January 2006

Connecting *White Noise* to Critical Whiteness Studies

Tim Engles
*Eastern Illinois University, tdengles@eiu.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://thekeep.eiu.edu/eng_fac](http://thekeep.eiu.edu/eng_fac)

Part of the [Educational Methods Commons](https://thecircle.eiu.edu/ed_cmpts), [Literature in English, North America Commons](https://thecircle.eiu.edu/lit_cmpts), and the [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](https://thecircle.eiu.edu/race_cmpts)

Recommended Citation


This is brought to you for free and open access by the English at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Research & Creative Activity by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact [tabruns@eiu.edu](mailto:tabruns@eiu.edu).
Connecting *White Noise* to Critical Whiteness Studies

Tim Engles

Although I have taught DeLillo's *White Noise* in American literature survey courses, I find, surprisingly enough, that it serves a crucial function in a course on multicultural literature. I teach the course Multicultural American Literature to an almost exclusively white student population at Eastern Illinois University. Including a novel by a white writer is part of my broader attempt to enhance this course with the insights of critical whiteness studies, a recent offshoot of academic inquiry into race. A guiding presumption amid this recent flurry of study is that racial whiteness has come to function in the United States not as a particular, specified racial status but rather as an invisible, unspoken norm. As George Lipsitz writes in an oft-quoted formulation of this phenomenon, "As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations" (1). I include *White Noise* in a course designed to highlight racial minority literature precisely because race seems, especially to white readers, to matter so little in the lives of the novel's white, middle-class characters. Jack Gladney would seem to be, as one such character puts it, just a "big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy" (83), but DeLillo subtly marks and scrutinizes Jack's social position in terms of race, class, and gender. The novel thus anticipates recent scholarly and pedagogical efforts to highlight overlooked features of majority membership. Teachers can heighten and enrich student understanding of matters of race by addressing with *White Noise*, and with other texts, some of the insights that critical whiteness studies has brought to the study of race.1 Doing so can also alleviate some of the difficulties that inevitably arise during serious classroom discussion of contemporary racial realities.

I have found that getting students to the point where they can appreciate DeLillo's analysis of racial whiteness calls for placing the work late in the semester and for prefacing it with periodic extraliterary readings and discussion on the history and ramifications of American racial formation. I open multicultural literature courses by asking why such relatively new classes exist and what students think of having a white person like me teaching them. These questions provoke discussion that is useful on its own terms, but my effort is to steer them toward consideration of the overwhelming, ongoing whiteness of the received literary canon. On the first day, I also ask students to jot down names that pop into their heads when I say the phrase "great author"; I then ask them to call out the names of such authors, which I write on the board. Shakespeare usually appears first, followed by, almost always, another eight or ten white, male British and American authors (Toni Morrison
and Virgina Woolf sometimes come up; DeLillo has not yet). When I ask what these authors all have in common, someone soon points out that they are all white and male. I then ask students to write for five minutes about why, despite the end of slavery, despite universal suffrage, the civil rights movement, the advent of politically correct language, the recent retiring of many racially offensive sports team mascots, and even the awarding of the 1992 Nobel Prize for Literature to an African American woman—why is it that, despite all this apparent progress toward recognition and celebration of America's diversity, almost no great authors come to mind who are not white and male?²

When I ask some of the students to summarize what they have just written, some occasionally venture intelligent guesses about the race and gender of those critics and teachers who initially established the canon. A discussion about canon formation may ensue, but my aim at this point is to crystallize their recognition of how a presumption of white superiority continues to influence our collective consciousness, including our normalized conceptions of the canon. To further illustrate hidden, related presumptions of white centrality, I give them another thought experiment. I ask them to close their eyes and let an image of someone come to mind when I say a certain phrase. I then say, “All-American girl,” and when they open their eyes, I ask them to call out adjectives describing the girl who came to mind. Young, beautiful, cheerleader, and blonde usually come up, but almost never the adjective white. Students usually acknowledge, though, whether they are white, black, or otherwise racially positioned, that the girl who came to mind for them did happen to be white. One student argued that some women of color, such as Jennifer Lopez and Halle Berry, receive widespread acclaim for their beauty. Others soon countered that while these women who are not white are indeed considered beautiful, their racial backgrounds clearly separate them from the wholesome, all-American looks of such white icons as Jessica Simpson, Hillary Duff, and Jennifer Aniston.

I then write on the board Toni Morrison’s assertion from her pioneering study Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the American Literary Imagination, “American means white . . .” (47).³ When we discuss what Morrison could have meant by such a claim and why she would make it, students of course recognize that America contains many citizens who are not white. It is a short step then to add that America also contains many nonwhite girls who are thoroughly American as well as many nonwhite authors who are certainly great. Yet, as the students have just demonstrated, broader collective conceptions of all-Americanness and of literary greatness continue to register, at least initially, as white. While conceptions, preconceptions, and stereotypes of others are not problems that white writers typically examine in their works, they are precisely what so many minority writers consciously attempt to counter in the works by them that we will read in this course.

On the first day, including some direct discussion of the paradoxically hid-
den centrality of whiteness helps explain the existence of separate multicultural courses, by highlighting both the dominance of white writers in the received canon and the default status of whiteness that lies behind that continuing dominance. Such discussion also establishes useful concepts for students' later reading of a white writer who does address matters of race in the lives of seemingly ordinary (white) people, Don DeLillo. From the first day of this course, white students are more engaged than they were in multicultural courses where I did not discuss whiteness, and their own racial status, whether taken for granted or not, has been marked as something that will be under consideration in this course. The few students of color in my classes have also expressed appreciation for periodic discussion of whiteness throughout the semester, primarily because it leads white students to some forms of awareness that students of color tend to have already.

We spend the first third of the semester on readings that begin in precolonial times and progress quickly to the start of the twentieth century. An understanding of the ongoing effects of white-supremacist ideology, effects that are reflected in both minority texts and white-authored texts, is deepened, I believe, by literary and extraliterary readings that provide historical and sociological insight into American racial formations. Literary readings include occasional pairing of works that enables comparative consideration of privilege and disadvantage on either side of the color line; extraliterary readings include chapters culled from the efforts of various recent historians (e.g., Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror*, and Reginald Horsman's *Race and Manifest Destiny*). Though I do not by any means match every minority text with an ostensibly white one, productive pairings have been transliterated Native American songs and chants with excerpts from Cabeza de Vaca's sixteenth-century account of Spanish and aboriginal contact, excerpts from Frederick Douglass's slave narrative with Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative, and short stories by Chinese American Sui Sin Far with excerpts from Italian American Constantine Panunzio's memoirs. As we occasionally read works by white authors, we search for ways that being categorized as white matters in the lives of the characters and of the authors, how it automatically increases their options and decreases their problems, and how little they often seem to appreciate the benefits of white racial membership (despite their heightened awareness at the time of this membership).

The next two-thirds of the course is taken up with twentieth-century literature and further outside readings. Studying Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* at some point shortly before *White Noise* has proved especially valuable for anticipating much of what I emphasize in DeLillo's novel. With her poignant, painful depictions of the internalized racism borne by black girls, Morrison helps students conceptualize America's normalization of white standards and the consequent erasure of white specificity. As Rafael Pérez-Torres writes in his discussion of teaching *The Bluest Eye*, "The novel . . . scrutinizes how white
most often is considered not a category in the text (or in our society) but, rather, a nonrace, a norm, a universal standard” (24).6 Morrison’s novel illustrates how deeply rooted and devastating the effects of racialization can be on the formation of individual minority identities, and an attentive reading of the part played in this process by unspoken white beauty standards provides solid groundwork for the interest in majority identity displayed in White Noise.

To increase our focus on the significance that race can have in shaping identity formation to both people of color and whites, I hand out near the end of our reading of The Bluest Eye the following quotation by the whiteness studies theorist Ross Chambers:

In contrast to minorities, whose identity is defined by their classificatory status as members of a given group, whites are perceived as individual historical agents whose unclassifiable difference from one another is their most prominent trait. Whiteness itself is thus atomized into invisibility through the individualization of white subjects. Whereas nonwhites are perceived first and foremost as a function of their group belongingness, that is, as black or Latino or Asian (and then as individuals), whites are perceived first as individual people (and only secondarily, if at all, as whites). Their essential identity is thus their individual identity, to which whiteness as such is a secondary, and so a negligible factor. (192)

This quotation takes a bit of unpacking, but by this point in the semester, the “invisibility” of whiteness having been one of our recurring course themes, most students quickly see Chambers’s point and register agreement with it. Chambers also provides here a way into discussion of how power is afforded those whose group membership seems to go unnoticed. As Timothy Barnett puts it, “Whiteness maintains its power by presenting itself as unraced individuality, as opposed to racialized subjectivity that is communally and politically interested” (10). Some students have astutely noted, though, that Chambers’s statement begs the question about who is doing the perceiving and where. An African American student pointed out that while whites may see themselves as individuals, many blacks, herself included, often see whites as white. She added that white people sometimes speak and act in ways that nonwhites see as “typical white behavior.” Many of the white students grew visibly uncomfortable, and some eventually explained why (these are polite midwesterners—open, heated debate, especially about race, rarely occurs in our classrooms): they felt that any such generalized assessments of white behavior were unfair and untrue. As a result, though, the sudden awareness that many had just experienced of how it feels to be categorized and then judged accordingly gave them some sense of the discomfort, frustration, and outrage expressed in the readings by many minority authors and characters.

More significant, these white students have gained the further understand-
ing that their being white does often place them in a group in the eyes of others, which counters the illusory sense of individuality that was heightened in those whites who were raised, like most of my students, in largely white settings. Some white students did remark, in discussing Chambers’s quotation, that when they attended high schools with a high percentage of minority students, they often felt themselves perceived as whites rather than as individuals. This point adds to the realization that the perception of group membership depends on who the perceiver is. Our discussion of Chambers’s claims concludes with a limiting of them to environments largely populated by whites, much like the environment depicted in DeLillo’s novel. Again, though, the larger gain here is getting white students to see that race matters not only for people of color but also for themselves and thus that the color-blind, liberal individualism subscribed to so dearly by most of them impedes perception of the group-bound realities of both oppression and privilege.

As we proceed with our reading of White Noise, I give students a one-page, overnight writing assignment: “Connect Ross Chambers’s quotation in any way you can to any of the novel’s characters.” Their written responses, which I ask some to summarize in our next session, have been widely varied and often insightful. Many focus on the protagonist, of course, noting that so far in our reading Jack Gladney has never thought of himself as white and that race seems to matter little, if at all, to him. (Some point out the irony of his inattention, given the centrality of racialized thinking to Hitler and the Nazis, Jack’s supposed area of academic expertise.) By now, students have read Peggy McIntosh’s foundational essay “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies.” In perhaps the most widely cited (and lauded) work in recent critical whiteness studies, McIntosh examines with penetrating clarity the ramifications of whiteness in her own life, giving forty-six concrete, quotidian examples of privilege that would not have been afforded her had she not been white. Thanks in part to this reading, in part to our periodic recognition in most texts of specific instances of white advantage as the underacknowledged counterpart to racial oppression, students often list additional advantages enjoyed by Jack that would be unavailable in his social setting to a person of color.

Especially productive discussions arise when we consider the racial status of Jack’s colleague, Murray Jay Siskind. Students often recall that Murray identifies himself as Jewish, something he seems to joke about when describing in caricatured detail the denizens of his apartment building (when Jack asks, “And which one are you?,” Murray answers, “I’m the Jew. What else would I be?” [10]). Being Jewish is of course not a racial status, at least not in contemporary America. I ask if Murray’s religious identity nevertheless separates him from whiteness somehow. If whiteness is a norm or normal and Christianity is as well, can a Jewish person be a normal white person? Reference to Karen Brodkin’s sociohistorical analysis How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America has been especially helpful
in these discussions. Part of Brodkin’s argument is that while overt discrimination clearly kept Jewish Americans outside the privileged realms of whiteness before the Second World War, Hitler’s racialization and abuse of the Jews, along with high-profile immigrant Jewish success, opened the doors of the white club to them when the war ended. As a prequisite of club membership, Jewish American families were in part enabled by what Brodkin aptly calls “the biggest and best affirmative action program in the history of our nation,” the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (or as it was popularly known, the GI Bill) (27). She explains that discriminatory allocation practices limited most of the act’s benefits to European American men, making it a de facto affirmative action program for whites, one that returning Jewish American veterans were by and large welcomed to take part in. Most Jewish Americans have now been absorbed by what Brodkin labels “an expand[ing] notion of whiteness” (Sephardic Jews are an occasional exception), to the point where a person like Murray has become unremarkably “white” in this novel’s setting (36). Few characters seem to notice his religious difference, least of all the one person who should be most aware of its historical significance in terms of racial discrimination, his friend and confidant, Professor Jack Gladney.

When such discussions are interwoven with efforts to discover the novel’s many other thematic concerns, it becomes evident that despite the tendency induced by unremarked whiteness to think of oneself in more individualized terms, membership in the white race does matter in the characters’ lives. The next question I raise is whether DeLillo has any overt authorial interest in the racial status of his characters. After all, in nearly every work students have now read by authors of color, race and its ramifications have been of central concern to the characters, clearly because these matters are of central concern to the authors. I introduce students to another of Morrison’s insights, a concept that I encapsulate for them with my own label, “relational identity formation.” Throughout Playing in the Dark, Morrison analyzes the ironic dependence of individualized, unremarked white identity on figurations of black otherness. For instance, in a discussion of early American literature and its intellectual context, she writes:

Eventually individualism fuses with the prototype of Americans as solitary, alienated, malcontent. What, one wants to ask, are Americans alienated from? What are Americans always so insistently innocent of? Different from? As for absolute power, over whom is this power held, from whom withheld, to whom distributed? Answers to these questions lie in the potent and ego-reinforcing presence of an Africanist population. This population is convenient in every way, not least of which is self-definition. This new white male can now persuade himself that savagery is “out there.” (45)

I sometimes assign Morrison’s book in these courses, and in those where I do not, I hand out this quotation during our reading of White Noise. As we
consider it together, I ask students if they can think of instances when someone they know evaluated or described the features or qualities of another person. As they try to remember such instances, I also ask if the describer was implicitly identifying himself or herself as different from the person being described, particularly in an opposite way. When students volunteer examples, we use Morrison’s quotation to articulate this process of implicit self-assertion as relational identity formation, a term that I write on the board. I then divide students into pairs and ask them to spend ten minutes searching together for moments when characters in White Noise size up other people while simultaneously bolstering a comparative conception of themselves.

Some students struggle with this task, but others realize that DeLillo has embedded many such incidents in the novel, beginning with the opening scene of the day of the station wagons, where the parents of college students look around and see in other parents “images of themselves in every direction” (3). Such moments occur elsewhere in terms of race and other categories. Students have twice pointed to Jack’s refusal to leave his house as the cloud of toxic chemicals looms. Explaining to his family, Jack says, “I’m not just a college professor. I’m the head of a department. I don’t see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That’s for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the county, where the fish hatcheries are” (117). This scene illustrates his tendency to see his surroundings through the lens of a media-induced construction of social relations. It also illustrates his use of specific categories of people to assert something about himself. As he ponders fleeing the toxic cloud, Jack fearfully and absurdly hopes that because he has seen lower-class people fleeing from disastrous events on television, a professional, middle-class person such as himself will be spared similar trauma.

In other scenes, Jack’s detailed recognition of an other and his implicit, simultaneous registering of himself as the opposite of that other occur specifically in terms of race. There is an encounter with “a black family of Jehovah’s Witnesses” (132); another with the “middle-aged Iranian” who delivers his newspaper (184); another in a jungle-like hardware store, replete with people speaking in “Hindi, Vietnamese, [and] related tongues” (82); and, most spectacularly, another with Willie Mink, a man whom Jack labels a racial “composite” and who is the only character in the book to identify Jack as racially white (307, 308). If instructor and students have been mindful of the novel’s racial undercurrents, the scene with Mink functions climactically in terms of both race and story line. Earlier in the hardware store setting, Jack’s conceptions of the racialized others hovering at the margins of his perception take on a sinister cast when students realize that Jack conceives of these others as part of an ersatz, sharply racialized, colonial backdrop, against which he asserts himself (albeit ridiculously, by shopping) as a masterful and ineluctably white male. His regular use of racial otherness to bolster a flagging sense of himself finally culminates in his shooting of his sexual rival, a man with an “odd, concave,” nonwhite face (305). Our earlier considerations of whiteness as the default all-American category usually resurface with Mink’s confession that
when Babette visited him incognito, she kept a ski mask on “so as not to kiss my face, which she said was un-American” (310). DeLillo pulls together in this scene nearly all the novel’s thematic threads. The dependency of white racial identity, in this instance on a watching, perceiving, and conveniently racialized other, is crucial, helping to bring off the novel’s satiric take on embittered, besieged American white masculinity.

As these and other scenes demonstrate, Jack tends to assert himself as an individual by claiming or perceiving his difference from another type of person. Yet as he does so, he implicitly and ironically places himself in an opposite category. The irony is that he fails to perceive his own categorical membership. In racial terms, White Noise contains repeated instances of what Valerie Babb calls “the recurring pattern of using nonwhiteness to give whiteness form” (66). Babb, Morrison, and others have problematized Euro-American authors’ usage of objectified racial otherness in order to flesh out and individualize white central characters. DeLillo’s figurations of otherness, however, seem quite different from those in Willa Cather’s Sapphira and the Slave Girl or Ernest Hemingway’s To Have and Have Not, texts used by Morrison to illustrate her thesis in Playing in the Dark. Such repeated, acutely detailed scenes in White Noise demonstrate DeLillo’s unusual awareness (unusual for a white writer) of the use whites often make of racial otherness to define themselves relationally. His novel repeatedly satirizes this process of majority identity formation.

It is important to acknowledge that everyone tends to think of others in terms of categories, as this or that type of person (be it stranger or acquaintance, friend or enemy, man or woman, American or foreigner, and so on). What we object to, of course, is when people assume that the occupants of a category all think or behave in a particular way. When discussed in a comparative context, with reference to issues and concepts raised in minority literature and some helpful outside readings, White Noise can shed light on the ubiquitous tendency to categorize people. It shows that to avoid categorizing oneself in the process is a habit especially instilled by racial whiteness, when, in a social environment such as the one in this novel, its members constitute the demographic majority. Majority membership can also occur in terms of class, gender, sexuality, religion, and so on. The larger the majority, the less aware its members tend to be of their membership.

Such a discussion can reach a level of abstraction beyond the grasp of some students; pausing to search with the class for more examples with categories other than race can help. For instance, my university has a large special education program. Some students with this major have pointed out how membership in the abled majority can make it difficult to keep in mind that the abled enjoy membership in a group, complete with perquisites unavailable to the disabled; they lack self-awareness as abled people. Mcintosh’s essay also offers a brief list of heterosexual privileges worth calling to mind as a way of talking about similar consequences for identity formation of the presumptive normality of heterosexuality. In both cases, it has been helpful to discuss in-
stances in students' lives or in the mainstream media when abled or heterosexual characters encounter people who are their categorical opposites. In such encounters, the minority figure is often referred to or conceived of in ways that reveal something of the opposite in the majority figure. (For example, a student remembers a cruel classmate in elementary school who laughed at a disabled child to bolster his own "low self-esteem"; a young man on campus is overheard complaining about "fags" as a way of asserting his own, tougher masculinity.)

Multicultural literature courses serve the worthy goal of highlighting and recognizing the merits of minority literatures, but the many insights such courses offer students into the complex, ever-shifting significance of race can be enhanced considerably with an analysis of whiteness. There is of course the danger of overemphasizing whiteness and thereby recentering it. Periodically addressing the issue from various angles more fully engages white students in discussions of race, prodding them into an awareness that most students of color already have—that race signifies in every American life.

Working with insights from critical whiteness studies has proved to me that in a multicultural literature course, addressing the significance of minority group membership for minority authors and characters without addressing whiteness tends to leave intact an erroneous pair of assumptions: that when we talk about race, we should automatically talk about the issues that people of color have and that, as a corollary, race doesn’t much matter in the lives of most whites. Including works by Euro-American authors can help counter such notions, if an instructor is alert to the significance that majority racial status has in the settings of particular works and to the standard ways that white authors address (or do not address) matters of race. Several teachers have noted that it is tricky to address whiteness in relation to racial oppression without demoralizing and effectively paralyzing white students with feelings of guilt or resentment. Conceiving of some common white tendencies as analogous to common majority tendencies can reduce such counterproductive emotions. In White Noise, instructors and students can appreciate a white author who clearly seeks understanding of the myriad ways that race works.

NOTES

1Especially useful introductory sources on critical whiteness studies are Delgado and Stefancic; Fine, Weis, Powell, and Wong; Frankenberg, White Women and Displacing; Hill; Lopez; Lipsitz; and McIntosh. Note that the McIntosh article listed in this volume’s works-cited list is the longer (and more useful) of two commonly reprinted versions (the other is usually entitled “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”).

2When I eventually ask for the names of famous “minority” authors and add them to the list, several arise, including Hurston, Wright, Ellison, Walker, Angelou, and others, invariably African American. Of course, if my classes had more students of color, such names might arise more frequently.
3Morrison’s full sentence reads, “American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen” (47). I take it as a good sign that many students find Morrison’s claim troublesome and even objectionable—such responses indicate that they are already engaged with the complexities of some fundamental multicultural issues. To shift the discussion toward Morrison’s crucial focus on standard conceptions of ordinary Americanness, I usually insert quotation marks around two words in her claim when I write it on the board, so that it reads, “American” means “white.”

4For further discussion of varying degrees of white student self-awareness qua white, see Gallagher; Perry.

5Apart from further outside readings that illuminate the sociohistorical contexts for twentieth-century minority works, McIntosh’s foundational article on white privilege is especially useful for direct discussion of white subjectivity and for the ramifications her insights have for white authorship and characterization. I have also had students conduct comparative analysis of two Web sites, that of the Center for the Study of White American Culture (www.euroamerican.org/) and that of Race Traitor: Journal of the New Abolitionism (www.postfun.com/racetraitor/). The second can be read as inflammatory, and student responses to it should be dealt with extensively and carefully. I have also found viewings of period maps useful for discussing the concept of Eurocentrism and its impact on canonicity and historiography. If instructors have computers available in the classroom, entering the words “world map” into Google’s Images section will produce dozens of maps, nearly all of them literally Eurocentric. For maps that illustrate alternative views of the world, see The Upsidedown Map Page (www.flourish.org/upsidedownmap/) and Roediger’s essay “Plotting against Eurocentrism: The 1929 Surrealist Map of the World” in Colored White 169–76.

6The essay by Pérez-Torres offers solid, pragmatic advice for promoting comprehension of The Bluest Eye’s depictions of the power that unspoken whiteness can have. He also writes, “For a class of predominantly white students, the novel can help highlight the deracialized status of Caucasians. The book focuses on the ‘ugliness’ of Pecola Breedlove, an ugliness fostered by a society that values blond hair and blue eyes as standards of beauty. The Bluest Eye can be unsettling because it traces the racial identity American society has erased for so many of our students” (22). This type of “unsettling,” I argue, is something that White Noise can further provoke, in productive ways.

7I examine several such scenes in further detail in another article (“Who Are You”). For further consideration of racial whiteness as depicted in White Noise and of the unexamined racialized perspective of many of DeLillo’s scholarly critics, see Cunningham’s chapter “His Complexion” in Race-ing. Wesley examines DeLillo’s depictions of racial whiteness elsewhere.

8Of course, much of what I recommend would play out differently in settings less homogeneously white and with teachers who are not themselves white or male. A good deal of helpful writing has appeared on the difficulty of addressing racial whiteness pedagogically, much of it from subject positions other than white or male and some of it about classrooms where white students are not in the majority. Particularly useful are Beech; Daly; Keating; McIntyre; Giroux; Barnett; Bernstein; Fox; A. Harvey; Kincheloe; McKinney; and several of the essays in Kincheloe, Steinberg, Rodriguez, and Chennault; Rodriguez and Villaverde; and TuSmith and Reddy.