



# The Body in/of Don DeLillo's Plays

A Digital Symposium

June 20-21, 2024



Conference organization, contact, and registration:

Dr. habil. Johanna Hartmann ([johanna.hartmann@amerikanistik.uni-halle.de](mailto:johanna.hartmann@amerikanistik.uni-halle.de))

## Conference Program (Central European Time)

### Thursday, June 20, 2024

3 – 3:10 p.m.	<b>Johanna Hartmann</b> (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München/Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg): “Conference Opening and Introduction”
3:10 – 4 p.m.	<b>Chair: Hannah Wojciehowski</b> (University of Texas at Austin) <b>Megan Barnard</b> (Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin): “The Don DeLillo Papers at the Harry Ransom Center: An Introduction”
4 – 4:45 p.m.	<b>Chair: Minou Arjomand</b> (University of Texas at Austin) <b>Jeffrey Severs &amp; Michael Streit</b> (University of British Columbia): ““Drink up, you Mothers’: Race and Invisibility in a DeLillo Radio Play”
5 – 5:45 p.m.	<b>Chair: Laura-Isabella Heitz</b> (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg) <b>Paula Martín-Salvan</b> (University of Cordoba): ““Secrets of the body’: Emplacement, Embodiment, and Externalized Perception in Don DeLillo’s <i>The Engineer of Moonlight</i> ”
6 – 6:45 p.m.	<b>Chair: Esther Wetzel</b> (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg) <b>Julia Rössler</b> (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München): “The Body and/as Postmodern Discourse in Don DeLillo’s <i>The Day Room</i> (1986)”

The Body in/of Don DeLillo's Plays  
Conference Brochure

**Friday, June 21, 2024**

3 – 3:45 p.m.	<b>Chair: Erik Redling</b> (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg) <b>Rebecca Rey</b> (The University of Western Australia): “From the Divine to the Mundane: The Body in DeLillo’s Microdramas”
4 – 4:45 p.m.	<b>Chair: Kerstin Schmidt</b> (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München) <b>Bob Jones</b> (Texas A&M, Corpus Christi): “Substitution as Form in <i>Valparaiso</i> ”
5 – 5:45 p.m.	<b>Chair: David Kornhaber</b> (University of Texas at Austin) <b>Patrick Whitmarsh</b> (College of the Holy Cross): “‘Untitled, unfinished’: Geological Inscription and Ecofeminist Refusal in Don DeLillo's <i>Love-Lies-Bleeding</i> ”
6 – 6:45 p.m.	<b>Chair: Allen MacDuffie</b> (University of Texas at Austin) <b>Johanna Hartmann</b> (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg/Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München): “Evolution <i>in extremis</i> : Climate Change Adaptation in Don DeLillo’s <i>The Word for Snow</i> ”
6:45 - 7 p.m.	Final Discussion and Closing Remarks

The Body in/of Don DeLillo's Plays  
Conference Brochure

**Megan Barnard** (Curator of the Don DeLillo Papers at the Harry Ransom Center and Associate Director for Administration and Curatorial Affairs, University of Texas at Austin).

**Title:** "The Don DeLillo Papers at the Harry Ransom Center: An Introduction"

**Abstract:** This presentation offers an introduction to the Don DeLillo Papers, which are preserved and accessible for research at the Harry Ransom Center, a humanities-focused archival research library and museum at The University of Texas at Austin. The Don DeLillo Papers first joined the Ransom Center's collections in 2004, and the presentation discusses both the initial acquisition of the archive and how the collection has continued to grow in the years since, as Don DeLillo has continued his active and celebrated literary career. The presentation offers an overview of the original, primary source materials that can be found within the archive, which include manuscripts and drafts, notes and research materials, personal and professional correspondence, reviews and production materials, career-related papers and ephemera, and other materials relating to Don DeLillo's novels, plays, screenplays, and short works of fiction and non-fiction. The presentation also explains how the Don DeLillo Papers connect with, complement, and are supported by other archival collections at the Ransom Center, giving scholars and students the ability to approach their research from a range of angles and offering a deeper understanding of the cultural contexts surrounding DeLillo's works. The presentation emphasizes many of the ways in which this archive has supported research, teaching, and public engagement throughout the years, demonstrating the rich and active life the archive holds at the Ransom Center. Moreover, the presentation includes information about how to access and study the Don DeLillo Papers at the Ransom Center, encouraging new research use of this unique and extensive archive that reveals much about the creative process behind the author's works.

**Bionote:** **Megan Barnard** is associate director for administration and curatorial affairs at the Harry Ransom Center at The University of Texas at Austin, where she manages the acquisition of collection materials, provides support and direction for the Center's curatorial staff, and serves on the Center's senior leadership team. She works closely with the Center's literary archives and has curated a number of exhibitions, including *Literature and Sport* (2013) and *Culture Unbound: Collecting in the Twenty-First Century* (2011). Select publications include "Collecting Digital Manuscripts and Archives," published in *Appraisal and Acquisition Strategies* by the Society of American Archivists (2016); *Born-Digital: Guidance for Donors, Dealers, and Archival Repositories* (Council on Library and Information Resources, 2013); and *Collecting the Imagination: The First Fifty Years of the Ransom Center* (University of Texas Press, 2007), for which she served as editor and co-author. She holds a Master of Arts degree in English from Texas A&M University.

The Body in/of Don DeLillo's Plays  
Conference Brochure

**Bob Jones** (Texas A&M, Corpus Christi)

**Title:** "Substitution as Form in *Valparaiso*"

**Abstract:** Don DeLillo's *Valparaiso* is a play of substitutes. The eponymously-named cities substitute for one another in destination, location, and even pronunciation, while a TV living room set knowingly substitutes as a . . . living room. Michael Majeski, the wayward traveler, turns out to be a substitute in a number of ways – it was his healthy body that was headed to Valparaiso to substitute for the diseased body of a sick colleague in the first place, and the repeating number of interviews Michael gives in Act One can be seen as a series of "substitutes" for his experience, eventually substituting solely for themselves. By the end of the play Michael has been revealed as a substitute father for Livia's child, and ultimately, becomes somewhat of a substitute for his own life.

However, given that this is a play, everything is already an exercise in avatars and substitution, a notion reinforced by DeLillo's instruction that "two actors . . . play all the interviewers in Act One." There is perhaps a danger in this play in performance; in the media's artificiality bleeding into the theater's. However, this paper will examine how moments of theatricality refocus attention on the human body (and therefore live human bodies) and away from what is seen as the inorganic and artificial.

**Bionote:** **R.W. (Bob) Jones** is currently visiting assistant professor of English at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi, where he teaches writing and literature. He owns a Ph.D. in English from the University of Texas, and a Master's of Fine Arts in Shakespeare and Performance from Mary Baldwin University in Staunton, Virginia. He has also worked as an actor, director, and dramaturg at numerous theaters in Texas and Virginia, including the American Shakespeare Center at the Blackfriars Playhouse. Much of his work focuses on the influence of modern dramatists on historic modes of performance, such as the "original practices" movement in Shakespearean drama. He has also worked at Temple College in Texas, and as a post-doctoral lecturer at UT, teaching Shakespeare, Modern Drama in Performance, and Cult Classics.

**Paula Martín-Salvan** (Universidad Córdoba)

**Title:** "‘Secrets of the body’: Emplacement, Embodiment, and Externalized Perception in Don DeLillo's *The Engineer of Moonlight*"

**Abstract:** Don DeLillo's 1979 play *The Engineer of Moonlight* features several of his recurrent concerns, such as the control of one's body through ascetic discipline, the problem of naming all minute aspects of reality, or the impossibility to describe a system (the observer effect). My paper aims at exploring these concerns through the prism of the interrelated concepts of emplacement and embodiment. I would tentatively argue that dramatic form affords DeLillo the creation of a reduced system in which to performatively enact his ideas.

First, I set out to analyze his use of theatrical space, and specially the on/off stage interaction between the four characters in the play. The text, divided in two acts, revolves around situations in which the potential absence of a character becomes the center of the text. On both occasions, the physical absence of one character is compensated by the remaining three on stage, who seem to 'summon' the absentee through their dialogue, thus pointing to how the four-character system, when altered, is reconstituted through referential language.

Furthermore, I would argue characters in the play explore different strategies of dis-embodiment. The text opens with James and Diana suntanning ritual and their dialogue on how heat allows to "lose yourself" in it (22). Later, Maya's decision to adopt an ascetic lifestyle illustrates her need to minimize the impact of her physical needs on her creative process. Most noticeable, in his attempt to split away from his embodied self, is Eric's resort to modes of externalized perception which include obsessive record keeping, game playing, and the use of other individuals as externalized perceptive instruments: "You are my body. It's through you I know the world" (45). These attempts are most significant when examined against the backdrop of theatrical performance and the role of embodiment in it.

**Bionote:** **Paula Martín-Salván** is professor of English at the University of Córdoba (Spain). Her research focuses on modern and contemporary fiction, and on critical theory. She is the author of monographs on Don DeLillo (UCOPress, 2009) and Graham Greene (Palgrave, 2015), and co-editor of the volumes *Community in Twentieth Century Fiction* (Palgrave, 2013) and *New Perspectives on Community and the Modernist Subject* (Routledge, 2017). She has recently completed a monograph on Colson Whitehead, and co-edited the collection *The Politics of Transparency in Modern American Fiction* with Sascha Pöhlmann. She is currently head of a research team working on a project on secrecy, democracy and dissidence in English literature (2020-2023).

**Julia Rössler** (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)

**Title:** The Body and/as Postmodern Discourse in Don DeLillo's *The Day Room* (1986)

**Abstract:** Don DeLillo's 1986 stage play *The Day Room* has until now played a secondary role in the periodization and canonization of DeLillo's decades-spanning oeuvre. Often described as a metatheatrical piece, the two-act play is commonly aligned with the European tradition of absurdism rather than with postmodern American theater. At the same time, theorists of postmodern theater have rarely turned towards Don DeLillo's dramatic oeuvre. *The Day Room's* prevalent mediations on aspects of performance, materiality, and anti-theatricality, however, illuminate Don DeLillo's preoccupation with the construction of the American self as well as his related interest in the possibilities and limitations of theatrical performance as a postmodernist practice.

In this talk, I will draw on postmodern discourses, performance theory, and recent practice theory to show how ideas of performance, materiality, and anti-theatricality figure as prevalent aesthetic and cultural tropes in *The Day Room*. This talk aims to establish a fresh critical perspective on the play by emphasizing the relevance of these concepts in theme and form. In particular, the talk investigates the relation between language and the body in the play and shows how both the body and language are staged as central antidotes to realist theater's claim to authenticity and the real. As the body is predominantly rendered as a site of pretence and (self-)deception in the play, *The Day Room* presents the dramatic figure as an embodiment of the onto-epistemological crisis of theatrical performance in the postmodern era.

**Bionote:** **Julia Rössler** is a research assistant at the Chair of North American literature at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich/Germany. In her dissertation "Drama After Postmodernism: New Aesthetics of Mimesis on the Contemporary Stage," she examined the aesthetics and ethics of mimesis on the contemporary stage after postmodernism. She is one of the guest-editors of the special issue *Reflections on the Tragic in Contemporary American Drama and Theatre* which appeared in *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre* (2019) as well as the special issue *From Page to Stage. The Role of Creative Interpretation Reconsidered* which was published in the *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* (2023). Her essays have been published in *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, *GRAMMA: Journal of Theory and Criticism* and *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*. She was a post-graduate research fellow at Harvard University and was a visiting scholar at the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, The CUNY Graduate Center, New York.

**Jeffrey Severs and Michael Streit** (University of British Columbia, Vancouver)

**Title:** "Drink up, you Mothers': Race and Invisibility in a DeLillo Radio Play"

**Abstract:** This paper examines a little-known DeLillo radio play, *Mother*, a troubling 27-minute piece that aired four times between 1966 and 1969 (see <https://archive.org/details/pr-BB3830.01>). Radio voices play major roles in DeLillo's later fiction, but as we argue, his unique choice of medium here strategically uses dramatic (dis)embodiment: as Ralph and Sally read the paper in bed, screams come from the hall, until Sally finally lets in a woman named Mildred who says she's been beaten by her husband. Sally and Ralph talk about Mildred for the remainder as though she's Black, despite her protests that she's white. The notes accompanying the play (though nothing in the piece itself) confirm it's about "three members of the white race," but DeLillo exploits actors' invisibility to leave his listening audience off balance. Why would Ralph not just call Mildred a "Negress" but go on about Blacks' noble suffering, and why would Mildred eventually start performing Blackness, speaking in dialect for the last few minutes, before the play ends confusingly with Mildred getting in their bed for a threesome?

We argue that *Mother*, even if not a fully realized work, prods its audience with scandalous racial analysis that DeLillo reworked in novels of the 1970s and beyond. *Mother* subtly satirizes white liberalism that appropriates Black experience, from Billie Holiday records (one's put on partway through the drama) to Ralph's lamenting of "a *white* malady. We are disappearing, all of us, and only you, Mildred, only you and your people can save us." *Mother* shows a young DeLillo interested in being a provocateur on race, and we connect *Mother* and *Americana*, begun in 1966 and containing a psychoanalytic critique of patriotism that parallels incestuous love of a dead mother with empty love of mother-country. *Mother*, from title on (one reference is a euphemized "Motherfucker"), represents an earlier, stranger attempt to explore such dark national fantasies along racial lines, hinting that this whole show may be a sexual game staged by these three players.

**Bionotes:**

**Jeffrey Severs** is associate professor of English at the University of British Columbia. He is the author of *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books* (2017), the co-editor of *Pynchon's Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim's Guide* (2011), and a contributor to Jesse Kavadlo, ed., *Don DeLillo in Context* (2022). With Michael Streit, he co-hosts *Don DeLillo Should Win the Nobel Prize: A Podcast*.

After earning an MA in Literature from the University of British Columbia, where his SSHRC-funded thesis focused on DeLillo's *Ratner's Star*, **Michael Streit** turned to writing fiction. He lives in Vancouver, teaching music and co-hosting *Don DeLillo Should Win the Nobel Prize: A Podcast* with Jeffrey Severs.



The Body in/of Don DeLillo's Plays  
Conference Brochure

**Rebecca Rey** (University of Western Australia)

**Title:** "From the Divine to the Mundane: The Body in DeLillo's Microdramas"

**Abstract:** Don DeLillo's two microdramas are potent distillations commissioned and performed by the American Repertory Theatre for two festivals of one-minute plays, a decade apart. Incredibly short at about two pages and two minutes each, they can be taken at simplistic face value or read in context of DeLillo's oeuvre and the milieu in which he wrote.

This paper is in two parts: first, we'll analyse "The Rapture of the Athlete Assumed into Heaven" (1990) through a close reading of the religious and celebrity aspects of the playlet, and the interaction between the two. As DeLillo is fond of writing about sports – mainly baseball – we'll compare his treatment of the divine athlete body across his works. Second, we will delve into mundane domesticity through an analysis of the micro-play "The Mystery at the Middle of Ordinary Life" (2000). We'll note similarities and differences between this and his other domestic-focussed works, including the novella *The Body Artist* (2001) and novel *White Noise* (1984), and discern his treatment of domesticity, the mundane and familial bodies across time. We'll also compare "The Mystery" to other plays about banality, and how this is represented through bodies and spaces between bodies. Finally, I'll conclude by drawing the two playlets together with the recent film adaptation of *White Noise* (2022), and the strikingly consistent threads of divinity and banality in the representation of bodies in all three.

**Bionote:** Dr. Rebecca Rey is the author of *Staging Don DeLillo* (Routledge, 2016), the first book-length study of DeLillo's plays. She has published chapters on his staged works for *DeLillo in Context* (Cambridge UP, 2022) and the *Edinburgh Companion to Don DeLillo and the Arts* (Edinburgh UP, 2023), as well as an article on the film adaptation of *Cosmopolis* in *The Conversation* (2012). Following her PhD from The University of Western Australia, she has taken up research communication and external relations roles alongside being Vice-Chair of the Propel Youth Arts WA board.

The Body in/of Don DeLillo's Plays  
Conference Brochure

**Patrick Whitmarsh** (College of the Holy Cross)

**Title:** "'Untitled, unfinished': Geological Inscription and Ecofeminist Refusal in Don DeLillo's *Love-Lies-Bleeding*"

**Abstract:** Don DeLillo's *Love-Lies-Bleeding* features an array of compromised bodies—human, vegetal, and mineral—through which there emerges an ecocritical dynamic between the earth as a site of fixed inscription and the earth as a fluctuating space of resistance, refusal, and obfuscation. Patriarch Alex's massive earthwork in an unspecified desert locale participates in a long tradition, dominated mostly by white men, of postwar land art in the American Southwest. In this tradition, the planet becomes an object of aesthetic exploitation and reconfiguration, mirroring the despoilation of the region from colonial occupation to the nuclear age. Alex's earthwork conveys a sense of religiosity and masculine control, as he carves a hollow space in the desert mountains to be filled with his own paintings. His aesthetic imposition upon the planet yields no final authorial expression, however, left "untitled" and "unfinished." This artistic incompleteness unveils a quiet ecofeminist refusal. Encountering the weight of geological mass and time, Alex's earthwork encounters what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen calls the "inhuman art" of fossilization and mineralization. A recombinant space of perpetual metamorphosis—compression and contraction, erosion and subsidence, sedimentation and tectonics—the planet undermines Alex's inscriptive practice, aspiring rather to a feminism of assemblage and flux, as expressed in Toinette's remark: "I was the second wife. This is supposed to be the beginning of the stunted male's maturity. But you weren't stunted exactly. You weren't unfinished or unshaped. I was the unfinished one." Drawing on the work of critical geology in writers such as Huffner, Stacy Alaimo, Claire Colebrook, and Elizabeth Povinelli, and considering the dynamic between a feminist geology and the patriarchal inscription of land art, this paper reads *Love-Lies-Bleeding* as coordinating a generative but unstable relationship between aesthetic form and process, authorship, and planetary time.

**Bionote:** **Patrick Whitmarsh** is a visiting assistant professor of English at College of the Holy Cross where he teaches on modern and contemporary literature. He is the author of *Writing Our Extinction: Anthropocene Fiction and Vertical Science*, published in 2023 with the Post45 Series at Stanford University Press. The book argues that a descriptive concern with verticality preoccupies multiple novels published after 1960, and that this concern reveals an ongoing dialogue between literature and the sciences about the anthropogenic transformation of the planet. His work can also be found in *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Contemporary Literature*, *Studies in American Fiction*, *Science Fiction Studies*, and elsewhere. He is currently at work on a project about the aesthetics of environmental alienation in the Anthropocene.

The Body in/of Don DeLillo's Plays  
Conference Brochure

**Johanna Hartmann** (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg/Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)

**Title:** "Evolution *in extremis*: Climate Change Adaptation in Don DeLillo's *The Word for Snow*"

**Abstract:** In Don DeLillo's play *The Word for Snow* (2007) a Pilgrim seeks out a Scholar, a former professor of eschatology, asking for guidance on what to do in the face of the climate catastrophe. In the play – through flooding and the loss of biodiversity –, climate change has dramatically changed how humans live. I will argue that the play shows both human and non-human ecologies as well as embodiment and consciousness, cognition, and the prerequisites of communication to be closely intertwined – with consequences for both the present and the future. In other words, in Don DeLillo's play *The Word for Snow*, climate change is shown as a highly complex issue that affects who we are as human beings. In my presentation, I will present a reading of DeLillo's play by drawing on concepts from the fields of eco-phenomenology and biosemiotics which allow me to describe the interconnectedness of and communicative processes between different ecologies and the epistemological consequences of climate change: How is it possible to know something when the conditions of communication cease to exist and how is communication possible under these circumstances? Furthermore, I will evaluate DeLillo's play in light of ethical questions, reconnecting to the Pilgrim's inquiry on what to do in light of climate change. I will interpret the ending of *The Word for Snow* by drawing on Teilhard de Chardin's theories of evolution and argue that DeLillo's play in fact suggests that there is agency available to combat climate change.

**Bionote:** **Johanna Hartmann** is assistant professor of American literature at Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg. Currently, she is guest professor of North American literature at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München. In her research, she focuses on American drama and theater since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, questions of (inter-)mediality (e.g., ekphrasis, photography, film), and contemporary literature. She is the author of *Literary Visuality in Siri Hustvedt Works: Phenomenological Perspectives* (Königshausen und Neumann, 2015) and the co-editor of *Censorship and Exile* (together with Hubert Zapf, V&R 2015), *Zones of Ambiguity in Siri Hustvedt's Works: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (together with Christine Marks and Hubert Zapf, De Gruyter 2016), and *The Tragic in Contemporary American Drama and Theater* (together with Julia Rössler, *JADT* 31:2 2019).