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Challenging the Idea of Community : Angels in America, The Laramie Project and Take Me Out

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Challenging the Idea of Community: *Angels in America*, *The Laramie Project* and *Take*

Me Out

by

Meghan Kathleen Kurta

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Abstract

This paper explores the disruptive impact that the verbal revelation of homosexuality causes to the community, as presented in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Moises Kaufman's *The Laramie Project*, and Richard Greenberg's *Take Me Out*. These revelations and subsequent disruptions occur in the early moments of each of the plays and, as a result, the larger action and substance of these works deals with the repercussions, including an exploration of the reactions and chain of events that these initial disturbances set in motion. The issues raised, however, are not always connected directly to the initial revelation of homosexuality, but the plays focus largely on how things will ultimately be set right again with the forcing of these issues to the forefront of the community consciousness.

In *Angels in America*, Kushner presents three separate instances in which varying levels of homosexuality cause disruptions both to a character's role in their specific community, as well as their personal identity. For the Mormon-Republican character of Joe Pitt his verbal coming out puts a strain not only on his heterosexual marriage and religious faith, but also his professional relationship with Republican powerhouse, and closeted homosexual, Roy Cohn. The fictionalized Cohn also experiences a similar disruption through his AIDS diagnosis, the illness serving as an undeniable indicator of his hidden sexuality. The openly homosexual character of Prior Walter also experiences the disruptive impact of AIDS, when his advancing illness puts a strain on his relationship with his partner Louis.

The Laramie Project uses a technique developed by Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre Project called "Moment work" to explore the disruptive impact the murder of

gay-university student Matthew Shepard had on the small town of Laramie, WY.

Matthew's murder pushes the existence of a homosexual "community" within the larger town to the forefront of people's minds and forces a re-examination of their "don't ask, don't tell" attitude toward homosexuality in general. *Laramie* is also the only one of the three plays that never deals directly with the disruption itself. Matthew is never presented on stage; all information concerning both his character and his part in the murder comes through second or third parties only, including other members of Laramie's homosexual population.

Finally, *Take Me Out* explores the disruptive aftermath following the very public coming out of major league baseball player Darren Lemming. This public acknowledgement of his homosexuality not only affects his status in the eyes of his fans, but also puts a strain on his teammates by forcing them to re-evaluate their relationships with Darren and their potential "homo-erotic" closeness with each other. If *he* could be homosexual, any of them could and it is precisely this growing tension and discomfort that leads to a slow loss of trust, and trust is a necessity for the success of any close community.

Through an examination of all of these plays I will explore the disruptions caused by these revelations of homosexuality, and the conflict that emerges between the individual and the community, and how the community as a whole may move forward.

*CHALLENGING THE IDEA OF COMMUNITY: ANGELS IN AMERICA, THE
LARAMIE PROJECT AND TAKE ME OUT*

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

by

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Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

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Introduction

“Along with the effect on an individual’s quality of life, limiting behavior in response to [anti-homosexual] crime serves to perpetuate the invisibility of gay men, strengthening the heterosexist and homophobic system that gives rise to the violence in the first place”
(Myslik72)

In 2005, Blackwell Publishing issued a compilation of essays relating to the history of drama in America during the twentieth century. Among this collection of over thirty essays, scholar Jill Dolan contributed a chapter dedicated specifically to the history of Gay & Lesbian drama. The decision to include so specific a demographic of theatrical subject matter is a firm indicator of the important place in the dramatic profession that the homosexual community has gained, both as a subject and creators and performers, by the early twenty-first century. However, as Dolan’s article indicates, such respect and recognition was not always extended to America’s homosexual playwrights:

Senator Joseph McCarthy’s House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in the 1950s blacklisted homosexuals along with Communists, since gay identity, which HUAC purposefully linked to anti-democratic politics, threatened national values. Such inculcation of homosexuality as a political as well as a moral menace meant that playwrights, actors, directors, and producers who might have called themselves lesbian or gay had to cloak their identities in innuendo. (“L&G” 487)

Dolan goes on to note that with the increasing intensity of the gay rights movement following Stonewall in the 1960s, “gay and lesbian theatre groups sprang up around the country to develop new plays and new ways of working in drama and performance” (“L&G” 488).

By 1993, the efforts of these small theatre groups and early attempts at presenting explicitly homosexual characters and subject matter finally produced noticeable and mainstream success with the emergence of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, a two part epic examination of the homosexual community in 1980s New York. *Angels'* blending of theatrical forms added to its popularity, allowing it to speak to a wide variety of audiences, as well as pay homage to the "absurdism and hybrid theatrical forms" experimented with by 1960s playwrights such as Lanford Wilson and John Guare, while still firmly aligning itself with more contemporary artists such as Terrence McNally in its use of realism ("L&G" 497). As James Fisher notes, in his overview of the proliferation of homosexual playwrights that emerged in the latter decades of the twentieth-century, "Their gay characters and themes reflect the vast changes in American society's relationship with homosexuality that began in the mid-twentieth century, in fringe theatres and moving to the mainstream in the late 1970s and beyond" ("Citizens" 8). Kushner's "very gay" drama, at once both extremely realistic and extraordinarily fantastical, finally firmly opened the door for subsequent homosexual playwrights and subject matter.

Angels in America's cast of characters, the majority of whom are homosexual men, served to "consolidate and challenge notions of lesbians and gay men which were held both by [other homosexuals] and in society at large" (Sinfield 4). By offering many different perspectives on what it means to be homosexual in late twentieth century America, *Angels* examines how the ever broadening scope of this identity is a fact that both homosexuals and heterosexuals alike find troubling. As Fisher notes, *Angels'* most openly gay character, Prior Walter, works as Kushner's mouthpiece toward the need for

further forward movement in the area of gay rights, both in and out of the theatrical field. "Prior's insistence brought an era of extraordinary gay plays to a hard-won zenith, reflecting vast changes in the American cultural landscape and, particularly, the depiction of gays on stage" (Fisher "Citizens" 7).

In the years following *Angels in America*, the number of plays by openly gay playwrights or that dealt with or explored openly gay themes and characters slowly increased. In 1998, the torture and murder of homosexual university student Matthew Shepard in the small town of Laramie, WY influenced Moises Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project to create a unique theatrical piece, titled *The Laramie Project*, crafted from their series of interviews with family and neighbors in the event's aftermath. Much as Kushner does with *Angels*, Kaufman and his company members presented audiences with a blend of reality and artifice in their powerful exploration of society's reactions to homosexuality, emphasizing the long distance America as a society still must go toward achieving equality for all its citizens.

A mere five years after Matthew's murder, another openly homosexual playwright, Richard Greenberg, brought his exploration of the impact of homosexuality on America's pastime to Broadway. Titled *Take Me Out*, the play explores the impact baseball star Darren Lemming's coming out has on his teammates and his career. Unlike the damaging dual lifestyle that Kushner's fact-based character of Roy Cohn, who insists on the remaining in the closet, represents, Darren approaches his homosexuality not as a disruptive force, but fully embraces it, even in the face of a public backlash following his announcement.

Each of the three plays, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Moises Kaufman's *The Laramie Project*, and Richard Greenberg's *Take Me Out*, explore significant aspects of the American homosexual's social experience. In addition, each play presents the verbal revelation of homosexuality as causing an immediate disturbance to the community. While these revelations of homosexuality are predominantly made by individuals, their occurrence forces the members of the community as a whole to re-examine themselves and their relation to the homosexual as a member of the community. These revelations and subsequent disruptions occur in the early moments of each of the plays and, as a result, the larger action and substance of these works deals with the repercussions, including an exploration of the reactions and chain of events that these initial disturbances set in motion. The issues raised, however, are not always connected directly to the initial revelation of homosexuality, but the plays focus largely on how things will ultimately be set right again with the forcing of these issues to the forefront of the community consciousness.

Angels in America

Introduction

When Tony Kushner's two-part theatrical epic premiered on Broadway in the spring of 1993 mainstream audiences were confronted with a boldly realistic and honest portrayal of Reagan-era American society, told primarily, though not exclusively, through the lives of five, very different, homosexual men living and dying in New York City. As Kushner himself observes in a 1994 interview with David Savran, the success of his play can be equally attributed to its literary and artistic merit, as to its timing and social relevance: "Up until that point, the American majority—if there is such a thing—fantasizes that the noise will just go away, that it's a trend. The way the play talks, and its complete lack of apology for that kind of fagginess, is something that would not have made sense before" (Kushner to Savran 141). Jill Dolan echoes Kushner's sentiments on the play in her article "Lesbian and Gay Drama," when she notes that, "Critics agreed that it spoke with breathtaking scope and intellectual, political, and theatrical daring to the concerns of a country living through the AIDS pandemic and the reign of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s" (498).

But *Angels in America* is far from a period piece. The political and social messages that it conveyed to its first audience in 1993, a group not that far removed from the play's 1980s setting, are just as relevant and important in today's America, where the threat of AIDS has reached beyond the homosexual community, and issues such as Proposition 8 still threaten the progress made by gays and lesbians. In the end, as Ranen Omer-Sherman observes in "The Fate of the Other in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*": "The value most consistently affirmed in the play is openness to change and

transformation—and the generosity to Others that such adaptiveness affords. [...] By the end of the drama each of these characters will have not only experienced, but embraced, startling changes and shifts in identity” (16). It is this openness to “change and transformation” that the play is speaking to most strongly. Those characters who embrace change and acceptance of themselves and others are granted the gift of “more life” that Prior wishes audiences during the play’s final moments (*Perestroika* 146), with only the “morbidly cynical Roy Cohn remain[ing] unredeemable; trapped in the stasis of selfishness, he succumbs to mortality by the end of the play” (“Fate of the Other” 16). However, such changes do not come easily, and as the characters of Joe Pitt, Roy Cohn, and Prior Walter illustrate, the initial revelations of homosexuality cause an immediate disruption to the community and the self.

Joe Pitt: Disruption by Contradiction

At the play’s start Joe Pitt is someone who is still firmly, if not comfortably, rooted in “the closet,” both verbally and physically denying his homosexuality. For Joe there is a distinct and clear division between interior longings and desires and external/social identity. When directly asked by his wife, Harper, if he is a homosexual, Joe responds:

No, I’m not. I don’t see what difference it makes. [...] Does it make any difference? That I might be one thing deep within, no matter how wrong or ugly that thing is, so long as I have fought, with everything I have, to kill it. What do you want from me? What do you want from me, Harper? More than that? For God’s sake, there’s nothing left, I’m a shell. There’s nothing left to kill. As long as my behavior is what I know it has to be. Decent. Correct. That

alone in the eyes of God. [...] All I will say is that I am a very good man who has worked very hard to become good and you want to destroy that. You want to destroy me, but I am not going to let you do that. (*Millennium* 38-40)

Even if Joe is a “homosexual” in the sense that he has sexual longings and attractions for people of the same gender, to him his refusal to act on these impulses makes his interior identity irrelevant and superfluous when identifying himself to the community. He is in a heterosexual marriage and is a devout Mormon; all external signs point toward heterosexuality, and, prior to his relations with Louis, his interior homosexual longings have never manifested themselves outwardly in any capacity. Marvin Harris references such disparate “identities” in his observation of the division of human behavior into “Etic” and “Emic.” According to Max Kirsch, “‘Etic’ refers to observable behavior; what is witnessed and can be recorded. The ‘emic,’ by contrast, refers to what ‘goes on’ in people’s heads, what emotions and thinking are actually made of” (62). For Joe, the problem emerges when his “emic” identity as a homosexual, replaces his previous “etic” heterosexual identity.

Joe’s first major push toward an outward revelation of this identity shift occurs during his first meeting with Louis, set symbolically in a men’s bathroom, a point of secret meetings for many closeted gay men in NYC. Upon informing Louis that he voted for Reagan, Louis responds, “Well, oh boy. A Gay Republican” (*Millennium* 29). As far as the audience is aware, this is the first time Joe has been socially identified as Gay. Joe’s reaction is both defensive, steadfastly denying that he is a homosexual, and curious, having already had his sexuality questioned by Harper and seemingly questioning Louis to decipher what aspects of him “seem” homosexual. It is clear that this first encounter

with Louis causes a disruption to Joe's ability to view his homosexuality as something that is purely internal.

Ultimately, Joe does make the decision to "come out" to his community, starting with a phone call to his mother, Hannah:

JOE. Mom. Momma. I'm a homosexual, Momma. Boy did that come out awkward. *(Pause)* Hello? Hello? I'm a homosexual. *(Pause)* Please, Momma. Say something.

HANNAH. You're old enough to understand that your father didn't love you without being ridiculous about it.

JOE. What?

HANNAH. You're ridiculous. You're being ridiculous. *(Millennium 75-76)*.

However, Joe soon discovers that by verbally acknowledging these internal feelings he has long suppressed, he is turning all previous social perceptions of his character (including his status as a Mormon and Republican affiliate of Roy Cohn) on their heads. In choosing to reveal his homosexuality, Joe has caused a direct disruption to the various communities to which he belongs.

Over the course of the plays we see the repercussion of Joe's proclamation of his societal contradictions, as he is denied acceptance from every community he encounters because he does not fit neatly into the binary system of identification at play. Laurence Senelick's discussion of the binary gender system is equally applicable to other traditional American binaries, such as heterosexuality/homosexuality, as well as Democratic-homosexual/Republican-heterosexual: "Centuries of social pressure, says Wex, have frozen men and women into these physical classifiers of gender. They are

equipped with a limited stock of signifiers because the official colors are black and white, male and female; intermediate shades do not receive the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval” (Senelick x). Joe’s inability to comfortably conform to either of these signifiers causes him to become increasingly more isolated. No matter which group he attempts to “join” he is always considered a homosexual/Mormon/Republican and therefore cannot be fully accepted by group A, B, or C.

Early in the play, when discussing with Harper the potential of accepting Roy’s offer of a job in Washington, Joe stresses the “good” changes that are occurring in America:

America has rediscovered itself. Its sacred position among nations. And people aren’t ashamed of that like they used to be. This is a great thing. The truth restored. Law restored. That’s what President Reagan’s done, Harper. He says ‘Truth exists and can be spoken proudly.’ And the country responds to him. We become better. More good. I need to be a part of that, I need something big to lift me up. (*Millennium* 26)

In light of Joe’s own closeted lifestyle at the time, there is more than a little irony in his profession of the Reagan administration calling for comfortability with the true role and “identity” of America. In order to be considered a part of this “true” American identity not *all* truths are accepted, only those which conform to the “hetero-normative” standards in place. But more than this, Joe’s impassioned support of Reaganite politics highlights his intense need to belong, to be a part of a community, even explicitly stating “I need to be a part of that, I need something big to lift me up” (*Millennium* 26). It is not a matter of *wanting* to be a part of this larger society, but a *need* to feel accepted, even at the risk of

destroying himself in the process. By saying that America has “rediscovered” itself, Joe is implying that he, as an American, has rediscovered his place as well, but of course this is misleading. In order to conform Joe must consciously refuse to “discover” those parts of himself deemed unacceptable, masking his “truth” in order to conform and demonstrating the complete opposite of his declaration that America has learned to “speak proudly”. By saying that Reagan makes the country “better” and “more good,” Joe is using the anti-homosexual policies to justify his self-denial, as this would place him within one of these “less good” groups. Once Joe accepts his homosexuality it becomes impossible for him to truly belong in what he defines as Reagan’s America as he has become a member of these unwanted and unrecognized American truths.

The politically minded Roy Cohn recognizes the importance of at least visually and verbally conforming to these binary systems, if a person wishes to maintain a valued and “counted” place in mainstream America. It is unclear if Roy suspects Joe’s “secret” identity, but regardless he seems comfortable and confident enough to make Joe one of his “boys”. However, it is only after Joe “comes out” to him and admits that he has been involved in a relationship of sorts with Louis that Roy severs ties with him:

JOE. I’ve been staying with someone. Else. For a whole month now.

ROY. It happens.

JOE. With a man.

(Pause.)

ROY. A man?

JOE. Yes.

ROY. You’re with a man?

JOE. Yes I... (*Roy sits up in his bed. He puts his legs over the side, away from where Joe is sitting.*)

.....

ROY. (*To Joe*) I want you home. With your wife. Whatever else you got going, cut it dead.

JOE. I can't, Roy, I need to be with...

(*Roy grabs Joe by the shirt, smearing it with blood.*)

ROY. YOU NEED? Listen to me. Do what I say. Or you will regret it. And don't talk to me about it.

Ever again. (Perestroika 84-85)

Roy appears initially comfortable with the idea that Joe has been unfaithful to his wife, but upon learning that the infidelity is with a man he immediately becomes panicked. Roy, more than anyone, is conscious of the importance of image to maintaining power, and Joe's admission of a homosexual affair is in direct contradiction with the image of the "good" Republican Roy has been molding for him. Because of his already weakening status, Roy views Joe's "out" homosexuality as more of a disease than his own AIDS¹.

But the political-right is not the only group that shows an aversion to Joe. Louis is himself a member of two socially marginalized and oppressed groups being both Jewish and homosexual, and he is the person Joe turns to after the fallout of his initial revelations to his mother and Harper. Yet even Louis cannot bring himself to accept Belize's news of Joe's affiliation with the hated Roy Cohn:

¹ The literal smearing of Roy's AIDS infected blood onto Joe's shirt serves as a visual reminder of the double infection that Joe has been stricken with because of his professional and personal relationship with Roy Cohn and his sexual relationship with Louis.

BELIZE. I don't know whether Mr. Cohn has penetrated more than his spiritual sphincter. All I'm saying is you better hope there's no GOP germ, Louis, 'cause if there is, you got it.

LOUIS. *I don't believe you.* Not *Roy Cohn*. He's like the polestar of human evil, he's like the worst human being who ever lived, he isn't *human* even, he's... Give me credit for *something*, please, some little moral shred of, of, of *something*, OK sure I fucked up, I fucked everything up, I fucked up everything maybe more than anyone in the whole history of everything that's ever been ever fucked up but still I haven't... I haven't lost my mind, I'm not *insane*, I'm... I'm horribly horribly unhappy, I'm lost, I'm... I hate myself, so totally, so fucking totally and completely but still I wouldn't, I wouldn't go around sleeping with someone who... someone who's *Roy Cohn's*... (*He stops himself*)

BELIZE. Buttboy. (*Perestroika* 93-94)

Belize's joking reference to Joe having a "GOP germ" offers an interesting juxtaposition against the AIDS and HIV scare among homosexual men, as Louis views his intimacy with Joe as an infectious and disgustingly irresponsible and damaging act. Even Prior initially views Joe as tainted because of his contradictory association with Roy, chastising Louis for his choice of lover:

PRIOR. A Gay Mormon Lawyer.

LOUIS. Yes. Republican too.

PRIOR. A Gay Mormon Republican Lawyer. (*With contempt*) Louis...

(*Perestroika* 86)

Joe is something that Louis and Prior, like Roy, cannot understand; a walking contradiction who defies everything they and other members of the homosexual community believe about themselves and each other.

The revelation of Joe as a homosexual even causes a disruption within himself, calling into question everything he had previously identified and associated with. Before his coming out, Joe's devout Mormonism, along with his active Republican political leanings, had served as self-imposed barriers against exposing his true inner-self to the external society. By adhering to his strict religious traditions, it was much easier for Joe to hide his homosexuality behind their protection, for as Harper states to Prior, "Oh! In my church we don't believe in homosexuals" (*Millennium* 32). Joe's continued wearing of his "temple garment," which he refers to as both "Protection" and "A second skin," serves as a literal religious barrier between his physical body, or his "real" skin, as well as a final barrier from true physical and sexual intimacy with Louis. As the play progresses Joe begins to express a growing discomfort with his closeted lifestyle, expressing to Louis in one of their early encounters (fittingly played outside the Halls of Justice in Brooklyn) the frightening and wonderful possibility of being free, "To shed your skin, every old skin, one by one and then walk away, unencumbered, into the morning" (*Millennium* 72-73) and moments later, when his real, entirely un-free existence comes back into focus, he dejectedly sighs, "I can't *be* this anymore" (73).

Joe finally rids himself of this barrier during a passionate encounter with Louis. After, "tearing the temple garment off" only Joe, "almost naked" remains before him, acknowledging the symbolic removal of his closeted and repressive life and history by declaring, "I'm flayed. No past now. I could give up anything" (*Perestroika* 73). By

shedding his metaphorical “second skin” Joe is allowing himself a type of rebirth, emphasized both by his declared lack of past and his physical nakedness. Just as babies are born with no accumulated baggage, so Joe has unencumbered himself of all socially imposed identities and traditions; with one single action Joe has removed all traces of who he had been.

Unfortunately, such sudden rebirth does not come easily, as Louis questions, “How can you stop wearing it if it’s a skin?” (*Perestroika* 69). Joe’s violent removal of his temple garment occurs in a moment of passion and impulse. There is no thought given to what will happen once he is fully exposed to the world, and no thought even to who this “new” or “reborn” Joe *is*. Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov addresses these questions in his speech that opens *Perestroika*: “If the snake sheds his skin before a new skin is ready, naked he will be in the world, prey to the forces of chaos. Without his skin he will be dismantled, lose coherence and die. Have you, my little serpents, a new skin?” (*Perestroika* 14). Just as you cannot reattach skin that has been flayed, Joe cannot turn back from his nakedness and must prepare himself to face the world without his protective armor or a clear indication of who or what he will become. By fully “coming out” before he has completely accepted or understood himself, Joe is unfortunately set up for a long and confusing journey toward personal understanding and contentment. As Steven F. Kruger observes:

In the depiction of Joe and the changes he undergoes, then, two seemingly opposed models for conversion—the strangling of the heart in the service of the skin and the shedding of the skin at the demand of the heart—come together, each shown to be inadequate, a killing of vitality, a denial of the past.

[...] Joe attempts first to deny feeling then to jettison the past, but he makes no real attempt to think how both surface and depth, skin and heart, constitute the self. (165)

And yet despite the pitfalls and personal dilemmas that coming out brings with it, as Joe acknowledges, the closet is a much more destructive force. Kruger notes, “Despite the presentation of identity as complex, as multiply determined, as relational, identity stubbornly remains identity, a marker of something unique to—given and intractable in—the person” (154). The more Joe denies his interior homosexuality, the more he is destroying himself, until finally there is nothing left but a shell of empty gestures and social practices. “At a moment when he is still fighting against his homoerotic feelings, Joe thinks of these as constituting something ‘deep within’ that might be concealed or even expurgated [...] But, while Joe sometimes imagines that he has conquered his buried secret, made inside and outside concur, this at the expense of both inside and outside” (Kruger 162). Joe even verbally acknowledges this in his conversation with Harper when he confesses, “For God’s sake, there’s nothing left, I’m a shell. There’s nothing left to kill” (*Millennium* 40). A person can only deny a part of themselves for so long, until eventually they begin to lose all sense of personal identity. As Joe confesses to Harper, “I knew this when I married you. I’ve know this I guess for as long as I’ve known anything, but...I don’t know, I thought maybe that with enough effort and will I could change myself...but I can’t...” (*Millennium* 77). No matter how badly Joe wishes and attempts to deny his homosexual desires, he ultimately realizes that by attempting to “become straight” he is slowly destroying all traces of the genuine Joe.

It is this desire to reclaim a true personal understanding that forces Joe's story to remain incomplete. His final conversation with Harper and appearance in the play offer strong implications of a continuation of his internal exploration and growth. For Omer-Sherman, the ending seems much neater: "Joe, who initially thinks he will go to hell for succumbing to homoerotic leanings and thinks he must kill off the buried identity, learns to live with the messiness of his once-opposed Republican and homosexual selves" ("Jewish/Queer" 88). Yet Joe himself admits that he still has not come to any clear understanding of who he is or his place in society. Having verbally identified as a homosexual (*Millennium* 75) and stripped himself of the physical and metaphorical barrier of his Mormonism (*Perestroika* 73), Joe still begs Harper to take him back: "I don't know what will happen to me without you. Only you. Only you love me. Out of everyone in the world. I have done things, I'm ashamed. But I have changed. I don't know how yet, but...Please, please, don't leave me now" (*Perestroika* 139). There is no profession of love for Harper, merely a need and desire to be accepted for who that person wants him to be, a need for communal belonging, still neglecting to take into account his own wants and desires. Joe's declaration that he has changed, but does not yet know how, further emphasizes his complete lack of the comfort with his multi-faceted self that Omer-Sherman alludes to in his statement. Harper's suggestion that Joe "Get lost" and "Go exploring" is a direct response to this continued uncertainty (*Perestroika* 139). She is not simply denying his request that they continue their marriage, but also emphatically encouraging him to acknowledge the personal disruption his coming out has caused. Joe must embrace his uncertainty and allow himself to be "lost" for a time and

use it to finally come to a realization and acceptance of who *he is*, not who society or certain groups dictate that he *should* be.

Roy Cohn: Disrupting a Political Powerhouse

For the character of Roy Cohn, based on the late historical figure of the same name, the choice to “come out” as a homosexual is not a conscious or personal decision. It is only when he is faced with a medical “fact” of his homosexuality, through a diagnosis of AIDS, that the personal and communal disruption occurs. In speaking to his doctor, upon learning he has AIDS, Roy verbalizes his views when he states:

“Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a pissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me, Henry?” (*Millennium* 45). For Roy, the labeling of someone as “homosexual” brings with it a plethora of social and personal stigmas, not least of which is the implication that the label demotes a person from any position of influence or power.

The setting of Roy’s office, in addition to being another strong indicator of his political power, also brings his emphasis on individualism immediately to the forefront. Kushner’s set description describes the scene set-up as:

Roy at an impressive desk, bare except for a very elaborate phone system, rows and rows of flashing buttons which bleep and beep and whistle incessantly, making chaotic music underneath Roy’s conversation. Joe is sitting, waiting. Roy conducts business with great energy, impatience and sensual abandon:

gesticulating, shouting, cajoling, crooning, playing with phone, receiver and hold button with virtuosity and love. (*Millennium* 11)

As he will throughout the remainder of the plays, Kushner introduces Roy using these harsh and extreme action descriptors, and the addition of the cacophony of noise emanating from the “elaborate phone system” immediately presents Roy as someone of importance. The addition of the calm and silent Joe offers an interesting juxtaposition against these frantic and overwhelmingly energetic movements, further placing him in a position of power and control.

But perhaps the most important detail in this set descriptor, is the specification of the items, or more accurately, lack of items on Roy’s desk. The elaborate telephone system is the desktop’s sole item; there is nothing personal in the way of photographs or mementoes to accompany it. Kushner’s decision to give Roy a complete lack of any personal objects emphasizes his self-imposed isolation and complete lack of real community. Roy views his power and career as the most important aspects of his life and believes that only he as an individual can help maintain them. Forming a real, human relationship with another person would put this in jeopardy. The safest way for Roy to communicate with others is through his phone, with its many buttons allowing him to exercise his power and put “on hold” those he wishes to avoid or dominate.

Roy’s status affords him the ability to live a type of dual existence. In this same introductory scene, Roy is engaged in an energetic phone conversation, during which he seamlessly switches between these two identities. Upon asking Joe if he has seen *La Cage*, Roy follows up his question by stating that the Harvey Fierstein and Jerry Herman musical is, “Fabulous. Best thing on Broadway. Maybe ever” and with one push of a

button shifts immediately back into Roy Cohn the assertive and powerful politician:

“(Button) Who? Aw, Jesus H. Christ, Harry, *no*, Harry, Judge John Francis Grimes, Manhattan Family Court. Do I have to do every goddam thing myself?” (*Millennium* 12-13). While Joe feels forced to remain completely in the closet, Roy is comfortable acting as he wishes, as long as he never completely “comes out” through the act of putting a different name on his person, transforming himself from a perceived “heterosexual” to a self-identified “homosexual”.

As mentioned, Roy views these titles as markers of status, rather than signifiers of sexual-gender preference. As a result, his denial of his status as a homosexual, in his mind, is simply a clarification of his ability to live a dual existence, precisely because he possesses a position and luxury not afforded to “real” homosexuals, explicitly stating to his doctor:

I have sex with men. But unlike nearly every other man of whom this is true, I bring the guy I’m screwing to the White House and President Reagan smiles at us and shakes his hand. Because *what* I am is defined entirely by *who* I am. Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys. (*Millennium* 46)

Roy’s status is precisely what allows him to live and act as he wishes, as long as he never verbally identifies himself as anything other than a “normal” heterosexual man, both inside and outside his circle, for despite his homosexual activity, as Laurence Senelick suggests, “The performance itself is no guarantee of a permanent transformation in either participants or spectators, however much perceptions may alter in the process.

Performing another gender does not define one's 'true' gender, either by confirmation or contrast" (Senelick xii).

Roy's refusal to completely closet himself or his actions is much in line with D.A. Miller's theorization of homosexuality as an "open secret". According to Alan Sinfield, "It must not be allowed fully into the open, for that would grant it public status; yet it must not disappear altogether, for then it would be beyond control and would no longer contribute to a general surveillance of aberrant desire. [...] The function of the secret, Miller observes, 'is not to conceal knowledge, so much as to conceal the knowledge of the knowledge'" (18). Roy does not sneak around in dark alley-ways or public restrooms with his sexual partners, but brings them out into the open, while never verbally or definitively acknowledging any of his sexual relationships. In this way, Roy is allowing his opponents and enemies very little ammunition, giving his allies 'plausible deniability' regarding his personal life, and maintaining control over his own image and career.

George Chauncey's study of New York City's homosexual population between 1890 and the start of World War II, aptly titled "Gay New York" points out that for many of the city's inhabitants, particularly those of a higher social rank, leading the type of dual life that Roy Cohn does was a necessary, and oftentimes enjoyable, part of being a "homosexual." "Leading a double life in which they often passed as straight (and sometimes married) allowed them to have jobs and status a queer would have been denied while still participating in what they called 'homosexual society' or 'the life' ...and many men positively enjoyed having a 'secret life' more complex and extensive than outsiders could imagine" (Chauncey 20). Based merely on his revealing conversation with his doctor, Roy appears to be a modern day equivalent of these early

twentieth-century men, seemingly relishing the ability to live both of his lives to their fullest extent, and subverting the ability of society to categorize him into an "either/or" system of types.

And yet, such duality comes with a price. By living a life in which power and social perceptions are the real motivations behind identity labels such as "heterosexual" and "homosexual", rather than some interior and personal declaration of the "true" self, Roy is in a constant cycle of denying some aspect of himself in order to survive. Such self-denial effectively leads him to renounce all communal ties of any kind, preferring instead a world outlook and philosophy based exclusively on the power of the individual *against* the greater society. For someone like Roy Cohn, his social and political success is exclusively the result of his independent work and ambition, and as such, feels no need to identify or show allegiance to *any* group or community, especially those groups, such as the gay community, that could potentially destroy all his individual efforts. According to Max Kirsch, "In the grasp of this illusion, one can be led to believe that struggles shared with those having a common identity are not a basis for alliance. This was the case for the carefully closeted, and is the case for those who regard identity as superfluous" (36-37).

However, Roy's sudden diagnosis of AIDS disrupts his ability to work within the system. As Brian Roberts us reminds in his "Whatever Happened to Gay Theatre?", "For the early 'eighties AIDS had been ineluctably equated with homosexuality, and the visualization of gay men began to take on the proportions of a demonic and doomed menace" (177). For political opponents, the interest and focus spread to "what the illness might allow them to say about the sexuality Cohn had chosen to keep hidden. AIDS gave them a final opportunity to out Cohn and thus shatter his immunity from journalistic

gossip-mongering” (Cadden 80). This absolute connection between AIDS and homosexuality is echoed by Roy, when he categorically denies his diagnosis, stating, “No, Henry, no. AIDS is what homosexuals have. I have liver cancer” (*Millennium* 46). By denying his AIDS, and instead choosing a more “heterosexual” illness, Roy is attempting to avoid this external factor and keep his homosexuality as simply an internal identity, but as Natalie Meisner notes, “The visible markings left by the disease on the very bodies that had transgressed the limits of compulsory heterosexuality provided all too convenient ‘proof’ for those wishing to pathologize open, promiscuous, and indeed all gay sex” (177). For the 1980s closeted or self-hating homosexual, AIDS was an undeniable marker of their secret sexuality.

By accepting his AIDS, Roy would be forced to accept and verbally acknowledge a part of himself over which he has no control. As Monica B. Pearl observes, for suffers of AIDS, the body was reacting against itself, with the immune system, “produc[ing] only double agents, and erod[ing] the boundaries of what was understood as self and not-self” (763). Just as AIDS is a foreign agent to his body, his newly exposed and conferred social identity as a homosexual is another “not self” with which he is forced to contend. Roy views himself, both politically and socially, based purely on the grounds of power and position, as a heterosexual man, who occasionally has sexual encounters with other men, but this is as far as he will allow his identity to go. His stubborn refusal to accept the truth of his illness is as much a fear of the political backlash of his true sexual identity, as it is self-preservation against being forced to reevaluate his past actions and self-identity.

A short statement by Roy midway through *Millennium Approaches* offers some insight into a potential reason for this persistence in refusing to accept the reality of his

sexuality. When Joe implies that the job Roy is offering him is unethical, Roy becomes angry, stressing to Joe that he will not be embarrassed in front of business associate and that he refuses to let his illness destroy what he has built for himself: "I'm gonna be a lawyer, Joe, I'm gonna be a lawyer, Joe, I'm gonna be a goddam motherfucking legally licensed member of the bar lawyer, just like my daddy was, till my last bitter day on earth, Joseph, until the day I die" (*Millennium* 68-69). Roy has been fighting his entire life to bring himself to a place of power within the larger society; to force them into accepting him as their superior. Because Roy has chosen to emulate his father in his pursuit of this, his diagnosis of AIDS serves as an even greater disruption to his personal ability to exist within this community. The persona of Roy Cohen that he has created is not truly *him*, but rather a mimicry of his father's actions and choices, and therefore more susceptible to such disturbances. By professing that he will be "like my daddy" no matter what, Roy is indicating that he will continue to repress those potentially disruptive elements, no matter what the cost.

But in denying his homosexuality, Roy is also rejecting any solidarity with the homosexual community. By denying this group for so long, the ultimate confirmation of Roy's sexual preference serves as an even greater disruption within the gay community. As Kushner observes in his program note for London's National Theatre production of *Angels*, "AIDS is what finally outed Roy Cohn. The ironies surrounding his death engendered a great deal of homophobic commentary, and among gay men and lesbians considerable introspection. How broad, how embracing was our sense of community? Did it encompass an implacable foe like Roy? Was he one of us?" (Cadden 83).

Belize is the only member of *Angels'* homosexual community who makes a conscious effort to embrace Roy Cohen as such, by offering him advice on the AZT drug treatment he hopes to be put on for his illness:

BELIZE. So if you have any strings left, pull them, because everyone's put through the double blind and with this, time's against you, you can't fuck around with placebos.

ROY. You hate me.

BELIZE. Yes.

ROY. Why are you telling me this?

BELIZE. I wish I knew.

(Pause.)

ROY. *(Very nasty)* You're a butterfingers spook faggot nurse. I think...you have little reason to want to help me.

BELIZE. Consider it solidarity. One faggot to another.

(Belize snaps, turns, exits. Roy calls after him.)

ROY. Any more of your lip, boy and you'll be flipping Big Macs in East Hell before tomorrow night! *(Perestroika 27)*

Belize freely admits his hatred of Roy; yet he still extends the same warning that he would to any of his AIDS patients. In many ways AIDS serves as an equalizer. While, as Belize recognizes, Roy still maintains his powerful connections, his physical state and social standing are now equally as vulnerable as Prior's, the play's other major AIDS sufferer. Roy's denial and defense at this offer of community solidarity indicates the severe disruption that his diagnosis still causes to his personal identity. As Kirsch notes,

“By denying the identification and the material fact of labeling, shame is thus avoided and no real resistance is actualized. But in fact the individual becomes even more alone” (92). Roy offers protest against Belize’s inclusion of him as a “homosexual,” yet still follows the advice given, without ever verbally recognizing this new social identity.

Prior Walter: Disturbing the already Marginalized

For the fully out homosexual character of Prior his diagnosis of AIDS is socially less problematic. However, even for someone as comfortable with his sexuality as Prior, his new status as an AIDS patient fundamentally changed how others viewed him and the way he perceived himself. As Alan Sinfield notes, “The epidemic, as well as making many of us fall sick and die, transformed the sense of who we are—in our own eyes and in the eyes of others. [...] As the nature of AIDS became apparent, the baths closed, the couple came under unanticipated stress, colleagues and friends found they had other priorities, and back home was needed after all as a place to die” (314). By introducing into the lives of all gay men a new found consequence of their sexual activity, AIDS fundamentally changed the way society viewed them as individuals, signifying a label akin to a worse level of homosexuality.

Even those close to the sufferers begin to pull away, as is seen in Louis’ growing isolation from Prior as his disease becomes more pronounced. Initially his status as an AIDS victim, even when physically manifested on his body, does little to alter Prior’s perception of who he is as a person outside of his illness. Prior half-jokingly displays his first lesion to Louis as if it were a battle wound, a proud marker of extreme suffering and strength:

PRIOR. (*He removes his jacket, rolls up his sleeve, shows Louis a dark-purple*

*spot on the underside of his arm near the shoulder)...K.S. baby, Lesion number one. Lookit. The wine-dark kiss of the angel of death...I'm a lesionnaire. The Foreign Lesion. The American Lesion. Lesionnaire's disease. (Millennium 21)*²

It is only when Louis begins to emotionally, and ultimately, physically remove himself that such internal changes occur, prompting Prior to lament, "I don't think there's any uninfected part of me. My heart is pumping polluted blood. I feel dirty" (*Millennium 34*) and later acknowledging how his disease has become something of a third party in their relationship: "Apartment too small for three? Louis and Prior comfy but not Louis and Prior and Prior's disease?" (*Millennium 78*). Louis has allowed Prior's disease to overshadow what, we assume, was a loving and committed relationship, as evidenced by Prior's accompanying Louis to his grandmother's funeral. However, even here we see Louis' fears of public perceptions of his sexuality, in his confession to Prior that he, "always get[s] so closety at these family things" (*Millennium 19*) or "What Erving Goffman calls 'The Arts of Impression Management,' the avoidance of inopportune or ambiguous signals," which Laurence Senelick suggests is "crucial to the performance of gender in everyday life" (ix). With the physical manifestation of Prior's AIDS finally emerging on his skin Louis' previous conceptions of who Prior is are significantly shaken. Louis is forced to confront an undeniable social marker of his partner's sexuality, and by extension his own. Through Louis' betrayal of Prior, Kushner is also calling

² The argument can be made, and rightly so, that Prior is putting on an act for Louis through this instance of black humor, in an attempt to lessen the impact of his news. However, regardless of the character motivations behind Prior's statements, it is important to stress that he is still highly affected emotionally by his illness, but is attempting to not allow the graveness of his diagnosis to overtake him. Louis does precisely this in the shifting of his view of Prior after his advancing AIDS is revealed.

attention to, “the larger culture’s inauthentic response to suffering, calling on us to replace indifference with the traditional principle of compassion” (“Jewish/Queer” 83). Indeed, the thrice marginalized character of Belize (homosexual, African American, ex-drag queen) is the only character who shows true, genuine compassion for another’s suffering without expecting anything in return, seen through his relationships with both Roy and Prior.³

In a 1993 interview with Patrick Pacheo for *Body Positive*, a non-profit organization offering “lifestyle education, medical information, and support groups for people infected and affected by HIV,” Kushner explains his conscious use of Louis’ character to explore the impact of AIDS not simply on those who suffer from the disease, but also the people who wind up being left behind (51). “That’s another thing I felt was missing from representations of the health crisis: how tremendously hard it is for people to take care of other people” (Kushner to Pacheo 57). Kushner makes an effort to show the true humanity of all his characters. Louis is not the devoted lover who stays by Prior’s side when things get bad, but rather abandons his partner when the disease itself can no longer be ignored. Before it had just been a name, but suddenly there is real suffering, which for Louis, fundamentally changes the way he views Prior. In allowing Louis to perform often hateful acts in his struggle to come to terms with both Prior’s illness and his own place in the society, Kushner allows his play to go where few other AIDS centered plays had: away from the opera-esque drama, and into the reality of the far-reaching effects of the pandemic. In this same interview Kushner also stresses that:

³ Arguably Hannah demonstrates this selfless compassion as well in her interactions with Prior, but she moves into this role slowly over the course of the play, while Belize enters with this personality trait.

It was important to me to create a character with AIDS who was not passive, who did not die at the end, but whose illness was treated realistically. So it wasn't just one lesion on the shoulder and then a little coughing fit and then he dies in time for the surviving lover to make a moving little speech that gets everybody in the theater to cry and then leave feeling uplifted. (Kushner to Pacheo 51)

Kushner does not use AIDS for emotional manipulation, but includes it simply as a means of presenting as realistic as possible a vision of homosexual life in 1980s New York.

Angels presents AIDS as a horrible disease, as evidenced by Prior's obvious physical suffering (*Millennium* 47-48), with Sinfield noting that, "Unlike most film and television, these plays do not focus on parents at the expense of gay people, underplay the importance of sex among gay men, or pretend that people with AIDS do not get very ill in very unpleasant ways" (315). At the same time, the fact that Prior does *not* die by the play's conclusion, instead outliving the earliest medical expectations, represents a refusal to become resigned to a diagnosis as a death sentence, both physically and socially, for as Kushner points out, in the early days of the AIDS crisis, "AZT hadn't yet been approved; there weren't any good treatment options for opportunistic infections either. So why bother getting tested? All you were doing was providing information for the government to use to put you in a concentration camp" (Kushner to Pacheo 52). But *Angels'* presentation of both Prior and his illness attempts to show that there *are* options, and indeed there *is* more to men, like Prior, who have been diagnosed, than serving as the heart wrenching sacrifice for the remaining characters to learn an important lesson about

life and death. As Kushner goes on to note, “the point is that people *do* survive. It’s seriously underrepresented. You don’t want to be pie-in-the-sky about it, but there can be years and years of very productive life. [...] Unfortunately, it’s considered one of the hallmarks of success in theater and film if you can make the audience break down at the end. And I think that’s disgusting” (Kushner to Pacheo 55).

Prior’s defiance of the expectations of someone with his condition, and his final message of “More Life” suggests a fundamental change in the way HIV and AIDS patients viewed themselves (*Perestroika* 146). The Angel, in her message to humanity that they cease moving, is pushing against this change, suggesting that Prior simply lie down and accept both his death sentence and further marginalization (*Perestroika* 44). “In other words: your constant motion (one might even say ‘promiscuity’) has brought you to this point and has marked you; there is nothing left for you to do but resign yourself to this conclusion, and tell others to do the same” (McRuer 163). But Prior categorically refuses this role:

PRIOR. I want more life. I can’t help myself. I do. I’ve lived through such terrible times, and there are people who live through much worse, but....You see them living anyway. When they’re more spirit than body, more sores than skin, when they’re burned and in agony, when flies lay eggs in the corners of the eyes of their children, they live. [...] We live past hope. If I can find hope anywhere, that’s it, that’s the best I can do. It’s so much not enough, so inadequate but....Bless me anyway. I want more life. (*Perestroika* 133)

In his decision to fight back against death, both as a literal and social diagnosis of his status as an AIDS sufferer, Prior is presenting a contradiction to Roy's assertion that homosexuals are men with "zero clout" (*Millennium* 45). Prior's change in his perception of himself from something completely overrun by the parasite of his disease occurs near the end of *Millennium Approaches*, just before his first physical encounter with the Angel, when he states, "I can handle pressure, I am a gay man and I am used to pressure, to trouble, I am tough and strong" (117). By being forced to suffer through yet another obstacle because of his identity as a homosexual man, Prior has come to the slow realization of his own personal strength, giving him the motivation to ignore the Angel's subsequent call for stasis, and to keep fighting. Kushner echoes this view of Prior's emotional and mental journey, stating that initially, "[Prior] sees himself as a fragile queen who isn't going to be able to bear up under all the horror and abandonment" but ultimately "finds himself to be a tremendously strong person with great courage, which has been very true to my own experience in a lot of people" (Kushner to Pacheo 56). Through his perseverance, Prior effectively alters his status from dying *of* AIDS to living *with* AIDS.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Despite Prior's personal acceptance of his disease, the social and communal disruptions caused by these various homosexual revelations are not so easily mended. *Angels'* epilogue, titled "Bethesda," illustrates one potential course toward the restoration of communal and social stability through the formation of a wholly New Community, with Prior as the new leader and prophet. All oppressed and marginalized groups (racial, religious, sexual, etc) are embraced: Hannah, the female-Mormon, who left Utah for New

York and befriended an AIDS patient; Louis: the Jewish abandoning homosexual lover of Prior; Belize: African American ex-drag queen; and Prior: the flamboyant homosexual AIDS patient. These individuals are by no means the most perfect people. As Louis most explicitly observes they each have their flaws and imperfections. But as McRuer indicates, the purpose of the New Community is to accept these inconsistencies and differences, "Rather than renouncing the contradictions of human existence, as the angel demands, Prior embraces them and insists that they sustain a more radical democracy" (159). The inclusiveness of the New Community is as close to an utopian existence as the play is willing to hint at, set as it is against the Bethesda Angel Fountain in Central Park, "wherein its outcast blacks, Jews, Mormons, and gays learn to reconcile the messy reality of human existence" ("Jewish/Queer" 94-95).

Prior's status as the leader and New Prophet of this community is equally important. Prior is not only an out homosexual man, but he carries the added stigma of being a homosexual with AIDS. Despite these layers of marginalization, Kushner is careful to present Prior not as a "gay prophet," but a prophet for all humanity. As Fisher notes, such a universal thematic presentation is not isolated to the epilogue:

Finding contemporary American society in an age of intellectual and moral stagnation, an era of staggering political and social crisis, Kushner insists in *Angels* that the moral emptiness experienced in postmodern America results from an abandonment of its founding principles of justice, compassion, inclusiveness, and liberty. With such an emphasis, the striving for survival of gays, particularly in the context of the AIDS crisis, becomes a metaphor for a nation's survival. ("Citizens" 27).

By using Prior as the creator and basis for America's newly formed and inclusive community, Kushner is presenting the idea that at the core level of human existence it makes very little difference whether a person is homosexual or heterosexual; they are all human. Ross Chambers argues a similar point when he states, "For if it is possible for straight people, as a social kind, to be generally understood as models of the human, without their being coextensive with the human population (which includes gay people), then it is possible, by the logic of the paradigm, to reverse the status of exceptionality assigned to homosexuality by showing the sense in which gay people, as a kind, are also definable in the same way" (171). Prior's potentially disruptive revelations have no bearing on his ability to represent humanity as a collective.

The creation of this New Community is necessary to achieve rebalance, since the old communities, the homosexual community included, were predicated and supported by a system that would not accept the reality of these individuals. The idea of community cannot be abandoned entirely, for as Omer-Sherman stresses, "Equally important is *Angels'* emphasis that in such times of flux and upheaval community in its most expansive, sheltering sense must be affirmed" ("Fate of the Other" 21). Prior's refusal of the Angel's call for stasis serves as clear indicator that these disruptive elements and individuals will not simply disappear, but will stand up and fight to be accepted, to be counted, not merely tolerated. As Kushner stresses, "Only by having the status of a full citizen, guaranteed by law, are you protected" (Kushner to Pacheo 59).

In his final speech, Prior outlines the forward visualization of this New Community, by stressing the knowledge that such changes and restorations will not occur immediately. It will take time and effort on both sides:

This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come. Bye now. You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you: *More Life*. The Great Work Begins.

(*Perestroika* 146)

Kushner is careful to connect the necessity and purpose of Prior's community with the reality of present day America, through Prior's direct address. According to Fisher, "In making this statement, Prior breaks the proverbial theatrical fourth wall to speak directly to the play's audience, leaving no doubt that Kushner had firmly moved gay drama from the sorts of tolerance pleas found in *The Boys in the Band*, *Torch Song Trilogy*, and the subsequent *Love! Valour! Compassion!* to demand full acceptance—equal citizenship—in American life" ("Citizens" 29). His inclusion of the audience as part of these "fabulous creatures" that surround Prior, indicates a true attempt at an all inclusive community of humanity, rather than types.

Roy and Joe are the only major characters not included in this New Community. Joe, as explored earlier, is still coming to terms personally with the external revelation of his sexuality. Until he rediscovers who he views himself as, he cannot fully rejoin any community, as a confident sense of self, even a contradictory one, is necessary. While Roy's death serves as the major barrier from his appearance in this final scene, it is his constant denial of any community ties and refusal to accept his homosexual *and* Jewish identities that ultimately bars his access.

Conclusion

Angels in America pushed traditional mainstream theatrical boundaries by having five of its seven main human characters as homosexual men. However, *Angels* is far from a play simply about homosexuality. As David Savran states:

Bringing together Jews and Mormons, African- and European-Americans, neo-conservatives and leftists, closeted gay men and exemplars of the new 'queer politics,' *Angels* is indeed a gay fantasia, writing a history of America in the age of Reagan and the age of AIDS. [...] *Angels in America* pays energetic tribute to these diverse experiences and inspirations. (130)

Through his work, Kushner is using these minority and marginalized "types" or groups, such as Jews, African Americans, and homosexuals, to stand not just for themselves, but also to fight against the exclusionary illusion of white-straight-middle class America and exemplify who Americans truly are. *Angels in America's* use and exploration of AIDS and AIDS patients serves as a catalyst for an examination of what it means to be something in American society, impacting the view of self and others. "Closely wrapped up with the play's analysis of sexuality is a recognition of how AIDS—identified in the popular imagination with a gayness conceived of as always already diseased and weak—becomes not just a category of health or illness but also of identity" (Kruger 152). Roy's AIDS diagnosis and Prior's visibly progressing illness serve as disruptions to each character's previous view of himself. It is not until each comes to terms and accepts AIDS as a part of who they are that they will ever come to fully accept themselves, a step which Roy, unlike Prior, is incapable of making.

Joe's revelation of his homosexual longings, and subsequent physical consummation of them, causes a disruption to the rigidly segregated groups and

categories established at the play's start. "Indeed, nothing is melting in the opening scenes; conservatives stick with conservatives, gay men with gay men, Mormons with Mormons. The society of the play is fractured into groups with their own labeled identities. [...] No sooner have these identities been established, however, than they begin to break down, as systems of *identification* prove to be as vulnerable as immune systems" (Cadden 84). Prior's establishment of a New Community, based on inclusion and acceptance, in the play's final moments serves as the antithesis of the America Kushner presents in these opening scenes. Prior's calls for "More Life" stress the continuation of his "Great Work" toward full citizenship and acceptance, rather than tolerance, for all Americans, regardless of sexual orientation.

The Laramie Project

Introduction

According to a 1994 report by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, “incidents of violence against gay men increased by 127 percent between 1988 and 1993” (Myslik 71). Unfortunately, such statistics seem to have changed little in the years leading up to the murder of Laramie, WY university student, and open homosexual, Matthew Shepard in 1998. The breakdown of typical perpetrators of such “anti-gay violence” in a 1991 survey conducted by Gary Comstock is strikingly similar to the statistical descriptions of Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney, the young men charged with Matthew’s murder. Myslik outlines Comstock’s findings as suggesting that:

perpetrators are typically white (67 percent) males (99 percent) under 21 years old (50 percent) and outnumber their victim. [...] It is perhaps most significant that perpetrators of anti-gay violence do not typically exhibit expected criminal attitudes and behaviors. [...] It is commonly observed, by victims as well as defense attorneys, that perpetrators of anti-gay violence are ‘average boys exhibiting typical behavior’ (Comstock 1991: 93). (Myslik 69)

Even five years removed from Prior’s utopian New Community, little seems to have changed. As Myslik goes on to note, as long as homosexuality is viewed as a “deviation from accepted gender roles” and a “violation of mandatory heterosexuality” gay men will continue to be “identified as a group requiring ridicule, policing and/or punishment” (69).

The decision by Moises Kaufman and the members of the Tectonic Theatre Project (TTP) to travel to Laramie, according to Kaufman, was not simply done to gather the necessary information required to create the piece that ultimately became *The*

Laramie Project. Kaufman and several of his company members arrived in Laramie in November 1998, a mere four weeks after Matthew's murder, and over the course of a year and a half conducted over two hundred interviews (Kaufman vii). For Kaufman and the TTP, Matthew's murder was a crime akin to Oscar Wilde's infamous trial, which was the subject of Kaufman's first production with the TTP entitled *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*. The play chronicles Oscar Wilde's three trials for acts of "gross indecency" through the heavy use of trial transcripts and other written sources, such as newspaper articles and *The Autobiography of Lord Alfred Douglas*. Wilde's trials piqued the interest of the TTP both for their wild historical inconsistencies and contradictory accounts, as well as for their importance in the formation of the modern day conception of the homosexual as a sexual type (Bottoms 62-63). According to Kaufman, "The brutal murder of Matthew Shepard was another event of this kind. In its immediate aftermath, the nation launched into a dialogue that brought to the surface how we think and talk about homosexuality, sexual politics, education, class, violence, privileges and rights, and the difference between tolerance and acceptance" (Kaufman vi). For Kaufman and his company members an exploration of Matthew's murder was a natural follow-up to this project.

But *The Laramie Project* is not simply a study in the final days of Matthew Shepard. Rather, through a series of interviews with the townspeople and involved parties, it explores the disruption caused in the small town of Laramie, WY following the brutal murder of a young, homosexual, university student. Matthew's murder brought the existence of homosexuals within the larger town to the forefront of people's minds, forcing a re-examination of their "don't ask, don't tell" attitude toward homosexuality in

general. Through its examination of Laramie in the aftermath of this disruptive tragedy, “the play also insistently reminds audiences of the need to question the assumptions buried in disarmingly ‘everyday’ turns of phrase, which lie at the root of very real violence” (Bottoms 66).

Such issues are highlighted particularly well through Kaufman’s use of what he has termed “moment work”. By grouping the interviews into specific sub-categories, or “moments”, and making the play’s focus the spoken word, rather than any specific visual action, “one is able to hear the way these prevailing ideas affect not only individual lives but also the culture at large” (Kaufman v). Through this careful editing process, Kaufman is able to construct “a cohesive narrative out of diffuse stories and focused characters out of actual people” creating a linear progression of ideas and affording the ability to trace the evolution of both people and attitudes of Laramie over the year and a half the play recounts (Tigner 142).

The play chronicles the initial disruption, including the attitudes of those directly involved in the murder and its investigation, as well as the experiences of those members of the community who exist on the periphery. By the play’s close, no clear conclusion is reached as to how to best deal with this issue; there is no suggestion of abandoning Laramie and “starting over” with a New Community as seen in *Angels* is given. Rather, as the play progresses small incidents of growth and change in several Laramie residents are depicted, as well as suggestions on how Laramie as a whole will deal with the disruption of Matthew’s murder in the long run.

Before continuing, it is perhaps important to take a moment to specify the differences between Kaufman’s use of real people as characters in *The Laramie Project*

and Kushner's use of the historical figure of Roy Cohn in *Angels in America*. While in his use of Roy, Kushner has created an entirely fictionalized character that is *based* on a real person, the characters in Kaufman's play speak words actually spoken by the real person. The only fictionalization that occurs is the contextualization of these quotes by the playwright for dramatic impact and emphasis. In dramatizing the fictionalized character of Roy Cohn, Kushner creates completely original dialogue and actions for him to perform, never once suggesting that he is presenting a representation of reality. Kaufman's use of introductions by the company member characters (*The Laramie Project's* version of the narrators found in *Gross Indecency*) reassures the audience that the men and women they are about to meet are *real*, and that the opinions and words they are about to hear come entirely from them. Whether or not this type of documentary drama results in an accurate representation of these interview subjects, however, is not quite as certain, but regardless, Kaufman clearly outlines these intentions through the theatrical formation and structure of the play.⁴

Disruption in a Small Town

While riding his bike on October 7, 1998 Aaron Kreifels, a local university student, discovered Matthew Shepard, beaten and bound to a fence in a field near Cactus Canyon. According to police records and subsequent interviews, Matthew met suspects Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson in a bar the night before and was subsequently seen getting into a truck and leaving with them. On Monday October 12, four days after being brought to the hospital Matthew succumbed to his injuries and died without ever regaining consciousness.

⁴ For a more thorough exploration of this problematic aspect of *The Laramie Project's* documentary style see: Baglia & Foster and Tigner.

The homophobic emotions and attitudes towards Matthew that both McKinney and Henderson expressed in police interrogations are not all that different from the general view of most Laramie residents regarding the role and place of homosexuals in the larger community. According to Jen, a friend of McKinney, "It probably would've pissed him off that Matthew was gay 'cause he didn't like—the gay people that I've seen him interact with, he was fine as long as, you know, they didn't hit on him. As long as it didn't come up" (Kaufman 61). For McKinney, Matthew's homosexuality posed no personal crisis or disruption as long as it did not show any attempts at disrupting his own heterosexuality. This "don't ask, don't tell" attitude seems to be a prime factor in the events leading up to Matthew's murder. Once this unspoken agreement is broken, or disrupted, McKinney and Henderson seemingly cannot control their rage.⁵

While not all residents of Laramie enact their frustrations with the homosexual population in so violent a manner, the "don't ask, don't tell" attitude of McKinney and Henderson is frighteningly prevalent among many of the people interviewed over the course of the play, such as Murdock Cooper, a fifty-something Rancher from a neighboring town:

There's more gay people around than what you think. [...] It doesn't bother anybody because most of 'em that are gay or lesbian they know damn well who to talk to. If you step out of line you're asking for it. Some people are saying he made a pass at them. You don't pick up regular people. I'm not excusing their actions, but it made me feel better because it was partially

⁵ The question of whether or not Matthew did in fact hit on McKinney and Henderson is one that is impossible to answer definitively. However, it is presented as a possible factor and motive in the murder and as such is worth hypothetical consideration.

Matthew Shepard's fault and partially the guys who did it...you know, maybe it's fifty-fifty. (Kaufman 58)

This instinctive blaming of the victim indicates a reluctance by the larger community to believe that a crime of this nature could ever happen in a town like Laramie, or that their own attitudes toward the community's homosexual members could result in such violence and hate. As Wyoming's Governor Jim Geringer stresses: "I would like to urge the people of Wyoming against overreacting in a way that gives one group 'special rights over others.' We will wait and see if the vicious beating and torture of Matthew Shepard was motivated by hate" (Kaufman 48). This reluctance to embrace Matthew's murder as "motivated by hate" may seem absurd, but when McKinney and Henderson's opinions on homosexuality are viewed as analogous to many residents of Laramie, such instinctual leanings toward finding a just cause for their violence become more apparent. As Governor Geringer's statement illustrates, it is often easier to believe that violence toward another group is motivated by some external factor, such as revenge or self-defense, rather than simple blind hatred for another human being for simply being "different," particularly when the perpetrators are demographically and socially average members of the community.

Matthew's assault and death did not simply bring to light the existence of homosexuals in Laramie, but sparked a movement that led to the creation of a true homosexual community, and in the process forced Laramie's residents to re-evaluate their own views and social attitudes towards this previously invisible group. Local resident Doc O'Connor emphasizes the invisibility of Laramie's homosexual population, stating that, "There's more gay people in Wyoming than meets the eye. I know, I know

for a fact. They're not particularly, ah, the whattayou call them, the queens, the gay people, queens, you know, runaround faggot-type people. No, they're the ones that throw bails of hay, jump on horses, brand'em, and kick ass, you see what I'm saying?"

(Kaufman 21). Laramie's homosexual residents are firmly assimilated into the town's larger, heterosexually crafted, culture. It is only *after* the news and details of Matthew's death are exposed that this long-held balance is upset, serving as a catalyst toward a recognition of the unfairness of the tolerance only policy at play in Laramie. The murder of Matthew Shepard brings the existence of homosexuality in Laramie to the surface; it is no longer something that can be avoided or denied.

Even the formerly predominantly male homosexual illness of HIV and AIDS (as it is presented in *Angels in America*) comes to infiltrate the straight population, as police officer Reggie Fluty, first responder to the scene of Matthew's attack, indicates:

"Probably a day and a half later, the hospital called me and told me Matthew had HIV [...] So I said to the doctor, 'Okay, what do I do?' And they said, 'Get up here.' So I got up there and we started the ATZ (sic) drugs. Immediately" (Kaufman 53-54). HIV is no longer merely a "homosexual" problem; it is now a "human" problem.

The initial reactions to the actual crime of Matthew Shepard's murder and the issues and dilemmas that it raised were varied. As explored above, prior to Matthew's death, the prevailing approach of Laramie to its homosexual residents was one of tolerance, rather than acceptance, as long as the fact of their sexual preference was not "flaunted". "Inherent in this statement is the assumption that heterosexuality is itself not flaunted or expressed outside the home" (Myslik 68). Once the facts and circumstances surrounding the motivations leading to so horrific a crime became known, the residents of

Laramie found this long-held social policy not only disrupted, but being scrutinized from every corner of the country. In this day and age, how could something like this still happen?

Dr. Cantway, the emergency room doctor who attended to both Matthew and Aaron McKinney on the day following the crime, best verbalizes this inability to comprehend such extreme hatred. "They were two kids!!!!!! They were both my patients and they were two kids. I took care of both of them....Of both their bodies. And...for a brief moment I wondered if this is how God feels when he looks down at us. How we are all his kids....Our bodies....Our souls....And I felt a great deal of compassion....For both of them...." (Kaufman 38). The question becomes not how could the heterosexual Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson enact such horrific violence on the homosexual Matthew Shepard, but how could one human do this to another human. As Dr. Cantway observes, externally Matthew and Aaron appear very similar. Both were young men, 21 years of age, who were treated at the same hospital by the same doctor. How could small differences, such as sexual gender preference, become so important as to lead to torture and murder, when they are not readily noticeable without people having been informed of their existence? Matthew's sexuality had little impact on those around him, except that it was stigmatized as something "wrong" or "threatening" to the dominant heterosexual culture.

One explanation for the actions of McKinney and Henderson can be found in Jordan Schildcrout's assessment of the forces motivating sadists toward violence:

Evil consists of treating others in precisely the way we do *not* want to be treated, thrusting our suffering and pain onto the other in the hope of avoiding

it ourselves. [...] The sadist's joy comes not just from seeing someone else suffer, but from feeling that he or she is in control of suffering, commanding and redirecting the force that threatens us with doom" (Schildcrout 91).

However, Myslik suggests that most incidents of anti-gay violence can be viewed as "the acts of young men attempting to affirm their individual status with their peer group and their group status in society" and that "These acts of violence are not personal expressions of intolerance of homosexuality, but of societal intolerance, or cultural heterosexism, which grants permission for their actions and mitigates their responsibility for the consequences" (Myslik 70). Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson are not presented as sadistic monsters, but as "normal" young men. The problem and the solution lie not with these specific individuals, but the community as a whole. It is not merely the social exposure of homosexuality that causes the disruption to the community, but the revelation of the possibility that two of their own could be guilty of so much hatred and violence. If *they* are capable of such actions, any one of them could have his or her emotions pushed to this extreme.

But the play that Kaufman and the TTP have crafted is not only about the effects of Shepard's murder in Laramie, but its aftermath on the outside world, represented by the members of the TTP that are chosen to be presented as characters themselves.

According to Stephen Bottoms:

The company's working process in generating text for the play thus becomes an explicit part of the play's narrative, with the various tensions and misapprehensions engendered by their presence in Laramie being explored, self-critically, alongside the Shepard story itself. [...] The inclusion of such

material invites audiences to question the role and assumptions of the interviewer-actors and writer-director in making the piece, just as they are asked to scrutinize the words of their interviewees. (65)

Audiences are presented with the reactions of the TTP interviewers and the affects of the disruption on them, as noticeably as they are made aware of its impact on the townspeople they have set out to document. In this fashion, the play is not simply one about the town *of* Laramie, but how the events that happened *in* Laramie have affected everyone.

An Unseen, but not Unnamed, Force

While *The Laramie Project* presents at its core a similar disruption as that presented in *Angels in America*, the revelation of homosexuality and the disturbance that occurs in its aftermath, it is most significantly the only one of the three plays that never deals directly with the cause of the disruption himself. Matthew is never presented on stage; all information concerning both his character and his part in the murder comes through second or third parties only, including other members of Laramie's homosexual population. As the temporal distance from the murder increases, Matthew slowly ceases to be thought of as a person at all, transforming into an ideal, a type of sacrificial lamb that forced a push toward homosexual equality and acceptance by showing the dangers of privileging tolerance over acceptance. It was only through Matthew's death that the homosexual men and women of Laramie were granted the opportunity to join together and fight back against decades of forced invisibility. In their eyes, Matthew takes on an almost Christ-like image. He died, that they may live.

In a "Moment" titled simply "Matthew," several different interviewees, some who met him only once, some who were close friends, attempt to present their interviewees and subsequent audiences with a snapshot definition and explanation of who Matthew Shepard the person had been. Doc O'Connor, one of the play's most bluntly outspoken figures, offers as his explanation an anecdote about their first meeting:

So he walks up to the window, and I say, "Are you Matthew Shepard?" And he says, "Yeah, I'm Matthew Shepard. But I don't want you to call me Matthew or Mr. Shepard. I don't want you to call me anything. My name is Matt. And I want you to know, I am gay and we're going to a gay bar. Do you have a problem with that?" And I said, "How're you payin'?" (Kaufman 18-19)

By Doc O'Connor's definition, Matthew was someone who was completely outspoken and proud of his sexuality, that it was one of the primary means by which he identified himself and he didn't care what the rest of Laramie thought of him.

For Romaine Patterson, a friend of Matthew, his sexuality is not the first image that comes to mind: "...whenever I think of Matthew, I always think of his incredible beaming smile" (Kaufman 19). Romaine, unlike Doc, is someone who knew Matthew on a personal level and as such her easiest memories of him are not connected to his outspoken sexuality, as this was not a defining factor in their relationship.⁶ But despite the apparent ease with which the majority of those who encountered Matthew seem to be able to sum up his character in a few short descriptors or anecdotes, local store owner and sister or Romaine, Trish Steger, offers no such insight. Trish explains her lack of "useful"

⁶ However, Kaufman is careful to include the character descriptor of "Lesbian" next to Romaine's name in the character breakdown.

information by stating, "I don't know, you know, how does any one person ever tell about another?" (Kaufman 19).

Kaufman and the TTP's decision on which portraits to include in the piece must be taken into consideration in assessing the image of Matthew *The Laramie Project* is projecting to audiences. Even some of the creative forces behind the play acknowledge that the project as a whole is not an attempt to factually portray every realistic detail of Matthew's murder:

The characters of Laramie were intended to help the audience to make sense of what happened to Shepard, but what we hoped for the *The Laramie Project* was a truth that has little to do with the facts of what happened to this young gay man in Wyoming. What we wanted was a truth that transformed the meaning of Shepard's murder from one town's tragedy into an awakening of the nation's conscience. (Baglia & Foster 136)

Matthew's torture and death is used as framing narrative to explore a town and nation in flux. As Amy Tigner stresses, "Who and what the company chooses to leave out influences how the spectators perceive the speakers and the story as much as what the company chooses to leave in" (144). Such creative choices are only a small indication of the extent to which the media, both in the immediate aftermath of Matthew's death and in the years since, has helped create the image and symbol of Matthew Shepard. As Bill McKinney, father of Aaron, bemoans: "Had this been a heterosexual these two boys decided to take out and rob, this never would have made the national news. Now my son is guilty before he's even had a trial" (Kaufman 49). In the months and years following

his death, Matthew was transformed from a murder victim, to a national symbol of gay rights and anti-hate crime legislation.

It could very well be said that it is precisely this championing of Matthew as a martyr for gay rights that causes the disruption to the Laramie community. This transformation from person to sacrificial lamb is best illustrated in Harry Wood's account of witnessing a parade of supporters march past his apartment window:

Five hundred people. Can you imagine? The tag at the end was larger than the entire parade. And people kept joining in. And you know what? I started to cry. Tears were streaming down my face. And I thought, "Thank God that I got to see this in my lifetime." And my second thought was, "Thank you, Matthew."

(Kaufman 63-64)

Harry offers up a heartfelt "Thank you," yet Matthew did not willingly choose this role. Unlike true martyrs, Matthew did not make a conscious decision to die for an ideal. He was merely refusing to comply with the unspoken "don't ask, don't tell" policy at play in Laramie, and for this he was killed.

According to Schildcrout, such glorifying of the victim, and indeed demonizing of the perpetrator(s), is not uncommon, particularly in hate crimes:

In other words, the queer and the killer are monstrous because they are not 'just themselves'; they are demonized as representatives of a Force of Evil whose goal is to destroy The Good (private domesticity, national civility, etc). This may seem like a great deal of symbolic weight to put on the shoulders of your average queer person, or, for that matter, even a violent murderer. But when we make the queer and the killer into monsters, they take up residence in

the realm of the symbolic, where they are endowed with extraordinary powers.

(Schildcrout 92-93)

The overt sanctification of both Matthew and the circumstances surrounding his attack is acknowledged by Unitarian minister Stephen Mead Johnson, who states, "That place [the fence] has become a pilgrimage site" (Kaufman 34). Even Greg Pierotti, a member of the TTP, as well as a fellow homosexual, is consumed by the idea of Matthew and what he has been created to stand for, stating, "I broke down the minute I touched it. I feel such a strong kinship with this young man" (34).⁷

By the media depicting Matthew not as a human victim, but as metaphorical symbol of the many troubles still facing America's homosexual population, it was inevitable that such emotional reactions would begin to extend beyond the borders of Laramie. In an e-mail written to Philip Dubois, President of the University of Wyoming, a young person, in response to a statement by Philip published in the *Denver Post*, asserts that:

You and the straight people of Laramie and Wyoming are guilty of the beating of Matthew Shepard just as the Germans who looked the other way are guilty of the deaths of the Jews, the Gypsies, and the homosexuals. You have taught your straight children to hate their gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. Unless and until you acknowledge that Matt Shepard's beating is not just a random occurrence, not just the work of a couple of random crazies, you have Matthew's blood on your hands. (Kaufman 56)

⁷ See McNally's *Corpus Christi* for another example of this same sanctification: "'The play is more religious ritual than a play' (McNally, *Corpus Christi* vii) and one that questions not only what was done to Christ, but what 'they did one cold October night to a young man in Wyoming as well. Jesus Christ died again when Matthew Shepard did' (McNally, *Corpus Christi* vii)." (Fisher "Citizens" 26).

The anonymous author's assertion that the entire community of Laramie is guilty of Matthew's murder illustrates the strong impact the murder is having on the town. Not only has the existence of a homosexual community been thrust into the open, but Laramie's residents are now faced with a changing social image. As University student Jedadiah Schultz states, "Now, after Matthew, I would say that Laramie is a town defined by an accident, a crime. We've become Waco, we've become Jasper. We're a noun, a definition, a sign. We may be able to get rid of that...but it will sure take a while" (Kaufman 9). For the outside world, Laramie and Matthew Shepard have become interchangeable terms. For better or worse, they are synonymous with each other.

It is for this reason that it is important to stress that the play Kaufman and the TTP crafted is *not* "The Matthew Shepard Story", but *The Laramie Project* and that "it is after all the story of the small town of Laramie and what happened there" (Tigner 139). With the focus being on the community as a whole, the importance of Matthew's complete lack of physical representation becomes even more important, as the audience learns of Matthew only through the eyes of the townspeople. For Tigner, this conscious decision to include Matthew only as an image, and unseen force behind the disruptive events, is similar to a technique used in traditional pastoral elegies, "in which the central figure is always present in the minds of others but absent himself" (Tigner 141). As such, Matthew Shepard and his murder can be viewed as a catalyst for the social awakening of Laramie's residents, rather than only the cause of the disruption. The tensions between Laramie's heterosexual and homosexual populations is something that had been building slowly over time, that would inevitably come to a head whether the person who had been murdered was Matthew Shepard or another member of Laramie's secret homosexual

community. And just as the spectre of Matthew can be said to, “stand in for all the unnamed hate-crimes victims...the grieving community is not only Laramie, but New York. We are meant to understand, and we do, that this tragedy of the West, of Matt, is really a universal tragedy that occurs all over America” (Tigner 154). The town of Laramie, WY is presented as analogous to any town in America, all with the potential for the same type of heinous crime if action is not taken to reexamine our own responses to others.

Where Do We Go From Here?

In contrast to the utopian vision presented in the Epilogue for *Angels in America*, Kaufman’s play lacks a clear conclusion as to how Laramie will begin to rebuild in the aftermath of the disruption. There is no suggestion of a larger community plan or that Laramie must be completely abandoned and a New Community formed. Instead, *The Laramie Project* charts the emotional and social journeys of several residents in connection to Matthew’s murder, indicating the potential for change in the future, but far from presenting anything concretely in place. The attitudes of many of Laramie’s residents toward homosexuality that are presented in the play’s opening moments still remain; not everyone experiences an epiphany in the months and years following Matthew’s death. The only major difference, and the dominant cause of the disruptive force of the murder, is that Laramie’s homosexual population refuses to be silenced any longer. Gone is the practice as related by openly gay University professor Catherine Connolly, in which she describes the greeting she received from a fellow homosexual resident:

'I hear—I hear—I hear you're gay. I hear you are,' I was like, 'Uh huh.' And she said, 'I hear you came as a couple. I'm one too. Not a couple, just a person.' And so—she was—a kind of lesbian who knew I was coming and she wanted to come over and meet me immediately. And she later told me that there were other lesbians that she knew who wouldn't be seen with me. That I would irreparably taint them, that just to be seen with me could be a problem.

(Kaufman 22)

The play's repetition of the mantra "Live and let live" emphasizes this embracing of the notion that tolerance without acceptance is no longer a sufficient approach to maintaining a thriving and successful community, as tolerance requires little understanding of the human element. As the play suggests, for a community to be truly successful, its members must not merely tolerate the differences among them, but reach out for an understanding of the *people* who embody these differences. It is only when the individual human element is taken into account that true acceptance can be achieved.

One of the play's most striking examples of this type of transformation is local university student Jedadiah Schultz. Jedadiah is first introduced in the play's early moments recounting his experience performing in a scene from *Angels in America* during his senior year of high school, despite his parent's objection and not being gay himself. (Kaufman 11-13). Later, in the Epilogue, the TTP revisits Jedadiah, who has been given the role of Prior in the University's production of *Angels*. According to Jedadiah, he feels a fundamental difference in his approach to homosexuality from his first interview to his last: "I don't know, it's weird. It's so weird, man. I just—I just feel bad. Just for all that stuff I told you, for the person I used to be. [...] I just can't believe I ever said that stuff

about homosexuals, you know. How did I ever let that stuff make me think that you were different from me?" (Kaufman 98). As Tigner points out, the play's several references to Kushner's ground-breaking play are not merely coincidental, but situate *The Laramie Project* within the theatrical movement begun by *Angels*. "The references to Kushner's play illustrate the transforming power of theatre and show how a Westerner, the university theatre student Jedadiah Schultz (played by Andy Paris), changes his moral principles" (Tigner 148). Jedadiah recognizes that his earlier statements and opinions were short-sighted and not based on personal interactions. Through his getting to know homosexuals as individuals and people, rather than as a collective idea or abstract concept, and his experience researching and performing the very out homosexual character of Prior, he has been able to develop a more informed and enlightened social attitude.

But acceptance and growth on the individual level is not enough. As long as the majority of Laramie's residents continue to view homosexuality as deviant behavior, the town as a whole will not be able to move fully beyond mere tolerance only social attitudes. According to Schildcrout, the task is not to transform the social standing of homosexuals, but to change the establishing order itself: "If Evil is a metaphysical force whose goal is to destroy The Good, who gets to decide what constitutes The Good? Whose lives, whose loves, and whose values are allowed to occupy the charmed realm of The Good, and who, then, must be relegated to the abject status of Evil?" (Schildcrout 95). Acceptance cannot come when the thing that needs to be accepted is still considered evil or poisonous to the majority. As Myslik notes, it is the voice of the larger organizations (religion, government, education, etc) and not the individual that have the

largest and most influence voice in the community: "Churches preach that homosexuality is a sin, schools fail to protect gay youths from harassment, police inadequately respond to assaults, and the courts give perpetrators light sentences" (Myslik 70). Jedadiah's perspective may have changed, but he is not indicative of the entire population of Laramie, as the TTP's encounter with the local Baptist Minister illustrates (Kaufman 69-71). Such vastly contrasting views indicate that by the play's conclusion (as much as there is one in a piece of this nature) there still remains a great deal of disruption and conflict. There is no clear conclusion or suggested plan; the play simply ends with the departure of the group of interviewers:

The trips to Laramie confronted them with their questions, but the final script does not answer them. They, perhaps a bit ambitiously, hoped to capture an emotional response of a town in crisis. Instead, they captured, through writing and acting brilliance, their interpretations of sixty individuals in crisis, perhaps providing a catharsis for themselves as actors, and for those of us in the audience who vicariously went along for the ride. (Baglia & Foster 141)

Laramie still has a very long journey ahead toward a complete rebuilding, but with the inclusion of characters, like Jedadiah, who *do* indicate growth, there remains a glimmer of hope that Laramie is, at the very least, heading in the right direction.

Conclusion

With the announcement on Playbill.com in September 2008 that the TTP would be returning to Laramie to gather interviews and information for a newly updated Epilogue that would chronicle the town ten years after Matthew's death it is clear that social impact of *The Laramie Project* shows no sign of waning. According to Playbill

writer Kenneth Jones, “Five members of Tectonic Theater Project — Kaufman, Andy Paris, Leigh Fondakowski, Greg Pierotti and Stephen Belber — are seeking out the same people they interviewed 10 years ago, and will interview them again. The core of the interviews will be about how Laramie has changed: politically, socially, religiously, educationally” (www.playbill.com). The TTP’s decision to chronicle not an event, but a community, allows *The Laramie Project* to serve as a window into how the community of Laramie, WY copes with and attempts to move past the murder of gay University student Matthew Shepard. “The resulting play is not about Shepard so much as it is about how a community identifies itself in the wake of the national media coverage of a hate crime” (Baglia & Foster 129). However, as with all good theatre, the play also serves as a mirror for the potential that exists within every small American town for tragedy, as well as growth. As Tigner stresses in her article, “Lurking in the background is the critique of societal attitudes towards issues about gay life in America. The production addresses not only what it is like to be gay in the small town of Laramie, but also the very real dangers of being gay anywhere in the country” (Tigner 141).

Take Me Out

Introduction

In 2003, another theatrical work centered around the disruptive impact that “coming out” can have on the society emerged on the Broadway scene. Richard Greenberg’s *Take Me Out* was transferred to Broadway from a successful Off-Broadway run at New York’s Public Theatre, which “regularly transfers promising work[s] to Broadway” that “typically include progressive themes, often addressing the lives and concerns of people of color and gay men, whether or not they are marketed as gay or minoritarian” (“L&G” 499-500). The play tells the story of African-American baseball star Darren Lemming and the effects and tragedies that follow his casual self-outing to the news media. According to James Fisher, such subject matter, and its popular reception (the play went on to win the Tony Award for Best Play that year) is not surprising:

In the aftermath of *Angels*, gay-themed plays (as well as films and television shows) proliferated and gay characters of every stripe found voice, with subsequent playwrights merging elements from earlier gay-themed plays from several generations. [...] The closet door had fallen off with a resounding thud—and in the new millennium, as gay marriage became a central element in national political debate, gays resided on American stages, depicted as full citizens in all walks of American life, just as Prior Walter insisted. (“Citizens” 30)

Unfortunately, as Greenberg’s play illustrates, the utopian vision of a new, inclusive and accepting community still has some distance to go. Just as *Angels in America* and *The Laramie Project* before it, *Take Me Out* explores the disruptions that are still arising

simply because of *who* and *what* people are, regardless of any actions they may perform or privilege.

The disruptive effect of Darren's verbal coming out to the media and his teammates is voiced by the character of Kippy in the opening moments of the play (Greenberg 5). This public acknowledgement of his homosexuality not only affects his status in the eyes of his fans, but also puts a strain on his teammates by forcing them to re-evaluate their relationships with Darren and their potential "homo-erotic" closeness with each other. If *he* could be homosexual, any of them could and it is precisely this growing tension and discomfort that leads to a slow loss of trust, and trust is a necessity for the success of any close community. Darren's verbal self "outing" causes this team/community tension and disruption, setting in motion a chain of events that ultimately leads to the death of Davey Battle, a fellow ballplayer and close friend of Darren's. While the ultimate outcome is not directly linked to Darren's homosexuality, the actions leading up to it are direct results of the events begun by his coming-out.

Coming Out

The play begins with Darren's coming out during a news interview; the event which sets into motion the disruption that reverberates throughout the remainder of the play. In the dialogue as it is presented, Darren is not seen explicitly stating that he is a homosexual. Rather, that information is heavily implied:

But you know, it seems like you reach this certain level of achievement, everyone wants to know what's goin' on with you. The irrelevancies. [...] And if, incidentally, there's any kid out there who's struggling with his identity, I hope this sends a message that it's okay. They can follow their dream no

matter what. Any young man, creed, whatever, can go out there and become a ballplayer. Or an interior decorator. (Greenberg 7)

Darren's reference to his sexual orientation as an "irrelevancy" indicates the lack of social importance he places on this aspect of himself. But not everyone shares this same view, as teammate Kippy Sunderstrom proves: "But now you'll be *completely* happy. You've *named* yourself, Darren—you've put yourself into *words*—which means you're free in a way you've never been before" (Greenberg 12). Darren's lack of response emphasizes his disagreement with this sentiment, as he does not feel his life has been made any more complete by the public declaration of his homosexuality.

Indeed, Darren's subsequent association with the homosexual community at large comes exclusively from outside influences, including his agent Mason Marzac, who congratulates Darren on the wonderful things he has done "for the community" since his coming out:

DARREN. What community would that be?

(*Beat*)

MASON. Well, *our* community. Of course, I don't really *have* a community.

Or, more precisely, the community won't really have me. And I don't like communities in general. I avoid them. I'm outside them. (*Beat.*) Possibly beneath them.

DARREN. I don't really have a community either. I'm above them.

MASON. Well, then, you've done a very wonderful thing for a community to which neither of us belongs but with which we will both inevitably be associated.

(Greenberg 31-32)

For Mason, his client's homosexuality (much as his own undeclared and seemingly uncomfortable sexuality) is very much a part of who he is as an individual. Mason even stresses the contradictory nature of Darren's apparent ability to live a multiple existence, being both black and white and the All-American Baseball star and self-declared homosexual:

And we all knew everything in an instant—all his contradictions—his white father, his black mother; he was universally beloved, he was a little remote—and now the biggest contradiction of all—But the contradictions all seemed reconciled in him; that was his genius. Often, in interviews, he'd be asked: 'Do you consider yourself black or white?' And he'd reply, 'I'm black *and* white.' As if that were the only answer possible. As if no sane person could have a problem with that. (Greenberg 26)

Darren's refusal to choose one identity as superior to another indicates his belief in the possibility of living a life in which none of his personal traits or identities is considered completely expendable. "Neither is mutually exclusive, as it is possible for a gay man to be absorbed into the cultural mainstream (to be 'virtually normal' in Sullivan's phrase) and still enjoy the exclusively gay culture of the ghetto" (Roberts 177).

Mason's description of Darren as "contradictory" brings to mind images of Kushner's own contradictory homosexual character: Joe Pitt. While Joe is undoubtedly of a different era than Darren, and must confront his homosexual longings under drastically different, and arguably more severe, circumstances, both possess other, perhaps more personally dominant, identities that seem completely contradictory to their homosexuality. Joe is a devote Mormon and active Republican; Darren is a major league

baseball star. While not connected in this sense, the traditional All-American baseball image is still not extended to homosexuality, just as in the 1980s the idea of a Gay Republican was incomprehensible.

However, unlike Joe, Darren has not only come to fully embrace his homosexuality, but has been able to move past the confusion of such seemingly conflicting identities and embrace them, choosing to identify himself primarily as a baseball player, the identity most important to him. The public declaration of his homosexuality is not disruptive to this self-view. As he states, "Naw, Toddy, uh-uh. If it concerns you, it's only 'cause, as of yet, it hasn't diminished me to any noticeable extent. I'm still *me*. I'm still the man. What actually confounds you is somethin' else" (Greenberg 19). It is only the outside world, his teammates and fans, that remains incapable of reconciling these seemingly disparate "Darrens."

The Disruption and its Aftermath

As Kippy outlines in the play's opening moments, Darren's very public declaration of his homosexuality began the trouble, or more accurately, served as the catalyst toward bringing underlying issues to the surface. "The whole mess started with Darren, I suppose. After all, if he hadn't done the thing, then the next thing wouldn't have happened, or all the stuff after... The whole mess started one morning when Darren Lemming said to himself: 'What the hell? I'm Darren Lemming, and that's a *very good thing...*'" (Greenberg 5-7). With this new piece of public knowledge, Darren's teammates and fans find themselves taking a step back and reevaluating their allegiance and relationships to Darren the ballplayer as well as Darren the homosexual man. As avid baseball fan William R. Danziger laments in a letter to Darren, "It would be a kick having

you as a friend. And I would have no trouble sharing a communal shower with you after a round of tennis at whatever club. *But do you have to play BASEBALL?* Don't you know what baseball *means to me?* I wish you well in all other things, but this hurts my feelings" (Greenberg 48). Danziger's letter emphasizes the play's main focus as being the sport of baseball, which is dealt with more directly and intensely than Darren's announcement. Baseball is the All-American sport, and through the character of Darren and the impact his sexuality has on his fans and teammates, Greenberg is exploring what homosexuality means to America. Has it been accepted enough as part of the larger culture to fit comfortably within something *as American as baseball?*

The revelation of Darren's homosexuality also causes a very severe disruption in the relationships with his teammates. During one exchange, Kippy suggests that the problem lies not in the belief that Darren wishes to "fuck them" but that he believes that they all hide secret sexual longings for him:

KIPPY. No. But as an amateur of social psychology? I suspect that we suspect that you suspect we do.

DARREN. Because that's presumed to be the presumption of my sudden peer group? That there are two classes of men: gay and indential? (Greenberg 8)

Assumptions of this kind indicate that the association of homosexuality as somehow contagious has not disappeared in the ten years since *Angels in America* brought similar issues into the nation's consciousness. This is not to say that once it is publicly acknowledged all relationships *must* focus on its existence, but that Darren's teammates seemingly cannot help but believe that his homosexuality consumes every aspect of who he is as a person, including even those relationships *not* connected to his sexuality.

Another teammate named Skipper projects feelings of frustration and indignation at the salary and perks Darren had negotiated for himself just prior to his announcement:

SKIPPER. Is it right, for instance, for somebody to land one of the fattest contracts in baseball history and *only then* reveal his interesting little personal quirk? Is *that* 'right'? I ask you.

(*Beat.*)

DARREN. Those things didn't have anything to do with each other.

SKIPPER. I didn't say they did. I'm just asking. (Greenberg 62)

Buried within Skipper's comments is the assertion that such perks should be reserved for "true" ballplayers and that with the revelation of his homosexuality Darren has become less of one. Skipper's caution, in not declaring this outright, signifies another shift in the team toward secrecy and deception. Such practices are detrimental to any community, particularly one in which the members must be able to rely on and trust each other fully every day. As a team, trust is a necessity, and without it the team (a stand in for community in this case) cannot and will not be able to succeed.

Such feelings of distrust are not limited to the teammates' interactions with Darren. Kippy best sums this up when he states:

Well, look at us now. How we turn from each other. How, when we turn *to* each other, we maintain eye contact. (RODRIGUEZ *and* MARTINEZ *look away.*) Before, this wasn't necessary. We were Men. This meant we could be girlish. We could pat fannies, snap towels, hug. Now... What do we do with our stray homosexual impulses? (Greenberg 53)

If someone of Darren's standing in the baseball community could be hiding a secret sexuality, then the possibility exists for any one of them to be hiding the same secret. Their previously playful antics and interactions have now become tainted with potential homo-erotic impulses, which, were it not for Darren's public announcement, would never have surfaced. Despite Darren and all the other members of the team remaining basically and fundamentally unchanged, the outing of the *knowledge* of Darren's homosexuality removes all innocence and naivete from the baseball community. As Kippy's hypothetical scenario illustrates, it has now become impossible for them to accurately judge each other based on their external selves, or those aspects that are projected to the world through actions or physical appearance, such as gender, career, race, etc. Those traits that are readily visible, without needing to be clarified by the individual. It is not until Darren verbally announces his homosexuality that it becomes something that the others can judge, as the majority of his other, external or visible, traits all fall within America's social heterosexual stereotypes.⁸ If someone as successful and "manly" as Darren Lemming could turn out to be homosexual, any of them might.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The reactions by Darren's friends and teammates indicate that even twenty years removed from the Reagan-era New York presented in *Angels in America* and in a country "after Laramie" the larger community may still not be quite ready to accept the existence of homosexuality in traditionally hetero-normative professions or cultures. In the end, Darren chooses to leave his baseball team, i.e. his community, because of the troubles and stress that have resulted from his disruptive coming out (Greenberg 113-14). His

⁸ Had Darren had been a well-dressed interior decorator, the social assumption would be made for the opposite sexuality, as he would be conforming to American homosexual stereotypes.

homosexuality, once viewed by him as an “irrelevancy”, has now completely eclipsed any previous identities he possessed. As he states to Mason, “I’m not who I was when the season started” (113). Darren’s identity as a homosexual may never have posed a threat to his personal view of himself, but the disruptive toll which his announcement takes on his baseball community has forced him to reevaluate his social standing and identity.

Despite the progress that has been made in the area of gay-rights in America, Greenberg’s play and the character of Darren Lemming indicate that there is still a long road ahead.

Conclusion

In his 2000 book, *Queer Theory and Social Change*, Max Kirsch puts forth the idea that for individuals with a same-gender sexual preference, the act of coming out and identifying with others of the same persuasion is a necessity if he or she is to gain a true sense of self:

When we are not comfortable enough with our positions to seek out others who are in the same position, and to use this identity, our identifications with them, to counter the symbolic and real violence that exists, we are also hiding from ourselves the real discrimination that denies self-assertion and fulfillment. [...] Denying a label or an identity is far easier than a fight for equity that might fail, thus rendering the individual even more isolated. By denying the identification and the material fact of labeling, shame is thus avoided and no real resistance is actualized. But in fact the individual becomes even more alone. (Kirsch 92)

While the overall message and theme of *Angels in America* and *The Laramie Project* seem to support this assertion, *Take Me Out*, and to a quieter extent Kaufman's play as well, pushes for an addendum. While connection and solidarity with a community of like-minded or oriented individuals is a positive force in the lives of many homosexuals in America, Greenberg's play suggests that there is nothing inherently wrong with merely being accepted into the larger society for who and what a person is, without all the social pressures of assigning the self a series of social labels or identifiers. As Darren stresses, he does not claim solidarity with a community developed out of a socially imposed identity (i.e. homosexual). He views himself as a baseball player before anything else. He does not *need* to associate with homosexuals simply because they all share an attraction to men; it is not a void that he feels needs to be filled. In his mind, he has a team, made up of very different individuals, who share a bond through the sport of baseball that, to him, is a more binding element than sexuality.

The character of Darren Lemming argues against Kirsch's claim. Darren's refusal of solidarity with the homosexual community is not a denial of his homosexuality, but instead a refusal to comply with the societal pressure to clarify his status in the larger community. To him his sexuality is irrelevant to his status as a baseball player. Unfortunately, such an outlook is not shared by many of his fellow teammates and one time supporters, leading to the disruptive impact of his **coming out**.

Conclusion

Angels in America, *The Laramie Project*, and *Take Me Out* each present their audiences with an exploration of what it means to be gay in American society, and the problems that arise when homosexuality becomes a public fact. With *Angels*, Kushner portrays the disruption homosexuals pose to both the individual and the larger community, through an exploration of the actual process of coming out, as seen through the character of Joe Pitt, as well as the impact that a diagnosis of AIDS can have, as illustrated by Prior Walter and the fictionalized Roy Cohn. For Roy, such an illness serves as a potentially damning indicator of the homosexuality he has been denying for years, while Prior's diagnosis forces him into a third class position in his relationship with his partner Louis. Joe's coming out is also used to illustrate the disruptions that are felt on the communal level when a self-proclaimed Mormon and Republican announces his homosexuality. A revelation such as Joe's forces the question of just how encompassing the homosexual community is in defining its members. While all of the questions and conflicts are by no means answered at the play's conclusion, Kushner does end his play on a positive note. A New Community is being formed that will embrace all people, regardless of race, gender or sexual orientation. Prior, the new "prophet," will not abandon his "Great Work" and will keep moving forward toward creating and maintaining a history and creating a future for the homosexual as a part of the human community.

The Laramie Project moves past the exploration of the disruptions felt within the homosexual community, choosing instead to focus primarily on the impact homosexuality has on the larger heterosexual majority. Such a decision is fitting with the

evolution of gay and lesbian drama near the end of the twentieth century. As Dolan notes, “over the course of the end of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first, the criteria of ‘authenticity,’ which once demanded that gay, lesbian, and queer experience be represented only by those who had lived it, gradually relaxed into a more open standard in which issues of alternative sexual identity could be addressed, performed, and received by anyone” (“L&G” 501). *Laramie* examines the disruptive impact the death of Matthew Shepard has on the entire community of Laramie, WY and presents audiences with a type of cautionary tale regarding the dangers that can result from complacency with a social policy based exclusively on tolerance, rather than acceptance. The young men responsible for Matthew’s death held similar opinions and beliefs regarding homosexuality as the majority of the residents of Laramie. As such, they serve as a chilling warning of the tragically disruptive impact such social attitudes can have when they are challenged by self-declared homosexuals, such as Matthew.

The most recent of the three plays explored, *Take Me Out* explores the disruptions still occurring in contemporary America when social identity assumptions about an individual are proven inaccurate. Darren’s decision to come out publicly does not present the type of personal disturbance that is seen in Kushner’s play, but, in the wake of the severe disruption his revelation *does* cause for the members of his community, ultimately forces him to reevaluate his social position as a ballplayer and teammate. As Sinfield observes, in such a situation questioning and analysis are unavoidable:

Many of us value our sense of national, regional and civic belonging, our racial or ethnic identity, our involvement in a world of work, our sense of shared political or religious commitment. To be disturbed in the allegiances is

uncomfortable- though many people experience that, either because others stigmatize and reject them or because they bravely repudiate aspects of the dominant ideology. (349-50)

In a scenario that echoes back to *Angels in America*, the challenging of community “membership” is once again a primary focus. Darren’s announcement compels his teammates to reevaluate not only their personal relationships with him, but also whether or not there remains a place for him in the community of ballplayers now that he has challenged the traditional definition of “All-American” by declaring his homosexuality.

Unlike the utopian vision presented by Kushner, both Kaufman and Greenberg end their plays without a clear conclusion. There remains a great deal of unfinished business and unanswered questions for all involved. According to Roberts, “It is a sign of maturity within a comparatively young ‘movement’ that there are writers and playwrights who are moving beyond the defensive and ‘affirming’ position of gay cultural production towards a more critical, questioning stance” (Roberts 177). For newly influential homosexual playwrights like Kaufman and Greenberg the future, and their places in it, are not as clear or optimistic as Kushner’s Prior may have believed.

So, where do we go from here? According to Dolan, the future of gay and lesbian drama is a bright one. “Gains in the law, the legislature, and the public sphere will no doubt influence the kind of drama, theatre, and performance produced by (and for) gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered, and queer people for generations” (“L&G” 502). As the homosexual community continues to push for more recognition and standing in the larger society, the American dramatic community will continue to chronicle these changes. As Roberts states, “[with] a changing perception of ‘gay’ itself, the theatre

continues to be a place where vital issues within and beyond the gay community can be expressed in a range of forms—magical and moving, shocking and humorous, sensuous and through-provoking” (184). As social attitudes and policies towards homosexuality continue to evolve, America’s playwrights, both hetero and homosexual, will continue to develop new and innovative styles and techniques in which to explore these important challenges and developments.

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