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An Ecological Examination of “The Airborne Toxic Event”

Don Delillo’s *White Noise* portrays a dysfunctional family fractured by marital infidelity in three parts. Part one, “Waves and Radiation,” and part three, “Dylarama,” named after the fictional drug that mitigates the fear of death, share a common setting and tone. The second division, on the other hand, breaks fundamentally with the other two sections. The titular “Airborne Toxic Event” casts Hitler historian Jack Gladney and his family out of their home, where they become refugees from a vast cloud of fictional chemical Nyodene D. After they are allowed to return home, the life of the Gladneys mostly returns to business as usual. The obvious question that demands to be asked is what exactly is the point of this drastic shift and subsequent negation? Here, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s writings on postcolonial ecology is helpful in that it provides a framework through which to understand this seemingly bizarre choice of plot structure. The thesis of his essay “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change” is that “the current conjuncture of globalization and global warming leaves us with the challenge of having to think of human agency over multiple and incommensurable scales at once” (Chakrabarty 1). *White Noise* presents the problem “multiple and incommensurable scales” in the aforementioned divide. The two scales, according to Chakrabarty, are the conception of humanity as a unified geophysical force and as a heterogeneous multicultural society.

Jack Gladney, from whose perspective *White Noise* is written, admits retrospectively that he has difficulty conceiving of the Airborne Toxic Event as a product of humanity as a geophysical force. He states that

This was a death made in the laboratory, defined and measurable, but we thought of it at the time in a simple and primitive way, as some seasonal perversity of the earth like a flood or tornado, something not subject to control. Our helplessness did not seem compatible with the idea of a man-made event. (Delillo 127-128)

Gladney here addresses the question of agency, by mentioning “helplessness” and “subject of control” in the context of a cloud that “moves like some death ship in a Norse legend” (Delillo 127). This reveals a struggle to reconcile the harm humanity accomplishes as a collective with the more tractable problems of one person’s day-to-day life. Chakrabarty argues this is typical, as “when we say humans are acting like a geophysical force … we then liken humans to some nonhuman, nonliving agency” (Chakrabarty 11). This also points out an ambiguity in the place of humans in this disaster: humans, and societal factors, have agency over the toxic chemical spill, but individual humans have no agency as they suffer displacement and health consequences. Certainly, though, it is not only humans that suffer. In the passage, Gladney also makes a implicit distinction between humanity and nature, arguing that “death made in a laboratory” is irreconcilable with natural disasters. Additionally, “the earth” is not capitalized while referencing the planet Earth, revealing a further devaluation of the environment relative to humans. This anthropocentric viewpoint recurs in an account of the effects of Nyodene D. Gladney’s son says about Nyodene D that “the movie wasn’t sure what it does to humans. Mainly it was rats growing urgent lumps,” then emphasizes twice more “This is human nausea we’re talking about. Not rats” (Delillo 111). This threefold emphasis on rats as not-humans suggests a disregard for Nyodene D’s effects on anything other than humans, which is especially ironic because Nyodene D is a byproduct of a chemical made specifically to kill the non-human entities known as insects. This irony highlights the shortsightedness of anthropocentrism and its potentially horrible consequences.

*White Noise* also engages the effects of man-made disasters on a societal level. Chakrabarty points out that viewing humanity as a geophysical force tends to unify all of humanity into one, but this union breaks down at the smaller scale. The effects of climate change and man-made disasters are not shared among all of humanity. Jack Gladney’s attitude demonstrates that he has internalized this, as he states “these things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. … We live in a neat and pleasant town near a college with a quaint name. These things don’t happen in places like Blacksmith” (Delillo 114) then later that “I’m the head of a department. … [Fleeing] is for people who live in mobile homes in the scrubby parts of the country” (Delillo 117). Fellow refugees bring up race and nationality as well, as an unnamed character declares that the governments of the United States, India, China, Vietnam and Russia could not do anything about the Airborne Toxic Event (Delillo 135). Even the military and Red Cross workers exhibit an alien appearance, always wrapped with Mylex and distanced from the refugees. These divisions demonstrate the fundamental problem with viewing humanity as a unified force. As Chakrabarty states, “There is no ‘humanity’ … that can act as a political agent” (14). Indeed, the question of who should contribute the most to fight climate change and what actions should be taken have divided the world, as “powerful and rich nations” benefited from industrialization the most while other nations were unable to industrialize at all.

One ambiguous moment raised during the examination of society-level consequences is whether or not the Gladneys are truly welcomed as refugees. The juxtaposition of a sign bearing the words “IRON CITY WELCOMES AREA EVACUEES” with the Gladneys’ experience that “We were not allowed to leave the building” raises this question, the answer to which hinges on the interpretation of the intentions of those involved (Delillo 160). While fleeing their homes, the Gladneys live similarly to asylum seekers, seeking refuge wherever they can find it. As asylum seekers, they exhibit the fundamental quality that they are “neither insiders nor outsiders” (Chakrabarty 5). They do not belong in Iron City, but they also do not belong back home, where they will die. Thus, without any sense of belonging, the Gladneys must rely on other people to provide them with food and shelter. The citizens of Iron City at minimum pretend to be welcoming, although it is unclear to what degree this act is performative. The swiftness of the transition between the welcome message and the revelation that the refugees cannot leave their building hints that this seeming generosity carries no actual burden. It is one thing to say the word “welcome,” and quite another to actual help and feed the possibly contaminated at significant personal risk. If the welcoming is genuine, there is a message of hope that humanity can overcome the fissures of “anthropological difference” (Chakrabarty 2), i.e. class, religious, cultural, and sexual differences, and mount an effective resistance of climate change. However, if the welcoming is merely symbolic, it instead points out a tendency for humans to signal their virtues without actually contributing meaningfully to the project they say they espouse.

Jack Gladney’s shift in priorities once he returns home demonstrates another problem that Chakrabarty highlights: humans do not fully understand or care about consequences of environmental disasters in more distant time frames, such as coming decades (Chakrabarty 14). All of the consequences of Neodyne D, cited with questionable reliability by Jack’s son Heinrich, take at least half a decade to take effect. After five years, “you’ll notice various kinds of fungi appearing between your regular windows and storm windows”, while after ten “your screens will turn rusty and begin to pit and rot” (Delillo 131). In view of these distant consequences, it is perhaps of little surprise the suddenness with which Jack returns to his normal life. After recounting a day at roughly a paragraph every three hours, the final sentence of “The Airborne Toxic Event” is “It was nine days before they told us we could go back home” (Delillo 163). This remark is the only link between two different worlds: in the first case, the fear of death; and in the second, a mundane supermarket scene. The contrast in time frames helps explain why Jack does not worry about what he has experienced at all. One step further along this path is the question of economics. As David Archer points out, “the rules of economics … tend to limit our focus to even shorter time frames” (quoted in Chakrabarty 14). That the first scene of the third section is a supermarket suggests that consumerism and a focus on work has limited Jack’s focus, a theory furthered by the multitude of seemingly disconnected interjections interspersed throughout the novel. These sometimes take the form of marketing slogans, such as “It’s the rainbow hologram that gives this credit card a marketing intrigue” (Delillo 122). Even pivotal movements, such as when Jack’s wife admits to him that she is addicted to pills that keep her from living in constant fear of death, are punctuated by chants of the chewing gum brands “Clorets, Velamints, Freedent” (Delillo 229). Jack’s lack of focus inhibits him from fully comprehending the catastrophic environmental effects of the Airborne Toxic Event.

A smug doctor turns Jack’s initial disinterest about the event on its head later in the third section as he blithely states that Jack has a “nebulous mass” that could “cause a person to die” (Delillo 280). While earlier an evacuation worker hinted at the possibility of contamination, the veracity of this insinuation was suspect, as the only evidence was some flashing stars on a computer screen (Delillo 140). This produces another ambiguity: is the Airborne Toxic Event the cause of Jack’s death sentence, if indeed the diagnosis is even correct? A key motif throughout *White Noise* is misinformation, through tabloids, the radio, and gossip, so it becomes very difficult to trust anything as decidedly true, regardless of the source. If the doctor and evacuation worker are mistaken, then Jack’s carefree attitude towards the Airborne Toxic Event had no lasting negative consequences on his life. However, if the event did indeed cause him to grow a “nebulous mass,” then an opposing message follows. This lack of concern for the environment and alienation from fellow humans leads Jack, a beneficiary of environmentally unsafe practices, to his death. Due to the lack of unassailable authority in the novel, this question is never clearly answered.

Works Cited

Delillo, Don. White Noise. Viking, 1984.

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