White Violence and Spectral Blackness in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*

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ABSTRACT: Don DeLillo's work is often framed as a visionary and ethical reflection on contemporary crises. Such reception redoubles an idea of white American farsightedness and morality that is already embedded in many of DeLillo's stories—most recently in his 2016 novel *Zero K*. The following article challenges celebratory rhetoric surrounding this narrative both in terms of how texts work to position DeLillo in the line of American writers who address and thus metaphorically dismantle social evils, and how these texts enable visions of American heroism and transcendence despite and due to narrative exclusions, politics of exclusion, and repeated legitimization of white supremacy. I signal towards long-disregarded anti-blackness in DeLillo's oeuvre, and consider some of its pronunciations in *Zero K.* I thus analyze some of the techniques and technologies through which DeLillo's novel prolongs narratives of white supremacy.

KEYWORDS: White Supremacy, Anti-Blackness, Orientalism, Don DeLillo, Narrative, *Zero K*

Out of the Shadows

There is nothing original in ending a story with light on the horizon, characters facing or moving towards it, the light flashing as a promise for a brighter future. For Toni Morrison, this "light" motif, which happens to be a symbol of whiteness, concludes a great number of American fictions (32-4). Don DeLillo's most recent novel, *Zero K,* makes no exception. At the end of a rather bleak story, the main character stares at the light ahead. This is a promising ending for a man who has looked for answers throughout the entire story and has seen the darkness of a dying, war-torn world. Armed conflicts may not be resolved in *Zero K*, but there is still hope.

A cult of scientists has discovered a cure for death. For Jeffrey, light flickers stronger than hope and has something godly about it (274). He is on the winning side of history. His family is the first to try the new technology and Jeffrey has proven a capacity to progress and change. Other than witnessing human and earthly decay, he remains safe and protected throughout the story. As a visionary facing the light, he testifies to *Zero K*'s optimistic finale and affirms the power and persistence of hope. Symbolized through light, hope appears bright and unified on *Zero K*'s last page. Here, hope is a spectrum of colors, the entire range of wavelengths combined, shining a bright and heavenly light:

> We were in midtown, with a clear view west, and he was pointing and wailing at the flaring sun, which was balanced with uncanny precision between rows of high-rise buildings. It was a striking thing to see […] the power of it, the great round ruddy mass, and I knew that there was a natural phenomenon, here in Manhattan, once or twice a year, in which the sun's rays align with the local street grid […] The full solar disk,

> bleeding into the streets, lighting up the towers to either side of us, and I told myself that the boy was not seeing the sky collapse upon us but finding the purest astonishment in the intimate touch of earth and sun. (273-4)

That light can unify and manifest is *Zero K*'s resolution. Throughout the story, while Jeffrey is still evolving, he sees scattered, unclear figures. The figures vanish like spectres, their presence intermittent, as if light has faded, and one can neither see them, nor do they form a sharp image. The figures emerge abruptly in the story. Flat and undeveloped narratively, they seem to bear no relevance to the plot. Contrary to the light seen at the end of the novel, the spectres do not align for a stronger meaning. They are shadows which materialize and perish suddenly, seemingly without influence on the linearity and coherence of the story. Although abstract and vague, I take these spectres to be read as racialized bodies directly opposed to the white characters in *Zero K.* In the following, I will discuss how the white light, or what I argue to be idealized and ideological whiteness, arises in juxtaposition to the seemingly unimportant spectral Other. Thus, I direct my study towards a rare consideration in Don DeLillo's oeuvre: DeLillo's complicity in antiblack representation.

Literary criticism has paid little attention to questions of race and racism in DeLillo's novels (Row 84) treating them like the narrator treats the spectres in *Zero K*—one acknowledges their existence but deems them irrelevant to the larger picture. In contrast, my analysis draws attention to the commonalities of writing and reading white heroes—considering both, DeLillo's fiction and him as author/ity—and how they blind the concurrence of a racialized Other. In white American literature, Morrison argues, characterization depends on an antagonism between positive whiteness and the obscure, vilified role of the Black (6, 17). Examining the ambiguous presence of Blackness in *Zero K,* I follow Morrison's theorizations and discuss how this antagonism enables DeLillo's narrative construction. A closer look at the novel's reception reveals that the antagonism undersigns not only literary texts like *Zero K* but reading practices at large. Although considered controversial, DeLillo is often celebrated, much like the main hero in master narratives about universality, transcendence, and endurance. As Jess Row points out, DeLillo is seen as

> a writer who has escaped race and locality, who never betrays "ethnic consciousness," who has become perfectly national, plural, "essential"—over a body of work that obsessively picks apart the certainties these narratives require. (86)

Zero K's men take center stage under similar lighting. Far away from the spotlight of narrative focus and critical attention, however, DeLillo's narrativization of Blackness remains minor and sketchy. Appearing as nothing but shadows in *Zero K*, Black bodies are also overshadowed by the light falling elsewhere—on (the) white author/ity. I focus on this contrast and investigate how it blinds the reading eye for present and brazen instances of anti-blackness in *Zero K*. My interest lies in the shift of light—the way light moves to create key personages, evades certain spaces and bodies, and transfers from structures staged in the text to practices of reading and modes of understanding. I begin, therefore, by contextualizing DeLillo's image and examining the ties between his reputation and existing interpretations of *Zero K.* My analysis suggests an

overlap between the ways lighting has worked in *Zero K's* narrative construction and DeLillo's canonization. As a technique regulating which figures appear as central and which as marginal, lighting accentuates and conceals nuances and features, and controls the viewer's focus. I am interested in the organization and effects of this technique, and to this end I will analyze some of *Zero K*'s most cherished characteristics and characters and what DeLillo and his critics often relegate to the margins.

Don DeLillo

Don DeLillo hardly needs an introduction for an issue on North American politics and poetics. He has entered the literary canon with the recognition that his works are a highpoint of creative experimentation and a deeply political engagement with the urgencies of U.S. culture and history. It takes just a brief look into the long list of awards and nominations DeLillo has received over the years to understand the place he occupies in the contemporary literary world. A 2016 conference organized in Paris and dedicated to the writer might reveal just as much. It ran under the banner "Fiction Rescues History" and aimed to address, among other things, DeLillo's insurgent poetics against official history and its oppressive protocols. To me, the title of the conference and its spirit summarize to a great extent a widespread opinion on DeLillo and his oeuvre. As Charles Baxter notes, the "typical DeLillo tale reads like a diagnosis of a zeitgeist malady we never knew we had [and] DeLillo has achieved greatness that [is] for a contemporary American writer, unsurpassed" ("A Different Kind"). DeLillo's capacity to diagnoze is often attributed to visionary and ethical reflections on contemporary crises.

For Duvall, "(w)hat makes DeLillo one of the most important American novelists since 1970 is his fiction's repeated invitation to think historically" (2).Back in 1991, Frank Lentricchia connected DeLillo's historical awareness to cultural criticism and social liberation and named him one of the writers "who invent in order to intervene" (2). Similarly, Daniel Aaron describes DeLillo as a "sociologist of crisis" (70). This feeling has underlain many of the appraisals the author received over the years. As Duvall underscores, DeLillo was awarded the Jerusalem Prize in 1999 for "his fiction's moral focus [and for] wrestling a bit of freedom from necessity by so thoroughly diagnosing what constrains us" (3). Thus, DeLillo is often recognized as a writer whose creative intentions and achievements rescue, at least conceptually, American history.

A recurring description, a sentence Robert Towers wrote in *The New York Review of Books* in 1988, positions DeLillo as "the chief shaman of the paranoid school of American fiction." The idea of the centrality and healing capacity of his work, as well as its preoccupation with social concerns, has braced a staggering amount of literary criticism and mainstream recognition. The idea also redoubles in reviews of *Zero K* – DeLillo's most recent novel. For Joshua Ferris, the book reaffirmed DeLillo's "individual genius" and his place as "the seeker, the prophet, the mystic, the guide" ("Joshua Ferris Reviews"). Ferris also deemed *Zero K* one of the finest

novels for the 21st century, and with this joined critics and writers like Michiko Kakutani, Charles Finch, Sam Lypsite, and Kevin Nance.

Like other DeLillo novels, *Zero K* is praised for thematizing "eternal human concerns" (Kakutani) and for being historically concious. Marketed as a "deeply moral book" (Levin), *Zero K* is seen as self-reflexive and inspirational. James Kidd notes, for instance, that it is "a visionary novel of ideas that remembers even visionary novels of ideas are read by living, breathing humans" ("Don DeLillo's Latest"). Mirroring this rhetoric, *Zero K* thematizes such idealization. As Graley Herren points out, DeLillo has frequently ironized (the) male author/ity by embedding himself in his fiction (*The Self-Reflexive Art*). To celebrating *Zero K* as self-reflexive leads also the reception of DeLillo's novels as "historiographic metafiction": often popular works which parody dominant discourse, rely heavily on historical events and personages, and subvert official versions of History (Hutcheon 114). The following analysis shows, however, that rather than ironize and dismantle dominant representations, novels like *Zero K* often reinforce them, uphold the status of (the) popular author/ity, and highlight images always already fixed "on the retina" (Sharpe "Response").

Zero K's Men

The trope of evolving white men drives the plot. Pertinent to another project is the investigation of *Zero K*'s alignment of all male characters with holy historical figures, and divinity altogether. I want to note briefly, however, that the men's depiction in *Zero K* unambiguously frames them as the proverbial forefathers[1]. Jeffrey's father, Ross, signifies, the godly and almighty ancestor, while Jeffrey, in resemblance to Jesus (and arguably, Thomas Jefferson), witnesses the destruction on earth and rises above those who sin. Father and son join two brothers, the Stenmarks[2], who invent and safeguard the future, and with this reinforce the image of white men as creators, saviours and visionaries. A close reading lucidly explicates this three-fold assembly. On the one hand, the triad characterisation is strengthened by staging the father and the son alongside another man in story: the Monk. The three of them figure as the holy trinity and further establish the context for transcendence and rebirth. Not accidentally, for instance, does Ross leave Jeffrey the moment he writes "over and over: *sine cosine tangent*" (14). Signalling the relationship between the sides of a triangle, the phrase functions as a leitmotif throughout the text and underscores the blessed men's connection to each other (67, 123-24). Although Ross disappears and leaves his son to grow up and witness the destruction of the world alone, he awaits Jeffrey at the Convergence, the

[1] As Alan Parker summarizes, "DeLillo has given us a new way of thinking about the old guy in the hooded cape" ("Mortal Panic")

[2] The name is very likely a reference to the Stenmark twins, two renowned Australian-born models who built a modelling career around their looks and identical genes (see https://stenmark.life).

hopeful space where the Stenmarks attempt human rebirth (7). *Zero K*'s numerous religious references and associations with important figures further brace white men's image as holy and eternally progressive. Three categories strengthen this characterization: men's capacity to 1) see/envision/discover, 2) evolve/grow/progress, and 3) create/survive/originate. Although these capacities are directly linked to white ideology in the story, they remain conveniently misinterpreted in literary analyses. Instead of parodying white male authority, everything male characters can do is used as evidence for DeLillo's own capacity to surpass the present.

To see why critics focus on DeLillo's inspirational tale rather than on the story's recourse to ideology, we need to look closer at Jeffrey's use of the capacities and their relation to transcendence. One the one hand, transcendence is motivated by Jeffrey's emotional adolescence. To Ross, he admits: "I'm doing my best to recognize that you're my father. I'm not ready to be your son" (113). Jeffrey is described as unprepared, wondering, and eager to learn. The shifts between jobs and women, and between the fullness and abridgement of his own name (18), mark the fluidity and incompleteness of Jeffrey's identity. Contrasted to Ross's stability and dominance, Jeffrey appears before us boy-like, confused and curious (57, 115). He mumbles, shuffles, and questions incessantly—all *childish* things to do—and, yet, Jeffrey is "eager to be educated" (93) and encouraged to go beyond his limitations. Jeffrey's openness to change and growth are not obscured in the story. Instead, they appear matter-of-factly:

> I saw myself in the limp, in the way I refined and nurtured it. But I killed the limp whenever my father showed up to take me to the Museum of Natural History […] there we were, fathers and sons, wandering among the dinosaurs and bones of human predecessors. (107)

Jeffrey literally learns to walk straight—he evolves, in the space and continuance of *natural history,* following his father(s). Importantly, the depiction of the museum as 'native terrain' stages men's evolution as inherent and natural. While there is a lot to unpack here, I want to point out that indications of ever-evolving white men, (Social) Darwinism and racial superiority, are already anticipated a sentence before Jeffrey's remarks on the limp. He says: "*Bessarabia, penetralia, pellucid, falafel.* I saw myself in these words. I saw myself in the limp" (107). On the one hand, the words trigger cognitive maps leading to the Ottoman empire (and its people) and summons stereotypes[3] of the Oriental other (Said 41). On the other, they signify Jeffrey's limp – the inability to walk (straight). It is this implied backwardness that Jeffrey abandons in the museum. This is not a new, or exclusively DeLillo's, story. In a letter to William Graham, Charles Darwin writes that the "more civilized so-called Caucasian races have beaten the Turkish hollow in the struggle of existence" (316). Clear to me seems the echo of this racist estimation in Jeffrey's faculty to walk within natural history.

[3] "Bessarabia" and "falafel" mark the specific location, whereas "penetralia" and "pellucid" imply this location's secrecy and simplicity. As Said argues, the other space is imagined as dangerous and inferior (41). Conflating the other space with the "limp", Jeffrey frames it as backward and burdening.

Positioned in constant movement—we find Jeffrey in planes, buses, and taxis—Jeffrey is also described as an explorer. Moreover, he persistently presents himself as a tourist (62, 185) and as someone who can help others by going somewhere (36, 226). His journey is motivated by an urgency to be educated (93) and the desire to truly see (140, 153, 204, 258). Thus, curiosity seems inherent to Jeffrey's character and in no way circumstantial. For instance, Jeffrey is obsessed with making up definitions (55, 59, 103, 109, 151). "This is what I did in any new environment", he explains, "I tried to interject meaning, make the place coherent" (10). Combined with the capacity to define and render things meaningful (or not), Jeffrey's movements highlight his resemblance to explorers. In fact, Jeffrey frequently names and renames characters and places—an authoritative gesture practiced by Europeans especially during the Age of Discovery. A parallel between Jeffrey and Captain Cook further solidifies this image:

> She gave me a wristwatch and on my way home from school I kept checking the minute hand, regarding it as a geographical marker, a sort of circumnavigation device indicating certain places I might be approaching somewhere in the northern or southern hemisphere depending on where the minute hand was when I started walking, possibly Cape Town to Tierra del Fuego to Easter Island and then maybe to Tonga. I wasn't sure whether Tonga was on the semicircular route but the name of the place qualified it for inclusion, along with the name Captain Cook, who sighted Tonga or visited Tonga or sailed to Britain with a Tongan on board. (107-108)

As the explorer, Jeffrey follows a compass, "checking the minute hand," and travels around his miniature-world. Furthermore, the wristwatch locks certain *geographical places in time*. By imagining Cape Town, Tierra del Fuego, Easter Island and Tonga inside the watch, Jeffrey frames them as his property. Here the narrative echoes his/stories of Western explorers who discover a world that is, in their eyes, static and outside progressive time. Again, this is not DeLillo's invention, but a reiteration of a longstanding mythology (Adas 117). Its repetition frames Jeffrey as the explorer, on the one hand, and multiplies the circulation of narratives of western conquest, on the other. As Mary Louise Pratt argues, these narratives depend heavily on portraying white explorers in opposition to an 'inferior' population (183). To a great extent, this inferiority is described through representations of othered bodies as outside culture and progressive time.

Another slippage the passage 'works' for is the conflation between Tonga-the-land and Tongan-the-person. The collapse between sighting/visiting Tonga and bringing a Tongan on board is marked by the interchangeability of these events. Put otherwise, the uncertainty and unimportance of whether Cook went to the land or returned with the person contributes to the abstraction of Tongan personhood, or what Aimé Césaire calls 'thing-ification' of the colonized (42). In DeLillo's representation, Tonga and its population become a homogeneous mass of 'Tongan-ness', where space and people are reduced to a unified idea, and thus rendered indistinctive. It is important to note that in this implication, the passage emerges as coherent because racism and reductionism are already at play. As Christina Sharpe points out, contemporaneity is always already antiblack and the reality of antiblack practices seen as

normative (*In the Wake* 104). Similarly, Martinot and Sexton clarify that "racism is a mundane affair" (173).

As normative, 'mundane affair', the racist implications of this passage figure as a shortcut to a dominant episteme. There is an available understanding of white superiority which rationalizes Jeffrey's character and Zero K's ideological markers only to direct us—full circle—back to it. Rather than ironize who and how they get to move in the text, Jeffrey's character enhances the image of white authority. Thus, it is Jeffrey's character who highlights the narrative's geographic specificity and allows for interpretations of the story in terms of progressive transnationalism. For instance, Jeffrey's movement marks distance and the characters' dis/connection from/to far-off places—North America, Tibet, China, India, Switzerland, Germany, England, Kazakhstan, Iran, Ukraine, Russia. Jeffrey's movement thus indexes the (diegetic) world's wide terrain. It is important to note here that geographical specificity and expansiveness must be read as DeLillo's reflection on the border concept. M.C. Armstrong writes, for instance, that DeLillo's

> celebration of the self-interested spirit suggests that, rather than seeing history as a dialectic of classes or collectives or discourses or tribes, it might be framed as "single lives in momentary touch." ("Back in the USSR")

Similarly, frequent references to (missing) nationalities and passports imply *Zero K*'s global landscape and movement. Like Armstrong, Jeffrey asserts that cultural difference falls off:

> Here I was, in a sealed compartment, inventing names, noting accents, improvising histories and nationalities. These were shallow responses to an environment that required abandonment of such distinctions. (72)

In fact, the story welcomes its interpretation in the context of border regimes and transnationalism. The characters frequently lose their names and languages, Jeffrey often comments on illegality and on other characters' countries and foreignness (19, 169, 268). Thus, when Jeffrey says that they "are completely outside the narrative of what we refer to as history [and that there] are no horizons [there]" (237), a portrait of a global landscape unravels. This globality triggers praises of *Zero K* as a depiction of a postracial and a post-postcolonial world, or at least at their narrative anticipation. Joshua Ferris remarks:

> We are in a vision of the future, a postracial, post-postcolonial world where Westerners like Ross and Jeff are but one contingent of a technocratic cult with a single aim: to rid the world of that absolute, all-defining force, that ultimate despotic colonizer, death […]. But the seduction is every bit as illusory […]. After all, we are as far from a postracial, post-postcolonial world as we are near to arriving at whatever technique or technology is necessary for eternal life ("Joshua Ferris Reviews")

Ferris's statement is problematic for two reasons: On the one hand, Ferris's statement is problematic, because it frames colonization as a plight for the living characters in the story. Thus, Ferris further suspends Black being—the bodies who suffered from colonization are removed from interpretations of *Zero K*, the white characters are dissociated from historical responsibility and from their position as oppressors, and the structure of colonial violence is

used as a metaphor which grants narrative tension rather than reflect historical actuality. On the other hand, it suggests that *Zero K* exists on the same imaginative plane and in the same progressive linearity which ties historical awareness—DeLillo's depiction of the imperfect world—to the prospect of social transformation; the postraciality and post-postcoloniality of the future is somewhere out there, just not 'here' yet. However indirectly, the contention entails that narratives like *Zero K* lead to, or at least do not sabotage, the possibility of a postracial and post-postcolonial future. On the contrary, they allude to its existence or even make metaphorical steps towards it by way of envisioning or pointing towards it. The unchecked normativity of who survives, evolves, and reinvents themselves in *Zero K*—exclusively white characters as this article underscores—renders Ferris' observation paradoxical. Both the future world in the narrative, and the text itself, bar living Black bodies. Rather than eliminate racism and racial violence—a certain prerequisite for a postracial and post-postcolonial world, the story eliminates Black being.

Objects in the Distance

For a story imbued with geographical and cultural specifics, *Zero K* forgets to include Black characters and only fleetingly refers to Black spaces. The appearance of South Africa, the Bronx, and Egypt in the texts rather contrasts, then partakes in the story's topography. These geographical markers do not function as the other territories in the story. Instead, they emerge abruptly and carry no significance. The Mastabas, which are the reason for citing Egypt, are only the model for a building, and not in Egypt itself (41). Cape Town is referred to in a prolonged sentence describing Jeffrey's movement as an explorer (107). South Africa surfaces in another complex sentence, this time indicating the movement of a guy's gaze: "he droned his way through a global roundup that ranged from Hungary to South Africa, the forint to the rand" (165). In a similar structure appears the Bronx:

> The subway is the man's total environment, or nearly so, all the way out to Rockaway and up into the Bronx, and he carries with him a claim on our sympathies, even a certain authority that we regard with wary respect, aside from the fact that we would like him to disappear (58)

In all cases, the reference to location aims to highlight distance. Moreover, the characters are never in, but rather relate their movement to, Black spaces. They thus appear as nothing other but a marker—uninhabited, irrelevant. This emptiness redoubles in the story. As mentioned before, Black characters are not named, and this, together with the voiding of full/lived Black space, works for a revised (and racialized) globality. This narrative manoeuvre also strengthens what McKittrick exposes as white practices of rendering Blackness 'ungeographic' (4). In *Zero K*, this abstraction of Blackness follows the Hegelian erasure which positions Africa outside progressive history, and also works towards fixing Black bodies as quintessentially dead. This is further suggested by the way the text excludes Black bodies but consistently forestalls Blackness's presence. In its configurations as a body-less and gender-less entity, Blackness haunts Jeffrey and gives the story an acceleration to unravel.

A straightforward way in which Blackness enters the text is the Black object. For example, there are numerous references to Indigenous and Black styles and things: Jeffrey has an "aboriginal shaved head" (15). A nameless woman wears "a black Navajo hat" (214), another an "Arab headdress" (179), and yet another one has "hair bunched afro-style" (236). Jeffrey drinks Portuguese Madeira (205); a man wears a "safari jacket" (230). Blackness is introduced through the things white characters use and are in possession of. In fact, the characters' whiteness intensifies the feeling that the Black body is not there and only the Black object remains as a signifier. This contrast is also implied by references to deserts, jungles, and Mastabas, and by DeLillo's persistent refusal to name Black people in these locations. Jeffrey copies this gesture by resisting "an impulse to name [a woman he meets] like a color" (23). Although, he encounters several people with a "dark face" (19), they are never really Black.

Another example for absent Blackness is the human skull Jeffrey sees at the Convergence. The skull unambiguously marks white settler colonialists' practice of exhibiting African bones, and the racial stereotypes that came with, and inspired, such representations. In *Zero K*, the skull is over-sized which is a direct replication of widely spread scientific racism (and phrenology more specifically):

> It was about five times the size of an ordinary human skull and it wore a headpiece, which I hadn't fully registered earlier. This was an imposing skullcap in the shape of many tiny birds, set flat to the skull, a golden flock, wingtips connected (….) It looked real, the cranium of a giant, blunt in its deathliness, disconcerting in its craftwork, its silvery grin, a folk art too sardonic to be affecting. I imagined the room empty of people and furniture, rock-walled, stone-cold, and maybe the skull seemed right at home. (68)

The point I want to push here is that objects in the story imply Black presence but underline its bodily absence. Thus, Blackness is summated as abstract. It is implied outside the precincts of country, context, and characters, and emerges as unknown and larger than body thingness. As Ferris underscores, what threatens *Zero K*'s characters in the story is an abstract enemy—death. In many ways, the story allows for taking an imaginative shortcut: Following dominant discourse, the story's abstracted Blackness sits near enough to the abstract threat that kills white women and that white men set out to defeat.

It is important to note here that Ferris' imaginative maneuvers are neither far-fetched, nor contextually isolated. On the contrary, DeLillo's image as a historically conscious writer motivate them, as do certain images in *Zero K*. For instance, by naming each part of the story after zones of contact/collision[4], DeLillo not only places his characters in a world that spans geographically but demonstrates an engagement with contemporary crises. Yet, neither the reference to collapsing/colliding worlds, nor Jeffrey's characterization ironize white men's quest and authority. Sympathetic to Jeffrey's desires to grow and become better, the story reaches its resolution: Jeffrey becomes "an ethics officer" and finally realizes the potential to

[4] Part One is named after the meteor which descended over the Ural Mountains in February 2013, and Part Two after the city were Russia and Ukraine clashed in 2014 (2, 163).

supervise and oversee (221). His authority remains intact because Jeffrey survives as a moral hero not only in the story but in its subsequent receptions as well. Rachele Dini uses Jeffrey's progressivity and moral impetus to conclude that in *Zero K*

> life extension is a form of bodily narration. The ultimate marriage of art and matter, it amounts to 'telling' ourselves to continue living, to continue existing beyond what we thought was the story's end, to indeed apply the rules of the novel to create the future itself—not only its representation. (2)

Like Ferris, Dini links Jeffrey's progressivity and possible futures to DeLillo's capacity to narrate (only men are capable of this in the story) and the capacity to endure/move forward (again, only men are capable of this in the story). Prescribing authority to the characters who have voice and participate in world-making follows a dominant ideology: active and mobile men are not ironized or deconstructed but rendered inspirational.

Bicycle

To understand how Zero K's men can appear as inspirational rather than problematic figures, it is necessary to examine their overall function in the narrative. Nowhere is this functionality better articulated than in the relationship between men and women in the story. Here is what Jeffrey observes:

> Now, somewhere else, another town, another time of day, a young woman on a bicycle pedaling past, foreground, oddly comic motion, quick and jittery, one end of the screen to the other, with a mile-wide storm, a vortex, still far off, crawling up out of the seam of earth and sky, and then cut to an obese man lurching down basement steps, ultra-real, families huddled in garages, faces in the dark, and the girl on the bike again, pedaling the other way now, carefree, without urgency, a scene in an old silent movie, she is Buster Keaton in nitwit innocence, and then a reddish flash of light and the thing was right here, touching down massively, sucking up half a house, pure power, truck and barn squarely in the path (…) Total wasteland now, a sheared landscape, the image persisting, the silence as well. I stood in place for some minutes waiting, houses gone, girl on bike gone, nothing, finished, done. (36-37)

In the passage above, the girl is foreign, far away, nameless, small, innocent, and soundless. The comparison to the American actor Buster Keaton relates her to his silent movies but also to his career as a stunt performer, comedian, and screenwriter. Thus, she emerges before us in her "oddly comic motion" and invokes silence, role(playing), and fiction. These allusions redouble her description—the movement on a bicycle summons our memories of Keaton. He appears together with her, amplifying the image. Her foreignness is redoubled, too. Not only is she far away by appearing on a screen (Jeffrey watches her from a distance), but she is in "another town, another time of day" and she is distant. Like the far-off vortex "crawling up out of the seam of earth and sky," she is "quick and jittery," a double of its remoteness and size. Her smallness repeats also in the opposition to an obese man who happens to be "ultra-

real." Again, his *realness* reiterates in the opposition to the girl's un-realness: she is merely a resemblance of Keaton in a screen within a screen, "a scene in an old silent movie."

The girl emerges suddenly and is suspended in the hallway. She disappears suddenly and is suspended in the image in turn, swallowed by ruins, "half a house [...] in the path," her motion stopped midsentence. Like other female characters, she becomes recognizable in her resemblance to an actress. Conceivably, Sybil Seely, one of Keaton's famous colleagues, is implied here. For one, Seely and Keaton partnered frequently, and were used to appearing together, as they do in *Convict 13, The Scarecrow, The Boat,* and *The Frozen North.* Moreover, Seely herself replicates the girl's characterizations of comic-ness, innocence, and she emerges on screen as well. Thus, in the bicycle passage the girl aligns once with Keaton, and once with the actress. A third time she aligns with both in another, widely circulated picture—it is Keaton and Seely together, riding a bike. In this image, Keaton stares at Seely who is sitting and, distracted, looks somewhere else; Keaton rides the bike for both of them and carries Seely forward.

The point I want to make here is that the narrative buries an image within an image. It thus connects different representations—Keaton's movies, for example. It amplifies them and makes them easier to imagine. Indeed, the narrative thus re-enters imagination because it is already there. There is an underlying story that is solidified through the discussed repetitions. I argue that, self-reflexively or not, DeLillo extends white mythology here and re-creates and re-buries female characters for a reason. Or, the girl appears (to disappear) not so much to underline female inferiority and thus diagnose gender troubles. Rather, she, like the other female characters in the text, delivers the contrast between 1) righteous whiteness (reinforcing the tropes of the white saviour and the damsel-in-distress) and 2) abstract evil by indexing the existence of a threat against her. This narrative does not owe to DeLillo's originality. As Bogle points out, whiteness has continually employed the tropes of the innocent/endangered white woman, of Blackness as intrinsic/uncontrollable evil, and of white men as saviours (10-15). Replicating this representation, *Zero K* continuously depicts white female fragility, desired sexuality, and purity.

Like most female characters in *Zero K*, the girl vanishes—but only after she has indicated her worthiness to be loved. Threatened by (natural) disaster, women are the purpose of and fuel to men's quest. Jeffrey's progress happens on the background of appearing and disappearing girlfriends, Ross tries to save Jeffrey's stepmother, and the Stenmark brothers work towards her rebirth. Continuously described as escorts, women in the story satisfy men and bring them to their desired destination. Yet, women are never where needed (19, 36, 210, 215, 226) and always seem to be in the middle of something (9, 258). Thus, Jeffrey's stepmother, Artis, "doesn't know how to get out of words into being someone" (157) and eventually turns into a "baby boy" (48). Consisting only of words, she appears as pure fiction (157-62).

Like the girl on the bicycle, women lack sight but are suspended in space to be seen. They are empty and "hollow-bodied," merely objects of admiration (94, 72, 157). One of Jeffrey's

girlfriends is so paper-like, so "tall and thin she [is] foldable" (56). Another one is smeared into the wall as "an imprint, a body mark" (78). Artis, the literal personification of art, reads as foldable, too, as do the other characters positioned artificially in chairs and beds. Furthermore, women appear abruptly out of the background, only to disappear into the background again—with no lineage, merely "*Gesso on linen*" (268). In the rare occasions of surfacing in the text, women are described as deficient. They are nameless, blind, incapable to speak, always sitting, dying, and barren. At the same time, they are desired. Here immediate focus falls on Artis, the "idealized human" (258), who is of equal importance to Ross and the Convergence, and is most useful in her sickness.

The worship of the female body redoubles in all portrayals. A good example is Madeleine, Jeffrey's dead mother. Framed by two of the central motifs in *Zero K,* misspelling and religion, the character functions as both an escort and a worshipped persona. Thus, her name activates associations with Lady Magdalene and summons popular imaginations of the woman as a repentant sinner, a prostitute, and a holy figure. For instance, Madeleine is both the obliging, "ever-accommodating, self-sacrificing, loving and supporting" woman in the story, and the one who betrays Ross by stabbing him with a knife (100). Although Madeleine has fallen out of grace and lost her name (32), Jeffrey idolizes her and restates her usefulness (15, 248). In this sense, Madeleine mirrors Artis and the idea that a woman can be useful in her death, perfect in her absence:

> Her body seemed lit from within. She stood erect, on her toes, shaved head tilted upward, eyes closed, breasts firm. It was an idealized human, encased, but it was also Artis. Her arms were at her sides, fingers cusped at thighs, legs parted slightly. (258)

Women's deficiency and fragility are their most visible features. Particularly, women lack voice – Artis's language falls off (157-62). Emma does not know how to speak to her adopted son (171-76), another woman has her mind "empty of words" (72), and others "speak" but in "choppy syllablelike units" (230), in vanishing whispers (16, 18, 105, 244). Women also lack names. Jeffrey says of one of them that she "blended better, nameless, with the room" (79), and dismisses another: "[n]ever mind giving her a name" (238). He sometimes names women only to withdraw, misspell, or forget these names later. Although sexualized and marked by eroticized nakedness, women seem robotic, artificial, and never really themselves (157, 48). Each female role is failed by the women who attempt to fill it. The repetition of these images and characters solidifies womanhood as a category and inscribes it in scarcity and sickness.

The explicit derogation with which women are portrayed and which could be misread as postmodern parody here has an important narrative function. As it becomes clear in the bicycle passage, female characters are notable in their disappearance. Their sickness and desirability stage them as endangered and in need of protection by white men. Indeed, Jeffrey and the other male characters watch out for women in the story. Yet, gendered characterizations in the text do not ironize patriarchal forms and formalities. Rather, they lend tension required for narrative coherence. *Zero K*'s women perish but not before indexing their innocence and worthiness to be loved. Thus, their objectification works to redouble the fear

that something sinister is out there to harm them (Artis is dying), and the heroism of the men who eventually save them (the Stenmark brothers help Artis reawaken). "Either way she dies," says Jeffrey thinking of his mother, but this conclusion "happens somewhere else," too, and envelopes all female personages in the story (50).

The scarcity of female characters in *Zero K* might suggest that DeLillo could have omitted them entirely. Yet, their (dis)appearances serve the plot. *Zero K*'s women remind readers that there is something to be protected, and heroism and rescue are necessary. Women summon the image of the hero and the image of danger when their bodies fail, lose abilities, and turn into objects.

Mannequins

The reason for women's objectification becomes clear in Jeffrey's first encounter with one of the mannequins. He relates this encounter as

> a figure standing there, arms, legs, head, torso, a thing fixed in place. I saw that it was a mannequin, naked, hairless, without facial features, and it was reddish brown, maybe russet or simply rust. There were breasts, it had breasts, and I stopped to study the figure, a molded plastic version of the human body, a jointed model of a woman. I imagined placing a hand on a breast. This seemed required, particularly if you are me. The head was a near oval, arms positioned in a manner that I tried to decipher—self-defense, withdrawal, with one foot set to the rear. The figure was rooted to the floor, not enclosed in protective glass. A hand on a breast, a hand sliding up a thigh. It's something I would have done once upon a time. Here and now, the cameras in place, the monitors, an alarm mechanism on the body itself—I was sure of this. I stood back and looked. The stillness of the figure, the empty face, the empty hallway, the figure at night, a dummy, in fear, drawing away. I moved farther back and kept on looking (24)

While they will become clearly more threatening later in the text (74, 132), the tension between Jeffrey and the mannequins is already introduced here, as are the first indications for their racialization. Before I unpack this, it is important to mention that these encounter occur exclusively in the liminality of corridors. On the one hand, these corridors contrast the security and peace of the compound. Lacking windows, Jeffrey's room does not seem claustrophobic but grants him consolation: in it, Jeffrey is protected from the collapsing outside world (20, 43). Furthermore, Jeffrey sees the building as a clean and cleansing hospice (9, 30, 42, 91). In direct opposition stands the passageway where screens with images of death and destruction startle Jeffrey. The juxtaposition between protected rooms and the corridor marks the latter as unsafe and unsanitary. Thus, the corridor frames Jeffrey's meetings with the mannequins by foreshadowing danger and building suspense.

On the other hand, the corridor marks the mannequins as marginalized and racialized. Echoing images of surveillance and illegal movement, the corridor is liminality's locale and where a certain *type* of characters appears. As Turner points out, liminal characters have "no status,

insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows" (98). Deprived of individuality, the mannequins become knowable only through their racialization. For, dominant discourse marks liminal spaces as "the border between civilized and primitive space, the space inhabited by savages whom civilized men vanquish on every turn" (Razack 13). Locating the mannequins in an over-determined liminality thus both replicates contemporary images of refugees and elicits already available fictions of racialized bodies. In this sense, DeLillo leaves no option of imagining the mannequins as any other than of color. He underlines, for instance, that they are darker—"reddish brown" (24). This is also how Jeffrey sees them—"painted in dark washes" (133) and "rust-colored" (51). Moreover, they are described as hooded, wearing chadors or burqas, standing "in the heat and dust" (51-52). In other words, they carry the characteristics of Muslim women in a desert-like environment, once again summoning Orientalist imagery.

Furthemore, DeLillo creates a juxtaposition between the white characters and white hospice and the dark figures and unsafe space. Thus, the figures contrast only one among them – the albino:

> Here were figures submerged in a pit, mannequins in convoluted mass, naked, arms jutting, heads horribly twisted, bare skulls, an entanglement of tumbled forms with jointed limbs and bodies, neutered humans, men and women stripped of identity, faces blank except for one unpigmented figure, albino, staring at me, pink eyes flashing. (134)

Just a moment earlier, Jeffrey has observed another contrast: "there was a floating white light and I needed to put a hand to my face when I drew near deflecting the glare." The chiaroscuro re-confirms the darkness of the dark. Overdetermining their distinction from whiteness, DeLillo hardly needs to spell out the Otherness of the mannequins. Interestingly, had the story portrayed a postracial or post-postcolonial landscape as Ferris suggests, there would be no references to white characters. Yet, the text abounds in such characterizations (46, 63, 87, 147-49, 203) and thus further racializes other(ed) figures. Having shown how Blackness is rendered absent/abstract and the mannequins made to signify otherness in *Zero K*, I now want to offer one possible reading of Jeffrey's encounter with them—instead of a conclusion.

Déjà Vu

When Jeffrey meets the mannequin, he becomes overwhelmed with desire to touch it. It is a sexual desire—Jeffrey wants to touch the *breast* in particular, and we are told that this is something he has previously done. Throughout the text, Jeffrey is positioned as the one who grows and gains authority. As the bicycle passage reveals, the story often returns us, the readers, to past scenes. For Jeffrey, touching the mannequin seems to have happened before. Then, how would he have looked this past time, and how does the image of Jeffrey touching the breast materialize before us? Considering DeLillo's descriptions of the figure, of Jeffrey, and the tensions between them, it seems easy to envision at least one version of this "once

upon a time." In this version, Jeffrey stands at a slave auction (like a distant relative of Captain Cook). He looks, touches and defines the value of what he sees. As Saidiya Hartman writes in *Scenes of Subjection*, the auction was one of the stages on which forms and formalities of white violence and authority dis/figured physically and imaginatively, and through sight and touch, Black bodies:

> Ethel Dougherty stated that at slave sales women were forced to stand half-naked for hours while crowds of rough-drinking men bargained for them, examining their teeth, heads, hands, et cetera, at equal intervals to test their endurance. According to Edward Lycurgas, enslaved women "always looked so shame[d] and pitiful up on dat stand wid all dem men standin' dere looking at em wid what dey had on dey minds shinin' in they eyes". Shining in their eyes and expressed in "indecent proposals" and "disgusting questions," according to Tabb Gross, was the power, acquired and enjoyed by the owner, to use slave women as he pleased. Millie Simpkins stated that before they were sold they had to take all their clothes off, although she refused to take hers off, and roll around and prove that they were physically fit and without broken bones or sores. Usually any reluctance or refusal to disrobe was met with the whip. When Mattie Gilmore's sister was sold, she was made to pull off her clothes. (38)

Zero K dis/figures Blackness in a similar way. It allows readers today, some hundreds of years after slave auctions took place in North America, to imagine them in the same light and on similar terms. Put otherwise, the mannequin—the form DeLillo assigned to Blackness—appears once again in terms of bodily availability. The Readers' perspective is again directed to breasts, heads, skulls, and limbs. It is the perspective of a white male gaze, a perspective regulated by male desires and toward the figure's nakedness. In this sense, Jeffrey's vision aligns with what slave owners saw. He perceives the mannequins as "half bodies […] stripped of identity" in their "faint yearning […] the illusion of humanoid aspiration" (133-34). As Hartman argues, the slave system and its operative imagination re-staged Black bodies as desirable and deathly things—as unhuman and calculable. What Jeffrey sees redoubles this imagination and it is once more redoubled the moment the story is read, because it is narrated with Jeffrey as the focalizer. Thus, DeLillo returns us to a scene of dehumanization by making it an available entry and marking it as implicit and logical. He renders anti-black images usable and unequivocal, but also unique as each new reader approaches the text afresh in the claim of their own originality and abilities to interpret it. From this perspective, *Zero K* can hardly support the image and inspiration of historically conscious, subversive fiction, nor can it distance DeLillo as author/ity from white ideology.

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