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AIDS, Nonhuman Animal Imagery and Extinction in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*

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This article analyzes the rhetorical significance of nonhuman animal Otherness in Tony Kushner's landmark two-part play *Angels in America*, which premiered in 1991 and 1992, respectively, and ambitiously explored (national) identity politics through the depiction of the AIDS crisis during the Reagan administration. Nonhuman animals appear in the text in multiple instances, articulating a rhetorical space of interspecies encounters at the center of which stands humans' assimilation of time and the bodily experience. This study examines such spaces and imagery in order to, on the one hand, describe Kushner's creative approach to nonhuman animals in the play and, on the other, shed some light on the exegetical possibilities that a serious consideration of nonhuman Otherness might entail. Drawing on animal studies scholarship, emphasis is placed on the ethical and historical significance that other species had in the AIDS epidemic and in the context of postmodernity—a role that has been largely overlooked by critics of the play. Although Kushner's anthropocentric scope is undeniable, the AIDS crisis prompts discussions on interspecies encounters that implicate nonhuman animals at a scientific, cultural and ethical level. By re-historicizing nonhuman animals as agents and victims of (human) disease, we may better reassert their position as subjects worthy of moral consideration and explore how the rhetoric of illness can broaden its scope to include other species' subjectivities and experience.

Keywords: Tony Kushner; *Angels in America*; nonhuman animals; AIDS; extinction; interspecies encounters

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El sida, la imaginería animal no humana y la extinción en *Angels in America* de Tony Kushner

El presente artículo analiza el concepto de Otredad animal no humana en tanto que recurso retórico sustantivo de la emblemática obra teatral en dos partes de Tony Kushner, *Ángeles en América*, estrenada respectivamente en 1991 y 1992, y cuyo eje principal radicaba en la cartografía de las políticas identitarias (nacionales) en el marco de la crisis del sida durante la administración Reagan. En el texto teatral, los animales no humanos cobran presencia de manera reiterada configurando un espacio retórico de encuentro entre especies en cuyo centro se ancla la asimilación del tiempo y de la experiencia corporal por parte del humano. Estos espacios e imágenes son estudiados con dos propósitos: primeramente, con el fin de describir el acercamiento creativo de Kushner a los animales no humanos en la obra; en segundo lugar, para mostrar las posibilidades interpretativas que derivarían de una consideración responsable de la Otredad no humana. Haciendo uso de una metodología de análisis derivada de los Estudios Animales, se enfatiza la dimensión ética e histórica que otras especies cobraron durante la epidemia del sida y en el contexto de la postmodernidad—una presencia que los críticos de la obra han, en su mayoría, ignorado. Si bien el enfoque antropocéntrico de Kushner es innegable, la crisis del sida precipita la consideración de un encuentro entre especies que rastree la integración de animales no humanos a nivel científico, cultural y ético. Por medio de la re-historización de los animales no humanos como agentes y víctimas de la enfermedad (humana), resulta posible reconocerlos más fácilmente como sujetos de consideración moral y continuar expandiendo el campo de la retórica de la enfermedad con el fin de incluir la experiencia y subjetividad de otras especies.

Palabras clave: Tony Kushner; *Ángeles en América*; animales no humanos; sida; extinción; encuentros entre especies

In the fourth act of *Perestroika*, the second part of Tony Kushner's Pulitzer and Tony Award-winning *Angels in America* (1991, 1992), the AIDS-stricken character of Prior shows his new Mormon acquaintance, Hannah, the Kaposi's sarcoma lesions on his torso. "See? That's not human. That's why I run. Wouldn't you? Wouldn't anybody," he laments. "It's a cancer. Nothing more. Nothing more human than that," Hannah responds (Kushner 2007, 237). Although Hannah has only just defined herself as a person who lacks pity for others—or perhaps precisely because of this—her remark sounds consolatory, as it anchors the terrified Prior back in the domain of humanity, momentarily extirpating him from the liminality of the corporeal, mental and social spaces he has been inhabiting since his diagnosis. At the same time, this remark reaffirms the play's overall thematic concern with all things human. Kushner's characteristically postmodern ambition affectively and effectively connects AIDS with mythical time,

history, national politics, gendered identities, religion and environmental crises. Tellingly subtitled *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, the two-part play finds in the historicized and discursive construction of AIDS during the Reagan administration the perfect means through which to establish metaphors and conceits to flesh out the human—and, more specifically, American experience, and through which, in the utopian tradition, to envision a new era of equal citizenry where homosexuality and infection will no longer be synonymous with shame, secrecy and marginality.

However, critical responses have for the most part missed or at best glossed over the extent to which the play's textual and performative compulsion towards the human is dependent on nonhuman animal imagery and the wide array of rhetorical possibilities this affords. This is not a surprising move, of course—in a work that, as David Savran contends, clings to binarisms to fuel energetic and ideologically-loaded dialogues, the ambivalence posed by a preoccupation with the historical can only function through the opposition of units. And rather frequently, ambivalence itself dissolves given the hierarchical and asymmetrical relationship between units, favoring communitarianism over individualism, progress over stasis, etc. (Savran 1995, 215). Following anthropocentric conventions, to carve out what it means to be specifically human, one needs to instrumentalize and rhetorize the opposite—the millions of species caged in the enclave of *the animal*. Kushner actively engages in this activity in both *Millennium Approaches* (1991) and *Perestroika* (1992), as animal-related symbolism defines and enhances representations of the human body and mind.

The aim of this article is to examine the play's textual rhetorizing of nonhuman Others and Otherness in order to explore how discourses of species inform the individual and collective experience of a much-historicized representation of AIDS. I draw on Arthur Kleinman's (1988) distinction between disease, illness and sickness so as to prompt discussions on the essential role that nonhuman animals played in the AIDS epidemic. This allows us to highlight the play's multiple textual interspecies encounters where, despite their potent rhetorical presence, nonhuman animals are deprived of moral status, historical significance and meaningful death. Far from arguing that they were ever, for Kushner, anything other than an instrument to further his interest in the human, I nonetheless consider that their fragmented absences and presences constitute innovative and holistic ways through which to continue interrogating narratives of illnesses and of AIDS in particular. These patterns suggest that a re-historization of nonhumans within experiences of illnesses may not only be an aesthetic exercise—through the foregrounding of imagery and tropes—but perhaps also an ethical one.

1. On the Perceived "Humanness" of AIDS

Arthur Kleinman's oft-cited *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition* (1988) describes the triad of illness, disease and sickness, which is a helpful starting point from which to approach the experiential complexities that are a part of human bodily ailments. Illness refers to the (everyday) "innately human experience"

(Kleinman 1988, 3) of suffering, coping, adjusting and living with symptoms and disability—an experience endured by the sick person, but which also affects family members and their immediate social circle. The patterning of how illness is to be responded to, Kleinman adds, is determined by cultural conventions whereby individual experiences are negotiated (5). Disease, on the other hand, is the problem as understood, analyzed and approached by the practitioner or healer, whose response to the alteration is shaped by their training and theoretical expertise and is reflected in discourses rooted in nosology. Disease may be tackled through narrow biomedical models that only focus on the biological disruption, or through biopsychosocial models that also take into account psychological states and environmental situations (6). Lastly, sickness emerges as a construct resulting from the meanings, associations and practices that the wider sociopolitical and cultural contexts fabricate. Sickness refers to "a disorder in its generic sense across a population in relation to macrosocial (economic, political, institutional) forces" (6). Illness is reconfigured as a disease by practitioners and can also be extrapolated into sickness, becoming "a reflection of political oppression, economic deprivation, and other social sources of human misery" (6).

Angels explores these different configurations of AIDS through a series of lead characters made up mostly of homosexual men from a variety of religious and/or ethnic backgrounds that are the mouthpieces of a range of political views. Set in mid-1980s New York City in a climate of presidential indifference to and disregard of the AIDS epidemic, the play follows the breakup of two couples whose paths cross and collide at different levels, a junction often technically evinced by Kushner's split scenes technique. Unable to cope with the manifestation of severe physical symptoms and deterioration, Louis Ironson, a Jewish liberal, abandons his thirty-year-old WASP lover Prior Walter, who has been infected with AIDS. In the meantime, a married Mormon couple begins to disintegrate as it becomes harder for Joe Pitt, the husband, to deny and quell his homosexuality, precipitating his wife Harper into the escapism of pill-popping and hallucinations. As a clerk for a conservative judge in the U.S. Court of Appeals Second Circuit, Joe is mentored by Roy Cohn, a ruthless conservative prosecutor based on the actual historical figure who was the right-hand of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s. Also a closeted homosexual and afflicted with AIDS, Roy's profound understanding of its implications as a sickness lead him to disguise his diagnosis under the un-stigmatizing label of liver cancer. In a conversation between Roy and Henry, his "very qualified, very expensive WASP doctor" (Kushner 2007, 160), Kushner delivers one of the most poignant dialogues of the play revolving around the fabrication of AIDS as an illness and a sickness, whereupon Roy reworks the arbitrary semiotics of terms such as "AIDS" and "homosexual," thus empowering himself as a "label maker" (King 2008, 92-93). Other leading characters include Belize, an African American ex-drag queen who reluctantly tends to Roy as his nurse and is also a close friend of Prior's; the already-mentioned Hannah Pitt, who moves from Utah when her son Joe reveals that he is gay; and the hermaphroditic Angel, desirous of leading Prior to his

destiny as a prophet. Throughout *Millennium Approaches*, the annunciation of the arrival of a messenger torments an ailing Prior, who hears voices and is even visited by the ghosts of his ancestors. *Millennium* ends with the arrival of this messenger, the Angel, who believes Prior to be the prophet that will make humankind cease their constant movement and progress in order to bring an absentee God back to Heaven, which He had abandoned after becoming disillusioned by His worldly and angelic creations.

Although Prior and Roy never share a scene, they parallel one another as the bearers of the "plague" (Kushner 2007, 264): the medical descriptions of their symptoms—informed by Henry, Belize and Prior's nurse, Emily—and the graphic performances of bodily pain texturize the conception of AIDS as a disease. Yet these descriptions from medical professionals are often inseparable from the conception of AIDS as an illness or sickness. Ramsby, for instance, notes how "Henry, indicative of rich, white, conservative America, adopts the attack metaphor" (2014, 408) when describing how little is known about how the virus is contracted and how it acts. This view is consistent with Daryl Ogden's (2000) brilliant study on how the Cold War rhetoric that separates "them" from "us" infiltrates the dialogues of the characters in *Angels*, showing how various medical practitioners inoculate their words with connotations reminiscent of political and ideological beliefs that are more attuned to the artifices of illness and sickness. Ultimately, the discursive blurring of the boundaries between disease, illness and sickness emerges as another scaffold for the play to continue scaling in its allegorizing of AIDS, Americanness and humanity at large. The play forces us "to recognize disturbing symptoms of the larger culture's inauthentic response to suffering, calling on us to replace indifference with the traditional principle of compassion" (Omer-Sherman 2007, 11). However, this compassion seems directed only towards the human Other. As Kushner dissolves AIDS as a disease into AIDS as an illness and sickness, he grounds symptomatology in historical and cultural artifices of human identity politics, and this exclusivist focus fails to address the wider connections between humans and nonhuman animals.

These centripetal, anthropocentric forces beg the question: Why care at all about nonhuman animals in a play that revolves around the human condition and human understanding of their place in time and in history? Why include nonhuman animals in the spectrum of existence that *Angels* presents through its depiction of suffering human bodies and souls? After all, from the perspective of Medical Humanities, "what the arts in their various forms address are the perennial questions about being alive, becoming sick and dying" (Pilgrim 2016, 440) as a human being. However, what this study argues is that despite Kushner's primary focus on the human as a historicized, political subject and as vulnerable matter, the presence of nonhuman animals in the complex history and discourses upon which AIDS was constructed both biologically and culturally cannot be fully overlooked, and must in fact become integrated into our more comprehensive understanding of medical conditions at large. How disease, illness and sickness are negotiated when it comes to interspecies encounters is very revealing of

how cultures and institutions classify forms of contact and intercorporeality. Some forms of contact are considered acceptable as long as hygiene is guaranteed or the nonhuman other serves a therapeutic purpose. Other forms are regarded as necessary, such as the manipulation of nonhuman animals for testing and experimentation. A third category involves unethical or undesirable forms of contact, such as bestiality, the consumption of improperly monitored and inspected animal products, unsanitary pet maintenance, pests and infestations, etc. As Dominik Ohrem is careful to point out, encounters between humans and nonhuman animals do not necessarily give rise to constructive animal ethics and politics that take nonhuman animal subjectivity into account, and can in fact lead straight back to objectification. Such is the "frustrating ambivalence of the event of encounter" (Ohrem 2018, 11) that problematizes interspecies relationships, and that is echoed in explorations of what to make of the nonhuman animal in the context of disease, illness and sickness.

Broadening humanistic approaches to medicine and medical conditions in order to include nonhuman animals in our scholarly critique seems timely enough given their unavoidable presence in our current (re)constructions of how the COVID pandemic has come to pass. It is true that, for the most part, public discussions on the ethical implications of COVID control and monitoring—from lockdown and the manufacturing of a vaccine to the allegorizing of the virus through war rhetoric, much like the character of Henry does when explaining the AIDS virus to Roy—revolved around the threat of abusive biopolitical power exercised by governments. Even early on in the outbreak, heated disputes in the field of philosophy evinced the insidious terror of biopolitics when Giorgio Agamben's online dismissal of COVID as an invented epidemic that could grant unlimited and unmediated political control over citizens was met with harsh—and even ageist—backlash from the academic community (van den Berge 2020, 3-4).

Although to a lesser extent, the COVID pandemic has, however, also reignited discussions about the ethical implications behind interspecies encounters. Not only has the zoonotic origin of the disease—that is, the transmission from nonhuman animal species to humans—once again reminded us of our close connections with animal Others, but has also precipitated cultural and ethical revisionism about how we consume them through ingestion, trafficking, extermination and entertainment and how we manipulate them to make them mean something in anthropocentric societies worldwide. From critical standpoints against wet markets (Singer and Cavalieri 2020; Bassey and Eyo 2020) and their connections to wider, universal practices based on the commodification of nonhuman animals for food (Benatar 2020), to our fascination with the visual and material significance of wildlife during lockdown (Alonso-Recarte 2022), the opportunity to revisit the biological and medical implications of interspecies encounters has forced itself upon us. In this same line, scholars such as the renowned Jane Desmond (2020) and Michael Lundblad (2020) have called for a re-examination of the scope of the field of Medical Humanities in order to encompass our biological

and cultural relationships with nonhuman animals. This demand seems reasonable: when considering AIDS, for example, a quick overview of certain medical literature on the disease reveals the tendency to refer to nonhuman animals only insofar as them being useful specimens and models to advance the research (Hatziiannou and Evans 2012; "AIDS and HIV" 2021). However, there is little academic output that integrates nonhuman animals into AIDS discourses of illness and sickness, despite solid theories on the original zoonotic transmission and the millions of nonhuman primates and mice used for research. This sheds a new interpretative light on Prior's final, uplifting prophecy at the end of *Perestroika*, "We won't die secret deaths anymore" (Kushner 2007, 280), as nonhuman animals account for a significant portion of the silenced lives sacrificed in the AIDS crisis. The blatant tendency to exclude nonhuman animals from the moral community prioritized by medical practice at the same time as them being materially indispensable for research is, of course, ethically problematic, and irreparably paradoxical: "The researchers are caught in a logical trap: in order to defend the usefulness of the research, they have to emphasize the similarities between the animals and the humans; but in order to defend it ethically, they must emphasize the differences. The problem is that one cannot have it both ways" (Rachels 1990, 220).

This paradox can be extrapolated into other ways that instrumentalize nonhuman animals. Indeed, nonhuman animals have not only been essential in the history of medicine—because of zoonosis, experimentation and testing, or their use in various types of therapies or assistance with disabilities—they also inadvertently contribute to the cornucopia of metaphors, metonymies, similes and tropes through which we attempt to extract meaning out of disease, shifting into discourses of illness and sickness. This imaginary "biodiversity" through which to explore pathology helps to expand discursive spaces: it is not just the ill body that becomes redefined as host of the disease, but also the society or culture that such "abnormal" bodies occupy and move within. Infectious and contagious diseases, in particular, have made processes of signification impossible to control and contain within the ill body as the sole referent, and have exposed the links that, for all the anthropocentric armory, continue to bind the human to the environment and to nonhuman Otherness.

The AIDS crisis was, in the words of Susan Sontag, "evidence of a world in which nothing important is regional, local, limited; in which everything that can circulate does, and every problem is, or is destined to become, worldwide" ([1988] 2002, 177-178). There is an active denunciation on the part of Kushner against the conservative political strategy to silence and make pariahs of AIDS patients and the gay community at large. AIDS in the 1980s was not only a death sentence in biological terms; the annihilation of the self began culturally and institutionally, and pointed in the direction of an eradication of queer counterculture. As Nicole Seymour suggests, the "(mis) diagnosis of queerness and AIDS, or queerness *as* AIDS" (2013, 81) was fueled in the 1980s by public policies and institutions that contributed to the classification of bodies as safe—white, heteronormative—and unsafe—queer, non-white, poor. To expand this

public, national experience of illness and sickness, nonhuman animals are also cast as the vectors that further pollute, through zoonosis, the "dirty" homosexual body. As Andil Gosine suggests, in Western cultures the male homosexual body is configured in public discourses as the symbolic host of a contaminant or pathogen that threatens the health of the environment (2010, 149), which is measured by heteronormative ideologies of purity and pristineness. As a toxic entity that sickens the natural spaces where gay sexual intercourse is carried out—note, for instance, a reading along such lines with respect to Central Park in *Angels*—the homosexual male body is perceived as filthy and as an obvious site of degeneracy caused by objectionable interspecies encounters.

Though in the play there is no explicit mention of the hypothetical zoonotic origin of AIDS, other diseases with which it is meant to resonate as a plague do emphasize such biological aspects, as well as undesirable forms of interspecies contact. The ghosts of Prior's ancestors, Prior 1 and Prior 2, assume that they have been chosen to appear before him to anticipate the Angel's visitation because of the "mortal affinities" (Kushner 2007, 93) they share, as they too died from "the pestilence," the "spotty monster" (92). "Fleas on rats," Prior 1 explains, "but who knew that?" (93). In the following scene, upon being physically examined by Emily, Prior relates the recent death of a friend from bird tuberculosis (103) and his fear of becoming contaminated himself. This avian image that becomes incrusted in Prior's subconscious resurfaces when in his pure terror at the sound of the beating wings of the nearing Angel, he panics: "What is that, like birds or something, like a *really* big bird, I'm frightened" (123; italics in the original). For Prior, bird imagery initially emerges as a site upon which to allocate the horror of AIDS and the end of his time. But after he overcomes his fear and wrestles the Angel, his discourse shifts in a somewhat ambivalent manner. When he climbs up to Heaven, he meets the six other angels who, along with the one he has wrestled, represent different geographical parts of the world and call themselves the Continental Principalities. Prior's verbal exchange with them situates the teleological longing to subsist, to survive and carry on in the face of adversity within the notion of historical progress. "We can't just stop," he explains. "We're not rocks—progress, migration, motion is… modernity. It's *animate*, it's what living things do. We desire. Even if all we desire is stillness, it's still desire *for*" (263-64; italics in the original). Here Kushner represents a constructive, sympathetic relationship between humans and nonhuman animals in the play, and he does so in the context of endorsing progress as a healing force in history. The shared survival instincts that are "just the animal" part of being, and that materialize as "a habit" and an "addiction to being alive" (267), acknowledge a communal desire for life shared by all "living things" (264): the dichotomy becomes one between animate/inanimate, whereupon the animate may unite the human and the nonhuman animal. At the same time that this compelling exposition is laid out for the angels and the audience, however, the one nonhuman animal species that Prior does actually name is the fly, one of the most common disease-transmitting "pests" and a clear symbol of bodily decay towards death: "You see [people] living anyway.

When they're more spirit than body, more sores than skin, when they're burned and in agony, when flies lay eggs in the corners of the eyes of their children, they live" (266-67), Prior argues. Prior's final, prophetic speech before the angels, therefore, condenses animality and then pulls it in two opposite directions, thereby following Savran's (1995, 209) predication of "ambivalence" as the "watchword" for analyzing the play. Kushner's instrumentalization of nonhuman animal imagery, in this sense, follows Boria Sax's premise that humans experience nonhuman animals as "traditions" where species-specific scientific concerns such as biology, physiology, ethology and habitat are juxtaposed and negotiated alongside the symbolic and rhetorical potential that such species—a frail and somewhat arbitrary category itself—arouse in different forms of storytelling (2001, x-xi). The biological threat of zoonosis mirrors the cultural meanings associated with "pests" such as fleas, rats, flies and city birds, fleshing out different "traditions" in Prior's mental landscape as he struggles to cope with AIDS as disease and illness.

Prior's counterpart, Roy, has an alternative take on interspecies contact right from the start. In the second scene of the third act of *Perestroika*, multiple rhetorical uses of nonhuman animals abound—tossed around as racial slurs, fantastic creatures, etc.—in an evocative display of how, as Joan Dunayer (1995; 2001) has long argued, speciesist lexicons both reflect and fuel racist and sexist discourses. Roy threatens to bite Belize, claiming he has got rabies (Kushner 2007, 188), and he later calls Ethel Rosenberg a "bloodsucking old bat" (191). In Roy's highly aggressive understanding of political survivalism, discursive fragments related to zoonosis, hunting, feeding, parasitism and scavenging are coherently assembled. This perspective allows him to confront AIDS for what it is: "It knows itself," he says to Belize. "It's harder to kill something if it knows what it is. Like pubic lice" (158). He goes on as follows: "I got some kind of super crabs from some kid once, it took twenty drenchings of Kwell and finally shaving to get rid of the little bastards. *Nothing* could kill them. And every time I had to itch I'd smile, because I learned to respect them, these unkillable crabs, because… I learned to identify. You know? Determined lowlife. Like me" (159; italics in the original). Nonhuman imagery seems to equip Roy with a philosophy with which to battle on against the disease—a disease that, one infers from the quote above, he has also learned to respect because it knows itself, despite all of his efforts to camouflage it under the euphemistic guise of liver cancer.

Whether in the case of Prior or Roy, the historical and biological precision of other species' diseases and behaviors frames a picture of human-nature ecology where nonhuman animals are entered as vermin, pests, parasites, and hosts of diseases in order to further inflame the perceived dirtiness of the sick, human (homosexual) body. Contrariwise, nonhuman animals' unconsented participation as test and research subjects used for the cleansing, treatment and recovery of bodies is overlooked—including their indispensability in the creation of AZT, the experimental drug that, however hazardous, ultimately seems to keep Prior alive for years to come. Nonhuman animals,

in other words, are part of the technology that Denis Flannery (2002/2003) regards as instrumental in fully understanding character development in *Angels.* Informed by the work of Donna Haraway, Flannery's posthuman analysis of the cyborg turns our attention to the multiple appearances and references to theatrical, communicational and medical technology that the play maps out and that establish the human/machine or body/machine dichotomy as central to Kushner's conception of AIDS and history. Flannery regards Roy's first appearance and his death as exemplary intersections between the human, the nonhuman animal and the machine. In both scenes, Roy expresses his desire to become an octopus while being attached to some form of technological device—first the telephone and then the hospital room equipment and IV. These insights prove useful for an understanding of the possible and plausible ways in which Kushner's humanity may, at best, be only categorizable as post- or trans-humanity. However, because nonhuman animal bodies are made textually present as external zoonotic threats and rendered absent as research subjects, their acknowledgement as an intrinsic part of that medical technology—and, more specifically, as its *victims*—remains overwhelmingly incomplete. Instead, Kushner resorts to an imagery, such as the octopus, whose mere presence trivializes the historical role that nonhuman animals have played as expendables in biomedical research.

2. Re-feathering the Angel of History

One way in which Kushner binds AIDS to a sense of history that is ambivalently structured both chronologically—linearly—and cyclically—given the reproduction of mythical and biblical patterns and stories—is through their common teleological drive towards destruction and annihilation. As often noted by scholars (Savran 1995, 210; Austin 1997, 35-36; Chambers-Letson 2012, 143-44), Kushner based his Angel on Walter Benjamin's 1940 essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History," which structurally gravitated around a central description of a painting by Paul Klee of the Angelus Novus. Benjamin describes this entity as being how one would imagine "the angel of history": a creature helplessly attempting to salvage the ravaged present to which he bears witness, and whose wings get caught up in a storm that "irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress" ([1968] 2007, 258).

The antithetical tension between Prior and the Angel that claims him as the prophet is based on a perceived opposition between progress and stasis. In one of the visitations, recounted by Prior to a bewildered and concerned Belize, the Angel commands him to "STOP MOVING! [...] Neither Mix nor Intermarry: Let Deep Roots Grow: If you do not MINGLE you will Cease to Progress [...] You cannot Understand, You can only Destroy, You do not Advance, You only Trample" (Kushner 2007, 178; capitals in the original). Despite his suffering, in the scene where he ascends to Heaven, Prior returns the book containing the prophecy that the Angel had tasked him with, as he cannot accept stagnation as the message to humanity, and he asks to be blessed with "more life"

(266). This willingness to fight for life parallels his exposition of the aforementioned inevitable movement and progress that motor history.

Kushner's ambivalence about progress—acknowledged as calamitous on the one hand, but as a beacon of hope for humanity on the other—implicates the environmental crisis that has over time given shape to what today we refer to as the Anthropocene, that is, the unofficial geological epoch marked by an excess of human activity that has drastically impacted ecosystems (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). Aside from Harper's ongoing apocalyptic concerns about holes in the ozone layer that make "birds go blind [and] icebergs melt" (Kushner 2007, 34), references to "terrible rains and showers of poison light" (24), "fancy lawyers" with "complicated cases" that include "environmental control" (73), "global warming" (150), "trash piling higher, day after day" (199), Chernobyl (261) and "wastage of Fossil Fuels" (262) pepper the text as scattered, uncanny displays of motifs that insert environmental destruction within Kushner's historization and politicization of AIDS. Sometimes these references emerge as an occasional comic retort that brings levity to an otherwise ominous predicament, such as when the Angel unearths the prophetic book from Prior's kitchen: "You cracked the refrigerator, you probably released a whole cloud of fluorocarbons, that's bad for the…," Prior hesitates, "the environment" (172). Indeed, the play grounds humans in planetary existence—and not merely a historical or mythical one—through its reliance on the "this-worldliness" of disease, zoonosis, ecocide and a devastated natural environment.

Furthermore, the type of human corporeality that Kushner pits against the natural world through interspecies encounters and environmental relationality cannot be detached from the social practices, institutions, politics and economies that contextualize such bodies and in which oppression and social inequality become visible. Disease and illness, to return to Kleinman, can be reconfigured into sickness. Grace King's (2019-2020) observations on how queer ecology challenges the heterosexism implicit in the ideologically conservative construction of both AIDS and environmental discourses explore how the motif of contamination and pollution can continue questioning (human) corporeal ontologies in the play.

Angels explores the nature/culture divide in ways that foment separation—as we have seen above, interspecies encounters with "pests" lead to infection—but also, ambivalently, in ways that demand connections between the health of the environment and justice. Nancy Tuana's metaphor of "viscous porosity" might be helpful here, as it addresses the need to reconceptualize interactions by "embracing an ontology that *rematerializes the social and takes seriously the agency of the natural*" (2008, 188; italics in the original). By understanding that subjecthood is determined by relationality, traditional Western ontologies based on dualisms are deconstructed. "[P]orosity is a hinge through which we are of and in the world," Tuana explains. "I refer to it as viscous, for there are membranes that effect the interactions. These membranes are of various types—skin and flesh, prejudgments and symbolic imaginaries, habits and embodiments" (199-

200). The emphasis that Kushner places on physiology goes hand in hand with the membranes that politically, socially and sexually connect the characters to each other and to the history and geography of America.

In her comments on Tuana's work, Stacy Alaimo notes how "viscous porosity" does not preclude accountability for the outcome of such material interactions, which may, in fact, have disastrous effects when nature is not taken seriously (2010, 15). Accountability is, actually, a form of responsibility that torments Louis at a personal level for having abandoned Prior and that he aggressively demands from Joe. Interestingly, one of the court decisions ghostwritten by Joe that Louis reprimands him for revolves around severe health hazards for children caused by a factory's discharge of air pollution. An enraged Louis points out to Joe how he found against the plaintiff mothers because allegedly "the Air and Water Protection Act doesn't protect *people*, but actually only *air and water*!" (Kushner 2007, 241; italics in the original). In her excellent reading of environmental justice in *Angels*, Katie Hogan centers the conversation around the manner by which poor and non-white communities, pushed as always into the liminal, become the victims of contaminated, detrimental environments. Hogan argues that Joe's legal decision, as a mirror of "Reagan-era legal rulings," puts "the conservation of pristine wilderness before the health and welfare of citizens" (2012, 9). This politically-equipped analysis goes to show the extent to which environmental management can be wielded as ideological weaponry. However, the polarized contraposition between the conservative, aestheticizing artifice of pristine American nature and the liberal, civil-rights concern for equality in terms of human safety against contamination, pulls the spotlight away from the grave consequences of environmental degradation on nonhuman animal inhabitants, also primary victims of the "progress" instigated by the Anthropocene.

In a similar manner, when Harper finally leaves Joe and flies to a new life in "heavenly" San Francisco, she relates a dream where the ozone layer is finally healed. The image is one of the bodies of human victims of the past forming, in their love and compassion and synergic sense of communal purpose, a gauze-like network to protect the planet:

> Souls were rising, from the earth far below, souls of the dead, of people who had perished, from famine, from war, from the plague, and they floated up, like skydivers in reverse, limbs all akimbo, wheeling and spinning. And the souls of these departed joined hands, clasped ankles and formed a web, a great net of souls, and the souls were three-atom oxygen molecules, of the stuff of ozone, and the outer rim absorbed them, and was repaired. (Kushner 2007, 275)

The hole in the ozone layer is an apt symbol for the gateway through which external viral or bacterial threats enter and infect the immunodeficient body, thus rounding Kushner's analogies of connectivity between AIDS and the environment. These hopeful

overtones spiriting the end of the play emphasize once again the centrality of human life and human death. Even though humans are the cause of environmental degradation and they account for just one species, the millions of nonhuman species that are the victims of the ecological crisis remain muted. The souls that rise are the souls of those who have suffered the catastrophes of history—a selection of agents which is consistent with what Stephanie Byttebier (2011) describes as the play's penchant for the representation of those who experience suffering and those who observe suffering, both of which lead to different levels of insight. In AIDS-related studies, mental suffering has also become a priority for the treatment of patients and a more complete understanding of their responses to their experience (Lestari and Carsita 2016).

However, suffering also presents a unique opportunity to trace the subjective, ontological and historical connections with nonhuman Otherness. The utilitarian approach to animal ethics, spearheaded by Australian philosopher Peter Singer ([1975] 1990) upon his reading and critical development of Jeremy Bentham, proclaims the capacity to suffer and to have an interest in one's own wellbeing as the nuclear ground on which to establish a moral consideration of those beings. Suffering is intrinsic to sentience, which is "more than the capacity to respond to stimuli; it is the capacity to have at least some *feelings*" (DeGrazia 2002, 18; italics in the original); that is, it refers to "the capacity of an individual organism to sense and feel things and to have subjective experiences of those sensations and feelings" (Calarco 2021, 121). Contrary to the beliefs imposed by Cartesian tradition, sentient nonhuman Others share the capacity to suffer by experiencing fear, terror, distress, uneasiness, discomfort and anxiety, among other negative emotions. Indeed, the field of animal ethics has greatly developed its arguments by emphasizing not just the physical, but also the mental state of nonhuman animals that are exploited and exterminated under the auspices of different anthropocentric industries. In an age in which mental health has gained considerable public attention and in which we are slowly being re-educated to discern the red flags that are symptomatic of a still undiagnosed troubled mind, focusing on the transversal character of interspecies subjectivity seems particularly pertinent. This could assist in the effort to conceive nonhuman animals not as metaphoric referents to verbalize and explain human suffering, but as subjectivities analogous to human sentience that contribute to a more holistic perception of the mind.

By omitting a substantial portion of the victims affected by the environmental crisis, *Angels* delivers an incomplete account of the biocide of the progress that hastens history, a portrayal that is consistent with the characters' overt reliance on nonhuman animal imagery to make sense of their own suffering and confusion brought on by their sexuality and disease. As a result, Kushner construes the human not as part of the biodiversity of the ecosystem he or she inhabits, but as the only subject worthy of moral consideration. For all of the play's ambivalence about progress and despite its exposure of the discourses that artificially construct illnesses, sicknesses and communal identities, the hierarchical human/animal binarism that is central to (Western) historiography remains, therefore,

stable. Erica Fudge discusses the complicated task of properly integrating nonhuman animals in history and historiography, exploring the differences between creating a history of animals and a history of attitudes towards animals (2002, 6). She adds that "animals are present in most Western cultures for practical use, and it is in *use*—in the material relation with the animal—that representation must be grounded" (7; italics in the original). It is the duty of the animal historian to acknowledge anthropocentrism and the implications of human dominion in order to decipher such types of use.

Angels is not a history per se, but its structural and thematic reliance on history and historization informs the textual spaces left to be occupied or absented by nonhuman animals. Not infrequently animal use, as an institutionalized practice, surfaces at different levels in the text. There are references to the lucrative business of anthropomorphizing nonhuman animals in the entertainment industry through an allusion to the musical *Cats* (Kushner 2007, 19); references to pets, which are objects of affective consumption (26-27); to the ancestral business of exporting whale oil and transporting European immigrants (47); and of course several uses of what Carol Adams calls "the absent referent" ([1990] 2010, 66-67)—that is, the nonhuman animals made absent in name and/or body when they are killed, dismembered, processed and consumed as food. The following are a handful of the instances in which food-related animal imagery embellishes character portrayals: as stated earlier, Roy first appears onstage quipping about wishing to be an octopus in order to multitask (Kushner 2007, 17) and taking a bite out of a liver sandwich (18); Roy transforms the disease of AIDS into a sickness by describing the sociopolitical hierarchy as a "food chain" and "pecking order" (51) determined by clout, and he later refers to politics as "bowel-movement and blood-red meat" (74); Joe chows down three hot dogs with Coke and Pepto-Bismol as Louis jokes about the sausage being made of "rat-poo and beetle legs" (76); Harper fantasizes about living off caribou fat in Antarctica (107) and fish caught by a misplaced Eskimo (108); a homeless woman in the Bronx that Hannah encounters rants in her insanity about slurping like an animal (110); a mannequin in the diorama room at the Mormon Visitor's Center envisions a promised land flowing with "milk and honey" (196), etc. All these and other similar signifiers that ultimately refer to the intake of food reinforce the play's organic focus on the human body—what it can consume, what it wants to consume, and what it is vulnerable to. Ramzi Fawaz's (2015) outstanding study on Kushner's rhetorical parallelisms between acts of ingestion associated with AIDS and the ailing health of the American body politic provides an in-depth perspective on how the digestive tract, organs, food, pills and medicaments are coherently and cohesively mapped out in *Angels.* His logic of metaphorical ingestion, however, ignores the origin of the object that is orally consumed. The sentient, nonhuman absent referent that precedes the edible component is not meaningfully integrated within the wider structure of ruthless capitalist survivalism that is integral to the Reagan years. Conversely, one could approach American history of oppression based on difference through what Jacques Derrida called 'carnophallogocentrism' (2008, 104; 1991, 113).

This schema situates hegemonic masculinity's subordination of Otherness in the orifice of the mouth—understood by Derrida as a site, a passage through which to ingest or produce the verbal language of domination—and provides a central exegetical point from which to reconstruct a history mapped by the cultural processing of consumables—a category that includes nonhuman animals alongside gendered, class-based or racialized human Others. A carnophallogocentric schema applied to the play thus connects the digestive consumption of nonhuman animal absent referents to their consumption as rhetorical devices, and to the manner in which human minorities are verbally objectified and denied subjecthood in discourses of extreme-right politics that aggressively correlate white heteronormative masculinity with nationhood.

3. "Come back, Little Sheba, come back": Disappearance and Extinction

An anti-speciesist revision of Kushner's postmodern treatment of history and historization not only involves a re-examination of the forms of nonhuman animal use depicted or naturalized in the play; in order to fully apprehend the implicit connections between nonhuman Otherness and the rippling effects of AIDS and its transhistorical metaphorization, attention must be paid to how the play's reliance on nonhuman imagery constitutes a form of use crafted through symbology, synecdoche and metonymy. In other words, beyond the textual and prop representations of nonhuman animals that are used and muted in the play as absent referents, we should also consider the operative paradox of the playwright: it is precisely through the extensive use of animal references and imagery that the nonhuman animal is rendered invisible. The disappearance of the nonhuman animal is significant in a play that is not only profoundly critical of the historical and institutionalized discrimination of non-normative communities—that is, communities that do not fit into the white heteropatriarchal system—but is also invested in the exploration of different types of temporal measurement—in the form of lifespans, teleological, geological, chronological, historical, mythical and biblical time—invoked by the experience of AIDS. The Angel describes humanity as being afflicted with the "Virus of TIME" (Kushner 2007, 175; capital letters in the original). AIDS in 1980s America, which is on the verge of the new millennium when "history is about to crack wide open" (118), insinuates a disquieting and chronic anxiety about disappearance that binds premature death by disease to a postmodern, apocalyptic crisis of time.

In line with the cultural unrest of modernity, John Berger describes nineteenth- and twentieth-century history as a progression marked by the disappearance of the animal—a train of developments that culminates with corporate capitalism. This gradual, yet relentless, disappearance is not only caused, geographically, by habitat destruction, growing urbanization and the relocation of nonhuman animals in modern Western private and public spaces, but also by a deterioration of the look exchanged between the human and the nonhuman subject. In the context of modern ideology, "animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance. They are

the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them. The more we know, the further away they are" (Berger [1980] 2009, 27). Berger regards zoos as the spatial epitome of this evanescence: they are sites of "enforced marginalization" that "constitute the living monument of their own disappearance" (36), where nonhuman animals "have been immunized to encounter" (37). The zoo is a viable metaphor for understanding other levels of nonhuman animal use: the artificial collection and blatant display of their bodies for humans to see and extract from them the significance of their own existence is a practice extended throughout the arts, including in Kushner's own phenomenal play. Almost nowhere in the "zoo" that is constitutive of the rhetorical depot of the characters' discourses can the nonhuman animal respond. There is little space for their inclusion as subjects affected by time, annihilation or extinction. For example, when Harper is immersed in what Mr. Lies, her hallucinated acquaintance, calls "the delicate ecology of [her] delusions" (Kushner 2007, 108), she imagines giving birth to "a baby covered with thick white fur" (109) with marsupial qualities. The thick white fur is obviously reminiscent of the harp seal pups that became the object of media attention in the late 1970s and early 1980s, especially thanks to the campaigns led by French actress Brigitte Bardot to publicly denounce the Canadian seal hunt. But in Harper's mindscape, I would argue, they do not function as indexes of their own dire situation as victims of a trade market, but as inhabitants of a "zoo" populated by "inmates" and other scattered signifiers that saturate the postmodern age of misinformation and "missing" information. They reinforce the uncanny sense of confusion that, much like ambivalence, remains hauntingly prevalent throughout the play.

Kushner's oneiric/hallucinatory/fantastic spaces where the human is posthumanized by virtue of the subject's ability to verbally and even physically interact with ghosts or metaphysical beings and to occupy a realm beyond that of the (healthy) human, remain territorially concerned for the humanoid and the anthropocentric. When it comes to the character of the Angel, for instance, her hermaphroditism—she is described by Prior as having "eight vaginas" (Kushner 2007, 174) and a "Bouquet of Phalli" (175)—has usually prompted discussions on gender politics. Verna A. Foster regards the Angel's androgyny as a reflection of her overall ambiguity, and her admonishments for stasis are countered by "*human beings* who can look forward to [the future] with courage and hope" (2002, 179; italics added). Similarly, Yair Lipshitz regards her hermaphroditism as a site that "transcends gender boundaries and sexual orientation" (2012, 216), a form of boundary blurring further accentuated by the fact that *Angels* relies on a limited number of actors that play different characters (218-19). But there is no mention of how this implicates the species divide. All in all, "the Angel is *humanity's* own bodily nature rendered ultimate" (Pederson 2009, 591; italics added). Along the same lines, Kushner does not seem inclined to put the Angel's wings in the service of a true interspecies form of "mingling," as they for the most part remain symbols that are referential to chimerical, biblical or nation-state imagery. Stage directions describe the sound the

Angel makes just before her wrestling bout with Prior as an "eagle screech" (Kushner 2007, 250), which is followed by a "chorus of voices" that come out of her mouth as she blazingly announces herself: "I I I I Am the CONTINENTAL PRINCIPALITY OF AMERICA, I I I I AM THE BIRD OF PREY" (251; capital letters in the original). The allusions to the bald eagle suggest a preoccupation with the historical and moral state of the nation; that is, the nonhuman animal is instrumentalized into a synecdoche in which parts such as the wings, the screeching and preying refer to a whole that is not the eagle itself as a species, but rather the embodiment of a nation and a national history. As Steve Baker contends in his study of postmodern animal iconography of nation states and national sentiment, "we are able to identify with 'our' animal symbol because we have been led to overlook its animality" ([1993] 2001, 43).

Considering the fact that *Angels* denounces the targeting and passive extermination of the homosexual community through sociopolitical public silencing and inaction against AIDS, and considering the fact that the play makes it a point to use the disease/illness/sickness triad as a link to the moral corruptness of a nation that profiles its expendables, the chance to fully extend the metaphor to the disappearance of endangered species and to the sixth mass extinction is unfortunately missed. Conversely, there exist productions and performances that straightforwardly tackle the issue of endangered species, the Anthropocene and mass extinction. These qualify as art that, in contrast to *Angels*, does integrate the nonhuman animal Other as a primary victim of the environmental crisis, rejecting an anthropocentric perspective on problems of a planetary magnitude. Renowned theater scholar Una Chaudhuri reclaims the importance of a "theater of species" as an ethically-informed form of staging based on interspecies and ecological connectivity (2017). The theater of species channels "geopathology"—that is, "the many problems related to *place*—as nation, homeland, neighborhood, environment, border—that largely defined the past century of dislocation"—into zoöpathology, defined as "a disease of the ties that bind humans to other animals" (Chaudhuri 2017, 154; italics in the original). In this sense, the disease-based term of zoonosis could be said to escalate, through the discursive transition into illness and sickness, into zoöpathology. In reference to the performance of climate change in the theater of species, Chaudhuri compellingly sums up the problem of endangered species as having "nowhere else to go" (153). Bringing these interpretative tools to *Angels*, I would further argue that having "nowhere to go" is not just a spatial problem, but also a temporal one. Extinction, in this sense, does not just mean disappearance from space, but also from time and history. In 1980s conservative America, there is no place in history for AIDS victims to go; they are destined to be the "secret deaths" against which Prior prophesizes the "Great Work" (Kushner 2007, 280) that is to begin. In this sense, the danger faced by the homosexual community and the danger faced by other species pushed into spatial and temporal extinction can provide a common ground from which to continue exploring a theater of species.

Kushner's "zoo," nonetheless, is comprised of not only endangered, physically exploited or edible nonhuman animals. It is interesting to note that Berger identifies

the modern custom of pet-keeping as the only way in which nonhuman animals, "instead of disappearing, continue to multiply" ([1980] 2009, 24). These demographic assertions, however, are not sustained in *Angels*, where companion nonhuman animals are also conspicuously absent in different ways. In the first scene in which we get a glimpse of the marital dynamics between Joe and Harper, their infantile reference to each other as "buddy" (Kushner 2007, 33), especially to appease one another, suggests a lack of sexual intimacy strategically disguised under an epithet that is commonly, though not exclusively, used as a term of endearment for pets. By the second scene of the first act of *Perestroika*, Harper is referring, from the depths of her hallucination, to her burning and irreparably frustrated sexual desire for her husband as follows: "There's your breasts, and your genitals, and they're amazingly stupid, like babies or faithful dogs, they don't get it, they just want him" (150). The absence of a real dog in the Pitt residence is symbolically reconfigured by Kushner into conventionalized owner-pet interspecies behaviors that characterize the sexless marriage.

More significantly, the play's only actual nonhuman animal "character" is a pet, and it is one that has disappeared. In the first scene to feature Louis and Prior, after Louis's grandmother's funeral, the couple discuss the disappearance of their cat, Little Sheba. There is an obvious allusion to William Inge's 1950 play, *Come Back, Little Sheba*, and its successful 1952 film adaptation starring Burt Lancaster and Shirley Booth, where the leitmotif of a middle-aged couple's missing dog symbolizes their grief for the past and the unbearable weight of the present and the future. Prior, at first half-jokingly, blames Louis for the disappearance because of his disregard of the cat's dignity and sense of identity: "I warned you, Louis. Names are important. Call an animal 'Little Sheba' and you can't expect it to stick around. Besides, it's a dog's name" (Kushner 2007, 26). Little Sheba is briefly presented as a confused creature with regards to her name, species and gender, as Louis also mistakenly believed her to be male. This confusion has presumably led to her departure, thus adding another layer to the themes of movement, migration, abandonment and exodus that so finely tie the play's conception of history with American and transatlantic spaces. Prior then uses the disappearance of Little Sheba to get to the topic of his AIDS diagnosis and break the news to Louis. Invoking the alleged clairvoyant talents of her species, Prior discloses that the cat knows that "something's wrong" (26), which has led her to abandon her home, an omen of the frightful future to come. With its lingering motifs of confusion and mythical animal imagery, Little Sheba's brief textual appearance by virtue of her disappearance somewhat foreshadows Belize's description of Heaven to Roy in *Perestroika*. Heaven is an urban space, much like San Francisco, the American mecca of gay culture. It is "overgrown with weeds, but flowering weeds," with "a gray sky full of ravens" that are "prophet birds" and is a place of miscegenation, of "racial impurity and gender confusion" (209). When Little Sheba does actually appear, it is in the context of Prior's dreamlike visit to Heaven, which spatially resembles Belize's own imaginary setting. Prior comes across Harper, who is playing with Little Sheba. Harper is immersed in her own valium-

induced hallucination, crossing paths once again with Prior in those "threshold[s] of revelation" (39), and the epiphany that the cat has somehow died rings true. When Little Sheba vanishes with Harper, Prior's original call for her to come back becomes a goodbye, indicating some sort of spiritual closure with the inevitability of time. Little Sheba's absence/appearance which encircles the play is, therefore, existentially bound to the very human mental process of coping—with loss, with time, with one's Thanatos and with the certainty of death. In true Heideggerian fashion, the cat's death is of no significance to herself: it is a mere death concluding a mere life that can only become meaningful through human aestheticization or exegesis: "In [Heidegger's] view, animals are not fully alive the way humans are, and their deaths are not deaths as human deaths are" (Rose 2011, 22). In *Angels*, nonhuman animals, therefore, are not true participants either in life or in death, as their only purpose in the spectrum of (non) existence is to assist characters with their own assimilation of humanity.

4. Conclusion

This article has explored the different ways that nonhuman animals, at the expense of their own ontological and historical experience, are made to "mean" in the anthropocentric conception of AIDS as a disease, an illness and a sickness. *Angels in America* emerges as the perfect textual ground in which to deconstruct nonhuman animal imagery because its outstanding conflation of history, politics, American identity and disease/illness/sickness carries anthropocentric ideologies that cannot escape ongoing anxieties about the human/animal divide. Scholarly approaches to literary criticism or to Medical Humanities that incorporate the nonhuman animal question enrich our aesthetic and ethical perceptions of pathologies—whatever the disease, ailment, or disability may be. This process of "recovery" involves identifying, collecting and reassembling the fragments of nonhuman animal signifiers scattered throughout the text in order to render them visible—that is, in order to emancipate them from their disappearance in postmodern culture and art and acknowledge their indispensability for shaping our personal and communal histories. By problematizing discourses of species in works that, like *Angels*, rely so much on the rhetorizing of nonhuman animals, literary criticism can identify and question the limits imposed by anthropocentric concerns over history, disease, suffering and extinction.[1]

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