

I saw starlight in your eyes and every critic
weeps in still solitude, for we are a dance
about the totem just before rain falls.
This is the beginning of wholeness and growth.
There is no time for judgments.

Maybe we are learning to live,
on the precipice
After all, that's the way the best things
begin.

Sheryl Luna's first collection of poems, *Pity the Drowned Horses*, was published by the University of Notre Dame Press in 2005. It received the inaugural Andres Montoya Prize for emerging Latino/a poets.

We're Still Vulnerable: Todd Haynes's *Safe* in 2011

Todd Haynes's *Safe*, Culver City, Calif.: Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 1994

Jason Tougaw

Todd Haynes's *Safe* was shot in and around Los Angeles while the city was besieged with aftershocks from the Northridge earthquake (6.7 on the Richter scale). Highways had collapsed all over the city, office buildings were in ruins, and damage to homes was widespread. This backdrop is probably not incidental to the film's tone. As a California native, what I remember about waiting for aftershocks is a menacing quiet. You don't know when they'll hit, but the earth and air around you change entirely when they do. Usually they're minor, but you never know when one might be devastating. You're vulnerable, and you know it. Haynes's *Poison* (1991) was stylized and confrontational, echoing the Act Up–Queer Nation chant, "We're here, we're queer, get used to it." *Safe* seems to murmur a different slogan with a broader *we* in mind: "We're vulnerable, we know it, and we'd better find a way to live with it." We're waiting for aftershocks. We're not safe.

When Haynes made *Safe* in 1994, he was still working with tiny budgets, Bill Clinton was in his first term, HIV was still generally understood as a death sentence, most people hadn't heard of chemical sensitivity disorder or Monica Lewinsky, and Julianne Moore was not yet a star. By the time he made his next film, *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), all that had changed. The world had changed. Watching *Safe* in 2011 is sort of like opening a time capsule. You knew it was there, but it manages to surprise you anyway.

Safe is a film in three acts. Act 1: The opening shot of *Safe* looks at a suburban street from the point of view of a car—in reality, Haynes's parents' car moving up the street to their house. (Many of the films' locations

are the homes of Haynes's southern California relatives.) Moore, who is in nearly every shot of the film, has yet to be introduced. The car's-eye view suggests a sterile suburb. The car parks, Carol White (Moore) gets out, and then we cut to her buried under her husband's limply thrusting body. She's the victim of bad sex. We know where we are: the suburbs. And we know what the problem is: suffocating suburban life. And suburban life suffocates because it fails to acknowledge vulnerability. Carol's body begins to revolt, attuning her immune system to the poisons of her environment. Her carpets, sofas, cleaning fluids—her husband's clothes—are making her sick. Act 2: Carol is energized by her disease and the community of fellow sufferers she finds through it. She comes to understand that she's "allergic to the twentieth century." Act 3: Carol finds Renwood, a creepy retreat in the California desert, which is supposedly free of toxins, brimming with oppressive New Age dogma that amounts to a simple message: If you're sick, it's your fault. In the arms of this cushioning community, Carol gets more and more frail. Her skin becomes papery and bruised. She shuffles around Renwood with an oxygen tank while her new community smiles at her as though she's finally found her place in the world. Safety, it turns out, is not just a myth. It will kill you.

"We all have a little Carol White in us," Haynes jokes in the commentary for the DVD release of the film. Carol wants to please; she doesn't want to be in anybody's way; but she wants a voice and some room in the world too. In that same commentary, Moore explains that to play Carol she spoke "above" her vocal chords, speaking without projecting. She conceived Carol's breathy speech to create the sense that her voice was "bodyless." As her friends and family respond with suspicion to her growing list of symptoms, it becomes clear that Carol's suburbs are a place where people eschew the idea that mind and body have anything to do with each other. Carol sees a physician and a psychiatrist, both of whom seem to be in the business of dislocating her mental life from her physiology. But she digs in her heels, and as a result she finds herself at Renwood, a smug community whose leaders seem to think they have a patent on mind-body relations. Carol's suburbs and Renwood have something in common: no epistemological crises here.

Haynes imagines his audience "trying to identify with Carol, with all these obstructions." He wants us to identify with her, but he doesn't want it to be easy. In many films about illness, identification is tidy. Their arcs trace the resolution of epistemological crisis. Think *Philadelphia* or

Lorenzo's Oil or *Awakenings*. In these films, we are invited to identify with the physical vulnerability of characters and then to follow them on a path to overcoming, transcending, or at least understanding their illnesses. But *Safe* asks us to identify with vulnerability and uncertainty and to stay there, to live there. This is both intentional and philosophical. According to Haynes, "The film makes a parallel between [identity and immunity]. And she loses both." In the suburbs, people refuse to acknowledge that Carol's immune system might have anything to do with who she is; at Renwood, they school her in the art of mastering her immune system, as though her identity held a lever that controlled her cellular body. But it's a sham. She gets sicker and sicker as she settles into the Renwood life. To identify with Carol is to acknowledge that our immune systems are powerful and beyond our control, that our bodies, our minds, and our environments shape each other in ways we can't predict or control. After visiting the real-world communities upon which Renwood was based, Haynes and producer Christine Vachon went to a bar. According to Haynes, they said to each other, "We need to get toxic fast." They were joking, of course, but the bar they went to is an alternative to the suburbs and Renwood. Nothing will remind you that body, mind, and environment are connected more quickly than getting drunk in an unfamiliar bar.

It's been widely recognized that Haynes's film about immunity and identity has everything to do with AIDS. But the film's relationship to HIV is oblique. AIDS is mentioned—and dismissed—early in the film; Renwood's creepiest guru claims to have AIDS, but to have mastered his immune system. Carol's autoimmune disorder is an analogue to HIV, but only by implication and adjacency. The first protease inhibitors were just on the market in 1995, when the film was released, but nobody quite yet conceived of HIV as a manageable chronic illness. The equation between immunity and identity had been writ large through the devastation of so many gay men throughout the mid-1980s and early 1990s. But few had learned to live with this equation. If *Safe* is prescient, it's in its insistence that our immune systems are murky conduits between our bodies and our environments. We have to live with this—as opposed to denying it, mastering it, or dying of it.

If that's the lesson of identifying with Carol White, there's a detail in the film that suggests that this lesson tests its own limits. Lester is a bizarre character who roams around Renwood, clothed from head to toe in what looks like thermals and wearing a ski mask. He hobbles in the background,

slightly out of focus. He doesn't speak. You never see his face. He's not involved in any of the community activities—therapy, cooking, dancing. According to Haynes, this character was based on somebody he used to see walking around New York's East Village. There's no explanation of Lester's presence, but he seems to be there to remind us that there are limits to identification.

My response to Lester—fear, reluctance, guilt—reminds me of my response, in my late teens and early twenties, when I would see a stranger I knew was dying from AIDS. These were the years between 1987 and 1994, when it seemed to any gay man—at least the ones I knew—that he could be next. First it was the stranger on the street, then a celebrity; then it was a friend, then more friends. People were dying, and it seemed clear that it could be any of us. Lester's creepy ski costume reads like an external immune system, implying that the internal one is shot. In the film, he's replaced identity with immunity, but it's clear that this can't last. Ironically, in the film's post-theater life, Lester has become the film's iconography. His role in the film is tiny, but his image is featured in the cover art for the DVD. Lester is *Safe's* poster boy, as if to remind us that this is a film about the difficulties of identification and understanding.

Those difficulties are *Safe's* legacy. Haynes sums it up near the conclusion of the DVD commentary: "It's the fact that people are confronted with things they know there's no real answer to, like AIDS or environmental illness, or so many things, we blame ourselves. We want to find an answer, and it's easier to blame yourself, than to deal with chaos." *Safe*—like *Velvet Goldmine* (1998); *Far from Heaven* (2002); Haynes's forthcoming HBO mini-series, *Mildred Pierce*; and of course his early film *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987)—is a period piece. It was shot in 1994 and set in 1987. It was the moment when Haynes made the transition from his niche position in the "New Queer Cinema," already on the wane, into an independent filmmaker whose sexuality informed but didn't define his work. He did this by making a film shot through the lens of his queer experience and sensibility, a film with a message from that world to the rest of the world, one with philosophical and social implications—a message about living with chaos. It's not an easy message, but people listened, perhaps because the film was so well conceived and crafted that it seemed instantly iconic, in synch with the zeitgeist. It turned out that we all had a little Carol White in us, and for that reason—among others, I'm sure—Haynes's unlikely film resonated with audiences and set the stage for the

remarkable trajectory of his own career. After *Safe*, he made films about glam rock stars, fifties housewives, and Bob Dylan. He calls them all *queer*. To think of these films as the aftershocks of the New Queer Cinema would be too dismissive, since each is remarkable on its own terms; but there's something to that idea. Todd Haynes managed to go broad without selling out, by examining characters and milieu with wide appeal through his queer lens. One thing has not changed since 1994: we are still vulnerable. Haynes's films continue to explore the difficulty of vulnerability without stigmatizing or sanitizing it—a feat that's all too rare and one that has everything to do with Haynes's queer life and politics.

Jason Tougaw is associate professor of English at Queens College, City University of New York. He is author of *Strange Cases: The Medical Case History and the British Novel* (Routledge, 2006) and coeditor, with Nancy K. Miller, of *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community* (University of Illinois Press, 2002).