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“Your Doctor Knows the Symbols”:
Trans-corporeality in the Fiction
of Don DeLillo and Richard Powers

By Andrew Gorman

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in

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Introduction

1. Trans-corporeality: An Emergence

In *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Stacy Alaimo effectively formulates the concept of “trans-corporeality,” a theoretical frame for thinking about the human body as a site of exchange with the environment. Trans-corporeality “grapples with the ways in which environmental ethics, social theories, popular understandings of science, and conceptions of the human self are profoundly altered by the recognition that ‘the environment’ is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves” (4). In this, trans-corporeality highlights that while human action is imposed onto the environment, actions of the environment are simultaneously imposed upon our bodies. For example, one might come to know the toxicity of his or her physical location by learning about the toxins which permeate his or her body. Trans-corporeality argues that the environment is always already embedded within the human. Alaimo encourages us to consider the material exchanges between the human and its environment as site where seemingly stable and discrete entities such as “body” or “earth” overlap in ways that create meaning. Furthermore, trans-corporeality can call our attention to the “the traffic in toxins” which highlights the ways a “chemical substance may poison the workers who produce it, the neighborhood in which it is produced, and the web of plants and animals who end up consuming it” (18). Trans-corporeality teaches us that when looking at the environment, we are also gazing at ourselves. Similarly, when considering the material forces that constitute our own bodies, we are also in dialogue with the environment

Alaimo’s concept of trans-corporeality arises from the discourse of material ecocriticism, in which matter is a dynamic and contested space, a site of exchange. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann liken material ecocriticism to the two-paneled painting of a diptych; they write that it

is composed of “two converging angles: that of the new materialist theories and of ecological postmodernism. Though independent from one another, our two panels form a conversation” (448). In this convergence material ecocriticism puts into dialogue such theorists as Latour or Deleuze with Haraway or Hekman. Such unions present “[i]nterlacing reflections on oceanic plastic, trash, subatomic particles, toxic bodies, semiotic emergences, and discursive practices” (448). What is more, material ecocriticism looks at the different roles and meanings that matter possesses when it moves between the inside and outside of the human.¹ Iovino and Oppermann attribute the reconsideration of matter to the “material turn” within cultural studies. This turn, they explain, is a “search for new conceptual models apt to theorize the connections between matter and agency on the one side, and the intertwining of bodies, natures, and meanings on the other side” (450). The way we might read garbage, for instance, would be as a narrative of matter that passes through the coordinates of the human, where meaning is further imbued and exchanged. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, in their “Introducing New Materialisms,” tell us about the material turn’s framework of an “ontological reorientation that is resonant with, and to some extent informed by, developments in the natural sciences: an orientation that is posthumanist in the sense that it conceives of matter itself as lively or exhibiting agency” (7). Trans-corporeality assumes this “posthumanist” stance, a critical trajectory which emerges out of systems theory and into the territory of what Cary Wolfe describes as processes which challenge our “taken-for-granted modes of human experience” with attention to “forms that are radically ‘not-human’” (xxv). Iovino and Oppermann write that “if matter is agentic, and capable of producing its own meanings, every material configuration, from bodies to their contexts of living, is ‘telling,’ and therefore can be the object of a critical analysis aimed at discovering its

¹ For more work from this material turn, see Karen Barad’s discussion of “agential matter” in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007) or Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Economy of Things* (2009).

stories, its material and discursive interplays, its place in a ‘choreography of becoming’” (75). My project is concerned with the strategies trans-corporeality exhibits in the work of contemporary fiction writers. I begin with a reading of Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* as a critique of the ways public discourse can be dissuaded from establishing a literacy of science and medicine and therefore a literacy of our bodies. In discussing DeLillo’s later novel, *Underworld*, I examine the way waste or garbage has come to represent a marginal space, matter that the human attempts to disentangle itself from, only to have the discarded creep back into our world and shake our presumptions with a vengeance. Lastly, I read Richard Powers’s *Gain* as a novel which highlights the presence of multinational corporations as stakeholders in both our environments and our bodies. The works of DeLillo and Powers formulate the human in such a way that it becomes impossible to disentangle from the material forces which constitute the environment.

Trans-corporeality, I argue, advances the work of Lawrence Buell’s “Toxic Discourse” (1998). Toxic discourse, as it is proposed by Buell, consists of narratives which focus on characters that become “awakened” to the toxicity or environmental hazards which constitute their environment (642). Toxic discourse extends as far back as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) to Ursula K. Heise’s “Toxins, Drugs, and Global Systems: Risk and Narrative in the Contemporary Novel” (2002). What is odd is that after the publication of Heise’s essay, the work within this frame of toxic discourse ceases for roughly a decade. During this time, literary and cultural theory saw the emergence of post-humanism, animal studies, and the global turn. But it is in this material turn that we see ecocritics revisiting and recasting the ideas once popular in the decade of toxic discourse. Matthew Zantigh, in reference to Buell’s *Writing for an Endangered Environment*, argues that part of the critical hesitation is that “[t]oxic discourse is not an

empirical science; it is heavily invested in affect and passion rather than in rigorous systems of proof and logic” (637). This in part explains why for so many years toxic discourse was wrapped up in discussions of Ulrich Beck’s theory of risk society, which “deriv[es] from the inability—even with science’s assistance—to calculate the lethal consequences of everyday life” (642).

Trans-corporeality advances toxic discourse as it is an effective strategy for considering the larger chain of material exchanges which both permeate and constitute the everyday. Where toxic discourse emphasizes the moments when one awakens to or recognizes toxicity, trans-corporeality takes the focus out of the human mind and posits it where the body and the environment overlap. We can, then, read such contemporary novels as *White Noise*, *Underworld*, or *Gain* to trace the “traffic in toxins,” asking who or what is allowing chemicals to saturate the aisles of the supermarket or the walls of a grade school. When talking about “the environment,” Alaimo resorts to this phrase for its “analytical convenience,” where “the material world vanishes into a humanly made, abstract calculus of power and identity” (10). When talking about the environment, then, we are discussing sites of dynamic cultural and material interaction. In addition, I employ the phrase “everyday” to stress the sites in which these toxic exchanges are normalized. For instance, we can take three scenes from these late twentieth century novels where one environment is consistent among all of them: the supermarket. In *White Noise*, DeLillo writes,

[t]here were six kinds of apples, there were exotic melons in several pastels.

Everything seemed to be in season, sprayed, burnished, bright. [...]The toneless systems, [...] the loudspeaker or coffee machine, the cries of children. And over it

all, or under it all, a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension. (*White Noise* 36)

DeLillo's *White Noise* depicts an environment where the products in the supermarket are "sprayed" and always "in season." However, the way these glossy products maintain this stasis without rotting is never fully investigated. Jack Gladney, the novel's protagonist, is more caught up in navigating through the symbols of the market, dazed by the "dull and unlocatable roar" of machines. Whereas *White Noise* stands as a canonical work of postmodernity, Frank Lentricchia is correct in identifying that it is also "an ecological novel at the dawn of ecological consciousness" (7). Cynthia Deitering observes this "dawn" similarly, formulating what she calls the "toxic consciousness" of American literature. Deitering tells us that this period covered the early 1980s when American literature became concerned with toxins and environmental hazards. "What happened," Deitering explains, "is that we came to perceive, perhaps inchoately, our own complicity in postindustrial ecosystems" (197). In this project I begin with an analysis of *White Noise* in part because it stood in a moment in time where there was a cultural demand for answers to hard ecological questions but limited material answers for such. Ultimately, *White Noise* alerts us to the ways discourses surrounding scientific authority enforce traditional understandings of corporeality. As Jack Gladney becomes more aware of his body as a dynamic site that is intertwined with the environment, the more he becomes aware of the forces which attempt to dull this perception.

Material ecocritics such as Christine Temko and Matthew Zantingh call our attention to the emerging concern of waste or garbage to the same degree which Buell does with toxicity. Nick Shay, the protagonist of DeLillo's *Underworld*, has a very different experience while shopping in the supermarket than Jack Gladney does. With his wife, Marion, Nick says they

“saw products as garbage even when they sat gleaming on store shelves, yet unbought. We didn’t say, What kind of casserole will that make? We said, What kind of garbage will that make?” (121). As Tony Tanner observes of *Underworld*, the “real protagonist of the novel is ‘waste’” (63). DeLillo’s novel illustrates the ways in which perceptions of trash within the cultural imagination began to both shadow and outline the environment at the end of the twentieth century. Nick and Marion further comment on the products they buy, asking “whether it was responsible to eat a certain item if the package the item comes in will live a million years” (121). Although it is seemingly external to the human, waste complicates the boundaries of the human as a discrete entity. Garbage is not something that leaves the human. Rather, a trans-corporeal reading of *Underworld* shows that post-consumer matter embeds the presence of the human within the environment while simultaneously connecting the environment to the human. Alaimo picks up the humanness of these dump sites in her essay “Trans-corporeality at Sea,” considering the ways in which the ocean—once considered a vast symbol of natural majesty—now remains a vast network of plastics and other garbage. Waste, though once thought to be something external or outside the self, now shows how the human narrative is intertwined with the toxicity of both our landscapes and our oceans.

Laura Bodey, the protagonist of *Gain*, presents a different view of the material exchanges in the everyday site of the supermarket. Standing in line at the local “Bounty Mart,” Laura notes “two weather-beaten men” before her (26). She says that these “[f]armers always fill her with a vague sense of shame,” that all she knows how to do is “take from them. These boxes of multigrain cereal. The corn dogs that Tim eats unheated, right out of the pouch. [...] Everything in her cart, however enhanced and tangled its way here” (27). As Paul Maliszewski observes, it is as Laura is “heading to her car after [this] routine round of grocery shopping [that she] feels a

cold twinge in her leg and finds out five days later she is dying” (128). Not only does Laura find out that her body is dependent on these phantom-like farmers, but she also comes to realize that Clare Soap and Chemical has a stake in her body as well. *Gain* effectively demonstrates that these corporate giants not only populate the market but also our bodies and environments. Clare Soap and Chemical becomes the environment. Trans-corporeality, then, can help us identify the ways in which such structures permeate our lives and call for a more complicated critique than the us-against-them scenario which populates much of toxic discourse.

2. Environmental Theory and the Specter of Carson

Over fifty years have passed since the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. Read and taught as the book which launched the environmental movement, a comprehensive study of the production and dissemination of DDT, a book of philosophy, and a collection of feminist propaganda, *Silent Spring* is perhaps one of the most contested texts to emerge out of the late twentieth century.² Carson taught the general public that DDT and other similar chemicals are largely hazardous to one’s health. By doing so, she also suggested that our bodies are interwoven with government regulations and giant chemical companies such as Monsanto and Dow. “Upon its publication,” David Hecht tells us in “How to Make a Villain,” “Carson’s book attracted swift and vociferous denunciation from scientists connected with or sympathetic to the pesticide industry” (149). The sheer volume and velocity of criticism for Carson was matched only by the praise she received for advancing the discussion of the ways in which our lives are saturated with synthetic chemicals. Revisiting Carson’s work half a century later brings us back to the genesis

² For a thorough outline of the criticism *Silent Spring* received, consider Lisa Sidaris’ “The Poison Book” (2002), Maril Hazlett’s “‘Women vs. Man. vs. Bugs’: Gender and Popular Ecology in Early Reactions to *Silent Spring*” (2004), and Michael B. Smith’s “‘Silence, Miss Carson!’ Science, Gender, and the Reception of *Silent Spring*” (2001).

of the modern environmental movement, the “awakening” discussed by much of toxic discourse. What is more, Rachel Carson presented the general public with a formulation of the human in regards to the chemicals it intakes, the waste it produces, and the radiation to which it is exposed. The human, as Carson proposed in *Silent Spring*, must be read and attended to in this larger environmental context.

In an afterword to the 50th anniversary edition of *Silent Spring*, Edward O. Wilson proclaims that “[i]t was Carson’s achievement to synthesize this knowledge into a single image that everyone, scientist and general public alike, could easily understand” (357).³ Carson, as Wilson points out here, is a central theorist in proposing a more complicated understanding of the relationship between the human and more-than-human world. Moreover, Carson becomes a symbol of the potential for vast scientific data to become tangible to the general public. This “single image” that unites both public and scientific knowledge has also been a focus for the literary community. Although scientists and essayists had stepped in to this new environmental discourse immediately, it took about two decades before contemporary fiction began to address the question of representing the human body amidst the flux of synthetic chemicals of the everyday. This moment, where fiction began to wrestle with the discourse of *Silent Spring*, is where critics like Deitering turn their focus toward Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, a work with a critical legacy which rivals that of Carson’s. *White Noise* both maintains and complicates the questions Carson raises in *Silent Spring*. In the novel, DeLillo employs a panorama of postmodern tropes to depict a culture that is just as saturated with toxins as it is with media; the aisles of the supermarket are colorful and vibrant, laced with chemical additives for the

³ Carson was not the first scientist to imagine the impact of these war-time chemicals on the general public, but she was the first to popularize it. For further investigation regarding the pre-*Silent Spring* era, see Edmund Russell’s *War and Nature: Fighting Humans and Insects with Chemicals from World War I to Silent Spring*.

prevention of rot, and, through what is dubbed the “airborne toxic event,” any physical space—including white suburbia—is a potential site of toxic exposure.

The return to Carson’s model (the blurring of the boundaries between the human and the environment) shows that *Silent Spring* offers a preceding model for the contemporary concept of trans-corporeality. In our current situation where chemicals, their impact, and public awareness have shifted, how can we advance Carson’s warnings further into public discourse? How can this trans-corporeal frame be fathomed as personal knowledge? Moreover, how can Carson’s pursuit to expose the links between synthetic chemicals and the human body be formulated by language and narrative? Rob Nixon, in “Rachel Carson’s Prescience,” discusses the process of coming back to Carson’s work after many years apart from it. “Naïvely,” Nixon writes, “I’d thought I’d be rereading Carson, forgetting that ‘rereading’ is invariably a misnomer. When we return to an author after a long absence, that return is colored by who we have become.” Nixon’s return is not dissimilar to that of environmental criticism and of literary studies more broadly. Material ecocriticism, I argue, usefully “color[s]” the return to Carson’s model. Rachel Carson’s presence within toxic discourse and material ecocriticism is that of a haunting, a specter with unanswered questions. In this sense, I argue, Carson exists in a similar state to that of Derrida’s Marx, a spectral presence that represents untheorized discourse or a structure of thought that we do not quite yet have the language to ontologize, a presence that calls into question its own absence.⁴ This specter of Carson is the call to action and desire to stop or at least to frame a potent critique of the role chemical giants such as Monsanto have in the dissemination of lethal chemicals. “A grim specter has crept upon us almost unnoticed,” Carson warns in the often-cited chapter “A

⁴ On this, see Derrida’s formulation of Hauntology, originally theorized in *Specters of Marx* (1993) and in *Ghostly Demarcations* (1999). For a contemporary summary, see Colin Davis’s “Hauntology, Specters, Phantoms” (2005) or Mark Fisher’s “What is Hauntology” (2012). Additionally, Karen Barad published what she considers to be an empirical case for hauntology in *Derrida Today*, entitled “Quantum Entanglements” (2010).

Fable for Tomorrow” (3). In my reading, Carson herself becomes the specter, a voice of warning whose continuity emerges within the environmental humanities. Carson’s haunting pressures toxic discourse to move beyond being what Buell calls a “discourse of allegation,” where claims of toxicity and environmental poisoning lack empirical evidence (659). Trans-corporeality, I argue, advances this problem productively, framing analyses of material exchanges which connect the human body and the environment. The body and its environment are not two discrete or separate entities, but are caught up in a network of material exchanges which trans-corporeality renders present.

3. Toxic Discourse: An Autopsy

Lawrence Buell opens his essay “Toxic Discourse” (1998) with the reminder that “[t]he fear of a poisoned world is being increasingly pressed, debated, debunked, and reiterated from many disciplinary vantage points: medicine, political science, history, sociology, economics, and ethics among others” (649). Up to the time of his writing, Buell claims, the discussion of toxicity has hardly coincided with the study of discourse. Buell’s initial observation has been useful in pointing out the lack of attention discourse continued to receive in its ability to represent or engage with the issue of toxicity. What is more, when we acknowledge the other “disciplinary vantage points,” we see that toxic discourse is always in dialogue with and drawing from the work of other disciplines. Buell’s aim is to “define the forms, origins, uses, and critical implications of toxic rhetoric” (649). Putting into conversation texts that range from *Silent Spring* and *White Noise* to Terry Tempest Williams’ *Refuge* and A.R. Ammons’ *Garbage*, Buell shows discourse’s ability to both represent and challenge the human’s relationship to and responsibilities for its toxic environment.

Buell positions his reading of *Silent Spring* alongside the Love Canal Disaster—where Hooker Chemical deposited 21,000 tons of toxic waste in Niagara Falls, New York before the company sold the tainted land to a local school board.⁵ Reading *Silent Spring* alongside the Love Canal Disaster, Buell imagines “chicken-and-egg questions about what’s constructing what,” and considers how similar events—both media coverage of toxicity and literary representations—are “preshaped by *Silent Spring* and its aftermath” (646). What we see here is an entanglement between natural disasters and the language used to construct or represent them. Additionally, this “preshaped” dimension to environmental disasters shows that there is a decorum even to situations where the air one breathes becomes toxic. An explicit example of the performative aspect of toxic exposure is the airborne toxic event at the heart of *White Noise*, a natural disaster which is used to simulate later artificial disasters. Toxicity, then, is not only experienced, but in part something performed—contingent on knowledge of exposure and that all of the actors are in place.

The sites where toxicity occurs, according to Buell, bear resemblance to the image of pastoral America.⁶ Buell writes that “[b]oth Carson and her populist successors, in short, revive a longstanding mythography of betrayed Edens, the American dispensation of which is traced by Leo Marx” (647). The work to which Buell refers is Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden*, which illustrates the tensions represented by 19th century writers in America’s paradoxical commitment to both the simple/pastoral and complex/mechanical. In the American imagination, neither of these formulations takes precedence over the other. Rather, the paradox is that both were (and continue to be) indispensable visions of the American identity. When thinking about

⁵ For the two prevailing—yet diverging—readings of the Love Canal Disaster, see Eric Zuesse’s article “Love Canal: The Truth Seeps Out” (1981) and Michael Harold Brown’s *Laying Waste* (1981).

⁶ Buell acknowledges that his focus is on “the United States” to “make [his] analysis pointed.... and to not outrun the limits of [his] knowledge” (639).

the idea of place within toxic discourse, we are thinking about environments that simultaneously crave a return to the Edenic pastoral and a transition into what social scientist Robert Fishman labels “technoburbs” (184). Catastrophes strike these environments already loaded with Marx’s tension, positioning the human as the victim. However, Buell observes that “victims are now permitted to reverse roles and claim authority” (655). Like Carson, whose analysis incorporates a ferocious amount of scientific research, the individual human may seize the opportunity to challenge the dissemination of toxic substances. Buell attributes this role-reversal to work done within the Environmental Justice movement, specifically in relation to agency. A subject self-reflective on their trans-corporeal position possesses a degree of agency. The exhibition of agency within a toxic environment, then, is the way one consciously acts upon this knowledge—the drive to mediate and create distance between his or herself and the toxic environments.

Perhaps the most important facet of Buell’s argument is that of toxic discourse’s limitations. The central issue is toxic discourse’s reliance on melodrama and its question of empirical evidence. Buell calls attention to “the importance of melodrama to toxic discourse, as well as the totalizing rhetoric with which it sets forth claims of environmental poisoning” (659). Although the formulation of melodrama is useful in creating us-against-them struggles for which characters can find themselves in, melodrama is traditionally limiting in that it deflates ambiguities and can oftentimes rely on allegation. However, Steven Schwarze, in a recent essay, revives melodrama as a potent frame for raising environmental questions. In “Environmental Melodrama,” Schwarze writes that melodrama is “a pervasive feature in public discourse,” in which we can discern immediate oppositional forces in toxic exposure (7). Schwarze stresses the “immediate oppositional forces” as a short term goal, whereas self-knowledge of toxic environments should be the end result. Melodrama strategically “place[s] the fault line of

environmentalism between the producers of significant environmental damage and those who suffer its effects” (8). Still, the us-against-them mentality that informs toxic discourse is sobered by the reality of what Buell sees as its inherent problem: “the question of evidence” (659). For a discourse that relies so heavily on conflicts between the human and external forces (toxic exposure), it is stunted by the difficulty—often impossibility—of tracing exposure to toxins, waste, or other hazardous substances to a single source. To put it simply, the barrage of these harmful substances onto the human is often sustained for such a long period of time (and of such myriad origins), that it then becomes impractical to assign blame to one single source. One cannot simply pin down the origin of his or her cancer to one agent (as we will see in *Gain*). Buell does not attempt to resolve this. Instead, he resolves that because “toxic discourse rests on anxieties about environmental poisoning for which there is copious historical evidence, it is plainly a discourse of allegation rather than of proof” (659). With toxic discourse, then, one can only allude to the agents who can be blamed, but never in the absolute or legal sense of the term. Buell continues to theorize this problem:

The problem of reaching even approximate certitude is compounded by the predictable reluctance of the allegedly responsible parties to concede error and by the cumbersomeness of the process by which error is legally determined. [...]

This climate of scientific and legal complexity calls toxic discourse into question even in advance of its utterance yet, at the same time, argues for both its social importance and ethical legitimacy. (660)

The lack of empirical evidence—and presumed impossibility of such—shows that toxic discourse operates in a hypothetical frame; blame and the perception of environmental hazards remain largely ambiguous. This is why Ulrich Beck’s formulation of risk society was so heavily

adopted in the next wave of toxic discourse. Beck's risk society considers the ways a culture perceives risk and then are in turn motivated or dissuaded by such. Toxic discourse plays an important role in risk perception because, as melodrama helps us become situated in us-against-them scenarios with toxicity, it becomes an essential strategy for establishing what may or may not signify a threat to our species, despite what the laws and regulations might tell us.

The discussion of risk alone, however, did little to resolve Carson's original question of how the human is intertwined with the environment. These formulations of risk, I argue, make far too sweeping claims about the material exchanges of toxicity in hope of productive answers to perceived risks. In short, toxic discourse needs to refocus on the material to present a more potent critique of toxicity. As works such as Richard Powers's *Gain* joined the conversation of toxic discourse, the nuances of risk assessment regarding global threats only embodied more complicated states of paralysis.⁷ Ursula K. Heise's 2002 essay, however, presents a useful balancing act between risk perception and the trap of toxicity becoming an abstraction, further considering the ways in which readers can respond to such. "Toxins, Drugs, and Global Systems" presents a close reading of the different ways in which toxicity and risk are represented within DeLillo's *White Noise* and Powers's *Gain*. Heise opens her analysis similar to the way Buell does his: a discussion of what ecocriticism (and "American literary studies during the 1990s") overlooked or failed to acknowledge was emerging from within the social sciences at the time (747). Even in Buell's writing, Heise notes, "the notion of risk and the social scientific theories that have evolved around it play only a relatively minor role" (747). Heise is not only interested in expanding a risk-centered reading of these texts, but like Buell she also calls

⁷At this moment within the history of toxic discourse, Buell incorporated a discussion of *Gain* in his 2001 book *Writing for an Endangered World* where he included it as he revisited his work in toxic discourse. What is most interesting is that Buell demonstrates a near-trans-corporeal understanding of the texts, saying that "*Gain* deconstructs traditional conceptions of stable body and determinate place as middle-American illusions" (56).

attention to the necessity of “multiple disciplinary vantage points.” It would seem that a conscious registering of the interdisciplinary nature of toxic discourse is a trend these theorists deem critical. This interdisciplinary focus is what provides Carson and Alaimo much authority when writing about environmental toxins: both draw from exhaustive research within the sciences to present a vision of the human in relation to the environment. Heise’s work echoes the interdisciplinary frame, her analysis focusing on Beck’s work on risk within the social sciences. What in turn is adopted from Heise’s essay for other works in toxic discourse is twofold. First, she considers the way a “focus on the notion of risk as a literary motif can substantially sharpen interpretations of some contemporary texts” (747). Heise calls attention to the representation of risk in *White Noise* and *Gain*, establishing a contrast between the two to highlight the difficulty in discerning the local and global systems which compose our lives. Then, Heise theorizes further on “risk and the kind of narrative articulation it requires” regarding “narrative form” (747). Heise teaches us that the depth to which a narrative can engage with risk is contingent—at least in part—on its form.

Heise stresses that her analysis “builds upon Buell’s earlier analyses of toxic discourse but also how contemporary novelists use chemical substances as a trope for the blurring of boundaries between body and environment” (748). Not only is this a conscious return to Buell’s frame (as Heise consistently does throughout her essay), but the boundary blurring “between body and environment” also carries with it the specter of Carson. This theorizing around the human’s desire (and often inability) to calculate risk, I argue, is an evolution of Carson’s discourse. Carson calls our attention to a population “fallen into a mesmerized state” in which we “tolerate a diet of weak poisons” (*Silent Spring* 12). Heise advances—and complicates—this by

pointing out that even those who are disillusioned are left with few options to resist. Heise asserts that

these authors constantly challenge their readers to reflect on the kinds of cognitive strategies and language that might be able to map global connections, strategies at which their own novels can only hint. [...] The differences notwithstanding, Powers and DeLillo place their protagonists in environments fraught with multiple risks of the most varied kinds, and one of the central challenges for the characters is to gain awareness of these riskscapes and find ways of living and dying within them. (773)

What is at stake for these protagonists, as Heise points out in this passage, is not only becoming awakened to the toxicity of their environments, but also establishing some agency or control of their locale. This drive to “find ways of living and dying” in these “riskscapes” is the central question for which trans-corporeality interrogates. Whereas traditional framing of toxic discourse considered the human in opposition to lax government regulations or a corporate body, trans-corporeality shows that toxicity is a multitude of exchanges, sites which crystalize the overlap between the body and the environment. Trans-corporeality does not establish new connections between the human and the environment. Rather, it is theoretical site which calls attention to the ways in which these forces are always already in dialogue with one another—dialogues which toxic discourse attempted to wrestle with decades ago.

DeLillo's Toxic Poetics

Because a more sophisticated science of analyzing toxicity is not yet at hand, our understanding of toxins often is much more explicitly textual than it is technical. [...] To see toxicity as textuality is to admit to the contested, unknown, and indeterminate qualities of toxic effects. Timothy Luke, *Rethinking Technoscience in Risk Society: Toxicity as Textuality*

In regards to the critical industry surrounding DeLillo's 1985 novel *White Noise*, Annjeannette Wiese maintains that it is "a testament to the fertile range of problematics that arise from the novel that critics are so divided on how to interpret the mix of cultural, literary, and popular" (2). However, despite the copious amount of criticism of *White Noise*, the question of the material world is suspiciously absent. Material readings of the novel are difficult due to the work's commitment to the postmodern. To put it simply, *White Noise* resists material readings because it foregrounds the issues of mediation and representation. This is in part due to DeLillo's vision of the ways in which the environment and the body are mediated and are experienced as simulacra. Many critics have picked up on this problem, highlighting the novel's treatment of nature, the environment, and the physical body. "Along with mortality, women and the poor," Richard Kerridge writes, "the natural world is an example of the repressed Other in postmodernity" (187).⁸ Similarly, Michael Valdez Moses points out that in *White Noise*, "[n]ature is on tap, on cable, readily available to any American viewer who possesses access to subscriber television" (64). Dana Philips uses *White Noise* to formulate what she calls "the postmodern pastoral," where a connection to natural or rural environments becomes "an absent presence of which the characters are still dimly aware" (236-7). How can we think productively

⁸ Richard Kerridge's catalogue of theoretical work is useful in thinking about the evolution of ecocriticism as a whole. The essay referenced above, "Small Rooms and the Ecosystem," was published in 1998 and still articulates a unified and unmediated conception of "nature." We can compare this to his later work like "Ecological Hardy" (2001)—an analysis of Thomas Hardy's fiction—where Kerridge uses a different formulation of nature altogether.

about the intertwining of the body and the environment in a novel that only offers up the phantoms of such?

Addressing a similar problem, Alaimo coins the phrase “material memoir,” an object of inquiry where personal knowledge and the record of one’s body can represent the material exchanges happening between his or her body and the more-than-human world. “In the material memoir,” Alaimo explains, “the question becomes how to understand the very substance of the self. [...] [M]aterial memoirs forge new ways of knowing our bodies and ourselves” (87). The problem, however, is the scientific or disciplinary knowledge needed to decode the data of the body. Alaimo’s formulation offers an innovative rereading of *White Noise*, where the material memoir of Jack Gladney, the professor of Hitler Studies, tries to decipher the abstractions which come to constitute both his body and the environment. After exposure to environmental toxins, Jack becomes increasingly aware of the stake the environment has on his own body. Moreover, as he learns more about his own health he feels paralyzed by his lack of scientific knowledge.

DeLillo presents readers with a before-and-after scenario regarding an ecological crisis—the novel’s “airborne toxic event.” Early in the novel, Jack acknowledges the potential toxicity of the everyday. However, it is not until his momentary exposure to the airborne toxic event while pumping gas that he begins to consciously register such toxins as hazardous. The anticipation or anxiety of his own death is the genesis of Jack’s material memoir. To engage with one’s biological narrative, DeLillo shows, coincides with acknowledging such narrative’s finality. *White Noise* portrays how environmental catastrophes like the airborne toxic event come to form metanarratives of toxicity. By “metanarrative” I imply that this airborne toxic event seizes the attention of Jack (and most critics of *White Noise*) in a manner which distracts from the other harmful substances which constitute our environments and our bodies. It is only when he

recognizes the harmful substances of the everyday that Jack challenges this toxic narrative.

Moreover, Jack cannot effectively formulate his own material memoir because he lacks scientific knowledge to make sense of his own data.

Although *White Noise* puts the relationship between the environment and the body into question, it does little to develop this into a potent critique early on. In “Waves and Radiation,” the first section of *White Noise*, Jack notes the many hazardous objects and chemicals that saturate the lives of him and family. The question of death, too, plays a role in this section, with off-handed remarks in which he and his wife, Babette, question, “Who will die first?” (15). During one of Jack’s lectures he states the often-quoted line, that “All plots tend to move deathward” (26). Death is topic of discussion, but it is referred to in the abstract or hypothetical. Moreover, toxins and environmental hazards also remain in this hypothetical state. In thinking about the receding hairline of his son, Heinrich, Jack attempts to identify an environmental cause. DeLillo writes, “Did his mother consume some kind of gene-piercing substance? [...] Have I raised him, unwittingly, in the vicinity of a chemical dump site, in the path of air currents that carry industrial wastes capable of producing scalp degeneration[?]” (22). Theorizing about environmental exposures, Jack Gladney acknowledges that there are external hazards which threaten the body, but his critique does not move beyond the mindset of assumption.

Buell and Heise read such hypothetical representations of toxins in *White Noise* as an articulation of Beck’s risk theory, where the drive to calculate environmental risks is a byproduct of an industrial society. Heise asserts that such representations exist “as a trope for blurring the boundaries between body and environment, public and domestic space, and harmful and beneficial technologies” (748). Moreover, Heise writes that “Jack Gladney’s experience of risk is intertwined with his self-perception as a member of the middle class” (752). This “middle class”

risk perception functions as an erasure for the boundaries between the self and the environment. Heise points out that Jack must call into question the very social foundations which come to shape his identity to develop a better understanding of his body and his environment. Heise's chief claim of *White Noise* is that "DeLillo is concerned with the way in which new kinds of risk have invaded the lives of even those citizens that might earlier have had reason to believe themselves safe from their most dire consequence" (753). Alaimo revisits Heise's work in her "Material Memoir" chapter, affirming that this "blurring [of] the boundaries" is not only "transcorporeal," but also a necessary symptom of engaging with scientific representation (93). What is more, these boundaries of "body and environment" may be complicated and difficult to discern because the two are never wholly separate. Rather than reading for Jack's perception of risk, the material memoir foregrounds the knowledge of one's body. Other ecological readings of *White Noise* (Kerridge, Moses, and Philips) do show attentiveness to risk and the novel's "airborne toxic event," but neglect the ways this perception develops. Jack possesses a complex—though unscientific—understanding of toxins and chemical hazards, but it is the localization of death that unhinges this knowledge. By the localization I mean the way the novel's central catastrophe makes the presence of death a real and immediate concern for Jack.

At the beginning of chapter nine, the novel's showcase supermarket scene, Jack briefly mentions an incident at the local school. This passage is worth further critical attention as the language demonstrates how Jack makes sense of the event. Opening the chapter, Jack observes:

They had to evacuate the grade school on Tuesday. Kids were getting headaches and eye irritations, tasting metal in their mouths. A teacher rolled on the floor and spoke foreign languages. 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 microcomputers, 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. (35)

What is most peculiar about this passage is that in the span of a single sentence, even one that summarizes rather than describes, the symptoms discussed in the incident are more factual than that of the airborne toxic event, the novel's primary ecological catastrophe. Moreover, in this school-yard incident, there is no one single cause, but Jack identifies a multitude of potential toxic agents, most of which he could find in his house in Blacksmith or the college in which he teaches. In the following paragraph "men in Mylex suits and respirator masks" come in to investigate, followed by the irony that Mylex itself is too dangerous to go unchecked so the men have to make a second, more thorough round of the school (35). These "men in Mylex," as the novel later affirms, are privileged with a closer relationship to toxins and catastrophes than the civilian characters. Their Mylex suits simultaneously protect them from toxins and establish their presence as a scientific authority. As such, *White Noise* stratifies characters between civilians and officials, contrasting such roles as teachers and doctors. While both groups have their own systems of knowledge, it is the latter—figures representing the hard sciences and health fields—that are permitted to contend with and represent the material world. Jack cognizes this grade school disaster solely as the reason why his two daughters, Denise and Steffie, stayed home for a week, therefore going grocery shopping with him and Babette. I argue that this passage is perhaps more disastrous than the airborne toxic event for Jack. As Jack observes, these potentially lethal materials are "woven into the basic state of things." These toxins permeate our lives from the grade school to the supermarket, but Jack still hesitates to make any affirmation

that they too exist within him. Instead, he relies on an arsenal of middle class theatrics and a limited command of scientific knowledge to distract himself from this reality.

The concepts of “Mylex,” toxins, and mortality are brought to the forefront in book’s second section, “The Airborne Toxic Event.” Perhaps one of the most overlooked aspects of the ecological disaster around which Buell claims the novel is “crystalized” is that the disaster is first known as two different catastrophes before the radio settles upon the name “airborne toxic event” (663). Sitting on top of his family’s roof with binoculars and a radio, Heinrich informs Jack that “[t]he radio said a tank car derailed. [...] It must be pretty toxic or pretty explosive” (108). The radio and sirens they hear take on two roles informing the viewer. On the one hand, they call attention to the incident and its severity. On the other hand, the radio also mediates knowledge. While Heinrich uses the radio to communicate the event to Jack, Heinrich seems to have his own analytic vantage point. Heinrich tells us that “The radio calls it a feathery plume,” but then interestingly critiques the radio in saying that “it’s not a plume.... [It’s] a shapeless growing thing. A dark black breathing thing of smoke” (109). Heinrich is able to translate this for his father with some scientific knowledge, informing him that the plume is “Nyodene Derivative or Nyodene D” that he learned from a toxic waste movie shown at school (109). Readers find out that “the movie wasn’t sure what it does to humans,” but the radio provides some ambiguous symptoms: “At first they said skin irritation and sweaty palms. But now they say nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath” (109). Heinrich begins to contrast other character’s insistent lack of scientific knowledge, drawing both from a documentary he watched and his own observational skills.

After a discussion of the “feathery plume” and whether or not it would become mobile, we find out that the name of the catastrophe has changed. Babette says that “[t]hey’re not calling

it a feathery plume anymore,” but a “black billowing cloud” (111). Jack comments, saying “they’re coming to grips with the thing” (111). Part of him is consciously registering the event as a disaster, but the attention is brought back to the familial; Jack asks, “When do we eat?” (111). Jack insulates himself with the routine of the family—what Murray Siskin, Jack’s colleague, has already deemed “the cradle of misinformation,” a “process [that] works toward sealing off the world” (81-2). Jack’s retreat back into the familial is a defense mechanism; rather than using this opportunity to calculate risks and develop a better understanding about his environment, Jack seeks psychic refuge from the material threats approaching him. When he learns of a wind blowing south from Canada, Jack draws upon further cultural definitions of danger rather than observing the material disaster as Heinrich does. In his denial, Jack says:

These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. Society is set up in such a way that it’s the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters. [...] I’m a college professor. [...] These things don’t happen in places like Blacksmith.

[...]

I’m not just a college professor. I’m the head of a department. That’s for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the country, where the fish hatcheries are” (112; 115)

Jack rejects the material reality of the situation, relying on his class status as a kind of psychological reassurance. A “college professor” or the “head of a department,” in Jack’s eyes, should not be subject to the same environmental risks which people “in the scrubby parts of the country” are exposed. The airborne toxic event subverts the distinction that environmental hazards are contingent on income brackets and other socioeconomic structures. Jack pays no

mind to the destructive chemicals in the grade school since they can be contained by symbolic activity of men in Mylex suits, but this “billowing cloud” appears to have its own agency. What is perhaps most threatening to Jack is that the “billowing cloud” teaches him that toxins and chemicals transcend class borders much more easily than the actors that compose such systems.

The name and the symptoms of this catastrophe shift yet another time. The symptoms become “[h]eart palpitations and a sense of *déjà vu*,” and the radio begins calling it “the airborne toxic event” (114). As a south wind pushes the toxic event toward their Blacksmith community, Jack comments on the role the radio plays as their car joins the traffic jam. Jack thinks, “Toxic event, chemical cloud. [...] It seems that danger assigns to public voices the responsibility of a rhythm, as if in metrical units there is a coherence we can use to balance whatever senseless and furious event is about to come rushing around our heads” (117). The radio, as it fades in and out, stands in as the voice of authority. Interestingly, Heinrich’s voice functions similarly to the radio broadcast as he explains the specifics of Nyodene D. He tells a group of evacuees that “Nyodene D is a whole bunch of things thrown together that are byproducts of the manufacture of insecticide. The original stuff kills roaches, the byproducts kill everything left over. A little joke our teacher made” (127). Heinrich not only voices specifics about the material effects of Nyodene D, but he also translates the information with a “little joke,” potentially bridging the gap between scientific and public discourse. Heinrich says that “Some things are too awful to publicize,” and that the “lesson in all of this” is to “[g]et to know your chemicals” (127). Heinrich calls for both public and personal understandings of toxicity. However, because Heinrich is not a doctor and does not wear a Mylex suit and respirator mask, this critique dissolves.

Looking out toward the airborne toxic event, Jack considers its content “so low, packed with chlorides, benzines, phenols, hydrocarbons, or whatever the precise toxic content” (124). The irony of “chlorides” and “hydrocarbons” is that these are also the chemicals that saturate the everyday. Suddenly the potential substances of the grade school disaster morph into this more titanic structure. The airborne toxic event stands in as a symbolic invasion of death into Jack’s life, despite his life being already saturated with these same substances. Shortly after, Jack learns that he was exposed to the event. Waiting in line for a physical evaluation, Jack is confronted by a man wearing a “SIMUVAC” armband, which stands for “simulated evacuation” (134). SIMUVAC is state program using real environmental disasters to prep for later simulations. Much of the environmental discussion surrounding *White Noise* considers SIMUVAC a critique of postmodern culture’s ability to simulate nature. Moses, in likening the novel’s nature television channel to the SIMUVAC organization, argues that “technology reduc[es] nature to a postmodern *simulacrum* (a copy with no original), [...] man assumes sovereignty over a reality that was once understood to transcend man himself” (65). However, the very concept of nature, as trans-corporeality emphasizes, is highly cultured. Whereas Moses proposes that this shift away from nature “once understood to transcend man himself” is an injustice, trans-corporeality argues that nature and man are always the very components of each other. What material ecocriticism and trans-corporeality offer up instead are readings of the material agencies that structure and are structured by experience. The moment Jack is confronted with the reality of his exposure is such an instance. Listing Jack’s information on the computer, the man with the SIMUVAC armband tells Jack “Your genetics, your personals, your medicals, your psychologicals, your police-and-hospitals. [...] It just means you are the sum total of your data” (136). All of these interlacing contexts display Jack’s body as a contested site; he is not one thing

but all of these combined. When the official tells him “[i]t is real,” Jack feels “as [he] would if a doctor held an X-ray to the light showing a star-shaped hole at the center of one of [his] vital organs. Death has entered” (137). Kerridge says that “Jack’s body is penetrated and reclaimed by the ecosystem” (192). This penetration, however, implies that Jack’s body was ever free from the ecosystem. Kerridge dangerously suggests that the body and the environment are discrete or separate entities. Kerridge’s analysis is informed by older waves of ecocriticism. Thinking transcorporeally, this scene highlights the way Jack’s body is always already penetrated by the environment. In addition, Jack’s perception of his own body is raised as the charts force him to confront this material exchange. As a reaction, Jack “wants [his] academic gown and dark glasses,” (137). His impulse is to retreat; however, these social codes he lives by fail him as he comes to terms with his vulnerability.

“It is when death is rendered graphically,” Jack says, “is televised so to speak, that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and yourself. A network of symbols has been introduced, an entire awesome technology wrestled from the gods. It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying” (137). This “network of symbols” constitutes Jack’s body. This “separation” is his detachment from the material world. Donna Philips highlights the way characters in *White Noise* rely on technology and representations for their bodies, stating that “[t]he postmodern body is, then, a curiously disembodied thing (242-3).” What is more, Jack not only attempts to read his body as an external thing, but he must also contend with the technology and symbols which create the graphic image. “In a postmodern world,” Philips writes, “technology and the body are merely different moments of the same feedback loop, just as the city and the country are merged in a common landscape of death” (243). Not only does Jack perceive his body as something external, but he must also rely on the interpretation of specialists

to conceive an understanding of these symbols. After his exposure, Jack enters a routine of seeing doctors to track the Nyodene D in his body. Additionally, his musings on death become more complex as the question of his mortality becomes more real. Jack explains to Murray about his discussion with the SIMUVAC man, saying “[t]hat little breath of Nyodene has planted a death in my body. It is now official, according to the computer. I’ve got death inside me” (144). The use of “planted” is peculiar as it draws attention to the material world. On one level, this analysis is presented by “the computer.” However, where this passage differs than Jack’s earlier consideration of mortality is that Jack begins to perceive his body as a mobile site that can be penetrated, not a closed entity. As Murray tells Jack:

This is the nature of modern death. [...] It has a life independent of us. It is growing prestige and dimension. It has a sweep it never had before. We study it objectively. We can predict its appearance, trace its path in the body. We can take cross-section pictures of it, tape its tremors and its waves. [...] Every advance in knowledge and techniques is matched by a new kind of death, a new strain. Death adapts, like a viral agent. (144-5)

Murray speaks about death in the abstract, but his analysis gestures toward the material world. The issue present is not so much that death is evolving, but the culture’s ability to read the lethal forces which invade the modern world is increasing. Murray’s proposition that “Every advance in knowledge” becomes “matched by a new kind of death” shows that the shift is one of literacy and perception regarding the ways in which death saturates our lives.

Talking about *déjà vu*, one of the supposed symptoms of the airborne toxic event, Murray poses the question: “Why do we think these things happened before? Simple. They did happen before, in our minds, as visions of the future. Because these are precognitions, we can’t fit the

material into our system of consciousness as it is now structured” (145). Although Murray is concerned in this passage with postmodern understandings of knowledge, I argue that these “visions for the future” reflect the way material exchanges are both overlooked and used to propel larger manifestations of environmental hazards. Jack’s explicit description of the grade school incident stands in as an “unrealized” environmental disaster, what Murray effectively labels as *déjà vu*. The material world haunts Jack, pressing him to face the reality that he is not only the professor of Hitler studies carrying a robe and dark glasses, but that he is also a site for material exchange, be it the asbestos in the walls or the airborne toxic event. But the airborne toxic event disrupts this trans-corporeal vision as it happens to be large enough that the SIMUVAC organization, the protagonists of the novel, and critics of *White Noise* read it as the sole catastrophe. The airborne toxic event becomes a metanarrative of toxicity. Although the event is largely hazardous, it also presents a comfort to Jack because he can identify it as his sole exposure to environmental toxins. In other words, it masks the toxicity of the everyday.

Not only is the environment concealed by these narratives, but Jack also discovers that his body is largely unknowable to him as well. Following his exposure, Jack participates in a series of medical exams, many inconclusive about the Nyodene D in his body, but all affirming its presence. Jack’s toxicity is affirmed by a “magnetic scanner” which relies on “bracketed stars” to translate the information (266). Because toxicity must be read and interpreted, it is largely a textual question as well. However, Jack is unable to learn more about this “nebulous mass” (266). The examiner hands him a “sealed envelope,” telling Jack that “[t]he last thing I’m supposed to tell you is to take the envelope to your doctor. Your doctor knows the symbols” (266-7). Knowledge of Jack’s body, knowledge of Jack’s toxicity, and, in the context of trans-corporeality, knowledge of the environment all are synthesized as knowledge belonging to

doctors. Jack cannot read these bracketed stars, nor is he even permitted to open the envelope. As a non-expert, Jack is denied access to his own body.

Toward the end of the novel, Jack begins to opt out of his medical visits. Jack consciously acknowledges that the “men in Mylex suits are still in the area, [...] aiming their infrared devises at the earth and sky” (309). Jack is aware of presence of Nyodene D and the microorganisms used to remove it still linger, but he does not dwell on the these symbols of scientific authority. Jack continues on, saying “Dr. Chakravarty wants to talk to me but I am making it a point to stay away” (309). Critics usually attribute Jack’s reluctance to fear, but this scene also calls attention to the ways in which Jack begins resisting an external and highly mediated representation of his body. Jack says Dr. Chakravarty “wants to insert me once more in the imaging block, where charged particles collide, high winds blow. But I am afraid of the imaging block. Afraid of its magnetic fields, its computerized nuclear pulse. Afraid of what it knows about me. I am taking no calls” (309). Jack is not only afraid of death, but also the way death is highlighted by, to use Philips’ phrase, this “feedback loop” between his body and technology. Doctors share his information by way of concealed data in secret envelopes, but Jack resists the cryptic and indecipherable symbols, refusing calls, and he begins to withdraw himself from the procedures. Although readers do not find out if Jack establishes his own knowledge of his body, this scene at least begins to fathom some resistance to the postmodern body. Whereas DeLillo hesitates in making any sweeping claim for or against medical field, he at least demonstrates that codes with which they operate can become public too. As Richard Powers writes in the 25th anniversary edition to *White Noise*, “[a] good story, at its best, does much better than decide; it embodies. It contains in itself the very nub of being’s contradictions” (xv). Jack Gladney never fully envisions a material memoir. Instead, his narrative informs readers of the

complex levels of mediation and representation that distance and dissuade us from interpreting material exchanges.

A “Planetary Context”: DeLillo’s Culture of Waste and Alaimo’s Waste of Culture

In her introduction to a cluster of articles for *ISLE* concerning the topic of waste, Véronique Bragard asserts that “waste is like Frankenstein’s creature: man’s creation that keeps escaping its creator. What is more, the creature’s spark can strike back. Humans can no longer destroy it but only be destroyed by it” (462). Bragard’s assigning a “creature’s spark” to post-consumer matter opens up a dialogue regarding the complex role trash plays in configuring the human’s relationship to the environment. In this sense, waste encourages trans-corporeal thinking as it calls attention to the way the human presence is embedded within the material world. What is more, I argue that such a trans-corporeal frame of waste shows how all walks of life are connected to spaces which are normally deemed marginal, where garbage comes to embody the environment. Many contemporary writers are concerned with the role garbage plays in our culture, as seen in the poetry of Rita Wong and A.R. Ammons and the prose of Don DeLillo and Eugene Marten. Whether we consider refuse in its many forms to be a product or byproduct of the human species, there is no avoiding the concern that we are entangled in and responsible for the vast network of waste on the planet. In *Underworld*, with its ambitious scope covering the last half of the twentieth century, Don DeLillo foregrounds the myriad roles trash has for both the handlers of waste and those for whom waste is their environment. Christine Temko’s recent essay, “Regulation and Refuse Matter,” considers the relationship between waste and agency in *Underworld* with the tools of material ecocriticism. Temko applies the work of Iovino, Opperman, Bennett, and Alaimo to show how the presence of waste or refuse matter in *Underworld* disrupts our presumptions about the internal/external relationship between the body and the environment. In addition, Todd McGowan reads of *Underworld* in the context of Lacan and Žižek to discuss the human’s cognitive relationship with waste. For McGowan, the vision of

Underworld alerts us to the collective nostalgia or intertwinement of loss and longing with which waste is imbued. Even “the very title of the novel suggest[s],” McGowan writes, “we now exist in an ‘Underworld,’ where what was once marginal and discarded becomes central” (125).

Considering these two critics, I argue that *Underworld* is of further use to the discussion of trans-corporeality. Whereas *White Noise* presented the family garbage as an enclosed system of symbols, *Underworld* foregrounds the way even our personal garbage iterates that our presence within the environment does not stop with the body. Trans-corporeality emphasizes the extent to which these material forces reconfigure the limits of the body. Moreover, by also calling attention to what thrives within these waste-scapes, garbage is a way to think about how the environment permeates the human. Alaimo, in her essay, “Trans-corporeality at Sea,” considers the presence of garbage in the texture of the world as a way to not only look for human agency within the environment, but also how the environment settles within the human network. As Bragard writes in “Garbage, Texture, and Écriture Blanche,” waste “emerges as not passive at all and more than other matters destabilizing and calling into question the very presence of man” (491).

In *White Noise*, waste is entangled with meaning. This meaning, however, is limited to the personal or domestic origin of the trash. In such a context, *White Noise* models Alaimo’s hesitation that “[b]ecause trans-corporeality brings the human body into focus, it is possible that it reinstalls anthropocentrism” (*Bodily Natures* 15). Because of this charge, I put *White Noise* in conversation with *Underworld* as the former is limited to personal and familial systems. The latter pushes us to think about the human in a global context. In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney discovers that garbage can be used as a personal resource. In an early scene where Jack learns

that his wife, Babette has been taking the mind-altering Dylar, his daughter Denise demonstrates where familial knowledge is hidden:

“How do you know she’s taking something?”

“I saw the bottle buried in the trash under the kitchen sink. A prescription bottle. It had her name and the name of the medication.”

“What’s the name of the medication?”

“Dylar. One every three days. Which sounds like it’s dangerous or habit-forming or whatever.” (62)

The family trashcan occupies a significant place in the consciousness of the household. The bottle is “buried” in a trashcan that is already hidden “under the kitchen sink.” The deliberate layering obstructs the conscious gaze of the family. To search through the trash, within the context of this familial space, is to break a social taboo which enables one’s secrets to be safely converted into waste. These materials are then further discarded and mixed in with the collective garbage of the community—the more impersonal (or social) garbage that we see in *Underworld*. Human waste carries with it a psychic entanglement, that of the personal.

Later in the novel, Denise claims to have thrown a bottle of Dylar away into the garbage compactor. She tells her father that she “threw it in with all the cans and bottles and other junk, Then I compacted it” (240). Here Jack assumes that the bottle of Dylar destroyed The compacter is a site where these personal or psychic symbols go to be demolished. Moreover, the compacter stands in as proxy, where one can assume their garbage is crushed and compacted, no longer discernable and the secrets it harbored unintelligible. Nevertheless, he finds himself sifting through the demolished garbage. DeLillo writes,

I walked across the kitchen, opened the compactor drawer and looked inside the trash bag. [...] The bottles were broken, the cartons flat. Product colors were undiminished in brightness and intensity. Fats, juices and heavy sludges seeped through layers of pressed vegetable matter. I feel like an archaeologist about to sift through a finding of tool fragments and assorted cave trash. (247)

Jack perceives the compactor to be a site of violent or destruction as it intermeshes the symbols once belonging to the kitchen wastebasket. Things are not only pushed down and buried, but they are “broken” and seep into each other. Jack talks here about feeling “like an archaeologist,” which suggests both some deciphering on his part and that he is engaged with is a system of cultural symbols. This process helps him to formulate questions regarding the ownership and agency of trash. Jack continues, saying “I unfolded the bag cuffs, released the latch and lifted out the bag. The full stench hit me with shocking force. Was this ours? Did it belong to us? Had we created it?” (247). Jack cannot fathom the boundaries between use and creation. Before him is an arrangement of discarded objects, but where one might see a random cluster he sees a constellation. In his digging, Jack finds within the objects “intimate and perhaps shameful secrets” where he asks, “[d]oes it glow at the core with personal heat, with signs of one’s deepest nature, clues to secret yearnings, humiliating flaws?” (247). The “personal heat” at “the core” of matter illustrates that waste is also space of cultural meaning. Jack cannot look away from the objects in the compactor and spends time considering their personal contexts; he reads them as “clues to secret yearning,” the way one might perform psychoanalysis. But these psychic associations become temporary as Jack hints that the contents of trash compactor will soon be transferred over to the utility services. The Gladneys do not follow their garbage out to its material destination, but the idiosyncrasies of their waste contribute to the landfills and dumping

sites which populate many of the pages of *Underworld*. However, because the Gladneys are embedded in the material history of their waste, their waste carries the imprint of them to these dumping sites as well.

“In *Underworld*,” Todd McGowan writes, “waste is everywhere, and it has become holy” (123). Nick Shay, the novel’s protagonist, is an executive for a waste management firm. The way Nick articulates his work coincides with how the novel begins to frame the concept of waste. Nick says that his firm is made up of “waste handlers, waste traders, cosmologists of waste” (88). Waste, it would seem, is something that is external, a type of object which is “handle[d]” or “trade[d].” Klara Sax, another prominent character within the novel, shares a similar vision of the discarded. In “Long Tall Sally,” the chapter of the book covering the early 90s, Klara is introduced as a visual artist whose latest project involves painting decommissioned planes. “They were built to carry bombs,” Klara tells Nick, “not beautiful coats of paint” (68). Klara is concerned with the repurposing of waste in a way that either distorts or challenges the initial vision these material objects had before they were discarded. Though different than Nick’s role in managing waste, Klara’s relationship with these decommissioned planes is not dissimilar. Although Klara emphasizes the origin of waste, they both acknowledge waste not as separate or exterior to human systems but as still intermeshed with the population that has tried to be rid of it. More importantly, these two represent waste in the context that it is handled by art and labor. Nick sees the correlation between their work when he has lunch with Klara, noting that “her own career had been marked at times by her methods of transforming and absorbing junk” (102). Although *White Noise* presented a vision where the question of waste ended with the garbage compactor, Nick and Klara show that both art and industry are entangled in the presence of waste.

Christine Temko considers the correlation between Nick and Klara. In Temko's analysis, the correlation between them is a question of agency, attributing this to their understanding of waste. Temko writes that

in a world where everything is ominously determined and networked together, only the protagonists that recognize and embrace the agency of matter—waste executives like Nick Shay or waste artists like Klara Sax, for example—are capable of claiming a similar agency within their own lives. (509)

Temko's taxonomy assumes that agency is the result of "recognize[ing] and embrac[ing]" the dynamic and storied aspects of matter. Agency, in this sense, relies not only on an awareness of waste, but also the active responsibility one takes in the containing or repurposing of waste.

Although Temko gives much attention to waste as affect matter, the attention she gives to *Underworld* hardly deviates from Nick and Klara. What I find absent from Temko's analysis is attention to characters whose immediate landscape is that of waste, characters that dwell in margins of cities where somebody else's garbage becomes a personal resource. Instead, Temko gives consideration to the protagonist of Eugene Marten's *Waste*, a janitor who brings trash home with him. The janitor is different than the Ismael and Esmeralda I discuss later in this essay. Although Temko is correct in asserting that the sense of agency which Nick and Klara embody is due to their ability to envision waste not as outside, but inside of culture, characters whose immediate environment are composed of waste also share this vision.

Nick provides insight as to how his awareness of waste formed. He compares this mindset to the education he received: "The Jesuits taught me to examine the examine things for second meanings and deeper connections. Were they thinking about waste?" (88). For him, objects not only contain their immediate purpose or meaning, but are also subject to "second"

and “deeper” meanings. Nick likens these “second meanings” directly to his work with waste, calling attention to idea that it may be more than just processing and handling. Additionally, Nick brings his analysis back toward domestic or personal relationships people have with waste. Speaking generally about common perceptions of waste, Nick says “[e]ven the lowest household trash is closely observed. People look at their garbage differently now, seeing every bottle and carton crushed in a planetary context” (88). This “planetary context” echoes the idea that our trash is inherently storied before and after its use, suggesting that each “carton crushed” carries with it a piece of the human narrative. Moreover, Nick’s specifying “household trash,” suggests that the attribution of agency to waste is not only maintained by waste executives or waste artists, but is also possible for anybody producing garbage. When shopping with his wife Marion, Nick imagines the waste potential for the objects he sees:

Marion and I saw products as garbage even when they sat gleaming on store shelves, yet unbought. We didn’t say, What kind of casserole will that make? We said, What kind of garbage will that make? [...] How does it measure up as waste, we asked. We asked whether it was responsible to eat a certain item if the package the item comes in will live a million years. (121)

Nick and Marrison’s imaginative faculties take into consideration the impact their potential waste has on the world. Nick and Marion attempt a consumer lifestyle that resists a process of waste production that will greatly outlive their immediate consumption—and, in many cases, potentially outlive the species. Big Sims, one of Nick’s close associates, articulates the process of becoming waste-aware slightly differently, but still conscious of the way it relates to the everyday. Attending the waste industry conference dubbed “Whiz Co,” Sims initiates a dialogue with Nick:

“From the first day I find that everything I see is garbage. I studied engineering. I didn’t study garbage. [...] Trouble is, the job follows me. The subject follows me. I went into a restaurant last week, nice new place, you know, and I find myself looking at scraps of food on people’s plates. Leftovers. I see butts in ashtrays. And when we get outside.”

“You see it everywhere because it is everywhere.”

“But I didn’t see it before.”

“You’re enlightened now. Be grateful,” I said. (283)

What Sims fails to register is that when one “studies engineering,” one also studies waste. Herein *Underworld* asserts that garbage is the shadow cast by human action. The image Sims presents differs from the image of Marion and Nick calculating and figuring in the grocery store. What Sims envisions is a much darker reality—one that Nick is also aware of—the unmediated production of waste in the everyday. In the case of Sim’s vision, waste is a shadow cast by human action. Those who are able to perceive this shadow, like Nick and Sims, become haunted by the “butts in ashtrays” and leftover “scraps of food.” Contrasting scene with Nick and Marion with the dialogue between Nick and Sims shows the possibility to sustain different understanding of waste. In other words, waste is not one single concept, but a multitude; waste can be viewed as both something that is created by human action and a process that can be measured—it is both a material substance and an imagined trajectory.

Jesse Detwiler, a waste theorist at the Whiz Co conference with Nick and Sims, proposes an even different vision of waste, contemplating it as process of commodification. Though DeLillo satirizes this character, Detwiler’s claim calls attention to an overlap between the

cognitive and material representation of waste. Standing over a crater of garbage with Nick and Sims, Detwiler tells us that garbage is

[t]he scenery of the future. Eventually the only scenery left. The more toxic the waste, the greater the effort and expense a tourist will be willing to tolerate in order to visit the site. [...] Isolate the most toxic waste, okay. This makes it grander, more ominous and magical. But basic household waste ought to be placed in the cities that produce it. Bring garbage into the open. Let people see it and respect it. Don't hide your waste facilities. Make an architecture of waste. Design gorgeous buildings to recycle waste and invite people to collect their own garbage and bring it with them to press rams and conveyors. [...] And the hot stuff, chemical waste, nuclear waste, this becomes a remote landscape of nostalgia. (286)

Detwiler illustrates that waste is the “scenery” to come. These first two sentences acknowledge the magnitude of waste produced and the physical space it occupies as a result. Detwiler flirts with the idea of waste as a commodity, specifically with the emphasis on tourism, where the most dangerous waste is “ominous and magical.” Detwiler suggests that people should make garbage a public experience—that it should be “respect[ed].” This thought is in line with Nick’s idea of enlightenment, a greater awareness of garbage and the material relations which construct it. However, their beliefs differ as Detwiler imagines these waste-scapes to be “remote landscape[s] of nostalgia.” McGowan attributes this nostalgia to a lack one perceives within the Other. Moreover, McGowan argues that when waste is turned into a commodity, what is sold is the desire for waste, not waste in and of itself.⁹ What McGowan’s essay does not resolve

⁹ McGowan tells us that waste is the novel’s “*objet petit a*—that which remains absent despite every attempt to render it present” (141). McGowan discusses at length the “transcendental” status of both waste and nostalgia in the

regarding Detwiler's claim is the urgency in the need to localize the placement of garbage in the cultural imagination. Part of the cultural resistance, as these critics observe, is the marginal status prescribed to waste. Trans-corporeality provides a useful intervention to the marginalization of waste. By expanding the formulation of the human to the waste it produces and the environments where such waste rests, we see that the human is part of a network of exchanges. This network is not composed of a discrete center or margins. Rather, what is then discussed is an entry point to a larger network of material exchanges. What was once the margins is then a context which is sustained by the agents which pass through or thrive in such spaces.

In "Sacred Waste," Christopher Todd Anderson tells us that "the placement of our waste symbolizes the marginal status of garbage both as a material substance and as a concept" (35). In his discussion of "the American garbage poem," Anderson asserts that "in the contemplative space of the dump, [...] we may find that which repels us, but also what we value most: an ongoing struggle to understand the complex physical and spiritual relationships between the self, human society, and the world we inhabit" (54). What we learn or find within this marginal space, then brings into focus the "relationships" which constitute the "self" and "the world we inhabit." Thus, to see waste as part of our immediate environments is also to invite us to refocus on the margins—a move that dominant culture is ready to resist. *Underworld*, however, takes its readers directly to the margins, a place where waste is perceived and understood as the environment. Contained in the novel is the narrative of Esmeralda, the story of a homeless child who is killed while living in the South Bronx. In the Epilogue, "Das Kapital," DeLillo writes "[h]er name is Esmeralda. She lives wild in the inner ghetto [...]—a girl who forages in empty lots for discarded clothes, plucks spoiled fruit from garbage bags behind bodegas, who is sometimes seen running

novel (141). For more, see Damjana Mraovic-O'Hare's "The Beautiful, Horrifying Past: Nostalgia and Apocalypse in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*" and Philip Nel's "Amazons in the *Underworld*: Gender, the Body, and Power in the Novels of Don DeLillo."

through the trees and weeds” (810). Esmeralda’s hunt for “discarded clothes” and “spoiled fruit” shows a need to retrieve garbage before it becomes unsalvageable. Esmeralda is not afforded the luxury of mediating waste the way Nick and Marian are while shopping. Additionally, DeLillo presents the character Ismael, a street graffiti artist who lives and thrives in a setting similar to that of Esmeralda. Ismael is introduced “under the water mains and waste pipes, under the gas and steam and electric” (433). What is more, Ismael uses his work to call attention to his environment, to make the space of “waste pipes” consciously registered by commuters. Ismael’s thoughts show that his graffiti is “art that can’t stand still, it climbs across your eyeballs night and day, the flicker jumping art of the slums and dumpsters” (441). As Clara Sarmiento observes in her analysis of Ismael, “[d]efacing public property is not the point of his graffiti; creating fresh perspectives for his viewers is, just like Klara Sax his female counterpart” (154). DeLillo places a few of Klara’s scenes parallel to Ismael’s, revealing that *Underworld* is interested in representing these marginal sites of “dumpsters” and “waste pipes” alongside the national art scene of painting decommissions planes. While standing over a dumpsite in the epilogue with his granddaughter, Sunny, Nick remarks about a collective feeling of “reverence for waste, for the redemptive qualities of the things we use and discard” (809). Waste, while still possessing a “planetary context,” has different meanings for Nick and Klara than Ismael and Esmeralda, those in “discard[ed]” environments. Moreover, by making these two worlds parallel, DeLillo asserts that waste is one of the major forces which binds these two worlds together.

In addition to the presence of waste in these marginal spaces, *Underworld* also calls attention to the dumping of waste into the oceans—a dump site that, throughout the mid to late twentieth century, was considered to be a space where garbage was broken down and scattered by the tides. Drawing from recent developments in the environmental sciences, Stacy Alaimo

contests the ocean as symbol for the infinite dumpster. In “Trans-corporeality at Sea,” Alaimo asserts that “[t]he persistent (and convenient) conception of the ocean as so vast and powerful that anything dumped into it will be dispersed into oblivion makes it particularly difficult to capture, map, and publicize the flow of toxins across terrestrial, oceanic, and human habitats” (477). She goes on to state that while in many cases we cannot trace the specific trajectories of much of the waste in our oceans, we know for certain that “seawater often contains more plastic than plankton and the bodies of both fish and seabirds harbor an astonishing volume of plastic relative to their size (487). In the case of our oceans, it seems that Bragard’s assertion of waste having a “creature’s spark”: in the unmediated production of waste we inscribe the matter of our own self-destruction. In the inaugural issue of *O-Zone*, Alaimo considers a reflective impulse in which we come to realize that the common objects found in our trash—things Jack Gladney would have found under the kitchen sink—become destructive forces that will likely outlive our species. Alaimo discusses a “recognition that banal objects such as toothbrushes, razors, plastic bottles, plastic bags, food containers, DVD packaging, children’s toys, etc. intended for momentary human use, pollute for eternity, renders them weirdly malevolent” (19). Through these objects, human “moment[s]” will continue to echo through the environment.

In *Underworld*, Brian Glassics, during the novel’s iconic Dodgers game, tells Nick Shay that “I hear they finally stopped ocean dumping off the East Coast” (91). Glassics continues to state that the more “they dumped in a particular area, the richer the sea life” (91). Sims interjection, saying “the sea life thrived,” remains a grim but ironic reminder of what life can thrive in the current state of our oceans. To a degree, Sims is correct; matter thrives as it is dynamic, always shifting. An article published in the Los Angeles Times in late 2013—one year after the publication of Alaimo’s “Trans-corporeality at Sea”—alerted the general public to the

shifting presence of plastics in our oceans. The article by Louis Sahagun analyzed what scientists are now calling the “plastisphere,” a “biological community starts with particles of degraded plastic no bigger than grains of salt” (n.p.). The knowledge that life emerges from vast network of waste in our oceans not only asserts that human garbage has a larger impact on the ocean than what was earlier conceived, but also that the narrative of the human is now intertwined with this new species by proxy of our waste. Sims’s grim assertion comes back: “the sea life thrive[s].” As new materialist theorists illustrate that matter is entangled with cultural, political, and economic meaning, the genesis of earth’s plastisphere exemplifies how nonhuman life emerges in the struggle. This new life, then, is just as much embedded in the material narrative of the human as we are with our oceans. What is more, these creatures within the plastisphere are like DeLillo’s Esmeralda and Ismael, calling our attention to the selves we have left in the margins and the margins we have within ourselves.

**The Corporate Body or the Corporate in the Body:
the Trans-Corporeal Idiom of Richard Powers's *Gain***

columbus squirmed out from his coffin
and renamed himself Monsanto
the larva that spewed the maggot

Gary Gottfriedson, "From Columbus to Monsanto"

Clare announced a massive corporate reorganization involving the sale
of the Agricultural Products Division to Monsanto.

Richard Powers, *Gain*

There are few contemporary novels that complicate the representation of the human body's exposure to environmental toxins as much as Richard Powers's *Gain* does. In this novel, Powers calls readers to follow—and even care about—the evolution of a soap-making company into a global corporate presence alongside the narrative of a real-estate agent's struggle with ovarian cancer. *Gain* provides a human face to a multi-national corporation, a corporation which was likely the direct cause of cancer for many residents of the suburban community of Lacewood, Illinois. *Gain* provokes a trans-corporeal reading of Laura Bodey, a resident of Lacewood where Clare International's present-day agricultural division stands. In Laura's story, readers contend with the ambiguities of both legal battles and the medical field. Laura questions what environmental forces have an influence upon her body as she struggles with and begins to reflect on her cancer diagnosis. While Laura comes to realize that her life and the lives of her loved ones are both blessed and cursed by Clare products, it becomes difficult to attribute blame as corporations like Clare International have become the environment. Moreover, following the logic trans-corporeality, Clare has to be seen as equally embedded within Laura as well. Laura's story calls our attention to the reality that we are not only the trace substances that settle within our bodies, but we are also entangled with the narratives of corporations. In my reading of *Gain* I use Carson's "Fable for Tomorrow" to show how the vision of *Silent Spring*'s warning is

compatible with the history of Lacewood before and after Clare Soap and Chemical settled in it. Then, I turn to the work Lisa Lynch accomplishes in analyzing Laura's narrative as it is staged by her resistance to but ultimately acknowledgement of her role within what Lynch calls an "illness community" (218). It is only when Laura embraces the reality of hers and other people's illnesses that she comes to establish truths about herself and her community. Despite the novel's grim reality, *Gain* encourages us to think productively of corporations as instances of exchange between material agencies, bringing them out of their capitalist abstraction.

On a strictly mechanical level, *Gain* is composed of two plots. One of these narratives follows the century-and-a-half growth and evolution of the soap-making business Clare and Sons into Clare International, a corporation which comes to rival other industry giants such as Proctor & Gamble. The other prevailing narrative follows Laura's cancer diagnosis, the suffering of her and her family, and her eventual death. Sprouting up between Laura and Clare's narratives are random assortments of news clippings from Clare, chemical equations, and drawings that help convey a visual history not only of Clare International, but also the public integration of these corporate bodies. The two dominant stories unfold in such a way that, while they remain similar, they never directly confront one another. Other than a class action lawsuit (the repercussions of which come after Laura's death), there is never an authentic dialogue between Laura's struggle for control and survival and Clare International's quest for the same. As Charles B. Harris noted in "'The Stereo View': Politics and the Role of the Reader in *Gain*," it is "*Gain*'s readers [who] are solely responsible for this missing expository dimension" (99). It is up to readers, then, to draw inferences between Laura's illness (and the cancer of other members of Lacewood) and the products produced by Clare. Additionally, Heise tells us in "Toxins, Drugs, and Global Systems" that these narrative strategies in *Gain* make "readers reflect on the kinds of cognitive strategies

and language that might be able to map global systems” to a degree at “which novels can only hint” (772-3).

In my reading of *Gain*, I choose to emphasize Laura’s narrative as it offers the most attention to the human individual. While I still draw from the corresponding Clare sections, characters in that plot are often—and necessarily—deflated in order to sustain the larger narrative of Clare International’s history. My concern with Clare International is that of its traffic in toxins, the ways in which these synthetic chemicals are not only disseminated, but also traced back to their corporate origin. Alaimo, in speaking broadly about the traffic in toxins, writes that it “may allow us to notice that carcinogenic chemicals are produced by the same companies that sell chemotherapy drugs” (*Bodily Natures* 18). She continues to say that “[t]his may be a useful thing to notice, but not an easy thing to remedy” (18). This process of “noticing” revisits toxic discourse’s limitations of insinuation and blame. There is no doubt that *Gain* calls attention to the correlations between Laura’s cancer and Clare International, but any concrete blame which readers envision is disrupted by the “climate of scientific and legal complexity that calls toxic discourse into question even in advance of its utterance” (Buell 660). Powers holds this urge for blame in a suspended state as the reader is unable to attribute Laura’s cancer to either Clare, the E.P.A., or even Laura’s genes. Cancer, here, becomes a peculiar signifier—one that is not contained within the logic and frame of Clare International’s narrative.¹⁰

My analysis is informed by what I see as a productive gap between the two dominant readings of *Gain*. Most readers of *Gain* choose to pay closer attention to the larger system of global capital which Clare International comes to embody. Jeffrey Williams’s “The Issue of

¹⁰ There is, however, a memo in the novel’s third space (the visual or other documents between Laura’s and Clare’s) which addresses this. The memo from Clare International says that people should consider “not the existence of a trace substance but rather its concentration” (297). Clare, then, acknowledges the existence of these trace minerals, but ultimately denies their potency.

Corporations in Richard Powers's *Gain*," Paul Maliszewski's "The Business of Gain," and, most recently, Ralph Clare's "Your Loss is Their Gain: Corporate Body and the Corporeal Body in Richard Powers's *Gain*," all draw our attention to the "image of what the abstract forces of production do to people" (Williams 5). Other readings take a more material approach. Philip Ball, in "Chemistry and Power in Recent American Fiction," reads *Gain* as "a fiction of almost unprecedented chemical sophistication," referencing the novel's commitment to and mastery of chemistry (56). In "The Epidemiology of 'Regrettable Kinship,'" Lisa Lynch considers Laura's reluctance in coming to terms with her own illness and the ways in which she resists joining the community of cancer victims. Laura's material body, I argue, is composed both of the historical narrative and the material realities which surround and compose her. Laura's internal struggle for self-knowledge and knowledge of her diagnosis reflects what Powers, in "Making the Rounds," calls the "claim for fiction [that] the individual human cannot be understood solely as an autonomous, self-expressing self-reflecting entity, but must be seen as a node on an immensely complex network" (Powers 305-6).

Gain portrays Clare Soap and Chemical's intertwinement with the town of Lacewood. In his introductory chapter, Powers writes that "[t]here must be a time when Lacewood did not mean Clare, Incorporated. But no one remembered it. [...] The two names always came joined in the same breath" (2). The narrative resists a reading that would try to separate the presence of Clare from Lacewood.¹¹ In this resistance, Powers shows that the physical environment is interwoven with the economic forces. Lacewood closely resembles the grim warning presented by Carson in her famous "Fable for Tomorrow" chapter in *Silent Spring*. Carson imagines a town

¹¹ There have been far too few attempts to do so, I must add. Joseph Williams tells us that Powers avoids "a utopian prospect envisioning life without corporations" and that *Gain* "is not an 'eco-novel,' as some reviewers have called it" (5). Williams might be speaking here of LeClair's review, "Powers of Invention," where LeClair actually puts *Gain* alongside the work of other "eco-novelists" (33).

where “all life lived in harmony with its surroundings” and is composed of “a checkerboard of prosperous farms” (1). *Gain* problematizes Carson’s model of the innocent farm town moments just before chemical giants take up residence. Lacewood, even before the establishment of Clare Soap and Chemical’s factory, was still far from this Edenic pastoral which Carson imagined, facing economic hardship that is in part due to its remoteness. Nevertheless, Douglas Clare, the “fifth Mr. Clare,” is attracted to Lacewood because it “smelled clean and distilled” (2). Douglas, the industry executive, seems to be looking for something restorative or “clean” in where the new agricultural factory will rest.

During one of the later Clare sections, it is made explicit for us that “Clare’s fertilizer factory had changed the very nature of the town’s existence,” going “from a tenuous camp on the land’s unforgiving crust to a permanent settlement” (283). In a material sense, Lacewood becomes a contact zone between one a highly localized community and the power of an international company. Neither Douglas Clare nor the residents of Lacewood have the ability to see the full trajectory of this relationship. As Laura tells the reader, Lacewood

cannot hold a corn boil without its corporate sponsor. The company cuts every other check, writes the headlines, sings the school fight song. It plays the organ at every wedding and packs the rice that rains down on departing honeymooners. It staffs the hospital and funds the ultrasound sweep of uterine seas where Lacewood’s next of kin lie gray and ghostly, asleep in the deep. (5)

Carson warns of a time when “a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community: [...] The farmers spoke of much illness among their families, the town doctors had become more and more puzzled by new kinds of sickness appearing among their patients” (3). The “evil spell” Carson warns of is the presence of

synthetic chemicals and environmental hazard which are rampant in the postindustrial world. The use of the farmer as a barometer for these economic and ecological shifts is peculiar, as the few images of farming in *Gain*'s Laura sequence appear phantom-like or out of place. At the "Bounty Mart," Laura spots a group of farmers who "have that natural-history skin" (26). Laura observes that these men "come in from the outlands, like the accidentals that stumble upon her finch feeder. They've wandered back into town to be hospitalized or die" (26). Here Laura asserts that the role of the farmer is that of the outsider; however, she also somewhat contradictorily points out that farmers are "the only people on earth whose work is indispensable" and that, upon reflecting on her garden, she tells us that these "[f]armers always will her with vague shame" (27). The symbol of the farmer, standing in as Carson's warning, does not exist within the immediate symbolic logic of Lacewood in the end of the twentieth century. The farmer is the ghostly remainder in the equation of multinational capitalism. *Gain*'s symbols of farmers and doctors (the latter of which we will attend to also) who once held the power to speak out against the presence of synthetic chemicals, are now without voice or agency.

Carson insists that the community as a collective body be held responsible for the saturation of synthetic substances such as DDT. At the end of Carson's "Fable," she writes "[n]o witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves" (3). Carson's formulation of blame is different than that of toxic discourse's; *Silent Spring* emphasized the complicity of the individual in the traffic of toxins. *Gain*, within dual narrative structure, distributes blame evenly. Where Carson and Powers do overlap is that they acknowledge that there is a large component of this system to which the public voluntarily submits—and of which it takes ownership. Powers chooses to position readers within the town of Lacewood via Laura Bodey, a real-estate agent. Laura's plot launches us into

her diagnosis and eventually into her death; Laura's sequence, then, is a journey in which she develops knowledge of her own body, which—as trans-corporeality implies—is also about cultivating the knowledge of her environment. Rather than choosing to emphasize the role of the farmers—the “outsider” already positioned in disagreement with large manufacturers—Powers positions the reader inside of Lacewood, making the object of inquiry Laura's awareness of the material forces which are imposed upon her. Laura is somebody who “drives past Clare's Agricultural Division headquarters at three times a week,” somebody who “hums the corporate theme song to herself sometimes, without realizing” (5-6). She is conscious of the role Clare plays in her life, but she is neither questions or opposes the company. Her inquiry emerges only after her diagnosis

Self-knowledge and knowledge of one's environment extends out of the body and the mind and into a scientific discourse, a vantage point which is only afforded by the Clare sequence of the novel. In discussing the flux of self-knowledge, Alaimo tells us:

[S]elf-knowledge, which has been a personal philosophical, psychological, or discursive matter, now extends into a rather ‘scientific’ investigation into the constitution of our coextensive environments. Science, however, offers no steady ground, as the information may be biased, incomplete, or opaque and the ostensible objet of scientific inquiry—the material world—is extremely complex, overwrought with agencies, and ever emergent. (20)

The self-knowledge Powers is interested in here is the kind that trans-corporeality produces, one that defines the borders of the self beyond metaphysic or cognitive frames. An accomplishment of the material turn is the increased pressure for us to contend with the physical and economic boundaries which help to compose such structures. But science, or Dr. Archer in Laura's case,

offers little specific help with which she can productively redefine these boundaries and see where something destructive has entered the economy of her body. Before Laura's cancer diagnosis, we see that her only true moment of inquiry comes when she finds herself unable to sleep one night, when she poses the type of questions "people ask only on light-flooded nights, when comforts go ephemeral, threats softly, and the town unmoors on its self-dug seas" (54). Laura's critical faculties change—and are further challenged—after she is diagnosed.

The first suggestion of Laura's illness is a cyst. She tells Tim and Ellen, her children, that "[a] cyst is like a little ball of water" (33). Whereas Laura refuses to take seriously the potential hazard she faces, Don, her ex-husband, is more skeptical of medical diagnoses. Don notes that "98 percent," the statistic Laura's doctor gave her, "means that 'certain' is going to be wrong one week out of the year" (41). Don's thoughts teach us that "[t]o Laura, health is an abstraction" (43). On one level we can take his thoughts for what they are, criticism from an ex-husband who did not encourage any mathematical literacy for his wife; however, Don alerts readers to some resistance Laura has to thinking about the larger material relations which define her life. Powers chooses for readers to witness the diagnosis through Don: "Oncology. He's never even thought about the word, and now it's his" (72). What is happening here is that Laura and Don are now participants in a community of illness of which they were all but unaware before. Lynch develops this concept of an "illness community," highlighting the reasons we commit to or resist such narratives. Lynch argues that when Laura "resists membership" of such communities, she is "depriving herself of an understanding of her disease which extends beyond her sense of her own body's mortality" (218). Stepping out of a discourse of resistance to her illness, then, is important for Laura to realize a larger material narrative that is playing out within the cells of her body.

Much later in her diagnosis, Laura reflects on how she came to see the reality of her illness. Laura “remembers bobbing up from the truth serum milkshake—thiopental sodium, fentanyl, tubocurarine, halothane—in a state perilously close to knowledge” (79). The drugs she lists here represent anesthetics, painkillers, alkaloids—symbols of nausea and paralysis which saturate her life from this point on. Laura begins to realize that her body, her diagnosis, and her treatment are almost completely out of her hands. In a dialogue between Laura, her oncologist, and Don, Powers tells us that “Laura isn’t keen on having her system referred to in the third person while she’s still in the room” (82). Her ovarian cancer, which has now spread elsewhere throughout her body, exists both internally and externally. It is talked about and experienced, diagnosed and felt. It is at this point in her narrative where Laura begins to question the origin of her cancer. In dialogue with her oncologist, Laura asks “[w]hat is the cause?” She cannot say *ovarian cancer*. She cannot say *of this*. “Is it genetic?” (84). Laura insists on developing some awareness of her cancer, yet she consciously refuses to articulate the cancer itself. To put into language, at this stage, would be too real for her. The doctor then responds to her questions, saying “sometimes” and “nobody really knows for certain” (84). The reluctance of her doctors to conceive of the cancer’s origin becomes a chronic pattern of the text. As time passes, Don questions her over the phone about the stage and grade of her cancer, providing pamphlets and books for her. After learning the difference between stages and grades, we see that she asks again “[w]hat causes... why do I have this?” (111). Again, the doctor emphasizes that she’s asking a “natural question” and that while he does not have the answer, he acknowledges that “ovarian cancer does follow at least three distinct hereditary patterns” (111). It is worth noting here that in Laura’s medical care the question of blame or the cancer’s origin is never proposed by any of her doctors. Oncology in the novel becomes a site of treatment, not of understanding. During her

treatment, however, the “ball, Laura’s cancer, is in Dr. Archer’s court” (122). What this shows us, then, is that treatment does not allow for much personal agency. Even the question of treatment itself presented with both hesitation and withheld information. There is some discussion of pills made from “six mature hundred-year-old Pacific yew trees,” pills that Laura thought she had been taking (171). She learns, however, that the taxol in the tree bark is not the same manufactured compound in her chemotherapy drugs. Instead, “the one that works is always too expensive to use” (172). When Laura is later able to confront one of her doctors about the possibility of an environmental source, she “asks point-blank” if cancer “can have environmental causes” (217). As a response, Dr. Archer “cannot keep the tone of professional irony out of his voice” (217). What we can gather from these particular scenes within Laura’s sequence are the limitations of patient knowledge and the roadblocks (or hesitations) that medical personnel come to embody in the insinuation of an environmental cause of her disease.

Alaimo addresses the medical field’s hesitation with environmental illness at length. “The World Health Organization,” Alaimo writes, “defines environmental health rather broadly (90)” Moreover, we see that “despite the reappearance of the permeable body in the late twentieth century, the medical model of the enclosed modern body still stands, as powerful social and economic forces continue to prop it up” (91).¹² Laura is caught between knowing herself as a “permeable” or “closed” body. Powers demonstrates an understanding of this flux in his portrayal of the medical field’s handling of Laura’s diagnosis. Alaimo argues that in such situations, people assume the roles of “citizen-experts,” where individual people seek to establish their own understandings of their environments and their bodies, “foster[ing] political awareness of the relations between power and knowledge as well as between science and capital enterprise”

¹² Alaimo references Heise’s “Toxins, Drugs, and Global Systems” directly in this section to maintain that Heise’s work encourages the “boundary blurring” between the body and the environment. Alaimo’s uses Heise and Buell to endorse her proposition of “citizen-experts” (94).

(94). Laura, a once-active member of the community of Lacewood, fits this model and her diagnosis raises the stakes for her to develop this awareness.

Like the novel, Laura uses a medley of public records, conversations, and print articles to assemble a narrative that puts their local chemical giant in a position of responsibility. What prompts her to confront Dr. Archer about environmental causes is the conversation she has with Janine, a woman passing out pamphlets for the local religious congregation. Janine identifies with Laura, relating Laura to her late husband, Jimmy. Janine describes Jimmy's work to Laura:

Chloro this and ethylene that. Pouring out paint cans full of solvent into big old drums. Drums that would sit around out back of the receiving docks until they started to rust. [...] Half of those men are sick with something now. Of course, insurance had them all down as impossible risks long before they started moving drums around for Clare. (215)

There is a dark irony to this passage. Whereas an individual, as Heise points out, is paralyzed in his or her ability to calculate the risks of the global systems, insurance companies are allowed to make judgments about the "impossible risks" of some coverage. Moreover, Janine's story calls Laura's attention to begin questioning Clare's relationship to the rate of cancer in Lacewood. Lisa Lynch maintains that this process is what enables Laura to identify with other cancer victims. In the Harvest Fair scene, Laura "cannot turn around without running into someone else. Everybody is battling cancer" (242). What is more, we note that Laura "starts to recognize them with no evidence," (242). Laura's admittance into this illness community helps her accept and articulate the reality of her cancer.

While still at the fair, Laura pulls from her purse a photocopy of "Cancer Tracks Chemicals," which tells the story of three people who used to work "in the same production

facility in Clare's Agricultural Products division" (245). Laura reads that "Today, Robert had a tumor in his testicle, Paula is fighting cervical cancer, and Willy is dead" (245). Even if Laura can relate the cancer of these three to Clare's Agricultural facility, she tells herself that she "has never gotten closer to the plant than to drive past it in a sport utility vehicle filled with grocery bags" (246). The grocery store, a repeated image within the novel, functions as a conduit between her and Clare. As her vehicle carries "grocery bags" to her home, Laura unconsciously allows Clare to slip into her life. Although she begins to contemplate sites of toxic exposure, Laura still remains heavily skeptical of her illness. She thinks that "she hasn't even *been* exposed. No Love Canal under the house. No Three Mile Island just across the river. Whatever she's getting by chance or proximity is no more than anyone else in the known world is getting" (322). The barrier Laura establishes here between herself and others within this illness community is that of exposure. As long as Laura convinces herself she has not been exposed, she is free from the entanglement of the illness community. As we saw with the discussion of DeLillo's *White Noise*, instances like the Love Canal Disaster form metanarratives of toxic exposure. To put it simply, when we have strong symbols of what environmental hazards represent it is then in turn difficult to discern the everyday toxins that hide within our grocery bags. Laura describing that she is in the same "proximity" to toxins as anybody else in the world is true. After Laura lists all of the carcinogen-rich food she had consumed, from "diet soda" to "charred barbecue burgers," she affirms that "[l]ife causes cancer" (322-3). While this defense is useful in calling attention to the myriad forces which saturate our lives with synthetic chemicals, it is far too reductive for a productive discussion. What is perhaps more interesting is when Laura begins to take ownership of this situation. Thinking about the Clare products, she tells us that she "cannot sue the company for raiding her house. She brought them in, by choice, totd

them in a shopping bag. And she'd do it all over again. Would have to" (346). Laura imagines the "shopping bag" as a site where domestic environments are penetrated and transformed. Additionally, Laura admits that she has little choice in the matter, showing us that the struggle is far more complicated than Laura against Clare's Agricultural facility. As Ball asserts, this is the way "*Gain* succeeds in showing how a simplistic 'little guy against big business' narrative does us no favors" (60). What Laura—and readers—contend with is a world where informed decisions made about one's body are eclipsed by the labyrinths of multination corporations.

Although Laura believes she "is due nothing. No more than anybody else with a body," she and Don still pursue the lawsuit (326). When Laura gains a little bit of her strength back, she visits Lacewood's historical society with her children, a place where "[t]he famous Clare logo grows backward before her eyes" (335). As Laura and her children explore the history of Lacewood, they are confronted by Clare at every turn. Herein Laura becomes conscious of the historical narrative that follows the corporation, realizing that her experience is only a sliver of that time. Thinking back to Clare's Boston origins, Laura "closes her eyes, wiped out. She pictures a crippling class action suit, the next microscopic bit of corporate history laid out in a last, empty display. A settlement big enough to close down the whole, ancient corporation" (336). At this point, Laura has about a month remaining to enlist in the lawsuit. It is when Don informs her that the firm handling the lawsuit is interested in her file that she officially agrees. Don explains that the chemicals from Clare's agricultural plant somehow "trick the body" into thinking they are estrogen, but it is when Don mentions the "herbicide" that Laura thinks back to her plot of land (363-4). Powers writes, "Her plot of earth. Her flowers. Sue them, she thinks. Every penny they are worth. Break them up for parts" (364). This destructive impulse emerges as Laura quickly envisions the way she has come in direct contact with these "ring shaped

molecules” which imitate estrogen (363). However, this impulse is quickly subverted. “And in the next blink,” Powers writes, “a weird dream of peace. It makes no difference whether this business gave her cancer. They have given her everything else” (364). For much of what remains of her narrative, Laura’s blame of Clare’s herbicide remains in a state of suspension.

In the final moments readers spend with Laura, she once again steps into toxic discourse’s formulation of blame. Powers writes, “‘I want the president... I want the... chief to come sit here. In my house. Tell me why this happened.’ She wants what it promises, in that naturalist’s log: the wrongful users of the magic plant, answering to her” (380). Laura imagines something tangible, a single entity to which she can prescribe blame. Rather than using his section to blame Clare, Powers makes it explicit that Laura “wants what [blame] promises.” In an earlier section, Don confronts a similar problem. He visits Clare’s agricultural plant, but what he finds more closely resembles an “irrepressible clubhouse than a continental nerve center” (294). After considering what it would be like to slide a bomb into this corporate office, Don realizes with Clare and other corporations “there is no ground zero,” and that they exist as an “amorphous jellyfish,” (296). Clare can neither supply Laura with answers nor become one sole entity which she can be in dialogue with. Even Franklin Kennibar Sr., one of Clare’s CEOs, informs readers that “drawing the salary he does, how little say a CEO has about anything” (397). It is within this corporate space where the novel seems to find some resolution. It is Laura’s son, Tim, who studies within the disciplines of human biology and computer science to create a program which finds the “solution to the protein folding problem” (404). However, Tim then suggests that they use the money—which was “waiting for a chance to revenge its earnings”—to incorporate (405). Tim joins the fight against Clare International by becoming another “amorphous” being.

Trans-corporeality forces such “amorphous” structures to materialize into tangible sites of material exchange. Regarding the phenomena of Clare International, the waste-scapes of DeLillo’s *Underworld*, or the airborne toxic event, trans-corporeality envisions how each crystallizes in ways that are both politically and personally useful. Building upon and complicating toxic discourse’s vision of a protagonist awakened to a poisoned world, trans-corporeality shows that there is not one single narrative which places the human in opposition to the dissemination of toxins. Rather, what these protagonists are awakened to are the intersecting narratives which compose their bodies and their environments. What is more, by reconfiguring the us-against-them scenarios of toxic discourse, trans-corporeality can more effectively contend with Carson’s vision of reading the human in a larger environmental context. Trans-corporeality calls attention to the material exchanges which bind the human and the environment together; rather than talking about synthetic chemicals as an abstract or potentially hazardous force, the focus instead is on the sites where such exchanges happen.

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