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Angels in America: AIDS as an Epidemic of Signification

Tony Kushner's theatrical piece titled *America Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* was considered groundbreaking when it opened on Broadway in 1993. Mike Nichols later created a six-hour film adaptation for HBO that aired in 2003. The play and film are broken up into two parts: *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*. *Angels in America* is "a serious play about politics, history, spirituality, and death...It was not only an attack on 1980s Reaganism, but also on the conservative movement of the U.S. politics and culture since the end of World War II" (Bronski, 58). *Angels in America* represents an act of resistance and asks its viewer whether change is possible. This question takes on a whole new meaning for contemporary viewers who have the benefit of hindsight. We are forced to reckon with the dark shadow of Reagan's legacy.

It is 1985 and the plot revolves around Prior Walter (Justin Kirk) who has just been diagnosed with AIDS, only to be left by his lover Louis Ironson (Ben Shenkman) after he is told the news. Louis becomes involved with Joe Pitt (Patrick Wilson), a closeted Republican lawyer who is the protégé of Roy Cohn (Al Pacino). Roy Cohn is a famous U.S. attorney whose character is based off of the real-life Roy Cohn who died of AIDS in 1986. Joe Pitt is married to his wife Harper Pitt who is addicted to pills. The film traces her nervous breakdown in the form of hallucinations after discovering that her husband is gay. Roy Cohn is diagnosed with AIDS shortly after and is visited by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg (Meryl Streep) who becomes a permanent fixture throughout the play until Roy's death. We are introduced to Hannah Pitt (Meryl Streep), Joe Pitt's

mother, after she travels halfway across the U.S. in response to her son's news that he is gay. While all of this is unfolding, Prior is visited by an angel (Emma Thompson) who declares him a Prophet. In the midst of all of this, viewers learn that God has abandoned his Angels in heaven in order to be with his human creations despite their propensity for cruelty and destruction.

We are first introduced to Louis and his partner Walter who are both in attendance at the funeral of Sarah Ironson, Louis's grandmother. Sarah was a magnanimous woman who, as told by Rabbi Chemelwitz, "carried the old world on her back across the ocean on a boat". While Rabbi Chemelwitz is delivering Sarah's eulogy, the camera cuts from the funeral home to still black and white images of immigrants as they travel to America and of their arrival at Ellis Island. This juxtaposition of the old world against the new, between stasis and change, is a major theme throughout the film. We can see representations of this theme in the Prior lineage and Roy Cohn's interaction with the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg. This scene also provides a starting point for Kushner's political critique, beginning in the early 20th century through the late 1980s. One of the first political critiques that this film addresses which permeates through the rest of the film is that idea of:

Marginalized Populations as Vectors of Disease

The series opens up with a birds-eye view of San Francisco and New York City, both of which have particular significance in terms of the history of gay rights activism. The emergence of AIDS first became apparent in these cities. According to AVERT, "The first recognised cases of AIDS occurred in the USA in the early 1980s...A number

of gay men in New York and California suddenly began to develop rare opportunistic infections and cancers”. These two cities have also historically been major destinations for immigrants travelling to the United States.

There was a “major wave of immigration to the United States during the early 20th century among which there were many European Jews. This is around the time in which Louis’ grandmother would have made the journey. Foreign-born individuals “were often stigmatized as disease carriers perhaps bringing with them more serious diseases such as tuberculosis, typhus, cholera, or trachoma” (Kraut, 123). Federal immigration depots such as Ellis Island in New York and Angel Island in San Francisco were created to screen incoming immigrants for disease. US citizens feared foreign contamination and often “stigmatized particular immigrant groups as the carriers of specific diseases, rationalizing their prejudice with medical and public health arguments” (Kraut, 125). As noted by Roy Cohn, the “worst thing about being sick in America is that you’re booted out of the parade. American’s have no use for sick...America is “just no country for the infirm”.

In using a historical lens to showcase how marginalized populations have often been blamed as the bearers of misfortune plays a significant role in setting the stage for the rest of the series. In doing so, viewers are able to see the parallels between constructions of AIDS victimhood and constructions of the poor and marginalized (usually mediated by medical and psychiatric discourse). As noted by Jan Zita Grover in her work *AIDS: Keywords*, it is “important to make connections between the construction of AIDS victimhood and similar constructions of the poor, who also suffer the triple

curse of objectification, institutionalized powerlessness, and blame for their condition”. (Grover, 17).

U.S. Conservatism in the Reagan Era

Roy Cohn is the next character introduced. In introducing Roy immediately after this scene, the film juxtaposes old world forms of oppression against the new. Roy Cohn was the prosecution lawyer for the Rosenberg trial and as we find out later, help to secure the death penalty for Ethel Rosenberg through illegal and immoral means. As a result of the trial, Cohn was appointed as the chief counsel to Joseph McCarthy. McCarthy helped create a climate of hatred and fear that characterized much of the early 20th century across the globe. As McCarthy’s right hand man, the type of man that shakes hands with the President and lives by his own moral code, Roy embodies the anti-humanistic nature of U.S. conservatism. It was in this political climate of hatred and fear that the AIDS epidemic began.

While the film provides a harsh political critique of Reagansim and conservatism, it still remains utopian. As noted by Bronski in hir review of the film, “much of the action careers between harsh realism and poetic fantasy” (Bronski, 57). While the real-lived experiences of Prior Walter are often painful, his spirit is ultimately left unbroken. While conservative ideologies wreak havoc on the minds and bodies of gay men across the U.S., this film shows us that political and social progress is possible if we are able to acknowledge and reckon with past failures. The character of Cohn is forced to reckon with a ghost from his past, a prosecutor facing the accused, in order to emphasize a need to atone for past mistakes. Through this action, the dehumanized become humanized and the potential for change is created.

In order for this change to occur, viewers must think critically about the ways in which knowledge is created, who constructs this knowledge, and the ways in which knowledge influences social relations of domination and resistance. This film urges viewers to think critically about: Structures of power within society as well as the problematic nature of normative constructions of gender and sexuality (brought to light through gender transgressions of key characters and the hermaphroditic body of Prior's angel) and in consequence the institutionalization of homophobia (represented by homophobic biomedical discourse whose consequences are played out on the bodies of gay men living with AIDS).

In thinking about all of the people living with AIDS who died painful, undignified deaths with no immediate response from the government, viewers are urged to consider the following question: What lives are deemed worth living and who gets to decide? Is it those who have the power to construct laws and policies? What roles do dominant ideologies and discursive power play? How much influence does the medical community have in creating these ideas?

Considering the title of the play in which this miniseries is based off of, *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, it is important to consider the relationship between the terms "gay" and "nation". We must consider how gender and nationalism are portrayed in *Angels* and what is at stake in creating such a portrayal. Ideas about nationalism play a major role in creating gender-based hierarchies. Representations of the nation through a male perspective depend not only on the marginalization of women, but also of specific representations of men, including gay men and men of color.

“Homosexuality” and “AIDS”: Why Labels Matter

It is necessary to consider how the term “homosexual” has been constructed in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the government’s response to the AIDS crisis. The construction of homosexuality as a sin or as immoral has far reaching social and political implications. The term homosexual does not just describe the sex of an individual’s partner just like the term AIDS does not simply imply that one has an acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. These are labels that were and continue to be fraught with negative stereotypes. These stereotypes or taken for granted truths are brought to light through the characters in *Angels in America* and their identification with these categories. Viewers are able to see how these labels become imbued with social and political meaning thus giving them metaphorical, material, and physical significance.

“Homosexuals Lack Clout”

The character Roy Cohn highlights several implications that the construction of the term homosexual had both on men who identified as gay as well as the impact that the AIDS epidemic had on these men.

When Roy Cohn is told that he has AIDS, he tells his doctor that “AIDS is for homosexuals” and thus he could not possibly have AIDS because that would mean he would be a “homosexual”. To be perceived as gay would strip him of his public identity that he has worked so hard to achieve. Cohn tells his doctor that the label homosexual, “like all labels, they tell you one thing, one thing only. Where does an individual so identify fit in the food chain, in the pecking order?... Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men who in 15 years of trying cannot pass a

puissant anti-discrimination bill through city council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout”.

This is a particularly significant moment because it highlights the correlations between social norms and biomedical discourse. What really becomes clear during the Reagan era is that the way that we interpret disease is just as important as the disease itself. In this scene we are able to see the juxtaposition of medical lingo and hard scientific facts (which we later discover are not objective, but very much informed my homophobia) against the social implications that these words can have. In saying that “AIDS is for homosexuals”, Roy Cohn is buying into homophobic discourse about AIDS. This discourse serves to stigmatize gay men through the implication that all gay men have AIDS. Since AIDS was thought to be a gay disease, people who got infected early on were assumed to be gay which meant that they may face the dual consequences of being diagnosed with AIDS and being “outed” (if they were not already out or falsely “outed” if they were heterosexual). This assumption that AIDS is for homosexuals also denies or silences the suffering of heterosexual individuals living with HIV/AIDS.

This scene is significant because it points to the fact that being gay was something that was considered to be bad. Homosexuality served as a barrier to accessing political, economic, and social opportunities and in consequence, treatment services for HIV/AIDS. As such, it was not a label that one of the most successful attorneys in New York City wanted to have attached to his name. As someone who was at the top of the food chain, Cohn is aware of the way that gay men are perceived by the public as well as the privilege that he receives as a heterosexual man. Roy Cohn makes this point clear

when he insists to his doctor that he is “a heterosexual man... who fucks around with guys”.

The best way that we are able to see the impact that these categories of identification play out on the real-lived embodied experiences of people living with HIV/AIDS is through the discrepancies between the experiences of Roy and Prior Walter. Both are gay men living in New York City, but there are several distinctions between these characters. Roy Cohn is a highly successful American attorney who is not publicly “out”. With his status and prestige come social and economic privileges that are inaccessible by Prior. Cohn is has access to the best medical treatment available in NYC and is even able to coerce his doctor into diagnosing him with liver cancer instead of AIDS in order to preserve his reputation. Most importantly, Cohn is able to procure the most coveted of all things to a person living with AIDS, AZT. As noted by Belize, “there are only thirty people in the whole country who have access to this drug”. Roy Cohn is able to call in favors in order to become number thirty-one. It is important to note that although Roy’s money and status provide him with protection from oppression, these things are unable to provide him with immunity from AIDS.

Connections Between Sexuality and Religion: Homosexuality as a Sin

Another construction of homosexuality that was very important in terms of its influence on the AIDS pandemic is the idea of homosexuality as immoral and sinful. Considering that Christianity is the dominant religion in the United States and is known to be a religion that is not tolerant of homosexuality, it is not surprising that religion is a major theme throughout this series. The angel played by Emma Thompson in Prior Walter’s visions refers to herself as the “Continental Principality of the United States”.

The construction of homosexuality as sinful and immoral is represented through the character of Joe Pitt. Joe is a closeted gay Mormon lawyer who struggles with what he considers to be a dual identity. Joe considers himself to be “a very good man who has worked very hard to become good”, but he struggles with inner demons. There is a part of him deep down inside that is “ugly” and “wrong”. When asked by his wife Harper what he prayed for, he responded, “I pray for God to crush me...to break me up into little pieces and start over again”. Joe’s life is built around his identity as a Mormon, which provides him with a moral compass. As a man who desires other men, this is problematic because his faith considers homosexuality to be sinful.

After starting an affair with Louis, Joe’s sexual desire has been awoken and he feels that in order to live out his life as a gay man, he must discard his faith. In the scene where Louis tells Joe that he needs to see Prior again, Joe responds by peeling off all of his clothing including his temple garment, his symbolic religious skin. The temple garment is supposed to shield adherents of the Mormon faith from the evils of the contemporary world. In removing this garment, Joe is signifying his inability to reconcile his religious faith with his sexual orientation. (It is also important to note, that in this act, he is not rejecting his identity as “a good man”. Through his relationship with Louis, Joe is able to understand that homosexual is not synonymous with the word bad).

AIDS: An Epidemic of Signification

With that said, it is now important to consider how these constructions influenced the public and medical field’s perception of the AIDS virus and the government’s response to the rising crisis. It is important to note that the scientific

community is made up of individuals who are not immune to the influences of social and political forces—a fact that is usually only made apparent in hindsight. It was the medical community that helped instill within the public consciousness, the idea that AIDS was synonymous with homosexuality which had a whole host of negative implications for gay men at this time. As Borreca wrote in the May 1993 *Theatre Journal*, *Angels in America* asks us, “What does it mean to be truthfully human at this moment in American social history (when AIDS is still seen, and dealt with politically, as a ‘gay disease’)?” (Fisher, 47).

Borreca is making the point that AIDS is not merely a disease. As noted by Francois Delaporte in *Disease and Civilization: The Cholera in Paris*, “‘disease’ does not exist. It is therefore illusory to think that one can ‘develop beliefs’ about it to ‘respond’ to it. What does exist is not disease but practices” (Delaporte, 6). Delaporte and *Angels in America* both challenge deeply held beliefs about disease in terms of the ways in which it is conceptualized and spread through populations. Although Delaporte is not denying the need for scientific data about disease, he is pointing to a significant, but much less touched upon area of concern—the way that disease is culturally produced. We are able to see the ways in which this process occurs in *Angels in America*. Viewers see the ways in which cultural productions are not only ideas with a metaphorical existence, but have a physical reality in the way that they are played out on the bodies of the characters in this film. Viewers are able to see that the way that disease is conceptualized directly impacts the response of the government and the medical community to the disease, the types of support made available to people afflicted

by disease and the various amounts of oppression or discrimination that they may encounter in their everyday lives as a result. Ideas about homosexuality and AIDS affect the type of treatment that Prior receives and the way that his loved ones interact with him.

A disease is not just comprised of symptoms or vectors of transmission, but is imbued with social and political significance. In reflecting upon the history of disease and major epidemics such as Cholera, Spanish Influenza, and AIDS, it becomes painfully clear that science is not an exception. It is science that first positioned AIDS as a gay disease, a stereotype that unfortunately still remains a part of the public consciousness. We often blindly accept outputs from the scientific community because we put naïve faith in its mandate to be objective and neutral. Science is not neutral. To unquestioningly accept scientific discourse is dangerous. Not only can it be misinformed, but also misinterpreted and misrepresented. Consider the ways in which scientific data has been utilized to explain the inferiority of women and African Americans and in consequence as a justification for the mistreatment of those groups. As seen in the case of Prior Walter and Louis's grandmother, marginalized groups often shoulder most of the burden and the blame for the spread of disease.

Since the film came out a decade after its debut on Broadway, viewers are really able to understand the effects that conservative ideologies had on the lives of people suffering from AIDS. A retrospective analysis of the AIDS crisis enables viewers to understand the fallibility of scientific discourse as well as the ways in which ideas and images being produced by the mass media and the effects that signification can have on the ways in which we conceptualize and respond to epidemics. While AIDS is most

often presented as a medical issue, we must also consider the ways in which it is a crisis of signification. Set in 1985 and continuing through 1990, *Angels in America* showcases the development of the AIDS epidemic and the particular impact that it had on the gay community.

This film provides viewers with a socio-historical, political critique of the AIDS epidemic and the (lack of) response of the Reagan administration to this crisis. While the visceral reaction to the plight of characters overwhelmed with feeling of loneliness, isolation and guilt are undoubtedly felt by viewers, I believe that more subtle social and political critiques and their importance could not be appreciated without some prior background knowledge of the AIDS epidemic and the gay rights movement.

The 80s were particularly devastating for the gay men. The Stone Wall riot of 1969 is considered to be the beginning of the gay rights movement which flourished in the 1970's, but came to a terrifying halt as the introduction of HIV/AIDS or gay cancer (as it was being referred to in the media) began to wreak havoc on the lives of gay men. The year of 1985 also marked the beginning of President Reagan's second term. Reagan is mentioned several times over the course of this first episode not only to set a political backdrop for the series, but also begs viewers to question why the government was slow to respond to an epidemic that was causing so many people to die slow, painful, undignified deaths.

It is worthy to note that Reagan did not even give his first speech on HIV/AIDS until 1987, several years after the on-start of the epidemic and after thousands of innocent lives had been lost. In this context, it is fair to posit that HIV/AIDS really became an epidemic through the lack of immediate action from the government and medical

establishments that can be directly attributed to institutionalized homophobia.

Looking back at newspaper and journal publications about the epidemic starting in the early 80's, several popular conceptualizations of AIDS begin to emerge. From its onset, there was widespread fear of contamination as AIDS was constructed as a fatal infectious disease that threatened to wipe out mankind. It was also seen as a “gay plague” or punishment for sexually deviant behavior. The various conceptualizations, stereotypes, and stigma about both homosexuality and people living with AIDS (PLWA) and the ways in which these have become embedded within the public psyche showcases the enormous power that these identity categories have in generating meaning. This series does a great job at addressing popular (mis) conceptions about identity and disease.

Perestroika- The Act of Restructuring.

Angels in America is not merely a political critique, but an act of political resistance and a beacon of hope. While the first part of the film does a great job in exposing political issues, the second part of the film takes a more active approach in guiding viewers towards possible strategies for social and political change. As noted by James Fisher, where “*Millennium Approaches* depicts faithlessness and selfishness with compassion, *Perestroika* offers a moving humanism, bringing the characters to some measure of self-awareness, forgiveness, and a settling of accounts” (Fisher, 292).

The dual roles played by the characters (Merly Streep as the Rabbi Chemelwitz, Hannah Pitt, and as Ethel Rosenberg/Emma Thompson as Prior’s nurse and a hermaphroditic angel in his visions) merge the fantastical with the real and reconcile the past with the present. Roy Cohn’s character and his beliefs are antithetical to the other characters’ politics of solidarity. Roy feels no solidarity with other oppressed groups, not

even gays and lesbians. His relationships with others are based on power and not on empathy or love. As a result, Roy Cohn dies without a single friend or family member by his bedside. He dies in the presence of Ethel Rosenberg and his nurse Belize whom he despises because of his race and his openness about his sexuality. Although, both of these characters despise Roy, they are nonetheless touched by his death and are able to act in ways that suggest some form of forgiveness. Belize gently closes his eyes and folds Roy's arms so that he is in a position that suggests peace. Hannah recites a Jewish prayer for Roy. In this second part, Louis is also able to restore his relationship with Prior. These acts of kindness and reconciliation prove that even if God has abandoned Heaven, humanity still retains the capacity for progress and not just destruction. They are still capable of feeling empathy and compassion for one another.

In the final scene of *Perestroika* in which Prior Walter delivers a stirring monologue, viewers are able to see that we are not doomed to repeat the mistakes of our past. The final scene takes place in 1990 after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the start of a new world order. In this scene, Prior, Louis, Hannah, and Belize are all sitting under the Bethesda Fountain. The film has come around full circle. In a conversation with Hannah Louis proclaims, "Perestroika, the fall, the whole world is changing overnight!" to which Hannah responds, "I wonder what will happen now though" signifying the potential for change.

The scene then cuts to Prior who describes the significance of the Bethesda Angel and her capacity to heal. Angels "commemorate death but they suggest a world without dying". It is in this moment that Prior provides viewers with the most moving and hopeful dialogue in the entire film. Prior declares that AIDS "will be the end of many of

us, but not nearly all. And the dead will be commemorated and we will struggle on with the living and we are not going away. We will not die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come.....The great work begins”.

Even though AIDS continues to plague him, Prior is unwilling to succumb to its forces nor will any of the other men (and women) who watched their friends and lovers slowly perish one by one. They will no longer silently accept that their lives are not as valued as much as your heterosexual counterparts. AIDS patients will no longer remain silent as they are denied proper medical treatment. All of the men and women whose lives were lost during this time became angels who were only seen by those who felt their loss. This will no longer be the case. AIDS patients and gay men will be acknowledged as citizens who are entitled to the same rights and freedoms as everyone else.

Prior Walter remains strong in his defiance and is now joined in his struggle with his new family-Louis, Hannah, and Belize. Hannah, symbolizing spirituality and faith, Belize, symbolizing the medical profession and the spirit of reconciliation, Louis, symbolizing political optimism, and Prior Walter serving as a beacon of hope for humanity, come together in solidarity to initiate change. In the very last scene of this film, this motley crew ascends the flight of stairs leading away from the Bethesda fountain as the screen fades away and the credits begin to roll. Together they walk in solidarity towards a bright new future.

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