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Gay and lesbian subcultures from Stonewall to *Angels in America*

The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature, ed. Brian McHale and Len Platt;

Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, forthcoming

This chapter's title would appear to provide an inauspicious frame for a discussion of the relationship between gay and lesbian writing and postmodernism. On the one hand, it projects a linear history which imagines sexual minorities advancing from marginalization and oppression and towards mainstream recognition and success. On the other, it seems to go nowhere at all, suggesting that gay and lesbian culture is coterminous with New York City. The account that follows then promises to be one that denies difference and ignores discontinuity – hardly moves which are ordinarily associated with postmodern narrative and politics. But while the Stonewall riots of 1969 have commonly been understood as a historical watershed, indeed, the moment at which sexual minorities in the West began to take control of their own history, they are also frequently invoked precisely to express concerns about the way other configurations of same-sex intimacy – in particular, those of earlier times and of places outside of the American metropolis – have been occulted by this master narrative.¹ And then Tony Kushner's celebrated epic play *Angels in America* (1990, 1992) is not meant to mark some terminal point at which gay cultural production has become part of the establishment firmament or has developed fully fledged postmodern credentials. Rather, the play typifies the way gay and lesbian writing from this period elaborates multiple histories, competing ideological paradigms and interactions across non-contiguous spaces, while remaining committed to a clear sense of futurity and a politics rooted in a specific community. Indeed, the similarities between the gay liberation movement, which arose immediately after the Stonewall riots, and *Angels* – both for instance articulate the situated

knowledge of sexual dissidents, while simultaneously offering up millenarian visions to the world² – indicate how this chapter is little concerned to chart the *progress* of a putatively postmodern mode of gay and lesbian writing. Instead, it examines a range of material by British and American authors in order to highlight the close affinities yet frequently ambivalent involvement between gay and lesbian culture and postmodernism.³ If the works discussed below – novels, biography, poetry, as well as Kushner’s play – revel in the pleasures of postmodern textual manoeuvres, they also recognize their utility: their potential for subversion, and their capacity to foreground contingency, diversity and dissonance. Yet the same material often equivocates over whether the fragmentation and scepticism typical of postmodern modes of writing help realise other needs – for instance, to account for embodiment and sexual intimacy, or to claim a cultural inheritance and articulate a coherent collective identity which might provide the basis for solidarity and political action.

A brief history of one gay cultural mode, camp, charts some of these tensions. With its tendency towards irony, its preoccupation with performance and surface, and its seemingly indiscriminate appreciation of artefacts from high and low culture, camp may reasonably be considered a tributary current of postmodern culture. Yet, proclamations of the death of camp have studded the period. In the early 1970s, gay liberation, with its political imperative to ‘come out’, seemed to render the dissimulations of camp obsolete. On the other hand, the following two decades saw concerted efforts by intellectuals to reclaim camp for a sexual minority or, more specifically, a gay male constituency, following its mainstream appropriation and commodification (which included its mobilization under the banner of postmodernism). By the late 1980s, camp’s traditional fascination with the *démodé*, and in particular, the body past its prime, in decay, became for many utterly unpalatable as thousands of gay men wasted and died of AIDS-related illnesses.⁴ However, spurred by the indifference of authorities in the face of the on-going disaster, and bolstered by emergent

theories which articulated the radical potential of drag and other performances of gender, camp seemed to find renewed purpose.

The conclusion of this little historical detour, however, foregrounds the most obvious peculiarity about plotting gay and lesbian culture and politics alongside “peak postmodernism:” the period’s close is marked by the rise of queer theory in the US. Although drawing on the work of earlier theorists, Foucault particularly, this body of thought provided sexual dissidents in the 1990s and beyond vital new critical frameworks through which to challenge institutionalized homophobia and, to use Michael Warner’s phrase, “regimes of the normal.”⁵ An avowedly poststructuralist enterprise, queer theory demands a shift from a politics of identity to one of signification. For Judith Butler, compulsive heterosexuality is underwritten by gender differences that are presumed to be natural but which are enacted and established through the repetition of bodily acts. Cultural interventions which foreground the performativity of gender have the potential also to reveal its contingency, thereby undermining the authority of normative codes of gender and sexuality, and creating opportunities for disavowed and wholly new desires and social relations to find expression and flourish.⁶ With a somewhat different focus that nevertheless leads to similar conclusions, Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick argues that the heterosexual/homosexual dyad is a centrally organizing principle that structures not only understandings of sexual identity but numerous other sites of knowledge in the West from the nineteenth century onwards. It is though a distinction that is ever unstable, contradictory, and as such is susceptible to reversal and subversion.⁷

The deconstructive projects of Butler, Sedgwick and others necessarily also contest the “ethnic” model of sexual identity which became the ascendant and most enduring configuration of gay and lesbian politics following gay liberation’s brief millenarian phase. Queer theorists contend that the discrete identity categories “lesbian” and “gay” are as much

predicated on exclusion as is 'heterosexual'. If this charge seems somewhat technical it certainly corresponded with criticisms of, firstly, the assimilative tendency in gay and lesbian culture – how the desire to take up “a place at the table” often entailed a disavowal of the conspicuously non-normative, for example, sex radicals, drag queens and butch lesbians – and, secondly, the frequent racism and classism of a “community” that was predominantly white and middle class. Yet one of the reasons for why such identities have endured is because they provide bases for socialization and political organization. As Steven Seidman succinctly puts it, “whereas identity politics offers a strong politics on a conceptually weak, exclusionary basis, poststructuralism offers a thin politics as it problematizes the very notion of a collective in whose name a movement acts.”⁸ Moreover, even while Butler insists that that her seminal book *Gender Trouble* emerged out of own involvement in activist networks (and its subsequent influence on queer activism has been considerable), many have questioned the efficacy of queer theory’s politics of signification. Alan Sinfield for instance suspects that “we have supposed too readily that to demonstrate indeterminacy on a dominant construct is to demonstrate its weakness and its vulnerability to subversion.” Indeed,

gay pastiche and its excesses may easily be pigeon-holed as illustrating all too well that lesbians and gay men can only play at true manliness and womanliness [...] The Stonewall queens instigated Gay Liberation not because they were camp or wore drag – there was nothing new about that; but because they fought the police.⁹

Queer theory’s principal tenets – and controversies – have left an indelible imprint on the work of many gay and lesbian authors writing in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century. Ali Smith’s effervescent reworking of Ovid’s story of Iphis and Ianthe, *Girl Meets Boy* (2007), even offers a line from Butler’s *Gender Trouble* as an epigraph. Smith’s novel

seeks to show how the fluidity of sexuality and gender is kept in check only by convention and institutional practices: in a pivotal sex scene between two female characters that extends over five breathless pages, intercourse is shown to be infinitely transformational, its pleasures not determined by fixed subject positions. Smith's retelling of the already 'very fluid' stories of the author of *Metamorphoses* is indicative of a desire to demonstrate that some of the imperatives of queer theory have always been known and lived. In so doing, ironically enough Smith's fiction compares with earlier essentializing projects which sought to identify and celebrate homosexual individuals and subcultures throughout history.¹⁰ Moreover, as if to register doubts about the capacity for articulations of the fluidity of sexuality and the instability of categories of gender to effect change, Smith insists on the importance of other traditions of political activism. Smith's lesbian lovers become activists, leaving a trail of very public graffiti messages damning global sexual inequality across their hometown of Inverness. Their guerrilla sloganeering undeniably recalls the direct action and iconoclasm of the suffragettes; indeed, the novel opens with an account of a suffragette arsonist. By situating its protagonists within the long historical march of feminist endeavour, Smith arguably confirms Linda Hutcheon's contention that feminism and postmodernism ought never to be conflated, since the latter, while "certainly political," "has not theorized agency; it has no strategies of resistance that would correspond to feminist ones".¹¹ The novel's opening anecdote, however, is told by the grandfather of one of the protagonists – he begins, "let me tell you about when I was a girl."¹² *Girl Meets Boy* is then decidedly optimistic about the capacity for a distinctly queer politics to effect change. Narratives of personal transformation appear to foster confidence in the possibility of social change – "things will always be different because things can always be different".¹³ What is more, the grandfather's account suggests that self-conscious enactments of gender facilitate access to, and enhance an appreciation of, diverse histories of struggle.

Prior to the publication of the cynosures of queer theory in the early 1990s, many gay and lesbian writers were grappling with the possibilities of postmodern narrative to provide adequate accounts of queer desire, politics and everyday life. In the United States the nearest thing to a literary school of sexually dissident authors committed to narrative experimentation emerged in the late 1970s. The so-called “New Narrative” movement, mainly comprised of writers based in the Bay Area, including Dodie Bellamy, Bruce Boone, Sam D’Alessandro, Robert Glück and Kevin Killian, grew out of the urban queer subcultures that were flourishing in the decade following Stonewall. Says Glück: “gay identity was [...] in its heroic period;” “in the urban mix, some great experiment was actually taking place, a genuine community where strangers and different classes and ethnicities rubbed more than shoulders.”¹⁴ Sexual and social experimentation, he implies, helped foster radical forms of writing, though the self-designation as a movement was as much a response to the disinterest of the ascendant literary vanguard of the moment, the Language Poets, in sex generally and queer experience especially. Glück has described the central problematics he faces as a writer to be the urgent need to articulate the corporality of desire, ‘to write close to the body – the place language goes reluctantly’, as well as to register the particularity of gay experience, but crucially in ways which do not reproduce falsely coherent portraits of either self or community.¹⁵ Glück declares that his writing attempts the seemingly impossible task of expressing “total continuity and total disjunction,” since that is how he experiences both himself and the world, and to recognise how the gay ‘community’ produces for itself a necessarily stable identity while simultaneously “speaking to itself dissonantly.”¹⁶

Glück’s 1985 novel *Jack the Modernist*, a thoroughly self-conscious retrospective account of an affair between narrator Bob and the perpetually inscrutable Jack, continually traces the uneasy interactions between bodies, narrative and community. From its opening, though, the novel looks like it will chart the familiar enough terrain of a boy-meets-boy story;

by the end, by Bob's own admission, "banality has set in" – he has merely narrated how 'I loved someone who loved me not'.¹⁷ But this is so much conventional structure that packages all manner of disruptions, digressions and excesses. Bob declares "Society wants its stories; I want to return to society the story it has made [...] as a revenge, a critique" (*Jack*, 171). Bob's narrative, while more-or-less linear and marked by predictable turns, is continually torn apart along diverse axes. These multiple polarizations foreground and deconstruct the false coherence produced – and demanded – by conventional story-making. Notably, Bob is impelled to employ different narrative modes to account for particular individuals and interactions. Jack "the modernist" requires a mode of writing that can relate his seeming fragmentariness, his "lack of story" (*Jack*, 18). Sex between Bob and Jack is similarly characterized as being beyond conventional temporal framing:

We eroticized a finely-honed attention which challenged terms as soon as our bodies invented them, which addressed my sudden shifts of context, his mid-gesture costume changes. Instead of an oceanic welling with its always-in-the-future-until-it's-in-the-past crescendo, we remained moment by moment (*Jack*, 11).

Bob's older friend Phyllis, on the other hand, "demands a realism complete with revelation of character and epiphany that would not suit Jack." (*Jack*, 30) Phyllis's inclusion in the story is vital – Bob declares "I feel an urgency to know personalities that include the passage of time. I borrow their sense of the future which makes storytelling possible." This begs the question: how to synthesize the two modes, or, "how do I mesh modernism's disjunction with continuity and depth of feeling?" Bob answers: "I'd have to add a sub-plot which duplicates the first explosion that began story and time: the body." (*Jack*, 31)

The body here is not being articulated as being prior to language; rather, the body is a process, and one that is generative – an “explosion” continually producing new situations that invite interpretation. But Bob’s corporal sub-plots, like all of his narratives, tend towards two extremes: excess and banality. For instance, he delights in sucking Jack’s cock because the act has no other meaning: “a rock bottom agreement that rejects any possibility of substitution” (*Jack*, 26-7); intensity exceeds articulation, and the language of sex, even the concept of pleasure, seems “hopelessly inadequate.” Hence his declaration “I wanted [his cock] to be a place: to be unconscious there, to sleep there.” (*Jack*, 28) Yet, when getting fucked by Jack, it is less the act than narrative conventions that become all-consuming, obliterating: “The more you get fucked, the more you want it; eventually the pornographic *hungry hole* becomes merely accurate” (*Jack*, 29). Bob’s visit to the bathhouse is similarly informed by commodified images – the interchangeable pieces of male bodies of the bathhouse ads are exactly what he finds there. Yet because of the proximity of so many desiring bodies he is able to focus as much on the apparent continuity of experience as its fragmentation. Bob declaims “we watch the pleasure rather than the men, feeling the potential interchangeability [...] their collective mind said *he’s doing it* which my finite mind repeated” (*Jack*, 54). The “dreamtime logic” of the orgy in darkness has “a unity that can’t be dismissed or broken into parts” (*Jack*, 56), and yet that is precisely what his narrative does at this point, breaking into two parallel accounts – one engages in poetic simile, the other considers, among other things, society’s anxieties about group sex. The reader is obliged to follow one or the other narrative strands or be faced with meaningless fragmentation.

Glück’s novel is repeatedly disrupted by such short-circuitings, combustions of two conflicting imperatives: the articulation of the fragmentariness of experience, and narrative coherence. Despite Glück’s contempt for the latter, it never drops out of the picture due to anxieties over the implications of embracing the former. Bob asks, “if I am so dispersed, what

happens to the possibility of intimacy for me?” (*Jack*, 59) Further, while fragmentation more closely corresponds with experience than coherence, it precludes the working towards social justice, or for that matter the imagining of any kind of future. Ultimately, the novel puts its trust in gossip – which for Bob refers to the diffusion of meaning across a community, and constitutes community: “Gossip registers the difference between a story one person knows and everyone knows, between one person’s story and everyone’s. Or it’s a mythology [...] a community and a future.” (*Jack*, 9) Gossip has traditionally been a maligned form discourse – associated with the trivial chatter of women and gay men, with sexual conduct, and with insinuations lacking empirical, verifiable evidence. But as such, gossip provides scope for a counter discourse, which according to Irit Rogoff, has the potential to mobilize a “distrust of the false immutable coherence of master narratives but also perhaps the false, immutable coherence of our identities as subjects and tellers of those narratives.”¹⁸ In Glück’s novel, gossip noticeably also enables all kinds of ethical manoeuvres within communities: the articulation of reciprocity, the confirmation of insincerity, and the facilitation of collective mourning.

In a postscript to *Jack the Modernist*, Glück declares that his “art of collage” invites readers to identify shifts in “tone and century” (*Jack*, 176); the novel packs in reflections on both Minnie Mouse and the *Mabinogion*, borrows from Baudelaire, Bataille and Barthes – and a good deal of porn. British gay writers, however, have been much more inclined than their American counterparts to consider subcultural life from earlier periods. For instance, Neil Bartlett’s collage-text *Who Was that Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (1988), which the author refers to as a scrapbook, scrutinizes the significance of Wilde and his times for a gay subculture that occupies the same urban spaces in the present. Bartlett admits that he once saw his own arrival in London as the beginning of his story, and that, “like a lot of other men, I’d seen America and 1970 as the start of everything.”¹⁹ Researching the life and work

of Wilde and other *fin-de-siècle* queers, Bartlett increasingly comes to realise that, *contra* Glück et al., there is little that is new about his narrative. Indeed, his own subcultural habits – the willing or subconscious quotation, the “shameless pleasure of repeating our own clichés” – demonstrate that the notion that modern gay life and identity is some kind of heroic self-creation is way off the mark. Rather, to “come out” is to immerse oneself in “a library of other texts.” This is no bad thing: “being predictable is a small price to pay for sharing something.” (*Who*, 205)

But it is not only gay men in the 1980s who were interminably quoting each other and their forbears; Wilde and his company did just the same. Wilde’s contempt for originality – evidenced in his endless plagiarism and recycling of his own material – is of course legendary; Bartlett though identifies in the raiding of biographies of the past a desire for self-definition of the part of an emergent subculture. Unable to ‘believe that theirs was a unique experience’ queer men in the late-nineteenth century “found their peers not in other men, but in other texts.” (*Who*, 199) But this was not – or was not only – an academic trawl through history for reassuring textual traces of themselves. Firstly, their historiographical method often verged on camp: “They perfected the arts of a much less scholarly approach. They engaged in the inspired queenly assemblage of fragments of history. They were masters of allusion, suggestion, the misinterpretation and reinterpretation of images.” (*Who*, 227) Secondly, the continual reworkings by these “magpies, thieves, *bricoleurs*” were often ambivalent towards or subversive of the sense of a discrete, authentic personage. For instance, with regard to Wilde’s short story “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.,” Bartlett asserts:

At the very moment at which, historically, we begin to exist, he created a biography of a homosexual man in which the fake and the true are quite indistinguishable. He proposed that our present is continually being written by our history; that the

individual voice can hardly be separated from the historic text which it repeats and adapts. (*Who*, 209)

To be clear, by insisting that “the present is continually being written by our history” describes gay life in the 1980s as well as it once did Wilde’s world in the 1890s, Bartlett is not merely saying that history repeats itself or that the two periods of homosexual subculture are indistinguishable. For, firstly, unlike Wilde, Bartlett identifies the limitations of his own historiography. There are lacunae in the historical record: the voices of young working-class men, for instance, are largely absent. The only record of the words of the lads Wilde rented are the statements they made in court; as is so often the case, nothing is otherwise known about their experiences. Secondly, and more pressingly, Bartlett recognizes the particular risks and responsibilities he faces in doing such historical work as a gay man. On the one hand, he warns against simply romanticizing Wilde as a gay pioneer while ignoring the fact that he exploited his wealth and status to get what he wanted. On the other, Bartlett instructs the gay historian never to lose sight of what he wants. Indeed, the enticements of history should be handled with the same “practical methods” that might be used in a crowded gay bar: “admit your interest, your position, your hunger.” (*Who*, 225) Such history-as-cruising facilitates counter readings to the hostility of the law courts, substituting the prosecution’s dismay with delight, and rereading the “amateur criticism” of the courts as evidence of the practices of a sophisticated subculture. (*Who*, 137-8).

The danger, however, is that this kind of interested rereading is channelled into the confirmation of current identities and practices, producing a singular, unreflexive account quite devoid of the camp dissembling of Wilde. “Having worked so hard to achieve this identity,” Bartlett warns, “there is little reason to scrutinize it, to poke around in it for possible sites of alteration and adjustment. We remake history in our image, rather than to

looking to our history as a source of doubts and hopes.” (*Who*, 218) The risks of this kind of presentist revisionism are obviously greatest in periods of crisis, since history seems entirely directed entirely towards termination: “Since we persuaded ourselves that all our previous history had served to usher in a golden age, we now see the challenge that AIDS presents as a very particular kind of disaster: the end of a golden age.” (*Who*, 221) Wilde’s fall can serve to reinforce this bleak historical narrative: then as now, a whole newly emergent and increasingly confident subculture is suddenly subdued by a single calamity. But of course, even though Wilde’s final words in 1895 court case were famously “And I? May I say nothing, my Lord?”, he was not silenced by his downfall, just as homosexual life on the streets of London did not evaporate upon his being carted off to Pentonville Prison. Wilde went on seeing the men, and boys, he loved and continued to fabricate new identities based on recycled materials. One of the last, his adoption of the moniker “Sebastian Melmoth” – part gay saint, part wandering outcast – was yet another piece of camp: “From 1894 to 1900 he was posing, camping not just to save his life, but to find out if any life was possible.” (*Who*, 168) This suggests the possibility of camp to be paradoxically unoriginal and inauthentic and at the same time exploratory and experimental – even in the most difficult of circumstances. It is this kind of historical insight that is most helpful, suggesting that camp may after all be a useful subcultural resource in the era of AIDS. But if both Wilde and Bartlett produced camp biographies and histories, Bartlett insists his work articulates a challenge which Wilde’s could not: “We suggest that a gay culture is something to be struggled for, not dreamt or bought. At this point, our rewriting of history becomes a truly dangerous activity.” (*Who*, 229)

The discussion so far has been dominated by metropolitan experience. Some non-Anglo lesbian and gay writers look insistently to a variety of cultural texts, histories and spaces to articulate the complexity of their own experiences and to delineate a politics which

can fully account for and build upon them. One striking and influential example is the mixed-genre work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) by Chicana feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa. For Anzaldúa, the borderland – like the area of southern Texas along the Mexican border where she grew up – is a space where two or more cultures meet, though rarely on equal terms. Borderland dwellers are typically considered troublesome and transgressive. Neither one thing nor the other, they “cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’”.²⁰ Residents of this thirdspace are often conflicted, damaged, because torn between worlds. Yet they are potentially tolerant of contradiction and ambiguity because they are used to living within and crossing between different cultures. Extending W.E.B. Du Bois’s notion of double consciousness, Anzaldúa’s figure of the “new mestiza” is predicated on a pluralistic mode of thought and behaviour. Instead of attempting always to synthesize opposing elements, “mestiza consciousness” excludes nothing; its inclusivity and its perpetual code switching enables the building of a non-dualistic mythos, “a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet.” (*Borderlands*, 103)

Borderlands are not only physical environments; they are imagined spaces, states of mind, “the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary.” (*Borderlands*, 25) Anzaldúa suggests the term might also refer to “where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.” (*Borderlands*, 19) sexuality too for Anzaldúa is a form of borderland. But she also closely affiliates queerness with mestiza consciousness. For while Anzaldúa argues that, “for the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behaviour,” queerness is also “a path of knowledge (and of learning) [...] a way of balancing, of mitigating duality.” (*Borderlands*, 41) Perhaps, though, her sense of identification with the hermaphroditic ‘half and half’, a figure frequently ostracized from Chicano culture for being “a work of nature inverted,” appears to verge on a questionable,

dusty essentialism: queerness here approximates inversion, or some other kind of embodied difference. Equally, her later claim that “I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races” (102) seems to overreach into universalism. However, her concern is rather to critique the ‘despot duality’ that renders the likes of the half and half abnormal, and to examine the potential of the queer’s “embodiment ... of the coming together of opposite qualities within” (Ibid.). Also, Anzaldúa typically reinterprets and redeploys the tools of feminist and gay and lesbian critique. For example, “homophobia” is reconfigured as “a fear of going home” – which immediately problematizes the manoeuvre that has proven to be so central to gay and lesbian narrative and politics in the West: coming out.

The structure of *Borderlands/La Frontera* and its constituent parts reflects Anzaldúa’s concern with the pressures of dualistic modes of thought and the need to move beyond them. The book is divided into two parts, one made up of essays, the other poetry. Though as Norma E. Cantú and Aída Hurtado remark in their introduction to the fourth edition of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, “the essays contain poetry and have a poetic and allusive quality to them, while the poetry in the latter half of the book records brutal ‘facts’ about the oppression suffered by Chicano/as throughout their history in the United States.” (*Borderlands*, 7) Yet many of the poems also focus on the emotional effects of “crossing borders” – which happens to be the title of the first part of the book comprised of essays. Several of the poems are riven by contradictions, which often makes for challenging reading. For instance, “Interface” combines at least two senses of borderland: sexual intimacy and the coming together of two cultures in one territory. The intersection of these two kinds of borderland is marked by an ambiguous doubling. The poetic speaker, a Chicana women residing in Brooklyn, describes discovering in her apartment the presence of an other-worldly female, one who is “pulsing colour, pure sound, bodiless [...] noumenal” (*Borderlands*, 170). They are only able to experience each other with considerable effort at the border between their respective worlds,

and it is at this interface where they are able to lay as lovers, “enclosed by margins, hems / where only we existed.” (*Borderlands*, 171) This “Leyla,” as she is named, gradually takes on physical form and is then socialized by the speaker to the point where she is able to return to Texas and present her lover to her family. Yet there is a clear sense that Leyla is also a projection of the speaker. The first line asserts “She’s always been there / occupying the same room,” and for some time, Leyla occupies the same space as the speaker’s own body. Leyla’s desire to become physical, for a body of her own, articulates a confidence to explore sex and sexuality, and perhaps even a willingness to take on a sexual identity; after all, these transformations occur in New York City – the celebrated site of countless stories of gay and lesbian migration and self-realization. But the poem’s conclusion counters such unidirectional metropolitanism. To her brothers’ query “is she a lez?” the speaker responds, “no, just an alien” (*Borderlands*, 174). This is a term that elsewhere Anzaldúa correlates with the emergent figure of the new mestiza, the ‘consciousness of the borderlands’, which has far less to do with arriving, than a constant “crossing over.” (*Borderlands*, 100)

Kushner’s *Angels in America* returns us to New York City, but his apocalyptic vision is of a city – and a physical and moral universe – “about to crack wide open.”²¹ Kushner’s characters have much in common with Anzaldúa’s border dwellers: they feel themselves pinioned by history but also impelled towards a nomadic existence; they too are continually crossing over, which is, once again, rarely a simple or painless process. In presenting subjects as burdened by history, restless and torn between worlds, Kushner, rather like Anzaldúa, connects the present to long histories of migration to and across the North American continent. The presence of gay people in New York City, then, is presented as the result of just one more wave of migration. But Kushner’s play also shares with Anzaldúa’s writing a utopian impulse. Like many apocalyptic narratives, *Angels’* works towards reconstruction, and its epilogue scene features a vision of a diverse queer community critically engaged with

the world. If Anzaldúa focuses on how individual experiences of contradiction may bring forth a consciousness that can foster new stories and a new politics, Kushner's ensemble of characters negotiate these contradictions and challenges together. The fact that most of play's actors are required to play several roles – many of which cross gender, age and ethnicity – has often been interpreted as a trust in the fluidity or performativity of these categories. Yet the play does not so much argue that these categories can and should be transcended (the closeted Mormon Republican Joe, who tears off his temple garments to prove his attachment to Louis – “No past now. I could give up anything” (*Angels*, 206) – is noticeably absent from the play's optimistic final scene), but rather that all manner of movements and interactions are possible, some dangerous, some fruitful. What is certainly valued more is the way that spaces and imaginaries are shared or relayed between characters. The AIDS epidemic has resulted in a collapse in confidence among gay men: “you know you've hit rock bottom when even drag is a drag” (*Angels*, 37); “faggots; we're just a bad dream the real world is having, and the real world's waking up.” (*Angels*, 168) The pooling or relaying of utopian imaginaries from a variety of standpoints – African American, leftist, Jewish, Mormon – provides a subculture in crisis with vital new resources, and the capacity to reach out to and find common cause with other constituencies.

These transferences are portrayed metadramatically during some of the play's numerous ‘split scenes’, in which events taking place in different locations are staged simultaneously. Occasionally characters break the frame of their scene and cross over, sensing “some sort of profound displacement” (*Angels*, 198). Prior and Harper, for instance, meet each other in a shared dream/hallucination. They are able to perceive painful truths about the other that their new acquaintance alone cannot. Yet this “threshold of revelation” (*Angels*, 39) is neither divinely inspired nor, as Harper supposes, a consequence of the overactivity of a single mind: “Imagination can't create anything new, can it? It only recycles

bits and pieces from the world and reassembles them into visions” (*Angels*, 38). (Harper’s assessment would preclude the possibility of divine intervention; indeed, later Prior seems to borrow from this, understanding Angels to be little more than “incredibly powerful bureaucrats [...] they can *do* anything, but they can’t invent, create”, *Angels*, 175.) An isolated imagination may not be able to conceive of the world anew, but it seems two might meet at some threshold (akin to Anzaldúa’s “interface” perhaps) thanks to the “magic of the theatre” (*Angels*, 199).

The imagined space which is most frequently relayed between characters is of an apocalyptic/celestial city – more often than not a vision of San Francisco. Sometimes these transferences enable others to take propitious action. The torpid version of heaven in which Prior and Harper meet toward the end of the play disappoints – it is a ruined, moribund incarnation of San Francisco – but Prior provides Harper the impetus to go see for herself the “real [...] unspeakably beautiful” city on earth (*Angels*, 253), and set her life on a new trajectory. Otherwise, such visions are designed to exclude. Belize’s account of heaven – ‘like San Francisco ... overgrown with weeds’ (*Angels*, 209) – for the dying Roy Cohn borrows from Prior’s earlier prophecies, which in turn draws on Louis’s understanding of a Jewish afterlife. Belize’s adaptation, however, in which “all the deities are creole, mulatto, brown as the mouths of rivers,” leaves no place for Cohn: “Race, taste and history, finally overcome. And you ain’t there.” (*Angels*, 210) All of these visions contrast with Cohn’s own chilling view of socialization which involves little more than the transfer of patriarchal power. As he advises Joe, “Don’t be afraid to live in the raw wind, naked alone [...] Let nothing stand in your way.” (*Angels*, 64) Cohn’s death and Joe’s unremarked disappearance silence those voices that articulate New Right values, which leaves space for a polyvalent communion to flourish. The religious term here is as appropriate as the secular “community:” even if the Angels’ reactionary instruction to humankind to remain still, to cease changing, is

ultimately rejected, religious tropes inform the play's concluding visions of reconstruction – whether Harper's dream of souls of the dead ascending to repair the hole in the ozone layer, the prophesy of the return of the healing waters the fountain of Bethesda, of Prior's final blessing of the audience – the last of a chain of blessings made throughout the play.

Noticeably, the play concludes on a note that is at once emphatically modernist and decidedly Biblical – Prior's exclamation, previously voiced by the Angel, "The Great Work Begins," (*Angels*, 280) is an instruction to all to participate. While this puts trust in a better future, there is no presumption of a "new book of Beautiful Theory," (*Angels*, 148) or a divine plan to set things right. Prior's demand for and his offering in that final blessing of "More life" speaks of a future, certainly – and his declaration "you are fabulous creatures, each and every one" (*Angels*, 280) reminds us that this is first and foremost a gay fantasia – but it imagines a future that is messy, diverse; a work in progress.

¹ For example the temporal framing of Gavin Butt's *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005) explicitly 'eschews 1969 as an historical turning point and resists its before and after effects upon historical interpretation' (15). See also Richard Phillips, Diane Watt and David Shuttleton (eds.) *Decentring Sexualities: Politics and Representations beyond the Metropolis* (Routledge: London, 2000).

² See for example Dennis Altman, *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation* (New York, Avon, 1971); *Out of the Closets*, ed. Karla Jay and Allen Young (New York: Douglas, 1972).

³ This chapter only indirectly addresses transgender experience. For two important accounts of transgender cultural production and politics, see Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) and Judith

Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

⁴ Caryl Flinn, "The Deaths of Camp," *Camera Obscura*, 1995, 12(2, 35): 52-84.

⁵ Michael Warner, "Introduction," in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), vii-xxxi [xxvi].

⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁷ Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

⁸ Steven Seidman, *Difference Troubles: Queering Social Theory and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 137.

⁹ Alan Sinfield, *Gay and After* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997), 33.

¹⁰ E.g., Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England, 1700-1830* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1992).

¹¹ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), 168

¹² Ali Smith, *Girl Meets Boy* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007), 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁴ Robert Glück, "Long Note on New Narrative", *Narrativity*, 1 (n.d.). Accessed online <https://www.sfsu.edu/~newlit/narrativity/issue_one/gluck.html>

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Robert Glück, *Jack the Modernist* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1995) 170. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Jack*.

¹⁸ Irit Rogoff, "Gossip as Testimony: A Postmodern Signature," in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London: Routledge, 1996), 58-65 [65].

¹⁹ Neil Bartlett. *Who Was that Man? A present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1993), xxi. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Who*.

²⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 2012), 25. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Borderlands*.

²¹ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (London: Nick Hern, 2007), 118. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Angels*.