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Performing Don DeLillo: Theatricality, Subjectivity, and the Borders of Genre

One would be hard-pressed to find a review of Don DeLillo's most recent novel, *The Body Artist*, that does not contain a bemused contrast between this slim, spare text and the behemoth that preceded it, *Underworld*. The majority of such reviews in fact begin with this comparison, which ranges in tone from John Leonard's shrug-shouldered acceptance in *The New York Review of Books* ("After a Divine Comedy, why not haiku?") So *The Body Artist* is seven hundred pages shorter than *Underworld*. Don DeLillo deserves a breather"), to Michael Pakenham's dismissiveness in the *Baltimore Sun* ("Compared with *Underworld's* 827 pages, this book is a featherweight, but because it's DeLillo, it must be taken seriously"); from Eric Wittmershaus's apparent disappointment in *FlakMagazine* ("A slim, breezy, 124-page title with large, airy type, *The Body Artist* is no *Underworld*. It trades in that book's dramatic scope for a female artist, her dead husband, a Webcam and a strange little man who might be a ghost. That's about it")), to Michiko Kakutani's measured ambivalence in *The New York Times* ("Don DeLillo has followed the big, mythic dazzle of his last novel, *Underworld* (1997), with a small, transitional work...").[1] The comparison is, of course, an obvious one; the two novels seem almost laughable in their differences, making such reviewer contrasts irresistible, though not particularly revealing.

1. Leonard, "The Hunger Artist" 14; Pakenham, "Don DeLillo's Latest Novel" 11E; Wittmershaus, "The Body Artist"; Kakutani, "The Body Artist" E50.

Kakutani goes on, however, to voice the real concerns that many of these comparisons only hint at; near the end of her review, she writes, "The problem is that [DeLillo's] writing seems strangely attenuated in these pages, stripped of its usual pop and fizz, its tactile sense of detail, and as a result the novel has a spindly, etiolated feel."[1] Attenuated, spindly, and etiolated: these adjectives are perhaps more nuanced, but they carry the same import as Adam Begley's suggestion that the novel is "weightless", or Michael Pakenham calling it a "featherweight", or Giles Foden referring to it as "the slimmest of novellas."[2] The novel, apparently, has become far too thin, and as John Leonard trenchantly points out, DeLillo "is likely to be punished for this starvation diet."[3] *The Body Artist* is, the critical consensus would seem, anorexic—thin to the point of being skeletal.

The argument that I would like to make about the novel in what follows is two-fold: first, that there is a point to that skeletal quality; and second, that while the numerous comparisons above seem to second Charles Foran's conviction that "this puzzling little fiction is meant to signal a sea change," *The Body Artist* bears more in common with *Underworld* than it may at first appear.[4] In order to complete the link between these two texts, and in order to understand the latter novel's thinness, one must consider the text that the reviewers—uniformly—have left out of the lineage, the one that appeared in between the two: DeLillo's second play, *Valparaiso*. In this article, I will argue that the skeletal nature of *The Body Artist* is not unlike that of dramatic literature, a printed text that demands a performance in order to be complete. That the subject of *The Body Artist* is a performance artist makes the nature of the "sea change" Foran suspects patently clear—but it's a sea change announced in *Underworld*: a rejection of the narrative logic of character and subject-formation in favor of a logic that is profoundly performative. From the opposite perspective, DeLillo's recent work itself may illuminate some previously underexplored implications of the concept of the performative and, in the process, should raise for us some compelling questions about genre and—not incidentally, as I'll explore in conclusion—some related questions about gender.

1. Kakutani E50.
2. Begley, "Ghostbuster" 12; Pakenham 11E; Foden, "Reality, Unplugged" 12.
3. Leonard 14.
4. Foran, "Don DeLillo Does Miniature."

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, a number of critics explored the relationship between performance and literary texts in general, and the novel in particular.[1] Richard Poirier, for instance, argued that critics should consider literary texts less as representations than as performances: "Literary works only provisionally constitute what Marcuse calls 'another dimension of reality.' They should be construed more properly as merely another dimension of action, of performance with language as its medium" (69). Jerzy Kutnik later expanded upon this position, exploring what he called the "performatory" impulse in the postmodern novel as the manifestation of a desire to escape the constraints of mimesis, demonstrating that "a work of art can be an open-form event or process in which the medium of a given art form is employed not for the sake of transmitting some prearranged meaning but in order to produce a meaning which could not otherwise be generated and experienced" (229). Performance, Kutnik argued, becomes "an essential element of all creative activity" for the postmodern artist, who hopes to demonstrate that "all art is always performatory, that it not so much says something *about* reality but, by its occurrence and presence, *does* something as a reality in its own right" (xxiv). These scholars' attempts to think postmodern culture via theories of performance, focusing upon cultural objects' investments in action, process, theatricality, and self-reflexivity, preceded by several years the theoretical suturing of postmodernism with poststructuralism.

The effects of that suturing on this line of critical work are readily visible. In more contemporary considerations of the cultural role of performance, particularly as it pertains to the construction of postmodern selfhood, the work of critics such as Poirier and Kutnik has been displaced by that of Judith Butler, and the admittedly juridical-sounding "performatory" has been refigured by the "performative." I wish to engage briefly with Butler's

1. See, in addition to the examples which follow, Mellard, *The Exploded Form*; Caramello, *Silverless Mirrors*; Benamou and Caramello, eds., *Performance in Postmodern Culture*.

concept, with its insights and oversights, in order to flesh out the difficulties it poses for a sufficient consideration of the relationship between the literary text and performance. I hope, through this admittedly incomplete interrogation, to add to the insights of Butler's "performative" those aspects of Kutnik's "performatory" that might problematize some of her key assumptions about performance, and to consider how these two different senses of performance shed light on the peculiarities of DeLillo's work leading up to *The Body Artist*.

Butler's theories, first fully explored in *Gender Trouble*, and later elaborated in *Bodies That Matter* and *Excitable Speech*, transformed the fields of feminist and queer theory by proposing that not only the ostensibly cultural markers of gender but also the presumably natural, material markers of "sex" are performative in origin, regulatory ideological functions constructed through discourse that interpellate the subject into certain intelligible forms of social and political life, or, conversely, into the unintelligibility of abjection. Butler adopts her notion of the performative—the sense in which speech becomes an act, in which discourse can be imagined as having force in the world—from J. L. Austin's classic study, *How to Do Things with Words*, as well as, and more particularly, from Derrida's response to this volume.[1] By combining this consideration of the force of the utterance with a Foucauldian analysis of the construction of the subject by the juridical systems of power that call it into being, Butler explores the ways in which the subject both performs and is performed by language.

While Butler's rendering of the performative has been unquestionably influential in contemporary reconsiderations of identity politics and subject formation, and while that rendering has grown in complexity over the course of her work, a few problems nonetheless remain with her account, most notably her failure—ameliorated in *Bodies That Matter* and acknowledged in her new introduction to the second edition of *Gender Trouble*[2]—to fully

1. See Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*; Derrida, "Signature Event Context."

2. See *Bodies That Matter*: "performance as bounded 'act' is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer's 'will' or 'choice'; further, what is 'performed' works to conceal, if not to disavow, what remains opaque,

distinguish between or explore the conjunctions of the two different and yet connected fields of the *linguistic* performative and the *theatrical* performative. Speech is inevitably an act—and yet is it the same kind of act as *acting*? Writing is often performative—and yet should we distinguish between the performance of writing and the performance of *performance*? Is the connection between the two merely a trick of vocabulary, one that hides differences either subtle or profound, or is it in fact as revealing as the critical reception of performativity would indicate?[1] While theatrically-based performance theory has struggled with Butler's concept of the performative, both resisting its assumptions of normativity and realizing the expansions that the term makes possible—a process Jon McKenzie documents in "Genre Trouble," in which he suggests that Butler's work both problematically and usefully "queers" performance theory—literary theories of performance have often been swept aside in favor of the performative, leaving the field with its own form of genre trouble.

Butler draws the force of her critique of Austin largely from the Derridean line, absorbing Derrida's own misreadings of the essay,[2] and thus attributes to the Austinian performative an authorizing gesture, a source of juridical power. To counter what she reads as Austin's interest in the continuance of the sovereign individual, Butler appeals to Althusser's notion of interpellation, arguing that the individual does not perform the utterance, but is rather in some sense performed by it. "Neither the Austinian promise nor the Althusserian prayer require a preexisting mental state to 'perform' in the way

unconscious, unperformable. The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake" (234). See also *Gender Trouble* xxv.

1. Admittedly, in *Bodies That Matter*, Butler distinguishes between what she refers to as "discursive performativity" and "embodied performance." While this distinction approximates the divide I suggest between the linguistic and the theatrical, the suggestion that the discursive is somehow disembodied requires the elision of the most important lesson of Felman's *The Literary Speech Act*: namely, that all speech acts are bodily acts. In that suppression resides the crux of the problem: if both the linguistic and the theatrical are embodied, wherein lies the difference? Butler suggests their simultaneous convergence and divergence, without fully elaborating on either: "Are these two different senses of 'performativity,' or do they converge as modes of citationality in which the compulsory character of certain social imperatives becomes subject to a more promising deregulation?" (*BTM* 231).

2. On those misreadings, see Cavell, "What Did Derrida Want of Austin?"

that they do," Butler acknowledges. "But where Austin assumes a subject who speaks, Althusser, in the scene in which the policemen hails the pedestrian, postulates a voice that brings that subject into being" (*ES* 25). This interpellated subject may then produce performative utterances that appear to require a preexisting, autonomous selfhood but that in fact merely reconfirm and reify the self formed by the voice of authority. As in the Nietzschean example that she explores, within Butler's theory of performativity, there need be no preexisting "doer" to complete the speech-act "deed"; it is, rather, the deed which brings the doer into being.[1] Thus, for Butler, the self created via the linguistic performative, the self that is perceived as sovereign, is an illusion, one intended to placate the subject for the loss of power implied in its social interpellation.[2]

In this manner, gendered statements simultaneously produce the gendered subject and the illusion of that subject's *a priori* existence. But what of the category of statement that Austin terms "parasitic"? Do gendered statements made on the stage have the same *kind* of illocutionary force, the same ability to create ideological subjects? Here, Derrida's collapse of Austin's sense of a specifically *literary* citation into a more general citationality creates difficulties for Butler as she attempts to negotiate the distinction between discursive performativity and theatrical performance. Butler follows Derrida in arguing that iterability or citationality is a necessary precondition of the performative, writing in *Bodies That Matter* that "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative or citational practice by which discourse produces the effects it names" (2). One of the effects of this citationality is the illusion of sovereignty, of individual "will": "Paradoxically, what is *invoked* by the one who speaks or inscribes the law is the *fiction* of a speaker who wields the authority to make his words binding, the legal incarnation of the divine utterance" (*BTM* 107). In this sense, juridical citationality is a normative participation in and replication of power. Does literary or theatrical citationality wield the same normative force, however? Butler herself begs the question when, in the final chapter of *Gender Trouble*, she invokes drag as a means of exploring the performed nature of all gender. Challenging the language of "internalization" that has been used to describe the formation of a gendered identity, Butler writes:

> acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manu-factured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (*GT* 173)

These fabrications indicate, she argues, that there is no preexisting identity that produces such gendered or sexed performance. Butler reads drag as calling attention to this process: "*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*" (*GT* 175). In reducing the theatricality of drag to imitation, however, to a form of citation, Butler does not account for the parodic nature of this instance of citation, thus failing to establish whether (or not) speech acts made with tongue planted firmly in cheek create the same kinds of effects as those made "straight." By revealingly but incompletely suggesting that the intentioned artifice of theatrical performance works subversively to unsettle the sovereign subject, revealing its discursively performative origins, Butler inadvertently fuses the two realms of the discursive and the theatrical, suggesting that, as one may be used to shed light on the other, the two are fundamentally linked—and that distinctions between them are incidental.

For further consideration of the role of theatrical performance in relation to the performative construction of the subject and more particularly in relation to literary texts, we must return to the work of critics such as Poirier and Kutnik, whose work has long been excluded from such discussions. Kutnik points out the low regard in which performance was long held in classi-

1. See *Excitable Speech*, pp. 45-46.

2. See Butler, *Excitable Speech*: "Does the figure of the sovereign performative compensate for a lost sense of power, and how might that loss become the condition for a revised sense of the performative?" (74).

cal aesthetics, a "vaguely defined" category considered only to apply to the traditional performing arts, and even there considered "derivative, a form of mediation" (1). Opposing this narrow view of performance, Kutnik and the theorists and critics he references hope to expose the centrality of performance in the aesthetics not only of the performing but also the plastic and the literary arts. In tracing the influence of performance from Action Painting, through Happenings, to contemporary poetry and the postmodern novel, Kutnik repeatedly describes these new forms' attempts to evade the strictures of classical aesthetics and, in particular, the demands of mimesis. Through the interventions of artists such as Jackson Pollock, post-war American painting became less about image and more about surface, less about composition and more about the process of its own creation. In similar ways other forms of art moved away from traditional aesthetic standards and toward an interest in process and action-based notions of performance. Kutnik describes the difference between these two modes of artistic production as being "that between the static notion of representation and the dynamic notion of (non-re-)presentation" (3), a shift that demonstrates a rejection of mimesis as the structuring principle of all art. Literature, however, presents certain challenges to the performance ideal:

> a literature which orients itself toward performance should eventually also approach the condition of a nonmimetic art. But within the framework of classic aesthetics, the notion of nonmimetic literature is a contradiction in terms, for according to the traditional view, literature is necessarily mimetic or representational. This view is rooted in the assumption common to all major philosophical systems from Descartes to Husserl that language, the medium of literature, is also inherently representational because its meaning depends utterly on its referentiality, that is, on the existence of a correspondence between secular facts and statements about those facts. (20)

This assumption—of the transparency of language, of its unproblematic referentiality, of its primary use in "statements" about "facts," which may be interpreted in order to discover their "meaning"—is precisely the view countered by the work of both Austin and Derrida. This critique in Derrida

is justly famous, and comprises such a quantity of his work, and has been explored in so many other, better venues, that I feel safe in leaving it aside here. Instead, I want to turn very briefly, to Austin's critique of language's "inherent" mimeticism.

In *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin begins from the position that, first, not all sentences can be classed as "statements," and second, that there is a class of utterance, which he terms *performatives*, that convey no facts, and that cannot be judged "true" or "false." Rather, these utterances, which he opposes to *constatives*, act within the world, altering the relationships between speaker and listener. As Austin's argument proceeds, however, the category of the performative rapidly expands, absorbing many uses of language that had previously seemed constative, until all utterances come under the sway of his more general theory of the speech act. In this shift, language ceases to report on reality and instead becomes the primary factor in *creating* that reality.[1] The utterance is for this reason less to be evaluated for its truth or falsity than for its force: "The truth or falsity of a statement," Austin insists, "depends not merely on the meanings of the words but on what act you were performing in what circumstances" (144). With this divorce of language from statements about facts, from representation, comes an end to the mimetic grounding of the uses of language. When language becomes performative, so, inevitably, does literature.

This begins to suggest that the chiasmic conjunction between the linguistic or discursive performative and the theatrical performance rests in the flight from mimesis, in the disjunction of language and representation. Both Butler's performative and Kutnik's performatory are invested in non-representational uses of language: for Butler, first, "it's a girl" can never be a merely descriptive statement, but is rather normativizing, creating the reality of an infant's girlness. Similarly, Kutnik's performatory describes those literary texts that seek, in focusing on the active processes of their creation, not only by their authors but by their readers as well, and on their inevitable failures to communicate, not to represent a preexisting world invested with a given meaning, but rather to create a dynamic new world, one whose mean-

1. See *How to Do Things with Words*, particularly lectures VIII through XI.

ing is unfixed, actively produced in the textual encounter with a reader. The crucial distinction between these two views, however, is their relationship to power: that which circulates in Butler's performative is always—though not exclusively, or inviolately—hegemonic, approving or invalidating the subject positions of those it names. In this interpellation, however, Butler's performative erases its own historicity, leaving behind the illusion that the subjects it constructs preexist this moment of utterance. Literary and theatrical performance, by contrast, require a disinvestment in the writer or performer's own "authority," a willingness to expose the mechanisms of representation and to acknowledge and disavow the historical role of representation in the unequal distribution of power. The literary performance, like the theatrical, has the potential to use its artifice to break down the notion of individual sovereignty and to explore the self as a construction, one radically decentered by the awareness that it has no *a priori* existence, but only that which it creates in speaking.

DeLillo has long been interested in the production of such a decentered self, but has generally explored across his career the ways that the phenomena of contemporary culture—ranging from film and television, to consumerism, to assassinations, to terrorism—have undermined the conventional grounding of the liberal individual.[1] Throughout this work, DeLillo has repeatedly pointed to language, and particularly the narrative uses of language in fiction, as an antidote to these postmodern ills, as a potential, if marginalized, means of reconnecting the fragmented self.[2] In *Americana*, the

1. See Goodheart: "The very presence or absence of self is one of the themes of DeLillo's fiction" (355). Interestingly, given what follows, Goodheart goes on to contrast DeLillo's approach to this absence of self with that of Phillip Roth, who pointedly theatricalizes the production of self; "DeLillo would endorse the view of the self as a nullity," Goodheart argues, "but he would, I think, object to the theatrical metaphor" (356), preferring the two-dimensionality of film as the locus of self-production. Goodheart goes on in this article to describe *Players* as "a novel about the absence of the quiddity of the subject, the need to make and unmake identities" (356), a need that is in this early work seen as oppressive.

2. See for instance Saltzman, who suggests this reclamation of the power of language in DeLillo's interest in the "paradox [that] lies at the heart of the writer's profession: he must break the grip of idiom while continuing to exploit its pressures artistically" (33). See also Stockinger's reading of *Americana* against Jean Baudrillard's *America*: "Ironically, the only one who succeeds is the author himself, who manages to create an artistic reflection of the world, a narrative which—in all its openness and 'undecidability'—presents the only valid alternative to the hegemony of a system or culture" (60).

messages from the figure David dubs "Trotsky" provide a corrective to the mediated excesses of the television network, in which "Words and meanings were at odds. Words did not say what was being said nor even its reverse" (36); in *The Names*, Tap's novel about the life of Owen Brademas rescues language from the murderous purposes of the Abecedarian cult; in *Mao II*, Bill Gray is able, in writing about a genuinely endangered writer, to recognize his own relative safety, and the power he wields, understanding at last that "There's a moral force in a sentence when it comes out right" (48). This interest in the power of linguistically-based narratives must not, however, be confused with an interest in *plot*; DeLillo has of course famously indicated in multiple novels the intimate relation between plot and death.[1] Thus, his focus in the later novels, particularly since *The Names*, on the legitimizing narratives of the late twentieth century—the Cold War, the Kennedy assassination, plots by nations, plots by terrorists—has tended to examine the uses of those narratives critically, arguing, as does Nicholas Branch in *Libra*, for their fundamental incoherence: in compiling such a narrative, "[i]t is impossible to stop assembling data" (59), impossible ever to create a unified sense of the whole of postmodernity. The only functional narratives in these novels are the local, the individual, the personal.

Underworld, the novel that many apparently consider the culmination of DeLillo's work[2], has largely been read for its concern with the sweep of the

1. See *Libra*: "There is a tendency of plots to move toward death" (221); see also *White Noise*: "All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots" (26), and "every plot is a murder in effect. To plot is to die, whether we know it or not" (291). Scanlan connects this deathward movement to the writer's own impotence: "What is left for the writer who cannot write, who has lost faith in literature, is the sterile impulse to make up stories and to bring the narrative of his life to that conclusion toward which a DeLillo character once argued that all plots tend—death" (243). I sense that this loss of faith is less in literature than in the *representative power* of literature, and that another, potentially liberating option exists in the escape from mimesis into the performative, where the "force" of sentences outweighs their truth value.

2. See Foran, who suggests that if a critic "had wondered aloud in 1997 whether Don DeLillo was done with fiction, the thought wouldn't have been so misguided. *Underworld* had that feeling."

Cold War, its breaking down of the legitimizing narratives of nations and its shift of focus to the waste those narratives have hidden from view. However, as I have argued elsewhere, the novel works to undermine the power of narrative in ways that exceed the postmodernist impulse toward delegitimization, that in fact point to the damage done by the narratives surrounding individual lives.[1] While *Underworld* toys with the conventions of the *bildungsroman*, it is fundamentally not a novel of self-making, but of self-unmaking. The immediate and apparent evidence of this interest not in the construction but rather the deconstruction of the liberal self rests in the novel's structural inversions; by beginning in the present and gradually retreating into the past, the novel problematizes the power of narrative to accurately tell any story, to adequately encompass any history.[2] This includes, most pointedly, the history of the self; while Nick Shay appears, in the novel's present to be a fully-formed, rational, sovereign individual, we come gradually to discover that this sovereignty is a kind of performative self-making, one which, as Butler might suggest, serves as compensation for the loss of agency that Nick realized in his deepest past.

Nick, we discover in the course of the novel, is a character composed of sedimented bits of stylized performance, most notably the enacting of a kind of faux-Mafia persona. This persona includes the movie-gangster growl he sometimes uses on his colleagues (87), repeated jokes about living like someone in the witness protection program (66), his assertion that the "*lontananza*" of the made man explains some fundamental steeliness of his character (275), and his conviction that his father was whacked by the mob (765-66). This persona serves him in two different regards: first, its emphasis on madeness—the power of the made man—not only lends him a species of personal authority, an intimidating presence, but points directly to his own agency in that process of self-creation. And secondly, relatedly, this Mafia-self allows Nick to reclaim the individual agency he lost in the basement

1. See "The Unmaking of History: Baseball, Cold War, *Underworld*."

2. Thus Tanner really does miss the point when he says of *Underworld* that "in a work of art, unless it is avowedly or manifestly aleatory, you usually feel that the scramblings and wrenched juxtapositions have some point... But—it may of course be my obtuseness—I just did not see the point of DeLillo's randomisings" (207-208).

room when he was coerced into becoming the means of another man's suicide. By performing the role of the made man, Nick is able both to claim an otherwise questionable sovereignty over that act and to ignore the ways in which his past has in fact unmade, rather than made him.[1] In this sense, Jesse Detwiler's claim about the founding of civilization holds for the founding of the individual as well. Rather than there being a pre-existing self that performs problematic actions, and thus one that can explain those actions in terms of motivation and causality, a "doer," in the Nietzschean sense, to precede the "deed," instead, the deed forces the creation of the doer: "Garbage comes first," as Detwiler points out, "then we build a system to deal with it" (288).[2]

Through this creation of an inauthentic self, a self produced via an accretion of normativizing speech acts, Nick's play with narrative reveals the fundamental connection for DeLillo between such narrative and the linguistic performative, one that seems to align with Derrida's intimate correlation of the illocutionary and the "parasitic," the citational. For the stories that Nick tells himself and others about his past are themselves performative rather than constative, to use Austin's distinction; they do not merely relate the truth of past events, but in fact create that truth. Moreover, these bits of performance are iterative in the Butlerian sense; the force of Nick's assumption of the Mafia persona arises not from one instance of such an utterance, but through their constant reinforcement. Thus, the story of his father's disappearance, told once as the narrative of a man whacked by the Mafia rather than that of a man who abandoned his wife and children has little force in

1. In a strikingly different reading, Helyer claims that Nick's Mafia-isms are not impersonations but simulacra, "relying on a standardized image to *pretend* to be what he actually *is* in a perceived escape from his roots" (1000). This reading requires taking Nick at his word when he suggests that the killing in the basement room "made" him, an interpretation that, given the novel's reversals, seems to me questionable, if thought-provoking.

2. Helyer, by contrast, argues that the self is constructed not in the management but in the rejection of its wastes: "*Underworld* confirms human identity as a fragile construct achieved only by disavowing valid parts of ourselves in the evacuation process defined by Kristeva as abjection" (990). This disavowal is not incompatible with the performative model of identity formation I suggest here, though it teeters near the edge of assuming a core self that can, even if wrongly, reject what it deems extrinsic.

the world; it is, like all such self-justifying, rationalizing narratives, merely a lie. In the constant reiteration of this story, however, a kind of reality is created, a selfhood for the teller. The most important element of this story for Nick is thus not its constative truth-value but its illocutionary force.

DeLillo signals, late in the novel, the potential that the reader might mistake one for the other, might conflate the presumed but inauthentic truth-value of narrative with the force of performance. This hint comes in Nick's own consideration of his life as *bildungsroman*, as a process of self-creation. After the discovery of the agency vacuum that exists at his center, he finds himself a "convert" to the correction system by which he is taken in:

> All that winter I shoveled snow and read books. The lines of print, the alphabetic characters, the strokes of the shovel when I cleared a walk, the linear arrangement of words on a page, the shovel strokes, the rote exercises in school texts, the novels I read, the dictionaries I found in the tiny library, the nature and shape of books, the routine of shovel strokes in the deep snow—this was how I began to build an individual. (503)

Nick seems here to understand his character as ensuing, in the best tradition of the *bildungsroman*, from the books he is reading, from the knowledge he is gaining in the correctional facility. In fact, however, the very structure of the passage undermines such a reading; the force of this passage for Nick's process of self-creation is not contained within the particularities of the texts he encounters—all of which are erased here, and are so interchangeable that even a dictionary would suffice—but rather for the reiterative nature of the routine. The shovel strokes, in their linearity and their iterability, are as much a factor, if not even more so, than the narratives that Nick reads. The power of the performative is such that Nick "builds an individual" not from the matter of the texts he reads but from the fact of his reading them, from their linearity, from the rote and the routine.

As *Underworld* regresses into the past, we gradually discover this individual that Nick has created to be an exercise in self-deception, an inauthentic self that restores to him a lost sense of agency and sovereignty. This, in the Butlerian view, is the normative, interpellative function of performativity; it

is, I would argue, more specifically the function of the linguistic performative. With Nick Shay, however, DeLillo announces his interest in the potential of performance, an interest more fully explored—particularly in its theatrical dimension— in *Valparaiso* and *The Body Artist*.

It is no accident, perhaps, given this apparent shift in DeLillo's interests, that his next published work should be a play. First performed by the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in January 1999, *Valparaiso* follows its central character, Michael Majeski, through a protracted series of media interviews that attempt to create a meaningful human interest story out of an odd set of misadventures in travel—setting out one morning for Valparaiso, Indiana, Michael instead found himself first in Valparaiso, Florida, and finally in Valparaiso, Chile. As DeLillo himself describes the play's import, "A man sets out on a routine business trip and when he returns everything is different. The way he and his wife talk to each other. The way they tell each other things, in public, they would never dare privately."[1] That this talk almost entirely takes place via the media, culminating in the second act in an extended appearance on an Oprah Winfrey-style talk show, has led many of the play's reviewers to comment on its connections to *White Noise*, and particularly to the novel's interest in the mediated construction of the contemporary American self.[2] I wish to approach the play from a slightly different angle, given its genre, and suggest instead that the play is about the role of performance in American identity creation, a role *assisted* but not wholly *mounted* by the media.

In *Valparaiso*, DeLillo confronts performance in its inevitably dual relationship with identity formation: performances both linguistic and theatrical, both discursive and embodied, both normative and subversive. In telling his story dozens of times, Michael comes, on the one hand, to construct a self, a subject position from which the story can be told:

1. DeLillo, "Looking for Valparaiso."
2. See, for instance, Siegel, in the *Boston Globe*, who argues that "*Valparaiso* may be the novelist's finest work since *White Noise*." See also Duvall, who connects the play to *Great Jones Street* and *Mao II* by reading it in part as DeLillo's return "once again to the fetishization and commodification of celebrity" ("Introduction" 559).

> MICHAEL: There's nothing I haven't spoken openly about. I've answered every question. I've answered some questions seventy, eighty, ninety times. I've answered in the same words every time. I do the same thoughtful pauses in the exact same places. We're dealing with the important things here. Our faith, our health. Who we are and how we live. And I'm beginning to think that people need my story. There's something in the symmetry of my mistake that shakes the heart and approaches a condition of wonder. (75)

In this reiteration of the details of his experience, Michael constructs and performs a center, an *actor*, who made the series of choices that led to his radical displacement to the opposite end of the earth. This constructed persona allows him, briefly, to think of his story as performing a service for *others*, who can find in his actions similar understandings of themselves.

But these actions are, more than anything, a series of *mistakes*, of failures, of infelicities. And in his increasing recognition that the self he is performing is not an *a priori* self, not a sovereign agent, but rather a consciousness created by and at the mercy of the collection of authorizing forces by which he is surrounded—airport security, airline personnel, and, most notably, media representatives and their dozens of technologies—Michael enacts a simultaneous and contradictory deconstruction of the persona he has built. The apparatuses of performance, both juridical performance, in the form of airport authorities, and theatrical performance, in the form of cameras, lights, tape recorders, studios, and production personnel, undermine his discursively lived self through the imposition of a theatrical character. The bulk of this deconstructive work takes place in the second act, in his extended appearance on Delfina Treadwell's daytime talk show. Michael begins his interview with Delfina in the reiterative mode of the earlier interviews, using the same phrases, the same glibnesses, the same constructed character that his series of mistakes seems to have produced. But Delfina, through a deft series of questions, assists in the process of breaking that self down, asking why, if this Michael to whom she is speaking existed during this adventure, he did nothing to correct his errors.

> MICHAEL: I felt submissive. I had to submit to the systems. They were all-powerful and all-knowing. If I was sitting in this assigned seat. Think about it. If the computers and metal detectors and uniformed personnel and bomb-sniffing dogs had allowed me to reach this assigned seat and given me this airline blanket that I could not rip out of its plastic shroud, then I must belong here. That's how I was thinking at the time. (86)

Michael's recognition of this powerlessness, of the thrall in which the interpellating forces of the contemporary social order hold him, produces an unspoken despair—unspoken because there is finally nothing at his core with which to speak it; despair because of the recognition that the only actions that the self he has constructed is capable of are mistakes—which leads to a brief, futile, and incomplete suicide attempt.

This suicide attempt, glimpsed on video at the play's opening, goes unmentioned in Michael's dozens of interviews, until he meets Delfina. Delfina—pointedly, the only of Michael's interviewers to be given a name, as though she were the sole possessor among them of a kind of selfhood—is not the oracle that her name invokes, transplanted onto daytime television. She is rather entirely composed of artifice, a walking theatrical performance. She wakes, she tells her sidekick Teddy, on the morning of the show, feeling "so totally unmyself," and yet this is no change from any other day, as she has no "myself" to feel: "Because this is my stark reality. I can't remember who I am" (65). She has become her performance to the extent that it is only before the audience that she acquires any kind of identity, suggesting, as Teddy points out, that she "draws literal life from her audience" (63), becoming an agent in the act of performing. Thus, in her interview with Michael, DeLillo stages a confrontation between the failures of the linguistically (and perhaps narratively) performed self and the power of the theatrically performed self. Delfina's conscious play of artifice, based upon her cool awareness that she has no core self, and can only create through her performance the illusion of selfhood, enables her to take charge of Michael, who wants to believe that the self that tells his story is stable and consistent. "Let me ease you toward

a sense of self-enlightenment" (95), Delfina purrs, and so gradually leads Michael to admit the meaninglessness, the absence of force, the final failure of the speech acts through which he has attempted to authorize his being:

> DELFINA: Up to that point. In the still center of your existence.
> TEDDY: In the penetralia.
> DELFINA: In the unpublished places. The hideaways.
> TEDDY: The hidey-holes.
> DELFINA: Day by day. Deepest night. Who were you?
> MICHAEL: I don't know what that question means. It's a joke question. The answer's *Boo*. Because there's no considered response that's nearly so apt as babble. How did I live? Out there, in the bump and run, I devised a kind of glancing man. Picnicked with the sales managers in the sheep meadow. For my wife, I built a husband, contractually bound. Loved and touched. Tossed the salad. But who was I? *Ga ga ga ga ga*. In the seams of being, nobody. In the final spiral strand, nobody, soul-lonely, smoke. (97)

Like Delfina, then, Michael is hollow at core, here forced into recognition that there was no doer that preexisted his deeds, no sovereign self to authorize his acts. The difference between these two characters, however, reveals the conflict between the linguistic or discursive performative and the theatrical performative. Michael, in the recognition of his fundamental decenteredness, his lack of subjectivity, is left with no other gesture but suicide: and even that act fails. Delfina, by contrast, with the awareness that her identity is literally artificial, based on artifice, and with the authority she draws from the audience that watches her, instead commits murder, strangling Michael with the mechanism of her performance.[1] Having wound the microphone cord around his neck, she coaxes him into one last reiteration of his story:

1. One might imagine here a connection to Murray Jay Siskind's assertion in *White Noise* that there are two kinds of people in the world, "killers and diers" (290). Duvall argues that Murray's logic is intentionally manipulative, seducing Jack Gladney toward his final, desperate act (see Duvall, "The (Super)Marketplace of Images," esp. 143-44), a manipulation that might be a comment on the corruption not just of postmodernism but of postmodernist theory as well. In Delfina's case, however, the divide between the murderer and the suicide seems less an indictment of an entire culture than of its modes of identity formation. The divide between the active and the passive replicates Kutnik's contrast between the performative and the mimetic; both may be deadly, but only one is successful.

> DELFINA: What does she say to you? Speak. Tell us.
> *Delfina grips Michael by the hair and eases his head back onto her shoulder. He does not resist.*
> MICHAEL: She says to me.
> *Together, her hands on his, they pull the cord tight around Michael's neck. He sinks down her body to his knees.*
> DELFINA: Why are you going to Chicago if your itinerary says Miami? (105-106)

In this final theft of Michael's line, the parasitic performance of his speech act, Delfina reveals the triumph of the theatrical. Throughout, Michael's speech acts have been produced and directed by the interviewers with whom he meets, saying "Be selective" (16), "Tell us everything" (17), "Look at the camera, not at me" (21), "Use the present tense, please" (22), "Give me faster" (28), "Make sense. We need you to make sense" (57). In response, Michael has been eminently pliable: "Do you want me to talk fast, slow—whatever" (41). But his performance is not fully theatrical until his lines are transformed into artifice, spoken by an actor with no intent of creating a coherent self from them. Delfina's performance is a recognition of the evacuation of the self and the inability of narrative to cope with that decenteredness. And while this example is horrifying, both in its assumption of the murderousness of performance and the abject state of the individual in its wake, there is nonetheless a potential for subversion, for a radical kind of freedom, in such a recognition. It only awaits the proper subject.

It is perhaps because the novel's critics expected an adherence to the principles of the narratively-organized self in a text claiming to be a novel that they found themselves so baffled in many cases by *The Body Artist*'s apparent skeletality. Thus we might understand Laura Miller's somewhat shockingly off-point criticism of DeLillo's style in the *New York Observer*: "No one writes more exhilarating set-pieces than Mr DeLillo, but he's not especially good with character and plot, something of a liability when it comes

to writing novels."[1] These assumptions—that character and plot are givens in the novel; that failure to find them is a flaw in the author, rather than the reader—reveal little more than Miller's own adherence to traditional conceptions of the relationship between literature and mimesis and the role of narrative in the production and understanding of individual subjectivity.[2] However, understanding the novel through the shift signaled by Nick Shay's relationship to the performative and through *Valparaiso*'s literal theatricality suggests that *The Body Artist*'s skeletal quality may result more from a shifting relationship to genre rather than any flaw in the novel itself. This skeletality enacts the theatrical performative both in its subject matter—Lauren's recovery of a sense of self through the evacuation of that self required by her performance art—and in its structure, its attenuations and evasions, which require that the reader in some sense perform the text in order to complete it.

The text's requirement of the reader is telegraphed by Lauren's own relationship to print: "She tended lately to place herself, to insert herself into certain stories in the newspaper. Some kind of daydream variation. She did it and then became aware she was doing it and then sometimes did it again a few minutes later with the same or a different story and then became aware again" (14). This insertion of self into story is less a reading than a performing of the text:

> You separate the Sunday sections and there are endless identical lines of print with people living somewhere in the words and the strange contained reality of paper and ink seeps through the house for a week and when you look at a page and distinguish one line from another it begins to gather you into it and there are people being tortured halfway around the world, who speak another language, and you have conversations with them more or less uncontrollably until you become aware you are doing it and then you stop, seeing whatever is in front of you at the time, like half a glass of juice in your husband's hand. (19)

1. Miller, "Eighteen Pages of Genius."

2. Saltzman makes a similar argument about Bawer's frustrations with DeLillo's characters' rather "unrealistic" dialogue: "can DeLillo's assault on predictability rightly be faulted for not living up to standards of verisimilitude?" (45-46). See Bawer.

These "uncontrollable" conversations suggest that Lauren's initial sense of "placing herself" into these newspaper stories is not wholly apt; she is less *placed* within them than *absorbed* by them, and she is less herself in them than she is a interlocutor, an actor, a performer playing a role: "Or you become someone else, one of the people in the story, doing dialogue of your own devising. You become a man at times, living between the lines, doing another version of the story" (20). Beyond Lauren's own relation to these stories, however, this idea's shift into the second person implicates the reader in such a performance, inviting the reader inside the text, to similarly enact a role within it. Thus, in the novel's first paragraph, when the reader is told that "you know more surely who you are" on a day after a storm, a day arguably at the chronological end of the novel, we are encouraged not simply to place ourselves in the text, but to find ourselves in it, to understand our *selves* to be as created by performance as Lauren's own.

Lauren's work, to which she gradually returns in the weeks following her husband's suicide, and which serves for her as a means of recuperating the self shattered by that death, reveals her performance to be, unlike Nick's or Michael's performances, not based in narrative, not linguistic, but rather wholly theatrical. Lauren begins with a recentering, a return to the body, to "her breathing exercises. There was bodywork to resume, her regimen of cat stretch and methodical contortion" (37). This contortion, though apparently physical, exerts control on both body and mind, the material and the immaterial self, suggesting the impossibility of their separation. And yet, the work that she does turns out to be a form of negation, an elimination of ego in favor of gesture: her bodywork, which includes "her slow-motion repetitions of everyday gestures, checking the time on your wrist or turning to hail a cab, actions quoted by rote in another conceptual frame, many times over and now slower and slower, with your mouth open in astonishment and your eyes shut tight against the intensity of passing awareness" (58), leads her out of the third-person and into the second, into an intersubjective openness. "Her bodywork made everything transparent," she suggests. "She saw and thought clearly, which might only mean there was little that needed seeing and not a lot to think about" (57).

In the midst of this resumption of her bodywork, Lauren discovers the odd little man living in her house, the man she dubs Mr Tuttle. Her discovery of and conversations with Mr Tuttle have by and large been taken by the novel's reviewers to constitute its plot,[1] but more important to the novel's overall sense, I think, is what Lauren *learns* from Mr Tuttle, and how she translates that knowledge into the performance that is reviewed in the novel's penultimate chapter. At first Mr Tuttle seems to have profound communicative difficulties, speaking only in dissociated fragments, but Lauren begins to understand those fragments as meaningful: "There was a certain futility in his tone, an endlessness of effort suggesting things he could not easily make clear to her no matter how much he said. Even his gestures seemed marked by struggle" (46). In listening to him, however, the strangeness of the man before her gives way to something else, something beyond him:

> He talked. After a while she began to understand what she was hearing. It took many levels of perception. It took whole social histories of how people listen to what other people say. There was a peculiarity in his voice, a trait developing even as he spoke, that she was able to follow to its source... It wasn't outright impersonation but she heard elements of her voice, the clipped delivery, the slight buzz deep in the throat, her pitch, her sound, and how difficult at first, unearthly almost, to detect her own voice coming from someone else, from him, and then how deeply disturbing. (50)

In Mr Tuttle's simultaneous absence of self and performance of others, in his near-catatonic identityless state and his flawless productions of her voice, and of her late husband's, Lauren finds the key both to her next performance piece and to theatrical performance more generally. His complete, perhaps schizophrenic, detachment from ego allows him to fully inhabit, without adopting, without trying to own, the voices by which he is surrounded. Lauren adopts this as a kind of method, both in her bodywork and in *Body Time*, the performance she ultimately creates.

1. See, for instance, Begley, in the *New York Times Book Review*: "What little plot there is in *The Body Artist* begins to unfold when Lauren discovers, in the empty third floor of her house, a man who may or may not have been there all along..." (12).

The critical response to this piece, written by Lauren's friend Mariella, seems to misunderstand the dislocation that her performance produces: "Hartke's work is not self-strutting or self-lacerating. She is acting, always in the process of becoming another or exploring some root identity" (105). The point of this performance is not the production of alternate identities, nor, after Lauren's intensive work, is there a "root identity" to explore; there is only the performance itself. Without the trappings of the self-authorizing linguistic performance, the narrative that creates the compensatory illusion of the centered, sovereign self, with the artifice of her painfully repeated and protracted gestures, Lauren instead hints at the decentered, fragmented, constructed state of all subjectivity. In this sense, Mariella's review has it right when she claims that Lauren's performance is "about who we are when we are not rehearsing who we are" (110); it is about the absence of core identity, about the power of the theatrical to subvert the daily normative rehearsals of linguistic performance and instead open up space for a genuine intersubjectivity, an understanding less of the self than of the other.

None of this is to suggest, however, that Lauren *loses* her self in the course of this performance. Her disappearance at the end of Mariella's review, a gesture that literalizes the kinds of disappearance that she performs in *Body Time*, is less a vanishing than an erasure, in the Derridean sense, a continuing presence under the mark of an intentional effacement. It is in this vein that Lauren says of herself in the final chapter, "I am Lauren. But less and less" (117); she is still present in the guise of this less-and-lessness, an elimination of self that produces not nothingness, but instead positive absence.

That this self-erasure largely takes place on the surface of Lauren's body, that her body is the surface upon which her performance plays, connects Lauren's theatrical performance to some of the unexplored implications of Butler's consideration of the performative construction of the materiality of the body in *Bodies That Matter*. In Butler's work, given her focus on the illocutionary production of the body, linguistic performance functions to regulate that body, to limit its possibilities, to normatively categorize bodies as thinkable or abject. In this manner, language constructs the materiality of the body; Butler's deconstructive work is largely aimed at breaking down

the regulatory functions of language, at thinking the unthinkable. However, theatrical performativity results in deconstructive work of another order, a subversion of regulation enacted through a subversion of the body itself. In Lauren's case, this subversion is at moments shocking, leading the reader to question Mariella's assessment of this work as not "self-lacerating." Two brief scenes of such "bodywork" appear in the novel; the first, but for an odd initial verb choice, begins by sounding merely hygienic or cosmetic:

> It was time to sand her body. She used a pumice stone on the bottoms of her feet, working circular swipes, balls, heels, and then resoaped the foot and twisted it up into her hand again. She liked to hold a foot in a hand. She patiently razed the lone callus, stretching the task over days, lost in it, her body coiled in a wholeness of intent, the kind of solemn self-absorption that marks a line from childhood. She had emery boards and files, many kinds of scissors, clippers and creams that activated the verbs of abridgement and excision. She studied her fingers and toes. There was a way in which she isolated a digit for sharp regard, using a magnifier and a square of dark cardboard, and there were hangnails flying and shreds and grains of dead skin and fragments of nail, scintillas, springing in the air. (76)

By the second passage, however, the implications of the choice of "sanding" begin to come into focus; Lauren is intent on scouring away all traces of the self:

> She wax-stripped hair from her armpits and legs. It came ripping off in cold sizzles. She had an acid exfoliating cream, hard-core, prescribed, and after she stripped the hair she rubbed in the cream to remove wastepapery skin in flakes and scales and little rolling boluses that she liked to hold between her fingers and imagine, unmorbidly, as the cell death of something inside her. She used a monkey-hair brush on her elbows and knees. She wanted it to hurt. She didn't have to go to Tangier to buy loofahs and orange sticks. It was all in the malls, in the high aisles, and so were the facial brushes, razors and oatmeal scrubs. This was her work, to disappear from all her former venues of aspect and bearing and to become a blankness, a body slate erased of every past resemblance. She had a fade cream she applied just about everywhere, to depigment herself. She cut off some, then more of the hair on her head. It was

> crude work that became nearly brutal when she bleached out the color. In the mirror she wanted to see someone who is classically unseen, the person you are trained to look through, bled of every familiar effect, a spook in the night static of every public toilet. (83-84)

This brutal exfoliation, the hair removal, the bleaching, the weight loss, all are aimed at the erasure of the "body slate," an erasure that Lauren insists, in her interview with Mariella, is not a destruction, but a new kind of writing: " 'The body has never been my enemy,' she says. 'I've always felt smart in my body. I taught it to do things other bodies could not. It absorbs me in a disinterested way. I try to analyze and redesign' " (105). But in this redesign, the body's own materiality must first be subverted. And, as Butler reminds us, one cannot intentionally *make* the body via performance; the body is made through its constitutive relationship with discourse. But one can *unmake* the body, and therein theatrical performativity lies. And thus the anorexic body of DeLillo's text; just as Lauren is literally "less and less," so is the text that performs her. By unmaking the text itself, DeLillo subverts the restrictions of mimesis, the restrictions of genre, and introduces a theatrical performativity to the novel.

In the final analysis, one must wonder, however, whether it is coincidental that DeLillo's turn to the liberatory possibilities for the subject and for the genre of the novel within theatrical performance is most strongly realized in his first novel to successfully imagine a female protagonist.[1] DeLillo's interest in the female artist, it must be acknowledged, does not begin with Lauren; Klara Sax, in *Underworld*, might be imagined as a sort of precursor. Klara, like Lauren, finds her art in a kind of self-abnegation; moreover, her culminating project, the reclamation and repainting of the bombers used in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, is itself a kind of performance, one that draws dozens into its creation, one that emphasizes the production of art from the

1. DeLillo's first female protagonist is arguably Cleo Birdwell, "author" of *Amazons*; comments on the relative success of this presentation will be left to the reader's imagination, given DeLillo's own refusal to acknowledge the text and his assistance in its suppression. See Nel's "*Amazons* in the *Underworld*," in which he interestingly reads DeLillo's *nom de plume* against Butler's mobilization of drag.

waste that is the underside of all cultural production.[1] Klara, however, in most critics' encounters with the novel, recedes a bit from view, leaving Nick Shay as the novel's clear center. Lauren's disappearance is not such a receding: she remains in our sight throughout the novel, despite her attenuations and etiolations.

One might ask further why this performative impulse in American culture, like so many others of the cultural dominants explored throughout DeLillo's fiction—film, television, consumerism, waste, assassination, terrorism—is imagined to liberate its female characters while so oppressing the men represented therein. Remember the differing fates of Delfina and Michael in *Valparaiso*, of course, but also Babette and Jack in *White Noise*, and, most pointedly, Brita and Bill in *Mao II*. Does this signal a more powerful adaptability to the contemporary on the part of the novels' female characters, or the corruption that their relationship with the dominant technologies brings? Do we read herein men's victimization by the forces of the contemporary, or their self-victimizing paralysis in the face of the new? In short, is this divide progressive or reactionary, to be embraced, or to be rejected?[2]

Much of DeLillo's writing, both the novelistic and the non-fictional, seems bent on obfuscating such easy political categorization, determined to make his work impossible to categorize ideologically.[3] That, however, DeLillo for the first time turns his work over in *The Body Artist* wholly to an imagination of a woman's psychology, that she is allowed the novel's greatest creative force *at the same time* that DeLillo first considers the liberatory aspect of performance seems no accident. In DeLillo, the female

1. On Klara's project as an exploration of the aesthetics of salvage, see Osteen 255.

2. On the politics of DeLillo's representations of imperiled masculinity, see Deardorff, "Dancing in the *End Zone*," and Kucich, "Postmodern Politics." By contrast, see Nel for a thorough reading of "DeLillo's growing recognition of gender as a social construct", in which he argues that "DeLillo is most successful at exposing gender's dependence on sets of social conventions when he treats masculinity or femininity as a performance, showing how those conventions may be susceptible to challenge and revision" (417). This reading of gender as performance, while not unaligned with Butler's work, does not treat the performative directly.

3. Such is in part the argument of a paper given by Jeremy Green at the 2002 Twentieth Century Literature Conference in Louisville, Kentucky. Thanks are due to him for his comments on an early version of this paper and for the insights that his own work has contributed.

has long been aligned with the corrupting, destructive forces of postmodernity; here instead we find a recognition that the attenuated position of the female in relation to the dominant modes of identity-formation—more constrained by others than self-made, more named than naming, more spoken than speaking—allows greater access to modes of subversion.[1] The female performance artist, the female body, the female text, all enable the escape from the constraints of mimesis, as well as the escape from the constraints of genre. In the rejection of the *bildungsroman*'s assumed modes of character-building and a turn instead to the deconstructive model of theatricalized performance, DeLillo unmakes the novel, challenging the reader to perform a new relationship to the text:

> Are you unable to imagine such a thing even when you see it? Is the thing that's happening so far outside experience that you're forced to make excuses for it, or give it the petty credentials of some misperception? Is reality too powerful for you? Take the risk. Believe what you see and hear. It's the pulse of every secret intimation you've ever felt around the edges of your life. (122)

Thus it is that Lauren, in throwing open the window at novel's end, is able to use the evacuation of ego that her actions bring to "tell her who she was" (124), such that, in performance, "you know more surely who you are" (7). Decentered, dismantled, unmade, both self and text take on new life. It is the novel, but less and less.

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1. This is by no means an unproblematic assumption, but one that could easily be used to re-other femaleness. See Engles, " 'Who Are You, Literally?' " for a reading of *White Noise* that problematizes this assumption with regard to race.

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