Grace McGuire

Professor Clark

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Identity, Hierarchy, and Solidarity in *Angels in America*

Poststructuralist queer thought interrogates the significance and necessity of identifying labels in interpersonal practice. In his essay "Queer Theory and Sociology: Locating the Subject and the Self in Sexuality Studies," Adam Isaiah Green interprets the more recent divergence of queer theory from its constructionist origins. He divides them into two major strains: radical deconstructionism and radical subversion. Respectively, these branches "dismantle otherwise intelligible readings of sexual orientation" and "locate nonheteronormative … practices as crucial sites of resistance" (Green 28). Together, these queered approaches to poststructuralism "aim to 'denaturalize' dominant social classifications and … destabilize the social order" (Green 28). The identity classifications articulated in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* guide its social cosmology. Whiteness, straightness, and masculinity consolidate power by subjugating the people who exist in the margins. The presence of disease in this hierarchy ultimately destabilizes the social order. It disconnects Roy from his vision of invulnerability and renders him a subject to the will of the gay community; it affirms the value of Belize's independence in the face of interpersonal and global strife and dignifies his fantasies of justice. In an era of crisis, disease strips away the power behind identity categories and testifies to the self-determination offered by queer solidarity.

Kushner relies on the performance of identity categories to deconstruct the components of normative social hierarchy and the privilege it affords those who fit its standards. In his essay

"When Girls Collide: Considering Race in *Angels in America,*" Framji Minwalla argues that race is the defining identity category of the play, "[taking] under its umbrella such diverse identities as the Jewishness of Roy Cohn and the WASPiness of Prior Walter" (Minwalla 104). Kushner articulates a racialized and gendered social hierarchy that depends upon race to function. Though race, and further, ethinicity, underpin the othering of non-white, non-masculine people, "definitions of gayness [complicate]" the applications of disempowerment (Minwalla 107). More than behavior, the dominant social hierarchy values the perception rendered under the subject position. Ki Namaste, writing for *Sociological Theory*, emphasizes that "subjects are embedded in a complex network of social relations" which prevents them from "[creating] themselves and their social worlds" (Namaste 224). Without any kind of agency, subjects are expected to play by the presupposed rules of these social networks. Attempts to subvert this lack of autonomy appear successful at times, as seen in Roy's explication of his "clout," or Belize's affected solitude, but neither of these characters can exist truly alone. Minwalla posits the two as "cultural opposites" in Kushner's narrative, who relate to hierarchical identity structures from completely different perspectives. Roy believes his connections fashion him a god of the legal world, but depends on the submission of the people in his network to preserve a presumption of omnipotence. As he finds himself disbarred and gravely ill, Roy's perceived social position becomes an empty signifier of what Minwalla describes as "a club that runs America" that Roy has committed to with his entire being (Minwalla 106).

As a wealthy white man who nominally passes as straight, Roy Cohn "epitomizes bigoted, closeted, white America" that subjugates "voices of difference," notably gay voices, for the sake of his own gain (Minwalla 107). Roy maintains this power through a heightened social standing that he refers to as "clout." This distinctive term conceptualizes Roy's manipulation of

the conventional hierarchy into a single word. He emphasizes that this privilege is completely removed from "who [he] fucks or who fucks [him]" (Kushner 46). By publicly performing a charade of dominant social categories, Roy can shirk the socialized perception of inferiority that accompanies his sexual behavior. His gayness is an open secret to his political affiliates, but because he's capable of ruining their lives with a few phone calls, Roy can situate himself firmly at the top of the social hierarchy. Through his "clout," Roy hides his habits in the safety of his access. He regularly verbally abuses people and manipulates them into tolerating it, because everyone around Roy knows that he has the power to easily ruin their lives. His "clout" acts as his shield against what should be the consequences of his actions.

The attitudes and behavior that define Roy's "clout" depend on several narcissistic traits. Most of the characters in *Angels in America* exhibit some degree of selfishness, but Roy's alternating pattern of egocentric and insecure behavior is excessive to the point of pathology. His status as a powerful lawyer with major political influence secures him the privilege to manipulate his affiliates and abuse those he views as inferior. Roy's narcissism is essential to reaching the top of his political cosmology. It is impossible to diagnose a fictional character with a mental illness, so this paper will make no claim that Roy has Narcissistic Personality Disorder. That being said, trait narcissism can be recognized through behavior alone. According to the DSM-5, a narcissist "has a grandiose sense of self-importance, [has] fantasies of unlimited success [and] power, believes that [they are] "special" and should only associate with other high-status people, requires excessive admiration, has a sense of entitlement, is interpersonally exploitative, lacks empathy, [and] shows arrogant behaviors and attitudes" (American Psychiatric Association). All of these characteristics constitute a power-hungry person who controls the people around them to

suit their own needs. Through his narcissistic behaviors, Roy constantly works to sustain a position in the dominant social category.

Roy's AIDS diagnosis reveals the threat that disease poses to his egotistical exterior. By subjugating his doctor, Henry, a man he views as inferior, Roy protects himself from the reality that this diagnosis is deadly serious. He warns Henry against explicitly identifying him with a stigmatized label, suspending Henry's entire livelihood above his head. Henry's fear is indicated explicitly by the stage directions, which read "*(Roy's too scary. He tries a different approach)*" (Kushner 43). Rather than relying on an identifying label to convey the severity of this diagnosis, which poses a threat to the safety of his interpersonal network, Henry reminds Roy of his pattern of sexual practices. Henry has been treating Roy long enough that there is no use pretending. Roy cannot operate with his usual instruments of control in the medical setting, as illness is capable of evading labels and destroying the subject they're applied to. He can only intimidate his doctor to give the public a mismatching diagnosis. No amount of "clout" can rid him of disease. Instead, Roy can only conceal it, resisting the social repercussions that accompany the label.

Stephen F. Kruger posits in his essay "Identity and Conversion in *Angels in America*" that Roy's rejection of gayness is enmeshed with his "disavowal of identity as a person with AIDS" (Kruger 152). Roy maintains his grandiosity by separating his identity and sexual behavior from the hierarchical implications of being labelled as gay. He tells Henry that a homosexual isn't a man who has sex with men, rather, a homosexual is someone "who knows nobody and nobody knows him" (Kushner 46). Roy explains that in his worldview, the label refers less to "who someone sleeps with" and more to "where they fit in the food chain," a lexical choice that shifts sexual behavior away from its relationship to social hierarchy (Kushner 46). To Roy, a

homosexual is an unidentified person, someone interchangeable and worthless, and therefore subhuman. He refuses to be associated in any capacity with gay people because of his perceived superiority. This narcissistic mindset reinforces Roy's attachment to social categories that shield him from the reality of his disease.

The term "masking" has many meanings in the field of psychology; in studies of trait narcissism, it is the behavior that separates a narcissist's public image from their innermost self. The narcissistic mask model "explains [a] narcissist's overinflated, positive self-views as a protective mask against deep-seated insecurities (Kuchynka and Bosson 89). Roy's mask, the image of invincibility he wields through social domination, slips somewhat after he's threatened with disbarment, and drops completely as his illness destroys him. Roy's "clout" relies on his narcissism to function, but cannot be used to prevent his degradation by disease.

While disease disintegrates Roy's perceived autonomy by destroying his capacity for social dominance, Belize's perceived autonomy is situated within his network of social connections, as Namaste suggests. Minwalla argues that Belize's function in the play is to connect everyone else as their lover, friend, and caretaker (Minwalla 104). The presupposition of dominant social classifications forces Belize to carry himself differently from his companions. As an effeminate Black gay man in the medical field, Belize is afforded less social access than his white counterparts. His navigation of the subject position is obviously informed by these identifying categories, but he carries himself with a firm conviction that refuses to waver in the margins of social hierarchy. Belize relies on his own perspective to resist being othered, but his identification is still embedded in his ties to social networks. His contribution to the gay community actualizes his perceived resistance to the subject position. Belize's aestheticized

conception of Heaven depends on the participation of his compatriots, envisioning a solidarity that overcomes the need for distinctive identity categories.

Belize's independence often manifests as a refusal to be ordered around. Though this impudence poses a risk to his safety as a Black man in a very white city, Belize's experience in this subject position allows him to gauge the risk of doing so. Belize challenges the authority of Roy's doctor by correcting him on the location of the oncology wing, Henry attempts to shift the balance of power back in his favor by telling Belize that Roy is "a very important man" (Kushner 149). He expects Belize to bow to his expectation and conceal the obvious deception that's taking place to protect both Henry's and Roy's reputations. Belize, of course, does the opposite of what he's told, and immediately calling Prior to gossip once Henry is out of the room. From his low-status position of nurse for a high-status man like Roy, Belize has the safety of invisibility to violate patient confidentiality that would not be afforded to him if he were considered an equal to Roy socially. While he is obligated by his job to support Roy as he gets sicker, Belize still keeps the interests of his community at heart by informing a close friend about a particularly homophobic tyrant contracting AIDS.

The first interaction between Roy and Belize subverts the presupposed hierarchy of race that Minwalla posits in "When Girls Collide." A simple change in backdrop forces Roy to abdicate his power to someone he considers functionally subhuman. Upon laying eyes on Belize, Roy immediately demands a white nurse on the basis of "[his] constitutional rights" (Kushner 151). Belize counters by telling Roy that as a patient in a hospital, he doesn't have any rights. He establishes right off the bat that Roy is no longer on his own turf, and has to play by a different set of rules than the one he's used to. Belize maintains his convictions by refusing to give in to Roy's attempts at intimidation and defends himself against Roy's abuse by arming himself with

the decision to keep Roy alive or kill him. Before Belize even begins treating him, Roy threatens his nurse with a lawsuit. Belize retaliates with a threat of his own, one that is grounded in the very real possibility of Roy's death. His ability to "make [the IV] feel like [he] just hooked [him] up to a bag of Liquid Drano" speaks to the expertise Belize has developed through his career as a nurse (Kushner 151). Roy depends on his connections to other people to disempower Belize, but Belize has the capability to end Roy's life on his own right then and there. Roy realizes the plausibility of this threat and capitulates to Belize, who then puts the needle in Roy's arm with ease. The stage directions, as well, indicate that Roy is "*impressed*" by Belize's skills but "*doesn't show it*" (Kushner 151). At the start of his disease, Roy refuses to abandon his mask, even when it would benefit him.

Belize eventually decides to help Roy once he feels that he's doing it of his own will. After listening to Roy disempower himself by recounting his case of pubic lice, Belize chooses on a whim to offer Roy medical advice that might extend his life. This is a piece of wisdom that could only come from being a nurse at the peak of the AIDS crisis. When Roy questions Belize's motives, he encourages Roy to "[c]onsider it solidarity. One faggot to another," (Kushner 155). Belize takes the chance to knock Roy down a peg by labeling Roy with the very derogatory term he spent his whole career trying to avoid. Belizeknows, too, that he can get away with it because as Roy's nurse, his verbal assault on Roy has the possibility of turning lethal. Even as Belize leaves the room, Roy shouts more threats and racist slurs after him, like a child throwing a temper tantrum. In spite of his burned ego, Roy takes Belize's advice seriously, ensuring that he gets more of the AZT medication that might keep him alive. Roy is aware that Belize's expertise exceeds that of his "very qualified, very expensive WASP doctor," who is incapable of treating AIDS because, unlike Belize, he isn't queer (Kushner 154). While he only does this to protect

himself, Roy concedes to the incompetence of his politically normative doctor on the subject and accepts that relenting to the agency of queer people might very well save his life.

Belize gains physical and mental superiority over Roy as he becomes sicker and less cogent. He's completely aware of what Roy is going through because he's seen it before in a number of his patients. Belize watches Roy experience extreme seizures and hallucinations and tells the barely present lawyer that he nearly feels sorry for him (Kushner 216). He has the power to pity Roy from his status as a caretaker for the dying lawyer, but refuses to give it to him out of his own convictions. Even Roy knows that being pitied is the lowest form of subjugation and rejects the idea entirely, calling it "repulsive" (Kushner 216). Roy resists Belize's belittling words, but has given up on trying to fight back. He's too weak to strike fear in anyone anymore, but still tries to shield himself from insults with what remains of his ego.

Because he spent his entire life hiding his insecurities behind a narcissistic mask, Roy has no self-sufficiency to dignify him as he begins to die. His previously elite status is rendered absolutely meaningless as he loses agency over his own body and mind and can't control the people around him anymore. In his final scene, Roy taunts the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg by manipulating her into singing for him through a feigned hallucation. The song she chooses to sing is a traditional Russian Jewish folk song, Tumbalaika. Ethel stops before getting to the last line of the song, which reads "Der toyt iz biter, biterer vi gal" in the original Yiddish. An English translation of this line would be "Death is bitter, more bitter than gall," which might have served as a warning message to Roy that his impudence will still crumble in the face of death (Accordeonworld). Even when Ethel offers him grace in his last moments, a gesture that Roy does not deserve, he refuses to let her dignify him, instead choosing to clutch at his ego on his way off the mortal coil.

Performing the Kaddish for Roy allows Belize the agency to "[clear] a path for Roy's redemption (Minwalla). Belize saw Roy through the last moments of his life and got to truly know the insecure man beneath his tyrannical narcissistic mask. He gains a level of respect for Roy that would have been unthinkable at their first meeting. For Belize, having Louis perform the Kaddish for Roy is an act of peace that dignifies him in death when he refused to pity him in life. Belize only takes Roy's AZT after "lend[ing] him a modicum of humanity" and grieving him as another gay man lost to the AIDS crisis (Minwalla). In death, Roy has no say over how he's mourned or who mourns him. While Roy would be absolutely infuriated to watch this scene play out, Belize remains alive, which affords him the position to posthumously incorporate Roy into the gay community. By releasing Roy's spirit from his misdeeds with the appropriate religious ceremony, Belize feels absolved in taking Roy's possessions to save the living AIDS patients. The Kaddish scene speaks to Belize's commitment to a solidarity that rejects the obligations of social classification in favor of personal agency.

Belize's depiction of Heaven is significant for its visual and social implications, which divert entirely from the hierarchy of power and normativity that he has spent his entire life negotiating. Visually, "flowering weeds" and "piles of trash, but lapidary like ruby and obsidian" comprise Belize's Heaven (Kushner 222). Its citizens spend their days partying in "big dance palaces full of music and lights and racial impurity and gender confusion" (Kushner 222). The blurring of boundaries and negation of labels furthers the idealism of Belize's dream. Echoing Green, Belize's Heaven can be conceived as a "site of resistance" where his community can thrive after the conquering of dominant social categories.

This fictional city is watched over by "Creole and mulatto [deities], brown as the mouths of rivers" who repudiate the erroneously Eurocentric image of white Jesus (Kushner 223).

Whereas Roy might fashion himself Godlike for the sake of his grandiosity, Belize envisions gods that resemble him to actualize a cosmology unbound from the white gaze. Belize finishes off the description by stating that in his Heaven, "race, taste, and history finally overcome" (Kushner 223). Belize's phrasing implicitly nods to America's colonial foundation, but refuses to render his vision "idealistic and facile," as "Queer Form" suggests, by "[unmooring] it from history" (Amin et. al). His Heaven is a decolonized state, perhaps not explicitly a feasible America, but a sanctified beacon of liberation where "love and justice can finally meet" (Kushner 265). Interpreting this vision as an explicitly anti-racist queer heaven affirms the value of lives and identities that American social hierarchy willfully discards.

Angels is, after all, subtitled as "*A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*," which lends itself to portraying the imaginations of the marginalized with dignity. Belize envisions democracy for the afterlife, a place where people of all races and genders are represented justly. He never once mentions disease in this Heaven, but he does mention voting booths. Applications of equity, justice, and triumph underpin this vision. Though it exists only in death as of yet, the labor of Belize and his community members enables the potential for its real-life development. The fantasy of building this depiction of Heaven is decidedly not "the willful act of naivety" suggested in "Queer Form," as Belize's actions directly constitute the "[resistance against] political surrender" that queer worldbuilding depends upon (Amin et. al). In the Epilogue, Prior sermonizes directly to the audience, ensuring to them that those who remain alive after the AIDS crisis "will be citizens," prophetically implying the impending existence of a queer world that resembles Belize's portrait of Heaven (Kushner 290). By offering this image, a space inhabited by amorphous jubilant masses, through the lens of Belize, Kushner "uses categories defined by race and gender to move beyond a politics of identity to a politics of citizenship" (Minwalla

105). The disintegration of identifying labels in favor of authentic expressions of ambiguity provokes the audience to envision an America that is in our line of sight but lies just beyond our grasp.

Considering *Angels in America* through a poststructuralist lens exemplifies the malleability of dominant social categories in a time of crisis. In Kushner's American fantasia, reckoning with disease lifts the veil off of each of its characters, betraying the dignity of labels to portray their true natures. Disease offers Belize the chance to willfully disempower an increasingly ill Roy, but after seeing the weak, insecure man beneath his mask of sociopolitical omnipotence, he chooses to mourn Roy as a compatriot of the gay community. Labors of interdependence embody the tools to develop Kushner's vision of a queer future that resists normative categories in favor of collective solidarity.

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