# Political Anxieties in the Land of the Free:

# Wrestling Towards Democratic Salvation in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*

by

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*Para mis padres*

*Yo vuelo en este país porque ustedes viajaron sin miedo*

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**Abstract**

Tony Kushner's two-part drama *Angels in America* is an epic metaphysical endeavor to locate, subvert, and propel the force of modern American democracy. Embedded in this undertaking is the paradoxical nature of its source: the system of democracy is inherently pluralist, meaning that locating a source of power would only mean pointing the finger at the collective. The challenge is how to activate *out* of something without bouncing off of each other, which could imply difference or the possibility of otherness.

Kushner's solution is creating a prophet named Prior Walter, a gay man dying from AIDS in 1985, envisions a theology in which the Father-lover Aleph has abandoned his adoring angels, the Continental Principalities of the Earth. These Principalities, responsible for the earth's creation through their incessant copulation, desperately seek for ways to stop progress in order to bring the Aleph back. These Continental Principalities that Prior imagines serve the doubles of the characters of the drama, meaning that their impediments are only caused by an irrational sense of power, the approval of their own "Aleph," or inability to see themselves without it. This thesis identifies and explores the ways in which these characters understand themselves in relation to political power dynamics and the ways that these are exposed in their artifice.

The first chapter examines the politics of power employed by the justice systems throughout the play. It explores the tensions between subscribing to a law and manipulating it for the advantage of perpetual protection. Next, the second chapter delves into how Kushner utilizes the physicalized spaces the characters occupy to interconnect them, comment on their insider or outsider status, and rupture their fantasies of isolation and separateness from the action around them. The third and final chapter demonstrates importance of a belief system that is not only

rooted in the mind, theory, or betterment, but one that prioritizes praxis and mutual understanding of difference. In identifying these, Kushner reconstructs a new understanding of the political system as one that does not rely on the power of exclusion, guilt, marginalization, or otherness, and instead one that advocates freedom, solidarity, and unity.

**Keywords**: Drama, *Angels in America*, Political Systems, Theology, Tony Kushner

*The Aleph's diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished. Each thing (a mirror's face, let us say) was infinite things, since I distinctly saw it from every angle of the universe. I saw the teeming sea; I saw daybreak and nightfall; I saw the multitudes of America; I saw a silvery cobweb in the center of a black pyramid; I saw a splintered labyrinth (it was London); I saw, close up, unending eyes watching themselves in me as in a mirror; I saw all the mirrors on earth and none of them reflected me; I saw in a backyard of Soler Street the same tiles that thirty years before I'd seen in the entrance of a house in Fray Bentos; I saw bunches of grapes, snow, tobacco, lodes of metal, steam; I saw convex equatorial deserts and each one of their grains of sand*

– Jorge Luis Borges, "The Aleph"

**Contents**

Introduction . . . . . . . . . . 1

Chapter 1: Destructive Forces of Political Justice . . . . . . . . . . 7

Chapter 2: Destabilizing Fantasies for a More Perfect Union . . . . . . . . . . 22

Chapter 3: Faith in the Other and the Unknown . . . . . . . . . . 37

Works Cited . . . . . . . . . . 49

## Introduction

*"You're scared. So am I. Everybody is in the land of the free*."

– Louis Ironson, *Millennium Approaches*

Tony Kushner's two-part drama *Angels in America* is an epic metaphysical endeavor to locate, subvert, and propel the force of modern American democracy. Embedded in this undertaking is the paradoxical nature of its source: the system of democracy is inherently pluralist, meaning that locating a source of power would only mean pointing the finger at the collective. The challenge, is how to activate *out* of something without bouncing off of each other, which could imply difference or the possibility of otherness. Even the historic creation of a country formed out of unequivocal rebellion from a monarch under the proposition that "all men are created equal" completely excluded anybody who was not a land-owning white male. In a country eternally divided by the political, is it possible to find a common purpose that activates everybody? "The monolith is missing," (*Millennium Approaches* 95) bemoans Louis Ironson, the play's Leftist intellectual who works through this problem at incredible lengths, noting the impossibility of "reaching out for a spiritual past in a country where no indigenous spirits exist—only the Indians, I mean, Native American spirits, and we killed them off so now, there are no gods here, no ghosts and spirits in America, there are no angels in America" (*MA* 96). The drama around him provides the necessary spirits to quell his anxieties.

If Louis had been paying attention at his grandmother's funeral, he might have heard Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz call her "the last of the Mohicans" (*MA* 11), positing her as an alternative for a spiritual center in an American reality that is built on immigration and

difference. “She was . . . not a person but a whole kind of person,” the rabbi explains, “and how we struggled, and how we fought, for the family, for the Jewish home, so that you would not grow up *here*, in this strange place, in the melting pot where nothing melted.” Indeed, Sarah Ironson’s legacy of struggle and hard work is a common thread in this play. The characters are perpetually in search for themselves, truth, and an understanding of cultural background, ultimately questioning what makes them American. The five male characters of the drama are all technically homosexual, but they understand their identities in completely different ways in relation to their faith, their politics, and their culture. The play features Mormons (the original American religion that was founded on America as the veritable Zion), homosexuals, drag queens, conservatives, Jews, nurses, and lawyers all struggling for a sense of belonging.

But while Sarah Ironson’s determined and hardworking spirit exists inside all the characters in various degrees, it doesn’t give them anything to work *off* of, to rebel *for*, to defy. Enter Louis’s boyfriend Prior Walter, the play’s AIDS-stricken prophet. Perfectly situated in great liminality and need for understanding, Prior has an encounter with the Angel of America who instills an Anti-Migratory Epistle, explaining that in Heaven, the Father-Lover Aleph—a male aleph glyph (*Perestroika* 166)—has abandoned both the angels that He created to adore Him and the extant humanity He created out of boredom from angelic worship. Desperate to get Him back, the Angel commands Prior that everybody “MUST STOP MOVING!” (*P* 172) because their progress has only caused destruction and chaos that has “bewitched” the Aleph into leaving. “When God created people, he created . . . division” (*P* 168) Prior explains to his friend Belize, who works as a nurse, three weeks after the visitation. The Angel foretells of great unraveling should Prior not take heed, echoing the Millennial beliefs of the late twentieth century.

Prior, however, completely rejects the prophecy that has been assigned to him. While the Continental Principalities in Heaven ponder over texts and theories to restructure the world while listening to the destructive effects of humanity over their illegally obtained radio, Prior explains that "We can't just stop. We're not rocks. Progress, migration, motion is . . . modernity. It's *animate*, it's what living things do. We desire" (*P* 275). In order to return the Anti-Migratory Epistle, Prior must first wrestle with the angel for a blessing of more life. Here, Kushner borrows from the Book of Genesis in the story of Jacob contending with the Angel, which "mysteriously but deliberately provokes the issue of survival. To win the new name of Israel is to win also a very different Blessing from the one stolen away from Esau, for this new Blessing . . . is extracted from the angel of death" (Bloom 217). Prior's destiny is a incredibly powerful reimagining of the ancient text of a gay man who will not stop fighting for life. Just as Jacob becomes the namesake of his nation (Israel meaning contends-with-God), Prior becomes his.

As inspiring as Prior's journey is, it nevertheless raises the question of what the Aleph actually represents and why the Continental Principalities want Him back so badly. In his notes about the Angel, Kushner writes that "The Angel's power and purpose semi-successfully conceal an abandoned lover's determination to get her lost love to return before everything falls apart" (Kushner 320). The Principalities themselves have endless recourses and "copulate ceaselessly" according to Prior ("Heaven is a City Much like San Francisco, the Angel proclaims), meaning that they are fully capable of thinking and creating for themselves. The Aleph is also not a New Testament judge who will separate the sinners from the saints, nor is His departure anything but passive disappearance. In Prior's envisioned theology, Millennium will apparently approach solely out of humanity's own doing. The Aleph, then, reveals itself to be a completely arbitrary fountain of power, origin, and stability. Belize himself identifies a probable source for Prior's

vision. "The man that got away? And I think the time has come to let him go," he says (*P* 171), referring to Louis, who has since abandoned Prior because of his worsening AIDS symptoms.

Prior's visitation of the Angel of America obviously arises from himself and his own turbulent reality. The angel serves as a "heavenly twin," a "dream that is both messenger and self-interpreter; the astral body that is appropriate for the ascent of resurrection; the advent of the end-time" (Bloom 10). So if Louis is a representative of the Aleph who abandons his lover, then the Angel surely must represent a side of Prior that is immobilized by his departure and dependent on him to return. Just as Reagan, the national Aleph of the 1980s, promoted a culture of conservatism that largely ignored the AIDS crisis for years, Prior wrestles with the debilitating effects of this absence in order to activate more life for himself. Brawling for his continuance on earth, Prior commands the Angel "Free me! Unfetter me! Bless me or whatever . . . but *I will be let go*" (*P* 260). Even as Prior holds the Angel in his own grips, it is the Angel who must release Prior from her agony in order to allow him to continue on living, desiring, and moving.

Prior is then granted entrance into Heaven, where he witnesses a sort of *Wizard of Oz* inversion of the characters of the drama as Continental Principalities, all engaged in a tepid discussion of how to stop humanity's progress in order to win the Aleph back. This scene suggests that it is in fact all of the characters who are experiencing a sort of withdrawal and reckoning with the absence of a monolith, a belief system, something to unite them with their country and their relationships with others. Joe Pitt, for example, is the Mormon closeted homosexual represented by the Angel of Europa who desperately yearns for the Aleph's return, while his earthly wife Harper (the Angel of Africanii in Heaven) struggles the effects of His departure. Roy Cohn is Heaven's Angel of Antarctica, completely isolated from the world and disinterested in the calamitous effects of humanity. But unlike their angelic counterparts, these

characters also have the choice to find connection with each other and their democratic nation. This thesis examines the limitations and the proposed solutions in achieving this uniting of separate realms that must rely on each other to ultimately progress.

The first chapter examines the politics of power employed by the justice systems throughout the play. It explores the tensions between subscribing to a law and manipulating it for the advantage of perpetual protection. These politics of power often manifest in destruction, conflicts of the individual versus the state, and a total egocentricity that denies any chance of genuine connection. In subverting dynamics of the characters' relationship of living under the law or creating it, Kushner demonstrates the importance of both: the law must exist as protection for every citizen and their humanity rather than as a tool for creating power imbalances that only function in negating others their rights. A law that is built politically for serving the elite, the play demonstrates, is unstable, undemocratic, and unnecessary for true progress.

The second chapter delves into how Kushner utilizes the physicalized spaces the characters occupy to interconnect them, comment on their insider or outsider status, and rupture their fantasies of isolation and separateness from the action around them. In order to forge the ideal of nation that is not conceptualized simply in terms of parties or self-interest, the characters are obliged to leave their perhaps-convenient or secluded lives in order to participate within their larger society. Otherwise, they impose vulnerable perimeters of "bourgeois tolerance" (*MA* 94) that prevent them from recognizing themselves as inhabiting one large commonwealth.

The third and final chapter demonstrates importance of a belief system that is not only rooted in the mind, theory, or betterment, but one that prioritizes praxis and mutual understanding of difference. Living inside the rationality of the mind, the characters demonstrate, only leads to an ambivalence and a separation from one's own objectives. By leaving their minds

and entering a world confronting and accepting Otherness, the characters able to form a faith that is completely sufficient in and of itself and is only strengthened by their fellow citizens.

The Angel's prophecy is foreshadowed in the first scene of *Perestroika*, in which the "Oldest Living Bolshevik" named Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov urges us that we "dare not, we *cannot*, we MUST NOT move ahead" (*P* 145). But the once-agoraphobic Harper finishes the drama on an airplane, literally flying away "ravaged, heartbroken, and free" (*P* 263) from her husband to San Francisco. Serving as a prelapsarian "Heaven" before the AIDS crisis, Harper moves towards a space of queerness and difference, echoing a past where the "promise of freedom had fueled the greatest exodus of immigrants to San Francisco since the Gold Rush" (Schilts 15). And while Walter Benjamin's Angel of History—the prototype of Kushner's own Angel of America—would like to "awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" (Benjamin 257), Harper instead envisions these "souls of the dead who had perished from famine, from war, from the plague" creating a "web" that repairs the outer rim of the earth (*P* 285). By conflating the realms of mortality with the realms of politics, Kushner imagines a fusion of the two that thrusts these characters away from division, fear, and dependency and towards life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

## Chapter One: Destructive Forces of Political Justice

*The Law: the only club I ever wanted to belong to.*

– Roy Cohn, *Perestroika*

Justice and law are pervading forces throughout the course of *Angels in America* and serve as perhaps the ultimate force in constructing the effective delimitations between exclusion and protection. “Lawyers are . . . the high priests of America,” Roy tells Belize. “We alone know the words that made America. Out of thin air. We alone know how to use The Words” (*P* 215). This concept of the law as existing simultaneously on paper and in reality is crucial in understanding its inherent power. Roy’s attitude, for example, is not one of compliant reverence but rather full appropriation and possibility, underscoring the potential in bending its fabrication for personal misuse. But this notion of national law as a theoretical concept with tangible effects also opens up the argument for articulated legal representation that corresponds with the authentic needs of its citizens. Law, *Angels in America* argues, should not provoke fear or subservience but rather insistence on conserving personal liberties for those who live under its domain. If it does not, then full confrontation—or “wrestling”—with hegemonic powers is not only necessary but also in complete accordance with the purposes of its manufactured existence.

Set during a period where identified homosexuals were not explicitly protected under the law, Kushner illustrates the dangerous and unstable limits of allegiance, submission, and avoidance of the politics of litigation through a sort of dysfunctional cursed trinity working in the conservative Hall of Justice. Roy is the megalomaniac father who weaponizes the law at his own will, destroying anything and everything that stands in his way. Joe is the helplessly dutiful son,

a Chief Clerk who, by surreptitiously making all the decision for an incompetent judge, enables the systems of power that maintain his legal oppression. Louis is the caustic yet ineffective spirit of leftism who works in word processing, the “lowest of the low” (*MA* 28), a figure who can incessantly critique and condemn the failures around him without having the vital capacity to enact change or do anything more than simply transcribe. These three gay men never tangibly confront the systems that keep them within their positions, but instead offer tremendous insight into the specific forces driving the law and the importance of reimagining its influence.

Roy, fully settled within his status of outright dominance, not only clings onto the thriving power of the law but also fully depends on its efficacy. “I wish I was an octopus, a fucking octopus. Eight loving arms and all those suckers,” (*MA* 11) he quips as he moves in between telephone lines during his first scene. Instantly dehumanized and perverted, Roy’s tentacular relationships with those on the other line are simultaneously controlling and adhesive, lacking any sort of connection or mutual respect to those he keeps on hold. Moreover, his monstrous ineluctable influence perpetuates a pernicious stereotype of Jewish cheating and vampirism melded with a equally malicious depiction of queer oversexualization (Freedman 95). Indeed, when he is later provided with a phone in the hospital, he yells after Belize to get him “a real phone, with a hold button” because the one in his possession just has “one little line,” rendering him incapable to “perform basic bodily functions” with it (*P* 155).

Where Roy shows utter disregard for a common standard, Joe lives in a hyper-aware state of his actions under the watchful eye of his Mormon God. “As long as my behavior is decent. Correct,” he asserts when he confronted about his homosexuality. “That alone in the eyes of God” (*MA* 41). Prone to a constant self-vigilance, Joe represents the citizen who prioritizes the judgment of a higher power over his own identity. Under the presumption that he cannot achieve

godhood or true belonging without suppressing his desires, he is the character most in need of an inverted sense of justice as one that protects the interests of its citizens rather than judging them for their human behavior. His view also conflicts with the spirit of his own Mormon prophet, for "Smith's God . . . began as a man, and struggled heroically in and with time and space, rather after the pattern of colonial and revolutionary Americans" (Bloom 101). Eternally stuck in his own shame and his only recourse in praying for salvation (*MA* 40), he turns to the ruthless Roy Cohn, desperate for some relief of validation and salvation. "I thought I was doing what I was supposed to do, I though I'd find my way, the way you did, to the, to the heart of the world," he confesses to him at the end of the drama. "I imagined myself . . . safe there" (*P* 269).

At one point, Joe tells Roy that growing up, he always longed to be "one of the Blessed" because he consistently felt that his "blemishes" were there "by choice, which of course they aren't" (*MA* 56). The self-perception of being "othered" from God is tremendously important—even if the "blemishes" were not there out of his own validation, they nevertheless are absolutely separate from his God. But Roy slyly yet decisively exploits Joe's anguish and perpetual urgency to perform "good" deeds, offering Joe a job in the Justice Department for the sole purpose to halt his impending disbarment due to illegal financial conduct with a client. "Complex cases like these need Justice Department cooperation like flowers need the sun," he tells Joe. "Without the light of the sun, Joe, these cases, and the fancy lawyers who represent them, will wither and die" (*MA* 70). Corrupted as the proposition is, it exposes the key nature of the mechanisms that relegate government systems to the playthings of the high and mighty and .

When disbarment looms over him, Roy assigns the attack as "revenge" (*MA* 68) rather than the consequences of his actions. "Because I know no rules," he explains to Joe. "Because I don't see the Law as a dead and arbitrary collection of dictums, thou shall, thou shalt not,

because, because I know the Law's a pliable, breathing sweating . . . *organ*" (*MA* 69). The law for Roy Cohn is not only consistently active, but also the most effective shield for personal freedom in the face of great struggle. Despite his political views set antithetically to those of Roy Cohn, Louis shares a similar affinity for the creation of the law rather than its verdict. He addresses his philosophies of justice not in the dimension of the political or national, but rather in the divine. "It should be the questions and shape of a life, its total complexity gathered, arranged and considered, which matters in the end," he theorizes. "Not some stamp of salvation or damnation which disperses all the complexity in some unsatisfying little decision" (*MA* 39).

But Prior is hesitant in indulging in his boyfriend's intellectual ramblings, offering in response a historical anecdote about women and children getting thrown off a longboat in order to avoid overcrowding the stability of the ballast. "I like your cosmology, baby," he says. "But it seems to me that it lets you off scot-free." (*MA* 42-43). Prior's counter-story to Louis's theorizings delineates the limits of political jurisprudence during a time where vulnerable members of a society are subjected to fundamental injustice. His story also echoes the AIDS crisis itself, which was entirely unpredictable and devastating in the complete powerlessness for the gay community. Musing on the importance of salvation in a moment of crisis negates the focus on the struggle at hand, and lets Louis live inside philosophical ideals rather than the situation at hand. But never in the drama is AIDS propositioned as a sort of judgment from God, despite its metaphorical capability that it is "punishment for deviant behavior and that it threatens the innocent" (Sontag 64). "Nobody knows what causes it," (*MA* 43) says Henry, Roy Cohn's doctor, immediately eliminating speculations of divine origin and causality.

Notwithstanding his Individualism, Roy is nevertheless fully devoted to the deeply patriarchal system that is responsible for both elevating and upholding his political authority.

"I've had many fathers, I owe my life to them, powerful, powerful men," he tells Joe during a late night at an uptown bar. "Walter Winchell. Edgar Hoover. Joe McCarthy most of all. He valued me because I am a good lawyer but he loved me because I was and am a good son" (*MA* 58). Considering the intimate nature of the conversation, Kushner places Roy's homosexuality within the context of hierarchical masculinity, diametrically opposed to the gender nonconforming or feminized realms of queer liberation. Kushner elaborates their relationship:

> I really feel that it was incredibly important that Roy's generation of gay men have that kind of deeply patriarchal, gender-enforced notion of the seduction of youth, the ephebe and the elder man . . . All the older gay man wants is the younger gay man. That comes down from the Greek, homosexuality being a form of tutelage, of transmission, of dominance and submission. It felt to me that that would be absolutely part of Roy's repressed, ardent desire for Joe. (Savran 106)

Roy goes on to explain that "women are for birth, beginning, but the father is continuance. The son offers the father a vessel for carrying forth his father's dreams" (*MA* 58). Apart from the overt sexism of Roy's dogma, his view reveals a concealed yet extraordinary lack of agency for "the son" who surrenders his own life for his father just to achieve a feeling of dominion. But Roy's allegiance is so strong that when his membership to the bar is threatened, he raves that "I'm gonna be a goddamn motherfucking legally licensed member of the bar lawyer, just like my daddy was, till my last bitter day on earth, Joseph, until the day I die" (*MA* 71).

Roy also constantly commends the principle of loyalty between his inner circle, highlighting yet another subservient dimension of his patriarchal world. "You cover admirably," (*MA* ) he tells Joe regarding his role in making Justice Wilson's decisions. Later, he berates Martin Heller, a Reagan acolyte, and brags to Joe that Martin "sitteth on the right hand of the

man who sitteth on the right hand of The Man. And yet I can say "shut the fuck up" and he will take no offense. Loyalty" (*MA* 67). Loyalty implies a debt of servitude, ringing of a monarchistic obligation based on everything antithetical to the structures of a functioning democracy. Under the promise of power and political clout, these men have little regard for each other but rather full devotion for what the other can provide for them. On the other side is Louis comparing himself to Queen Mathilde who was "capable of . . . more than loyalty. Devotion" (*MA* 54) and wondering why he cannot perform the same way. But both of the men fail to recognize the other person as a partner rather than a stepping stone or an anchor, and because of this, they are unable or unwilling to form connections based on anything more than their own selves.

Louis and Roy are also similar in how they "strike out" (*P* 229) at others who are not of their political affiliation (Martin Heller describes the Republican judge takeover as "land mines everywhere" (*MA* 66)). The only true difference is that Roy does it because sees those who are marginalized as disposable and completely useless to anything he needs, while Louis does it out of victimhood. At different parts of the play, Belize engages in a back-and-forth with each of them in a battle between anti-semitism and racism. While Louis ends up "ambivalent" (*MA* 100) about his positioning, Roy and Belize fight to the end with the most vicious slurs. When Belize unleashes one of the most offensive pejoratives, Roy rewards him—"*Now* you're talking!" (*P* 187)—by giving him the AZT. In Roy's politics, that essence of competition rests at the core of solving problems with a clear winner and loser. This system, of course, only reinforces otherwise arbitrary political and racial divides. By participating in this sort of combat, Louis parallels the lawyer whom he that he considers to be the "polestar of human evil" (*P* 229); Roy is simply conscientious of its political benefits, while Louis does it in response to self-hatred.

Louis's issue comes not from feeling any pressure to concede to any law, but rather from the stress and the conflict between innocent or guilty, or in the courtroom of survival, between life and death. If Prior cannot "return to him whole and healthy and able to live a normal life," (*MA* 54) then Louis does not want him at all, as if his boyfriend exists only in his mind as a site of struggle without any sign of resolution. Prior pinpoints the issue while Louis leaves him as he asks "Apartment too small for three? Louis and Prior comfy but not Louis and Prior and Prior's disease?" (*MA* 81). What seems to be the problem with Louis is that he cannot identify death as existing separately from himself. Because he perceives himself as the eternal victim, he cannot imagine a life where death (or guilt) is not inevitable. By avoiding it, he holds a sense of power over it, but still remains in exile and fear. He cannot imagine a justice system where he is free from the threat of justice, so he instead creates his own isolated reality where he can explore freedom at his own accord without the political intimidation of difference or challenge.

As the self-proclaimed "heart of modern conservatism" (*P* 209), Roy does not identify with homosexuality even though he has contracted AIDS from a male sex worker. While this distancing might read as self-negating, closeted, or even self-hating, Roy explains in very clear terms to his doctor that "Homosexuals are not men who sleep with men. Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot pass a pissant antidiscimination bill through City Council" and "Who have zero clout" (*MA* 46). In other words, Roy's dissociation has nothing to do with a sense of inferiority or protectiveness, but rather with an incisive perception of American "pecking order" that is fully contingent on "labels" and "clout" (*MA* 46). For Roy, to be homosexual is to be on the vulnerable side of the spectrum that he so actively works to curtail and hold at a distance. Even after goading his doctor to call him a homosexual, Roy informs him that in doing so, he will "proceed, systematically, to destroy [his] reputation and [his] practice

and [his] career in New York State" (*MA* 45). Like Louis, Roy must destroy any prospect of powerlessness for others to attack him, which only conserves his own endless pursuit of power.

Over and over again, themes of inner destruction and persistence haunt and torture these characters. When Joe expresses resistance to Roy's promotion on the grounds of ethicality, Roy strikes back. "This is gastric juices churning, this is enzymes and acids, this is intestinal is what this is, bowel movement and blood-red meat! This stinks, this is *politics*, Joe, the game of being alive," he says. "Above alive is what? Dead! In the clouds! You're on earth, goddamnit!" (*MA* 71). There is no in-between for Roy Cohn: his ruthless approach towards life allows no room for peace or true connection; it all reverts back to strategy and rancid political maneuverings. Attempting to assuage his own internal "gut" clashes between himself and God, Joe drinks Pepto-Bismol (*MA* 73) while eating phallic hot dogs with Louis. Shortly thereafter, he regurgitates blood from an ulcer while finally confirming his homosexuality to his wife, purging himself of the self-inflicted undertaking to triumph over his true and instinctive desires.

But Joe's suppression also stems from a lack of self-recognition. Confiding in Harper, he remembers a picture of Jacob Wrestling with the Angel from a book of Bible stories his mother used to read him. Even though he admits he doesn't "remember the story or why the wrestling" (*MA* 52) he identifies himself not in any distinct character but rather in the middle of the Manichean struggle. "It's me," he tells her. "In that struggle. Fierce, and unfair. The angel is not human, and it holds nothing back, so how could anyone human win, what kind of a fight is that? It's not just. Losing means your soul thrown down in the dust, your heart torn out from God's. But you can't not lose" (*MA* 52) Joe's skewed perspective lies in separating God from the Angel— it is in fact himself who is playing the obliterating role of the angel of death while his humanity wrestles back, not letting him go until he blesses and releases himself from his own

homophobic internalizations. "I'm a shell," he later tells Harper, signaling his total self-annihilation. "There's nothing left to kill" (*MA* 40). When Roy Cohn describes the impossibility of killing AIDS, he remarks that "it's harder to kill something if it knows what it is" (*P* 214)

Harper uses a similar language of destruction when she describes her sexual encounters with Joe. "You think you're the only one who hates sex," she asks him. "I hate it with you; I do. I dream that you batter away at me till all my joints come apart, like wax, and I fall into pieces. It's like a punishment" (*MA* 37). While Joe wrestles with his own angel of self-destruction, he also acts as the figure of torture for Harper, who must confront his constant unfamiliarity in the most intimate settings. Louis, also in a state of total moral anguish for abandoning his boyfriend, also tells the Man in the Park to infect him because he doesn't care (*MA* 60). Rather than participating in productive and loving relationships, these characters are exiled to a state of carnal retribution and suffering. Kushner himself advocates that "We, subjects of capitalists societies, have to talk about the ways in which we are constructed to eroticize and cathect pain, as well as the way pain is transformed into pleasure, and self-destruction into self-creation" (Savran 105).

Harper's imagination is in perpetual discrepancy between her husband as a protector and as a threat. In the beginning of the play she marvels at ozone layer as a "gift, from God, the crowning touch to the creation of the world: guardian angels, hands linked, make a spherical net, a blue-green nesting orb, a shell of safety for life itself" while also noticing on how rejects "darker rays and emanations. Danger from without" (*MA* 16). When she grows anxious about its destruction in language reminiscent of the Millennium and Judgment Day, she cries out for her husband, pleading that "this is why, Joe, this is why I shouldn't be left alone" (*MA* 16). Dwelling in her subconscious, however, is an elusive man with the knives, who threatens her with "metal

scraping on the walls" (*MA* 24) and prevents her from getting any work done around the house. It is finally Joe himself who understands that this projection is a reflection of himself. This revelation perfectly encapsulates the arbitrary and insatiable relationship of the law and protection as a construct that provides both comfort within its limits and threats outside its walls.

But unlike Joe, Harper comes to understand and confront the root of her pain. Desperate to understand what she will do next, she asks the historically silenced animatronic of a Mormon Mother how people change. The Mormon Mother answers:

> MORMON MOTHER. God splits the skin with a jagged thumbnail from throat to belly and then plunges a huge filthy hand in, he grabs hold of your bloody tubes and they slip to evade his grasp but he squeezes hard, he *insists*, he pulls and pull till all your innards are yanked out and the pain! We can't even talk about that. And then he stuff hem back, dirty, tangled and torn. It's up to you to do the stitching. (*P* 200)

Recovery of injustice, whether personal or political, turns out to be an act that is totally self-driven. Nevertheless, Harper is able to recognize that the source of her anguish comes not from herself but rather from a place of external injustice. Separating these two exhibit a profound realization of the effects of everyday injustices of powerlessness. She finally sees the "source as the brutality of torture, thus exposing the politics of pain. In the Mormon Mother's eyes, it is ultimately God himself who needs to revert to the sadistic infliction of pain to confirm the realness of his creation and power" (Byttebier 298). When she returns back to her husband with a resigned apathy, she looks over the Brooklyn Promenade and contemplates that "Water won't ever accomplish the end, no matter how much you cry" and instead that "Fire's the answer. The Great and Terrible Day. At last" (*P* 237).

It is imperative to keep in mind that Harper's journey is not one of victimhood or weakness, but rather one of a love that has been broken. Throughout the play, love proves to be perhaps the most vulnerable realms when the destructive force of power and judgment is introduced. When Joe shares that he had a difficult relationship with his own "unfair" father, Roy assures him that he still loved him, explaining that "sometimes a father's love has to be very, very hard, unfair even, cold, to make his son grow up strong in a world like this. This isn't a good world" (*MA* 59). But these are nothing more than myths of strength that perpetuate a lethal Individualism and a dangerously misconstrued framework of love. When Louis confronts him about his legal complacency against homosexuals, Joe pleads "Why are you doing this to me? Please, believe me, please, *I love you*. *Stop hurting me like—*" (*P* 249). Getting a taste of his own medicine, Joe's self-involved language is precisely the type of "love" that Roy's paternal advice both shields him from and preserves. Without taking accountability or recognizing the pain of the other person, Joe is eternally lost, looking for love externally without realizing it in himself.

Louis himself is no stranger to the courtroom of love. When he tells Prior that he is going to move out of the apartment, he shields himself from judgment, telling him that he won't be judged because "this isn't a crime, just—the inevitable consequence of people who run out of. . . whose limitations—" (*MA* 81). But Prior is not interested: "Bang bang bang the court will come to order" (*MA* 81). Setting up a trial in his hospital bed, Prior reaches the verdict that "this man's heart is deficient. He loves but his love is worth nothing" (*MA* 82). This is a crucial moment for Louis, a figure who (like Roy) never confronts the restrictive, exclusionary potential of the law, instead more preoccupied with his own "limitations." Louis must choose between the law existing in the mind as a fountain of eternal potential and reconciling with its consequences affecting those around him. Roy's advice to Joe rings perfectly true: "Make the law or subject to

it" (*MA* 114). Louis's trouble, though, is that he perceives everybody around him in relation to himself, causing everything to exist in a realm of courtroom rather than community.

"It goes bad for you if you violate the hard law of love," Belize tells Louis (*MA* 104). Even Louis's unambivalence about fundamentally loving Prior cannot excuse him for his actions, as Belize demonstrates with the plot of a historical fiction novel in which the daughter of a white plantation owner named Margaret falls in love with an enslaved African-American named Thaddeus and proclaims that "Real love is never ambivalent" (*MA* 100). Belize's story epitomizes the total fallacy that love is not subject to the brutal political inequity. Like Louis's verbose introspections, Margaret's comments are not grounded in the reality of the political landscape that both she and Thaddeus belong to. Nevertheless, Louis feels an immense guilt and shows Belize the cut on his forehead, his version of the Mark of Cain, "people who . . . in betraying others betray what is truest in themselves" (*MA* 104). Self-destruction suffuses the play once again. Betraying love and community, Kushner posits, is just as detrimental as negating a sense of self like Joe. Law means nothing if both parties are not represented together under deliberately equal protection, protected within the boundaries of each other.

Joe's ultimate betrayal of Louis is a brilliant exercise in how Louis fully comes to grasp the importance of both creation of the law and its ultimate verdict. He finds an old court case that harbors Justice Wilson's opinion (and therefore Joe's handiwork) on a dishonorable discharge due to homosexuality. While it maintained the original court's decision to rule in favor of the defendant, it changed the reason for the verdict: the army knew the man was gay when he enlisted, meaning that the discharge was not considered political discrimination. Instead of reflecting or acknowledging his damage, Joe punches Louis (fittingly) the stomach, marking his allegiance to the conservative realm of power of Roy Cohn that is literally in direct defiance of

Louis and the homosexual community. It marks his loyalties as being arbitrary and outside himself, and he remains trapped outside his own fundamentally contradictory political boundary. By placing Louis in a position of circumstantial powerlessness, Kushner exonerates him from his crimes (even though Prior does not welcome him back into the domain of a romantic relationship) and curses Joe to pursue a false notion of identity. Joe's status is one in contrast to "his pioneer ancestors, whose mass exodus beyond the borders of the United States was an act of both self-preservation and intentional radical separation" (Hutchinson-Jones 22).

The ghost of Ethel Rosenberg—the convicted and executed communist whom Roy Cohn historically prosecuted—haunts Roy during his worsening AIDS symptoms. First appearing in his New York townhouse, she simply walks through the door and comments on his weight before performing "an action that has consequences in the living world, an action that enables Roy to live: calling him an ambulance" (Barnett 136). By subverting this sense of power (Roy's reckoning in death is imminent), Ethel proves to live outside of Roy's binary and is granted simply the viewing pleasure of his demise while not feeling threatened by it. Ethel's extension of Roy's life is mirrored by Belize, who advises him on what medication to pursue even though he makes it clear that he doesn't like him at all. "Consider it solidarity," Belize says. "One faggot to another" (*P* 129). Extending this type of purposeful solidarity beats Roy at his own game, ruining his structures of power that he creates for himself in order to marginalize others.

Roy, having battled with everything he had over at the hospital, receives his ultimate judgment right before his death. "I'm going Ethel," he informs her. "All mine enemies will be standing on the other shore, mouths gaping open like stupid fish, while the Almighty parts the Sea of Death and lets his Royboy cross over to Jordan. On dry land and still a lawyer" (*P* 252). His celebration of death and embrace of the God he loves position him as a sort of morally

corrupt Jacob, who "outside the land of Blessing, still across the river in Transjordan, fights for and still achieves more life so as to be able to *cross over and survive*" (Bloom 219). Roy's concept of life is fully contingent on the power that is provided to him by the Almighty Law, solely for the purposes of achieving a sort of patriarchal apotheosis. But when Ethel informs Roy that he's been disbarred, Roy tricks her into singing him a lullaby before jumping up in hateful joy. Even in the face of his allegiance to "loyalties" falling through, snatching away all the power he once held, Roy relishes the opportunity to subvert maternal protection once more.

Louis's recitation of the Kaddish over Roy Cohn with the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg and Belize holds myriad implications in terms of its politics. After rejecting the proposal of forgiving Roy's evils, Louis touches his forehead, signaling a shared understanding of guilt and recognition. In forgiving Roy Cohn, Louis forgives himself for enshrouding himself in the law of self-interest rather than the Law of the Land. While both Roy and Louis understood life to be a continual accumulation of power against the verdict of death, Louis is the one who is able to relinquish this perception for a life that is rooted in itself. "Maybe . . . a queen can forgive her vanquished foe," Belize says, decisively queering the sexist and patriarchal battle under which Roy Cohn fought all his life. "Forgiveness. Which is maybe where love and justice finally meet. Peace, at least" (*P* 266). In reciting the Kaddish, "these three come together . . . to mourn, forgive, attain resolution, relieve themselves of a moral burden, and to confront and embrace their other, thereby inventing a more complex yet exact sense of self and a more expansively conceived idea of community" (Minwalla 110). Power is equalized among the four characters across different realms of life, race, political affiliation, and anything that could invite judgment.

These characters must choose between self-destruction or a commitment to struggle for unconditional protection granted to them by citizenship. Ambivalence and disassociation only

invites complacency and Individualism that is antithetical to the political groundwork of the United States. The notions of wrestling with God from the Old Testament, a text that weaves "both responses to suffering—faith and defiance—into one profound paradox," Kushner invokes the spirit of political and spiritual battle that is all too pertinent to American history: "Ancient Israelites, like the enslaved African Americans who drew upon their texts, found hope in holding the two together" (Kynes 296). When Prior calls Belize to describe the "war inside" of him, he tells him that he's "scared. And also full of, I don't know, Joy or something" . . . "Hope" (*P* 148).

## Chapter 2: Destabilizing Fantasies for a More Perfect Union

*Respect the delicate ecology of your delusions.*

– Mr. Lies, *Millennium Approaches*

The divisive state of American politics manifests in part because of the diverse yet isolated realms of lifestyles that develop out of the nation's vast geography and plentiful influences. Setting the play in New York City, Kushner juxtaposes a menagerie of political spheres from the established chambers of the Hall of Justice to the precarious niches of Central Park. These characters are continually exploring different territories around them and dabbling in their respective promises of freedom, dominance, security, and change. Building arbitrary borders in between each other, the characters find themselves occupying incongruous spaces that sever their connections from familiar systems and allure them with the opportunities they desperately yearn for. Kushner also frequently employs fantasies and phantasms for the characters to dialogue with, sticking them in contradictory positions that evince their innermost struggles. In mixing these queer characters all around their varied zones of comfort and interconnecting them with one another, Kushner assesses the repercussions of American isolation, finally demonstrating that the "truest characteristic of freedom is generosity, the basic gesture of freedom is to include, not to exclude" (Kushner 7).

Insofar as homosexuality has existed throughout history, it wasn't until the second half of the 20th century through organized activism like the Gay Liberation Movement that queer identities, or anything deviating from heteronormativity, truly became a recognized political group. The peculiar challenge of this struggle, though, was its difference from other culturally

peripheral groups, on the basis that like "Mormons, Jews, and other racial groups, gay people too are oppressed, without a homeland, and on the move. But, unlike those groups, gays are, first of all, a *political* people, not bound by nation or race" (Frantzen 146). Because it roots itself almost totally in sexuality, a feature that is both intimately elusive and completely nonvisible, the homosexual identity was constructed by and large within self-assembled communities and subversive spaces. In the words of Roy Cohn, the expert on clout and the political reality of the 1980s, "Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows" (*MA* 46).

Prior is an ideal candidate to unite the marginalized of the United States who all live in their own limiting political realms. As a gay man with AIDS during the 1980s, Prior exists in the fringe of American culture, following the lineage of Ancient Judaism where "the prophet is not so much a "seer" (understood as one who merely predicts the future) but rather an often marginalized outsider who critiques society, sometimes anticipating disastrous consequences if society does not abandon its pursuit of certain practices" (Omer-Sherman 9). Isolated by Louis and living in between the sites of the hospital and his solitary apartment, Prior does remain fixed in any interstitial space other than his own life and death. His forced exile from dominant American culture also empowers him to act as fearless commentator of what he views around him. "I'm sick, I get to be politically incorrect if I want to" (*MA* 64), he snaps at Belize when he suggests they should give up the language of drag. His queerness locates him in a particularly peculiar realm: he is privileged in every other sense (his is, after all, a WASP living off a trust fund), but he is nevertheless outcast from the mortal world and assesses it from a distance.

Both Belize and Prior reside within the realm of Camp, a queer sensibility based on artifice and references to popular culture. Camp is born out of a collective recognition and celebration of absurdity, and also marks an emergence of a gay populace that is inherently

detached from the mainstream. In other words, the Camp persona exists to both comment on and ridicule culture, expressing "his impotence as the dominated fraction of a ruling bloc in order to remain there (i.e. as a non-threatening presence) while he distances himself rom the conventional morality and taste of the growing class" (Ross 317). Almost like a stalemate from dominant culture, Camp in the 20th century granted a previously isolated and unidentified group a form of mutual connection, a queerness that marked itself completely separate from the heteronormative hegemony of popular media. Camp provided both an escape and a utopia, a parallel branch from culture that nevertheless fed off of its structures only to mock its illogical and constructed nature.

The limits of Camp, however, are in full display for Prior. Suffering from the both the physical and the emotional effects of AIDS, Prior tries to cheer himself up and "escape" by using his former drag queen persona. "One wants to move through life with elegance and grace," he contemplates while applying makeup and staring at the mirror (*MA* 31). Through his own reflection, Prior sees himself not as a citizen or a person, but rather from an objective distance, pondering the loss of earthly ideals like elegance and grace. He later reaches a boiling point with his commiseration, finally dismissing the fantasy and spewing "Fuck this shit" (*MA* 31). For Prior, a person with AIDS who must encounter his own mortality much sooner than expected, "gay camp seems little more than a kind of anesthetic, allowing one to remain inside oppressive relations while enjoying the illusory confidence that one is flouting them" (Britton 138). There is no in-between realm that he can inhabit now; he must confront his prophecy and his life with total commitment to reality rather than the fictitious world of movies and television.

Prior's disdain for the ridicule of Camp in the face of death only intensifies after leaving an excessively overblown funeral of  "one of the Great Glitter Queens" (*P* 158) with Belize. Belize, on the other hand, deems it "divine" and tells Prior that "He couldn't be buried like a

*civilian*" (*P* 158). Loaded with overtones of heavenly superiority that has no obligation for terrestrial law, Belize's comment gets to the root of the central problem of Camp: it delegates supremacy for those who are in on the joke but leaves its community vulnerable for outside oppression, "trap[ping] us if we are not careful in the endless pursuit of enjoyment at any price, in a rejection of seriousness and depth of feeling" (Dyer 116). Prior retorts right back at Belize, calling the funeral a "ludicrous spectacle" and "just a parody of the funeral of someone who *really* counted. We don't; faggots; we're just a bad dream the real world is having, and the real world's waking up. And he's *dead*" (*P* 158). For Prior, the lightswitch of fantasy can easily get turned off by somebody who just views the queer community as "spectacle" and "parody," which leaves dwelling in Camp as an insufficient response for emergencies like the AIDS crisis.

Harper is perhaps the character most trapped within an agoraphobic limbo, between the obligations imposed on her as a heterosexual housewife and the elusive pursuit of personal freedom as an self-activated woman. While Joe is away, she explores this latter realm by herself through her own Valium-induced fantasies. In literally physicalizing these realms on the stage, Harper's internal considerations of departure are reconfigured as equally separate adventures outside the space of the apartment. Her stasis indoors is only a matter of her own anxieties rather than an essential confinement within her own home; Harper goes off into her derangements only to go away (*MA* 51). This leads to tremendous paranoia, as she is connected to the external world only through the apocalyptic news she hears over the radio and what she observes outside her window, like a schizophrenic traffic cop (*MA* 26). The perilous "clash of worlds, between the everyday authority of the traffic cop and the one who lives in an altered or fragmented subworld of his own, is an apt reflection of Harper's own splintered consciousness" (Geis 201). Through

her travels to nowhere but her imagination, Harper is able to negotiate between the uncertain discord of present and the daunting allure of her future.

Stranded in between the two distinct yet overlapping dimensions of liberation and a politically binding marriage, Harper attempts to reconcile them both by inverting herself inside a self-assumed state of motherhood. As idyllic as the condition might appear, she describes her imagined daughter as an infant who will "have a pouch I can crawl into" (*MA* 108) and "who stares up at us with big mirror eyes and who does not know who we are" (*MA* 41). Not only will the baby exist within the confines of Harper's own compromised realm as simple reassurance, she also proves to be "little more than Harper and Joe's own reflections" (Geis 202). Like Prior attempting to reassume a now-obsolete imagined life within his own queer vanity, Harper fabricates her own "reflection" in the form of a daughter who only serves as a mooring for her long-lost heterosexual role of motherhood. Both find shelter in cultural familiarity but quickly discover the limits of the fantasy as dangerously fragile and totally unstable in progress. When Joe finally confirms Harper's suspicions about his homosexuality, Harper completely escapes into her own mind with her imaginary friend Mr. Lies into the frozen depths of Antarctica. "Cold shelter for the shattered," Mr. Lies assures her while she makes snow angels.

Eager to build her new life, Harper begins to imagine her new life restarting itself. "I want to make a new world here," she exclaims, "So that I never have to go home again" (*MA* 106). But by immediately switching over inside a dependably desolated Antarctica, Harper reverts to a realm of outright separation without confronting the world she leaves behind, repeating what Prior has realized with his own Camp. Harper is left starving and cold, chewing down a pine tree from Prospect Park with her teeth to build a fire. Now vulnerable to "The Law. For real" (*P* 145) when she's stopped by the police in her vagrancy, she breaks the fallacy that

living inside a detached world enables total freedom. In order to rebuild herself from devastation, Harper must acknowledge her own human heartbreak and confront her previous domain rather than withdrawing completely from it. These themes are repeated later on during the meeting of the Continental Principalities while they listen to the effects of the Chernobyl disaster: the unreliable static radio makes sure to mention that the catastrophe "is a direct consequence of the lack of safety culture caused by Cold War isolation" (*P* 272).

After her brief and unsuccessful "vacation" to Antarctica, Harper remains exactly where she was before: in between the realm of separation and her marriage with Joe. The only difference now, however, is that her physical location is not with her husband but rather apart from him. While she recovers from the fantasy of pain-free divergence, Harper imagines Joe appearing to her, just like her imaginary friends that she entertained while he left her alone:

> HARPER. Leave me alone if you're so goddamned happy.
>
> JOE. You want me here.
>
> (*She nods.*)
>
> HARPER. To see you again. Any way I can.
>
> OH GOD I WISH YOU WERE— No I don't.
>
> JOE. Please don't.
>
> HARPER. DEAD.
>
> Come back.
>
> (*P* 144)

Even through her tremendous resentment of her husband to the point where she wishes him dead, Harper still clings onto familiarity and love, uncovering the brutality of her wounded and fragmented world. She struggles to rid herself from the ghosts of her husband that haunt her and

who still holds very real dominion over her to the point where she doesn't know where home exists without him. Still recovering from the politics of power that ruled over her previous life, she simultaneously imagines his vulnerability while attempting to disconnect herself from it.

Harper's experience at the Mormon Visitors' Center is a crucial turning point for her relationship with both her husband and her politically designated role. It is now her former life that has turned into fantasy—her past rather than her future—and Harper watches it with a concurrent longing and cynicism. She proceeds to see "through it as a transparent fantasy, a falsely promising vision of America as a heaven on earth" and is "transfixed by the bitterly ironic analogy between her sham marriage and its illusory Mormon model" (Miller 69-70). Accepting the artifice of her marriage as an unachievable utopia allows her to both acquiesce to the synthetic reality of traversing in between realms and find a sense of self along the way. Confiding with the Mormon Mother that her "heart's an anchor," the Mother advises her to "Leave it then. Can't carry no extra weight" (*P* 199). Activation prioritizes itself over the perceived status quo or restrictive attachments. Her advice also speaks to historical Mormon identity in relation to the similarly confused political landscape of 19th century, where the "American mainstream . . . never meant anything except what competing parties chose to make of it. It was not anything fixed. It was an area of conflict. In defining themselves as being apart from the mainstream, Mormons were in fact laying their claim to it" (Moore 46).

While Harper is consistently in-between, Joe traverses between disparate realms in order to keep his own clashing identities completely separate from one another. He tells his wife that he been "Just out. Thinking" (*MA* 36), imitating Harper's adventures through her imagination while still remaining locked inside his mind. Unbeknownst to Harper, Joe furtively goes "cruising" in the Ramble of Central Park, a distinctively homosexual space that served as a

collective and subversive area to find sexual partners. Practices at the Ramble are purposefully kept clandestine and separate despite the park's literal centrality, and is frequently used as an "underworld" for the characters, far away from their normal lives. For example, when the Man in the Park tells Louis that he wants to go to his apartment, Louis refuses his request even though Prior is in the hospital. Louis later admonishes Joe for entering the Ramble with his ___ , telling him that "Married gentlemen before cruising the Ramble should first remove their bands of gold" (*MA* 140). Bound by his heterosexual domestic sphere just like his wife, Joe also inhabits both of these spaces that are (literally) night-and-day.

Naturally, Roy never mentions the Ramble nor does he occupy any queer space at all. However, he actually seems to cross between realms in total ease and expertise. While acquiring tickets for the wife of a judge, he counsels her that she "wouldn't like *La Cage*, trust me, I know," before turning to Joe and calling it "Fabulous. Best thing on Broadway. Maybe ever" (*MA* 12). *La Cage Aux Folles* is an unequivocally queer musical about a drag queen, signaling that while Roy is avoidant of this subculture, he isn't reluctant of appropriating and commending its material. When his secretary acquires the tickets he asks her: "So, baby doll, what? *Cats*? Ugh," before telling the judge's wife "*Cats*! It's about cats. Singing cats, you'll love it. Eight o'clock, the theater's always at eight. (*Button.*) Fucking tourists" (*MA* 13). Roy establishes his territory the perpetual insider, scorning incompetent tourists and willing to traverse through subjective political boundaries without permanently situating himself inside one or the other. He also does not guard himself from sharing his affinity of *La Cage* with Joe, cementing his self-assurance within his own identity. It is in fact Louis who is not "out" to his Jewish family and who is almost late for his grandmother's burial (*MA* 19), marking him "outside Jewish

communal life, whereas Roy is completely acommunal. Thus, the narrative function of Roy Cohn . . . is to create an alter ego for Louis" (Felman 193).

Inhabiting every space and no space at all finally reveals its consequences for Roy Cohn during his disbarment hearings. When he divulges the true reason for sending Joe to Washington, he explains to his protege that he's "about to be tried, Joe, by a jury that is not a jury of my peers. the disbarment committee: genteel gentleman Brahmin lawyers, country club men" (*MA* 69). Roy's fervent fidelity to a political center without any attachment to any group ineluctably yields fruitless results in decisive moments like these. A community built on "loyalty" only allows for antisemitism to lurk under tolerance, contrasting Roy's display of fortitude with "a discomfiting caricature of the American Tough Jew who has climbed the ladder but still cannot pass at the country club" (Solomon 127). Ultimately disbarred, the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg reports that "one of the main guys on the Executive leaned over to his friend and whispered "Finally. I hated that little faggot for thirty-six years" (*P* 253). Alluring as Roy's individual mobility might seem, it becomes as unstable and imaginary as Harper's Antarctica and Prior's Camp fantasy.

Paralleling the outskirt status of homosexuality, the ghost of convicted communist Ethel Rosenberg broaches another political group that was once highly persecuted and suppressed by conservative America. Roy, in characteristic bias against outsiders, tells Joe that he convinced the judge to execute her because "I fucking hate traitors. Because I fucking hate communists" (*MA* 113). The tension between realms comes back to literally haunt him: just as the "threat" of communism "creeped up" on America in the 1950s, the threat of death moves slowly yet surely against him. Entering his own indeterminate future just like Harper and Prior, Roy tells Belize that there is "nobody . . . with [him] now. But the dead" (*P* 216). Ethel's ghost also completely subverts the notion of essential political boundaries. When Roy tells her that "they won't let you

through the front door" of his disbarment hearings because she's "a convicted and executed traitor," she simply replies that she'll "walk through a wall" (*P* 188). Indeed, it is ultimately Roy himself who is exiled, "grasping for the control he perpetually sought to exercise in an effort to embody his gospel of clout, resisting to the very end any attempt to label him as a pariah, an outcast from the temple of The Law" (Tuss 54).

Louis and Joe's three-week liaison into a sort of no man's land, estranged from their partners and political realms, presents a compelling look into the ultimately irrational confines that politicized characters like Louis prescribe to. They first meet inside an unmistakably masculine realm—the men's bathroom—and when Louis makes a joke about a run in his nylons (*MA* 29), Joe doesn't understand. But when Joe tells him that he voted for Reagan, Louis designates him as a gay Republican. Joe immediately and denies it, but Louis insists that he "sounds" like one. Then, they engage in a complete blurring of the barriers that fasten their own reactive political identities:

> JOE. Do I? Sound like a . . . ?
>
> LOUIS. What? Like a . . . ? Republican, or . . . ?
>
> Do I?
>
> JOE. Do you what?
>
> LOUIS. Sound like a . . . ?
>
> JOE. Like a . . . ?
>
> I'm confused.
>
> LOUIS. Yes.
>
> (*MA* 30)

Louis and Joe achieve a total destabilization of politics defined completely by what is *not* said rather than experimenting with political integration. They escape into one another, peering through the fences that keep them steadfast inside their own self-assigned identities. Rather than trying to defend their positions or their beliefs, they fuse into one another out of curiosity.

In total contrast to their partners' evasion, Prior and Harper converge with each other intimately within their personal liminal spaces of hallucination and fantasy. They discuss makeup and the effects of their "emotional problems" (*MA* 32), noticeably feminizing their mutual spaces. Most importantly, the two abandoned figures openly admit to their political identities, remaining both open and secure of themselves alongside the company of the other person:

HARPER. I'm a Mormon.

PRIOR. I'm a homosexual.

HARPER. Oh! In my church we don't believe in homosexuals.

PRIOR. In my church we don't believe in Mormons. (*MA* 32)

In bringing their respective "churches" into dialogue, both Prior and Harper achieve a sort of cultural synthesis. Their individual desires are not the sole forces that attract them to one another nor do their politically-charged allegiances repel their differences. Instead, the continue their discourse and ultimately end up affirming truths within each other, Harper telling Prior that his innermost self exists free of disease and Prior confirming that her husband is a homosexual (*MA* 33). Despite the exchange happening in an immaterial plane, the implication that they are in each other's fantasies suggests that they are kindred spirits, extensions of themselves despite all their otherwise-perceived differences. This is perhaps the first display of truly democratic communication, fortifying a solidarity and rapport that grows out of mutual understanding.

At the core of Louis and Joe's relationship is the very human yearning for freedom. More than anything else, Joe is entranced by Louis's apparent commitment to staying true to his own inclinations with no regard for what anybody else thinks. "You just . . . Whatever you feel like saying or doing, you don't care, you just . . do it" (*MA* 74), he admires. Their conversation takes place outside the Hall of Justice, and Joe describes the total relief he felt when he mistakenly came in on a Sunday and found it empty, indicating a total independence from any law that restricted him from acting in self-interest. "I think we all know what that's like. Nowadays," Louis responds. "No connections. No responsibilities. All of us . . . falling through the cracks that separate what we owe to our selves and . . . what we owe to love" (*MA* 74). His language is eerily reminiscent of his freewheeling alter ego Roy Cohn, who tells Joe that he "owes" more to himself than his obligation to love Harper, warning him than "Love, that's a trap. Responsibility, that's a trap, too" because "Whatever pulls on you, needs from you, threatens you" (*MA* 61). Love and associations are imagined as a burden, as something requiring shielding or even fear, as if the other person exists solely to help or burden personal endeavors.

Inside their retreat into an apolitical realm of self-protection away from anything threatening or oppressive, Louis begins to grow apprehensive of his relationship with Joe. Joe tells Louis that his problem is thinking that the world is "perfectible" and that he has to reconcile to its imperfections by "being thoroughly in the world but not of it" and accepting the happiness that "rightfully" comes his way (*P* 202). Unconvinced, Louis brings up how impossible this philosophy truly is when considering the presence of feelings, echoing Mr. Lies' warnings to Harper on the impermanence of social and personal withdrawal in that "its virtue is that it lacks everything, deep freeze for feelings" (*MA* 107). Idyllic as the new reality is for a newly-liberated Joe, its only appeal is that it exists outside of the America that he has come to recognize as

inhibiting and restrictive. And when Louis endangers their codependent bubble and tells Joe by longing to see Prior again, Joe reverts to the exact same rhetoric that Roy once used against him for self-interest. “Think about what you need. Be brave,” he urges Louis (*P* 206). When Louis finally leaves him stranded, all Joe can do is plead that he’ll come back to him (*P* 207).

Joe’s great tragedy is his inability to see his personal freedom coinciding with a larger system of justice and politics. “Nothing works,” he wails to his mother. “Not all my . . . oh, you know, my *effortful* clinging to the good, to what’s right, not pursuing . . . freedom, or happiness” (*P* 231). When he tells Roy that he has been seeing a man, Roy instantly expels him from the room and commands to go back to his heterosexual relationship (*P* 214). Eternally conflicted between fatherly protection of ingrained “decency” and his own homoerotic desires, Joe wanders in between realms without realizing that he can understand himself in relation to a community rather than conforming to its standards or controlling its practices. Instead, he fulfills Roy Cohn’s own prophecy that Joe will come back to him like a prodigal son (*MA* 115) and conjures his ghost only so that it can haunt him. “I want you to go, Roy, you’re really frightening me,” he begs him before turning to him in full reliance, “Tell me what to do” (*P* 269). But Roy is silent, and Joe concedes that he is “of the world” and “above nothing” (*P* 269).

Joe’s epiphany mirrors Belize’s criticism of Louis’s disaffiliation with anything that might threaten the idealization of his nation. “Up in the air, just like that angel, too far off the earth to pick out the details. Louis and his Big Ideas. Big Ideas are all you love. “America” is what Louis loves” (*P* 230). Conflating Louis’s relationship with Roy Cohn’s “buttboy” (*P* 228) and his love for the democratic principles of America, Belize exposes Louis’s essential frailty when it comes to actually fighting for the politics he professes to support. By staying above the world around him through intellectual discourse, Louis maintains both a sense of superiority and

vacillation that will never come to fruition if he does not activate his own participation. Both Louis and Joe attempt to live detached from the true condition of their nation, leading to nothing but stasis, dependency, and an ultimate failure in achieving the reality they desperately crave.

It is in fact the infirm and the pathologized, Kushner exhibits throughout, who are the true victims that are left to wither away inside their own realm of solitude just like the abandoned Continental Principalities. "The worst thing about being sick in America, Ethel, is that you are booted out of the parade," Roy Cohn contemplates. "Americans have no use for sick" (*P* 189). Sarah Ironson herself is one of these vulnerable and forgotten citizens. "She was pretty crazy," Louis tells Prior. "She was up there in that home for ten years, talking to herself. I never visited" (*MA* 19). Standing beside her grave, Louis realizes that he abandoned her (*MA* 24). In the Bronx, the same peripheral burrough that Sarah Ironson died, Hannah meets a Homeless Woman also abandoned by Reaganomics (Geis 199) who implores an imaginary antagonist to stop slurping the soup she's drinking (*MA* 109). Following the betraying ostracization of a fraternity that has disposed of him, Roy Cohn himself dies alone berating and competing with an imagined enemy.

Possibly the most immediate and visceral indication of true connection in *Angels in America* lies in its physical touch. During a time where speculations of the transmission of AIDS did not discriminate against the possibility of contact, the "skin becomes a complex site—protective, yes, but also the place at which the self is endangered and at which one self may threaten another" (Kruger 159). As Prior lies on the ground and defecates blood, he warns Louis that "Maybe you shouldn't touch it . . . me . . ." (*MA* 50), intertwining his disease and himself as sinister hazards. "I think if you touch me your hand might fall off or something," Louis warns Joe during their midnight encounter in the Ramble. "Worse things have happened to people who have touched me" (*MA* 122). But Belize demonstrates the unapologetic necessity to

come in contact with those who are hurting. One of his first actions on stage is rubbing a instantly exoticized "voodoo cream" on Prior's back that is "full of good vibes and love from some little black Cubana witch in Miami" (*MA* 62). Later, in true Camp fashion, they reenact a scene from *E.T.* where the alien heals the little boy's wound by touching him and saying "ouch." "Ouch indeed," Belize says (*MA* 65), both affirming and alleviating Prior's pain by sharing in it.

The notion that these characters are divided by veritable boundaries that relieve them from one other's influence is completely dismissed throughout the course of *Angels in America*. A nation that is constructed of the people, by the people, and for the people should encompass every civilian that lives on its terrain. Instead of naively assuming self-serving and secluded refuge, Kushner illustrates the importance of solidarity in the face of injustice. Democracy itself "has been a fantasy from the start and has been maintained . . . because it is yet another expression of the belief in a metaphysics of unity, the representation of the one (or at least the very few) and the many" (Scapp 96). While struggle might be inevitable, *Angels* argues, it is indispensable for a genuine portrayal of the multifaceted population that comprises the country.

# Chapter 3

*An angel is a belief. With wings and arms that can carry you. If it lets you down, reject it.*

– Hannah Pitt, *Perestroika*

While the ideal of a nation completely devoid of politics and power inequity is at the core of the democratic principles of America, Kushner recognizes the obvious deficiency of this proposition: human beings are naturally divided and our ideals often contradict. Instead of providing a solution for this divisiveness (the characters at the end of the play are left debating the Israel-Palestine conflict), Kushner actually reorients the emphasis towards individual desire and migration rather than focusing on the collective. It is in fact the Continental Principalities themselves who lack the faculty of imagination, leaving them pointlessly searching for an all-encompassing solution that will impede the cataclysmic effects of humanity. But imagination (and therefore desire) is the very quality that the Aleph instilled in humanity in deliberate contrast to the eternally adoring angels. Through this logic, Kushner stimulates the human instinct to move and progress in lieu of offering a solution that would inevitably elicit counterarguments and loopholes. Hypothetical theories in practice, after all, are only as strong as willpower; they cannot help but invite reflexive transgressions; they always propose another side. Even as the Angel foreshadows the prophecy that she will grant Prior, she refers to it as the "rule, sword, and broom of Truth!" (*MA* 66), implying slaughter and a mess to be swept away.

But as the previous two chapters have demonstrated, the will to serve the self's own desires does not function within the democratic justice that Kushner advocates for. Therefore, in order to construct a nondiscriminatory community, the characters must understand the "Other" as

being separate from themselves yet totally equal in their citizenship. In the words of Kushner, "I demand to be accorded my rights by others; and so I must be prepared to accord to others their rights" (Kushner 7). To confront and synthesize with the "Other" and the unknown, the characters must dismiss notions of essential truths and exist comfortably with difference around them. If they remain fixated on their own ideologies, these characters stick themselves inside their own mind, always creating or dismissing Otherness only to define themselves against it. This trend of isolated conflict that prevents human connection is consistently presented as insanity throughout the play: the Homeless Woman chides the air around her instead of communicating with Hannah, Harper sits in her apartment all day talking to herself, and Belize warns Prior against "going crazy" on him regarding the angelic voice he hears (*MA* 65). Rather than trying to search for "truths" and remain as static our heavenly counterparts, Kushner posits, we as a nation should attempt to find beliefs that are both rooted in the instinct and the collective.

As the three openly gay characters in the play—suggesting a certain comfort level with their "Otherness"— Louis, Prior, and Belize form an interesting triangle in relation to their natural reactions to surroundings. Prior reveals his AIDS diagnosis to Louis by telling him that their cat Little Sheba ran away because "Cats have instincts" and that "Cats know when something's wrong" (*MA* 20). Little Sheba's bolt foreshadows Prior's own initial evasion of his prophecy, characterizing him as instinctual rather than rational. Louis, for his part, prefers dogs because of their brains (*MA* 20), but his instinct is not nearly as strong as Prior's. Constantly abstracted, Prior teases Louis for trying to act "butch" in front of a family member who, to Louis's shock, clearly is a lesbian (*MA* 19). "You don't notice anything," Prior says. "If I hadn't spent the last four years fellating you I'd swear you were straight" (*MA* 19). Located as the ultimate "Other" as a Black drag queen, Belize steadily remains neutral with his surroundings,

both great equanimity and disdain for the world around him. Little is actually revealed about his life; his role in the play seems to be as a moral center for the white and Jewish characters around him, for it "follows in the unconscious logic of the play that if he is a person of color, he is therefore quite naturally more pragmatic, more realistic, more earthy, less given to intellectual rationalization and moral uncertainty" (Wallace 436).

If Prior is representative of queer intuition, Louis of intellectual rationale, and Belize of racialized pragmatism, then Joe begins the play as a staunch devotee of conservative divinity. His Right-wing views never allude to anything more than an adherence to the hopeful yet illusory narrative of the Reagan administration. Clinging onto its fictive promise of American idealism, Joe seems to believe that in subsuming himself to the amalgamation of the political movement he will transform alongside it and attain a spiritual unity with his optimistic projections:

> JOE. America has rediscovered itself. Its sacred position among nations. And people aren't ashamed of that like they used to be. This is a great thing. The truth restored. Law restored. That's what President Reagan's done, Harper. He says: "Truth exists and can be spoken proudly." And the country responds to him. We become better. More good. I need to be a part of that, I need something big to lift me up. (*MA* 26)

Overflowing in this rhetoric is the sense of renewal and progress welded on symbiotic attachment to a new American prophet. For Joe, participation in Washington ensures an irrevocable restoration into transcendence, a possibility for blessing once and for all based on an unabashed display of conservative politics, whatever they might entail. Truth becomes cloaked as an engine for political gain and conformity on the basis of "goodness" rather than individual difference. Instead of activating his own critical thinking or confronting his homosexuality, Joe instead joins a political group that coxes him with personal elevation.

While her husband subscribes to these fantasies as genuine catalysts for change, Harper perceives her own interpretations of the world decay as frightening absurdities. Sitting alone and listening to the radio, Harper meditates on how "People who are lonely, people left alone, sit talking nonsense to the air, imagining . . . beautiful systems dying, old fixed orders spiraling apart" (*MA* 16). Her potentially revolutionary notions are thwarted based on her own assignations. Because of her social isolation, there is nobody around her to validate or support her rationale, leaving her stranded from the world without any possibility for mobilization. Instead, Harper has to create imaginary friends herself that "startle" her (*MA* 17) or whom she does not even recognize (*MA* 31). The effects of abandonment render her incapable to confront or change what it really is that petrifies her; solidarity is impossible because Harper's anxieties are not represented anywhere but her own mind. When she attempts to contradict Joe with facts that the world has not changed under President Reagan and that it actually seems worse than before, Joe dismisses her as "not even making sense" (*MA* 27), convincing her that it appears this way to her because she "doesn't get out in the world" (*MA* 27). Subjective fantasies, it seems, are fit only when they are reverberated by a political majority.

For his part, Joe never takes his wife seriously and frequently employs his religion to hold a uphold a sense of superiority. "The devil everywhere you turn, huh, buddy?" he mocks her as she expresses her anxiety, before asking her "How many pills today, buddy?" (*MA* 24). Harper's perspective is reduced to a pathologized irrationality, rendering her fears to reside only in her mind. Her husband's gaslighting that suggest undertones of hysteria and self-induced delirium undermine her viewpoints as fundamentally mistaken. In a heart-to-heart with Roy Cohn, Joe confesses that "What scares me is that maybe what I really love in her is the part of her that's farthest from the light, from God's love; maybe I was drawn to that in the first place"

(*MA* 55). Defining himself against others, including his own wife, Joe preserves a sense of his own "goodness" as a result of an inferiority complex due to his homophobic and harsh upbringing. "The failure to measure up hits people very hard," he tells Roy. "From such a strong desire to be good they feel very far from goodness when they fail" (*MA* 55). Encountering any sort of otherness poses a threat to Joe's need to conform to arbitrary "goodness," meaning that he cannot truly form relationships of solidarity and participate in democratic citizenship.

Through her own imaginary friends, Harper is also able to maintain a kind of neutrality and separateness that distances her subconscious from herself. In other words, she creates her own "others" as a way to negotiate her reality with Joe as a home base. "I DO NOT have emotional problems," she asserts to her husband (*MA* 27), later telling a hallucinatory Prior that she does (*MA* 32). Even her own designation of her imaginary friend as "Mr. Lies" indicates self-negation and restriction, almost a sort of purposeful disjunction from herself to sustain the "pretend-happy" marriage (*MA* 23) that she has with her closeted husband. When Prior suggests that her husband is gay (Prior is obviously a projection of that belief), Harper instinctually denies it and accuses him of not intuiting well at all before acknowledging that his conclusion is probably true (*MA* 34). In this hallucination, Harper bemoans the depressing "limitations of the imagination," realizing that "when we think we've escaped the unbearable ordinariness and, well, untruthfulness of our lives, it's really only the same old ordinariness and falseness rearranged into the appearance of novelty and truth" (*MA* 29). But for Harper, weary of leaving her husband and actually acting on her impulse, this is a depressing and hopeless fact. "The world. Finite," she laments. "Terribly, terribly . . ." (*MA* 33).

Harper's own fractured comprehension of the truth stems in part because she is unable to recognize her own husband. "Even the weight of you in the bed at night, the way you breathe in

your sleep seems unfamiliar," she pleads with him, but when he says he knows who *she* is, Harper astutely responds "I'm the enemy. That's easy. That doesn't change" (*MA* 37). Joe's fluctuating identity is kept moored by his sense of Harper's Otherness, paralleling Roy's own interactions with Belize at his deathbed, identifying him as "The Negro night nurse, my negation. You've come to escort me to the underworld" (*P* 221). When Joe returns to Brooklyn, Harper unveils her naked body and asks him:

> HARPER. What do you see?
>
> JOE. *Nothing*, I—
>
> (*Little pause*)
>
> I see nothing.
>
> HARPER. (*A nod, then*): Finally. The truth.
>
> JOE. I'm going. Out. Just . . . Out.
>
> (*He exits.*)
>
> HARPER. It sets you free.
>
> Good-bye.
>
> (*P* 244)

In order to progress, Harper exposes her entire corporeality to her husband in order to conclusively sunder any semblance of affiliation. She painfully understands that the truth is not only separate from her husband, but far away from him. Later, talking to her now-very real friend Prior, she reveals that she "found the secret to all that Mormon energy. Devastation." and that she feels horrible but also more alive (*P* 263). Participating in a destructive relationship where she was unceasingly disposed of as "the enemy," Harper achieves her own blessing in dissolution.

Roy's own self-determination to always hold power over others means that his identity is entirely defined by how others understand him. "Because *what* I am is defined entire by *who* I am," he tells his doctor (*MA* 46). Changing his diagnosis from AIDS to liver cancer, Roy is a shapeshifting Iago-like figure who is able to mold himself into anything he wants to become for the purposes of clout. As a expert yet morally corrupt lawyer, he is able to manipulate verities to fit his own narratives just so he can triumph. Initially, he isn't worried about his disbarment because the client whom he stole money from "has no paperwork. Can't prove a fucking thing" (*MA* 46), and much later says that he's got "no records for their shitty little committee" because they were "LOST. In a fire, water damage" (*P* 184). He haughtily destabilizes any notion of collectively-understood truth to those around him, always bouncing towards to the angle that is most convenient for him, which "disables law from continuing to carry out its principal function—i.e., to govern people, to define their rights and obligations, to advise them how to behave" (Quinn 83). Without any inclination to appease anybody but himself, Roy darts around others, trailing the destruction behind him without worrying for a second about its aftermath.

Nonsensical as Roy's disorderly practice of the law appears, his ability to live inside his own version of truth proves almost entirely effective. But Prior can also play at this game: he finds Joe working in the Hall of Justice and raves at him before calling himself a "mental patient," weaponizing the pathology that has been assigned to his self-interest but not to Roy's. By occupying this realm of simultaneous insanity and justice, Prior blurs the lines between effective political strategy and complete otherworldliness, demonstrating that there should be no shame in appearing "crazy" in political struggle for the human recognition. "I never imagined losing my mind was going to be such hard work," Prior tells Harper. "Oh, it is," she confirms (*P* 196). Harper also uses her assigned role as a "mentally deranged sex-starved pill-popping

housewife" to her advantage, burning Joe's dinner and threatening to asphyxiate the building if Joe walks away from her inquiries of where he had been. Insanity is only as detrimental insofar as it remains isolated within the mind; when these "outcasts" actually confront their muddled realities and force those around them to address their concerns, they prove to hold tremendous power. "Then I'm crazy," he tells Belize, who attempts to tell him that the Angel is himself. "The whole world is, why not me?" (*P* 175).

Hannah Pitt—appropriately designated as the Angel of Asiatica in Prior's vision of heaven, linking her with the former Soviet Union—is the character most in perpetual motion, delving without fear into the unknown. Selling her house in Salt Lake City as a widow, she establishes herself as a liberated woman far away from any figure that may threaten her movement, even her best friend Sister Ella Chapter. "Stay put," the real estate agent—played by the same actor as the Angel of America—begs Hannah before she finally leaves for New York. "Every step a Believer takes away from here is a step fraught with peril" (*MA* 86). When she arrives and settles herself in her son's apartment while he stays with Louis, she starts volunteering at the Mormon Visitor's Center because she "can't sit around, idle" (*P* 180). True to her Mormon ancestry, Hannah is a character who knows her "duty" when she sees it (*P* 197), compelled by a force that not even she can pinpoint. "I flew into a rage, filled with rage, then the rage . . . lifted me up; I felt . . . truly I felt lifted up, into the air, and . . . And I flew" (*P* 240). Hannah's flight is based on pure guttural feeling rather than any precept or idea at all. She exhibits total agency and a determination to answer of the call of her instinct and actually work towards change, progress, and amelioration.

For Hannah, the realm of the mind appropriately exists for one's own enterprise but should prove no hindrance in forming democratic relationships. Refusing to pathologize her own

stranded daughter-in-law, she talks to a police officer over the telephone, commanding him "*No*! No hospital! She's not insane, she's just . . . bewildered, she— I don't see how it's any business of yours what she is" (*P* 146). Hannah's protection of Harper to remain outside the confines of a hospital indicate a commitment to the freedom of thought that should not be repressed. Even talking to a seemingly deranged homeless woman—again, played by the Angel—seems to be no excuse for the possibility of exchange:

> HANNAH. So I am sorry you're psychotic but just make the effort. (*Another step closer*) Take a deep breath. DO IT!
>
> (*Hannah and the Homeless Woman breathe together*)
>
> HANNAH. That's good. Now exhale.
>
> (*They do*)
>
> HANNAH. Good. Now tell me how to get to Brooklyn.
>
> (*MA* 110)

By breathing together, both Hannah and the Homeless Woman "make the effort" to ritualize a feeling of life within themselves, grounding them towards each other. This scene also presages Hannah's own involvement in Harper's isolated reality as an authority figure who will interrupt her delusions only to build her back up and guard her as she recovers from her own past.

As rife as his play is with sadomasochistic implications of submission and dominance, Kushner is sure to place a scene that displays an alternative representation of homoeroticism that also suggests shared breath and life. When Joe first arrives at Louis's apartment, hesitant to take action and ready to leave, Louis guides him through his first experience with another man. Louis smells Joe's "butch" cologne (*P* 140) and explains to Joe that "Smell is . . . an incredibly

complex and underappreciated physical phenomenon. Inextricably bound up with sex" (*P* 140). Then, they become more intimate:

> LOUIS. It's made of the molecules of what you're smelling. Some part of you, where you meet the air, is airborne.
>
> (*Louis steps carefully closer to Joe, who still seems ready, though not as ready, to bolt.*)
>
> LOUIS. Little molecules of Joe . . . (*Leaning in, inhaling deeply*) Up my nose.
>
> (*P* 141)

By presenting sexuality within the realm of desire and literal interconnection rather than disinterested lust, Kushner underscores the argument of the need for sex, that compulsory abstinence in the face of the AIDS denies this need. Louis is not taking control of Joe but rather equalizing their relationship, incorporating "little molecules" of him into his own body. There is no "other" in this scenario; both parties encounter each other at an even playing field.

Hannah's ultimate gift to the play is her reimagining of faith as belief rather than law. While Belize remains unconvinced about the authenticity of the Angel and Louis lingers absent and abstracted in political theory, Hannah provides Prior with the necessary tools to reckon with his vision as a source of urgent comprehension of the world around him:

> HANNAH. I *believe* this. He had a great need of understanding. Our Prophet. His desire made prayer. His prayer made an angel. The angel was real. I believe that.
>
> PRIOR. I don't. And I'm sorry but it's repellent ot me. So much of what you believe.
>
> HANNAH. What do I believe?
>
> PRIOR. I'm a homosexual. With AIDS. I can just imagine what you—
>
> HANNAH. No you can't. Imagine. The things in my head. You don't make assumptions about me, mister; I won't make them about you. (*P* 240)

Hannah's lesson is an important one: in order to not judge his own visions or fear them, he must let go of prejudices of other people's beliefs. Faith exists solely within the self. With Prior's vision for the marginalized angels in America, Kushner also borrows Joseph Smith's own ability to synthesize difference into one blended religion: "Within the turbulence of the age and the frictions of ideologies, young Joseph accomplished more than mere survival: he confronted the times with a new formulation of belief, a syncretic cosmology pieced together from a constellation of destabilized fragments of multiple traditions" (Davis 13).

Perhaps the most elusive synthesis that occurs throughout the play is with the undiscovered country of death. Illness is the hallmark clash between the two mortal realms, a dialectic that proves to be far too excruciating for cerebral Louis, who has a self-proclaimed "neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant historical progress towards happiness or perfection or something" but "can't, um, incorporate sickness into his sense of how things are supposed to go" and "isn't so good with death" (*MA* 25). But by understanding history as the abstracted analytical sphere that memorializes the struggles of those who cannot desire any longer, Kushner posits the dead as the new source for protection. While Prior caustically lets Harper know that you learn that "It's All Been Done Before" after your second theme party (*MA* 33), he is later visited by his ancestors that have suffered pestilence "much worse than now" (*MA* 90). The dead themselves, it appear to require solidarity with the living as well: Ethel's haunting of Roy was a challenge to see if she could forgive him, but insead "all I can do is take pleasure in your misery" (*P* 253). After his death, however, she remains stuck until she prays the Kaddish with Louis, who has never seen a dead body before Roy's (*P* 266), and they obtain final cohesion with each other.

While he is in Heaven, Prior rejects not only the Anti-Migratory Epistle, but also the chance of death itself over the struggle of illness: "I'm leaving Heaven to you now," he tells the

Principalities. "I'll take my illness with me, and. And I'll take my death with me, too. The earth's my home, and I want to go home" (*P* 279). Back on the ground, the newly-formed community debates the subtleties of political theory in contrast with praxis:

> BELIZE. The world is faster than the mind.
>
> LOUIS. That's what politics is. The world moving ahead. And only in politics does the miraculous occur.
>
> BELIZE. But that's a theory.
>
> HANNAH. You can't live in the world without an idea of the world. But it's the living that makes the idea. You can't wait for a theory, but you have to make the theory.
>
> LOUIS. Go know. As my grandma would say.
>
> (*P* 288-89)

Finally Louis understands the true nature of Sarah Ironson's immigration to the New World: it is one lacking a map and yet desiring to live anyway, instilling theories based on life rather than convenience or intellectualization. As for Prior, he "moves ahead, not in spite of AIDS but, rather, because of AIDS: the "virus of time" has jolted him out of torpor and self-pity and eventually transforms him into the play's strongest character" (Frantzen 146). He is the model of the American who in the face of death and stasis wrestles for protection of freedom he is guaranteed by his citizenship. Knocking down the walls of Zion is the first step.

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