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Nation, Body, Citizenship: Tony Kushner's Angels in America

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As shown in the subtitle, Tony Kushner's Angels in America explores a "gay fantasia on national themes" at the particular moment of "perestroika" as "millennium approaches" by intersecting American/world history and memory. According to Ron Scapp in "The Vehicle of Democracy: Fantasies toward a (Queer) Nation," "Angels in America is an attempt to extend the political imagination of Americans through fantasy, that is to say, to broaden the fantasy of democracy through a 'gay fantasia on national themes'" (93). In his admiring review of Angels, Scapp argues that the play situates this fantasy "as part of the history of the 'cause of America,' the history of the fantasy of America."

On the other hand, as David Savran points out in "Queering the Nation," "the question of America also remains vexed for queer nationalism. In Angels, the idea of America is inextricably bound up with questions of identity, migration, and progress" (221). This paper examines how Angels uncovers the questions of identity (national, racial, religious, gender and sexual) and challenges the decentralization and the deconstruction of a fixed structure of identity in order to "reorder the world" (II: 14). In this paper, I will also analyze the significance of performing America and reimagining the world by making the issues of representing a gendered, racialized, and sexualized (American) nation, body, and citizenship.

According to Jeffrey D. Mason, "The stage is only an explicit site for performing national identity, one that serves to focus the issues, rhetoric, and images found in the more general forums; its creative freedom and opportunity to take risks encourage attempts to develop, explore, test, and dispute conceptions of national character" (1). In Performing America, by introducing and quoting David Savran's well-focused essay on "Queering the Nation," J. Ellen Gainor describes Kushner's choice of the theatre as his medium to perform his mission "to queer the idea of America," to overturn homophobia and jingoism in a utopian reconstruction of our society" (15). Kushner himself states a similar message in an afterward to Homebody/Kabul, that is, his eerie drama about a British woman who is missing in Afghanistan:

My greatest hope for a play is always that it might prove generative of thought, contemplation, discussion—important components of what I think we want from our entertainments [...]. We need to think about ourselves, our society—even about our enemies. I have always believed theater can be a useful part of our collective and individual examining." (144-45)
Gainor convinces us that Kushner’s belief in the potential for theater has brought not only *Angels*’ successful productions and well-received critiques but also the usefulness of theatrical representation of *America* in a global/local context. *Angels in America* was originally opened on Broadway in 1993 and awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, two best-play Tonys and a spate of other prestigious awards, and then became the American theatrical epic of the 1990s. What is more, audiences worldwide, that is to say, more than 17 foreign countries including France, Germany, Japan, Iceland and Brazil, have seen homegrown production of *Angels*. For instance, in both 1994 and 2004 the Japanese productions were directed by Brooklyn-born director, Robert Allan Ackerman, who has become “a quiet giant on the world stage, whether in New York, London, Los Angeles or Tokyo.” In addition, in 2003 a version of *Angels* was filmed for the cable network, HBO, directed by Mike Nichols. This invaluable record of production history and film-making eloquently suggests that *Angels in America* is no less than a play about not just the nation named America and its fantasy but rather a positive idea alive in the minds of people around the world in the twenty-first century; yet it seems to be “the longstanding problems of virtue and happiness” as it became a part of the title of Kushner’s book including his essays, a play, two poems and a prayer.

In directing for the stage of Kushner’s *Angels* again, Ackerman observed:

> It was written in the ’80s, but I think the things it talks about are very relevant to what’s going on in the world right now, and certainly AIDS has not gone away. When we did the play originally at the Ginza Saison Theater 10 years ago, I think we all thought that in 10 years there would be no more AIDS, but AIDS is bigger now and it’s more prevalent throughout the world than it was even then, and I think post-9/11 what’s happened to the world, all of the things that the play prophesied would happen, we can see them every time we turn on the news—death and destruction everywhere—and I think the play is more relevant in many ways now than it was then. (1-2)

In contrast, David Savran comments, “*Angels in America* is by no means a play about defeat. On the contrary, it consistently attests to the possibility not only of progress but also of radical—almost unimaginable—transfiguration” in an interview with Tony Kushner (22). In providing such fresh perspectives as both progress and transfiguration, Kushner creates “a cosmic-scale history of America in the age of Reagan and the age of AIDS” (21).

Kushner expresses his idea of being progressive, that is no less than seeking human interaction and connection. He emphasizes on freedom in his understanding of progress by stating, “The truest characteristic of freedom is generosity, the basic gesture of freedom is to include, not exclude” (*Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness* 7). *Angels*, therefore, demonstrates this new vision of America as well as the world, while at the same time performing the constructed concept of America, bringing together Jews and Mormons, African- and European-Americans, neo-conservatives and leftists, closeted gay men and exemplars of America’s new “queer politics.” But how is America a performed self-conception in the play?

In Una Chaudhuri’s *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, the concept of a
reimagined and redefined America with the idea and movement of multiculturalism is pointed out:

In the late twentieth century the figure of America has begun to be required, increasingly to make good its utopian claims, and the principle of placelessness is confronted by the multivoiced demand for new placements. The movement known generally as multiculturalism is in fact a call for America to be reimagined: not, this time as a utopia, but as what Foucault would call a "heterotopia," a place capable of containing within it many different, even incompatible, places. (5)

In this respect, Chaudhuri remarks, "Angels in America" engages the questions of place from its title onward. What America is, what modes of placement and displacement it enjoins—in short, what it means to be here [in America], physically, spiritually, psychologically, and ideologically—is the range of questions that the play’s expansive structure is designed to accommodate" (249-50). Millennium Approaches opens with Rabbi Chemelwitz’s speech with Eastern European accent. He describes multicultural/multiethnic America as a "strange place, in the melting pot where nothing melted" (I: 9). Adding to the contradiction in the concept of America, he claims, "You do not live in America. No such place exists" (I: 9).

With this kind of figuration of America, it is also defined as a “free country” by the young lawyer, Joe Pitt, who is a “married probably bisexual Mormon Republican closet.” Joe also appreciates America as once a “paradise.” But this paradise is “ruined now,” despite Joe’s belief of “a great country. Best place on earth. Best place to be” (II: 69). He is certain that “America has rediscovered itself. Its sacred position among nations. And people aren’t ashamed of that like they used to be. This is a great thing. The truth restored. Law restored” (I: 26) because of president Regan’s presidency. By contrast, his wife, Harper, “who is not dreaming but wandering in a valium-induced hallucination,” expresses the very opposite idea of America: “It’s a Promised land but what a disappointing promise!” (II: 62). Why do these characters articulate the binary oppositions in performing America?

The vexing question of what exactly America is as a nation and who American is as a national subject remains unsolved. Thus, Kushner engages in these questions by paralleling the binary oppositions or “a set of conceptual poles” from the perspective of a performed self-conception of America; “The answers come in various rhetorical modes, from argumentation to ranting to incantation—their plurality always qualifying their dogmatisms, their situatedness always deflating their potential sentimentality” (Chaudhuri 250). Because the play attempts to intervene in the politics of national identity, bringing together five gay characters, along with female characters such as Harper, and Joe’s mother, Hannah, and even adding the scenes by Angels, who all play important roles in performing the other America.

In Jeffrey D. Mason’s reading of “cultural nationalism in American theater,” America becomes the most crucial site as a nation, “a special status and carries a unique burden” (2). A black drag queen, Belize, speaks to “a very powerful Jewish figure,” Louis about this kind of America as a metaphorical site:
Belize: No'cause you never bothered to ask.

Up in the air, just like that angel, too far off the earth
to pick out the details. Louis and his Big Ideas. Big Ideas
are all you love. “America” is what Louis loves.

(Little pause. )

don’t.

Belize: Well I hate America, Louis. I hate this country. It’s
just big ideas, and stories, and people dying, and people
like you[...]. (II: 94-5)

But Louis is the closeted character who abandoned Prior, his Euro-American lover with AIDS. Significantly, “‘America’ becomes a concept that transcends mere nationality, a symbol belonging not only to its citizens, but to those who yearn, no matter from what cultural tradition they may spring” (Mason 2).

On the contrary, Belize hates the figure of America such as the big ideas and stories and people’s death. He cynically continues by saying to Louis, “I’ll show you America. Terminal, crazy and mean[...].” (II: 95). This America explicitly means not only the historical figure but also “New York’s number one closeted queer” named Roy Cohn, who is hospitalized with the terminal symptoms of AIDS. Roy Cohn doubly signifies America as a nation, because first, he is a lawyer, and in his words, one of “the High Priests of America” and second, his body is the key site for performing America. He declares, “We alone know the words that made America” (II: 87). Meanwhile he is ironically equated with “negation” because of having a body diagnosed with AIDS.

David Savran, however, discusses: “Angels does not pathologize gay men. Or, more exactly, gay men as a class are not pathologized. Rather, they are revealed to be pathologized circumstantially: first, by their construction[...].as one of the “risk groups” for HIV; and second, by the fact that some remain closeted and repressed[...].” (Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism” 35). Clearly, in performing America, what the play makes the issue of is “not homosexuality that is pathological but, rather, its denial” (35). Angels critically examines the representation of “negation” with and "denial" from America through the linkage between nation and body by providing a devastating critique of racialized, sexualized and moreover, in Savran’s words, “medicalized” bodies.

Accordingly, Angels presents, as David Savran points out, “the peculiar sexiness of Reagan’s vision of America” by placing the sexualized and “medicalized” bodies at the very center of American history, and simultaneously by showing them to be not just the depository of a special kind of memory but by recognizing the significant role that it also has had in the construction of anational subject. As discussed in Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma by Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler, “The ‘body’ proved to be a fruitful site not only for theoretical
debate, challenging the tyranny of scientific, social, political, economic, sexual, and biological abstractions, but for resistance and emancipatory politics as well” (13). In this sense, Kushner attempts not just to transfigure national body in American historical experiences but to embrace, convey and speak to the queer sense of new nation and world as well.

While Louis and Belize look at Roy Cohn’s corpse in the hospital, they discuss what a terrible person he was and how he died a hard death with AIDS. As Louis puts it: “He [Roy]’s like the polestar of human evil, he’s like the worst human being who ever lived[...]” (II: 93). But Belize claims: “Forgiveness. Which is maybe where love and justice finally meet. Peace, at least” (II: 122). Then he asks Louis to say Kaddish for Roy. It is the historical figure Ethel Rosenberg who helps Louis to complete his Kaddish. The sexualized and medicalized body is part of a context in which there should be a turn towards evocation of different memory from American history. In Angels, the body which represents the past, skin, and belief of the (post)colonial self is no less than a very important voice of witness in not only reinterpreting the history but also “reconstructing the lost history of homosexual America, along with all the other lost histories” (Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness 8).

The body, therefore, shapes life/death, love/hate, justice/injustice, mind/soul and identity as well. When Louis confesses to Joe his temptation to love, his body must negotiate with his love/hate. Louis expresses how one of the five senses, smell is associated with national body and sexuality in performing America, for instance, “Smell is…an incredibly complex and under-appreciated physical phenomenon. Inextricably bound up with sex” (II: 30). He also emphasizes: “Words are the worst things. Breathe. Smell” (II: 32). It seems to be difficult for Louis to distinguish his Americaness, Jewishness, and gayness from his body. Because Louis’ homosexuality is a product of the desire and imagination and part of what performs America is the sense that even love and justice can be reimagined in the world. In this vision, “The Body is the Garden of the Soul” (II: 119) as shown in the Angel’s words.

Sara Ashmed puts it in The Cultural Politics of Emotion:

[...]the nation is a concrete effect of how some bodies have moved towards and away from other bodies, a movement that works to create boundaries and borders, and the ‘approximation’ of what we can call ‘national character’ (what the nation is like). Such a history of movement ‘sticks’, so that it remains possible to ‘see’ a breach in the ideal image of the nation in the concrete difference of others. (133)

Angels’ characters, as Ashmed suggests, put the emphasis on the “progress” and “travel” of the human race even though both America and the world are still “an unmapped terrain” like the homosexual male body. There is “unperfectability” in both of them. In Millennium Approaches, Kushner assures us that the traveling body exits both in the everyday life and in ourselves. The dialogue between Harper and her travel agent explains well this kind of traveling body and movement. Her travel agent Mr. Lies says, “It’s the price of rootlessness. Motion sickness. The only cure: to keep moving” (I: 17).

As S. E. Wilmer points out, “While alluding to the disasters of the twentieth century and
fantasizing that God abandoned the world at the time of the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, *Angels in America* conjures up the vision that mankind is moving towards a better future” (184). Similarly, Kushner’s great theme in not only other recent works such as *Homebody/Kabul*, and *Caroline, or Change* but also in *Angels in America*, “people changing and how they change” is a key element for the time of “perestroika” as “millennium approaches.”2 As the new millennium approaches, Joe is certain that “things are starting to change in the world” (I: 26). And perestroika suggests that “we all desire that Change will come” (II: 13). On a private level, Joe feels that “[i]t’s time to make some changes” (I: 23) and he needs them for his upward mobility. Yet we see the change for a better future is not just for Joe but also for anyone who visualizes it. Angels and Prior discuss this change. Prior says, “In making people, God apparently set in motion a potential in the design for change, for random event, for movement forward.” The Angel responds to him, “YOU Think. And You IMAGINE. Migrate, Explore, […]” (II: 42). Because it is Prior who has to become an “American Prophecy,” “American Eye” and “American Heart” as Angels would prophesize. Imagination is so significant that Prior can perform his mission for change, even though he sometimes critically states, “Imagination is a dangerous thing.” Again, Kushner presents the idea with “a set of conceptual poles” but it keeps us thinking.

*Angel’s* reassertion of reimagining the world for change is reflected on every page in the play. In this sense of reshaping the world, “we must also recognize that the *how* of that change is problematic” (Kruger 155). The play displays the difficulties in distinguishing the reality from the fantasy, and the personal from the political as well, but the human race must “progress, travel, and intermingle” for the benefit of our future. Belize, who was once scorned as “nothing” by Roy Cohn, assumes, “Race, taste, and history finally overcome [discrimination and injustice]” (II: 77). When this happens, Roy will exist no more. Indeed, *Angels* “takes on questions of national mission and identity. It also attempts to interrogate the various mythologies—from Mormonism to multiculturalism to neo-conservatism—that have been fashioned to consolidate an American identity” (Savran 23). By involving the project of queering national character and body, as Kushner demonstrates, a queer nation is not necessarily fixed, rather an elusive constructed one by performing America with intent to subvert the distinction between the personal and the political, to refuse to be closeted, to undermine the category of the “normal.” While *Angels* presents tortuous connections not only between sexual, racial, religious or gender identity and national one, but also between the personal and the political, it dramatizes the possibility of “[n]ot changing the world by ridding it of homophobia and racism, but changing the people—empowering them so that they can go forward, unconditionally living their lives” (Gener 33). In doing so, Kushner emphasizes that we must fully acknowledge the crucial importance of using strategic imagination.

Within the emergence of identity politics, the issue of citizenship remains still unsolved and even problematic. Belize and Prior become witnesses to the funeral for “one of the Great Glitter Queens.” Belize mourns over the death of the Glitter Queen because “[h]e couldn’t be buried like a *civilian*” (II: 33). Prior, however, speaks of this as “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” (II: 34). As discussed in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, “The politics of citizenship today […] is first and foremost a politics of nationhood. As such, it is a politics of identity, not a politics of interest (in the restricted, materialist sense)” (Hall 173).

*Angels’* final scene in Epilogue offers insights into making claims for citizenship and nationhood. Prior, who has been living with AIDS for five years, finally says:

Prior: I’m almost done.

The fountain’s not flowing now, they turn it off in the winter, ice in the pipes. But in the summer it’s a sight to see. I want to be around to see it. I plan to be. I hope to be.

This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won’t die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come.

Bye now.

You are fabulous creatures, each and every one.

And I bless you: *More Life*.

The Great Work Begins. (II: 146)

Prior’s final lines certainly serve to challenge the notion such as “a new kind of citizenship in the world, one that embraces both the legal and spiritual notion of the word but one that also knows no national, racial, sexual, or economic boundaries” (Minwalla 116).

Thus, Harper, who “has an incredibly powerful imagination” (Vorlicky 81), repeatedly insists on crossing borders and boundaries in order to move toward the next chapter of American/world history. Kushner clearly states in an interview, “The play is about, in terms of Harper’ story, the devastation and a willingness to keep moving in the face of devastation. I feel that that’s really important” (Vorlicky 82). When the play comes to an end, Harper is in a window seat on the flight to San Francisco, looking back and saying, “Nothing’s lost forever. In this world, there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we’ve left behind, and dreaming ahead. At least I think that’s so” (II: 142). At the same time, in Kushner’s words, “life is about losing” (Vorlicky 61).

In *Angels*, identity is always negotiated and produced in the borderlands, the multidimensional sites that deconstruct the traditional categories of not only between the normative and the perverse but also between “the margin and the center, the many and the few, the individual and society, the dispossessed and the possessors” (*Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness* 8). Moreover, identity is “constantly on the move, constantly unmaking and remaking America” ( “Queering the Nation” 222). Tony Kushner’s miraculous epic drama, therefore, provocatively explores a new way to conceive, represent and critique our understanding of
nation, body, and citizenship. It goes without saying this is inextricably connected with constantly questioning how we see the world and how we can reimagine it in the era of post-multiculturalism and post-9/11. In this sense, Prior’s final lines brilliantly illuminate the issue to open up a passage to “a new kind of global citizenship in the twenty-first century.”

Notes

*An earlier version of this paper entitled “Performing America and Reimagining the World: Tony Kushner’s Angels in America” was delivered at the Second World Congress of the International American Studies Association held at the University of Ottawa, Canada, 18th August 2005.


2 Trinity Repertory Company artistic director Oskar Eustis pointed out that the theme of the TCG National Conference “Shape-Shifting for a Viable Future” was fully evidenced in Kushner’s work and told the playwright, “Part of what’s so moving about following your trajectory as a writer is watching you simultaneously be utterly convinced that change is the most important thing—and yet refuse to sugarcoat how hard it is” (Hart 29-30).

Works Cited


要 旨

トニー・クシュナーの『エンジェルズ・イン・アメリカ』は、第一部「至福千年紀が近づく」と第二部「ベレストロイカ」双方の副題「国家的テーマに関するガイ・ファンタジア」を探求し、エイズというメタファーを通して、アメリカと世界の壮大な歴史と記憶を交差させる試みである。いかければ、『エンジェルズ』は、ジェンダー化・人種化・セクシュアリティ化された（アメリカの）ネイション・身体・シティズンショップの表象について問題提起することで、「世界的体制を新たにする」ためにアイデンティティの脱中心化や脱構築化を図ることと挑むクィア・ファンタジーといえよう。本稿では、作品がどのように「アメリカ」を行為遂行し、世界を再想像するのかという観点から検証し、「21世紀における新たなシティズンショップ」のありようにを提示していることを明らかにする。