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Fig. 1. Todd Haynes, *Safe*, 1995

In the closing image of Todd Haynes' 1995 film *Safe*, Carol White gazes deeply into the mirror, softly voicing the words, "I love you. I really love you. I love you," as the camera pushes slowly towards her. While the inward tracking promises access to Carol's interiority and her direct address to the camera suggests authorship of her own story, this is not what Haynes' film delivers. The camera comes to a rest after Carol's faltering last words, and we are left with a haunting image of her blotchy, lesion-marked face staring placidly at her reflection in the camera lens.



Fig. 2. *Safe*, 1995

Carol, superbly played by Julianne Moore, is a vessel for the words of Louise Hay, author of *The Aids Book; Creating a Positive Approach*, which appeared in 1988. Hay rose to New Age prominence after authoring the international bestseller *You Can Heal Your Life* (1984), filled with affirmations, meditations, and visualizations to promote positive thinking. In the 1980s, Hay developed a large following among gay men with AIDS, who gathered every Wednesday night in West Hollywood for a support group that came to be known as the “Hayride.”

Hay saw AIDS as a “message from the body,” a “final attempt of one’s own consciousness to communicate,” arguing that “when you can’t just take a pill and keep going . . . you have to listen” (19). She associated AIDS with a “lack of love”—for oneself and from others—and alleged that such a deficit was a leading cause of the “dis-ease,” as she parsed it (31). To overcome this lack, she prescribed changing one’s mental patterns to embrace a “positive, loving approach,” through which one might heal oneself (7-8). Central to Hay’s therapeutic approach was “mirror work”—a disciplined practice involving “sitting in front of a mirror, looking into [one’s] eyes lovingly and saying something like: ‘I love you, I really love you’” (111). Because “the mirror always tells the truth,” Hays reasoned, “when we tell it what we want, it can only reflect those positive things” (112-13). Arguing that she and her followers could not “wait for the medical profession to find its chemical cure,” Hays honed her mirror work to heal both consciousness and the immune system.[1]

In her call to empowerment through mirror work and visualizations, Hay draws on the tradition of mind cure, described by William James as “the religion of healthy-mindedness”—where suggestion is used to bring about states good health, both mental and physical (105). Hay became exposed to mind cure techniques in the late 1960s when she began attending the First Church of Religious Science in New York and reading the 1920s metaphysical tracts of its founder, Ernest Holmes (Oppenheimer). Hay was a quick study and by the early 70s, she was leading workshops and teaching “spiritual mind treatment,” a process involving performative self-healing utterances. When the AIDS crisis hit in the 80s, she was well-positioned to adapt her healing approach to

comfort patients who felt abandoned by the conventional medical and mental health establishment.

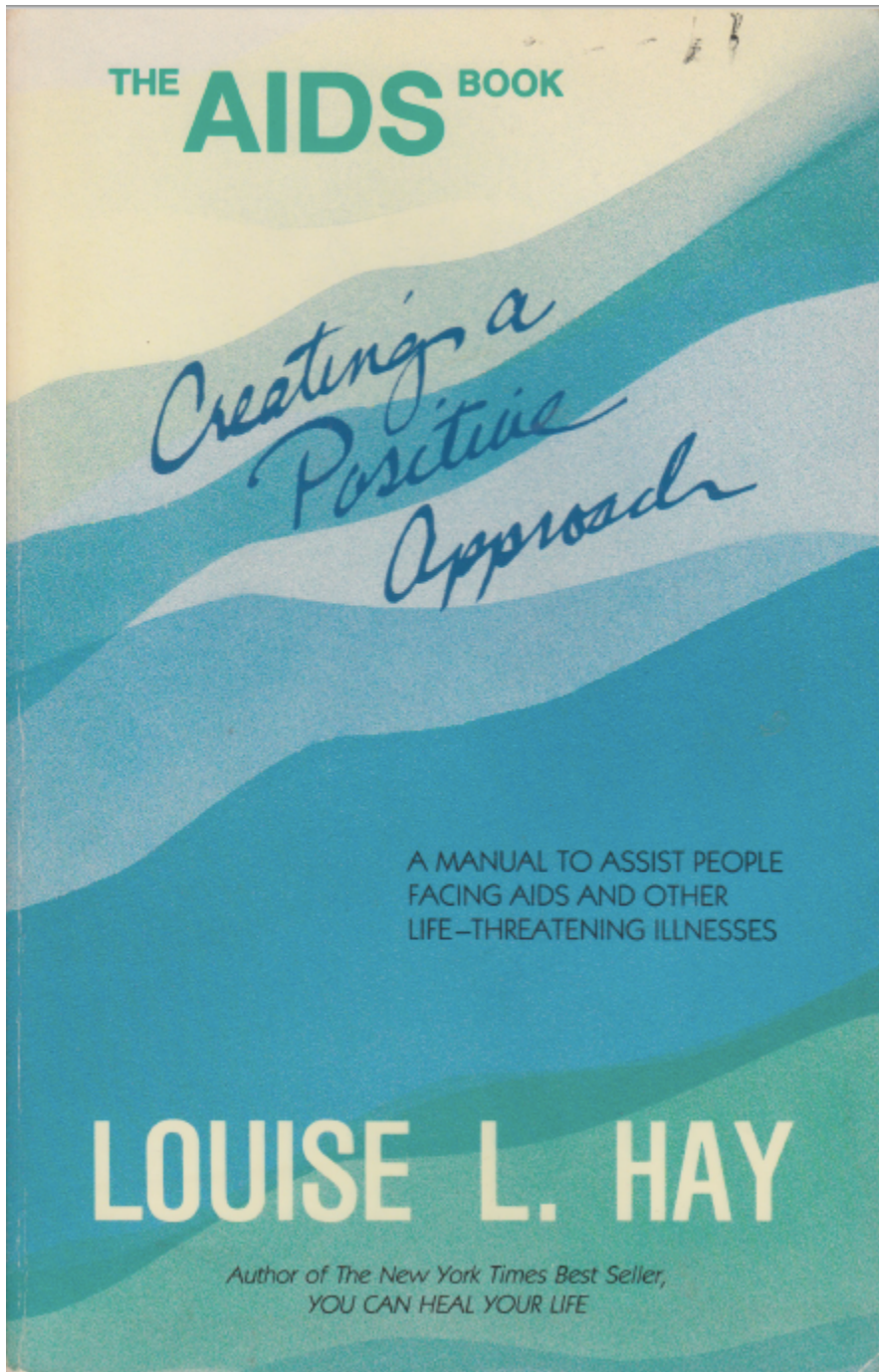


Fig. 3. *The AIDS Book*, First Edition, 1988

Hay's influence on the AIDS movement was pervasive, and when Haynes conceived the project that would eventually evolve into *Safe*, he was concerned to come to terms with the consequences of this influence. In a 1995 interview with Collier Schorr, Haynes reflects on the final act of *Safe*, set in Wrenwood, the New Age compound in New Mexico where the main protagonist Carol White goes to get "clear." He questions what made people with AIDS accept the ideological underpinnings of Hay's brand of positive thinking, which put them in "an impossible situation where they [would] never overcome their illness because they [would] never love themselves enough" (Haynes and Schorr 48). Haynes explains that his objective with *Safe* was not to "demonize the instigators or to victimize and reveal the blind ignorance of the followers," but rather to conduct a "guarded interrogation of the whole thing" (Haynes and MacLean 50).



Fig. 4. Todd Haynes, *Poison*, 1991

Safe is closely akin to the disease-of-the-week TV movie (think *Boy in the Plastic Bubble*), but in its careful sympathy for Carol, the film fits into the women's picture genre on which Haynes has built much of his career. But it is also a central film in what Ruby Rich has dubbed New Queer Cinema, in which the interrogation of mainstream society goes beyond content, shaping film form and character construction in ways that trouble simple straightforward sympathies and identifications (Rich 16-30; Haynes and Saunders 41). While Haynes acknowledges that neither his first feature, *Poison* (1991), nor his second, "could have existed without the epidemic," he explains that with *Safe* he wanted to create a story that was not thematically focused on AIDS in order to reach viewers who might otherwise be resistant (Haynes and Schorr 45). Retreating from the assaultive, operatic pitch of *Poison*, Haynes, in his second feature, locates illness in the most unlikely place—in the comfortable, sealed off life of San Fernando Valley homemaker Carol White.



Fig. 5. *Safe*, 1995

Carol's life of lunching, aerobics, and gardening takes a dire turn when a black sofa is mistakenly delivered to her pristine, pastel-hued home. The turn of the mise-en-scène gives rise to a series of

worsening attacks induced by exhaust fumes, a new perm, dry-cleaning chemicals, a baby shower, and her husband's (aerosol-perfumed) embrace. The family doctor determines that Carol is physically healthy, but that she might be suffering from a stress-related condition and recommends that her husband, Greg, take her to a psychiatrist. After seeing a notice about environmental illness at the health club, Carol breaks away from her male caretakers and begins slowly making changes in her life. In the middle of writing a letter to the group advertised on the flyer, for instance, Carol, in a state of seeming disorientation, pauses to ask her husband, "Oh god, what is this? Where am I? Right now?" to which he blithely answers, "We're in our house. Greg and Carol's house," as a row of family portraits looks on.

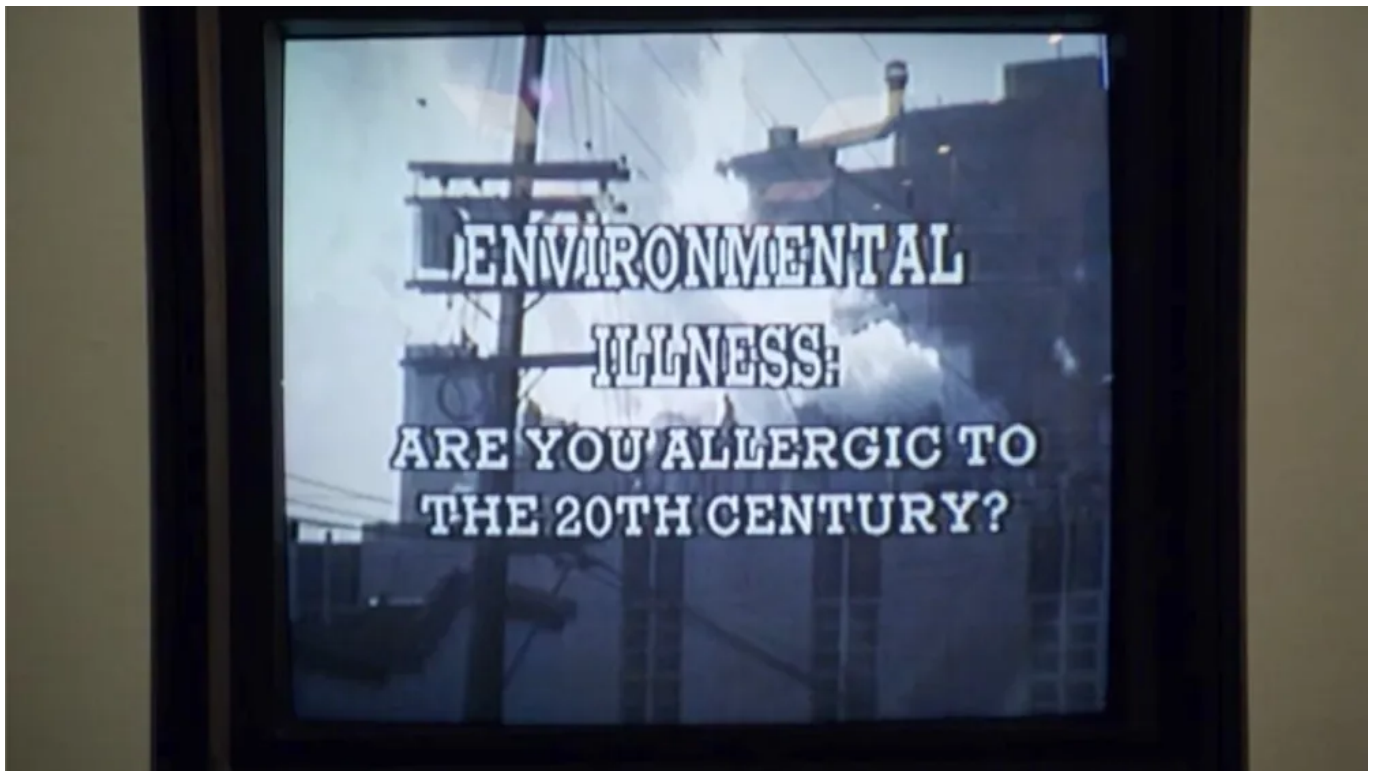


Fig. 6. *Safe*, 1995

After seeing an advertisement for a healing retreat on TV, Carol decides to relocate to Wrenwood, where she falls under the influence of charismatic leader Peter Dunning, described adoringly by another group member as a "chemically sensitive person with AIDS."^[2] Dunning, who lives in a sprawling white mansion overlooking the center, refuses to watch the news or read newspapers, fearing that his immune system would not be able to withstand the "gloom and doom" proliferated by the mass media. Convinced of the healing power of self-love, he ends each session with the group affirmation, "We are one with the power that created us. We are safe, and all is well in our world."



Fig. 7. Carol's "safe haven for troubled times"

Carol remains conspicuously quiet during the first closing incantation, and when she breaks down in her cabin after Greg's departure, Director Claire Fitzpatrick recommends that she try mirror affirmations. Gradually, Carol becomes habituated to life at Wrenwood and eventually moves into a safe house, a porcelain-lined dome, fully impervious to outside toxins. As she celebrates her birthday with her new Wrenwood community, Carol falteringly gives testimony, piecing together snippets of borrowed language. Returning from the party, Carol enters her sterile igloo-like domicile and approaches the mirror. Adopting the language of Wrenwood, Carol looks deep into the mirror and speaks the requisite words of self-love.

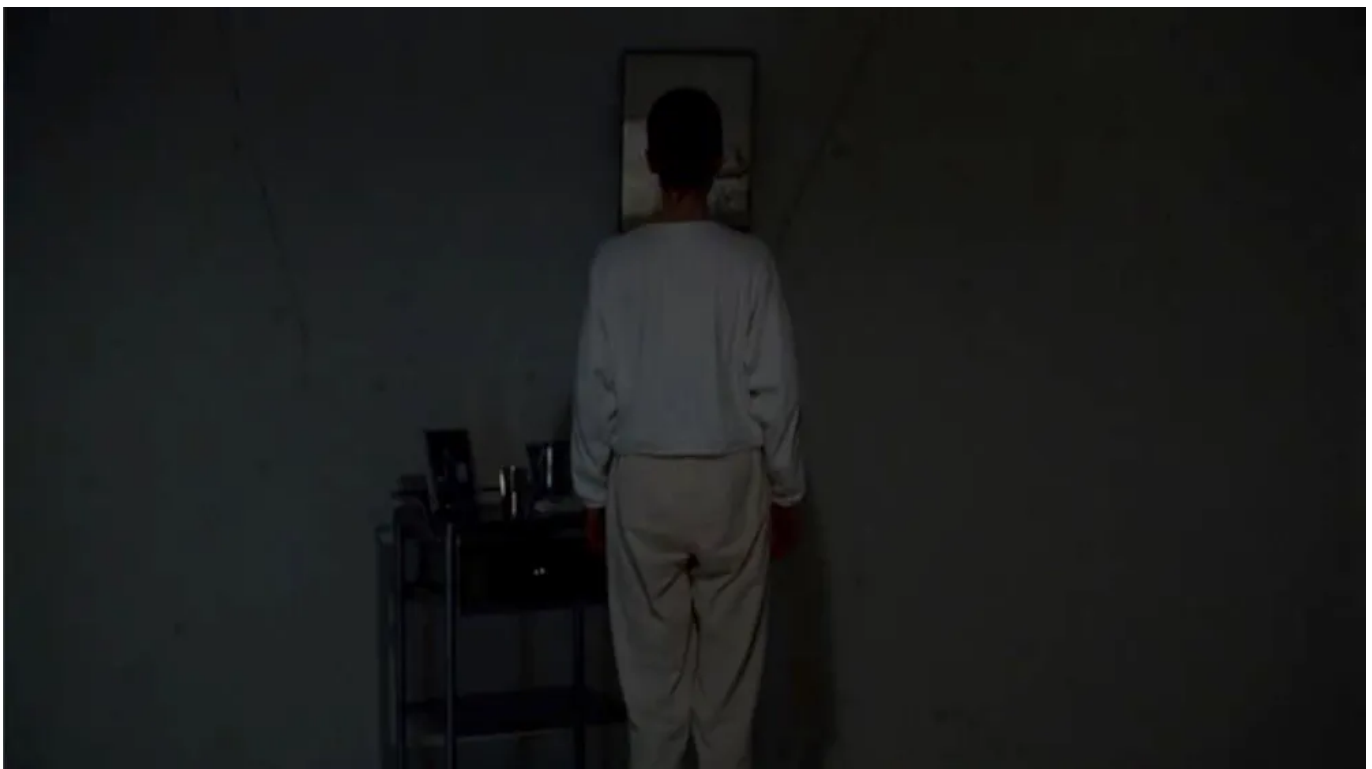


Fig. 8. *Safe*, 1995

If, as Hay claims, "the mirror always [told] the truth," Carol's final words would, indeed, signal a transcendent, happy ending for Carol. As the locus of *méconnaissance*, however, the mirror in this scene instead suggests that Wrenwood's solution for Carol is viciously cruel; she is inculcated for her sickness and enclosed in a vault. The film, then, comes full circle with Carol in a hermetically sealed variant of where she began (Haynes and Schorr 47; Haynes and MacLean 51). If the film

offers any hope, it is to be found in the tumultuous middle portion of the film when Carol leaves her sheltered domesticity and begins educating herself about her illness. “Her body,” Haynes explains, “tells her that something is terribly wrong with her life and her world. Whether it’s a material problem or a larger symbolic problem, it’s something that everything in her life has been encouraging her not to look at” (Haynes and MacLean 51). When Carol’s illness compels her to examine her life, she finds it in dire need of change. And although her search for self-healing yields a toxic New Age balm, her quest, nevertheless, remains significant.

Historian Anne Harrington argues that during the AIDS crisis, positive thinking became a significant part of the grass-roots response—and an expression of “rebellion”—particularly within portions of the heavily-impacted gay community (129). In the mid-80s, but also in the present, Harrington explains, the notion of the “speaking body,” holds considerable sway—in “the busy, restless margins of health care, and particularly in the worlds of alternative, feminist, and holistic medicine,” where it functions, above all, as a call to personal empowerment (95). Rather than relegating mind cure exclusively to the murky realms of institutionalized, kitsch spirituality represented by Wrenwood, then, we might also locate in Carols’ search for self-healing a spirit of individualism and anti-authoritarianism that animated mind cure (and its commitment to the interconnectedness of mind and body) from the outset, while also remaining mindful that such individual anti-authoritarian gestures are always capable of being appropriated and re-circuited. *Safe* straddles the line between queering the mind cure and critiquing its tendency to exploit patients’ desperate longing for a form of healing otherwise denied to them, revealing in the disjunction between these alternatives, the desire for another more affirmative mode of speaking the body.

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[1] To this end, Hay developed the custom-fitted affirmation:

I now attract to myself everything I need on the physical level to help me in this healing process. I bless this condition called AIDS with love, and I am willing to release it and let it go. I love my immune system and do everything I can to make it strong and healthy . . . My body gets stronger everyday. I feel better, and I look better. I am at peace. All is well in my world. (113)

[2] In an interview with Collier Scorr Haynes relates, "I think I made Peter someone with AIDS not only because it's another immune-system illness, like environmental illness—they're often linked—but also because there was this history of New Age thinking and AIDS that I wanted to bring into the film" (48).