

**An Apocalypse of Change:  
The Reconstruction of the American Identity in Post-9/11 Cinema**

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*A man finds his identity by identifying. A man's identity is not best thought of as the way in which he is separated from his fellows, but the way in which he is united with them."*

*–Robert Terwilliger*

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## ABSTRACT

At 8:45am on September 11, 2001, United States citizens stood in shock and awe as the confidence in their national identity shattered as quickly as the fall of the World Trade Center. In the after-math of September 11, Americans everywhere fought to recreate a sense of individual belonging and restructure an identity as a nation. Media, television, and film sought to fill this void in the American people.

This paper analyzes the reconstruction of the American identity through the lens of two post-modern films: Paul Haggis' *Crash* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. First, the role of 9/11 on the resurgence of trauma culture and its catalytic effect on the start of the post-modern era is examined. This analysis argues that these films unite American citizens through the central notion of humanity that mankind ultimately shares. This is achieved through the framework of three central themes: the elimination of the typified other, the restoration of faith in mankind and the human condition, and the uniting sense of touch. The construction of these themes reconciles the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in all aspects of the post-modern era. These films serve as metaphorical narrative vehicles and function to draw the American people back into a sense of a universal, national identity in the wake of September 11. In addition, they foster reassurance in the American spirit and ensure the ability of the United States to initiate collective recovery after periods of intense national trauma.

## CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

What creates an identity? Simple wisdom suggests that identity is formed through individual experience and knowledge. However, might the experiences of and lessons learned through others guide us in the creation of self? Mankind as a population constantly grasps onto any and all forms of experience as a way to make sense of their own trials and tribulations. This frame of reference held true most notably after the terrorist attacks on the United States of America on September 11, 2001. Americans everywhere fought to recreate a sense of individual belonging and restructure an identity as a nation. Media, television, and film sought to fill this void in the American people.

The following paper analyzes two films- Paul Haggis' *Crash* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*-and their recent relevancy and importance for American citizens. These films serve as metaphorical narrative vehicles and function to draw the American people back into a sense of a universal, national identity in the wake of September 11. Chapter Two of this study outlines the events of September 11 and the effect of President George W. Bush's post-9/11 rhetoric on the attitudes and perceptions of the national public. Chapter Three examines the effects of these attacks on American citizens and the social impacts of post-9/11 racist attitudes on American immigrants and minorities. Chapter Four investigates previous research in the areas of racial and American identities, outlining the stereotypical media representations of race and ethnicity and how this has affected the construction of tolerance in popular American culture and society. Chapter Five develops this understanding of tolerance through a historical perspective. The

chapter demonstrates the influence of the transition from modernity to post-modernity on the American identity by summarizing the contrasting characteristics of these time periods. The events of September 11 are cited as a marked trauma, and thus function collectively as a catalyst for the post-modern era and the transformation of the modern American identity. Chapter Six presents a brief overview of the concept of both trauma culture and trauma film. The chapter then examines trauma film in relation to post-9/11 cinema and its contribution to the post-modern belief in synchronicity, otherwise defined as temporally coincidental occurrences that demonstrate the interconnectedness of mankind (Schloesser, "TMI"). Chapter Seven identifies post-modern films *Crash* and *Angels in America* as dual focuses for analysis and contextualizes these films and their various producers. The urban setting of these films and their function as microcosms of America as important elements of representational post-modern cinema are discussed. Chapter Eight analyzes the two films through the lens of three overarching themes: the elimination of the other, the restoration of faith, and the uniting sense of touch. Chapter Nine generates a discussion of the findings of chapter eight, provides suggestions for interpreting the messages of *Crash* and *Angels in America*, and proposes considerations for future related research. Chapter Ten formulates a new perspective of America and the identities of its citizens as a collective force.

**CHAPTER TWO**  
**THE SPARK THAT LIT THE FIRE:**  
**THE CRASH THAT SET THE MODERN WORLD AFLAME**

At 8:45am on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, The United States of America's reputation as the sole-surviving superpower began to decline when the first plane struck the World Trade Center in New York City. Within a period of eighteen minutes, the second tower received a similar blow. As the twin towers fell, so did the confidence in the American identity. By the time President George W. Bush took the air for his Address to the American public almost twelve hours later, the nation was in dire need of hope, reassurance, and relief. In hopes of lifting the spirits of the American public, Bush chose to evade the answers to the more difficult questions surrounding the attacks, and instead focused on framing the crisis as a "melodrama:" defined in *From Post-9/11 Melodrama to Quagmire in Iraq: A Rhetorical History* as a victimized America and a villainous, unidentified "other," a battle between good and evil in the fight for the moral virtues of freedom and democracy (Simons, 184). The creation of an "us versus them" rhetorical strategy had three main objectives: to leave an air of ambiguity surrounding the attacks so as to leave room for later rhetorical adaptability, to trample all possible criticism in siding with America as the "moral" and "virtuous," and to give the American people a sense of reassurance and security and establish the central unity of the nation needed to bounce back from the recent tragedies.

The controversies and various angled-positions surrounding the ambiguous War on Iraq and Bush's strategies are endless, and far too complex to extensively elaborate on in this work. The key importance in this analysis lies in the understanding that President

Bush's reaction to 9/11, combined with the rhetorical ambiguity of the "War on Terror," created a climate of suspicion and intolerance. In combination with Bush's response and the events surrounding the aftermath of the attack, September 11 left America with three gaping issues: a discrepancy between the therapeutic desire to unify as a nation and the degeneration of a full, collective sense of the United States, the ambiguous identity of an "American" individual as a result of the religious and ethnic intolerance provoked by the War on Iraq, and the various concerns associated with America's unexpected, sudden thrust into an era of "post-modernity."

### CHAPTER THREE DIVIDED LINES: POST 9/11 RACISM AND INTOLERANCE

A lingering air of fear after the attacks on the World Trade Center left the American nation vulnerable to racist attitudes and bigotry. This pervasive atmosphere had drastic social impacts on American minorities. Nancy Foner's *Wounded City*, a work chronicling the social effects of 9/11, emphasizes the importance of understanding "...cultural specificity of disaster responses (Foner, 234)." Although America generally felt a sense of unity after the traumatic events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the disaster did not sweep away the differences felt among various social groups. Foner zeros in on South-Asian and Muslim New York City taxi drivers as a focus group "The accounts of yellow cab drivers reveal that structural hierarchies of class, race, immigration status, national origin, and religious identity mediated their experiences of economic hardship and hostility after the terrorist attack of September 11 (Foner, 233)." At a time when Americans were encouraged and pushed to feel united as a nation, it seems that racial, ethnic, religious, and socio-economic boundaries, differences that existed long before the acts of terrorism, still pervaded:

South Asian and Muslim drivers...did not feel drawn into the community of sufferers, even though they responded with a sense of unity, purpose, and service...the 9/11 attacks, seen from the drivers perspective, solidified rather than dissolved lines drawn from ethnic, religious, national, and racial difference (Foner, 234).

This feeling of exclusion was not limited to the New York City area-Jersey City, New Jersey, an area known for its high concentration of Arab Muslims, felt the pang of

struggle with inter-community race relations as well. Because of its association with the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Jersey City became a target for FBI investigations shortly after the attacks. In addition, the media images and stories equating Arab Muslims with terrorism did not help the backlash against American Muslims. The Muslims of Jersey city suffered from a number of incidents of racial discrimination, including hate crimes and hostility in public spaces, employment discrimination, and racial profiling (Foner, 142). However, rather than abandoning their faith or further assimilating themselves into the “American” way of life, Jersey City Muslims ironically clung to their religious identities as if their lives depended on it. Foner writes:

The observation that most Arab Muslims in Jersey City did not attempt to blend in or downplay their Arab or Muslim appearance presents a challenge to the classic model of assimilation, which suggests that immigrants eventually lose their homeland culture and melt into the mainstream. At the same time, this observation supports what sociologists noted many years ago: when an identity--ethnic, religious, or cultural--is used to discriminate against a group, this identity, paradoxically, becomes even more important for the group to defend and emphasize. Arab Muslims in Jersey City believed that it was the responsibility of every Muslim to correct perceived misrepresentations and to follow religious practices that honored their own sense of the true Islam (Foner, 151).

In the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup>, individuals everywhere grappled with issues of intolerance, racism, and fear, each in his/her own manner. Some remained consumed with fear. Some repressed the events of the tragedy, retreating into their safe and familiar identities and avoiding the unanswered questions, the unspoken racial injustices occurring on America’s own soil. Unfortunately, these reactions were not unprecedented, as the face of intolerance is one well-recognized by the American public. The cultural identity of America in relation to race and diversity has been a prolific topic

for scholars both before and after the terrorist attacks of September 11. This literature review explores the various angles from which scholars have examined both racial and American identity as individual and combined issues. The question of racial “ambiguity” and its effects on popular American culture, as well as the misconception of “tolerance” in media and television, are also reviewed.

**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**AMBIGUITY OF IDENTITY:**  
**PREVIOUS STUDIES OF INTOLERANCE, RACISM, AND THE AMERICAN**  
**RACIAL IDENTITY**

Although increased efforts in social interactions are necessary to form a holistic “American” lifestyle, the effectiveness in this sort of “hybridity” is debated. Helene Shugart examines the “threat of hybridity” in the context of contemporary popular culture in her study, “Crossing Over: Hybridity and Hegemony in the Popular Media.” In short, she argues that “...representations of ‘other’ are coded to the end of reinforcing and reproducing conventional discourses that maintain the marginalization of designated ‘others’ (115).” Shugart believes that the idea of hybridity is “contained” and managed in order to maintain the already established levels of social, political, and economy hierarchies established by “white society.” Her study focuses specifically on the media’s construction of celebrity Jenifer Lopez, identifying her “ambiguous” character and its perception in the media as an unsettling “threat” to a discourse of whiteness. Through Jennifer Lopez, the media highlights hybridity as “unfeasible” and often destructive. Shugart claims that, through the lens of the media, “...hybridity is shored up against a narrative of authentic ‘otherness,’ secured via a particularly gendered and sexualized discourse of excess, in ways that implicitly address a crisis of racial/ethnic integrity and ultimately serve to preserve whiteness (116).”

This sort of false “tolerance” is also examined in Calabrese and Lenart’s “Cultural Diversity and the Perversion of Tolerance.” The article discusses the amplification of the “PC controversy (33)” and the inverted spin that the popular media has taken on the idea

of tolerance. The authors comment on the media's sudden obsession with creating a "tolerant" media. However, in reality this "accepting" media lens merely frames all issues in an all too positive light. Calabrese and Lenart argue that this lack of intelligent, constructive criticism and dialogue regarding controversial issues is a sign of "right-wing dominance over public discourse (33)" and allows the white majority to remain "above" other racial minorities in the media and otherwise. These scholars hold that "...if the idea of tolerance is to remain useful, it should be applied in the name of equality, not for the hidden reason of preserving inequality (43)."

"Black is Blak: *Bamboozled* and the Crisis of a Postmodern Racial Identity" argues a point very similar to that of other analyses of racial identities in the postmodern era-although it appears to be tolerant and accepting, American society challenges the stability of racial identities, particularly those of African Americans. Phil Chidester argues that the combined energies of the media, corporate hierarchies, and educational institutions to "champion the merits of plurality and diversity of indeterminacy" crush the possibility of any stable understanding and or definition of racial identity (288). This sort of "media monarchy" has led to a crisis of identity for racial minorities, specifically African Americans. Chidester, Campbell, and Bell argue that Spike Lee's film "Bamboozled" examines and addresses the struggle to maintain a sense of "racial self" in twenty-first century America by "...focusing on the primacy of the authentic self, reinforcing the centrality of the image in contemporary thought, and engaging in a self-reflexive critique of its own message on race (287)." After close examination of the film and its various metaphorical levels, authors indicate that, based on the film's meanings,

there is little hope for drawing much of a racial identity amidst a multi-media postmodern world filled with gross generalizations and stereotype identifications. However, the scholars do comment that there is a hope for constructing a view of identity as "...a series of small 'unities' with a handful of others rather than as an identification with a large, indeterminate mass (303)." In this light, although an authentic "African American" racial experience may be partially lost, there is much to be said for the alternate process of identification as a way of developing one's true self.

The studies of Werner and Wirth demonstrate the importance of subjective factors for the development of images initiated by the media. In "Looking into the Black Box: Intolerance of Ambiguity and the Dynamic-transactional Processes in the Development of Issue-related Images," they argue that "ambiguity tolerance" influences the way information is processed. "People willing to accept contradictions and ambiguities in their communicative environment and whose selection strategies do not result in consistent images seem to be cognitively stimulated more strongly (559)," they write. "In this process cognitive and activational components reciprocally influence each other. The mixing and supplementing with already known contents seems to take place more rarely than among ambiguity-intolerant people (559). " In other words, subjects willing to factor exceptions and contradictions into their perceptions were more easily stimulated, which both physical and mental components playing a role in this process, more commonly for the more open-minded subjects. The importance of this study is largely based on the fact that the majority of information received by today's society is filtered through mass media before it is processed by the general public. The understanding that

a large portion of this media may be tainted or biased is an important perception to have when approaching the issue of media consumption.

The media's perceived lack of ability to construct atypical representations of racial individuals independent of their stereotypical cultural identities as a way to craft unbiased, tolerant audiences is both examined and challenged in "I Am Who I Am": Black Masculinity and the Interpretation of Individualism in the Film *Barbershop*." Timothy J. Brown identifies cultural identity as "perceived membership in a culture that is enacting in the appropriate and effective use of symbols and cultural narratives, similar interpretations and meanings, and common ancestry and traditions (50)." The article acknowledges that one traditionally creates a sense of belonging and membership by identifying with a shared sense of community and codes in conversation through the use of symbols, meanings, and norms. However, Brown uses the film *Barbershop* to demonstrate that audiences can construct identity in film from a perspective of individualism rather than from cultural representations and stereotypes. Cinematically constructed characters whose thoughts and actions differ from perceived ethnic and/or racial generalizations often reinforce self-development and identity construction in audience members.

Much like *Barbershop*, Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic* challenges conventional ethnic and racial stereotypes. However, rather than achieving these "unconventional" representations through dialogue, Soderbergh uses a displaced narrative center to explore the screen identities of ethnic and national groups, as explained in Deborah Shaw's article, "'You Are Alright, But...': Individual and Collective Representations of

Mexicans, Latinos, Anglo-Americans and African-Americans in Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic*. ” In inter-weaving multiple storylines and destabilizing the traditional “hero” figure with the use of several “good” characters, Shaw uses Soderbergh's film to question whether or not stereotypes are disappearing in the twenty-first century as of result of American cinema's increasing awareness of national and ethnic sensibilities. In order to unite the characters and retain a flowing plotline, *Traffic* uses editing to create connections. Rather than a linear storyline, the film's editing techniques function as a “narrator-focalizer,” overseeing and synthesizing the layered plots and interrelated characters.

The thin line that exists between blurring racial and ethnic identities with that of American ideals is a delicate boundary, and one with which many ethnic-Americans struggle. Cameron McCarthy's “Living with Anxiety: Race and the Re-narration of White Identity in Contemporary Popular Culture and Public Life” discusses the issues surrounding “identity politics” and their various effects on both whites and racial minorities upon entering the twenty-first century. McCarthy defines identity politics as, “the strategic deployment of the discourse of group distinctiveness in everyday struggles over political representation and scarce resources in education and society (355).” He argues that for the most part, these sorts of racial differences and identities are produced, and that exclusion or affiliations based on race are the products of an excess of language and human efforts. This sort of racial identity formation is the result of two main processes: racial stimulation (the fabrication of racial identity through the creation of space of racial origins) and resentment (defining one's identity through negation of an

established “other”) (355). With the rapid growth of minority populations in the United States, McCarthy argues that cultural diversity is prominent in every sphere of American life, and therefore the model of resentment must be broken to pave way for increased efforts in social interactions. The American people must accept differences as starting points for new cohesions and alliances and work towards improved race relations.

American ethnic identity would not be complete without the discussion of assimilating cultural differences, as discussed in Tzanelli’s “Europe Within and Without: Narratives of American Cultural Belonging in and through *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*.” Tzanelli frames the film “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” as an analysis of American cultural identity and its desire to appeal to all races while striving to maintain its “pure” image. Tzanelli identifies two conflicting narratives in the film: “...one which supports assimilation of ethnic Americans, and another, which criticizes this monolithic approach and appreciates the multiplicity of American identity (56).” For example, the “Greek” or “ethnic” component of the film is partially misleading, as it covers up the controversial aspects of ethnic representation, in turn troping the Greek ethnicity. The degree of compromise between these two inconsistent narratives is the fundamental dilemma of American cultural self-narration. Although Tzanelli writes that cinematic narrative attempts to rework contemporary social and cultural realities, the end result is still this same “tug of war” between these two opposing ideologies.

“Villains, Victims and Heroes: Melodrama, Media, and September 11,” an article by Elizabeth Anker, describes how the media coverage of 9/11 produced a specific American collective identity through the use of an overlying “melodramatic” plotline,

much like that of a film or a cinematically constructed work. Melodrama is described as a “mode of popular culture narrative that employs emotionality to provide an unambiguous distinction between good and evil through clear designations of victimization, heroism, and villainy (23).” Anker believes that melodrama also serves as a persuasive cultural mode, which took form in the media’s framing of the atrocities surrounding 9/11. News coverage illustrated the United States as moral “victim” trapped by the villainous terrorists, leaving the US in a position requiring heroic retributive action. In short, this framing of American identity through the use of melodrama masked any and all actions of the state as “good” and necessary.” This sort of hero/villain dichotomy eliminated any form of resistance from the American people. Anker identifies this sort of unquestioned power as the dangerous component of melodramatic narrative.

The studies of Peter Ehrenhaus furthered Anker’s research on media events and their function as social rituals in relation to their ability to create collective identity. “Why We Fought: Holocaust Memory in Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*” examines how Spielberg’s film re-illusions the American national identity in the wake of Vietnam by erasing distinctions between Christian and Judaic religious cultures. By weaving Holocaust memory throughout the film’s narrative, Spielberg paints the Vietnam War as a purposeful, redemptive fight for justice. Ehrenhaus addresses the fact that chronologically, this seems improbable:

Despite the fact that this crusade is utterly implausible as a historically valid premise for U.S. involvement in World War II, the Holocaust has gained definition in the final third of this century as the premier moral failing of Western

culture, a transcendent benchmark for personal and collective moral judgments and responsibilities...the emergence of the Holocaust as a symbolic construction roughly parallels the time frame of the Vietnam syndrome (322).

The character development of Private Mellish and his narrative functions as the units Jewish member allow audiences to participate in the memory of the Holocaust and its construction as an American phenomenon in the film. Mellish serves three distinct functions. First, his character's personality is an acknowledgement of the nation's moral conscience and commitment and the true reason for waging war. Secondly, he represents both secularized Judaism and a thoroughly assimilated and recognizable American character. Finally, his final demise demonstrates the key dynamics that motivate contemporary Holocaust memory: the mortally endangered Jew, and the unmitigated horror of Nazi extermination and genocide as a result of the surrounding passivity of nations (325). As a result, *Saving Private Ryan* constructs an ethically usable past in the present and highlights the United States' progress towards an inclusive national identity in post-Vietnam America.

Like Ehrenhaus, Susan Owen's "Memory, War and American Identity: *Saving Private Ryan* as Cinematic Jeremiad" also analyzes Spielberg's film in light of a medium that furthered the development of identity on a national scale. Owen's study identifies a number of important assertions about the nature of film as a medium for formulating national identity, specifically in regards to the post-Vietnam crisis in America and the traumatic response of the nation in conjunction with the process of salvation and recovery. She makes the connection between the film "Saving Private Ryan" as a response to the American post-Vietnam crisis and the idea of the American jeremiad.

Owen first addresses the importance of film in society: “Participation in the American national community frequently occurs through acts of spectatorship. Popular film is a public site where matters of national identity, morality, and historical representation are negotiated (273).” Owen explains the emotional connection that an audience makes with a war film post-Vietnam: “The vividness of the film, in general, and the intensely vivid depiction of combat in post-Vietnam popular film, in particular, speaks to the emergence of image as equally significant with lived experience as a source of meanings, understandings, and commitments (273).” This sort of emotional attachment explains why the jeremiad, “an established rhetorical form that operates as a corrective to conditions gone awry (249),” fits this type of film. Owen argues that “Saving Private Ryan” is formulated as a cinematic version of a jeremiad that addresses the crisis of representation of American national identity, offering viewers solutions on how to “return home” to the America they knew pre-Vietnam.

In summary, research in the fields of cultural intolerance and the construction of the American racial identity reveals that despite attempts to mediate hybridity and the portrayal of tolerance in media, culture, and society, America struggles to strike a balance between retaining its reputation of “white privilege” with its desired image as the all-encompassing cultural melting pot of the world. The literature reviews discussed argue that the desire to promote an “accepting” media lens merely maintains previously designated levels of social, political, and economy hierarchies established by “white society.” This, in combination with media-generated racial characters defined by gross generalizations and stereotype identifications, leaves the hope of defining a balanced

racial and ethnic identity rooted in cultural history and fostered through individual perspective nearly impossible. However, the recent direction of scholarship in this area reveals that the use of melodramatic plotline in actual media events aids in the construction of a collective identity, destabilizing the traditional cinematic “hero” figure with the use of several “good” characters and weaving historical memory into fictional film narrative. As a result, the crisis of representation for American national identity and the desire to form new cohesions and alliances and work towards improved race relations is making headway to the forefront of the American consciousness.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **A HISTORICAL APPROACH TO IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION**

As research clearly demonstrates, the problem of American cultural self-narration has been an omnipresent issue throughout recent decades. In a constant, metaphorical game of tug of war between the opposing ideologies of hybridity and distinct ethnic and racial identities, the United States struggles to reconcile its reputation as the world's cultural melting pot with a single, unique, "American" identity. Despite numerous cinematic narrative attempts to rework contemporary social and cultural realities, the end result remains as an ambiguous concept of ethnicity and race through the American lens. However, researchers have identified an emerging pattern in US history that explains period transitions in thought related to the construction of American identity. Characteristically, specific incidents or periods of heightened national trauma often serve as catalysts for a series of events that alter the underpinnings of a nation and its associated cultural makeup. More specifically, traumatic events shake the foundations and conceptions of what it means to be an American. To this effect, there is often a degree of erasure, either temporarily or permanently, of distinctions between cultures. As a result, there is a distinct change in the identity of American collective society in the wake of events or instances of heightened national trauma.

This observation is most clearly exemplified through the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Research argues that the Vietnam War caused a decline in patriotism and a disillusioned sense of moral identity among the American people. This created the need for a revitalization of faith in American ideals, the promotion of America's reputation as

a hybrid of cultures and a locus of equal opportunity and a resurrection of previously destroyed concepts of national identity. Although the Vietnam War was a prolonged traumatic event that spanned over sixteen years, the desired outcomes for the aftermath of this event hold true for the outcomes desired by American individuals in nearly all post-traumatic situations. Therefore, it is logical to assume that America's approach to tolerance changes drastically after September 11 as a result of a desperate search for a conformation of identity.

One cannot understand the distinct differences between the periods before and after September 11 without exploring these time periods as two distinct eras: the modern and the post-modern. This chapter examines the changes in both framework and philosophy between these two periods in order to prove that the outlook on American identity is directly influenced by the transition from modernity to post-modernity.

### **Progress and Perimeters: Concepts of the Modern Era**

Historical scholars often use the term "modernity" to refer to the vast period between the start of the Enlightenment in 1750 and 1979 (Schloesser, "TMII"). This era was marked by a number of driving forces. Above all, modernity was defined by a central understanding in two parts: that history moves in a constant, forward motion, and that this trajectory is driven by progress. The belief in a linear path towards a definite endpoint was reassuring for citizens, and this newfound rationality evolved into a quest for the "certain," the undeniable. The associated attributes of the modern age and their manifestation in society reflect this very assumption.

In line with the idea of a linear path, modern society was driven by “meta-narratives”- huge, overarching stories that define the forward movement of history. Meta-narratives traversed everything from history (liberalism and capitalism) to literature and drama (central plotlines and main characters). Meta-narratives grouped individuals under an umbrella of collective identity, and therefore dictated their subsequent daily decisions towards and ultimate goal and/or outcome.

Forward progress cannot be achieved without innovation. Therefore, modernity was defined as just that-modern, radical innovation as opposed to tradition. Nothing from the past was recycled or reused, from décor and literature to laws and doctrines. Similarly so, society was thought to modernize as it secularized. In other words, the world sought to eradicate religion from the public sphere. Questions of ethics split off entirely from any previous religious context, allowing room for rational discussion of “right” and “wrong” free from the “irrationality” and “superstition” of religious beliefs and ideals. With the absence of religion, science became a more approachable topic, as the “big issues” of medicine, physical anatomy, and the workings of the universe grew in popularity.

In summary, the post-1979 world was consumed with the concept of the lucid, bigger picture: the belief in an over-arching meta-narrative, the forward progress of history towards a definite endpoint, rationality as a way of discerning certainties in ethics and science, and the eradication of religion’s presence in the public sphere due to its inherent ambiguity. These ideals painted a very clear, defined picture of the typical modern individual-a secular, rational, scientific, “Western” Euro-American. Racial

identities and ethnic associations other than European were seen as child-like and uncivilized. Western society was quick to identify these individuals as “others,” creating distinct boundaries constructed of the rigid, static definitions of modernity.

Scholars generally hold that this concept of the world’s rationality came into question with the onset of Watergate and Nixon’s resignation, the end of the Vietnam War, and the Soviet disaster in Afghanistan. As political affiliations fragmented, so too did the concept of history’s progression. Although a consideration prior to the terrorist attacks on the United States of America, I argue that the defining end of modernity occurred on September 11, 2001 at 8:46am when American Airlines Flight 11 hit the north tower of the World Trade Center. Furthermore, post modernity’s associated characteristics were both recognized by and manifested in society thereafter. The validity of this hypothesis is most strongly demonstrated by three distinct analyses: an examination of the defining characteristics of a post-modern society, scholarly studies of trauma and its subsequent effects in context of a national community, and the presence of these post-modern characteristics after the traumatic events of September 11, most notably through the construction of post-9/11 cinema.

### **Blissful Ambiguity: The Post-Modern Outlook**

If modernity was distinctly defined by boundaries and identifications, then the onslaught of post-modernity is marked by the very absence of this clarity. This era replaces distinctions with mixtures, hybridizations of previous and present explanations, and a satisfaction with the unknown. The certainty on which modern society relied was

suddenly seen as a brash, oppressive worldly outlook. Individuals gradually became satisfied with their own partial knowledge as a result of their individual perspectives rather than forcing a pan-optical<sup>1</sup> understanding of the world. This sort of partial acumen carried over into the ethical realm. As a result of accepting the inability to know precisely how to define concepts of “right” and “wrong” or “moral” and “immoral” in a seemingly unethical world, connections to religion the paranormal were reintroduced into society. Questions of the metaphysical, such as existence, fate, and moral purpose, became foundations for an individual’s ethical and spiritual search.

Unlike the modern obsession with progress and innovation, post-modern society developed an anxiety in regards to the questionable evolution of history. Are all technological and cultural advancements merely pastiches of recycled elements of past traditions? Can mankind ever truly develop anything “new,” or are all hybridized fragmentations of tradition novelties within themselves? Do manmade empires ever truly devise revolutionary approaches and theories that foster growth? And if these concerns are valid, has history ever truly “made progress”? These questions led to the disintegration of the meta-narrative, and a turn to the fragmentation of time. Ironically enough, the creation of a super-highway of complex, simultaneous, intersecting micro-narratives provided a space for the representation of various cultures and perspectives within the larger understanding of an American narrative. This also directly contributed to post-modern de-secularization, and the acceptance of “non-European” Americans.

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<sup>1</sup> Created by Jeremy Bentham in 1785, the panopticon was structural concept for prisons designed so that prison guards can observe prisoners unbeknownst to the incarcerated. This provides the observer with a sense of an “omnipotent” presence. French philosopher and historian Michael Foucault uses Bentham’s panopticon as a metaphor for modern society. He argues that this visibility demonstrates the controlling systems of power and knowledge in modern society (Schloesser, “TMI”).

## **CHAPTER SIX A TRAUMATIC TRANSITION: THE ROLE OF TRAUMA IN IDENTITY FORMATION**

With such drastic distinctions between two historic eras, it is clear that only an event of colossal proportions could incite such a rapid, divergent transformation in history. The events of September 11 incited just that-trauma and transformation. However, it was not only the political effects, but the emotional impact of the terrorist attacks on American citizens that sparked the resurgence of a theory which lead directly to the post-modern outlook: trauma culture. This chapter highlights the general principles surrounding trauma culture and what this term means for the collective identity of a nation in order to clarify why and how September 11 sparked the resurgence of “trauma culture” in the United States. This proves that the terrorists attacks on American soil thrust the United States over the ledge of modernity and into the post-modern abyss.

### **Collective Suffering: The Concept of Trauma Culture**

According to E. Ann Kaplan’s *Trauma Culture*, the concept of “trauma” exists in varying degrees and forms. Although the original appearance of trauma is most clearly noted in Freud’s theories of social collectives in 1913, its relevance as a historical term originated in the context of research relating to Holocaust survivors (1). To avoid over-expanding this concept, this analysis focuses on the recently indistinguishable levels of encounters with trauma (individual or collective, directly or indirectly), how this contributes to associated reactions to traumatic events, and why 9/11 set a new precedent for studies in the field of trauma culture.

The key component in understanding trauma is its ability to blur the boundaries between the individual and the collective (Kaplan, 19). Individually, how one reacts to a traumatic event depends on his/her psychic history, recollection of real and/or fantasized memories of prior catastrophes, and the cultural and political context within which a catastrophe takes place, including how the event is managed by institutional forces (2). However, as a result of a modern world saturated with constant forms of media and satellite technology, the concepts of “direct” and “indirect” trauma victims becomes increasingly blurred with the development of computer, satellite, television, and mobile technologies that provide international alerts and updates almost immediately.

The terrorist attacks of September 11 provided a prime example for the justification of this theory. Although the attack occurred on American soil, the shock absorption of the fall of the World Trade Center was experienced not only nationally, but internationally, as the advancements of technology allowed for nearly instantaneous global coverage of the event. As a result, there was no time for America to comprehend the events or to reflect on their meaning—news coverage around the world immediately referred to the attacks as a “traumatic event,” fostering a polarized understanding of the events at hand. In efforts to present a united American front in the face of potential threat, the American government grabbed hold of this “us and them” approach, creating rise for George W. Bush’s rhetoric of good and evil as previously discussed in earlier chapters. This dialectic further emphasized the importance of a cohesive, collective American identity. According to Allen Meek, author of *Trauma and Media: Theories, Histories, and Images*, “it was claimed after 9/11 that potentially all Americans and

everyone in Western societies experienced a traumatic shock. The idea of collective trauma now became more closely bound to the imagined community of the nation and to the role of mass media in defining the experience of that community” (171).

As a result of media technologies and the subsequent cultural reactions, one finds the complex interconnections between individual and cultural trauma melding further and further together, so much so that where the “self” begins and cultural reactions end is nearly impossible to determine.

In summary, the search for a collective identity amongst the rubble of the World Trade Center initiated the emergence of post-modern society, bringing with it an onslaught of micro-narratives, a significant erasure of traditional constructions of good and evil, and a blurred configuration of culture, nation, and space. For this reason, art in its various forms became an important medium for coping with the trauma in the wake of 9/11. According to *Trauma and Media*, “photo and film take on increasingly important function as shock absorbers in societies characterized by intense visual stimuli and rapid social change” (Meek, 173). Whereas trauma blocks the ability of individuals to make sense of events, media, through both the production and reproduction of images, bestows meaning on events. These meanings are often familiar and ideological rather than a direct, immediate response to the new and/or unexpected. Thus, experiencing trauma through visual interpretation gives individuals a basis for approaching rehabilitation: “Art that invites us to bear witness to injustice goes beyond moving us to identify with and help a specific individual, and prepares us to take responsibility for preventing future occurrences” (Kaplan, 19). The following research examines this concept in relation to

post-9/11 cinema and frames post-modernity as a return to the belief in interconnectedness and synchronicity amidst a period of relative chaos.

### **Therapeutic Cinema: Previous Studies of Traumatic Film**

*Trauma and Cinema* cites four “positions” for viewers of trauma film, according to different cinematic strategies: introducing viewers to trauma through a film’s themes and techniques and resolving the trauma through a melodramatic “cure”; vicariously traumatizing the viewer through shock (often with negative implications); positioning viewers as “voyeurs” through routine coverage of and exposure to victims of actual trauma; and situating viewers as witnesses, “an identification which allows the spectator to enter into the victim’s experience through a work’s narration... a process of narration that is transformative in inviting viewer to be there emotionally (and often powerfully moved), but also to keep a cognitive distance and awareness denied to the victim by the traumatic process-viewer reasserts continuity and humanity” (Kaplan and Wang, 10). This concept is directly related to the methodology of narrative paradigm, In “Narration as Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,” Walter Fisher defines narration as “...a theory of symbolic actions-words and or deeds-that have sequence and meaning for those who create, live, or interpret them (373),” outlying the expansive definition that defies what most consider a more “traditional” narrative.

Narrative paradigm is relatively similar in structure. The main construct encompasses five basic presuppositions: Humans are essentially storytellers; “good reasons,” or the modes of human decision-making, are the stuff of stories, the means by

which humans realize their nature as reasoning-valuing animals; the practice and production of these reasons are ruled by history, biography, culture, and character; narrative probability, the coherent “sensibility” of a story, and narrative fidelity, the degree to which the characters and situations ring true to the audience, determine the narrative’s degree of rationality, and the world itself is a set of stories-humans live out narratives, and in turn understand their own lives in terms of narratives (383).

Humans have been drawn to storytelling since the beginning of evolution, as evident in the depictive illustrations of primitive cavemen. Stories provide a way to both pass on and compare wisdom and experience. In the words of Fisher:

The idea of human beings as storytellers indicates the generic form of all symbol composition; it holds that symbols are created and communicated ultimately as stories meant to give order to human experience and to induce others to dwell in them to establish ways of living in common, in communities in which there is a sanction for the story that constitutes one’s life (381).

In this way, narrative allows the fictional world to translate somewhat directly into human experience through similarities in circumstance, scene, or character. The emotional ties that the audience creates with the characters and the storyline solidify their connections to the narrative without having to foster the paradigm an argumentation to be rhetorical, thus becoming persuasive in its own accord.

Although September 11<sup>th</sup> generated an entirely new genre of post-modern therapeutic cinema, the idea of film as a healing remedy existed long before the distressing attacks. As previously discussed, concluding a film with a “melodramatic cure” is considered one of Kaplan and Wang’s four positions for viewers of trauma film

(9). Kim Golombisky's "Mothers, Daughters, and Female Identity Therapy in *How to Make an American Quilt*" enforces the idea that electronic media can function therapeutically during times of social tension. Golombisky's research defines film and television as "the watching cure," and her research identifies three ways in which mass media has been described as therapeutic: repeatedly visited media "events", especially during social transition or crisis, resemble social rituals that bind individuals and create a collective identity; popular psychologies that encourage individualism pervade mass media and encourage audiences to participate in self-development; and ritually consuming narrative myths may relieve anxiety in today's society. In summary, popular film serves as a form of "problem-solving folklore" that motivates audiences to adopt particular attitudes towards apprehending everyday life.

In the past, Hollywood attempted to relieve a degree of audience anxiety with the creation of archetypal characters, such as the hero and the villain. This allowed the general public to draw a fine line between "good" and "evil," and established a degree of certainty for the audience, no matter the genre or subject of the film. However, the collapse of the World Trade Center introduced the concept of ambiguity into previously "traditional" constructions of evil. Neil Bather's "Big Rocks, Big Bangs, Big Bucks: The Spectacle of Evil in the Popular Cinema of Jerry Bruckheimer" explores the refined concept of evil in post-9/11 film. Bather comments that, "...the integration of obscurity of meaning within the filmic spectacle with the 'live' spectacle of the collapse of the World Trade Center allowed a more formless version of evil to emerge rather than one based on identificatory markers such as political belief, race, gender, and ethnicity (38)."

Bather explains the shift from “film as text to film as experience” allows the audience to connect with the components of evil. Audiences can then transfer this understanding into the real world, helping them make sense of traumatic events in American and world history rather than broadly attributing evil to specific cultural and/or political groups.

Despite embracing a newfound ambiguity in cinematic depictions of evil, American individuals and institutions struggled with how to strike a balance between ethics and cinematic documentation in the quest to heal the wound left in the wake of September 11. This struggle is exemplified through the visual images present in post-9/11 cinema. Alison Young explores the limits of the representational dimension of post-9/11 film in her article, “Images in the Aftermath of Trauma: Responding to September 11<sup>th</sup>.” Rather than focusing on the immediate aftermath of the attacks, Young examines what she defines as a time of “present pasts”- the interim space of the succeeding years after 2001. Young marks the imagery of this time as a “product of a struggle between memory and amnesia, between trauma and resolution.” Thus, visual works during this period sought to re-imagine the disaster while reconciling “pre-9/11” with “post-9/11” in an attempt to work through the suffering caused by the events.

As Young explains, the period after September 11 was an enigmatic time- before even making sense of the tragedy, U.S. citizens and families searched for coping strategies, grasping at resolutions for a problem yet to be clearly identified. This ubiquitous ambiguity seeped into all aspects of American culture and society. Eleftheria Thanouli recognized this disorder in post-modern cinema, most notably through changes in narrative structures, in her article, “Post-Classical Narration: A New Paradigm in

Contemporary Cinema.” Recognizing the conversion from cinematic traditions of the past, Thanouli termed this genre of film as “post-classical” rather than “post-modern.” However, the literal names themselves are the only differences between these two eras, as they share nearly identical characteristics. The article examines this “post-classical” mode of narration based on the four types of motivation as identified in David Bordwell’s narrative theory (explained in his work “Narration in the Fiction Film”): compositional, realistic, generic, and artistic. In summary, Thanouli pinpoints a number of characteristics that separate post-classical cinema from previous genres: character-centered causality, recurring motifs, double-plot structure, high doses of subjective realism that attempts to visualize the innermost mental and emotional states in a plurality of characters, double-encoding as a result of strong historical references, loss of a typified “hero,” and a loosening of the goal-oriented progression of the narrative. These examples, in addition to aligning with commonly recognized post-modern characteristics, point to a change in the language of cinema on both a national and global scale.

Soja Lane’s “It’s the Sense of Touch’: Skin in the Making of Cinematic Consciousness” addresses the post-modern concepts of the micro-narrative and fragmentation of time in its analysis of the use of alternative film techniques to create connections between characters. This article identifies films (*Crash*, *Traffic*, *Syriana*, and *Babel*) that escape the organized control of narrative and rely on the concept of touch as a mode of knowledge. This form of sensory knowledge constantly forms and reforms itself in a large network of connections. Lane insists that “narratives” that operate in this form of organization “...bring local things and events together across multiple spaces

that can no longer be grasped within the global...establishing relays between spaces determined as radically different (36).” In addition, Lane’s research holds that touch also functions thematically: “...narrative that emerges from the logic of clinamen is also the model of identity...The moments of touch are singular, accidental points of intersection between different individuals that define their identity.” (37). Lane defines identity as “...the effect of the configuration that is characterized by shared belonging, chance, and randomness (39).” This definition, in combination with Lane’s assertion that the very foundation of identity is both mobile and relational and therefore constantly changing, ties directly into the concept of the post-modern

Marked as an interim space between traumatic shock and recovery and rehabilitation, the immediate years after 9/11 demonstrated a drastic shift in cinematic patterns. Recognizing its function as a tool of therapeutic change, producers and directors alike sought to re-imagine the disaster and work through suffering with the use of alternate narrative constructions, evil ambiguous constructions of evil, and physical interactions between characters as modes of knowledge and identity formation.

**CHAPTER SEVEN**  
**UNITED WE STAND:**  
**THE CENTRAL ELEMENT OF TRAUMATIC FILM**  
**AND THE RATIONALE FOR *CRASH* AND *ANGELS IN AMERICA***

Despite these divergences from the patterns of modern film, there is one element that these post-9/11 traumatic films share: a metaphorical “cure.” However, these resolutions are not nearly as typified as those of modern film constructions—families are reunited, evil is conquered and good triumphs, and the protagonist is redeemed and finds true love. Discerning the cure in post-modern cinema often requires an enhanced degree of perceptual attention to sublevel motifs.

Post-modern traumatic cinema is often structured around two central ideas through which humanity can unite: the restoration of faith and the interconnectedness of mankind. The construction of these two themes reconciles the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in all aspects of the post-modern era, hence their presence in nearly all forms of post-9/11 film. However, to consider all films produced after the traumatic events of 9/11 for the scope of this examination would be both impossible and inefficient. For the sake of both brevity and clarity, this analysis centers on two distinctly unique films that illustrate these motifs with exceptional accuracy and intricate detail: Paul Haggis’ *Crash* and the cinematic version of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*. These films were chosen based on a number of specific characteristics: their production and associated release in relation to the chronology of 9/11; their structural components, including their diverse plot-lines and raw, jarring screenplays; and the reputation and character of their various producers. These elements will be examined through concise, abbreviated plot

synopses and associated background context for each film in order to better conceptualize how *Crash* and *Angels in America* revitalized the American spirit and redefined the concept of patriotism. In order to accurately examine *Angels in America* and the contextual differences between the original theatrical debut and its cinematic reproduction and release in 2003, this analysis also summarizes the differences in content and context between productions and the concerns associated with its transition from stage to screen. Following these contextual reconstructions, the urban settings of these films and their importance as transformational epicenters of political, social, and cultural discourse will be discussed. The concept of cities in the height of post-modernity and their function as microcosms of America were both strong considerations when choosing representational post-modern films with urban settings.

### *Crash*

The following analysis provides contextual information for Paul Haggis' film *Crash*, released in 2005 by Lions Gate Films. An overview of the film's plot structure and its thematic complexities are introduced, followed by a brief background of producer and director Paul Haggis and his inspiration for the film.

#### **“Oh What a Tangled Web We Weave:” A Plot Summary of the Racial Intricacies of *Crash***

*Crash* is a raw narrative of the racial complexities of contemporary America post 9/11, centering specifically in and around the cultural melting pot of Los Angeles, California. The main plotline surrounds a group of racially diverse individuals whose

lives collide somewhat detrimentally within a period of 36 hours. Atypical of most films, the central focus of the narrative surrounds seven radically different scenarios: a Mexican locksmith, an African-American carjacking duo, a tag team of police detective lovers, a LA District Attorney and his pampered housewife, a racist cop and his idealistic partner, a Persian storeowner and his family, and an African-American television producer and his light-skinned black wife, along with a few other minor characters (IMDb).

The film opens with police Detective Graham (Don Cheadle) and his partner/girlfriend Ria (Jennifer Esposito) after a multi-car accident. Cheadle attempts to assist the on-site police in what appears to be a murder scene. However, his disturbance at the sight of the body (which remains invisible to the audience) triggers the film's flashback to the day before the crash, where the series of events and interactions began. Also atypical of most films, there is no "central" plot; the action builds as the character's lives collide, building a complex layering of interactions and relationships that both intensify and transform drastically throughout the film.

The film's complexity lies within the fact that every single character represented in the film is both the victim and the victimizer of judgmental, discriminatory behavior, creating a tangled web of prejudice, rage, betrayal, defeat, and ultimately, salvation and purgation. *Crash* creates racial tensions, poses unanswered questions to societal "norms," and most importantly, provokes its audience to ponder profound issues of societal intolerance, discrimination, and moral definitions of character.

Apart from figurative “character,” the celebrity appeal in *Crash* is undeniable. The film boasts an all-star cast of Don Cheadle, Jennifer Esposito, Ryan Phillippe, Matt Dillon, Sandra Bullock, Terrence Howard, Brendan Fraser, and even Chris “Ludarcris” Bridges (Lions Gate Entertainment). This diverse cast of well-known celebrities drew a number of viewers based on reputation alone. However, Haggis sought a different outcome with his decision to cast high-profile celebrities. Although he did not have any specifics in mind, Haggis deliberately chose actors with preconceived public images and placed them in challenging roles:

That's the way to get good actors, to give them something they haven't done before. It's also, I think, what audiences love- they don't like to see somebody who's already done it four or five times do it again. Why go to that movie? See something that's fresh. And in this case, the fact that people had preconceptions about some of these actors really worked for me because the movie itself is about preconceptions (Loger).

Haggis' choice of actors and actresses created an additional layer of depth to a film already containing multiple layers of intelligence. In addition to giving audiences a fresh perspective, *Crash* combats the struggles of intolerance and race relations, a glimmer of hope for those still searching for answers in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup>. The question was, would Haggis' trust and his tactics pay off?

In the end, Haggis' intuition could not have been more on the mark. The film first appeared at the Toronto International Film Festival, receiving rave reviews and packed audiences. It was then purchased by Lions Gate Films, a Canadian-based entertainment company, and was released nationwide on May 6, 2005 (IMDb-Crash). In no time, the film's brilliant screenplay, in conjunction with its all-star cast, took the nation by storm.

The “amateur” film director’s “leap of faith” earned his film the prestigious honors of Academy Awards in Best Original Screenplay, Best Achievement in Editing, and the coveted Motion Picture of the Year Award. In addition, *Crash* received a host of other awards and honors from various film critics and academics worldwide, including two Emmys, the Humanitas Prize, and the Hollywood Award for Breakthrough Director (IMDb-Crash).

### **A Multi-Million Dollar Heist: The Carjack That Molded Paul Haggis**

Although the blockbuster *Crash* may convince audiences of producer and director Paul Haggis’ skills in the filmmaking industry, the film in fact marked his first stint in directing. Twenty-two-year old Haggis began his career in Hollywood when he headed to Los Angeles at to pursue entertainment writing. He found work in the television industry, beginning as a scribe for the series *Different Strokes* and eventually writing for a variety of different popular television series, most notably the acclaimed *Thirty Something* (Ursic). Finally, Haggis was ready for a change of pace. In 2000, after nearly three decades of working in the television industry, he left his traditional line of work to pursue the uncertainty of independent film writing. Ironically enough, *Crash* came to the novice filmmaker as an accident.

Haggis’ personal and emotional ties to *Crash* run deep. The film not only marks his first stab at directing, but the starting ideas for the plotline arose from Haggis’ own personal involvement in a carjacking in Los Angeles, his home of twenty-eight years. In 1991, Haggis reported in an interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle*, he and his wife

were held at gunpoint outside of a Blockbuster on Wilshire Boulevard by two black men (Stein). Ten years later, Haggis could not put the incident out of his mind. "Once a year for the next 10 years," Haggis told the *Chronicle*. "I would think about who those kids were. Were they best friends or had they just met that night? Did they do this a lot or was this the first time (Stein)?" Haggis was so intrigued by his assailants that they haunted his dreams, so much so that he awoke at 2:00 am one morning and began writing about them. As he furthered the stories of the two thugs, he found himself following the subsequent stories of the individuals that the assailants themselves encountered, and everything fell into place. By 10:00 am, Haggis had all of the stories finished. After a brief phone call to his friend and soon-to-be co-author Bobby Moresco, the two had a working script within days (Ursic).

Although the script was well-received by all those who read it, the consensus was that it would not sell. A film about race-relations in a post-9/11 world seemed too risqué for any distributor. However, Haggis was insistent on the film's importance. "I think it's about the world around us right now," Haggis commented in an interview with Greg Ursic for Efilmcritic. "It's the fact that we're moving further and further from each other and we don't feel safe. And paradoxically we only really feel safe when we're surrounded by strangers."

Aside from his direct connection to the carjacking, Haggis claims that *Crash* is a mirror of his own life experiences and encounters with relative strangers in and around Los Angeles. Matt Dillon's character generated from a piece of hate-mail Haggis received, and Terrence Howard's story originated from an incident he witnessed in a

television studio involving the mistreatment of a black director (Loger). Yet Haggis' film does not shed an entirely negative light on the attitudes of contemporary America. Instead, he illuminates the intricate hybridity of a nation struggling with complex issues and contradictions. In a 2006 interview with MTV's Kurt Loger, Haggis relays his understanding of America's perceived "evils:" "Intolerance, fear, racism, these are things that we think are really simple and easy to define, and they're not."

### *Angels in America*

The following portion of this analysis provides contextual information for Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, originally released as a theatrical production in 1990 and re-produced as a made-for-television mini-series on HBO in 2003. This analysis provides a brief overview of the work's plot structure its associated protagonists. Due to the work's strong historical context and its content rooted in homosexuality, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and 1980s politics, a brief summary of the 1980s and the associated political and social movements are discussed in relation to the life and experiences of Tony Kushner. *Angels in America* is largely inspired by the playwright's academic encounters, intellectual pursuits, and politically active lifestyle. Therefore, this analysis spans a larger portion of Tony Kushner's biography prior so as to better understand the context and relevance of the references within the play. Finally, this analysis also summarizes the differences in content and context between the original theatrical release of *Angels in America* and its re-production as a made-for-television mini-series in 2003 and the concerns associated with its transition from stage to screen.

### **The Epic of Epic Proportions: A Plot Summary of *Angels in America***

Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* is a complex narrative that poignantly depicts the cultural, social, and spiritual facing mankind at the dawn of the new millennium. Converging narratives of past, present and future, the screen play is a mix of harsh reality and inconceivable fantasy, and one of the first American plays to combine apocalyptic anxiety with a renewed sense of hope in the dawning of the millennia. Set in the sprawling urban landscape of New York City during the 1950s, the film explores controversial issues of AIDS, homosexuality, politics, religion, metaphysics through the lives of seven diverse individuals: homosexual partners Prior Walter and Louis Ironson, their close friend and ex-drag queen Belize, Mormon relational partners Joe and Harper Pitt, and Joe's mother Hannah. Much like Haggis' *Crash*, nearly all of the characters who appear structured to fit purposeful representations either fluctuate in morality and ethical behavior or undergo a radical transformation throughout the course of the film. This component of ambiguity inherent in all of the film's protagonists transcends all sexual, racial, and political affiliations. In the words of David Savran, author of "Tony Kushner Considers the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness, "Bringing together Jews and Mormons, African and European-Americans, neoconservatives and leftists, closeted gay men and exemplars of America's new 'queer politics,' *Angels* attempts nothing less than the creation of a cosmic-scale history of America in the age of Reagan and the age of AIDS" (20).

*Angels in America* is divided into two, three-hour segments: "Millennium Approaches" and "Perestroika." Apart from their separated release onstage, both pieces

blend smoothly together to create a complex, raw narrative of epic proportions. Set (apart from the epilogue) during a five-month period between October 1985 and February 1986, the plot's action is driven by the troubles of two sets of relational couples: pill-popping, agoraphobe housewife Harper and her conservative, Mormon lawyer husband Joe Pitt, and democratic Jew Louis Ironson and his relational partner Prior Walter. Within the first few moments of the film's inception, Prior reveals to both Louis and the audience that he has contracted AIDS. Unable to stand the thought of losing his relational partner to death and disease, Louis abandons Prior. Stricken with heartbreak and physical emaciation, Prior falls into depression. However, in his state of mental and emotional instability he bears witness to a visit from the Angel of America. Involuntarily, he becomes a "prophet," instructed to spread the Angel's plea for mankind to cease all movement and forward progression. On the other side of the city, Joe and Harper struggle to maintain their marriage as Joe's closeted homosexuality begins to surface. When Joe runs out on Harper to experiment with his sexual identity, chaos ensues. Meanwhile, Roy Cohn, a powerful, unethical lawyer who maintains a close relationship with Joe Pitt, is diagnosed with AIDS, revealing his secret identity as a closeted homosexual. In summary, the film's multi-faceted storylines, overlapping and intersecting with one another through a series of surprising circumstances, tackles issues of disease, politics, identity, sexuality, death, and religion, all the while capturing the history of America during the age of Reagan and stressing a post-modern faith in the human condition.

Much like *Crash*, *Angels in America* boasts an impressive celebrity cast appeal, featuring Meryl Streep (Mother Pitt), Al Pacino (Roy Cohn), Mary-Louise Parker (Harper), Patrick Wilson (Joe), Emma Thompson (The Angel of America), and James Cromwell (Henry). Both Al Pacino and Meryl Streep voiced their eagerness to take part in this revolutionary work. In an interview with Brad Goldfarb, Streep emphasized her excitement and the power of the prophetic film:

BRAD GOLDFARB: What did you think of this production?

MERYL STREEP: I think it's astonishing... Very few people are willing to put themselves up as a prophet, and yet he [Tony Kushner] did it. It was unbelievably prescient about so many things, like the end, which predicts where the world will be with AIDS. I felt lucky to be invited in, I'll say that.

Similarly so, Al Pacino recognized the magnitude and significance of Kushner's work:

AL PACINO: I felt it to be theatrically powerful, and completely new. You felt that Tony Kushner had to write this, he had to say this, so there's a certain personal thing going on in the midst of this epic story. I think that's what gives it power. And of course, the role of Roy Cohn, which I took on, is such a living, breathing one... I think the moment I really got the sense of the piece was when all of us in the cast had a reading that started at nine in the morning and went until four in the afternoon. The impact of it somehow really just changed the room. It was palpable.

Kushner's work was recognized as a masterpiece even before its screen premiere, and not just by its cast members. In 1993, the Broadway run of "Millennium Approaches" won four Tony Awards including Best Play (Tony Kushner), as well as the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, five Drama Desk Awards, and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. The following year, "Perestroika" continued *Angels'* streak of prestigious

theatre decorations with three Tony awards including Best Play, in addition to three Drama Desk Awards and three Outer Critics Circle Awards (HBO Inc.).

Upon its release in the world of multi-media, *Angels* took America by storm. In 2004, the miniseries captured five Golden Globes and broke the record previously held by *Roots* for the most Emmys awarded to a program in a single year, winning eleven awards from twenty-one nominations. These awards included Outstanding Directing, Writing, Lead Actor/Actress, Supporting Actor/Actress, Art Direction, and Makeup for a Miniseries, Movie or Special. The score, written by Thomas Newman, also picked up a Grammy for Best Score Soundtrack Album for a Motion Picture, and the entire film was awarded Best Picture Made for Television and Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Movies for Television by the Broadcast Film Critics and Directors Guild of America, respectively.

**Identity Crisis as a Career:  
Tony Kushner and the Historical Context of *Angels in America***

Unlike Haggis, the history of and motivation behind Tony Kushner's politically activated dramas span much farther back in years than his mid-twenties. Kushner's works are seeped with historic sentimentality and inspired by his intellectual pursuits, politics and politically active playwrights, and private personal experiences.

When Kushner developed a "crush" on his Hebrew school teacher at the age of six, he knew that he was unlike his surrounding male peers (Savran, 20). However, he remained closeted well into his college years. In the mid 1970s, he moved to New York to attend Columbia University, where he earned a Bachelor's degree in Medieval Studies.

During his years at Columbia, Kushner explored the work of experimental directors, most notably the work of Tennessee Williams. Williams is recognized as the theater's "angel of sexuality," and is deemed responsible for "forcefully" introducing issues of sexuality to the American stage (Fisher, 9). Literary critics recognize a strong influence from Williams in Kushner's works, specifically in relation to his merging of tragic and comic elements, the complexity of his characters, and his emphasis on gender roles and sexuality.

Through his readings and research, Kushner also acquired an understanding of what he deemed as "politically engaged theatre," specifically from his exposure to playwright Bertolt Brecht. Kushner was inspired by the idea that theatre could serve as a catalyst for social change. Brecht also introduced him to the idea of the paradoxical synchronicity of mankind, that "...within what is apparently a naturally occurring event lies a web of human labor and relationships. He teaches you to see that something can be the thing it's supposed to be, and not, at the same time," Kushner later remarked in a *New York Times* article by journalist Alex Abramovich. His interest in Brecht led him to Walter Benjamin, a German philosopher and sociologist famous for his dramatization of history and his writings on the infamous "*angelus novus*," or "Angel of History." It is no stretch of the imagination to infer that Kushner drew the basis of *Angels in America* and Emma Watson's character from Benjamin's writings.

After his undergraduate experience at Columbia, Kushner went on to pursue a Masters of fine arts in directing at New York University, although his true passion lay in the realm of playwriting. He emerged as a true dramatist in the early 1980s, and his first

prominent and noteworthy appearance on the theatrical scene arrived with the release of *Angels in America*.

Although its poignant dialogue and intriguing plotline speak for themselves, Kushner attributes a large degree of *Angels in America*'s success to the development of queer politics around the time of the play's release in 1990. Just as the American death toll of AIDS victims passed the 100,000 mark, the activist group Queer Nation was formed and the world was forced to confront the reality of the disease that was affecting a rapidly increasing population who refused to be silenced. "The way *Angels in America* talks," Kushner explained in an interview with David Saran, "its complete lack of apology for that kind of fagginess, is something that would not have made sense before."

Kushner attributes the ostracism of homosexuals to America's own anxiety over its national identity during the Reagan administration. An extreme liberal, he attributes this era with the deterioration of intellectualism and ethical morality. He believes that the Reagan conservatism, in conjunction with the failure of the 1960s-style liberalism to counter this movement, led the United States toward its current divisive "red state-blue state" bitterness, in which "issues from American foreign policy and Iraq war to gay rights and economic justice [are] reduced to a conservative versus liberal turf war," a battle between black and white with no gray area in sight (Fisher, 14).

Although examining this period in history sheds light on the "us or them" dialectic present in American politics, the rhetoric of President George W. Bush in regards to terrorism, and the resulting attitude towards homosexuals and other identified

“others”, Kushner clarifies that the oppression of minorities is an ongoing issue in times of crisis, and that the key lies in unification:

“It always seems to me that in the concerns of any group called a minority and called oppressed can be found the biggest problems and the central identity issues that the country is facing...I realized that the key is the solidarity of the oppressed for the oppressed-being able to see the connecting lines...making disenfranchisement incredibly clear across color lines and gender lines” (interview, p 7).

As a liberal, Jewish homosexual and a product of emigrants from Eastern Europe, Kushner himself is, in a sense, a microcosm of American minorities. Thus, Kushner embedded pieces of himself within *Angels*, connecting much of the work to his own identity. For example, his own coming out experience was very similar to that of character Joe Pitt’s. David Fisher, author of “Understanding Tony Kushner,” identifies the character Prior Walter as Kushner’s own dramatic alter-ego—an eager Jewish liberal working towards and advocating for progressive change (9).

Kushner’s work itself was a movement of progressive change, sweeping the nation by storm upon its release in 1990. Yet its lifetime was not limited to its original, staged form. Produced first in San Francisco and followed by Los Angeles, London, and finally Broadway in the early 1990s, the piece eventually caught the eye of acclaimed producer and film executive Cary Brokaw, and the rest is history.

### **From Stage to Screen: Angels in America’s Transition to Cinema**

Brokaw claims that he took an immediate liking to the work after reading it in 1989, and finally convinced Kushner to let him turn *Angels* into a film in 1991 (Jensen,

1). After an attempt to work with both directors Robert Altman (*MASH*, *Gosford Park*) and P.J. Hogan (*Muriel's Wedding*, *My Best Friend's Wedding*, *Confessions of a Shopaholic*), Kushner finally landed on Mike Nichols in 2001. The connection was largely a result of Brokaw's recent collaboration with Nichols on an adaptation of Margaret Edson's play *Wit* for HBO (Jensen, 1). HBO Films' President Colin Callender approved the film's sixty-million dollar budget, and agreed to air the work as a mini-series with a six-chapter structure. With a budget approved and a director in place, the team of Brokaw, Kushner, and Nichols approached their first of two massive production hurdles: cutting down the work's length.

Nichols' approach to *Angels'* adaptation was drastically different than that of Altman's. "Very different things mattered to him," said Kushner of Nichols in an interview with Randy Gener for the Theatre Communications Group, "This version is utterly different than any other attempt to make it into a film" (3). Despite the differences in directorial style, Nichols cut little from the play's original script, and was able to maintain the work's general shape. As previously mentioned, *Angels'* original eight acts were morphed into six chapters, with a total running time slightly under six hours.

The team then approached their second largest task: capturing the work's theatricality on camera. What Kushner had represented in space now had to be represented in time, which introduced a risk of placing too much emphasis on plot and dialogue and failing to capture the work's key nonverbal elements. To avoid this pitfall, Nichols utilized a cinematic technique known as cross-cutting (Franklin, 2). By moving

back and forth between scenes and scenarios occurring simultaneously rather than using a split-screen approach, Nichols captures the similarities between environments and characters, preserving the work's themes of unity and interconnectedness.

In fact, the work's alternative medium adds a level of meaning and significance that many argue surpasses its one-dimensional presence on the stage. *The New Yorker's* article "America, Lost and Found" explains how the opening credits "set the stage" for a film about the entirety of the American nation.

### **From Sea to Shining Sea: The Importance of Setting**

*Crash* and *Angels in America* explore two of the most well-known, representational urban landscapes of the United States of America—Los Angeles, California, and New York City, New York. These cities function as microcosms of America, and depict a number of socio-economic, racial, and ethnic crossovers and divides inherent in many urban centers. The concept of the "city" itself has transformed over time as a result of the post-modern era. According to Jolanta A. Drzewiecka and Thomas K. Nakayama's "City Sites: Postmodern Urban Space and the Communication of Identity," the idea of fluid, mobile identities amongst individual urban residents is a concept that has come into play since the onslaught of the post-modern era. Drzewiecka and Nakayama argue that due to the rapidly changing U.S. culture and physical landscape, it is no longer possible to maintain a modernist understanding of distinct cultural identities within a fixed configuration of culture, nation, and space. As a result, traditional approaches to identity do not capture the fluidity and dynamic nature of ethnic

identifications, and rhetorical battles over what it means to be an “American” at the center of current cultural discourse. These changing dynamics are most notably evident in urban environments, as cities allow for greater anonymity and multiple ethnic identities present in these settings.

Drzewiecka and Nakayama’s research highlights the importance of choosing cities recognized as epi-centers of mobile liberal, social, and political discourse as settings for films tackling issues of individual, cultural, and national identity. In Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, New York City epitomizes the post-modern outlook, presenting itself as a city with layers of meaning that reflect back on America and its history. The racial, ethnic, and geographical layout of New York City represents synecdoche of America. Identified as the cultural melting pot of the nation, New York City draws all types of Americans. This is evident in the diverse characters featured in *Angels*, not the least of which include a pill-popping Mormon, a homosexual lawyer, and a Kriol drag-queen. The film brings out the history rooted within the city’s architecture and commemorative sites, utilizing this tactic as a symbolic representation of movement and time and the importance of union and hybridity.

At time of the play’s original release, the nation was a conglomerate of fragments- the “New Left” was splintering off into sectors, the idea of an overarching “meta-narrative” had fallen to the wayside with the “micro-narrative” taking its place. Kushner’s presentation of New York City’s varied layers of meaning and its sites that reference the Civil War seems to invert the previous notion of “mixing” as a negative perversion and rather as a positive step forward towards progress and de-secularization.

The most prominent sculpture in the film is the Bethesda statue in Central Park, where the film begins and ends. Kusher ties this statue to the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Arch Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn, the site of Harper's most significant hallucination. These sites are identified as "civil war monuments," commemorations of both division and union. The Washington Square Arch, located in Washington Square Park where Louis and Prior reunite, is visually comparable to the Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, a symbol of freedom and the desire to unify Berlin after the fall of the Wall in 1989. These monuments represent the importance of healing, retribution, and reunification, much like the central message of *Angels*.

The allusion to the Civil War is paralleled by post-modern New York's geographical separation of heterosexuals and gays. *Angels* alternates between the dual geographical axes of "family-oriented" residential Brooklyn, home of Joe and Harper, and stereotypically "gay" Greenwich Village/Chelsea area and site of the Stonewall Riots. This also encompasses Central Park's Ramble, known as the gay cruising area. As referenced in Walt Whitman's poem, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," and his words "I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me...I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution," the juxtaposition between these two sectors of New York City encompass Joe's personal anxieties as he grapples with how to come to terms with his homosexuality. Kushner's parallel suggests that much like the Civil War, the present-day geographies (as well as the culture wars that emerged during the Reagan era) that keep sectors of society apart must be melded together in hopes of greater unity.

Unlike New York City, the spatial and temporal flux crucial to identity formation is aptly illustrated in the geographical construction and organization of the city of Los Angeles. While the traditional neighborhoods of New York City are divided by social divisions are recognized by identifiable districts (residential Brooklyn, “gay” Greenwich Village, Chinatown, Italian district, etc.), Los Angeles defies this construction with a sprawling, fragmented urban development. Sonja Laine, author of, “It’s the Sense of Touch: Skin in the Making of Cinematic Consciousness,” highlights this concept:

...*Crash* is situated in Los Angeles, the city that...is an archipelago of regional islands, constantly in a state of becoming, emerging from the changing relations between the local and the global. The urban organization of the city does not assume an orderly metropolis, but a dynamic network of changing multiplicities. In this organization, power no longer belongs to large, administrative institutions where individuals can be disciplined and policed, but...those who operate in multiple directions within the larger system of random (but not necessarily meaningless) connections (Laine, 37).

As Laine states, the demographic layout of Los Angeles fluctuates drastically from one block to another. Within minutes, one moves from prominent neighborhoods of affluence and wealth to downtrodden ghettos of extreme poverty. However, the borders between these drastically different worlds are far from defined. *Crash* draws out this sense of overlapping dichotomies throughout the film. For example, the chase scene between Anthony (Bridges)/Cameron (Howard) and Officer Hansen (Phillippe), one that most would expect to happen on a crowded LA super-highway or in the ramparts of Compton, takes place on the streets of a lush suburban neighborhood. Apart from the physical irony, the scenario also mirrors Cameron’s inner conflict between his socio-economic and racial identities, supplementing the understanding of the overlapping

physical and emotional identities present in an urban metropolis. “City Sites: Postmodern Urban Space and the Communication of Identity” further communicates the complexity of Los Angeles’ spatial layout:

[Los Angeles] is difficult to grasp persuasively in a temporal narrative for it generates too many conflicting images, confounding historicization, always seeming to stretch laterally instead of unfolding sequentially. At the same time, its spatiality challenges orthodox analysis and interpretation, for it seems limitless and constantly in motion, never still enough to encompass, too filled with ‘other spaces’ to be informatively described...L.A. shows us rather what the ancient capitals lost, one after the other, in their wish, or their destiny, to be fixed permanently in one place: that a capital is not locatable, that it has no center...that the survey of L.A., an unsettled basin, always has to be done again and again (Drzewiecka and Nakayama, 23).

*Crash* focuses on the importance of physical location in relation to interactions between characters rather than the importance of the setting in isolation. The overall irony lies in the fact that despite the overwhelming size and population of Los Angeles, the film’s plot is driven by its ironic collision of characters, whose lives are either clearly or subconsciously intertwined.

### **Summary**

With jarring language and raw honesty, complex multi-narratives woven together by the thematic interconnectedness of mankind, and plot-lines centered in and around urban metropolises reflecting the deep-seeded roots of American racial and ethnic hybridization, *Crash* and *Angels in America* are ideal foci for a post-modern cinematic analysis of American identity. Although absent from the forefront of their consciousness, Paul Haggis and Tony Kushner crafted cinematic works that simultaneously illustrate

components of traumatic film and lay groundwork for the rehabilitation of the American spirit.

## CHAPTER EIGHT ANALYSIS

As previously discussed, post-modern traumatic films are linked by a metaphorical cure present in nearly all cinematic works of this genre. However, the complexity inherent in the plot synopses of both *Crash* and *Angels in America* illustrate the ambiguous nature of these films, and thus the difficulty in presenting a typified “happy” ending to satisfy anxious viewers. How can American citizens draw comfort and build a renewed sense of self from such a raw representation of American life? Rather than providing a solution for the problems of the post-modern world, *Crash* and *Angels in America* achieve a cure for the American spirit by reminding society of the central “humanity” of mankind through the presence of three overarching themes: the elimination of the other, the restoration of faith, and the uniting sense of touch. The following chapter explores the manifestation of these themes in each film. First, this analysis introduces the elimination of the other in *Angels in America* through its integration of religious, political, sexual, and racial identities within individual characters. This erases stereotyped distinctions and illuminates the concept of mixture as a forward movement towards progress, mitigation, and change. Following this examination, both the elimination of the other and the restoration of faith in *Crash* are demonstrated through the dual narrative personalities of the four major protagonists. *Angels in America* demonstrates this restoration of faith through the reoccurring motif of improvement and progress in the human condition. Both the erasure of distinctions between individuals and a restored faith in the human condition are central ideas around which humanity can

unite. This idea of unity is furthered through its physical manifestation in the final theme of touch as a cohesive force. The final component of this analysis argues that physical connection between individuals create a sense of emotional unity and bonds individuals together.

### **Perversion or Progress? Eliminating the Distinction of “Other”**

One of the largest obstacles to creating a sense of identity and purpose is maintaining order and structure in one’s surroundings, so as to better analyze the pieces of one’s environment that contribute to him/her as a whole. Society itself functions in a similar sense. In an attempt to preserve order, society organizes itself through a series of restrictive boundaries and labels. This helps to maintain various identities within the larger context of society’s identity as a whole. However, this propagates a fear of mixture, enforcing the idea that with boundaries and typified categories comes systematic organization and clarity.

Mary Douglas, British anthropologist and author of the classic text *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, argues that this fear of “mixing” traces back to the High Middle Ages. Douglas points to a primary example in the Hebrew text *Leviticus*, focusing on the central concepts of *tehvel* and *kadosh* in relation to the kosher dietary practices of Jews. The term “tehvel” literally translates to mean “perversion,” equated to mixing things up and confusion. *Kadosh*, translated as “holy,” means to set apart, or to give the physical expression of wholeness. Judith

Friedlander explains the importance of these translations in her writings for Social Research:

“ Mary Douglas argued that Jews are horrified by what is out of place, by what does not fit into a proscribed category, or is incomplete. ‘Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong. And holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused’” (Douglas, 53-4).

The Jew’s attempts to separate the “holy” from the “unclean” mirrors an anxiety present in nearly all cultures-preserving order through boundaries and distinctions as a way of maintaining identity. Douglas argues that society projects this cultural fear of “mixing” onto the physical body in efforts to further clarify these distinctions. That which is “dirty” becomes “unclean,” both literally and figuratively, and the sacred/holy is preserved through “cleanliness,” likening dirt as a metaphor for the generalized “other. ” These distinctions between “clean” and “unclean” maintained boundaries between religious, social, and ethnic subcultures and solidified the identity of the other.

*Angels in America* functions as a post-modern effort to invert this anthropological fear. Through his use of the film’s protagonists (mainly character Belize) and the infective nature of the AIDS epidemic, Kushner merges political, sexual, and religious identities as a way to overturn the notion of mixture, illuminating the concept as a forward movement towards progress, mitigation, and change.

Within the first few scenes of the film, one can separate the characters of *Angels in America* into three distinct identity filters, each with two stringent categories: religious (Mormon or Jewish), political (Republican or Democrat), and sexual (heterosexual or

homosexual). For many, these filters serve as mental cues that trigger one's brain to assume certain perceptions (however valid) of the individual/individuals associated with the filter in question. However, immediately upon laying a conceivable trail of associations for each character, Kushner flips societal conceptions. In blurring distinctions between these three filters through the character developments, specifically Roy Cohn, Mother Pitt, and Joe Pitt, *Angels in America* constructs alternative definitions of identity.

The film's most notable contradiction lies in the way that characters construct definitions of gayness. Most identifiable is the drastic difference on the spectrum of homosexuality between Roy Cohn—a conservative, white, unethical lawyer—and Belize—a liberal-minded, Creole, effeminate drag-queen. Although these characters are cultural opposites of one another, *Angels* presents homosexuals in every facet—black, white, Jewish, Mormon, conservative, liberal, “butch” and feminine. None of these characters can be categorized under a single banner. Louis, a pronounced homosexual, struggles to conceptualize this very idea, evident in his interaction with Joe in the bathroom of the Supreme Court:

LOUIS: Well, oh boy. A gay Republican.

JOE: Excuse me?

LOUIS: Nothing.

JOE: Oh, I'm not... no, forget it.

LOUIS : Not... Republican? Not Republican?

JOE: What?

LOUIS: What.

JOE: Not gay. I'm not gay.

LOUIS: Oh. Sorry. It's just that sometimes you can tell by the way a person sounds. I mean, you sound...

JOE: No, I don't. Like what?

LOUIS: Like a Republican.

JOE: Do I sound like a...?

LOUIS: What? Like a Republican? Or do I?

JOE: Do you what?

LOUIS: Sound like a...

JOE: Yeah. Like a... I'm confused.

Steven Kruger, author of “Identity and Conversation in *Angels in America*,” highlights this multi-faceted approach to homosexuality as a key thematic point of identity: “Thus recognizing the differences within identity categories, the play furthermore emphasizes that any individual’s identity is potentially contested and driven: sexuality, gender, and race do not come together without conflict and contradiction” (152).

Ironically enough, racial identity is not a central focus in any of the unusual interactions between characters. Rather, the concept of Judaism, Mormonism, and political identifications become racialized in place of culture and ethnicity. Jewishness and Mormonism play important roles in the initial identity formation for characters Louis, Roy, Mother Pitt, Harper, and Joe. Historically, both Judaism and Mormonism

have always been “othered” religions, forced into exile and subject to migration as detailed in their religious testaments. This forceful movement away from the accepted “center” explains the shared notion of a resistance to change that these religions share. The followers of Judaism and Mormonism are often looked upon as outsiders, inconsistent with the norm and outside the existing rules of society. In addition to the history behind these religions, the stringent limitations of their various traditions contribute to their sense of place (or lack thereof) in society and the associated power structures for the characters of *Angels in America*. Joe struggles to come to terms with his homosexuality as a result of his Mormon religious affiliation and Louis, aware that his religion fosters not redemption for wrongdoing but ethical action, knows that he would not be forgiven by religious authorities for abandoning Prior in his time of need and struggles to reconcile his religious teachings with his weak heart. However, not all of *Angels’* characters limit themselves to the restrictive teachings of their religion. Prior’s conversation with Mother Pitt in the hospital illuminates this very point:

PRIOR: I’m sorry, but it’s repellent to me, so much of what you believe.

MOTHER PITT: What do I believe?

PRIOR: I’m a homosexual with AIDS, I can just imagine what you bel-

MOTHER PITT: No you can’t-imagine-the things in my head. You don’t make assumptions about me mister. And I won’t make them about you.

PRIOR:…I wish you would be more true to your demographic profile, life is confusing enough.

In this way, Kushner moves beyond a politics of identity to a politics of citizenship. Challenging Prior's understanding of Mormonism and its followers, Mother Pitt symbolizes the endless exceptions to the predisposed "rules" that govern various identities and thus place those considered part of these identity sub-cultures on the outskirts of society. Subsequently so, Mother Pitt's interaction with Prior, shortly after discovering that her own son is a homosexual, drastically changes her own conception of what it means to be a homosexual. Serving as an anchor throughout his physical instability, Mother Pitt finds comfort and companionship in her relationship with Prior, further exemplifying another strategy Kushner uses to eradicate boundaries of identity: the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic is a central theme throughout *Angels*. However, rather than delving into the biological aspects of the disease or its historical relevance to social movements associated with gay rights, this analysis focuses on AIDS' ability to break down ethnic, religious, and political boundaries and unify characters despite their differences.

Disease and illness are often subconscious societal signifiers of those "outside" the realm of the normal, healthy population. As many diseases are often biologically inherent or a familial trait and trace back to the genes of an ancestor or familial trait, those who contract these life-threatening illnesses or cancers often wonder why they were chosen to fall victim to such a cursed existence. However, HIV is an infection that neither discriminates nor is biologically inherent. According to Framji Minwalla, of "When Girls Collide: Considering Race in *Angels in America*," "The disease includes in its ever-

growing roster the rich, the poor, black, white, brown, red, yellow, men, women, children, straights, and queers...AIDS is the melting pot in which ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality all have melted” (114). Kushner’s film emphasizes this aspect of the disease, most distinctly in the first of character Roy Cohn’s monologues. After a routine check-up, Cohn and his Doctor dance around the verbalization of Cohn’s diagnosis, due in large part to Cohn’s assumption that AIDS is primarily contracted by homosexuals. Opposed to being labeled a “homosexual” by his doctor, Cohn launches into a tirade about his identity:

ROY COHN: AIDS. You know, your problem, Henry is that you are hung up on words. On labels, that you believe they mean what they seem to mean. AIDS. Homosexual. Gay. Lesbian. You think these are names that tell you who a person sleeps with. They don't tell you that...Like all labels they tell you one thing, and one thing only: Where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order? Not ideology or sexual taste, but something much simpler: clout. Not who I fuck or who fucks me, but who will pick up the phone when I call, who owes me favors. This is what a label refers to. Now to someone who does not understand this, a homosexual is what I am because I have sex with men, but really this is wrong. Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men who, in fifteen years of trying cannot get a piss-ant anti-discrimination bill through city council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody, and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me Henry?...No. I have clout. Lots. I pick up this phone, I punch fifteen numbers, you know who’s on the other end? In five minutes, Henry.

HENRY: The President?

ROY COHN: Better-his wife....I don’t want you to be impressed. I want you to understand. This is not sophistry. And this not hypocrisy. This is reality. I have sex with men, but nearly every other man of whom this is true, I bring the guy I’m screwing to the White House, and President Reagan smiles at us, and shakes his hand. Because what I am is defined entirely by who I am. Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn, is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys...And what is my diagnosis Henry?

HENRY: You have AIDS, Roy.

Cohn is certain that his credible, strong-willed, high-ranking character does not fall into the same category nor fit the same stereotypes as those of other homosexuals. In many ways, he is correct. His over-zealous, business-like Republican demeanor is the polar opposite of the liberal-minded, sarcastic, affectionate character of Prior Walter. However, Roy Cohn cannot change the fact that he and Prior will eventually suffer the same fate—a foreseeable death, much like numerous other homosexuals diagnosed with AIDS.

Despite its inevitable fatality, the virus also creates a platform for simple acknowledgement of humanity, an ironically transformational, redeeming, and hopeful point of reference for a number of characters in the film. After helping Prior to the hospital, Mother Pitt remains in his hospital room as a source of comfort and consolation. When Prior reveals his lesions, Mother Pitt is neither repulsed nor sympathetic: “It’s a cancer. Nothing more. Nothing more human than that.” This line, in essence, illuminates the centrality of AIDS. The disease allows Mother Pitt to see Prior not as a homosexual, but as a human being fighting to endure a terrible illness. It allows both Belize and Ethel Rosenberg to see Roy Cohn not as a monster, but as a suffering human being, alone and afraid. It allows Louis to confront his fears of death and dying and forego his wariness of an uncertain future for the sake of the ultimate human condition—love. According to “When Girls Collide: Considering Race in *Angels in America*, “...this fatal infection also produces its own other—a striving for life, for going forward, for moving outside and beyond the disease” (Minwalla, 114).

Yet how can a world ridden with disease characters constantly revising their stereotyped perceptions give an audience consolation in regards to their own moral sense of identity? Both Belize's character and his unifying vision of the world localize him as the ethical center of the film. Despite a physical manifestation (an ethnic, homosexual drag-queen) that would make right-winged conservatives shudder, Belize serves as a link between nearly all of the characters in *Angels*. Connecting Roy and Prior, Prior and Louis, Louis and Roy, and Prior and Joe, Belize serves (both intentionally and unintentionally) as the intermediary between characters, a coherent, eloquent center around which other unstable personalities revolve (Minwalla, 104). However, despite his seemingly clear and rational approach to life, in retrospect the audience knows little about his true character-born a Creole<sup>2</sup> (Schloesser, "Celluloid Salvation"), a concept nearly synonymous with mixture, and introducing himself with a name given to him only as "a drag role that stuck," Belize's background is an enigma in itself. Apart from his nursing profession and the brief mention of a lover in Harlem, his personal history plays little to no role in his interactions with others. Rather, the combined influence of his skin color, sexuality, philosophical reasoning and ideology represent all those communities who identities converge with his. In doing so, Kushner shifts the previously stereotypes conceptions of sexuality and ethnicity away from the margins of society and into the center, spinning identity categories off their conservative hinges (Minwalla, 105).

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<sup>2</sup> In Belize, Creole is the standard term for any person of at least partial Black African descent, or any person that speaks Creole as a first or sole language. The concept of "Creole" and that of mixture have become synonymous to the extent that any individual with Afro-European ancestry combined with any other ethnicity is likely to be considered Creole.

In addition to his physical presence and personality, Belize's vision of heaven epitomizes his role as a unifying force. When Roy Cohn, delirious struggling for consolation in his final hours of life, asks Belize to describe Heaven, he receives an unusual response:

BELIZE: Like San Francisco....Big city. Overgrown with weeds, but flowering weeds. On every corner a wrecking crew and something new and crooked going up catty corner to that. Windows missing in every edifice like broken teeth, gritty wind, and a gray high sky full of ravens.... Prophet birds, Roy. Piles of trash, but lapidary like rubies and obsidian, and diamond-colored cowspit streamers in the wind. And voting booths. And everyone in Balenciaga gowns with red corsages, and big dance palaces full of music and lights and racial impurity and gender confusion. And all the deities are Creole, mulatto, brown as the mouths of rivers. Race, taste and history finally overcome. And you ain't there.

ROY COHN: And Heaven?

BELIZE: That was Heaven, Roy.

Belize's vision of heaven seems to suggest Kushner's ideal community of the future—a society in which the bonds and boundaries of identity are overcome in a celebration of delicious ambiguity. This imagery suggests that the absence of order in Belize's heaven becomes not a fury of mass chaos, but a safe-haven for those considered “outside” their racial, sexual, or social identities: “The task of...*Perestroika*...is to remake a world of meaning that has been systematically unmade...the challenge [America] faces is not...to find a new structure, but rather to demonstrate how life can—must-proceed without the consolation of fixed orders, ‘beautiful theories’” (116). Yet, is it only after death that one is finally stripped of misconceptions of and left with an all-

encompassing “American” identity? Or does Belize’s allusion to San Francisco suggest that America itself is on its way to establishing such communities of citizenship?

In the film’s final moments, Prior’s monologue somewhat clarifies this ambiguity. His hopeful lines allude to a new kind of global citizenship in the twenty-first century, one that “...embraces both the legal and spiritual notion of the world but one that also knows no national, racial, sexual, or economic boundaries....With this Kushner attempts to upset the homogeneity of America” (Minwalla, 116). An epic detailing the struggles of race, sexuality, religion, and identity, the final lines of *Angels in America* unite all American identities through the central struggle for and desire of all citizens of humanity—more life.

### **Divine Chaos: A Restoration of Faith**

Much like *Angels in America*, the characters of *Crash* erase stereotypes and subvert previous conceptions of identity. Rather than subverting misconceptions surrounding sexual and political identities, the identities of the characters of *Crash* center around racial, ethnic, and societal misconceptions. While challenging these stereotypes through dialogue and interactions with other characters, the multi-faceted personalities and actions of these individuals simultaneously support the second of three overarching themes: the restoration faith in the human condition.

Although almost every character in *Crash* displays forms of dual narrative personalities, the relative dual components of each and every character are far too difficult to discuss. This analysis focuses on four major characters/sets of characters and

their personas: Officer Ryan, Officer Hansen, Detective Graham Waters, and carjacking thugs Anthony and Peter. The construction of these characters reduces ethnic, socio-economic, and racial stereotypes and their heroic, compassionate actions restore faith in the integrity of mankind.

### **Schizophrenia or Human Persona? The Split Personalities in *Crash***

Matt Dillon's character, Officer Ryan, is the character that commits both the most hated and the most heroic acts of the film. As member of the police force for over seventeen years, one assumes that Ryan's character would be that of a strong, tolerant, and just man. However, the film introduces Ryan's character in the middle of his verbally abusive telephone conversation with HMO supervisor Shaniqua Johnson. The phone call is in regards his father's supposed Urinary Tract Infection. Ryan wants an explanation for why the UTI medication given to his father months ago is still not working, but Johnson cannot give him any clear answer. Ryan questions her intelligence and degrades her name, illuminating his bigoted personality to the audience for the first time. Immediately following this conversation, Ryan and his partner, Officer Hansen (Philippe), pull over a vehicle previously announced over police radio as stolen by two armed and dangerous males. Despite the differing license plate number and the car's male and *female* occupants as noted by Hansen, Ryan proceeds to question the driver, Cameron, as if a contender for a DUI, also suspecting the light-skinned black female, Christine, of giving the male oral sex while driving. When Christine, slightly intoxicated, yells at the officers out of irritation, Officer Ryan takes action. Partially

irritated by her tone and consumed in racist rage after his recent phone call, Ryan sexually assaults and victimizes Christine in the form of a “search,” forcing her husband Cameron to be a helpless onlooker.

At this point in the film, the audience is disgusted with Dillon’s character. Thus far Ryan exhibits no positive or even remotely “tolerant” marks of personality. However, Ryan’s character deepens during his scene in the HMO office with Shaniqua Johnson. Ryan reveals his assumption that his father’s apparent UTI is in fact connected to a larger issue with his prostate. Knowing that the surgery will only be covered under his HMO plan with a diagnosis from a doctor inside the network, Ryan struggles to compromise with Shaniqua. When she refuses, Ryan launches into an interesting tirade:

OFFICER RYAN: ... Well you know what I can’t do? I can’t look at you without thinking about the five or six more qualified white men who didn’t get your job... Now I’m sayin’ this because I’m really hoping that I’m wrong about you. I’m hoping that someone like yourself, someone who may have been given a helping hand might have a little compassion for someone in a similar situation... You know you don’t like me, that’s fine. I’m a prick. But my father doesn’t deserve to suffer like this. He was a janitor, he struggled his whole life, saved enough to start his own company, twenty-three employees all of them black, paid them equal wages when no one else was doing that. For thirty years he worked side by side with those men sweeping and carrying garbage. And then the city council decides to give minority-owned companies preference in city contracts. And overnight my father loses everything-his business, his home, his wife, everything. And not once does he blame you people. Now I’m not asking you to help me. I’m asking that you to do this small thing for a man who lost everything so people like yourself could reap the benefits. And you know what it’s going to cost you? Nothing. Just a flick of your pen (*Crash*).

Despite Ryan’s apparent racial discrimination tactics, he presents a very complex “narrative” within his own character narrative. Ryan’s compassion for his father is evident. He goes above and beyond necessity to cure this man’s pain, exhausting all

possible options and meeting with the very woman he insulted in an attempt to get a referral. It is also clear that Ryan values his father's noble efforts in the workplace, both as a hardworking businessman and as a moral man attempting to bridge gaps of inequality. However, his heated temper and irritation present this compassion and admiration for his father in a harsh light. He uses the story of his father's tragic downfall in an attempt to guilt Shaniqua into giving him a referral. Although touched by the heartfelt story of the heroic father, Shaniqua ultimately denies Ryan a referral in lieu of his racist attitude. However, this scene illuminates the more "humane" side of Ryan's character, providing the audience with somewhat of a background and understanding for Ryan's racist remarks.

Ryan's ultimate act of compassion rests in his final scene with Christine in what may be the most artistically-crafted, dramatically poignant scene of the film. Ryan and his new partner stumble upon a severe car accident. Upon realizing that one of the drivers is trapped under the flipped car, Ryan races into the smoking vehicle and discovers that the injured driver is none other than Christine Thayer. When she recognizes his face, she immediately begins to scream and resist his grip, struggling until Ryan calms her down and assures her that he is there to help. After explaining the severity of their situation due to the spilling gasoline and the approaching flames, Christine relents and allows Ryan to maneuver around her (in a notably gracious and polite manner) and extract her from the seat. Ryan not only saves Christine, but throws himself *back* into the nearly exploding vehicle after his partner advises him to abandon the car to pull Christine out from the wreckage, risking his life for the sake of her own.

This act of courageousness leaves the audience speechless. Previous notions about the nature of Ryan's character are almost abandoned as viewers struggle to imagine if they would risk their own lives to save the life of another relative stranger.

Officer Ryan's partner, Officer Hansen (Philippe), takes an opposite turn in character. Offended by his partner's sexual assault on Christine, Hansen files for a squad partner change. Ironically enough, the officer has a second run-in with Cameron Thayer, this time in a far more compromising position. After an attempted carjacking by thugs Anthony (Ludarcis) and Peter (Larenz Tate), Ryan's squad car catches sight of the scuffle and backtracks to follow the vehicle. Peter takes off on foot, while Anthony jumps in the car with Cameron close behind him. A chase scene ensues, ending in the driveway of an unknown home. Cameron, with his vehicle surrounded, steps out of the car, keeping Anthony hidden. He is angry, confused, and extremely violent, cursing and verbally assaulting the officers in a threatening manner. Hansen, recognizing Cameron, takes a dangerous chance- he tells his fellow officers to lower their weapons, approaches Cameron, and talks him into a relatively suppressed state. He then convinces the other officers to let Cameron go with a warning, asking them to do him this as a "favor." Clearly devastated by the events of the previous night, Hansen demonstrates his remorse in this act of apology. Although Cameron is ungrateful ("I didn't ask for your help, Did I [*Crash*]"), the subliminal messaging of relative understanding between the two is clear.

At this point, the audience holds Philippe's character in high regard. Selfless and righteous, Officer Hansen seems to be one of the few just officers on the LA police force. However, this attitude takes a turn when Hansen picks up Peter as a hitchhiker on the

freeway. Hansen seems skeptical of Peter, a behavior relatively inconsistent with his previous actions of character. When Peter laughs at the sight of the Saint Christopher statue on Hansen's dashboard (he coincidentally has the same figure in his pocket), Hansen gets agitated and threatens to pull over and end the ride. When Peter attempts to show Hansen his own figurine, the cop mistakes his movement for the reaching of a gun, and pulls out his own before Peter can explain. With one impulsive shot, he kills Peter, only realizing afterwards the intent of the hitchhiker's movement when the camera zooms in on Peter's hand clutching his own Saint Christopher medal. Hansen's next move is that which entirely morphs his role as a character. He abandons Peter's body on the side of the road. When the audience makes this connection, it is then that the character previously hailed as "just" and "moral" transforms into "cowardly" and "murderous." How can an officer of the law, committed to preserving justice, commit a murder and selfishly abandon his mistake? This is the last scene in which Hansen appears, leaving the audience to fill in the blanks with their own assumptions.

Don Cheadle's role as Detective Graham Waters is another character whose actions drastically fluctuate on the scale of morality and tolerance. In the opening scene of the film in which Graham and his partner are involved in a car crash, Graham verbalizes his desire to feel connected to people in a cold, isolating city like Los Angeles. This automatically gives the audience the perception that he is the type of individual who wants to connect with people. However, in a later scene, we see his partner and lover, Ria, angrily dressing after a disruptive phone call mid-intercourse from Graham's mother in which he labels Ria as a "white woman" with whom he is having sex. "Why do you

keep everybody a certain distance, huh?” Ria comments. “What, you start to feel something and panic (*Crash*)?” Throughout the film, Graham faces struggles with a constant battle between sheltering the ones he loves and acting “justly,” a type of moral dilemma to which many individuals can relate. This clash of relative importance is best displayed in Graham’s relationship with his mother. His care and compassion for her runs deep, as demonstrated in his regular visits to her home and weekly “anonymous” grocery pickups for her despite her nasty attitude. Graham’s mother blames him for his brother Peter’s disappearance. Although she still believes her youngest son to be an “angelic” boy wandering around lost and confused in Los Angeles, Graham is aware of his brother’s record of felonies and car-heists. However, he chooses not to relay this information to his mother. The ultimate test of Graham’s priorities falls on the scene between him and the aide to the LA District Attorney, Jake Flanagan. Graham meets with Flanagan after covering a suspicious shooting in which a white male officer, Detective Conklin, shot a black male undercover cop, Detective Lewis. Lewis marked the third of three black men shot by Detective Conklin, as noted suspiciously on his record. However, the situation becomes more complicated when the detectives discover a stash of money hidden in the trunk of Detective Lewis’ car, although the vehicle was registered under another individual. As the two discuss the complexity of the situation, tensions heighten:

FLANAGAN: Fucking black people, huh?

GRAHAM: What did you just say?

FLANAGAN: I mean, you know I know all the sociological reasons why, per capita eight times more black men are incarcerated than white men. Schools are a disgrace, lack of opportunity, bias in the judicial system, all that stuff, but still... but still, it's... it's gotta get to you, I mean, on a gut level, as a black man. They just can't keep their hands out of the cookie jar. Of course you and I know that's not the truth but that's the way it always plays doesn't it? And assholes like Lewis just keep feeding the flames, it's gotta get to you... You coach ball down in Compton, am I right?... What do you think those kids need? To make them believe, to give them hope. You they need another drug-dealing cop or do you think they need a fallen black hero (*Crash*)?

Flanagan then admits that the DA squad is looking to replace their lead investigator with a “person of color” in order to “send the right message to the community” (*Crash*). Graham, offended by this tactic, rejects the assumed offer and begins to leave. Before he makes it to the door, Flanagan blackmails Graham using the detective’s juvenile delinquent brother’s criminal record against him. He infers that if Graham goes on record against Detective Conklin, the DA’s office will clear his brother’s record. When Graham argues that he would be framing a potentially innocent man, Flanagan launches into a tyrannical monologue:

FLANAGAN: What are you? The fucking defender of all things white? We're talking about a white man who shot three black men and you're arguing with me that maybe we're not being "fair" to him? You know what? Maybe you're right. Maybe you're right. Maybe Lewis did provoke this and maybe he got exactly what was coming to him. Or, maybe, stoned or not, being a black man in the valley was enough to get him killed. There was no one there to see who shot first, so there is no way to know. Which means we could get this wrong. Maybe that's what happened with your brother. Maybe we got it wrong. Maybe Lewis isn't the only one who deserves the benefit of the doubt. You're the one closest to all this. You need to tell us. What does your gut tell you (*Crash*)?

Flanagan’s complex rant contains a number of complex ethical concerns in itself. The question of where the ultimately important outcome lies, whether in justice for one

individual or in partial justice for a deserving race, is left up in the air for the audience at the end of this scene. Although many audience members may not be faced with decisions as critical or as life-threatening as Graham's, a clear comparison can be drawn to human experience in which individuals struggle to do what they believe is "right." In the end, after much contemplation, Graham chooses to save his brother's reputation by inferring Detective Conklin's guilt to the DA. This decision, although relatively unexpected, highlights Graham's connection to his family and his own apparent guilt for "abandoning" his brother. Familial concerns such as Graham's are largely indicative of greater societal issues facing Americans nationwide. Though the issues at hand are largely different, Graham's attitudes towards his mother and brother directly parallel situations in daily life.

The final pairing of characters demonstrating these contrasting narratives is the carjacking duo of Anthony (Bridges) and Peter (Tate). Although Anthony's family lineage is unknown, Peter is the brother of Detective Graham, a juvenile delinquent who walked out on his family years ago. The two make their living hijacking cars and selling them to local dealerships. The interesting aspect of Anthony and Peter lies in their complex intellectual dialogue with one another that almost always contradicts their actions, outlining the basis for the parallel narratives. For example, after exiting a diner, Anthony and Peter discuss the lack of service they received, attributing it to racial stereotyping:

ANTHONY: You see any white people in there waiting an hour and thirty two minutes for a plate of spaghetti? Huh? And how many cups of coffee did we get?

...That woman poured cup after cup to every single white person around us. Did she even ask you if you wanted any?

PETER: We didn't get any coffee that you didn't want and I didn't order, and this is evidence of racial discrimination? Did you happen to notice our waitress was black?

ANTHONY: And black women don't think in stereo types? You tell me something man. When was the last time you met one who didn't think she knew everything about your lazy ass? Before you even open your mouth, huh? That waitress sized us up in two seconds. We're black and black people don't tip. So she wasn't gonna waste her time. Now somebody like that? Nothing you can do to change their mind.

PETER: So, uh... how much did you leave?

ANTHONY: You expect me to pay for that kind of service (*Crash*)?

Anthony's comment regarding the inability to change the minds of intolerant people is ironic in light of the fact that his lack of tipping precisely reflects the apparent stereotypes that create racial discrimination. Despite his relatively accurate analysis of racial America, he still "follows the crowd" in his behavior as a black male. Similarly so, Anthony and Peter's conversation prior to the hijacking of the Cabot's vehicle provide further proof of Anthony's contribution to racial profiling:

ANTHONY: Look around! You couldn't find a whiter, safer or better lit part of this city. But this white woman sees two black guys, who look like UCLA students, strolling down the sidewalk and her reaction is blind fear. I mean, look at us! Are we dressed like gang-bangers? Huh? No. Do we look threatening? No. Fact, if anybody should be scared around here, it's us: We're the only two black faces surrounded by a sea of over-caffeinated white people, patrolled by the trigger-happy LA-PD. So you tell me, why aren't we scared?

PETER: Because we have guns?

ANTHONY: You could be right.

Anthony's offended attitude after being sized up by Jean Cabot seems relatively irrelevant when he proceeds to use his stashed weapon to hijack the car of the white couple. It is this contraction between verbosity and action that the audience struggles with in analyzing Anthony's character. How can such an intelligent man pervade his surroundings with the same stereotypes and attitudes that he mocks? It seems so contradictory. This disconnect between language and action also mirrors aspects of contemporary society. Humanity often warns against those who say one thing and turn around and do another. However, Anthony's behavior at the end of the film highlights his inner "light." When he steals an unmarked van and brings it to the car dealership, he discovers a dozen or so Chinese immigrants in the van's cargo hold. Although the owner of the dealership offers to pay Anthony a hefty sum for the individuals, the following scene displays Anthony driving the van to an area clearly populated by a majority of Chinese people. Anthony frees the immigrants into the city, handing the apparent eldest male forty dollars and telling him to "Buy everybody Chop Suey, okay (*Crash*)?" Anthony's noble behavior seems more in line with the theories and arguments he discusses throughout the entire film. Nevertheless, his final act of "heroism" is marked by a derogatory racial comment, further emphasizing the idea that no character in the film is exclusively one-sided, nor do any of them turn over an entirely new leaf after their traumatic experiences.

Anthony's final act demonstrates his recognition of the value of a human life. Despite the uncertainty of what lies ahead for these immigrants, his behavior demonstrates an attitude that the belief in progress and a better life are far more beneficial

than little to no life at all. This very conviction is mirrored in *Angels in America* as it constructs a restoration of faith in life and the human condition.

**“More Life:” Restoration in *Angels in America***

The restoration of faith present in *Angels in America* lies not in the erasure of stereotypes and blurred definitions of identity, but in the resolution of the film’s inherent conflict between stasis and forward movement as belief in the improvement and progress of the human condition. The juxtaposition between movement and stasis and its inherent “solution” is best illustrated through the character Prior Walter, who functions as symbol for humanity in its entirety. Demanding him to give up, to cease movement and thus stop the movement of mankind, the Angel of America hopes to enlist Prior’s aid in ending what she views to be a downtrodden world, hopeless and doomed for failure since God’s abdication. In the eyes of the Angel and her comrades, the very idea of change incites a swift path to the inevitable devolution of the world toward apocalypse.

Prior, physically exhausted and emotionally weak from a broken heart, is not, ironically immediately moved by the Angel’s warning. He remains rooted on the margin between termination and survival. When Prior reveals his hallucination and the prophecy to Belize, he too shares in his suspicion: “This is...worse than nuts, it’s...well, don’t migrate, don’t mingle that’s...malevolent” (*Angels*). Yet how can Prior justify that his world is worth the struggle of survival? An eminently fatal disease with brutal side effects, a lost love and a broken heart, and with only Belize (and eventually Mother Pitt) by his side, it is hard to justify his cause against that of the Angel’s.

Despite the trying times and struggles of the characters in *Millennium Approaches*, Kushner reveals his stance of the future of the human condition in his title for the second half of *Angels in America*. *Perestroika*, a Russian word meaning, “thaw,” or the overcoming of the stagnation process, illuminates Kushner’s hopeful anticipation of human reconstruction and renovation. In spite of hardship, Prior, along with characters Belize, Harper, Mother Pitt, and even Louis, hold strong to the possibilities of progress. Harper’s migration to San Francisco, Mother Pitt’s newfound friendship with a homosexual AIDS victim, Louis’s return to Prior, and Belize’s view of Heaven and the intermingling between races and sexual identities all contain catalysts for change in hopes of a better tomorrow. Above all, Prior embodies the physical struggle of this symbolic fight for progress as he subverts the very deterioration of his own body: “It is in fact his body we see deconstructing even as he rejects the prophecy handed to him, favoring a vision that will lead not to the Angel’s idea of paradise but to Belize’s” (Minwalla, 116). Although he does not know why, Prior resists the prophecy, and states so quite articulately during his confrontation with the Council of Continental Principalities in Heaven:

PRIOR: But still. Still bless me anyway. I want more life. I can't help myself. I do. I've lived through such terrible times and there are people who live through much worse. But you see them living anyway. When they're more spirit than body, more sores than skin, when they're burned and in agony, when flies lay eggs in the corners of the eyes of their children - they live. Death usually has to take life away. I don't know if that's just the animal. I don't know if it's not braver to die, but I recognize the habit; the addiction to being alive. So we live past hope. If I can find hope anywhere, that's it, that's the best I can do. It's so much not enough. It's so inadequate. But still bless me anyway. I want more life. And if he [God] comes back, take him to court. He walked out on us, he ought to pay.

Ironically enough, Prior does not disagree with the horrors of life to which the Angels allude. Although he recognizes the atrocities of disease, poverty, hunger and heartbreak and identifies no foreseeable end in sight, he yearns to keep moving forward, to awake each day alive and with the hope for “more life.” In the film’s epilogue, nearly two years after Prior’s diagnosis, he still adamantly declares the same vivacity. After his restorative verbal imagery of the Bethesda fountain and its healing power, Prior turns to the AIDS crisis and the struggle for gay rights. Rather than eschewing their significance with threatening words of inevitable violence and “the end” of society as he knows it, Prior frames both the disease and the acknowledged existence of homosexuals in a progressive tone:

PRIOR: This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all. And the dead will be commemorated, and we'll 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 now. You are fabulous, each and every one, and I bless you: More life. The great work begins.

Prior leaves his audiences with a commanding sense of determination for the improvements that lie with mankind’s evolution, and “...the hopeful (desperate?) revelation of an eventual utopia that is a genuine alternative to death: a society of change, of migration, of plurality, of ‘more life,’ whatever the cost” (Smith, 163).

How does one foster this society of change? In order to create change, a community must be unified and cohesive. This does not mean that all of one’s beliefs must mirror that of his/her neighbor. However, citizens must understand one another on a

deep, visceral level that surpasses surface understanding. How can one achieve this connection?

### **“It’s The Sense of Touch:” Touch as a Uniting Element**

Individuals establish emotional connections with one another on three distinct levels: verbally, visually, and physically. So far, the analyses of both *Crash* and *Angels in America* have centered on verbal and visual interactions in society, including erasing racial, cultural, religious, political, and socio-economic distinctions and restoring faith in individuals through dual narratives. Yet these reconstructions of identity are primarily achieved on an individual basis. In understanding the various complexities inherent in individual characters, we as a society refine our own individual definition of what it means to exist as an American. However, the key to a shared humanity is not just to exist, but to *co-exist*, and this requires an ability not simply to *relate*, but to *connect* with others. How do we achieve this emotional unity?

Sonja Lane, author of “‘It’s the Sense of Touch.’ Skin in the Making of Cinematic Consciousness,” provides a possible solution to this problem in her definition of the literal, physical membrane of the body: “...the figure of the membrane is not just a mediator but a shared existence, circulating as the width of this singularly plural coexistence” (33). It is undeniable that touch and physical contact creates an emotional connection between two parties, regardless of whether this emotion is intimate, violent, awkward, or simply a trigger for arousal or heightened awareness. It is this sort of personal contact and its effect on one’s experience defines him/her as human.

The idea of touch as a strongly impacting function of human experience is not an unusual assumption. In Michael Bross' "McLuhan's Theory of Sensory Functions: A Critique and Analysis," Bross examines the work of Marshall McLuhan, a well-renowned expert in sensory-perceptual experience. Bross argues for the importance of sensory functions as a useful tool for analyzing and understanding how changes in media technologies affect individuals and societies. He identifies three fundamental premises concerning the nature of sensory processes and perception. The first premise states that the senses are ordered into a specific hierarchy, the second states that an agency exists that translates sensory experiences from one modality to another, and the third states that one of the major functions of this agency determines "sense ratios," or the contribution made by each individual sense to the total sensory experience (93). Although the hierarchy of senses remains intact, Bross discusses McLuhan's opinion of the importance of touch as a modality with a special status. McLuhan argued that touch is "necessary to integral existence (93)" and considers the information processing role that touch plays on "conveying impressions from the world to the individual, and to what extent it is based on experimental factors which relate to affective and emotional states generated or associated with tactile experience (95)." In short, McLuhan believed that our senses are constantly bombarded by media productions, and these productions change our sense ratios of what is expected, and thereby our experience of life in general.

Bross' study clarifies the importance of touch in human experience, and how this tactile knowledge is often removed in individual's interactions with media technology. However, efforts to incorporate touch into cinema lessen the sensory wall between media

and viewer. Audience members identify with a narrative when they witness physical interactions between fictional characters and connect these experiences to experiences of their own, thus emotionally drawing viewers into the narrative and tying shared sensory experience to the concept of universal humanity.

Both *Crash* and *Angels in America* utilize cinematic techniques to emphasize the importance of touch and accentuate these moments for the sake of audience's shared sensory experience. These films also take the importance of touch to another level, using it to bridge the gap of understanding between diverse individuals in an attempt to unite Americans under the umbrella of "humanity." The following sections depict the most extreme examples of touch in *Crash* and *Angels in America*, and analyze these occurrences as they relate to the restoration of human morality and the need for raw vulnerability and open emotional exchange to incite progress and promote unification.

### **Making Contact: Touch in *Crash***

Cheadle's character, Detective Graham, frames the idea of shared humanity within the context of touch in the first line of the film:

GRAHAM: It's the sense of touch. Any real city, you walk, you know? You brush past people, people bump into you. In L.A., nobody touches you. We're always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much, that we crash into each other, just so we can feel something (*Crash*).

Although seemingly irrelevant because of its location in the opening scene of the film, Graham's words tie directly into the importance of the sense of touch as a uniting element in *Crash*. Three characters directly display a transition in thought as a result of

human touch: Officer Ryan, pampered housewife Jean Cabot, and Persian store owner Farhad.

Officer Ryan's encounter with human touch lies in his extremely physical rescue of Christine Thayer. When Ryan removes Christine from the burning vehicle, she collapses into his arms in a fit of tears. When the other officers carry her off, Ryan seems to hold onto her as long as possible, both confused and fascinated by the emotional draw he feels towards this woman. The scene ends with individual shots of both Ryan, their eyes lingering on one another as Christine is carted away. The physical contact involved in the shared experience between the two heightens the emotional impact of the event, both for the characters involved and for the audience. Viewers equate Christine's hysterics with their own experiences of collapsing into a loved one's arms after a traumatic or devastating experience. It is this physical connection that ties meaning and impact to the scene and partially rectifies the previously negative encounter between the two characters.

Jean Cabot, wife of Los Angeles' District Attorney Rick Cabot, is displayed as a very sheltered woman surrounded by comfortable amenities. Her negative attitudes towards the Hispanic locksmith and her Mexican maid Maria display her racial intolerance. Later in the film, Jean slips on the stairs in her home and takes a painful fall. With Maria as the only woman to answer her phone call for help and care for her in her bedridden state, Jean begins to acknowledge the sense of isolation she feels from those in her life. When Maria enters her bedroom to bring her tea and adjust her position

on her pillows, Jean pulls Maria in for a longer, awkward hug. As she hugs Maria, she whispers words of recognition, as if the embrace has coaxed her to admit to her defeat:

JEAN: Do you want to hear something funny?

MARIA: What's that Mrs. Jean?

JEAN: You're the best friend I've got. (*Crash*)

Jean's understanding of her own loneliness and desire for compassion is only revealed when she receives the warm hug from Maria. Sometimes it is this type of physical contact that gives us the strength to move forward or admit to a relatively demoralizing truth. The awkward length of the hug between Maria and Jean gives the audience time to grasp the importance of the exchange, lingering the moment with the characters and understanding Jean's sense of relief.

One of the most emotionally gripping scenes of the film involves Farhad, the Persian store owner, Daniel, the Hispanic Locksmith, and Lara, his daughter. Farhad is enraged after a second break-in into his store resulting in total destruction of his only source of income. He blames Daniel for "failing" to fix the lock, despite the fact that Daniel warned Farhad about the broken door. Furious, Farhad impulsively loads a gun and drives to Daniel's address, stopping him in the driveway on his way into his house. Lara, seeing her father from the window and sensing that something is wrong, runs out into the driveway despite desperate calls from her father and mother. At the same time that Lara reaches her father's arms, Farhad pulls the trigger and mistakenly "shoots" the child. After the initial shock, both Daniel and Farhad realize that the girl has

mysteriously not been touched- in fact, they cannot find the bullet. As Daniel embraces Lara in what seems to be an everlasting hug, Farhad looks on to the father and daughter's physical contact and realizes his dangerous mistake. Upon comprehending the idea of a family behind every individual, Farhad realizes the potential consequences of his actions. The audience, already deeply moved by this compelling scene, can clearly read the regret on Farhad's face as he watches Daniel and Lara embrace.

Daniel and Lara illustrate the ultimate bond of love and compassion between a father and his daughter. However, without a biological connection to another human being, internal connections of this magnitude take time to support and cultivate. This sort of relationship often requires a degree of vulnerability, a precarious step and one difficult for nearly all individuals. *Angels in America* depicts this raw, emotional vulnerability in the various relationships within its plot, and growth of community and connections that often result from open and honest emotional sacrifice.

### **Shedding Skins: Touch In *Angels in America***

In Kushner's *Angels in America*, the focus on literal touch shifts slightly to include a thematics of skin and bowels. The characters' inherent conflicts between their internal and external selves are rectified through a motif of skin, functioning as a metaphor for the revelation and/or protection of self.

Susceptible to decay and invasion (hence the immeasurable allusions and references to disease and infection), the skin is penetrable, clarifying its role in triggering the conscious reactions of individuals. This physiological locale is both where the self is

endangered, and where one may physically and emotionally threaten another. This is most notably illustrated through Prior's personal experience with AIDS and its detrimental effect on his relationship with relational partner, Louis Ironson. Upon contracting AIDS, the fragility of Prior's skin and is displayed throughout the film, visually identifiable by his massive lesions alone. He attempts to mask his insecurities about his illness. However, physically he still believes himself to be a danger to others and insists that Louis not touch him, especially after he falls bleeding in the couple's hallway after having "shit himself." Despite his outward mental toughness, this scene and Prior's release of literal bodily fluids represent his physical and mental vulnerability as a result of the disease.

Throughout the film, skin and flesh become metaphors for crossing uncertain and dangerous boundaries, and serve as an ironic point of contention for Louis throughout the film. From the film's inception it is evident, both verbally and non-verbally, that Louis does not know how to handle Prior's disease. The scene between Louis and the Rabi after his grandmother's burial demonstrates Louis' immediate reaction after Prior reveals that he has AIDS:

LOUIS: Rabi, what does the holy word say about someone who abandons someone he loves at a time of great need?

RABI: Why would a person do such a thing?

LOUIS: Because he has to. Maybe this person can't incorporate sickness into his sense of how things are supposed to go. Maybe vomit, and sores, and disease really frighten him. Maybe he isn't so good with death.

Disgusted by the physical manifestations of Prior's disease and afraid of losing his partner to death, Louis attempts to detach himself emotionally and abandons Prior while he recovers in the hospital. Unsure of how to approach a relationship with a partner whose death is eminent, Louis avoids straddling the fragile boundary between mortality and immortality. Instead, he puts up a protective "skin," avoiding any and all thoughts regarding his feelings for Prior.

However, Louis seems to have no problem breaching other dangerous boundaries. Even before his physical split with Prior, Louis pushes the limits in his relationship with Joe, a conservative Mormon lawyer who has spent his years as a married man trying to disguise his homosexual inclinations. The two first meet in the workplace, and when they cross paths on "The Ramble" [an area in Central Park commonly associated with homosexuals], Louis takes a bold step and invites Joe back to his home in Manhattan, enticing him to engage in sexual intercourse:

LOUIS: We can cap anything that leaks in latex. We can smear our bodies with non-Oxonol VI, safe, chemical sex. Messy, but not dirty. Look I want to, but I don't want to beg....Go if you're going. Go.

JOE: I'm not staying. (*crosses, embracing LOUIS. The two hold this stance for a while.* )

LOUIS: You smell nice.

JOE: So do you.

LOUIS: Smell is an incredibly complex and under-appreciated physical phenomenon. Inextricably linked to sex. The nose is really a sexual organ. Know what a smell is?.... It's made of the molecules of what you're smelling. Some part of you where you meet the air is airborne. Little molecules of Joe up my nose. Smelling and tasting, first the nose, then the tongue. They work as a team, see the nose tells the body, the heart, the mind, the fingers, the cock what it

wants, and then the tongue explores. (He licks Joe's face). Salt. Iron. Clay. Chlorine. Copper. Earth....Words are the worst things. Breathe smell.

Crossing the boundaries of skin and flesh provides not only the opportunity for pain and infection, but for connection as well, recognized in this scene by the sexual intimacy between Joe and Louis. The relationship between the two men allows Joe (however briefly) to shed his protective heterosexual skin for that of his true homosexuality. This transformation is initiated by the physical embrace between Joe and Louis after Joe asserts that he is not spending the night. Much like the embrace between housewife Jean Cabot (Bullock) and housekeeper Maria in Haggis' *Crash*, the embrace is extended for an uncomfortable length of time, allowing viewers to grasp the importance of the moment. Eliminating the physical boundary between himself and Louis, Joe realizes what has been missing in his life--true emotional and physical connection to another. Understanding the importance of experiencing these emotions, Joe gives in to Louis' request and spends the night.

However, the consummation of the relationship does not hold the same importance for Louis as it does for Joe. It is important to note that Louis insists on "cap[ping] anything that leaks," agreeing to sexual relations that are "messy, but not dirty." His need for physical protection from disease symbolizes his desire to remain emotionally unattached. Louis is too afraid to let down his protective outer shell and expose his raw skin to the potential pain, much like the pain that resulted from his previous relationship with Prior.

In relation to Joe's character, skin represents an individual's connections and commitments in the world. Joe's reference to "shedding his skin" is an attempt to disconnect himself from the reality of his heterosexual ties to Brooklyn, including both his job and his wife, Harper (Kruger, 163). Desperate to prove his love for and commitment to Louis, Joe vows his readiness to shed his "temple garment," his heterosexual protective skin as a shield to the harsh realities of the outside world:

JOE: Louis, anything. Whatever you want, I can give up. Anything. My skin. (starts stripping) I'm flayed, no past now. I can give up anything. Maybe what we've been doing, maybe I'm infected. But I don't want to be! I want to live now, I can be anything I need to be, and I want to be with you!

However, to deny any part of oneself in hopes of illuminating another is to empty oneself of depth, no matter how essential or unimportant the element is to an individual's well-being. Joe fails to reconcile his inner and outer selves, and his weakness as an individual causes his character to fade into the background, unable to connect to anything other than his own self-pity and confusion.

Ultimately, it is the characters of *Angels* who are courageous enough to shed their protective skin, overlook differences, and breach uncertain boundaries that experience the true benefits of human connection and discover the lasting bonds of support and friendship. The relationships that best demonstrate these outcomes are those between Mother Pitt, Prior, and Belize.

Before her arrival in New York City, Mother Pitt is unable to express her emotions and/or connect with another individual, not least of which includes her own son. A firm model of ethical morality, her connection to her religion holds her back

from investing emotionally in her surrounding relationships. However, her coincidental encounter with Prior sparks a relationship that far succeeds those of her past. The image of Mother Pitt awkwardly holding up Prior's weak, frail body as she struggles to hail and taxi is a striking frame for viewers, emphasizing the odd, yet poignant inception of this connection. This is the first time that viewers visually see Mother Pitt connect skin-to-skin with another human being. In this moment, the once flaccid, stubborn Mormon woman solidifies an ironic, enigmatic connection between herself and the sickly, crazed, homosexual prophet. This mutually beneficial relationship only grows in strength and value, and Mother Pitt becomes Prior's salvation, fueling his determination to survive and using her motherly presence as a replacement for Prior's emotional attachment to Louis. In this way, she functions as the living representation of her own advice regarding how to react to prominent figures in one's life: "If it can't hold you up, then seek for something new" (*Angels in America*).

Belize also demonstrates a strong attachment to Prior, evident in their constant physical interactions. Audience members are first introduced to Belize when he visits Prior in the hospital, as the two are long-time friends. This ethnic drag-queen spends the entirety of his visit in close physical contact with Prior—rubbing "magic goop" on his wounds, and holding him as he cries for his partner Louis. It is only when the two are touching that their conversations turn from sarcasm and surface-level topics to issues of seriousness seeped with emotional intensity. Prior relies on Belize as his confidante, exemplified in the fact that he is the only one to know about his "interactions" with the

prophetic angel. Despite his seemingly insane “hallucinations,” Belize remains loyal to Prior.

One of the most emotionally captivating moments of physical interaction occurs between two characters whose identities fall on opposite ends of the spectrum of humanity: Belize and Roy Cohn. While Belize is on-call, Roy has a seizure in his hospital bed. As his body convulses uncontrollably, Belize rushes to his side and grasps his shoulders for support. In a fit of helplessness and self-pity Roy screams out, whimpers, and grabs Belize’s arm. Almost immediately a soft angelic music begins, Roy’s seizure stops, and he lets out a weak sigh of relief. Rather than immediately pulling away from one another, the two remain in an awkward embrace, and the frame lingers on the interlocked arms of these individuals. Roy, eyes closed, shifts his grasp as he familiarizes himself with the muscles in the nurse’s arm, while Belize murmurs “Shh...” in a nurturing tone. Much like the embrace between *Crash*’s Officer Ryan and Christine, two individuals sharing little in common and repulsed by the very thought of one another share in a simple, comforting embrace. The understanding that comes with this physical unity mirrors that of the contact between Jean Cabot and housekeeper Maria in *Crash*. Like Jean, Roy constantly belittles those around him and considers himself to be both racially and socio-economically superior in comparison to majority of society. Believing himself to be an infinitely more powerful man with limitless connections and resources, Roy finds himself almost entirely alone throughout his battle with HIV/AIDS. In the final stages of his illness, his only visitor during his hospital stay is that of lowly clerk Joe Pitt. Even more poignant is that akin to Jean Cabot, the only individual to rush to Roy’s aid in

his moment of utmost vulnerability is one whom he least expected—a racially-mixed, homosexual nurse. It is in this moment that Roy seems to recognize how truly isolated he is from the rest of humanity. This feeling of isolation is further illustrated in his final words after hallucinating Ethel Rosenberg: “Nobody with me now. Only the dead” (*Angels*).

It is no surprise that the disease takes hold of Roy Cohn. With no one yearning for his existence, his strength disintegrates nearly as quickly as the sympathy he extracted from those around him. Had Roy crafted merely a single relationship of meaning in his life, perhaps he would have willed a stronger mental vigor to fight and survive his terrible disease. The final scene between Belize, Mother Pitt, Prior, and Louis proves the importance of the strength found within relational bonds, and how these ties in turn set the path toward recovery and fuel the will to live.

Throughout the duration of the scene, the four individuals, specifically Mother Pitt, Belize, and Prior, are rarely in the frame without being/appearing to be in physical contact—touching shoulders, holding hands, linking arms, patting one another’s knees, melding into one another’s shadow, etc. As each individual steps forward towards the camera to deliver his/her monologue in regards to the Bethesda fountain, he/she touches the other individuals within his/her reach. In the film’s final moments, Prior extends this human touch to viewers, in an attempt to break the third wall and enforce the belief of the interconnectedness of humanity:

PRIOR: And I bless you. (*Kissing his hand, reaching out as if to touch the viewers, fingers literally grace screen*) More life. The great work begins.

Although seemingly unimportant in its initial stages, physical connections between individuals lead to just that--more life. More connections, more compassion, more affection, and more progress. Prior's breaching of the third wall allows audience members to utilize his attempted physical connection to link themselves to the film in a unique way, to feel a connection between themselves and their relationship to the characters in the film and deepen their understanding of and appreciation for the film's message of unity.

Harper's transformational understanding of the ozone layer serves as a final, lasting symbolic metaphor for the importance of physical connection and the interconnectedness of humanity. Harper's character is introduced as a hypochondriac house-wife, constantly in fear of the world's demise. In own her failure to seek protection from pain and suffering, she idealizes the Earth's ozone layer as a way of protecting humanity from the dangers of the cosmic world. In this same way, she shelters herself from heartache and affliction through her addiction to Valium, isolating herself from the world with the help of a protective, drug-induced, mental pseudo-skin. Upon weaning herself from Valium and leaving her husband for a better life, Harper decisively exposes herself to the realities of the outside world. In her final appearance in the film, she describes her newfound understanding of the ozone layer as a result of her aerial view on her way to San Francisco. Once merely a "ragged skin" barely covering the Earth, Harper sees the ozone as a place of human interconnectedness:

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

Here, Harper recognizes the value of the connection between the souls of individuals who have fallen victim to various forms of “brokenness”—emotionally, physically, in relation to mortal falls or the ultimate fall of immortality. This sort of brokenness signals that in some way, the protective skin that once left individuals impenetrable to emotion and/or feeling has been breached, leaving them open, vulnerable, and receptive to the hopes and desire of others. Sharing this common, uniting goal of reparation and recovery, souls come together, merging physically and emotionally, to replenish the bruised, wounded skin of the world.

### Summary

*Crash* and *Angels in America* illuminate the overarching goals of redemptive, post-traumatic cinema. Their elaborate plot-lines mirror the complexities inherent in society as mankind struggles to navigate a post-modern world and discover the interconnectedness of humanity. In blurring distinctions between stereotyped religious, sexual, political, and racial filters in the construction of its characters, *Angels in America* restructures definitions of identity. *Crash* achieves a similar effect in its development of dual narrative personalities in each of its four main protagonists—Officer Ryan, Officer Hansen, Detective Graham Waters, and carjacking thugs Anthony and Peter. The dual

personalities of these characters also correlate to their individual acts of heroism and courage. These actions display their inherent morality, thus restoring faith in the human condition. *Angels in America* also restores this faith in mankind, largely through the character Prior. Prior is a symbolic representation of the strength and courage of mankind in the face of strife. In his fight for survival and his optimism and hopeful outlook in the progress ahead for humanity, he inspires viewers to retain an invigorated sense of life and the continued pursuit for progress and betterment. In an effort to form a cohesive society of change, both films utilize cinematic techniques to encourage the importance of touch and physical contact. This sort of connection between human beings fosters a reconstruction of a unified society in which individuals are connected not only through exterior motives but on a visceral, emotional level. This helps individuals identify with one another, as thus with the nation as a whole.

**CHAPTER NINE**  
**“IT MADE ME THINK:” A SOCIETAL RESPONSE**

How do we, as both an American nation and as individuals, grapple with the messages of *Crash* and *Angels in America*? After the events of 9/11, Americans searched for one thing; an answer. Without a clear explanation from President Bush, they turned their attention to those that could bear the brunt of their agony, whether Iraq as a whole or the various ethnic Americans within their own communities. The struggle to understand oneself in both an individual and national sense was an issue for nearly every American. However, the societal problem lay in the desire for a concrete explanation and outcome, rather than focusing on the exploration itself.

**The Power of Participation and the Optimism of Will: Implications of *Crash* and *Angels in America***

In an interview with Stephen Applebaum, Paul Haggis expressed his understanding of the importance of self-exploration as it related to *Crash*:

I don't think it's the job of filmmakers to give anybody answers. I do think, though, that a good film makes you ask questions of yourself as you leave the theatre. The ones that are a total experience in themselves, where you leave the theatre going, "Yeah, nice film," I think are failures (Applebaum).

Haggis' words apply not just to *Crash*, but to *Angels in America* as well. It is not necessarily the solutions that these films provide, but rather the fuel for the right questions that make both such powerful works of cinema. The dual narratives and blurred identities of each and every individual in the films cause viewers to actively

“participate” while watching. As the audience constantly changes their opinions of characters, they in turn question their own values and beliefs as they layer the experiences of the characters onto their own lives. *Crash* and *Angels in America* bring the cinematic experience outside of the movie theatre. These works address issues of controversy, pose the right questions, and ask audiences to take these questions out into the real world and explore their meaning through observation and self-examination.

In the context of *Crash*, its power lies in its ambiguity. Roger Ebert, acclaimed movie critic explained its role as a “thinking” movie:

*Crash* is not a movie with answers, and maybe not even with questions. Maybe it is all made of observations. In a time when we are encouraged to draw sharp lines and leap to immediate conclusions, here is a movie that asks us to think twice, to look again, to look also within ourselves. “It made me think,” a lot of people say (Ebert).

The film itself ends with a contradiction. Moments after Anthony performs a heroic act of kindness, viewers see Shaniqua Johnson’s car get rear-ended by a Chinese driver. Jumping out of the car in a rage, she screams, “Ugh, what is wrong with you people? Don’t talk to me unless you speak American (*Crash*)!” Again, a character the audience thought to be free of racial prejudice makes a derogatory comment towards an individual of another race. The film underscores the importance of accepting mankind’s imperfections. If individuals can acknowledge their own intolerances and examine the origins of these prejudices as a way to come to a better understanding of oneself and one’s nation as a whole, then *Crash* has achieved its goal.

Just as *Crash* emphasizes the importance of recognizing prejudice and expanding cultural understanding, *Angels in America*'s emphasis on the universality of the human condition remains pertinent in today's world. It is no longer a "gay" story but a national story, illuminating the struggles of realistic characters and individuals to substantiate the struggles of everyday American citizens in all facets of life. In the end, the struggles of blacks, of whites, of gays, of straights, of Mormons, of Jews, are the struggles of Americans. Yes, the characters present in *Angels* are types, but for a specific reason-to re-substantiate the eclecticism of American identities. In the words of Monica Pearl, author of "Epic Aids: *Angels in America* From Stage to Screen:"

The amalgam of these identities is what makes American identities....No sentimental romantic love, but an amalgamation of friends, with serious and enduring differences, all still arguing in the very last scene....Not a solution or a resolution, but 'More Life' (Pearl, 773).

Kushner extends this idea of American identity to the concept of the *human* identity, specifically in relation to the conflict in Iraq (Fisher, 14). He insists that American citizens must consider not the national toll but the *human* toll of the conflict, a process that begins by moving beyond conflict, acquiring a greater knowledge of the other culture, and placing an emphasis not on differences, but on humanism:

Kushner invites his audience to apply his "optimism of will" when encountering racial, ethnic, or gender differences evident in the contemporary world with compassion and a willingness to create an equitable community of nations (Fisher, 15).

The play's resurgence in popular culture illuminates society's search for any and all messages of this type in a post-9/11 world. As Americans grasp for ways to establish meaningful connections with one another, these films remind citizens that solutions do not precede unity. In fact, it is just the opposite. In unifying despite disparity, hardship, and difference and strife, a nation creates its own solution.

### **What Now? Future Research**

Although *Crash* and *Angels in America* contribute to a greater understanding of humanity, there are a number of questions that remain unanswered as the stream of credits begin. Some are content to leave these mysterious ambiguities untouched, while others re-watch clips and footage in search of an answer. However, the most pressing question that remains at the end of these films' conclusions is one with no intrinsic or definite answer-What now?

The opportunities for expansion in this area of research are limitless. Apart from analyzing a number of additional post-modern films, expanding cinematic analysis to other artistic mediums such as visual and performing arts would strengthen the understanding of the role of creative mediums in post-traumatic periods. In addition, the inevitable reoccurrence of national and international catastrophes will bring new perspectives on trauma culture and the role of trauma in restoring and reforming identity. One might further expand this analysis and consider the effect of traumatic events outside of the United States on a collective international identity.

## **CHAPTER TEN**

### **THE ESSENCE OF AMERICA: A CITIZEN OF CITIZENS**

America is not defined by its President, nor by its geography, but by its citizens. A country that holds no limits, home to a virus that does not respect boundaries, inspiring art that does not respect genres, all boiling down to represent an un-mappable country. Yet the expandable boundaries of America should serve not as a deterrent, but as an inspiration, a glimpse of our nation's endless possibilities.

Identity is not about defining an "us" and "them:" it is about defining oneself in relation to others as a means of uniting for the greater purposes of humanity. It is about reaching forward with vivacious determination into an unknown abyss, armed with nothing but confidence in the human condition and the belief in progress. It is a courageous thing to explore and integrate our own contradictions, but a valuable and necessary step. If the America's people can take hold of their cultural differences and use them as a means of reconstruction, reformation and faith in the expansive possibilities the nation, than The United States of America will always remain "the home of the brave-" and that is the heart and soul of the American identity.

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