



Tony Kushner's *Angel Archive* and the Re-visioning of American History

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Abstract: Jean Howard argues that one way to understand *Angels in America*'s deep engagement with history is through the angel archive the play creates and the new configuration of knowledge produced through it. Some critics such as David Savron have claimed that in *Angels in America* Kushner has bought into a specific myth of American history, i.e., the myth of American exceptionalism and destined progress toward perfectibility. Howard argues that Kushner has done so only by radically queering and transforming that myth, not simply by showing the centrality of gays in American history, whether in the persons of Roy Cohn or gay Mormons like Joe Pitt; rather, his play queers history by rewriting, interrupting, and co-mingling received narratives as a way of moving beyond their limitations, including narratives of national exceptionalism, special election, and progress. In *Angels in America* Kushner summons, fragments, and re-arranges pieces of national history in order to create a tentative theatrical intimation of a *different*, less injurious future. The best way to understand Kushner's vision of American possibility is, however, to explore the particular archive of angels his play assembles and creates, for it is through that luminous and difficult archive that secular national history is probed and opened to the winds of change.

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In Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* a gay man, Louis Ironson, the estranged lover of Prior Walter, one of the play's several protagonists and a person with AIDS, declares that "there are no gods here, no ghosts and spirits in America, there are no angels in America" (*Millennium Approaches* III.ii, 98).¹ The play shows that Louis is wrong. In *Angels in America*, angels can take the form of statues, like the angel of the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park; they can be embodied on stage, as when an angel crashes through Prior's bedroom ceiling and later accompanies him on a journey to heaven; and they can be referred to by their effects, as when Prior calls his first K.S. lesion "the wine-dark kiss of the angel of death" (*Millennium Approaches*, IV.ii, 27). Angels also play a role in the characters' erotic lives. Both Prior and the Mormon mother, Hannah Pitt, have a sexual encounter with the angel who appears to Prior, and Hannah's homosexual Mormon son, Joe Pitt, recounts his recurring erotic dream of a picture showing the Old Testament Jacob wrestling with an angel and "the angel is a beautiful man, with golden hair and wings" (*Millennium Approaches* II.ii, 55). Angels figure directly in American history as well. Hannah Pitt tells how "an angel of God [the angel Moroni] appeared to Joseph Smith in upstate New York, not far from here. People have visions" (*Perestroika* II.i.p, 235). Angels feature in Christmas carols when Belize, the black nurse, sings "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" over the phone to comfort Prior; and they hover like presences over the text even when not explicitly mentioned. Walter Benjamin wrote famously of the angel of history based on his experience of Paul Klee's painting, *Angelus Novus*, and traces of Benjamin's angel haunt Kushner's play.

It is fair to say, then, that Kushner's America has many angels in it and that they are integral to his claims to be writing, as the subtitle of *Angels in America* suggests, *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. While *Angels in America* was first received as a play about the devastating impact of AIDS before the widespread availability of AZT or other anti-viral drugs, it never was *solely* an AIDS play, but aspired to use the period of crisis in the late 80s and early 90s to engage national themes, in part through an unusual and far-reaching evocation of American history. Among the people and events from America's collective past that figure in *Angels in America* are the visionary prophet Joseph Smith and the story of the Mormon trek from New York west to the new Zion in Utah; Ethel Rosenberg, executed for her alleged part in un-American activities during the McCarthy era; Roy Cohn, a closeted homosexual and a member of Joseph McCarthy's staff who went on to be a notorious figure in the New York real estate and legal worlds; and Joe Welch, the Army lawyer who played a significant part in bringing McCarthy down.² This *national* history is also related to extra-national events such as the lifting of the so-called Iron Curtain and the European pogroms and persecutions that sent waves of Jewish immigrants to America in the first half of the 20th century.

I will argue that one way to understand *Angels in America*'s deep engagement with history is through the angel archive the play creates and the new configuration of knowledge produced

through it.³ There is nothing random about the play's angels. Most open a door to a discrete history—Mormon history, Jewish history, the history of the European left—though in the play these co-mingle and overlap, creating a force field of juxtapositions that unsettle all received stories. Some critics such as David Savran have claimed that in *Angels in America* Kushner has bought into a specific myth of American history, i.e., the myth of American exceptionalism and destined progress toward perfectibility.⁴ I want to argue that Kushner has done so only by radically queering and transforming that myth. By this I do not simply mean that he has shown the centrality of gays in American history, whether in the persons of Roy Cohn or gay Mormons like Joe Pitt; rather, I will argue that his play queers history by rewriting, interrupting, and co-mingling received narratives as a way of moving beyond their limitations, including narratives of national exceptionalism, special election, and progress. In *Angels in America* Kushner summons, fragments, and re-arranges pieces of national history in order to create a tentative theatrical intimation of a *different*, less injurious future. The best way to understand Kushner's vision of American possibility is, however, to explore the particular archive of angels his play assembles and creates, for it is through that luminous and difficult archive that secular national history is probed and opened to the winds of change.

I. The Angel Moroni

Angels in America exists in two parts, *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, and follows a young man, Prior Walter, who as he discovers he has AIDS, is abandoned by his lover, Louis, and struggles to find a way to endure and to live. Along the way, Prior becomes entangled with Mormonism: Louis takes a Mormon lover, Joe Pitt; Joe's mother, Hannah, becomes Prior's friend; Prior is visited by an angel who resembles the angel Moroni, who brought the Mormon scriptures to Joseph Smith. It is worth, then, thinking more about Moroni, and the religious traditions brought into the play by his citation. As a religion, Mormonism is a product of American soil, and Kushner is clearly fascinated by it, perhaps in part for the queer family forms, including polygamy, associated with it. In interviews, he has said that *The Book of Mormon* is a work of nineteenth-century American fiction on the same scale as *Moby-Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn* and that its "theology is an American reworking of a western tradition that is uniquely American: the notion of an uninhabited world in which it's possible to reinvent."⁵ Aware of the conservative dimensions of Mormonism, Kushner also has described Mormons as "decent, hardworking, serious, intelligent people" (Vorlicki 1998, 25), a characterization that would at least partly capture the essence of Joe Pitt, the Mormon Republican and closeted gay man who is a friend of Roy Cohn and who—horrible paradox—writes legal briefs arguing for the limitation of homosexuals' civil rights.

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The angel Moroni delivering the plates of the Book of Mormon to Joseph Smith (1886).
Library of Congress, [source](#)

The most interesting use of Mormon traditions in *Angels in America*, however, lies in Prior Walter's unconscious imitation of the visionary tradition exemplified by Joseph Smith. In 1823 in Palmyra, New York, the angel Moroni came to the young Smith, saying that the last days were at hand, that Smith was to have a special mission to all nations, and that he was to dig up golden plates on which were written the revelations, supposedly in Egyptian, that, translated by Smith, would become *The Book of Mormon*.⁶ To aid him, Smith received the Urim and Thummim, devices like spectacles, which helped with the work of translation.

In Kushner's play, Prior receives a revelation from an angel and is told to dig, not in the earth near Palmyra, but under his kitchen floor, to find the sacred Scriptures. He receives, as well, a set of special spectacles, peep-stones, to promote his visionary seeing. As with Smith, Prior's angelic revelations are preceded by a shaft of light entering his room, and like Smith, his vision eventually includes a ladder or conduit leading up to heaven. These echoes of Mormon traditions are unmistakable even though in interviews Kushner has rightly insisted that the angel is not Smith's angel, but Prior's, emphasizing the way in which various histories, narratives, and cultural templates inform Kushner's text but are altered by it.⁷ Prior, as I will discuss more fully below, does not follow in Smith's footsteps and obey his angel. In fact, he ultimately refuses her commands, returns the sacred tablets to heaven, and insists on a mission not fueled by a divine imperative.

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Something Hannah Pitt, the mother of Joe, tells Prior when he is hospitalized provides an unusual and interesting perspective on the play's insistent angelology as well as on Prior's actions. Hannah connects angels to human desire. As she says, "Our prophet. His desire made prayer. His prayer made an angel. The angel was real. I believe that" (*Perestroika* IV. vi, 235), but Hannah's genealogy of angels undoes their sacred status. "An angel is just a belief, with wings and arms that can carry you. It's naught to be afraid of. If it lets you down, reject it. Seek for something new" (*Perestroika* IV.vi, 237). That is exactly, I will argue, what Prior does in turning his back on the angel of his revelation.

The citation of Mormon history and of its place in a larger American history is explored most explicitly, however, in the key scene in *Perestroika* in which Harper Pitt, Joe Pitt's wife, talks with Prior while they are seated in front of the diorama at the Mormon Visitors' Center on Broadway in New York City. The diorama represents the last stage of the great Mormon trek from Missouri west to Salt Lake City, and as such is a rendition of perhaps the most storied event in Mormon history. A voiceover intones, "In 1847, across fifteen hundred miles of frontier wilderness, braving mountain blizzards, desert storms, and renegade Indians, the first Mormon wagon trains made their difficult way toward the Kingdom of God" (*Perestroika* III.iii, 194). The diorama shows a father, his wife, their daughter and two sons perched on a wagon against a backdrop of the desert. Eerily, the Mormon father is personated by the actor playing Joe Pitt, collapsing the present into the past, interpolating Joe (and by extension his wife) into a vision of Mormon propriety and godly purpose.

But the story of the Mormon trek to the new Zion does not unfold as it should. In part, the machinery in the diorama malfunctions, speeding up and slowing down unpredictably; more importantly, whatever the mannequins say is undermined by the cynical commentary of Harper, Joe's wife's, creating a counter-narrative, voicing what the "official" archive excludes. She notes, for example, that the mother and the sister have no lines, only the father and his sons, and she repeatedly suggests that the idealizations of the story are just that. When a son asks: "Will there be lots to eat there, Father? Will the desert flow with milk and honey?" Harper interjects: "No. Just sand." When the son asks, "Will there be water there?" she says, "Oh, there's a big lake but it's *salt*, that's the joke, they drag you on your knees through hell and when you get there the water of course is undrinkable. Salt. It's a promised land, but *what* a disappointing promise!" (*Perestroika* III.iii.p, 196). A key myth of Mormon historical self-representation is corroded by Harper's debunking of its premises. And yet, for the month that Joe is living with Louis, the Mormon Visitors' Center remains Harper's virtual home. Not believing any longer in the telos and promise of Mormon history, she nonetheless stares doggedly at the diorama as it plays and replays its narrative, while the detritus of Dorito bags and soda cans piles up at her feet.

How to be free of the grip of a history that paralyzes and hurts you but keeps

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you deeply in its thrall? That seems in part to be the problem Kushner is thinking through in his citation and queering of the story of the Mormon trek westward, and in the diorama scene Harper finally gets help from the silenced part of Mormon history, the story of the Mormon mother who gets no lines in the diorama, but is addressed directly by Harper: “Bitter lady of the Plains, talk to me. Tell me what to do.” The Mother in the diorama stands and leaves the stage, beckoning for Harper to follow. But Harper says: “I’m stuck. My heart’s an anchor.” To which the Mother replies: “Leave it, then. Can’t carry no extra weight” (*Perestroika* III.iii, 201). Harper goes to sit on the wagon the Mormon Mother has abandoned, as if to try on the position that seat implies, only then rising to follow the Mother who leads her to the Brooklyn Heights Promenade and reads her a lesson on the possibility of change, a process so painful that the Mormon mother says it is as if your innards get yanked out and then stuffed back into your split skin (*Perestroika* III.vi.p. 211). Getting off the wagon train of history—in this case the view of history encoded in Mormon belief—in order to forge a new history is a process both violent and painful. We may call this progress, or perhaps only call it change, but there’s nothing either beautiful or inevitable about it.

In *Angels in America*, both of the Mormon women, Harper and Hannah Pitt, enact this painful process of change. Hannah leaves the safety of Salt Lake City, reversing the Mormon trek, to help her homosexual son, Joe, and then, when he rejects her help, she creates a new family among those not of her blood or her religion: Prior, Louis, and Belize, a black male nurse. Harper finally walks out of the script of the Mormon wife, leaving Joe, and heading west, not on a wagon train headed for Salt Lake City, but on an airplane headed for San Francisco. Each woman has lived through a rupture, a great break with the histories they have known and inhabited, and while this rupture is dramatized as part of a personal narrative, it is also emblematic of the queer and querying relationship to history that the play repeatedly enacts. The women, perhaps because they are not the heroines of the diorama, have the courage to swerve away from the sectarian histories in which their destinies are inscribed and to insert themselves into new histories. Painfully, each woman finds her way away from Salt Lake City and away from the teleological vision of an Elect nation planting a new Zion in the American wilderness. Geography emblemizes the new histories of which each would be a part. They end up single and uncoupled in the great coastal, cosmopolitan and gay cities of San Francisco and New York.

By contrast, Joe Pitt, the central figure in the diorama’s vision of Mormon history, never entirely frees himself from the Mormon narrative that has repressed his sexuality and caused him to embrace a self-wounding Republican rectitude that, we infer, has caused his bleeding ulcer. Made sick by a history he internalizes, he nonetheless remains true to his Mormon heritage, innocently susceptible to the political ideas of his second father, Roy Cohn, and closed to the alternative possibilities evoked by Louis, briefly his gay lover. Joe can’t change. The Mormon narrative of a people apart, progressing through adversity to the New Zion, straightjackets him.

Despite his obvious respect for his Mormon characters, Kushner's treatment of Joe Pitt is the play's most powerful indictment of a peculiarly American understanding of history, one given powerful and dangerous affirmation in the years of Ronald Reagan's Presidency when Kushner was writing this play, years in which Reagan renewed the rhetoric of America as an Elect nation, a city on a hill, a beacon and moral example to the world.

II. Jacob's Angel



Gustav Doré, *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (1855)

One of the amazing and difficult things about Kushner's play, however, is how it layers one history on top of another to create something new. The angel that crashes through Prior's ceiling is not only a memory trace of the angel Moroni; it's also, simultaneously, the angel (in the Bible called a man, but most often in commentary called an angel) with whom Jacob wrestled as he left the land of his father-in-law, Laban, and returned to the land of his father, Isaac, and his brother, Esau, in the book of Genesis. On this journey, an angel came to Jacob at night, and Jacob wrestled with him, as Prior wrestles with his angel, and Jacob would not let go of the angel, even though he received a wound in his thigh, until he received the angel's blessing (Genesis 32: 25-26). The angel finally concedes that Jacob has prevailed, and he blesses him and gives him a new name: Israel. Again, Kushner plants details in *his* play that deliberately cue the audience to the relevance of the Genesis story to Prior's situation. Prior is told by Hannah Pitt to wrestle with the angel, and he does, crying, "I will not let thee go except thou bless me" (*Perestroika* v.i., 251). In the struggle, the Angel pulls a muscle in *her* thigh, while Prior, whose leg has been hurting for months, walks with a cane throughout the later part of the play.

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In interviews, Kushner has said that his meditations on the Jacob story were influenced by Harold Bloom's account of this figure in his commentary on *The Book of J*. There, Bloom speaks of Jacob as a figure of struggle, suffering, and trickery. Jacob fought with his brother Esau in the womb, defrauded Esau of his father's blessing, through sharp practice won the better part of his father-in-law, Laban's, sheep, and wrung from the angel a second blessing on the eve of his reunion with his brother after twenty years of living in the land of Laban. As Bloom suggests, "His lifelong agony to receive and secure the Blessing is the source of his fascination."⁸ But what is this blessing? Literally it translates as "more life," the words which Prior himself speaks to the theater audience at the end of *Perestroika* as he stands by the Bethesda Fountain. In Jewish tradition, this is sometimes taken to mean more progeny. Jacob, after all, had many sons, and he gave his name to a people: the Israelites. Prior has no progeny; in this he is very unlike Jacob. But Bloom discusses what else "more life" can mean in the particular context of Jacob's story. For Bloom, the Blessing is extracted from a very particular angel, the angel of death, on the night when Jacob fears he will be killed by his brother's forces the next day. What Jacob wins from the angel, by his persistence, is the right to cross over the river Jabbok into the land of his fathers and to survive there, though lame in his hip and weighed down by the loss of his wife Rachel. As Bloom says, "what matters is that this lifelong struggler indeed held out," (Bloom 1990, 219) which is what Prior, the AIDS survivor, does, though not as the progenitor of a race or nation, but as someone who persists, though wounded, and who makes something new from the shards of his old life.

Prior, then, who is neither Mormon nor Jewish, is the figure where two histories meet: the Mormon story of the angel Moroni's revelation to Joseph Smith of the destiny of the Mormon people to found a new Zion in Utah; and the Jewish story of the blessing bestowed on the Old Testament patriarch, Jacob, which promises that he will survive and be the progenitor of a chosen people. While the stories of Mormon and Jew are hardly the same story, Kushner's play shows a moment of convergence in the belief in special revelation, in chosen-ness. Prior reconfigures both histories. Prophet without progeny, the founder of no race or religion, but, indeed, their confounder, he is used to critique histories of election and exclusion.

Kushner, himself both Jewish and homosexual, makes the treatment of Jewish history in *Angels in America* especially complex. *Millennium Approaches* opens with the funeral of the Jewish immigrant, Sarah Ironson, grandmother of Louis, who, in the aged rabbi's account, was a survivor like Jacob; *Perestroika* ends with a debate at the Bethesda fountain in Central Park about the present actions of the modern-day state of Israel. *Angels in America*, then, is literally bookended by episodes that recall the histories of victimhood, wandering, and modern nation building of the children of Israel. Of Sarah Ironson, the rabbi says that Jews like her "crossed the ocean...[and] brought with us to America the villages of Russia and Lithuania...Descendants of this immigrant woman, you do not grow up in America, you and your children and their children with the goyische names. You do not live in America. No such place exists. Your clay is the clay of some Litvak shtetl, your air the air of the steppes—because

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she carried the old world on her back across the ocean, in a boat, and she put it down on Grand Concourse Avenue, or in Flatbush, and she worked that earth into your bones, and you pass it to your children, this ancient, ancient culture and home” (*Millennium Approaches*, I.i, 16). This is one version of the story of Jews in America, a story of perpetual difference and refusal of assimilation.

Scene II of *Millennium*, by contrast, takes us to the law offices of Roy Cohn, a different kind of Jew, at home in the wheeling-dealing world of Washington’s Reaganite politics, a world to which he would like to introduce his young Mormon protégé. Much has been written about Kushner’s treatment of Roy Cohn, and about the ambivalence with which the play presents his corruption and his charisma. It has been argued that his horrible death from AIDS perpetuates stereotypes about the link between Jews and sexual perversion, and it has been argued that his drive for power and for life counter other stereotypes of the Jew as ineffectual and effeminate.⁹ In my view Kushner’s ambivalence about Cohn, though real, is firmly resolved in the play by Kushner’s refusal to make Cohn into a monster, but instead to make him a human being of enormous vulgar energy whose political positions must be firmly repudiated.

The juxtaposition of Sarah Ironson and Roy Cohn suggests several things about Jews in America: first, that they are not all the same and that their histories in America are not one indivisible history; moreover, running down the spine of both of Kushner’s plays is a semi-comic and also deadly serious haunting of the dying Roy Cohn by the ghost of another Jew, Ethel Rosenberg. If Roy has something of Jacob’s persistence, struggling and fighting to stay alive and determined to conceal from the world the fact that he has AIDS, Ethel has a different kind of persistence. Roy saw her to the electric chair, but she sees him both to his death and to his disbarment. Slipping from his hospital room, she takes the train up to Yonkers to see how the hearings are going and is the first to bring Roy the news that he will die disbarred. The bonds of a shared cultural and religious heritage cannot erase the differences between these characters. When Roy finally dies, Louis, urged on by Belize, says Kaddish over Roy’s body, the words fed to him by the invisible presence of Ethel by his side. It’s a potentially sentimental moment, the three main Jews of the narrative—Louis, Ethel, and Roy—are united by a religious ritual, but the sentimentality is immediately countered. Ethel and then Louis end the ceremony by intoning, “You sonofabitch” (*Perestroika* V.iii, 257).

Ethel Rosenberg, of course, as an earnest supporter of the Communist party, had tried to shape an America quite different from Cohn’s, and her presence at Roy’s deathbed fills her with a strange sort of excitement and intensity that hint at more than the settling of a private score. In her view, Roy’s death will coincide with an historical cataclysm. When Roy says he has “forced [his] way into history” and “ain’t never gonna die,” Ethel replies that “History is about to crack wide open. Millennium approaches” (*The Millenium Approaches*, 118), implying that what counts as history is about to be changed, the past blown up, a new age

installed, one in which Cohn's role in history will be obliterated or discredited. The play constantly teases the viewer with the possibility that Ethel might be right: that the politics embodied in Roy Cohn can be absolutely defeated; that perestroika will change the history of the world; that reviled peoples will find acceptance and a way to live in peace with their neighbors; that virtue will triumph over evil. This possibility of a radical and utopian cracking open of history is constantly insinuated, yet it is also the vision of history most insistently and skeptically queried over the two-part course of Kushner's epic drama.

III. Benjamin's Angel of History



Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus* (1920)

To consider the millennial possibility critically, it is necessary now to turn to Walter Benjamin and his famous discussion of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*. Benjamin is not named in Kushner's play, but his ideas are a force in it, as is his famous account of Klee's angel portrait. Benjamin was, of course, both a Jew and a Marxist, and he wrote works of philosophy and aesthetic theory in the terrible time that was Nazi Germany. In 1940, he committed suicide while trying to escape to America from occupied France. His thoughts on history are given their most concise expression in his late work, "On the Concept of History," written in part as a protest against the ineffectuality of the Social Democrats in combating Fascism. In this difficult and elliptical work he lays out his view of history, including his critique of the idea of progress and his dissatisfaction with normative history since, in his view, such history always sympathizes with the victors and benefits those who currently rule.¹⁰ But in the middle of the essay Benjamin also claims that every generation has "a weak Messianic power," that is, an ability to connect with the past differently, outside the normative continuum of victors' history (Benjamin 2001, 390). That connection occurs in moments when the past flashes up

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imagistically, allowing some to make what Benjamin calls “the tiger’s leap into the past” (395), a leap that allows the future to be imagined differently and the present defamiliarized so that it loses its aura of inevitability. In such moments, when the continuum of history explodes, revolution is possible. As many commentators have noted, Benjamin’s mystical Messianism substitutes a revolutionary prophet for a revolutionary party, and while evoking class struggle, does so in terms of image, memory, and experience, not political forms.¹¹ This is important, I think, for understanding the limits of Benjamin’s politics, and also bears on the question of what art can do, including a play such as *Angels in America*, in moments of political and social emergency.

A key passage from “On the Concept of History,” and one of particular importance for Kushner’s play, involves a picture of Paul Klee’s described by Benjamin in the following way:

There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at 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 and has got caught in its wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm (392).

The clearest thing about this passage is the writer’s critique of the idea of progress and of the carnage (including the atrocities of the Nazis) created by a mindless dedication to this ideology. The angel of history here is helpless: staring with horrified eyes at the carnage of the past, the angel can not control its own fate, turn its face to the future, repair past damage. Its desire is “to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed,” but this desire is rendered impossible. Whether the angel’s desire to restore a past wholeness is admirable, of course, remains an open question.

To the extent that Kushner in *Angels* engages with Benjamin, the play takes a complicated stance toward Benjamin’s theses and particularly toward his description of the angel of history. The representation of several characters in *Angels* deliberately recalls aspects of “On the Concept of History.” Ethel Rosenberg, true to her revolutionary heritage, does so most directly, in her prophecy that “History is about to crack wide open.” And Harper, sitting among the detritus of Dorito bags and Coke cans, the flotsam of human progress, staring hypnotically at a certain image of the past, the Mormon trek, registers the pained shock of Benjamin’s angel, facing backward and impaled by a force he can’t control. Importantly, of course, Harper does not stay impaled, but, as I have suggested, makes her own break with the continuum of history and painfully faces toward a different future. She enacts in miniature and in personal terms something like a revolutionary

break with the past. But of Klee's angel itself, the one who cannot turn, Kushner has said in interviews that that angel is a reactionary force, and she, I believe, is one of his models for Prior's angel. According to Kushner, swept along by progress, "The Angel of History wants to go back and restore what has been destroyed. But the winds of time are inevitably blowing her forward."¹² The playwright seems to feel that neither stasis nor a politics of restoration is a viable political option, but neither is being blown about wildly by unregulated forces of change. So firmly, however, does Kushner's play repudiate nostalgia and restoration that Kushner has been himself accused of embracing ideologies of progress and liberal reform and of repudiating Benjamin's revolutionary idealism.¹³ I think this is too simple, and to discuss this problem further and to come to some conclusions about the relationship of Kushner's angels to his vision of America's history and its future, it is time, finally, to turn to Prior's angel.

IV. Prior's Angel

In Prior, as we have seen, several of the play's historical vectors converge and comment on one another. His name evokes the prior or former Walter, Walter Benjamin; his experience evokes both the Mormon and Jewish origin stories: Joseph Smith and Jacobs' pivotal encounters with their angels. But Prior himself is neither Jew nor Mormon nor Marxist, but a Christian with an extremely long British/American pedigree stretching back to at least the 13th century. Among the spirits who haunt him are two of his ancestors, a 13th century farmer from Yorkshire and a 17th century Londoner. With this lineage, he should be the *unmarked* American insider, the one who belongs, the one not marked by ethnicity, race, or religion as marginal or eccentric. But marked he is, both by his sexuality which, we infer, means that the unbroken succession of Walters will cease with him, and marked by his disease, the wine-dark lesions that spread across his body. The disease links Prior to Roy Cohn and to all the other persons with AIDS, forging new paths of non-familial interconnection, but it is the disease, the play suggests, that also makes Prior the object of angelic visitation.

When, in *The Millennium Approaches*, Prior first has intimations of an impending supernatural event, he is both terrified and erotically aroused, and the theater audience is as unsure as he about what the event presages. Is the disease affecting his brain? Is he about to die? Is he the unlikely conduit for a divine revelation? *Part I* does not answer these questions. It ends with the Angel's words:

Greetings, Prophet,
The Great Work beings:
The Messenger has arrived.
(*Blackout.*)
(V.vii.p. 125)

Sitting in the audience at one of the first New York performances of the play, neither I nor a great many others really knew if Prior had died, whether like one of Walter Benjamin's

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revolutionary souls, he was seeing history explode before him, or whether, like Jacob or Joseph Smith, he was about to become the leader of a new nation or religion. Terrifying and exhilarating, the theatrical moment ambiguously gestured toward a world extinguished or a world transformed.

The second play, *Perestroika*, reveals the disappointing reality that often emerges in the wake of millennial hopes. It is a post-millennial play, but not, I would argue, a dystopic one, though it quite firmly seems to put paid to the idea of political revolution, at least in 1990s America. Prior is still sick; the world has not been transformed; and Prior has still fully to understand just what his particular angel wants from him. Eventually she instructs him; his mission as a prophet to the nations is to command a halt to mixing, mingling, traveling, and questing. He is to preach the doctrine of stasis and immobility. In explaining this mission, the angel says that God has abandoned his angels and abandoned heaven because God has become enthralled with his own creation, Protean humanity, and its restless drive toward change. In what I consider to be a key moment in the text, Prior refuses to accept the angel's mission, and, by implication, her negative view of change. In so doing, he repudiates, first, the idea that all calls to election must be answered; some must and should be refused. He also repudiates a historical vision that is mainly restorative in nature, that looks backward to a lost moment of plenitude rather than forward to an indeterminate but living future; and he repudiates the consolations of Christian transcendence. Prior refuses to die and to be at peace. Instead, he demands to return to earth and to receive "the Blessing" for this choice.

Alisa Solomon has convincingly argued that in making this decision, Prior here manifests values often associated with a Jewish tradition of thought in that he chooses ethical human conduct on earth as the ultimate test and goal, turning from the redemptive, other-worldly ideologies of Christianity.¹⁴ I agree with Solomon, seeing Prior's choice as another example within the play of traditions and histories being queried, queered, and transformed by other traditions and histories. Simply put, Christian transcendence is queried and transformed by Jewish embodiment and worldliness. Prior ends the play as something other than the blue-blooded, 34th descendent of the Walter lineage. In turning his face toward the world, Prior embraces a different family, a hybrid community composed of those linked not primarily by lineage or religion but by values, politics, and historical contingency. At its heart, *Angels in America* is a profoundly anti-genealogical play. It repudiates the narratives of privilege that come from being born into a particular race or lineage. This is as true for the Anglo-Saxons whose ancestors were stitched into the Bayeux Tapestry as for the Jews or the Mormons. As I have indicated, Kushner's present America is haunted by images from the past: Ethel Rosenberg's execution, the Mormon trek and Joseph Smith's revelation, Sarah Ironside's immigration journey, Ray Cohn's homophobia, the English origins and New England sea-faring past of Prior's ancestors. These iconic moments crosscut, critique, and interrogate one another, especially as they put Mormon and Jewish ideologies of "choseness" in conversation, and as they use homosexuality to query the histories that privilege biological, racial, or religious lineage.

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The play's repudiation of nostalgia, however, extends beyond its refusal to embrace the angels' dream of stasis and restoration to its treatment of a certain kind of entrenched, inflexible Marxism. If the angels want to go back to a time before God abandoned heaven, some Marxists want to go back to the theoretical purity of a pre-Perestroika world. In a short scene frequently left out of stage productions of *Perestroika*, but which in the script actually begins that play, an ancient Marxist, described as "unimaginably old and totally blind" (*Perestroika* l.i., 147), rages against the reformers who work for social change without having a "Beautiful Theory" (148) to justify their actions. Without a theory, he asserts, "we dare not, we *cannot*, we **MUST NOT** move ahead" (p. 149). This ridiculous figure with his satiric name, Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov, is a satiric send-up of the nostalgic revolutionary.

But while the play repudiates nostalgic politics, it does embrace a visionary orientation toward the future, but one incredibly chastened and stripped of ideologies of election and choice. With its insistence that there *are* angels in America, Kushner affirms visionary seeing as part of American radical histories. Within the fiction of the play, Prior's angelic visitations are real—as real as the angel Moroni that came to Joseph Smith and, in another land, as an angel came to Jacob. Kushner seems to affirm, as well, the possibility that *change* can arise from such seeing. Just as Harper, the other figure uncannily attuned to the spirit world, chooses to repudiate her place in Mormon history after conversation with the Mormon mother in the historical diorama, so Prior embraces a new life. Crucially, he does not return to his old history with Louis, the man who left him when his wine-dark lesions came. He forges new bonds, as, for example, with Hannah Pitt, the Mormon mother of Joe Pitt, and he affirms, in the play's closing lines, that there will be a future time in America in which all people marked by AIDS and marked by other histories of marginalization *will be citizens*. This is part of the Great Work to come, and it is a goal disdained as merely "liberal politics" primarily by those whose citizenship has never been in question.

Embracing, then, the possibility of historical and personal change that are part of Benjamin and Rosenberg's legacy, *Angels in America* remains modest in its intimations about the form such change will take or how it will come about. Part of the play's historical genealogy in the moment of AIDS and of *perestroika*, is a hesitancy, for example, about the adequacy of traditional Marxism to offer a blueprint for the future.¹⁵ Does this mean that, as some have argued, Kushner turns away from a praxis and an ideology of Marxist revolution only to go back to what Benjamin found so pernicious, that is, an Enlightenment narrative of progress? I think it is important to recognize that like all the other historical narratives entertained in *Angels*, the narrative of progress is queried and transformed in the play under the dialectical pressure of other narratives. *Angels* insists on the necessity for change and movement, for taking political account of new realities like AIDS and social oppressions not directly linked to class, but it is

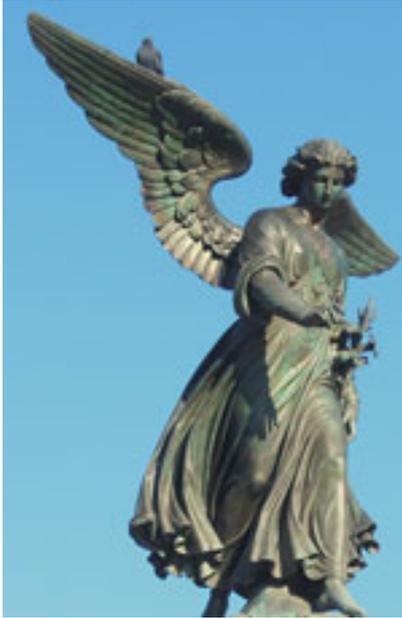
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tentative about the shape of—or the inevitability of—more progressive political and social structures. While the legacies of Benjamin and Rosenberg are present in the play and fuel its chastened activist vision, neither fully provides the blueprint for contemporary political action. At best, as Harper, one of the play’s visionaries put it, “In this world, there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we’ve left behind, and dreaming ahead. At least I think that’s so” (V.x, 275). A painful *kind* of progress, tentative and uncertain, taking shape between memory and hope: that is one of the play’s most optimistic and yet modest articulations of future possibility.

V. The Bethesda Angel

Another such moment occurs in the epilogue in which Prior and his friends, four years after the events of the play proper, gather in winter at the fountain of the Bethesda Angel in Central Park. As many have noted, these friends represent the new non-biological, cross-racial American family and polity. There is a Jew, a Black, a Mormon, an Anglo-Saxon, a female, and three males—three homosexuals and at least one formerly married person. They stand in front of the fountain, its water shut off for the season, above which towers the beautiful features of the Bethesda angel. We are told earlier in the play that the statue was erected to commemorate the navel dead in the Civil War, making it a part of America’s complicated history of slavery and racism (*Perestroika* IV.iii. 226). But the angel is inscribed in many histories. It is linked also to the history of the Jews. As Louis says: “she was this angel, she landed in the Temple square in Jerusalem, in the days of the Second Temple, right in the middle of a working day she descended and just her foot touched the earth. And where it did, a foundation shot up from the ground. When the Romans destroyed the Temple, the fountain of Bethesda ran dry” (279). The fountain had special healing properties, and at the Millennium, not the year 2000, but, as Prior says, “the Capital M Millennium,” the fountain will flow again, and Hannah and Prior will go there together to bathe and be healed.

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[John Sondeman, Bethesda Angel in Central Park \(2008\)](#)

The Bethesda Angel is a symbol of hope and the creation of many people's desire. As Hannah said earlier, "An angel is just a belief, with wings and arms that can carry you. It's naught to be afraid of. If it lets you down, reject it. Seek for something new" (*Perestroika* IV.vi, 237). This angel represents a dream of healing to persons with AIDS. The angel also represents a dream of restored community to many Jews. In the epilogue, simply titled "Bethesda," Louis, however, queries whether at the Millennium the restored fountain will literally spring up in the actual Jerusalem, focus, as it is, of contested political claims. As the play draws to its close, behind Prior one hears the voices of Belize and Louis and Hannah debating the propriety of Israeli statehood and the rights of the Palestinians.

It is perhaps fitting, therefore, that the play's final image of the Bethesda Angel is firmly rooted in Central Park, in New York City. This Bethesda angel is a New York reality, a landmark, a gathering spot, a thing of beauty (**Image 4**). It represents a place where new communities can form, communities of difference, not of sameness, communities whose members are often far from their imagined "home." This angel becomes a symbol within *Angels in America* of the reality and the promise of diaspora, of the promise of "more life" that comes to those—often those most deeply wounded by history—who give up the dream of election, who step down from the wagon train of a certain historical narrative and live freely with others not of their own kind. It is here, I think, that what has been termed Kushner's liberal vision of a multi-cultural America emerges as a powerful and important alternative to death-dealing narratives of election and of racial, national, and religious purity.

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It is with this Bethesda Angel as a backdrop that Prior steps out of the frame of the play, like Prospero at the end of *The Tempest*, to speak to the audience.

You are fabulous creatures, each and every one.
And I bless you: *More Life*.
The Great Work Begins.
(p. 280)

No more than at the end of *Millennium Approaches* does the audience know exactly what the Great Work is or how it is to be enacted. It has something, surely, to do with the creation of a more just society, which is, in the end, part of the American dream, but a dream often married by racism, homophobia, and ideologies of election. How to realize the dream more perfectly, and not just for America, and how to change it into an inclusive dream, is the burden Kushner here passes, in a self-consciously Shakespearean moment, from his characters to the audience. With Prior's final line, "the Great Work begins," Kushner challenges his audiences to renewed and refashioned political engagement. In that regard, as he himself has often said, in writing *Angels* he was self-consciously attempting to revive Brechtian epic theater for a contemporary moment.¹⁶ Partly this meant a serious engagement with history as a way of disrupting a sense of historical inevitability and opening audiences to the possibility of change.

I want to end, however, by stressing that, above all, Prior's angel is a *theatrical* angel, a creature of flesh and blood dressed up in a costume. Not a supernatural force, the angel embodies the earthly hopes of the human imagination using art to create new histories and new possibilities. Part of the audacity of *Angels in America* lies in the very fact that it features an angel on the stage, an angel that has to crash through ceilings, that has to fly, that has to wrestle, convincingly, with another human actor. To make the angel "work" is one of the hardest parts of staging the play, and Kushner has spoken often of the way the angel's presence must rekindle the magic of theater, even while revealing the wires and the technology that create that magic. In Ellen McLaughlin, his first stage angel, and in Emma Thompson, the angel of the television version, Kushner had two memorable enactments of this astonishing stage character, a figure that at once invites amazement and detachment, conjures up the magic of the theater and the supernatural and simultaneously puts pressure on a naïve belief in either. Kushner's theatrical angels are now part of a new archive of angels in America. They are central to Kushner's "gay fantasia on national themes" and central to his belief in the power of theater to recall us to the great earthly work of re-imagining our political life, in America and in the world, now.

Jean Howard's books include *Shakespeare's Art of Orchestration* (1984); *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, edited with Marion O'Connor (1987); *The Stage and Struggle in Early Modern England* (1994); with Phyllis Rackin, *Engendering a Nation: A Feminist Account of Shakespeare's English Histories* (1997); *Marxist Shakespeares*, edited

with Scott Shershow (2000); and four generically organized Companions to Shakespeare, edited with Richard Dutton (2001). She is a co-editor of *The Norton Shakespeare* (2nd ed. 2007) and General Editor of the Bedford Contextual Editions of Shakespeare. Her most recent book, entitled *Theater of a City: The Places of London Comedy 1598-1642* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007) won the Barnard Hewitt Award for Outstanding Work in Theater History for 2008. She is currently working on a book on the contemporary feminist dramatist Caryl Churchill and another book on the development of Renaissance tragedy. She is a member of the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, a Senator of Phi Beta Kappa, and co-coordinator of a forthcoming issue of PMLA on tragedy.

Notes

¹ All references to both part of Kushner, Tony. 1995. *Angels in America, Millenium Approaches and Perestroika*, are taken from *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. New York: Theatre Communications Group.

² In Kushner, Tony and Robert Vorlicky. 1998. *Tony Kushner in Conversation*, ed. Robert Vorlicky, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, pp. 18-19, Kushner says that he wanted his play to bring the words “gay” and “national” into conjunction as a way of moving beyond the gay liberation themes and relationship issues of plays from the 60s and 70s and to focus on more explicitly political matters.

³ An archive is not just a repository of objects, but, more importantly, the process of selecting them-- bringing some things to light, obscuring others, establishing connections through juxtaposition or rules of order. See Foucault, Michel. 1972. *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language*. New York: Pantheon; Derrida, Jacques. 1998. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Okwui Enwezor. 2008. *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*. Gettingen, Germany: Steidl Publishers. I argue that Kushner uses his play to collect angel lore into a new archival assemblage that queries the discrete histories to which the angels have been attached, providing openings to a refigured future.

⁴ See, in particular, the excellent and provocative essay by Savran, David. 1997. “Ambivalence, Utopia, and A Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the Nation,” in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, pp. 13-39. Savran claims that Kushner is committed to a liberal politics that uses the same rhetoric of American exceptionalism employed by Ronald Reagan.

⁵ Vorlicky, Ed., *Tony Kushner in Conversation*, pp. 24-25.

⁶ Bushman, Richard. 1984. *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*. Urbana: University of Chicago Press, pp. 61-64.

⁷ Vorlicky, Ed., *Tony Kushner in Conversation*, p. 26.

⁸ Bloom, Harold. 1990. *The Book of J*, trans. David Rosenberg. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, p. 210.

⁹ David Roman, for example, in "November 1, 1992:AIDS/Angels in America" in *Approaching the Millenium*, Eds. Geis and Krugers, p. 40-55 at 53, argues that Cohn's death thematizes "the expulsion of evil;" while Michael Caddon, "Strange Angel: The Pinklisting of Roy Cohn," in the same volume, pp. 78-89, also points up the outpouring of homophobia that followed Cohn's death. Freedman, Jonathan. 1998. "Angels, Monsters, and Jews: Intersections of Queer and Jewish Identity in Kushner's Angels in America," *PMLA* 113 (January): 90-102, argues that Kushner finally affirms a Christian-centered culture and abandons Jewish difference in his struggle to eliminate Cohn from both the narrative of *Angels in America* and from the queer national community Kushner fashions at the end of the play. This last is a view I wish to challenge.

¹⁰ Benjamin, Walter. 2003. "On the Concept of History," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 4. trans. Edmund Jephcott. Ed. Howard Eiland and Michale W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 391.

¹¹ Eagleton, Terry. 1981. *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*. London: Verso, pp. 176-77.

¹² Tony Kushner, *Tony Kushner in Conversation*, Ed. Robert Vorlicky. p. 57.

¹³ See Savron, David. 1995. "Ambivalence, Utopia, and A Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Constructs the Nation," *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 2, Gay and Lesbian Queeries (May) for the most incisive critique along these lines. For the most cogent answer to Savron, see Betchel, Roger. 2001. "'A Kind of Painful Progress': The Benjaminian Dialectics of *Angels in America*." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (Fall): 99-121.

¹⁴ Solomon, Alisa. 1997. "Wrestling with *Angels*: A Jewish Fantasia," *Approaching the Millenium*, pp. 118-33.

¹⁵ On this point see especially, Roger Betchel, "A Painful Progress," p. 107.

¹⁶ See Kushner's comments on the Brechtian inspiration for his play in *Tony Kushner in Conversation*, Ed. Robert Vorlicky, pp. 106-23.

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