

SHIFTING CONTEXTS: RECONSIDERING
ANGELS IN AMERICA AS QUEER THEORY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department
of the School of Theatre and Dance
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By

Rachel Aker

May, 2015

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ABSTRACT

No theatrical work emerged from the AIDS crisis of the 1980s with as much national and global influence as Tony Kushner's two-part *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes—Millennium Approaches* (1991) and *Perestroika* (1992). Prior Walter, a gay man living with AIDS, concludes the cycle with a charge to the audience: "The Great Work Begins." *Angels in America* presents itself as a part of that Great Work, placing the various experiences of its characters at the center of a growing conversation on sexual identity. The period of the play's first workshops to its successful premiers around the world parallel the window of time during which queer theory became a coherent academic discipline. Kushner's play has been critically dissected from a broad range of perspectives, including a queer lens; however, *Angels in America* has yet to be recognized as a work of queer theory itself. This thesis examines *Angels in America* as a work that emerges alongside landmark texts of queer theory as a praxis that embodies its own theories about identity formation under discursive institutional power. The dramatic dialogue of the play allows for the multivocality of Kushner's characters to shape a neo-Platonic dialectic on queer ideology and the construction of the sexual self. The characters' manifold assertions embrace the ambiguity and discord that have marked queer theory and sexuality studies, as well as foreshadowing further developments within the American LGBT civil rights and queer visibility movements.

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CONTENTS

Chapter 1	<i>A Gay Fantasia on National Themes</i>—Historical Construction	9
Chapter 2	“How are we to proceed without a theory?”: Queer Theory and its Sociological Tensions	21
Chapter 3	“The Slow Dissolving of the Great Design”—<i>Angels in America</i> as Queer Theory	38
	Conclusion	51
	Works Cited	53
	Bibliography	57
	Notes	61

Introduction

“I don't think that my job is to represent people, or to assist in a political struggle. I feel like it's my job as a citizen to do that, but as an artist, my job is more I think to try and describe the world as truthfully as I'm able to do it, and to get below the surface of things, to get at truths that aren't as readily apparent, and that's really, I think all I intended to do.” –Tony Kushner¹

In 1992, an epic two part play, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, by a then relatively unknown playwright, Tony Kushner, premiered at the Mark Taper Forum Theatre in Los Angeles. The following year, the play's first part, *Millennium Approaches* opened on Broadway at the Walter Kerr Theatre on 4 May 1993, and its second part, *Perestroika*, opened later the same year on 23 November.² The play has received numerous awards and accolades in the time since: it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1993, in April before its Broadway debut; *Millennium Approaches* received the Tony award for Best New Play in 1993 and *Perestroika* won the American Theatre Wing's award the following year (as its November premiere placed it in the following theatre season); and Harold Bloom included the play in his 1994 *The Western Canon*, an act that recognized the play for its contemporary significance and for the impact it would continue to make on the American theatre tradition.

Kushner, in his mid-thirties at the time, had seen only minor success prior to *Angels*' emergence on the national theatre scene, most notably his short play *A Bright Room Called Day* that Oskar Eustis, the then dramaturg and literary manager for the Eureka Theatre Company in San Francisco, saw in a small playhouse in New York City, helping forge the relationship that eventually resulted in the commissioning of *Angels in America*. Funded in part by Eureka, The Mark Taper Forum, and through a grant from the National

Endowment for the Arts, Kushner has acknowledged that the play required collaboration and input from various other people, including his longtime best friend Kimberly T. Flynn, whose conversations about feminism, philosophy, and history guided him through trouble spots in the writing of his play.³

In the epilogue of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: Perestroika*, Prior, a gay WASP who has now been living with AIDS for five years, blesses the audience with "More Life," and concludes the play with the open-ended charge: "The Great Work Begins."⁴ The statement might be read by some as an augury from the reluctant prophet who refused his appointment but maintains connections to the divine—or perhaps as a benediction, urging the audience to move forward in the name of progress. The play ends with a crackling excitement and hope for new possibilities that may emerge, but the end goal of such Great Work is not defined. Instead, the audience is left with a sense of ambiguity about where More Life will lead, leaving its meaning open for interpretation.

Over time, *Angels* has been approached through many theoretical lenses in an attempt to discover the truths of the play as a great work, but it has not yet been explored as a work of theory itself. For more than two decades, *Angels in America* has been performed globally and incited analysis about the state of everything from gay life and identity to American politics, from history to religious beliefs. Kushner centers his story on characters who represent various marginalized subjects engaged in the exchange of ideas about sex, power, identity, and politics, amid the backdrop of America in 1985—a time marked by the AIDS crisis within a national political landscape dominated by Republicans and an increasingly conservative religious right under President Ronald Reagan. This thesis will examine Kushner's cycle as a work that emerges alongside

landmark texts of queer theory and sexuality studies as a praxis that embodies its own theories about identity formation under discursive institutional power. Kushner's dramatic dialogue allows for the multivocality of his characters to shape a neo-Platonic dialectic on queer ideology and the construction of the sexual self, as these individuals interact within the structures of their communities and the larger society. Moving towards an uncertain end of the millennium, Kushner's characters represent individuals whose concern grew regarding the unknown that would greet them, viewing themselves as members of a fractured nation that seemed to be buckling under the pressures of Cold War, the AIDS crisis, splintered political factions, and the fear that progress might manifest in a way previously unimagined.

Angels in America has inspired scholars to examine the (hetero) normative construction of identity and community from various vantages of political, religious, social, and philosophical theory. Susan Sontag, in an interview with the playwright, spoke of the power of the play and art itself to subvert normative structures and assumptions, telling him, "These images and stories influence us; they create legitimacy and credibility. They make things which used to be central marginal, difficult to defend."⁵ The cast of characters in *Angels in America*, comprised of gay men—Prior Walter, his Jewish lover Louis Ironson, the fiendish "pink-listed"⁶ Roy Cohn, the closeted Mormon Joe Pitt, and the African American drag-queen-turned-nurse Belize—as well as the plays' women—Joe's wife Harper, his mother Hannah Pitt, and the hermaphroditically-equipped Angel⁷—help reveal Kushner's ideas about how modern life became what it was in 1985 amid the AIDS crisis. These characters, who embody and represent differing views and opinions, serve as a group that teases out a dialectical approach to the larger questions the cycle produces.

One such question arises about the struggle for change or for stasis, a topic that is revisited throughout the play and which will be discussed in further detail throughout the chapters of this thesis. The dialectical structure, as modeled in the Platonic dialogues, allows the audience to draw its own conclusions from the information presented by the different characters.

Through the interesting combination of characters, who possess differing religious, class, and even sexual desires (and how they manifest), Kushner explores how a disparate group of individuals tackle the larger question of stasis and change, as well as the particularities of modern American citizenship as gay men and marginalized identities through his concept of the Great Work. This idea of the Great Work leads to more questions, themselves indebted to the projects of activists and scholars, especially queer and feminist individuals in the 1980s and early 1990s. What is this Great Work? Is it the direction of LGBTQ equality and rights activism that gained greater attention toward the end of the twentieth century? Is it the strengthening of the queer identity movement? As a concept that is introduced in the final blessing or charge of the play, seeming to predict that it is not temporally and spatially isolated to 1990 in New York City, could it be read as a prediction for the future that encompasses all of the directions that LGBTQ movements have made over the past twenty years?

These are just a few of the questions that prompted my exploration of *Angels in America* as queer theory. These questions, coupled with a methodological lens that is decidedly informed by queer theory and feminist theory, led to this project of recovering *Angels in America* as an important work of theoretical praxis. In a traditional understanding of the word, “praxis” calls to mind an action or practice of a skill, art, or theory. A word

often associated with “theory,” the two words are often used together in opposition of each other—the former being more practical and grounded, while the latter is read as an abstraction or idea. In fact, Merriam-Webster defines praxis as the “practical application of a theory.” However feminist scholars have expanded this concept, finding theory within praxis, through a broader understanding of what T.V. Reed calls the “poetical is political.” Reed further elaborates this idea explaining, “For some people who might be recruited to a movement and for some people already in it, poems (and other forms of art) are more effective in conveying movement ideology than are manifestos and other directly political forms.”⁸ For feminist activists, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, the ground was set to begin reading poetry, art, music, and theatre for the theoretical and ideological messages embedded within the texts and images of the works. Specifically in these movements, “poetry as theory and consciousness-raising did much to challenge the limits of theory emerging from the often fairly segregated movement groups.”⁹ As a scholar who spends much of my time reading other people’s theories onto texts, I have only recently begun to realize, through my exposure to feminist and queer scholars (and more particularly, feminist and queer scholars of color), that texts and narratives hold theories within their own pages.

Some examples of texts containing new theories can be seen in Maria Coteri’s *Native Voices*, in which she locates the works of Ella Deloria, Jovita Gonzalez, and Zora Neale Hurston in a growing conversation about the expansion of ethnographic readings of autobiography and hybridized fiction/non-fiction as source materials; in June Jordan’s “Report from the Bahamas,” a personal essay that reveals insight into the effects of intersectionality on an individual through Jordan’s perception of her own experience in

relation to others; and in Reed's example of Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua's *The Bridge Called My Back* which collects various personal essays, poems, and other writings that articulate theories about the experience of being women of color. These are only three examples of a larger body of feminist texts that can be, and have been, read for theory— theory that finds more nuanced expression when read in the context of a narrative or non-traditional form. This theory becomes clearer with an understanding of what Michelle V. Rowley calls the “politics and conditions of emergence”¹⁰ in her discussion of expanding the literary canon. She describes this approach as “a praxis that foregrounds differently named theoretical trajectories, attends to the locally specific ways in which feminists have responded and contributed to a wider body of feminist knowledge through the naming of their locally specific realities...”¹¹ By challenging the notion that a single historical trajectory or mode of communication defines theory, such practical explorations can identify theory that is more inclusive of different perspectives, groups, and identities. As Reed has shown in “The Poetical is Political,” poetry and other works of literature have served as a vehicle for distributing theory to groups and individuals engaged in activist work, and this idea of poetry can be expanded to include art, plays, novels, and other narrative texts as a site for theoretical emergence. The possibilities for engaging in such practice are rich for exploration in other works, especially those by feminist and/or queer writers and artists, and *Angels in America* serves as one such work to be explored in such a matter.

I am also guided by a desire to explore further the effect of Kushner's work on audiences. This thesis emerged out of a larger interest that I hope to pursue as my academic career continues: uncovering queer identities on stage in the American south and

southwest. *Angels in America* was performed in major cities across the United States, and especially in theatres like Atlanta's Alliance Theatre, the Dallas Theatre Center, and Houston's Alley Theatre. The play managed to reach broader audiences in these conservative regions than did other AIDS plays that came before it (*As Is*, *The Normal Heart*, etc.), and this thesis is just the beginning of an attempt to determine why Kushner's work was able to play in these houses. As I will discuss, *Angels in America*'s characters ask questions of each other in the hope of clarifying and teasing out their own positions that result from differing identities and experiences, but the play also raises these questions and others for the audience. As Elin Diamond has discussed about the experience of identification by an audience and the subsequent disidentification that may result, there is a type of doubleness experienced by the audience who identifies with characters of fiction. Diamond describes the "terroristic thrill" of standing in for the other, while concurrently "feel[ing] traversed."¹² The possibility that the audience might identify with any of Kushner's characters opens the individual viewers up to the potential of being "radically destabilized," as Diamond would call it.¹³ Such identification and disidentification, the violence of relating, may be part of the political impact of any given narrative, but also of *Angels in America*.

Kushner's Great Work is read in this thesis as a call for change, shaped by history, theory, and activism, as outlined in its three chapters. In Chapter 1, I explore the construction of LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual) communities in the United States, from the shift of homosexuality as an act to an identity, from pathologization and the closet to the homophile movement and gay liberation, across more than a century of American life. Grounding the project in an

historical lens that traces the construction of how gay men, in particular, were seen in relation to the greater public and political institutions, informs the emergence of queer theory and sociology's treatment of how gender and sexuality inform power relations that I outline in Chapter 2. Queer theory's definitional indeterminacy is both strengthened and contested by an active interrogation through a sociological lens, and I believe that the tensions created in such a reading will enhance the reading of *Angels in America* as queer theory, as a dialectical praxis, in Chapter 3.

A Gay Fantasia on National Themes— Historical Construction

Political problems are complex and can be understood only through research. History must be explored, particularly the history of the great periods of transition.... Revolutions are undertheorized and approached with insufficient appreciation of the complexity and the impenetrability of great uprisings, such as the French, the Russian, and the Los Angeles. Americans suffer from collective amnesia; our own past is lost to us. Theater has always had a vital relationship to history; the examination and, yes, the teaching of history has got to be accounted a function of any political theater.—Tony Kushner¹⁴

In the fictionalized account of a very real New York City, *Angels in America* explores the early days of the AIDS crisis through the perspectives of homosexual and Mormon characters. The character of Roy Cohn, who Kushner is careful to point out is a real man who did in fact die of AIDS but with whom liberties of creative license have been utilized in his portrayal, makes a statement that remains with many who have read or seen the play:

Homosexual. Gay. Lesbian. You think these are names that tell you who someone sleeps with, but they don't tell you that. No. Like all labels they tell you one thing and one thing only: where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order? Not ideology, or sexual taste, but something much simpler: clout. Not who I fuck or who fucks me, but who will pick up the phone when I call, who owes me favors. This is what a label refers to. [...] Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me, Henry? ...No. I have clout. [...] This is reality. [...] Because *what* I am is defined entirely by *who* I am. Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys.¹⁵

Placing this statement, and *Angels in America* itself into a greater understanding of American LGBT history gives insight into the perspectives of the characters and their differing reactions throughout the play. Louis, an openly gay Jewish court typist who is accused of butching up around family, obsesses over the state of American politics, and

how he sees them affecting his life. After leaving his longtime lover, Prior, an HIV-positive WASP and former drag queen with ties to the earliest American colonists, Louis develops a new relationship with Joe Pitt, the closeted homosexual Mormon trapped in an unhappy marriage who works as a Republican court clerk. Belize, an African-American nurse and the friend (and former lover) of Prior, serves as a nurse for Roy Cohn. These characters serve as just a few examples of gay American men in New York City in 1985-1986, at the very height of the AIDS crisis.

Kushner's characters and fiction are grounded in history, and he situates his narrative into a time and place influenced by everything that had come before it. The reactions of the characters are influenced by the LGBTQ history of America. This history has been the work of decades of recovery by historians, who, in asking questions about the extraordinary moments and day to day lives of gay men, lesbians, and others who fall under the umbrella term LGBTQIA+, have begun to share how America's relationship with the sexually marginalized have shaped the political landscape of the United States, especially in the 1980s and beyond. This history has real implications for the emergence of queer theory, liberation theory, sexuality studies, and how HIV/AIDS was handled in the early years of the epidemic.

Gregory W. Bredbeck, in his "Free[ing] the Erotic Angels": Performing Liberation in the 1970s and 1990s," explores the strains of a very specific movement within American LGBT history, gay liberation, explaining, "Of all the many things that Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* is, one that has not been much commented on is its function as a profound rumination on the historicity of gay liberation theory."¹⁶ Liberation theory, as Bredbeck explains it, precedes queer theory by a full decade, and rises out of the multiple

identity liberation movements of the 1970s before slowly, almost imperceptibly, merging into a more contemporary understanding of gay and lesbian civil rights. This reading of the play is helpful in explaining one facet of the truths that Kushner works to express through his characters, especially Prior, in his many ruminations about the state of Right versus Left politics throughout the play, although the argument limits itself in its reading of the hermaphroditically-equipped angel as a symbol of the Liberation from gender and sexuality. I argue that Kushner's angel, as well as his characters who are often played by different gendered actors, force the audience to question the construction of performativity in everyday lives. But Bredbeck raises an important issue in our understanding of the play in his historiographic treatment of America at the time. What follows is an attempt to better frame the history of *Angels in America*, beyond its theoretical implications, setting the ground for a more holistic reading of the play's particular truths that emerge within a very real United States.

Angels in History

Angels in America introduces an early American perspective of same-sex sexuality through Prior's British ancestors from previous centuries who appear in Prior's fever-induced hallucinations. Prior's relative tells the other, "Now I see why he's got no children. He's a sodomite,"¹⁷ when Louis appears in order to dance with Prior in the dream. In "The Cry of Sodom," Richard Godbeer utilizes court reports to recover the public perceptions of sodomy in British Colonial New England. Rooted in Biblical verses, sodomy was a capital crime requiring two witnesses to convict a defendant as guilty, and, as in the case of the man Nicholas Sension, some could only be found guilty of attempted sodomy. Godbeer

investigates how the laws against sodomy helped shape meaning for individuals, not as an act, but as a function of differing social, economic, political and religious ideologies.¹⁸

Complicating Godbeer's study of same-sex sex in rural New England, Clare A. Lyons presents Philadelphia, a metropolitan seaport city with access to international trade of homoerotic literature and public places for men interested in engaging in same-sex sex acts, as an early example of the trends of homosexual population growth in urban port cities in the United States that have continued to present day. Discussed as a special isolated case in early America, Philadelphia's social and political stance toward homosexuality would develop into a model for other urban cities as the young country grew. Philadelphia's dearth of court cases against sodomy and other sexual crime indictments may speak towards a progressive approach to sexuality, though it would be many years, even centuries, before other cities followed suit.¹⁹

The idea of homosexuality as an identity, as Roy Cohn discusses it, did not emerge until the late 19th-century and turn of the 20th-century in America. Many historians have worked to recover the history of gay men in the United States, as for many years it was excluded from historiographical explorations of American history. Jay Hatheway discusses the different factors that led to the development of homosexuality as an identity in America and the medical pathologization of homosexuality by the developing medical fields of the late 19th-century Gilded Age in his monograph, *The Gilded Age Construction of Modern American Homophobia*. By no means the only historian to argue that homosexuality as an identity is a societal construction (Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* treats the issue from the view of a philosopher,²⁰ Hatheway presents the American belief system, guided by essentialism, American exceptionalism, and morality that developed as a descendent of

Puritan beginnings and extended through educational and philosophical training, as being challenged by the consequences and change created through urbanization, immigration, and industrialization following the Civil War. These changes, as well as a newly forming landscape of individual rights (for women, for people of color, etc.) produced a time of unrest, particularly for the educated white gentry of the North, who saw progress endangering their ways of life and the moral fabric of the country. Their reactions, fueled by advances in science and the Darwinian “survival of the fittest” social philosophy (which Roy Cohn expresses in the opening monologue of this chapter), shaped the public construction of homosexuality as an inborn pathology, rooted in biology and supported by developing medical studies in psychology and neurology. Homosexuals were seen as having an innate degeneration that should be treated, and homophobia developed as a result.²¹ The continuation of this line of thinking can be traced throughout the past century and a half, and the LGBT community combats such rhetoric still today. Prior’s line, “I don’t think there’s any uninfected part of me. My heart is pumping polluted blood. I feel dirty,”²² (though in its most obvious context, is in reference to his AIDS status) speaks to the legacy of pathologization that has been deployed for so many years.

Urbanization and changes in technology through the first half of the twentieth century afforded more freedom to homosexuals, both male and female, which makes the characters’ lives in New York more possible, whether they be out or still in the closet. Lillian Faderman’s *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* details the progression of lesbian life throughout the twentieth century, though similarities can be traced to gay men in some cases. Front marriages allowed women to engage in the public sphere as heterosexual, but often allowed lesbian interactions in private.²³ Joe Pitt’s marriage to Harper is unhappy

because of his lack of sexual desire for his wife, and his need to go to Central Park to watch other men. It is easy to believe that he has never engaged in a homosexual relationship at the opening of the play, and he has obviously worked hard to maintain a heterosexual persona to the outside world.

By engaging in a sexual relationship with Louis, Joe works to make his marriage continue to work, leading us to comparisons of some of the interviewed men of E. Patrick Johnson's *Sweet Tea*. Johnson specifically explores black male homosexuality in the American South, in which many of the interviewees discuss the act of "passing" or being on the "DL" (down-low), ways of maintaining a public heterosexual persona, while engaging in homosex in private, keeping the information of affairs away from their wives, friends, and community.²⁴ Roy Cohn, though never married, has maintained a public character of bachelor throughout his political career in the play, and jokes about Joe's "wife," when he recognizes a kindred spirit trying to "pass."

Johnson's history of black men may also serve useful to an understanding of Belize, the African American nurse and former drag queen in *Angels in America*. Though his origin is not discussed, his experience as a black man may be further illuminated through a reading of the stories of the Southern black gay men from the 1950s to 2000s that Johnson has compiled. The diversity of experience of gay black men is rich, and the recollections of the black drag queens may serve a particular use for Belize's character. Though there is little in the script that speaks specifically to Belize's experience as a black gay man, hints of his otherness are expressed in his interactions with Louis in Act III, Scene 2 of *Millennium Approaches*, when Louis accuses Belize of being an anti-Semite. Belize calls out Louis' attack, explaining, "Louis, it's good to know you haven't changed; you are still an honorary

citizen of the Twilight Zone, and after your pale, pale white polemics on behalf of racial insensitivity you have a flaming *fuck* of a lot of nerve calling me an anti-Semite.”²⁵ Instead of leaving as he says he will, Belize continues the conversation with Louis, and the two address the hurtful comments made by the other, including Belize’s referral to Louis earlier as “Sid the Yid.”²⁶ Belize takes the opportunity to educate Louis about the racism (however unintentional Louis may have believed it was) expressed about black people, reflecting the contemporary trends of activism that emerged out of liberation movements and scholarship around critical race theory, queer theory, and feminism.

Another interesting aspect of the characters’ lives depicted in the play is the importance of the Rambles in Central Park for social interaction with other gay men. Kushner does not situate these encounters at a bar, perhaps because of the importance of the Bethesda Fountain to the story and the restrictions of location created by set limitations, but the park serves as the central meeting place of gay men, particularly Louis and Joe, who desire to see and be seen by other gay men, and even more specifically in Louis’ sexual encounter with the Man in Act II, Scene 4 of *Millennium Approaches*. Throughout the past century, other sites emerged in cities across the nation as centers for LGBT interaction and gatherings. Besides parks—bars, coffee shops, bath houses, and house parties, emerged as sites of LGBT interaction. George Chauncey details the long history of New York’s gay centers in his monograph *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, which gives insight into how long gay men have congregated in certain locations, like Greenwich Village, Times Square, and Harlem, within New York City. Chauncey reveals these sites alongside an argument of the construction of homosexuality, and its converse heterosexuality, prior to World War II in

New York.²⁷ Robert A. Schanke speaks of the gay nightlife of New York City, Atlanta, Los Angeles, and San Francisco during the late 1960s through early 1980s, as he details the life of Cal Yeomans, a gay playwright and theatre artist, who worked off-off Broadway and nationally throughout adulthood.²⁸ Though different sites emerge in each city, similarities of sites are evident: public places for gay encounters were often separated into neighborhoods that harbored multiple locations for interaction, the sole patrons of such locations were often LGBT-identified, and the danger of police enforcement of sexual-related and indecency laws was always present, though often minimized by the urban location and through under-the-table protection by law enforcement agents.

Louis' encounter with the Man reflects the trends of gay men's cruising activities, but their dialogic exchange parallels the greater conversation about sex in the wake of HIV and AIDS. Larry Kramer's 1985 *A Normal Heart* gives more attention to the debate between safer or no sex in the face of HIV/AIDS and the struggle to maintain the liberties afforded by the sexual revolution of the 1970, and Kushner chooses not to engage in the same debate, perhaps because of the years that have passed in the actual writing of *Angels in America*. Instead, by showing the ways in which men met and found sexual satisfaction (or in Louis' case, attempted to erase his guilt about his treatment of Prior), Kushner shows the audience how sex and hookups occurred for many gay men in the 1980s and beyond.

Elsewhere in the United States, historians like E. Patrick Johnson in *Sweet Tea*, Peter Boag in *Same Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest*, Susan Stryker and Jim Van Buskirk, *Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area*, and James H. Jones in *Alfred C. Kinsey: A Life* uncover rich and diverse public sites of homosexual populations and activity throughout

the twentieth century in the United States. San Francisco's Castro and Tenderloin districts, which are covered with great detail and illustrations by Stryker and Van Buskirk, serve as *Angel in America's* heaven, as imagined by Prior—it is the gay mecca, a land of possibility and freedom in the eyes of Kushner's gay character.

John D'Emilio brought new attention to the homophile movement with his groundbreaking 1983 text, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States*. D'Emilio's exploration of thirty years of gay community-building that resulted in activism begun in the 1950s by groups like the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis shed light on attempts to bring gay individuals' concerns to the greater public. The homophile organizations arose during the Cold War, when closeted gay men and lesbians were outed and forced to resign government agency jobs during the Lavender Scare, which David Johnson explains as coinciding with the Red Scare and the McCarthy HUAC trials.²⁹ Robert A. Schanke expands on the topic, discussing the personal effects experienced by Cal Yoemans as a young college student in Florida under the Johns Committee, which allowed police investigators to uncover gay college students and charge them with crimes at state universities.³⁰ This is just one of many ways in which the public and political environment made it necessary for gay men to work diligently to maintain a public heterosexual persona, or even to deny their sexual desires at all. Roy Cohn and Joe Pitt are navigating such an environment in *Angels in America*. (though as discussed in further detail above, Kushner's Roy Cohn makes his decisions explicitly because of the power that he has been able to achieve and maintain by keeping his sexuality discreet). Some relief was offered through the movements that followed the Stonewall Riot in 1969, which marked the end of the homophile movement

and the beginning of the Gay Liberation Movement. The gay liberationists utilized tactics borrowed from contemporary civil rights and feminist movements, helping create a new confrontational, even militant, movement for gay rights and recognition in the face of increasing societal pressure—such an environment makes it possible for Louis, Prior, and Belize to be publicly out, however open or restricted they might have been with some others.³¹

An understanding of the homophile movement and subsequent gay liberation movement (and later organizations like ACT UP and Queer Nation, discussed in more detail below) help us see Roy Cohn's previously discussed statement in *Angels in America* about the inability for progress by homosexuals as both true and untrue. As D'Emilio, John Loughery, Marc Stein, and Neil Miller illustrate in their respective monographs, antidiscrimination laws passed in some communities, but not others. Activism marked the homosexual communities across the country, but they faced strong opposition from religiously and politically conservative constituencies. Greater recognition was achieved, a goal of the post-Stonewall Gay Liberation Movement, but militancy was not necessarily successful in achieving goals that required legal and institutional support for change. In fact, the assimilationist tactics of the homophile movement were sometimes favored, as they allowed legal change. Within the organizations, conflict arose between gay and lesbian members, creating internal strife that challenged the momentum of the organizations helping aid the movement.³² Tina Fetner's treatment of the symbiotic relationship of the gay rights movement and the Christian right further complicates the gains and setbacks of the gay rights movement through the late 1970s into the 1980s and beyond, as the two opposing forces responded to changes in the other through each

encounter.³³ Kushner articulates the peculiarities of 1985 America in a speech made by Martin, a friend (and lover?) of Roy Cohn, to Joe:

It's a revolution in Washington, Joe. We have a new agenda and finally a real leader. They got back the Senate but we have the courts. By the nineties the Supreme Court will be block-solid Republican appointees, and the Federal bench—Republican judges like land mines, everywhere, everywhere they turn. Affirmative action? Take it to court. Boom! Land mine. And we'll get our way on just about everything: abortion, defense, Central America, family values, a live investment climate. We have the White House locked till the year 2000. And beyond. A permanent fix on the Oval Office? It's possible. By '92 we'll get the Senate back, and in ten years the South is going to give us the House. It's really the end of Liberalism. The end of New Deal Socialism. The end of ipso facto secular humanism. The dawning of a genuinely American political personality. Modeled on Ronald Wilson Reagan.³⁴

This history of LGBT experience, movements, and activism lead us to New York City and the United States in the 1980s, the setting of *Angels in America*. As Randy Shilts reported in *And the Band Played On*, AIDS first gained recognition as the “gay cancer” in 1981 for the number of gay men developing opportunistic diseases in urban areas across the United States, though the coverage was denied priority because of the population it affected first. National media outlets reported coverage sporadically throughout the initial months and years as infection diagnosis numbers rose, and medical and political officials attempted to divert attention and resources from the populations in need of treatment at the time: gay men, intravenous drug users, and immigrants. With national Republican leadership and President Ronald Reagan in the majority and refusing to acknowledge the growing threat of the syndrome and the challenges facing medical personnel, patients, families, and caregivers, gay men and lesbians strengthened their ties to face the crisis head on. Organizations like Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), founded in 1982, and AIDS

Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), founded in 1987, worked to force public attention to the ever increasing numbers of ill and dying, demanding political action from government agencies for medical and social solutions to the problems facing those affected by AIDS. Scientists identified Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) as the virus that causes AIDS in 1984, and azidothymidine (AZT) was the first HIV/AIDS treatment introduced for clinical trials in 1985, which matches the timeline of *Angels in America* when Roy Cohn illegally obtains the drug to prevent being given the placebo.³⁵

Angels in America ends in an epilogue in 1990, five years after Prior has been diagnosed with AIDS and experiences his hallucinations. The play, written in the early 90s, allows the characters to express optimism for the future, in which the state of gay rights and living with AIDS will still be a struggle, but one moving towards greater progress and achievement. Prior's final monologue provides a premonition for the a future that resembles the past two decades, when strides for gay rights—marriage equality, protection of LGBT military service personnel, and so many other personal and public rights—have made exceptional progress:

This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come. ...The Great Work Begins.³⁶

The histories of LGBTQ individuals have been carefully and respectfully traced and shared by historians hoping to bring greater recognition for those individuals who seek to be seen as equal citizens under the law, and within the larger society. Their work is some of that Great Work that strengthens the stories of individuals like Prior, Louis, Belize, and Joe, and brings truer understanding to the life and times of LGBTQ Americans.

“How are we to proceed without a theory?”: Queer Theory and its Sociological Tensions

Perestroika opens in January 1986 with an appearance by Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov, the oldest living Bolshevik (or so at least we are informed by an unseen Voice). This is the only time that Prelapsarianov graces the stage, and in just a few moments, he (though, played by the actress who also plays Hannah) sets the scene for the questions that may be addressed throughout the second part of the play:

The Great Question before us is: Are we doomed? The Great Question before us is: Will the Past release us? In Time? And we all desire that Change will come.

(A little pause, then with sudden violent passion:)

And *Theory*? How are we to proceed without *Theory*? What System of Thought have these Reformers to present to this mad swirling planetary disorganization, to the Inevitable Welter of fact, event, phenomenon, calamity? Do they have, as we did, a beautiful Theory, as bold, as Grand, as comprehensive a construct...?....

Change? Yes, we must change, only show me the Theory, and I will be at the barricades, show me the book of the next Beautiful Theory, and I promise you these blind eyes will see again, just to read it, to devour that text. Show me the words that will reorder the world, or else *keep silent*.³⁷

Perestroika proved more difficult than *Millennium Approaches* to win over critics and even Kushner himself, facing numerous rewrites before each new production and reprint of the script, including the 2013 book edition (also available as an ebook). Describing *Perestroika*, Kushner explains:

This edition incorporates changes I've made to *Angels* over the past several years. Most of these changes are to be found in *Part Two, Perestroika*, which is now closer to complete than it's ever been. I can't quite bring myself to write that it's complete. Since the day I finished the first draft of *Perestroika*, I've always known that it's one of those plays that refuses to be entirely in harmony with itself. Some plays want to sprawl, some plays contain expansiveness, roughness, wildness, and incompleteness in their DNA. These plays may, if they're not misunderstood and dismissed as failed attempts at tidiness, speak more powerfully about what's expansive, rough, wild, and incomplete in human life than plays with tauter, more efficient, more cleanly constructed narratives.³⁸

Kushner's discussion of the "sprawl," the "expansiveness," of *Perestroika* is rightfully introduced by the Bolshevik who urges for a new theory that will allow for change that will release humans from the past. Queer theory, in its development and subsequent challenges and reworkings, manifests as a theory that urges a reconsideration of the past constructs that shaped social life. Kushner's multiple revisions of *Perestroika* point to the need for theory and praxis to be reshaped, reconsidered, and re-presented, and parallels the constant reconsiderations that queer theory experiences from its inception to today.

This chapter, in exploring *Angels in America* as an example of the power of praxis to present theoretical insight, follows the previous chapter's historical construction of the trends and generalities of gay men's encounters in daily life and political engagement in the United States (and ultimately helped contribute to the development of the academic discipline of queer theory) and explores the ways in which queer theory developed as a field. Further, the chapter will explore the ways in which sociology at times preceded and even predicted the shift in thinking about gender and sexuality that queer theorists grappled with beginning in the same years that Tony Kushner was writing his epic play that bridged the gap between straight theatre and LGBT theatre. As I move forward, I do so with a question similar to the one asked about the Great Work in the Introduction to this thesis: What if the work is read as a charge for greater consideration of sexualities, social construction, and the interplay of queer theory and sociology? This chapter traces the development of queer theory and sexual studies, informed and critiqued through a sociological perspective, as an opportunity to deepen my theoretical reading of *Angels in America* Chapter 3.

Foundations of Queer Theory

In her 1996 *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, Annemarie Jagose begins her survey of the emerging discipline of queer theory with a discussion of the term “queer.” The word is associated with its slang usage as a homophobic slur but also as a term of self-identification. Then, and still today, what “queer” is remains in flux. Explaining this mercurial nature, Jagose clarifies:

What is clear, even from this brief and partial account of its contemporary deployment, is that queer is very much a category in the process of formation. It is not simply that queer has yet to solidify and take on a more consistent profile, but rather that its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics.³⁹

The field of queer theory, from its roots in various academic disciplines, is as ever-changing as the community of individuals who claim its (hotly contested) tenets as identifiers.

Jagose concludes the book, which travels across the broad field of the developing discipline, with a discussion of critiques of queer theory, as well as possible directions in which the implementation of queer work may lead scholars over time. In a section on Judith Butler’s work, the contradictions of the queer project are discussed in careful detail. Queer identification is in itself paradoxical, as the queer project as it is expressed by Butler, relies on the promotion of a non-identity (“or even anti-identity”⁴⁰) politics. Jagose continues:

If a potentially infinite coalition of sexual identities, practices, discourses and sites might be identified as queer, what it betokens is not so much liberal pluralism as a negotiation of the very concept of identity itself. For queer is, in part, a conscious politics of the gay and lesbian feminist movements. The rhetoric of both has been structured predominantly around self-recognition, community and shared identity; inevitably, if inadvertently, both movements have also resulted in exclusions, delegitimation, and a false sense of universality. The discursive proliferation of queer has been enabled in part by the knowledge that identities are fictitious—that is, produced by

and productive of material effects but nevertheless arbitrary, contingent and ideologically motivated.⁴¹

Queer cannot be consolidated or stabilized. Though unifying for those who identify as queer, or LGBTQ, the movement recognizes that even through collection and recognition of sameness, exclusions and dismissals occur. After surveying the state of queer theory over a span of just less than a decade, Jagose hints at the ambiguous future that queer theory will see: “[Q]ueer is a way of pointing ahead without knowing for certain what to point at.”⁴²

Teresa de Lauretis, often credited as the scholar to coin “queer” for a 1990 conference “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities” at University of California Santa Cruz and a special journal issue of *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, moved away from queer theory just a few years later, fearing that it had been appropriated by the institutions it had set out to challenge. Her initial call for the creation of a queer project evolved out of a desire to resituate the issue of sexuality and identity, to allow an interrogation of the plurality of factors that influenced identity. “Lesbian” and “gay” were not preferable to “queer” because they definitionally involve a gender and race bias. Queer held the potential of allowing an anti-identitarian movement to collectively represent individuals who fell outside of so-called normal categories.⁴³

Judith Butler on Performativity and *Gender Trouble*

Now generally accepted by queer theorists, the concept of gender as a performative act emerges in Judith Butler’s close reading and critiques of numerous other philosophers and writers in 1990’s *Gender Trouble*. The effects of power, described by Butler as being produced through a compulsory heterosexual matrix, lead to the acts that are repeated,

become ritual, and become so “naturalized” (second nature, even) that they are believed to be the “natural” gendered identity of an individual. The gendered identity did not exist prior to the cultural influence that led to the performativity and is, in fact, created by the juridical and sexual laws of desire that seek to repress it.

The repressed (body) exists as a necessary product of the agency of repression. Butler agrees with Foucault’s notion that the agency of repression produces the object it comes to deny and states: “As Foucault makes clear, the culturally contradictory enterprise of the mechanism of repression is prohibitive and generative at once and makes the problematic of ‘liberation’ especially acute.”⁴⁴ There is a danger that, even if the female body is freed from the confines of the paternal law, the possibility remains that the female body would still remain “another incarnation”⁴⁵ of the law, which unfortunately would consider itself subversive, but still be operating in the service of the law. She calls for a consideration of the “full complexity and subtlety of the law and to cure ourselves of the illusion of a true body beyond the law.”⁴⁶ Here, we see Butler’s belief that change will occur “within the terms of the law.”⁴⁷

Butler reveals the idea of the reappropriation and redeployment of language and action as a means to subvert the heterosexual normative ideals/law, to transform the constructs of gender into something beyond the binary of male and female. She is wary of the idea of an unlimited, individualized gender, as it is too idealized, too far outside the established culture and law to be successful, but looks to parody as a possibility for this hopeful transformation. The terms used to name homosexuals, as well as the butch/femme labels of lesbianism, are given as examples of the reappropriation or redeployment of

terms, meant originally by the heterosexual matrix oppressor to be derogatory or repressive, but are now used to destabilize and denaturalize the categories of sex.

Drag is also an important teaching tool in *Gender Trouble*, as the gendered character performed must be presumed to have the other gender, and an inversion is witnessed. Butler says, “Drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity.”⁴⁸ Drag is not simply a person of one anatomical sex displaying attributes of characteristics of the opposite gender, but puts the audience in the “presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance.”⁴⁹ Butler continues that drag does not imitate an original, but rather, the parody lies in the notion of an original. It is an imitation of an identity that has no real original, but is instead a composite of culturally-defined and culturally-regulated meanings that are viewed as “naturalized” gendered acts. These gendered acts (and language), this performativity of gender, that have been created and perpetuated by the gender hierarchy, the compulsory heterosexuality and juridical law that in part define and reinforce the cultural intelligibility constructs, must be subverted and redeployed, within the cultural domains, in order to allow “denaturalized” gender to become a reality.

Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*

In the section titled “The Perverse Implantation” in Michel Foucault’s 1976 book *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (translated in English in 1978 and reprinted in 1990), he speaks of the adaptation of a society to use language to discuss sexual development in terms of *norms*, prescribing what sex should look like, how it should occur,

what would be acceptable, who could engage, and how it would be *discussed*, throughout western culture. Foucault discusses the codes that govern sexuality as canonical law, the Christian pastoral, and civil law. Matrimonial relations, obviously in this context strengthening the concept of heterosexual love, is the center. Society is inserted into the prescriptions of accepted sexuality, and the description of “unnatural” can be used. Society, as represented by the law, medicine, and teaching, attains power to be asserted over sex and the body. On discourse, Foucault states,

For was this transformation of sex into discourse not governed by the endeavor to expel from reality the forms of sexuality that were not amenable to the strict economy of reproduction: to say no to unproductive activities, to banish casual pleasures, to reduce or exclude practices whose object was not procreation.⁵⁰

Foucault suggests that the act of discussion serves as an attempt to conceal. By creating a conversation around sex—the morality of sex, the norms of sex—it becomes something that is repeated, and becomes ingrained, and as Foucault states about science, “Claiming to speak the truth, it stirred up people’s fears....”⁵¹ There is discourse, but it is not “rationally formed.”⁵² Not based on fact, in most cases, and treated with “systematic blindness,” a society’s interpretation of sex is based on fallible, false logic. Confession becomes an agent to use against the people and against sex.

When considered with Foucault’s concept of sexuality as a tactical deployment in the power systems engaged in society, sex became a topic to be studied and then applied to the betterment of life, to manage one’s desires and practices in order to make oneself more productive (which he discusses was initiated in the higher classes, rather than it being first forced onto the lower classes). Rather than the truth of sex being relayed by a master in *ars erotica*, scientific truth was pursued.

But, sex as identity...how did this occur? In “The Deployment of Sexuality,” Foucault discusses that there is a connection between power and sex, and it is considered a negative relation. But we order sex, and power comes from this, and is maintained through language, through discussion.

“Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere”⁵³ He says it is not necessarily a hierarchical structure (though one develops), but rather a complex system that develops in a society. It is an interwoven system of social relations that does not develop from above, but from within.

Foucault describes the following four examples as the strategic unities that formed specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex:

1. An hysterization of women’s bodies (hysterical woman)
2. A pedagogization of children’s sex (to take charge as sexual potential developed and the masturbating child whose sex is evident anatomically but also not fully formed, physiologically)
3. A socialization of procreative behavior (Malthusian couple)
4. A psychiatrization of perverse pleasure (perverse adult)

These four categories become objects of surveillance in the discourse and scientific study of sexuality.⁵⁴ The deployment of alliance by the power system, as a means of control, is followed by a deployment of sexuality, though Foucault does assert that sexuality has not completely erased the deployment of alliance.

The deployment of techniques in power have adapted as the realization of the power for life, rather than life through deciding issues of death, has evolved. In the past couple of centuries, Foucault sees a shift from those in power exercising the right “to take life or let

live”⁵⁵ to the right to “ensure, maintain or develop its life.”⁵⁶ The development of sexual discourse is found in the disciplines of the body and the regulation of populations, in an attempt to understand this *bio-power* that Foucault sees emerging. If one (or a population system) is going to be successful, the physical and mental health of the individual and the larger population is necessary. Sex and sexuality are directly linked to the health and well-being of the individual (and the larger group), and have the ability to either negatively or positively affect the success of society and its progress. If one is not well, one is not productive. To actively engage in discipline of the body (your own and, through the deployment of sexuality on others) is to aid in the regulation of the population, which will enable the success of the society (defined by the aims of the powerful).

According to Foucault, sex has been given the power and mystery that the Greeks spoke of when discussing love. By engaging ourselves in a quest to determine all there is to know about sex, we are further exposing ourselves to the power system which uses the deployment of sexuality to keep us in our place. Foucault pushes us to break away from the “agency of sex,” to counter the grip of power saying, “The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures.”⁵⁷

The Development of Queer Theory and Sexuality Studies

As detailed above, queer theory was being recognized as a nascent discipline in the late 1980s and early 1990s, pulling from the works of philosophers, historians, literature theorists, and feminist theorists, but surprisingly, sociologists were not usually recognized among the contributors of the growing field. Michael Warner, whose 1991 book *Fear of A*

Queer Planet is just the first of his several monographs about the issues of deconstructionist insight into issues of the subject/self and sexuality, is considered a social theorist, though he serves as a professor of Literature and American Studies at Yale. Within just a few years of the genesis of queer theory's organization into a field, sociologists began to voice both their support, but also their misgivings, of the emerging field of queer theory, and critiques of the theoretical assertions of those scholars whose work was centered on literature, cultural studies, philosophy, and history. As early as 1994 and 1996, sociologists including Kenneth Plummer and Arlene Stein and Ki Namaste raised questions about theoretical blindspots of queer theory from a sociological perspective.⁵⁸ The questions were not limited to a critique of queer theory, but also extended to sociology as a field, urging sociologists to take up the spirit of queer theory's recognition of sexuality as a classifier (not as deviance, but as a stratum of identity creation) in further research.

Not surprisingly, sociologists have continued to explore what queer theory means for a reconsideration of the sexual self for the past twenty five years, though it is a greatly nuanced issue that results in as much tension as the debates about goals within the LGBTQIA+ communities. Stephen Valocchi, in the December 2005 issue of *Gender and Society* gauges the success of the use of queer theory by sociologists within four contemporary studies of gender and sexuality. In conclusion, he critiques the studies for their limited use of queer theory's offerings and proposes ways in which the work might have been expanded through reconsiderations of sex, gender, and sexuality. For Valocchi, queer theory offers a set of questions that broadens the sociological lens of contemporary individuals and communities, and is best applied to sociology as a lens for ethnographic analysis.⁵⁹

Adam Isaiah Green, in the March 2007 issue of *Sociological Theory*, joins the discussion about the use of queer theory and sociology in tandem, advocating for a careful use of the theories together, as they are wholly different and necessarily create a tension and set of paradoxes that are not easily reconciled. Not the first to highlight such an issue (see discussion of Seidman below), Green cautions that queer theory, with its deconstructionist goals and desire to queer sexualities, often contradict the practices of sociology, saying “the two approaches to the subject represent incommensurable positions that cannot be collapsed into a single framework.”⁶⁰ Though his argument sounds bleak for those who hope to combine the considerations of both fields, Green does encourage a reflexive sociology that recognizes the possibilities of contradictions created by the two fields—to explore the tensions for new perspectives.

Steven Seidman first queried the tensions of queer theory and sociology as early as 1994 in his book *Embattled Eros*, revisited the topic in his 1996 *Queer Theory/Sociology*, and has since co-edited two editions of *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies* (in 2006 and 2011). Highlighting that sociologists had begun to recognize the social construction of subjectivity dependent on sexuality by referencing Mary McIntosh’s 1968 “The Homosexual Role,” published in the Autumn issue of *Social Problems*, Seidman addresses the blindspots inherent in both fields and has presented sexuality studies as a possible solution to the limitations of either discipline studied without consideration of the other. The discourse created through careful use of a broad range of disciplines opens up the possibility of ascertaining “what is sexual and which institutions are responsible for regulating our sexualities,”⁶¹ which Seidman sees as key sociological and political questions.

Queer theory has at times adopted beliefs (and laid claim to being originators of ideas) that can be found in prior sociological works (like McIntosh in 1968). Sociology has, on the other hand, limited its use of queer theoretical insights, or utilized a myopic perspective of queer theory in its application to sociological methodologies. How might a more interdisciplinary stance deepen, broaden, expand, and ground the study of sexual identities? How may sociologists use queer theory as a new or different point of entry when considering the issues of subject/institution dynamics? How can the tensions of queer theory (situated within the debate of the dependency of heterosexuality on homosexuality) be clarified through sociological studies? How may the reluctance of sociologists to utilize queer theory as a theoretical framework give insight into the limitations of queer theory's queries for a scholar within a critical field like theatre?

Through a careful exploration of sociological precursors to queer theory (as in the specialty of sociology of homosexuality), sociological responses to queer theory, and utilization of sociological methodology within queer theory, I hope to gain a clearer understanding of the fields. Like the tensions between the queer activism and LGBT rights movements, there is nothing easy about the Great Work that Kushner's character Prior Walter suggests. Like lesbian feminists' and women of color feminists' critiques of white heterosexual feminism, queer theory has shed light on the multivalent nature of modern existence. Sociology, though often mistakenly ignored in queer theoretical construction, offers an opportunity to qualitatively and quantitatively explore the assumptions of queer theory, while queer theory offers different ways of exploring sociological assumptions. Though Green cautions that the two fields will never be read together harmoniously, the tension allows for a strengthened reconsideration of social construction and the

individual.⁶² Read together, they may point to a better view of how social institutions obstructed a clearer understanding of sexualities.

Reconciling Queer Theory within Sociology—the emergence of Sexuality Studies

Steven Seidman, mentioned above, has worked extensively in developing a methodological and theoretical foundation for sexuality studies, which serves as an attempt to open the pathways between sociology and queer theory. In *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies (2nd edition)*, edited by Seidman, Nancy Fischer, and Chet Meeks, sociologists and sexuality scholars explore many different ways in which sexuality and gender can be used to explore sociological phenomena. Seidman begins this book with an essay on the differing approaches academia has employed to begin an understanding of sexuality, including gay and lesbian studies, sociology, queer theory, and also sexuality studies, ending the chapter with a challenge for scholars moving forward:

Beliefs that there are natural and normal ways to be sexual are ideologies. How we come to have such beliefs, and their personal and social consequences, are important questions for the study of sexuality. Indeed, the question of who gets to define what is sexual and which institutions are responsible for regulating our sexualities are key sociological and political questions.⁶³

In studying sexuality, the construction of identity, whether it be of gender performativity or the study of desire or any other element, the institutions that shape such phenomena must be interrogated and explored, as the authors of *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies* take every effort to do.

Jeffrey Weeks discussed the issues of essentialism and construction as early as 1986 in his work *Sexuality*, just two years before Butler's first work on construction of gender

was published. In an interview published in 2011, Weeks expands on the concept of sexuality, and why it has become such a dominant topic in modern society:

[T]here is no simple definition of sexuality, or explanation of its undoubted power. What complicates the issue is that 'sexuality' as a concept operates on two levels. It refers to the bundle of social phenomena that shape erotic life: laws, religion, norms and values, beliefs and ideologies, the social organization of reproduction, family life, identities, domestic arrangements, diseases, violence and love—everything we evoke when we speak of the sexuality of a culture. And it also refers to the level of the individual—to the pleasures and pains that can shape our lives for good or ill. The two constantly interact, as I have suggested, shaping and reshaping the other.⁶⁴

Weeks asks scholars to consider the results of sexuality stemming from the influence of culture, but also from individual interactions, and importantly, through the lens of intersectionality. Erotic life, like identity, is shaped by a number of factors that affect the individual, both through macro and micro interactions. Weeks also advocates the importance of an historical understanding of sexuality, that through an understanding of past historical trends (that often must be viewed through a revisionist historical perspective, uncovering what was previously obscured), a greater understanding of current trends may be discovered.

Introducing Sexuality Studies offers a wide range of sociological considerations in the field of sexuality, exploring the commerce of sexuality, the influence of religious institutions, the power of sexuality on identity-formation and politics, and on global differences of sexuality, as well as many more topics. The issues of sexuality are compelling and beg for more research by scholars who are willing to bridge the gaps between sociology and queer theory, alongside other disciplines like political theory and history. It is an indication of the great steps taken so far to try to understand the power of

sexuality, but also the power that defines sexuality, and directions that further research may move toward.

Conclusion and Moving Forward

Sexuality studies is not the only way in which sociology and queer theory may work together. As I have worked with the concepts of queer theory, and now have seen them in use within the field of sociology, I have found the most compelling use of queer theory as an interrogation of the construction of a plural subject in a postmodern world. Queer theory, with its discussions of gender, sexuality, intersectionality, performativity and the ways that each of these things are shaped by or result from institutional and individual interactions, begs for its application in the study of how the individual and the larger institutions of modern life are constructed. Queer theory is not just directed at the development of the individual but is an attempt to understand the role of the individual *and* the role of the larger forces that have developed up to now. Queer theory, with its always changing definitions and boundaries, opens itself up to being used by even other fields—politics and government, anthropology, and others. It is made portable by the nature of its topic—which is not just gender and sexuality, but also issues of power and subjectivities—and the many varying directions in which the past twenty five years have pulled it. The concepts and uses of queer theory are made malleable by the interdisciplinary nature of its roots, allowing for a constant reworking and reconsideration of what it's truly getting at—probably exactly what a postmodern deconstructionist theory field should want.

Jagose, in her tracing of queer theory's foundation in 1996, reminds us that the indeterminacy and flexibility of queer theory will lead toward an unknown future, and I

would like to suggest that this results partly from the varying ways in which queer theory may be utilized and shaped by other fields. Developing out of film studies, cultural studies, lesbian theory, literature, and philosophy, it is a set of theories that requires the expansion and refinement offered by other disciplines across time. And I would argue, scholars of queer theory need to understand the historical academic precursors that sociology and other fields offer. Queer theory did not develop in a vacuum. Sociological projects are not conducted in a world with individuals who only identify as a single thing, but instead experience any combination of different identities as explained by intersectionality—for example, I am a queer, white, educated cisgender woman from a lower middle class family, and no other person who identifies with these descriptors will share all of the same descriptors that I have. The power of institutions are felt more sharply by some whose identities fall outside of society's established norms, and queer theory may give insight to exploring why.

In *Angels in America*, this has been one of the most difficult aspects of the play to grasp—not that everyone is so incredibly different, with their immensely different identity intersections, but that the role of the construction of institutions and their effects on individuals reveals a site of exploration that will be almost infinitely mineable. Historical and historiographical consideration in Chapter 1 begins to explain the importance of the political institutions and their representations of politics (in Roy Cohn), institutional medicine (Henry and Belize), and religion (particularly Jewish traditions in the Rabbi and Louis, and Mormonism in the Pitts).

In the final chapter, I will explore the Great Work that the character Prior Walter suggests awaits the characters at the end of the play (as well as the audience, and the greater

American public); however what exactly this Work will be is never clearly defined—left with its many ambiguous and varying possibilities to be developed in the minds of its audience. Like queer theory's own path, it suggests that in breaking down and questioning the many elements of modern life, a better understanding of existence and interaction will emerge. Kushner's work is decidedly utopian, following an exploration of the apocalyptic possibilities of so many contemporary unknowns, and my hope is that this work within queer theory, sociology, and history helps clarify and maintain this optimistic view of the theoretical possibilities that may be uncovered as we explore *Angels in America* as queer theory.

**“The Slow Dissolving of the Great Design”—
Angels in America as Queer Theory**

The very nature of queer theory, which built upon foundational texts by Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michel Foucault, and others who deconstructed the development of “normal,” as well as the progress of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) activism since the early 1990s, allow us to further explicate David Savran’s assertion that the plays “mobiliz(e) the principle of ambivalence—or more exactly, dissensus—to produce a vision of a once and future pluralist culture.”⁶⁵ Savran strives to find Kushner’s ultimate purpose in his analysis and concludes his essay “Ambivalence, Utopia, Queer Materialism” with his determination of the most non-ambivalent intention of *Angels in America*:

More decisively than any recent cultural text, *Angels* queers the America of Joseph Smith—and Ronald Reagan—by placing this oppressed class [gay men] at the very center of American history, by showing it to be not just the depository of a special kind of knowledge, but by recognizing the central role that it has had in the construction of a national subject, polity, literature and theatre. On this issue, the play is not ambivalent at all.⁶⁶

Savran’s searching for certainty reminds us that queer theory, as a modern dialectic, is always already marked by ambiguity and dissensus, with its still developing and contrasting understandings of identity and subjectivity paralleling the theorized fluidity and slipperiness of gender and sexuality, and how these different markers lead to action. The desire for tidy answers of an ultimate meaning in the milieu of ambiguity is problematic. Perhaps we are attempting to understand too fast, as Prior warns, but the striving to understand explains and excuses the messiness of it all. The beauty is in the ambiguity, wherein lie the differences among people and positions.

Kushner's Queer Dialectic

Prior Walter reveals that he has AIDS early in the play, and in the struggle of his illness and the ending of his relationship with his partner Louis, he begins to have visions of an Angel. In *Perestroika*, the Angel of the Continental Principality of America (aka the Angel of History) offers him a blessing in the form of the Book of Immobility, which would ensure comfort through stasis throughout humankind in the world. This moment helps illustrate just one way in which the characters handle one of the major dialectical questions of the play: that of stasis and change. Stasis is already enjoyed by the Angels who disdain humans for clinging to free will and choice, the human characteristics the Angels blame for conflict and struggle in the world. Prior refuses the gift and pleads instead for “more life,”⁶⁷ with all its complications, pain, and confusion. The Angel warns:

What will the grim Unfolding of these Latter Days bring?
That you or any Being should wish to endure them?
Death more plenteous than all Heaven has tears to mourn it,
The slow dissolving of the Great Design,
The spiraling apart of the Work of Eternity,
The World and its beautiful particle logic
All collapsed. All dead, forever...⁶⁸

The Angel of History cannot comprehend why the gift is not accepted, when an easier existence may result. “The slow dissolving of the Great Design” points to the deconstructionist trends of queer theory and the tensions between queer and LGBT movements, in which the issues of marriage equality, gays in the military, and other issues that affect LGBT- and queer-identified individuals do not necessarily point to easy answers that would please all. Prior, and Kushner's other human characters, choose to explore the possibility of a future that would ensure a comfortable stasis throughout the play; but

ultimately they deny an easy answer to uncertainty as progress emerges as the true desire of their existence, even when facing insurmountable fear. Harper Pitt, finally propelled into action to free herself from the stagnation of her unhappy marriage with the closeted gay Joe Pitt, muses, “Nothing’s lost forever. In this world, there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we’ve left behind, and dreaming ahead.”⁶⁹ Kushner, in his 1995 interview with Susan Sontag, echoes and expands upon his characters’ view of progress:

In this period of transition...It seems to me that one doesn’t want to look to the past for solutions; and yet, because of the reactionary nature of our time and because of the ground that we’ve lost recently, pushing ahead into a new form of social organization is difficult because we need to rebuild what’s been stripped away...And, I find myself asking questions about the extent of the change we’re witnessing.⁷⁰

This sentiment is expressed throughout the play, as he places characters in situations that allow them to share differing views and opinions about a multitude of topics, all of which address the idea of progress. What are the goals of a new social order? Who are the players? How might they be achieved? Like Savran’s assertion about the ambiguity within the play, these answers are not easily found, and often, multiple answers rise out of the exchanges. Instead, the answers may be found for each individual, at differing times. This is also a result of the nature of our time. As one millennium has passed into another (though, not THE millennium that Prior assures us will come), the Great Work that Prior promises has emerged in many different ways, and it is just as complicated as he and the other characters suggest it will be. Prior proclaims, “The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The Time has come.”⁷¹ The citizens he speaks of are not just those with AIDS, but also individuals from the margins whose voices have not been heard.

In understanding Kushner’s play as a type of dialectic, I believe it will be helpful to explore a consideration of Plato’s dialogues as a philosophical exercise and how

Kushner's characters work to raise questions and explain viewpoints from their differing positions. In her 2015 book, *Plato at the Googleplex: Why Philosophy Won't Go Away*, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein explores Plato's dialogic form, breaking down a modern interpretation of its philosophical implications:

Progress in philosophy consists, at least in part, in constantly bringing to light the covert presumptions that burrow their way deep down into our thinking, too deep down for us to even be aware of them. Some of these presumptions are societal, spread among us by successful memes....Some will veer toward the more personal and eccentric, rooted in one's history and psychology. But whatever the source of these presumptions of which we are oblivious, they must be brought to light and subjected to questioning. Such bringing to light is what philosophical progress consists of.⁷²

Kushner's characters bring to light questions that are so often "personal and eccentric," giving the audience characters that they might find some spark of recognition within whom to identify as they consider how institutions and interpersonal relationships shape the contemporary America of the mid 1980s and 1990s, but also today. Plato's dialogic characters allow the reader to see how experience and personalities influence philosophical positions and the way they argue these insights. Plato's conception of philosophy, according to Goldstein, was "necessarily gregarious rather than solitary," forcing everything to be "aired in the bracing dialectic wind stirred by many clashing viewpoints."⁷³ She continues, "Only in this way can intuitions that have their source in societal or personal idiosyncrasies be exposed and questioned."⁷⁴ The purpose of philosophy for Plato, and particularly for the dialectical form? "Nothing less than to render violence to our sense of ourselves and our world, our sense of ourselves in the world."⁷⁵ Kushner's dialectic does this kind of violence to one's assumptions of position and order by pushing its audience out of complacency to consider opposing views that emerge out of

the interactions between characters that may or may not resemble persons the audience recognize. This violence to the senses upsets the reader or viewer, challenging presumptions—“undermining, overturning, destabilizing, and disorienting.”⁷⁶ A subsequent “inner drama, both terrifying and exhilarating,”⁷⁷ ensues.

Angels in America does not fit the dialectic form of thesis/antithesis, which will follow necessarily with synthesis that is usually attributed to Hegel; instead it is complicated by the ambiguity that Savran highlighted above. This ambiguity is better understood if we take a moment to look at Kushner’s own perceptions of politics and how theatre, resembling real life, mixes the public and the private:

And I learned politics through numerous episodes in my youth of mild anti-Semitism and not-so-mild homophobia. The rest is just generalizing from a few deeply etched particulars, returning anger absorbed to the world that generated it in the first place; again, public becomes private becomes public. People who work in the theater, which is never pure, should be comfortable with this dialectical impurity, this seesaw mixing-up of spheres, this paradox. And it is a paradox: the personal is the political, and yet it is important, somehow, to maintain a distinction between the two. Which is to say that the personal and the political are the same, and aren't.⁷⁸

The characters argue their positions and do not necessarily come to an obvious consensus, though the outcomes may be read as a type of synthesis.

The past twenty plus years have offered new ways of considering who people are in relation to one another as the fields of LGBT history, social theory, and queer theory have expanded and complicated the understanding of individuals and subjectivities, leading us to reconsider the constructs and identity politics that have developed through the centuries to define and separate individuals from each other. The Great Work predicted in *Angels in America* sets the plays as a “threshold of revelation,” a moment of insight into the years to come that only hints that *something* will happen, but never definitively saying

what will happen. *Angels* emerges as a piece of the greater body of work that encourages discourse about the compounded nature of life in our postmodern world, demonstrating how a dialectic may unfold between multiple individuals with differing perspectives which are shaped by the many intersections of identity (gay, straight, black, white, Jewish, Mormon, etc.) and experience.

Michael Warner, whose theoretical works helps forge the bridge between queer theory and public sphere theory, warns against the current teleological direction of the gay and lesbian movement towards gay marriage, which he argues is “presented as the final frontier in the antagonism between gays and straights.”⁷⁹ His view of the gay and lesbian movements reflect the uncertainty that Kushner alludes to in the final act of *Perestroika*. Progress is the only absolute; the desire is obvious, but for what, all these years later, is still in question. Warner’s treatment of queer identity places it within a greater context of the interplay of publics and counterpublics through an examination of social theory to illuminate the field of queer theory, which he has criticized, explaining:

Queer theory, meanwhile, got to be very good at redescribing nonnormative sexualities and the flaws of identitarian thinking. But partly because the field relied so heavily on psychoanalytic theory for this purpose, it was somewhat less adept at describing the worldliness of sexuality and the conditions of the social-movement form.⁸⁰

Recognizing a growing rift between the organized LGBT movement and its critics from within, he “came to the conclusion that one of the underlying flaws of the gay and lesbian movement was the way it obscured and normalized the most compelling challenges of queer counterpublics.”⁸¹ Tactics of action, rhetoric, and belief-assimilation have fractured gay and lesbian activists from queer activists, according to Warner. The question of what should be the final end of queer visibility remained obscure to Warner in the early 2000s,

a decade after *Angels in America* premiered. But Warner offers an expanded perspective of queer identity and purpose, however ambiguous, to consider in relation to *Angels*. Not just the critical analysis of identity and subjectivity of the characters of *Angels*, but an exploration of their place within a public and the formation of a counterpublic shape the Great Work embarked upon within the play, and Kushner provides an opportunity to explore the possibilities of a new social public in the previously odd combination of Belize, Louis, Prior, and Hannah around the Bethesda fountain in the epilogue, acting as a testament to the shifts in interrelatedness that may occur as social publics adapt to changing forces.

The Angel warns of “The slow dissolving of the Great Design, The spiraling apart of the Work of Eternity, The World and its beautiful particle logic All collapsed,”⁸² and I would like to suggest that we consider this work of eternity that the Angel suggests to be the development of the normative controls that shaped the great design of the American public. The Angel suggests that such an event will tear apart the world as humanity knows it, but Prior, recognizing the human compulsion for change (as witnessed by centuries of counterpublics and technological progress), accepts this fate. Kushner’s characters bring gay and queer identities onto a public (and literal) stage, beckoning recognition for the concepts presented in the play, as well as the discourse that will follow thereafter.

These gay and queer identities represent a counterpublic, traditionally marginalized but voicing their positions within the play. This idea of participation by a counterpublic in relation to its public is discussed in fuller detail in the context of Bertolt Brecht’s early plays, which have led to decades of debate over the inclusion of homosexual themes, as discussed in Alan Sikes’ essay “Weimar Sexual Politics.” Sikes

suggests that rather than reducing the reading of the plays of Brecht to products of sexuality or “polemical commentary,” that “we might instead interrogate the ways in which they reflect and refract the highly charged political climate in which they were written.”⁸³ *Angels in America*, set in a struggling modern democracy sets its characters against mounting difficulties that will necessarily complicate and multiply the problems of queer progress. As Sikes continues, about the state of the Weimar republic that Brecht found cause to respond:

The Weimar years were marked by a cacophony of discourses not only over the proper functioning of democratic society, but also over the participation of certain parties, certain people, and certain citizens in the democratic process. As Jacques Rancière has noted, democracy ‘happens’ precisely when a hitherto excluded population struggles to assert its presence on the political stage; for this reason, democracy is less a stable form of government than a continual challenge to the criteria for inclusion in public political discourse.⁸⁴

Angels in America, with its first play, *Millennium Approaches* situated in 1985, reflects a “highly politically charged environment” that begs such a reading. Louis Ironson resorts to waxing unapologetically on political themes with Belize as a way to work out the tensions that have grown due to his inability to serve as a faithful, caring partner to Prior. In a passage that foreshadows the difficulties of the gay and lesbian/queer movement that Warner discusses in *The Trouble with Normal*, Louis polemicizes about his concerns for the Left, saying:

That’s just liberalism, the worst kind of liberalism, really, bourgeois tolerance, and what I think is that what AIDS shows us is the limits of tolerance, that it’s not enough to be tolerated, because when the shit hits the fan you find out how much tolerance is worth. Nothing. And underneath all the tolerance is intense, passionate hatred...*Power* is the object, not being tolerated. Fuck assimilation.⁸⁵

Louis' concerns for the future are not fully assuaged by the end of the play, but his theoretical curiosity and inclinations are still alive and well. The future is not as bleak as it once was in the height of fearful uncertainty at the peak of the AIDS crisis, and he has learned lessons from the tribulations of the past five years. Perhaps still disdaining tolerance as an end to a struggle, he congratulates a newly re-formed Russia:

Whatever comes, what you have to admire in Gorbachev, in the Russians is that they're making a leap into the unknown. You can't wait around for a theory. The sprawl of life. [Hannah: Interconnectedness...] It's all too much to be encompassed by a single theory now. [Belize: The world is faster than the mind.] That's what politics is. The world moving ahead. And only in politics does the miraculous occur.⁸⁶

Kushner examines the political landscape, and masterfully illustrates the complexities of a queer collective that has begun to emerge over the coming years. There is no single queer identity, but rather many characteristics to many individuals who make up a larger whole, begging the problems associated with dissensus to emerge within the counterpublic. As Savran suggests, for each example of a person, Kushner offers a foil, serving as antithesis,⁸⁷ but I would argue also a complement, for their personality. As an illustrative example, Louis and Joe are well-matched to provide comparative analysis when one considers the torments of acceptance of self—Louis' self-deprecation and need to butch up around family members hazily mirrors Joe's inner turmoil and resultant ulcer from years of repressed homosexuality--though Louis is an out gay man who otherwise embraces his own performativity of gay identity in his everyday life ("But all my friends call me Louise."⁸⁸). But, in political and social ways, Kushner pits Louis' Jewish Democrat self against Joe's Mormon Republican, and the unavoidable conflicts of the emerging Great Work are further illustrated through these two characters, and the others.

Roy Cohn's role in the dialectic cannot be overlooked here. The topic of much scholarly attention, the Roy Cohn of *Angels in America* highlights the difficulties of Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality, which points to the institutional construct of heterosexuality as the norm in modern society. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1, following his diagnosis of AIDS, Roy tells his doctor, "AIDS. Homosexual. Gay. Lesbian. You think these are names that tell you who someone sleeps with, but they don't tell you that...No. Like all labels they tell you one thing and one thing only: where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order?"⁸⁹ Roy Cohn, refusing the labels of a marginalized sexuality, tells his doctor that "*what* I am is defined entirely by *who* I am. Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys."⁹⁰ Rejecting the ideology of the emerging counterpublic, Roy instead maintains a public persona of heterosexuality that sets him at odds with the progress of the greater minority collective. But Kushner's treatment of Roy speaks to the greater issue that challenges the queer community: reconciling the existence of disparate opinions and voices. Though his sexual affinities would seem to align him with the queer public (and other men who attempt to "pass" or live on the DL, or down-low, in front marriages or with heterosexual public personae), his political ideologies situate him as the almost-Satanic human antagonist of *Angels in America* and its gay community that has been forced together in the face of AIDS.

Belize's compassion at Roy's deathbed, where he urges Louis to recite the mourning Kaddish, serves to remind the audience that despite, and because of, his faults, Roy Cohn was human. But, Belize's compassion is shaded by the harsh realities of AIDS medical treatment in 1986: Roy Cohn's stash of AZT risks being lost at his death, and the

Kaddish serves as an attempt to thank Roy for his contribution to Prior's health. Louis' reluctance to offer a final rite is assuaged by Belize's urging in the following scene:

LOUIS: What am I doing here?

BELIZE: Expiation for your sins. I can't take the stuff out myself, I have to tell them he's dead and fill out all the forms, and I don't want them confiscating the medicine. I needed a packmule, so I called you.

LOUIS: Why me? You hate me.

BELIZE: I needed a Jew. You were the first to come to mind.

LOUIS: What do you mean you needed...

BELIZE: We're going to thank him. For the pills.

LOUIS: *Thank him?*

BELIZE: What do you call the Jewish prayer for the dead?

LOUIS: The Kaddish?

BELIZE: That's the one. Hit it.

LOUIS: Whoah, hold on.

BELIZE: Do it, do it, they'll be in here to check and he...

LOUIS: I'm not saying any fucking Kaddish for him. The drugs OK, sure, fine, but no fucking way am I praying for *him*. My New Deal Pinko Parents in Schenectady would never forgive me, they're already so disappointed, "He's a fag, he's an office temp, and *now look*, he's saying Kaddish for Roy Cohn." I can't believe you'd actually pray for...

BELIZE: Louis, I'd even pray for you.

He was a terrible person. He died a hard death. So maybe...A queen can forgive her vanquished foe. It isn't easy, it doesn't count if it's easy, it's the hardest thing. Forgiveness. Which is maybe where love and justice finally meet. Peace, at least. Isn't that what the Kaddish asks for?⁹¹

Louis proceeds to recite the Kaddish, aided by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, Roy's own self-professed nemesis in life, but not without a shared "You sonofabitch"⁹² to round it out. Louis does not, surprisingly, explain himself, but his actions are clear: Belize has moved him to a more inclusive understanding of humanity, one shaped by a consideration of forgiveness.

Kushner's skill as a playwright urges contemplation, scholarship, and discourse around the state of a gay body politic in the mid-1980s, but also through the past twenty-odd years and the future. The final aspect of *Angels in America* and its complication of

the Great Work as fantasia (defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “a thing composed of a mixture of different forms or styles”) that I would like to note is that of the play in production. Though criticized for giving voice to gay men at the expense of female characters—Natalie Meiser censures Kushner’s characterizations of women, particularly Harper,⁹³ and Savran asks “Are not women sacrificed—yet again—to the male citizenry of a (queer) nation?”⁹⁴—Kushner’s play with the gender-bending roles of the Rabbi/Hannah Pitt/Henry/etc. allows for a glimpse at the concurrent development of conversations around biological sex and performative gender that Judith Butler outlines in her book *Gender Trouble* and that has reached new peaks of collective attention for genderqueer and trans-identified individuals in just the past few years.

This casting choice that challenges audience perceptions of gender is coupled with Kushner’s insistence that, in presenting his technically-adventurous production, “the moments of magic...are to be fully realized, as bits of wonderful *theatrical* illusion—which means it’s OK if the wires show, and maybe it’s good that they do, but the magic should at the same time be thoroughly amazing.”⁹⁵ The human elements of the play should be revealed to the audience, alongside the magic, and perhaps this could be interpreted as full disclosure to an audience that deserves the truth—that it’s all a collective construct, created for their consumption and digestion. Maybe it’s Kushner’s hope that, in a society that has so carefully crafted the façade of innate, “natural” norms, the audience will see the mechanisms and recognize the need to look for and question the wires that manipulate their own interactions. This note precedes the last of his charges for the companies that produce the plays:

Perestroika is essentially a comedy, in that issues are resolved, mostly peaceably; growth takes place and loss is, to a certain degree, countenanced.

But it's not a farce; all this happens only through a terrific amount of struggle, and the stakes are high...Eschew sentiment! Particularly in the final act—metaphorical though the fantasies may be (or maybe not), the problems the characters face are finally among the hardest problems—how to let go of the past, how to change and lose with grace, how to keep going in the face of overwhelming suffering. It shouldn't be easy.⁹⁶

In *Angels in America*, Kushner reminds us that LGBT and queer individuals are actively engaged in this Great Work, facing these hard problems, and not without struggle. Progress is hard, painful even, and missteps occur along the way, but even in the unknown, terror can make way for a new, truer shared existence:

And the whole place was empty. And at first I couldn't figure out why, and I had this moment of incredible...fear and also....It just flashed through my mind: The whole Hall of Justice, it's empty, it's deserted, it's gone out of business. Forever. The people that make it run have up and abandoned it. [...]

I felt that I was going to scream. Not because it was creepy, but because the emptiness felt so *fast*.

And...well, good. A ...happy scream.

I just wondered what a thing it would be...if overnight everything you owe anything to, justice, or love, had really gone away. Free.

It would be...heartless terror. Yes. Terrible, and...

Very great. To shed your skin, every old skin, one by one and then walk away, unencumbered, into the morning.⁹⁷

When the goals are not clear—do the LGBT and queer movements in the United States stop at gay marriage, gays in the military, parental rights, gender neutral bathrooms, or any number of steps along the way to an equal representation within the American public?—and the tactics are contested, the work is not easy. Attempts to pave the way for a better world emerge in theories that are complicated, and sometimes contradictory, and that force individuals to expand how they see themselves inside that world, constantly re-examining their relation to others. But *Angels in America* does serve as the Threshold of Revelation on something, even if it cannot reveal the ultimate achievement: The Great Work happens, will continue to happen, and we can learn many things from the effort and doing.

Conclusion

Queer theory takes on new meaning when considered in the context of activists who engage the theory to make change within the American public, and Tony Kushner is no stranger to activism himself:

The personal is private; there is a membrane, however permeable it may be, that divides inside from outside. The private is a preserve, a place of resistance-of the erotic, the human, against a world grown increasingly pornographic, toxic, violent, and technologically nonhuman. The political, in one sense, is a realm of conscious intent to enter the world of struggle, change, activism, revolution, and growth, even in the face of the fearfulness, the caution and conservatism of the past-haunted interior. In times of struggle and oppression the names with which we identify become very important. If we are in opposition to the established order, it's strategically necessary and personally fortifying to call oneself an oppositionist, or something less clunky if it's available. Assimilation is dangerous if we attempt to blend in with an order that's out to destroy us. Identifying oneself as a pariah, as Other, if that's what we are, is an important political act. We take the right and privilege of definition away from the oppressor, we assume the power of naming ourselves. This is a lesson every gay man and lesbian learns: the closet doesn't protect us, it only shames and enervates. Strength rests in open declaration.⁹⁸

Angels in America shows us the strength of these Others in its final scene, set in 1990, around the Bethesda fountain in New York City's Central Park, as Hannah, Joe Pitt's Mormon mother, Belize, Louis, and Prior discuss the possibilities for the future:

LOUIS: Whatever comes, what you have to admire in Gorbachev, in the Russians is that they're making a leap into the unknown. You can't wait around for a theory. The sprawl of life, the weird...

HANNAH: Interconnectedness...

LOUIS: Yes.

BELIZE: Maybe the sheer size of the terrain.

LOUIS: It's all too much to be encompassed by a single theory now.

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 living that makes the ideas. You can't wait for a theory, but you have to have a theory.

LOUIS: Go know. As my grandma would say.⁹⁹

Eschewing assimilation, each is still individual on their own, made up of all of the peculiar specificities of their own identities, but they manage to still enjoy each other's company. Kushner shows us that, though history has resulted in a difficult, struggle-inducing thing that must be dealt with, our differences should not hold us back, but instead allow us to create a richer community in which the living helps shape new ideas, and in doing so, continue to change and grow.

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Notes

¹ National Endowment for the Arts (Arts.gov), 2014.

<http://arts.gov/art-works/2014/notable-quotable-tony-kushner-job-artist#sthash.wn45nYdE.dpuf>

² <http://www.playbill.com/features/article/photo-archive-looking-back-at-the-original-angels-in-america-171841> Both *The New York Times* and *The LA Times* provided extensive coverage about the play's tortuous journey to the stage (those articles are available in the Bibliography), detailing its move from the Eureka in San Francisco (the company that commissioned the work in 1988 and presented the World Premiere of *Millennium Approaches* in May 1991) to the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles (the new home of dramaturg and director Oskar Eustis where *Millennium* was first workshopped in 1990 and presented the first full run of both parts in 1992), from the Mark Taper to London (*Millennium* only), and then finally in its home at the Walter Kerr Theatre (after being promised to the Public and changing locations and theatre groups). *Millennium* postponed its Broadway debut due to technical difficulties, and *Perestroika*, due to constant rewrites and other technical issues, opened later. The show ran in repertory through the end of its run.

³ Tony Kushner, Acknowledgements in *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995).

⁴ Tony Kushner. *Angels in America, A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 265.

⁵ Susan Sontag, "On Art and Politics," in *Tony Kushner in Conversation*, ed. Robert Vorlicky (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 187.

⁶ Michael Cadden, "Strange Angel: The Pinklisting of Roy Cohn," in *Approaching the Millennium*, eds. Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 79.

⁷ In referring to the Angel as a woman, I am following the language used by the character Prior, as well as the practice of casting a woman in the role. Despite the script's references to the character's hermaphroditism, the Angel is described as a woman by Kushner in his production notes as well.

⁸ TV Reed, "The Poetical is Political: Feminist Poetry and the Poetics of Women's Rights," in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, 3rd ed., eds. Carole R. McCann and Seung-kyung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2013), 90.

⁹ Ibid., Ibid.

¹⁰ Michelle V. Rowley. "The Idea of Ancestry: Of Feminist Genealogies and Many Other Things," in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, 3rd ed., eds. Carole R. McCann and Seung-kyung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2013), 80.

¹¹ Ibid., Ibid.

¹² Elin Diamond, "The Violence of 'We': Politicizing Identification," in *Critical Theory and Performance*. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach, eds. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 404.

¹³ Ibid., 405.

¹⁴ Adam Mars Jones, "Tony Kushner at the Royal National Theatre of Great Britain," in *Tony Kushner in Conversation*, ed. Robert Vorlicky (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998).

¹⁵ Kushner, *Angels in America*, 51-52.

¹⁶ Gregory W. Bredbeck, "Free[ing] the Erotic Angel: Performing Liberation in the 1970s and 1990s," in *Approaching the Millennium*, eds. Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 271.

¹⁷ Kushner, *Angels in America*, 120.

¹⁸ Richard Godbeer, "The Cry of Sodom," in *Long Before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America*. Thomas Foster, ed. New York: New York University Press, 2007.

¹⁹ Clare A. Lyons, "Mapping an Atlantic Sexual Culture: Homoeroticism in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," in *Long Before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America*, ed. Thomas Foster (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

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²¹ Jay Hatheway, *The Gilded Age Construction of Modern American Homophobia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

²² Kushner, *Angels in America*, 40.

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- ²³ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
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- ²⁵ Kushner, *Angels in America*, 101.
- ²⁶ Ibid., Ibid.
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- ³⁴ Kushner, *Angels in America*, 69.
- ³⁵ Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played on: Politics, People, and the Aids Epidemic* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).
- ³⁶ Kushner, *Angels in America*, 280.
- ³⁷ Kushner, *Angels in America*, 148.
- ³⁸ Kushner, Tony. *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes: Revised and Complete Edition*, Theatre Communications Group, 2013. Kindle Edition.
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- ⁴⁰ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 130.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., Ibid.
- ⁴² Ibid., 131.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 127.
- ⁴⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2006), 126.
- ⁴⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 127.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., Ibid.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 186.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol I* (New York: Random House, 1990), 36.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 53.
- ⁵² Ibid., 55.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 93.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 136.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 157.
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- ⁶² Green, "Queer Theory and Sociology," 27.

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- ⁶³ Seidman et al., *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies*, 12.
- ⁶⁴ Weeks, "The Social Construction of Sexuality," 19.
- ⁶⁵ David Savran, "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the Nation," in *Approaching the Millennium*, edited by Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 33.
- ⁶⁶ Savran, "Ambivalence," 36.
- ⁶⁷ Kushner, *Angels in America*, 267.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid., 265.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., 275.
- ⁷⁰ Sontag, "On Art and Politics," 178.
- ⁷¹ Kushner, *Angels in America*, 280.
- ⁷² Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, *Plato at the Googleplex* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014), 38.
- ⁷³ Goldstein, *Plato at the Googleplex*, 38-39.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid., 39.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid., 40.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid., 41.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid., Ibid.
- ⁷⁸ Jones, "Kushner at the Royal National Theatre," 20-21.
- ⁷⁹ Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 143.
- ⁸⁰ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 18.
- ⁸¹ Ibid., Ibid.
- ⁸² Kushner, *Angels in America*, 265.
- ⁸³ Alan Sikes, "Weimar Sexual Politics: Homosexual Desire in the Early Plays of Bertolt Brecht" in *Public Theatres and Theatre Publics*, eds. Robert B. Shimko and Sara Freeman (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 155.
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- ⁸⁵ Kushner, *Angels in America*, 96.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid., 278.
- ⁸⁷ Savran, "Ambivalence," 211.
- ⁸⁸ Kushner, *Angels in America*, 36.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid., 51.
- ⁹⁰ Ibid., 52.
- ⁹¹ Ibid., 255-256.
- ⁹² Ibid., 257.
- ⁹³ Natalie Meisner, "Messing with the Idyllic: The Performance of Femininity in Kushner's *Angels in America*" *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 16 (2003): 177.
- ⁹⁴ Savran, "Ambivalence," 35.
- ⁹⁵ Kushner, *Angels in America*, Playwrights Notes.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid., 142.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid., 78.
- ⁹⁸ Jones, "Kushner at the Royal National Theatre," 26.
- ⁹⁹ Kushner, *Angels in America*, 278.