On COVID-19, *White Noise,* and Stochastic Death (590 words)

During the tedious and bewildering ramp-up to social distancing, selective quarantining, and finally shelter-in-place here on the west coast of Florida, I'd taken solace in the following words from Don Delillo's 1985 masterpiece *White Noise*: "Let’s enjoy these aimless days while we can, fearing some kind of deft acceleration." In my community, neighbors kayak (I dictated part of this in a kayak), suntan, and play volleyball all day. It’s weirdly dissociating that death is all around us, inside us and inside loved ones, yet everything looks like a beer commercial (it’ll get better, Corona!).

Later in the novel, after an environmental disaster (“The Airborne Toxic Event,” great name for a [band](https://theairbornetoxicevent.com/) guys!) exposes him to radiation, the narrator, a hale, middle-aged college professor whom medical officials declare statistically contaminated, ponders “death has entered. It is inside you. You are said to be dying and yet are separate from the dying, can ponder it at your leisure, literally see on the X-ray photograph or computer screen the horrible alien logic of it all.”

Now that COVID-19 has in fact deftly accelerated, my phone pings with red heat maps seeping over the country, Dad-emails with line graphs trending from exponential to logarithmic, darker shades of maroon puddling in real-time on my flatscreen as neighbors test positive for COVID-19 (389 cases in my county, 9 deaths, as of noon April 7). I scroll through the casualties and deaths the way I do dating sites and Instacart. As Delillo writes, “it is when death is rendered graphically, is televised so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself [...] It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying.”

Throughout the novel Delillo, [who should have won a Nobel by now](https://www.bookforum.com/print/2701/why-don-delillo-deserves-the-nobel-23926), characterizes "white noise" as stochastic data, the rambling word salad of a *Tiger King*-President, statistics without context, the infinite banshee of Twitter. In the novel’s final passage, the stunned, blinking natives of Secaucus/Pittsburgh emerge from shelters, curious, twitchy, swaying religiously towards the palliative crowds. The novel swoons out in a wonderful elegy, describing ad hoc congregations on an overpass before an irradiated Crayola sunset:

The spirit of these warm evenings is hard to describe. There is an anticipation in the air but it is not the expected midsummer hum of a shirtsleeve crowd, a sandlot game, with coherent precedents, a history of secure response. What else do we feel? Certainly, there is awe, it is all awe, it transcends previous categories of awe, but we don’t know whether we are watching in wonder or dread, we don’t know what we are watching or what it means [...] The collapsible chairs are tanked open, the old people sit. What is there to say?

I don’t know what to say. For now, I pass the time skimming 2012 Google Hangout transcripts with an Ex and dink at “Come As You Are” while watching *Seinfeld*.I also wrote a will, which took five minutes because I have no assets except for a condo with a water view. But the sunsets *are* lovely this time of year in St. Pete, as well as three months from now, or three years, and we’ll embrace then on the brine, sloshing shiny Coronas, slithering on the beach like festivals of ecstatic wriggling snakes, because we’ll just be so *in love* again, or for the first time. It’ll be the first time for me. I’ll shake your unwashed hand then and say: “I love you.”