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Waiting for Other Reparations : Technology, Cybercapitalism and Neoliberal Exploitation in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*

Takashi Yagura

Don DeLillo's 2003 novel *Cosmopolis* is about the ruin of Eric Packer, a 28-year-old billionaire. He lives on the top floor of the world's highest tower in Manhattan, moves across the "cosmopolis" in his custom-made high-tech limousine, and loses all of his wealth in one day in April, 2000. Soon after his financial ruin, Eric is killed by his ex-subordinate, becoming a "human rat"-like (Cowart 186) miserable corpse. DeLillo stresses that this is not just the end of a young capitalist, but also the end of the 1990s of America. In his 2001 essay "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September," DeLillo describes the 1990s of America as follows :

In the past decade the surge of capital markets has dominated discourse and shaped global consciousness. Multinational corporations have come to seem more vital and influential than governments. The dramatic climb of the Dow and the speed of the internet summoned us all to live permanently in the future, in the utopian glow of cyber-capital, because there is no memory there and this is where markets are uncontrolled and investment potential has no limit. (33)

In the last decade of the 20th century, taking advantage of a market upturn, Americans were able to believe in their permanent growth and brighter future, forgetting the past and the present. DeLillo says in an interview that this American utopia “began to end (as it does in the novel) in the spring of the year 2000” (Gediman 9). In other words, *Cosmopolis* is a novel which portrays the end of the American financial utopia and at the same time the backlash of the painful past and the present.

Though we can list Jonathan Franzen’s *Corrections* (2001) as another novel which criticizes America for having exploited other countries in the 1990s, DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* is conspicuous for its description of the perverted time-space sense of cybertotalitarians. Eric, as an investor, always watches the data on the computer screen, predicts the future, and thinks little of the living body and the lived time and space. He has little interest in his workers’ personal history or pain, though they bring him interest. Apparently, it seems that this novel criticizes this kind of cybertotalitarian who devotes himself to the unlived beams of light on the screen and the future, making light of the lived time, space, and living people.

Mark Schuster writes :

[. . .] *Cosmopolis*-like many of DeLillo’s novels-can be read as a warning : unlike Eric, we must allow ourselves to be “receptive to the mysteries” of life beyond the artificial confines of consumer culture, or like Eric, we will realize too late that we are not only dead in the virtual world, but that our lives in “original space” are in jeopardy as well. (Schuster 190)

Koji Toko also argues that the only way for Eric to get back his lost reality is to shoot his own hand and then face the killer (Toko 295). However, these readings may oversimplify the mysteries of the novel. It seems that neither Schuster nor Toko doubts the original(real)-virtual dichotomy and pays little attention to the

questions : What is reality? ; Can we really live “unlike Eric”? ; If Eric gets back his lost reality in the end, was it not reality he had experienced till then? The original-virtual dichotomy has made it difficult to analyze the last part of *Cosmopolis*. Eric, still foreseeing his own death on the screen, does not experience the dramatic change to which Toko refers, and further, it is too optimistic for us, living with cybermoney and the “accumulation by dispossession” to which I refer later, to dream of a life “unlike” the one of Eric.

This essay can be considered as having three goals. The first is to read this novel away from a reading based on the original-virtual dichotomy. The fact that Eric is still foreseeing on the screen his own death, which at the very moment he is shot to death is unwritten, demonstrates that we cannot tell whether our life is original or virtual. Secondly, we will analyze the perverted time-space sense which we share with Eric and Benno. Many critics have commented on Eric’s perverted time-space sense, however, not enough has been said about that of Benno Levin or that of the readers of this novel. This analysis will make it clear that we cannot see Eric as a peculiar pervert from whom we had better keep away and that we *always-already are* involved in the crime and punishment Eric experiences in the “cosmopolis.” These two steps will make it possible for us to consider the third and last subject : Could *Cosmopolis* properly make reparation for the America of the 1990s? To hasten to the conclusion, *Cosmopolis*, refusing to give us the catharsis of reparations, is waiting for other reparations, welcoming ghosts from other times and spaces than America in the 1990s, searching for other punishments suitable for a cosmic crime. Let us start with an analysis of Eric’s perverted time-space sense and the “accumulation by dispossession” of America.

1. The Perverted Time-Space Sense of a Cybercapitalist and the “Accumulation by Dispossession”

In a sense, Eric Packer is a man living in the future.¹ Eric and his subordinates are studying developments in Japanese yen and they have already known what is going to happen in Tokyo tonight, though they are in the daytime in New York.

“The yen will fall.”

“That’s right.”

“Consumer spending’s down,” he said.

“That’s right. Besides which the Bank of Japan left interest rates unchanged.”

“*This happened today?*”

“*This happened tonight.* In Tokyo. I called a source at the Nikkei.” (C 40, emphasis added)

When talking about the fact in the future in the past tense, they tend to think little of the fact in the present and the past. This out-of-joint time perception accompanies the out-of-joint space perception. Through the web Eric seems to get all the information in the world so perfectly, though he later gets to know that his information is not perfect at all, that he tends to make light of things other than the data on the screen. Thanks to his high-tech limousine in which Eric is connected to the world, it is as if his limousine itself was worth being called the universe or the “cosmopolis.” Eric considers many things outside his limousine outdated ; for example, “skyscraper” (C 9), “office” (C 15), “airport” (C 22), “automated teller machine” (C 54), “cash registers” (C 71). On top of all that, Eric gets to want to be data itself : “He’d always wanted to become quantum

dust, transcending his body mass, the soft tissue over the bones, the muscle and fat. The idea was to live outside the given limits, in a chip, on a disk, as data, in whirl, in radiant spin, a consciousness saved from void" (*C* 206).

Eric's devotion to the future and cyberspace entails indifference to his workers: He never exchanges glances with his bodyguard, the chief of technology, or the driver of his limousine (*C* 11, 32), has little interest in his former subordinate Richard Sheets (Benno Levin), and does not know where his limousine is parked at night (*C* 12–13) or who cleans up the toilet with which it is furnished (*C* 157–58). What is worse, Eric calmly declares that his people are living in the shadow of what he does.

Patterns, ratios, indexes, whole maps of information. I love information. This is our sweetness and light. It's a fuckall wonder. And we have meaning in the world. People eat and sleep in the shadow of what we do. But at the same time what? (*C* 14)

This remark eloquently shows the arrogance of a cybercapitalist; only cybercapitalists have meaning in the world, and the others are worth nothing. Furthermore, Eric comes to think that all the things and labor can be databased so thoroughly that all he has to do is just watch the data.

In fact data itself was soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process. This was the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet's living billions. Here was the heave of the biosphere. Our bodies and ocean were here, knowable and whole. (*C* 24)

We had better not attribute this arrogance only to Eric's personal situation. Rather, we should read this in relation to the American people in the 1990s, when they were indifferent to the result of their exploitation, while they were supported by the "flow of tribute from the rest of the world" (Harvey, *Spaces of Neoliberalization*, 25). In the neo-liberal society, the success of a country never fails to dispossess other countries of their wealth. According to David Harvey, some Asian countries enjoyed their success in the 1980s, and the US and the UK followed them in the 1990s.

If, for example, the 1980s belonged largely to Japan, the Asian 'tigers,' and West Germany, and if the 1990s belonged to the US and the UK, then the fact that 'success' was to be had somewhere obscured the fact that neoliberalization was generally failing to stimulate growth or improve well-being. (Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 156)

When we are enjoying bright prosperity, like Eric haughtily says, it is difficult for us to think of other people "living in the shadow" of what we do. Harvey writes that neoliberalism is the process of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 56), and the "capitalist seeks individual advantage and (though usually constrained by law) is responsible to no one other than his or her immediate social circle" (Harvey, *Spaces of Neoliberalization*, 82). *Cosmopolis*, through describing one day of a cybercapitalist, shows how the Americans were indifferent to the capital flow from the rest of the world and the result of the "accumulation by dispossession."

At the end of the novel, Eric stands face to face with Benno Levin, who seems to be the incarnation of people "living in the shadow".

2. Transforming into a Visible Murderer and Retaliation without Catharsis

In a sense, Benno Levin provides the contrast of light and shadow with Eric Packer. While Eric is a world-famous investor, Benno is almost an invisible man. Having trouble getting along with people at his workplace and in his family, Benno, after getting fired by Eric and losing both his job and family, begins to take aim at Eric (*C* 55–56). He thinks as if he were transparent: “Light shines through me on the street. I’m what’s the word, pervious to visible light” (*C* 195). An invisible man, Richard Sheets tries to get back the dignity of a visible man through transforming himself into a murderer, renaming himself Benno Levin. This transformation from Richard Sheets into Benno Levin reminds us of that from Richard Henry Gilkey into Texas Highway Killer in DeLillo’s earlier novel *Underworld* (1997). Richard Henry Gilkey is a socially inept middle aged man working at the counter in a supermarket. He, just like Richard Sheets (Benno Levin) in *Cosmopolis*, thinks of himself as a “transparent” man (*U* 268), and transforms himself into a serial killer, who, driving alongside, shoots drivers on the highway. He can realize his own existence only when he is broadcast on the news. We had better not see these two Richards in DeLillo’s novels as just some kind of abnormal men irrelevant to us. If we consider Hannah Arendt’s argument that “speech and action” are the only ways for us to reveal our uniqueness and “[a] life without speech and without action [. . .] is literally dead to the world” (Arendt 176), it is understandable that the two invisible Richards have to transform themselves into something else, even if it is a murderer. This epistemological metamorphosis into a murderer is their “human condition.” They “act,” or more directly kill others in order to be seen and heard. Richard Sheets can give a “speech” to Eric and make his “confession” only through his epistemological change into Benno Levin. He says to Eric “Do you think people

like me can't happen?" (C 189), and pulls out an answer: "All right. People like you can happen. I understand this. I believe it" (C 193). Eric comes to face the man living in the shadow, and he suddenly shoots his own left hand, knowing what he was missing is the sheer "need to be": "He understood what was missing, the predatory impulse, the sense of large excitation that drove him through his days, the sheer and reeling need to be" (C 209). It seems to some degree that Eric in this part shows his remorse and the Fall from utopian futurism.

However, we cannot perceive any catharsis in the last part of this novel. *Cosmopolis* ends with the description of Eric, looking at the screen of his watch, foreseeing his own death on it, waiting for the fatal shot to come: "This is not the end. He is dead inside the crystal of his watch but still alive in original space, waiting for the shot to sound" (C 209). This part makes it impossible for us to consider that Eric finally gets back his reality in the original space away from the virtual space. Rather, it makes us doubt the original-virtual dichotomy. To analyze the ending part—quoting Eric, it "is not the end"—properly, we have to consider Eric's self-direction towards his own destruction, Benno's perverted time-space sense, and what we share with both Eric and Benno.

3. The *Always-Already* Perverted Time-Space Sense of Eric, Benno, and Readers

Eric is shot to death by his ex-subordinate. What is worth considering is that Eric himself is waiting for his own death. He could call a barber to get a haircut, but he chooses to go to his familiar barber shop while he knows that is dangerous. Furthermore, he goes so far as to kill his bodyguard in order to face the killer. The fact that the financial and physical ruin of Eric is somehow stage-managed by himself makes it difficult for us to think of his death as just punishment or warning.

In addition, not only Eric but also Benno has a perverted sense of time and space. Critics have commented a lot about the time-space sense of Eric but not enough about that of Benno or further, the readers of this novel. *Cosmopolis* is about a day in April of the year 2000, and it has two fragments entitled “The Confessions of Benno Levin.” These two fragments are written about the events after the last page of the novel, and readers inevitably foresee what is going to happen after the ending. Just like Eric foresees his own dead body while he is still living, we see his future death in advance. Likewise, Benno has to be a foreteller, letting us know Eric’s future half-haircut or death in the past tense. Henry Veggian accurately points out this anachronism and insists that Eric and Benno share “the asynchronous time of global capital markets” (Veggian 88–89). Therefore we have to reconsider Marc Schuster’s argument that Benno represents the opposite of Eric. He writes that the world Benno occupies is not the weightless landscape of smart spaces built on beams of light Eric envisions but one that embodies a practical life starting over in a condemned building with only an iron writing desk and a defective exercise bike to call his own (Shuster 187). What Schuster ignores is the fact that Eric and Benno share so many things, other than “the asynchronous time of global capital markets,” that they are almost inseparable. Benno writes that “everything enters something else,” and he does not know if it is him that is writing so much as someone he wants to sound like (C 60). In this case, Benno wants to sound like Eric. Benno watched Eric in the live video feed from Eric’s website all the time. He “watched for hours and realistically days” (C 151), and his words “resemble something [Eric] would say.” Benno writes : “I must be mouthing his words again” (C 55). The border between Eric and Benno, contrary to Schuster’s argument, is not so clear. A reading which assigns a weightless virtual life to Eric and a practical life to Benno has a limit.

Can we tell a “weightless” virtual life from a “practical” original life in the first place? According to N. Katherine Hayles’s 1999 work, *How We Became*

Posthuman : Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics, information technology and machines have worked as our “electronic prosthesis” (Hayles 291) so much that “it is no longer possible to distinguish meaningfully between the biological organism and the informational circuits in which the organism is enmeshed” (Hayles 35). Information technology and our body are inseparably interwoven. We have already seen that not only Eric but also Benno is a man possessed by the light of a computer screen. Information on the screen enters Benno’s body, voices and thoughts so deep that we cannot say for sure that he is living a “practical” original life.² Slavoj Žižek also insists that we have to avoid the notion that “prior to the computer-generated virtualization of reality, we were dealing with direct, ‘real’ reality : the experience of virtual reality should, rather, make us sensitive to how the ‘reality’ with which we were dealing *always-already was virtualized*” (Žižek 194, emphasis in the original). If we see Eric as a peculiar pervert in the age of cybercapitalism, we shall overlook the fact that our own time-space sense *always-already has been* virtualized and perverted.

We cannot divide our life into two opposite realities. The last scene of *Cosmopolis*, in which Eric foresees his future death on the screen of his watch while he is still living with a sharp pain in his left hand, eloquently speaks of this. Eric does not get back his original reality, to which Schuster and Toko refer, but casts a question : What is reality? It is almost unthinkable that we live completely away from the telecommunication technology, cybercapitalism, or the neoliberal exploitation. Eric, Benno, and we ourselves share so many things to greater or lesser degrees. What then we need to do is not to live *unlike Eric* but live *with Eric* so that we think of our life as one being interfered with by other times, spaces, and people.

Living here at the present time being interfered with by other times, spaces, and people. This is what is important when we tackle the question : Can *Cosmopolis* make reparation for the America of the 1990s? It seems that

Cosmopolis shows that the reparations for the “accumulation by dispossession” of America in the 1990s cannot be finished fully, because that process inevitably summons memories and ghosts from other times and spaces. To confirm this, let us analyze the film-shooting scene.

4. Crime and Punishment in a Cosmic City

Before meeting Benno, Eric comes across “three hundred naked people sprawled in the street.” The only thing he vaguely knows is that “someone is making a movie” (C 172–73). Eric takes off his clothes, steps among the naked people, and lays himself down among them. Critics have read this scene with reference to various kinds of historical or fictional events. Critics like David Cowart, Paul Giaimo, and James Gourley have commented that this scene reminds us of the multiple attacks which occurred on September 11th, 2001 (Cowart 217, Giaimo 111–12, Gourley 47–48). The fact that the name of Eric’s assassin “Benno Levin” sounds like “bin Laden” also reinforces their argument. Eric, as a symbol of the global financial hegemony of America in the 1990s, faces the consequences of what he has done. But we shall know this scene can be read beyond the context of the September 11 attacks if we consult other critics’ readings. Especially, Peter Boxall’s reading is highly suggestive.

But if the mounds of naked bodies are suggestive of an exposed body politic, they also carry with them a set of associations that have been already seen, a kind of collective political memory that runs through DeLillo’s writing. They call up *the littered corpses of the My Lai massacre*, and *the bundled bodies of holocaust victims*, as they have found themselves shadowed forth in *White Noise*, in the ethically evacuated space of the simulated disaster, the simulated evacuation. *It is as if the body of history itself* [. . .] (Boxall 225,

emphasis added)

Katsuaki Watanabe likewise reads the Holocaust in this scene (Watanabe 100). Of course 28-year-old Eric is not a person immediately related to the massacres in Auschwitz or Vietnam, but it is possible for us to recall such historical events when we read this part. This reading releases *Cosmopolis* from the context of the reparations for the America of the 1990s, making us turn our eyes to broader times and spaces. At the present time in 2015, we can also recall Occupy Wall Street on September 17th in 2011, which happened 8 years after the publishing of the novel. Furthermore, David Cowart's argument releases this scene from historical facts or actual place. Cowart compares Eric to Odysseus and the naked bodies to the suitors of Penelope (Cowart 20).

Cosmopolis obviously deviates from the context of the reparations for the America of the 1990s. It has the memories of massacres in the past and the premonition of resistance movements in the future. Manhattan is described as a container of other times, spaces, and ghosts of the whole cosmos. The title of the novel *Cosmopolis* (cosmic city) indicates that it is not just about a particular place but the whole universe. This idea “cosmopolis” or “cosmopolitan” is not so new. Immanuel Kant introduced the idea of cosmopolitanism in his 1795 essay “On Perpetual Peace : A Philosophical Sketch.” In this essay, Kant lists ships and camels (Kant 23) as means of transportation ; nevertheless he argues that the “social interactions among the nations of the earth [. . .] have now spread so far that a violation of rights in one part of the earth is felt everywhere” (Kant 25). After more than 200 years from Kant's essay, we have planes to move faster, the web to communicate with people on the other side of the earth, and multinational corporations providing many more social interactions. It has become easier to realize our cosmopolitan nature. Edward W. Soja points out that Los Angeles is like Jorge Luis Borges's Aleph. The Aleph is “probably two or three centimeters

in diameter, but universal space [is] contained inside it, with no diminution in size" (Borges 129–30). Los Angeles, like Borges's Aleph, is "exceedingly tough-to-track, peculiarly resistant to conventional description," and further, "[e]verywhere seems also to be in Los Angeles" (Soja 222–23). Manhattan in *Cosmopolis* is also this kind of cosmic city, resistant to conventional description, containing universal space inside it. If we try to write about such a "cosmopolis," it necessarily contains the whole universal history. This is the distinctive nature of *Cosmopolis*, setting it apart from other oeuvres such as Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987), *Wall Street : Money Never Sleeps* (2010), and Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013).³ In most movies and novels about supreme rulers of Wall Street, a self-centered wealthy protagonist is convicted in court, takes the consequences of his misdeeds, or returns to a humble life. In other words, his or her crime and punishment are clearly described. If we could tell what the crime and punishment are like, it would enable us to keep away from them and to draw a moral. Those works have described the crime which can be easily punished, or the punishment within the existing law. By contrast, Eric Packer's crime and punishment are unclear. Even though he is ruined both financially and physically, the fact that he himself wanted it makes us hesitate to call it a punishment. In addition, his encounter with ghosts from Auschwitz, Vietnam, Ithaca, and other times and spaces expands his crime ever outward. In *Cosmopolis*, crime and punishment are so unclear and the reparation for what America has done in the 1990s ends so incompletely that we have to live with questions : What crime have we committed? ; How shall we be punished?

Conclusion : Waiting for Other Reparations

As we have seen in the beginning of this essay, Don DeLillo says that *Cosmopolis* is about the end of the American utopia. It is, however, difficult to

see the very end of it in this novel. Eric “never truly dies in the novel” (Veggian 89), and the second-to-last sentence of this novel is, “This is not the end” (C 209). *Cosmopolis* does not give us a catharsis that Eric has finished paying for his crime or properly made amends for America of the 1990s. On the contrary, it meticulously evades a crucial moment ; namely, we cannot know when and how Benno shoots Eric to death. The vital point of Benno’s retaliation is eviscerated. Though it is not totally impossible to draw criticism against arrogant cyberspace capitalists, the ending part of this novel, hanging in midair, evading the crucial moment, and lacking the catharsis of retaliation, demonstrates our incapability of living to the fullest unlike Eric. We cannot criticize Eric from the outside of the world of telecommunication technology, cyberspace capitalism and neoliberal exploitation.

The fact that *Cosmopolis* lacks the catharsis of burying the past is related to welcome things still forgotten or others yet to come from other times and spaces. Just as critics have read the Holocaust, the My Lai Massacre, Occupy Wall Street, and *Odyssey* into the naked bodies lying still, *Cosmopolis* has warmly received ghosts from other times and spaces, beyond the expectation of Don DeLillo. It incessantly asks what crimes we have committed and how we should be punished. Eric is still waiting for the shot to sound. Likewise, *Cosmopolis* is still waiting for other reparations.

Notes

- 1 When we analyze Don DeLillo’s novels, it seems impossible to assign one specific role to any one person, because they are performing themselves deliberately. The most remarkable example is Bill Gray in *Mao II*. Though Bill blames terrorists for robbing novelists of their influence, he himself knows that he is “a bad actor” (M 42) and his idea comes from “self-exaggeration” (M 37). He himself does not believe in his words from the bottom of his heart. Likewise, if Eric Packer in *Cosmopolis* shows a certain characteristic at one point, we can expect that he might show the polar opposite

characteristic later or maybe it will be revealed that he did not believe in what they have said. For example, Eric's thought is described as follows : "He liked the fact that the cars were indistinguishable from each other. He wanted such a car because he thought it was a platonic replica, weightless for all its size, less an object than an idea." However, he continues : "But he knew this wasn't true. This was something he said for effect and he didn't believe it for an instant. He believed it for an instant but only just" (C 10). This part makes it difficult to tell to what degree he is serious about his own words, and therefore we cannot easily understand what his character is really like.

- 2 Randy Laist also refers to N. Katherine Hayles in order to avoid the original / virtual dichotomy (Laist 157).
- 3 Comparing Oliver Stone's movies and Don DeLillo's novels is rather significant, because DeLillo himself criticizes Stone's movie. In an interview on 1988 novel *Libra*, in which DeLillo writes about JFK assassination, he criticizes Stone's JFK as the "nostalgia for a master plan" : "Regardless of [Stone's] vigorous imagination I don't think it was anything but an example of a particular type of nostalgia : the nostalgia for a master plan, the conspiracy which explains absolutely everything (Nadotti 116)." Stone's movie could reach the absolute truth in the end no matter how difficult. It is as if Stone had an overview of this world and clearly knew what was right and wrong. In contrast, DeLillo gives up Stone's "master plan ;" in other words, he does not think he can explain absolutely everything or he does not completely shows what is right and wrong in his novel. The fact that JFK assassination, by the Zapruder Film, was changed into a totally different event gave DeLillo a great shock. His novels are filled with feelings that this reality could change into other realities.

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