

“A PARTICIPANT IN THE WORLD”: IDENTITY, CHANGE,
AND THE CLOSET IN *ANGELS IN AMERICA*

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“A PARTICIPANT IN THE WORLD”: IDENTITY, CHANGE, AND
THE CLOSET IN *ANGELS IN AMERICA*

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* consists of two plays that examine the lives of a group of gay men living in New York City during the mid-1980s. Kushner revised *Perestroika*, the second play, in 1995, and made further changes for the HBO film adaptation of his plays in 2003. All three versions end with an epilogue that features all of the surviving gay characters except Joe Pitt, a married, Mormon lawyer. Most critics argue that Joe is excluded because he is unredeemable or simply unimportant, but it can also be argued that he is especially important because Kushner revised this character more than any other. Through a critical lens combining John McGowan's discussion of situated freedom and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's analysis of gay identity, we can see that Kushner also revises his views on identity, the possibility of change, and the necessity of the gay closet, with the result of idealizing a narrow and exclusive gay community.

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INTRODUCTION

An important part of what distinguishes Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* from most mainstream American drama is the fact that almost all of the central characters are gay men. No two characters experience being gay in the same way, and critics have made much of the ways in which homosexuality intersects with other kinds of identity in Kushner's representations. The gay characters in the play represent different religions, races, sexual styles, and political affiliations. Steven F. Kruger and Deborah Geis, the editors of the 1997 collection *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, devote an entire section to essays exploring these different identities and how they intersect with gayness. While the play certainly addresses a variety of gay identities, these critics ignore the clear distinctions and value judgments Kushner makes between them. Several of these identities have a presence in the epilogue of *Perestroika*, the second half of *Angels*, which features Prior Walter, a white man living with AIDS, Belize, Prior's black best friend, Louis Ironson, his Jewish ex-lover, and Hannah Pitt, his Mormon adoptive mother. This manner of describing these characters indicates that they are all present in the epilogue because of their importance to Prior, who emerges as the play's hero, particularly in *Perestroika*. In fact, in revising his play as a screenplay for the 2003 HBO film production, Kushner gives his characters a specific reason for gathering in the epilogue; they are celebrating Prior's birthday. Another way of reading this concluding scene involves contrasting the characters, specifically the gay men, who are present with those that are not; more importantly, separating those who are rewarded

from those who are condemned. In the second reading, what Kushner represents in the epilogue is an ideal gay community, and the characters that he excludes are absent for reasons far more significant than their not knowing Prior.

I think that both of these readings are valid, but only when applied to different versions of *Perestroika*. In the first, published in 1992, the group in the epilogue may simply be a specific group of friends; Kushner's vision of the universal gay community may be more inclusive, a group that any gay person may join, under the right circumstances. In the 1995 and 2003 versions, the epilogue remains essentially the same, but Kushner changes the play itself so much that the significance of the epilogue changes. I will argue that while he represents a variety of gay individuals who are very different from each other, in the revisions his representations of gay identities fall into two categories: one including individuals who are proud, productive, and politically liberal, and the other, individuals who are ashamed, destructive, and politically conservative. The dividing line between these two types is the gay closet, a figurative structure that becomes more crucial to Kushner's representations of gay identity with each revision. In this thesis, I will argue that, ultimately, Kushner's growing emphasis on this division makes his representation of gayness more reductive than pluralistic.

The two characters through whom Kushner represents the second type of gay identity, Joe Pitt and Roy Cohn, are actually very different from each other, most significantly in that Joe tries, voluntarily, to come out of the closet while Roy threatens to "destroy" his doctor for saying that he is a homosexual (*Millennium* 50). However, the similarity that they share, their Republican politics, holds more importance for Kushner than their differences. In a 1994 interview with Kushner, Michael Cunningham

commented that, in *Angels*, “the only character who is damned to some extent is a kind of relatively minor Republican functionary. I was wondering, is being an obedient Republican the only unforgivable sin?” (Vorlicky 62). Kushner’s reply, “It would certainly classify as an unforgivable sin,” is less than satisfactory; he seems to dodge the question rather than actually answering it. The character he discusses in his response to Cunningham is Roy, the Republican character that, as the playwright points out, actually is forgiven “to a certain degree . . . [and] in the play, only forgiven when he’s dead” (63). The character to whom Cunningham is most likely referring, however, is Joe, whose duties as a “minor Republican functionary” include ghostwriting homophobic court decisions for a Republican federal judge. While other characters receive forgiveness for sins ranging from the abandonment of sick lovers to murder, Joe’s participation in homophobic politics, even though he is clearly subordinate to others, is so reprehensible, and so central to his identity, that he is left in isolation at the end of the play. Apparently, being a loyal Republican is *the only* unforgivable sin. What makes Joe interesting is that he seems ready to give up his own homophobia—he comes out of the closet and begins a relationship with a man--but this does not redeem him. The question that I will attempt to answer is, what are the consequences of a view of identity that classifies “being an obedient Republican” as an unforgivable sin--or, at least, a sin so irredeemable that the sinner can only be forgiven after death--for the gay community?

It is important here to point out that Kushner does not regard forgiveness as the play’s “central problem” (Vorlicky 63). In another interview, in 1993, he described the two plays that make up *Angels* as follows: “*Millennium [Approaches]* has been shaped a good deal, but the first draft of it and this draft [1992] are within shooting distance of

each other. *Perestroika* has just changed and changed and changed, and it's still changing, and that's appropriate, because that's what the play's about" (Vorlicky 40-41). Intriguingly, most of the changes in this play occur in his representation of Joe, the character towards whom he displays the most ambivalence. In a 1994 interview with David Savran, Kushner said that Joe "gets somewhere and will ultimately be redeemable in *Angels*, part 3" (Kolin and Kullman 311). Instead of writing *Angels*, part 3, however, Kushner has continued changing *Angels*, part 2, removing this gay character further from redemption with each revision. Indeed, he comes to posit the possibility of change as impossible for a person who has been complicit in homophobic Republican legislation, regardless of this person's desire for change.

Early in *Angels*, however, it appears that Joe's desire for change can become productive under the right circumstances. One view of identity, which Kushner seems to embrace in *Millennium* and the 1992 *Perestroika*, represents the acceptance of a new community as necessary for change. Theorist John McGowan endorses this view of change—positive freedom--in his book *Postmodernism and its Critics*. Positive freedom, he tells us,

presents both individuals and society as shaping their identities in relation to others and to the past, and it understands the capacity for successful action as limited by what existing conditions make possible . . . the self in isolation would have no capacity to act at all; the self's (or society's) ability to have an identity, purposes, and the wherewithal to act upon them are products of its relation to a concrete situation (58).

Since the other characters do not forgive Joe, he does not join those who gather in the play's epilogue, set five years after its final scene. However, Joe's circumstance is not completely hopeless. In his last scene with Roy, the older man tells Joe, "you'll find, my friend, that what you love will take you places you never dreamed you'd go" (1992 127). If Joe could "be redeemable in *Angels* part 3," it is possible that his forgiveness could take place in a situation very different from that which Kushner provides in this play. If such personal change is possible, then the potential for social change is also present. In McGowan's view, one cannot separate what individuals can accomplish from what society can accomplish. Therefore, if some individuals cannot change, then it becomes questionable whether society as a whole can do so. No view of social change can be separated from a view of the individual self. Positive freedom attributes the unique qualities of selves to the intersubjective settings that constitute them:

Individual identity, like communal identity, is a construct and, more particularly, a construct created through constitutive action . . . a self-identity must be constructed by any individual who is 'thrown' (to use Heidegger's term) into a network of intersubjective relations. The resulting self is the product of a process, radically nonautonomous, but is differentiated from other selves and possesses an identity that unifies its disparate experiences, guides the presentation of the self to others, and forms the context for the various choices that the self makes. (243).

In *Millennium Approaches*, Joe expresses a desire to "be a participant in the world" (113). This phrase might serve as a metaphor for the process of identity construction. One constructs an identity in the context of relationships with others, with a specific

world, as a means of securing one's place within that context; one participates in this world through making choices that reinforce that identity. A self, in this view, has some agency in constructing, or even changing, her or his identity, but never complete control over it. Since self-construction is a process, it can never be said to be complete; there is always the potential for the self to be "thrown" into a new intersubjective setting that will cause it to change, whether it wants to or not. At the same time, a single self's desires can only produce change when they coincide with the desires of other selves.

As McGowan is quick to point out, "this stress on contextual constraints may make the term *freedom* seem the wrong one to use"(58). The alternative view of change—which McGowan, following Hegel, terms "negative freedom"—promises the individual a more complete agency: "the ideal of negative freedom presupposes an autonomous individual who can shape desires and courses of action apart from any social context" (40). In *Perestroika*, Joe appears invested in this ideal when he is trying to persuade his lover, Louis, not to leave him. Joe claims that he can "give up anything," even his past: "I can be anything I need to be. And I want to be with you" (1992 74-75). However, when Louis leaves Joe at the end of the scene, Kushner reveals the emptiness of negative freedom. Kushner and McGowan both deny the possibility of autonomous change, but while the playwright and the theorist agree in their rejection of this particular form of individual freedom, Kushner's view concerning what circumstances can allow identity to change becomes very different from McGowan's.

While rejecting the possibility of an autonomous self, McGowan does attribute some significance to the choices—all the choices—that a self makes. According to the theorist,

because an identity is constructed in an intersubjective process that takes place in the self's earliest years, the self, at a later time, can easily experience that identity as imposed or as inadequate to some other sense of self . . . the experience of alienation from the earliest identity (or earlier identities) stems from the creation of new identities in new intersubjective contexts, not from some existential split between the social and the true self (245).

Although a person still cannot change autonomously, he or she can make choices that then become open to the interpretation of other selves in new intersubjective situations. If it is impossible to give up one's past, this is because the past shapes the choices one makes; as McGowan writes earlier, "choice can only be made in relation to the self's commitment to its past and to *its sense of itself*. Choices are self affirming and serve to reinforce identity by enacting it"(my italics 216-17). The juxtaposition of these two passages indicates that even though the individual's past plays an important role in shaping his or her identity, it is only one part of a lifelong process in which one's sense of self and relationships with other selves also play important roles.

Kushner represents the possibility of change as situational, to an extent. In *Angels*, some selves change as a result of becoming situated in a new community; some cannot. In representing this discrepancy, Kushner reveals an investment in one of the political views McGowan critiques, liberalism, which offers this account of choice:

The classical liberalism of Smith and Kant understands both rationality and freedom as the product of choices made by unconstrained, uninfluenced, autonomous selves. A very similar notion of freedom

underlies the liberal origin myth of the social contract; society, which places various constraints on individuals, can be legitimated only if completely unconstrained individuals made the original choice to construct a social order. (216)

What I find particularly interesting in this passage is the idea of original choice. If the constructed self's choices reflect her or his past and present intersubjective settings, what do the choices of a pre-social, unconstrained self reflect if not that self's "true" identity? Once the individual makes the choice to enter society, in a certain capacity, she or he has established her or his true self. This is the point at which the views of the theorist and the playwright become different. In McGowan's view, a self may go through a number of identities; all of them are responses to situations in which the self finds herself or himself and none is more authentic than any other. Kushner discredits autonomous change, but reveals an investment in autonomous identity construction; it is only when "being a loyal Republican" is the product of an original choice, as opposed to pressure from one's community, that it makes sense to classify it as an unforgivable sin. If Kushner holds this liberal view of choice, then, for him, Joe has already chosen this identity, and the character's attempt to change seems like fickleness. This view prioritizes the original choice over subsequent choices. Hannah, like Joe, comes from the conservative Mormon community of Salt Lake City, Utah, but she is not constrained by an identity formed in this setting. In fact, *Angels* includes two characters, Hannah and Joe's wife, Harper, who have no place in the view of the self that McGowan endorses; both possess identities that remain relatively untouched by the intersubjective settings in which they have spent most of their lives. What separates them from Joe is a lack of original choice. Throughout

Angels, Kushner represents the women as occupying disempowered positions. When Joe returns after abandoning Harper in *Perestroika*, Hannah tells him, “you’re a man, you botch up, it’s not such a big deal . . . being a woman’s harder. Look at her” (1992 97). Earlier in the same play, Hannah tells Harper, “at first it can be very hard to accept how disappointing life is . . . because that’s what it is and you have to accept it” (37). Hannah implies that life is disappointing for women because they lack agency; both women are dissatisfied housewives and neither considers the possibility of becoming something else until the end of the play. The two women are not entirely unfortunate, however, because this lack of original choice makes it possible for them to change. For McGowan, who discredits the idea of original choice, all identities have the potential to change under the right conditions. If, for Kushner, Joe’s Republicanism reflects a true self’s autonomous choice, then the other characters are justified in excluding him.

If this is the case, then what vantage point enables the other gay characters to condemn Joe justifiably? The group in the epilogue, from which Kushner excludes him, contains a variety of individuals from different backgrounds, not all of whom are gay men; Hannah is also present. What, then, do these characters have in common that Kushner valorizes? In describing the history of liberal individualism, McGowan tells us,

any meritocratic justification of social differences must be based on an appeal to inner qualities (as opposed to inherited advantages, given social places, or sociohistorical determinants). Thus liberalism both explains and justifies the new kinds of social/economic differences characteristic of modernity by contrasting individuals to one another rather than by contrasting social orders or contexts (248).

Kushner proclaims his distaste for individualism in the afterward to *Perestroika*, but elsewhere he has described the gay characters in the epilogue--Louis, Prior, and Belize--as being “great [people]” (Vorlicky 73). I will explore the ways in which Kushner contrasts these men with Joe in more detail later, but it is significant that Kushner does not represent or describe the intersubjective settings that produced any of these “great” gay men. None of the characters in the epilogue are loyal Republicans, but I want to suggest that the men have another quality that makes them more virtuous; they are all out of the closet, while Joe’s relation to this structure remains ambivalent.

In fact, Kushner displays a great deal of ambivalence about the importance of the closet in the lives of gay people. McGowan argues that, because a person’s identity is largely a product of her or his intersubjective setting, change only becomes possible when individuals move into new intersubjective settings. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers a more specified view of identity, highlighting the relationality of gay identity in her *Epistemology of the Closet*. McGowan’s valuable discussion of identity construction and change is general enough to apply to a number of different kinds of identity, but Sedgwick writes not only about the ways in which relationships with other people limit a gay person’s ability to come out of the closet in a homophobic culture, but about what, specifically, makes gay identity unique. At same time, she does not discuss the importance of specific intersubjective settings in shaping identities or the changes in setting that can make personal change possible; she focuses on what gay people have in common, their existence in a homophobic culture, rather than what makes them different from each other. These differences make both McGowan and Sedgwick useful for my analysis, but the theorists also share several similarities. Both regard the recognition and

support of one's community as crucial to one's identity and both dismiss the possibility of autonomous change.

Sedgwick's first chapter in particular demonstrates the difficulties that gay people face in the process of coming out to loved ones and others who would often prefer not to know. To contrast her own point of view, she provides examples of a tendency in anti-homophobic writing to simplify the process of coming out: "the image of coming out regularly interfaces the image of the closet, and its seemingly unambivalent public citing can be counterposed as a salvational epistemologic certainty against the very equivocal privacy afforded by the closet" (71). This optimistic view implies that coming out is always safer and more rewarding than remaining in the closet and ignores the many negative consequences that people face when coming out. Kushner, at times, has held this view himself. In a 1992 interview with Adam Mars Jones, he said, "I think it's morally incumbent on gay people to tell the world they're gay, because we need to have a presence in the world. Being in the closet is personally disempowering and not really something that anybody really ought to do" (Vorlicky 24). This statement oversimplifies the issue in assuming that coming out is an autonomous decision; that any gay person can come out at any time she or he chooses and, in fact, owes it to herself or himself, and the gay community, to do so. At the same time, Kushner posits a gay community that is always willing to welcome anyone who has the courage to tell other people that she or he is gay; he says of gay people with public personas, actors and writers, who remain in the closet, "they'd be surprised at how acceptable they'd be if they came out" (24). These statements are also ironic because they occur in an interview that focuses on a play, *Angels*, in which the only character who comes out does so to characters who, for the

most part, completely ignore his declaration; he does not gain the gay community's acceptance, and, near the end of the play, he begs Harper to take him back. Although Kushner stresses the importance of coming out, in *Angels*, he shows that simply making this declaration is not enough; it is impossible to come out of the closet autonomously.

This is quite similar to what Sedgwick argues; interestingly, she describes obstacles similar to those that Joe encounters in *Angels* as typical in the experiences of gay people who come out. The common issue between the two texts can be best summarized in Sedgwick's observation, "erotic identity, of all things, can never be circumscribed simply as itself, can never not be relational, is never to be perceived or known outside of a structure of transference or countertransference"(81). Sedgwick's view of identity shares many similarities with McGowan's; she sees the gay person's intersubjective setting, particularly the responses of the people he or she comes out to, as all important. Kushner acknowledges that these responses are important in his representation of Joe's coming out, but in *Perestroika*, and especially the revisions, his view of the closet becomes very different from Sedgwick's.

For her, the closet is "the defining structure for gay oppression in this century"(71), and she regards it as oppressive for almost all gay people:

Even at the individual level, there are very few of even the most openly gay people who are not deliberately in the closet with someone personally or economically or institutionally important to them . . . the gay closet is not a feature only in the lives of gay people. But for many gay people it is still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in

the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence. (68)

Sedgwick regards the closet as a structure that members of a homophobic culture enforce, and, for her, this homophobia is ubiquitous as well as powerful; even coming out and gaining the acceptance of the gay community will not end one's relation to the closet. In such a culture, all gay people are victims, and choosing to remain in the closet hardly exempts one from this oppression. Kushner himself makes this argument in his essay "A Socialism of the Skin (Liberation, Honey!)": "the idea that invisibility protects anyone from discrimination is perverse. To need to be invisible, or to feel that you need to be, if there is reason for this fear, is to be discriminated against" (26). However, this belief does not prevent him from making value judgments about gay people based on their positions in relation to the closet. His admiration of outness as a personal triumph indicates that those who remain in the closet are somehow deficient, or worse.

Kushner appears very sympathetic towards gay people who "feel [they] need to be" invisible, but the way in which he qualifies this sympathy seems suspicious. When he adds "if there is reason for that fear," he implies that some gay people are simply paranoid or ashamed and could come out easily if they had more courage. Even in his sympathy, he is careful to distinguish between the deserving and undeserving. In *Angels*, he displays more open hostility to closeted gay men, even while showing that coming out does not end one's relation to the closet. By the end of the play, everyone accepts that Joe is gay, but this does not mean that they accept him as "out." All of the gay men in the epilogue are out, and Prior, the spokesman of Kushner's ideal gay community, stresses the importance of visibility and solidarity, particularly for AIDS victims, saying to the

audience, “we won’t die secret deaths anymore” (1995 280). The other, shameful gay identity is represented most obviously by Roy, who speaks disparagingly of “homosexuals” and calls himself “a heterosexual man . . . who fucks around with guys” (*Millennium* 52). Joe and Louis each hold a more equivocal relation to the closet; Louis “get[s] closety” around his family, and Joe appears to come out only to be forced back in. However, by the end of the play, it is clear that Louis is far more “out” than Joe, thus qualifying for inclusion in the gay community, while Joe is definitely a “closet case” whether he wants to be or not (*Perestroika* 1995, 203). Whether or not Joe’s personal sentiments are homophobic or whether or not he wants to be part of this community are not, ultimately, questions that interest Kushner. The character’s complicity in homophobic politics prevent him, in Kushner’s view, from being able to exit the closet meaningfully.

In discussing Kushner’s political view of the gay community, two terms from the introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet* become useful. Sedgwick does not differentiate between kinds of gay identity, but she does make distinctions between a minoritizing view of homo/heterosexual definition and a universalizing view. The first view regards homo/heterosexual differentiation as “an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority.” The second regards this distinction as “an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities” (1). Sedgwick makes it very clear that she does not find one of these versions more credible than the other when she writes, “the book will not suggest (nor do I currently believe there currently exists) any standpoint of thought from which the rival claims of these minoritizing and universalizing

understandings of sexual definition can be arbitrated as to their ‘truth’” (9). In fact, she argues that the view of “most moderately to well educated Western people of this century” borrows from both of these opposing views: “it holds the minoritizing view that there is a distinct population of persons that ‘really are’ gay; at the same time, it holds the universalizing view that sexual desire is an unpredictably powerful solvent of stable identities” (85).

Angels presents a minoritizing view of gay identity view in that none of the male characters, at any rate, are ever in any real doubt about their sexual preferences. The only character who has sex with women in the context of the play, Joe, tells his wife, “I don’t have any sexual feelings for you, Harper. And I don’t think I ever did” (*Millennium* 84), and, in *Perestroika*, he admits to imagining men when he has sex with her (106). He may be among the men who ‘really are’ gay in terms of sexual desire, but sexual desire has become less and less important as *Perestroika* has evolved. Joe can be nothing other than a “heterosexual man who fucks around with guys,” like Roy, because his political views are the same as Roy’s. Kushner’s representation of an extreme minoritizing view provides an example of an oversimplification that Sedgwick points out when she writes, “that one is *either* the oppressed *or* the oppressor, or that if one happens to be both, the two are not likely to have much to do with each other, still seems to continue to be a common assumption . . . in at any rate male gay writing and activism as it hasn’t been for a long time been in careful feminist work” (32-33).

One could argue that no character in *Angels* fits neatly into only the oppressor or oppressed categories. Ironically, Kushner seems adamant that Joe is only the oppressor, and he especially emphasizes the qualities that place this character in this category in his

1995 revision of *Perestroika*. Intriguingly, almost every character in the play claims that Joe has oppressed them in some way. For example, during one of several arguments in *Millennium*, Harper tells him, “If I do have emotional problems it’s from living with you” (33). In *Perestroika*, Prior, who has met Joe once, tells Hannah, “I have been driven insane by . . . your son”(1992 102). What is missing from the text, however, is any acknowledgment of the ways in which Joe and, by extension, gay Republicans, may be oppressed.

Sedgwick’s text discusses numerous examples of ways in which straight people oppress gay people, some public and some quite private. She writes, “in the process of gay self-disclosure, questions of evidence and authority can be the first to arise,” and these responses on the part of those come out to “reveal how problematical at present is the very concept of gay identity . . . and how far authority over its definition has been distanced from the gay subject her-or himself”(79). These questions tend toward the assumption that the person coming out is not really gay, the same assumption that Hannah, Louis, Prior, and Roy make when they tell Joe to go home to his wife. Their combined refusal to acknowledge his self-avowal are an important part of what forces him back into the closet near the end of the play. The other part, the uncovering of his political decisions and relationship with Roy--and what the other characters assume these discoveries mean—is a result of the combined efforts of three gay men: Louis, Belize, and a nameless gay librarian. Joe’s complete estrangement from the others at the end of the play may be read as a case of oppressed people oppressing the oppressor. However, nothing in the play indicates criticism of the out gay men’s actions regarding Joe.

Furthermore, when critics discuss Joe's condemnation, it is in terms of order restored (Cohen 211) or justice served (Kruger 162).

Ultimately, what places Joe in the category of oppressor and not oppressed is his Republican identity, which Kushner regards as unchangeable. In his revisions of *Perestroika*, the playwright increasingly emphasizes Joe's politics, and his closetedness, to the extent that the character seems to have no identity apart from these qualities. In both revisions, Kushner represents a gay identity that cannot exist outside of the closet, that is only productive as a point of self-comparison for gay people who have achieved outness. Sedgwick writes about the dangers of "focusing scrutiny on those who inhabit the closet (however equivocally) to the exclusion of those in the ambient heterosexual culture who enjoin it and whose intimate representational needs it serves in a way less extortionate to themselves"(69), but Kushner's plays posit the argument that gay people may also have something to gain from enjoining the closet. This viewpoint is the object of my critique in this thesis.

If we accept Sedgwick's assertion that the closet is oppressive for most gay people, then Kushner's decision merely to transfer control of this structure into the hands of some gay people seems unreasonable; the number of gay people who have completely dissolved all ties to the closet would be too small to effect social change. Sedgwick warns that

There are risks in making salient the continuity and centrality of the closet, in a historical narrative that does not have as a fulcrum a saving vision . . . of its apocalyptic rupture. A mediation that lacks that particular utopian organization will risk glamorizing the closet itself, if only by

default; will risk presenting as inevitable its exactions, its deformations, its disempowerment and sheer pain (69).

It is important to note that Joe is the only person in the play who undergoes, or tries to undergo, the process of coming out. Certainly, *Angels* offers a number of accounts of people in great pain, both physical and nonphysical, but one of the most intriguing questions that this text raises is: what counts as suffering? Kushner seems to suggest that the pain closet cases undergo is often self-inflicted, the result of homophobic shame, and therefore not worth our notice or pity.

Can oppression really become more productive if it is enacted by out gay people as opposed to closeted gay people? It seems unlikely that Kushner, given his belief that all gay people should come out, would admit to believing that the closet is useful for the gay community, but when he denies the possibility for gay people with conservative political views to change their views, or even to come out of the closet, he renders this structure necessary for containing them. In *Millennium*, he makes it clear that sexual preference, gay or straight, is the product of one's formative experiences. If McGowan's views on the situated self are correct, a person's political views share the same origin. With these two theories in mind, it is obviously possible that many gay people come from homophobic, Republican communities and that these situations have shaped their identities. If gay Republicans cannot change or come out of the closet, then there is no rupture for this structure in sight. There seems little evidence of this foreclosure of hope, however, in *Millennium* when considered by itself.

MILLENNIUM APPROACHES

In the first half of *Angels*, Kushner shows us the difficult struggle that often precedes a gay person's acceptance of her or his identity, and the ways in which one's ability to enact this identity is contingent on the acceptance of others. Joe is only able to accept his gay identity when another gay person recognizes it; he accepts his other identities, his Mormonism and conservatism, because it is only these that those closest to him are willing to recognize. Recognition, the understanding, on both sides, that an individual belongs to a group of people who share similar traits or even values or beliefs, is of crucial importance in identity formation, McGowan tells us (218). In fact, his use of this Hegelian concept backs up his most striking argument for the social character of the self:

At stake in recognition is the ability to be a person at all, the terms on which personhood is constituted in a given society. The self can exist only if recognized by some social group, which provides the group with a tremendous power over individuals. Recognition, even within a family, is always experienced as to some extent provisional; the self must behave in expected and established ways to retain its existence in the eyes of others. (219).

The ability to recognize, or not recognize, gives the other selves in an individual's intersubjective setting tremendous power over her or his identity, and this power plays an immensely important role in both *Millennium* and *Perestroika*. Recognition works in two

different ways in both plays. The first, which Belize, in *Perestroika*, calls solidarity, involves one self's recognition of a quality that it shares with another self. Belize warns Roy about the double blind test that could kill him faster because he and Roy are both gay (1992, 30). While all of the characters are the beneficiaries of solidarity at some point, Joe is more often the victim of willful misrecognition than anyone else. In *Millennium*, he tells two people who are important to him that he is gay: the first is Hannah, who tells him, "we will just forget this phone call," and hangs up on him (82). The second is Harper, whose response is quite similar: "This is so scary. I want this to stop, to go back" (85). Both women believe that if they ignore, refuse to recognize, Joe's gay identity, it will disappear. According to McGowan's argument, this is not wishful thinking; a self can only be what others recognize in it.

The women do not, initially, seem to wield this kind of power; rather, they seem to be the passive, unwilling receptors of upsetting news. Surprise plays a role in both of these reactions, although Hannah's shock seems more justifiable; when Joe calls her, to come out to her, in a phone call from Central Park late at night, drunk, she tells him, "that isn't like you"(80). Harper, however, already finds Joe's sexuality suspect; earlier, when she asks if he is "a homo," he tells her, "No. I'm not. I don't see what difference it makes"(44). Joe has been denying that he is gay for most of his life. In this section, I will pose answers to two questions: why does he hide his sexuality and what circumstances allow this to change?

Steven F. Kruger's essay "Identity and Conversion in *Angels in America*" provides the most thorough analysis of Joe's trajectory in both plays. Kruger provides an excellent close reading as he charts Joe's failed transformation and includes parts of most

of Joe's speeches. However, he fails to consider these speeches in the context of their audiences within the play; instead, Kruger seems to take all that Joe says at face value. This leads him to argue that Joe's denials and disavowals are rooted in shame: "for all his searching, Joe never finds a self of which *not* to be 'ashamed;,' for all his 'changing' he never grapples with the self or its past history in such a way as to effect real change" (165). For example, he cites Joe's plea to Harper—"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" (46),—as "a moment at which he is still fighting against his homoerotic feelings" (162). Considering that Joe has just returned from one of his voyeuristic walks, excursions to places where gay men have public sex, I would argue that he is actually indulging his homoerotic feelings, but he has to hide this from his wife. His words suggest not simply shame, but also an attempt to stage an identity that Harper can accept.

According to McGowan,

Only where the self recognizes as its own the identity that it has for others can it act constitutively. The self constructs its identity by enacting it before others; that others witness its actions and recognize them as the signs of its identity establishes the purposive ground of action. The self does not move from one random reflection of temporary impulse to the next but makes decisions based upon the identity it wishes to stage for others. (247)

Joe recognizes that Harper cannot accept part of his identity, and must hide it because he does not want to leave her. He cannot grapple with his identity in the way that Kruger

proposes because he is not alone responsible for it. Harper's need and desire for him play a significant role in the way he sees his identity. When Roy tries to persuade him to accept a position in Washington, he refuses, saying that Harper will "fall apart if I leave her . . . She needs me" (*Millennium* 60). However, his relationship with her is not simply based on her dependence. He tells Roy earlier in this scene,

What scares me is that maybe what I really love in her is the part of her that's the furthest from the light, from God's love; maybe I was drawn to that in the first place and I'm keeping it alive because I need it.

Roy: Why would you need it?

Joe: There are things . . . I don't know how well we know ourselves. I mean what if? I know I married her because she . . . because I loved it that she was always wrong, always doing something wrong, like one step out of step. In Salt Lake City that stands out. I never stood out, on the outside, but inside, it was hard for me. To pass. (59).

Harper helps him to pass as a good Mormon and, as this identity makes compulsory, a straight man. Moreover, she sees in him the identity that he wants to project; he tells Roy, "I wanted to be one of the elect, one of the blessed," even though his secret makes it impossible for him to pass as "someone cheerful and strong" (60). However, his relationship with Harper is ultimately destructive for both of them. Kushner emphasizes the devastation that Joe's secret wreaks on Harper; she tells Joe that when they have sex, "I dream that you batter away at me till all my joints come apart like wax, and I fall into pieces. It's like a punishment. It was wrong of me to marry you. I knew you . . . (*She stops herself*). It's a sin and it's killing us both."(43). It is not completely clear which sin

is killing them both; is it Harper's marrying a gay man, Joe's hiding that he is gay, or Joe's *being* gay?

I want to argue that she sees Joe's homosexuality not only as a sin, but as an expendable part of his identity. Kushner clearly does not regard Harper as homophobic; in a 1995 interview with Bruce McLeod, he speaks of her very sympathetically: "Her tragedy that she has been avoiding and the thing which she has to face, and does finally in a very brave way—although it takes her, it takes everybody a long time to face their stuff—is that she is someone who loves very deeply and has fallen very deeply in love with the wrong person" (Vorlicky 81). The problem with this description of Harper is that it does not acknowledge her attempt to make Joe into the right person by refusing to recognize him as anything else. In his sympathy for Harper, Kushner does not see her actions towards Joe as manipulative and self-serving, but they can be read in this way. She does not recognize Joe as the wrong person until near the end of *Perestroika* because, earlier, she regards his gay identity as a separate person; she tells him when he comes in from walking, "your face is never exactly the way that I remembered it . . . Even the weight of you in the bed at night, the way you breathe in your sleep seems unfamiliar. You terrify me" (*Millennium* 43). Later, she expresses a fear that there is "someone . . . actually in the bed, under the covers with a knife" (55). Intriguingly, it is Joe who connects these identities; when he comes out to her he says, "I'm the man with the knives" and Harper responds, "I recognize you now"(85). When she tells Mr. Lies, her imaginary companion, "I can't see him anymore,"(86) does she mean that she cannot bear Joe's confession, or that she literally cannot see/recognize the person that she loves in the person standing before her?

The Joe that she is in love with is the idealized Mormon archetype, one of the “blessed,” an image that Joe struggles to maintain because he, too, is heavily invested in its value, as we see in his confession to Roy earlier in *Millennium*. However, Joe knows that he is not two people, a good Mormon and a homosexual, but that he must perform the first identity while hiding the second. In fact, he must hide the second so completely, that it does not seem, under the conditions that McGowan stipulates, to qualify as an identity. However, Joe recognizes himself as a homosexual; it is only because no one else recognizes him as such that he cannot enact this identity. This changes when he meets Louis in the men’s room in the offices of the Brooklyn Federal Court of Appeals and Louis, upon hearing that Joe voted for Reagan twice, says, “Oh boy. A Gay Republican” (35). Although Joe’s relationship with Harper does not change immediately as a result, this scene marks the beginning of the process through which Joe realizes that perhaps being openly gay is a possibility for him after all. Soon after his second meeting with Louis, he comes out to Hannah. Coming out to Harper is far more difficult because their circumstances are similar to those that Sedgwick describes: “When gay people in a homophobic society come out . . . perhaps especially to parents and spouses, it is with the consciousness of a potential for serious injury that is likely to go in both directions” (80). Joe’s certainty that Harper will “fall apart” does not only apply to moving to Washington. It is with this fear in mind that Joe prefaces his coming out by saying, “I still love you very much . . . I’m not going to leave you” (82). However, it is not enough for Harper that he is willing to stay with her; she wants him to be straight.

As I have argued earlier, Kushner represents the women in this play as disempowered, but Harper is far from powerless in her relationship with Joe. Although

her subject position as a Mormon woman limits her choices, her position as a heterosexual is a privileged one in her relationship with a homosexual. She does not have to hide her desire, as Joe does, because it is socially and, in a Mormon context, morally acceptable. When Joe, earlier, refuses to admit that he is gay, he is not only protecting Harper. When she attempts to force a confession from him, he almost gives in—"what if I . . ."—but her response is less than encouraging: "tell me, please, and we'll see" (44). Joe refuses: "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 and I am not going to let you do that" (46). If this speech seems straightforward—Joe refuses to admit that he is not entirely "good" in spite of his efforts—the one which immediately precedes it is much less so. He moves from admitting that he "might be one thing deep within . . . however wrong or ugly" to claiming "there's nothing left, I'm a shell . . . There's nothing left to kill" (46). When Kruger states that Joe's "disavowal of an unwanted depth, his attempt to hide and kill his secret self, in fact fails" (163), he ignores the logical incoherence of this speech. To hide and kill his disavowed depth are opposing impulses; to kill this self is, obviously, to destroy it, but to hide it implies a desire to keep it from being destroyed. Joe cannot do both, and this bewildering confession/disavowal finds him caught in the intricate web that he has woven in order to maintain his gay identity while hiding it from Harper, who actually wants it destroyed.

When he decides to come out to her on his own, we see that what is important is not so much the information Joe offers as the circumstances of his delivery. Sedgwick tells us, "in many, if not most, relationships, coming out is a matter of crystallizing intuitions or convictions that had been in the air for a while and had already established

their own power-circuits of silent contempt, silent blackmail, silent glamorization, and silent complicity” (79-80). Harper has a great deal of control over Joe’s identity while he is in the closet; her attempt to force him out can be read as an attempt to gain complete control; when he insists on keeping a secret from her, which allows him to create a haven for his homosexual desire, she makes up a secret—“I’m going to have a baby”(47)—which further attaches him to her. These power positions are reversed when Joe breaks his silence; he reveals the truth not only of his secret, but of hers: “you aren’t pregnant. I called your gynecologist” (83). He tries to force her to listen to, pity and, most significantly, recognize him:

I thought that maybe with enough effort and will that I could change myself . . . but I can’t . . . I keep swearing that I won’t go walking again, but I just can’t . . . I try to learn to live dead, just numb, but then I see someone I want and it’s like a nail, like a hot spike through my chest and I know I’m losing. (83)

Harper responds as Joe has already predicted: she falls apart, escaping into a fantasy. During the rest of *Millennium*, he seeks the fulfillment that he could not find in attempting to enact an identity that he could not recognize in himself.

Joe does not, initially, regard his homosexuality as something fulfilling. He tells Harper about his childhood fascination with a picture in a book of Bible stories depicting Jacob wrestling with the angel about which he has a recurring dream:

Jacob is young and very strong. The angel is . . . a beautiful man, with golden hair and wings, of course. I still dream about it. Many nights. I’m . . . It’s me. In that struggle. Fierce, and unfair. Losing means your soul

thrown down in the dust, your heart torn out from God's. But you can't not lose. (55)

The question that this scene raises is, does Joe see this identity entirely as something of which to be ashamed? According to Richard Dellamora,

The dream is a representation of desire between men: its attraction and obsessiveness, its refusal to become part of life's normal narratives, even the sense of election that accompanies it . . . the implication is that male-male desire need not function only within the decadent political order of Reagan and Cohn; it can function in one in which a people are constituted and find their destiny. The work assigned Joe by the play is to remember this other possibility of desire (84).

Does Joe remember this possibility of desire? For critics, such as Kruger, who see Joe's consistent loyalty to Roy as proof that he is unredeemable, he does not (164). I want to argue, however, that there is more to his attachment to Roy than political commonality. Dellamora also addresses Roy's "attempts to enlist Joe as his son"(80) and points out that Joe's lack of love from his father¹ "helps explain his fascination with Cohn" (85). While Dellamora acknowledges that Joe and Roy's relationship is not simply political, he does not address the importance of this relationship in Joe's reproduction of his identity. Roy not only proposes himself as a father for Joe-- "I want to be family"(64)--he gives him the attention, affection, and—Joe believes—love that others deny him. For this reason, he is desperate to please Roy, even though he disobeys him. In telling Roy that he will

¹ Joe tells Roy, "I had a hard time with my father . . . he could be very unfair. And cold" (62).

not go to Washington, he gives an elaborate explanation that almost amounts to an apology:

I love you. Roy. There's so much that I want, to be . . . what you see in me, I want to be participant in the world, in your world, Roy, [. . .] I've tried, really I have but . . . I can't do this. Not because I don't believe in you but because I believe in you so much, in what you stand for, at heart, the order, the decency. I would give anything to protect you, but . . .

There are laws I can't break. It's too ingrained. It's not me (113).

This speech has several things in common with that which he makes to Harper when he explains that he cannot hide or kill his homosexuality. His moral fortitude, like his desire for men, is something that he would be willing to give up, if it were possible to do so, to preserve his relationships with the people who, he believes, love him. Critics such as Kruger correctly identify Joe's continual dedication to Roy as one of the reasons for his failure to progress (164), but do not acknowledge that he does not actually do what Roy wants. Joe knows that Roy's request that he act as his spy in the Justice Department, and Roy's past actions, are unethical, but he acknowledges this while still striving to preserve the identity that he recognizes in Roy.² As with his confessions to Harper, this speech is illogical: Joe cannot do what Roy wants because it contradicts the moral order that he believes Roy represents. Joe is determined to preserve this view of Roy's identity, in spite of the overwhelming evidence against it, because he is attached to the identity that Roy sees in him, that of being "a good son" (62).

² After hearing that Roy has borrowed money from a client, Joe says, "I'm sure you only did what you thought at the time that you needed to do" (72). When Roy tells about the instrumental role he played in Ethel Rosenberg's execution, Joe, even while acknowledging that this was "censurable, at least," tries to deny that it could be true: "you're just not well is all" (114).

For other characters, critics such as Kruger, and perhaps even Kushner, Joe's lies to Harper and excuses for Roy are unjustifiable, but they may be read as evidence that Joe does not see himself as an autonomous being. McGowan writes,

Individual action, I insist, is always based on relations to others to whom one feels answerable, and the choice among various possible courses of action is determined less by knowledge than by the attempt to be the sort of person who is respected, admired, loved, or approved of by the others before whom and in relation to whom one acts. (259).

The people to whom Joe feels answerable make it very clear that they cannot approve of homosexuality, and although Joe maintains his desire for men, it is difficult for him to act on it even when given the opportunity. Yet, it is Joe's circumstances, not simply his private shame, that cause him to enact an identity that is, in McGowan's terms, "inadequate to another sense of self." According to the theorist, "the experience of alienation from the earliest identity (or earlier identities) stems from the creation of new identities in new intersubjective contexts . . . it is the need to reconcile old and new, or scuttle one in favor of the other, that produces identity crisis or alienation" (245). Joe's identity crisis comes about through his relationship with Louis.

Even before meeting Louis, Joe says that he wants to change. He tells Harper, "I need something big to lift me up"(32), but, at that point, the something big is a move to Washington. When he tells Louis, in their second scene together, "I can't *be* this anymore. I need . . . a change," he is no longer talking about geographic change. However, when Louis asks if he "want[s] some company? For whatever" (79), Joe responds with fear. He hesitates to come out to Louis, and this apprehensiveness causes

some critics to read him as passive. Alisa Solomon tells us that “Joe Pitt’s first homosexual act in *Angels in America* is to inhale”(118), something that he does under Louis’s direction in *Perestroika*. However, if Solomon paid closer attention to Joe’s actions in *Millennium*, she would see that he performs several “queer acts” in it. While he tells Louis that he is not gay in their first meeting, he nonetheless continues to pursue him throughout the play. Louis is the person with whom he can afford to be most honest because Louis already knows his secret.

This recognition—and the opportunity to “be” something else—is what attracts Joe to Louis. Even if his deliberate excursions to places where gay men have sex do not constitute queer acts—I would argue that they do—his motivations for following Louis into the park, where Joe often goes “to watch” (81), are certainly clear. Louis suggests that Joe wants sympathy—“you thought maybe I’ll cry for you”(122)--and Joe agrees, but he also wants to touch Louis, and does, even though Louis tells him, “your hand might fall off.” Although Joe’s beliefs still cause him to hesitate—as he is touching Louis’s face, he tells him, “I’m going to hell for doing this”(122)--he is clearly advancing toward change. Kruger describes Joe as simply moving from concealing his gay identity to concealing his Mormon and homophobic identities, but he also neglects this scene (158). Joe points out that “the whole Republican thing” is only the beginning of what Louis would not like about him (123). However, after Louis kisses him, Joe simply sums himself up as “a pretty terrible person” (123). His desire to tell the truth is overwhelmed by his desire to be with Louis.

PERESTROIKA

What allows Joe to change is not only meeting Louis, but having sex with him. Kushner not only credits sex with a great deal of power, he sees it in sacred terms. Shortly before his first kiss with Louis, Joe recounts the story of Lazarus--“Well, he was dead, Lazarus, and Jesus breathed life into him. He brought him back from death” (121). In the same way, Louis “breathe[s] life” into Joe, and helps him change from someone who, Harper says, is “pretend happy” (*Millennium* 29) to someone “actually” happy (*Perestroika* 33). We see a change in Joe immediately after he and Louis have sex for the first time: Joe says, “I’m . . . suspended. Sort of remote from the earth. Like I’ve left no traces, like I haven’t been here at all. [. . .] Till tonight. I was here. With you. This has consequence. This was new. I keep expecting divine retribution for this, but . . . I’m actually happy. Actually” (1992 33). Here, we see Joe for the first time regarding his gay identity as something fulfilling.

In the context of *Angels* as a whole, it is significant that the one identity in which Joe finds fulfillment is this one, not his Mormon or Republican identities. In some ways, Kushner affirms Joe’s decision to go home with Louis, an act that could signal the beginning of his transformation, but the playwright also shows us the pain Joe’s decision causes for others. The passage I have just cited is part of a long split scene that features Louis and Joe in bed and Hannah and Harper in the Pitt’s apartment. While Joe is happy, Harper is inconsolable with grief; critics have read this contrast in strikingly different

ways. For Natalie Meisner, “Harper’s appearance as a sexually thwarted and politically detached female character constructs Joe’s emergence, in contrast, as all the more reasonable, brave, and lively” (2). Charles McNulty, on the other hand, refers to Joe’s seemingly carefree cheerfulness in *Perestroika* as “giving an American spin to the phrase ‘the banality of evil’” as “he admits to being happy and sleeping peacefully” (47). What McNulty ignores, however, is that Joe does not sleep peacefully; immediately after admitting this to Louis, he has a nightmare in which Harper appears beside the bed that he shares with Louis and tells him, “you’re a liar. You do so have dreams. Bad ones” (40). In their next scene, when Louis says, “you must want to see your wife,” Joe responds, “I do see her. All the time. (*Pointing to his head*). In here. I miss her, I feel bad for her, I . . . I’m afraid of her” (74). Joe’s fear of Harper is justified when he returns to her later in the play.

In *Perestroika*, Harper appears more confused about Joe’s identity, but she never accepts the man she loves as gay. When she realizes, at the end of the play, that his homosexuality not only has always been a part of him, but that it is not going to go away, she rejects him (142-143). While he is with Louis, she consoles herself by going to the diorama room at the Mormon visitor’s center, which features a dummy, the father in a nineteenth-century Mormon family, that looks remarkably like Joe. For Harper, however, it does not only look like him. When she visits the dummy, she also has visions of Joe in his office, often with Louis, whom she calls “the little creep,” and who, she tells Prior, has “got absolutely *nothing* to do with the story” (*italics Kushner’s* 67). Louis does not fit in the diorama because obviously, from Harper’s perspective, the Mormon patriarch cannot have a male lover; he is straight, and has a wife and two sons to prove it.

The Mormon patriarch represents all of the qualities that Harper does recognize in Joe, real and imagined; his idealistic Mormon rhetoric resembles Joe's "Utah talk" in *Millennium*, which Harper claims to hate (46). This fantasy is more disturbing when contrasted with the scene, in which Harper tells Joe, while Louis is asleep beside him, "I wish you were . . . dead"(40). What she appears to love is not the complex subject that Kushner depicts, but always only the idealized identity that the dummy represents.

Harper's anger in this scene foreshadows her reunion with Joe after Louis leaves him. The affair that has enabled Joe's transformation is, for Louis, a failed attempt to escape from his guilt over abandoning Prior. His relationship with Joe is not merely sexual, however; they are intimate in other ways, as we see in parts of the bed scene:

Joe: I don't want to be a punishment to you

Louis: What do you want to be?

Joe: Um . . . a friend, I guess, a . . .

Louis: You are. Believe me. You protect me.

From all the buried and the unburied dead. (36)

In another part of this scene, we see Joe comforting Louis, who has awoken from a nightmare, by "cradl[ing]" him in his arms and kissing him "*affectionately, romantically*" (39). These exchanges reveal a complexity that critics Peter F. Cohen, David Savran, and Warren Rosenberg ignore in their comments on this relationship. All of these critics discuss the relationship in light of what it means for Louis. Cohen discusses Louis's abandonment of his "noticeably liberal credentials in order to enter into a relationship

with a Reaganite Mormon” (207-208). Savran tells us, “*Angels* also demonstrates the peculiar sexiness of Reagan’s view of America. Through Louis, it demonstrates the allure of a particular brand of machismo embodied by Joe Pitt” (133). Rosenberg writes that “Joe . . . pushes Louis towards a more assertive manhood under the guise of a conservative ideology of the self, reminiscent of his mentor, Cohn” (277). All of these arguments find support in the scene in which Louis takes Joe to Jones Beach to break up with him. Joe tells Louis, after pleading with him not to leave, “sometimes self-interested is the most generous thing you can be” (75), an idea that Kushner describes as central to Reaganite conservatism (Cavendish). For these critics, Louis is the character who “learns and grows” (Cohen 211), while Joe remains static, simply representing the political view that Kushner is critiquing. Cohen, Savran, and Rosenberg ignore the other qualities that attract Louis to Joe, who he sees as “a decent, caring man” (38) in spite of his politics and the circumstances of Joe’s individualist argument. They forget that when Roy makes this argument in *Millennium*, before Joe goes home with Louis, Joe does not find it so convincing; he remains ready to give up what he wants for Harper. In *Perestroika*, he echoes Roy’s argument, but his circumstances have changed so that he has something to gain, he appears to think, from embracing individualism. Importantly, it is when these arguments fail that Joe resorts to claiming that he can “give up anything” and ripping off his clothes. Underneath the political rhetoric, which Kushner clearly critiques, we can also discern a sense of desperation over the fear that Louis, the only person who recognizes the identity through which he has found fulfillment, will leave him and he will have to return to the production that he must stage in order to be accepted by his wife.

Initially, Joe does not return to Harper, but instead goes to visit Roy, who is dying from AIDS, in the hospital. For Kruger, this scene shows how little Joe has learned because he does not realize that “the real danger is . . . his connection with Roy and his refusal . . . to grapple with the meaning of that connection” (164). Indeed, both Kruger and Cohen characterize Joe’s actions in the remainder of *Perestroika* as rapid movement from one relationship to another in lieu of the “grappl[ing]” that could effect real change. Cohen writes, “Joe, under pressure from Roy Cohn, makes a fainthearted attempt to return to his wife (in the course of the same evening, Joe has sex with Harper, tries to see Louis, and then begs Harper to take him back when he and Louis fight” (209). Cohen presents Joe as pathetic in his need to be taken care of, but if we consider each of these scenes through McGowan’s paradigm, it becomes clear that he is desperate to find at least one relationship to continue, because grappling with his identity, while isolated from intersubjective connections, is quite meaningless. Joe visits Roy with the express purpose of coming out to him, but when he does Roy becomes hysterical:

I want you home. With your wife. Whatever else you’ve got going, cut it dead.

Joe: I can’t, Roy, I need to be with . . .

Roy: YOU NEED? Listen to me. Do as I say. Or you will regret it.

And don’t talk to me about it. *Ever again.* (87).

This scene shares much in common with Joe’s coming out to Hannah, but it is more devastating for Joe because, as we see in other scenes, he has a stronger, more affectionate connection with Roy than with his mother. Another crucial difference is that

while Hannah's sexuality remains ambivalent, Roy represents an example of the paradox that Sedgwick describes when she writes "it is entirely within the experience of gay people to find that a homophobic figure in power has, if anything, a disproportionate likelihood of being gay and closeted (81)." In fact, Sedgwick uses the historical Roy Cohn as an example of this paradox near the end of *Epistemology* (243). In Kushner's play, Roy becomes hysterical not only because he is homophobically worried about Joe but because he fears that Joe is not outing only himself.

While Roy is entirely surprised by Joe's confession—he tells Joe, "I . . . never saw that coming"(87)—Harper finally accepts that Joe has no sexual feelings for her. Ironically, this acceptance comes only after Joe has given up trying to convince Harper that he is gay. After they have sex in their Brooklyn apartment, she realizes that he cannot see what she wants him to see in her and decides to leave him. Dellamora tells us that Harper is "reclaiming authority from the object of her desire"(86) , but this scene offers what is perhaps the most striking example of Harper's authority *over* the object of her desire. As soon as Joe returns, she regains her heterosexual privilege. He is never able to demand successfully what he wants—recognition--from her, but she can still demand, and have, sex with him, even after he comes out. Although Harper appears to recognize that she and Joe have something in common—she says he is "imaging, just like me" (1992 106),--she does not empathize with him. Just as when, earlier in *Perestroika*, she tells Joe, "isn't it pathetic . . . you're turning into me"(1992 40), she views their similarity as something that makes him defective. Until the end of the play, she sees Joe not only as better than herself but as better than human. In the final scene that she shares with Prior, she says, "I don't think God loved His people any better than Joe loved me"

and, having recognized that Joe is human and vulnerable, she says, “I’m ready to lose him. Armed with the truth. He’s got a sweet, hollow center, but he’s the nothing man” (122). Kushner removed this statement from the 1995 revision, perhaps because it is difficult to reconcile with his claim that she is deeply in love with Joe, and not simply her preferred idea of him. When she realizes that he cannot love her in the way that she wants, she sees his identity not as gay, but as nothing; when he fails to be what she wants, he ceases to exist for her. Harper retains her existence for Joe; after Louis denounces him as a “closeted bigot” (111), he tries to return to her, but as a last resort. He tells her, rather unflatteringly, “Only you. Only you love me. Out of everyone in the world” (142). The implication is that if anyone else in the world loved him, he would be with that person instead.

We see that returning to Harper is not Joe’s choice because of the scene that precedes this one. When Joe returns to the apartment he meets not Harper, but Roy’s ghost. He and Roy argue about whether Louis deserved the beating Joe has just given him; Joe tells Roy, “I *hurt* him. I didn’t . . . mean to, I didn’t want to but . . . I made him bleed. And he won’t . . . ever see me again, I won’t . . . Louis,” and starts to cry (127). Joe shows he has learned not only that his identity is not autonomous—he needs Louis—but neither are his actions; he does not form his own ends. His beating of Louis is, ultimately, a gratification of Louis’s wishes, not his own. Regarded in this light, his situation is not entirely hopeless. Even his relationship with Roy becomes positive; Roy can no longer benefit from preserving his and Joe’s relation to the closet and can afford to accept Joe as gay. Before leaving he says, “show me a little of what you’ve learned, baby Joe. Out in the world,” and kisses Joe on the mouth (127). His words of comfort—

“you’ll find . . . that what you love will take you places you never dreamed you’d go” (127)—can be read as affirming Joe’s gay identity. We can even see Harper’s suggestion--“sometimes, perhaps, lost is best. Get lost, Joe. Go exploring” (143)—as an indication that while Joe may not be able to join the gay community at the Bethesda Fountain in 1990, he may find a another gay community that can accept him and, with its aid, change.

For the most part, in his treatment of Joe in the earlier *Perestroika*, Kushner endorses a view of the self similar to McGowan’s. Joe, at one point in *Perestroika*, says that he has autonomous control over his identity, but Kushner shows that he is constrained by what other people recognize as his identity. Even when Joe claims to be autonomous, he does so in order to preserve his connection with another person, hardly an autonomous action. However, in his treatment of other characters, Kushner seems to question the socially constructed nature of the self. In some ways, he does appear to see a person who enacts a different identity for each person whom he loves--as Joe does--as fickle and pathetic. Kruger suggests that Harper is able to change, as Joe is not, because she does not attempt to erase part of her identity: “change somehow occurs through a violent rearrangement over which one may have no control but also through patching one’s own wounds, living with what is ‘dirty, tangled, and torn,’ ‘pretending’ to go on and thus actually going on” (166). We have seen that Harper’s pretending is a powerful force—it wreaks absolute havoc on Joe’s identity--but what does it say about her own identity? Kruger argues that she, unlike Joe, “chang[es her] way of being in the world” (165), but I want to suggest that she and Joe follow different trajectories because they have, from the beginning of the play to its end, different ways of being. Harper is not a

participant in the world. She is not constrained by relationships with others, nor does she even seem to be capable of solidarity. In spite of her praise of community in her final speech (144), she never actually becomes part of one. The only relations that she has that involve understanding and compassion on her part are the scenes that she shares with Prior, but two out of three of these are hallucinations in which she regards Prior as her imaginary friend. As Harper herself points out in *Millennium*, she can have anything she wants in her hallucinations, even relationships (108). In her fantasies/hallucinations, she recreates the world and Joe as she would prefer them to be, even though her idealizing view of him crumbles over the course of *Perestroika*. She herself does not have to construct an identity for anyone.

Even the characters that do make up the community of the epilogue have certain essential differences from Joe. Hannah is not as autonomous as Harper; she does change as a result of entering a new intersubjective setting, becoming Prior's surrogate mother. However, she is able to enter this community because she has remained virtually untouched by her previous one. Like Harper, she is a very unusual Mormon and, as is the case with Harper, others see this as an attractive quality: her friend, Sister Ella Chapter, tells her, "I decided to like you 'cause you're the only unfriendly Mormon I ever met" (88). When Hannah confesses her disgust with homosexuality to Prior, a disgust that seems to warrant the charge of homophobia, his only response is, "I wish you would be more true to your demographic profile. Life's confusing enough" (105). These women are not different from Joe just because they are capable of changing, but because they have managed to evade being marked by their conservative communities in ways others recognize. Even the qualities that seem to mark them as conservative, such as

homophobia, are surprisingly easily shed. Hannah's cruelty to Joe does not prevent her from showing kindness to Prior; we must ask, what is different about these two situations? The fact that Hannah shows more compassion to a stranger than to her son hardly stands in her favor. Perhaps the most important difference is that while her response to Joe's phone call in *Millennium* is made harsher by her surprise, she has no reason to be surprised when Prior tells her that he is a homosexual. It is Prior's honesty, his outness, that makes him more acceptable than Joe.

The same can be said for Louis, whose inclusion in the epilogue recalls McGowan's discussion of liberalism's tendency to contrast individuals rather than intersubjective settings (248). Louis shows that he is one of the out, proud, productive gay men by denouncing someone whom he takes to be a hypocritical closet case. When Joe tries to return to Louis after seeing Harper, Louis greets him by pointedly asking the same question that Joseph Welch asked Joseph McCarthy during the Army/McCarthy hearings: "Have you no decency?" (107). Louis then reveals that he has not only read Joe's conservative, homophobic decisions, he has made Xeroxes of them, which he dramatically throws in Joe's face. He continues asking Welch's question, while blocking Joe's exit from the apartment, until Joe punches him. Louis clings to Joe, who punches him until Louis collapses. Rosenberg and Cohen both read this scene as redemptive for Louis. Rosenberg writes that Kushner means Louis's comment to Joe—"I just want to lie here and bleed for a while. Do me good"—as "an antidote to his habit . . . of overintellectualizing and thereby distancing himself from reality" (278). He also references Prior's desire that Louis return to him "black and blue"(89) when he writes, "for Louis to be true to himself as a gay man and a political radical, he must return to

Prior. Hence, Louis's treatment of Joe is a case in which the ends justify the means.

Cohen's comments are even more dismissive of Joe's part in this scene:

besides constituting the moment in the play at which Louis recovers his political sense, Louis's breakup with Joe is also significant in its resemblance to what occurs in an actual activist politics . . . like many gay and AIDS activists, Louis literally puts his body on the line: prevent[ing Joe] from leaving the apartment until he has heard what Louis has to say. (210).

Both of these critics see the fight as a political one, and it is, but only in part. Certainly, Kushner contrasts Louis and Joe's politics, and Louis's politics emerge as the more commendable. However, from another perspective, his actions appear self-interested and cruel. In this scene, Louis gets away with something that Joe cannot; he erases the past, the relationship he has had with Joe, and everything, outside of these legal decisions, that constitutes Joe's identity. Earlier in *Perestroika*, he tells Joe, "you've . . . blossomed, but you're not a terrible person, you're a decent, caring man" (38). Does his discovery of these decisions, as a devoted liberal, make the qualities that he saw in Joe, as his lover, suddenly illusory? Is Joe's political identity, as these decisions reflect it, his "true self" as far as Louis is concerned? Even more disturbingly, Louis attempts to erase the transformative impact that he has had on Joe; he sees Joe as not only politically but sexually corrupt; claiming to believe that Joe is more than just, as Cohn describes him, a "Royboy" (*Millennium* 70), but, as Belize suggests, "Roy Cohn's buttboy" (*Perestroika* 94).

Louis incites Joe to violence not, as Rosenberg suggests, over politics, but over Louis's allegation that he and Roy have been lovers:

How often has the latex sheathed cock that I put in my mouth previously been in the mouth of the most evil, twisted, vicious bastard ever to snort coke at Studio 54, because the lips that have kissed those lips will never kiss mine . . . Did you fuck him, did he pay you to let him . . . (111).

It is not certain whether Louis actually believes that Joe has prostituted himself to Roy; he also says, "stupid, closeted bigots, you probably never figured out that each other was . . ." (111), but his claim to believe it serves a rhetorical function. Louis appears to realize that an attack on Joe's politics will not provoke the desired violent response, so he attacks him where it really hurts. When Joe protests, "why are you doing this to me. I love you," Louis responds, "you *lied* to me, you *love* me, well fuck you, you cheap piece of . . ." (111). The first time that Joe tells Louis he loves him, Louis says, "You think you do, but that's just the gay virgin thing" (72). In the confrontation scene, Louis not only denies the good qualities he has seen in Joe, but, more deprecatingly, Joe's transformation as well. Especially damning is Louis's assertion, "the lips that have kissed those lips *will* never kiss mine," because it is through kissing Louis that Joe first embraces his gay identity as something positive. In withdrawing his recognition of Joe's "blossom[ing]," Louis gets the recognition that he wants, but only through disavowing the identity, the potential to become an out, proud gay man, that he has helped Joe achieve.

REVISIONS

Kushner has said and written very little about the changes that he made in his 1995 revision of *Perestroika*, but that does not mean that these changes are unimportant. The impact that the changes in Kushner's representation of Joe, and the other characters' responses to him, have on the text suggests several possible reasons for revision. For example, the playwright drastically shortened the first scene in act 3, showing us only one episode split between the Pitt apartment and Louis's apartment, instead of three separate ones covering a span of one week. While this change may be justifiable for production related reasons, what is more interesting for me is the parts of this scene that Kushner chose to remove. In the 1992 version, Louis responds to Joe's praise of freedom, choice, and self-interest by asking, "and our fucking brought you to this Republican epiphany?" (38). Although Louis and Kushner dispute what Joe says here, it is significant that this *is* an epiphany. Being with Louis does not change Joe's politics; as John M. Clum points out, Louis "does not engage Joe in political argument; he hectors him and goads him"(263). However, it does change Joe's way of seeing himself. By the end, Joe is able to realize that "the freedom to choose"(38) is not enough, that he needs recognition from others in order to enact his gay identity successfully. However, in the 1995 *Perestroika*, not only is Louis's observation missing, so is Joe's epiphany. Most of the changes that Kushner makes in this revision suggest a conflation of conservatism, homophobia, and closetedness that becomes of central importance in Joe's identity.

Paradoxically, Joe becomes more closeted and more sexually aggressive at the same time. When he and Louis are arguing about Mormonism in Joe's office, Joe asks Louis to "talk a bit softer" after Louis says, "I can't believe I've spent a month in bed with a Mormon" (1995 197). Both here and in the following scene, Joe makes Louis "shut up" by kissing him; sexual contact serves an entirely different function in the revision than in the original. While in the 1992 play, the sex scenes mingle tenderness with political discussion, in the 1995 play, we see only the masochistic impulse that leads Louis to say to Joe, "I'm losing myself in an ideological leather bar. The more appalling I find your politics, the more I want to hump you" (205). This also appears in the 1992 version, but Louis is more aware here of the gulf that separates him from Joe politically. In the first *Perestroika*, Louis follows this statement by telling Joe, "Burn me up. May I never ever reemerge" (1992, 36), but here, he responds to Joe's assertion that "fundamentally, we both want the same thing" by getting off of Joe's lap and saying, "I don't think that's true" (1995, 205). Joe has pulled Louis onto his lap in an effort to show him the physical benefits of self-interest; he tells Louis to "accept as yours the happiness that comes your way" with his hand inside Louis's pants (204). Here, Kushner shows sex not as a path to transformation, but a rhetorical device, one that Joe uses because he, apparently, has no other way of influencing Louis, whom Kushner contrasts with Joe, in a way that is flattering to Louis, much earlier than in the original. Louis himself comments on the reasons why he should not be with someone like Joe, a "married probably bisexual Mormon Republican closet case" (203).

In this passage, Louis succinctly lists all of the qualities that make up Joe's identity in the revised *Perestroika*; notably, gay is not among them. Instead, Louis

defines Joe according to the products of his earliest intersubjective setting: his marriage, his religion, and his politics, and Kushner, in other changes to the play, represents these as constituting Joe's true self. Louis discovers that Joe is a Mormon after awaking from a nightmare. He says to Joe, "it was you and me and some furiously angry woman and it turned out that you were a member of some bizarre religious sect like a Moonie or a Rajnishi or a Mormon or something, and you hadn't told me, and it was like I didn't know you at all" (186). It is not certain whether this furiously angry woman is Hannah or Harper, but whoever she is, her appearance in Louis's nightmare is new and significant. Joe's relationships with women play an important role in the way that Louis sees him; instead of believing that Joe has "blossomed," he assumes that Joe must be bisexual—and the conflation of this term with "closet case" suggests he means it in a disparaging sense—even though, after the sex scene with Harper, we know better.

Kushner himself permits the women greater insight into Joe's identity; when Hannah explains to Harper that she has not been able to get in touch with Joe, she says, "They say he's not in but I know he is and he won't take my call. He's ashamed" (1995 184). Harper, in the revision, knows Joe even better than he knows himself. While in the 1992 version she appears at the bedside after Joe confesses his love to Louis, who is asleep, here she tells Joe, "you love him," and Joe responds, "I do?" (185). It is not only the women who comment on Joe's identity in new ways; when Belize tells Louis about Joe's connection with Roy Cohn, he adds, "you don't even know Thing One about this guy, do you?" Louis simply shakes his head 'no' (227). The women, who refuse to recognize Joe as gay, and the out gay man, whose opinion of Joe is based only on Joe's visit to Roy's hospital room, know him better than the person who has spent a month in

bed with him. The reason for this is that they see the parts of Joe's identity that mean something in Kushner's new view of him, as a Reaganite Mormon closet case, without paying any heed to Joe's attempts to come out of the closet.

Even though no one ever considers Joe to be out in the 1995 *Perestroika*, Kushner's retention of the final scene with Roy, unchanged, suggests that, perhaps, Joe could successfully come out at some point. It is only when this scene is eliminated, as it is in the 2003 film adaptation, that Joe becomes utterly irredeemable. In Mike Nichols' film, Hannah has a greater degree of insight and interest in Joe's identity than in either of the published versions, and it is with her that he shares his final scene. When she speaks to Harper about Joe, she says, "I tried to discuss it with the Bishop. He says that it's mothers that are too close to their sons that cause this. Well, I guess we disproved that, [Joe] and I." In Joe's final scene, Hannah indicates at least a desire to become closer to her son. After he admits that he does not know where Harper is—this is the morning after she leaves for San Francisco—Hannah, trying to cheer him up, asks, "shall I fix supper tonight?" When Joe begins to cry, she touches him gently and says, "I'll try to wait up until you get home." Even if this scene renders Hannah more sympathetic, it does not give us any real sense that she will be able to help Joe deal with his heartbreak, let alone help him change. As a replacement for the scene with Roy, this scene is disturbing in a number of ways. Hannah's desire to become closer to Joe does not include any attempt to encourage him to embrace his gay identity; she makes friends with several gay men, as we see in the epilogue, but Joe is still not part of that group. We do not even have any indication that Louis knows whose mother Hannah is. Joe's only consolation

for losing Louis is the interest of his mother, who, however well-meaning she may be, still does not recognize him as gay.

Perhaps even more disturbing are the changes in Joe's relationship with Louis. In the film, Joe is not sexually aggressive at all; in fact, the only clue the film offers us about the quality of Joe and Louis's sex life is Louis's comment, "in bed you're so sweet and I just can't see how you believe what you do . . . you don't make sense." Louis's comments are consistent with the view that Joe's political views must be implicated in every aspect of his identity, even the way that he has sex. While Louis does comment, as in the 1992 version, that Joe has "blossomed," he immediately follows this by asserting "and that's terrible." In the same vein, Hannah describes what she sarcastically refers to as Joe's "vitality" as "pathetic if it weren't so ugly." No one regards Joe's attempt to come out as positive, or even as a real indication of what he wants. Both Louis and Hannah see Joe's identity as entirely defined by his original choices, especially his choice to marry Harper. For Louis, Joe should be "all torn up and guilty" because he has left his wife. His decision to leave her and begin a relationship with Louis is, here, not evidence of a new identity formed in a new intersubjective setting, but of fickleness, an attempt to choose again in a case in which only the first choice really matters.

Hannah offers a more scathing critique of Joe's fickleness when she says, in their first scene in *Perestroika*, "you have a responsibility to your wife. You cannot wish it away . . . [imitating Joe] 'what I want. What I want.' That changes with the breeze. How can you steer your life by what you want? Hold to what you believe." It could seem that Hannah simply misunderstands Joe, but in the middle of her speech he admits "I don't know anymore what I want." While this could be read as a refusal to tell his mother what

he really wants, Joe bears out his assertion in his final scene. Set between the breakup with Harper and her final speech in the play, it indicates that Joe is heartbroken not over losing Louis but over losing Harper. This sentiment represents the most radical change from the 1992 and 1995 versions. In those, Joe begins to cry in the scene before he begs Harper to take him back; his sorrow may be read not only as fear that he cannot be happy without Louis but fear of what returning to Harper will mean. In the film, he actually seems to want Harper, to want anyone who will have him. He has not changed, or even learned anything about himself, as a result of meeting Louis and falling in love with him.

CONCLUSION

According to John M. Clum, Kushner “drops Joe off the face of the earth . . . as if he is unredeemable or simply not very interesting” (263). This statement becomes ironic when we consider its position near the beginning of several paragraphs in which Clum describes the qualities that make Joe interesting, most importantly that he “represents a lot of gay men who are brought up with a set of religious and social beliefs that he finds difficult to reconcile with his newly discovered homosexuality” (262). Speaking of Joe’s absence from the epilogue, Dellamora describes him in a similar way: “for Joe and many other homosexuals [the ‘transference of authority’] is more likely to take the shape of an abject service to the powers that be” (86). Both of these critics regard Joe as representing the experience of a significant number of gay people, and it is hard to believe that Kushner did not write this character with this purpose in mind. It is evident in the number and quality of speeches that the playwright gives Joe, especially in *Millennium*, that he is not only interesting to his author, but that Kushner has made an effort to write him as someone with whom his audience can sympathize and empathize. Even in the first *Perestroika*, with its ambivalent ending, the care with which he represents a gay person’s struggles to acknowledge and embrace his identity is commendable.

However, this acknowledgment of Joe’s significance on Kushner’s part makes his decision to make him unredeemable in the revisions all the more disturbing. Most of the changes in the revised *Perestroikas* occur in Kushner’s characterization of Joe and other

characters' responses to him, but the most important change occurs in Kushner's view of the self's potential to change. Even in the 1992 *Perestroika*, he offers a view of change that is quite similar to McGowan's account of positive or "situated" freedom; Joe does not succeed in changing because he loses his connection with the intersubjective setting in which he could change, but there is the possibility that he will find another setting in which to construct a new identity. I wrote earlier that, in losing Louis, Joe loses, for the time being, his potential to become an out, proud gay man. For the revisions, this would not be a valid reading because, in those, Kushner never represents Joe as having such potential. It is clear that he could never become the kind of gay man that Prior is simply because the differences between them are worked into the unchangeable fibers of their true selves.

While the negative consequences for Joe in this view of the self are more obvious, the idealization of the out gay man is also disturbing. Prior is able to secure the privileged position that he occupies, most notably in the epilogue, because of his own situated-ness. In an interview with Patrick R. Pacheco, Kushner said that Prior "sees himself as a fragile queen who isn't going to be able to bear up under all the horror and abandonment. And he finds himself to be a tremendously strong person with great courage" (Vorlicky 56). Certainly, Prior is strong and courageous, but the fact remains that without the care that he receives from Belize, Hannah, and even Louis, he would probably not survive the action of *Perestroika*, let alone remain alive five years later to preside over the epilogue. Even though Prior suffers a great deal, he is, to echo Sedgwick, "fortunate in the support of [his] immediate communit[y]" (68). In contrast, we can see Joe, even when he is most similar to Roy Cohn, as unfortunate. During the

one conversation that Prior and Joe have, the former compares himself to the latter in a very different way: “some people are so greedy, such pigs, they have everything, health, everything, and still they want more” (1992 92). Obviously, health is not everything; in the epilogue, Prior is unwell, but with help from his loved ones, he is surviving. By that point, Joe’s health is irrelevant because he has ceased to exist.

Of course, many people like Joe exist in America, but they are not important in Kushner’s political vision. Clum writes that *Angels* “lets its audience off the hook. Like much of gay drama, it does not question the assumed righteousness of out gay men of liberal to left political persuasion” (265). Earlier, he says, “*Perestroika* is not a call for political action” (265). Perhaps not, but it certainly offers a declaration of hope and, what is more significant, a concise statement of political goals. Prior tells the audience, “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 will be citizens. The time has come. You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you” (148). Clearly, this “we” is not only AIDS victims; Prior is calling for the citizenship of all gay people. In his essay “Some Thoughts About Tolerance,” Kushner defines his goal in more detail:

Our best hope, I believe, for reclaiming lost ground and for pushing ahead lies not so much in cultural exchange but in securing civil rights. Before we can lay claim to our common humanity, we must learn to recognize and respect Difference and what it tells us about the infinite complexities of human behavior—recognize and respect Difference, not just tolerate it. The foregrounding of such respect is social justice. (47).

While Kushner's goal is straightforward, it is disappointing that he does not propose means for attaining it. What is more disappointing is that his view of gay identity makes the attainment of such a goal seem impossible. Prior may describe the audience as "fabulous creatures, each and every one," but he is far more discriminating in the context of the play. He does not bless Joe; rather, he tells him, "you better be keeping a file on the hearts you break, that's all that counts in the end, you'll have bills to pay in the world to come" (1992 91). Obviously, Joe is not a fabulous creature, and that is unfortunate because he represents many gay people. Within the play, this is one of the funniest scenes, but when one considers the implications of Prior's condemnation, the results are potentially frightening. When Prior damns Joe, is he also damning all of the gay people who have broken hearts in the process of coming out? Are he, and Kushner, claiming that it is more moral for gay people to stay in the closet than to come out if that means breaking hearts?

The play does not tell us whether the acceptably out gay people have done this; Prior says that his mother is "out of it" (*Millennium* 103), whatever that means, and Louis believes that his "New Deal Pinko parents in Schenectady [are] disappointed" because he is "a fag" (1992 124). We actually learn very little about the pasts of any characters besides Joe; we do not, for example, know anything about Prior's father. These omissions make it difficult to draw conclusions about *their* past intersubjective settings, but if the evidence that Joe cannot come out of the closet is to be found in his past—his marriage, his political decisions—then we can assume that Prior, Louis and Belize have never been in the closet, or, if they have, it does not matter because they are part of the gay community at present. Kushner appears, in the revisions, to see a need to justify

Joe's exclusion, but he does not justify the other gay men's inclusion in this community. As I have argued in my introduction, these three share two qualities in common: outness and left-wing politics. Here, I want to introduce a third; they are all New Yorkers. Intriguingly, whenever Kushner speaks of the gay community he locates it in either New York or San Francisco. In the Adam Mars Jones interview, he contrasts the two cities: "[San Francisco is] a city where the gay and lesbian community wields an enormous amount of political power, where homophobia is simply not acceptable in the general public discourse. That's absolutely not the case in New York, where homophobia can win you elections" (19). While the latter may not be as 'gay-positive' as the former, enough out gay men and women live there, and seek social justice there, to make homophobes nervous enough to elect officials based on this criteria.

For most gay people in such homophobic communities, outness is not an affordable option. Gay New Yorkers and San Franciscans can afford to be out because of their situated-ness, not simply personal virtue. Although Kushner does not emphasize this, we can see some evidence of the importance Prior's community has in his identity. In *Millennium*, he tells his nurse, "I am generally known where I am known as one cool, collected queen" (104), and in *Perestroika* he says to Belize, "it's 1986 and there's a *plague*, half my friends are dead" (1992 55). The contexts of both scenes reveal Prior as unfortunate, but even though his community is in crisis, he has its recognition and recognizes himself as part of it. When Hannah asks him, "do you consider yourself a typical homosexual," he can respond, "Oh, I'm *stereotypical*" (1992 99 italics Kushner's). Kushner does not denigrate Prior as a stereotype, quite the opposite; being stereotypical gives Prior his status in his community. In *Perestroika*, he and Belize

decide who is acceptable and who is not. Hannah's presence in the epilogue is only accountable because she is Prior's care-giver. Louis is there, most practically, because he helped Belize steal the AZT that has made it possible for Prior to live so long.

This status is also the reason behind Prior's absolute outness; he does not have to be in the closet because almost all of the people who are important to him are gay and out. Being out of the closet is easy for Prior, but very difficult for Joe, who takes enormous risks in coming out to people who recognize him as a stereotypical Mormon. Yet, Joe's courage counts for nothing in light of his earlier sexual and political choices. We cannot contrast Prior and Joe without also contrasting New York City and Salt Lake City. Kushner's interest in New York is not surprising; he is part of this community himself. However, his lack of sympathy for closet cases—and it is important that his definition of a closet case encompasses a person who comes out to three homophobic loved ones and, as such, must be very broad—is far less reasonable. If only people who can afford to be out of the closet to everyone they know—a very tiny minority, according to Sedgwick—deserve social justice, and people who are closet cases, by Kushner's definition, cannot change, then social justice can only become a reality in San Francisco, where Kushner says it already exists, and maybe, eventually, in New York.

Sedgwick's vision of the gay community is far less celebratory than Kushner's, but it is also simultaneously more compassionate and practical.

Gay people . . . seldom grow up in gay families . . . are exposed to their culture's, if not their parent's, high ambient homophobia long before either they or those who care for them know that they are among those who most urgently need to define themselves against it . . . have with

difficulty and always belatedly to patch together from fragments a community, a usable heritage, a politics of survival or resistance. (81).

The community that Sedgwick describes is not glamorous; it is not made up of fabulous, out and proud New Yorkers and their dependants, but it has an advantage over Kushner's because it actually is universal; it encompasses all gay identities. Sedgwick's community has the potential to accommodate enough gay people to actually make an authoritative claim for visibility, political power, and social justice. Contrasting Kushner and Sedgwick's versions of the universal gay community bears out Clum's assertion that *Perestroika* is not a call to political action. It does not encourage attitudes and actions that might lead to a growth in the numbers of out gay people—compassion, forgiveness, acceptance, willingness to educate those who come out about gay identity and progressive politics. Rather, it stresses virtue over numbers; it represents those who are fortunate enough to live in communities where outness is acceptable as elite and encourages their self-congratulation. In spite of the importance it places on politics, *Angels* becomes less progressive with each revision.

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