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The AIDS Crisis and the Incarnations of Fear in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*

ABSTRACT
The discussion of Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* is set at the intersection of crisis and fear inherent to the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s. The paper delves into two distinct manifestations of fear induced by this crisis – the fear of commitment in the face of AIDS, exemplified by Louis Ironson, and the fear of self-identification as a gay individual, embodied by Joe Pitt. By integrating insights from the psychology of fear, the article strives to single out social and cultural connotations of the AIDS crisis as depicted in the play. It marks out Kushner's perceptive construal of fear as a destructive force in the context of the deteriorating human relationships.

KEYWORDS
Angels in America; AIDS crisis; fear; Tony Kushner; Martha C. Nussbaum; *The Monarchy of Fear*

1. Introduction

Given the global scope of the turmoil brought about by Covid-19, it is not an overstatement that health crisis can put enormous strains on populations and lay bare weaknesses of all interconnected systems, from healthcare to economy. Even after the worst of the health crisis has passed, people are confronted with their personal predicaments that usually ensue, from financial insecurity to psychological distress and symptoms of depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress (Staupe-Delgado & Rubin, 2022). Analogous to the global impact of Covid-19 in the 21st century, the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s stands as a testament to the profound influence of health crises on both societies and individuals. With over 49,000 people in the United States dying of AIDS-related causes in 1995 alone (Nall, 2021), the epidemic brought about significant social and cultural upheaval. Media and arts, propelled by social activism, played a crucial role in shaping public perception and combating the stigma surrounding AIDS. Artists provided intimate portrayals of the hardships faced by individuals living with HIV/AIDS, offering a humanizing lens through which to view the epidemic.

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Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* (1991) stands as a prominent example of theatre's response to the AIDS crisis. Through a combination of heavenly transcendence and stark realism, Kushner portrays the physical and psychological disruptions caused by illness and the challenges of coming to terms with one's identity amidst the turmoil of the epidemic. In Kushner's play, fear emerges as a central theme that not only shapes the narrative, but also serves as a driving force of crisis. This profound human emotion, while universal, manifests in two distinct forms critical to the play's narrative: the fear of commitment in the context of the AIDS epidemic and the fear of self-identity as a gay individual.

This essay aims to explore fear as an incapacitating emotion, obstructing the characters' efforts to cultivate meaningful relationships in the face of adversity. Drawing on Silvan S. Tomkins' affect theory and Martha Nussbaum's exploration of fear as an emotional underpinning of crisis, the analysis delves into the intricate ways in which fear manifests itself in the lives of Louis Ironson and Joe Pitt, influencing their life choices and ultimately leading to their demise. Through this examination, the article endeavours to uncover the profound influence of fear on human behavior and relationships, as depicted in Kushner's reflective exploration of the human condition amidst the AIDS epidemic.

2. Artistic world in response to the AIDS epidemic

Since the start of the AIDS epidemic, media and arts, propelled by social activism, have played an important role in shaping the public's perception by fighting stigmas developed from misinformation and misunderstanding about the virus. Works such as Marika Cifor's 2022 *Viral Cultures* on activist movement, Avram Finkelstein's 2017 *After Silence: A History of AIDS through Its Images,* Judith Pastore's 1993 *Confronting AIDS through Literature: the Responsibilities of Representation* and James Kinsella's 1992 *Covering the Plague: AIDS and the American Media* have been instrumental in documenting these endeavours. Artists' and activists' engaging narratives, like those described in the books above, helped people see HIV and AIDS through human eyes thanks to a direct and often intimate exposure to the hardships that people faced after the diagnosis. Alexander Peuser (2017, p. 13) highlighted two significant themes prevalent in artistic endeavors: the portrayal of inadequate public education about AIDS alongside scathing critiques of the government's handling of the AIDS crisis. Notable examples include William Parker's concert cycle *The AIDS Quilt Songbook,* which premiered in 1992 at Lincoln Center and is still continuing, with the latest addition in 2014. Additionally, the artists' collective Gran Fury's body of work, including a graphic poster *Silence = Death* (1987) or Daniel Goldstein's haunting art works series *Icarian* (1990s) and *Medicine People* (2010s) are among the countless artistic testimonies of the crisis wrought by the epidemic. These authors were "unapologetic" and "worked to combat the stigma

that surrounds AIDS by presenting a truthful and at times frightening depiction of AIDS through their compositions and performances" (Peuser, 2017, p. 13).

The artistic picture would certainly be incomplete without mentioning theatre. As Becky Latcham observes, "[t]he stage is an integral element of history, of understanding the societies, of situations past and present", and therefore "[g]reat moments of upheaval in history have been marked by reactionary theatrical productions exploring the fallout, how people think and feel about the history that has just been made" (Latcham, 2020). Plagues or plague allegories have been present throughout the history of stagecraft since Ancient Greece, which allows us to see how people have used drama to process such events. For instance, in a 2017 production of Albert Camus' *La Peste* in Arcola Theatre disease served as a tool to explore reactions to the spread of Nazism across Europe during the 1930s and 1940s. A common factor which binds theatrical reactions to health crisis is an "anxiety over forces beyond our control" (Latcham, 2020). Theatre allows for a manifestation of a collective fear despite it still being a very individual reaction. However, living in a "global risk society" (Tuncer, 2020), we cannot disregard the ascendance of fear as a dominating collective emotional orientation (Jarymowicz & Bar-Tal, 2006) which organizes society's views and directs its actions.

Mirroring the extensive legacy of theatrical engagements with health crises, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* emerges as a seminal work in this tradition. Depicting the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, Kushner's play, with its nearly eight-hour production on stage, grapples directly with the complexities of a global health emergency. Set amidst the height of the AIDS epidemic, the play delves into the profound physical and psychological disruptions caused by illness and the arduous journey of coming out, which was often delayed due to the threatening circumstances imposed on gay individuals by the AIDS crisis, ultimately tearing apart loving relationships. Notably, the narrative centers on Prior Walter, a 30-year-old New Yorker with AIDS, who is chosen by an Angel to become a Prophet. This divine encounter sets the stage for Prior's journey as he grapples with existential questions set against societal and personal turmoil. Despite the Angel's demand to halt human progress, Prior ultimately rejects the prophecy, yet he is still given a blessing, which miraculously prolongs his life. This pivotal moment encapsulates the thematic depth and emotional resonance that define Kushner's exploration of fear, love, and resilience in the face of crisis.

In the Epilogue, Prior extends the blessing to the audience, addressing them directly with the following words:

> 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 for now.

> You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you: More Life. The Great Work Begins. (*Perestroika*, Epilogue: Bethesda[1])

The seemingly happy and positive ending, bringing hope and reconciliation, does not eradicate the tragic overtone inherent to the whole play. As expressed by Nemani, even though the play "seems to convey a tremendous amount of hope and strength in the human character" at the same time, "Kushner's work demonstrates the greatest of tragic flaws, the human flaw" (Nemani, 2016). A relentless desire for a happy life and a fulfilled relationship is always curtailed by the inherently flawed nature of human beings who succumb to the dubious command of fear(s). Understanding this predilection is imperative in the context of this essay. Its aim is to demonstrate how fear is an incapacitating emotion which impedes *Angels'* leading characters from cultivating their relationships in the face of personal crises.

The analysis begins with an overview of Silvan Tomkins' affect theory, shedding light on the essence of fear. Following this, an elucidation of the intricate relationship between fear and crisis, drawing from Martha Nussbaum's seminal work *The Monarchy of Fear*, is presented. Subsequent segments delve deeper into these foundational concepts within the broader landscape of theatrical responses to the AIDS crisis, with a focused lens on *Angels in America*. Finally, an examination unfolds, probing how fear serves as a driving force for the pivotal characters, Louis Ironson and Joe Pitt, influencing their decisions and ultimately leading to their downfall.

3. The phenomenology of fear

As one of nine innate affects in Silvan Tomkins' affect theory, fear belongs to the negative category qualified as *inherently unacceptable.* Frank and Wilson (2020, Chapter 6) explain Tomkins' definition of negative affects in a following way:

> The affects of shame, anger, fear, contempt, distress, disgust, and dissmell are experienced as punitive ("All the negative affects trouble human beings deeply. Indeed, they have evolved just to amplify and deepen suffering and to add insult to the injuries of the human condition" [3:111]), and the noxiousness of these affective states is direct and immediate ("One does not learn to be afraid, or to cry, or to startle any more than one learns to feel pain or to gasp for air"). [1:244]

Addressing the detrimental impact of these adverse emotions poses a substantial challenge for both the individual experiencing them and the various environments they inhabit like homes, workplaces or schools. These settings, as Tomkins

[1] All references to both parts of the play (*Millenium Approaches* and *Perestroika*) are taken from: Kushner, T. (2006). *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. 5th ed. Theatre Communications Group.

suggests, can become overwhelmed with negative emotions. Hence, these emotional challenges are unavoidable issues that require substantial psychological and societal involvement.

Drawing upon the insights of Tomkins' theory, fear emerges as an affect of great toxicity, especially at high levels of intensity. Despite the consistent bodily responses to fear, its phenomenology exhibits considerable variability concerning factors such as intensity, duration, and frequency. As Tomkins elucidates this complexity: "One individual is vulnerable to constant low-grade fear. Another is frequently bombarded with slightly more intense fear but enjoys much positive affect in his fear-free intervals. Another is intensely afraid but with only moderate frequency. Yet another is entirely engulfed by terror" (Tomkins, 2008, p. 521).

Coassembled with other negative affects, like distress, anger and shame, fear becomes the target of intensive socialization since "its toxicity envelops not just the self but also the social world" (Frank & Wilson, 2020, Chapter 6). Theatre constitutes one of the forums where actors make attempts at performing fear and thus giving the audience a persuasive composite for a personal *catharsis* (Konijn, 2000). At the same time, through a shared and inevitably negative feeling about life with a malady, actors' performance of fear strengthens the sense of mutuality and community of a shared traumatic experience.

4. Fear as an emotional underpinning of crisis in Martha C. Nussbaum's humanist worldview

The choice of Nussbaum's definition of fear as a framework for this analysis was dictated by her unique and idiosyncratic understanding of human emotions, informed as much by philosophy as by psychoanalysis, neuropsychology, learning theory, and studies of perception and cognition. In *The Monarchy of Fear* Nussbaum delves into a fundamental truth she perceives as central to contemporary societal challenges: the inherent emotional nature of crises. Even though Nussbaum's book has at its core the examination of the current political crisis in America, a substantial part of it is devoted to a philosophical enquiry of a primary affect of fear which "needs careful scrutiny and containment if it is not to turn poisonous" (Nussbaum, 2018, p. 5). In her view, while people on both sides of the divide exhibit emotions such as anger, envy, or disgust, first and foremost they all seem afraid. "My previous books had taken the emotions one by one, but I saw that I needed to link them all together more closely and see how fear bubbles up and infuses them all", explained the author and added: "I needed to go deeper" (Gillespie, 2018).

Nussbaum regards fear as an incapacitating force which cannot be disentangled from its social context. While fear alerts us to the presence of danger or the threat of harm, at the same time it clouds rational thought and ruptures the human psyche. Tracing its roots to infantile helplessness, Nussbaum delineates the destructive

power of fear as infectious to other emotions, creating a "toxic brew" of blame, disgust and envy. While Nussbaum's analysis of fear as a poison to democracy and a trigger of its crisis deserves more attention than the constraint of this essay would allow, the fragment of particular relevance to the interpretation of fear in *Angels in America* is the Preface to *The Monarchy of Fear*. In this autobiographical introduction, Nussbaum contends that her personal coming-of-age crisis steeped in a full amplitude of conflicting emotions, including fear, anger, envy and disgust, in retrospect became a cornerstone of her humanist worldview.

All the life-shaping encounters she describes in the Preface – with the Welsh working class, with a gay actor and with a Jewish partner – fed Nussbaum's skepticism about her father's racially prejudiced credo and fuelled her intellectual explorations and emotional growth towards firmly establishing her inclusive and humanist worldview. The philosopher's successive personal struggles in overcoming her inner fears lay the foundation for the analysis of the trajectory of fear in *Angels'* characters. Their struggles reflect Nussbaum's personal road towards self-discovery while dealing with the nuanced delineations of their existential crisis.

5. *Angels in America* and the AIDS crisis – the origins and the climate of fear

The idea for the play's main theme came to Tony Kushner in a dream. He recalls his moment of revelation as a kind of hypnagogic hallucination (Butler & Kois, 2018, p. 8)[2]:

> Around November of 1985, the first person that I knew personally died of AIDS. A dancer that I had a huge crush on, a very sweet man and very beautiful. I got an NEA directing fellowship at the repertory theater in St. Louis, and right before I left New York, I heard through the grapevine that he had gotten sick. And then, in November, he died.
>
> And I had this dream: Bill dying – I don't know if he was actually dying, but he was in his pajamas and sick on his bed – and the ceiling collapsed and this angel comes into the room. And then I wrote a poem. I'm not a poet, but I wrote this thing. It was many pages long. After I finished it, I put it away. No one will ever see it.
>
> Its title was "Angels in America".

The plot revolves around Prior Walter – the character inspired by Bill from Kushner's dream. Soon after being diagnosed with AIDS, Prior is abandoned by

[2] The facts about the history of *Angels in America* and its subsequent theatrical productions come from the collection of the interviews with the play's creators and production teams carried out by Isaac Butler and Dan Kois, published in 2018 in a book *The World Only Spins Forward: The Ascent of Angels in America,* Bloomsbury USA.

Louis Ironson, a Jewish gay man. Lonely and hating himself for having abandoned Prior, Louis then becomes involved with a Mormon lawyer, Joe Pitt, who is in the midst of coming to terms with the fact that he is gay. Although Joe is married to Harper, an emotionally unstable, pill-addicted Mormon, he leaves her to move in with Louis.

Louis and Prior are very aware of their different family and religious backgrounds. However, what ultimately drives a wedge between them is not these differences, but Louis' inability to provide support and love at a time of crisis. Although initially Prior wants Louis back, upon his eventual reappearance, Prior feels compelled to reject Louis due to his earlier abandonment. Their different conceptions of the moral obligations of a friend and partner destroy their relationship to the point of blighting the possibility of reconciliation.

The plot of *Angels* is set in 1985. It was only 4 years earlier, on July 3, 1981, that Lawrence K. Altman wrote the first piece for NYT reporting about "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals" (Butler & Kois 2018, p. 21). At that time AIDS was treated either as a new and worse (because fatal) form of the STD or as cancer whose cause was still unknown. By the end of the 1970s gay community members talked about navigating double consciousness. Inside the community, AIDS affected almost everyone, while on the outside, the awareness of AIDS was virtually non-existent. This was beginning to change rapidly in the early 1980 when AIDS got politicized as described by Larry Kramer's 1985 play *The Normal Heart*.

When the first cases of AIDS were identified in 1981, what followed was an outbreak of panic, along with widespread discrimination against those affected. In 1981, epidemiologists in North America formulated an initial hypothesis about the origins of AIDS, commonly termed as '4H disease', as it predominantly afflicted heroin addicts, homosexuals, haemophiliacs, and Haitians. Health anthropologist Sandrine Musso, affiliated with the research center CNELIAS, notes that, except for haemophiliacs, these categorizations encompass groups that were already subjected to discrimination (Stricot, 2021).

The creators, producers and actors of *Angels in America* since 1991 until its Broadway revival in 2018 shared their on- and off-stage memories of those times in nearly 250 interviews conducted by Isaac Butler and Dan Kois and gathered in the oral history theatrical saga *The World Only Spins Forward*: *The Ascent of Angels in America* (2018). Apart from the intimate storytelling on their artistic creations and character developments, presented in the essay's next section, *Angels'* crew with the aid of historians and critics painted the social panorama of the AIDS crisis through the lens of theatre (Butler & Kois, 2018, pp. 39– 46).

In their accounts, two strands visibly stand out: the scale and immediacy of AIDS epidemics from the mid-1980s throughout 1990s as well as the hostility of the social environment towards its victims. Frank Rich, a chief *New York Times* theatre critic in 1980–1993, recreated a popular sensation:

> Gradually what happened was, if you were on the theater beat, you had to notice that young men, featured actors, no one quite famous yet, or super-famous, were dying. Something was going on. Then it became quite clear that there was this lethal epidemic.

For Joe Mantello (Louis in Los Angeles and New York productions, 1992–1994), the early 1990s on stage were harrowing as "it felt like people were just disappearing". The scale of those disappearances was enormous. When F. Murray Abraham (Roy in New York replacement cast, 1994) did *The Ritz,* eighty percent of its big cast died of AIDS. For the actors, these were not the numbers, but the real people, who suddenly disappeared from their private and professional lives. The tragedy of this unforeseen wave of disappearances is best rendered by Jeffrey Wright (Belize in New York, 1993–1994; on HBO, 2003):

> That visit to Prior's hospital bed was something I had experience of, as everyone had. The first director who hired me in a legitimate role at Arena Stage in D.C., Hal Scott; the first director to hire me when I moved back to New York, Dennis Scott; my favorite teacher at NYU, Paul Walker – these people were so important to me in my early days, and they all died of AIDS.

There was a widespread sense of a plague going through the arts community, who, in the words of Nick Reding (Joe in London, 1992), was "*hammered* by AIDS" [emphasis original].

Not only was AIDS a lethal diagnosis, but it was also a body-wrecking illness. David Weissman (director, *We Were Here*) visualized its horror:

> As things got worse and worse, you could not be in the Castro [*a historic gay district in San Francisco*] without being confronted by AIDS all the time. You would see someone walking up the street … those skeletal bodies with sagging sweatpants covering just the most bony frame, carrying a cane.

The bodily aspect of AIDS served as a token of social visibility and stigmatization, which became crucial for Tony Kushner in his depiction of AIDS in *Angels.* Mark Bronnenberg, Kushner's partner in the 1980s, recalls a particular instance during the writing process when Kushner said, "I don't want this to just be about AIDS. I want people to see AIDS, to see the horror". This sentiment reaches its climax in a scene where Prior, one of the play's central characters, experiences a severe physical breakdown due to AIDS. This scene, filled with raw physicality and suffering, leads Louis to the painful decision to abandon Prior. Through this depiction, Kushner ensures that the audience does not merely learn about AIDS, but witnesses its terrifying reality.

The AIDS "scare" gave rise to fear in the American society, which, in turn, led to the search of scapegoats inherent to any epidemic. Dubbed as a "gay cancer", AIDS was not on the government funding priority list. The attacks on a gay community became widespread in 1990s, which led to a considerable stigma. A director and writer of *How to Survive a Plague*, David France, points

to the underlying problem, which in his opinion lay in the fact that "the humanity of people with AIDS wasn't recognized". The victimization resulted in overtly hostile and "insane" social response targeting this particular community. For instance, the ideas ranged from quarantine (in twenty states there were bills discussed to quarantine HIV-positive patients) to visual recognition (William F. Buckley, a conservative political commentator, said people with AIDS should be tattooed). One of the reasons might have been the lack of knowledge, which might be attributed to poor coverage of AIDS in the media. "The *Times* had done such a poor job of covering AIDS, many people like myself were unaware of it", admits Frank Rich and adds: "This was a period where, under the dictates of Abe Rosenthal, you were not allowed to use the word gay in the *Times*".

The stigmatization took its toll also on a personal level. There were families torn apart and bonds shattered when the diagnosis was clear but not fully acknowledged or accepted. In their stories, the actors rendered the tragedy of lives lost to the illness and at the same time deprived of emotional care usually provided by the patient's family. Marcia Gay Harden (Harper in New York, 1993–1994) remembered the first person she knew who died of AIDS in 1986 was her first boyfriend: "His mother was Catholic. She was telling him to repent on his deathbed. And he was so sick. And so scared". For Sean Chapman (Prior in London, 1992) it was his godfather who had worked for a major airline: "He was gay, and he died a couple of years before the play. It was referred to as cancer. It wasn't considered acceptable for some of his family members to know". The burden of psychosocial stress was affecting both sides, which was best rendered in the story told by Ellen McLaughlin:

> One show, there was a group of students from Brigham Young! Like the Mormon kids! And this beautiful, corn-fed girl said to Stephen Spinella, "Everyone in my life, my family, my church, my school, my entire society, has taught me to hate you, and I love you". And she burst into tears. And Stephen burst into tears and they hugged. And I thought, *If we've done nothing else, we changed that young woman's life.*

In this way, it was affirmed that already at the onset of the AIDS crisis theatre was endowed with the important mission. Interestingly, as Frank Rich observes, "by the standards of American pop culture" theatre caught up with the critical moment relatively fast with the 1984 William Hoffman's play *As Is* and 1985 Larry Kramer's autobiographical play *The Normal Heart.* When Kramer's play rights went to Berkley Rep., "Tony [Kushner] and Oskar [Eustis, artistic director of Eureka Theatre in San Francisco in 1980s] were so angry, they said, 'We're gonna write our own AIDS play!'". And they did.

6. Fear as characters' driving force in Angels is America

As we delve deeper into the characters' experiences, it becomes necessary to transition from the broader societal context of AIDS to a more focused analysis of the characters

themselves. This shift allows us to explore the characters' individual handling of fear and the powerful impact it had on their lives. In order to do this, a method of Computational Text Analysis (CTA) has been applied, which will provide a more nuanced understanding of the fear experienced by Prior, Louis, Harper, and Joe. The CTA performed on the play's script with the use of sentiment analysis[3] applied to the scenes featuring Prior and Louis and Harper and Joe respectively has demonstrated that in the emotional design, the couples' dialogues project a comparatively high level of negativity.

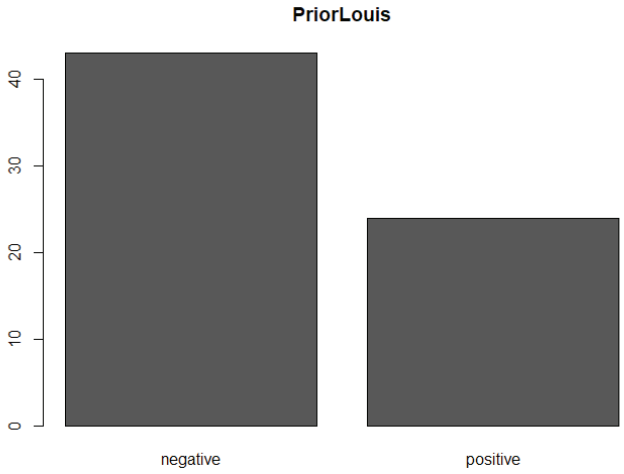

Figure 1: Sentiment polarity for Prior and Louis

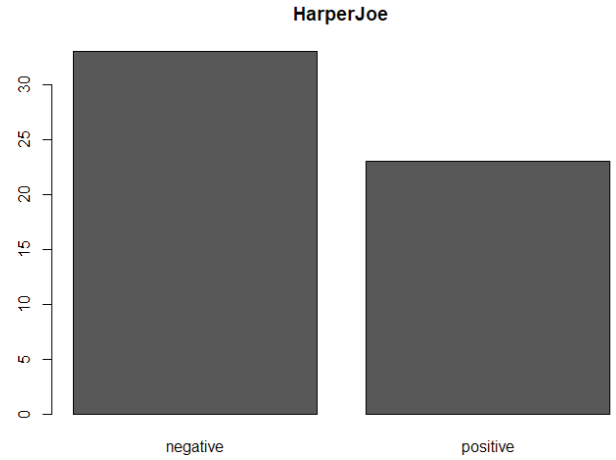

Figure 2: Sentiment polarity for Harper and Joe

[3] For the detailed explication of the CTA method and its use in literary studies see Bendrat (2020, pp. 243–268).

The text mining analysis was carried out with the use of a *syuzhet* package, a dictionary-based tool for the sentiment analysis of literary texts (Jockers, 2015/2021). The results have demonstrated that the numerical values of sentiments in the couple's exchanges are comparable. The juxtaposition of barplots with sentiment counts prove the validity of the essay's argument that within the multiple layers of emotion, fear is indeed the dominant force infusing the characters' relationships.

Table 1. Sentiment values for Prior and Louis and Harper and Joe

	anger	antici-pation	disgust	fear	joy	sadness	surprise	trust	positive	negative
Prior and Louis	23	12	16	24	8	23	6	17	43	24
Harper and Joe	17	12	14	23	11	17	8	15	33	22

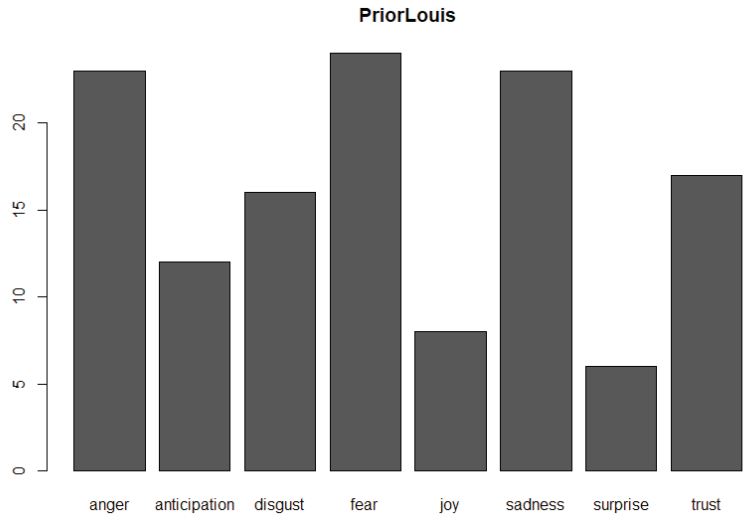

Figure 3: Sentiment distribution for Prior and Louis

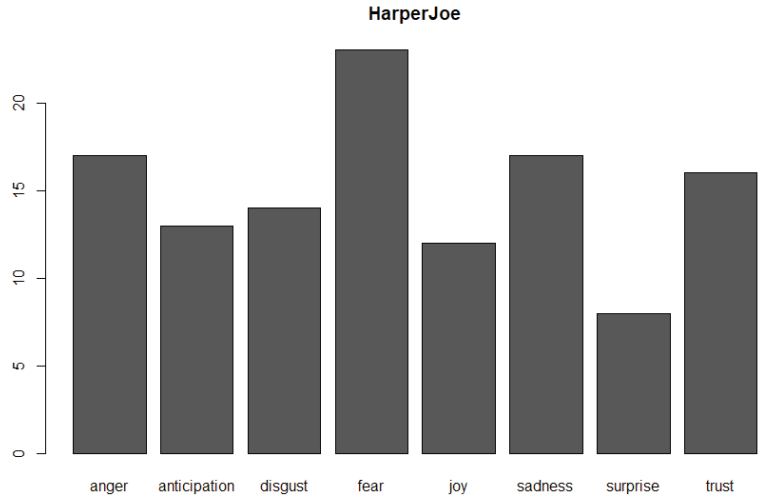

Figure 4: Sentiment distribution for Harper and Joe

The pattern of fear as a dominant sentiment identified in the computational text analysis is fundamental to establishing the individualized trajectory of this sentiment in the emotional evolution of the two characters representing the two analyzed couples – Louis Ironson and Joe Pitt.

7. Louis Ironson and the incapacitating fear of commitment

LOUIS
Why?

PRIOR
I was scared, Lou.

LOUIS
Of what?

PRIOR
That you'll leave me.

LOUIS
Oh.

(Little pause.)
– *Millennium Approaches*, Act 1, Scene 4

Louis and Prior's relationship is an emotive illustration of the fear of commitment, intensified by the grim reality of AIDS. This kind of apprehension arises not only from the disease itself, but also from the overwhelming responsibility of supporting a partner during such a traumatic period. Louis, unable to grapple with this fear, ends up abandoning Prior at the time when his partner needs him the most. This action encapsulates the detrimental potential of such apprehensions, leading to personal turmoil for both characters as well as the deterioration of their relationship. Louis's abandonment of Prior serves as a stark reminder of how apprehension can influence individuals to make choices with grave consequences. Meanwhile, Prior, left to confront his illness alone, undergoes emotional upheaval, while Louis grapples with the remorse and sorrow brought about by his decision. The turmoil that unfolds in their lives serves as a poignant commentary on the potent influence of fear.

Exploring the psychological dimensions of the fear of commitment brings forth the concept of ambivalence. In psychology, ambivalence is defined as coexistence within an individual of positive and negative feelings toward the same person, object, or action, simultaneously drawing him or her in opposite directions (Brogaard & Gatzia, 2020). Louis was well aware that the correct action in his situation would be the one that produces the best consequences, understood in terms of the welfare of all those affected. The impossibility to resolve whose welfare deserves priority makes Louis's character grounded in a constant dilemma. From his perspective, Prior's illness presented him not with a merely difficult choice between the right action (stay) and the wrong action (leave), but with an impossible choice between two simultaneously required, but mutually incompatible actions.

For Stephen Spinella (Prior in workshops, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, 1988–1994) it was established in the very first act "that Louis is a chickenshit" (Butler & Kois, 2018, p. 200). When Prior rolls up his sleeve and reveals a Kaposi's sarcoma lesion, an infectious disease that accompanies AIDS, Louis's reaction verges on panic. "I think Louis carries the biggest burden of the play", admits Kushner. The playwright acknowledges that the issue of responsibility in this case is inescapable as "it is incredibly hard to take care of someone who is catastrophically ill". Louis and Prior's story bears resemblance to Kushner's own experience, yet in a different circumstance. When his close college friend and a dramaturg for *Angels*, Kimberly Flynn, had a car accident, Kushner was very supportive throughout her convalescence. However, the playwright notifies that witnessing the suddenly shattered life and career of a fantastic friend and a brilliant writer often evoked a feeling of helplessness. Kushner's personal quandary and the fear of the uncertain future, mixed with the sense of injustice, found its artistic expression in *Angels in America*. He was vocal about the fact that "'Millennium' is completely infused with dealing with

the consequences of [Flynn's] accident". The analogous sensation permeates the memories of Flynn:

> People used to say things to me like "Are you Harper?" (Laughs.) If I'm any one person in this play, I'm Prior. The articulation of crisis followed by outrage, and the sense of "Can I get a witness" that you hear in Prior, was in part fueled by something I was experiencing, and that Tony was hearing on a daily basis, because he was … well, he was my witness.

Kushner's "strange relationship with calamity" let him "render life into material" and coalesce the private with the universal in the artistic creation of an expessive but unfulfilled relationship torn by illness and destroyed by fear:

> Louis loves the very things about Prior that come back to bite him so ferociously after he leaves him, and that he himself so profoundly lacks. Prior is as clear-eyed as Louis is abstracted, as brave as Louis is afraid. Louis hides from his life. He takes refuge in his head, but Prior lives in the world—the big, mysterious, infinitely terrifying world (Peter Birkenhead, Louis in national tour, 1994–1995).

8. Fear's grip: Unveiling Louis's emotional helplessness in "Democracy in America"

Louis and Belize facing one another at a table in a coffee shop. Louis, responding to something Belize has said, is pursuing an idea as he always does, by thinking aloud.

LOUIS
Why has democracy succeeded in America? Of course by succeeded I mean comparatively, not literally, but …
– *Millennium Approaches*, Act 3, Scene 2

To analyze Louis's emotional response to a crisis, one particular scene called Democracy in America has been chosen. This scene might be read as a metaphorical equivalent to a classical tragedy about the human helplessness in dealing with fear. Louis's lengthy monologue on democracy, liberalism and race delivered over a coffee table to Belize, while Prior lies helpless in his hospital bed, involves an exposition scene, a *peripetia*, and a moment of recognition that is followed by a catastrophic ending. The scene occurred to Kushner at the moment of his own creative dilemma:

> I got sort of stuck after I finished the second act. … In *A Bright Room Called Day*, all the characters had behaved and obeyed the outline that I had written. I didn't know what to do next, and for the first time ever I asked one of the characters to explain to me what the play was about, and I picked Louis because he was sort of the most like me – at least demographically. And I sat

> down at the writing table on Clinton Street, and said to Louis, "What is this play about?" and then just started writing. And the first thing he said to me was "Why is democracy succeeding in America?" Then I realized he was nervous, and he was talking to somebody, and then I realized it was Belize, and that scene took place.

For Jeffrey Wright who witnessed Louis's monologue as Belize – a black openly gay man and Prior's best friend – the connections between the big picture of democracy's triumphs and defeats and Louis's personal struggles and fears were obvious. They were not happening outside the room, they were colliding at their coffee table: "[r]ace and gender and responsibility and citizenship. Your responsibility to those you love and those who are of your community".

Peter Birkenhead (Louis in national tour, 1994–1995) concurs with Wright's observation on ambivalent and contradictory character of Louis's words reflecting the character's convoluted mental state: "Where to begin with the Democracy in America scene? The size of it? The dozens of ideas packed into it? The velocity with which they zip through Louis's brain? The fuel that keeps them zipping: the fierce dread Louis feels at the prospect of opening his eyes to himself and his behavior? It was like every acting challenge in the world all balled into one". A common trace noticed by actors in that scene was guilt crippling Louis's judgment overshadowed by his unspeakable fear of commitment. They refer to Louis as an "emotionally crippled commitment-phobe" and a "character running his mouth off, filled with guilt". For Adam Driver (Louis at Signature Theatre, New York, 2010) guilt infused with fear defined his initial connection to Louis, which later evolved into "needing to feel justified for having your guilt. Then being surprised by how strong the nerve is to self-preserve. Then the self-loathing". The scene, however, did not subvert the psychological unraveling of Louis's fear. As Marcus D'Amico (Louis in London, 1992) observed, "[h]e knows instinctively that he's absolutely, miserably failing to be the partner that he needs to be. He knows it. So his defense mechanism is just to intellectually vent". Louis instinctively feels that he is "walking very dangerously in the minefield with the best friend of the person he's wronged", but at that moment, Louis's intellectual articulation of deeply hidden fear seems the only way he can afford to manifest his inner struggle. This in a way is his own self-delivered punishment.

Ben Shenkman (Roy in NYU Perestroika workshop, 1993) approached that scene by explicating what on a subconscious level was driving Louis's speech emotionally. For him, "a white privileged person talking to a person of color, floating this huge target by giving short shrift to the incredible compromise of racial discrimination" was meant for a defeat in confrontation with an African American person whose temperament and moral makeup he knows all too well. The audience knows it as well. "There are few things more pleasurable", admits Gregory Wallace (Belize at American Conservatory Theater, San Francisco, 1994–

1995), "than being onstage and listening to an audience quietly turn against another character". Louis's helplessness and indirectness of his emotional expression of fear is what renders the scene fundamentally depressing and the character deeply tragic both in dramatistic and human terms.

9. Joe Pitt and the unredeemed fear of self-identification

HARPER
I have something to ask you.

JOE
Then ASK! ASK! What in hell are you —

HARPER
Are you a homo? . . .
God, is my husband a —

JOE
(Scary)
Stop it. Stop it. I'm warning you.
Does it make any difference? That I might be one thing deep within, no matter how wrong or ugly that thing is, so long as I have fought, with everything I have, to kill it.
– *Millennium Approaches*, Act 1, Scene 8

In contrast to Prior and Louis, Joe and Harper's narrative is marked by a different kind of fear – the fear of self-identification as a gay individual. As a Mormon and a Republican lawyer, Joe grapples with his latent homosexuality. This fear, engendered by societal norms and expectations, leads to a deep-seated internal conflict. Joe's protracted struggle to embrace his sexual orientation and Harper's endeavor to reconcile herself with her husband's undisclosed homosexuality epitomize the crisis precipitated by this form of fear. Joe's incapacity to reconcile with his authentic identity propels him into a trajectory of self-repudiation and clandestinity, thereby exacerbating his internal strife. Conversely, Harper confronts a personal crisis as she contends with the stark reality of her husband's concealed sexual orientation. The interwoven narratives of Joe and Harper thus serve as a poignant exemplification of how fear can precipitate a crisis of self-identity and personal turmoil.

The actors generally admitted that to give expression to Joe, they had to wrestle with the character (Butler & Kois, 2018, pp. 131–142). His path in the play (from self-sufficient and strong to helpless and dependent) is in some ways the opposite

of Prior's trajectory. The play finally seems to abandon Joe, excluding him from its vision of the good society. At the end, he is the only character who isn't redeemed. Fully aware of the impacts upon psyche elicited by living with a suppressed identity, Kushner attributes invincible horror to Joe's insufferable existence. To conjure up a different type of tragic, Joe is endowed with the widest array of techniques to combat his fear, ranging from denial to anger. At a production stage, it was a director's decision which version of Joe they wanted their actors to embody. As Steven Culp (Joe at American Conservatory Theater, San Francisco, 1994–1995) recalls, denial in constructing the character was crucial for the director Mark Wing-Davey for there he saw the clue to Joe's tragedy:

> It took a while, but finding that level of denial – that inner mechanism by which you can move forward doing one thing and simultaneously say to yourself, I'm not that person – was central to playing Joe; it was central to his character.

Shedding light on characters' trapped estrangement with himself not through his forced reticence, but rather through anger, was a strategy adapted by George C. Wolfe (director in New York, 1993–1994). David Marshall Grant (Joe in New York, 1993–1994) recalls that "George was really looking for a kind of passion, a kind of anger under the surface, a kind of rage about Joe's place in the world".

The source of anger lay in Joe's deep-seated conviction of his distorted life due to his incapacitating fear of acknowledging his homosexuality, first to himself, and then to others. Wolfe compared Joe's psychologically complex state to mental imprisonment incarnated in the image of African Americans:

> He's a Negro. He's a Negro just in the sense that he is hyper-aware of how he is perceived by the "other". In my mind, the definition of a Negro is someone who is exaggeratedly aware of how they are perceived by white people, so therefore it can inhibit more organic impulses. And Joe Pitt is imprisoned in a very similar way.

Whether in denial or in anger, for Grant, Joe "felt so unprepared to be combative like that", so "it took [the actor] a while to understand Joe's place in the world". Confrontation "was such an anathema to him" and the fear of moral condemnation made him conceal his identity even to himself:

> You can't even entertain the thought of who you are because everything you know tells you it is wrong. Until Louis Ironson comes up to you in a bathroom and says, "Oh, a gay Republican". Louis recognizes Joe before Joe recognizes himself, so he has to seek him out and say, "You know who I am? *Who am I?*"

Joe's angle of introspection was narrow because he was afraid that homosexuality was so unacceptable, especially during AIDS epidemic, that it had to be kept out of conscious awareness and thus could not be integrated into his

public persona. Consequently, these feelings had to be dissociated from the self and hidden from others.

Kushner realized he had an unsatisfactory end for Joe (there were rumors he was going to write a third play about him). The same impression was shared by the actors. Russell Tovey (Joe in London, 2017) complained about "no denouement, no happy end", which stood in contrast to other characters: "His mother goes off with the other gays. Harper's going to go have adventures with loads of hippies in San Francisco. Where's Joe? He gets punished for hating himself. That's hard, that's very hard". What made the contrast even more poignant was the pessimistic realization expressed by Grant that Joe "was not sort of the moral hero of the play" as "every night I would get slapped by Marcia [Harper] and the audience would applaud".

Playing Joe was not an easy task and certainly took a toll on the actors' psyche. A story of emotional burden was shared by Jeff Christian (Joe in the Journeymen, Chicago, 1998) who remembered a number of times when he would go off someplace alone and completely break down after working the scene with Harper and not really know why. Then, once they started running *Part 2: Perestroika*, he found that he had a really hard time falling asleep after those shows which he "eventually chalked up to the feeling that [he] had some unfinished business as Joe". Kushner must have felt that as well as for *Perestroika* he rewrote about 70 percent of Joe's part. Still, Joe's fear is never redeemed. He tried the life he always longed for but failed and now he feels he has nothing to fall back on but his fear again. An attempt at explaining the effect produced by Kushner was proposed by Ben Shenkman (Louis at American Conservatory Theater, San Francisco, 1994–1995, and on HBO, 2003):

> A lot of the audience says, "Why is Louis welcomed back into the fold five years after, with Joe's mother of all people, and Joe's nowhere to be found?" A lot of people find that very harsh. But Tony's idea is that, despite Louis's cowardice, Louis is redeemable and Joe isn't. From Tony's perspective, Louis does not lose his soul; Joe *does* lose his soul by making peace with what he's done. The fact that Louis never makes peace with what he's done is redemption.

Joe's intricate relationship with his fears posed a significant challenge for the playwright, who candidly acknowledged: "Of all the characters, Joe was the hardest nut to crack". Kushner elucidated Joe's profound struggle with cognitive dissonance, noting his remarkable capacity to deny glaring truths even when confronted with them directly. This internal conflict rendered Joe particularly resistant to acknowledging the existence of his underlying issues, prolonging his journey towards self-awareness. As Kushner remarked, "[Joe] can look at something in the face and deny that it's right in front of him". Consequently, Joe's evolution throughout the play was a protracted process, characterized by a gradual recognition of the challenges he faced. Ultimately, Kushner expressed

a sense of ambiguity regarding Joe's future, remarking, "He's kind of gotten to that place at the end of Perestroika and ... good luck to him, I guess". This reflection encapsulates the playwright's acknowledgment of the complexity inherent in Joe's character and the unresolved nature of his narrative arc within *Angels in Americ*a.

10. Conclusion

In *Angels in America* Kushner scrutinizes the causes of relationship problems and the brunt of the interpersonal crisis is bestowed upon various shades of fear. Whether it is the fear of commitment in the face of a life-threatening disease like AIDS or the fear of accepting one's identity as a gay individual, these fears have destructive potential, leading to personal crises and strained relationships. The play explores the limits of human ability to give to and support our partners, the point at which we want to take care of our own needs, and looks at how we live with those decisions where fear makes us incapacitated to take thoughtful decisions. The humanist understanding of fear in this study, inspired by Martha Nussbaum's *Monarchy of Fear*, aimed at tracing the emotional underpinnings of the two leading characters' – Louis and Joe's – underlying motives for (not) recognizing, (not) understanding, (not) counteracting, and (not) persevering through personal crises and thus giving up to natural human weaknesses.

While the secular Louis is tormented by his abandonment of his partner, the devout Joe appears to feel no guilt at all. Although his religion has taught Joe certain rules, it apparently has not guided him to treat others with compassion. Louis, on the other hand, does not practice his religion, but he apparently has more, albeit flawed, compassion for his fellow human beings than Joe does. This offers illuminating commentary on the power of affect and emotion in our decision making.

Angels in America calls into question whether the way a person is raised and shaped makes for a strong enough indication of a character which is able to resist the challenge of a difficult moment. Instead, on the dynamics of Prior/Louis and Harper/Joe relationships, Kushner has illuminated what research in different areas of cognitive science has proven in recent decades, namely that fear as a primary affect constitutes potent, pervasive and most often harmful driver of critical decision making. The ways in which Louis and Joe deal with their dilemmas prove Nussbaum's claim that emotions are fundamental to dealing with decisions that do not have a clear rational basis for choosing. Assuming the perspective offered by Kenneth Burke's theory of consubstantiality (Burke, 1969), the observation which follows is that for the audience invited to share a "sub-stance" with the characters, Louis and Joe are not their obvious choices:

> We all want to believe that we are Harper and Prior, these magical wounded heroes who, despite cannons being fired at us, find in our weakness, our madness, our sickness, all this miraculous

> strength. Most people are Joe and Louis. We are all Joe and Louis: We are weak and liars. And I love those characters for that (David Cromer, director and Louis in the Journeymen, Chicago, 1998; director at Kansas City Rep, 2015).

Faced with tensions and qualms over neediness and the ability to give, dependence and independence, and attraction and the lack of it, both characters come at odds with their inner-selves. The destroying power of fear keeps them clogged in the tormented relationships which eventually fail on their commitments.

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