Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How Angels in America Reconstructs the Nation

David Savran

Critics, pundits, and producers have placed Tony Kushner's Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes in the unenviable position of having to rescue the American theatre. The latter, by all accounts, is in a sorry state. It has attempted to maintain its elite cultural status despite the fact that the differences between "high" and "low" have become precarious. On Broadway, increasingly expensive productions survive more and more by mimicking mass culture, either in the form of mind-numbing spectacles featuring singing cats, falling chandeliers, and dancing dinnerware or plays, like The Heidi Chronicles or Prelude to a Kiss, whose style and themes aspire to "quality" television. In regional theatres, meanwhile, subscriptions continue to decline, and with them the adventurousness of artistic directors. Given this dismal situation, Angels in America has almost singlehandedly resuscitated a category of play that has become almost extinct: the serious Broadway drama that is neither a British import nor a revival.

Not within memory has a new American play been canonized by the press as rapidly as Angels in America. Indeed, critics have been stumbling over each other in an adulatory stupor. John Lahr hails Perestroika as a "masterpiece" and notes that "[n]ot since Williams has a playwright announced his poetic vision with such authority on the Broadway stage." Jack Kroll judges both parts "the broadest, deepest, most searching American play of our time," while Robert Brustein deems Millennium Approaches "the authoritative achievement of a radical dramatic artist with a fresh, clear voice." In the gay press, meanwhile, the play is viewed as testifying to the fact

David Savran is Professor of English at Brown University. His most recent book is Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. This essay is excerpted from a work-in-progress on masochism and masculinity in American culture since 1960.

My thanks to Rhett Landrum, Loren Noveck, John Rouse, and Ronn Smith for their invaluable contributions to this essay.

1Joseph Roach has suggested to me that the closest analogue to Angels on the American stage is, in fact, Uncle Tom's Cabin, with its tremendous popularity before the Civil War, its epic length, and its skill in addressing the most controversial issues of the time in deeply equivocal ways.


that "Broadway now leads the way in the industry with its unapologetic portrayals of gay characters."4 For both Frank Rich and John Clum, Angels is far more than just a successful play; it is the marker of a decisive historical shift in American theatre. According to Rich, the play's success is in part the result of its ability to conduct "a searching and radical rethinking of the whole esthetic of American political drama."5 For Clum, the play's appearance on Broadway "marks a turning point in the history of gay drama, the history of American drama, and of American literary culture."6 In its reception, Angels—so deeply preoccupied with teleological process—is itself positioned as both the culmination of history and as that which rewrites the past.

Despite the enormity of the claims cited above, I am less interested in disputing them than in trying to understand why they are being made—and why now. Why is a play featuring five gay male characters being universalized as a "turning point" in the American theatre, and minoritized as the preeminent gay male artifact of the 1990s? Why is it both popular and "radical?" What is the linkage between the two primary sources for the play's theory of history and utopia—Walter Benjamin and Mormonism? And what does this linkage suggest about the constitution of the nation? Finally, why has queer drama become the theatrical sensation of the 1990s? I hope it's not too perverse of me to attempt to answer these questions by focusing less on the construction of queer subjectivities per se than on the field of cultural production in which Angels in America is situated. After all, how else would one practice a queer materialism?

The Angel of History

The opposite of nearly everything you say about Angels in America will also hold true: Angels valorizes identity politics; it offers an anti-fundamentalist critique of identity politics. Angels mounts an attack against ideologies of individualism; it problematizes the idea of community. Angels submits liberalism to a trenchant examination; it finally opts for yet another version of American liberal pluralism. Angels launches a critique of the very mechanisms that produce pathologized and acquiescent female bodies; it represents yet another pathologization and silencing of women. A conscientious reader or spectator might well rebuke the play, as Belize does Louis: "you're ambivalent about everything."7 And so it is. The play's ambivalence, however, is not simply the result of Kushner hedging his bets on the most controversial issues. Rather, it functions, I believe—quite independently of the intent of its author—as the play's political unconscious, playing itself out on many different levels: formal, ideological, characterological, and rhetorical. (Frank Rich refers to this as Kushner's "refusal to adhere to any theatrical or political theory."8) Yet the fact that

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4 John E. Harris, "Miracle on 48th Street," Christopher Street, March 1994, 6.
7 Tony Kushner, Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes. Part One: Millennium Approaches (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993), 95. All further references will be noted in the text.
ambivalence—or undecidability—is the watchword of this text (which is, after all, *two* plays) does not mean that all the questions it raises remain unresolved. On the contrary, I will argue that the play’s undecidability is, in fact, always already resolved because the questions that appear to be ambivalent in fact already have been decided consciously or unconsciously by the text itself. Moreover, the relentless operation of normalizing reading practices works to reinforce these decisions. If I am correct, the play turns out (*pace* Frank Rich) to adhere all too well to a particular political theory.

Formally, *Angels* is a promiscuously complicated play that is very difficult to categorize generically. Clum’s characterization of it as being “like a Shakespearean romance” is doubtlessly motivated by the play’s rambling and episodic form, its interweaving of multiple plotlines, its mixture of realism and fantasy, its invocation of various theological and mythological narratives, as well as by its success in evoking those characteristics that are usually associated with both comedy and tragedy. Moreover, *Perestroika*’s luminous finale is remarkably suggestive of the beatific scenes that end Shakespeare’s romances. There is no question, moreover, but that the play deliberately evokes the long history of Western dramatic literature and positions itself as heir to the traditions of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Brecht, and others. Consider, for example, its use of the blindness/insight opposition and the way that Prior Walter is carefully constructed (like the blind Praelaparianov) as a kind of Teiresias, “going blind, as prophets do.”10 This binarism, the paradigmatic emblem of the tragic subject (and mark of Teiresias, Oedipus, and Gloucester) deftly links cause and effect—because one is blind to truth, one loses one’s sight—and is used to claim Prior’s priority, his epistemologically privileged position in the text. Or consider the parallels often drawn in the press between Kushner’s Roy Cohn and Shakespeare’s Richard III.11 Or Kushner’s use of a fate motif, reminiscent of *Macbeth*, whereby Prior insists that Louis not return until the seemingly impossible comes to pass, until he sees Louis “black and blue” (2:89). Or Kushner’s rewriting of those momentous moral and political debates that riddle not just classical tragedy (*Antigone, Richard II*) but also the work of Brecht and his (mainly British) successors (Howard Brenton, David Hare, Caryl Churchill). Or the focus on the presence/absence of God that one finds not just in early modern tragedy but also in so-called Absurdism (Beckett, Ionesco, Stoppard). Moreover, these characteristics tend to be balanced, on the one hand, by the play’s insistent tendency to ironize and, on the other, by the familiar ingredients of romantic comedies (ill-matched paramours, repentant lovers, characters suddenly finding themselves in unfamiliar places, plus a lot of good jokes). Despite the ironic/comic tone, however, none of the interlaced couples survives the onslaught of chaos, disease, and revelation. Prior and Louis, Louis and Joe, Joe and Harper have all parted at the end of the play and the romantic dyad (as primary social unit) is replaced in the final scene of *Perestroika* by a utopian concept of (erotic) affiliation and a new definition of family.

9 Clum, 314.
10 Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes. Part Two: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994), 56. All further references will be noted in the text.
Angels in America’s title, its idea of utopia, and its model for a particular kind of ambivalence are derived in part from Benjamin’s extraordinary meditation, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” written shortly before his death in 1940. Composed during the first months of World War II, with fascism on its march across Europe, the darkness (and simultaneous luminosity) of Benjamin’s “Theses” attest not only to the seeming invincibility of Hitler, but also to the impossible position of the European left, “[s]tranded,” as Terry Eagleton notes, “between social democracy and Stalinism.”12 In this essay, Benjamin sketches a discontinuous theory of history in which “the services of theology” are enlisted in the aid of reconceiving “historical materialism.”13 Opposing the universalizing strategies of bourgeois historicism with historical materialism’s project of brushing “history against the grain” (257), he attempts a radical revision of Marxist historiography. Saturing the Jewish notion of Messianic time (in which all history is given meaning retrospectively by the sudden and unexpected coming of the Messiah) to the Marxist concept of revolution, Benjamin reimagines proletariat revolution not as the culmination of a conflict between classes, or between traditional institutions and new forms of production, but as a “blast[ing] open” of “the continuum of history” (262). Unlike traditional Marxist (or idealist) historiographers, he rejects the idea of the present as a moment of “transition” and instead conceives it as Jetztzeit: “time filled by the presence of the now” (261), a moment in which “time stands still and has come to a stop” (262). Facing Jetztzeit, and opposing all forms of gradualism, Benjamin’s historical materialist is given the task not of imagining and inciting progressive change (or a movement toward socialism), but of “blast[ing] a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history” (263).

The centerpiece of Benjamin’s essay is his explication of a painting by Paul Klee, which becomes a parable of history, of the time of the Now, in the face of catastrophe (which for him means all of human history):

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

[257–58]

In Benjamin’s allegory, with its irresolvable play of contradictions, the doggedly well-intentioned angel of history embodies both the inconceivability of progress and the excruciating condition of the Now. Poised (not unlike Benjamin himself in Europe in 1940) between the past, which is to say “catastrophe,” and an unknown and terrifying

future, he is less a heavenly actor than a passive observer, "fixedly contemplating" that
disaster which is the history of the world. His "Paradise," meanwhile, is not the site of
a benign utopianism but a "storm" whose "violence" gets caught under his wings and
propels him helplessly into an inconceivable future that stymies his gaze.

Benjamin's allegory of history is, in many respects, the primary generative fiction
for Angels in America. Not only is its Angel clearly derived from Benjamin's text
(although with gender reassignment surgery along the way—Kushner's Angel is
"Hermaphroditically Equipped"), but so is its vision of Heaven, which has "a deserted,
derelict feel to it," with "rubble . . . strewn everywhere" (2:48; 121). And the play's
conceptualizations of the past, of catastrophe, and of utopia are clearly inflected by
Benjamin's "Theses," as is its linkage between historical materialism and theology.
Moreover, rather than attempt to suppress the contradictions that inform Benjamin's
materialist theology, Kushner expands them. As a result, the ideas of history, progress,
and paradise that Angels in America invokes are irreducibly contradictory (often
without appearing to be so). Just as Benjamin's notion of revolution is related
dialectically to catastrophe, so are Angels's concepts of deliverance and abjection,
ecstasy and pain, utopia and dystopia, necessarily linked. Kushner's Angel (and her/
his heaven) serve as a constant reminder both of catastrophe (AIDS, racism,
homophobia, and the pathologization of queer and female bodies, to name only the
play's most obvious examples) and of the perpetual possibility of millennium's
approach, or in the words of Ethel Rosenberg (unmistakably echoing Benjamin), that
"[h]istory is about to crack wide open" (1:112). And the concept of utopia/dystopia to
which s/he is linked guarantees that the vehicle of hope and redemption in Angels—
the prophet who foresees a new age—will be the character who must endure the most
agony: Prior Walter, suffering from AIDS and Louis's desertion.

Within the economy of utopia/dystopia that Angels installs, the greatest promise of
the millennium is the possibility of life freed from the shackles of hatred, oppression,
and disease. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Roy Cohn is constructed as the
embodiment and guarantor of dystopia. Not only is he the paradigm of bourgeois
individualism—and Reaganism—at its most murderous, hypocritical, and malignant,
but he is the one with the most terrifying vision of the "universe," which he apprehends
"as a kind of sandstorm in outer space with winds of mega-hurricane
velocity, but instead of grains of sand it's shards and splinters of glass" (1:13). It is,
however, a sign of the play's obsessively dialectical structure that Roy's vision of what
sounds like hell should provide an uncanny echo of Benjamin's "storm blowing from
Paradise." Yet even this dialectic, much like the play's ambivalences, is deceptive
insofar as its habit of turning one pole of a binarism relentlessly into its opposite
(rather than into a synthesis) describes a false dialectic. Prior, on the other hand,
refusing the role of victim, becomes the sign of the unimaginable, of "[t]he Great
Work" (2:148). Yet, as with Roy, so Prior's privileged position is a figure of contradic-
tion, coupling not just blindness with prophecy, but also history with an impossible
future, an ancient lineage (embodied by Prior 1 and Prior 2) with the millennium yet
to come, and AIDS with a "most inner part, entirely free of disease" (1:34). Moreover,
Prior's very name designates his temporal dislocation, the fact that he is at once too
soon and belated, both that which anticipates and that which provides an epilogue
(to the Walter family, if nothing else, since he seems to mark the end of the line). Prior
Walter also serves as the queer commemoration of the Walter that came before—Walter Benjamin—whose revolutionary principles he both embodies and displaces insofar as he marks both the presence and absence of Walter Benjamin in this text.\textsuperscript{14}

Throughout Angels in America, the utopia/dystopia coupling (wherein disaster becomes simultaneously the marker for and incitement to think Paradise) plays itself out through a host of binary oppositions: heaven/hell, forgiveness/retribution, communitarianism/individualism, spirit/flesh, pleasure/pain, beauty/decay, future/past, homosexuality/heterosexuality, rationalism/indeterminacy, migration/staying put, progress/stasis, life/death. Each of these functions not just as a set of conceptual poles in relation to which characters and themes are worked out and interpreted, but also as an \textit{oxymoron}, a figure of undecidability whose contradictory being becomes an incitement to think the impossible—revolution. For it is precisely the conjunction of opposites that allows what Benjamin calls “the flow of thoughts” to be given a “shock” and so turned into “the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening” (262–63). The \textit{oxymoron}, in other words, becomes the privileged figure by which the unimaginable allows itself to be imagined.

In Kushner’s reading of Benjamin, the hermaphroditic Angel becomes the most crucial site for the elaboration of contradiction. Because her/his body is the one on which an impossible—and utopian—sexual conjunction is played out, s/he decisively undermines the distinction between the heterosexual and the homosexual. With her/his “eight vaginas” and “Bouquet of Phalli” (2:48), s/he represents an absolute otherness, the impossible Other that fulfills the longing for both the maternal and paternal (or in Lacanian terms, both demand and the Law). On the one hand, as the maternal “Other,” s/he is constituted by “[d]emand . . . as already possessing the ‘privilege’ of satisfying needs, that is to say, the power of depriving them of that alone by which they are satisfied.”\textsuperscript{15} On the other hand, “[a]s the law of symbolic functioning,” s/he simultaneously represents the “Other embodied in the figure of the symbolic father,” “not a person but a place, the locus of law, language and the symbolic.”\textsuperscript{16} The impossible conjunction of the maternal and the paternal, s/he provides Prior with sexual pleasure of celestial quality—and gives a new meaning to safe sex. At the same time, s/he also fills and completes subjectivity, being the embodiment of and receptacle for Prior’s “Released Female Essence” (2:48).

Although all of these characteristics suggest that the Angel is constructed as an extratemporal being, untouched by the ravages of passing time, s/he comes (quite

\textsuperscript{14} Tony Kushner explains: “I've written about my friend Kimberly [Flynn] who is a profound influence on me. And she and I were talking about this utopian thing that we share—she's the person who introduced me to that side of Walter Benjamin. . . . She said jokingly that at times she felt such an extraordinary kinship with him that she thought she was Walter Benjamin reincarnated. And so at one point in the conversation, when I was coming up with names for my characters, I said, ‘I had to look up something in Benjamin—not you, but the prior Walter.’ That’s where the name came from. I had been looking for one of those WASP names that nobody gets called anymore.” David Savran, “The Theatre of the Fabulous: An Interview with Tony Kushner,” in \textit{Speaking on Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights}, ed. Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press), forthcoming.


literally for Prior) already culturally mediated. When s/he first appears at the end of *Millennium*, he exclaims, “Very Steven Spielberg” (1:118). Although his campy ejaculation is clearly calculated as a laugh line, defusing and undercutting (with typical postmodern cynicism) the deadly earnestness of the scene, it also betrays the fact that this miraculous apparition is in part the product of a culture industry and that any reading of her/him will be mediated by the success of Steven Spielberg and his ilk (in films like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *E.T.*) in producing a particular vision of the miraculous—with lots of bright white light and music by John Williams. To that extent, the appearance of the Angel signals the degree to which utopia—and revolution!—have now become the product of commodity culture. Unlike earlier periods, when utopia tended to be imagined in terms of production (rather than consumption) and was sited in a preceding phase of capitalism (for example, in a preindustrial or agrarian society), late capitalism envisions utopia through the lens of the commodity and—not unlike Walter Benjamin at his most populist—projects it into a future and an elsewhere lit by that “unearthly white light” (1:118) which represents, among other things, the illimitable allure of the commodity form.¹⁷

Although the construction of the Angel represses her/his historicity, the heaven s/he calls home is explicitly the product (and victim) of temporality. Heaven is a simulacrum of San Francisco on 18 April 1906, the day of the Great Earthquake. For it is on this day that God “[a]bandoned” his angels and their heaven “[a]nd did not return” (2:51). Heaven thus appears frozen in time, “deserted and derelict,” with “rubble strewn everywhere” (2:121). The Council Room in Heaven, meanwhile, “dimmily lit by candles and a single great bulb” (which periodically fails) is a monument to the past, specifically to the New Science of the seventeenth century and the Enlightenment project to which it is inextricably linked. The table in the Council Room is “covered with antique and broken astronomical, astrological, mathematical and nautical objects of measurement and calculation . . . .” At its center sits a “bulky radio, a 1940s model in very poor repair” (2:128) on which the Angels are listening to the first reports of the Chernobyl disaster. Conflating different moments of the past and distinct (Western) histories, Heaven is a kind of museum, not the insignia of the Now, but of *before*, of an antique past, of the obsolete. Its decrepitude is also symptomatic of the Angels’ fear that God will never return. More nightmare than utopia, marooned in history, Heaven commemorates disaster, despair, and stasis.

Because of its embeddedness in the past, the geography of Heaven is a key to the complex notion of temporality that governs *Angels in America*. Although the scheme does not become clear until *Perestroika*, there are two opposing concepts of time and history running through the play. First, there is the time of the Angels (and of Heaven), the time of dystopian “STASIS” (2:54) as decreed by the absence of a God who, Prior insists, “isn’t coming back” (2:133). According to the Angel, this temporal paralysis is

¹⁷ Benjamin maintained a far less condemnatory attitude toward the increasing technologization of culture than many other Western Marxists. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” for example, he writes of his qualified approval of the destruction of the aura associated with modern technologies. He explains that because “mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual, . . . the total function of art” can “be based on another practice—politics,” which for him is clearly preferable. Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, 224.
the direct result of the hyperactivity of human beings: "YOU HAVE DRIVEN HIM
AWAY!," the Angel enjoins Prior, "YOU MUST STOP MOVING!" (2:52), in the hope
that immobility will once again prompt the return of God and the forward movement
of time. Yet this concept of time as stasis is also linked to decay. In the Angel’s threnody
that ends the Council scene, s/he envisions the dissolution of “the Great Design, / The
spiraling apart of the Work of Eternity” (2:134). Directly opposed to this concept is
human temporality, of which Prior, in contradistinction to the Angel, becomes the
spokesperson. This time—which is also apparently the time of God—is the temporality
connected with Enlightenment epistemologies; it is the time of “Progress,”
“Science,” and “Forward Motion” (2:132; 50). It is the time of “Change” (2:13) so
dervently desired by Comrade Prelapsarianov and the “neo-Hegelian positivist sense
of constant historical progress towards happiness or perfection” so precious to Louis
(1:25). It is the promise fulfilled at the end of Perestroika when Louis, apprehending
“the end of the Cold War,” announces, “[t]he whole world is changing!” (2:145). Most
important, the time of “progress, migration, motion” and “modernity” is also, in
Prior’s formulation, the time of “desire,” because it is this last all-too-human charac-
teristic that produces modernity (2:132). Without desire (for change, utopia, the Other),
there could be no history.

Despite the fact that this binary opposition generates so much of the play’s
ideological framework, and that its two poles are at times indistinguishable, it seems
to me that this is one question on which Angels in America is not ambivalent at all.
Unlike the Benjamin of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” for whom any
concept of progress seems quite inconceivable, Kushner is devoted to rescuing
Enlightenment epistemologies at a time when they are, to say the least, extremely
unfashionable. On the one hand, Angels in America counters attacks from the pundits
of the right, wallowing in their post-Cold War triumphalism, for whom socialism, or
“the coordination of men’s activities through central direction,” is the road to
“serfdom.”18 For these neoconservatives, “[w]e already live in the millennal new age,”
we already stand at “the end of history” and, as a result, in Francis Fukuyama’s words,
“we cannot picture to ourselves a world that is essentially different from the present
one, and at the same time better.”19 Obsessed with “free markets and private
property,” and trying desperately to maintain the imperialist status quo, they can only
imagine progress as regression.20 On the other hand, Angels also challenges the
orthodoxies of those poststructuralists on the left by whom the Marxian concept of
history is often dismissed as hopelessly idealist, as “a contemptible attempt” to
construct “grand narratives” and “totalizing (totalitarian?) knowledges.”21 In the face
of these profound cynics, Angels unabashedly champions rationalism and progress.
In the last words of Perestroika’s last act, Harper suggests that “[i]n this world, there is

18 Although one could cite a myriad of sources, this quotation is extracted from Milton Friedman,
19 Krishan Kumar, “The End of Socialism? The End of Utopia? The End of History?,” in Utopias and
the Millennium, ed. Krishan Kumar and Stephen Bann (London: Reaktion Books, 1993), 61; Francis
Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man, quoted in Kumar, 78.
20 Friedman, 21.
21 Aijaz Ahmad, In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures (London: Verso, 1992), 69. Ahmad is
summarizing this position as part of his critique of poststructuralism.
a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we've left behind, and dreaming ahead” (2:144). The last words of the epilogue, meanwhile, are given to Prior who envisions a future in which “[w]e” (presumably gay men, lesbians, and persons with AIDS) “will be citizens.” “More Life” (2:148), he demands.

Kushner's differences with Benjamin—and the poststructuralists—over the possibility of progress and his championing of modernity (and the desire that produces it) suggest that the string of binary oppositions that are foundational to the play are perhaps less undecidable than I originally suggested. Meaning is produced, in part, because these oppositions are constructed as interlocking homologies, each an analogy for all the others. And despite the fact that each term of each opposition is strictly dependent on the other and, indeed, is produced by its other, these relations are by no means symmetrical. Binary oppositions are always hierarchical—especially when the fact of hierarchy is repressed. Angels is carefully constructed so that communitarianism, rationalism, progress, and so forth, will be read as being preferable to their alternatives: individualism, indeterminacy, stasis, and so forth (“the playwright has been able to find hope in his chronicle of the poisonous 1980s”). So at least as far as this string of interlocked binary oppositions is concerned, ambivalence turns out to be not especially ambivalent after all.

At the same time, what is one to make of other binarisms—most notably, the opposition between masculine and feminine—toward which the play seems to cultivate a certain studied ambivalence? On the one hand, it is clear that Kushner is making some effort to counter the long history of the marginalization and silencing of women in American culture generally and in American theatre, in particular. Harper's hallucinations are crucial to the play's articulation of its central themes, including questions of exile and of the utopia/dystopia binarism. They also give her a privileged relationship to Prior, in whose fantasies she sometimes partakes and with whom she visits Heaven. Her unequivocal rejection of Joe and expropriation of his credit card at the end of the play, moreover, signal her repossession of her life and her progress from imaginary to real travel. Hannah, meanwhile, is constructed as an extremely independent and strong-willed woman who becomes part of the new extended family that is consolidated at the end of the play. Most intriguingly, the play's deliberate foregrounding of the silencing of the Mormon Mother and Daughter in the diorama is symptomatic of Kushner's desire to let women speak. On the other hand, Angels seems to replicate many of the structures that historically have produced female subjectivity as Other. Harper may be crucial to the play's structure but she is still pathologized, like so many of her antecedents on the American stage (from Mary Tyrone to Blanche DuBois to Honey in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?). With her hallucinations and “emotional problems” (1:27), she functions as a scapegoat for Joe, the displacement of his sexual problems. Moreover, her false confession that she's “going to have a baby” (1:41) not only reinforces the link in the play between femininity and maternity but also literally hystericizes her. And Hannah, despite her strength, is defined almost entirely by her relationship to her real son and to Prior, her surrogate son. Like Belize, she is given the role of caretaker.

Most important, the celestial "sexual politics" (2:49) of the play guarantees that the feminine remains Other. After his visitation by the Angel, Prior explains that "God . . . is a man. Well, not a man, he's a flaming Hebrew letter, but a male flaming Hebrew letter" (2:49). In comparison with this masculinized, Old Testament-style, "flaming" (!) patriarch, the Angels are decidedly hermaphroditic. Nonetheless, the play’s stage directions use the feminine pronoun when designating the Angel and s/he has been played by a woman in all of the play’s various American premieres. As a result of this clearly delineated gendered difference, femininity is associated (in Heaven at least) with "STASIS" and collapse, while a divine masculinity is coded as being simultaneously deterministic and absent. In the play’s pseudo-Platonic—and heterosexualized—metaphysics, the “orgasm” of the Angels produces (a feminized) “protomatter, which fuels the [masculinized] Engine of Creation” (2:49).

Moreover, the play’s use of doubling reinforces this sense of the centrality of masculinity. Unlike Caryl Churchill’s Cloud 9 (surely the locus classicus of genderfuck), Angels uses cross-gender casting only for minor characters. And the crossing of gender works in one direction only. The actresses playing Hannah, Harper, and the Angel take on a number of male heterosexual characters while the male actors double only in masculine roles. As a result, it seems to me that Angels, unlike the work of Churchill, does not denaturalize gender. Rather, masculinity—which, intriguingly, is always already queered in this text—is produced as a remarkably stable, if contradictory, essence that others can mime but which only a real (i.e., biological) male can embody. Thus, yet another ambivalence turns out to be always already decided.

The American Religion

The nation that Angels in America fantasizes has its roots in the early nineteenth century, the period during which the United States became constituted, to borrow Benedict Anderson’s celebrated formulation, as “an imagined political community, . . . imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”23 For not until the 1830s and 1840s, with the success of Jacksonian democracy and the development of the ideology of Manifest Destiny, did a sense of an imagined community of Americans begin to solidify, due to a number of factors: the consolidation of industrialization in the Northeast; the proliferation of large newspapers and state banks; and a transportation revolution that linked the urban centers with both agricultural producers and markets abroad.24

It is far more than coincidence that the birth of the modern idea of America coincided with what is often called the Second Great Awakening (the First had culminated in the Revolutionary War). During these years, as Klaus Hansen relates, “the old paternalistic reform impulse directed toward social control yielded to a romantic reform movement impelled by millennialism, immediatism, and individualism.” This movement, in turn, “made possible the creation of the modern American

capitalist empire with its fundamental belief in religious, political, and economic pluralism. For those made uneasy (for a variety of reasons) by the new Jacksonian individualism, this pluralism authorized the emergence of alternative social and religious sects, both millenialist evangelical revivals and new communities like the Shakers, the Oneida Perfectionists, and, most prominently and successfully, the Mormons. As Hansen emphasizes, “Mormonism was not merely one more variant of American Protestant pluralism but an articulate and sophisticated counterideology that attempted to establish a ‘new heaven and a new earth . . . ’” Moreover, “both in its origins and doctrines,” Mormonism “insisted on the peculiarly American nature of its fundamental values” and on the identity of America as the promised land.

Given the number and prominence of Mormon characters in the play, it should come as little surprise that Mormonism, at least as it was originally articulated in the 1820s and 1830s, maintains a very close relationship to the epistemology of Angels in America. Many of the explicitly hieratic qualities of the play—the notion of prophecy, the sacred book, as well as the Angel her/himself—owe as much to Mormonism as to Walter Benjamin. Even more important, the play’s conceptualization of history, its millenialism, and its idea of America bring it startlingly close to the tenets of early Mormonism. Indeed, it is impossible to understand the concept of the nation with which Angels is obsessed (and even the idea of queering the nation!) without understanding the constitution of early Mormonism. Providing Calvinism with its most radical challenge during the National Period, it was deeply utopian in its thrust (and it remains so today). Indeed, its concept of time is identical to the temporality for which Angels in America polemicizes. Like Angels, Mormonism understands time as evolution and progress (in that sense, it is more closely linked to Enlightenment epistemologies than Romantic ones) and holds out the possibility of unlimited human growth: “As man is God once was: as God is man may become.” Part of a tremendous resurgence of interest in the millennium between 1828 and 1832, Mormonism went far beyond the ideology of progress implicit in Jacksonian democracy (just as Angels’s millenialism goes far beyond most contemporary ideologies of progress). Understood historically, this utopianism was in part the result of the relatively marginal economic status of Joseph Smith and his followers, subsistence farmers and struggling petits bourgeois. Tending “to be ‘agin the government,” these early Mormons were a persecuted minority and, in their westward journey to Zion, became the subjects of widespread violence, beginning in 1832 when Smith was tarred and feathered in Ohio. Much like twentieth-century lesbians and gay men—although most contemporary Mormons would be appalled by the comparison—Mormons were, throughout the 1830s and 1840s, attacked by mobs, arrested on false

27 Hansen, 52.
28 Joseph Smith, quoted in Hansen, 72.
30 Hansen, 119.
challenges, imprisoned, and murdered. In 1838, the Governor of Missouri decreed that they must be “exterminated” or expelled from the state. In 1844, Smith and his brother were assassinated by an angry mob.  

The violent antipathy towards early Mormonism was in part the result of the fact that it presented a significant challenge to the principles of individualist social and economic organization. From the beginning, Mormonism was communitarian in nature and proposed a kind of ecclesiastical socialism in which “those entering the order were asked to ‘consecrate’ their property and belongings to the church . . . .” To each male would then be returned enough to sustain him and his family, while the remainder would be apportioned to “‘every man who has need . . . .’” As Hansen emphasizes, this organization represents a repudiation of the principles of laissez-faire and an attempt “to restore a more traditional society in which the economy was regulated in behalf of the larger interests of the group . . . .” This nostalgia for an earlier period of capitalism (the agrarianism of the early colonies) is echoed by Mormonism’s conceptualization of the continent as the promised land. Believing the Garden of Eden to have been sited in America and assigning all antediluvian history to the western hemisphere, early Mormonism believed that the term “‘New World’ was in fact a misnomer because America was really the cradle of man and civilization.” So the privileged character of the nation is linked to its sacred past and—as with Benjamin—history is tied to theology. At the same time, this essentially theological conceptualization of the nation bears witness to the “strong affinity,” noted by Anderson, between “the nationalist imagining” and “religious imaginings.” As Timothy Brennan explains it, “nationalism largely extend[s] and modernize[s] (although [does] not replace) ‘religious imaginings,’ taking on religion’s concern with death, continuity, and the desire for origins.” Like religion, the nation authorizes a reconfiguration of time and mortality, a “secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning.” Mormonism’s spiritual geography was perfectly suited to this process, constructing America as both origin and meaning of history. Moreover, as Hans Kohn has pointed out, modern nationalism has expropriated these crucial concepts from those same Old Testament mythologies that provide the basis for Mormonism: “the idea of a chosen people, the emphasis on a common stock of memory of the past and of hopes for the future, and finally national messianism.”

This conceptualization of America as the site of a blessed past and a millennial future represents—simultaneously—the fulfillment of early nineteenth-century ideas of the nation and a repudiation of the ideologies of individualism and acquisitiveness that underwrite the Jacksonian marketplace. Yet, as Sacvan Bercovitch points out, this contradiction was at the heart of the nationalist project. As the economy was being

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33 Hansen, 27, 66.
34 Anderson, 10–11.
36 Anderson, 10–11.
transformed "from agrarian to industrial capitalism," the primary "source of dissent was an indigenous residual culture," which, like Mormonism, was "variously identified with agrarianism, libertarian thought, and the tradition of civic humanism." These ideologies, "by conserving the myths of a bygone age" and dreaming "of human wholeness and social regeneration," then produced "the notion of an ideal America with a politically transformative potential." Like the writers of the American Renaissance, Mormonism "adopted the culture's controlling metaphor—'America' as synonym for human possibility," and then turned it against the dominant class. Both producing and fulfilling the nationalist dream, it "portray[ed] the American ideology, as all ideology yearns to be portrayed, in the transcendent colors of utopia."38 A form of dissent that ultimately (and contradictorily) reinforced hegemonic values, Mormonism reconceived America as the promised land, the land of an already achieved utopia, and simultaneously as the land of promise, the site of the millennium yet to come.

I recapitulate the early history of Mormonism because I believe it is crucial for understanding how Angels in America has been culturally positioned. It seems to me that the play replicates both the situation and project of early Mormonism with an uncanny accuracy and thereby documents the continued validity of both a particular regressive fantasy of America and a particular understanding of oppositional cultural practices. Like the projects of Joseph Smith and his followers, Angels has, from the beginning, on the levels of authorial intention and reception, been constructed as an oppositional, and even "radical" work. Structurally and ideologically, the play challenges the conventions of American realism and the tenets of Reaganism. Indeed, it offers by far the most explicit and trenchant critique of neoconservatism to have been produced on Broadway. It also provides the most thoroughgoing—and unambivalent—deconstruction in memory of a binarism absolutely crucial to liberalism, the opposition between public and private. Angels demonstrates conclusively not only the constructedness of the difference between the political and the sexual, but also the murderous power of this distinction. Yet, at the same time, not despite but because of these endeavors, the play has been accommodated with stunning ease to the hegemonic ideology not just of the theatre-going public, but of the democratic majority—an ideology that has become the new American religion—liberal pluralism.39

The old-style American liberalisms, variously associated (reading from left to right) with trade unionism, reformism, and competitive individualism, tend to value freedom above all other qualities (the root word for liberalism is, after all, the Latin liber, meaning "free"). Taking the "free" individual subject as the fundamental social unit, liberalism has long been associated with the principle of laissez-faire and the "free" market, and is reformist rather than revolutionary in its politics. At the same time, however, because liberalism, particularly in its American versions, has always paid at least lip service to equality, certain irreducible contradictions have been bred in

39 Despite the 1994 Republican House and Senate victories (in which the Republicans received the vote of only 20% of the electorate) and the grandstanding of Newt Gingrich, the country remains far less conservative on many social issues than the Republicans would like Americans to believe. See Thomas Ferguson, "G.O.P. $$$ Talked; Did Voters Listen?," The Nation, 26 December 1994, 792–98.
what did, after all, emerge during the seventeenth century as the ideological complement to (and justification for) mercantile capitalism. Historically, American liberalism has permitted dissent and fostered tolerance—within certain limits—and guaranteed that all men in principle are created equal (women were long excluded from the compact, as well as African American slaves). In fact, given the structure of American capitalism, the incommensurability of its commitment both to freedom and equality has proven a disabling contradiction, one that liberalism has tried continually, and with little success, to negotiate. Like the bourgeois subject that is its production and raison d'être, liberalism is hopelessly schizoid.

The new liberalism that has been consolidated in the United States since the decline of the New Left in the mid-1970s (but whose antecedents date back to the first stirrings of the nation) marks the adaptation of traditional liberalism to a post-welfare state economy. Pursuing a policy of regressive taxation, its major constituent is the corporate sector—all others it labels “special interest groups” (despite certain superficial changes, there is no fundamental difference between the economic and foreign policies of Reagan/Bush and Clinton). In spite of its corporatism, however, and its efficiency in redistributing the wealth upward, liberalism speaks the language of tolerance. Unable to support substantive changes in economic policy that might in fact produce a more equitable and less segregated society, it instead promotes a rhetoric of pluralism and moderation. Reformist in method, it endeavors to fine tune the status quo while at the same time acknowledging (and even celebrating) the diversity of American culture. For the liberal pluralist, America is less a melting pot than a smorgasbord. He or she takes pride in the ability to consume cultural difference—now understood as a commodity, a source of boundless pleasure, an expression of an exoticized Other. And yet, for him or her, access to and participation in so-called minority cultures is entirely consumerist. Like the new, passive racist characterized by Hazel Carby, the liberal pluralist uses “texts”—whether literary, musical, theatrical or cinematic—as “a way of gaining knowledge of the ‘other,’ a knowledge that appears to replace the desire to challenge existing frameworks of segregation.”

Liberal pluralism thus does far more than tolerate dissent. It actively enlists its aid in reaffirming a fundamentally conservative hegemony. In doing so, it reconsolidates a fantasy of America that dates back to the early nineteenth century. Liberal pluralism demonstrates the dogged persistence of a consensus politic that masquerades as dissensus. It proves once again, in Bercovitch’s words, that

[the American way is to turn potential conflict into a quarrel about fusion or fragmentation. It is a fixed match, a debate with a foregone conclusion: you must have your fusion and feed on fragmentation too. And the formula for doing so has become virtually a cultural reflex: you just alternate between harmony-in-diversity and diversity-in-harmony. It amounts to a hermeneutics of laissez-faire: all problems are obviated by the continual flow of the one into the many, and the many into the one.]

According to Bercovitch, a kind of dissensus (of which liberal pluralism is the contemporary avatar) has been the hallmark of the very idea of America—and

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41 Bercovitch, 649.
American literature—from the very beginning. In this most American of ideologies, an almost incomparably wide range of opinions, beliefs, and cultural positions are finally absorbed into a fantasy of a utopian nation in which anything and everything is possible, in which the millennium is simultaneously at hand and indefinitely deferred. Moreover, the nation is imagined as the geographical representation of that utopia which is both everywhere and nowhere. For as Lauren Berlant explains, “the contradiction between the ‘nowhere’ of utopia and the ‘everywhere’ of the nation [is] dissolved by the American recasting of the ‘political’ into the terms of providential ideality, ‘one nation under God.’” Under the sign of the “one,” all contradictions are subsumed, all races and religions united, all politics theologized.

**Dissensus and the Field of Cultural Production**

It is my contention that Angels’s mobilization of a consensual politic (masquerading as dissensual) is precisely the source not only of the play’s ambivalence, but also of its ability to be instantly recognized as part of the canon of American literature. Regardless of Kushner’s intentions, Angels sets forth a project wherein the theological is constructed as a transcendent category into which politics and history finally disappear. For all its commitment to a historical materialist method, for all its attention to political struggle and the dynamics of oppression, Angels finally sets forth a liberal pluralist vision of America in which all, not in spite but because of their diversity, will be welcomed into the new Jerusalem (to this extent, it differs sharply from the more exclusionist character of early Mormonism and other, more recent millennialisms). Like other apocalyptic discourses, from Joseph Smith to Jerry Falwell, the millennialism of Angels reassures an “audience that knows it has lost control over events” not by enabling it to “regain... control,” but by letting it know “that history is nevertheless controlled by an underlying order and that it has a purpose that is nearing fulfillment.” It thereby demonstrates that “personal pain,” whether Prior’s, or that of the reader or spectator, “is subsumed within the pattern of history.” Like Joseph Smith, Tony Kushner has resuscitated a vision of America as both promised land and land of infinite promise. Simultaneously, he has inspired virtually every theatre critic in the U.S. to a host of salvational fantasies about theatre, art, and politics. And he has done all this at a crucial juncture in history, at the end of the Cold War, as the geopolitical order of forty-five years has collapsed.

Despite the success of the 1991 Gulf War in signaling international “terrorism” as the successor to the Soviet empire and justification for the expansion of the national security state, the idea of the nation remains, I believe, in crisis (it seems to me that “terrorism,” being less of a threat to individualism than communism, does not harness paranoia quite as effectively as the idea of an evil empire). If nothing else, Angels in America attests both to the continuing anxiety over national definition and mission and to the importance of an ideological means of assuaging that anxiety. In Angels, a series of political dialectics (which are, yet again, false dialectics) remains the primary means for producing this ideological fix, for producing dissensus, a sense of alternation between “harmony-in-diversity and diversity-in-harmony.” The play is filled with

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political disputation—all of it between men since women, unless in drag, are excluded from the political realm. Most is centered around Louis, the unmistakably ambivalent, ironic Jew, who invariably sets the level of discussion and determines the tenor of the argument. If with Belize he takes a comparatively rightist (and racist) stance, with Joe he takes an explicitly leftist (and antihomophobic) one. And while the play unquestionably problematizes his several positions, he ends up, with all his contradictions, becoming by default the spokesperson for liberal pluralism, with all its contradictions. Belize, intriguingly, functions unlike the white gay men as an ideological point of reference, a kind of “moral bellwether,” in the words of one critic.44 Because his is the one point of view that is never submitted to a critique, he becomes, as David Román points out, “the political and ethical center of the plays.” The purveyor of truth, “he carries the burden of race” and so seems to issue from what is unmistakably a “white imaginary” (“[t]his fetishization,” Román notes, “of lesbian and gay people of color as a type of political catalyst is ubiquitous among the left”).45 He is also cast in the role of caretaker, a position long reserved for African Americans in “the white imaginary.” Even Belize’s name commemorates not the Name of the Father, but his status as a “former drag queen” (1:3), giving him an identity that is both performative and exoticized. He is the play’s guarantee of diversity.

The pivotal scene for the enunciation of Louis’s politics, meanwhile, is his long discussion with Belize in Millennium which begins with his question, “Why has democracy succeeded in America?” (1:89), a question whose assumption is belied by the unparalleled political and economic power of American corporatism to buy elections and from which Louis, as is his wont, almost immediately backs down. (His rhetorical strategy throughout this scene is to stake out a position from which he immediately draws a guilty retreat, thereby making Belize look like the aggressor.) Invoking “radical democracy” and “freedom” in one breath, and crying “[f]uck assimilation” (1:89–90) in the next, he careens wildly between a liberal discourse of rights and a rhetoric of identity politics. Alternating between universalizing and minoritizing concepts of the subject, he manages at once to dismiss a politics of race (and insult Belize) and to assert its irreducibility. Yet the gist of Louis’s argument (if constant vacillation could be said to have a gist) is his disquisition about the nation:

this reaching out for a spiritual past in a country where no indigenous spirits exist—only the Indians, I mean Native American spirits and we killed them off so now, there are no gods here, no ghosts and spirits in America, there are no angels in America, no spiritual past, no racial past, there’s only the political.

[1:92]

For Louis, America hardly exists as a community (whether real or imagined). Rather, for this confused liberal, America is defined entirely by its relationship to the “political.” With characteristic irony, Kushner chooses to present this crucial idea (which does, after all, echo the play’s title) in the negative, in the form of a statement which the rest of the play aggressively refutes. For if nothing else, Angels in America—like The Book of Mormon—demonstrates that there are angels in America, that America

is in essence a utopian and theological construction, a nation with a divine mission. Politics is by no means banished insofar as it provides a crucial way in which the nation is imagined. But it is subordinated to utopian fantasies of harmony in diversity, of one nation under a derelict God.

Moreover, this scene between Louis and Belize reproduces millennialism in miniature, in its very structure, in the pattern whereby the political is finally subsumed by utopian fantasies. After the spirited argument between Louis and Belize (if one can call a discussion in which one person refuses to stake out a coherent position an argument), their conflict is suddenly overrun by an outbreak of lyricism, by the intrusion, after so much talk about culture, of what passes for the natural world:

Belize: All day today it’s felt like Thanksgiving. Soon, this . . . ruination will be blanketed white. You can smell it—can you smell it?
Louis: Smell what?
Belize: Softness, compliance, forgiveness, grace.

[1:100]

Argumentation gives way not to a resolution (nothing has been settled) but to the ostensible forces of nature: snow and smell. According to Belize, snow (an insignia of coldness and purity in the play) is linked to “[s]oftness, compliance, forgiveness, grace,” in short, to the theological virtues. Like the ending of Perestroika, in which another dispute between Louis and Belize fades out behind Prior’s benediction, this scene enacts a movement of transcendence whereby the political is not so much resolved as left trailing in the dust. In the American way, contradiction is less disentangled than immobilized. History gives way to a concept of cosmic evolution that is far closer to Joseph Smith than to Walter Benjamin.

In the person of Louis (who is, after all, constructed as the most empathic character in the play), with his unshakable faith in liberalism and the possibility of “radical democracy,” Angels in America assures the (liberal) theatre-going public that a kind of liberal pluralism remains the best hope for change.46 Revolution, in the Marxist sense, is rendered virtually unthinkable, oxymoronic. Amidst all the political disputation,

46 This is corroborated by Kushner’s own statements: “The strain in the American character that I feel the most affection for and that I feel has the most potential for growth is American liberalism, which is incredibly short of what it needs to be and incredibly limited and exclusionary and predicated on all sorts of racist, sexist, homophobic and classist prerogatives. And yet, as Louis asks, why has democracy succeeded in America? And why does it have this potential, as I believe it does? I really believe that there is the potential for radical democracy in this country, one of the few places on earth where I see it as a strong possibility. It doesn’t seem to be happening in Russia. There is a tradition of liberalism, of a kind of social justice, fair play and tolerance—and each of these things is problematic and can certainly be played upon in the most horrid ways. Reagan kept the most hair-raising anarchist aspects of his agenda hidden and presented himself as a good old-fashioned liberal who kept invoking FDR. It may just be sentimentalism on my part because I am the child of liberal-pinko parents, but I do believe in it—as much as I often find it despicable. It’s sort of like the Democratic National Convention every four years: it’s horrendous and you can feel it sucking all the energy from progressive movements in this country, with everybody pinning their hopes on this sleazy bunch of guys. But you do have Jesse Jackson getting up and calling the Virgin Mary a single mother, and on an emotional level, and I hope also on a more practical level, I do believe that these are the people in whom to have hope.” Savran, 24–25.
there is no talk of social class. Oppression is understood not in relation to economics but to differences of race, gender and sexual orientation. In short: an identity politics comes to substitute for Marxist analysis. There is no clear sense that the political and social problems with which the characters wrestle might be connected to a particular economic system (comrade Prelapsarianov is, after all, a comic figure). And despite Kushner’s avowed commitment to socialism, an alternative to capitalism, except in the form of an indefinitely deferred utopia, remains absent from the play's dialectic. Revolution, even in Benjamin’s sense of the term, is evacuated of its political content, functioning less as a Marxist hermeneutic tool than a trope, a figure of speech (the oxymoron) that marks the place later to be occupied by a (liberal pluralist?) utopia. Angels thus falls into line behind the utopianisms of Joseph Smith and the American Renaissance and becomes less a subversion of hegemonic culture than its reaffirmation. As Berlant observes, “the temporal and spatial ambiguity of ‘utopia’ has the effect of obscuring the implications of political activity and power relations in American civil life.” Like “our classic texts” (as characterized by Bercovitch), Angels has a way of conceptualizing utopia so that it may be adopted by “the dominant culture . . . for its purposes.” “So molded, ritualized, and controlled,” Bercovitch notes (and, I would like to add, stripped of its impulse for radical economic change), “utopianism has served . . . to diffuse or deflect dissent, or actually to transmute it into a vehicle of socialization.”

The ambivalences that are so deeply inscribed in Angels in America, its conflicted relationship to various utopianisms, to the concept of America, to Marxism, Mormonism, and liberalism, function, I believe, to accommodate the play to what I see as a fundamentally conservative and paradigmatically American politic—dissensus, the “hermeneutics of laissez-faire.” Yet it seems to me that the play’s ambivalence (its way of being, in Eve Sedgwick’s memorable phrase, “kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic”) is finally, less a question of authorial intention than of the peculiar cultural and economic position of this play (and its writer) in relation to the theatre, theatre artists, and the theatre-going public in the United States. On the one hand, the Broadway and regional theatres remain in a uniquely marginal position in comparison with Hollywood. The subscribers to regional theatres continue to dwindle while more than half of Theatre Communications Group’s sample theatres in their annual survey “played to smaller audiences in 1993 than they did five years ago.” Moreover, in a move that bodes particularly ill for the future of new plays, “workshops, staged readings and other developmental activities decreased drastically over the five years studied.” On the other hand, serious Broadway drama does not have the same cultural capital as other forms of literature. Enmortgaged to a slew of others who must realize the playwright’s text, it has long been regarded as a bastard art. Meanwhile, the relatively small public that today attends professional theatre in America is overwhelmingly middle-class and overwhelmingly liberal in its attitudes. Indeed, theatre audiences are

48 Berlant, 32.
49 Bercovitch, 644.
50 Sedgwick used this phrase during the question period that followed a lecture at Brown University, 1 October 1992.
in large part distinguished from the audiences for film and television on account of their tolerance for works that are more challenging both formally and thematically than the vast majority of major studio releases or prime-time miniseries.

Because of its marginal position, both economically and culturally, theatre is a privileged portion of what Pierre Bourdieu designates as the literary and artistic field. As he explains, this field is contained within a larger field of economic and political power, while, at the same time, “possessing a relative autonomy with respect to it . . .” It is this relative autonomy that gives the literary and artistic field—and theatre in particular—both its high level of symbolic forms of capital and its low level of economic capital. In other words, despite its artistic cachet, it “occupies a dominated position” with respect to the field of economic and political power as whole. And the individual cultural producer (or theatre artist), insofar as he or she is a part of the bourgeoisie, represents a “dominated fraction of the dominant class.” The cultural producer is thus placed in an irreducibly contradictory position—and this has become particularly clear since the decline of patronage in the eighteenth century and the increasing dependence of the artist on the vicissitudes of the marketplace. On the one hand, he or she is licensed to challenge hegemonic values insofar as it is a particularly effective way of accruing cultural capital. On the other hand, the more effective his or her challenge, the less economic capital he or she is likely to amass. Because of theatre’s marginality in American culture, it seems to be held hostage to this double bind in a particularly unnerving way: the very disposition of the field guarantees that Broadway and regional theatres (unlike mass culture) are constantly in the process of having to negotiate this impossible position.

What is perhaps most remarkable about Angels in America is that it has managed, against all odds, to amass significant levels of both cultural and economic capital. And while it by no means resolves the contradictions that are constitutive of theatre’s cultural positioning, its production history has become a measure of the seemingly impossible juncture of these two forms of success. Just as the play’s structure copes with argumentation by transcending it, so does the play as cultural phenomenon seemingly transcend the opposition between economic and cultural capital, between the hegemonic and the counterhegemonic. Moreover, it does so, I am arguing, by its skill in both reactivating a sense (derived from the early nineteenth century) of America as the utopian nation and mobilizing the principle of ambivalence—or more exactly, dissensus—to produce a vision of a once and future pluralist culture. And although the text’s contradictory positioning is to a large extent defined by the marginal cultural position of Broadway, it is also related specifically to Tony Kushner’s own class position. Like Joseph Smith, Kushner represents a dominated—and dissident—fraction of the dominant class. As a white gay man, he is able to amass considerable economic and cultural capital despite the fact that the class of which he is a part remains relatively disempowered politically (according to a 1993 survey, the average household income for gay men is 40% higher than that of the average

American household). As an avowed leftist and intellectual, he is committed (as Angels demonstrates) to mounting a critique of hegemonic ideology. Yet as a member of the bourgeoisie and as the recipient of two Tony awards, he is also committed—if only unconsciously—to the continuation of the system that has granted him no small measure of success.

A Queer Sort of Nation

Although I am tempted to see the celebrity of Angels in America as yet another measure of the power of liberal pluralism to neutralize oppositional practices, the play’s success also suggests a willingness to recognize the contributions of gay men to American culture and to American literature, in particular. For as Eve Sedgwick and others have argued, both the American canon and the very principle of canonicity are centrally concerned with questions of male (homo)sexual definition and desire. Thus, the issues of homoeroticism, of the anxiety generated by the instability of the homosocial/homosexual boundary, of coding, of secrecy and disclosure, and of the problems around securing a sexual identity, remain pivotal for so many of the writers who hold pride of place in the American canon, from Thoreau, Melville, Whitman, and James to Hart Crane, Tennessee Williams, and James Baldwin—in that sense, the American canon is always already queered. At the same time, however, unlike so much of the canon, and in particular, the canon of American drama, Angels in America foregrounds explicitly gay men. No more need the reader eager to queer the text read subversively between the lines, or transpose genders, as is so often done to the work of Williams, Inge, Albee, and others. Since the 1988 controversies over NEA funding for exhibitions of Mapplethorpe and Serrano and the subsequent attempt by the Endowment to revoke grants to the so-called NEA four (three of whom are queer), theatre, as a liberal form, has been distinguished from mass culture in large part by virtue of its queer content. In the 1990s, a play without a same-sex kiss may be entertainment, but it can hardly be considered a work of art. It appears that the representation of (usually male) homosexual desire has become the privileged emblem of that endangered species, the serious Broadway drama. But I wonder finally how subversive this queering of Broadway is when women, in this play at least, remain firmly in the background. What is one to make of the remarkable ease with which Angels in America has been accommodated to that lineage of American drama (and literature) that focuses on masculine experience and agency and produces women as the premise for history, as the ground on which it is constructed? Are not women sacrificed—yet again—to the male citizenry of a (queer) nation?

If Kushner, following Benjamin’s prompting (and echoing his masculinism), attempts to “brush history against the grain” (257), he does so by demonstrating the crucial importance of (closeted) gay men in twentieth-century American politics—including, most prominently, Roy Cohn and two of his surrogate fathers, J. Edgar Hoover and Joseph McCarthy. By so highlighting the (homo)eroticization of patriar-

Angels does not pathologize gay men. Or more exactly, gay men as a class are not who were most assiduous in their denunciation of political and sexual dissidence. Moreover, unlike the work of most of Kushner’s predecessors on the American stage, Angels does not pathologize gay men. Or more exactly, gay men as a class are not pathologized. Rather, they are revealed to be pathologized circumstancially: first, by their construction (through a singularly horrific stroke of ill luck) as one of the “risk groups” for HIV; and second, by the fact that some remain closeted and repressed (Joe’s ulcer is unmistakably the price of disavowal). So, it turns out, it is not homosexuality that is pathological, but its denial. Flagrantly uncloseted, the play provides a devastating critique of the closeted gay man in two medicalized bodies: Roy Cohn and Joe Pitt.

If Angels in America queers historical materialism (at least as Benjamin understands it), it does so by exposing the process by which the political (which ostensibly drives history) intersects with the personal and sexual (which ostensibly are no more than footnotes to history). Reagan’s presidency and the neoconservative hegemony of the 1980s provide not just the background to the play’s exploration of ostensibly personal (i.e., sexual, marital, medical) problems, but the very ground on which desire is produced. For despite the trenchancy of its critique of neoconservatism, Angels also demonstrates the peculiar sexiness of Reagan’s vision of America. Through Louis, it demonstrates the allure of a particular brand of machismo embodied by Joe Pitt. “The more appalling I find your politics the more I want to hump you” (2:36). And if the Angel is indeed “a cosmic reactionary” (2:55), it is in part because her/his position represents an analogue to the same utopian promises and hopes that Reagan so brilliantly and deceptively exploited. Moreover, in this history play, questions of male homosexual identity and desire are carefully juxtaposed against questions of equal protection for lesbians and gay men and debates about their military service. Louis attacks Joe for his participation in “an important bit of legal fag-bashing,” a case that upholds the U.S. government’s policy that it’s not “unconstitutional to discriminate against homosexuals” (2:110). And while the case that Louis cites may be fictional, the continuing refusal of the courts in the wake of Bowers v. Hardwick to consider lesbians and gay men a suspect class, and thus eligible for protection under the provisions of the Fourteenth Amendment, is anything but. Unilaterally constructing gay men as a suspect class (with sexual identity substituting for economic positionality), Angels realizes Benjamin’s suggestion that it is not “man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself [that] is the depository of historical knowledge” (260). More decisively than any other recent cultural text, Angels queers the America of Joseph Smith—and Ronald Reagan—by placing this oppressed class 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.

56 It is not the subjects who comprise a bona fide suspect class (like African Americans) that are suspect, but rather the forces of oppression that produce the class. For an analysis of the legal issues around equal protection, see Janet Halley, “The Politics of the Closet: Towards Equal Protection for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity,” UCLA Law Review (June 1989): 915–76.