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QUEERING THE FAMILY SPACE: CONFRONTING THE CHILD FIGURE AND THE EVOLVING DYNAMICS OF  
INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS IN DON DELILLO'S *WHITE NOISE*

by

JOSHUA LITTLE

Under the Direction of Nancy Chase

ABSTRACT

Criticism surrounding the children of the Gladney family in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* remains a contested issue. I argue the children and their social environment reflect Lee Edelman's analysis of the Child figure and its bolstering of reproductive futurism. The Child figure upholds a heteronormative social order that precludes equal rights and social viability for non-normative family structures and those opposed to an inherently conservative ideology. I find the continually evolving family structure elicits new dynamics among its members, offering greater social independence for all, which institutes a stronger familial bond and ensures a greater chance for its vitality. The Gladney family share such a dynamic; this is observed through the specific roles its members perform and the relations among them. Furthermore, I contend the Gladney family represent a model for maintaining group vitality, which is first required for organized political action against our inequitable social order.

INDEX WORDS: Queer theory, Don DeLillo, Lee Edelman, Family dynamics, Intergenerational relations, Child figure, Children in literature, Reproductive futurism, Progressive politics, Political resistance, Conservative ideology

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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2011



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December 2011

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my family and to my friends. Without the support of these individuals this work would not have been possible.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am proud to have my thesis committee populated by three individuals that have given their unconditional support throughout my academic career at Georgia State. They have been superior instructors, encouraging me to better myself and the world we share; true confidants during times of uncertainty and duress; and models of intellectualism I only hope to resemble in the future. As with my friends and family, this thesis would not have been possible without their guidance through the years.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

On the third of November, 2004, American progressives and various liberal constituents were demoralized for the second time in a decade, suffering the news of George W. Bush's presidential election victory over Massachusetts Senator John Kerry. This, of course, guaranteed the rationally befuddling and always ill-articulated policies of the Bush administration would thrive for another tedious and dispiriting four years. Bush, the self-proclaimed "decider," had promised in more or less figurative terms, to ride the valiant white horse of "justice" wherever that presence was evoked during his second term as president. But what was actually guaranteed was more good-old-boy ass-kicking and oil-refining in the Middle East, a concept predicated on so-called "payback" for the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, a concept many Americans, both liberal and conservative, had grown comfortable supporting in such fearful times. Capitalizing on the cross-party appeal of retribution for Al Qaeda's disruption in America's sense of security, the issue of "justice" seemed to eclipse most other fundamentally significant considerations, such as legislation for greater social and fiscal equanimity among the population, environmental protection, and resuscitation of our feeble education system. But, as we were assured, we need not worry who did and did not deserve this reciprocal brand of "justice"; Bush, the unwavering captain of a new right-wing majority in America, claimed that God—"himself" presumably—gave the orders on how to carry out certain key policies of the administration. After attending an Israeli-Palestinian summit just four months after the US invasion of Iraq, then Palestinian foreign minister Nabil Shaath was quoted as saying that Bush disclosed to the council, "I am driven with a mission from God. God would tell me, George, go and fight these terrorists in Afghanistan, and I did. And then God would tell me, George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq. And I did" (MacAskill para. 3). We can at least count on one of those "and I did" affirmations ringing true after the fact. But indeed, Bush was admitting he had a direct connection to the creator of the

multiverse, was sent direct orders from the real chief of staff, in his perception. Bush was the chosen one, a faithful arbiter of the true word of the father in a new conservatively helmed America.

Apparently this kind of providential consulting also affected the former president's feelings on social issues, namely, that of gay marriage. Bush had remained staunch in his opposition to same-sex unions throughout his campaign for a second term, a move which later proved successful, as it was among the tipping points that "helped power him to reelection in 2004," claimed *Washington Post* reporter Peter Baker in a 2006 article on the administration's push for an overall ban on gay marriage (para. 2). Then White House spokesman Tony Snow told the press that the president "thinks people ought to have the freedom to lead their private lives...He also does not believe that means that you have to redefine the institution of marriage," summing up his remarks with a statement that hearkens back to the aforementioned word of the father: "He *believes* the institution of marriage is between a man and a woman" (para. 4, emphasis mine). Whether or not Bush had consulted God on this issue specifically is immaterial; advice on fighting a contemporary war may be hard to find in the sacred Christian handbook; where to go concerning gay legislation is plain. Bush's *belief* comes from his faith in the word of God, and it is this "word," in psychoanalytic terms, that has permeated Western culture, dictating the limits of the Symbolic; at least, that is, until a new thesis on the delimiting force of meaning in the social realm was developed.

Just 12 days after the harrowing 2004 election results were determined, a controversial text on the place of the queer in society was released. The book was Lee Edelman's caustic polemic *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. This publication was a timely response to the growing influence of the evangelical right in American politics, aiming its rhetoric at what Edelman describes as an inherently conservative culture; not just conservative in relation to a select political faction (which would be an anachronistic accusation, of course), but conservative in the sense that politics in general, or the "body politic" itself, is conservative by nature, insofar as its very core, regardless of the moral persuasions of its

collective, serves to uphold the Symbolic limits of heteronormativity. Such limits are what could be considered as the boundaries of what is allowed to mean in our culture, what is allowed identity and therefore agency—that which delegates meaning on the basis that it is deemed acceptable by epistemic norms. Edelman articulates this logic as being what subtends the conservative fantasy of political discourse as such. Therefore, politics exists not as a real means for social autonomy and engagement with culture, but as a function of inherent human desire, animating the collective will of reproductive futurism. Edelman elaborates the true source of politics in the following:

Politics, that is, by externalizing and configuring in the fictive form of narrative, allegorizes or elaborates sequentially, precisely *as* desire for its translation into narrative, those overdeterminations of libidinal positions and inconsistencies of psychic defenses occasioned by what disarticulates the narrativity of desire: the drives, themselves intractable, unassimilable to the logic of interpretation or the demands of meaning production; the drives that carry the destabilizing force of what insists outside or beyond, because foreclosed by, signification. (9)

Creating a narrative to bolster our political fantasy—which, psychoanalytically speaking, rejects the drives inherent in all human activity—is precisely what Edelman argues as maintaining the status quo, and it is exactly this normalization that had framed the argument Bush would make for the ban on gay marriage in 2006; its basis the tenets of Christian scripture, what is regarded as “the word of the father” by its adherents. This “word” is in large part, if not in all, responsible for the classic right-wing rhetoric that espouses the nuclear family (a man, a woman, and their attendant brood) as the natural and morally right familial configuration. This philosophy refuses to address the reality of our circumstance in America, and considering that it is still hard at work today, presents a formidable threat to developing a more authentically progressive politics in this country.

The conservative backlash against gay marriage and nontraditional familial configurations in America represents a flat out refusal of lived reality. It must be acknowledged that the American family has been

steadily changing for a little over half a century. I do not mean to say this marks an epoch in our culture, as family units have been organizing in non-traditional ways for quite some time. What I acknowledge is that alternative, non-heteronormative family structures have become socially recognizable by the general public in recent years, thereby granting those constituencies a place within political discourse. As Edelman submits, “It is true that the ranks of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and transgendered parents grow larger every day” (17). And it is true as well, which should be added, that their presence within discourse is a result of exacting political activism against a heteronormative society that asserts political activism as the only means by which individuals may affect their social viability. In other words, the marginalized have relied on heteronormative logic to subvert its authority. Edelman finds little solace in queer activism channeled through the political establishment, as it preserves the model for our experience of “social reality” that will always deny equal rights to those opposed to its governing order. As Edelman claims, “For politics, however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable social order, remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to *affirm* a structure, to *authenticate* social order” (2). But despite the limitations current political activism will continue to place on disenfranchised groups in this country, as a result of political resistance, their social rights are slowly improving—but by no means are they acceptable, nor truly progressive. What I argue precludes much needed progressivism are two key obstacles: (1) the use of the child figure as political ammunition to help sustain a social order and conservative ideology that opposes an equitable society, and (2) failure to acknowledge the value of evolving dynamics in intergenerational relations as a result of the changing family structure and its culture at large. To frame my argument, I will examine Edelman’s polemic to establish a point of departure for analyzing representations of the child figure and intergenerational dynamics in Don DeLillo’s seminal novel *White Noise*, as I believe the text a rich source for extending the cultural dialogue on how the family and its members pose a disruption to our ongoing

hegemonic malaise through their internal dynamics. I will also refer to critical readings of the novel as well as critical reception to Edelman's theoretical insights to help construct my analysis.

The title of Edelman's book comes from his notion of "reproductive futurism," a phrase meant to describe the way in which the Child figure is used to preserve the social order of heteronormativity (hence the "reproductive"<sup>1</sup>) and as a false projection of our Imagined self, which falsely offers to close the gap between our subjectivity within the Symbolic and our Imagined self developed during the Mirror Phase. Therefore, the promised "future" of politics is always a manifestation of our Imaginary past. Edelman claims that reproductive futurism is meant to describe the "terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity." By upholding the singular order of heteronormativity, "reproductive futurism" will always preclude "the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations" (2).

The investment in our "sacred emblem" (3), the figure of the innocent Child, is what ultimately forms the political discourse preserving our ideological quandary, as Edelman argues throughout his book and makes plain in the following:

For politics, however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable social order, remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to *affirm* a structure, to *authenticate* social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child. That Child remains the horizon for every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of any political intervention. (2, 3)

This figure remains the object on which we attach our deepest values and highest aspirations. We use the child as lens through which we may see the world ideally, and to our detriment, naively. Far from ensuring the rights of children once they mature, or any real children at all for that matter, this "sacred emblem" is used as political ammunition to preserve heteronormativity and its attendant mandates, to

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<sup>1</sup> "Reproductive" also refers to a repetition, a continuous process of producing our current social order.

preserve the “body politic” (3) as a means of maintaining conservative power and a false ideology that extols hope for a future that is never to come but strategically uses the image of the child, falsely purported as “extrapolitical” (2), to motivate our country’s political efforts that ensure a conservative social order. As Edelman writes,

we are no more able of conceiving of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child. That figural Child alone embodies the citizen as an ideal, entitled to claim full rights in its future’s share in the nation’s good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights “real” citizens are allowed. (11)

Furthermore, as suggested above, the child figure is what grants us subjectivity in the Symbolic; Edelman argues that identity is never whole for any individual, as our dependence on the Symbolic to structure reality simultaneously severs us from the Real of our existence. Before a child acquires language, the misconceived image of their identity, their Imagined self, is created during what Lacan describes as the Mirror Phase. This image is what is worked for and preserved in the Symbolic, although never achieved. According to the poststructuralist tradition informing much of Lacan’s theory, meaning can never be achieved in the Symbolic, as its reality is predicated on language, which is arbitrary and only continues to defer the discovery of meaning and thus of true subjectivity. Edelman makes clear that we must accept our identities as structured around fantasies of the self, both Imaginary and Symbolic, and refuse their being invested into a false hope for achieving wholeness in the future that is represented by our “fantasmatic” notion of unified identity, the child.

Positively though, there is indeed an upside to this situation: while the cultural emblem of the child has altered little in American history, the relationships between children and adults have changed significantly, as well as the roles family members fulfill and idiosyncrasies they develop. This is what offers possibility for a shift in political discourse within the United States, affecting a new cultural context through which a more equitable society may arise. The cultural image of the child and the evolving

manner in which children and parents engage one another and take on changing roles within the clan is deftly illustrated in *White Noise*.

## 2 THE CHILD FIGURE AND LIVING WITHOUT A FUTURE

One can see Edelman's thesis on the Child figure at work in a scene towards the close of *White Noise* where protagonist Jack Gladney, chairman of the Hitler Studies department at the College-on-the-Hill, and his colleague and fellow professor Murray Siskind embark on a mid-day trek through the streets of their small Midwestern town, quaintly named Blacksmith. Jack is seeking advice from Murray concerning his obsessive fear of death, and wonders why he achieves repose in the company of his youngest son—although not his biological son—Wilder. Murray explains that children do not fear death and can therefore provide comfort through their naivety. He extols the child as "A cloud of unknowing, an omnipotent little person. The child is everything, the adult nothing...A person's entire life is the unraveling of this conflict" (290). Siskind's understanding of "the child [as] everything" implies she is a unitary being, one that retains a whole identity. As the child becomes older, her person is "unraveled," and the once unified individual must accept its fragmentation, albeit in "bewildered, staggered, and shattered" fashion (290). This perspective reflects Edelman's description of a culturally false designation of the child figure, not to be confused with an actual child, as the continually deferred object for which social justice and prosperity is worked for and seemingly ensured but never actualized; the figure of the child is used to bolster our political system that inherently rejects the arbitrary nature of the Symbolic—which subjects our identities to language—and instead claims identity is inherent within the individual and can be observed most plainly in our "sacred emblem."

In response to Edelman's criticism of the child figure, Jon Davies concurs and provides insight on how intergenerational roles have flipped: "To embrace the infantilization that American culture celebrates [through our investment of identity in the child figure] is to give up all claims on the authority of adulthood...they have renounced their supposed superiority to children" (380). He argues that reproductive futurism is to be held responsible for "casting fetuses as the protagonists of American life" which in turn "infantilizes everyone" (380). This reading of Edelman would support an argument that



such a situation has led to the “infantilization” of Jack and Babette and the reconfiguring of individual roles within the traditional family structure. I argue, though, that while such infantilization can be politically dangerous, as I will discuss in what follows, we may as a culture capitalize on this problem to affirm the positive side of a reversal in intergenerational roles; this concept will be addressed more fully in the following two chapters of my thesis. Davies also discusses, insightfully, how children have also become our cultural effigies of purity; not the actual ones living at the moment—that would require us to address problematic but fixed cultural issues like adolescent sexuality—but the non-existent, fictive representations of the untainted child that we uphold to retain the binaries of our cultural values, such as right/wrong, innocence/guilt, purity/depravity. Jack confirms this notion when he responds to a moment of “transcendence” made possible by his youngest daughter, Steffie.

In one of the more often-discussed scenes from *White Noise*, Jack Gladney wondrously ponders the “*Toyota Celica*” murmur voiced by his daughter Steffie in her sleep (155). He describes the murmur as “beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder...Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence. I depend on my children for that” (155). Paul Maltby argues that this scene “is typical of DeLillo’s tendency to seek out transcendent moments in our postmodern lives that hint at possibilities for cultural regeneration” (261) and has an “incantatory power that conveys, at a deeper level, another order of meaning” (265). I, however, feel DeLillo remains too ambiguous regarding the power of “transcendent moments” to say they suggest “cultural regeneration,” as the undermining of all authoritative statements is a theme within the novel, and I believe this scene alludes to Jack’s misconceived notion that the children possess some preternatural, guardian-angel-like ability to give protection and spiritual comfort. Edelman confirms this to be a social preoccupation: “the Child has come to embody for us the *telos* of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust” (11). Arthur Saltzman rejects Steffie’s spiritual ability as well, arguing the effect of the media has fully conditioned our responses to all forms of culture (811).

In the final chapter of the novel *Wilder*, the youngest of the Gladney family, escapes the home on his tricycle, headed straight for the expressway just behind the Gladney home—the very same expressway that elicits its nightly “murmur around [the family’s] sleep, as of dead souls babbling at the edge of a dream” (4). Amidst a stunned and pleading crowd of onlookers, Wilder traverses the freeway on his plastic chariot, across both sets of opposite lanes. Astonishingly, he makes it to the other side unscathed, as if some force were guiding his movement. Indeed, the narrator notes that he was “mystically charged,” propelled by some nebulous trance or spirit (322). Pifer assesses the final scene as a demonstration of how humanity, in the form of a child, can overcome the impending ubiquity of technology and industry, as a testament to the inner power of the human subject, in closer connection to the “‘natural world,’” besting the most dominant force in our culture today—technology. John Berger reads the scene as follows: “Why did the wild child cross the highway? To show his imperviousness to every medium of symbolic exchange. He emerges unharmed, triumphant, transcendent; and yet, of course, the scene is ludicrous” (352). Berger declares the scene absurd because when Wilder makes it to the other side, he falls into the ditch, demonstrating his humanity and therefore proving Jack’s belief in his son’s transcendent powers as mere “hopelessness” (352). And I must say that I concur with Berger’s argument for the following reason: Although the possibility of transcendence through the innocence of children is hinted at in the novel, it is purported to exist by characters whose authority is highly questionable. For there are many wise adages, criticisms, and deft observations made by Jack and Murray (the latter with greater frequency and acuity), but their authority and seriousness as contentions the novel supports are de-stabilized by the trivialization of knowledge inherent within the consumer-driven milieu of the novel. Scholars in the humanities study cereal boxes instead of Barthes or Foucault; they thirst for information but are primarily concerned for what that knowledge reveals about themselves and what it can provide for their image (see Weekes 292), or, in Jack’s case, what realness of life it can deflect or shield him from. Jack teaches Hitler Studies but focuses on banalities like marching patterns and Hitler’s image as a

rock-star-like figure *vis-à-vis* Elvis rather than analyze the proliferation of Nazi violence, hate, and ideological/psychosocial data such a specified program should. There is no longer a difference between the knowledge one obtains from strict research, disciplined analysis that promotes contextualization of information and ideas, and the knowledge obtained from a cereal box, tabloids, or advertisements. DeLillo sees knowledge to be just as susceptible to commodification and rapid consumption, with no lasting product, as the multitudes of cultural material surrounding and informing it; much like what can be purchased for “existential credit” at the supermarket or local mall, rather than worked for intellectually and emotionally (84). As Arthur Saltzman attests, “The prophets are sick with the same disease; promises of solace, words of cure, are contaminated by the same plague of enervation. The same congestion in the house is in the air. White noise becomes the societal equivalent of cliché” (812). “White noise” describes that force which makes equivalent trivial knowledge and useful knowledge; it reduces all of culture to an indecipherable hum, whose decryption is just beyond our understanding.

Although I do not accept that children possess some inherent quality of transcendence or angelic closeness to the Real, in reality or in DeLillo’s novel, I do believe they uphold a prevalent philosophy concerning parent/child relations in our culture. As Pifer and Phillips note, sound reason is something the children have a stronger hold of than their parents. Intelligence is something deferred to the next generation; parents are focused on providing and keeping their families well taken care of—the children of the future have the time to save the world (my-child-will-be-smarter-than-me complex). This resembles Edelman’s notion of reproductive futurism, in the sense that this is a philosophy that endlessly reproduces its logic with each generation. Parents become more concerned with being parents once the family comes around. Especially in larger family units, how can the adults keep up with what is going on in their culture when they have a family to raise, a brood nourish, discipline, and love? And so they invest the intellect of the family within the children in hopes of actualizing their lost quality of reason in a future generation. But what is flawed here is that parents negate their political agency by investing their

reasoning/intellectual capabilities in their children, and this creates a culture of politically unengaged adults, more invested in everything-family-related, which is what generates so much power in the image of the Child and the sacredness of the normative clan.

The famous line from the musical “Annie,” “Tomorrow is always a day away,” is evoked by Edelman to demonstrate the state of “no future” that characterizes our era; there is no future because the “future” is based upon the political fantasy, made possible by the Symbolic, that I described in the introduction to this work. Under close analysis, one may also see this situation at work—at least, in terms of a “no future” paradigm—in *White Noise*. The novel renders American culture that has been sped up and exaggerated. Yet, it exists in a state of no future insofar as there is no given time period for the story. The 1980s saw a boom in the American economy under Reagan and thus a significant increase in technological innovation; anytime this occurs, we witness a rise in artistic renditions of the future, most notably in film (see *Blade Runner*, *Back to the Future*, the *Mad Max* films, innumerable action films)—DeLillo refuses to acknowledge this trend in his novel by not disclosing a given year in which the story takes place, a gesture that insinuates a place of suspended time, a continuous present. This situation resembles the cultural lock reproductive futurism holds on our society by always projecting an ideal future that is never to be realized for the reason that the figure that embodies our ideal future, the Child, is a means for maintaining a heteronormative political order. The Child figure is paradoxically upheld as an extrapolitical emblem but in fact exists as what qualifies politics in contemporary American culture.

My argument here may be more clearly expressed by example: “Iron City,” the next-door city to Blacksmith, has “no media,” as Heinrich purports during a conversation with Jack about his letter-writing with a prison inmate sequestered there (45). Iron City is therefore out of sync with Blacksmith’s media-saturated culture; its name is a vestige of the old days—when considering the historical succession of the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, and then the Industrial Revolution, a time in which new modes of technology produced a drive further in civilization. But in our current era of mechanical reproduction and end-

less commodification, the cultural artifacts produced by our civilization have become mere emulations and reconfigurations of past artifacts. Much like how our age continues to reproduce forms of past culture rather than initiate change in itself, “Blacksmith” connotes a forging and manipulation of metals, an admixture of what has come before. Indeed, a blacksmith does not produce new material, and this is the static milieu of the novel. The governing order is Blacksmith itself, an isolated pocket of Americana that functions as a microcosm, out of which the characters’ observations and interpretations are made. The operations of the Symbolic are demonstrated through the inner workings of the town (much like David Lynch constructed two years after the publication of *WN* with the town of Lumberton in *Blue Velvet* and subsequently four years later in the town of Twin Peaks in the TV program of the same name.) Like the Symbolic, Blacksmith thrives outside of a given time (no year is given for the setting of the book) and place (Blacksmith is not a real town; it’s just located somewhere in the “Midwest”). The town has its pillar of meaning and structure, dominantly held by the College-On-the-Hill; then on a slightly lower tier are the supermarkets and malls; the “most photographed barn in America,” representing mass tourist sites; and then there are the most traditional echelons of the suburbs—the homes of its citizens. One may also read this symbolism in the scene in which Jack arrives at the Mother of Mercy hospital in Iron City after his altercation with Willie Mink, a.k.a. Mr. Gray. Jack is attended to by a nurse named Sister Hermann Marie. In his room, Jack notices a picture of Jack Kennedy and the Pope together in heaven hanging on the wall. He asks Sister Hermann what the Church’s contemporary stance on heaven entails. Her response, in short, is that she does not believe in heaven. What ensues is a conversation on the need for those in society to believe, regardless of whether or not they think what they are supporting is in fact true. Jack asks, “Your dedication is a pretense?” She responds that “Our pretense is dedication...Someone must appear to believe...Nuns in black...Fools, children” (319). Here Sister Hermann Marie illustrates the force subtending Blacksmith’s feeble structure; “Nuns in black,” “Fools,” and “children” maintain the status quo through their admitted or naïve ignorance to the actuality of environmen-

tal and psychological phenomena. Marie understands this quite well yet attends her duty faithfully. Edelman echoes this sentiment when he affirms that the norm of American society is dictated by what is allowed to mean in the realm of the Symbolic; the Child figure is used as impetus for political discourse and for politics as such. And, as Edelman so cogently portrays, politics is the very means by which something is given presence (i.e., “meaning” and therefore recognition) in our society. I like to think of the nun as a morally inverted Edelman here. She admits that like herself, “children” are integral to the amalgam of unknowing that makes our way of living possible; she believes this is acceptable to retain order, regardless of the substance underlying, which is the very same patriarchal consensus Edelman threatens in his analysis.

And very much like American culture today, the adults of *Blacksmith*, at least its main characters, regard children to possess some kind of transcendent quality and, as Jack admits, are used for what adults believe they can provide them. As I argued above, I feel DeLillo remains ambiguous on this matter and rather opens up a dialogue for understanding his representation of the figures, which leaves open the suggestion that a societal symptom is being portrayed in the novel, reflecting Edelman’s contention of the Child figure. I believe the tendency to uphold the Child figure as an emissary from the Real, ripe with transcendental capabilities and the fantasy of our false oneness of the Imaginary self and Symbolic self, resembles a fetish, according to the Freudian conception of the term.

In examining Freud’s classic analysis of object fetishism, one finds what could be a driving force of heteronormativity: the male figure’s deep, inherent fear of losing dominance, flowering, so to speak, into a fetishized object<sup>2</sup>. When a young boy first sees his mother naked he then realizes that not all people have penises, even his most revered object choice. The boy thinks she is disfigured, possessing a body unlike his own, and concludes she has been castrated by the father. In fear of his own castration, the boy accepts the “no” of the father, abandons his object choice, and develops his authoritative super-

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<sup>2</sup> Here, I believe it must be noted that individuals can have multiple fetishes.

ego. Freud explains that the boy, after witnessing the primal unveiling of his mother, refuses to accept she has no penis and coincidentally develops a fetish to substitute for this lack<sup>3</sup>. Insecurity, it comes as no surprise, is behind the neurosis: “for if a woman can be castrated then his own penis is in danger; and against that there rebels a part of his narcissism which Nature has providentially attached to this particular organ” (199). I am not sure how “providential” penis narcissism turns out to be when such is the very basis for the “no” of the father in Western culture, for keeping a white, male, conservative ideology at the helm of operations. The fetish, whatever it may turn out to be physically, “remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a safeguard against it,” wrote Freud (200). In a broader context, “castration” involves the fear and anxiety related to social alienation also, as fetishes are developed to mask myriad psychosocial crises, not just the fear of castration and a rejection of the penis-less mother. Approaching this issue in light of Edelman’s analysis, I propose the child-figure fetishists are those insecure about losing their sense of normalcy (which is equal to their established subjectivity) and as a result have developed a fetish based upon the image of the Child; and if we concede to Edelman’s logic regarding the life source of the status quo, the reason behind the choice is to assuage an ongoing volatility in regards to social status.

The social order and how it maintains its vitality is, of course, at the very heart of Edelman’s polemic, which I have detailed above. Others have found flaws in his thinking on this issue, and regard his “antisocial” thesis as a somewhat empty contribution to political activism. In the final section of this paper, I will address these responses to Edelman, but I would now like to discuss the role of the family and how the Gladneys serve as a hopeful starting point for political activism in America and elsewhere.

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<sup>3</sup> The fetish becomes a sexual object to the man (a remnant of his infantile sexual object) and typically, according to Freud, materializes as the thing last seen before the mother’s genitals (such as her feet, pubic hair, undergarments, etc.).

### 3 THE CHANGING FAMILY STRUCTURE AND THE ROLE OF THE QUEER

In his introduction to DeLillo's novel, Mark Osteen attributes the book's congenial humor to its "skewed depiction of the postmodern family, where the once-solid core of mom, dad, and kids has given way to a loose aggregate of siblings, step-siblings, and ex-spouses rotating in various impermanent groupings" (viii). Indeed, father Jack Gladney and mother Babette have no children from their marriage together, bringing to the household two children of their own, each from discrete previous marriages: Steffie and Heinrich from Jack's failed unions, Denise and Wilder from Babette's. And as Thomas Ferraro has noted, since Wilder is only two years old, the family could not have been together for any longer than he has been alive (17). Osteen relates this to an impermanence in postmodern life that extends to the family unit and its structure. I argue the non-traditional structure of the Gladney clan, in addition to its ephemeral cohesiveness, suggests not only transience but a weakening of the family structure in postmodern culture<sup>4</sup>. Upon considering the possible instability of his family, Jack observes that "The deeper we delve into the nature of things, the looser our *structure* may seem to become" (82, emphasis mine), suggesting that close investigation of origins—that which authenticate structure—evinces their instability. Edelman would argue this is precisely how non-heteronormative identities and familial structures have been allowed presence in political discourse; by closely scrutinizing the existence of an absolute reality that establishes sexual identity and familial anatomy to reveal its looseness, its arbitrary nature. For what "queering" itself involves is an acceptance of the arbitrary nature of the signifier as the governing force of culture. As Edelman contests, "the queer insists that politics is always a politics of the signifier, or what Lacan will often refer to as 'the letter'" (6). However, the queer figure must not be read as simply against what is defined as the heterosexual norm; rather, it should be understood as that "which is always oppositionally defined" and comes "to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form" (4).

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<sup>4</sup> See Chekki (1996) for more on this topic.



What must be acknowledged here, and what is centrally pertinent to my proposed argument, is that opposition to “social structure” will necessarily alter the internal dynamics of that structure, at least in time; for if we are to believe the norm’s designation of authentic identity and familial composition are subject to the Symbolic, we must also believe that the relationships made possible by the Symbolic are relative also and will just as soon follow suit as their social context evolves. Indeed, Dan A. Chekki, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Winnipeg, has noted that we now live in an age where “The network of kinship has narrowed and the sphere of individual decision has grown” (176), meaning that changes in kinship have brought more autonomy to the family’s individual members. This is an especially significant development, considering many children who do not live up to their parent’s moral standards—such as a gay child in a Christian home, for example—have a greater chance at manifesting change not only in domestic terms but also, by extension, in society at large. Ultimately though, Edelman sees little value in “hoping” for change in our social order, and characterizes his polemic as an anti-utopian endeavor. Edelman uses the term “better” to describe what he foresees as a more liberated society but cautions against “hoping” for the “future,” as it delimits all action by continual deferral; by its very meaning, “hope” implies an impossibility for change, which works to preserve the status quo (4).

Frank Lentricchia characterizes *White Noise* as DeLillo’s attempt at writing a domestic novel but distinguishes this endeavor as one that overturns the genre’s conventions and looks beneath the surface of the postmodern family structure to address the unseen ways in which families and their members operate as a unit and as individuals (*New Essays* 7). If one investigates further how these members do indeed operate, she will find that the children in the family act more like the adults in terms of the protection and reason they instill, and the parents, wrapped up in their fears and anxieties, act out and respond to certain events selfishly and naively<sup>5</sup>. For instance, Denise keeps a *Physician’s Desk Reference* handy in

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<sup>5</sup> See Jack’s response to the airborne toxic event (114), his exorbitant shopping spree after being called “harmless” and “aging” (83), Babette’s impetuous use of Dylar and her tryst with Mr. Gray (193-94), and Jack’s obsessive plan to attain Dylar for himself and confront Mr. Gray at gunpoint (304).

the home, using it to inform her authority when suggesting healthy eating habits to her family. Denise is also the first to notice her mother's use of Dylar and attempts to research the effects of the drug, finally apprising her father of the situation out of concern. In this way, Denise assumes the role of knowledgeable protector, usually reserved for a parent. As Jack admits, like many traditional mother figures, she "[nags] us to higher conscience" (89). Denise is also the first member of the family "to pack some things for all of us" when they are forced to evacuate their home post the airborne toxic event (119) and to warn Babette that the sugarless gum she chews "causes cancer in laboratory animals" (41). And in a similar respect, Heinrich, Jack's biological son, must also be mentioned. He stands as the family's intellectual center that, although not always accurate, calls forth his knowledge of Nyodene-D during the airborne toxic event, undoubtedly providing comfort to his family by demystifying the menace threatening their lives<sup>6</sup>. Heinrich displaces his father in this sense, who, being a professor, would normally figure as the family's rational emissary of comfort. Conversely, Jack's response to the event offers little reassurance and exposes his overall selfish nature: "'These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas...I'm a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods?'" (114). Offering little leadership and consolation themselves, the parents look to their children for protection, considering them "a guarantee of our relative longevity" (100).

Rather than a personal idiosyncrasy, I argue Jack's self-serving behavior is indicative of a general cultural malaise, currently at large. It seems as if we are becoming a more self-centered culture as technology presses forward. Facebook and other social media have tapped into the true marketing spirit of Americans; these tools allow us to self-mythologize and obscure the nature of an individual through a fluid image of the self that is revised as occasion dictates (popular contemporary events, general social and professional competition (who's really staying on top of culture and market trends?)). And the

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<sup>6</sup> Also consider Heinrich's warning to his father "Our senses are wrong a lot more often than they're right" (23), which is a somewhat prescient statement regarding Jack and Babette's eventual obsession with Dylar and its ultimate failure to assuage their fear of death.

temptation to take a more proactive role in regards to controlling one's self image—as if that were ever truly possible<sup>7</sup>—is certainly compounded by the user-friendliness and availability of the emerging technologies that promote change in our society. The effect technology has had on what individuals believe it can do for their person has established a use-value population, meaning that our relationship with technology as supplemental to our functionality has affected our relationships with the non-material. In *White Noise*, we find adult figures that strive for knowledge as supplemental to their person, mentally and physically, or to suppress fears and anxieties related to the destruction or displacement of the self. This is exemplified by a conversation Jack has with the head of the cultural studies department at the College-on-the-Hill. Like the other New York émigrés in the department, Alfonse (fast food) Stompanato maintains a very detached relationship with the minutia of culture he analyzes. He tells Jack that it is perfectly natural to watch disaster footage on TV to assuage the “brain fade” caused by an “incessant bombardment of information” (66) they face in everyday life. Stompanato says to Jack, “For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set. If a thing happens on television, we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is” (66). In addition to desensitizing the viewer to images of destructive violence and death, such morally questionable entertainment provides a sense of pleasure and comfort from knowing these horrific events are happening to someone else; the more you watch, the greater the distance becomes between the viewer and the reality of the outside world—thus, de-realizing death. The émigrés approach their studies to further investigate their own lives, rather than educating the general public, and go about their work more like fanboys than cultural critics. Jack describes the purpose of their work as “mak[ing] a formal method of the shiny pleasures they'd known in their Europe-shadowed childhoods—an Aristotlelianism of bubble gum wrappers and detergent jingles” (9). Critical studies have become a hobby; they have been emptied of deep analysis

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<sup>7</sup> This position affirms my belief that the true nature of the self is always obscured in the Symbolic, and our essential conceptions of “who we are” are based upon the fantasies of the self that are developed in direct relation to the Other.

and cultural application. This, I contend, is DeLillo's comment on the commodification of knowledge—and by extension, the academy—and the result of intense fragmentation within the social order. No one cares about broader concepts anymore; no one has the desire, or the ability, to make connections between the minutia of culture and the present and past world they inhabit. Everything seems to fall under the general category of phenomena. Here, I believe it necessary to propose a connection between Edelman's argument and key devices in the novel: the Symbolically unstable milieu of *White Noise* (represented by Blacksmith) and the threat of its dissolution (Jack's fear of death), resembles the unstable social order in which we currently live and that internal force of self-negation, the death drive.

Edelman's thesis has been described as the "antisocial thesis" because of what is charged as the cultural imperative of the queer. He writes, "The 'negativity' associated with the queer should be embraced, insofar as it rejects the necessity of 'hope itself' as affirmation, which is always affirmation of an order whose refusal will register as unthinkable, irresponsible, inhumane" (4) The queer figure, that is, being that which is inherently against the proscribed norms of the social order, must figure within itself the function of the death drive, which is what characterizes the force that embodies the Real within each individual, that which connects us to an ever-present source of jouissance<sup>8</sup>. Embodying that which cannot be represented in the Symbolic, the death drive always threatens to break down the unifying structure of the Symbolic order (to "negate" its terms), revealing its arbitrary nature, and to destroy our Imaginary conceptions of a whole identity falsely guaranteed by politics. The anti-political impetus for his project is stated as follows: "Impossibly, against all reason, my projects stakes its claim to the very space that 'politics' makes unthinkable: the space outside the conflict of visions that share as their presupposition that the body politic must survive" (3). Nina Power, however, finds a flaw with the previous statement: positioning himself "outside" of the fantasy that ensures the survival of politics, Edelman

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<sup>8</sup> One may define "jouissance" as a natural source of meaningless pleasure, whose fulfillment is motivated by the individual desire of the subject. Therefore, accessing this pleasure is a means of demonstrating one's true subjectivity, as it represents an actualization of desire that is not mediated by the Symbolic (hence, "meaningless"). This subject will be addressed in more detail below in my discussion of sinthomosexuality.

melds political and non-political domains, exposing a false conflation of “democracy with the child, rationality with a naïve concept of progress and heterosexuality with reproduction, sweeping away the possibility of collective organisation and action” (5-6). Power’s dispute mainly lies in the fact that Edelman’s diagnosis for doing something about our predicament is to forever perpetuate antisociality, to always refuse the Symbolic and embrace the logic of the death drive, which always refuses subjectivity and therefore any norm as such. This, I have gleaned, is the main source of contention for critics who find Edelman’s recommendation empty, only theoretical, non-practical for exacting political resistance.

As mentioned above, Jack Gladney serves as chairman of the department of Hitler studies. His college, resting in the suburban town of Blacksmith, is situated somewhere in the Midwest. The building that houses the Hitler department is shared with the popular culture department. Outside the university is a world replete with advertisements, giant supermarkets, and television programs that incessantly broadcast mindless entertainment for the gawking masses. Having lived within this world for many years, Jack has developed a grave fear of death, convincing himself that “All plots tend to move deathward” (26). Jack’s wife Babette teaches instructional classes on sitting and correct posture and reads tabloid newspapers each week to an elderly man named Old Man Treadwell. Like Jack, Babette is also terrified of death and constantly worries over which of the two will expire first. Although Jack’s cause for fearing death so gravely is not disclosed, it seems obvious, through examples in the text, that this is actually a fear of losing his assumed and lived identity as J.A.K Gladney<sup>9</sup>. We find that when Jack was first hired at the college, he was coerced by the chancellor to change his name so that he would “be taken more seriously as a Hitler innovator” (16). At the end of this section, Jack admits, “I am the false character that follows the name around” (17). Much like how Jack opines that he may purchase “existential credit” at the grocery store, his identity as J.A.K. and its attendant neutralization of Hitler as an historical figure preserve a way of living and a subjectivity within his volatile world. When discussing his fear of

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<sup>9</sup> Which, in psychoanalytic terms, is equivalent to losing subjectivity within the Symbolic.

death with Murray, he is told that “Helpless and fearful people are drawn to magical figures, mythic figures, epic men who intimidate and darkly loom...Some people are larger than life. Hitler is larger than death. You thought he would protect you” (287). When Tweedy Browner, one of Jack’s former wives, asks him, “How is Hitler?,” on their way back from a trip to the airport, he responds, “Fine, solid, dependable” (89). Jack’s false identity is a defense mechanism to secure a false identity within the Symbolic and to shield him from the bleak and entropic “real world” outside Blacksmith.

In his article “Fleeing Death in a World of Hyper-Babble”, Sol Yurik comments on Jack’s inherent refusal to learn German for the Hitler Studies conference at the College-on-the-Hill: “It’s not that he hasn’t tried to learn. German resists him—he finds the sound of the language ominous and mysterious” (366). “German resists” Jack because the reality of Hitler resides most deeply in the German tongue, the very fabric by which his being was developed, preserving all those bombastic pronunciations and malevolent implications Hitler intended. Jack doesn’t want the real Hitler; he wants the Hitler that has been stripped of historical context, the cultural aggregate that survives in pictures, often deciphered by voice over narration, and colored with dramatic score; the Hitler of the History Channel, a Hitler of the media. This notion is evidenced by the scenes where we see Jack in the classroom; in the first instance, we see Jack screen a film that he edited, which “consisted of propaganda films, scenes shot at party congresses, outtakes from mystical epics featuring parades of gymnasts and mountaineers—a collection I’d edited into an impressionistic eighty-minute documentary” (25). In the second instance, Murray comes to class as a guest lecturer and the two basically try to one-up each other through knowledge of their figure’s biography, on who is the bigger rock star like image (Hitler or Elvis). Hitler has been just as important for preserving the West’s cultural values as our heroes have been; he maintains evil—the same sense of “evil” in the world that Bush claimed deserved our American justice. Indeed, commenting on his resistance to the German tongue, Jack admits, “What we are reluctant to touch often seems the very fabric of our salvation” (31). That “fabric of our salvation” is exactly what Edelman attributes to

the death drive. This force, the psychological “excess” that remains once the subject enters the Symbolic, functions as that which inherently resists the governing logic of the social order. The death drive, according to Edelman, “insists both on and as the impossibility of Symbolic closure, the absence of any Other to affirm the Symbolic order’s truth, and hence the illusory status of meaning as defense against the self-negating substance of *jouissance*” (48). The death drive functions through one’s *sinthome*, which can be described as “the template of a given subject’s distinctive access to *jouissance*” (35). The *sinthome*, which Lacan notes was formerly meant to denote “symptom,” “speaks to the singularity of the subject’s existence, to the particular way each manages to know together the orders of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real,” writes Edelman (35). He argues that individuals who do not connect to their *sinthome*, and therefore refute the death drive in favor of achieving false oneness of the Imaginary and Symbolic self through politics, fall under the spell of the collective fantasy of reproductive futurism, and thus, abide by the herd mentality of their culture. This is illustrated in Jack’s comment that “Crowds came to form a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to keep out *death*. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone. Crowds came for this reason above all others” (73, emphasis mine). This (il)logic of the death drive is also conveyed when Jack ponders the reality of imminent destruction: “The question of dying becomes a wise reminder. It cures us of our *innocence of the future*” (15, emphasis mine). Here, we have spelled out the function of the death drive: to dismiss the fantasies of the self and a falsely designated future, which is a direct refusal of the innocent Child figure that represents our false identity within that future. This role that the Child figure has been cast to play must be seen for its socially delimiting function, which infantilizes adults (see Jack and Babette), inhibiting our access to real change within the Symbolic. Nonetheless, Edelman’s suggestion that we must embrace the death drive as the only means of resistance to the political investment in the Child figure is a very limited solution. Can we not embrace queering in other forms to subvert the domi-

nant conservative ideology? I believe a queering of the conservative notion of the family is certainly a start to political change, and such a process may be observed in the dynamics of the Gladney family.

Changes in the configuration and dynamics of the family in America is a central theme of *White Noise*, one addressed with critical ambiguity and subtle comedy. These changes represent a hope for our political future in the sense that they provide a blueprint for how to care for and maintain a group, which is necessary not only for the political advancement of our society, but for the survival of our species en masse. I contend the children in *White Noise* occupy a liminal space between their parents' generation and their own by adhering to principles of the old generation, such as belief in family togetherness (as the children seem to enjoy group activities as much as their parents<sup>10</sup>) protection of the clan (consider Denise with her *Physician's Desk Reference* and Heinrich's knowledge of Nyodene-D), as well as Steffie's simple enjoyment of the aroma of burned toast; while at the same time adhering to principles of their own generation, such as Heinrich's limitless questioning of facts and accepted customs and the children's deep adoration of television and shopping. Denise also demonstrates characteristics of her parent's generation by keeping objects to retain a personal history, rather than purchasing "existential credit," perpetually consuming and replacing, drawing out the search for meaning and identity through consumerism in an effort to quell the fears and anxieties that arise in postmodern life<sup>11</sup>. This generational hybrid, I argue, is a direct result of the changing form of the family unit, which will always impose a shift in the roles its members fulfill and the relationships they cultivate. I believe we may read this as a queering of the family space in the sense that the roles within the home are queered, and this shift against the normalization of familial roles poses a direct threat to the conservative fantasies regarding authentic family structure, which coincidentally imposes static roles for parents and children that perpetuate our socially delimiting hegemony.

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<sup>10</sup> Consider the mandatory family gatherings around the television (16, 64, 104), trips to the supermarket (18, 35), mealtimes (6, 7, 16, 18, 34, 58, 75), and shopping at the mall (80).

<sup>11</sup> This is the space Jack occupies and is indicative of his neutralization of Hitler and the Nazi Party that functions to preserve his false identity (J.A.K.) and shield him from the bleak and entropic world outside Blacksmith.



Nancy Chase has found that a common "preoccupation" of twentieth-century novels, or what can be considered postmodern novels, is the generational boundary dissolution between parents and children. This dissolution comes about as family roles alter or are inverted in response to external forces on the family unit. Since around the time of the Industrial Revolution, family roles have undergone a significant shift due to a changing global economy that displaces local economies, such as the ever fading, all encompassing family home that also serves as the family's place of business (e.g., the farm). In accordance with Chase, Dan Chekki notes that some scholars, namely Janet Saltzman Chafetz and Jacqueline Hagan, have found the changing family structure is, at its core, a reaction to the culture's economic milieu. Their thesis is summarized by Chekki here:

[T]he profound transformation in the economy has had the impact of expanding the demand for women's participation in the work force. In turn, the array of family changes witnessed in recent decades is a function of social psychological processes resulting from a major shift in the gender division of labor. (177)

I find this information useful in regards to the changing family in America, as Chafetz and Hagan note these shifts occur in response to women's more active role in the workforce, which they claim is a response to the growing labor demands of "industrial nations"<sup>12</sup> (178). This research points to a hopeful upside within the fantastical narrative of the social order; that is, while the social contract may not change in Edelman's terms, economic conditions affect changes within the home, and as research demonstrates, these changes are positive in terms of the individual mobility they offer. And it is certainly autonomy that Edelman wishes to always strive for, regardless of the dictates of reproductive futurism. The "shift in the division of labor" is an anti-conservative change, or a queering of the conservative norm, which was a direct queering of the family space; this, I argue, is what paved the way for the

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<sup>12</sup> Chafetz and Hagan collected data from twenty-one industrial nations "related to labor force, post-secondary education, and family-related phenomena [to] demonstrate that, regardless of cross-national variation in the extent and timing of change, there is overwhelming uniformity in the direction of change" (178).

queering of family roles regarding each member, which will continue to threaten what Edelman describes as the source of our social turmoil.

Altered family structures and the roles performed within those groups engender family dynamics that can function to preserve the bond formed among its members and thus maintain the group in lieu of external threats. Recalling my argument from chapter one that children do not inherently possess qualities of transcendence within the novel, I argue the changing makeup of the family structure and its internal dynamics are what engender such ethereal characteristics. Consider the scene where Denise notices Babette throw away a mysterious wet bag into the trash compactor in part one of the novel, which she later retrieves and discovers the empty Dylar bottle inside, giving the family the proof they need for intervention. Jack witnesses his daughter studying her mother's behavior with suspicion as she discards the bag and notices an underlying force at work. "I could see it in her eyes, a sardonic connection. It was these extrasensory flashes and floating nuances of being, these pockets of rapport forming unexpectedly, that made me believe we were a magic act, adults and children together, sharing unaccountable things" (34). The "magic act" here is the unquantifiable and inexplicable result of familial dynamics that operates to protect as much as it could to nurture. In the same manner, this describes Jack's feeling of his daughter Bee, from his former marriage to Tweedy Browner, wanting to communicate with him in a "secondary way, with optical fluids" (95). What Jack is witnessing is not something inherent within the children alone; it is the psychological connection between both parent and child made possible by a special family dynamic. As Chekki claims, changes in the family structure over the years have yielded greater social independence for all its members, which I contend is responsible for fostering a stronger family dynamic. Each member of the Gladney family seems to exhibit autonomy regarding the roles they uphold within the family or actions they take (Steffie could also be considered a knowledgeable protector, as she, while not as frequently as Denise, warns her mother and the rest of the family of unhealthy lifestyle choices; Wilder is more autonomous in terms of his activities, namely, his tedious

crying spell, slipping away from the family in the supermarket to get in the cart with Phun Duc, and the scene in which he leaves the house alone on his tricycle). The Gladney dynamic is responsible for maintaining the group in spite of the entropic world around them; the particular structure and roles of the family members is what creates the strong bond that holds the unit together. I believe the Gladneys can serve as a model for how to form political resistance to the inequitable society we inhabit, and I will address this issue in the conclusion of the chapter that follows.

#### 4 INFANTILIZED ADULTS, CRITICAL RESPONSE TO EDELMAN, AND THE POSSIBILITY OF CHANGE

Although I have worked hard to demonstrate the persuasiveness of Edelman's thesis above, as well as its use to my reading of DeLillo, I remain in disagreement with the *totalizing* nature of reproductive futurism and its endless reign under the terms of the Symbolic order. Nonetheless, there are certainly valuable insights supporting Edelman's analysis, and I believe they may be applied to cultural analyses without having to accept his theory on the whole. What I feel is understated in critical response to Edelman's book is that it summons our attention to the false enterprise of the Child figure in society (namely, American society), which I concur limits the rights of existing adults and real children; utilizing the child as the predominant image of a political future, which Edelman is shrewd in acknowledging, reverses, or contributes to a reversal in, the political and psychological autonomy of adults. By identifying ourselves with the cultural emblem of the Child figure, this reversal of political and psychological autonomy infantilizes our social perspective, which in turn weakens the ability of individuals to live effectively in the face of constant volatility and disruption. Reproductive futurism maintains a deferral of individual autonomy, as it confers political discourse to an underlying conservative ideology that is predicated on a collective will to power. This situation recalls Davies' reading of reproductive futurism discussed above, concerning the "infantilization" of adults. There are several scenes in *White Noise* that reflect this situation, as well as other facets of Edelman's theory that, I believe, are pertinent to evaluate in order to help illustrate our cultural symptom.

At first glance, Jack's constant fear of death seems to be at the heart of his unscrupulous decisions and responses to stressful events and familial pressures. When the children react with anxiety to news of the dark chemical cloud approaching Blacksmith, Jack's indignant reply, "'These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas...I'm a college professor'" suggests his belief in the relative security his J.A.K. identity offers, exposing a fear of separation from this assumed identity, which is in part a fear of self-dissolution. It is also important to note that the kids are the most concerned in this situation,

showing a deeper understanding of the impending danger threatening the family, which is a reversal in terms of the responsibility concerning the security of the family. Yet the repetition of Jack's naïve responses, as well as a few of Babette's, suggests a pattern of behavior that certainly borders on the infantile. Directly following her husband's overwrought response to the kids' concern of the "black billowing cloud," (113) Babette ignores the conversation at hand, almost as if she were not listening at all, asking Jack about his request for an early dinner and then inquiring "Where is Wilder?" (114). Of course, food could be a source of comfort and distraction here, but I also believe the request for the location of her youngest bespeaks of a need for protection against the toxic cloud encroaching on the town. As Babette admits, she would feel like life would not be worth living if the kids were not around. This fear of helplessness without the children, as well as Jack's need for the transcendence the children offer, are only two indications revealing the parents' greater existential need for their kids, rather than the other way around.

Upon arriving at the Mid-Village Mall with his family in part one of the novel, Jack runs into a colleague, Eric Massingale, while shopping for rope at the mall's hardware store. Appearing unadorned with his academic garb that signifies the false identity of J.A.K. Gladney, this shopping-man Jack appears as "a different man altogether," says Massingale. Possibly as a jab at his colleague, Massingale proclaims, "You look so harmless, Jack. A big, harmless, aging, *indistinct* sort of guy" (83, emphasis mine). Although claiming no offense was taken by this observation, Jack's exorbitant shopping spree that follows, characterized by "reckless abandon" and a purpose for fulfilling "immediate needs and distant contingencies" reflects a less than mature reaction to humorous criticism (84). The "immediate need" at hand is the existential inconsistency exposed by his peer, for which he attempts to ignore by recklessly purchasing "existential credit," a substitute that carries a similar effect to the real thing—namely, a sense of security, albeit through monetary autonomy. As Frank Lentricchia writes, "[Jack's] sense of fulfillment seems to lie in the spending of money, not the actual acquisition of goods" (*New Essays* 21).

Lentricchia believes the episode portrays not a backlash to the stab at Jack's ego, but a coming together of the family as a unified clan, a gesture that represents its stability in a time where all other ideological foundations seem vulnerable to decay. "By shopping with his family, he becomes 'one' with his family, which in turn achieves its 'oneness' through the activity of shopping" (22). As cogent as his assessment of this scene is in regards to family, I argue it is also indicative of Jack's need to reaffirm his identity through the purchase of "existential credit"; and of course, this is a false affirmation that confirms nothing more than the power attributed to capital. Jack struggles to embody and act through a whole being but continually fails and attests no greater ability to master his being by the novel's conclusion. As Jack, Babette, and Wilder visit the overpass for a view of the awe-inspiring, chemically-infused setting sun, amidst crowds of others doing the very same, Jack describes the vision before them, communicating an underlying volatility, both psychologically and culturally:

[W]e don't know whether we are watching in wonder or dread, we don't know what we are watching or what it means, we don't know whether permanent, a level of experience to which we will gradually adjust, into which our uncertainty will eventually be absorbed, or just some atmospheric weirdness, soon to pass...What is there to say? The sunsets linger and so do we" (325).

Above we have the novel's predominant theme spelled out for us: a pervasive feeling of instability, an uncertainty of emotion, of vision, and of identity. When Jack claims he "needs" his children for their value of quotidian transcendence, he is revealing a lack within himself, an indetermination of identity and the emotional repercussions that follow, which are just as difficult to discern. Jack needs the special powers of his children so as to identify with a sense of himself that simply is no longer there; he is reaching for a wholeness of self, an attempt that is motivated by the same reasons he relies so heavily on his mask of J.A.K. This reflects what Edelman deems as our cultural symptom: we transpose our desire for wholeness of identity onto the figure of the Child and impart this figure with our imagined, unified self in an effort to bridge the impossible gap between the Symbolic and the Imaginary.

The cultural image of our wished-for being, bearing the fantasmatic amalgam of citizen's imagined components of a whole self, is certainly a response to, and perhaps a coping mechanism designed to combat, our inability to discover the locus of authentic subjectivity. Using the Child figure as a substitute for this lack is also evident in the strategies used in commodity production and marketing, which is alluded to in a passage from DeLillo's novel. In like manner to Edelman's argument that the Child figure is a false representation of the "universalized subject" in today's era (10), Murray tells Jack of a common lecture given to his college-age students:

This is a society of kids. I tell my students they're already too old to figure importantly in the making of society...I tell them, 'you are spinning out from the core, becoming less recognizable as a group, less targetable by advertisers and mass-producers of culture. Kids are a true *universal*. But you're well beyond that, already beginning to drift, to feel estranged from the products you consume'" (50, emphasis mine).

Living in a "society of kids" mirrors Davies' analysis of reproductive futurism: investing our naïve and seemingly insatiable desire for plenitude in the image of the child strips adults of their logical and experiential superiority to children. When children are deemed our universalized subject, "fetuses" become the "protagonists of American life," and thus we are all "infantilized" as a consequence. Take for instance Babette's impetuous use of Dylar (which is reported to Jack by their daughter, Denise) and her tryst with Willie Mink (193-94), as well as Jack's obsessive plan to attain Dylar for himself and confront Mink at gunpoint (304), which he does and ends up plugging the man in the "midsection" (312). And quite possibly at the heart of Jack's plan is yet another failed endeavor to slip into existential fullness. As he takes out the Zumwalt (no surprise a German gun was selected) given as a gift from Vernon, Babette's vagrant father, Jack attains, momentarily, what he has been searching for: "Great and nameless emotions thudded on my chest. I knew who I was in the network of meanings" (312). Although Jack claims "all plots tend to move deathward," exposing his fear of the linear decay of life, he devises a fairly

complicated plan to kill Mink despite this fear. It seems Jack is more than willing to contradict himself when there is an opportunity to become someone else (i.e., the archetypal “man with a gun bent on revenge”), to embody, if only ephemerally, that other’s wholeness of being, which is of course only a projection.

Considering the cultural impasse we face in terms of the pending attainment of authentic subjectivity, as well as reproductive futurism’s capitalization on this crisis, it seems difficult not to uphold a cynical point of view. Edelman lacks in his challenge to our symptom—the queer’s stringent and constant negation of the Symbolic order—and since *No Future’s* publication, many readers and critics alike have made this clear. Yet, by the reception’s sheer volume and variety of interpretation, it is also clear that Edelman’s arguments have forced some to re-think as well as reaffirm the function of queer theory, which is always a theory on the limits and the potential of individual autonomy, when one really traces it back to its roots (i.e., Foucault). And while most critics seem to value the analysis of the Child figure in his work (although the praise is usually issued with brevity), some have noted inconsistencies in Edelman’s thinking, and this is what I will now address as I provide my final thoughts on the value of his theory and what *White Noise* may have in common with a more positive response to reproductive futurism.

Nina Power takes issue with Edelman’s conflation of politics and the family, a seemingly destructive union that constantly works to marginalize non-heterosexuals and those opposed to reproductive futurism. She contends, “we know that in practice politics, and the policies of elected governments, have extremely contradictory attitudes towards families, slashing budgets for crèches here, permitting only the most minimal of paternity leave there, and so on” (4). This proves a valid point, as we must consider the varying economic conditions of disparate societies and whether or not the family unit is as politically protected as it may be in the United States. This is where I believe Edelman fails to properly narrow his argument; although the symbolic, if one is to completely embrace its ubiquity, touches all



human life and its permutations, why not focus the charge of reproductive futurism within the states alone, which is where Edelman situates most political evidence for his argument? I feel this would, psychoanalytic jargon aside, produce a more concise analysis and force readers to focus centrally on politics in this country and Edelman's insights on the system that maintains it, rather than deciding first if he or she buys the theoretical framework for the overall argument. Power expands on the problem of Edelman's limited focus here: "Edelman ultimately concedes far too much to a very narrow ideological image of the family that, whilst pernicious, is easier to undo with reference to history and practice than he seems to think" (11). Power argues that one cannot delegate an "image" that produces a pervasive effect when it is not examined in its particular "social and economic function" (11). Indeed, Edelman's totalizing view of the family as always a puppet for the right neglects the fact there are now non-normalized family formations whose number increases daily, and by their very "symbolic" representation pose a threat to those striving fervently to uphold the traditional, heterosexual family structure. Power notes that what has been deemed the "'classical'" family structure in America was held together so tightly by its division of labor (5). In the 1950s, for instance, the father was almost always the breadwinner, while the mother remained at home, her only job to rear the children and manage the domesticities of the household. This situation has, of course, changed over the decades, and while compensation and mobility for male and female workers remains inequitable, the change in the workforce has necessitated a break from the classical, right-wing family structure. Power writes that "Who looks after the children is an increasingly complicated question, and neither the state nor the classical family seem able to do it effectively and affordably. Politics is so pro-child in theory because it is so anti-child (and anti-woman) in practice" (5). This dilemma of "'Who looks after the children'" can be clearly seen in *White Noise*, as the children seem to be more effective at taking care of themselves, as well as their parents. This bespeaks of a culture of ineffective parents, and from what is gleaned regarding the family's overall environment, the state apparatus isn't working either. But it is interesting to note that in spite of

the non-traditional family amalgam the Gladney's represent, Jack is the breadwinner; Babette's job is menial and assuredly contributes little to the family fund. As far as home economics are concerned, the gender roles each parent maintains seem to be the most "classical" in terms of the values associated with such a division of labor. This evidences one of the few conservative notions in the novel, whether intentional or otherwise. This traditional division of labor within the home can certainly be traced to a conservative ideology regarding gender roles. Yet, in regards to Edelman's thesis, Power asks, "[I]s all politics conservative by definition? Does negativity or resistance to existing power structures always translate back into some stable and positive form?" (12). One could answer yes to the first question, if they were to buy Edelman's psychoanalytic reading of the formation of politics in this country; the problem, though, is that Edelman's weakest effort is issuing an all-Lacanian-Symbolic-or-nothing analysis, which seems just as irresponsibly totalizing as accepting the evangelical right's belief that all existence was the creation of a singular, male god's desire for cosmological substance. As John Brenkman echoes, "'To grant the Right the status of exemplary articulators of 'the' social order strikes me as politically self-destructive and theoretically just plain wrong'" (cited in Power 12). However, Edelman does make an important distinction regarding the difference between the left and right in politics, which strengthens his assessment that the right wields central control over the social order. His delineation of right and leftist politics is provided in the following: "The right...better sees the inherently conflictual aspect of identities, the constant danger they face in alterity, the psychic anxiety in which they are lived; but the left better recognizes history's persistent re-writing of those identities, finding hope in the fact that identity's borders are never fully fixed. (14) Here, Edelman credits the left for its greater "reason" than the right in respect to subjectification, but notes that the "defensive structure of the ego" is always produced and maintained by the "Imaginary relation" developed during childhood that solidifies the subject's fixed internal split (14). The second question Power poses, referenced above, relating to negativity as means for political response is also addressed by other notable critics of Edelman, and their com-

ments, admittedly, ultimately reflect my own qualm with his prescription to our societal malaise of reproductive futurism.

Mari Ruti opines “The fact that jouissance, in Edelman’s account, serves the death drive does not change the fact that he ends up positing a space of redemption – a kind of anti-redemptive redemption – for those who are able to accede to the pure NO of subjective destitution (the NO of *No Future*)” (116). She argues this possibly unlimited access to jouissance queers have, and that only queers have, disregards any corroboration in social change with those whom are not homosexual, charging Edelman with a rather isolated and bleak response to the cultural deadlock he calls us to resist. Inherent within his argument is a denial of the creative possibilities of jouissance. While it is forever tied to the death drive, Ruti notes that Lacan also attributed to jouissance an ability to “revitalize and enrich – rather than merely obliterate—its subject” (116). Edelman’s thesis is an anachronism in that it upholds the classical and inflexible tenets of poststructuralism that simply proclaim there is no way to circumvent the governing order of the Symbolic. She expresses that “Any fleeting state of fullness or positivity that we may be able to attain must always in the end dissolve back into negativity; any endeavor to erase lack only gives rise to new instances of lack. This means that the process of filling lack must by necessity be continually renewed” (119). A part of this repetitive process is acknowledging the intrusion of the Real in the Symbolic, and harnessing these isolated experiences to actualize the creative power of jouissance. Ruti agrees with Edelman insofar as his thesis demonstrates how a continual focus on the future leads to an inability to live in the present, which contributes to a lack in creative action against the limitations of the Symbolic. She contends that moments when we encounter the Real allow us to enter “‘the midst life,’” and retaining emotions and insights from these experiences are what may adequately combat reproductive futurism (124). “During such encounters with the real we are without past or future, our entire being unified in a single instant of the present. At the same time, to cast the future as an inherently fan-

tasmatic quest of salvation, as Edelman does, is to portray it in unnecessarily narrow and unimaginative terms,” claims Ruti (124).

Tim Dean reminds his audience that the impetus for Edelman’s anti-social thesis comes from Leo Bersani’s classic article “Is the Rectum a Grave,” in which Bersani suggests that queer’s provisionally adopt “a homophobic representation of homosexuality” (124). He was the first to contest that it may be politically advantageous to embrace the stereotype of homosexuals, basing this notion on his push for a sexualized politics in America, one that gains a satisfaction in submitting to a force other than the self. Dean notes that Bersani believes “masochism is a tautology for sexuality,” insofar as the “origins” of sexuality lie in the initial ego-effacing moment of erotic oversaturation, or what has been called the “little death” (124). The latter statement, as well as his positioning of queerness “beyond the pleasure principle,” places Bersani’s function of the queer in line with the function of the death drive from the start. However, Dean notes that Bersani’s conception of the death drive and Edelman’s are of two distinct interpretations: “Whereas Bersani proposes as a tactic our embracing a particular representation of homosexuality as corrosive of autonomous selfhood, Edelman advocates our embracing—even identifying with—something that is not of the order of representation, namely, the death drive” (125). This is an empty recommendation for Dean, as what can be represented is what can mean in society, and what has attained meaning is exactly what has precipitated social activism. Contemplating the “melodramatic” response of Christian conservatives to homosexual mothers and fathers that, in their eyes, adulterate the American way, Dean writes, “What I find striking about *No Future* is that, in hearing the delusional rants of homophobes the truth of queer sexuality, it comes across as equally melodramatic” (125). He criticizes Edelman as reproducing the Christian right’s one-sided, impassioned rhetoric, which calls for ultimate resistance to the secular norm but proposes no seriously pragmatic way of changing global circumstances to promote greater social harmony. In like manner to Ruti, Dean feels *No Future* only em-

powers one group (queers) and submits others to simply look on as the social order is dismantled without their consent or, more importantly, their corroboration.

Dean's most scathing and insightful criticisms, however, highlight Edelman's general neglect of certain foundational theoretical insights. In regards to the Child figure, he writes:

His quarantining of the 'image of the Child' from any and every historical incarnation of that image enables him to overlook all those ways in which, far from the antithesis of queerness, children may be regarded as the original queers...Freud's theory of infantile sexuality, with its account of a universal predisposition to polymorphous perversion, long ago shattered the illusion of childhood innocence...As Freud repeatedly discovered, sexual perversion comes from inside the family home, not from outside it" (128).

He also reminds us, since Edelman seems to have forgotten, that Foucault altered our perception in regards to sexuality "precisely through its critique of negativity, arguing that the relation between power and sex should not be conceptualized in terms of repression, prohibition, exclusion, or negation." We are warned that "To characterize queer sexuality as the privileged figure for a force that unequivocally negates normalizing power thus risks returning to an embarrassingly Pre-Foucaultian conception of sex" (138). Homosexuality should be viewed as a positive enterprise in that it "offers an occasion for initiating ontological differentiations whose only assured outcome paradoxically would be the unpredictability of the new," meaning that homosexuality's threat to heteronormativity lies in the potential its difference holds; as history demonstrates, confronting the essential values of culture leads us always to the possibility of change.

Upon examining Power, Ruti, and Dean's arguments against Edelman's narrow means for resistance to the strictures of heteronormativity, I concur we need more than thanatos driven, specifically queer retaliation to produce change in contemporary politics, or in Edelman's more precise terms, a "better" social order. I find Dean's and Ruti's responses to Edelman highly productive in particular be-

cause they acknowledge aspects of reproductive futurism (the use of the Child figure in political discourse) but responsibly disabuse some of his conceptions relating to the only mode of resistance queer sexuality offers and the impossibility of real change in the Symbolic. I concur that Edelman leaves little room for bettering our condition and remains satisfied to let his “stylistic acrobatics,” to borrow a description from Ruti (117), construct a technically formidable shield against oppositional interpretations. And it seems also the case that DeLillo’s novel paints a particularly bleak picture of our existence under media omnipotence and perpetual commodification, encroaching on all systems and values we revere. But we must remember that as Lentricchia notes, *White Noise* was written with the intent of exploring domesticity. DeLillo casts this theme among the “dread” and uncertainty of the world outside the safe confines of the home and lets it collide with those forces almost as if one would release a domesticated animal into the wild. The family works together through turmoil and fear as a unit—one that is slightly dysfunctional and non traditional in its composition. But as Jack discovers, what helps keep a family together is their resistance to the supposed objectivity of the world they inhabit; they challenge convention as a means of survival against the constant barrage of “hostile facts” (81), remaining “strongest where objective reality is most likely to be misinterpreted” (82). As the novel suggests through its undermining of authoritative information, though, what is “fact” is not so easy to ascertain, making the value of “objective reality” less pertinent to our happiness and longevity. And I believe this is precisely how we must proceed to establish better social conditions for individuals on this planet. While I am not saying we must ignore *all* the facts, we must continue to question why certain values are imparted on a particular society and assess those values based on their applicability to the conditions of the lived experience of its citizens—and, of course, to a standard of equal social viability. I disagree with Edelman’s caution against “hoping” for a better future. Hope is what motivates us to change our condition, and without it we risk political stasis and an implicit affirmation of our current social order. It also is quite implausible that a single group of citizens can work to produce the change needed. As Ruti and Dean

support, and as the strength of the Gladney family illustrates, we must work together, as a political clan, to maintain human existence and create a future that is worthwhile for us all.

Where Edelman gets it wrong is his complete delegation of the family unit as an arm of the conservative ideology responsible for inequitable social policies. What is needed for political change is what has always been required: organized parties of varying individuals<sup>13</sup> — engaging one another as peers and performing various roles to sustain viability—that bring awareness of their cause(s) to the social realm by collective action and protection of the group. Edelman’s entire argument is predicated on poststructuralist rhetoric that is certainly valuable as long as it is applicable to progress, but when adopted in totality it virtually extinguishes all tangible means for change. As Jack acknowledges, we live in a world where “knowledge changes everyday,” a social landscape that is no longer pressed forward by ideas alone because of their inherent relativity; for there are no longer any stable, universal ideologies that cannot be argued against by simply adopting another ideology to combat them. And perhaps this evinces the ongoing battle among human minds that has thrived for ages. Even some researchers now claim that “rationality” was adopted by human beings so they could win arguments against their opponents, not for purposes of philosophical human development<sup>14</sup>. This game is clearly evident in politics today as whenever one faction makes an argument for political change, it is always combated with some other rhetoric that has its own intellectual basis for resistance<sup>15</sup>. The Gladney’s represent a hope for the future that is contained within the family itself; a group of varying individuals that perform roles necessary for the sustainability of each member. In spite of all the fear and instability surrounding them, they share a bond, held together by a nebulous force hinged upon togetherness that keeps them in tact and content to “linger” in the face of existential and political uncertainty. And perhaps we may apply this to

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<sup>13</sup> Varying in terms of personality, age, sexual orientation, belief, non belief, etc.

<sup>14</sup> See Patricia Cohen (2011) for a detailed account of this new theory.

<sup>15</sup> Consider the counter propaganda agencies, a.k.a. PR firms, hired to smear an adversarial individual or group by purposely releasing false and harmful information into the media stream. A recent example of this was Facebook’s hiring of the PR firm Burson-Marsteller to smear Google, as reported by Dan Lyons (2011).

Ruti's push for us to harness the emergences of the Real in an effort to contend with the Symbolic. As discussed above in this chapter, I argue the inner dynamics of the Gladney family account for the "transcendental" relationship between the parents and the children, not within an inherent quality in the children alone; both parties are needed to create this special connection. Perhaps such dynamics engender the emergence of the Real, of "unaccountable things," as a means of sustainability. And it is pertinent to clarify that in the scene with Denise, the "magic act" occurs as a result of a reversal in familial roles: Denise is the concerned and informed protector; Babette the irresponsible and ignorant pill popper. Such action constitutes a method of defense and vitality for the Gladney family that can be applied to group dynamics necessary for political change: an intergenerational group of individuals that function without a hierarchy in terms of the roles they perform, and through their inner dynamics (made possible by changes in intergenerational relations, which is a direct result of the change of the family make-up) harness the emergences of the Real, or whatever we wish to deem the unaccountable force(s) at work, to nurture and maintain the group. The Gladney family shows us how group dynamics can perform to maintain a greater whole, which is what we must understand first before deciding on what is the most effective means by which to produce change in the political realm and to establish a hopeful plan for our collective future.



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