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“The Great Work Begins”

The Reception and Relevance of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* in a Millennial World

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Creative Thesis

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When it was first performed in 1991, Tony Kushner’s play about the HIV/AIDS epidemic in 1980s America, Angels in America, was clearly relevant and, because of this, successful. Nearly three decades later, 2017 saw a resurgence of Angels in America, raising an important question: why now? This paper seeks to answer this question (previously posed by David Savran in 1995) through the dual lenses of close reading and reception theory, studying the evolution of productions over time and examining the extended lifetime of Kushner’s characters and messages. The renewed relevance of Angels in America is the result of a return to a sociopolitical and environmental landscape that is similar to that of the 1980s. Furthermore, the play survives not only because of such similarities, but because it is written for turbulent periods of change and preaches a message of hope and perseverance; for this reason, it will continue to thrive long past this moment in time.

By the time Tony Kushner’s groundbreaking work *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* was first performed in 1991, more than 14,000 people had died from HIV/AIDS (Christensen). Because the play takes place at the height of the epidemic in the 1980s, its timeliness and immediacy persisted through much of the 1990s. At the start of the current millennium, though, *Angels in America* came to be regarded as more of a historical text, emblematic of a time now past, than one with events that directly applied to the present. It had lost much of its “millennial urgency,” in large part because, in North America after 1993, HIV/AIDS was no longer a death sentence thanks to wider access to medication (McNulty). Then, in 2017, *Angels in America* played first at London’s Na-

tional Theater, followed by a 2018 Broadway run in New York City, garnering eleven Tony nominations (McPhee). But why the resurgence—why now? In 1995, David Savran asked, “why now?” questioning the link between the play and the era in which it was not just created, but performed and received. Now, by combining methods of critical reading and reception theory—which provide insight into the way a text grows and changes with each new audience—it is possible to arrive at an updated answer, one that arises within another turbulent era (which includes the 2016 elections and pressing concerns regarding climate change). *Angels in America*’s current relevancy is the result of a political and environmental landscape reminiscent of the text’s, as well as its much-needed message of



I recently graduated with a bachelor’s degree in English from the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, where I am continuing my studies in the master’s program. I hope to one day earn my PhD and remain in academia as a teacher and a scholar, devoted to the pursuit of knowledge in and out of the classroom. I am particularly interested in contemporary literature, popular culture, and queer theory. I was drawn to *Angels in America* because it presents a message of prosperity for the LGBTQ+ community that, as a queer woman, can be difficult to find in literature and film. So much in the world during 2018 terrified me, which made the writing process for this paper mentally and emotionally draining, but *Angels in America* restored in me, just as it did in many of its characters, a profound sense of hope.

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hope and perseverance in an age of widespread disillusionment and fear.

Reception theory, which involves “a general shift in concern from the author and the work to the text and the reader,” situates a text in place and time, whereas close reading alone does not often venture outside the pages of the work itself (Holub xii). This approach not only supplies context for the setting in which the text was written, but also provides opportunities to locate the text in *different* places and times. It is key, then, to define the word “reception” as Florian Hurka does: it is not a passive act, but an active one, in which readers “take in” the text and, when combined with close reading, produce new meaning because of their unique identities and positions in the world (qtd. in Tatum 83). Understanding these readings requires an evaluation of the events surrounding a text that color it and impact its popularity and success (or lack thereof) within a group. This process is carried out via the examination of news headlines, reviews, and other relevant contextual details. Thus, merging close reading and reception theory enables the literary community to constantly see texts anew and, perhaps more significantly, understand the shifting values of texts within diverse contexts.

If ever there were a text ideally suited for this dual method of analysis, it would be *Angels in America*, a play thoroughly tied to a certain time and place: 1980s America. Its depictions of HIV/AIDS combined with its inclusion of characters based on real people (such as Roy Cohn and Ethel Rosenberg) make it uniquely specific to one setting. For this reason, by the 2000s, *Angels in America* had become a (seemingly) dated text with far less urgency. By now, 2018, it should feel particularly outdated, a historical text from a bygone era. After all, the play is further now from the time in which Tony Kushner wrote it than he was to the time he was writing about in the play. How fascinating it has been, then, to behold *Angels in America*'s return over the past two years with a new vigor, rivaling even that of the initial release in the 1990s. It is not a work that was coined an instant classic, nor did its popularity build slowly and steadily over time. Its boom nearly three decades after its first performance appears to be sudden and surprising, but, viewed through the lens of reception theory, it is clear that the play's resurgence is not anomalous. *Angels in America*'s recent success is entirely predicated on the landscape of modern America.

Before venturing to understand *Angels in America*'s current success, though, its initial reception must be considered. David Savran's 1995 article, “Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism,” is invaluable. Savran asks, “Why now?” of the play, but his definition of “now” is wider than 1995. “Now” refers to the 1980s and 1990s, the era in which the text was produced and received. This timeframe is important because *Angels in America* was a groundbreaking text, one that Savran himself calls, “the marker of a decisive historical shift in American theatre” (208). Most salient of his arguments is that of queering history. Not only are American politics (Reaganism

and the Cold War especially) queered through Roy Cohn's character, Mormonism is as well, through Joe, Roy's mentee, and even the Angel, is as well (Savran 227). Walter Benjamin, whose work is a major influence for *Angels in America*, says that it is not “man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself [that] is the depository of historical knowledge,” an idea reflected in Kushner's account of 1980s America (qtd. in Savran 227). Savran points out that Kushner “[places] this oppressed class at the very center of American history” and “[recognizes] the central role that it has had in the construction of a national subject, polity, literature, and theatre” (227). Even in 1995, then, *Angels in America* could be regarded as more of a historical text, one that allowed what was a new imagination of a queer 1980s that rejected Reagan's patented erasure of queerness and associated neglect of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

At the same time, it is impossible to deny *Angels in America*'s relevance to a 1990s, post-Reagan America. Although technically historical, the early 1990s production ran during a time in which the remnants of the world Kushner depicts were still visible. The HIV/AIDS epidemic may finally have been acknowledged publicly, but the treatment of HIV/AIDS was only just beginning to offer more than a death sentence. Ronald Reagan was no longer in office, but George H.W. Bush had been voted in. As Frank Rich points out, the production was less defined by a change in directors as it was by “Washington's change of Administrations [sic].” Rather than pushing the text and its conflicts further into the past, though, “the shift in Washington [had] the subliminal effect of making ‘Angels in America’ seem more focused on what [happened] next” (Rich). Roy and Prior, a man recently diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, are central to this sustained relevancy, though they never interact in the play; in fact, it is their indirect opposition and the collision of what each represents that is of particular interest. Roy is cast as “an Anti-christ,” whereas Prior is perhaps not a Christ-figure but certainly is a prophet (Rich). It is their “battle over their visions of the future” that takes center stage in the early 1990s—an urgent and violent metaphor that acts as a reminder that, then, the millennium was still approaching and “the plague was not done yet” (Rich). Though no cure was found for the “plague,” over the following years, medication would improve and become more widespread, Bill Clinton would become president in 1993, and the millennium would pass, leaving *Angels in America* in the position of a historical work.

Equally important to understanding *Angels in America*'s success in the 1990s is uncovering why it lost much of its traction in the 2000s. In large part, this was because of major changes on the national stage: those with HIV/AIDS could live long and full lives, climate change was a concern, but not an urgent one, and sitting president George W. Bush was not seen to be as much of a threat by liberals as Ronald Reagan had been. It was in this world that the 2003 HBO miniseries aired and, while it was by no means an outright failure, it was certainly not a resounding success either. While some critics

attributed this to flaws in staging a play for television, it is irresponsible here to overlook other factors, most notably the passing of the millennium—both in terms of time as well as an event of great peril (Peck; Franklin). As Todd McCarthy notes in his 2003 review of the miniseries, "... we have passed through the millennium, and the millennium was 9/11." In other words, a widespread feeling of impending doom was quieted after 9/11, because it was difficult to imagine something worse than that tragedy. More than that, America as a country survived 9/11 and was—at least in theory—unified because of it. In the realm of the LGBTQ+ community, focus had shifted from HIV/AIDS (which was no longer as monumental a concern as it had once been) to the marriage equality movement, which was still struggling in the early 2000s. The lack of marriage equality, though a serious problem for the LGBTQ+ community, was not a direct and urgent threat to survival; the play's plot had connections to this 2003 landscape but did little to speak to new audiences. Ultimately, the problem with the HBO miniseries was that its particular concerns no longer felt timely; instead, it was characterized by its "retrospective brooding," a work centered almost entirely in history (McNulty).

In 2010, Signature Theatre Company of New York City staged a revival of *Angels in America* that, while edging closer to the present relevance, still could not reach the height of the 2018 run. With Barack Obama's 2008 presidential victory, the fears on which *Angels in America* is based were simply not as prevalent. Climate change was a significant concern, but Obama was working towards better environmental policy. The struggle for LGBTQ+ rights was ongoing, but Obama was an ally. Ben Brantley's metaphor finds the root of the 2010 run's flaw: "... this 'Angels' is rather like picking up a paperback version of a bestseller you devoured, wide eyed and breathless, in hardcover not so long ago. It's still a good read, but you don't feel the same urgency." In sum, 2010 was far too peaceful and hopeful for a revival of *Angels in America* to experience a boom in popularity akin to the 2017 and 2018 runs. The message of hope at the heart of the play resonated enough for the production to fill seats but did little to impact the cultural landscape at the time. Furthermore, 2010 was too distant from the 1980s AIDS epidemic to have the same potent impact on the general public. In discussing the actors' performances, Charles McNulty writes that he "sensed a remove between imagination and experience." The play's relevance had little reach beyond the Reagan presidency and its status as a historical work seemed to have solidified. It is clear that the 2000s were not conducive to success for *Angels in America*, but by 2018, it had risen to fame. So, why now?

The clearest answer to this question lies in the 2016 presidential election and Donald Trump's electoral college victory. In Tony Kushner's 2012 introduction to *Angels in America*, written the day before Election Day in the year Mitt Romney and Barack Obama were up for the presidency, he states that "this is the place from which it seems to me I've always writ-

ten, perched on the knife's edge of terror and hope." His words take on new meaning when considering the 2016 election, which was arguably the most contentious election since *Angels in America* was written (and long before). Kushner could easily be discussing Election Day 2016 when he writes that "today the edge is sharper than it's ever been, and the two worlds it divides, one of light, one of darkness, seem respectively more brilliant and more abysmal, more extremely opposed than ever" (xi). But where Kushner could return in 2013 to say, "It turned out OK," he did not say the same for the 2016 election (xi). *Angels in America* ceased to be relegated to history when its nightmares returned from the same sources: Donald Trump and his followers, namely Reaganites, conservative republicans, and religious fundamentalists.

The root of these nightmares in *Angels in America* is Roy Cohn, who has posthumously gained new significance as Donald Trump's former mentor. Still, this fact does not need to be known for one to see the similarities between these two figures. In Act 3, Scene 5 of "Millennium Approaches," Roy says, in reference to the Rosenberg trial, "I would have fucking pulled the switch if they'd have let me. Why? Because I fucking hate traitors.... Was it legal? Fuck legal. Am I a nice man? Fuck nice. They say terrible things about me in the *Nation*. Fuck the *Nation*" (Kushner 113–114). Vox writer and cultural critic Constance Grady claims that this speech "sounds eerily like something that could have come out of Trump's mouth," though perhaps more concerningly, would most likely be openly broadcast at one of his rallies rather than stated privately, as Roy does with Joe. In the play, Kushner dramatizes the breakdown of the separation between private and public discourses, which finds new relevance in an age in which inner thoughts are publicized through social media, both by the general public as well as by politicians. Trump has changed the way America does politics by jettisoning niceties in favor of smear campaigns (against other politicians as well as the press at large), expletives, and outright threats. For example, in July 2018, Trump tweeted, "To Iranian President Rouhani: NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE," a threat that is reminiscent of Roy's dangerous and violent rhetoric (@realDonaldTrump). It is through aggressive strongman tweets and statements like this that Donald Trump asserts his power not simply over the target of the message (here, the Iranian president), but over other possible adversaries as well. The return of Kushner's Roy Cohn to the post-2016 election stage leaves little room to imagine where these strategies originated.

Where the connection between Donald Trump and Roy Cohn is clear and based on a real relationship, 2018's political landscape has colored the Angel in a new Trumpian light, finding a connection where none may have existed before now. Amanda Lawrence (the actress playing the Angel in the 2018

run) says that director Marianne Elliott has stated in rehearsals that “the Angel and Roy Cohn are very similar. This disgust, this racism, this disgust” (qtd. In Grady). Most notably, the “Anti-Migratory Epistle” is eerily similar to Trump’s foremost doctrines. For one, it echoes his travel ban, which went into effect in 2017, barring citizens from several countries (most of which are “Muslim-majority countries”) from entering the United States (Gladstone and Sugiyama). The Angel decrees, “If you do not MINGLE you will Cease to Progress,” a statement that may also serve as a warning to today’s audiences: a lack of “mingling”—here, between cultures and perhaps even religions—will halt all progress (Kushner 172). Of course, for some, this may be the goal. Trump’s campaign slogan was “Make America Great Again,” suggesting that forward-motion makes America worse; thus, the Angel’s command to “STOP MOVING” does not sound so different from Trump’s apparent mission statement (Kushner 172). Moreover, this plea to stop and turn back is now fueled by the desire to ensure “that *no one* outside a monolith can exist within its borders: not gay people, and not black and brown people either” (Grady). It is no longer a time of pretending that the LGBTQ+ community does not exist, as was done in the Reagan years; now, both “STOP MOVING” and “Make America Great Again” are threats to the livelihoods of anyone who does not quite fit into Trump and his followers’ vision of America.

The irony of this threat in *Angels in America* is that it comes from two queer characters: Roy Cohn, “a heterosexual man...who fucks around with guys,” and the Angel, who has “eight vaginas” and “a Bouquet of Phalli” (Kushner 47, 165). It seems counterintuitive for these characters to act as the posterchildren of Trump’s America, but they embody the most important quality of Trump’s supporters: fear. While Roy would never admit it, he refuses to acknowledge his homosexuality because doing so would leave him powerless. In order to succeed in Reagan’s America, Roy could not be gay; out of fear of losing his power—over himself as well as others—he takes on the identity of a heterosexual man. The Angel, on the other hand, is more difficult to understand, as she does not appear to be bothered by her sexuality or her body. Ultimately, her queerness becomes a boundary, a wall between humanity and divinity. She is above humanity’s norms and standards but is still subjected to them because of her interactions with Prior and Hannah, Joe’s mother. The Angel’s fear stems from change. Progress is terrifying because it has driven God away; progress is painful because it has caused her world to quite literally fall apart. These fears—of losing power and of change—are the foundation of Donald Trump’s rhetoric on (and off) the campaign trail, and their abundance across much of the United States almost certainly contributed to his victory in 2016.

In Joe, these fears become manifest. Unlike Roy, however, Joe is motivated not by political power, but by religious tradition. His identity as a Republican is predicated on the party’s similarities with Mormonism, as his religious beliefs,

like those of many religious conservatives now, are his primary concern. Nevertheless, Joe’s relationship with his religion is not without conflict. In his mind, Joe situates himself in the biblical role of Jacob, fighting an impossible battle with an angel: “The angel is not human, and it holds nothing back, so how could anyone human win, what kind of a fight is that? It’s not just. Losing means your soul thrown down in the dust, your heart torn out from God’s. But you can’t not lose” (Kushner 52). In actuality, Joe finds himself struggling against Mormon standards because of his sexuality (which he sees as a personal failing), tortured by his own humanity, utterly incapable of victory but not resigned to failure. He will never win, but he keeps fighting—why? Like Roy, he is afraid of losing his status, in this case as a devout and good Mormon, which is dependent upon heterosexuality. And, like the Angel, he is terrified of change, of breaking tradition, so much so that he cannot fathom how changed his life is by the end of the play—after Roy’s death, after Harper leaves him, after his affair with Louis, Prior’s partner. Joe is perhaps not representative of the average Trump voter, but it is difficult to imagine him as anything else; he must uphold conservative and Mormon values, even if they hurt him, even if he feels just as ethically and emotionally conflicted about Trump as he does about Roy, because it is what he feels is expected of him.

Angels in America’s political interests are not only in conservatism and the republican party, but also in ambivalence, of which Louis is a paragon. While he distances himself from “the American Left,” Louis still serves as the embodiment of deep-rooted flaws in this group that have recently come to light: mainly, the failure to integrate intersectionality into its ideological framework (Kushner 94). When Louis tells Belize, an African American drag queen, that, in the United States, “what defines us isn’t race, but politics,” he not only minimizes the significance of race in the formation of identity, but also fails to see race and politics as interconnected (Kushner 94). In recalling a conversation with a black Jamaican man (whose family had been in the United Kingdom since the Civil War) about feelings of discomfort in London, he cannot see how nuanced experiences of race are, as made evident when he responds to the man’s frustration of generational discrimination with a simple, “yeah, me too” (Kushner 95). Worse still, Louis often speaks for historically oppressed groups—from black people at large to the drag community—as a more privileged outsider and refuses to actually listen to members of these communities. When Belize points out that Louis has been ranting and interrupting him, Louis denies any culpability by stating, “Well, you could have joined in at any time,” though it is made clear that this is not true (Kushner 97). In actuality, Louis is too tangled in the webs of his theories to be cognizant of his own flaws. His intellectualization is, in fact, a product of his own fear. It is a defense mechanism, one that gives him the illusion of control, of power. As the world around him falls apart—on both the macro level (through threats of war and

disease) as well as the micro level (with his infidelity and Prior's imminent demise)—Louis recedes into these illusions, destructive and misguided as they are, as a coping mechanism.

While America's political landscape is a major contributor to *Angels in America's* 2018 success, the world's environment has brought new relevancy to Harper (Joe's wife) and her constant fear of climate change. Where ozone damage was the primary environmental concern of the 1990s, and a catalyst for Harper's concerns, it is difficult to narrow 2018's struggles down to one focal point, especially since Donald Trump's election and his denial of the need for a proactive response to climate change. In June 2017, Trump withdrew from the Paris Agreement, which seeks to work against environmental catastrophe (Roberts). Tension continued to mount after this decision, increasing in January 2018, when the doomsday clock returned to two minutes to midnight for the first time since the Cold War due to threats of both nuclear warfare and climate change (Chan). In October 2018, the United Nations released a report warning that humanity has twelve years before incredibly harmful and devastating environmental cataclysm becomes irreversible (Watts). Although the report was issued after the 2018 run concluded, it validated fears that had been building for years. Unlike the 2010 production, which was not as driven by a sense of urgency, the contemporary climate ensured that the 2018 production would be saturated with it, more so than ever before.

In her petrified terror, then, Harper becomes the picture of a somewhat average American (perhaps aside from her Valium addiction, though addiction to opioids is a national crisis). She tries to escape but is never able to leave her fear behind. Writing of *Angels in America*, Brantley claims, "You know those days when you wake up and the grim morning news feels like a direct extension of your own depression? That's the state of mind of almost everyone in 'Angels'" (2010). Where this quote may have once suggested an overdramatic edge to the cast of *Angels in America*, it now captures a symptom of daily life in 2018. The headlines of 2018 directly affect each individual's lifestyle; Kushner's breakdown of boundaries between public and private is realized in an entirely new and despairing way because of modern life. With a collapsing of these spheres comes, the play suggests, an entanglement of every problem with climate change, which Harper consistently illustrates. In her first lines, Harper discusses the ozone layer's slow disintegration, but moves from scientific explanations to theological ones ("It's a kind of gift, from God") to foreboding messages about Joe's sexuality ("lies surfacing") and the Angel's coming as a direct result of God's abandonment ("systems of defense giving way") (Kushner 16). Throughout *Angels in America*, fears of climate change are ever-present, though often peripheral, reflecting how each political, social, and economic problem today is undergirded by the impending doom of the planet.

The 2018 revival of *Angels in America* does not simply present a past that eerily reflects the present; it gives us a road

map for the future. Harper initially feels deeply depressed and utterly powerless, but her final speech is one of the most hopeful speeches in the text. How does she achieve this transformation and, more importantly, how might other Americans? Disillusionment is rampant in America, as evident in the fact that one-fourth of those who did not vote in the 2016 election believed that their vote would not have mattered (Wines). In recent years, with increasingly frightening headlines, disillusionment has grown more and more severe, and is now seemingly incurable. This reason above all others is perhaps why *Angels in America* is not only wanted but needed now more than ever. Kushner has stated that "this play doesn't describe a time of great triumph, it describes a time of great terror, beneath the surface of which the seeds of change are beginning to push upward and through" (qtd. in Grady). Along with and within tales of fear and suffering, Kushner provides the most valuable currency of 2018: hope.

The principal fear-turned-hope story in *Angels in America* is that of Prior. On one level, he is provided with medication to manage his disease, overcoming his physical suffering in order to continue living. In this sense, just living is a radical act, one that Prior acknowledges when he says, "We won't die secret deaths anymore" (Kushner 290). In 1990 (the year of the epilogue), just as in 2018, the simple act of existence is a form of activism for the LGBTQ+ community, one that has helped in surviving the HIV/AIDS epidemic and fighting for rights. Prior also overcomes his challenges as "prophet" by deciding on his own what is best for him, for his community, and for humanity at large. In Roy's world, Prior has little to no power as a gay man with AIDS, but he ultimately has the most power—power over the entire world and perhaps even heaven—out of the entire cast. When he states that "the world only spins forward," he acknowledges the possibility of terrifying fates—like the Millennium—but proceeds with hope because he knows that the future could very well be far better than the present and the past (Kushner 290). "The Great Work" Prior mentions in his final lines is not the cessation of movement, but the continuation of progress, all to build and discover a better, brighter world (Kushner 290).

While Prior's narrative is certainly the focal point of *Angels in America*, it is not the only hopeful tale. Now, in 2018, it is Hannah, Joe's mother, who offers the most hope for change. Had Hannah, as the audience sees her in "Millennium Approaches", voted in the 2012 and 2016 elections, she would have most certainly voted for Mitt Romney and possibly even for Donald Trump. In the first part of the play, she is the most stalwart character (perhaps aside from Roy), unquestionably faithful to her Mormon roots. When Joe comes out to her during a phone call, she first ignores him, then tells him that he is "being ridiculous" and suggests forgetting the entire conversation, before ultimately stating, "I raised you better than that" and hanging up (Kushner 79). However, this disruptive phone call causes Hannah not to pull away from her son but

to sell her home and fly to New York City to help him. This journey changes the course of her life, as she spends most of her time supporting Harper (in her own tough way), befriends Prior, and kisses the Angel (who is referred to by she/her pronouns). In her last moments of the epilogue, Hannah says that she will “personally take [Prior to the fountain of Bethesda] to bathe,” a promise that illustrates not only her continued religiosity, but also her compassion and, beyond tolerance and acceptance, her love for Prior. Joe believes that Hannah will try to rid him of his homosexuality through prayer, but her relationship with Prior—which grows from tenuous to familial over a relatively short time—suggests that she has always had the capacity for acceptance. In this sense, while Hannah may appear to be the most changed character, her transformation is not sudden, but rather, is an expansion of what was already inside of her.

Although Hannah changes profoundly, she is certainly not the only character to do so. Battered and bruised by his own folly, Louis returns to Prior—though they remain friends, Prior tells Louis that he cannot come home—and becomes one of the final voices in the text. His intellectualism and tone-deafness remain—especially when he says, “no one supports Palestinian rights more than I do,” to which Belize quips, “not even the Palestinians”—but Louis has grown (Kushner 290). Rather than hiding behind his rants, Louis states that “the sprawl of life” is “too much to be encompassed by a single theory”; instead of arguing that theory must determine the future, he says, “You can’t wait around for a theory” (Kushner 288). Louis redeems himself, not through an act of God, but through a conscious decision to change. Over the course of the text, he finds

that his strategies for living are effective only in his own head and utterly inadequate in practice. His participation and membership in Prior, Hannah, and Belize’s communion of friends is dependent on the fact that he has chosen to change. On the other hand, Roy and Joe cannot be redeemed because they are stubborn, too afraid of change to bring it about in themselves. They will always suffer because they resist progress.

While many others in *Angels in America* are averse to forward motion, Belize embraces it without struggle; this is why, after nearly three decades, he has remained the “moral bellwether” of the text (Savran 222). Belize not only confronts disease and death—especially at the hands of HIV/AIDS—on a daily basis as a nurse, but he must also deal with Roy Cohn, an unruly, derisive patient. Rather than coldly refuse or vindictively cause Roy more physical pain, Belize cares for him. He does not hesitate to share his disdain for Roy and his ideology, but he does bring Louis in to say Kaddish over Roy’s dead body. When Louis expresses disgust at the idea of praying for Roy, Belize says, “A queen can forgive her vanquished foe” (Kushner 265). Forgiveness, Belize argues, is not erasure of the past or blind agreement with others, but rather an acknowledgement of the pain and suffering that came before in order to keep moving forward, a tenet that is valuable in light of the 2016 election. The United States is exceptionally polarized; disagreements lead to disconnect between parties and people rather than discussion. In order to progress, conversations must take place; before this can happen, everyone must forgive. Belize acknowledges, “It isn’t easy, it doesn’t count if it’s easy, it’s the hardest thing,” but he also says that forgiveness “is maybe where love and justice finally meet. Peace, at



Wings for Angel in "Angels in America" by Doris L. Black. https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/SS37227_37227_35631412

least" (Kushner 265–266). Ethel's final moments in the play reveal the truth of this statement; rather than finding peace after Roy's death, she discovers it after she leads Louis in saying Kaddish. Her suffering ends where forgiveness begins, a forgiveness that seems impossible (after all, it was Roy who ruthlessly fought for her death) but sets her free. Similarly, the only way to mend a split nation is through forgiveness; only then will there be peace.

Ultimately, *Angels in America* elevates the concept of interconnectedness and argues that it is only possible to progress by working together, a message that encourages current audiences to bridge the chasms between people in an increasingly polarized society. Within the context of the play as well as in America today, hope is a radical act of courage that illuminates the path forward in dark times. Kushner's claim that "apparently, nothing good is happening, but good things *are* happening" reminds audiences that change always starts on the micro level (qtd. in Grady). Lasting transformations come about through small acts—Harper leaving Joe, Prior's survival, the formation of an almost familial unit with Hannah, Louis, Belize, and Prior—that slowly work to build a better world. The Roy Cohns and Joes of the world perhaps cannot be redeemed, but the Hannahs can, the Louis's can. The gospel of *Angels in America* is not to change the world, but to change the people in it; this is where "The Great Work Begins" and where the text reaches beyond the generation of its origin and into present and future generations (Kushner 290). Those generations, as the merging of critical reading and reception theory shows, may not always regard the text as particularly relevant or urgent, but there will always be times of great terror, of disillusionment, of hopelessness, and *Angels in America* will continue to give voice to those times, as it does now. Texts may rise and fall in popularity, but the message of *Angels in America* endures: "*More Life*" (Kushner 290).

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