

**“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 to an ongoing anxiety about the changing relationship between the body and its environment, whether ‘natural’ or technological, and to the struggle over the legitimacy or authenticity of knowledges and discourses which express this concern. Both texts depict ‘toxic events’, an apparent environmental disaster in *White Noise* and the onset of an environmental illness in *Safe*, which prompt crises of the body and of knowledge; by exploring the way in which these toxic events are acted out through the bodies of women, I wish to examine the implication of discourses of toxicity in discourses of feminine embodiment. Ursula K. Heise has written about how contemporary novelists have used “chemical substances” as “a trope for the blurring of boundaries between body and environment, public and domestic space, and harmful and beneficial technologies” (748). In *White Noise* and [*Safe*], I would argue, the gendered boundaries that are in question are those between normative and transgressive identities and between legitimate and illicit knowledges. Both Babette in *White Noise* and Carol in [*Safe*] suffer symptoms without cause, whose meaning the (masculine) discourses of medicine and psychiatry cannot articulate; they are converted from exemplars of normative gendered and sexual identity into deviants whose bodies exhibit a silent protest. Propelled into the realms of illicit and alternative technologies, Babette and Carol assume diagnoses - “extra sensitiv[ity] to the terror of death” (DeLillo 197) and ‘Environmental Illness’ - which construct their identities as pathological. By placing the discourse of toxicity in these texts in the context of discourses of feminine embodiment, especially those of consumption, both bodily and economic, and of pathology, I intend to explore how these

“conspiracies of the [female] body” (DeLillo 5) prompt crises of knowledge, discourse and power.

Toxic events in *White Noise* and *Safe*

The protagonists of Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, published in 1984, like those of Todd Haynes’s [*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 and vicarious reality. In both texts, however, a latent danger is made spectacularly manifest; moreover, the reality and authenticity of this danger remains radically ambiguous. A possibly catastrophic environmental disaster, in the form of the ‘airborne toxic event’, is depicted in *White Noise*; however, a profound uncertainty about the reality of this event, as stage managed by Advanced Disaster Management and as mediated by the mass media, remains unresolved. 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, his wife Babette’s willing, and potentially harmful, exposure to another chemical substance, the illicit medication Dylar, is especially significant. In [*Safe*], the latent toxicity of the postindustrial environment is made manifest in the allergic reactions suffered by Carol (played by Julianne Moore); however, in the absence of recognition of the reality of her symptoms from the medical establishment, Carol assumes the identity of one who is ‘environmentally ill’ – a condition which testifies to the reality of her experience but which is denied the legitimacy of medical authority.

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)

An unpredictable and uncontrollable potential 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 its place in a context where, as 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's teenage son Heinrich, the circulation of discourses of risk engenders a sensibility in which normality is infused with danger. As Heinrich puts it:

"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)

The very medium which allows the comfortable and secure to obtain vicarious pleasure from witnessing scenes of human extremity here becomes the source of an impending domestic disaster.

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, hazards and dangers 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 be in part attributed to a masculine assumption about the male body as having boundaries which should not

be breached, whether by toxic chemicals or medical technology. 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, 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; in the context of the narrative structure of DeLillo’s novel, Babette’s intuition that *her* story will become *his* story is not mistaken. However, I intend to read Babette’s negotiation with her environment and its toxicity not as a symptom of Jack’s crisis but rather to place it 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 illicit 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”’ (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. Babette's 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 astutely incisive when commenting on the cycle of compulsion and guilt which inform 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). The pattern of binge and purge, constructed as disordered in relation to food, is endorsed by consumer society as normative in regard to shopping. Moreover, the environmental 'waste' which is the inevitable outcome of consumption - whether economic or

bodily - is implicitly gendered in the scene in which Jack inspects the compacted household garbage: "I found a banana skin with a tampon inside. Was this the dark underside of consumer consciousness?" (DeLillo 259).

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, I would argue, 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 simultaneously 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 illicit 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 (hetero)sexual 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 an identity constructed by regimes of femininity and reproductive 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 and 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 a literal and figurative symptom occurs when Carol is discovered to be missing from the marital bed by her husband and is revealed to be wandering in her garden. When Carol is captured, in her garden at night, 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 – their visibility, their manifestation in public spaces – provokes but also confounds the classifying surveillance of medical and psychological discourses. Perhaps what is so peculiarly disturbing about Carol's symptoms - which have no verifiable cause and yet which inscribe themselves on her body with absolute legibility – is the way in which they seem to make visible the invisible inscriptions of power onto 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 to internalises a state of “permanent visibility” so that the source of this power can remain ‘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 identity 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 have been noted by a number of 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 in the symptoms of pathologised female bodies 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. Attempts to read the disordered female body

as constituting a protest against the normative must struggle against the power of dominant discourses to read 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 perversely resisting that role by taking within her body the only available means of resistance – refusal 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). Carol's passivity is not so much an absence of subjectivity as a presence without agency; while this lack of agency makes problematic a simplistic reading of Carol as a dissenting figure, this absence of volition disrupts those discourses which seek to ensure a willing and consensual subjection through the process of internalisation.

In pursuit of a 'cure', Babette in *White Noise* and Carol in *Safe* are depicted as turning to forms of unsanctioned knowledge, whether illicit, in the form of unregulated psychopharmaceutical human subject testing, or alternative, in the form of the discourse of Environmental Illness. I wish to explore how accidental environments are productive of 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: as embarking 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 in this clandestine project 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 in *White Noise* and Carol in [*Safe*] acquire an altered understanding of their own identities and bodies through alternative and nonexpert forms of knowledge; significantly, they access these forms to knowledge through the channels of mass and / or popular media communication: the radio, the TV, the tabloid publication, the photocopied flyer. Babette's route to Dylar is enabled by an advert headed "DO YOU FEAR DEATH" in a sensationalist tabloid. The holistic and spiritual ethos of the 'deep ecology' movement is seemingly imparted to Carol as she wakes to a TV broadcast on the subject; 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 TV again acts as the means through which an understanding of Environmental Illness is disseminated. Moreover, in response to Carol's anguished "Where am I? Right now?", a cut away shot to a TV screen in standby mode brings into view the question "Who are you?" The question posed at the opening of a video programme about Environmental Illness contains its own answer; at this moment the TV 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 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 doing so it both gives expression to experiences of alienation and isolation and provides 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 in 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, she reveals and confides" (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 TV 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 TV and radio play in this novel as sources of knowledge, Babette’s transfer onto the TV 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;” 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; 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 -

through internalisation - the disruptions which the symptoms of their bodies have expressed. Christian suggests that an “extortory ‘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 own 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 and 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 “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 instance of authentic testimony only confirms the sense of the containment of Carol’s voice in 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 with 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 nevertheless enables her exercise an agency which contests the ideological narrative which spatially contains her gendered and sexual identity.

In *White Noise* and *Safe*, accidental environments produce 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 unorthodox forms of knowledge, but also in the very presumption at work in their attempt to ‘know’ their own bodies. Indeed, both texts depict the way in which the authenticity and legitimacy of a woman’s experience of a crisis of embodiment is placed in question by dominant cultural narratives which seek to pathologise the female body and hystericize feminine subjectivity. However, I have argued that the toxic events depicted in Don

DeLillo's novel and Todd Haynes's film can be understood as perversely empowering and productive; the seemingly accidental effects which these environments create include transgressive configurations of identity and knowledge which serve to question normative constructions of gendered power.

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