

Are We “Citizens”? Tony Kushner’s Deweyan Democratic Vision in *Angels in America*

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In his recent book *Democracy in Black* (2016), Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. argues that for Americans, “collective forgetting is crucial in determining the kind of story we tell ourselves. Ours is the chosen nation, the ‘shining city upon a hill,’ as Ronald Reagan called it. America *is* democracy. . . . To believe this, we have to forget and willfully ignore what is going on around us.”^[1] While Glaude is particularly concerned with the distortions and fairy tales Americans continue to tell ourselves about race, Tony Kushner’s epic two-part play *Angels in America* tackles this same theme of conveniently forgetting and willfully ignoring so as not to disrupt the American self-image with respect to sexual orientation and the AIDS crisis of the 1980s.

Kushner’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play received much acclaim from critics and scholars alike for many years following its initial publication—resulting in initial runs on Broadway and the National Theatre in London in 1992-1993 and an award-winning 2003 HBO mini-series starring Al Pacino, Meryl Streep, and Emma Thompson—but more recently, it seems to have fallen out of favor among scholars, despite a successful 2010 revival at the Signature Theatre and a 2017 production at the National Theatre that transferred to Broadway in February 2018. Indeed, many (although not all) scholarly articles that discuss Kushner and *Angels* in recent years focus on how AIDS functions in the play,^[2] with scant consideration of Kushner’s portrayal of democracy. I argue that Kushner is especially relevant in the socio-historical moment in which Americans currently find ourselves—one marked by political polarization and distrust of those who think differently than we do. The 2016 election was symptomatic of these problems and brought them into full view for any who still harbored doubts about how deep this divide runs, but Kushner’s play proves instructive for how to build an engaged democratic citizenry.

In the epilogue to Part Two of *Angels in America*, Prior leaves the audience with an optimistic vision for the future, stating, “The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come.”^[3] He then offers a blessing of “more life,” and the play concludes with the same phrase that appears at the end of Part One: “The Great Work Begins” (*Perestroika*, 146). As David Kornhaber has observed, many scholars and critics are dissatisfied with the play’s conclusion due to “the reconciliationist politics it seems to espouse,”^[4] which for them provides “a too-easy gloss on more intractable problems”^[5] that continue to plague society. Thus, Kornhaber reasons, “a lot must depend on how one figures what seem to be the two key concepts of Kushner’s conclusion: citizen and blessing.”^[6] Like Kornhaber, I believe that individual understanding of the term “citizens” as well as broader notions of what constitutes citizenship figure heavily in interpretation of both the epilogue and *Angels* as a whole. Furthermore, I contend that Kushner’s idea of citizenship is necessarily linked to the beginning of the “Great Work” invoked at the end of both parts of the play. In *Angels*, “citizens” are those who are part of a Deweyan

community, made up of diverse people with sometimes conflicting opinions who listen to each other and who are nonetheless connected by their desire to enact positive change in the world, to progress toward a more ideal and inclusive democracy. This is what Prior (and by extension, Kushner) means by “Great Work.” Individualism and undemocratic communication—represented by Roy Cohn and Joe Pitt—fall away by the end of *Angels in America*, making room for what Atsushi Fujita calls a “a new model of community,”^[7] consisting of Belize, Hannah, Louis, and Prior, who value inclusivity and democratic communication.

John Dewey argues in *Freedom and Culture* (1939) for a distinction between “society” and “community.” Society arises from the politics of individual nations, how a particular country governs, and what policies are enforced, whereas community is unrestricted and made up of individuals or groups who share a common solidarity. He explains, “[F]or a number of persons to form anything that can be called a community in its pregnant sense there must be values prized in common. Without them, any so-called social group, class, people, nation, tends to fall apart into molecules having but mechanically enforced connections with one another.”^[8] Thus, for Dewey, one characteristic of community lies in shared values. Furthermore, Dewey adds democratic communication to his idea of community, arguing that “there is a difference between a society, in the sense of an association, and a community. . . . Natural associations are conditions for the existence of a community, but a community adds the function of communication in which emotions and ideas are shared as well as joint undertaking engaged in.”^[9] In the case of Americans, our joint undertaking is the democratic experiment, and for this reason, we should likewise strive to embody democratic ideals of communication.

In the vein of Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy, Kushner emphasizes the importance of inclusive, democratic community in *Angels in America*. The play models Deweyan communities while also highlighting models that are anti-Deweyan: there is no great community—no solidarity between different groups of Americans—and thus, there is no realized democracy. Kushner writes in the Afterword to *Perestroika* that Americans “pay high prices for maintaining the myth of the Individual,”^[10] which he contrasts with the idea that “the smallest indivisible human unit is two people, not one; one is a fiction.”^[11] This juxtaposition of individualism with community, illustrated in the play by Roy and Joe as opposed to the community envisioned in the epilogue, is central to Kushner’s understanding of democratic progress and what it means to be a citizen. Some leftist critics may bemoan the ending of *Angels* as “turn[ing] away from the kind of collective action demanded by Marx and staged by Brecht,”^[12] but as Hussein Al-Badri has observed, the play’s main flaw in this regard is merely presenting “a different politic[s] than its detractors would like it to be.”^[13] Kushner is ultimately more concerned with how to enact Deweyan democracy and community—which he believes will lead to real and lasting social change—than he is with envisioning an America based around socialism or Marxism.

In recent years, John Dewey’s notions of community and his pedagogy have come under scrutiny from critics who rightly cite the ethnocentrism that undergirds much of his early philosophy in these matters.^[14] Thomas Fallace notes that because pragmatism is “a self-correcting theory of knowledge,”^[15] by 1916, Dewey understood that “a plurality of cultures was necessary for democratic living and intellectual growth.”^[16] Nevertheless, Fallace argues, “ethnocentrism was built right into Dewey’s early pedagogy and philosophy.”^[17] This ethnocentrism troubles Dewey’s notion of community; he conceived of community as “not merely a variety of associative ties which hold persons together in diverse ways, but an organization of all elements by an integrated principle.”^[18]

If Dewey believed that white people represented a more advanced form of civilization that people of color had not yet achieved, then how would it be possible to form a community in which “all elements” are organized by the same principle? As Glaude has noted, democracy for Dewey “is a form of life that requires constant attention if we are to secure the ideals that purportedly animate it.”^[19] Likewise, Scott Stroud emphasizes that a “real amount of openness is implicated in the [pragmatist] habits of democracy.”^[20] In other words, democracy is a process, one which must continually be reexamined to ensure that we are increasing democracy and participation among citizens, creating a more inclusive community rather than excluding or marginalizing certain voices, as Dewey was guilty of doing in his early career. As Dewey himself put it, “only when we start from a community as a fact, grasp the fact in thought so as to clarify and enhance its constituent elements, can we reach an idea of democracy which is not [merely] utopian.”^[21]

One particular benefit to considering the vision of Deweyan community and democracy in Kushner’s *Angels* is that, several generations removed from Dewey, he is interested in how to incorporate citizens from different backgrounds with vastly different life experiences into the great community Dewey envisioned, particularly African Americans and people who identify as queer. Thus, Kushner’s reexamination of community and inclusive democracy as demonstrated in *Angels* is itself pragmatic in its consideration of the conditions and context of American life and democracy in the 1980s and ‘90s, revising Dewey’s idea of community by incorporating more and varied groups and voices into it.

Fallace argues that an important part of Dewey’s pragmatism was context: “all knowledge was context-bound; it served a purpose in a particular situation and its usefulness was dependent upon that context.”^[22] Kushner speaks to a particular historical moment in his work on community, examining the anxieties and shortcomings of American democracy in light of black/white and gay/straight relations. Thus, reading Kushner as a pragmatist increases our understanding of what an ideal community might look like, taking into account the experiences of those who are often pushed to the margins of society by the not-so-silent majority. A consideration of how Kushner treated the power disparities he observed at work in society may also prove instructive for how the U.S. might address current forms of oppression and marginalization in society. I argue in the remainder of this essay that the “Great Work” to which Kushner refers at the end of both *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* is, in part, a call to the greater democratic community reflected in the play’s epilogue, which is championed over the closed views of community embodied in Roy Cohn and Joe Pitt. Kushner’s vision of Deweyan community emphasizes inclusion and listening to marginal voices, for characters in *Angels in America* who ignore the voices of the other do so at their peril.

Roy Cohn and Joe Pitt are representative of undemocratic communication in the play—Roy because he dominates those around him, and Joe because he cannot be truthful with others or see beyond himself. Dewey writes that in a democracy, “both parties learn by giving the other a chance to express itself, instead of having one party conquer by forceful suppression of the other.”^[23] For Roy, suppression of the other in communication is par for the course. One early example of this occurs in Act One, Scene 9 of *Millennium Approaches* when Roy’s doctor Henry diagnoses him with AIDS. Roy then tries to force Henry to call him a homosexual, finally threatening, “No, say it. I mean it. Say: ‘Roy Cohn, you are a homosexual.’ And I will proceed, systematically, to destroy your reputation and your practice and your career in New York State, Henry. Which you know I can do” (*Millennium*, 44). When Henry gives him the diagnosis of AIDS, Roy counters, “No, Henry, no. AIDS is what homosexuals have. I have liver cancer” (*Millennium*, 46). Roy forcefully suppresses Henry from telling anyone that Roy is gay by

threatening his career, and he even manages to suppress the diagnosis of AIDS. The next time Henry appears is in *Perestroika* to facilitate Roy's admission to the hospital, where even his medical charts, as Belize reads them, say "liver cancer" (*Perestroika*, 21).

Roy's relationship with his nurse Belize in *Perestroika* is similarly domineering, as Roy makes racist and homophobic remarks, goads Belize into using an anti-Semitic slur in one scene, knocks over pills he is supposed to take, and generally proves to be an insufferable patient. Roy also makes it clear that even though he is somewhat dependent on Belize, he does not consider him an equal in any way. Bemoaning his imminent disbarment in Act Four, Scene 1 of *Perestroika*, Roy says, "Every goddam thing I ever wanted they have taken from me. Mocked and reviled, all my life" (*Perestroika*, 87). When Belize identifies and responds, "Join the club" (*Perestroika*, 87). Roy says, "I don't belong to any club you could get through the front door of. You watch yourself you take too many liberties" (*Perestroika*, 87). Shortly after Roy has a series of violent spasms, Belize says that he almost feels sorry for him. Roy is quick to remind him, "You. Me. No. Connection" (*Perestroika*, 88). Thus, Roy suppresses Belize any time Belize attempts to identify with him in the slightest. If democracy is characterized in part by open communication, then Roy's constant desire to "win" or conquer in conversations with others exposes him as a totalitarian at heart.

Roy's totalitarian communication is a natural result of his individualism. He relishes his status as "the dragon atop the golden horde" (*Perestroika*, 55), maintaining that "Life is full of horror; nobody escapes; nobody; save yourself. Whatever pulls on you, whatever needs from you, threatens you" (*Millennium*, 58). This philosophy clearly runs counter to Kushner's belief in the smallest indivisible unit as two people. Nevertheless, Kushner includes Roy in the play, explaining in an interview that he is "a part of the gay and lesbian community even if we don't really want him to be a part of our community."^[24] This indicates a capacity for inclusivity in his democratic vision that Roy himself disdains in the play. This inclusive community is similarly emphasized when Louis, aided by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, recites the Mourner's Kaddish for Roy, thus accepting him into the greater Jewish community of which they are part (albeit in death).

While Joe is not like Roy in his communication in the sense that he has to win or dominate others in conversation, his general dishonesty and unwillingness to take responsibility for his actions make him undemocratic in his dealings with other characters in the play. Kushner has sometimes been criticized in scholarship on *Angels in America* for being too hard on Joe. Hussein Al-Badri, for example, asserts that Kushner's omission of Joe from the community included in the epilogue runs counter to Kushner's "own political ideology of inclusion and inclusiveness."^[25] However, this dramatic punishment seems more fitting when Joe's undemocratic communication and individualism are taken into consideration, for then it is clear that like his mentor Roy, Joe too spurns community and democratic communication. Dewey argues for truthful communication in "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us" writing, "knowledge of conditions as they are is the only solid ground for communication and sharing."^[26] Joe lies about his identity as a gay man to his wife Harper, he keeps from Louis the fact that he is a Mormon, and he repeatedly tells Harper that he is not going to leave her, only to abandon her anyway. Because Joe lacks a foundation of truthfulness with people who are important to him, open, democratic communication is not possible.

Like Roy, Joe also acts with the individual—himself—in mind, rather than considering community or the circumstances and experiences of others. Following an irreparable fight with Louis in *Perestroika*, Joe

tries to return to Harper, not because she needs him but because he is thinking of himself. He tells her, “I don’t know what will happen to me without you. Only you. Only you love me. Out of everyone in the world. . . . Please, please, don’t leave me now” (*Perestroika*, 139). Joe is unable to sustain a community or communicate democratically with others because he never considers the experience of the other person and only considers his own needs and desires. In fact, Joe even tells Louis that “sometimes self-interested is the most generous thing you can be,” (*Perestroika*, 73) a notion that serves as Joe’s modus operandi throughout the play. Deweyan communication requires what Hongmei Peng calls sympathetic thinking, the ability to “step outside of [one’s] own experience and see it as the other would see it by putting [oneself] in the place of the other and using imagination in order to assimilate the other’s experience.”^[27] Since Joe proves incapable of imagining the other’s experience, he necessarily excludes rather than includes others in his would-be community, particularly Harper and Hannah. His unwillingness or inability to change in this regard is why he is not included among the democratic “citizens” in the epilogue, since undemocratic communication and exclusive community building stand in opposition to Kushner’s Deweyan model of community.

Although Roy and Joe form a community of sorts in *Angels*, it proves to be undemocratic and representative of anti-Deweyan communication. In spite of the father/son-type relationship that Roy and Joe maintain throughout most of the play, there is much that they keep from one another, and their relationship is marked as much by silence as it is by the closeness and warm feelings for one another as mentor and mentee. This silence comes to a head in Act Four, Scene 1 of *Perestroika*, when Joe visits Roy in the hospital. When Joe reveals that he left his wife Harper and has been living with Louis, Roy forcefully silences Joe:

JOE: Roy, please, get back into...

ROY: SHUT UP! Now you listen to me.

[. . .]

ROY: I want you home. With your wife. Whatever else you got going, cut it dead.

JOE: I can’t, Roy, I need to be with...

ROY: YOU NEED? Listen to me. Do what I say. Or you will regret it. And don’t talk to me about it. *Ever again.* (*Perestroika*, 85)

Roy not only silences Joe in this particular moment of the play, but he commands him never to speak of his relationship with Louis or to make any allusion to homosexuality again. Thus, Roy’s silencing of Joe is distinctly undemocratic and unrepresentative of the kind of communication expected in a democratic community. Far from being an outlier, this is not the first time Roy has stifled Joe’s communication with him. Rather than being open to hearing what Joe wants to express (even if he disagrees with it), Roy chastises him in *Millennium Approaches* for having ethical reservations about interfering with the disbarment committee hearing, calling Joe “Dumb Utah Mormon hick shit” (*Millennium*, 106) and “a sissy” (*Millennium*, 107). As for Joe, he claims to love Roy, but is unwilling to go to bat for him when the chips are down. Although this is a legal as well as an ethical quandary, it demonstrates that Joe’s love for

Roy is more theory than practice. He asserts, “I’ll do whatever I can to help,” (*Millennium*, 66) but those are empty words, since he ultimately refuses the job in Washington he is offered and fails Roy. Joe and Roy cannot agree on a shared ideal toward which they can work together, and thus, their efforts at community building are doomed to fail.

Given Dewey’s assertions that community involves “communication in which emotions and ideas are shared” [28] and that such community is “a pressing [concern] for democracy,” [29] Roy and Joe fail at both democratic communication and maintaining a community even with one another. In addition to their undemocratic communication, Roy and Joe are devoted to exclusion rather than inclusion and to individualism rather than community, qualities that are distinctly anti-Deweyan, and for which (along with their undemocratic communication) they are dramatically “punished” by Kushner. Roy succumbs to his illness, while Harper leaves Joe for good and Joe is nowhere to be found in the democratic community of the play’s epilogue.

Unlike Roy and Joe, Louis is able and willing to change, demonstrating by the end of the play a commitment to open communication and revising harmful beliefs and actions. While Louis initially abandons Prior when the effects of AIDS become more than he can handle, he eventually sees the error of his ways and atones for his past misdeeds. Prior tells Louis when they meet after Louis’s month-long absence in *Perestroika* that when he cries, he “endanger[s] nothing. . . . It’s like the idea of crying when you do it. Or the idea of love” (*Perestroika*, 83). Similarly, Belize remarks to Louis in *Millennium Approaches*, “All your checks bounce, Louis; you’re ambivalent about everything” (*Millennium*, 95). For much of the play, Louis claims to support things in theory, but his practice reveals his own ambivalence on the subject, from his alleged love for Prior to his support of the Rainbow Coalition. However, following a conversation with Belize in Act Four, Scene 3 of *Perestroika* in which Belize observes that Louis is “up in the air, just like that angel, too far off the earth to pick out the details. Louis and his Big Ideas. Big Ideas are all you love,” (*Perestroika*, 94) Louis realizes that theory and practice must be joined, both in love and in democracy. This is confirmed for him when he researches Joe’s legal decisions written on behalf of Justice Wilson and finally understands that Joe, who wants to be “a nice, nice man” (*Millennium*, 107)—as Roy aptly puts it—has rendered legal decisions that have real and damaging consequences for children and gay people.

Dewey argues for praxis in democracy, asserting that democracy is “a *personal* way of individual life. . . . Instead of thinking of our own dispositions and habits as accommodated to certain institutions we have to learn to think of the latter as expressions, projections, and extensions of habitually dominant personal attitudes.” [30] Joe thus expresses a clearly undemocratic viewpoint when he tells Louis of his legal decisions, “It’s law not justice, it’s power, not the merits of its exercise, it’s not an expression of the ideal” (*Perestroika*, 109). The discrepancy between Joe’s theory and practice in multiple areas of life, including love and democracy, causes him to think that he must accommodate himself to institutions—like “legal fag-bashing” (*Perestroika*, 109) or heterosexual marriage, for example—rather than viewing such institutions democratically, as potential sites for expressing his own experiences and habits. Louis recognizes his own behavior in Joe’s habits, and after their fight, Louis finally understands the extent to which he has failed Prior. He later asks to come back to Prior and tells him, “Failing in love isn’t the same as not loving. It doesn’t let you off the hook, it doesn’t mean you’re free to not love,” (*Perestroika*, 140) indicating a respect for praxis that he previously lacked.

In addition, Louis gains “expiation for [his] sins” (*Perestroika*, 121) through his recitation of the

Mourner's Kaddish for Roy Cohn. Although he had previously refused to identify with Roy in any way, calling him "the polestar of human evil ... the worst human being who ever lived, he isn't *human* even," (*Perestroika*, 93) with some coaxing from Belize and help from Ethel Rosenberg's ghost, Louis recites the traditional Jewish prayer for the dead, thus affirming Roy as part of the Jewish community. Framji Minwilla argues that the coming together of Belize, Ethel, and Louis to say Kaddish for Roy "invent[s] a more complex yet exact sense of self and a more expansively conceived idea of community."^[31] This community is a democratic one, in which people who have ideas and beliefs differing from the mainstream (like Roy, for whom this is the case not in life nor in the Reagan years of the play, but within the politics espoused by Kushner and the characters in the epilogue of *Angels*) are nevertheless included and acknowledged as part of the larger community. Based on his joining together of theory with practice and expanding his idea of community by praying for Roy, Louis is able to participate as a "citizen" in the epilogue: he argues at points with Belize about politics, but he is ultimately able to listen and value the presence of differing opinions in his community.

Prior also makes a few missteps, but like Louis, he ultimately "succeeds because he is willing to change,"^[32] to become more democratic in his communication with others and his vision of community. For instance, when he first meets Joe's mother, Hannah, he assumes that because she is Mormon, she must be trying to convert him when she helps him to the hospital. After they arrive at the hospital, Prior tells Hannah about his visit from the Angel, and she says he had a vision, drawing a comparison with Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, and Prior once again rushes to make assumptions about her because of her Mormonism:

PRIOR: But that's preposterous, that's...

HANNAH: It's not polite to call other people's beliefs preposterous. He had great need of understanding. Our Prophet. His desire made prayer. His prayer made an angel. The angel was real. I believe that.

PRIOR: I don't. And I'm sorry but it's repellent to me. So much of what you believe.

HANNAH: What do I believe?

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

HANNAH: No you can't. Imagine. The things in my head. You don't make assumptions about me, mister; I won't make them about you. (*Perestroika*, 102)

This is the first moment of democratic communication between Prior and Hannah. He acknowledges her point, listening and taking to heart her experiences. This openness serves him well when Hannah advises, "An angel is just a belief, with wings and arms that can carry you. It's naught to be afraid of. If it lets you down, reject it. Seek for something new" (*Perestroika*, 103). Prior takes her advice, struggling with the Angel of America and returning the Book of the Anti-Migratory Epistle to Heaven. He previously identified with the Angels—their abandonment by the Almighty and desire to go back—but ultimately he insists upon progress and forward movement. Additionally, Prior's vision of community becomes more expansive and inclusive by the end of the play. He tells Louis in *Millennium Approaches* that if Louis

walked out on him, he would hate him forever. While he does not take Louis back as a partner in *Perestroika*, he forgives him, tells him he loves him, and Louis remains an important presence in Prior's life based on their interaction in the epilogue.

In Hannah's first appearance, she does not seem particularly inclusive or capable of democratic communication given her outrage at Joe's admission that he is gay, however she experiences a transformation in *Perestroika* and shows more concern for others, particularly Prior and Harper. Despite Hannah's somewhat gruff manner—she is described by Sister Ella Chapter in *Millennium Approaches* as “the only unfriendly Mormon [she] ever met” (*Millennium*, 82)—and her claim that she “[doesn't] have pity,” (*Perestroika*, 101) she tends to both Prior and Harper, both of whom have been abandoned by the person closest to them. Hannah explains her actions by claiming, “I know my duty when I see it,” (*Perestroika*, 66) which suggests that unlike Joe, she is willing to take the needs and experiences of others into consideration before acting.

Much like Dewey, Hannah acknowledges that communication and community require cooperation, “understanding, learning, [and] other-regarding thinking.”^[33] Given her sympathy and concern for Prior and Harper as well as her advice to Joe to reflect on his actions and beliefs by asking himself “what it was [he was] running from,” (*Perestroika*, 96) Hannah has become a Kushnerian “citizen” in the epilogue, musing about the “interconnectedness” (*Perestroika*, 144) of people in the world and providing hope for Prior to keep moving forward. Her advice to Prior that he should “seek for something new” (*Perestroika*, 103) if his beliefs fail him demonstrates her own willingness to revise previous assumptions and incorporate new knowledge into her experience, an essential quality in a member of a democratic community.

As for Belize, who has been described in scholarship as the moral center of *Angels in America*,^[34] his actions toward Roy and Louis show a commitment to inclusivity in line with Deweyan democratic community. Belize empathizes with Roy and Louis as fellow gay men, despite his outright hatred for some of their actions and ideologies. He advises Roy about the best course of treatment for late-stage AIDS, contra the opinion of Roy's “very qualified, very expensive WASP doctor,” (*Perestroika*, 26) and warns him about the double-blind AZT trials. Despite the fact that Roy is a terrible patient and person who, as mentioned previously, takes every opportunity to remind Belize that Roy considers him beneath him, Belize feels, as he puts it, a sense of “solidarity. One faggot to another,” (*Perestroika*, 27) and reminds Louis that Roy “died a hard death” (*Perestroika*, 122). With Louis, Belize embodies the democratic value of believing in human nature's capacity for change. Dewey argues in “Creative Democracy” that democracy is “a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature.”^[35] Although Belize disdains Louis for his abandonment of Prior, he meets with Louis in both *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* and offers him some moral guidance, indicating that he has not given up on Louis and retains some hope that he will change for the better.

Belize's inclusivity is unsurprising considering his description of Heaven as encompassing “voting booths ... everyone in Balenciaga gowns with red corsages, and big dance palaces full of music and lights and racial impurity and gender confusion” (*Perestroika*, 76) with gods who are all “brown as the mouths of rivers” (*Perestroika*, 76). This utopic vision eradicates all of the obstacles to justice and democratic participation of marginalized groups in the United States; everyone has gained suffrage, wealth inequality has been destroyed, and racism, sexism, and transphobia have all been tempered by mixed-race divinities and blurred gender boundaries. Belize's idea of Heaven is aligned with Kushner's philosophy on

freedom; he argues that freedom “expand[s] outward”^[36] and the most “basic gesture of freedom is to include, not to exclude.”^[37] This sounds remarkably like Dewey, who concludes in “Creative Democracy” that the task of democracy is always to create “a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute.”^[38] Belize’s vision of Heaven and Kushner’s understanding of freedom express Dewey’s practical ideal for democracy.

The four characters included in the epilogue to *Angels in America*—Belize, Hannah, Louis, and Prior—represent democratic community either because they have demonstrated a willingness to change, listen to others, and revise previous beliefs/actions in the course of the play, or (in Belize’s case) because that kind of inclusivity and democratic communication had already been attained. Michael Cadden argues that the epilogue to *Angels* “leaves us with the image of four individuals who, despite their very real differences, have chosen, based on their collective experience, to think about themselves as a community working for change.”^[39] Similarly, Ron Scapp suggests that Kushner’s ending embraces “the hope of democracy.”^[40] For Kushner, the “hope of democracy” is embodied in these characters who have become “citizens” (*Perestroika*, 146) with differing thoughts and opinions who are nevertheless capable of working together to accomplish the “Great Work” (*Perestroika*, 146) of expanding democracy. Roy and Joe, who were neither inclusive of dissenting voices nor able to form democratic communities, are incapable of acting as citizens and thus omitted from the epilogue, even as Kushner includes them in the greater community of the play itself.

The epilogue to *Angels in America* ultimately advocates for a more ideal democracy, which must begin with individuals who act as citizens. This is the kind of democracy envisioned by Dewey, where all citizens believe “that even when needs and ends or consequences are different for each individual, the habit of amicable cooperation ... is itself a priceless addition to life.”^[41] Such a community stands in stark contrast to the exclusive, undemocratic, and homophobic legislation and political rhetoric of the Reagan years as portrayed in the play and embodied by Roy and Joe. Kushner’s small democratic community at the end of *Angels* reminds the audience that democracy is a process, one toward which we must constantly work to ensure we are applying the democratic method of expanding rights and freedoms outward, revising beliefs or actions based on experience and new information, and opening ourselves to democratic communication with others.

Kushner begins from the premise that including marginalized voices is not only beneficial but essential to democracy. This revises some of Dewey’s early notions, which had been grounded in ethnocentric thinking, and provides a foundation for what including others in a democratic community looks like. The inclusivity Kushner portrays in *Angels in America* demonstrates that democracy does not mean that *all* voices are considered to be equally valid; rather, Kushner highlights voices that are similarly committed to democracy as method. Roy Cohn and Joe Pitt provide examples of voices that are too partisan and too committed to their own individualistic and undemocratic ways of thinking. However, it is important to note that such people are not irredeemable; they have the capacity to change, as we see Louis do over the course of the play. As a result, such individuals deserve to be included in the larger community (as Kushner includes Roy) even if their ideology is itself anti-democratic. Kushner cautions, however, that such individualism and anti-democratic thinking is harmful to democratic inclusivity and communication. Thus, anti-democratic ideology must not be allowed to dominate at a legal level, as we see its harmful consequences in the exclusive, homophobic legislation of the Reagan administration.

In addition, democratic communication is encouraged on a personal level, too, otherwise relationships

and communities run the risk of being torn apart, as evidenced by Roy and Joe or Joe and Harper. Like Dewey, Kushner believes that it is necessary to revise our methods to become always more democratic and more inclusive—like the “citizens” referred to in the epilogue—progressing slowly but ever closer to true democratic communication and community with one another. In our present political moment in the United States, democratic communication and community seem like essential tools to cultivate as we work together toward a future like the one Kushner envisions in his epilogue rather than resigning ourselves to undemocratic rule by the Roy Cohns of the world.

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[1] Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (New York: Broadway Books, 2016), 48.

[2] See, for example, Alexander Peuser, “AIDS and the Artist’s Call to Action,” *Lucerna* 11 (2017): 10-22; Dennis Altman and Kent Buse, “Thinking Politically about HIV: Political Analysis and Action in Response to AIDS,” *Contemporary Politics* 18, no. 2 (2012): 127-140; Laura L. Beadling, “The Trauma of AIDS Then and Now: Kushner’s *Angels in America* on the Stage and Small Screen,” *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance* 5, no. 3 (2012): 229-240; and Claudia Barnett, “AIDS = Purgatory: Prior Walter’s Prophecy and *Angels in America*,” *Modern Drama* 53, no. 4 (2010): 471-494.

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