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Erick Sierra

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Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* explores the difficulty of its protagonist in defining his identity within wider American society. At moments, he comes close to merging with it, but the prospects turn threatening, as they do when he becomes "one with the mass" of Harlem rioters, "moving down the littered street," "my personality blasted" (550). His heroism lies in his ability finally to wrest himself from the social mass and to stand alone, a liberated consciousness. In contrast, notice how Saleem Sinai, of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980), succumbs to merger with the larger nation of India, disintegrating outward into "crowds without boundaries, growing until it fills the world":

I am alone in this vastness of the numbers, the numbers marching one two three, I am being buffeted right and left while rip tear crunch reaches its climax, and my body is screaming, it cannot take this kind of treatment any more....[W]atch me explode, bones splitting breaking beneath the awful pressure of the crowd, bag of bones falling down down down...only a broken creature spilling pieces of itself into the street, because I have been so-many too-many persons....Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust...suck[ing me] into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes. (532-533)

Whereas the *Invisible Man* isolates himself from a larger threatening society, Saleem is metabolized into its "annihilating whirlpool." In these stories, either the self contracts into an "I" without a world or explodes into a world without an "I." How, these scenes demand, do we imagine boundaries for a viable self? Although bearing a long complex history in the West, this question has taken on specific urgency in the wake of French poststructuralism, which undertook to devastate basic Western notions of what it means to be, or have, a "self," particularly ones arising from the Enlightenment. Indeed, Saleem has been read as figuring the poststructural self constituted in the national-symbolic fabric of India.<sup>3</sup> Within such a framework, how might we imagine the

boundaries, or spatialization, of “the self”? The Invisible Man tears the papers of racial identity imposed by American society, stripping himself down to a crystalline ego located within his room underground, but “where” is Saleem? Is he the only way of conceiving subjectivity within “the claustrophobic Foucaultian universe, where nothing exists except refractions of language and where the body is merely a passive recipient of oppressive social power” (Paglia B9)? In what follows, I would like to explore the ways in which some recent American literature is taking up the question of the human self—its definition, its boundaries, its relationship to the outside world—while seeking to steer clear of both the Invisible Man’s alienation and Saleem’s annihilation.

Critics such as John A. McClure and Amy Hungerford have altered the field of postmodern literary studies by accounting for a “re-enchantment of the world” in such authors as Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, Marilyn Robinson, Thomas Pynchon, and Tony Kushner, among others. McClure calls this literature “postsecular” “because the stories it tells trace the turn of secular-minded characters back toward the religious” and “because its ontological signature is a religiously inflected disruption of secular constructions of the real” (*Partial Faiths* 3). In McClure’s and Hungerford’s accounts, this late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century literature makes resource of a wide concatenation of religious frameworks—from Buddhism and the New Age, to Christian and Judaic mysticisms—in its turn away from secular-materialist constructions of the real. How does such infusion of religious imagination bear upon these texts’ conceptualization of subjectivity? My aim will be to explore a loose ensemble of texts articulating what Amy Hungerford accounts for as “postmodern belief.” Particularly through their turn to non-Western mystical traditions and improvised spiritual practices, they strive to imagine a self that unlike Saleem’s remains intact, but that unlike the Invisible Man’s enters into communion with the wider human world: an amplification of self that, stretching and finally exploding racial affiliation, ushers the self into more expansive matrices of social belonging.

## 1. Oxherding Tale

If the Invisible Man tears himself from humanity, Andrew Hawkins, of Charles Johnson’s novel *Oxherding Tale* (1982), tears himself in half. Hawkins is a half-black, half-white slave living in the antebellum south. Light-skinned, however, he faces the dilemma throughout the novel of whether to abandon his family’s black racial identification to “pass” for white. Framing racial differences as mutually irreconcilable —“Which we you talkin’ about?” “Whitefolks-we or blackfolks-we?” (25)—Andrew’s father can conceive of no viable middle ground, warning Andrew that if he ever dared side with the “white-man Devil” (24), “it’d be like turnin’ your back on me and everythin’ I believes in” (21). The problem is that when Andrew tries to identify then as black, he’s never black enough. Fellow slaves on the plantation turn suspicious: “You folks, I say, or white people?” Andrew responds, “Oh folks,” I assured him. “Definitely folks.” Not buying it, they turn hostile toward him: “You ain’t folks or white.” His eyes studied me. “You fresh meat, boy” (36). So when Andrew’s father dies, he flees the plantation and takes on a new life passing for white, marrying a white wife and assuming the identity of the respectable “William Harris.” But this only makes him feel like “My life was a patchwork of lies,” “My personality whipstitched

from a dozen sources" (139). He finds a life of passing impossible: "I can't *fake* that kind of belongingness, that blithe, numbed belief that the world is an extension of my sitting room" (109). In white America, Andrew feels like "The only Earthman stranded on a strange world," a racial "Red Planet" (160). Neither "owning" his blackness nor "passing" for white offers a socially or psychically viable existence for him; both force Andrew's tortured disavowal of half of his racial selfhood.

Given the antebellum historical context, Andrew's racial division leaves him at an identitarian impasse that demands that he choose one racial side over the other. Johnson uses this scene to dramatize what he takes to be the rules of identity-making. This is an either/or structuration that leaves no space for intermixture, resulting in what Diana Fuss in a different context calls "an indispensable interior exclusion—an outside which is inside interiority making the articulation of the latter possible" (2-3). Her concentric "inside/out" metaphor helps us schematize subjectivity as a sphere with internal contents, a "me," that takes shape through the exteriorization of its own "contaminated and expurgated insides": the "not-me" identifications it repudiates outward in order to conceive of the self as such (3). In Johnson's imagination, this entire process produces a fractured identity that results in psychic pain, or a particular kind of racial melancholia<sup>ii</sup>—what Franz Fanon describes in the transnational context as an "amputation," "an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood" (110). The process of racing produces a self "divided from itself, constituted from a difference within (and between) itself; a difference that at the same time determines its difference from another, supposedly outside itself" (Kirby 30). At one moment, Andrew, peering through a window into a white family's hearth, says: "I was thinking about setting their barn on fire." "The only reason I don't kill myself is because it doesn't seem worth the effort" (109). Andrew Hawkins cannot identify as both black and white, and the result is a split that makes him self-hating as well as hostile toward the whites with whom he fails to identify.

In response, the novel aims to forge a livable identitarian space for him. Johnson being a Buddhist who views *Oxherding Tale* as a dramatization of his Buddhist philosophies,<sup>iii</sup> his solution involves a reconceptualization of the self at its very ground. In the novel's astonishing climactic scene, Andrew, gazing on the body of the Soulcatcher, has a vision of himself (dis)integrating into a "mosaic" of surrounding energy:

[I]ntricately woven brown tattoos presented...an impossible flesh tapestry of a thousand individualities no longer static, mere drawings, but if you looked at them long enough, bodies moving like Lilliputians over the surface of his skin....[E]ven the tiniest of these thrashing within the body mosaic was, clearly, a society as complex as the higher forms.... [I]n this process of doubling, nothing was lost in the masquerade, the cosmic costume ball, where behind every different mask at the party—behind snout beak nose and blossom—the selfsame face was uncovered at midnight, and this was my father appearing briefly in the dead boy Moon as he gave Flo Hatfield [Andrew's nymphomaniac former slave owner] a goodly stroke and, at the instant of convulsive orgasm, opened his mouth as wide as that of the dying steer [that the Soulcatcher] slew in his teens, was that steer, then several others, and I lost his figure in this field of energy, where the profound mystery of the One and the Many gave me back my father again and again, his love, in every being from grubworms to giant sumacs, for these too were my father and, in the final face I saw in the Soulcatcher, which shook tears from me—my own face....I was my father's father, and he my child. (*Oxherding* 175-176)

While Saleem Sinai of *Midnight's Children* finally disintegrates into the vortex of the social, for Andrew “nothing was lost” as he is given back to himself, “my own face,” as an entity dynamically networked into a surrounding field of living Otherness: his former master Flo Hatfield, the slave catcher (Soulcatcher) whom he has fled the entire story, environmental flora and fauna, even his deceased father (recall that he had come to disidentify with his father, particularly on racial terms). Andrew is figured here not as a unitary entity detached from other such entities in space; rather his subjective fabric opens and expands materially into them in a perpetual “process of doubling.” How does this revelation speak to Andrew’s split racial self? Ultimately, this scene gives Andrew back to himself “beyond” race, revealing that on a ground level—ontologically<sup>iv</sup>—Andrew is black, white, neither of these, both of these, and even a vast plurality of identities he has never imagined. Andrew’s centrifugal constitution explodes any notions of a “self” contained neatly within the borders of a hard body, let alone a fixed race.

Johnson’s vision of selfhood is Buddhist all the way through (a point I will come back to below) and, as such, reconceptualizes what Charles Taylor calls “the punctual self” of secular modernity, a unit materially “buffered” from the surrounding world.<sup>v</sup> Taken this way, Johnson’s concept of human identity makes even the most radical “poststructuralist” notions of subjectivity seem conservative. One might make the comparison to Jacques Lacan here, for the scene above is fruitfully understood in dialogue with his notion of the “mirror stage.” For Lacan, the infant initially perceives the world as a visual blur with no self-other (self-mother) distinction. Psychic subjectivity forms when the infant sees its body reflected in the mirror as an object in space: a gestalt figure it then assumes as “the armor of an alienating identity” (6). Out of this visual economy the self emerges as a discrete object holding in spatial opposition to everything else out there—which is Other. Borch-Jakobsen elaborates the ways in which, for Lacan, “The erection of the ego is always the erection of a statue that I see, over there—triumphant, unshakable, fixed for eternity” (49). The bodily “statue in which man projects himself” serves (60), in this way, as template for personal identity: “I” am here inside my body. “You” are there, inside yours. Empty space separates us. This is precisely the subjectivity Johnson wants to unthink. His own alternative asks us to imagine selfhood as incorporating (literally, becoming of same flesh with) a dynamic panorama of living otherness: *I am (in) your body, and you are (in) my body. Living space unites us.* Andrew Hawkins’ final liberation is figured when, on the basis of this inclusionary anthropology, he is finally able to put to rest his striving for racial authenticity and simply allow himself to be. The reasoning for Johnson is Buddhist: Since racial categories say nothing of a person’s being, there is no conflict or contradiction in playing the role of black or “passing” for white, both being evanescent fictions. Charles Johnson casts a pointedly Buddhist transraciality<sup>vi</sup> as solution to Andrew’s racial fracture.

## 2. The Open Self

The postsecular imagination at work here drives *Oxherding Tale* down into the basic structures of the self and back out again into a Buddhist anthropological vision of the self as kinetic, integrative, and co-constitutive with the outer living world. This is a self that is neither the Invisible Man alone in his room, postured against a hostile world,

nor is it Saleem splitting in subjective dissolution. What Johnson offers instead is a self somehow itself yet also unfathomably inclusive. But Johnson's tale is hardly a fringe literary experiment undertaken by a Western secular discontent. We do not have to look far for other examples of postmodern literature availing itself of religious imaginative resources to reconceive of the self.

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997) explores the lives of a racially eclectic group of women who, each in her own way downtrodden, and each hailing from varied locations and lifestyles, find sorority together in a former Convent on the Oklahoma plain. Led by the elder Consolata, they engage in practices of spiritual healing. In one such practice, "loud dreaming," Mavis recalls traumatic memories of sexual violation, and the Convent women "step into" those memories and experience them collectively together with her. Their entrance into Mavis' trauma is not psychological, in the sense that an analyst pictures in her own mind the suffering of the analysand across the room. The Convent women "step into" her past in a metaphysically positive manner, enabling Mavis to re-live it and rewrite it through the empowering infusion of their collective empathy. In a similar possession ritual, the women paint outlines of their bodies on the floor; these serve as "templates" through which they can once again enter into the psychic damage of one another's pasts, exorcising persisting "demons." Gigi draws around the neck of her "template" a heart locket, long ago bequeathed by her father, that she has since lost; at the end of the story, the heart locket appears on her throat.

Charles Johnson and Toni Morrison first and foremost blur the material boundaries of the body so as to render it porous. The self is defined less around the material body than as some sort of perceptible yet permeable node of energy or potential. Moreover, as in *Oxherding Tale*, in *Paradise* this reconceptualization of the self makes way for much-needed forms of psychic reintegration. And, finally, even though both Johnson and Morrison live active lives within the American academy, they source their notions of identity in non-academic, non-Western religious imaginaries. Scaffolding her spiritual healing practices off of those used in the Brazilian folk spirituality Candomblé,<sup>vii</sup> Morrison asks why this possession religion offers any less serious or efficacious a vision of psychological subjectivity than those enclosed within the walls of academe. In making this move, Morrison actively resists a "public and scholarly life [that] forbids us to take seriously the milieu of buried stimuli" ("Memory, Creation, and Writing" 385). In *Paradise*, as in *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, these stimuli erupt from characters with metaphysical ebullience, defying strictly secular-materialist constructions of the real. The African-American community of her childhood, she recounts, "formed a kind of cosmology that was perceptive as well as enchanting." The "black people I knew had visitations and did not find that shocking and they had some sweet, intimate connection with things that were not empirically verifiable. It not only made them for me the most interesting people in the world—it was an enormous resource for the solution of certain kinds of problems" (qtd. in McClure 104). The open, permeable characters in *Paradise* offer an "enormous" imaginative "resource" indeed for thinking beyond alienated subjectivity—the Invisible Man buffered hard against a hostile world.

In addition, John McClure accounts for the postsecular turn, in Tony Kushner's play "Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes" (1992), from grand historical monotheistic traditions—Mormonism, Judaism—"to the unbounded, open-air

space of Central Park, where an informal congregation pursues political and religious knowledge with the help of an unordained teacher, Prior" (13). Bound up in this turn to more open-ended "preterite spiritualities" is an articulation of a self that, like Johnson's and Morrison's, is permeable. A gay male living in 1980s New York City, Prior, the play's protagonist, has AIDS and is abandoned by his partner Luis. In the play's "Mutual dream scene," "Prior is at a fantastic makeup table, having a dream, applying the face. Harper is having a pill-induced hallucination. She has these from time to time. For some reason, Prior has appeared in this one. Or Harper has appeared in Prior's dream. It is bewildering"(1:30). These stage directions befuddle our ability to determine whether Harper is in Prior's dream or Prior is in Harper's, literally dislocating subjectivity. Harper and Prior are thrust into an experience of mutual non-recognition: Harper: "Who are you?" Prior: "Who are you?" Harper: "What are you doing in my hallucination?" Prior: "I'm not in your hallucination. You're in my dream." Harper: "There must be some mistake here. I don't recognize you" (1:31). This scene speaks powerfully to the spatial structuration of human subjectivity. Where might we say Prior is located here? Is he in front of the "makeup table"? or in his bedroom sleeping? or is all of this located in fact within Harper's psychic hallucinatory dreamscape? Within such a subjective house of mirrors, how do we speak of where self ends and other begins? "Americans," Kushner argues in the play's "Afterword," "pay high prices for maintaining the myth of the Individual" (2:149). "And maybe in this spacious, under- and depopulated, as yet only lightly inscribed country, the Individual will finally expand to its unstable, insupportably swollen limits, and pop" (2:150); culminating finally in "the painful dismantling, as revolutionary necessity, of the individual ego" (2:151).

Finally, no discussion of postmodern literary spirituality and subjectivity could exclude DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), where the self takes shape arguably at its most open, porous, and energetic. The vision this novel casts is of a self constituted in energy that radiates through and beyond the material body. When Jack's wife Babette appears on a local television broadcast, her psychic energy pulses from the screen and through the room as "Waves and radiation. Something leaked through the mesh. She was shining a light on us, she was coming into being...as the electronic dots swarmed. We were being shot through with Babette. Her image was projected on our bodies, swam in us and through us. Babette of electrons and photons, of whatever forces produced the gray light we took to be her face" (105). As in *Oxherding Tale*, the outer world of *White Noise* is defined not by empty space but by bustling psychic life. "Isn't it all a question of brain chemistry," Gladney's son asks, "signals going back and forth, electrical energy in the cortex," forming a dispersed "level of energy composed solely of the dead?" (98). Accordingly, when at the novel's climax, Jack Gladney, possessed of a rage, hunts down the character Willy Mink, "I sensed I was a part of networks of structures and channels. I knew the precise nature of events. I was moving closer to things in their actual state as I approached a violence, a smashing intensity" (305). "I could feel the pressure and density of things. So much was happening. I sensed molecules active in my brain, moving along neural pathways" (306). This internal neural intensification generates a heightened awareness of the "extrasensory material" (309) swirling about in the form of ambient "psychic data" (36-37): "I heard a noise." "Great stuff everywhere, racing through the room, racing slowly." "White noise everywhere." "Things began to glow, a secret life rising out of them." "I saw things new" (308-312). In this scene, not only does Gladney gain awareness of a world bright with psychic—indeed human—energy, but

also experiences his own subjectivity as part of the same metaphysical cloth. And as it does for Johnson and Morrison, this vision arises out of DeLillo's own "sense of [a] transcendence that lies just beyond our touch." As DeLillo put it in an interview, "I think it is something we all feel, something we almost never talk about, something that is almost there" (DeCurtis, "An Outsider" 52). So "In *White Noise* in particular, I tried to find a kind of radiance in dailiness." "Is it really there? Well, yes" (DeCurtis, *In Other Words* 440).

### 3. Singing the Body Electric

Taken together, these representations give shape to a particular kind of open self: Johnson's self expanding and "doubling" out of itself, Morrison's interfusion of embodied psyches, Kushner's dislocated selves relocated into each other, and the interpenetrating "waves and radiation" of DeLillo's selves. While I would ultimately like to make some suggestions as to the racial politics at work here, it might behoove our overall discussion first to consider how we might situate these representations within a broader genealogy of American writing and thinking.

Is this self not simply the non-unitary modernist self of Faulkner and Joyce? In the early part of the twentieth century, modernist writers sought to represent psychological subjectivity as "elusive, indeterminate, multiple, often implausible, infinitely various and essentially irreducible" (McFarlane and Bradbury 81).<sup>viii</sup> Brian McHale reminds us, however, that postmodern writers tend to background psychological/epistemological concerns for those of ontology (6-11). What McHale calls the "ontological dominant" of postmodernism also applies to the texts analyzed here: Johnson, Morrison, and DeLillo seem less preoccupied with the human as fragmented, like a Picasso painting, than with one whose ontology is structured a certain way. The open structure of the self is less a problem to solve or a fate to endure here than, as Morrison says, "an enormous resource for the solution of certain kinds of problems" and a gateway "opening doors to all sorts of things" (Jaffrey 1). As such, these texts might be seen as engaging in a mode of mimesis distinct from the metaphors of psychological fragmentation traditionally attributed to earlier-century modernists. Charles Johnson, as I have noted, is a committed Buddhist who does not blush to assert, as he does in *Turning of the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing*, that he intends his writing to lay out the Buddhist path. Toni Morrison takes seriously the spiritualist modalities of as much "the black people I knew" growing up as also the Afro-Brazilian practitioners of the religion Candomblé. And in *White Noise* DeLillo reaches out toward the "radiance," the "sense of transcendence," "that lies just beyond our touch" (DeCurtis 52). The porous protagonists in these stories emerge out of precisely such species of religious imagination.

If not in modernism, where else might we locate a back-history for these selves? In *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, Jeffrey Kripal offers a helpful history of the energetic self as it was inscribed and practiced in American countercultural religion. In doing so, he traces the energetic self back to the writings of the American Transcendentalists. Kripal reminds us that, far from being a recent innovation, such imaginaries of self can be seen sprouting in the soil of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855): "the soul is not more than the body, / And I have said that the human body is not more than the soul, / And nothing, not God, is greater to one than



one's-self is" (qtd. in Kripal 466). Like my postmodern authors, Whitman writes the human as participating in the material ontology of the other ("I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you") as well as in the material ontology of Nature ("I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles" [qtd. in Kripal 466]). In Whitman, "Nature without check with original energy" charges "the body electric," uniting it with the outer living cosmos such that the "leaf of grass" to which the poetic persona "bequeath[s]" himself is "no less than the journeywork of the stars" (ibid.). This bears, I think, upon the postmodern writers in question here. Entering into dialogue with a Transcendentalist vision of selfhood through reference to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Kushner writes his angel as a "divine emanation" whose "Utter Flesh" emits powerful energy, an "infinite aggregate myriad entity" (2:46), "four divine emanations...manifest in One" (1:3). Quoting Emerson, the angel warns: "Hiding from Me one place, you will find me in another. I I I I stop down the road, waiting for you" (2:46). (If we want her again, might we look for her under our bootsoles?)

According to Kripal, the earlier Transcendentalist variant of this self was mobilized into the twentieth century through a loose yet discernible subcultural ensemble that included the "New Age," neopaganism, the occult, Wicca.<sup>ix</sup> In the 1960s these American religious countercultures found an institutional home in California's Esalen Institute, where the energetic self was modified in three important ways. First, Esalen intellectuals synergized it with homologous Hindu and Buddhist understandings of selfhood. Fritjof Capra recounts, in *The Tao of Physics* (1975), experiencing "cascades of energy coming down from outer space," "the atoms of the elements and those of my body participating in this cosmic dance of energy; I felt its rhythm and I 'heard' its sound, and at that moment I *knew* this was the Dance of the Shiva, the Lord of Dancers worshipped by the Hindus" (304). Secondly, this thinking took a "Tantric turn" which looked "to the sexual body as the most potent site of spiritual enlightenment and occult energy" (19). The body was conceptualized as locus of sexual energies that sing together with the erotic vibrations of other bodies across space. In a manner evocative of this "enlightenment of the body," while in bed one night Prior is "contacted" by a distant angel as her body telekinetically excites his to sexual arousal. Mike Nichols' film version depicts that angel's libidinal energy pulsating across the room and drawing the prudish Hannah up into the air with "a long, hot kiss," inducing in her an "enormous orgasm" (2:118). They never physically touch, for it is "Not Physics but Ecstasies Makes the Engine Run" (2:39). By persistently forging such ecstatic and erotic communicabilities between angelic and human corporeality, Kushner imagines the self as networked into a larger intercorporeal libidinal-energetic dynamism.

Thirdly, Esalen intellectuals suffused their Tantric vocabularies with imagery arising from signals-processing technology. F.W. Myers imagined the brain as a kind of television or radio antenna that transmitted energy outward into the world while reciprocally receiving energy into itself from the world (Kripal 443-5). Albert Hofmann repeated this "transmission thesis" in his 1983 Esalen lecture "The Transmitter-Receiver Concept of Reality." Likewise, Don DeLillo, writing *White Noise* the same year Hofmann was articulating this theory, suffused his novel with imagery of human psychic subjectivity networked across vast technological circuits—from radios and televisions, to ATM and CAT Scan machines (recall, for instance, Gladney experiencing

his wife's "spirit...released by the power of technology, set free to glide through wavebands, through energy levels" pulsing from "the fluorescent screen" [104]).

All in all, Jeffrey Kripal's cultural history might serve as an important bridge for connecting the back-history of the more recent postmodern texts I explore, for the subjectivities they imagine bear the markings of both the religious mystical vocabularies as well as technological imagery that the self accreted at Esalen. With Whitman in the deep background, argues Kripal, the open energetic self "begins in the 1950s, explodes in the '60s, develops in the '70s, and matures in the '80s and '90's" (20). The American literature I take up here, written between 1982 and 1998, suggests itself as lying roughly within this trajectory of American cultural history. In 1992, Esalen founder Michael Murphy called his fiction "mystical realism" (272). Indeed, it becomes hard not to view these postmodern writers as carrying residues of this mystical realism to the very edge of the twentieth century.

## 4. (E)racing the Human

This historical connection, however, thrusts us immediately into questions of race. For the 1960s Esalen counterculture was overwhelmingly white, upper-middle class, and male (289).<sup>x</sup> In a scathing 1975 *Harper's* piece, Paul Marin called the American mystical subculture "The New Narcissism," arguing that it fostered a "worship of the self" in which "life...gives way to an abstraction" and "The web of reciprocity and relation is broken. The world diminishes. The felt presence of the other disappears, and with it a part of our own existence" (48). Marin was remarking upon an attunement to the metaphysical that was not translating, in his view, into attunement to the socio-economic. "The mystical," he argues, "is not ethical" (288). How might a Jungian transpersonal "web of interconnectivity" include those "who harvest in inhumane conditions the coffee and sugar we take in the mornings" (56)? As was spray-painted at Esalen's entrance in 1990, all this mystical talk was just "Jive shit for rich white folk" (Kripal 400). Cultivating self-centered, even hedonistic, forms of consciousness, the American spiritualist counterculture failed to give its mystical imaginaries the legs of social and political praxis.

Johnson, Morrison, Kushner, and DeLillo take up the energetic self in order to press precisely against such culturally inscribed narcissisms. In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney hunts down Willy Mink, propelling the plot toward a racial violence that has persistently befuddled critics.<sup>xi</sup> What qualifies Mink for violence is his persistent racial indecipherability: "What kind of name is Willy Mink?" "Did he speak with an accent?" (305). "His face was odd, concave, forehead and chin jutting" (306). "His nose was flat, his skin the color of a Planter's peanut. What is the geography of a spoon-shaped face? Was he Melanesian, Polynesian, Indonesian, Nepalese, Surinamese, Dutch-Chinese? Was he a composite?...Where was Surinam?" (307). A persistent racial strangeness pervades the novel, leading to the dissemination of non-white characters "throughout Gladney's landscape as" little more than "a kind of 'white noise,'" an amusing "sideshow" (Cunningham 102). This racial incomprehension makes Mink the deserving scapegoat<sup>xii</sup> for a "slow and agonizing death" (312); Gladney will "reduce him to trembling" (310), "fire three bullets at his midsection for maximum visceral agony" (309), "blast him in the gut," then "put the gun in his hand to suggest a lonely man's suicide"—"this weary pulse of a man" (306, 307).

We might read Gladney's violence as dramatizing what Michael Fishbane calls a "breach" of "attunement," an "interpersonal infringement":

For evil occurs along a hermeneutic spectrum. It may begin somewhat innocuously, with a forgetting or obscuring of one's primary hermeneutic responsibility—perhaps through the inurements of habit or self-centeredness. One expression of this is indifference. Such an attitude may lead to disregard—perhaps for similar reasons. The result is a more deliberate turning away from the other person. All such moments may result in interpersonal or social dis-ease, and may corrode into malign acts of disruption or deliberate destruction. Each act along this spectrum thus effects a different rending of worldly co-habitation, a different effacement of the human presence that has solicited me and my being. Thus ethics may be thought of as involving attunements of intentional co-regulation, for the sake of transforming the world into communities of value through reflective acts of inter-subjective interpretation.

Fishbane describes a posture of "indifference" and "disregard" toward another "human presence" that can corrode ultimately into "deliberate destruction" (n. pag.). If American mystical countercultures were accused of inter-racial indifference and disregard, we find this posture degenerating in *White Noise* into outright racial violence. It is my sense that the stories under discussion here want to speak to this problematic, however, and that they do so primarily by deploying representations of the self as open and porous in order to bore open pathways of hermeneutical visibility beyond the raced self through moments of mutual interface culminating in powerful cross-racial attunement. In *Oxherding Tale*, recall the ways in which Andrew Hawkins identifies with a Buddhist image of himself, and how this empowers him to re-envision himself as more vastly inclusive than strict "black" and "white" categories can encompass. In *White Noise*, DeLillo experiments with analogous images of subjective opening; if Gladney's racial violence is situated within a larger structuration of the self as buffered from and antagonistic toward the racial Other, then the novel reformulates Gladney's subjectivity so that it becomes profoundly continuous with that of Willy Mink's.

Gladney's physical sensorium turns translucent as he enters into a mystical awareness of "Great stuff everywhere, racing through the room, racing slowly," "white noise" in the surrounding atmosphere (310). This gives him an awareness of his collusion with the "waves and radiation" racing through the world, the psychic "stuff" of which both he and Mink are mere strands. On the strength of this awareness, Gladney rediscovers himself, in a stunning turnaround, as continuous not only with the world around him but also with Mink. Desisting from violence, Jack now can

look at him. Alive. His lap a puddle of blood. With the restoration of the normal order of matter and sensation, I felt I was seeing him for the first time as a person....Compassion, remorse, mercy....This was the key to selflessness, or so it seemed to me as I knelt over the wounded man, exhaling rhythmically in the littered street....Get past disgust. Forgive the foul body. Embrace the whole. (313-314)

Jack's experience of himself as part of a larger ineffable whole begins to structure an ethical posture of compassion, however incipiently, toward Willy Mink. Passing through the gateway of open selfhood, Andrew Hawkins can embrace his divided raciality; Gladney passes through the same gateway into a cross-racial ethical attunement that empowers him to "see" Willy Mink "for the first time as a person." The energetic constitution of the self renders Gladney open and continuous with Mink in a manner that dissolves racial difference as pretext for violence. These writers take

up the open energetic self in this manner to transcend race, ontologically interfusing selves across and beyond racial divides. The mystical, here, wants to become ethical.

A line of movement begins to emerge: from disregard, through a reimagination of the self as open and energetic and continuous with the other, toward the transcendence of noisome racial-identitarian categories. Tony Kushner's play "Angels in America" traces a similar line of movement. The play has become something of a poster child for postmodern multicultural literature, particularly for how it brings mutually conflicting identifications into violent collision with one another.<sup>xiii</sup> The story probes the ways in which difference along its various vectors—political ideology (Republican/Democrat), sexuality (gay/straight), religion (Mormon/ Jewish/atheist), and finally race—transforms the other into an object of aggression. Joe, a white conservative Republican from Utah, and Luis, a Jewish northeast liberal Democrat, enter into a romantic relationship that only intensifies their differences:

Louis: But the Republican party...

Joe: Responsible for everything bad and evil in the world.

Louis: Throw Reagan in the pile and you're not far off.

Joe: If people like you didn't have President Reagan to demonize where would you be?

Louis: If he didn't have people like me to demonize where would he be? ....

Joe: I'm not your enemy. Louis.

Louis: I never said you were my...

Joe: Fundamentally, we both want the same thing.

Louis: I don't think that's true. (2:71)

Joe attempts to appeal to what unites them—"Fundamentally, we both want the same thing"—but Louis reasserts their mutually exclusionary identifications. Their relationship devolves into a full-on fist fight and then ends. Joe being white and Luis Jewish, race here is simply one part of a larger matrix of difference that preoccupies Kushner throughout the play. The Jew/Gentile dialectic is given another racial layer through the character Belize, whom the Jewish Roy Cohn calls, "The Negro night nurse," "my negation," to which Belize retorts, "Everything I want is in the end of you" (2:75). Roy Cohn is a hyper-conservative Jew and Belize a liberal Christian Afro-Caribbean,<sup>xiv</sup> race synergizing together here with sundry identitarian markers to foment the hostile dynamic of mutual "negation" that drives the play.

Much has been said about the play's reconciliation of characters across such opposing identifications, particularly at the play's closing scene, where they come together at Central Park's Bethesda Fountain to figure an eclectic "harmony-in-diversity and diversity-in-harmony" (Savran 31). But what role does the open energetic self play in this community-making? The protagonist, Prior, a gay liberal male from New York City, is abandoned by his lover Luis shortly after being diagnosed with HIV. The play's "*mutual dream scene*" thrusts him into unexpected proximity with a straight Mormon woman from Salt Lake City. Not only have they never met before, but they would have had little occasion to come within meaningful proximity to each other. Yet in this scene they erupt in each other's inner psychic landscapes. Prior appears in Harper's hallucination. "*Or Harper has appeared in Prior's dream. It is bewildering*" (1:30). Whatever the case may be, from such a vantage point of mutual indwelling, "You can see things...[like] how sick you are." The mutual dream scene enables them to literally *see* each other for the first time. "Do you see anything about me?" Harper asks (1:33). Prior responds, "You are amazingly unhappy." He then adds, shockingly, that "Your husband's a homo." While Harper is initially taken aback by

this, she concedes that an extraordinary form of knowledge is at work here, and she takes Prior's word as if it were that of a prophet. This is because "I just looked at you, and there was"—and here Harper finishes his sentence: "A sort of blue streak of recognition...Like you knew me incredibly well" (1:34).<sup>xv</sup> The experience of suddenly finding themselves dwelling in each other's interiority erodes and ultimately deconstructs the barriers of difference that would otherwise keep them estranged, a Mormon woman and a gay male.

At the end of the play, at the feet of the Bethesda angel in Central Park, a tiny congregation of loved ones surrounds Prior to address his suffering. The community is a racial mosaic: a middle-aged white Utah Mormon (Hannah), a thirtysomething atheist liberal New York Jew (Luis), and a gay male of Afro-Caribbean descent (Belize). In the play's undertaking to bore holes across identitarian differences, it uses among its strategies the imaginative technology of open interpenetrative selfhood, ultimately cohering a cross-racial white/black/Jewish community around Prior. *Oxherding Tale*, *Paradise*, *White Noise*, and "Angels in America" similarly amplify the boundaries of the self far and wide enough to place antagonistic identifications, first and foremost race, under erasure. Because of its efforts to pry open transracial access ways of ethical belonging, I read this literature as chastening the narcissism of earlier mid-century American mysticisms, instantiating this longer history of energetic anthropology to render it serviceable to contemporary American race politics.

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## NOTES

i. While Wendy Faris reads this scene as figuring the "idea of multiple or mobile identity" (Ordinary Enchantments 25), Santiago Juan-Navarro goes further to read Saleem in the tradition of the third-world hero whose personal biography parallels that of the state. Saleem is thereby synecdoche of the nation/culture/people of India, and his personal fate not only parallels but is materially co-constitutive with that of the state.

ii. In *Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler builds on Sigmund Freud's theory on "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) to account for the archaic losses that shape and gender the ego. In using the term melancholia here, I follow David Eng's application of this concept to race in *Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas*. Here he explores the extent to which the transnational adoptee, to become "American," must renounce an entire constellation of former racial identifications. The process of transnational adoption, for Eng, subjects the adoptee to a state of loss, a loss that, for being irrecoverable, turns into melancholia—what for Freud on through Eng is a deeply painful, internally violent disposition.

iii. Charles Johnson is emphatic about the religious vision charging his novels. His book *Turning of the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing* illuminates the ways in which *Oxherding Tale* allegorizes the Buddhist path to enlightenment. Jonathan Little explores Johnson's Buddhism further in *Charles Johnson's Spiritual Imagination*.

iv. I use the term ontology here with Brian McHale in mind, who identifies it a key feature of postmodernist fiction. He uses the term "ontological opening" to describe what unfolds in postmodernist fiction on the level of the cosmic. "Ontological opening" has to do with the opening of one domain of reality upon another, a proliferation or mutual collision or interpenetration of ontic domains across an ontologically plural landscape (McHale 26-40). Another way of saying this is that in postmodern fiction worlds cease to be mutually sealed off from one another and can become porous and even enter into mutual osmosis. My sense is that we could extend McHale's analytic to describe an opening, in the stories I explore, not only of worlds but also of selves.

v. Charles Taylor offers powerful resource with his account of the emergence, in *A Secular Age*, of a "buffered" self. In distinction to a "porous" self vulnerable to possessions and spells and augurs and prophetic voices, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century secularity gave shape to a self "buffered" from the exterior world (35-43). The "porous" self was one whose "inner" mental content was bound up in a world teeming with forces—demons, angels, spells and incantations, relics suffused with power; these "external" phenomena interacted directly with the "inner" mind in a way that rendered our modern "inside/outside geography" unthinkable. The more secularized definitions of "buffered" selfhood were spatialized around the body, which came to serve as a material buffer demarcating the new "inner" content of mind from the new "outer" content of world (31-43). In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor describes this modern individual as a discrete object in space (159-176). In the writing of John Locke and the other architects of the modern, this gives way to a "subject who can take...radical distance of disengagement to himself or herself with a view to remaking [in] what I want to call the 'punctual' self" (171). Brough McPherson has famously called the notion of selfhood that emerges "possessive individualism": the self that possesses itself as an object of property.



vi. I am tempted to use “postraciality” here. It seems to have gained a certain fashionability in discussions on race in America in the twenty-first century—one thinks of the 1993 *Time* magazine article on “The New Face of America,” which featured a computer-generated image of a post-white American of hybrid racial make-up, the 2009 *Atlantic* article celebrating “The End of White America,” and Fareed Zakariah’s diagnosis, in *The Post-American World*, that we are currently experiencing the third “tectonic power shift” of the past 500 years: “the rise of the rest” (1-3). These racial “posts” carry with them a certain rhetorical power that it is not within the scope of my study to explore. In using “transracial” instead, I seek to avoid the sense of linear progressivity implied in “post”: a movement away from confining identitarian structures toward a liberatory post-racial space. I do not believe that this teleological thinking could be ascribed to Charles Johnson, especially given the long history of Buddhist notions of identity, which may be understood as anterior to or running side-by-side secular modernity but by no means coming progressively “after” it.

vii. McClure cites Morrison criticism that points out the extent to which these spiritual practices “resemble those identified with Candomblé, the Brazilian religion that draws on both African sacred traditions and on Catholicism” (*Partial Faiths* 115).

viii. McFarlane and Bradbury show how modernist writers such as William Faulkner, Ford Madox Ford, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf represent the psyche through a narrative “emphasis on fragmentation” (80) while seeking to imposing “order” through the cohering power of art (92).

ix. For more on this, see Sarah Pike’s studies *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* and *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves*.

x. Kripal elaborates: “Colored bodies are not well represented on the [Esalen] grounds,” and “most bodies simply cannot afford an Esalen massage or a trip to Big Sur” (463).

xi. DeLillo criticism has sought to account for Gladney’s aggression toward Mink mainly in terms of cultural, linguistic, and spiritual conditions (see Cornel Bonca, Leonard Wilcox, and McClure *Partial Faiths*). But this criticism, I feel, does not go far enough in explaining why this violence is so deliberately racialized. Tim Engles and Jonathan Little, in my view, offer the most useful racial analytic, describing how Gladney imagines his whiteness as raceless and so has to produce otherness through violent forms of racialization.

xii. Matthew Packer uses this term to account for Gladney’s violence through a Girardian dynamic of mimetic desire and violence. Although I question Packer’s use of René Girard as providing a comprehensive framework for describing Gladney’s violence, I find the term “scapegoat” useful here.

xiii. See Savran for an insightful exploration of—and challenge to—the pluralist claims of the play.

xiv. Muñoz offers us a useful outline of Belize’s racial profile: “A black man with a Hispanic surname (Arriaga), Belize probably comes from a Caribbean country such as Cuba, Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico (we have to remember that in *Millennium Approaches*, Belize brings Prior voodoo ointment from ‘some little black Cubana witch in Miami’ [43]). From a Latin milieu, Belize was probably raised a Catholic. In addition, Prior refers to Belize at one moment in the play as a ‘Christian martyr’ (1992: 45), or Roy depicts him as ‘you people had Jesus so the reds never got to you’ (1994: 11)” (Muñoz 13).

xv. It bears noting the ways in which the language of “revelation,” “recognition,” and mutual sight/insight, besides speaking to identity, invokes the question of epistemology as well. What can we know about the Other, and how? I am currently pursuing another study of precisely such moments of “revelatory” interface in postmodern literature. If the larger postmodern project critiqued certain (metanarrative/rationalist/discursive) modes of knowing, how do such face-to-face encounters propose alternative epistemological modalities? And do these perpetuate or resist postmodernism’s famed skepticism?

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## ABSTRACTS

Twentieth-century literature and theory have offered no shortage of challenges to the unity of personal identity. What such undertakings leave largely unquestioned, however, is the prevailing understanding of the individual as sealed within the circumference of the physical body. Emerging from a matrix of “postsecular” texts—by Don DeLillo, Charles Johnson, Tony Kushner, Toni Morrison—is a counter-argument to such a notion of selfhood. This paper explores the ways in which this recent American literature re-imagines the human self as porous and energetic and capable of deep inter-ontological communion with other open selves across space. Drawing upon a rich history of the “energetic self” in the American imagination, this literature uses the open self as gateway to forms of intersubjective attunement and cross-racial identification that ultimately transcend nefarious racial-identitarian categories.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** American literature, energy mysticisms, identity, postsecular, race, subjectivity

## AUTHOR

**ERICK SIERRA**

Trinity Christian College