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Mourning Becomes Electric

The Disappearing Act of AIDS

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MOURNING AIDS IS BOTH IMPOSSIBLE AND NECESSARY—IMPOSSIBLE because, as we will see, the world that would allow for the work of mourning to end remains impossible to trust; necessary because without bringing such work to an end, one necessarily succumbs to melancholia or abjection. The predicament has played out rather boisterously from the first unraveling of the quilt or the NAMES Project in 1987 to the demonstrations that surrounded a retrospective of David Wojnarowicz's work in 2018 (Cascone 2018). Mourning, for those who insist that the time for such has not arrived, signals a shift from political activism to bourgeois sentimentality as well as an abandonment of the suffering masses who are not yet ready to be mourned. Given the successful management of the disease in many communities or even nations, the battle that first emerged with the NAMES Project no longer needs be joined. But as Larry Kramer argues in

the epilogue to the 2011 edition of *The Normal Heart*, the war is hardly won. AIDS remains.

Please know that here in America case numbers continue to rise in every category. In much of the rest of the world, like Russia, India, Southeast Asia, and in Africa, the numbers of the infected and the dying are so grotesquely high they are rarely acknowledged

Please know that as I write this the world has suffered at the very least some 75 million infections and 35 million deaths. When the action of the play that you have just seen, there were (1981–83) 431. (Kramer 2011, 94–95)¹

If the urgency of Kramer's pleas seems exaggerated or merely a result of one person's monomania, that is only because the emergence of a gay bourgeois class, married with children in a homestead secured by a picket fence, disguises the conditions that have allowed for such admission to proper society and, more important, perpetuates the myth that AIDS is over. In fact, as I will argue, such societal privilege comes only with a forgetting of AIDS and its threat to the body politic.

In what follows, I examine examples of mourning for those who died of AIDS first in the 1980s and then in subsequent decades. To be sure, this is neither comprehensive nor even representative. What I hope to show with these case studies is how mourning as it is understood in Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" is neither possible nor even desirable. Rather, a different trajectory grounded in a countertemporality is required, a messianic dimension that also serves to re-invigorate thinking about a politics that does not serve the sexual geopolitics of the West and its quest to assert moral superiority.

At the same time, following this alternate trajectory will provide a lens through which to contribute to an understanding of the impossible. That is, the experience of those who died from the disease (not unlike the *Muselmänner* of the Nazi concentration camps), those whose final state of emaciation in hospital beds recalled the hollowed faces of Nazi victims in their final states, is something no one survives to bear witness to. The essential experience of the disease—essential for no other reason than until

the introduction of the AIDS cocktail few survived—is not accessible to any sort of discourse. Hope, understood according to the messianic dimensions I will propose here, offers an alternative to witness testimony. As something reserved only for the hopeless, hope resurrects those voices in the promise of a coming community.

My hypothesis could easily be recast as follows: the delusion that AIDS is under control and poses no threat to middle-class America allows for the newfound inclusiveness enjoyed by the gay community in the last two decades. In fact, many popular accounts of gay history neglect to even mention the devastation to our communities.² AIDS narratives just don't fit with the pretty picture of domestic bliss that captivated those who followed a generation wiped out by the disease. If gay men, before baby making or baby picking became a popular ritual, had no future, the communities ravished by AIDS testified to how limited that future horizon was. In families, for whom legacies and generations of offspring are priceless treasures, any whiff of AIDS had to be eliminated and its source forgotten. A white picket fence preserves the family and keeps the virus out. The AIDS contagion exists "elsewhere," in a different place and time far removed from the bliss of the homestead. Immediately apparent is that this essay proposes to link the end-time or the messianic with a discussion of a history of mourning AIDS that moves in just the opposite direction. The reason is simple: a politics that emerges from thoughts of the end-time does not accommodate dreams of a future, of legacy, and of legacies of legacies.

I. THE TRIUMPH OF MELANCHOLIA OR "I WILL NOT HAVE
NOT BEEN"

The enforced domestication of the LGBT(QIA+) world complicates even the already contentious process of mourning. For Freud, mourning ends when deference for reality takes over. Too often, too much evidence points to the absence of the beloved that attachments to that specter can be loosened or undone.

Normally, respect for reality gains the day. Nevertheless, its orders cannot be obeyed at once. They are carried out bit by bit . . . each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is bound and hyper-catheted, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it. . . . When the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited. (Freud 1957)

For gay men of today lack of inhibition is acquired through daily doses of PREP. More to the point, what Freud says of the ego once mourning is completed precludes from the outset mourning AIDS. To even arrive at a point of resignation, let alone reconciliation, with a world that not so long ago wished every one of us dead is only for those with amnesia.

Freud's remarks about melancholia, by contrast, appear to offer a more promising diagnosis, if not a prognosis.

The object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love . . . this would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious. (Freud 1957, 244)

Upon first reading, one must insist that the beloved is indeed the object lost; sickness unto death leaves indelible memories of the disease and the patient. But lost is also a trust in the world (nascent at best by 1981 or 12 years after Stonewall), and subsequent attempts by mainstream culture to erase memories of the disease and its threat to legacy and offspring amplify that loss.

The temptation is thus to consider mourners as destined to suffer from what the title of Freud's essay presents as mourning's partner, melancholia. There is, of course, an asymmetry between mourning for an individual or object and mourning for a lost subculture, even if Freud's own metapsychological writings invite such an extrapolation. Still, Freud's insistence on the absence for consciousness of the lost object in melancholia eases this transition; thinking about mourning collectively and individually—if I can

describe what I am doing here as such—introduces competing temporalities that provide some resistance to the simple progression of time from one moment to the next that produces a withdrawal of AIDS from consciousness. The asymmetry, stated otherwise, points to a productive tension that calls for thinking about mourning AIDS as charged with a messianic potential, a potentiality born out of the impossibility of mourning AIDS coming to a foreseeable end and the temporal asymmetry of mourning a subject who has only always been pronounced dead.

Freud's further distinctions between the two underscores how his model offers no hope for AIDS-related melancholia.

If one listens patiently to a melancholic's many and various self-accusations, one cannot in the end avoid the impression that often the most violent of them are hardly at all applicable to the patient himself . . . but someone whom the patient loves or has loved. We perceive that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it onto the patient's ego. (Freud 1957, 247)

In other words, the patients blame themselves for the loss of the object. What Freud goes on to call a "*regression* from one type of object choice to an original narcissism" can be just as easily understood in the context of AIDS as an enforced melancholy (Freud 1957, 248). For one, gay men had a head start on the requisite self-hatred, suggesting at the same time that melancholia was a distinctive feature of gay subjectivity before AIDS. Melancholia is thus squared, a melancholia of melancholia. For another, self-reproach and loss of one's ego cannot return the AIDS mourner to an original narcissism if the self that would ground such a narcissism has yet to be born or constructed. Or in the age of AIDS, a subject that is always already dead.

This is precisely the challenge Alexander García-Düttmann takes up in *Uneins Mit AIDS (At Odds with AIDS)*. What does the plague mean in terms of embracing one's finitude? AIDS forces us to reconsider being unto death and the horizon of subjective unity that underwrites Heidegger's *Dasein*. The life mourned before they have truly lived means the subject is DOA.

The AIDS patient has been pronounced dead before they have constructed any serviceable horizon for Dasein (García Düttmann 1996, 2). That is, the patient is at odds with a subject, for example, themselves, that has always only been mourned. Aligning oneself with the disease, being at one with it, is foreclosed since the disease preempts any attempt to construct a unified subject. At the very least, such a oneness or being at one with AIDS, were such a thing possible, is nothing less than a state of *atonement* (35–42). Confessions and self-recriminations that embrace or succumb to a linear life's narrative lead to an end—of life, the disease and all memory of it. It seeks to suture the rupture introduced by the disease, which is another way of saying it abandons all politics.

An alternative formulation might read something like this: What kind of politics could a subject who is always already dead announce or initiate? For García Düttmann, an AIDS politics begins by stating an apparent impossibility, one that links homosexuality with the Cartesian *cogito*. “I am out . . . therefore I am” (42–44). But how does one who is only always dead come out? Any recognition of identity of the AIDS patient, the “massive legibility” allegedly produced by the eruption of the disease, can only be tied to a sign or emblem that stands in for the “recognition of destruction” (54). So when he argues for a politics of outing, it is not one that has subjects coming to an authentic self through public proclamation of their sexuality. Rather, any proclamation of sexual identity is complicated by the fact that AIDS registers, as Douglas Crimp wrote, the loss and mourning of an ideal, whose perverse pleasures granted homosexuals an identity (1989, 11). In other words, there is no self to come out and be what they truly are. The statement: I am out, therefore I am, is untenable; what is required is a declaration that, like AIDS, registers the destruction of the subject simultaneous with its self-proclamation.

The question is a simple one: What does it mean to listen to, mourn for, and of a fashion to exist in a past whose only traces of being is that it will have been? While the future perfect captures a horizon of inevitable loss, it also summons the cliché about gay men; ours is a barren existence if for no other reason than we produce no bundles of joy. To come out according to this modality is already to have embraced an identity that seeks a oneness

with the disease; that is, an identity fully consonant with Freud's identification of homosexuals with the death drive or, in this case, with the disease that merely attests to the self-destructiveness of a gay lifestyle. What best captures the "at-odds-with" character of the disease and mourning for it is what I have proposed elsewhere as expressive of the disease's messianic potential: I will not have not loved, or in this instance, I will not have not lived. To return to García-Düttmann's directive to come out, the statement of declaring oneself homosexual would now read, I will not have not been. Or, I will not have not have died from AIDS. This, I believe, offers an absolutely queer space that suspends structures of meaning and power and instead leaves everything unsettled and unsettling. "Meaning appears to adhere to the phrase, yet can only approach it. The double negative does not cancel itself out to yield to a positive form of self-identification, but rather the second "not," as an echo, precedes the life and love that it seeks to recapture. *The "not" resounds before anything has been actualized* (Block 2018).³ In turning now to the NAMES Project, I want to demonstrate the kinds of queer communities that emerge from the modalities of mourning opened up by the phrase "I will not have not been."

II. COMING COMMUNITIES OR "NO ONE IS ALONE"

The *NAMES Project* or the quilt was first presented six years after death began to besiege the gay community. Already, sentiments that attempted to rethink the plague, if not soteriologically but messianically, were both inevitable and seductive. That is, thinking of the times as "out of joint" and not consistent with chronological progression or age begins to register hope along the dimensions described above. Not surprisingly, Broadway is rich in this regard. As David Halperin has argued, Broadway is quite gay save that there is no gay subject or self. The gay experience begins before any sexual awakening. Rather, they are a milieu, whereby subjects see themselves reflected in something quite different from themselves. The musical plays with explicitly gay themes (*Torch Song Trilogy*) and is less gay and less appealing to the community, according to Halperin, than the musical in which gayness is diffuse and never identified as such. The really gay

musical, singing and dancing at inappropriate times and channeling desire through all sorts of surrogates, realizes rather than portrays gay desire (Halperin 2014, 92–121). In fact, beginning with *A Chorus Line*, in which the individuals we come to know during the production dissolve into an amorphous mass, Broadway history of the early decades of the pandemic offers many examples that begin to articulate what comes to be realized with the quilt.

Perhaps most intriguing is the 1983 production of *La Cage aux Folles*. The musical might have been a celebration of trans and gay people—and certainly a jolt of gay pride was needed when most of America was wishing the community dead—but it also registered the loss of what it was celebrating, both on stage and off. As one reviewer remarked, the cast was singing “the best of times is now, but we could not fully embrace the final exhilarating . . . encore because we knew what was waiting for us when we left the theater—desperation, desolation and death—the worst of times” (Bellmont 2012). Still, “The Best of Times Is Now” embraces what was a gay shibboleth of sorts in the 1970s: Live fast and die young:

The best of times is now,
 What’s left of summer but a faded rose!
 The best of times is now,
 As for tomorrow, well who knows,
 Who knows, who knows!
 So hold this moment fast (hold it fast)
 And live and love as hard as you know how (you know how)
 And make this moment last (moment last)
 Because the best of times is now,
 Is now, is now! (Herman 1983)

In *La Cage aux Folles* the times are out of joint; celebration and death are unthinkable without each other. Death shadows the play’s celebration of difference, and outside the theater “celebrations of life” serve as a euphemism for “funeral.”

Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*, often described as an allegory of the AIDS crisis, weaves numerous Grimm fairy tales together ("Little Red Riding Hood," "Rapunzel," "Jack and the Beanstalk," "Cinderella," and "The Baker and His Wife") not only to question the possibility of living happily ever after but also to insist upon an obligation that we share toward each other and that implicates one another in all we do. Blind self-interest dooms all the characters, which in the Reagan era and its glorification of greed has special resonance. The last words or afterthought of the finale summarize the shattering of the fairy-tale world that *La Cage* would celebrate with all its bangles and feathers. After the chorus warns of going it alone, the play ends with the required refrain, "And they lived happily ever after." This is followed by Cinderella muttering, "I wish" (Lapine and Sondheim 1986, 25).⁴ Obvious is the dismissal of the halcyon outlook predicted by the traditional phrase, less obvious is how hoping against all hope is the moral imperative that emerges from the disastrous course all of the protagonists of the various fairy tales pursue. That surprising directive is poignantly framed by the song that comes near the finale, "No One Is Alone." "Sometimes people leave you halfway through the woods" is an experience already felt too many times by communities ravaged by the disease. The verses that follow reiterate the lessons of this fairy tale cum nightmare: "You decide what's good / you decides what's right, but no one is alone" (24). The loneliest number, one, is a fiction. Further, going it alone or abandoning one in need will never lead you anywhere but back into the woods with no exit in view. What the appeal celebrates—a new kind of community whose bonds are forged by disease—is only always a potential one, both realized and unrealized, or rather, realizable and unrealizable. A queer entity, in other words. Its unreal quality is emphasized by the lyric that comments on those lost too soon: "No one's gone for good." Try telling that to anyone whose weekly rituals included attending these "celebrations of life." Such implausibility is pushed to the extreme in the verses that conclude the song: "Hard to see the light now. / Just don't let it go / Things will turn out right now. / We can make it so. Someone is on your side. / No one is alone" (24).

Any promise for things to turn out right is impossible to imagine in 1987 and even today. So what kind of potential community could fulfill the promise that even the dying, or the always already dead, are not alone? The NAMES Project (AIDS Quilt) offers an intriguing possibility. The panels of the quilt create communities as diverse as the loved ones of the disease. Each individual panel, stitched to the main canvas, brings that first community into contact with other, if not all, of those represented by panels. The unknown and the famous, the glamorous and the common, the gay and the straight, the black and the white and the brown and the yellow all share equal billing. "Each quilt panel has its own tale. They tell of people who worked and played, who laughed and fought, and are finally remembered" (Ruskin 1988, 13).⁵ If this demonstration of mourning was inspired by a need to at least name those who Reagan and Bush were unwilling to acknowledge as beings even deserving of bare life, its afterlife is tied to the new kinds of communities that emerge when the already dead, the soon to be dead, the ones living in dire uncertainty, and those completely queer or other to the community discover or rediscover each other. As one man dying of the disease commented, "I decided I had to take the lead in order for them to get to know me again and to get to know what it's like for me living with this disease, and what it might be like for them" (49). The disease serves as a contagion that infects more than just those who are HIV-positive. Its founding members, so to speak, also include those who care for them, commemorate them, and stitch their memories into a panel whose aesthetics, values, techniques, materials, and messages have only a shared measure in common. The borders of the self extend beyond the measure of the panel if for no other reason than the subject of the panel is deceased. The dead one inspires the sewer, whose stitching reminds us of how makeshift and "unnatural" such a community is, held together only by a promise of death and dissolution.

The style and material of panel establishes all sorts of random connections with those of another. A note accompanying a panel prepared by Cindy is telling in this regard: "Please know that my intent, when making this panel, was not to invade your memories or life with David. I have no memories to share with him but I do share one thing with you. On October

23, 1986, a pain went through my heart that was unbearable. A loneliness for the loss of a complete stranger—a *potential* friend. To this day I cry when I think of how you must miss each other” (Ruskin 1988, 63; emphasis added). The signature block of the panel prepared by Cindy reads: “For your lover, from Cindy, he loves you very much.” Who is Cindy in this affair? How do we explain her role in the relationship? What potential for a different sort of friendship does this posthumous bond promise?

Let me conclude the discussion of the NAMES Project by considering two other panels that speak to this potentiality. Wayne Hadley had learned from his landlord that a man dying of AIDS was moving in next door. “I would sit on the couch and gaze out my bay window and wonder what he was doing. . . . And then I’d get frightened and angry and then just wait—and I knew he was doing the same” (Ruskin 1988, 64). Waiting for a cure that will not come is the mode of being or even readiness that brings them together. Hadley never met his neighbor and doesn’t know if he ever saw him. The panel features a silhouette of a single figure whose shadow extends across the yellow background. Above the shadow’s end, written in purple, are the words, “Our brother next door” (64). A friendship that never actualized and exists only in a shared but separate ritual of waiting acquires an afterlife that extends beyond the death of one to forge a fellowship of or in shadows.

The story behind the panel for Clarence Robinson is in many ways a familiar one, his dignity denied even by health care workers. He was not provided a proper room but was left instead in an open hallway, avoided by all save one nurse. His sole advocate was his divorced father, a gruff phosphate miner who often wept when pleading for proper care for his son. Afraid of dying and dying alone, Clarence would extend the stays of visitors by asking for a cheeseburger and a milkshake from McDonald’s. Breaking bread under such miserable conditions with junk food nonetheless provided occasion to celebrate a different kind of coming together. Clarence’s panel features his favorite menu items, sewn by someone who never met Clarence but knew his story and wanted to be a part of his afterlife (Ruskin 1988, 65). To be sure, the pathos underwriting these panels should not obscure the very real and massive suffering accompanied by society’s abandonment

and repudiation of its most vulnerable. Still, the quilt offers an alternative temporality, interrupted, disjunctive, and always only potential. Adopting the phrase proposed above, I will not have not, could be followed both by “died” and “lived” and applies equally to the communities imagined by the quilt.

The quilt is always already a fragment. Remnants of society, of the fabric of society, comprise its ultimate configuration, which is always configurations. The whole, for one, can never be displayed in its entirety; it is simply too big. For another, the potential for additional patches to be included remains as long as AIDS remains. It announces a coming community whose integration into the main fabric of society is foreclosed; it refuses to forget or to allow for forgetting of the “gay” plague and is an absolute interruption of so many lives before they were lived. As such, it lacks the continuity required for legacy and offspring.

III. *ANGELS IN AMERICA* OR “THERE ARE NO ANGELS IN AMERICA”

If we allow for the quilt, or at least the ceremony that often preceded and accompanied its unveiling, to be understood as a form of theater and also allow that any hope inspired by the quilt is merely a kind of preparedness for something always about to arrive but held back eternally, then Tony Kushner’s two-part gay fantasia on American themes, *Angels in America*, might promise to further articulate those energies. Given the American-centrism framed in the title, we might also expect the articulation to serve as a possible foundation for a politics whose aim is something other than admission to good society, to the very society whose rank and file wished us all dead. And the fantasia would seem to deliver, or at least be unequivocal in its rejection of neoliberalism and Reagan individualism. Both Roy Cohn and his protégé Joe (a Mormon transplant from Utah whose marriage is a sham and who cruises men after dark to get what his wife, Harper, can’t give him) expose the hypocrisies and amorality of Reagan’s America. Further, juxtaposed and at times intertwined with scenes of the unhappily married couple is another. Louis, Jewish and ambivalent about everything,

leaves his lover Prior upon learning the latter has AIDS. He soon hooks up with his counterpart, Joe, who tries to justify their bald self-interest. On display with both is a moral ambivalence that underwrites the entire fantasia and will serve in the end to make peace with the very tenets of neoliberalism it seems so ready to indict.

My purpose is not to explore the entirety of the play to track this ambivalence but rather to limit my remarks to the dynamic that restores American exceptionalism under the very terms all that chatter about Reagan was supposed to reject. That is, the watchword of these angels is “ambivalence” (Savran 1995, 209), and the playing out of these ambivalences comes over the course of the two parts to mirror the path to civil society that has marked gay culture since its abandonment of politics, or what I would like to call after Leo Bersani an outlaw sexual politics (Bersani 1995, 123).

As Jonathan Friedman writes, there is “a simultaneous othering of Jewish and gay culture” in play all in service of Christian thematics (see Savran 1995, 211). David Savran mostly agrees, “Angels sets forth a project wherein the theological is constructed as a transcendent category into which politics and history finally disappear” (Savran 1995, 211). And others point out that the enduring vision of America’s specialness is likewise affirmed (see McNulty 1996; Wahman 2017). Completing this ecumenical vision is the play’s final plea, central to Judaism, “More Life.” The irony is only too apparent. Just what kind of life should one want more of? Of disease and death? To which the text responds in its final lines: “[But] you will all be citizens. The time has come” (Kushner 1992, 92). The glorious vision of America as a work in progress, as striving upward and onward toward becoming a more perfect union, seems unimaginable in New York’s West Village in the 1990s. So how does Kushner turn it all around? At what cost? Is this seat at the table precisely the position that places members of the gay community into the fold of respectable society, wins them the right to marry and to fight for their country?

As I mentioned, the play by design is American-centric, God blesses America with angels and no place else. But the heavens are in ruins; utopia does not exist. As Louis remarks, “There are no gods here, no ghosts and

spirits in America. There are no angels in America, no spiritual past, no racial past, there's only the political, and the decoys and the ploys to maneuver around the inescapable battle of politics" (Kushner 1994, 92). The drama that unfolds to restore angelic promise is, according to Kushner, inspired by Walter Benjamin's "Theses on History." In particular, Benjamin's reading of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, which, as we know, presents an angel of history that cannot reach us to save us because the rubble of history's catastrophes, which is all of history, keeps the angel hovering just beyond. The angels need the belief in progress to end, buffeted about as they are by the winds of progress whose disastrous forward push offers a counter force too strong for the angels to overcome but not enough to send them back entirely (see Mosès 1992, 101–28). Kushner's angels want the world to stop, but Kushner's earthly beings want to go on living and push for future inclusion: "More Life!"

For Benjamin, the continuum of history needs to be interrupted, ruptured. What he elsewhere describes as the eschatological that inhabits every moment should not be sutured in service of a future. Required is no future, an end to the catastrophic winds of change that hold the Angel of History at bay. Such ground-breaking or earthshattering events abound in the text, beginning with the reference to the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 that devastated heaven. But the possibilities of heaven's renewal depend on an end to human activity, a respite from the disasters of progress. Prior Walter is chosen to be their prophet. The hermaphroditic angel that visits him discovers in the one-time drag queen a resistant assistant, who, as just mentioned, wants to hold out hopes for a long life of conviviality with survivors of the melting pot. The end of part 1 or the "Millennium Approaches" announces, however, that the end is near, the continuum of history seems shattered. In what Kushner describes as a "Stephen Spielberg" moment, the angel crashes in on real time: Greetings Prophet. The Great Work Begins: The Messenger has arrived (Kushner 1992, 119).

The approach of the millennium, the San Francisco earthquake, perestroika, Reagan, all these epochal events or markers attest to America's special mission to make heaven right again, to remake heaven.⁶ Further, this mission falls upon drag queens for its accomplishment. Heaven looks to

America, where people are forever re-inventing themselves, to re-invent itself. For this millennial event it is the gay community ravaged by AIDS, at least two of whom are expert at drag, that best inhabits this spirit of re-invention, which is all progress that goes nowhere actually is. The rubble of gay communities is stark proof of where nowhere is. Finally, AIDS is the signal epochal event of all such events. It brings forth or summons Prior, so the great work of restoring paradise can begin and the imminent death of the neoliberal agenda of progress or a progressively inclusive America completed.

Here is where things go awry. Benjamin's eschatology is replaced by a this-worldly exceptionalism that reasserts America's special access to all that's good. For one, heaven as Belize describes it, the gay nurse who was Louis's previous partner and Prior's in drag, reads as a blueprint of Enlightenment dreams: "Everyone in Balenciago gowns with red corsages, and big dance palaces full of music and lights and racial impurity and gender confusion. . . . And all the deities are creole, mulatto, brown as the mouths of rivers. . . . Race, taste, and history finally overcome."⁷ As Jessica Wahman writes, "Belize's vision of Heaven seems, to be, in one way, the ultimate realization of a progressive pluralist American melting pot projected into the empyrean, . . . a democracy of full enfranchisement" (Wahman 2017, 18). The reason is rooted in Kushner's sympathy for his characters that underwrites the play's pathos: "Every moment must be played for its reality, the terms always life and death. The problems the characters face are among the hardest problems, how to keep going in the face of overwhelming suffering" (Kushner 1992, 8).

Therein lies the problem. As Hannah Arendt wrote of Bertolt Brecht, his sin, the reason writer's block plagued him in the East and prevented him from living up to his early promise as a playwright and poet, was compassion. "What brought Brecht back to reality, and almost killed his poetry, was compassion. . . . Compassion was doubtless the fiercest and most fundamental of Brecht's passion" (Arendt 2007, 244-45). This passion blinded him to the misdeeds and crimes of Stalin and instead had him attempt to apply his considerable talents to "versify," so to speak, the regime, and in so doing, he lost the "gift" and his way. For Kushner perhaps the same can be

said. Is it possible to look in the faces of all those dying around you and give up? The play, in the final analysis, becomes merely an anthem, a plea to go on living. The only way this morally bankrupt world can be reconciled with an unreconstructed heaven is to move on, to turn one's back on the past and pursue life's happiness with a promised seat at the table. That is, to be at one with AIDS. If this turn away represents a rupture from the past, it is a betrayal of that past and an abandonment of any messianic hope. The past redeemed. This interruption of history is thus no interruption at all but merely a displacement, or a replacement that allows for the forgetting of AIDS and a requisite cultural amnesia that permits participation in the American dream. The times are no longer out of joint; "the world only spins forward" (Kushner 1994, 148). The Angel of the Waters atop the fountain of Bethesda in New York, where the play ends (constructed in 1842 to celebrate the purity of the city's water) is no angel of history but rather inspiration to prepare for the great work, a world in which there "is no dying" and thus no need for mourning and commemoration (148). The past is not redeemed but forgotten. The play concludes: "The world only spins forward. The time has come. Bye now. You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you: More Life. The Great Work Begins" (148). Part 1 completed the last line with "The Messenger has arrived" (148). What has become of the Messenger and why does this more inclusive vision jettison them? The change signals a reassessment of that work; securing a place at the table banishes the Angel of History and any hope of redeeming the past or forcing the times out of joint.

As Bersani writes in *Homos*, "Nothing has made gay men more visible than AIDS. But we may wonder if AIDS, in addition to transforming gay men into infinitely fascinating taboos, has made it less dangerous to look." The success of *Angels in America* is evidence of "how ready and anxious America is to see and hear about gays—provided we reassure America how familiar, how morally sincere, and particularly in the case of Kushner's work, how innocuously full of significance we can be" (Bersani 1995, 5). Ultimately, the play banks on Enlightenment ideals to promote what Savran calls the "new American religion—liberal pluralism," which is merely conservative, capitalistic, and logically incoherent (Savran 1995,

209). Whatever it is, America's new religion is hardly compatible with where Kushner started, Benjamin's theses of history. Kushner's own words to the introduction of "Perestroika" confirm this: "Perestroika is essentially a comedy, in that issues are resolved, mostly peaceably, growth takes place and loss is, to a certain degree, countenanced" (Kushner 1994, 148).

The wager of this essay, namely that the shift in the politics, reception, and wishes of gay people is reflected in how AIDS is remembered or forgotten, mourned or ignored, runs parallel to another shift: Stonewall was meant to decriminalize homosexual or trans acts. Today, and arguably beginning around the production of *Angels in America* and finding widespread approbation with *Will and Grace* (1998), LGBT politics shifted to acceptance of a lifestyle. The Enlightenment platitude that we all want the same thing demands a shift away from sex acts and a focus on the family, and as Savran remarks, on capitalism. The New York City AIDS Memorial completes and confirms the shift that tamed the radical impulses of *Angels in America*. I will conclude with a few remarks regarding the memorial.

IV. THE CITY OF BROTHERLY LOVE OR "THOSE PEOPLE MAKE ME SICK"

But first, the transformation I seek to present hinges in many ways around the kind of reassurances Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia* offered. Not to be overlooked is that a year after the film's release the AIDS cocktail was introduced and signaled a major accomplishment for ACT UP and its politics. The year 1996 saw a major celebration of the group for the antiviral treatments or HAART. Not all those dancing to a different drummer had perished yet or given up. In this light, *Philadelphia* provides a particularly rich map of how "love of the law" replaces protest (Nyswaner 1992); how fighting back is acted out in civil court, or how Tom Hanks becomes the new, improved face of AIDS. In short, the film concerns a most homophobic lawyer and father who finds in his vast reservoir of empathy for the oppressed (played by Denzel Washington; he is Black, after all) the courage to represent a "faggot" dying of AIDS. Hanks's character (Andrew Beckett) is suing his former high-priced, tony Philadelphia law firm for unlawful dismissal.

Since Hanks is the firm's rising star, assigned its most important cases, the only drama is when a Perry Mason moment will force the scales of justice to tip in favor of one so gifted and charming in an ever-more-inclusive America, which, lest we forget, is blessed by angels. For its director the film was a peace offering to the LGBT community for his Oscar winning *Silence of the Lambs*. That film drew on stereotypes of trans people to up the horror quotient. That is, the psycho-killer at the center of the FBI investigation is so beyond the pale that the FBI must rely on the insight of the cannibal Hannibal Lecter to plumb the depths of the trans' depravity. The 1991 film's success, a truckload of Oscars including Best Picture, substituted the image of a sex-crazed disease-carrying fag for one who had advanced to a new stage of depravity, dressing up and terrorizing innocents, which in this case is the daughter of a senator. Homosex is merely a gateway perversion to things scarier than even AIDS.

That welcome message may account for the frequent appearance of *Silence of the Lambs* on many critics' lists of the most influential films of all time. By enlisting two A-list actors to present Hollywood's first serious treatment of AIDS, *Philadelphia* means to demystify and detoxify the AIDS "victim" and represent him as talented, ethical, loving, unthreatening, and, of course, moribund. In addition to offering medical diagnoses at odds with contemporary understanding of the disease at the time, the film panders to an audience uncomfortable, it seems, with any marker of difference or disease. In a contemporary review for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, critic Roger Ebert gave the film three and a half out of four stars;

It is quite a good film, on its own terms. And for moviegoers with an antipathy to AIDS but an enthusiasm for stars like Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington, it may help to broaden understanding of the disease. It's a ground-breaker like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1969), the first major film about an interracial romance; it uses the chemistry of popular stars in a reliable genre to sidestep what looks like controversy. (Ebert 1994)

The comparison to Stanley Kramer's treatment of miscegenation in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is telling. The families concerned are well off,

well educated, and thus prepped for enlightenment. But the movie is afraid of its own challenge. The only kiss or sign of romance between Sidney Poitier's character and his white fiancé is viewed through a rearview mirror in a taxicab. Let no stomach turn. Just as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* avoided any uncomfortable encounters about a very uncomfortable subject (just how offensive can Hepburn and Tracey be?), the same might be said for *Philadelphia*, although the cover-up can only do so much with an infected, gay body dappled with lesions. The dead man coughing and bruised, Tom Hanks, hardly represents the average AIDS patient, not to mention his standing as a highly talented attorney with a supportive and loving family nearby. This hardly tells the story of the endless suffering endured by legions of patients in public hospitals across America or simply forgotten and discarded. What the film most assuredly does accomplish is reassurance—to upper-middle-class families everywhere who fear homos and their ilk will not only rupture the seamless transference of America's future to a new generation of baby-makers but sicken it fatally as well.

The final scenes, just before the patient dies in the hospital and then at the family's home after the funeral, have all the trappings necessary for a decent send-off and burial. Each scene features relatives grieving for the loss of their beloved and likewise reasserting their love for each other. Family pictures are everywhere. The loyal boyfriend (played by Antonio Banderas) is welcomed into the family's secure homestead, all the more secure now that the contagion of the "gay" is buried. But Hanks's figure does not die in vain or in silence. His whole existence is redeemed; a jury of his peers, by a vote of 11 to 1, said so (Nyswaner 1992, 129–35). That is to say, he died a winner. Moving on from AIDS requires families to rehabilitate the sexual degenerate since he has/had so many qualities that even good society cannot fail to recognize. The narrowness of the focus not only reserves and prepares in the years to come a place for the gay man at the table (lawyers always make a family proud.) but also allows for vast numbers of sufferers—without family or family support and without an Ivy League pedigree—to remain in the shadows, uninvited and uncared for, nameless.

The biggest threat comes from the fear of contracting same-sex sexual desire. There are enough references to seedy encounters among gay men to warn any fence sitters of the dangers of going over to the gay side, as if that were really a possibility. In fact, anything short of an absolute repudiation of “faggots” predictably raises suspicions among one’s confident straight peers, and such suspicion extends to the possibility that empathy, even with the dying, might signal a subtle conversion to the other side. Confronted by his peers in a very hetero bar after the TV news has just put him front and center, Washington reassures those challenging his straightness that he despises them as much as they do: “Those people make me sick, Filko! But a law’s been broken, okay” (Nyswaner 1992, 67).

But the challenge pains. After wryly asserting his ignorance about opera to an almost dead Tom Hanks, he appears to be blindsided by a latent liking for it. Hanks prevails and gets the very straight lawyer to listen to the highly emotional “Mamma Morta” from *Andre Chenier* by Umberto Giordano while he offers a rather histrionic commentary. A gay man turning on his straight lawyer to an aria about losing dear Mama to the French Revolution delivers on its threat to the straight bystander. At aria’s end, Hanks declares with his soprano accompanist, “I Am Love” (Nyswaner 1992, 105). Opera, mother, love, and AIDS—is this how gay people emerge and come to be and come out? Does opera make you weepy and gay? Whether that is what prompts Washington’s character to leave immediately thereafter is not clear, although upon returning home he looks in on his baby, “adjusting the blanket,” quietly slips into bed and “begins to weep” (Nyswaner 1992, 108). But the fear has been implanted: could his gay advocacy be about to announce a turning, a very unwelcome reorientation? As long as his face retains a healthy ruggedness, he can step back and breathe; he will still want his wife.

The risk, however, is evidently strong enough that homophobia must be protected, and its attendant vocabulary, protected speech. The film’s characters cannot repeat the word “faggot” enough, as though it possessed some cathartic or amuletic power. As defendants are cross-examined by Washington, he seeks to get a rise out of all of them by asking them about their sexuality. The purpose of that line of questioning, however easily the

judge may allow it, is unclear except to see how many different ways a gay man can be insulted, how rich the vocabulary of put-downs is (Nyswaner 1992, 87–89). Moreover, in a wholly gratuitous scene—insofar as it does nothing to advance the story—homophobia is presented as a necessary reaction to protect the integrity of the family, particularly its newborn. In a crowded drug store, Washington grabs two pink packages of Pampers. A clerk addresses him, thanks him for his courage to represent the discarded, then hits on him. Washington’s reaction is predictable, finding ample opportunity to employ his ready-made vocabulary of gay put-downs and even asserting his right to be disgusted by them:

What’s the matter with you? Do I look gay to you? . . . Relax? I ought to kick your faggoty little ass for you. . . . Don’t you know this is exactly the kind of bullshit that makes people hate you. (Nyswaner 1992, 111–13)

In other words, the film assures homophobes that the table still belongs to them. How else does one react to a presumptuous clerk who ignores the signal pink packages of diapers are supposed to send? If all the clerk sees is pink, then the target of the come-on has no choice but to express repulsion and even threaten violence lest one lawsuit allows these gay men to forget their place.

V. MEMORIALIZING AIDS OR “LOOK FOR ME ON YOUR BOOT SOLES”

It comes as no surprise that the AIDS memorial or New York City AIDS Memorial Park at St. Vincent’s Triangle (first opened in 2016) has all the polish and shine of the corporate structures that surround it. It’s a safe space, a restored space across from where St. Vincent’s Hospital pronounced thousands of gay men dead. The specific site is significant. The park is one block from the LGBT Community Center on 13th Street, where ACT UP first organized. It is also blocks from the headquarters of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis. The gentrification of the area coincides with the gentrification of gay history and life. The Greenwich Village site “honor[s] New

York City's 100,000 men and women, and children who have died of AIDS and . . . commemorate[s] and celebrate[s] the efforts of the caregivers and activists" (New York City AIDS Memorial 2020). Almost 500 architects contributed to the final design as the gateway to the new St. Vincent's Hospital, and simultaneously, a gateway forward where all of the disfigurements of the past have had an extreme makeover. The memorial consists of an 18-foot-high steel canopy of about 1,600 square feet. Scalene and equilateral triangles serve as legs to connect two large triangles at top, so that "it looks like an open airplane" (New York City AIDS Memorial 2020). The smaller triangles are filled with 16 smaller ones that light up at night through air vents. The memorial, it might be said, flies above the wreckage buried beneath its structure.

Perhaps strangest of all is the contribution of visual artist Jenny Holzer, who chose to engrave a granite panel with almost the entirety of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." On the one hand, it seems a fitting choice to continue the work begun by Kushner, who has referred to all American artists as "children" of Whitman's "Song of Myself." The following verses, the first from section 52 of Whitman's poem and the second from *Angels in America*, point to a consanguinity.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged. Missing me in one place, search another, I stop waiting somewhere for you. (Whitman 2016, 173)⁸

Hiding from me in one place, you will find me in another. I stop down the road waiting for you. (Kushner 1994, 54)⁹

On the other, given the relentless attack of the body fighting itself with AIDS and given the reactionary climate of those times, a poem that celebrates wholeness in dispersion of self, a democratic being that belongs everywhere and sees itself reflected and reproduced in everything, seems wholly misguided. Editors of the Iowa Whitman series describe the poem in terms wholly at odds with the disintegration of the AIDS patient: "The whole poem will be Whitman's record of the self, expanding out into the world, absorbing more and more experience, then contracting back into the self, coming back home to the body" (Whitman 2016, 4). As if that were not

enough compensatory gibberish in the context of a merciless disease, consider the following: “You will hardly know who I am or what I mean, But I shall be good health to you nevertheless, / And filter and fibre your blood” (Whitman 2016, 183) . The self is a sort of contagion here, but a glorious one that links all Americans in celebration, not mourning, a contagion that allows for the poet’s super-self to announce triumphantly: “And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (Whitman 2016, 7). “I am the poet of the body / And I am the poet of the soul” (Whitman 2016, 70). Such halcyon expressions of living etched on a memorial to those who died a horrible death, often in silence and shame, rehearse the turn to the creature comforts promised by Kushner’s conferring of citizenship. The dead are not really gone but are reborn and reseeded in the vast and sprawling fields of America. And the democracy it gives birth to: “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles” (Whitman 2016, 83). The soil is pure American; the self establishes grass roots from sea to shining sea. Death in America from AIDS is really no dying at all but rather a route to discover the boundlessness of the self as it attaches itself to the boot soles of all those who walked all over us (and kicked us) as so many lay dying.

In other words, beginning at least with *Angels in America* a halcyon narrative comes to compensate for the senseless deaths of so many; we are invited to seek citizenship, to share a table with those who secretly celebrated our deaths. The emptiness or abjection brought on by an inability to mourn AIDS, as I argued at the beginning of this essay, leads to a compensatory impulse that can only obtain if AIDS is essentially forgotten only for its corpses to be reanimated with the spirit of Whitman’s democratic voice. But, of course, AIDS remains, and its devastations are less visible and disquieting but startle nonetheless, as Larry Kramer emphasizes in his epilogue cited at the beginning of this essay.

The reception of Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart*, which first opened off Broadway at the Public Theater in 1985 and had its original Broadway production and a Tony win in 2011, tells a similar story. At the time, the play was panned by many, who regarded the play’s demands for gay

visibility and abstinence to fight the disease as impossible. Many were not in Kramer's position to come out and challenge authorities and agencies to address, or even just name, the disease, let alone to seek proper funding and treatment. To do so would risk one's job, residence, health insurance, life. The call for an immediate halt to the gay sexual revolution was hardly any easier. More than merely interrupt what had become a celebration of bodies and their potential for outlaw sex, this newfound sexual freedom spoke to the transgressive possibilities of gay sex and its disruption of social hierarchy rather than to a new pathway for a seat at the table. For an audience in 2011 for whom citizenship has insulated them from the ongoing ravages of the disease, there was nothing threatening or, perhaps, even uncomfortable about Kramer's sharp polemics. Rather, as the *New York Times* reported, "it was a great cathartic night at the theater" (Kramer 2011).¹⁰ AIDS was part of a history that had been partitioned off, often forgotten and claimed by few. And any hangover or afterlife was easily cured by a Broadway purging.

Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric," part of the original edition of *Leaves of Grass*, reveals something quite troubling about the pan-corporeality of his vision and its place as the centerpiece of an AIDS memorial. "A slave at auction! / I help the auctioneer." "A woman at auction / She too is not only herself . . . she is the teeming mother of mothers" (Whitman 1976, 131). The glorification of the enslaved mother has been then as now compatible if not required for our democracy. The payoff is "a clean strong firm-fibred body," virtually immune to illness so long as the values that countenance the slave obtain (Whitman 1976, 133). "He would not be the poet of slaves nor the poet of masters but rather only the poet of slaves and masters. Whatever democratic voice he invented would have to speak for both or it was doomed to be partial and thus not representative" (Whitman 2016, 4). Disdain, however, is not absent, reserved for the "fool that corrupted his own live body:" "Who degrades or defiles the living human body is cursed" (Whitman 1976, 133). Such an assertion anticipates the moral arguments that will be used to distinguish the good or innocent AIDS patient (Ryan White) from the deserving and debauched ones. For the latter, AIDS was the curse the body wreaked on itself for those nights of

sodomitic pleasure or needle-swapping. Hemophiliacs deserved pity; the others, including Haitians, repudiation.

In 2018, the connection between the memorial and the poem was articulated in a different but equally telling way. In recognition of World AIDS Day 2018, animated text appeared on truck billboards in black and white with bursts of color to highlight the messages. The trucks visited areas bearing a special significance, such as the LGBT Community Center, Harlem, Times Square, and the Hudson River piers near Christopher Street. The messages included phrases such as “Light the Fight” or “Scream Again.” Arguably, the quilt has been electrified and sanitized, reimagined as a patchwork of words. Such phrases possess a pan-applicability, just as easily exhorting the cast of a horror film as a public for whom AIDS is out of sight and out of mind. Missing are any references to sex, sex acts, or even sexuality that are woven into the quilt. There are no names to be recalled, no promises of a coming community, only a flash across a screen that is over almost as it begins, a memory forgotten the moment it is summoned. Mourning AIDS becomes a body electric whose current serves, as Whitman writes, to purify, “to discorrupt” and restore “in them [gay citizens] the fathers of sons, and in them the fathers of sons” (Whitman 1976, 128). This disappearing act of AIDS is not, however, without its rich rewards. As “The Body Electric” demanded and *Philadelphia* assured us, it provides for the family to be restored and its legacy assured.



NOTES

1. In what follows, the use of “coming community” signals my reliance on the work of Giorgio Agamben, especially *The Coming Community* (1990).
2. Amy Hoffman notes how struck she was at the 50th anniversary of Stonewall by “how little space AIDS seem to occupy even of people who lived through it” (2020).
3. Excerpts from Block (1989) are represented here (xxiv–xxv). If the use of “queer” here seems idiosyncratic, a brief explanation of my understanding of “potential” and “potentiality” should clarify the use. With “potential” I am working Giorgio Agamben’s definition of potentiality as something that can both be and not be; both possibilities reside and remain. The word does not signal something on the way to actualization or

- realization. It both is and isn't, which is what I understand to be "totally queer" and something always at odds with itself, never self-same and always under construction.
4. For an intelligent discussion of how the Broadway production, not the Disney movie, can function as an AIDS parable, see Bloom (2015).
 5. Again, much of the discussion of the quilt is worked out in Block (2015, xxvii–xxx).
 6. Important to note is that the millennium is not just the year 2000 but is the word for the event of events, which in part 2, one could argue, becomes perestroika or a retreat from the millennial "event" that, as we know from the Angel of History, will never occur. That is, a radical politics based on millennial event is replaced by a hope for a better, more peaceful world where "perestroika" comes to define, like "millennium," the endless work of a more democratic, inclusive America, i.e., Kushner's America.
 7. Roy Cohn at this moment believes Belize may be an angel, so the description is also meant to horrify Cohn.
 8. For Kushner's relationship to Whitman, see Wahman (2017, 26).
 9. A reference to Jonah comes just before: "You can't Outrun your Occupation." Prior wants to live; more life is incompatible with the angel's designs. Once again, an ecumenicalism is at play, decontextualizing the Old Testament to render it capable of assimilation into this fantasia of gay themes.
 10. As cited on back cover.

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