the negotiation of the human form, explains that "[i]n place of the religious awe of prior cultures toward the body, we commonly speak of our heart as a 'ticker,' our brain as a 'computer,' our thoughts as 'feedback,' and our digestive and sexual organs as 'plumbing.'"[16] Indeed, whereas the body had historically been typified as a single biological unit, Elizabeth Grosz explains that theorists in the latter half of the twentieth century began to "understand the body, not as an organism or entity in itself, but as a system, or series of open-ended systems, functioning within other huge systems it cannot control through which it can access and acquire its abilities and capacities."[17] By reinventing the body as a mechanical entity or information processing unit, posthumanists have been able to consider its construction as an assembly of programmable systems and sub-systems. This manner of thinking suggests that typical impressions of the human subject may be more flexible than once presumed. Indeed, theorists entertain the idea that previously accepted models of the human could be dismantled and reconstructed without inherent physical and mental inadequacies.

Such reconceptualization operates at the heart of transhumanism (a movement within the discourse of posthumanism), which James Hughes explains is "the belief that science can be used to transcend the limitations of the human body and brain."[18] Attending to history, he stresses that this effort of the posthuman project is not entirely

new, but rather "an ideological descendent of the Enlightenment, a part of the family of Enlightenment philosophies."[19] Certainly, eighteen-century thought concerned the constitution of the human subject. In his 1748 publication *Man a Machine*, for example, Enlightenment physician and philosopher Julien Offray de la Mettrie construes the individual as simultaneously natural and mechanical: humans are "at bottom, only animals and machines."[20] Interested in Enlightenment knowledge's transformational power, French philosopher Marquis de Condorcet similarly suggests in 1794 that the "real advantages that should result from [Englightenment] progress…can have no other term than that of the absolute perfection of the human race."[21] Predating both of these *philosophes*, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz asserts in his 1714 work *The Monadology* that "living bodies, are machines even in their smallest parts *ad infinitum*."[22] Indeed, as Hughes argues, the transhuman project is not strictly modern; however, technology of the mid-twentieth century significantly increased the effort's legitimacy and practicality. Whereas the theorists of the Enlightenment period put their faith in the transformative power of knowledge to overcome inherent human limitations, contemporary theorists have been able to do more than capture the spirit of the intellectual movement by imagining the human subject as a machine; they have advanced technology at their disposal.

"[T]he growing presence of technology in the world of the present," Goody explains, "had an immediate impact on conceptions of the body, space and human interrelations."[23] Accordingly, as Hayles insists, "[c]yborgs actually exist."[24] She reports, "[a]bout 10 percent of the current U.S. population are [*sic*] estimated to be cyborgs in the technical sense, including people with electronic pacemakers, artificial joints, drug-

implant systems, implanted corneal lenses, and artificial skin."[25] Furthermore, "[a] much higher percentage participates in occupations that make them into metaphoric cyborgs, including the computer keyboarder jointed in a cybernetic circuit with the screen, the neurosurgeon guided by fiber-optic microscopy during an operation, and the adolescent game player in the local video-game arcade."[26] Though these amalgamations are evidence of the project's success, promises to distance the human subject from the always-threatening other, death, remain unfulfilled.

Recognizing that "technological innovations and the increasing technologization of human culture and existence have had an inevitable impact on the literature of the twentieth century in terms of its thematic concerns, its formal innovations, and in what that literature is held to be," this study explores the way literature since 1945 has reconceptualized the human subject in accordance with the ongoing posthuman project.[27] These works, written in the wake of World War II's technological destruction, are especially troubled by an overwhelming anxiety toward death. In response to this disquietude, a number of authors explore the possibility that twentieth-century technology could drive the human into its next evolutionary step. The succeeding stage of development, in accordance with transhuman efforts, promises to unshackle the subject from its inherent corporeal limitations, most notably death and bodily decay. While these writers recognize that mid-century technology offers the transhuman effort new possibilities, however, they ultimately resist the movement. Instead of endorsing the project, this body of fiction suggests that transhumanism exposes itself as impractical and overly radical for the twentieth century: the proposed theoretical transformations, which

may force the subject to sacrifice subjectivity to extend life satisfactorily, demand such fundamental changes that the resulting forms appear unrecognizable as human.

The characters of Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, a novel published only three years after the conclusion of World War II, learn of "the final resigned terror that [comes] with accepting death" while fighting the Japanese on the fictional island of Anopopei.[28] Participants in noxious jungle warfare, the soldiers of Mailer's work are forced to confront and accept their corporeal vulnerability. Through Private Woodrow Wilson, who is shot during an intelligence-gathering mission, Mailer explores psychological and physical aspects of the dying process: "[Wilson's] mind swirled, plumbing back into his core, considering himself objectively as a man who was going to die. He fought against it, terrified, not really believing it, like a man who looks in a mirror and speaks, and cannot believe that the face he has seen really belongs to himself."[29] Through this dying process, Mailer reminds the reader that warfare plays out at the level of the body—Brown's "body was racked; he had been retching emptily ever since they had halted, and his vision was uncertain….Every minute or two a wave of faintness would glide through him, darkening his sight and pocking his back with an icy perspiration."[30] This helplessness, the author insists, reveals the fallacy of presumed human invulnerability.

Late in the novel, however, General Edward Cummings drafts an essay that reconfigures the relationship between the human subject and machinery. Comparing the body and lifespan of a soldier to the arc of a fired artillery shell's trajectory, the general muses over ways that flesh/machine amalgamation could extend human life indefinitely. A stark contrast to the soldiers' resigned attitude when confronting their bodily

vulnerability, this mode of thinking comes to dominate the latter half of the twentieth century, an era marked by the rise of the cyborg as a cultural symbol. Though Cummings considers his impromptu composition an impractical failure, it is an early instance of posthuman thought. Mailer's novel thus offers the reader a vague theoretical model of the reinvented human that runs parallel to emerging posthuman discourse, a project that comes to gain considerable stock following the Macy Conferences and the scientific community's interest in redefining the human subject.

The theoretically-driven writing of Don DeLillo extends and critiques these models of reinvention. Like Mailer's soldiers, the characters of *White Noise* are preoccupied with death. When the novel is read alongside Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*, in which the author claims that "[t]he irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be freed of the anxiety of death and annihilation…but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive," Jack Gladney's crushing worry over "who will die first" becomes an echo of a more extensive cultural concern.[31] Though Jack unintentionally explores the possibility of being reinscribed digitally as disembodied information after being infected by Nyodene Derivative, a pesticide that plagues his town after a disastrous chemical spill, the loss of subjectivity he suffers as consequence of his anxiety over death keeps him from putting any faith in theoretical rewriting of the human form. DeLillo assures readers that no device can successfully kill off death. Ironically, to accept transhuman methods of life extension is to forfeit subjectivity—a death that leads to living without being alive.

Chuck Palahniuk's turn-of-the-century novel *Choke* further emphasizes such resistance to posthuman thought. Written in the early-twenty-first century, it functions as

a millennial critique of the posthuman project. The novel, which reports the misadventures of Victor Mancini and his friend Denny, revolves around the historic juxtaposition of present-day America and Colonial Dunsboro, a troubled (but nevertheless historically accurate) recreation of an eighteenth-century settlement. Because this era marks the birth of modern medicine, the rampant death in this historic milieu is alarming. More distressing, however, is the way Palahniuk collapses the distinction between the two temporally distanced spaces. Revealing the fruitlessness of Jean Baudrillard's suggestion that "the modern enterprise of staving off death" is realized in "the accumulation of life as *value*," Palahniuk reminds the reader that modern technological advancement has not delivered on its promise to liberate the human subject from corporeal limitations.[32]

Following World War II, a cultural obsession over death revealed traditional repression devices' inability to stave off human mortality. Technological advancements of the mid-twentieth century, however, promised the possibility of a reinvented human subject unbound from physical and mental shortcomings. Though death is a timeless concern, this technologically-driven era afforded transhumanists a cultural moment in which the extension of human life through theoretical constructions seemed progressively more feasible. Authors reflecting on this project, however, characterize the posthuman subject as Henry Adams describes forces first glimpsed at the *fin-de-siècle*: "occult, supersensual, [and] irrational."[33] This critique is now wholly negative, but it reveals that the movement is yet to reach its successful completion; at the end of the twentieth century, the human subject is yet to be saved by technological advancement.

Notes

[1] Laurens van der Post, *The Night of the New Moon* (New York, Vintage 2002), p. 271.

[2] Alex Goody, *Technology, Literature and Culture* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2011), p. 17.

[3] Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Radford, Wilder Publicaitons, 2009) p. 245.

[4] Goody, p. 17.

[5] Paul Fussell, "Thank God for the Atom Bomb," in *Thank God for the Atom Bomb and Other Essays* (New York, Summit Books, 1988), p. 28.

[6] Goody, pp. 82, 79.

[7] Goody, p. 89.

[8] Goody, p. 89.

[9] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 113.

[10] Hayles, p. 113.

[11] Cary Wolfe. *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. xvi.

[12] Wolfe, p. xvi.

[13] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of The Human Sciences*, ed. R. D. Laing (New York, Vintage Books, 1973), p. 387.

[14] Foucault, p. 387.

[15] Wolfe, p. xii.

[16] Andrew Kimball, *The Human Body Shop: The Engineering and Marketing of Life* (San Francisco, Harper, 1994), p. 230.

[17] Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2004), p. 3.

[18] James Hughes, "Contradictions from the Enlightenment roots of Transhunism," in *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 35.6 (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 622.

[19] Hughes, p. 622.

[20] Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Man a Machine* (Chicago, Open Court Publishing, 1912), p. 143.

[21] Marquis de Condorcet, *Sketch for the Progress of the Human Mind*, trans. June Barraclough (London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1955), p. 184.

[22] Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *The Monadology*, in *The Philosophical Works of Leibnitz …*, 2nd Ed., trans. by George Martin Duncan (New Haven, The Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor Company, 1908), p. 319.

[23] Goody, p. 15.

[24] Hayles, p. 115.

[25] Hayles, p. 115.

[26] Hayles, p. 115.

[27] Goody, p. 2.

[28] Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead* (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1948), p. 547.

[29] Mailer, p. 466.

[30] Mailer, p. 548.

[31] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York, The Free Press, 1973), p. 66; Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York, Penguin Group, 1986), pp. 15, 30, 100, 198.

[32] Jean Baudrillard, "Political Economy and Death," in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London, Sage Publications, 1993), pp. 147, 145.

[33] Adams, p. 246.

Chapter 2

"We are not so discreet from the machine any longer":
Vulnerable Bodies and Posthuman Vision in Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*

> A man said to the universe:
> "Sir, I exist!"
> "However," replied the universe,
> "The fact has not created in me
> A sense of obligation."
> —Stephen Crane, from *War Is Kind*

The Naked and the Dead, Norman Mailer's first published novel, unfolds as a

dramatic documentary of a reconnaissance platoon participating in the World War II

invasion of Anopopei, a small, fictional island in the South Pacific. Beginning with the

assault on the island's northern coast, the episodic novel's alternating chapters explore

multiple characters' experiences during the campaign and provide detailed biographical

sketches of their prewar lives. The majority of the plot focuses on the troops' experiences

during minor patrols preceding an information gathering mission on the south side of the

island behind the Toyaku Line (named after the Japanese commander), as well as the

events that arise during the reconnaissance tour at the base of a towering peak, Mount

Anaka. "I wanted to write a short novel about a long patrol. All during the war I kept

thinking about this patrol," Mailer explains in *The Spooky Art: Thoughts on Writing*.[1]

"When I started writing *The Naked and the Dead* I thought it might be a good idea to

have a preliminary chapter or two to give readers a chance to meet my characters before

they went on patrol," he continues, "[b]ut the six months and…400 pages went into that,

and I remembered in the early days I was annoyed at how long it was taking me to get to my patrol."

As a number of critics have made clear, Mailer's wartime experiences provided both subject and stylistic influence for *The Naked and the Dead*. Mulling over his unpublishable pre-war play, *A Transit to Narcissus*, which concerns his experiences working at a state mental asylum in Boston, Mailer explained, "I suspect that if it had not been for the experience of the army (that invaluable experience for the writer of a situation which he cannot quit when he so chooses), I should have continued to write books in very much that style."[2] Never intending to be molded into a respectable soldier or patriot, the author joined the American campaign against Japan in March 1944, twenty-eight months after Pearl Harbor, with the sole purpose of gathering material for what he hoped would become *the* next great American war novel. Early in his enlistment, he recognized his place as "the third lousiest GI in a platoon of twelve."[3] Afraid that his desk-job appointment as a clerk-typist following the initial Philippine invasion was not providing him with the wartime experience necessary for what was to develop into *The Naked and the Dead*, the author volunteered to join a reconnaissance platoon, the 112th Cavalry, a Texas National Guard outfit, as a rifleman fighting in the mountains. He saw little combat—probably just enough to describe accurately the combat scenes and tedium of the war. In the Twenty-Fifth-Anniversary Report for Harvard College, the institution from which he graduated in 1943, Mailer succinctly summarized his wartime role and experience:

> To put it briefly, I had two years in the Army after Harvard, most of it with the 112th Cavalry from San Antonio, Texas. Was tacked onto them at the end of the Leyte Campaign, then saw some modest bits of action in Luzon as a rifleman in a reconnaissance platoon. After the war, in the

occupation of Japan, I rose so high as sergeant technician fourth Grade, T/4, a first cook. The occupation inspired me with shame, however, Harvard snobbery being subtler than one expects, so picked a contretemps one day, and was busted. Left the Army a private.[4]

After returning from the war unscathed and writing with unflagging energy for fifteen months, he saw his war novel land on the *New York Times* best-seller list for eleven consecutive weeks and sell 197,185 copies in its first year.[5] Mailer, then a twenty-five-year-old student, emerged as an overnight success.

In *Mankind in Barbary: The Individual and Society in the Novels of Norman Mailer*, Stanley T. Gutman, echoing an array of other critics, points to "pervasive social determinism, along with Mailer's resolute effort to observe and capture the totality of military experience," as evidence of the novel's place within the tradition of American Naturalism.[6] This literary movement dominated literature at the turn of the century—particularly the work of Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser—and experienced a revival in the 1930s—with fiction by John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, and John Steinbeck. It was from these authors that Mailer drew his inspiration:

> I didn't have much literary sophistication while writing *The Naked and the Dead*. I admired Dos Passos immensely and wanted to write a book that would be like one of his. My novel was frankly derivative, directly derivative…. I had four books on my desk all the time I was writing: *Anna Karenina*, *Of Time and the River*, *U.S.A.*, and *Studs Lonigan*….The atmosphere of *The Naked and the Dead*, the overspirit, is Tolstoyan; the rococo comes out of Dos Passos; the fundamental, slogging style from Farrell, and the occasional overrich descriptions from Wolfe.[7]

Noting Mailer's emphasis on the insignificance and impotence of human beings, Gutman argues that "[f]oremost in the novel is the antagonistic relationship between men and the natural world, a world Mailer consistently portrays as powerful, harsh, alien, and impenetrable."[8] Philip H. Bufithis observes that Naturalism's "most frequent metaphor,

the lawless jungle, is the literal setting of *The Naked and the Dead*."[9] Michael K. Glenday elaborates: "[i]n Mailer's army all are victims, either of each other or of the deterministic trap within which they are boxed almost as soon as they are born."[10] Indeed, Mailer's novel, like other works dominated by characters whose fates are determined by degenerate heredity or a brutal and unaccommodating environment, foregrounds the historical, socio-economic, and biographical forces that deny presumptions of human exceptionalism.

Thus, surprisingly little attention is given to the present enemy in *The Naked and the Dead*, the Japanese. Instead, as the campaign unfolds and the soldiers begin to suffer increasingly debilitating exhaustion, Mailer directs the reader's attention to other enemies: time and the vulnerability of the human body. In "The Minority Within," Richard Poirier reassesses Mailer's "intuitive taste" for writing on war by suggesting that "'war' is only an occasion...for his effort to discover the minority element within any person, constituency, or force which might be engaged in a 'war.'"[11] "The minority is not God or the Devil, Black or white, woman or man," Poirier continues, but rather "that element in each which has somehow been repressed or stifled by conforming to system—including systematic dialectical opposition—or by fear of some power, like death, which is altogether larger than the ostensible, necessarily more manageable opponent apparently assigned by history." Indeed, as Mailer critiques an unaccommodating class structure in the United States through characters such as Red Valsen, a drifter in prewar life, and explores minority experience through two Jewish soldiers—Privates Goldstein and Roth—and a Mexican scout named Martinez, his attention repeatedly returns to the mortality that his characters share.

According to Richard Foster, "[l]ife threatened in our time by the forces of death is Mailer's subject everywhere."[12] Robert J. Begiebing, author of *Acts of Regeneration*, agrees that "Mailer's principle theme is the struggle of Life against Death."[13] Like Poirier, Begiebing notes the author's concern with totalitarianism, the "disease of our time," and asserts that "his central metaphor for totalitarianism is the Devil, or Death; his central metaphor for the intuitive, instinctual life is God, or Life."[14] "In his fiction and nonfiction," Begiebing clarifies, "Mailer's heroes participate in the battle between Life and Death and engage in a quest to find the roots of life and to embody what Mailer calls 'it,' a life force of some sort." He explains, "[i]t is his conviction that the survival and growth of humanity and the victory of Life depend upon our capacity to attain heroic consciousness."[15] This conviction seems, however, to be inchoate in *The Naked and the Dead*, as is apparent from the defeated characters' failure to achieve much in the way of heightened consciousness, heroic or otherwise. Thus, human beings must "learn to give up deferred dreams, and to hope instead for a minimal survival."[16]

Mailer's subject, indeed, is the death that pervades his fiction. Further exploration of the author's attention to the inevitability of mortality can offer a reassessment of the human condition following World War II, particularly in terms of modernity's promises to extend teleologically the limits of the human subject along the lines of the aforementioned impulse of human exceptionalism. Indeed, Mailer's consideration of the vulnerability of the human subject in the years of World War II—a historical moment preceding the posthumanist movements that gained momentum in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries—comes most sharply into focus as he contrasts the protracted dying of a private, Woodrow Wilson, with General Edward Cummings's impromptu

meditation regarding the body/machine relationship and subtle suggestion that,

theoretically, the "curve of all human powers" can be rewritten as a straight line of

upward movement.[17] These irreconcilable positions regarding the condition of the human

being in an increasingly technological era (dying while designing its survival) establish a

platform from which Mailer is able to reassert the vulnerability of the human subject

while envisioning a rewritten human with the capacity to overcome the limitations of its

fragile form, which the author recognizes as the defining characteristic of the human in

the latter half of the twentieth century.

Exposing Vulnerability

"The awareness we each have of being a living body, being 'alive to the world,'

carries with it exposure to the bodily sense of vulnerability to death, sheer animal

vulnerability, the vulnerability we share with them," Cora Diamond explains.[18] "This

vulnerability is capable of panicking us," she continues, and "[t]o be able to acknowledge

it at all, let alone as shared, is wounding." In *The Naked and the Dead*, this

acknowledgement of vulnerability pervades the soldiers' daily lives: "All over the ship,

all through the convoy, there was a knowledge that in a few hours some of them were

going to be dead" (3). Nevertheless, the soldiers refuse complete acceptance of their

impending mortality. Though the reader is told that Red, who is the most realistic about

the likelihood of being killed while serving in the army, has "been through so much

combat, had felt so many kinds of terror, and had seen so many men killed that he no

longer had any illusions about the inviolability of his own flesh," that "[h]e knew he

would be killed; it was something that he accepted long ago," one is further told that he

has "grown a shell about that knowledge so that he rarely thought of anything further

ahead than the next few minutes" (107-108). Though he understands that "a man was really a very fragile thing," and though he occasionally finds "his mind churning with the physical knowledge of life and death and his own vulnerability," Red, too, subscribes to unthinking investment in the ideology of human exceptionalism that keeps "the thought of his death…always a little unbelievable to him" (189).

The impulse to resist acknowledging mortality is a practice that is reinforced by history and a tradition of mythology. As Friedrich Nietzsche explains in "On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense," a human is a "mighty architectural genius who succeeds in erecting the infinitely complicated cathedral of concepts on moving foundations, or even, one might say, on flowing water."[19] Stemming to the Italian Renaissance, human exceptionalism reproduces an ideology of invulnerability that we have forgotten is an illusion. Establishing the human tendency to fall victim to such artifices, Nietzsche explains that the "drive to form metaphors, that fundamental human drive…cannot be left out of consideration for even a second without also leaving out human beings themselves."[20] Red explains that while "they weren't really tough, they still believed it would be perfect in the end," as if "they separated all the golden grains in the sand and looked at them, only at them—with a magnifying glass" (501). It is this proclivity to observe the gold while ignoring the sand, to accept illusions of inviolability while ignoring harmful truths of mortality, that enables the soldiers in the *The Naked and the Dead* to imagine themselves invulnerable.

When Wilson, nicknamed "the invincible," is shot in the stomach during the reconnaissance mission at the base of Mount Anaka, William Brown, another private in the platoon, remarks, "[t]here was no way out of it. It seemed like a plot against them all.

They were betrayed, that's all. He could not have said who betrayed them, but the idea fed his bitterness" (459). Despite the disbelief that the soldiers share—Private Minetta, while in the hospital, likewise muses that "[i]t didn't seem possible that something as small as a bullet could have hurt him"—Wilson's fatal wound forces on his fellows the realization that humans are not only far from invincible, but fated to die (309). This experience, seeing the defeated corpse, excites self-conscious horror and knowledge of the fact of death, a type of *tremendum* that shakes the epistemological structures through which one has perceived of one's life. Nevertheless, the myth of human exceptionalism, which betrays believers by reinforcing a false sense of immortality, is enticing. The soldiers have adopted the ideology and tricked themselves into believing in it: "they had discovered it was a talisman, they were going to die soon, and they wore it magically until you believed in it" (210).

As Wilson proves mortal, so may the other soldiers. Red Valsen, another private in the platoon, compares him to "a big ox," and repeats at multiple points in the novel, "[y]ou can't kill ol' Wilson" (455), "you can't kill that old sonofabitch Wilson" (498), but his reassuring pleading is falsely conceived. Reflecting on the shock he felt when he found that Wilson had been wounded, Roth admits, "Wilson had always been so alive….It was impossible. One moment, and then… So [*sic*] badly wounded; he had looked dead when they brought him in. It was difficult to conceive" (498). Wilson himself has a difficult time accepting the fact that he has been wounded in action: "His mind hovered about the realization that he was badly wounded, marooned miles and miles from anywhere, alone in a barren wilderness. But he could not grasp it, sinking back again into a partial stupor from the effect it had cost him to crawl. He heard

someone groan, then groan again, and realized with surprise that he was making the sounds. Goddam" (450). The hesitancy that the soldiers—including Wilson, himself— exhibit draws attention to the distance one assumes exists between oneself and death: though the human body is fragile and vulnerable, we all think ourselves "invincible."

Mailer is at pains to show that the vulnerability of the human subject, obvious enough in wartime, is visible in everyday life if one looks. Wilson's body is decaying prior to being pierced by a Japanese round. As he tells Red, who suffers from nephritis, "Ah'm all shot to hell inside Ah cain't take a leak easy, and mah back hurts, and Ah gets the cramps sometimes" (324). Readers learn that Wilson has contracted a sexually transmitted disease prior to his deployment in Anapopei. Though he claims that he has "the clap," or gonorrhea, which is easily treated and cured, Wilson's self-medication with pyridine has not successfully rid him of the pus that he believes clogs his major organs (381). He has been told that he needs surgery, and his resistance to the prescribed procedure—"[m]ah old man died from an op-per-ration an' Ah don't like none of it"— hints toward his subconscious fear of death (324, 381). He recognizes the poor state of his health, but he refuses to acknowledge his vulnerability consciously.

An even more powerful refusal to acknowledge the force of death comes from Private Gallagher's denial regarding his wife's passing. Initially, he responds to her death with the expected numbness of one who loses a spouse, but when mail from his late wife continues to arrive—a phenomenon arising from a month-long delay on all non-urgent letters—the reader finds that Gallagher tells himself, "[s]he's dead, she's dead, but he did not believe it completely" (245). Indeed, "as the letters from Mary kept coming every few days, he began to believe that she was alive. If someone had asked him about his wife, he

would have said, She died, but nevertheless he was thinking about her the way he always had" (245). The letters allow Gallagher to construct a counterfactual narrative in which his wife is still alive and about to give birth to their first child. Noting that "[t]he date of her confinement was approaching closer and closer," he begins to believe that "she had not died but that she was going to, unless he could find some way to prevent it" (246). Mary's last letter, like death itself, is that which is certain to arrive despite numerous efforts to deny its existence.

After Wilson is wounded in action, a four-man detail attempts to carry him from the base of Mount Anaka to the beach—at which point he is meant to be transported to the hospital on the other side of the island by boat at the first opportunity. But his southward movement out of the tall kunai grass covering the foothills of the mountain to the dense jungle and, finally, into the river leading to the beach, symbolically illustrates life as a process of decay. When his comrades retrieve him from the grass that shelters him from the Japanese soldiers, who have been searching for his body, they are reasserting the possibility that he may live: the shift off of the shaded dirt and into the sun with his platoon corresponds with the perception that he is being rescued. This is the image of birth and hope. As his pain grows increasingly unbearable on the arduous trip toward the beach, however, the reader recognizes that his body's passage into the dark and chaotic jungle reasserts the severity and fragility of his physical condition—the hope that had been established by his symbolic birth is stolen away as he reenters the darkness.

As Mailer establishes early in the novel, the jungle is "formidable," and the sort of geographical space in which "[n]o Army could live or move" (38-39). "Through the densest portions," readers learn, "a choked assortment of vines and ferns, wild banana

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trees, stunted palms, flowers, brush and shrubs squeezed against each other, raised their

burdened leaves to the doubtful light that filtered through, sucking for air and food like

snakes at the bottom of a pit" (38). The jungle, which is "always as dark as the sky before

a summer thunderstorm," and in which "no air ever stirred," is a space resembling

Darwin's tangled bank: an environment in which many organisms must die so that a few

may live (38). Mailer's language—specifically the stress on "choked," "stunted,"

"sucking for air," and "dark"—indicates that the jungle teems with death as much as life.

Wilson dies in the jungle, sliding "backward into unconsciousness, grunting once

with surprise as…his breath gave a last rasping sound" (589). One relinquishes any hope

for his rehabilitation when his body is unintentionally submerged and swept down a

dangerous river, effectively burying his corpse. Reminding readers of the way the

soldiers had found themselves "too weary to lift their legs" (406) while crossing the

rapids at the start of the invasion, Goldstein and Ridges lament, "he's lost" (592), after

surrendering Wilson's body at the conclusion of his process of decay. Through Wilson's

death, Mailer reasserts the vulnerability of the human body against an impulse of human

exceptionalism—the death of "the invincible" is a paradox that undermines one's

assumptions about one's strength.

Observing the representation of death in the novel, Bufithis explains, "[i]n a

dumb, wanton universe man labors to die. He does not really fit into the universe; he is an

outlaw on an earth not designed for him. In a profoundly anti-Christian vein, we conclude

that God does not take any interest in man."[21] Indeed, following Wilson's death, the

litter-bearers experience overpowering frustration:

> All his life he had labored without repayment; his grandfather and his
> father and he had struggled with bleak crops and unending poverty. What

had their work come to? 'What profit hath man of all his labour wherein he laboureth under the sun?' The line came back to him. It was part of the Bible he had always hated. Ridges felt the beginning of a deep and unending bitterness. It was not fair...God's way. He hated it suddenly. What kind of God could there be who always tricked you in the end? (592)

As Ridges "wept out of bitterness and longing and despair," as well as "from exhaustion and failure," he comes to "the shattering naked conviction that nothing mattered" (592). Goldstein, with "nothing in him at the moment, nothing but a vague anger, a deep resentment, and the origins of a vast hopelessness," experiences a similar disillusion, lamenting that one's faith and beliefs are "carried and carried and carried, and when it finally grew too heavy it was dropped. That was all there was to it" (592-593).

As Nietzsche explains, while one naturally "desire[s] the pleasant, life preserving consequences of truth," the process by which one is disillusioned and presented with "truths that may be harmful or destructive" invites hostility and despair. Hence, the crisis that Goldstein and Ridges experience following Wilson's death brings them to the Nietzschean insight noted before: the "infinitely complicated cathedral" of conceptual patterns and categories with which we make sense of the world (those founded on human exceptionalism) is not as stable or universal as it appears.[22] Those who participated in World War II witnessed events of such catastrophic proportions that they were forced to reevaluate these conceptual patterns, including what it meant to be human and vulnerable in the world. Walter Benjamin, in "The Storyteller," mourns this conceptual dislocation in war:

> For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged

but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosion, was the fragile human body.[23]

Indeed, the mechanical devastation witnessed in twentieth-century warfare forced humankind to confront its vulnerability and begin thinking outside of the presumption of inviolability that the tradition of rational humanism had instilled. As Mailer explains, the mid-century assertion of human fragility left even the surviving combatants defeated: "They had so little to anticipate. The months and years ahead were very palpable to them. They were still on the treadmill; the misery, the ennui, the dislocated horror….Things would happen and time would pass, but there was no hope, no anticipation. There would be nothing but the deep cloudy dejection that overcast everything" (610).

Rewriting the Human after World War II

Though some met the recognition of finitude with an unbearable comic indifference, this reaction served to distract from a deeper and more lingering problem, one that was taken up by a number of serious technological enterprises in the years after World War II. Ihab Hassan, in "Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?," for example, calls for a reassessment of "the human form—including human desire and all its external representations."[24] These aspects of the human may be changing radically, he cautions, and "[w]e need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call post-humanism." Cary Wolfe suggests that a common "strand of posthumanism is what is now being called 'transhumanism,'" philosophical thought dedicated, according to Joel Garreau, to "the enhancement of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capabilities, the limitation of disease and unnecessary suffering, and the dramatic extension of life span."[25] Transhumanists maintain that the current form

of humanity is not the final stages of development, but a relatively early phase.[26] Thus, it is subject to revisioning and improvement.

Mailer, foregrounding the vulnerability of the fragile body, exposes the illusion of human exceptionalism (a presumption put in place by a tradition of liberal humanism), yet he alludes to the possibility of what we would now call transhumanist evolution. While his vision acknowledges the current state of the human as ineffectual and exceeding vulnerable, characterizing it as an ineffectually-molded being that has yet to reach its full potential, he alludes to the possibility that technological advancements of the twentieth century has set the stage for the next developmental stage of the human. If "[s]trong transhumanism advocates see themselves engaged in a project, the purpose of which is to overcome the limits of human nature," as M. J. McNamee and S. D. Edwards explain, then Mailer's characters, particularly Sergeant Croft and General Cummings, are identifiable as proponents of posthuman thought emerging at the close of World War II.[27] This transhumanist reading suggests that Mailer was attentive to an emerging cultural imaginary developing in the years immediately following the war, when rapid technological development inspired a number of theorists to reevaluate the seeming limits and possibilities of the human subject.

Mailer's vision of transhuman evolution, in which humankind is able to overcome its perceived limitations, is apparent from the title of part two of the novel, "Argil and Mold," an allusion to myths of creation from clay. Argil, a potter's clay, is cited as the origin of the human in several myths, including ancient Persian, Greek and Christian creation stories. The Koran reads:

> Surely We created man of a clay of mud moulded,
> and the jinn created We before of fire flaming.

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And when thy Lord said to the angels,
'See, I am creating a mortal of a clay of mud moulded.'[28]

Similarly, Apollodorus tells a story in which "Prometheus moulded men out of water and earth, and gave them also fire, which, unknown to Zeus, he had hidden in a stalk of fennel."[29] Pausanias, too, speaks of two stones made of unearthly clay that smell like human skin and "are remains of the clay out of which the whole race of mankind was fashioned by Prometheus."[30] Similarly, Genesis: "And the LORD God formed man *of* the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."[31] If the human has its origins in potter's clay, which is molded into shape, then it retains the possibility of re-molding, the process by which the human subject, in the manner of the transhuman project, is reconstructed as something so fundamentally different than the current stage of development that what was once considered distinctly human is no longer apparent. One of the main efforts of such a project is to overcome death.

Mailer, when asked about the figure of Mount Anaka, responded that it "represents a great many things…—things like death and man's creative urge and man's desire to conquer the elements, fate—all kinds of things that you never dream of separating and stating so badly."[32] As a number of critics have noted, Mailer drew on Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* when writing of this mountain, which is likened to "an immense old gray elephant erecting himself somberly on his front legs, his haunches lost in the green bedding of his lair" (389). It is this obviously symbolic mountain that the platoon leader, Croft, a character frequently connected to Mailer's enthusiasm for unreasoning violence in the face of irrational modern life, grows increasingly determined to scale: "The mountain attracted him, taunted and inflamed him with its size…He stared

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at it now, examined its ridges, feeling an instinctive desire to climb the mountain and stand on its peak, to know that all its mighty weight was beneath his feet" (389). When Croft's attempt to climb the mountain—symbolically to overcome death in the spirit of a transhumanist—ends in failure, he mourns that he "had lost it, had missed some tantalizing revelation of himself…Of himself and much more…Of life…Everything" (616). As Gutman notes, "[t]rying to overcome nature by climbing Anaka is as futile as trying to cancel death," which requires a technological advancement that Croft's all too human body lacks.[33]

In stark contrast to this sublime symbol, are the brown, slimy bodies of the snakelike giant kelp. Unlike Mount Anaka, which "seemed wise and powerful, and terrifying in its size," the kelp is insignificant and unimpressive (389). "[C]onsider the phenomenon of the kelp," a professor had lectured to one of Lieutenant Robert Hearn's classes in college, "they have no roots, no leaves, they receive no light from the sun. Under the water the giant kelp form veritable jungles of plant life where they live without movement, absorbing their nutrition from the ocean medium" (294). In accordance with the transhumanist belief that the current state of the human is in a relatively early evolutionary stage, the human is likened to the kelp, which has yet to develop the means to leave its primordial ocean. Gallager, coming across a dead strand of kelp that had washed ashore during a storm, cringes in horror, associating its sliminess with bodies he had seen rotting in a cave (249). Solidifying the association between the lifeless algae and the undeveloped human, and echoing the professor's explanation that kelp is valuable only as fertilizer, Wilson announces, "[g]oddam carrion, that's all we are, men, goddam carrion" (294). While the soldiers serve a practical function during the war, they are

characterized as an organic, decaying material. Unlike the mountain, which is an age-old boulder, the men are, in their helplessness, impotence, and absorption in their own nutrition, associated with the lowest common denominator of life. The men and their supposed strength are compared to flaccid kelp beneath Mount Anaka's phallic shadow.

The Nietzsche quotation that serves as the epigraph to part three of the novel reinforces the suggestion that human reality is undeveloped. To open this section, titled "Plant and Phantom," Mailer draws on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "[e]ven the wisest among you is only a disharmony and hybrid of plant and phantom. But do I bid you become phantoms or plants?" (375). The author regretted not naming the novel "Plant and Phantom," a phrase that refers, he suggests, "to the conflict between the animal roots of man and his sense of vision."[34] While the "animal roots of man" are easy to connect to the human's material body, which is prone to decay and victim of mortality, a full understanding of what Mailer perceives to be the human vision requires the third line of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, who promises, "[b]ehold, I teach you beyond-man!"[35] The "beyond-man" (also translated as "Overhuman"[36] and "overman"[37]), is the next step of humanity, the "significance of earth."[38] Because "[m]an is something that shall be surpassed," Zarathustra explains, "[m]an shall be…a joke or a sore shame."[39]

Midway through the novel, after the platoon seems to have rescued Wilson and is in the process of transporting him to the beach, Cummings visits the artillery bivouacs on the northern side of Anopopei and, after firing a howitzer, reflects on the vulnerability of the twentieth-century human. Back in his quarters, in an impromptu essay, he sketches an asymmetrical parabolic line representing an artillery shell's trajectory as the force which impels it is lessened by gravity and wind resistance (a later novelist will call this

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"gravity's rainbow"). The General explains that the curve, "*the fundamental path of any projectile*," also "demonstrates the form of existence, and life and death are merely different points of observation on the same trajectory" (494-495). The upward path of anything launched, fired, or birthed, then, is countered by opposing forces—gravity and wind resistance for the missile, old age and decay for the human body. This model is a reduction of the complexity of the process by which the human body decays, but Cummings's suggestion, "[i]f not for [these opposing forces], the missile would forever rise on the same straight line," suggests a dissatisfaction with the vulnerability of the human body and an ancient dream of transcending its limitations in a decidedly transhumanistic manner (495).

Continuing his journal entry, Cummings hesitantly writes, "[i]t's a not entirely unproductive conceit to consider weapons as being something more than machines, as having personalities, perhaps, likenesses to the human….And for the obverse, in battle, men are closer to machines than humans," and concludes, "[w]e are not so discrete from the machine any longer" (493-494). Cummings, intrigued with the possibility of amalgamating humans and machines, stumbles across what Donna Haraway later identifies as the cyborg, "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism."[40] This figure has become "the twentieth century's most enduring image of the interaction between humanity and technology, imagined variously as the technological extension, invasion or assimilation of the individual."[41] While it is frequently introduced hypothetically, advances in medicine, bioengineering, and genetic manipulation have made the relationship between humans and the inorganic significantly indistinct. Glossing Stanley Cooperman's *World War I and the American Novel*, Randall H.

Waldron, in "The Naked, the Dead, and the Machine," contends that "[b]y the time of World War II...the machine had been thoroughly assimilated into our culture."[42] As a number of theorists explain, "[f]rom pacemakers to cosmetic surgery, Bluetooth ear pieces to satnavs, bomb-disposal exoskeletons to smart drugs, the late twentieth-century interpenetration of human and machine suggests that the high-tech societies of the world are increasingly populated by cyborg beings."[43] But for most theorists, N. Katherine Hayles explains in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, "becoming a posthuman means much more than having prosthetic devices grafted onto one's body. It means envisioning humans as information-processing machines with fundamental similarities to other kinds of information-processing machines, especially intelligent computers."[44]

While Cummings's observation—that the military turns individuals into cogs in the machinery of war—is not particularly original, the notion that in the course of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century the human subject has become increasingly compatible with technology (as well as the idea that it can be somehow augmented to overcome old age and decay, its apparent limitations) suggests an early responsiveness to posthumanism. Furthermore, Cummings's suggestion that "[t]he trick is to make yourself an instrument of your own policy," though meant in terms of political efficiency, is analogous to an early call for biological autopoiesis (72). Though the concept was briefly explored in a 1959 paper titled "What a Frog's Eye Tells the Frog's Brain," a developed understanding of the autopoietic system—that which is capable of generating the components that produce its organization, containing within itself sufficient processes to maintain its whole—was not introduced until 1972 by Chilean biologists Humberto

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Maturana and Francisco Valera in "Notes on an Epistemology of Living Things" from *Observing Systems*.[45] Replacing the previously explored models of homeostasis and W. Ross Ashby's homeostat—an electrical device that "searched for the configuration of variables that would return it to its initial condition," suggesting that "departure from homeostasis threatens death" and that "[h]umans and machines are alike in needing stable interior environments"—the human as autopoietic is the vision of a subject uninhibited by old age or decay.[46] Whereas the biological cell is a canonical example of the autopoietic system, expanding this model to the human body as a whole, thus making oneself the instrument of one's own policy, is distinctly posthuman.

The general fails to articulate his thought satisfactorily and destroys his journal entry. He laments that he is "playing with words" and "[a]ll that he had written seemed meaningless, a conceit," but his conclusion is not unfounded: "There was order but he could not reduce it to the form of a single curve. Things eluded him" (496). Indeed, his musing suggests that under the imperative of ceaseless invention and technological advancement in machinery and machine methods, the limiting natural processes could be replaced by superior artificial ones to distance humanity from its limited, biological state—thus effectively straightening the curve. Cummings reassesses the relationship between the human, its mortality, and the technology it creates by noting, as Alex Goody asserts, that "[a]long with leisure, art and work, death was subject to comprehensive technologization during the twentieth century."[47] Though "[i]n transcribing his thought to paper it seemed somehow less profound, more contrived, and though he was dissatisfied vaguely," the journal entry offers an insight into the development of the twentieth-century human, whose relationship to technology continues to become less discrete (496).

The General's remark, "the rifle, the quiet personal arm, the extension of a man's power," as well as his conclusion, "[w]e are not so discrete from the machine any longer," pertinently suggests the emergence of a mid-twentieth-century vision in which humans are no longer as vulnerable as Wilson and his fellow soldiers find themselves.

For this reason, Mailer explains, *The Naked and the Dead* is not "a novel without hope."[48] "I intended it to be a parable about the movement of man through history," Mailer continues. While "[t]he book finds man corrupted, confused to the point of helplessness," it also "finds that even in his corruption and sickness there are yearnings for a better world." Though, as Hassan notes in "Encounters with Necessity," "[t]he world of *The Naked and the Dead*, on all levels, is a dying world" in which "[o]mnipotence, as private motive or historical destiny, gives way to impotence," Mailer quietly applauds any effort to overcome what he recognizes as temporary human limitations.[49] The general's misguided philosophical thoughts, as well as Croft's determination, continuously reassert that "we're in the middle ages of a new era, waiting for the renaissance of real power" (74). Noting that, "[m]an's deepest urge is omnipotence" (282), Hearn as it were rewrites Roth's assumption that "everything lives to die" (252).

The general is not alone in questioning the state of the human in the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, the Macy conferences on cybernetics, a set of meetings in New York that began immediately after WWII and continued into the early 1950s, assembled philosophers for the purpose of reexamining the way the human fits into an exponentially more technological world. This conference series pioneered systems theory, and converged on a new theoretical model that removed the human from biological,

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mechanical, and communicational processes, effectively dethroning it from the privileged position established in the Renaissance and solidified by a history of rational humanism.[50] Living under the shadow of the destruction that accompanied dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, furthermore, revealed the full effect of technology on human life. As Robert J. Lifton notes in *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*, the impact of the bomb had "the power to make everything into nothing," and left survivors having "experienced a permanent encounter with death," consequently challenging the epistemological framework through which they understood what it meant to be alive and human.[51] Hayles has suggested that "the cyborg," which emerged directly as a response to the devastating power of technology like the atomic bomb in World War II, "was constructed in the postwar years as technological artifact and cultural icon."[52] Under the imperative of "ceaseless invention and advancement of new machines and machine methods," Goody asserts, "natural processes were superseded by artificial ones and technological development took humanity further and further from the limits of their biological organism."[53] Cummings may not fully grasp the scope of his attempt to rewrite the human subject at the close of World War II, but he is engaging with a problem that comes to see increasing attention in the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Notes

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[3] Anna Rothe and Constance Ellis, *Current Biography, 1948* (New York, H.W. Wilson Company, 1949), p. 408.

[4] Peter Manso, *Mailer: His Life and Times* (New York, Washington Square Press, 2008), p. 74.

[5] Philip H. Bufithis, *Norman Mailer* (New York, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1978), p. 7.

[6] Stanley T. Gutman, *Mankind in Barbary: The Individual and Society in the Novels of Norman Mailer* (Hanover, The University Press of New England, 1975), p. 12.

[7] Manso, p. 101.

[8] Gutman, p. 6.

[9] Bufithis, p. 19.

[10] Michael K. Glenday, *Norman Mailer* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1995), p. 48.

[11] Richard Poirier, "The Minority Within," in *Norman Mailer,* Ed. Harold Bloom (New York, Chelsea House publishers, 1986), p. 85.

[12] Richard Foster, "The Early Novels," in *Norman Mailer*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, Chelsea House publishers, 1986), p. 26.

[13] Robert J. Begiebing, *Acts of Regeneration: Allegory and Archetype in the Works of Norman Mailer* (Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1980), p. 1.

[14] Begiebing, p. 3.

[15] Begiebing, p. 1.

[16] Glenday, p. 50.

[17] Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead* (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1948), p. 495.

[18] Cora Diamond, "Injustice and Animals," in *Slow Cures and Bad Philosophers: Essays on Wittgenstein, Medicine, and Bioethics*, ed. Carl Elliot (Durham, Duke University Press, 2001), p. 123.

[19] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense," trans. Ronald Speirs, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 879.

[20] Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense, pp. 881-882.

[21] Bufithis, p. 18.

[22] Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense, p. 876.

[23] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, Schocken Books, 2007), p. 84.

[24] Ihab Hassan, "Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?," in *Georgia Review* 31.4 (Athens, The University of Georgia Press, 1977), p. 212.

[25] Cary Wolfe. *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p.xiii.; Joel Garreau, *Radical Evolution: The Promise and Peril of Enhancing Our Minds, Our Bodies—and What It means to Be Human* (New York: Random House, 2005), p. 231-232.

[26] Nick Bostrom. "The Transhumanist FAQ," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Technology*, 2nd ed., ed. by David M. Kaplan (Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), p. 345.

[27] M. J. McNamee and S. D. Edwards. "Transhumanism, Medical Technology and Slippery Slopes," in the *Journal of Medical Ethics* 32.9 (London, BMJ Publishing Group Ltd, 2006), p. 514.

[28] The Koran: Interpreted, trans. Arthur John Arberry (New York, Oxford University Press, 1982), ll. 15-27.

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[30] Pausanias, *Pausanias: Description of Greece, Books 1-2*, trans. W. H. S. Jones (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1918), ll. 10.4.4.

[31] *The Holy Bible: King James Version* (Peabody, Hendrickson Marketing, 2011), l. 2.4.

[32] Norman Mailer, "*The Naked* are Fanatics *and the Dead* Don't Care," by Louise Levitas, in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, ed. J. Michael Lennon (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1988), p. 7.

[33] Gutman, p. 9.

[34] Mailer, *The Naked* are Fanatics *and the Dead* Don't Care," p. 7.

[35] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Alexander Tille (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1896), p. 5.

[36] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody,* trans. Graham Parkes (New York, Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 12.

[37] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ed. Adrian Del Caro and Robert Pippin (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 6.

[38] Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, p. 5.

[39] Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, p. 5.

[40] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifest: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York, Routledge, 1991), p 149.

[41] Alex Goody, *Technology, Literature and Culture* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2011), p. 136.

[42] Randall H. Waldron, "The Naked, the Dead, and the Machine," in *Norman Mailer: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), p. 116.

[43] Goody, p. 139.

[44] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 246.

[45] Hayles, p. 131-134.

[46] Hayles, p. 65.

[47] Goody, p. 79.

[48] Norman Mailer, "Rugged Times," in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, ed. J. Michael Lennon (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1988), p. 18.

[49] Ihab Hassan, "Encounter With Necessity," in *Critical Essay on Norman Mailer*, ed. J. Michael Lennon (Boston, G.K. Hall & Co., 1986), pp. 94, 93.

[50] Wolfe, p. xii.

[51] Robert J. Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (New York, Random House, 1967), pp. 79, 541.

[52] Hayles, pp. 2, 84-86, 120, 132, 291.

[53] Goody, p. 1.

Chapter 3

Plotting to Live: Subjectivity and Fear of Death in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

To be a person is to have a story to tell.
—Isak Dinesen

Don DeLillo's eighth novel, *White Noise*, opens as a postmodern recasting of the domestic narrative, "continuously concerned with the secret life of the house—with the closet doors that open by themselves, with the chirping of the radiator, with the sounds of the sink and the washing machine compactor, with the jeans tumbling in the dryer."[1] Jack Gladney, founder and chair of the Department of Hitler Studies at what is referred to as The-College-on-the-Hill in the fictional town of Blacksmith, is the head of an average suburban family: "Father works, mother stays at home. Four normal kids, a station wagon, and a nice house on a quiet street in a small town that is the suburb of nowhere."[2] The novel's three sections—"Waves and Radiation," "The Airborne Toxic Event," and "Dylarama"—trace a year of Jack's life before and after his community is exposed to a noxious cloud of "Nyodene Derivative" (an insecticide spilled during a railway accident). In addition to this chemical, the Gladney family is plagued by technologies of reproduction, including television reality, which DeLillo has elsewhere called "the daily toxic spill."[3] As he struggles to confront his wife's addiction to Dylar, a pill that aims to ease one's fear of death, Jack comes to think his own life shortened by exposure to the chemical spill. His worries over what might be called human finitude evolve into an obsession that nearly consumes him entirely. Delillo's novel advances and assesses a

number of methods to neutralize or repress one's fear of death, but all prove ineffectual and, indeed, dangerous to the well-being of a human subject's personal identity.

Following World War II, when the violence inherent to the military-industrial complex's technological developments—particularly the power and aggression represented by the atomic bomb and Colossus machine, forces that came to govern the human consciousness during the Cold War—reasserted the inevitable vulnerability of flesh to finitude, awareness of death's pervasiveness paradoxically threatened and stimulated the human subject. As Ernest Becker explains in his 1973 study *The Denial of Death*, a crescive awareness of mortality revealed itself as the driving force in the development of twentieth-century culture: "of all things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death."[4] In the shadow of disabling technologies, the human subject was both vulnerable and inspired to reach for immortality. Echoing Ralph Waldo Emerson and Friedrich Nietzsche, Becker asserts that this fear is a condition of disenchantment, the breakdown of the human narcissism born from "our central calling, our main task on this planet…the heroic."[5] He clarifies, "[t]his narcissism is what keeps men marching into point-blank fire in wars: at heart one doesn't feel that *he* will die, he only feels sorry for the man next to him."[6] When mid-century technological warfare shattered the illusion of immortality, the once normally-functioning repression device failed and ours became a culture of death.

DeLillo—the twice Pulitzer Prize for Fiction finalist and Pen/Faulkner Award winning author of *Libra*, *Underworld* and *Mao II*—has suggested that he is a writer molded from an intense awareness of the pervasiveness of violence and death in twentieth-century America. Citing the death of President Kennedy as a source of major

inspiration, DeLillo explained, "[m]aybe it invented me. Certainly, when it happened, I was not a fully formed writer…it's possible I wouldn't have become the kind of writer I am if it weren't for the assassination."[7] Taking this possibility further, he supposed that his work attends to an "element of unresolvability" and focuses on "danger, modern danger."[8] As Douglass Keesey argues, this conception of modern danger, which informs the author's "sense of imminent apocalypse," is not the event of death or assassination itself, but "a loss in our ability to understand it and other events, to see what it all means."[9]

Observing the way our world has grown increasingly mediated by technologies of reproduction, specifically repeatedly televised video recordings like Kennedy's assassination, DeLillo reveals that once monumental events like death depreciate in value and meaning. This phenomenon is evident in the Gladney family's experience watching natural disasters on television: "Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping."[10] The screen's ability to reproduce events without end, as Jack's friend and colleague Murray Siskind explains, turns a disaster into "a celebration" (218). Death, an inevitability that deserves attention, seemed to undergo a radical reconceptualization in the years following World War II. Murray's assertion that "the nature of modern death" is its "life independent of us," as well as his suggestion that "[i]t is growing in prestige and dimension," draws attention to the way DeLillo's subject has been distanced from the individual. Noting that one no longer has any subjective, personal relationship to death, Murray suggests that "[w]e study it objectively," as if oblivious to its place in *our* future (150).

Becker's investigation of death consciousness as a force in twentieth-century America is one of the only sources that DeLillo has cited as an inspiration for *White Noise*, which had a working title of "The American Book of the Dead."[11] DeLillo explains, "[d]eath seems to be all around us—in the newspapers, in magazines, on television, on the radio. Much of this, of course, is welcome news—new scientific developments which help us live longer. Nevertheless, I can't imagine a culture more steeped in the idea of death. I can't imagine what it's like to grow up in America today."[12] Predating Derrida's assertion that death is terrifying because of an inability to experience it—it is precisely that which we resist ever imagining as *for us*—DeLillo's novel draws attention to a deep and natural anxiety over mortality, as well as the devices one erects to distance it from one's self:[13]

> Our sense of fear—we avoid it because we feel it so deeply, so there is an intense conflict at work. I brought this conflict to the surface in the shape of Jack Gladney.
> I think it is something we all feel, something we almost never talk about, something that is *almost* there. I tried to relate it in *White Noise* to this other sense of transcendence that lies just beyond our touch. This extraordinary wonder of things is somehow related to the extraordinary dread, to the death fear we try to keep beneath the surface of our perceptions.[14]

Jack and his wife, Babette, do not want to continue to live because they enjoy being alive—"[s]ounds like a boring life," Jack says—but because their fear of its ending is so powerful: "I hope it lasts forever" (53). The couple struggles to reconcile their overwhelming fear of mortality with the inevitability of death over the course of the novel, though they find little solace in any method of repression.

As David Cowart notes in *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language*, the story "is about the fear of death in a world that offers more and more insidious ways to die—and

fewer and fewer structures conducive to the acceptance of death."[15] The twentieth

century has little room for spiritual vision, Cowart makes clear, as is apparent from the

Gladney family's failure to consider religious comfort to combat their overwhelming fear

of death. Indeed, religion, a traditional device for lessening one's fear of death by

promising an afterlife, is no longer able to function as an institution through which

believers find spiritual comfort. Cowart reveals that such solace is undermined when Jack

visits a hospital run by nuns who "appear to believe" in traditional religious ideas for the

sake of others (319). The nuns' disbelief creates an image that "*plays at being* an

appearance" of some "basic reality," revealing the hollowness of institutions that had

once made death acceptable.[16]

       Joseph Dewey, author of *Beyond Grief and Nothing: A Reading of Don DeLillo*,

suggests that Jack replaces this lost religious impulse with identity construction and

performativity. On campus, Jack wears a black, medieval robe and "glasses with thick

black heavy frames and dark lenses" (17). In addition to the extra weight he gains in an

attempt to add "an air of unhealthy excess, of padding and exaggeration, hulking

massiveness," he has also invented an extra initial for his professional name, J.A.K.

Gladney (17). This costume, Dewey argues, is Jack's most transparent attempt to

immortalize himself, though it fails when a work colleague glimpses him in his street-

wear. Broken down by the comment that he looks like "[a] big, harmless, indistinct sort

of guy," Jack finds himself "in the mood to shop" (83). This unrestrained consumerism

casts the supermarket as the new church and source of consolation toward death. Jack

explains, "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....[The money spent] came back to me in the form of existential credit" (84).

When his fear grows too burdensome, Jack reaches for larger-than-death devices for a feeling of safety. The Hitler identity, Jack explains, "is a tag I wore like a borrowed suit" (16). Dewey observes that "Gladney is a massively conceived performance piece, a career fraud, who moves by the end of the novel to a position apart, accepting the vulnerability implicit in mortality and rejecting the insulation of domesticity and the seductive illusion of invincibility he had found within his comfy bunker of middle-class plenty."[17] Certainly, as Keesey argues, "the Hitler charade only makes Jack feel more self-conscious and afraid, for now he has created this myth of invincible power impossible for him to live up to."[18] "As the physician introduces discreet quanta of some weakened pathogen into the body to stimulate its immune system, so will Jack, in a professional embrace of the chief death merchant of his age, promote his own resistance to *timor mortis*," Cowart concludes, "[b]ut Jack's attempt at philosophical inoculation fails conspicuously to armor the mental immune system."[19] When this device proves unhelpful, or when it is exposed as a thin façade, the supermarket's rampant consumerism makes for an acceptable substitute. Murray, commenting on the process by which one accrues goods to distance death, explains: "[h]ere we don't die, we shop" (38).

Shopping does not repress the fear of death satisfactorily in the novel—it leaves people always needing to buy more. Rather than extending life, or even repressing fear, it offers distraction that is ineffectual—and short-lived. Noting the shortcomings of consumerism as repression device, Jesse Kavadlo explains, "people channel belief into science and technology, through waves and radiation, neurochemical drugs, and the

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human-made microbes that eat away the human-made disaster of the airborne toxic event—ancient fears recast in contemporary images."[20] Dylar, specifically, is the technology that Babette hopes may cure her fear of death. Characterized as "[t]echnology with a human face" (211), Dylar is a device that isolates the "fear-of-death part of the brain" and "speeds relief to that sector" (200). This pill, which works by inhibiting the neurotransmitters responsible for producing one's fear of death, proves to be a failure. Not only does Dylar have a number of hazardous side effects, including severe memory impairment and the loss of one's ability to distinguish words from reality (a breakdown of the process of signification), the pill is addictive and does little to alleviate one's fear. Babette's experiment with the drug leaves her more, not less, terrified of her inevitable death.

As Tom LeClair asserts in *In The Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*, *White Noise* "might be termed DeLillo's subtractive or retractive achievement, a deepening of the American and human mystery by means of a narrow and relentless focus on a seemingly ultimate subject—death."[21] LeClair discusses "three strategies" whereby DeLillo's characters futilely struggle to neutralize their mortal anxiety: "'mastering' death by expanding the physical self as an entity; evading awareness of their mortality by extending the physical self into protective communications systems; and sheltering the illusion-producing consciousness from awareness of its defensive mechanisms."[22] Noting the failure of these methods, Mark Osteen, in *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture*, similarly argues that the novel "depicts postmodern mortality not as a glorious struggle, but as 'daily seeping falsehearted death' heard as white noise, as a 'dull and unlocatable roar.'"[23] The plot of

the novel, Osteen reminds the reader, unfolds as an examination of previously accepted "magical spells like those found in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and the *Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*," which "provide detailed prayers and rituals to protect the dying on their journey beyond the body" in the same way that the Gladneys listen to televised advertisements in a search for the sacredness of postmodern life.[24] DeLillo's meditation on the perils of the human body, particularly the overwhelming fear of finitude, reasserts what it means to be a human subject in the late-twentieth century: to be at once vulnerable to and preoccupied with death-consciousness, the consequence of which is the death of subjectivity.

Plotlessness and Death

In *White Noise*, the reader is immediately, as Peter Boxall explains in *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction*, "cast into the slack tide of a plotless narrative, which is light on historical detail and lacking in temporal vision."[25] Indeed, DeLillo's work offers significant attention to the nature of plot, particularly through Jack's resistance to narrative action. Arguing that Hitler has had a larger cultural impact than Elvis, Jack tells Murray's classroom that "[a]ll plots tend to move deathward" (26). "This is the nature of plots," Jack believes, "[w]e edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like the contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot" (26). Resonating with Sigmund Freud's remark from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, that "*the aim of all life is death*," Jack's speech connects the advancement of the action of one's life to the approach of one's inevitable finish.[26] DeLillo incorporates this theory into the actionlessness of the first section of the novel, which Boxall explains creates an

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experience of "the insistent recurrence of the same in the midst of the drifting, unanchored days...not contained within any...narrative cage."[27]

As an antidote for death, or at least his fear of death, Jack seeks to empty time of narrativity. He is attempting, observes Dewey, to "ignore the gradual movement toward death by pretending such aimlessness resists ending."[28] He proposes, while musing on death in Blacksmith's cemetery, to allow the days to drift aimlessly: "Do not advance the action according to a plan" (98). As consequence, the "eternal present," Boxall notes, "fails, eternally, to become present."[29] Ironically, "[i]n a confusion between symptom and cure that becomes very familiar in DeLillo, the attempt to ward death off, to live in drifting seasons, produces a plotless time which is itself deathly; it is as if the aimless days of the work are days that are already in the province of death."[30] Jack's resistance keeps the plot of the narrative and the progression of time from coming together, and the failure to "accrue to a rounded truth" causes a sense of listlessness that Boxall ties to déjà vu, a condition that haunts several characters over the course of the novel.[31]

As radio reporters update the symptoms of contamination during the Nyodene D. spill from "nausea, vomiting, [and] shortness of breath" to "a sense of *déjà vu*," Jack's son, Heinrich, explains: "It affects the false part of the human memory" (116). Steffie and Babette both suffer from this disorder during the evacuation of Blacksmith. Jack's daughter says, "I saw all this before....This happened once before. Just like this. The man in the yellow suit and gas mask. The big wreck sitting in the snow. It was totally and exactly like this. We were all here in the car. Rain made little holes in the snow. Everything" (125). Murray's analysis of déjà vu is not overly complicated: the phenomenon is a psychological response to the resurfacing of one's repressed

acknowledgement of a future moving (as Jack suggests all plots do) deathward. Murray theorizes that the phenomenon of thinking "these things happened before" is because "[t]hey did happen before, in our minds, as visions of the future" (151). Unable to acknowledge these future visions, particularly those concerning death, the mind keeps them "hidden until the precognition comes true, until we come face to face with the event" (151).

Psychoanalyst and historian of psychiatry Gregory Zilboorg, in an article published in 1943, says much the same: self-preservation demands repression of death-consciousness.

> The very term "self-preservation" implies an effort against some force of disintegration; the affective aspect of this is fear, fear of death…must be properly repressed to keep us living with any modicum of comfort….Therefore in normal times we move about actually without ever believing in our own death, as if we fully believe in our own corporeal immortality. We are intent on mastering death….A man will say, of course, that he knows he will die someday, but he does not really care…he does not think about death and does not care to bother about it….The affect of fear is repressed.[32]

If, as Zilboorg argues, even the declaration that one "does not really care" is "a purely verbal admission" and not a legitimate acceptance of one's inevitable mortality, then the mind does not consciously attend to the knowledge it has already accepted: that the human is victim to finitude. This process "means more than to put away and to forget that which was put away and the place where we put it;" moreover, it means "to maintain a constant psychological effort to keep the lid on and inwardly never relax our watchfulness."[33] Thus, the airborne toxic event causes déjà vu simply "[b]ecause death is in the air" and it is "liberating suppressed material" (151).

Repression, however natural, can be dangerous to the construction of personal identity because it often results in the resistance to a teleology of self-narration (i.e., plotting). Marya Schechtman, in *The Constitution of Selves*, argues that existence as a subject is established by recognizing life as a narrative. "[I]ndividuals constitute themselves as persons by coming to think of themselves as persisting subjects who have had experience in the past and will continue to have experience in the future, taking certain experiences as theirs," Schechtman explains; "[persons] weave stories of their lives."[34] Similarly, Daniel Dennett argues that the self is a center of narrative gravity, a construction that is written over the course of one's life.[35] For Dennett, however, the self is not something developed epiphenomenally from a narrative; it *is* the narrative. While Jack tends to think of his world as plotted, he tries to avoid becoming a "character" in its story—strives, as it were, for some attenuation of subjectivity. Before events overtake him, the lack of action in his life-as-narrative effectively removes his self from his story. Thus, according to theories of personal identity as narration, resistance to self-narration causes the flame of subjectivity to gutter. If the self is a narrative that weaves thoughts, desires, and feelings into a coherent whole, then Jack's fear of physical death is causing an inactivity that is, ironically, killing him.

Indeed Jack's failure to interact with the natural world suggests that he may suffer from a condition resembling Abraham Maslow's "Jonah Syndrome," the intentional avoidance of living life to its fullest degree because of "a justified fear of being torn apart, of losing control, of being shattered and disintegrated, even of being killed by the experience."[36] Rudolf Otto examines this sort of phenomenon in *The Idea of the Holy*, noting that the terror of the world establishes an overwhelming and restricting awe and

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fear—the *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum* that leaves some restraining in life while questioning how existence can exist at all.[37]

Heinrich's friend, Orest Mercator, alternatively, has chosen a route of reckless denial in the face of mortality. As the metaphoric meaning of his name implies, he believes that, like Orestes, he can conquer mountains without coming to any harm. Training to sit in a cage of poisonous snakes for sixty-seven days to break a record, Orestes blithely discounts Jack's earnest counsel: "you think death applies to everyone but you. They will bite and you will die" (208). Dumbfounded at Orest's certainty that he will remain unharmed—"[p]eople get bitten. But I won't," the daredevil states (208)—Jack muses that "[i]f each of us is the center of his or her existence, Orest seemed intent on enlarging the center, making it everything" (267). While Jack's center is ever-diminishing (if it exists at all), Orest's narrative is plot driven. Heinrich later reports that "he got bit in four minutes," however, reminding the reader that personal identity and physical existence are distinct: bodily danger abounds and mortality persists (297).

While Jack's fear of death staves off plotting in the first section of *White Noise*, his exposure to Nyodene D. during the evacuation of Blacksmith unhinges the unconscious knowledge of his mortality and forces him to seek ways to repress his fear actively. Dewey explains that in the first part of the narrative, "Gladney's strategy [to avoid acknowledging death] had been clear: calculated denial," but that "[w]hen the evacuation and subsequent exposure so completely rob Gladney of his fabricated persona and force him to confront the grief-world that lurks just beyond the fringes of his comfortably tidy middle-class world, Gladney is presented an array of strategies for confronting the invasive immediacy of death."[38] No longer able to resist plotting, Jack is

surrounded by a multitude of approaches to this distinctly human problem, but as LeClair observes, characters "are victims of a self-inflicted double bind: fearing death and desiring transcendence, they engage in evasive artifices and mastering devices that turn back upon them, bringing them closer to the death they fear, even inspiring a longing for disaster."[39]

The shallow illusions by which characters attempt to stave off death—or, minimally, the fear of death—are embedded in a natural desire to expand and continue life indefinitely. "Jack's journey through various forms, like the novel's movement through different genres, does not end with any one form as final solution, fatal or salvific," Keesey explains, "[i]t leads instead to a healthy skepticism regarding conventional and simplistic solutions to life's problems, combined with a lingering hope that some new form will be developed to answer human needs" (133). Kavadlo, surveying the Gladneys' evasive techniques, argues that "[l]ove, language, and technology all seem reduced to little more than further failed protection against death, extravagant systems of evasion, just as Murray suggests."[40] While each of these methods appears to repress one's fear of death, none actually deals with the problem of death: the characters of *White Noise* are still vulnerable to the world in which they live. Furthermore, they restrict character development by pausing the death-centric narrative of self. Following Jack's contamination, the danger of methods to resist plotting becomes transparent. Jack's prognosis is a catalyst for his anxiety, which consumes him in the second half of the novel.

Information Reproduction and Death

Though only outside the family station wagon to pump gas for two and a half minutes during the evacuation of Blacksmith, Jack's computerized scan is "generating big numbers…bracketed numbers with pulsing stars" following his exposure to the toxic cloud (140). The scan's results, displayed graphically, are the very measure of mortality, the quantification of Jack's vulnerability:

> I think I felt as I would if a doctor had held an X-ray to the light showing a star-shaped hole at the center of one of my vital organs. Death has entered. It is inside you. You are said to be dying and yet are separate from the dying, can ponder it at your leisure, literally see on the X-ray photograph or computer screen the horrible alien logic of it all. It is when death is rendered graphically, is televised so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself. A network of symbols has been introduced, an entire awesome technology wrestled from the gods. It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying. (142)

After having had "[a]ctual skin and orifice contact" with the "state of the art" insecticide that "can send a rat into a permanent state…[at] [o]ne part per million million [*sic*]," Jack becomes consciously estranged from the data-system that is his body. Reinscribed into waves and radiation, Jack is established as a posthuman subject. As Leonard Wilcox argues, "media and technology transform death into a sign spectacle, and its reality is experienced as the body doubled in technified forms."[41] Indeed, as Alex Goody explains in *Technology, Literature and Culture*, "the selves manufactured by the TV screen are intimately technological selves, posthuman selves who are unreadable and impossible without the expectations and forms of visual technology."[42]

N. Katherine Hayles recalls that participants of the Macy Conferences "wavered between a vision of man as a homeostatic self-regulating mechanism whose boundaries were clearly delineated from the environment and a more threatening, reflexive vision of

a man spliced into an informational circuit that could change him in unpredictable ways."[43] Though a technologized human is relatively simple to conceptualize, particularly in cultural images of the cyborg, Jack's informational body can be difficult to grasp. Beyond the purely biological unit, extracted from a vulnerable, physical body, Jack reifies Hayles's vision of the human liberated from limitations by means of technological interconnectedness. "The technological transformation and extension of the self means we are no longer a bounded, biological unit," Goody explains, "instead, we are inevitably part of an intelligent system that comprises information, machines and bodies."[44] But Jack is a victim to this technology because the digitization he undergoes does not promise, as Goody argues, to extend his life. [45] Instead, as Boxall notes, "DeLillo finds death, and death possibility, inhabiting those very technologies that promise to eradicate death, to bring the unknown future under control of the present."[46] Hayles, however, maintains that "boundaries are *both* permeable and meaningful, humans are distinct from intelligent machines even while the two are become increasingly entwined."[47]

Baudrillard understood the television or computer screen as a space that usurps reality and brings viewers into an existence that is mediated through the technological image. As Frow explains, death itself is digitized. Jack's dying "is projected through a characterology taken from the movies.…The cliché is a simulacrum, an idea form that shapes and constrains both life and death."[48] The print-out offers Jack the possibility of recognizing the self through the hyperreality of digital representation. The digital subject thus created reveals, as Scott Buckatman puts it, that "the body is no longer the repository of the soul," for it is "technologies that now construct our experiences and therefore our *selves*."[49] The computer print-out, diagnostic harbinger of Jack's death, does not refer to

reality, but replaces it. Reflecting on this process, Osteen observes that "[t]echnology is doubly alienating: not only does it give us the lethal chemicals that lead to early death but it then takes death away by turning it into data. The toxin soon comes to embody Jack's nebulous dread, giving it local habitation and a name: Nyodene D."[50]

Yet "even death," observes Wilcox, "is not exempt from the world of simulation: the experience of dying is utterly mediated by technology and eclipsed by a world of symbols. The body becomes a simulacrum, and death loses its personal and existential resonances."[51] In an age growing dominated by the proliferation of signs, such representation effectively distances Jack from the death with which he has become obsessed. The body itself becomes mere simulacrum; one's conception of self is perforce attenuated. Subjectivity is killed off as Jack's contact with the real world is abruptly interrupted by this mediated representation of his immediate environment. Keesey concludes that "the computerized analysis of Jack's disease, the technological structures that mediate his death, turn out to be yet another form of commercial noise, representations of reality that distance us from ourselves, conveying death rather than communicating life, and profiting from our misfortune."[52]

Thus, the cure becomes worse than the disease when Jack is pronounced "technically dead" (158). As Roland Barthes explains in his reflections on photographic reproductions, "the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity.…[It] represents that very subtle movement when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (or parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter.[53] Like the subject/object of Barthes's photograph, which experiences a type of

death-by-camera in the process of being photographed, the process by which the subject

gains a digital representation unbound from finitude, Jack begins a new life as a

fragmented posthuman construction when his body is rendered digital.

Thus, as he reads his data profile, Jack is "forced to recognize the existence of a

second kind of death," a postmodern death of subjectivity (240). As he witnesses the

digital representation of his self, particularly his essence represented in numbers and

symbols of death, Jack's repression device is broken and what William James calls the

"worm at the core of all our usual springs of delight," the death fear that we repress,

begins to eat away at his interior.[54] He explains, drawing attention to the phenomenon of

being dead while alive, "[e]ver since I was in my twenties, I've had the fear, the dread.

Now it's been realized. I feel enmeshed, feel deeply involved. It's no wonder they call

this thing the airborne toxic event. It's an event all right. It marks the end of uneventful

things. This is just the beginning. Wait and see" (151).

Breaking Stasis: Reconstituting the Self

While Jack's desire to establish plotlessness renders him incapable of action, the

digitization and reproduction of his body further removes him from his narrative. Victim

to postmodern death of subjectivity, Jack seeks his colleagues' advice regarding how he

should approach the burgeoning anxiety his diagnosis fosters. "The deepest regret is

death. The only thing to face is death. This is all I think about. There's only one issue

here. I want to live," he tells Murray (285). In response to Jack's lament, that Murray

deconstructs the role of technology in modern society in terms of death consciousness:

> You could put your faith in technology. It got you here, it can get you out.
> This is the whole point of technology. It creates an appetite for
> immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other.
> Technology is lust removed from nature...It's what we invented to conceal

the terrible secret of our decaying bodies. But it's also life, isn't it? It prolongs life, it provides new organs for those that wear out. New devices, new techniques every day. Lasers, masers, ultrasound. Give yourself up to it, Jack. Believe in it. They'll insert you in a gleaming tube, irradiate your body with the basic stuff of the universe. Light, energy, dreams. God's own goodness. (285)

Updating, as it were, Becker's thesis that the fear of death (and its consequential repression) is the driving force of culture in the twentieth century, Murray asserts that technology provides the means to overcome human anxiety of finitude. In a vein similar to the cyborg constructions that Hayles and Donna Haraway imagine, Murray theorizes a merging of the body with technology to overcome the physical limitations of the human subject or, at the very least, to disguise shortcomings of corporeality. While Murray may not believe that technology can actually extend life indefinitely—his suggestion that one's body can be irradiated "with the basic stuff of the universe" falls short of the hybrid constructions Hayles finds in her survey of science fiction texts—he does assert that technology is capable of postponing or retarding our bodily decay. Still, Jack has already experienced the irony of technology that Murray observes: it promises the extension of physical life at the cost of one's subjectivity. As Dewey notes, "[i]f science and technology destroy, they also meddle by extending to a needful people the illusion that nature can be controlled…, that the body's deficiencies can be corrected, life extended indefinitely, thus canceling the responsibility to accept the difficult arc of mortality, encouraging a dedicated denial of its reality."[55]

Murray's further theories concerning the relationship between life and the process of dying are alarming. Jack has been under the impression that "[t]o plot is to die," but Murray reassures him that "[t]o plot is to live" (91). "Your whole life is a plot, a scheme, a diagram," Murray clarifies, and "[t]o plot is to affirm life, to seek shape and control"

(292). This, he concludes in concurrence with theorists arguing that personal identity is constructed as narrative, "is how we advance the art of human consciousness" (292).

> I believe, Jack, that there are two kinds of people in the world. Killers and diers. Most of us are diers. We don't have the disposition, the rage or whatever it takes to be a killer. We let death happen. We lie down and die. But think what it's like to be a killer. Think how exciting it is, in theory, to kill a person in direct confrontation. If he dies, you cannot. To kill him is to gain life-credit. The more people you kill, the more credit you store up. (290)

The corollary, then, is "violence [as] a form of rebirth. The dier passively succumbs. The killer lives on...[and] gathers strength. Strength accumulates like a favor from the gods" (290). In theory, the killer is able to kill death by killing others. As the killer forces death onto others, his or her time increases. Murray, establishing an economy of death, explains that as "[h]e buys time, he buys life" (291). In strict disagreement with Jack's efforts to bring the narrative to a halt, Murray demands action.

In opposition to what Kavadlo considers the major theme of the novel, "the desire to escape fear and evade death," Winnie Richards, one of the novel's characters who is described as a "tall gawky furtive...neurosurgeon whose work was said to be brilliant" (184), provides Jack with advice regarding how the event should be approached.[56] Rejecting Jack's belief that "[o]nce your death is established, it becomes impossible to live a satisfying life," she argues that his efforts are misguided (285). To kill off the sense of death is a dangerous practice that misses the point of living: "I think it's a mistake to lose one's sense of death, even one's fear of death. Isn't death the boundary we need? Doesn't it give a precious texture to life, a sense of definition? You have to ask yourself whether anything you do in this life would have beauty and meaning without the knowledge you carry of a final line, a border or limit" (228-229). Like Murray, who

endorses an alarming economy of death, Winnie urges Jack to abandon his unproductive (and possibly dangerous) evasive practice.

Death, Winnie observes, is like a grizzly bear "so electrifyingly strange that it gives you a renewed sense of yourself, a fresh awareness of the self—the self in terms of a unique and horrific situation. You see yourself in a new and intense way. You rediscover yourself. You are lit up for your own imminent dismemberment" (229). For Winnie, Jack is able to reclaim subjectivity and awareness of the self—that which is lost in his efforts to render his life as a narrative without plot and the process by which he is reinscribed digitally after his contamination—only through actively acknowledging and accepting his fear: "The beast on hind legs has enabled you to see who you are as if for the first time, outside familiar surroundings, alone, distinct, whole. The name we give to this complicated process is fear" (229).

Winnie suggests that an impending physical death is not a real problem. She assures Jack that, as Zilboorg has observed, "[w]e're all aware there's no escape from death," and that this knowledge is easily crushed if "[w]e repress, we disguise, we bury, we exclude." [57] The natural tendency to repress, however, leaches away and eventually kills human subjectivity—one ends up dead while alive. As Becker explains, the search for "fountains of youth, holy grails, buried treasures—some kind of omnipotent power that would instantly reverse…fate and change the natural order of things"—is informed by "man's illusion par excellence, the denial of the bodily reality of his destiny."[58] Enchanting life-extending devices and Dylarian repression aids aside, one can diminish one's fear of death only by engaging with it as a subject according to Winnie, an approach which Jack had cleverly avoided with his Hitler Studies façade.

Killing Death: The Rebirth of Subjectivity

Jack grows increasingly obsessed with the "nebulous mass" formed by the contamination of the airborne toxic event, and his desire to control the world in which he lives grows (283). Reasserting his agency by creating narrative action, Jack appears to adopt Murray's method when he begins plotting to murder Mr. Gray (whose real name is Willie Mink), the scientist responsible for seducing Babette by promising her the fear-eradicating drug, Dylar. In accordance with Murray's logic, Jack invents his own story, a "reality [he can] control, secretly dominate," in an attempt to manage his own death (297). If, as Walter Benjamin writes, "[d]eath is the sanction for everything that the storyteller can tell," then Jack has ironically moved himself toward physical death by advancing his plot and attempting to extend life by earning life-credit.[59] Nevertheless, his action equally follows Winnie's advice by confronting and accepting his finitude. By approaching Mink, his psychological double, Jack recasts himself as the hero of his story and, as Winnie puts it, rediscovers himself by seeing himself "in a new and intense way" (229).

Whereas Jack had suggested that the trouble of the human experience is "that we are the highest form of life on earth and yet ineffably sad because we know what no other animal knows, that we must die," he recaptures his subjectivity by recasting himself as the author of his life and advancing his plot deathward (99). Terming the human condition "*individuality within finitude*," Becker explains this state:

> Man has a symbolic identity that brings him sharply out of nature. He is a symbolic self, a creature with a name, a life history. He is a creator with a mind that soars out to speculate about atoms and infinity, who can place himself imaginatively at a point in space and contemplate bemusedly his own planet. This immense expansion, this dexterity, this ethereality, this

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self-consciousness gives to man literally the status of a small god in nature, as the Renaissance thinkers knew.[60]

While this recasting leaves Jack vulnerable to physical death, he is able to reassert himself as one that experiences the phenomena that compose his subjectivity.

Jack recites his plot against death eight times, as if the repetition of the sign is able to alter reality directly. He meditates variations of the same plot, all of which involve locating Mink, "shooting him three times in the viscera for maximum pain," placing the weapon in his hands to stage the murder as an odd and poorly executed suicide, stealing the supply of Dylar, and returning his getaway vehicle, his neighbor's car, unseen (304). When Jack arrives at the Grayview Motel, however, Mink proves to be much less of a man than Jack had imagined him to be when picturing the composite scientist. Jack can still "see in his face and eyes the faltering remains of an enterprising shrewdness and intelligence," but now "[t]he eyes were half closed. The hair was long and spiky. He was sprawled in the attitude of a stranded air traveler, someone long since defeated by the stale waiting, the airport babble" (307). Though Mink had "been a project manager, dynamic, hard-driving," he, like Jack, has been reduced to a "weary pulse of a man, a common pusher…going mad in a dead motel" and tossing handfuls of Dylar tablets toward his open mouth in a manic attempt to repress his anxiety over death (307).

Winnie's warning, that having a fear of mortality is distinctly human and not to be eradicated, takes full meaning in Mink. The broken scientist, who now eats Dylar "like candy," has worked tirelessly to repress his death anxiety (308). His fear when misunderstanding Jack's announcements, "[h]ail of bullets" and "[F]usillade" (311), for reality reveals that his efforts have been unsuccessful: Mink is still afraid of death, and his attempts to eradicate this fear have rendered him nearly inhuman, merely a "grayish

figure" (308). Jack "sets out not only to kill Mink, but also, like a kind of 1980s Frankenstein, to kill death itself, to pit Eros against Thanatos," Keesey explains.[61] When Jack finally shoots Mink, he feels "[l]ooming, dominant, gaining life-power, storing up life credit" (312). This credit is not literal time being added to the end of his life, but the rebirth of his role in the narrative that is his identity. As John Duvall notes in "The (Super) Marketplace of Images: Television as Unmediated Mediation in DeLillo's *White Noise*," this is the point in the novel when "Murray's theory of killing for life-credit substitutes for Jack's now untenable sense of shopping for existential credit."[62]

As Kavadlo reminds the reader, the subject of DeLillo's work is frequently linked to "terrorism, media simulacrum, or human-made disaster," but the author is equally concerned with "belief, spirituality, and the possibility of redemption."[63] Thus, he continues, "*White Noise* should be discussed for its timelessness rather than timeliness, for the way it addresses the problem of what it means to be human when being human seems fraught with peril."[64] Indeed, as Becker mourns, "[m]an is out of nature and hopelessly in it...he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever," but to let this fear of death and consequent repression override one's identity is to suffer a "second kind of death" (240), the kind explored in Jack's crisis of subjectivity.[65]

Notes

[1] John Frow, "The Last Things Before the Last: Notes on *White Noise*," in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, ed. Frank Lentricchia (Durham, Duke University Press, 1991), p. 190.

[2] Thomas J. Ferraro, "Whole Families Shopping at Night!," in *New Essays on White Noise*, ed. Frank Lentricchia (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 19.

[3] Don DeLillo, "A Novelist Faces His Themes on New Ground," by Mervyn Rothstein, in *Conversations With Don DeLillo*, ed. Thomas DePietro (Jackson, University of Mississippi Press, 2005), p. 23-24.

[4] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York, The Free Press, 1973), p. 11.

[5] Becker, p. 1.

[6] Becker, p. 2.

[7] Don DeLillo, "'An Outsider in This Society': An Interview with Don DeLillo," by Anthony DeCurtis, in *Introducing Don DeLillo*, ed. Frank Lentricchia (Durham, Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 47-48.

[8] Don DeLillo, "PW Interviews: Don DeLillo," by William Goldstein, in *Conversations With Don DeLillo*, ed. Thomas DePietro (Jackson, University of Mississippi Press, 2005), pp. 48-49.

[9] Douglass Keesey, *Don DeLillo* (New York, Twayne Publishers, 1993), pp. 2, 4.

[10] Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York, Penguin Group, 1986), p. 64.

[11] DeLillo revealed Becker's influence in a letter to Tom LeClair (see *In The Loop: DeLillo and the Systems Novel* 213 and 237, n. 7).

[12] Don DeLillo, "A Novelist Faces His Themes on New Ground," p. 24.

[13] Jacques Derrida, *Aporias: Dying – Awaiting (one Another At) the "limits of Truth*," tran. Thomas Dutoit (Palo Alto, Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 76.

[14] DeLillo, "'An Outsider in This Society': An Interview with Don DeLillo," pg. 63.

[15] David Cowart, *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* (Athens, The University of Georgia Press, 2002), p. 78.

[16] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (Los Angeles, Semiotext[e], 1983), p. 12.

[17] Joseph Dewey, *Beyond Grief and Nothing: A Reading of Don DeLillo* (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2006), p. 83.

[18] Keesey, p. 134.

[19] Cowart, p. 80.

[20] Jesse Kavadlo, *Don DeLillo: Balance at the Edge of Belief* (New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2004), p. 38.

[21] Tom LeClair, *In The Loop: DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 205.

[22] LeClair, p. 214.

[23] Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), p. 165.

[24] Osteen, p. 165.

[25] Peter Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (New York, Routledge, 2006), p. 110.

[26] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), p. 613.

[27] Boxall, p. 111.

[28] Dewey, p. 87.

[29] Boxall, p. 111.

[30] Boxall, p. 112.

[31] Don DeLillo, *The Names* (New York, Vintage Books, 1989), p. 329.

[32] Gregory Zilboorg, "Fear of Death," in *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 12 (1943), pp. 467-471.

[33] Zilboorg, p. 267.

[34] Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 94.

[35] Daniel Dennett, "The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity," in *Self and Consciousnesses: Multiple Perspectives*, ed. F. Kessel, P. Cole, and D. Johnson (Hillsdale, Erlbaum, 1992), pp. 103-115.

[36] Abraham Maslow, "Neurosis as a Failure of Personal Growth," in *Humanitas* 3 (1967), p. 165.

[37] See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry Into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (New York, Galaxy Books, 1958), chapters IV-VI.

[38] Dewey, p. 86.

[39] LeClair, p. 213.

[40] Kavadlo, p. 30.

[41] Leonard Wilcox, "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative," in *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo*, ed. Hugh Ruppersburg and Tim Engles (New York, G. K. Hall & Co., 2000), p. 201.

[42] Alex Goody, *Technology, Literature and Culture* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2011), p. 162.

[43] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 34.

[44] Goody, 163.

[45] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* , p. 19.

[46] Boxall, p.10.

[47] N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 242.

[48] Frow, p. 180.

[49] Scott Buckatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Post-Modern Science Fiction* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 98, 111.

[50] Osteen, p. 178.

[51] Wilcox, p. 201.

[52] Keesey, p. 146.

[53] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 12-14.

[54] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Rockville, Arc Manor, 2008), p. 109.

[55] Dewey, p. 86.

[56] Kavadlo, p. 18.

[57] Zilboorg, p. 288.

[58] Becker, p. 237-238.

[59] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, Schocken Books, 2007), p. 94.

[60] Becker, p. 26.

[61] Keesey, p. 127.

[62] John Duvall, "The (Super) Marketplace of Images: Television as Unmediated Mediation in DeLillo's *White Noise*," in *Arizona Quarterly* 50.3 (Autumn, 1994), p. 143.

[63] Kavadlo, p. 12.

[64] Kavadlo, p. 15-16.

[65] Becker, p. 26.

Chapter 4

Dismantling the Body of Posthuman Thought:
The False Promise of Modernity in Chuck Palahniuk's *Choke*

By Med'cine life may be prolong'd, yet death
Will seize the doctor too.
—William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline, King of Britain*

Chuck Palahniuk's fourth novel, *Choke*, examines the chaos of American life at the opening of the twenty-first century. Narrated by Victor Mancini, the novel explores the dysfunctional family unit, the power of addiction, the rhetoric of sincerity and the value of deception as a profitable enterprise. The work focuses on several months of Victor's life, as well as significant—and usually disturbing—moments of his childhood, through flashbacks. Because Ida Mancini, who Victor believes to be his mother (she actually kidnapped him from a stroller in Iowa when he was a child), had been unfit to raise him, the reader quickly learns that Victor has grown up in a series of foster homes. Ida would steal him from these homes and, after authorities caught her and the child, she would be forced to remand Victor to a government welfare agency once again. Though Ida and her reckless, anti-authority attitude can be identified as the catalyst of Victor's disquieting failure of a life, the narrator's detached approach to his life-crisis is characteristic of a manner of thinking that questions and disregards cultural constructions that seem to order the world.

In present narrative time, Victor is in his mid-twenties and struggling to support Ida, who is suffering from dementia and confined to a nursing home, St. Anthony's Care

Center. Victor, suffering from his own psychological issues, is engaged in a twelve-step recovery program through which he hopes to overcome his sexual addiction. It is at a sexaholics gathering that he first meets his best friend, Denny, who "had got up to the point where he needed to masturbate fifteen times a day just to break even."[1] The two friends work at an interactive history museum called Colonial Dunsboro, where they are employed as living exhibits. Unable to afford the bill for his mother's institutionalization with a paycheck from this legitimate occupation, Victor has developed what he calls "dinner theater," a con that involves tricking affluent guests at various restaurants across the city into giving him money (80). While dining at expensive restaurants, Victor intentionally engages his pharyngeal reflex and forces himself to choke. The second-year dropout of the Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California then allows one of the wealthy diners to save his life. Afterward, he performs the part of a victim and shares a tragic tale to gain his rescuer's sympathy. His savior, whoever happens to be the first to dislodge the chunk of food clogging his windpipe, feeling obligated, typically offers him a check to help him overcome his made-up misfortunes.

The body of criticism regarding Palahniuk's fiction is small but growing as the popularity of his work increases. While *Fight Club,* the author's first novel, is the subject of considerable scholarly work, *Choke,* though widely read, remains relatively unstudied. Mendieta Eduardo, noting the lack of criticism regarding his work, offers a brief survey of the author's five novels in "Surviving American Culture: On Chuck Palahniuk." She insists that his "works ought to be read as a mortician's report on American culture," and proposes that they grow increasingly popular because of their style, which, up to *Lullaby*, a novel that marked the author's movement toward satirical horror stories, could be best

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described as transgressive fiction.[2] "[A] writer with a mission, a vision, and a very distinctive style…, Palahniuk tells…stories that begin at the end, and end at the beginning: they are turned around *Bildungsromans* [*sic*]" that explore the idea of "surviving American Culture" and suggest that "deviance is the health of the individual in a sick society."[3]

Eduardo explains that though "Palahniuk's [narratives] are charming, almost nostalgic, empathetic and softened by the lull of his rhythmic writing," transgressive fiction traditionally explores disturbing subject matter: "Under the mundane and pedestrian dwells the fantastic and horrific."[4] This aesthetic, which is willing to engage (and sometimes celebrate) disturbing material including rape, incest, mutilation, drug use, or even cannibalism, is not new—William S. Burroughs and Hubert Selby Jr., as well as Bret Easton Ellis and Irvine Welsh, are Palahniuk's predecessors in this literary movement. Kathryn Hume, author of *Aggressive Fictions: Reading the Contemporary American Novel*, cites Palahniuk as one in a group of such authors, each of whom "exhibit[s] despair about our future, which only adds gloom to our discomfort."[5] She explains that transgressive works (which she calls aggressive fictions) aim "both to upset the reader's beliefs and to disturb that reader's comfortable confidence in the reading process."[6] Unlike conventional fiction, which Hume argues "reinforces cultural norms," transgressive literature "tends to consider those norms evil or idiotic and works to undercut the reader complacence that rests on those common beliefs."[7]

Typically identified as a style of writing within a larger literary movement, transgressive fiction upholds the premise that knowledge is generated on the edge of experience and maintains that the body is key to achieving this knowledge. Hume, in tune

with this definition, argues that "[w]riters can still use the human body to upset reader sensibilities, to break into our comfort zone and leave us disturbed."[8] She suggests that the grotesquerie of authors like Palahniuk "make[s] us flinch as boundaries we rely on disappear, and all our ways of defining what it means to be human seem to dissolve or rot away, leaving us unprotected against a threatening other, whether that be the deformed, the female, the animal, or the supernatural."[9] Sex and violence, both of which are enacted at the level of the body, overlap with Hume's conceptualization of the grotesque in *Choke*. This disturbing subject matter dismantles culturally accepted notions of human exceptionalism, specifically the species' supposed moral quality. This disillusioning allows death, the always-threatening other, to assault the reader. As Palahniuk explores these topics, the "long-standing author-reader contract" is broken in accordance with the transgressive fiction aesthetic: no longer is the reader *pleased* by an author's work, which is written instead with the intent to disturb.[10]

Olivia Burgess, in "Revolutionary Bodies in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*," remarks that, for the author, "[t]he body is a marker of possibility, even if this is not an appealing possibility."[11] "[N]ightly forays into death and dying," she clarifies, "allow the Narrator to create a fantasy world where he, too, is dying, and by 'dying' he is able to continually reembrace life, as if he were remaking utopia day in and day out."[12] With a similar methodology, Victor's dinner theater is a process that brings him to "the edge of death" nightly (3). Every evening the narrators of both *Fight Club* and *Choke* die, and every evening they feel "reborn and 'resurrected.'"[13] Thus, Eduardo's statement— "Palahniuk's fourth novel *Choke*…returns to some of the topics and themes dealt with in his first novel, *Fight Club*"—is not unfounded: each work, at its heart, is about what it

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means to live, die, and be resurrected in a consumer-driven and technology-centered twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century America.

Krister Friday, in "A Generation of Men Without History: *Fight Club*, Masculinity, and the Historical Symptom," argues that identity is tied distinctly to death for Palahniuk, though only as a symptom, "*an identity that is to come*."[14] Unlike traditional conceptions of death as an event, specifically those that characterize it as both inevitable and final, Palahniuk's reconceptualization allows his characters a degree of agency in relation to their mortality, which is refigured as a performance. For example, the narrator of *Fight Club* declares, "[y]ou aren't alive anywhere like you're alive in Fight Club," a statement that suggests one can gain life only by accepting defeat in a sort of death.[15] Furthermore, Palahniuk emphasizes that "[i]n death we become heroes" by explaining, "only in death will we have our own names since only in death are we no longer part of the effort."[16] *Choke* offers significant attention to human finitude, but engages the subject less quixotically. Instead of romanticizing death by associating it with heroic consciousness, Palahniuk examines a twentieth-century anxiety toward its pervasiveness and critiques theoretically driven preventative measures.

Victor tells the reader that his first near death experience occurred in a fast food restaurant after trying to eat a corn dog that was too hot to swallow (3). Instead of being ingested, the corn dog lodges in Victor's throat and Ida saves his life by performing the Heimlich maneuver and ejecting it (3, 269). Victor explains that "[a]t that moment, it seemed like the whole world cared what happened to him" (3). He organizes his life around a maxim based on this incident and the thrill he feels from the unexpected attention: "[y]ou had to risk your life to get love. You had to get right to the edge of death

to ever be saved" (3). Because this idea is the driving force of Victor's life, his reflections on death offer the event new meaning. More than simply an inevitable incident that may give the rest of life meaning, Victor refigures death as a procedure through which he can increase the value of life continuously: by pushing corporeal limitations, Victor is able to gain love, which he perceives to be the driving force of life for the human subject. Thus Palahniuk verifies an economy of utility and accumulation in death, what Jean Baudrillard, in "Political Economy and Death," refers to as the "accumulation of life as *value*."[17]

Baudrillard argues that modernity is founded on efforts to separate life from death by hoarding and ascribing value to time. By giving death a considerable presence throughout *Choke*, especially as a source of constant anxiety to the present-day American like Victor, Palahniuk is able to explore the process through which value is created in Baudrillard's symbolic exchange. Whereas *Fight Club* is often associated with what Sally Robinson identifies as a "dominant or master narrative of white male decline," an idea prevalent in white-male American fiction of the post-sixties, *Choke* explores an undiscriminating deterioration of all things living to reexamine and critique the idea that human decay may be overcome by posthuman thought, an effort that promises a revolution of the body.[18] This investigation concludes with a frustrating reality: while modernity has promised us so much, particularly the persistence of life via technology, it is unable to defer death satisfactorily.

Posthuman discourse promises to bring the human subject out of the dark ages, effectively distancing or even killing off death, but Palahniuk remains skeptical of this possibility. Victor's medical background continuously reveals the weakness and

vulnerability of the human body despite the progress of modern medicine, which is unconsciously believed to be the savior of twentieth-century humanity. The recognition that this technology cannot successfully disassociate the body and sickness threatens the ontological assumptions that reassure the safety of the human: scientific discourse, including the transhuman project, guarantees one's health, but such ideas prove hollow. Palahniuk resists the messages of posthuman thought, that technological progress is capable of teleologically bringing the human subject toward a mode of being that is unbound from bodily limitation. In *Choke*, the body is not a sheddable mode of existence that is temporarily necessary because the human is in a relatively early stage of evolutionary development, but a coffin that entombs the living; it is a *lithos sarkophagos* decomposing the living flesh it holds.

Examining the Historical Dimension

Choke is a novel that reexamines the relationship between the human body and death, as modernity attempts, at the turn of the century, to distance the former from the latter via technology. In *Death in Literature*, Robert Weir explains that the natural response to death anxiety is to deny mortality entirely, suggesting a continual resistance toward acknowledging the "undeniable fact of human existence: all who live, die."[19] Aware of this phenomenon, Baudrillard asserts that "[o]ur whole culture is just one huge effort to dissociate life and death, to ward off the ambivalence of death in the interests of life as value, and time as the general equivalent."[20] The modern conception of death as "the sign of general equivalence," or that which we will all partake of equally, Baudrillard explains, is not an inherent quality of the human subject, but rather a sixteenth-century reaction against revolutionary movements.[21] This historical moment

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constitutes a rupture out of which "the modern enterprise of staving off death" was born, he clarifies.[22] Baudrillard explains that modern death consciousness invites "the will to abolish death through accumulation" as "the fundamental motor of the rationality of political economy. Value, in particular time as value, is accumulated in the phantasm of death deferred, pending the term of a linear infinity of value."[23] By characterizing death as a continuously approaching and unstoppable event—which sets apart life as a meager countdown toward its sudden cessation—Palahniuk interrogates mortality as a reflective device that reorients the reader's "attention on that part of nature which we most want to ignore: the inevitability of death."[24]

Baudrillard's understanding of the relationship between life and death, one notes, fetishizes time, which can be exchanged only symbolically. Because the accumulation of time (or, in Victor's case, money and love) as value connotes the possibility of progress, the process of amassing and hoarding life evokes the transhuman effort to supersede the inherent limitations of the human subject, most notably its vulnerability to fatality. As Myra J. Seaman explains in "Becoming More (than) Human: Affective Posthumanisms, Past and Future," "[t]he popular culture posthuman…envisions the challenges to the human as largely corporeal ones resulting from our supposedly intractable situatedness in the so-called natural word."[25] Transhumanism, a specific strain of posthumanism characterized by a belief that the human subject can be improved by means of technology, calls for "an entirely new and supposedly better human form" not "to simply replace the weak body but to attain an extended lifespan and improved capabilities for the already-existing embodied human self."[26] By introducing a historical element to *Choke*, setting the novel in both a 1730s living history museum and present-day America,

Palahniuk accommodates posthuman readings, especially those treating the body as an object that modernity promises to improve over time by distancing it from death.

Victor's job performing as an Irish indentured servant at "Colonial Dunsboro," an interactive museum that resembles Baudrillard's idea of museumification, a concept advancing the argument that a locale such as a museum or amusement park "conceals something else, and that 'ideological' blanket exactly serves to cover over a *third-order simulation*," provides a historical milieu with which the reader can contrast modernity in the novel.[27] According to Alex E. Blazer, Palahniuk's museum represents "the nostalgic desire to resurrect and preserve in image a world that never existed;" it "symbolizes the mastery of the virtual over the real."[28] Though this nostalgic desire to reclaim an inaccurate perception of the past drives Victor's attempts to "establish [his own] reality," one in which he is invulnerable to the sickness and death that his medical training allows him to spot all around him, it also brings to life Colonial Dunsboro, which functions as a narrative space that allows the author to explore the pervasiveness of death as an uninhibited force that modernity assures us has since been restrained (32).

While the reader may acknowledge that engaging in work constitutes an exchange of life (in the form of time) for a wage, a process that construes labor as a type of death, it is more valuable to note that Palahniuk's characters, because their job relocates them to the year 1734 as "the backbone of early colonial America," find themselves living in the midst of the era in which doctors pioneered modern medicine, one of the most common real-world connections between technology and the body (23). Yet, despite distinguished medical discoveries of the eighteenth century—Edward Jenner's smallpox vaccine (1796) comes to mind—James Le Fanu, author of *The Rise and Fall of Modern Medicine*,

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reports that modern medicine made relatively few definitive advancements prior to the invention of penicillin in 1941.[29] "In general the nation's health had been gradually improving over the previous hundred years," Le Fanu explains, but "[f]or the previous 2,000 years doctors had sought in vain for the 'magic bullets' that would alleviate their patients' suffering."[30] Victor, performing outside of his historical character while working at the museum, affirms Le Fanu's argument by informing a group of schoolchildren and tourists of the death's persistence: "In 1711, in the Holy Roman Empire, the Black Plague killed five hundred thousand people. In 1781, millions died worldwide from the flu. In 1792, another plague killed eight hundred thousand people in Egypt. In 1793, mosquitoes spread yellow fever to Philadelphia, where it killed thousands" (181). The narrator reminds the reader that even though the eighteenth century marked the birth of modern medicine, which undertook to deter sickness and death, it was a time period that remained overwhelmed by unrestrained fatality: technology's promise of uninhibited health fell short of cultural expectations.

Because Victor's boss, "His Lord High Charlie, the colonial governor," prizes historical authenticity, "all aspects of [the employees'] behavior and appearance must coincide with [their] official period in history" (30). While standard workplace regulations undoubtedly protect employees from any legitimate danger, this setting forebodes death by forbidding, amongst other things, interaction between modern medical technology and the body. Victor explains, "[y]ou wear an earring, you go to jail. Color your hair, Pierce your nose. Put on deodorant. Go directly to jail. Do not pass Go. Do not collect jack shit" (28-9). This explanation, in which jewelry incites a punishment, is comical, but equally outlawed are eye drops, cough syrup, and aspirin. Indeed, many

infractions of this inflexible rule in Colonial Dunsboro are remarkably humorous. For instance, Denny is frequently charged with being "historically inappropriate" (27). Bent over in the stocks, the typical punishment for chronological indiscretion, Denny explains that he is sentenced to public humiliation several times every week for accidentally chewing gum, wearing a wristwatch, having Chap Stick on his lips or smoking cigarettes (26-7). While the reader can laugh that "The Lord High Governor bends Denny over at least twice a week, for chewing tobacco, for wearing cologne, [and] shaving his head," Palahniuk's historical milieu serves as a temporal space in which medical technology and the body are mutually exclusive. For this reason, Victor and his fellow colonists are described in a state of perpetually poor health.

Victor recognizes the sickness surrounding him effortlessly because of his background as a medical student. While monitoring his best friend's deteriorating health, he grows increasingly alarmed: "[f]rom what I remember about physical diagnosis, Denny's pallor could mean liver tumors…[s]ee also: [l]eukemia…[s]ee also: [p]ulmonary edema" (32). When "Denny sneezes," Victor notes the "long hank of yellowy goob that snakes out of his nose" (33). "Nasal discharge means [r]ubella," Victor thinks, his diagnostic training automatically taking over; "[s]ee also: [w]hooping cough…[s]ee also: [p]neumonia" (33-4). Denny is not the only colonist exhibiting signs of bodily distress. Ursula, Colonial Dunsboro's milkmaid, has "stoner eyes just about filled with blood" (123), and even Victor catches himself with his finger in his mouth after handling animal feces, "[s]ee also: [h]istoplasmosis. See also: [t]apeworms" (127). The most striking example of death in Palahniuk's eighteenth-century setting, however, is the bodily disfigurement Colonial Dunsboro's chickens suffer: "Here are chickens with no wings or

only one leg. There are chickens with no legs, swimming with just their ragged wings through the barnyard mud. Blind chickens without eyes. Without beaks. Born that way. Defective. Born with their little chicken brains already scrambled" (120). These deformed chickens are an allegory for the pre-modern human, who, as a slave to his/her historical moment, would not be in the presence of sensible treatment for any physical or mental ailment.

This historical dimension in *Choke* is particularly valuable because it portrays a time period preceding modernity in which death is all-pervading and insurmountable: though the modern impulse is to accumulate time in an attempt to overcome death, pre-modern technology admits vulnerability. Palahniuk establishes anxiety in the reader by associating Colonial Dunsboro with sickness and mutilation, which contradicts Baudrillard's remark that the aversion of death is the primary motivation of modern consciousness. "At the very core of the 'rationality' of our culture," Baudrillard asserts, "is an exclusion that precedes every other, more radical than the exclusion of madmen, children or inferior races, an exclusion preceding all these and serving as their model: the exclusion of death."[31] By overwhelming Colonial Dunsboro with death, Palaniuk encourages the reader to recognize the fact that death surrounds us in spite of our attempts to dissociate it from life by exiling it from symbolic circulation: "ours is a culture of death."[32]

Accumulative Practices and Death Deferment

Victor's choking scheme is the most alarming reference to death showcased in the novel's modern setting (49). As "a performance artist doing dinner theater, doing three shows a night," Victor has died just over three hundred times, enough that he cannot

remember every experience (80, 78). Suggesting that he could continue repeating this process indefinitely, Victor explains, "[t]here's still a thousand places I haven't gone to die" (79). Because this "death" is a repeatable performance, it is best understood as a simulation of death and the dying process. Victor's nightly "death," which comes with an almost guaranteed resurrection, removes the absolutism that gives the event its meaning, effectively undermining the concept entirely. As Blazer notes, Victor is tangled in this hyperreal existence throughout *Choke*. He narrates early in the work, "[w]hat you're getting here is a stupid story about a stupid little boy. A stupid true life story about nobody you'd ever want to meet" (5). This statement draws the reader's attention to the simulation that the character's life has become as well as his awareness of the story in which he exists (5). As Ida emphasizes countless times throughout the novel—"Screw history. All these fake people, they're the most important people for you to know"— twentieth-century America has traded authentic emotion and experience for postmodern mythologies and simulations (146).

Victor's dinner theater becomes an example of how he has incorporated Ida's worldview. Living as a simulation of death, he explains that every bodily manipulation proceeds in the same planned manner:

> I don't breathe. In the next instant, my legs snap straight so fast my chair flies over behind me. My hands go to gripping around my throat. I'm on my feet and gaping at the painted ceiling, my eyes rolled back. My chin stretches out away from my face….From not breathing, the veins in my neck swell. My face gets red, gets hot. Sweat springs up on my forehead. Sweat blots through the back of my shirt. With my hands, I hold tight around my neck, the universal sign language for someone choking to death. (48)

Victor performs this simulation to "put adventure back into people's lives," "create heroes," "[p]ut people to the test," and "make money" to help pay for Ida's medical bills

at St. Anthony's Care Center (49). It insists on death's presence, which our consciousness tries so desperately to deny, thus challenging the illusionary nature of modernity: technology has not killed death, though it may seem to have delayed it for a brief period. Victor accumulates value (love and money) every time he escapes death, but he has not successfully defeated mortality. He will keep living, but his end is still looming.

Denny, the masturbation addict who collects "a rock for every day he has sobriety" from his sexual addiction, occupies himself in a project to overcome death that is analogous to Baudrillard's conception of modern consciousness (139). In the same way that the human subject engages in "staving off" death by "accumulation" of "time as value," Denny tries to push back his symbolic demise—that is, the little death, succumbing to his intense desire to bring himself to orgasm—by collecting rocks.[33] Victor finds this project exceedingly annoying:

> Every day, I come home from a hard day in the eighteenth century, and here's a big lava rock on the kitchen counter next to the sink. There's this little gray boulder on the second shelf down in the fridge….The oven is full of rocks. The freezer is full. The kitchen cabinets are so full they're coming down off the wall….Round gray rocks. Square black rocks. Broken brown and streaked yellow rocks.…Then the basement's filled halfway up the stairs. Now you open the basement door and the rocks piled inside spill out into the kitchen. Anymore, there is no basement. (189)

Victor misunderstands Denny's efforts to "abolish death through accumulation."[34] Instead of recognizing his friend's efforts as a symbolic preventative process, Victor feels as if the two of them are "living in the bottom half of an hourglass" (189). Because Victor is growing progressively sicker over the course of the novel—a sex toy lodged in his descending colon is obstructing the natural movement of his bowels, which causes him significant discomfort—the hourglass analogy seems appropriate: he is literally running

out of time as Denny fills the basement with stones. Denny, alternatively, grows considerably stronger as he continues collecting rocks and stacking them on top of one another, thus suggesting that such methods to defeat death may be practical and effective. Palahniuk details the health benefits of this accumulative process by exploring the bodily strength that Denny gains from collecting: "Denny, his arms flicker with shadows where his muscles flex. Denny, now his arms stretch the sleeves of his sour T-shirt. His skinny arms look big around. His pinched shoulders spread wide. With every row, he's having to life the stones a little higher. With every row, he's having to be stronger" (220). Victor may be "living in the bottom half of an hourglass," but it appears as though Denny has grown strong enough to lift boulders that the two of them could not have lifted together a month ago.

After moving his rocks out of the house, Denny constructs a castle, the "columns and walls, the statues and stairways" of his temple growing alongside the health and strength of his body (289). The castle that Denny builds is modeled on Postman Ferdinand Cheval's *Palais ideal*, an architectural feat just outside of Lyon, France. Like Cheval's late-nineteenth-century palace, which was built from stones he collected on his daily postal route over a period of thirty-three years, Denny's castle is a symbol of human aptitude. By connecting the builder's increasing strength to his castle's growth, Palahniuk is able to establish a metaphor of human development in the hands of the posthuman efforts to disassociate life and death. Denny, who becomes capable of what had seemed impossible, is representative of an imagined future in which the human subject's technological amalgamation liberates it from corporeal limitation.

Palahniuk, however, reveals his distaste for posthuman thought by reminding the reader of the inevitable destruction of the body. After detailing the magnificence of Denny's castle, he describes its collapse:

> [T]he walls are pulled down, the rocks busted and rolled away from how hard they fell. The columns are toppled. The colonnades. The pedestals thrown over. The statues smashed. Busted rock and mortar, rubble fills the courtyards and fills the fountains. Even the trees are splintered and flattened down under the fallen rock. The battered stairways lead nowhere. (290-291)

Once the castle has been destroyed, the reader recognizes that the rocks do not have the value with which Denny has invested them: "[w]e all looked down at the scattered rocks, just rocks, just some brown lumps of nothing special" (291). Like Denny's castle, which appears insignificant once it is toppled, the idea of human-as-exceptional is torn down and exposed as misguided optimism.

Though Victor thinks that "maybe it's our job to invent something better," a reference to modernity and its efforts to improve life by abolishing death, Palahniuk recognizes that this project is not feasible. "In the dark," he writes, "the feeling is rough and cold and takes forever, and all of us together, we struggle to just put one rock on top of another" (292). The author emphasizes that modernity has left us blind and groping in the dark. Instead of bringing us out of the 1700s, the vulnerable space of Colonial Dunsboro, modern technology merely masks the fact that our progress has left us "[p]ilgrims, the crackpots of our time, trying to establish our own alternate reality. To build a world out of rocks and chaos" (292). Palahniuk, noting the failure of modern attempts to stave off death by advancing the human to its next evolutionary phase, explains that "[e]ven after all that rushing around, where we've ended up is the middle of

nowhere in the middle of the night" (293). Like Denny's toppled castle, our "battered stairways lead to nowhere" (291).

Reevaluating the Posthuman Project

A number of posthumanists since World War II have explored the possibility that technology could disconnect life from death, but few have formed a clear picture of humanity's next evolutionary step. Nick Bostrom, for instance, explains that the project would likely manipulate and reconceptualize the body through a synthesis of the subject with technology, creating a hybrid like Donna Harraway's cyborg or a disembodied mode of living as digitized information.[35] N. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, suggests that such projects may see humans as "patterns of organization," "body surfaces through which information flows, or "information-processing systems whose boundaries are determined by the flow of information."[36] "The posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction," Hayles clarifies; "[a]lthough the 'posthuman' differs in its articulations, a common theme is the union of the human with the intelligent machine."[37] These visions of the posthuman subject, though indistinct, indicate a cultural movement that espouses technology as a life-extending miracle, but many theorists resist these theoretical articulations of an uninhibited future. Alex Goody, observing the different degrees of enthusiasm for the posthuman project, explains that "[c]yborgs, robots and other mechanical beings are key figures for understanding the technophilic and technological encroachment, suggesting to

some the chance for technological transcendence, and challenging the idea of the individual, differentiated, human subject."[38]

Palahniuk, too, resists the posthuman idea that "the flesh-and-blood human being is nothing more than a composite of various coded systems and a mere assemblage of biological limbs and organs, a view that reduces the human body to the sum of its parts and promotes a utilitarian approach" to understanding the human subject.[39] Suggesting that such visions belong in the pages of science fiction novels, the author offers little serious consideration of posthuman constructions as legitimate ways to combat mortality. For example, Denny teases Victor about the possibility that he may be a cyborg by questioning whether or not he is "an artificial humanoid created with a limited life span, but implanted with false childhood memories so [he] thinks [he's] really a person" (125). Denny also jokingly proposes that Victor may be "just a brain in a pan somewhere being stimulated with chemicals and electricity," and entertains the idea that he is "an artificially intelligent computer program that interacts with other programs in a stimulated reality" (125). Though this ridicule hints at an epistemological problem rooted in the unreliability of one's relationship to one's body and the subject's construction in an increasingly technological world, it dismisses the possibility of such developments without fostering any space for critical thought. Hayles argues that the posthuman can be constructed and understood in terms of a positive evolutionary movement, but Palahniuk regards it a fearful and abhorrent transformation.[40]

The suggestion that Victor may actually be a reincarnation of Jesus Christ who has been born again as the product of another foundational idea of transhumanism, a genetic experiment, inspires a number of Denny's jokes. Dr. Paige Marshall, a patient of

St. Anthony's Care Center who pretends to be Ida's physician, deceives Victor by falsely explaining that "six women were offered embryos created from…[t]he foreskin of Jesus Christ," thus making Victor, the only child who came to term, "the second coming of Christ" (153). This statement's lack of validity works to undermine the possibility of genetic engineering, the process of artificially *designing* life, an infusion of technology and the natural human body that is frequently evoked as a way modernity could theoretically dissociate life and death—the culmination of the posthuman project. In a similar vein, Dr. Marshall recommends that Ida undergo a neural transplant, a notably intrusive operation that she believes would avert the patient's impeding death. Despite the promise that this procedure holds, Ida's death—which is brought about, ironically, by choking on food that Victor feeds her—reminds the reader that technological assurances are, with regard to death, illusions; one can die from something as simple as choking on pudding, and such vulnerability is definite. Collapsing the temporal juxtaposition (equating Colonial Dunsboro with present-day America), Victor mourns, "it's always the same day, every day" (273).

One of the most memorable narrative flashbacks to Victor's childhood involves his recollection of Ida tracing his shadow onto the face of a cliff with black spray paint. Because of the distance between Victor's body and the rocky canvas, his shadow forms an image that is larger than his true physical form. Palahniuk writes, "the boy's so far away that his shadow falls a head taller than the mother. His skinny arms look big around. His stubby legs stretch long. His pinched shoulders spread wide" (5). The author's description of the scene focuses on Victor's shadow, which is distinguished by powerful arms, strong legs, and broad shoulders even though its corresponding physical

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body is frail and characterized by short, ineffectual limbs. Because Ida's tracing can be established only with modern technology—that is, spray paint and headlights of a stolen school bus—it serves to represent the promise of modernity. Palahniuk reasserts the theme of simulation by illustrating Victor's shadow as an ideal image of health and perfection, but reminds the reader that its corresponding human subject is frail and easily victim to sickness and death. In this passage—which is resonant of Pliny the Elder's account of the method through which Boutades made a clay statuette of his daughter— Ida mythologizes her son in herculean proportions. She assures him that someday he "will come back here and see how he's grown into the exact outline she'd planned for him this night," but this is a promise the reader knows cannot be kept: though modernity has promised us so much, especially in relation to the fear of death around which we organize our lives, it sketches an image of the human subject into which Palahniuk insists we are incapable of growing (6). Even Denny will be perpetually beating his head against the lid that caps human aptitude as his temple is repeatedly toppled. The promise Ida traces onto the cliff wall is hollow, an empty outline, because modernity has left us as helpless as Colonial Dunsboro's chickens, "[s]ee also: [t]otal paralysis…[s]ee also: [d]ifficulty breathing…[s]ee also: [d]eath" (105).

Notes

[1] Chuck Palahniuk, *Choke* (New York, Anchor Books, 2001), p. 14.

[2] Mendieta Eduardo, "Surviving American Culture: On Chuck Palahniuk," in *Philosophy and Literature* 29.2 (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), p. 394.

[3] Eduardo, 395.

[4] Eduardo, pp. 407-408.

[5] Kathryn Hume, *Aggressive Fictions: Reading the Contemporary American Novel* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2012), p. *x*.

[6] Hume, p. 9.

[7] Hume, p. 9.

[8] Hume, p. 95.

[9] Hume, p. 11.

[10] Hume, p. 2.

[11] Olivia Burgess, "Revolutionary Bodies in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*," in *Utopian Studies* 23.1 (University Park, Pennsylvania University Press, 2012), p. 271.

[12] Burgess, p. 271.

[13] Burgess, p. 271.

[14] Krister Friday, "'A Generation of Men Without History': *Fight Club*, Masculinity, and the Historical Symptom," in *Postmodern Culture* 13.3 (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), May 2003, Web, 21 March 2003.

[15] Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (New York, W. W. Norton, 2005), p. 51.

[16] Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 178.

[17] Jean Baudrillard, "Political Economy and Death," in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London, Sage Publications, 1993), p. 147.

[18] Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 2.

[19] Robert Weir, *Death in Literature* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 2.

[20] Baudrillard, "Political Economy and Death," p. 147.

[21] Baudrillard, "Political Economy and Death," p. 146.

[22] Baudrillard, "Political Economy and Death," p. 145.

[23] Baudrillar,d "Political Economy and Death," p. 146.

[24] Weir, p. 3.

[25] Mary J. Seaman, "Becoming More (than) Human: Affective Posthumanisms, Past and Future," in *Journal of Narrative Theory* 37.2 (Ypsilanti, Eastern Michigan University, 2007), p. 248.

[26] Seaman, p. 248.

[27] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 25.

[28] Alex E. Blazer, "'The Phony Martyrdom of St. Me': *Choke*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and the Problem of Postmodern Narcissistic Nihilism," in *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem*, ed. Cynthia Kuhn and Lance Rubin (New York, Routledge, 2012), p. 147.

[29] James Le Fanu, *The Rise and Fall of Modern Medicine* (New York, Carroll and Graf Publishers, 1999), p. 5.

[30] Le Fanu, pp. 3-4.

[31] Baudrillard, "Political Economy and Death," p. 126.

[32] Baudrillard, "Political Economy and Death," p. 127.

[33] Baudrillard, "Political Economy and Death," p. 146.

[34] Baudrillard, "Political Economy and Death," p. 146.

[35] Nick Bostrom, "The Transhumanist FAQ," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Technology*, 2nd ed, ed. David M. Kaplan (Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 2009) p. 346.

³⁶ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 104, 109, 113.

³⁷ Hayles, pp. 3, 2.

³⁸ Alex Goody, *Technology, Literature and Culture* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2011), p. 136.

³⁹ Zoe Detsi-Diamanti, Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou, and Effie Yiannopoulou, "Towards the Futures of Flesh: An Introduction," in *The Future of Flesh: A Cultural Survey of the Body*, ed. Zoe Detsi-Diamanti, Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou, and Effie Yiannopoulou (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p. 12.

⁴⁰ Hayles, p. 291.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

> "Changes of shape, new forms, are the theme which my spirit impels me
> now to recite."
> —Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

The atomic bomb and computer systems of World War II, forces that comprised a

rupture in twentieth-century consciousness, drove scientists and philosophers to consider

new ways of understanding the human subject in the mid-twentieth century. Though

destructive, these technological developments also indicated the possibility that humans

could overcome their inherent physical and mental limitations: no longer could the

human subject and the technology it created be evaluated separately. At the end of the

war, accordingly, the transhuman effort began rewriting the human subject as an

amalgamation of natural flesh with mechanical parts—the cultural image of the cyborg—

and as digital, disembodied data. As the narrator of Steve Tomasula and Stephen Farrell's

VAS: An Opera in Flatland reflects, this period was ripe for speculation regarding "old

snakes in new skins…[a]nd rewriting your body seemed natural, suddenly."[1] The project,

as reported by N. Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway, achieved initial success:

advances in medical science outfitted a number of patients with mechanical devices and

electronic implants.[2] Tomasula and Farrell's main character's mother, who suffers from a

blood complication, is reconstructed as one of these individuals, technically cyborgian,

with "a synthetic sponginess…surgically implanted in her shoulder to serve as an

interface between her body and the equipment they used to draw her blood from and put

chemicals into her veins" (146). Though Mother's love for conventional opera suggests a more humanist outlook, she becomes a posthuman creation that stands testament to the project's twentieth-century achievement.

Yet the movement met with significant resistance. Tomasula and Farrell's main character, a writer named Square who is contemplating a vasectomy and struggling to draft the end of his latest story, is representative of the era's cultural anxiety over bodily rearrangement. Initially straightforward, the novel is made increasingly complex as Square's research—which concerns the power structures inherent to a history of eugenics, anatomical studies, and speculation about genetic engineering— invades its pages and creates a collage of charts, diagrams, and images. Thus, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which aims to disrupt traditional understandings of narrative and plot by loading its poetry-filled pages with seemingly disconnected graphs and digressions, is best understood as an extended meditation over the state of the body as posthuman construction becomes increasingly viable. Square's anxiety over bodily malleability runs parallel to a twentieth-century concern over the transhuman project, specifically apprehension over disturbing presumed notions of the human. Refusing to celebrate the traditionally privileged, unaltered human form, this discourse challenges the notion of human exceptionalism by undercutting the distinction between the natural and the artificial, between the human and the nonhuman. Reinvention of the human in even the smallest degree, Square observes, displaces the notion that the human is an established and whole biological unit: it is, instead, a rearrangeable form that is in perpetual flux.

This anxiety figures prominently in the works of Norman Mailer, Don DeLillo, and Chuck Palahniuk, among other twentieth-century authors. Even as *The Naked and the*

Dead's General Cummings, in an impromptu journal entry, questions whether "the tragic curve…[that] demonstrates the form of existence, and life and death" can be straightened to an unconstrained line signifying a perpetuation of life, transhuman efforts to rewrite the human subject appear to demand significant sacrifice.[3] Despite his overwhelming anxiety over his own mortality, Jack Gladney comes to recognize the high cost of transhuman vision midway through *White Noise*. Seeing his wife, Babette, displayed graphically on the family television, reinscribed into waves and radiation, he weighs the life-extending benefit of posthumanism with an apparent loss of subjectivity:

> Confusion, fear, astonishment spilled from our faces. What did it mean? What was she doing there, in black and white, framed in formal borders? Was she dead, missing, disembodied? Was this her spirit, her secret self, some two-dimensional facsimile released by the power of technology, set free to glide through wavebands, through energy levels, pausing to say good-bye to us from the fluorescent screen?[4]

Jack tries to tell himself "it was only television," but his wife's posthuman construction, mediated through the television screen, resembles "some journey out of life or death…some mysterious separation."[5] Murray Siskind, Jack's colleague at The-College-on-the-Hill, assures him that "[t]here's no scientific reason why we can't live a hundred and fifty years," but Jack fears that the unnaturalness of this revolution forces one to forfeit more than can be gained: to be posthuman is, by definition, to be no longer human.

In *VAS: An Opera in Flatland*, Square is unable to "explain this irrational attachment to his old body," yet he resists "[c]omposing a body as if it were a crossword puzzle" (178-179). In the same way that "[e]very generation's map becom[es] the next generation's myth," he worries that his generation's facts—including the body as a controlled and cohesive biological unit—may become the next generation's stories—malleable and rearrangeable (191). "[W]hat was scaring him," he clarifies, is "[t]he

finality of the story's end…[t]he fear of closure" (119). Conflating transhuman efforts with his literary background, he categorizes: "Modernism: Control the body….Postmodernism: Rearrange the body" (186). Square, like a number of twentieth-century individuals, is heavily invested in a traditional, humanistic conception of the body—one that privileges human exceptionalism and naturalness—which he recognizes as a metanarrative. While subsequent generations may by marked, as Jean-François Lyotard suggests postmodernists are, by "incredulity toward metanarratives" like humanism and the unchanging body, Square cannot forego his facts.[6] In the nineteenth century, we worried about what Leo Marx called the machine in the garden; now, suggests Square, immachination threatens the old corporeal integrity.

This observation is born out of a critical moment in time. Tomasula has explained that his work, like Edwin A. Abbott 1884 *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, is "shot through [the] cultural assumptions" prevalent to the time in which it was written, a time that witnessed the cloning of Dolly the sheep.[7] "[V]ery much about bodies, and how we read bodies, and how we represent bodies, and how we relate to one another through bodies," the novel follows Abbott's critique of the suggestion that "figures for the good of society need to be regular because an irregular shape will fall over." While both works perform this critique "in the guise of geometry, [they are] informed by a very common idea of what a genetically healthy society would look like and why you should work to obtain it." Moreover, the novel examines how we represent ourselves and others as technologies change and erase presumed notions of the human, particularly as bodily malleability supersedes vulnerable corporeality as the subject's primary characteristic.

Though "[t]he 'fact' of a stopped heart no longer being synonymous with the fact of 'death'" is irreconcilable with the traditional framework of the human subject, immortality is the end of the teleological transhuman project (195). In one of the few plot-driven sections of Tomasula and Farrell's novel, a man dressed as the Grim Reaper accosts Square's wife, Circle, during an Independence Day parade. As Death approaches his wife, who the shrouded figure believes hit him with a water balloon, she freezes: "On the cusp of fight or flight, her muscles contracted to protect inner organs, her face going pale to reduce bleeding from wounds to come" (118). Square, too slow to react, is unable to protect her from the imminent attack. Only their daughter, Oval, born of a less vulnerable generation than her parents, can successfully stun the assailant "into a shielding posture" by hitting him with a face full of parade candy (119). Though Square, quoting J.B.S. Haldane—"[o]*nce you deem it desirable to begin, it is a little difficult to know where you are to stop*"—remains skeptical of the transhuman project (whether to render him impotent or extend his life), Tomasula and Farrell suggest a revolution of the body is fast approaching (119). Indeed, it may have already arrived for the younger generation, which, through Oval's action, is distinguished as invulnerable to Death's advances.

Thus, the novel revives a number of ideas that were strictly theoretical in the twentieth century. In contrast to the post-World War II era, which Hayles argues was "ripe for theories that reified information into a free-floating, decontextualized, quantifiable entity that could serve as the master key unlocking secrets of life and death," a flash-forward reveals that Square's world has seamlessly incorporated once hypothetical visions of the future human into daily life.[8] For example, Oval's "cat" has

been spliced with dog and bird genes, genetically engineered to have wings and the ability to bark (179). Extending this constructability to the human subject, Square and Circle consider the options they would like in their child as if it were an automobile:

> Children engineered to repel mosquitoes, engineered to not develop an appendix, or wisdom teeth, or any anachronistic appendages…and all for the having by simply creating a litter of embryos from which they could select the one with the best genetic profile…knocking out genes for spina bifida, colon cancer, schizophrenia, dialing in the standard gene clip that everyone (who could afford it) received for concentration and memory, for facial symmetry, for skin color. (178)

In addition to these feats of genetic engineering, one can purchase "the designer genes: genes from cod fish for increased tolerance to cold, genes from Gila monsters for increased tolerance to heat, and a thousand others" (178). While a child produced in this process may appear to be similar to any other human being, Square is anxious about the unnaturalness that will be at the child's core. Since only the wealthy will be able to afford genetic-enhancement packages, he is also concerned about the class discrimination and the possibility that a bodily revolution could perpetuate eugenic prejudices. To understand the generational divide developing between him and his daughter, who recognizes the body's malleability as a "natural" process, Square has begun to think in terms of evolution: "he couldn't help but wonder who and what he would see…when he looked in the mirror and saw his own Cro-Mag face masking a brain that remembered what it had been to be Neanderthal" (180). Afraid of the pending posthuman revolution, Square wants "[t]o be [his] body, and not just have [his] body" (180).

Still, this revolution failed to arrive prior to the turn of the century, at which point Victor Mancini, the narrator of *Choke*, critiques the transhuman project. Aware that "we can't live with the things we can't understand," the medical school dropout recognizes

the culmination of the transhuman project as overcoming death, the incomprehensible and always-threatening other.[9] Despite his medical training, he laments that the theoretical discourse has failed to revolutionize the material world by distancing the human subject from vulnerability to mortality: "I can't save anybody, not as a doctor, not as a son…I can't save anybody, I can't save myself."[10] Indeed, though the body has grown more malleable—Victor explains, "[t]he bald ones would ask for full, thick hair. The fat ones asked for muscle. The pale, tans"—the anticipated twentieth-century revolution of the body has left the human subject "dying anyway, from the inside out."[11]

The opening of the twenty-first century, however, provides a fresh start for the transhuman project. More than a second chance to successfully kill off death, the dawning era offers resistors a chance to recognize transhumanism as an attractive discourse. In opposition to present anxiety, Hayles explains, these theoretical constructions can be distinguished as part of a positive evolutionary progression: "Just as the posthuman need not be antihuman, so it also need not be apocalyptic."[12] Correspondingly, Square succumbs to the transhuman project at the close of *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* by ending his pedestrian story on an operating table wearing a paper gown, voluntarily manipulating his natural form, a decision that suggests a budding acceptance of transhumanism. Though efforts challenging humanism threaten subjectivity, "[p]eople and their bodies being inseparable as they are," Square explains, their accomplishments are increasingly alluring and realistic, "[b]odies becoming as rearrangeable as they are (and malleable as they are)" (310).

Transhumanism, while yet unable to distance the human subject from its impending death, seems to become progressively more viable and accepted with the

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advancement of time. Though the twentieth-century may not have been witness to the immortal human—a phrase that remains rather sticky—the future beckons such theoretical construction. If history does not unfold, as Square asserts, as "variations on a theme" of human progress, but as a progression of increasingly astonishing feats, the posthuman may be arriving only slightly later than its anticipated, twentieth-century arrival (124). While Palahniuk mourns the failure of the project, Tomasula and Farrell propose that critics of the posthuman simply have not waited patiently enough.

Notes

[1] Steve Tomasula and Stephen Farrell, *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 98.

[2] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 115.

[3] Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead* (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1948), pp. 494-495.

[4] Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York, Penguin Group, 1986), p. 104.

[5] DeLillo, p. 105.

[6] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.xxiv.

[7] Steve Tomasula, Interview by David (Jhave) Johnson, *Vimeo*, 20 Mar. 2012, Web, 7 April 2013.

[8] Hayles, p. 19.

[9] Chuck Palahniuk, *Choke* (New York, Anchor Books, 2001), p. 232.

[10] Palahniuk, p. 281.

[11] Palahniuk, pp. 136, 281.

[12] Hayles, 288.

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