

## Prior's Blindness: Magical Realism in Kushner's *Angels in America*

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### Abstract:

This paper is primarily concerned with examining Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* through the lens of "magical realism": the literary synthesis/coexistence of realism with elements of fantasy or the unknown. Because the play is saturated with moments that confuse normative reality with the "supernatural" world of angels and ghosts, I argue that the genre of magical realism can offer rich perspectives on how marginalized ideologies challenge dominant ideologies presented throughout *Angels*. *Angels* is set in the 1980s – a time of great redefinition for homosexuals and of AIDS as a disease – and consequently addresses related cultural situations and challenges. I focus on the character of Prior Walter, a homosexual, AIDS-infected "prophet" who becomes a provocative locus for simultaneously "imagined" and "real" spiritual activity in *Angels*. Through Prior's progressive spiritual encounters throughout *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, I argue that Kushner uses Prior to model a discursive, metaphorical, and literal movement away from narrow, exclusive perspectives of the unknown (what I call the "marginalized spiritual") and toward an acceptance of that unknown. Many of the critically-noted binaries in the play can be explained in this light, and although I remain focused on the issues related to Prior (i.e. spirituality and religion), I finally suggest that the complex reception of *Angels* can be more effectively reconciled through a magical realist approach.

**Keywords:** magical realism, alternative spaces, dialectical struggle, marginalized spiritual, drama studies, Tony Kushner, Lois Zamora, Wendy Faris.

Even though the comingling of the real and the fantastic has been frequently noticed, few have considered Tony Kushner's acclaimed *Angels in America* as a work of magical realism.<sup>1</sup> Given the ambiguity of the play, this may not be surprising. Kushner labels it as "essentially a comedy," though only because of the incredible dramatic seriousness within it (2003, 142). *Angels* blew conventional theatre apart both in presentation and form when it debuted, and so the play sits in an amorphous position, aside from its acceptance as a play at all (Pearl 764). Critics like David Savran have called it "promiscuously complicated," and filled with diametric oppositions: "the opposite of nearly everything you say about *Angels in America* will also hold true," due to Kushner's "refusal to adhere to any theatrical or political theory" (1995, 208-209). Yet perhaps all the disagreement over definitions of the play can be addressed without disqualifying any of those opinions. Perhaps these disparities contain what magical realists call "all-at-onceness," and represent a play whose boundaries

are “erased, transgressed, blurred, brought together, or otherwise fundamentally refashioned” (Faris and Zamora 1995, 6). If anything can be said of *Angels*, it is that it lives between spaces and labels: between sobering realism and fantastic comedy. The complications offer rich grounds for analysis.

It is because of this dichotomous nature that I wish to consider *Angels* as a work of magical realism. The play has rarely been considered from a magical realist perspective, and only then in passing, but Monica Pearl claims that “*Angels in America* was exceptional in its presentation – given to magical realism when realism was the modus operandi of the American stage; it challenged suspensions of disbelief, willing and unwilling” (763). My hope here is less to suggest that *Angels in America* is – all other genres considered – best read as a work of magical realism. It is not, and scholars of magical realism rightfully suggest that wholesale categorization is dangerous.<sup>2</sup> Yet given the spaces evident in criticism and the contradictory, often-incredible moments that pervade the play, magical realism finds an ideal application within *Angels*, particularly in the character of Prior Walter. Although nearly every character in *Angels* experiences “magic” at some point, Prior is a hub of spiritual activity. He is a homosexual who injures an angel and gets a book embedded in his chest. He swears, he lies, he rages, and he is not anything like a conventional prophet. Prior exhibits a profound struggle to reconcile what he experiences with what he knows. He feels “Wonderful and horrible all at once, like... like there’s a war inside... I’m scared. And also full of, I don’t know, Joy or something. Hope” (Kushner 2003, 154). He never fully accepts his spiritual experiences as spiritual experiences, but his character still makes distinct progress toward reconciliation with the fantastic world penetrating his own. Perspectival change is not portrayed as an easy or quick fix, and Prior remains infected with AIDS and is blind by the end of the story. Yet Prior is still able to *change*, and it is here that magical realism becomes an accurate lens for this play.

*Angels* turns into a critique of the perception of the alien or “un-conventional” in American culture in both Prior and the reader. His steady encounters with the Angel of America, the prior Priors, and his encounter with the character of Hannah Pitt move him from a narrow perspective about the spiritual to a broadened, more harmonized, lexically corrected view of that same spirituality. Prior’s struggle to reconcile the spiritual to the “real” is a powerful, hypothetical example of perspectival change wrought through linguistic conflict with the “marginalized” spiritual. Through Prior, the Christian definition of a prophet is challenged, and angels are tied to a radio in heaven, both mutable and non-omniscient. Readers are similarly placed in a world where we are forced to question what we know – a world where “both real and logically impossible events [are] considered to be on the same level of reality” (Chanady 1985, 23).

Magical realism is neither a “genre” nor a “mode.” It is a broadly typified collection of traits, and not a historically established genre like realism or symbolism. A magical realist text typically contains the juxtaposition and combination of two different worldviews.<sup>3</sup> Amaryll Chanady calls this a “synthetic, totalizing activity...” which offers the reader two completely different perceptions of reality – the magical and the rational” (1985, 19). Magical realism challenges a reader’s unique, normalized view of reality, suggesting that the “rational” may not be as rational as it seems, and

generally employs the supernatural or the fantastic as a foil against a materialistic, post-enlightenment view of the world (Faris and Zamora 1995, 6-7). In contrast to what might otherwise be “science fiction” or “fantasy,” magical realism contains an unproblematic sense of the “unknown”: the non-disruptive occurrence of anything that contradicts our adopted view of reality without denying our adopted view (Chanady 1985, 21-22). Here, there is no narrative issue with the concurrence of the real and unreal. The fantastic is amalgamated with the real and “integrated within the norms of perception of the narrator and characters in the fictitious world” (1985, 23). Within magical realism, then, “Mind and body, spirit and matter, life and death, real and imaginary, self and other, male and female... are boundaries to be erased, transgressed, blurred, brought together, or otherwise fundamentally refashioned” (Faris and Zamora 1995, 7).

The hybridization of real/unreal is ideal for a confrontation with the marginal – the “magical,” as it were. As she defines magical realism, Chanady explains that “The term ‘magic’ refers to the fact that the perspective presented by the text in an explicit manner is not accepted according to the implicit world view of the educated implied author” (1985, 22). Unification allows and encourages a reconciliation between two disparate worldviews, whatever those views might be. As such, socially marginalized people – of different ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation – can exist on a dramatically equalized plane. The fictional combination of worldviews essentially forces a reader to accept the coexistence of multiple realities, since “Although the educated reader considers the rational and the irrational as conflicting world views, he does not react to the supernatural in the text as if it were antimonious with respect to our conventional view of reality, since it is integrated within the norms of perception of the narrator and characters in the fictitious world” (Chanady 1985, 23). Fiction becomes a powerful tool here, since reading demands a suspension of belief, and so a reader’s normative guard is lowered.

With this in mind, Kushner’s play clearly works as a piece of magical realism, and not only contains a superabundance of magic but also revolves around the theme of cultural marginalization. *Angels in America* was among the many artistic responses to the AIDS epidemic and other cultural issues within the 1980s, and was written with concern over the status of homosexuals.<sup>4</sup> Fiona Ramsby usefully details the social environment at the time Kushner wrote his play and describes it in terms of marginalized “homosexual bodies and AIDS sufferers.” She explains,

[During the 1980s,] the Reagan administration compounded fear of the virus by its “‘abdication of leadership in the fight against AIDS,” which exacerbated the homophobic attitudes of the conservative right (white). Right-wing ideologues coopted discourses that marginalized those who contradicted their beliefs – homosexuals and AIDS sufferers. . . not only were bodies with AIDS “attacked” physically, but this physical “assault” was exacerbated by the sleuth-like dissemination of language about those bodies. (2014, 418, 408)

The AIDS epidemic spawned disjointed, postmodern plays to confront an unfathomable disease. This is not to suggest that AIDS is a “magical” force (though some have argued this),<sup>5</sup> but

rather that Kushner's play was born of intensely social issues. As Pearl explains, "The common conception of the immune system as producing a cohort of warriors to fight off invaders, became itself a useless paradigm of explanation. The immune system, under this metaphor, could produce only double agents, and erode the boundaries of what was understood as self and not-self" (762-764). Because of this, she continues, AIDS "changed the rules and boundaries of the genres that were engaged to represent it" (763). A deconstruction needed to occur, and one that was naturally concerned both with current social issues and with the unfamiliar and unknown. *Angels* was no exception and achieves cohesion through Kushner's abundant dichotomies. Indeed, many dualities in the play exist as units of disarming social critique because, as critic Claudia Barnett notes, "Kushner demonstrates not only what is but what could be. . . by combining politics and the supernatural, pushing ideas beyond their logical limits to make them appear both implausible and achievable" (2010, 491).

Social concerns aside, *Angels* is also notoriously full of "magical" moments, and nearly all of them have plausible counterclaims within the play. In his playwright's notes, Kushner explains that "The moments of magic – the appearance and disappearance of Mr. Lies and the ghosts, the Book hallucination, and the ending – are to be fully realized, as bits of wonderful theatrical illusion – which means it's OK if the wires show, and maybe it's good that they do, but the magic should at the same time be thoroughly amazing" (Kushner 2003, 11). Despite the gritty realist backdrop, angels burst through ceilings and ghosts harass AIDS victims.<sup>6</sup> Characters blend together in parallel conversations or gain insight through conversation *in dream* with other characters. Roy Cohn talks to the ghost of Ethel multiple times in the play, for example, even while other characters (like Belize) don't see her (Kushner 2003, 188). During a shared dream, Harper Pitt believes Prior when he claims that an angel broke through his ceiling, even acknowledging that "That sort of thing always happens to me" (Kushner 2003, 194). Yet while Roy and Harper react to the imposition of dreams, ghosts, and angels as if they were real, they also realize that they are either terribly sick, on drugs, or both (Kushner 2003, 104, 53, 95, 188-189, 37). The play itself offers no indication of whether one reality is realer than the other. Savran usefully simplifies this abundance of dichotomies and problematic relationships as one meaningful, singular "oxymoron, a figure of undecidability whose contradictory being becomes. . . the privileged figure by which the unimaginable allows itself to be imagined" (1995, 212, 215).<sup>7</sup> The play occupies an in-between space, and that balance cannot be disrupted. Indeed, as Barnett writes, "To inhabit the world of *Angels in America* fully, one must accept the terrifying and magnificent possibility that angels and ghosts exist" (2010, 472). As an inhabitant of this world, Prior is predictably faced with the same dilemma.

Prior is stuck between the real and the unreal. Despite his self-acknowledged marginalization as a homosexual man and his marginalizing view of Mormonism (as seen in his first mutual dream with Harper in act one, scene seven of *Millennium Approaches*) and his discussion of homosexuality with Hannah (act four, scene four of *Millennium Approaches*), Prior's struggle in *Angels* is more *hypothetical*: he cannot understand the "marginalized" spiritual. That said, it is important to note that Prior only interacts with the spiritual beings of *Angels* (i.e. angels and ghosts) *as if* they were a

marginalized group. Slemon offers some clarity here. After describing what Mikhail Bakhtin called a battle “among discourses to ‘become a language of truth,’” Slemon notes, “In magic realism this battle is represented in the language of narration by the foregrounding of two opposing discursive systems, with neither managing to subordinate or contain the other” (1995, 12). As such, Prior’s “marginalization” is a linguistic one, and not necessarily literal; he is not prejudiced against angels, and the play would be significantly less effective if this were true. Thus, Prior’s conflict with the supernatural can be described as a “discursive” or dialogic one.

In fact, Prior is utterly unfamiliar with the spiritual world and seems to have few religious beliefs. If his later talks with Hannah are any indication, Prior may be more than ambivalent about spirituality and religion, but his belief is otherwise ambiguous (Kushner 2003, 234-235). Once Prior is diagnosed with AIDS, he confronts his mortality with a vague, directionless sense of purpose. He tells a troubled Louis that “I can’t find a way to spare you baby. No wall like the wall of hard scientific fact” (Kushner 2003, 26). In act one, scene seven of *Millennium Approaches*, Prior also pessimistically reflects, “One wants to move through life with elegance and grace... One wants.... But one so seldom gets what one wants, does one? No. One does not. One gets fucked. Over. One... dies at thirty, robbed of... decades of majesty” (Kushner 2003, 36-37). In addition, he does not seem to believe that truth exists, as his conversation with Harper demonstrates, “I usually say, ‘Fuck the truth,’ but mostly, the truth fucks you” (Kushner 2003, 45, 40).<sup>8</sup> And as his death approaches, as he explains to Louis, he has become drawn toward “anything that’s suspended, that lacks an ending... it seems to me that it lets you off scot-free... No judgement, no guilt or responsibility” (Kushner 2003, 48).

Unsurprisingly, Prior’s terrifying brushes with the angel and with the ghosts of Prior 1 and Prior 2 are highly “separated”; he is unable to reconcile their existence with the world he currently occupies and tries to rationally explain them away. Upon hearing the angel for the first time (while dreaming), he is at a loss:

PRIOR: Hello?

A VOICE: Look up!

PRIOR: Who is that?

A VOICE: Prepare the way!

PRIOR: I don’t see any... (Kushner 2003, 41)

In an ambiguous pun (does he not see any *way* or *anyone*?) he is immediately afraid and disoriented by the event. Prior is also terrified by his encounters with the prior Priors, and (as with the angel) entranced enough by their presence to ask questions (Kushner 2003, 91-93, 119). The disorienting banter of Prior 1 and Prior 2 flies over Prior’s head, who merely communicates that he is “afraid” (Kushner 2003, 95) and disconnects from the conversation quickly. Although he carries himself with the same, casual passivity of before (he jokes about “a convention”), he is primarily fixated on his death (Kushner 2003, 92-93). In fact, until the aftermath of the Messenger’s arrival, Prior constantly assumes that his otherworldly visitations are omens of death, even though the angel

and the prior Priors indicate otherwise (Kushner 2003, 68, 92-93). Given his fatal, incurable disease, his hopelessness and fear are natural responses, though misperceived. Aside from the fact that he knows the Messenger is going to return, he cannot comprehend the significance of spiritual events.

Prior is also linguistically unable to address the imposition of the incredible, which evinces his problematic relationship with the unreal. Ramsby offers a helpful perspective in his article, “The Drama as Rhetorical Critique: Language, Bodies, and Power in *Angels in America*.” Although he specifically discusses performance through sociopolitical metaphor, his distinction between “dominant and marginalizing metaphors” is useful, particularly in describing “marginalized bodies and how they function within social norms” (2014, 405).<sup>9</sup> Language itself, he explains, is a relational entity wherein (to put it simply) social forces can collide and challenge each other – much like Slemon’s “dialectical struggle” (1995, 12). Quoting Norman Fairclough, Ramsby explains that “discursive relationships ‘constitute social life: meaning and meaning making’” and that “*Angels* enacts the discursive relationships between social groups, and the conditions of those relations at a very specific point in recent political history,” thereby allowing marginalizing language to be “mapped onto the bodies it performs” (2014, 406). Thus, titles and ideas can become inscribed onto people or (in this case) spiritual beings, and so Prior’s language demonstrates a broken relationship which distorts his understanding of the angel. In a way, Prior is hemmed into his previously established (and not very extensive) relationship with the supernatural. Ironically, Prior is blinded.

He cannot accurately describe what is happening to him. As he tells Emily in act three, scene two, “I feel like something terrifying is on its way, you know, like a missile from outer space, and it’s plummeting down towards the earth, and I’m ground zero” (Kushner 2003, 104). He doesn’t describe his dread as a byproduct of an angelic encounter, or even as an imposition of God’s will. Instead, he describes a *missile*. He responds similarly to the prior Priors’ maddening, half-spoken-Hebrew lists: “Garlic. A mirror. Holy water. A crucifix. FUCK OFF! Get the fuck out of my room! GO!” (Kushner 2003, 119) and first assumes they – and Louis, who appears briefly (Kushner 2003, 120) – are “ghosts,” rather than “ancestors” or “heralds” (Kushner 2003, 171). He does not call the angel an “angel” until the end of his second physical encounter with the Messenger (Kushner 2003, 179). When he hears the angel’s voice in act two, scene five he asks, “Are you one of those ‘Follow me to the other side’ voices?” (Kushner 2003, 170) and, later calls the angel a “thing” (Kushner 2003, 68). Humorously, he can even only describe the incredible entrance of the Angel as “very Steven Spielberg” (Kushner 2003, 124). Indeed, as Savran aptly points out, even though the angel seems atemporal and inhuman, it “comes socially mediated . . . [and] betrays the fact that this miraculous apparition is in part the product of a culture industry and that any reading of her/him will be mediated by the success of Steven Spielberg and his ilk . . . [and] producing a particular vision of the miraculous” (1995, 212-213).<sup>10</sup> How else could Prior understand the unbelievable? Indeed, this interaction demonstrates how out of touch Prior is with the being that has entered his room – how he has marginalized it. There are more examples, but suffice it to say that Prior’s relationship with the spiritual is at odds with his mind. He lacks clear psychological and emotional understanding of this supernatural “Other.”

Yet Prior is able to grow precisely because he struggles to cope with the spiritual. His most formative moments occur when he is simultaneously torn between repulsion and enticement. His crisis escalates moments before the Messenger arrives in act three, scene five. As the Angel approaches, Prior holds onto rationality (asserting the facts he knows about himself),<sup>11</sup> though even that doesn't assuage his confusion: "No. My name is Prior Walter, I am... the scion of an ancient line, I am...abandoned I...no, my name is...is... Prior and I live... *here and now*, and... in the dark, in the dark, the Recording Angel opens its hundred eyes and snaps the spine of the Book of Life and... hush! Hush! / I'm talking nonsense, I... / No more mad scene, hush, hush..." (Kushner 2003, 121). Despite his fear, he listens when Prior 2 asks him to close his eyes, and despite his abject terror toward the angel, Prior is nonetheless *drawn* toward the "beautiful," "truth-filled" sound of the angel's voice (Kushner 2003, 68). He claims, in all apparent seriousness, that he *desires* her voice, despite his bleak mantra ("Fuck the truth"). Indeed, he believes that the voice is the only thing keeping him alive (Kushner 2003, 66). Nonetheless, when the Messenger finally arrives, he is filled with terror and turns again to the rational: "*This*, this is a dream, obviously, I'm sick and so I... Well OK it's a pretty spectacular dream but still it's just some..." (Kushner 2003, 171). He is also conflicted by the idea of being the prophet, although he ironically evinces a marginal understanding: "Please. Please. Whatever you are, I don't understand this visitation, I'm not a prophet, I'm a sick, lonely man, I don't understand what you want from me" (Kushner 2003, 179). His reality has become destabilized. Steven Kruger argues that community is a deliberate, "conscientious" theme in *Angels*, noting that "one is not oneself in isolation but only in contrast to, in solidarity and negotiation with a variety of other selves. . . . Even a character's fantasies and imaginations are conceived of as not solely his or hers. These gather their full meaning only in relation to, even interpenetration with, one another" (qtd. in Omer-Sherman 2007, 96-97).<sup>12</sup> In this case, Prior is surrounded by spiritual, unreal, and literally "other" selves, which challenge his self-definition. He is being changed both in behavior and word, and instructed by the presence of the magical.

The arrival of the Messenger marks a significant change in Prior: he finally becomes conversant with the fantastic and adopts a more refined language. His increased ability to relate, again recalling Ramsby, "demonstrates how marginalized bodies might be resignified" (2014, 406). In other words, Prior demonstrates how "things" and "ghosts" can be resignified as "angels" and "ancients." They are resignified in the same way that, as Ramsby explains, Prior claims that AIDS has transformed him into a non-human, only to be corrected by Hannah who says that there is "nothing *more* human" (2014, 406, emphasis added). After three weeks separate Prior from the Messenger, Prior also self-consciously embraces the title of "prophet," and begins to go blind, "I've been given a prophecy. A book. Not a *physical* book, or there was one but they took it back, but somehow there's still this book. In me. A prophecy. It... really happened, I'm...almost completely sure of it" (Kushner 2003, 169). His vision – his view of the world – has literally shifted and he now understands the prophetic role of the Book, though (of course) not entirely.<sup>13</sup> He argues (in direct contrast to before) to Belize that his encounter with the angel "wasn't a dream... I'm a prophet" (Kushner 2003, 169) and later says, "I believe I've

seen the end of things. And having seen, I'm going blind, as prophets do. It makes a certain sense to me" (Kushner 2003, 182). Ela Nutu, in comparing Prior the Prophet to the Biblical prophet Elijah ("The biblical prophet who also regains strength as a result of an angelic encounter") describes Prior's encounters as a "strengthening" and an "enabling" "through the medium of angels": "Both Prior and Elijah experience something that makes them want to live and, ironically for Prior, to move, to activate change and progress" (2006, 177- 178). Prior has been given a mission that defeats his hopelessness as it revitalizes his view of the world. He is no longer paralyzed by the unknown, and now understands both the role of the Book (in a general sense) and that the Angels and ghosts were sent to aid him, not to murder him.<sup>14</sup>

Significantly, Prior begins to equate the real and the fantastic in a broader sense. After Belize calls Prior crazy, he responds "Then I'm crazy. The whole world is, why not me? It's 1986 and there's a *plague*, half my friends are dead and I'm only thirty-one, and every goddamn morning I wake up and I think Louis is next to me in the bed and it takes me long minutes to remember...that this is *real*, it isn't just an impossible, terrible dream" (Kushner 2003, 181). Prior – the man who once blamed pills for the "voices" he heard, and who was outright labeled crazy by Emily and Belize – calls the *world* "crazy." Anthony Lioi speaks effectively to this, acknowledging that he also considers Harper as a "seer" in *Angels* (a claim too large to consider here): "Prior and Harper should not be taken as absolute authorities; rather, they are frightened, struggling mortals who occasionally snatch traces of the Real from the haze of their afflictions. This renders their prophecy more believable and more poignant – funny, even" (2004, 101). Indeed, Prior is a flawed, living contradiction, and yet his message becomes more penetrating because of it. Note also that Prior calls AIDS a "plague," harkening back to his second encounter with the prior Priors ("The spotty monster") (Kushner 2003, 93). AIDS is not "just an impossible, terrible dream," but is instead a reality that America cannot face.<sup>15</sup> Like the often-terrifying impossibility of his spiritual visions, there is an equivocation of dream and non-dream here, or (in magical realist terms) an "all-at-onceness" (Faris and Zamora 1995, 6). As such, because Prior has been able to experience the reality of the angels, he is now more fully equipped to experience the "normal" world.

Prior's slow acquaintance with the spiritual allows for several final, key contrasts within the story: his interactions with Hannah and with the council of the Angels. Given his evolving worldview, Prior's encounter with Hannah may seem like a step backwards for him as a character. After she stands to leave, he says, unprompted,

PRIOR: I'm not insane...

HANNAH: I didn't say you...

PRIOR: I saw an angel. That's insane...

HANNAH: Well, it's...

PRIOR: Insane. But I'm not insane. But then why did I do this to myself? (Kushner 2003, 234)

He goes on to explain a constant, razor-sharp desire to run ever since the Angel appeared: "She seemed so real. What's happened to me?" (Kushner 2003, 235). The situation is complicated, however,



when Hannah says that he had a “vision,” at which point he mocks her and says that he won’t be “assuaged by pity and lies” (Kushner 2003, 235). He calls Joseph Smith’s visions “preposterous,” and when Hannah says that Smith’s prayer created an angel, Prior doesn’t believe it: “it’s repellent to me. So much of what you believe” (Kushner 2003, 235). The difference here is not so much his belief in the spiritual, however. Instead, he is reacting to a distinctly *Mormon* definition of the spiritual.<sup>16</sup> His sudden fear over the Messenger’s return a few scenes later strongly suggests that he has not *truly* dismissed his spiritual experiences throughout the play, or not for long. Instead, Prior is likely reacting to Hannah’s religious interpretation – her religious definition – of his experience. They continue:

HANNAH: What do I believe?

PRIOR: I’m a homosexual. With AIDS. I can just imagine what you...

HANNAH: No you can’t. Imagine. The things in my head. You don’t make assumptions about me mister; I won’t make them about you. (Kushner 2003, 235)

Significantly, Prior is again confronted with inadequate terms of description. He describes their interaction in terms of labels and is not considering their larger similarities. Prior is perturbed by the fact that he is a “homosexual” in her eyes. In the words of Ramzi Fawaz, he is a “man whose HIV status renders him already ‘dead’ in the eyes of the general public” (2015, 136). Notice also that he calls his illness AIDS and not a “plague.” This is a significant contrast, since even though Prior has become distinctly more convinced of the spiritual world, the beings within that world, and his role within that world, he can reject a form of spirituality that wears a different shape than the one he has experienced.

As always, the inverse is revealed through this interaction, as Hannah’s belief completely breaks down when an actual angel enters the room, and suddenly Prior looks like the more spiritual person of the two. Not a few lines after she affirms that prayer can create angels, she outright *dismisses* Prior’s warning about the angel for spring rain, and when the terrifying angel enters the room, she is the first to scream and call it all a “fever dream,” in contrast to Prior, who demands that the angel take his Book back without question (Kushner 2003, 250). Ironically, Hannah provided Prior with the information he needed to confront his own destiny, particularly by saying that “An angel is just a belief, with wings and arms that can carry you. It’s naught to be afraid of. If it lets you down, reject it. Seek for something new” (Kushner 2003, 237). Here, Kushner both affirms and denies the usefulness of religion, as it turns out to be superficial in the religious character of Hannah, who (by calling an angel a “belief”) is not representing Mormonism accurately.<sup>17</sup> As Nutu has observed about binaries in *Angels* (as a whole), “The binary terms continue to exist (gratis?), only they have changed sides in their hierarchical system” (2006, 183). Although she then launches a larger criticism at Kushner’s work (which I cannot adequately address in this context), her assertion holds true here.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Hannah’s words do not seem spoken from experience. In a way, she occupies the same, unfamiliar space as Prior occupied earlier in the play, although we never see whether she progresses in the same way. Regardless, sets of biases are brilliantly presented through the contrast of a once-non-spiritual character becoming more spiritual than a religious character.

Fascinatingly, this leads him to reject the book offered him by the angel, which then leads him to wrestle and defeat the angel, leading finally to his refusal to do what the angels asked while still requesting his blessing (Kushner 2003, 234-236, 250, 265).

It is this contrast that primes Prior to make one of the most significant decisions within the entire story. Because he has gained an enhanced understanding of the angels and ghosts surrounding him, he is able to ultimately refuse his calling: “The Book, whatever you left in me, I won’t be its repository, I reject it” (Kushner 2003, 250). After wrestling the angel, the angel concedes, “You have prevailed, Prophet. You... Choose” (Kushner 2003, 251). The angel no longer controls him. Prior is no longer a slave to the system which once dominated him; he has been freed. Recalling Prior’s prior conflict in trying to reconcile to the spiritual, Deborah R. Geis effectively notes that to progress, he needs “to accept both the possibility of insanity/ prophecy (the world of the Imagination) and the right to do so on his own terms” (qtd. in Barnett 2010, 472). He rejects a power that is seemingly all-powerful, literally dragging it down to his level (Kushner 2003, 250). And when Prior finally arrives in heaven, the Angels are all listening to an old radio, trying to catch wind of what is happening on earth (Kushner 2003, 252). Nutu aptly describes this place as a “shaken heaven, disorganized, de-centered, de-deified” (2016, 181-182). We learn that this power was an illusion, and angels are brought down to man’s level (even bowing to Prior in act five, scene four). They are shown to have what Omer-Sherman calls a “common plight,” both in their weakness and in their shared existence in a universe with a runaway God (2007, 86). In this way, both Prior and the angels are equalized. Their interactions minimize their differences.

Prior’s steady encounters with the spiritual, thus allow him to *undermine* the spiritual and break free of its conventional rules. Nutu notes that by “moving away from ‘proper’, prescribed identities to which the Symbolic Order summons us, *Angels* queers the hierarchical systems that exists not merely on earth – in which homosexuals ‘have zero clout’ – but also between heaven and earth – in which those above dictate the Law for those below” (2007, 182). Prior recognizes his biases because of his encounters with the alien, unknown world of the spiritual. In magical realist terms, his encounters are an admission of the “exceptional that subverts existing structures of power” (Faris and Zamora 1995, 6). He is a gay prophet, and so the idea of prophecy is challenged. Angels are weakened, and so their authority is challenged.

It is because of this, then, that Kushner’s play works as an effective piece of magical realism and acts precisely within magical realist terms. Had Prior simply accepted the imposition of the fantastic as it was presented, or had he possessed a supernatural, dominating knowledge over every event in *Angels*, the play would be reduced to a simple fantasy and lose its thorough critique of society in the 1980s. Because both the magical and real are merged together, Prior is forced to work through the painful process of reconciliation. This is a terribly messy process and not a simple issue of turning one switch on or off; there are many, ingrained switches which can refuse to change, even after incredible experiences. In a way, Prior’s largest enemies were complacency and contentment. Indeed, earlier in the play, he wants to escape his fate precisely because it is *uncomfortable*, as in act two, scene two: “*I. WANT. You to go away. I’m tired to death of being done to, walked out on,*

*infected*, fucked over and *now* tortured by some mixed-up, reactionary angel” (Kushner 2003, 179). Julie Sparks notices this as well, drawing a contrast between the characters in the play who are fearful and “resist change, settling for a stifling stagnation, while the braver characters accept the sometimes excruciating changes life forces on them, winning revelation and release through their struggle” (Kushner 2003, 194). It is this back and forth between apathetic acceptance and proactive action that marks the difference between Prior pre-angel and Prior post-angel.

Although Prior is finally able to take action and refuse his fate, he is still left wondering about which parts of his dream or reality are true, and though he has gone blind “as prophets do” (Kushner 2003, 182), he remains infected with AIDS at the close of *Angels* (Kushner 2003, 278). The angels did not bless him. In this way, Kushner refuses to apply new labels to the character of Prior. After all, Prior never *really* successfully makes a prophecy; he never really predicts the future or brings in some revelatory meaning to the world of *Angels*. Indeed, he is told to “prepare the way” (i.e. he is addressed as a prophet) before he even understands that the “voice” belongs to an angel (Kushner 2003, 42). It is only through the “magical” that Prior can change from a narrowed perspective to a broadened perspective, even as “magic” adopts many different names. Lioi says it effectively, explaining that Kushner’s play “is sacramental, it enacts the secrets it narrates, and effects real change in the willing participant” (Kushner 2003, 112). Kushner does not paint the transition from “ignorance” to “knowledge” in shining colors at all, and instead, as Lioi notes, “takes his oracular brew with arsenic rather than sugar” (2004, 101). By affirming and denying the existence of spirituality, Kushner avoids making the very judgement calls that he is trying to highlight (Barnett 2010, 485). Prior models the way out of troublesome, conflicted worldviews. As Barnett has also noted, “Prior’s message is his resistance to stasis, his survival, his fight – and by extension, his blessing. He is a role model of survival” (2010, 479). Indeed, it may not be coincidental that Prior, as Barnett notes, is the only character to break the fourth wall and address the audience (2010, 492). Indeed, Barnett argues that Kushner’s play is designed primarily to change the audience.<sup>19</sup> Her quote from Frank Rich is particularly useful here: “[Kushner] sends his haunting messenger, a spindly, abandoned gay man with a heroic spirit and a ravaged body, deep into the audience’s heart to ask just who we are and just what, as the plague continues and the millennium approaches, we intend this country to become” (qtd. in Barnett 2010, 487).

Though the idea is hardly satisfactory, could it be that the play attempts to decentralize itself? Perhaps by adopting many unusual, controversial, shocking, hilarious, and unbelievable forms, the play itself avoids becoming a new “category,” and instead is made whole by its separateness. As Pearl acknowledges, despite its complication, *Angels* is “a good example of how form mimics and spells out the very experience it is representing” (763). While criticizing Kushner’s treatment of Jewishness in *Angel*, Jonathan Freedman similarly notes that the play points “beyond itself” (1998, 100), that “Kushner desires a dramatic form and an understanding of transcendence that allow a space for queer citizenship in a culture obsessed with the mythography of rebirth and the inevitability of miracle” (1998, 91). Admittedly, Freedman demonstrates, as does Savran, that the play is not itself

wholly ambivalent, and several other critics have made compelling cases for a fairly upsetting agenda behind the play.<sup>20</sup> But consider, for a moment, that Kushner is Prior. Should we expect a prophet to be any different than human? Prior himself never escapes his human flaws, and though he makes tremendous progress, he is nonetheless never a perfect arbiter.

In this sense, Kushner's play is made effective simply because of the way magical realism disarms those who read or watch it. As Omer-Sherman explains, "in the return from spirit to the mundane world of politics, there is an implicit burden laid by Prior on the audience/reader, requiring that when a watcher emerges blinking into the sunlight, s/he accepts the burden of fully living in and engaging with the world" (2007, 26). While it is true that the final tone of the play is somewhat ambiguous – perhaps necessarily so – readers are privy to the entire *process* of the story, and are aware of what is at stake. Indeed, Louis flatly challenges the very content of the play in act three, scene two, arguing that "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... the shifting downwards and outwards of political power to the power" (Kushner 2003, 98). Although juxtaposition of the real with the fantastic might seem to answer this question with an emphatic "maybe," perhaps Hannah's words near the end of the play speak to this: "You can't live in the world without an idea of the world, but it's living that makes the ideas. You can't wait for a theory, but you have to have a theory" (Kushner 2003, 278). As critics like Freedman and Savran have rightfully noted, there is a point where it is necessary to accept intrinsic flaws within our perspectives – it is unavoidable – but there is a difference between ambivalence and "prophecy," as it were. In this, Prior as "role model" becomes a beautifully nuanced notion: he is imperfect, he is frightened, he is ill, and he is often mistaken. Yet by slowly, imperfectly encountering the spiritual as he does, we see that he softens and reaches heaven by stumbling upward one step at a time. It is a masterful stroke on Kushner's part that Prior happens to be a homosexual man during a time of oppressive bigotry, and this is the intrinsic challenge issued toward the reader. If he or she can accept that angels could coexist in Kushner's stark, familiar New York – accepting absurdity as a normal part of their narrative experience – the message behind Prior's progression can be administered: perspectival change *is* possible. Without the inclusion of magic in *Angels*, the culturally revolutionary perspective therein would likely be easily passed over and obscured by our own undisturbed notions of the "normal" and the "abnormal." It is an irony that Barnett notes effectively, "[Prior] sees because he has AIDS; he survives because he sees; and, in the end, he shares his vision with humanity" (Barnett 2010, 472). Without the presence of magic realism in *Angels*, the power of Kushner's message would be negated. His highly challenging, provocative work asks us to reconsider our relationship to others (and to ourselves) by daring us to pause, reflect, and reconsider the words of a dying, confused, and inflammatory homosexual prophet; we are pushed straight to the edge of our normative boundaries, which is precisely what successful magical realism aims to do. In this way, Kushner's nearly-endlessly complicated work urges us both to acknowledge and to seek out the billions of human "worlds" that surround us. In seeking – in experiencing – perhaps we can better understand each other. Perhaps we can learn that it is

possible to find a common ground and a shared humanity despite shared differences. Perhaps we can see that weakness become strength and that, if one looks closely enough, one might even see angels in the tangled, shared reality resting madly and beautifully between the boundaries of the real and the incredible.

### Endnotes:

1. See Savran 209, Barnett 471-473.
2. "It is not a monolithic mode of writing that pervades a text at the expense of other techniques and strategies" (Barker 1). See Barker 10.
3. Of course, it is more nuanced than this. See Barker 10-11, Zamora and Faris 5, Chanady 17, 19 and Slemmon 10-11.
4. See also Ogden, "*Angels in America* uses the physical phenomenon of HIV, a virus that attacks the immune system, as a trope to investigate the degree to which homosexuals qualify as the Self or the Other in the United States" (2000, 249).
5. Barnett's article suggests that AIDS is a form of purgatory, which propels characters in *Angels* into a middle space.
6. See Fawaz for an interesting take on the coarser elements of *Angels*.
7. "[T]o be a progressive is to seek out connection' among communities, activism, ideas, issues, and politics" (Kushner qtd. in Hogan 4).
8. See Ramsby 411.
9. "*Angels* enacts the discursive relationships between social groups, and the conditions of those relations, at a very specific point in recent political history, which allows for the mapping of marginalizing language use – specifically metaphoric language use – onto the bodies it performs" (Ramsby 2014, 405).
10. Nutu argues something similar: "What Kushner's *Angels* demonstrates successfully is that biblical texts have been, are and always will be culturally mediated" (2006, 185). See also Nutu 182.
11. Barnett 474.
12. "*Angels* presses toward its own agenda, in the form of a renewed unification of present-day humanity united by a common plight with the angels, dwelling in a cosmos that God has abandoned" (Omer-Sherman 86). See Kushner 73. See Pearl 768-771 for a discussion of dialectic in the context both of the lines of the play and in the visuals of the film adaptation.
13. See the rest of Lioi's fascinating work on the Jewish context of Kushner, particularly "Kabbalistic world-repair." See Freedman's article in its entirety.
14. Interestingly, the intentionality of the angel is not always seen as helpful, as Ramsby notes. See Fisher's article.
15. See Prior's conversation with Belize: "A great queen; big fucking deal. That ludicrous spectacle in there, just a parody of the funeral of someone who *really* counted. We don't; faggots; we're just a bad dream the real world is having, and the real world's waking up. And he's *dead*" (Kushner 2003, 168).
16. See Savran 216-221 for a discussion of Mormonism in *Angels*.
17. "It rings false that Hannah Pitt, the mother of Joe who has left Utah to come to New York to settle the chaos in her son's life says that 'angels are beliefs with wings,' for this claim belies the literal core of the Mormon faith, even while it affirms progressive Judaism's more relaxed relationship with metaphor" (Omer-Sherman 2007, 21).
18. See Nutu 183-186.
19. See Omer-Sherman's discussion of Sarah Ironson (2007 17-27).

20. See Savran 215-216 on the treatment of females in the play. See Pearl 182-183. Though arguing that Kushner's work is more conservatively minded, Omer-Sherman notes *Angel's* "unabashed liberal paean to multicultural tolerance and understanding" (2007, 79).

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