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Toxic Shock: Gendered Environments and Embodied Knowledge in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and Todd Haynes's *[Safe]*

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Lawrence Buell has noted the “emergence of toxicity as a widely shared paradigm of cultural self-identification and of toxic discourse as a commensurately influential force” (665). The centrality of this paradigm to the narratives of Don DeLillo’s novel *White Noise* (1984) and Todd Haynes’s film *[Safe]* (USA, 1995) attests not only to an anxiety about the changing relationship between the body and its environment but also to a struggle over the legitimacy of discourses which express this anxiety. In these texts, the postindustrial environment is represented as producing accidental effects in the form of “toxic events:” an apparent environmental disaster in *White Noise* and the onset of a contested “environmental illness” in *[Safe]*. I wish to explore the way in which these toxic events are productive of transgressive bodies. Both Babette in *White Noise* and Carol in *[Safe]* suffer symptoms whose meaning confounds the masculine discourses of medicine and psychiatry. Moreover, both appropriate unauthorised forms of medical knowledge or technology and in doing so implicitly challenge the gendered authority of normative discourses. By examining the representation of accidental environments and women’s bodies in *White Noise* and *[Safe]*, I aim to explore the relationship between discourses of toxicity and discourses of female embodiment, focusing especially on discourses of consumption and pathology. I will argue that the toxic events depicted in these texts are productive not only of transgressive bodies but also of crises of gendered knowledge and power.

Toxic events in *White Noise* and *[Safe]*

The protagonists of *White Noise* and *[Safe]*, whose action is located in the San Fernando Valley in 1987, inhabit a world of affluence and privilege in which risk, hazard and danger exist principally as a mediated or vicarious reality. In both texts, however, a latent danger is made spectacularly manifest. A possibly catastrophic environmental disaster, in the form of the “airborne toxic event,” is depicted in *White Noise*, and in *[Safe]* the potential toxicity of the postindustrial environment is revealed in the allergic reactions suffered by Carol (played by Julianne Moore). An underlying toxicity is alluded to throughout *White Noise* and is depicted as occupying the continuum of normality in the campus town of Blacksmith:

They had to evacuate the grade school on Tuesday No one knew what was wrong. Investigators said it could be the ventilating system, the paint or varnish, the foam insulation, the electrical insulation, the cafeteria food, the rays emitted by micro-computers, the asbestos fireproofing, the adhesive on shipping containers, the fumes from the chlorinated pool, or perhaps something deeper, finer-grained, more closely woven into the basic state of things. (DeLillo 35)

A pervasive toxicity is similarly attributed to everyday environments by both conventional and

alternative medical discourses in [*Safe*]. An infomercial watched by Carol attributes its viewers' "strange, never-ending ailments" to Environmental Illness: "a disease you can catch from your environment." While the scientific credibility of the terms of this assertion may seem questionable, it differs little in effect from the litany of potential allergic triggers offered by Carol's allergist in the validating context of an impressively equipped and discreetly staffed laboratory: the "new carpeting, new kitchen, cars, paint fumes, strong fragrances" which are an integral and inescapable feature of Carol's affluent lifestyle. The airborne toxic event in *White Noise* may be exceptional in its scale but not in its condition in that it takes place in a context where, as Ursula Heise puts it, "environmental risks ranging from the trivial to the deadly surround the average citizen" (752). As Babette comments, the frequency with which environmental hazards are reported divest them of gravity:

"Every day on the news there's another toxic spill. Cancerous solvents from storage tanks, arsenic from smokestacks, radioactive water from power plants. How serious can they be if they happen all the time? Isn't the definition of a serious event based on the fact that it's not an everyday occurrence?" (DeLillo 174)

For Babette, the discourse of toxicity has become normalised to the extent that it is emptied of threat and urgency; by contrast, for Jack Gladney's teenage son Heinrich, the circulation of discourses of risk engenders a sensibility in which normality is infused with danger. As Heinrich observes:

"Forget spills, fallouts, leakages. It's the things right around you in your own house that'll get you sooner or later. It's the electrical and magnetic fields Forget headaches and fatigue What about nerve disorders, strange and violent behaviours in the home? Where do you think all the deformed babies are coming from? Radio and TV, that's where." (DeLillo 175)

In *White Noise*, television is depicted as enabling Western viewers to enjoy the spectacle of global human suffering from the safety and comfort of their own home; here it is transformed from a medium of vicarious pleasure to an agent of domestic risk.

Anne Balsamo has commented on the way in which the unprecedented advances and aspirations made possible by technology seem to engender a discourse of risk and danger of exact inverse proportion: "Beliefs about the technological future 'life' of the body are complemented by a palpable fear of death and annihilation from uncontrollable and spectacular body threats: exotic new forms of viruses, radon contamination, flesh eating bacteria" (1-2). As Murray Jay Siskind puts it in *White Noise*: "This is the whole point of technology. It creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other" (DeLillo 285). The hold which "uncontrollable and spectacular body threats" exercise over the popular imagination can be attributed to an awareness that the very technological intervention undertaken in the name of protection and safety can itself produce new threats; moreover, these risks often outrun the reach of current scientific knowledge. It is perhaps the simultaneous plausibility and unknowability of such threats which provokes both denial and paranoia. The "modern nature" (Buell 657) of the post-industrial environment, whether domestic or public, built or "natural," seemingly provides a refuge from the dangers to which those living in unmediated relationship with both nature and technology are exposed. However, its totalising embrace (signified by the "white noise" of DeLillo's title) becomes malign, if not menacing, when it is perceived to constitute less a safe space than a hermetic prison: a paradox inferred in the square brackets which enclose the title of Haynes's film [*Safe*].

Environment, embodiment and consumption in *White Noise*

In *White Noise*, Jack's outrage at the discovery of his purported contamination by Nyodene D. in the course of the airborne toxic event can in part be attributed to a masculine assumption about the male body as having boundaries which should not be breached. For Babette, by contrast, the incorporation of Dylar – offered as the “benign counterpart to the Nyodene menace” (DeLillo 211) – can be placed within the spectrum of *normative* technologies of feminine embodiment which routinely negotiate the body's boundaries. In the course of a confessional disclosure to her husband Jack, Babette voices her exasperation at his interjections: “ ‘This is not a story about your disappointment at my silence. The theme of this story is my pain and my attempts to end it’ ” (192). Babette's protest at the way in which her testimony is made to serve the trajectory of Jack's narrative is also a kind of self-reflexive comment on DeLillo's narrative strategies; within the narrative structure of *White Noise*, Babette's intuition that *her* story will become *his* story is not mistaken. The toxic body in *White Noise* is ostensibly that of its male protagonist, Jack Gladney. However, in the context of anxieties about toxicity centring on the involuntary exposure of one body to chemicals, Babette's willing, and potentially harmful, exposure of her body to another chemical substance, the unlicensed medication Dylar, seems especially significant. I intend to place Babette's negotiation with her environment and its toxicity within the context of the discourses of feminine embodiment, or the “conspiracies of the body” (DeLillo 5), to which women are subject.

Babette is depicted throughout *White Noise* as having a problematic relationship with her body which is acted out through modes of consumption, both economic and bodily. In this context it seems very significant that the unlicensed and potentially toxic medication Dylar is depicted both as a commodity, for which she barter with her body, and as an object of consumption, which she consumes through purchase and ingestion. Babette's use of Dylar entails participation in clandestine economic and sexual activities; in a strong sense, however, the role it occupies within the spectrum of technologies of feminine embodiment, including those of consumption, is not aberrant but rather normative. Susan Bordo has written of the body as not only a “*text* of culture” but also a “*practical*, direct locus of social control” (165). As the locus of social control in patriarchal cultures, female bodies become, in Foucauldian terms “docile bodies” – “bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjections, transformation, improvement” (Bordo 166). This habituation is perhaps most powerful where it is internalised; that is, where women act as agents of technologies of feminine embodiment, subjecting the bodies which they inhabit to regulating regimes of femininity, such as diet and exercise. Babette's ingestion of Dylar can be placed in a continuum of activities designed to regulate and modify the female body. Her activities in relationship to bodily regimes – her ongoing struggle against the “bulkiness” (DeLillo 7) of her body – reveal the “compulsive and even ritualistic characteristics” which Sandra Lee Bartky attributes to “a pervasive sense of bodily deficiency” informing the “technologies of femininity taken up and practised by women” (71). By contrast, Jack is encouraged to acquire “weight,” “bulk” and even “hulking massiveness” (DeLillo 17) to lend gravity to his academic authority and professional credibility. Moreover, Babette is policed by her daughters who subject her consumption, whether of food, commodities or medication, to constant and critical surveillance. Denise and Steffie are incisive when commenting on the cycle of compulsion and guilt which informs Babette's attempts and failures to eat healthily, a cycle in which economic and bodily forms of consumption are inextricably implicated: “She feels guilty if she doesn't buy it, she feels guilty if she buys it and doesn't eat it, she feels guilty when she sees it in the fridge, she feels guilty when she throws it away” (DeLillo 7). Babette and Jack's daughters can be read as feminine apprentices, inducted into self-regulatory practices by acting as agents of their mother's self-policing. The guilty pleasures of consumption, whether denied or indulged, are the constituent and mutually reinforcing parts of the pathologising of women's appetite as described by Bordo: “The representation of unrestrained appetite as inappropriate for women, the depiction of female eating as a private, transgressive act, make restriction and denial of hunger central features of the construction of femininity and set up the compensatory binge as a virtual inevitability” (130). The discovery of Dylar concealed in the bathroom only confirms its place

within the domestic landscapes of eating-disordered rituals.

Babette's crisis of identity in *White Noise* can be placed in a context in which discourses of the body and the imperatives of advanced consumer capitalism are deeply implicated in one another; that is, as Bordo puts it, a "culture of contemporary body management" which is "struggling to manage desire in a system dedicated to the proliferation of desirable commodities" (198). Babette describes herself as caught within a market of desires which are competing and yet mutually reinforcing: "My life is either/or. Either I chew regular gum or I chew sugarless gum [denounced by Denise as carcinogenic]. Either I chew gum or I smoke. Either I smoke or I gain weight. Either I gain weight or I run up the stadium steps" (DeLillo 53). Interestingly, the pattern of binge and purge – which consumer society endorses as normative in regard to shopping but castigates as disordered in relation to food – is acted out by Jack in an attempt to recoup a sense of masculine identity. Following an encounter in the mall in which Jack is described by a male colleague as a "'harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy'" (DeLillo 83), Jack enters into a compensatory shopping binge through which he seeks to replenish his sense of himself:

I shopped with reckless abandon. I shopped for immediate needs and distant contingencies. I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching, inspecting merchandise I had no intention of buying, then buying it I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed. (DeLillo 84)

Significantly, this activity is not private, secretive or shameful but public, performative and affirming. Moreover, the family are enlisted in support of Jack's desires, acting to validate his compulsion as an expression of his masculine identity as father and provider: "My family gloried in the event I could tell they were impressed I was the benefactor, the one who dispenses gifts, bonuses, bribes, *baksheesh*" (DeLillo 83 – 84). A subtle gendered distinction is at work between Babette's consuming and Jack's spending; the former constructed as a form of neurotic internalisation and the latter as an authenticating externalisation of self. Nevertheless, Jack's consumerist "binge" is followed by repetitive and compulsive "purgings" which are undertaken privately and secretly: "I started throwing things away" (DeLillo 222):

The more things I threw away, the more I found There was an immensity of things, an overburdening weight No one helped me. I didn't want help or company or human understanding. I just wanted to get the stuff out of the house. I sat on the front steps alone, waiting for a sense of ease and peace to settle in the air around me. (DeLillo 262)

This struggle with the "weight" of materiality takes place in the domestic space of the house, a space which is the site of the oppressive embodiment from which Jack seeks to escape. The aversion underlying this compulsive "throwing away" is given explicit expression in a scene in which Jack inspects the material evidence of his family's consumption, in the form of compacted household garbage: "I picked through it item by item, mass by shapeless mass, wondering why I felt guilty, a violator of privacy, uncovering intimate and perhaps shameful secrets" (DeLillo 259). The waste which is the inevitable outcome of consumption, whether economic or bodily, is here overtly gendered feminine: "I found a banana skin with a tampon inside. Was this the dark underside of consumer consciousness?" (DeLillo 259). Jack's compulsion can be interpreted as an attempt to purge himself of an incipient feminisation.

Bordo has written of the continuum between the normative and the disordered in regard to women's experience of embodiment, arguing that the pathologising of disordered behaviours (such as anorexia and bulimia) serves to conceal the extent to which these behaviours can be located within the spectrum of normative behaviour sanctioned by dominant discourses. By subjecting herself to the intervention of medical technology in the form of the "drug delivery

system" (DeLillo 187) that is Dylar, it could be argued that Babette has internalised a construction of her identity which could only account for her alienation as pathological. This pathologising of feminine subjectivity is made explicit in *[Safe]*. In assuming the subject position of a person with Environmental Illness, it could be argued that Carol conforms to the pathologising of the transgressive female body by conventional medical discourse; however, by subscribing to an alternative discourse she subsequently confounds the authority of those discourses. In pursuit of normality Babette is licensed, even empowered, to commit transgressive acts: she commits adultery in order to obtain proscribed drugs. Similarly, in the name of a return to normality, Carol removes herself from her marital home; indeed she is a figure who is most transgressive when most tenaciously attached to her normality.

Environment, toxicity and pathology in *[Safe]*

The toxic body in *[Safe]* is very emphatically gendered feminine in the form of its protagonist Carol White, an affluent white Californian wife and "homemaker" who suffers symptoms of escalating gravity for which conventional medicine can find neither cause nor cure. Throughout the film, Carol's symptoms are presented in contexts which provide grounds both for an environmental cause and for an ideological cause. Her symptoms, that is, can be read as an allergic response to a postindustrial domestic and public environment so saturated with chemical products as to have become inhospitable; they can also, and simultaneously, be read as expressing a profound alienation from the gendered and heterosexual construction of her identity. As a "hostage of her environment" (Mary-Ann Doane 6), Carol's symptoms are incapacitating but in very specific ways; they render her unable, or license her to refuse, to continue to inhabit a gendered identity constructed by normative regimes of femininity and heterosexuality.

Carol's symptoms escalate in severity from sneezing, dizziness, nosebleeds and "absences" to debilitating attacks of breathlessness, vomiting and convulsive collapse. In each instance a proximity to potentially toxic chemicals provides a possible trigger for her symptoms: new paint which is being applied to her kitchen where food and cleaning products occupy the same work surface; exhaust fumes; chemical hair treatment fluids and nail varnish; aerosol deodorant and hairspray; industrial dry cleaning products. In each case, however, an ideological cause can also be discerned. Pivotal episodes in the escalation of Carol's condition occur in highly charged spaces as far as her gendered and sexual identity is concerned. For example, in the morning after a scene in which Carol's husband Greg expresses anger and frustration at his wife's inability to meet his sexual demands, Carol responds to what promises to be a reconciliatory embrace by convulsively drawing away and vomiting. This scene suggests an aversion to a regime of compulsory heterosexuality in which sexual availability is implicitly exchanged for economic security; Greg's sense of entitlement is mirrored in Carol's apologetic response ("I'm sorry ... I know it's not normal") and yet her body seems to be speaking a different language. An absence which is both literal and figurative occurs when Carol is discovered to be missing from the marital bed by her husband and is revealed to be wandering alone in her garden at night. When Carol is captured by the headlights of a patrolling security vehicle, the forces which will meet her "absence" from her gendered and heterosexual role are anticipated; she becomes a trespasser in her own space, a suspect whose actions will be monitored and subject to surveillance. The message conveyed by this scene is that Carol is crossing a threshold from the realm of the privileged and protected wife to that of deviant and disruptive woman.

Laura Christian has written of *[Safe]* that it

dramatizes how what Foucault has described as a society increasingly governed by normative injunctions . . . facilitates the increased intervention of experts in the lives of those whose bodies are imagined to be particularly prone to pathology. Constructed by medical and psychological discourse as intrinsically sick, the bodies

of women are the focus of especially intimate surveillance. (115)

The spectacular nature of Carol's symptoms, in terms of their visibility and their manifestation in public spaces, provokes but also confounds the classifying surveillance of medical and psychological discourses. Carol's symptoms have no verifiable cause and yet inscribe themselves on her body with absolute legibility; they make visible the invisible inscriptions of power on the female body. When Bartky describes the "disciplinary power ... charged with the production of a properly embodied femininity" as "dispersed and anonymous," "invested in everyone and in no one in particular" and as "perpetual and exhaustive" (81), she is describing a form of power which is ubiquitous and yet invisible. The "self-surveillance" of its feminine subjects internalises a state of "permanent visibility" so that the source of this power remains "invisible." When Carol's body is deprived of breath, possessed with convulsions, made to bleed as if assaulted by an invisible assailant, she is very clearly being acted upon, but by an agent whose origin the normative discourses of medicine are unable to disclose.

The resemblance between the symptoms of Environmental Illness, as experienced by Carol in *[Safe]*, and the classic symptoms of hysteria has been noted by critics (see Naismith and Christian). The history of hysteria is essential to an account of the pathologisation of the female body through scientific discourse; it is also plays a pivotal role in a counter discourse, constructed by feminism, which reads the symptoms of pathologised female bodies as a coded form of protest against their condition as women. Christian places Carol within this tradition when she writes "we might identify Carol's illness as an instance of the body speaking when Carol cannot, much like in the case of the nineteenth century hysteric" (106). Feminist theorists have explored the ways in which discourses of the body have, historically, tended to pathologise the female body: that is, to construct it as inherently aberrant, disordered and in need of correction. However, attempts to read the disordered female body as constituting a protest against the normative must struggle against the power of dominant discourses to construe such bodies as merely reiterating the pathological as the norm where women's bodies are concerned. The paradoxes of internalisation are exemplified in the body of the hysteric; she can be read both as perpetuating the role prepared for her by patriarchal culture in her paralysis, voicelessness and incapacity and as resisting that role through passivity. Carol's passivity throughout the film has been the cause of much debate among critics; as Susan Potter writes "unlike many white female protagonists in mainstream Hollywood narratives, Carol is never represented as a figure who embodies authentic or natural feeling. Rather, she is systematically evacuated of any interiority" (137). While this lack of agency makes any simplistic reading of Carol as a dissenting figure problematic, the absence of volition disrupts those discourses which seek to secure willing and consensual subjection through the process of internalisation.

In pursuit of a "cure," Babette and Carol are depicted as turning to forms of unsanctioned knowledge, whether manifested in the unregulated psycho-pharmaceutical testing of Dylar or in the alternative therapeutic discourse of Environmental Illness. I wish finally to explore how accidental environments are productive of gendered struggles over the ownership and legitimacy of knowledge, focussing on the alignment of transgressive feminine identities and delegitimised modes of knowledge production and consumption.

Accidental Knowledge

In her response to her emerging but as yet undefined 'condition', Babette is represented in *White Noise* as a kind of autodidact; she embarks on a self-initiated programme of investigation and research outside of the structures and institutions of formal learning:

"I had to find out I went to libraries and bookstores, read magazines and technical journals, watched cable TV, made lists and diagrams, made multicolored charts,

made phone calls to technical writers and scientists, talked to a Sikh holy man in Iron City and even studied the occult, hiding the books in the attic so you and Denise wouldn't find them ... " (DeLillo 192)

What is notable about this programme of self-education is that expert and nonexpert, orthodox and alternative forms of knowledge claim equal status. What is absent is any deference to the notion that the possession of knowledge is the privilege of specifically sanctioned individuals or institutions. Both Babette and Carol acquire an altered understanding of their own identities and bodies through alternative and nonexpert forms of knowledge. Significantly, they access these forms of knowledge through the channels of mass and / or popular media communication: the radio, the television, the tabloid publication, the photocopied flyer. Babette is directed to Dylar by an advert headed "DO YOU FEAR DEATH" in a sensationalist tabloid. The holistic and spiritual ethos of the "deep ecology" movement is imparted to Carol as she wakes to a television broadcast on the subject. Furthermore, a flyer headed "Do you smell FUMES?" pinned to the noticeboard at Carol's health club prompts her to attend a public meeting at which the television again acts as the means through which an understanding of Environmental Illness is disseminated. In response to Carol's anguished plea "Where am I? Right now?", a cutaway shot to a television screen in standby mode brings into view the question "Who are you?" The question posed at the opening of this video programme about Environmental Illness contains its own answer; at this moment the television brings into being Carol's identity as a person with Environmental Illness. Carol gains access through these channels to an alternative community; the possibility of a community of support is also suggested, however ironically, in *White Noise* through Babette's recourse to talk radio. In *White Noise*, the radio uncritically gives voice to crises of identity and embodiment: " 'I hate my face,' a woman said. 'This is an ongoing problem with me for years' " (DeLillo 263). In so doing it gives expression to experiences of alienation and isolation and offers a validating remedy to them. These testifying broadcast voices constitute a virtual community to which Babette can subscribe without leaving home:

Babette lay on her side staring into the clock-radio, listening to a call-in show. I heard a woman say: "In 1977 I looked into the mirror and saw the person I was becoming. I couldn't or wouldn't get out of bed. Figures moved on the edge of my vision, like with scurrying steps. I was getting phone calls from a Pershing missile base. I needed to talk to others who shared these experiences. I needed a support program, something to enrol in." (DeLillo 190)

That Babette's subscription to alternative and mediated forms of knowledge in *White Noise* is a challenge to dominant constructions of gendered roles is made apparent in the scenes in which Jack attempts to re-inscribe Babette into the discourses of their marriage. Jack's insistence, despite evidence to the contrary, that Babette is one who "reveals and confides" (DeLillo 192), one who is "not a keeper of secrets" (DeLillo 213), ensures that when she does "reveal and confide" the very act will restore her to her former role: "The whole point of Babette is that she speaks to me" (DeLillo 192). Throughout the novel Jack struggles to maintain his academic authority as a college professor in the face of implicitly mocking simulations of authentic knowledge, whether produced by technology, the mass media, his children (the new experts in the "society of kids" (DeLillo 101)) or his wife. Jack attempts to evoke a more traditional, indeed classical, hierarchy of voices when he makes the following scholarly analogy: "I spoke to [Babette] as one might address a younger member of the academy, someone whose work is promising and fitfully brilliant but perhaps too heavily dependent on the scholarship of the senior fellows" (DeLillo 197). In this context Babette's anxiety is dismissed as derivative, as incompletely learnt and unknowing. However, even in the course of Babette's pivotal disclosure to Jack of her fear of death, the radio turns itself on and contributes the following: " 'I was getting mixed message about my sexuality'" (DeLillo 201). Jack's attempt to manage the scene of Babette's revelation is subverted by popular, and arguably feminised, discourses of identity. An underlying suspicion that the voice of the

radio has more authority than the voice of a husband (and tenured academic) seems confirmed when Babette states: “Talk is radio” (DeLillo 263, my italics). In a sense, Babette has usurped Jack’s masculine prerogative to knowledge by withholding knowledge and, moreover, by autonomously experiencing an existential crisis: as Jack ruefully complains: “Baba, I am the one in this family who is obsessed by death. I always have been” (DeLillo 197). The threat posed by a seeming alliance of popular and “feminine” forms of knowledge perhaps explains Jack’s response to a scene in which Babette’s face unexpectedly appears on a television screen, causing a disproportionate disorientation. Babette is out of place and out of role; by suggesting an identity and existence beyond the family home the television screen prompts Jack to question the very structure of his reality:

The face on the screen was Babette’s. Was she dead, missing, disembodied ? It was but wasn’t her ... she was coming into being, endlessly being formed and reformed as the muscles in her face worked at smiling and speaking, as the electronic dots swarmed. (DeLillo 104]

Given the role that the television and radio play in this novel as sources of knowledge, Babette’s transfer onto the television screen (on which her adult posture class is being broadcast) places her in a position of popular knowledge which is perhaps the real source of Jack’s unease.

In [*Safe*], Carol’s appropriation of the discourses of Environmental Illness, as disseminated by forms of popular and mass media, implicitly challenge the power and authority of medical knowledge as endorsed by professional and state institutions. In *Bodies in Protest: Environmental Illness and the Struggle over Medical Knowledge* (1997), Steve Kroll-Smith and H. Hugh Floyd suggest that “the key to understanding modernity is the authority of expertise to disempower the senses” (118). They argue that modernity makes the following pact: “surrender the sovereignty of your senses to the authority of administrative expertise, and in return you will enjoy the benefits of legitimate and reliable knowledge, about your own body, your self, and the world you inhabit” (118). Carol’s experience of the medical establishment in [*Safe*] is one characterised by the breakdown of this pact: that is, by the failure of medical discourse to produce a narrative to legitimise the experience of the body in return for the compliance of the subject. Like Babette, Carol is subject to pressure from masculine figures of authority, whether marital or professional, to disclose the secrets of her sickness; in both texts discourses of confession and disclosure seek to contain the transgressive effects of their bodies. Christian suggests that an “extortionary ‘incitement to discourse’ . . . similar to the institutionalized procedures of confession analysed by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*” (115-116) is evident throughout [*Safe*]. Carol is subject to a series of interrogations through which the normative discourses of medicine and psychiatry seek to elicit confessional testimony from her. Initially, she is questioned as a means of disclosing a knowledge about her body which she is assumed not to possess; in later scenes, as medical science reaches its limits, she is interrogated as a “bad subject” assumed to be in improper possession of a knowledge which she is refusing to disclose. “Can you think of anything else that might be causing it?” demands Carol’s doctor in open exasperation; his question is an admission of the failure of medical science to fulfil its role. Moreover, his refusal to accept Carol’s increasingly insistent account of the cause of her illness suggests that her attempts at self-diagnosis will only be interpreted as further evidence of her pathology. Her husband Greg’s incredulous exclamation, “what would cause you to actually bleed?”, makes it clear that Carol will be held to blame for her own symptoms and implicitly held to blame for exposing the limits of masculine scientific rationality. A scene which seems to offer an expression of authentic testimony only confirms the containment of Carol’s voice by dominant discourses. In one of only two instances of voiceover in the film, Carol’s voice is heard in testimonial form declaring “my name is Carol” as a tracking shot of her dressing table takes in both family photographs and the flyer to which the narrated letter is a response. What might seem a moment of self-revelation and genuine interiority is disrupted by her husband’s entry into the bedroom in which Carol is

writing. Greg's response to Carol's distressed disorientation – "Where am I? Right now?" – returns her discursively to the scene and cause of her alienation: "We're in our house. Greg and Carol's house."

By employing the discourse of Environmental Illness, a medically contested condition, in her attempts to re-negotiate her understanding of her relationship to her environment, Carol's efforts have the effect of questioning both the ownership and authority of medical discourse. Carol experiences her body as a source of "unmediated knowledge" and acts "towards that knowledge as if it were rational, that is, legitimate" (Kroll-Smith and Floyd 93). Not only is Carol licensed by her illness to exercise an unprecedented degree of agency over the management of her immediate environment but in assuming the identity of a person with Environmental Illness she is implicitly challenging the gendered power and authority of conventional scientific discourses. For Carol, her devastating loss of normality is also curiously empowering; the pursuit of health, and ostensibly of normality, licenses a transformation of identity which in other contexts would be seen as avowedly subversive. Carol is permitted, as a victim of ill health, to exercise an agency directly at odds with her socially sanctioned role and her husband is conscripted to consent to this alteration; Carol must temporarily relinquish her identity as wife, mother and homemaker in order to return more fully to it. A parallel can be drawn between Carol's experience of Environmental Illness as depicted in *[Safe]* and the pathologies of female protest to which Bordo refers. Bordo ascribes the peculiarly subversive quality of such feminised pathologies as hysteria and anorexia to the way in which they confound the medical ownership of the body and its significance: "The spectacle of each presents the *patient* (however, unconsciously or self-destructively) creating and bestowing meaning on her own body" (67). While Carol's ill health is certainly debilitating, the discourse of Environmental Illness by which she makes sense of her condition empowers her to "bestow meaning on her body." By providing an environmental narrative in which her body makes sense, this discourse enables her to exercise an agency which contests the ideological narrative which spatially contains her gendered and sexual identity.

In *White Noise* and *[Safe]* accidental environments produce transgressive bodies which in turn prompt gendered crises of knowledge. From the perspective of their respective husbands and doctors, Babette and Carol are considered perverse in the sense of being persistent in error; their "error" lies not simply in their unlicensed pursuit of unauthorised forms of knowledge, but also in the very presumption at work in their attempt to "know" their own bodies. Indeed, both texts suggest the ways in which women's experience of embodiment is delegitimised by dominant cultural narratives which pathologise the female body and hystericize feminine subjectivity. However, I have argued that the toxic events depicted in *White Noise* and *[Safe]* can also be understood as perversely empowering and productive; the seemingly accidental effects which these environments produce include transgressive configurations of gender, embodiment and knowledge which serve to question normative constructions of power.

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