

# "I CHERISH MY BILE DUCT AS MUCH AS ANY OTHER ORGAN"

**Political Disgust and the Digestive Life of AIDS  
in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America***

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I cherish my bile duct as much as any other organ. I take good care of it. I make sure it gets its daily vitamins and antioxidants and invigorating exposure to news of Antonin Scalia and everyone else working for the Bush family.

—Tony Kushner, speech to the undergraduate class of Bard College (2005)

In one of many verbally assaultive scenes in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1991–92), the closeted, acerbic lawyer Roy Cohn rages at his naive protégé Joe Pitt that politics is, in his words, “gastric juices churning, this is enzymes and acids, this is intestinal is what this is, bowel movement and blood-red meat—this stinks, this is *politics*, Joe, the game of being alive.”<sup>1</sup> Roy's metaphor links politics to the gut, as a state of being alive both digestively *and* affectively. The metaphor is apt, for in the following scene Joe, also a closeted Reaganite apostle, is chastised by the gay liberal Louis Ironson for downing hot dogs with Coca-Cola and Pepto-Bismol, which leads to a bleeding ulcer. Roy also experiences violent convulsions of the gut brought on by complications of AIDS. The play suggests that despite Roy's bravado and Joe's Pepto guzzling, their political conservatism and self-hating homophobia are the worst kinds of “gastric juices churning,”

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causing painful gut feelings. What are we to make of this dizzying array of links among intestines, bowel movements, eating, and purging along distinct political lines and sexual identities? Not incidental, these connections range across the entire play, depicted in the HIV-positive character Prior's repeated lamentations over his "chapped ass" from bouts of blood-filled diarrhea, as well as Harper, Joe's unhappy wife, who imagines being disemboweled by God on her journey of self-discovery.

This essay explores what I call the "digestive politics and poetics of AIDS," or the proliferation of metaphors, tropes, and figures linking the material experience of HIV/AIDS (including pill popping and diarrhea- and vomit-inducing pangs) to an intuitive or "gut feeling" of aversion for the state of American politics, particularly in its most racist and homophobic forms. I focus on *Angels in America* because it offered the most sustained examination of this link at the height of the AIDS epidemic by using the literal performance of "gut feelings" in language and onstage to redirect public culture's disgust with the bodies of people with AIDS (and the syndrome's association with gay men) toward a disgust with the failure of American liberal democracy to respond to the AIDS epidemic. This project expanded the social axes along which AIDS was understood; simultaneously, it made those bodies most abjected from US culture (people with AIDS, queers, women, racial minorities, and the homeless) the site of an *alternative* intuition based on the ability to perceive multiple, interlocking forms of oppression and the need to combat them. For instance, the character Belize, a black, gay ex-drag queen turned nurse, responds to both Louis's left-wing humanism and Roy's racist conservatism with indignant disgust born of his knowledge of US racial history and his experience of AIDS among his patients. His name, "Belize," a drag moniker "that stuck," self-consciously references a Central American and Caribbean nation where the Atlantic slave trade once flourished. By maintaining this drag name in his everyday life, Belize deploys his former performance persona to signify both a personal history of queer cross-dressing as well as the broader history of North American racism. In Belize, Kushner depicts the intuitive or felt sense of a relationship between histories of racial violence, AIDS, and the state's simultaneous aversion to, and erotic courting of, the very abject (often queer) bodies it destroys.

I coin the phrase "the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS" to describe a dense rhetorical formation distinct to queer cultural production in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This formation developed metaphors, conceptual juxtapositions, and figures that linked the material forms of the gut (particularly as they were affected by HIV/AIDS)—the stomach, ingestion, digestion, blood flow, and

excretion—to the forms of American political life: democracy, the public sphere, the law, and liberal humanism. By employing viscerally charged representations of bodily and political forms that elicit affective responses, the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS worked not only to reroute the direction of a particular emotion—social and political disgust—but also to *repurpose* its content, that is, to transform a dehumanizing disgust that enables political apathy toward people with AIDS into a galvanizing disgust that might incite political action in response to the AIDS crisis.<sup>2</sup>

Following the work of Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth, I use the terms *affect* or *affective* to indicate material or sensate intensities that “pass body to body” as well the body’s physical response to external stimuli, including an array of encounters with human and nonhuman agents; consequently, I use the term *visceral* (or the phrase *viscerally charged*) to describe language and imagery that simultaneously invoke both the literal viscera (internal organs of the intestinal tract) and “gut-level responses” to external forces that have a sensory impact on the body. Rather than separate the materiality of affect from “merely representational” discourse or language, then, I treat the visceral as a potent cultural site where the literal and the figurative aspects of embodiment are so tightly wound as to become coterminous, so that linguistic *representations* of the body figuratively invoke, and materially elicit, affective responses.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning in the late 1980s, queer cultural producers working across an array of media forms and genres took up the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS by using viscerally charged language and imagery to imbue, or figuratively “infect,” American political life with the material experience of living with AIDS. In the rage-filled, tactile mixed-media works of artists like David Wojnarowicz and Zoe Leonard; in the performance of “gut feelings” onstage in productions like Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1991–92) and public displays of the bleeding body in the solo performances of Ron Vawter (1992–93) and Ron Athey (1994); in the humorous “ass-play” of films like John Greyson’s *Zero Patience* (1993); in images of the body’s painful and messy excretions under stress from AIDS in the documentary work of Peter Friedman and Tom Joslin (1993); and in the impassioned descriptions of piss drinking and cum eating in the journals of Gary Fisher (1996), queer artists, filmmakers, and writers deployed the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS to explore what kinds of rhetorical moves could elicit the same gut-wrenching symptoms of AIDS, but as a physical response to the abhorrent political realities that enabled the dehumanization of people living with the disease. These creators’ representations of the disease came to carry a figural weight capable of arousing and repurposing what Deborah Gould has called

“*political feelings*.” Writing about the political uses of rage in AIDS activism in this same time period, Gould uses the term *political feelings* to describe instances in which seemingly individualized “bodily, felt experience” becomes the ground for articulating matters of collective concern, allowing such sensations to be named (as rage or disgust, for instance), transmitted between bodies, and deployed to motivate public action.<sup>4</sup>

The rerouting and repurposing of political feelings undertaken by the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS were spectacularly displayed in the genre of drama, where embodied performances of viscerally charged language model new ways to inhabit particular affects and relate them to other bodies and objects in public. How any given actor might publicly perform an emotion, or enact a physical expression of “gut feelings” indicated by a stage direction, is always open to interpretation. The choice to perform one way or another requires an intuitive *affective* embodiment of that direction that can affect an audience and other actors onstage in various ways. *Angels in America* is an exceptional case study in this process because it organizes the logic of its characters around visceral language while requiring its actors to perform that language with high levels of affective or embodied intensity.

*Angels in America* is a repository of digestive metaphors, figures, and puns. From quotidian insults (“Your problem is that you are . . . full of piping hot crap”) to grand political comparisons (“the Law’s a pliable, breathing, sweating . . . organ”), the play relentlessly deploys visceral language to describe abject or dysfunctional forms of embodiment (227, 72). Characters are directed to perform vomiting and diarrhea, bleeding, gagging, (painful) fucking, and swallowing (both pills and cock), often in conjunction with these metaphors, at other times independent of them. At a historical moment when the question of viral transmission remained a hotly contested one in both medical discourse and public superstition, for a play like *Angels in America* to stage HIV-positive, and *possibly* positive, characters expelling blood, spit, and shit in proximity to one another *and* the audience had the potential to invoke deep affective discomfort, fear, or disgust in viewers.<sup>5</sup> When at one point the character Prior claims, “My heart is pumping polluted blood. I feel dirty,” he captures the play’s affective project: *Angels* makes its audience “feel dirty” by reminding viewers through its visceral language that the “petrified little fetishes” of liberal thought—humanism, democracy, tolerance, and individualism—are “full of piping hot crap” (40). *Angels* both discursively and performatively elicits such affective responses from its actors, and potentially its audience, in order that these responses might be worked on, and transformed, over the course of the play. To articulate the stakes of this project, let me begin by

placing the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS within its cultural context, as well as its broader affective investments, before moving to a reading of *Angels in America*.

### **Feeling Vomitey: Invoking Affective Intensities in the Digestive Politics and Poetics of AIDS**

In his introduction to “AIDS: Cultural Activism/Cultural Analysis,” a special issue of *October* (1987), Douglas Crimp claimed that “if we recognize that AIDS exists only in and through its representations, culture, and politics, then the hope is that we can also recognize the imperative to know them, analyze them, and wrest control of them. . . . We don’t need a cultural renaissance, we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS. We don’t need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it.”<sup>6</sup> The digestive politics and poetics of AIDS was just such a “cultural [practice] participating in the struggle against AIDS,” one that intentionally blurred the lines between the material and the representational to make visible how bodies are literally affected by discursive productions, particularly metaphors. This was a point that cultural theorists of AIDS like Crimp, Paula Treichler, Leo Bersani, and Simon Watney, among others, vehemently argued in their critique of attempts to bracket cultural representations of AIDS from the disease’s material realities.<sup>7</sup> These scholar-activists revealed how popular assumptions and socially constructed meanings that came to attach to the disease—including erroneous medical suppositions about sites of genital transmission of HIV that equated the vagina with “rugged” elasticity and framed the anus as a “fragile” membrane more susceptible to the disease—affected medical and political responses to AIDS, resulted in the uneven distribution of treatment, and shaped epidemiological research around the disease.<sup>8</sup> As Treichler famously claimed, “AIDS is a real disease syndrome, damaging and killing real human beings . . . yet [it] . . . is simultaneously . . . an epidemic of meanings or signification” (32). Perhaps the most pernicious form of meaning making around the virus was the popular association of the disease with the “perverted” or “disgusting” sex acts of gay men, namely, anal penetration, and the similarly stigmatized lifestyles of drug addicts and prostitutes. Such stigmas led to the widespread focus on these target groups as the supposed progenitors of the disease, and ideologically supported the US government’s neglect of those who were perceived as willfully courting the disease through illicit behaviors.

The digestive politics and poetics of AIDS emerged in the late 1980s as a nuanced attempt to “wrest control” over a specific emotion, disgust, and to offer

alternative outlets for expressing feelings of revulsion, contempt, and general disease at different targets than people with AIDS, the queer community, and the variously identified “risk groups” of early HIV epidemiology. This is captured in a hilarious number titled “The Butthole Duet,” in the AIDS musical comedy *Zero Patience*, which narrates the adventurer Sir Richard Burton’s attempt to locate the origin of AIDS in a “patient zero.” Having discovered and brought back the promiscuous “Zero” (purportedly the progenitor of North American AIDS) to his home, Burton falls asleep with Zero. In their slumber, the two men’s buttholes (puppets made of pink silk with gaping black holes for mouths) melodically debate the merits of anal sex. Representing the uptight British patriarchy, Burton’s butthole claims, “Freud said we have a death wish/Getting buggard’s getting killed. This ghastly epidemic is something our subconscious willed.” To which Zero’s talented rear retorts, “An asshole’s just an asshole/Skip the analytic crit. The meanings are straightforward/Cocks go in and out comes shit.” Zero debases Burton’s meaning-laden assessment of anal sex as the embodiment of a “death wish” with his reference to the asshole’s primary physical functions—taking cock and shitting. He not only deflates the negative meanings associated with anal penetration but also affectively performs disgust for Burton’s sex-phobia: “Your asshole’s such an asshole/You’ll regret being so uptight,” Zero sings contemptibly. By deploying the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS, Zero’s “literal” ass makes a figurative ass out of both Burton’s bum and his conservatism around sex, rerouting disgust for so-called deviant sex acts toward those who misunderstand its pleasures.

The cultural work of the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS was aligned with, and made possible by, both radical AIDS activism and AIDS cultural theory in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As Gould has shown, the inception of the radical AIDS activist organization ACT UP in 1987 was driven by a collective rerouting of grief among members of the gay community into political rage. This rage was expressed through forms of direct-action activism—including civil disobedience and contentious visual culture—that materially embodied, and ideologically supported, feelings of righteous indignation at the medical and political stigmatization of people with AIDS.<sup>9</sup> As Crimp thoughtfully notes in his essay “Mourning and Militancy,” the activist drive to mobilize militant political energies toward the movement often led to diminishing less politically effective emotions—depression, malaise, apathy, confusion—and a refusal to portray people with AIDS as suffering in the movement’s visual media.<sup>10</sup> The latter fact was an ethical and necessary response to mass-media representations of people with AIDS as wasting and physically incapacitated by the disease; as Crimp himself trenchantly claimed at the height of the epidemic, “Certainly we can say that these representations

do not help us, and that they probably hinder us, in our struggle, because the best they can do is elicit pity, and pity is not solidarity” (99). Against “dominant media” images of people with AIDS (PWAs) as “wasting deathbed images,” Crimp declared, “We must continue to demand and create our own counter-images, images of PWA self-empowerment, of the organized PWA movement and of the larger AIDS activist movement. . . . we must therefore wage a war of representation, too” (145).

The digestive politics and poetics of AIDS was just such a “war of representation,” and it shared with AIDS activism a commitment to the rerouting of emotion through attention to the material experiences of actual bodies; yet unlike AIDS activism, the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS risked representing the most materially devastating aspects of the illness and its various treatments, to make the physical symptoms of the disease politically and affectively productive *for* people with AIDS and their allies. As I discuss below, in stage dramas like *Angels in America*, this rhetorical productivity was literalized in the physical performance of viscerally charged language around the AIDS epidemic that actors affectively embodied on stage. The rich body of work of affect theorists such as Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, and Sianne Ngai has compellingly shown how different affects come to attach (or “stick”) to particular objects through powerful cultural imperatives and ideological mechanisms.<sup>11</sup> Expanding on this work, I seek to analyze how affects are modified, rerouted, and forced to become *unstuck* from dominant meanings by representational strategies that specifically set themselves to the task of enacting affective transformation. My analysis of the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS is an attempt to clear a space for understanding how transformations in the affective register of subjectivity can be enabled when viscerally charged discourse sidles up to, prods, and provokes affective response.

One response that people have to such situations of heightened emotional impact or shock is to vomit. Indeed, the verbal delivery of an HIV-positive test result itself can produce a feeling of violent affective intensity powerful enough to induce vomiting (in Gregg Araki’s film *The Living End* [1992], the protagonist is shown throwing up into a toilet immediately after receiving positive test results from a doctor). Yet the desire to throw up, whether acted on or merely felt, is also a gut-level feeling that AIDS activists and cultural producers have used to express the affective intensities provoked in them by government neglect, racism, and homophobia at the height of the epidemic.<sup>12</sup> As the mixed-media artist and AIDS activist David Wojnarowicz asserted in his 1991 memoir, *Close to the Knives*: “I want to throw up because we’re supposed to quietly and politely make house in this killing machine called America and pay taxes to support our own

slow murder.”<sup>13</sup> Wojnarowicz links an embodied response—“feeling vomitey”—to a horrific political reality that carries a level of intensity that can provoke powerful sensory reactions. Of course, both the virus’s impact on the digestive system and the consequence of swallowing countless pills to combat it often cause/d people with AIDS to experience *literal* bouts of vomiting and diarrhea. In an interview with *Poz Magazine* about his digestively inspired mixed-media show *Space Oddity (lesson in survival)* in 1999, the artist Chuck Nanney explained, “I started my [HIV drug] regimen three years ago. . . . My body went berserk. I’d take the Viracept, throw up this gray nuclear bile and cry. Then things got better. But the emotional impact of ‘I’m taking these pills to save my life but the way they make me feel is worse than death’ is still with me. And I’ve stayed very tuned in to all the internal functions of my body. For example, I’m obsessed with my bowel movements.”<sup>14</sup> Shuttling back and forth between literal and figurative digestive rhetoric allowed cultural producers like Wojnarowicz, Araki, Nanney, Kushner, and others to represent the material fact of AIDS as a conceptual figure that could magnetize political feelings imbued with force through their articulation to the sensory experience of illness.

Before moving to my reading of *Angels in America*, let me offer an example of this operation from a related cultural text. In one of the most disturbing scenes of his memoir, *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz recounts the following story about how many people with AIDS, including his former lover and friend Peter Hugar, flocked to a quack physician in New York City when he claimed to have found a cure for the disease in the late 1980s:

The deciding factor for many people to leave this doctor was a vaccine he’d developed from human shit which each person was eventually injected with. When Peter told me about this treatment I figured that because shit was one of the most dangerous corporeal substances in terms of passing disease . . . maybe this guy figured out something in the properties of shit to develop a vaccine. After all, the bite of a rattlesnake is treated with a vaccine made of venom. But I also assumed that the doctor had at least made a vaccine for each patient out of their own shit. Later we found that one person’s shit served as a base for all treatments. (10)

This brief recollection is stunning not only in its calm delivery (unusual in a text where most of the language is conveyed with ferocious rage) but also in the visceral reality it presents. Wojnarowicz describes an act of medical barbarism. Consequently, one might expect him to deliver a direct condemnation of the kind he



repeatedly lobs against politicians and religious leaders like Jesse Helms and Cardinal Joseph O'Connor. What appears to be the absence of direct opposition here, however, is in fact a critique delivered at the level of affect, namely, through the linguistic invocation of an embodied reality so horrific that its description alone has the potential to invoke negative affect or sensation around this scenario (it is difficult to read this scene without feeling your skin crawl). This possibility is materialized through Wojnarowicz's canny reorganization of the popular logic surrounding AIDS transmission. In the public imagination, people with AIDS were repeatedly framed as social low-lives—most often drug addicts and sexual perverts—who, by allowing themselves to be exposed to “tainted” blood and body fluids, had been infected with a life-threatening disease that merely confirmed the popular presumption of them as “human shit.”<sup>15</sup> Here, however, Wojnarowicz presents us with a situation in which people who are already sick allow themselves to be injected *with* shit by supposedly trustworthy medical practitioners because they have no other treatment options. Wojnarowicz replaces the AIDS virus—as a kind of “shit” injected into the body because of so-called deviant social and sexual practices—with American medicine itself, the latter framed as the lethal agent of an inhuman treatment that “bites” or injects its victim with the force of a viper. In this sense, Wojnarowicz's final statement can be understood as a cruel joke: the public's dehumanized understanding of AIDS is so extreme that PWAs are not only thought of *as* shit, and treated accordingly *with* it, but even in this treatment, they are not afforded the one promise of liberal democracy: individualism in their abjection. By juxtaposing some of the most viscerally discomforting elements of the disease—tainted injections, “polluted” bodily excrement—with the practices of American medicine, this scene makes possible the rerouting of disgust from bodies themselves to the larger systemic dehumanization of people with AIDS. This is a point Wojnarowicz hits home in one of his most famous statements: “When I was told that I'd contracted the virus, it didn't take me long to realize that I'd contracted a diseased society as well.”<sup>16</sup> Wojnarowicz's claim resonates with the character Prior's previously quoted statement from *Angels in America*: “My heart is pumping polluted blood. I feel dirty.” In Kushner's digestive imaginary, and Wojnarowicz's visceral language, such “dirty” feelings are the direct result of government inaction, social stigma, and medical malpractice; consequently, for those artists working within the rhetorical practices of the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS, the solution to “dirty feelings” was not to wash them away beneath pride or dignity but to multiply them in all those who imagine themselves as “unpolluted” by the stigma of AIDS.

No cultural production of the late 1980s and early 1990s took up this proj-

ect more powerfully than *Angels in America*, which was being written and performed at the same time that AIDS cultural theory and radical AIDS activism reached their zenith between 1987 and 1993. The play renders the realm of politics itself as an affective intensity experienced on the body both in the visceral metaphors used to describe it and in the possible performance of those metaphors elicited by stage directions that demand “fury,” “distaste,” “terror,” and “despair”; simultaneously, it links its characters’ seemingly individual experiences of AIDS, racism, homophobia, and sexism—in particular, their digestive responses to the disease and its corollary social stigmas—to wider orders of experience including the nation, the globe, even the category of the human.

Composed of two distinct plays performed over seven hours, and ranging over countless political issues including AIDS, religion, Reaganism, environmental catastrophe, and US race relations, *Angels in America* has earned its reputation as one of the most logistically and politically ambitious plays in American theater. At the center of the production are two couples at a moment of crisis. Having lived together for four years, the gay couple Louis and Prior are shaken by news of Prior’s HIV diagnosis, while Harper and Joe Pitt, Mormon migrants to New York, reach a breaking point in their marriage when Harper begins to suspect that her husband is gay. In part 1, Louis leaves Prior, unable to deal with his lover’s illness, and starts an affair with Joe. Joe considers leaving his wife and seeks professional advice from Roy Cohn, a successful lawyer and famed McCarthyite who, unbeknownst to Joe, is dying of AIDS. Confined to bed rest, and visited by his best friend Belize, Prior experiences a series of dreams that foreshadows the arrival of an otherworldly presence; in part 2 we learn that this is an angel, sent from Heaven on a mission to ordain Prior as a prophet who will halt the spread of AIDS by convincing the world to “stop moving.” Part 2 narrates Prior’s struggle to decide how to respond to this mandate, Louis’s attempts to make amends for his abandonment, and Harper’s soul-searching to imagine a life beyond her marriage; simultaneously, Roy is forced to come to terms with his political past as he dies of AIDS in a hospital ward while being nursed by Belize. At the play’s conclusion, Prior rejects his mission in order to seek “more life” among a newly formed community of queer friends and loved ones, rather than the comforts of stasis or death.

In his now-classic analysis of *Angels in America*, David Román locates the play’s transformative potential in its capacity to instill hope among its audience members, especially gay men, who, in the face of homophobia, illness, and death, witnessed in the play a reconfiguration of bonds between characters who become unlikely allies in the struggle against AIDS. Across the narrative’s arc, Román claims, “the reproductive dictums of heteronormativity are rejected for a queer

politics invested in sustaining life.”<sup>17</sup> Texturing this reading, I argue that the production of hope in the play that Román associates with its queer relational politics is paradoxically predicated on its engagement with the seemingly *antisocial* affect of disgust. If we feel hope at the play’s conclusion, it is not merely because of the visibility of a longed-for queer community in the face of AIDS (though that is certainly available) but because we have also affectively internalized a proper disgust for the systems of power that prevent people from seeing those kinships as viable in the first place. This affective orientation is cultivated not at the level of the plot but *at the level of the text*, namely, in the visceral language used to organize the logic of each character. For this reason, my analysis works through rhetorical framing of the play’s central characters in digestive terms, as a conceit that links alimentary functions and dysfunctions to wide-ranging political feelings.

### III Liberalism

Louis: I’m trying to be responsible. Prior. There are limits. Boundaries. And you have to be reasonable.

Prior (*Furious*): *Reasonable? Limits?* Tell it to my lungs, stupid, tell it to my lesions, tell it to the cotton-wooly patches in my eyes! . . . You cry, but you endanger nothing in yourself. It’s like the idea of crying when you do it. Or the idea of love.

*Angels in America Part Two: Perestroika*, act 4, scene 1

Midway through the second half of *Angels in America*, Louis Ironson, wracked with guilt, attempts to make amends for abandoning his ex-lover Prior while he is dying of AIDS. Falteringly, Louis justifies his leaving as a rational choice based on the desire to protect himself from emotional pain and potential physical infection. His language is that of boundaries, rational judgment, and clear moral distinctions. Except as an object to be safeguarded, Louis’s body remains outside the calculus of his reasoning. Prior’s “furious” return makes a mockery of Louis’s rhetorical attempts at setting limits by invoking the messy materiality of his own HIV-positive body, a fleshy substance whose biological boundaries have been broken down by the disease’s myriad symptoms. His visceral language—given affective charge by the direction to perform these lines with “fury”—issues a scathing critique, not of Louis’s abandonment as such, but his unwillingness to “endanger” anything in himself either physically or emotionally in his engagements with the world.

This moment underscores *Angels in America*’s most trenchant conflict: the

inability of American liberal democracy to account for and respond to the embodied or affective experience of its subjects. Louis articulates this dilemma early in the play. After learning of Prior's HIV diagnosis, Louis asks the rabbi who presided over his grandmother's funeral what "the Holy Writ says about someone who abandons someone he loves in a time of need." When the rabbi responds, "Why would a person do such a thing?" Louis explains, "Maybe because . . . a person who has this neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant historical progress towards happiness or perfection or something . . . 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" (31). As the play's representative liberal (both a humanist and a good Democrat) Louis is not only presaging his abandonment of Prior but also articulating, under the sign of a "neo-Hegelian positivism," a broader political subjectivity so invested in notions of pure historical progress that it must deny human mortality. *Angels* frames American liberalism as a worldview that both assumes the existence of a rational, rights-bearing subject *and* exhibits a conviction that human "progress" and "happiness" are contingent on an ever-expanding horizon of individual freedom; yet the play also associates this worldview with an idealized political subject that is disembodied, transhistorical, and immortal. *Angels* counters this vision by presenting audiences with an alternative political subjectivity that I call "ill liberalism," a worldview most powerfully enacted by the play's central HIV-positive character, Prior Walter. In the play's logic, ill liberalism retains the liberal commitment to democratic freedom and political recognition while recasting the subject of any democracy as materially contingent and productively affected by external forces that attenuate its attachment to humanist notions of universal progress. In this sense, the ill liberal subject profoundly embodies the visceral project of the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS by both *literally* inhabiting a sick or dysfunctional body (as all bodies inherently are or will one day be) and *figuratively* being "*sick of*" the false ideology of liberal progress. As an expression of this ill liberal politics, Louis's and Prior's respective political orientations to liberalism are characterized throughout the play by the dual digestive dysfunctions of constipation and diarrhea, both common symptoms of illness, but especially of AIDS. By articulating a critique of liberalism in the language of defecation, the play creates formal equivalences between dysfunctional alimentary processes and political rhetoric that confront the abstraction inherent to the liberal framework with the visceral experience of carnal life; consequently *Angels in America* encourages audiences to see embodiment and political subjectivity as intimately interwoven categories.<sup>18</sup>

As his dialogue with the rabbi indicates, Louis is defined by his phobia of sick and dying bodies. After his grandmother's funeral, he admits that his discomfort with her aging led him to "[pretend] for years that she was already dead" (30). His revulsion for bodies is repeatedly commented on by friends and loved ones and catalyzes some of the play's central events, including his abandonment of Prior. When Prior meets Hannah, Joe Pitt's mother, in part 2, he jokes, "I wanted to warn your son about *later*, when his hair goes and there's hips and jowls . . . human stuff, that poor slob there's just gonna wind up . . . frightened and alone because Louis, he can't handle bodies" (231). Louis's inability to "handle bodies" is framed as an expression of a constipated orientation to the world that is both literal and figurative.

Not long after Louis's dialogue with the rabbi, Prior becomes ill and is rushed to the hospital where Louis abandons him. Louis retreats to Central Park where he begs a male hustler to "fuck me, hurt me, make me bleed" as a form of self-imposed punishment for his liberal intolerance in the face of his dying lover; unsurprisingly, his ass is so tight that the hustler asks him to relax, to which Louis characteristically responds "not a chance" (60, 63). His clenched sphincter muscles cause the condom to break, but Louis's guilt-induced wish to be infected with AIDS disgusts the hustler enough that he leaves the scene. Even when Louis willfully seeks infection, his physical tightness refuses to "endanger anything in himself" by disallowing the entry of foreign fluid (or dick) into his body. We soon learn that Louis suffers from hemorrhoids, a classic symptom of constipation; and throughout the rest of the play, both Prior and his friend Belize hurl defecatory insults at Louis—claiming he is "full of piping hot crap" and characterizing him as a "shitbag"—intimating the stored-up material he badly needs to release.

Belize's and Prior's canny insults conceptually link Louis's digestive dysfunction and his questionable ethics, suggesting a larger relationship between embodied realities—in this case, a closed digestive tract—and distinct political orientations that Louis himself vehemently denies. When Belize first visits Prior after Louis abandons him, Prior claims, "Well, at least I have the satisfaction of knowing he's in anguish somewhere. I loved . . . watching him stick his head up his asshole and eat his guts out over some relatively minor moral conundrum" (67). The metaphorical rewriting of Louis's "anguish" as the act of "sticking his head up his asshole and eat[ing] his guts out" materializes liberal guilt—which is often characterized as a stalled political emotion—as an embodied tautology. To eat your own guts results in constipation, or the incapacity to release a bowel movement, since the material you eat *is* your digestive tract, which is the conduit for working through food and expelling shit.

Ironically, when Louis expresses his own frustrations with liberal politics to Belize, he uses strikingly scatological language that links the forms of the digestive tract to the forms of democracy. He defines democracy as the “inescapable shifting downwards and outwards of political power to the people” and claims:

The American Left can't help but trip over all these petrified little fetishes: freedom; that's the worst. . . . [people see] what's potential within the idea, not the idea with blood in it. That's . . . the worst kind of liberalism, really, bourgeois tolerance, and what I think is that what AIDS shows us is . . . that it's not enough to be tolerated, because when the shit hits the fan you find out [that] underneath all the tolerance is intense, passionate hatred. (98, 96)

In a play where dysfunctional digestion is a hallmark of AIDS, Louis's description of the “downward and outward” movement of democracy can be read as parallel to a bowel movement, while the “petrified little fetishes” of liberalism are so much hardened stool. If democracy is a “good shit,” Louis unwittingly indicts himself when he rails against the constipated ideologies of liberalism. Indeed, when in Louis's life “the shit hit the fan” (literally the moment when Prior's shit hit the floor only a few scenes earlier), his tolerance for the bodies of people with AIDS reached its limit. Louis may not notice that his literal constipation is an embodied metaphor for the uptight liberal tolerance he disparages, but the play's digestive language has prepared audiences to do so *and* to feel proper disgust for Louis's lack of self-awareness.

Belize legitimizes this potential reaction by responding to Louis's political hypocrisy with palpable disgust. Moments after his critique of liberal tolerance, Louis shockingly suggests that despite a history of white supremacy, US democracy has never reflected a genuine belief in racial hierarchy, but that some white Americans have leveraged the *idea* of racial supremacy in their various bids for social, economic, and political power. Louis then assumes that America's underlying democratic spirit has allowed its citizens to overcome the nation's “racial past” (95–96). Once again, Louis purifies liberal politics of actual bodies, specifically racialized ones, and their distinct material histories. Belize responds by radically reducing Louis to his own body: “I know the guilt fueling this peculiar tirade is obviously already swollen bigger than your hemorrhoids.”<sup>19</sup> Louis denies the claim until finally admitting:

Louis: Prior told you, he's an asshole, he shouldn't have . . .

Belize: You promised, Louis. Prior is not a subject.

Louis: So it's indirect. Passive-aggressive.

Belize: Unlike, I suppose, banging me over the head with your theory that America doesn't have a race problem. (98–99)

This exchange exemplifies the rhetorical and affective work of the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS. Belize uses a visceral metaphor to link Louis's liberal politics to digestive dysfunction (Louis's "tirade" is "swollen bigger than [a] hemorrhoid"); this metaphor reroutes disgust for dysfunctional bodies toward the hypocrisies of a constipated liberalism. Belize's comments reveal that Louis equates race itself with something as materially undesirable as hemorrhoids, an issue supposedly cured by the "shifting downward and outward of political power to the people" (92). Pointing out this parallel, Belize writes race back onto Louis's body by materially marking his digestive dysfunction as something that identifies him with a distinct political position, namely, a racist liberalism.

Belize's critique of Louis echoes the rhetoric of contemporaneous AIDS activist organizations that described government inaction in the face of AIDS in constipated terms. In a handbook accompanying their action against the Federal Drug Administration in October 1998, ACT UP characterized the FDA as "actively *blocking* the delivery of promising drugs to PWAs" and explained that the FDA's job is "to compel reluctant drug sponsors to *release* experimental treatments" (my italics).<sup>20</sup> Organizations like ACT UP saw themselves as helping "unblock" the machinery of government by opening up access to treatment and galvanizing humane health policies. This excremental language in activist discourse, as well as cultural productions that used anality as a touchstone for discussions of AIDS, was particularly prescient at a moment when the anus had become one of the most contested sites of meaning making in American culture. In his 1988 essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" Leo Bersani argued that the predominance of HIV transmission by anal intercourse, an act attributed almost exclusively to gay men, not only produced the asshole as a site of deadly, "perverse" pleasures in US society but also elicited a murderous rage against practitioners (or perceived practitioners) of this act.<sup>21</sup> Despite the conceptual power of his argument, Bersani's essay ironically avoids discussing the actual physical trials of getting fucked. As any practitioner of anal sex knows, taking it up the ass takes practice, can be inordinately messy and painful, *as well as* pleasurable and orgasmic. *Angels in America*

ventures into this territory by depicting the discomforts of “opening up” (including Louis’s encounter with the hustler) and the asshole’s myriad physical ailments. The play’s central protagonist Prior is the character whose asshole is made most vulnerable in the narrative, both as the putative site where he contracted HIV and as the orifice most affected by the disease through cycles of diarrhea. It is this anally dysfunctional queer figure, the very object of Americans’ murderous calumny according to Bersani, on which *Angels* hitches its political vision.

If Louis exhibits a constipated liberalism, Prior inhabits a diarrheal (or excremental) political imaginary. Where Louis fervently denies rhetorical practices that point back at his own embodiment, Prior is *relentlessly* embodied, both in the spectacular symptoms of his illness and in his emotionally excessive relationship to the world. He is in turns melodramatic, histrionic, flamboyant, and fabulous in his emotive responses to his illness and Louis’s abandonment. Prior ingests countless pills, vomits, and diarrheas onstage, and repeatedly verbalizes his physical symptoms to loved ones, friends, and medical professionals.

Prior represents the constitutive limit of liberal thought in the mid-1980s, a man whose HIV status renders him already “dead” in the eyes of the general public, but whose loud, angry, and fabulous *refusal* of death contradicts this assessment, presenting someone who “lives past” physical dysfunction (267). If Louis’s (and by extension, liberalism’s) disgust for bodies polices the boundary between healthy liberal subjects and the deathly ill, Prior’s embodied performance of counterdisgust for Louis’s unwillingness to “endanger anything in himself” becomes an affective force that underwrites a new political subjectivity at the margins of American democracy that I call “ill liberalism.” As expressed in the figure of Prior, ill liberalism is defined by three qualities. It is, first and foremost, a form of liberal politics that takes as its starting point the common physical experience of inhabiting a body (with its capacity to register affect) and an awareness of the uneven distribution of bodily privileges. Ill liberalism recognizes that political subjects are inherently heterogeneous despite any common conception of rights or privileges they may share because of their distinct embodied experiences of the world. Yet because politics is so often enacted in discourse (namely, language and representation), ill liberalism performs radical acts of resignification that link discursive and affective registers of experience to make political language more amenable to responding to embodied realities. When, near the conclusion of *Angels in America*, Louis tries to make amends to Prior by claiming that he is emotionally bruised “inside” from the choices he has made, Prior demands that he “come back when they’re visible. I want to see black and blue, Louis, I want to see blood. Because I can’t believe you even have blood in your veins till you show it to me”



(226). Prior seeks material accountability from Louis for the psychic pain he has inflicted by bearing physical marks on his own body as an outward expression of his atonement and empathy for others. In this case, those marks are “black and blue” bruises that echo the “wine-dark” mark of Kaposi’s sarcoma lesions that so many people with AIDS exhibited.

Second, ill liberalism functions as a critical political orientation that speaks truth to power from the position of the sick, the infirm, and the disabled. In this sense, it takes up what Robert McRuer has termed a “severely disabled” vantage point on political engagement by “revers[ing] the able-bodied understanding of severely disabled bodies as the most marginalized, the most excluded . . . instead suggest[ing] that it is precisely those bodies that are best positioned to refuse ‘mere toleration’ and to call out the inadequacies of compulsory able-bodiedness.”<sup>22</sup> In doing so, ill liberalism recodes illness (and the fact that humans live through all manner of infirmity) as a source of political power irreducible to the will or fantasies of overcoming. This ill liberal posture toward traditional liberal notions of health is evident in Prior’s response to Belize’s gift of AZT pills at the play’s conclusion. Louis says, “These pills, they . . . make you better,” to which Prior replies, “They’re poison, they make you anemic. This is my life, from now on, Louis. I’m not getting ‘better.’ (To Belize) I’m not sure I’m ready to do that to my bone marrow” (272). Prior’s judicious response to the supposedly life-saving properties of modern medicine acknowledges that the attempt to cling to a progressive view of history—to imagine that the goal of life is to always “get better”—can itself be poisonous, or at least lead one to choose poison above one’s own gut sense of what is right for one’s body. Prior’s “life, from now on,” is *not about* “getting better,” and not getting better might mean inhabiting the world in new and unexpected ways.

Finally, ill liberalism is a promiscuous political outlook that actively seeks engagement with the messiness of everyday life; it is, like Prior’s diarrhea, an excremental political imaginary that functions through contamination, diffusion, and proliferation. We can see one example of this in the Angel’s poetic description of Prior as a “battered heart; Bleeding life in the Universe of Wounds” (180). The image of Prior as a “battered heart” resignifies the figure of the “bleeding heart liberal,” not as an epithet, but as a messy and productive outpouring of political energies that injects (polluted) blood into a social world understood as a porous “Universe of Wounds.” In Ben Highmore’s words, this rhetorical gesture recasts politics as “a form of experiential pedagogy, of constantly submitting your sensorium to new sensual worlds that sit uncomfortably within your ethos . . . if this politics [is] dedicated to opening up the affective, sensorial tuning and retuning of the social body—then it [needs] to be exorbitant . . . a politics of the gut as much

as the mind.”<sup>23</sup> As an “exorbitant” politics of “the gut as much as the mind,” ill liberalism retools liberal thought to value the body’s potentially transformative encounters with a “sensual world” of other bodies, fleshy agents, objects, even ideas, and to recognize that such encounters might alter what counts as “human” or worthy of political recognition.

These elements of ill liberalism are captured in Prior’s final statement to the Angels when he refuses their prophetic injunction to “stop moving,” at the play’s conclusion. He proclaims:

Even sick, I want to be alive . . . I can’t help myself . . . I’ve lived through such terrible times, and there are people who live through much 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 . . . I don’t know if that’s just the animal . . . if it’s not braver to die. But I recognize the habit. The addiction to being alive. We live past hope . . . It’s so much not enough, so inadequate but . . . Bless me anyway. I want more life. (265, 266–67)

Prior’s invocation of the array of human infirmities acknowledges the many physical forms that the human takes while recognizing the visceral registers of human existence, including potentially “animal” forces that drive us. His ill liberal interpretation of life itself as an “addiction” blurs the lines between a pure humanist category and a disease; it makes life more fleshly, and less abstract, as a biochemical longing for existence *and* a potential spiritual or ethical ideal oriented toward practices of “living anyway.” As the iconic ill liberal subject, Prior enacts the visceral as a political stance, but is also a character textually produced through relentlessly visceral language that enables him to be seen as literally and figuratively *alive* because of his experience of illness. It is this discursive work of Prior’s ill liberal orientation to the world that enables one of the most ambitious resignifying projects in the history of AIDS cultural production: the disarticulation of AIDS and DEATH, and the *rearticulation* of AIDS with “*MORE LIFE*.”

Certainly, this ill liberal perspective maintains the teleological thrust of liberal thought; it looks forward to a democratic future yet to come and it demands accountability from the very social forces and political institutions—American medicine, the legal system, the Council of Angels, even God (“Sue the bastard for walking out,” as Prior puts it [264])—that “interfere with progress for people with AIDS.”<sup>24</sup> Yet the play’s teleology reorients liberalism’s commitment to an idealized

political horizon, toward immediate egalitarian projects to abolish real-world suffering. When, in his meeting with the Angels, Prior claims, “this plague, it should stop. In me and everywhere” (264), he echoes Crimp’s assertion, “We don’t need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it.” An ill liberal worldview allows Prior to hold two seemingly contradictory ideas at once: that living things are “animate” desiring beings that move forward in time and space (who don’t “need to transcend” the epidemic through angelic intervention), but that certain atrocities and forms of suffering should simply *stop*. This was also the orientation of radical AIDS activism, which highlighted the animate, vibrant lives of people with AIDS and their allies while fighting to bring an end to the epidemic.

### **“I Hate Your Guts”: Disgust, Contempt, and Other Gut Feelings**

In the preceding section, I mapped a rhetorical dualism between forms of digestive dysfunction and the political orientations that attach to them in the characters of Louis and Prior.<sup>25</sup> Yet even as it stages this dualism, the play does not seek a middle ground (or dialectical reconciliation) in the figure of a “healthy bowel movement.” Rather, the narrative *multiplies* forms of messy excretion and commingling that might allow for a greater attentiveness to actual bodies and their humane treatment within American liberal democracy.<sup>26</sup> To demonstrate this, in this section I extend my analysis of Louis and Prior to three supporting characters—Roy Cohn, Belize (Norman Arriaga), and Harper Pitt—around whom the play constructs an array of metaphors and tropes of “the gut” that slide from the literal to the figurative. This includes the catalog of alimentary functions (chewing, swallowing, and spitting up) and the stomach’s appetitive demands, as well as gut feelings (disgust, contempt, rage, anxiety, even hope). The play’s proliferation of meanings and uses of the gut—as literal digestive system, as intuitive sense of dynamic social relations, as politics itself—maps numerous political relationships across race, class, and gender, shifts emotional investments, and links alimentary sensations like the churning of the stomach, to conceptual forms of “gut” aversion for American racism and homophobia.

No character in *Angels in America* is more richly woven in digestive terms than the play’s putative villain, Roy Cohn, the successful but reviled attorney who first made his name as Joseph McCarthy’s right-hand man. Throughout the play, Roy’s closeted homosexuality and AIDS diagnosis are emblems of his contemptible political hypocrisy, while his unfettered pursuit of political power is characterized by a voracious appetite for food and sex. The first stage direction introducing Roy links his personality to a prodigious excess of embodiment: “Roy conducts busi-

ness with . . . sensual abandon: gesticulating, shouting, cajoling, crooning, playing the phone . . . with virtuosity and love” (17). Both his endearments and epithets are gastronomic in character. In his first scene he encourages Joe Pitt to “live a little . . . *eat* something for Christ sake,” screams at a former client to “eat me,” and responds to Joe admitting he is a Mormon with the word “delectable” (19, 21).

Roy’s promiscuous engagement with gustatory pleasures would initially appear to make him an ideal figure of ill liberalism. Yet it is immediately clear that his ravenous appetite is a material symptom of his self-image as a shark at the top of the political “food chain.” When he is first diagnosed with AIDS, he fiercely refuses association with the disease. He tells his doctor:

AIDS. 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 someone sleeps with, but 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. . . . This is what a label refers to. Not ideology, or sexual taste, but something much simpler: clout. . . . Homosexuals are men who . . . cannot get a pissant anti-discrimination bill through City Council . . . who have zero clout. Does this sound like me, Henry? . . . AIDS is what homosexuals have. I have liver cancer. (51–52)

In this remarkable speech, Roy deconstructs how identity categories, rather than identify objective truths about a person, are social inventions that attach to bodies for the purpose of organizing social and political hierarchies. Yet even as he deconstructs one set of hierarchies around AIDS and sexual identity, he reinstates another through the metaphor of the “food chain,” placing himself at the top of a complex organization of power based on sexual and class privilege by exhibiting contempt for the identities that compose its lowest rungs, namely, gay men and people with AIDS. As his story line unfolds, however, the play makes clear that Roy’s downfall is not due to his conservatism alone but to his inability to see his own compromised position *within* the very hierarchies of race, class, and sex that he so admires.

This irony is performatively expressed through Roy’s most visible AIDS symptom: excruciating stomach cramps. Roy’s onstage performance is organized around verbally acerbic expressions of contempt, followed by (or concurrent with) debilitating stomach spasms that undermine his attempts to distance himself from politically “spoiled” bodies. By suturing a violently painful gut feeling to Roy’s

hypocritical politics, the play performs an ill liberal reading of Cohn to suggest that he has no intuition, or *rhetorical* “gut-feeling,” for his own precarious position in the “pecking order.” When Roy dies, having been summarily disbarred for laundering money from a client, it is with the knowledge that his colleagues gleefully brought down a judgment against him, both professional and social, one of them admitting, “Finally. I’ve hated that little faggot for thirty-six years” (245). It is telling that the only other person in the play who calls Roy a faggot is his nurse Belize, who brilliantly uses the term to signal the unexpected commonalities between them as abject bodies in the American political “food chain.”

At the conclusion of the third act in part 2 of *Angels in America*, Roy, in a morphine-induced stupor, asks Belize to describe the afterlife. Belize humors Roy, who has up to this point treated him with racist disdain:

[A] big city . . . like San Francisco . . . overgrown with flowering weeds . . . on every corner a wrecking crew and something new and crooked going up catty-corner to that . . . piles of trash, but lapidary like rubies . . . 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. (209–10)

Belize describes an urban fantasy-space where the uneven geography reflects the breakdown of traditional social status, the figurative and literal intermixing of racial and gendered differences, and the emergence of sites of collective expression and political participation for formerly disenfranchised people. This is a queer afterlife indeed, where the lowliest citizens appear in exquisite fashion ready to vote, where trash hides gems, where gods look like the people they represent . . . a lot like “San Francisco.” This is the antithesis of the world as Roy understands it. “Suspicious, and frightened,” according to the stage directions, Roy responds to Belize: “*Who are you?* . . . I know you. . . . A stomach grumble that wakes you in the night” (210). Fittingly, the act in which Belize describes his version of Heaven is titled “Borborygmi,” meaning the rumbling noise made by gas moving through the intestine. Belize, then, *is* the literal borborygmi of the play, a figure who performs political indigestion in response to the “hot-air” of racist, homophobic conservatism and self-interested liberalism.<sup>27</sup>

Belize is the only explicitly racialized figure in *Angels in America*, and he articulates the play’s most nuanced critique of race by repeatedly forcing into view those bodies and social worlds occluded by Louis’s constipated liberalism

and Roy's conservatism. Though he appears to identify as African American (and is usually played by African American actors), both his drag name and surname (Norman Arriaga) link him to South America, while his anti-imperialist critique of American racism expresses an affinity with diasporic cultures across the Americas. When Prior first relates to Belize the Angel's prophecy, Belize immediately points out the colonial implications of the heavenly injunction to "Stop Moving!": "This is . . . worse than nuts," he exclaims; "don't migrate, don't mingle, that's . . . malevolent, some of us didn't exactly choose to migrate, know what I'm saying?" (180). Where the Angel conceives of "the virus of time" as transhistorical, Belize reminds us that all kinds of movement—whether voluntary or coerced—have a history grounded in real bodies, including the enforced diasporas of colonized peoples and the global movement of AIDS across continents *and* bodies.

Throughout the play, Belize performs what William Ian Miller calls "upward contempt" for those who sit at the top of American social hierarchies.<sup>28</sup> In one particularly direct expression of upward contempt, Belize exclaims to Louis, "I hate America . . . the white cracker who wrote the national anthem . . . set the word 'free' to a note so high nobody can reach it"; for Belize, neither the soaring heights of heaven nor the lofty ideals of democracy are beyond political scrutiny (228). When Roy asks him to stay and talk in his hospital room, Belize responds, "Mr. Cohn. I'd rather suck the pus out of an abscess. I'd rather drink a subway toilet. I'd rather chew off my tongue and spit it in your leathery face" (158). Belize's willingness to endanger his bodily boundaries to consume such vile ingestibles *above* conversing with Roy dramatically reverses their positions of power, placing Roy and his ideas about the world beneath pus and toilet water. Belize also raises himself to the level of a saint in his reference to sucking pus from an abscess, an act attributed to Catherine of Sienna. One might assume that Belize should be afraid of *Roy's* bodily fluids (spit and blood) as a potential site of HIV transmission. But Belize is far more wary of *Roy's words*, which transmit his conservative politics. Belize inoculates himself against the possibility of being *affected* by Roy's base politics by threatening to soil Roy with his own tongue, itself a powerful vehicle for caustic language but also affective revulsion for Roy's worldview. At one point in the play, when Belize asks Roy why he refuses to share his stash of AZT pills with those in need, Roy claims, "Because I hate your guts, and your friends' guts, that's why" (190). Roy hates Belize and his friends because he sees in them the kind of labels (AIDS, gay and lesbian, black), that signal the loss of Roy's standing in the political "food chain." Belize's counterclaim that he "hates America," *rather than* people with AIDS, rewrites those very identities as a gut feeling for how the food chain is organized unevenly; in so doing, he inno-

vates a political language that acts as counterknowledge to a whitewashed liberal imaginary (228).

Like Belize, Harper Pitt, Joe Pitt's alienated and spiritually lost wife, is one of the play's producers of counterknowledge that is born out of intuitive feelings grounded in her distinct social location as a woman, a housewife, and a Mormon. If Roy's locus of vision is limited to his own social and political interests, and Belize's worldview is shaped by larger networks of unevenly distributed privileges, Harper's intuition is planetary in scope, taking in the larger web of relations between human beings and the globe. In her opening monologue, Harper voices her gut sense that "things [in the world] are collapsing, lies surfacing, systems of defense giving way." She claims: "People are like planets, you need a thick skin. Things get to me" (23–24). In referencing "systems of defense giving way," Harper is describing the dissolving of the ozone layer (*Earth's* immune system), a phenomenon that fascinates and horrifies her; yet in doing so, she is unwittingly identifying the central consequence of AIDS, namely, the "giving way" of the body's immune defenses to a deadly virus, as a grander earthly event than any single AIDS death might suggest. If, as Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth suggest, "the political dimensions of affect generally proceed through . . . the body's capacity for becoming sensitive to the 'manner' of a world," then Harper is arguably the most politically attuned character in the play.<sup>29</sup> As someone *without* a "thick skin" (who lets things "get to her"), Harper is vulnerable to the world and hence able to affectively register the consequences of grand social and political upheavals.

Like other characters, Harper eats food associated with her openness to broader scales of existence. She pops Valium pills, eats Jell-O, M&Ms, and frozen dinners, and binges on soda and potato chips, all "bad objects" antithetical to healthy eating. Each act of ingestion facilitates extraordinary hallucinations in which Harper's imagination allows her to give structure and meaning to her premonitions through dream narratives. When Harper transports herself to the North Pole in a Valium-induced hallucination, she marvels at being so close to the ozone layer, exclaiming, "There are ice crystals in my lungs, wonderful and sharp. And the snow smells like cold, crushed peaches. And there's . . . some current of blood in the wind . . . it has that iron taste" (107). If the world is sick, Harper is unafraid to contract whatever virus it has, relishing the taste of the world's lifeblood in her lungs.

Like Prior and Belize, Harper resists traditional notions of human progress, both Louis's narrative of historical evolution toward "perfection" and her husband's vision of moral regeneration through a conservative political revolution. Her sense that "lies are starting to surface" not only references her husband's

lies about his sexuality but the broader deception of a Reaganite revolution whose image of a bright American future criminally neglects the realities of environmental collapse, the AIDS epidemic, racism and homophobia, and political corruption. At one point, Harper goes to the Mormon Visitor Center in Manhattan where she hallucinates that the female puppet representing Joseph Smith's wife comes to life. Harper asks her, "In your experience, how do people change?" The Mormon Mother replies:

God splits the skin with a jagged thumbnail from throat to belly and then plunges a huge filthy hand in, he grabs hold of your bloody tubes and . . . pulls and pulls till all your innards are yanked out and the pain! . . . And then he stuffs them back, dirty, tangled and torn. It's up to you to do the stitching. . . . Just mangled guts pretending. (211)

Figuratively torn apart by her husband's deceit and her fear of change, Harper finds comfort in the Mormon Mother's description of change as the excruciating feeling of literally having one's guts torn out. Where once Harper felt out of joint with the movement of human progress as a woman without a husband and a Mormon without a calling, this visceral description of humans grappling with their mangled insides describes a form of "painful progress" that accords with her sense that real change is enabled when people acknowledge the lies that they have told themselves. In the visceral image of "mangled guts pretending," the play proposes a powerful metaphor for unraveling the ideological fantasies that humans produce to imagine themselves as whole or uncontaminated, fantasies deployed to murderous effect in the AIDS epidemic; these modes of being in the world, like Louis's myopic liberalism, are forms of "pretending" that mask both the messiness of the body and its psychic and social wounds. Unlike Roy and Louis, Harper listens to the grumbling in her stomach. That stomach grumble leads her to leave her husband and take off on a night flight to San Francisco, the very city that Belize described as a homeland of misfits, queers, and all those willing to let their "mangled guts" show.

### **Spit or Swallow?**

How do affects change? How is that change embodied? How does language facilitate affective transformation and register its political effects? In the preceding analysis, I have tried to show how studying formal structures that marshal visceral figures to reroute affective flows can offer answers to some of these questions.



Through a close reading of the viscerally charged discursive work of *Angels in America*, I have identified the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS as a historically situated rhetorical complex that sought to alter murderous political feelings as a matter of survival in the AIDS epidemic. If, as Roy Cohn claims, politics is “enzymes and gastric juices churning,” then the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS suggest that we should know something about the stomachs of those who participate in it. At the conclusion of *Angels*, Louis is redeemed because of his willingness to see Joe Pitt’s abysmal diet (consisting of hot dogs, Pepto-Bismol, and Coca-Cola) as an allegory for his racist and homophobic politics. When Louis confronts Joe about his unethical politics including his professional (and potential sexual) attachments to Roy Cohn, he screams, “How many times has the latex-sheathed cock I put in my mouth been previously in the mouth of the most evil twisted, vicious, bastard ever to snort coke at Studio 54, because lips that kissed those lips will never kiss mine” (243). In the classic structure of the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS, Louis’s redemption is confirmed when he reroutes his inability to stomach the reality of AIDS toward a refusal to stomach a cock attached to a man with bankrupt political ideals.

Despite his transformation, Louis’s admission that he only ever sucked Joe’s cock with a condom on reminds us that even after shedding his liberal intolerance of AIDS, his stomach remains free of the potentially polluted fluids of other men’s bodies, including semen, blood, and urine. More recently, Kushner invoked this same logic of bodily integrity in a much-publicized speech at Bard College in 2005, when he stated, “I cherish my bile duct almost as much as any other organ. I take good care of it. I make sure it gets its daily vitamins and antioxidants and invigorating exposure to news of . . . everyone working for the Bush family.” Performing his own style of ill liberalism, Kushner’s acidic humor underscores the ways that conservative politics function as a potentially vomit-inducing assault on the gut that must be countered by a strengthening of the bile duct and its biological defenses. Yet like Louis, who only ever sucked Joe’s cock with a condom on, Kushner’s upward contempt is a characteristically defensive posture that guards the stomach from toxic political stimuli.<sup>30</sup> While *Angels in America*’s deployment of the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS makes people and politics dirty for the purpose of developing a richly embodied political language in response to the AIDS epidemic, it paradoxically side-steps some of the most viscerally charged aspects of bodily pleasure and potential HIV exposure, including those of cum eating, piss drinking, and barebacking. In other words, if the play’s use of digestive rhetoric often produces the gut reaction to spit, it leaves open the critical question of what it would mean to articulate the digestive politics and poetics of

AIDS from the position of someone who chooses to swallow. At the same time that *Angels in America* was being written and staged, numerous independent queer cultural producers working and living with AIDS were deploying the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS to ask just this question. I conclude by briefly glossing three contemporaneous cultural producers who pursued this latter approach to the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS to show how generative this discursive formation was for articulating multiple positionalities within the AIDS epidemic.

For Gary Fisher, an African American poet and journalist, the alimentary tract functioned as both a site of radical pleasure and a figurative zone where competing, and sometimes incommensurate, desires clashed. In his autobiographical writings of the late 1980s, Fisher lovingly describes his oral fixations with men's semen and piss: "I have no words for it, just an image, at once holy and profane, of the nigger on his knees taking cock juices in his body, particularly piss as a kind of spiritual cleanser."<sup>31</sup> Fisher's near-ecstatic pleasure in receiving the gift of cum and piss, particularly from white masters who racially debase him, comes into conflict with his aversion to American racism. Fisher is aware of the contradictions in his thinking, yet as his actual digestive system deteriorates with the advancement of his disease, he cannily comments on the structural similarities between his subjection to white men as sex slave and his subjection to medical doctors as patient: "Right now, I hate my doctor for my crazy symptoms. . . . And yet I've accumulated so much love and respect (maybe a little lust too) that I will take his prescription unquestioned—that same way I used to have sex" (257–58). In each case, Fisher reveals how ingestion—whether of men's bodily fluids or medicine—is a site where hierarchies of race and sexuality are powerfully displayed. As a gay black man with AIDS and no health insurance, Fisher feels compelled to say "yes," a response that subjects him to white power but also reveals a limited form of agency in willingly accepting, even taking sexual pleasure, in one's own subjection.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, in their acclaimed documentary *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (1993), the filmmakers Tom Joslin and Peter Friedman offer viewers some of queer cinema's most visceral images of the embodied experience of AIDS. The film documents a year in the couple's life as they both struggle with AIDS, culminating with Tom's death, which Peter films. In this penultimate scene, we see a close-up of Tom's emaciated body inert in bed, while Peter addresses the viewer, between sobs, "Isn't he beautiful? He's so beautiful." The question is affectively jarring, because it demands that viewers confront their own gut-level discomfort with the idea that sickness and death can be anything but revolting. Because of the visual conventions of documentary film, viewers are forced to inhabit Peter's subject position both literally and figuratively as someone who values the body of a

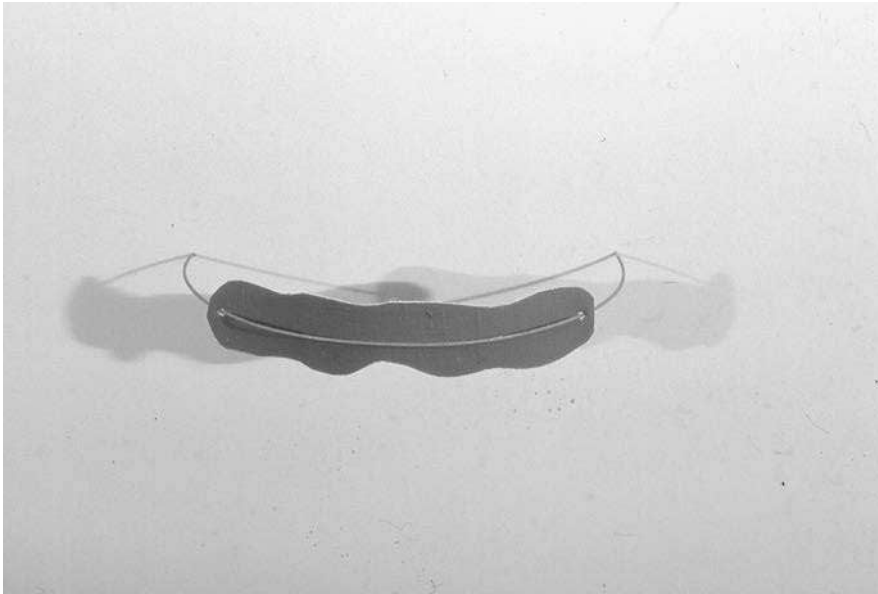


Figure 1. Chuck Nanny, *fiery turd*, 1998. Latex on canvas, wire, 1 x 6.25 x 3 in.  
Image courtesy of *Visual Aids*

loved one who has suffered the physical effects of AIDS. Later, when Peter receives Tom's ashes in the mail, he clumsily cuts himself while trying to open the box containing Tom's remains. He then spills bits of bone and ash on the floor while pouring them into an urn. Like the shot of Tom's corpse, the scene has the potential to elicit intense discomfort because of its messy breakdown of bodily and symbolic boundaries, including Peter's bleeding finger mingling with Tom's remains. Yet just at the moment that one is tempted to cringe, Peter off-handedly jokes, "You're all over the place Tom." The camplike quality of the joke cuts through the viewer's potential aversion by forcing us to realize that any disgust we might feel is based on a need to assert boundaries between our own bodies and that of two people with AIDS. Through its visual depictions of the embodied experience of AIDS, *Silverlake Life* forces a reconsideration of the ethics of disgust by encouraging us to ask ourselves who or what we might be protecting when we deploy emotion to shore up boundaries between ourselves and those we deem beneath us.

Finally, in his 1999 exhibit *Space Oddity (lesson in survival)*, the mixed-media artist Chuck Nanney expresses the material and psychic anxieties surrounding the daily practice of taking AIDS medication through found-object works that transform discomfiting digestive dysfunctions into deceptively simple visual abstractions made of acrylic, latex, thumbtacks, paper clips, book rings, and basic office supplies.<sup>33</sup> In one piece titled *fiery turd* (1998) (see fig. 1), for instance, a bright-red latex cutout in the shape of a clown's irregular smile is pinned to a

wall by a curved piece of wire, presumably an abstraction of a painful shit. The seemingly playful quality of the pieces, indicated by their larger-than-life size and colorful textures, is undercut by the often-distressing titles of each work (including *colostomy*, 1998; *sideways stool*, 1998; and *stomach lining*, 1999), usually referring to painful bowel movements or fleshy parts of the alimentary tract; similarly, the sharp edges of the wires and thumbtacks that prop the pieces up puncture materials representing sensitive stomach linings, bellies, and throats. The colorful impact of a bright-red shit in the piece *fiery turd*, for example, invokes the searing hot pain of a bad bowel movement (as does the sharp wire running through the red latex). Nanney's displays abstract and visually expand digestive dysfunctions specific to taking HIV medication in order to generalize feelings of bodily precariousness to viewers who are forced to meditate on the vulnerability of their own bellies, stomach linings, and stool.

A brief look at these creators' works reveals that the digestive tract and its embodied experience were common reference points for queer cultural producers at the height of the AIDS epidemic, and after. Like Kushner, each artist activates digestion, and its dysfunctions, to route different affects—pleasure, abjection, discomfort, rage, empathy—toward an array of alternative bodies, objects, and political commitments. If Kushner and Wojnarowicz orient their project toward a critique of the grander operations of political power, Fisher, Joslin and Friedman, and Nanney elicit empathetic responses to the quotidian aspects of illness; all do so, however, through the gut. Considering the centrality of the digestive system to the AIDS epidemic, it is clear why it became a touchstone for queer activists and artists: struggles over getting “drugs into bodies,” the deterioration of digestive functions caused by HIV/AIDS and its treatments, and the gut-level vitriol issued on both sides of the political divide (toward people with AIDS and toward political inaction) all marked the digestive as a contested site of political and affective meaning making.

In her now-classic essay “An Epidemic of Signification,” Paula Treichler called for “an epidemiology of signification—a comprehensive mapping and analysis of [AIDS's] multiple meanings—to form the basis for an official definition that will in turn constitute the policies, regulations, rules, and practices that will govern our behavior for some time to come.”<sup>34</sup> The digestive politics and poetics of AIDS was just such an “epidemiology of signification,” at once a diagnostic rhetorical tool that used formal equivalences between bodies and political ideologies to uncover forms of discursive violence being done to people with AIDS *and* a formal practice that proliferated alternatives to the negative metaphors that surrounded the disease. The digestive politics and poetics of AIDS did not transform

policies and regulations, or galvanize scientific research; rather, it functioned at the level of affect, to vitalize new ways of feeling in the world by resignifying the meanings of AIDS so as to cultivate ethical orientations toward those struggling with the disease. This was no minor achievement.

The fact that *Angels in America* begins with Roy Cohn rhetorically linking AIDS and gay men with political impotence and ends with Prior Walter convincingly articulating AIDS with “*more life*” and queer citizenship; the fact that Peter Friedman could film his lover Tom Joslin’s body following his death from complications of AIDS and claim “he’s so beautiful”; the fact that David Wojnarowicz could speak of the disease that tormented his insides as an incitement to develop his most potent creative work and express his political rage more sharply than ever before—these and countless other examples from queer cultural productions of the late twentieth century suggest the powerful capacity of the visceral to resignify AIDS, a disease that evinced violent disgust not only because of its association with gay men, drug use, and moral degeneracy but because it made visible the vulnerability of the body, a vulnerability that no liberal imaginary could will away. It is in the digestive politics and poetics of AIDS that a generation of queer cultural producers found a language with which to show a wider public a reality they themselves had long understood as social pariahs: that beneath the facades of liberal progress, happiness, and the promise of freedom, we are all “just mangled guts pretending.”

## Notes

This essay is for Samir Hachem, my late uncle, who has always been the gut feeling that guides me. Before he died from complications of AIDS in 1991, Samir’s extraordinary essays on queer film for the *Hollywood Reporter* and the *Advocate* in the 1980s helped identify what would later be called “the New Queer Cinema” years before it received the name from B. Ruby Rich. His passion for queer culture and his beautiful writings on what he called “the new sensuality” in independent and Hollywood filmmaking infuse my own writing; he could not have known then that his young nephew would discover this same world of queer film and video, and fall in love with its sexy, rebellious spirit. I only wish I had been able to watch and read the texts I discuss here with him. Thank you to Michael Horka, Justin Mann, Jennifer Nash, and Damon Young for feedback on this essay in its early stages. Indispensable conversations with Nirvana Tanoukhi, Stephanie Elsky, Aida Hussen, and our junior faculty writing group at UW Madison were critical in rethinking my approach to affect theory. Finally, an especial thanks to the anonymous readers and special issue editors whose incisive critiques pushed me to make this essay live up to its scholarly claims.

1. Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes Parts I and II*, rev. ed. (New York: The Theatre Communications Group, 2004), 74.
2. Borrowing from William Ian Miller and Sara Ahmed, I understand disgust as a socially cultivated response of recoiling from bodies and objects perceived as invading one's physical or psychic integrity; the visceral enactment of this emotion-state is often accompanied by "somatic reactions like retching, gagging, vomiting, spitting out" (Miller, "Upward Contempt," *Political Theory* 23, no. 3 [1995]: 478; and Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* [London: Routledge, 2004]).
3. Theories of affect in cultural studies distinguish affect from emotion by identifying affect as the prelinguistic, nonconscious, visceral intensities registered by the body in everyday encounters with the world. Alternatively, emotion references the entire network of linguistic, cultural, or symbolic signs that come to attach to inchoate and unformed affective experiences, rendering them legible while also narrowing the potentially varied directions affective sensations could take to a single feeling state. This distinction has had the benefit of acknowledging the body's sensory experience of the world without collapsing all material experiences to discourse or social construction; simultaneously, it has made it difficult to theorize those moments in which discourse functions *as* an intensity that can activate or elicit affective responses. In its most extreme versions, the split between affect and emotion has the potential of reproducing the very split between the embodied and the representational that cultural analysts of AIDS vehemently and convincingly theorized against. This essay is the beginning of a larger project that I am pursuing to theorize the discursive or representational production of affect in 1970s queer and feminist cultural politics. On the affect/emotion divide, see Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and "Introduction: An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Studies Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 1–5.
4. Gould, *Moving Politics*, 23, 28.
5. Thanks to the playwright Bonnie Metzgar for this insight. In *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), David Román highlights the broader material stakes of *Angels in America* when he states, "The body of the spectator enduring the length of the performance and the physical demands of theatergoing—reaching the theater, walking to our seats . . . needing to stretch, feeling hunger—identifies metaphorically with the bodies of the actors onstage performing the roles. . . . So while we register the effects of AIDS on Prior Walter's body, we also register the effects of the labor of this presentation on the actor who plays him" (220).
6. Douglas Crimp, introduction to "AIDS: Cultural Activism/Cultural Analysis," special

- issue, ed. Douglas Crimp, *October* 43, no. 1 (1987): 3–16. Reprinted in Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 28, 32.
7. See, e.g., the essays collected in Crimp, “AIDS: Cultural Activism, Cultural Analysis.” Two other foundational texts in the study of AIDS representational politics are Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS* (New York: Routledge, 1990), and Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Finally, the locus classicus on the uses of AIDS as metaphor is Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988).
  8. Paula Treichler, “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification,” *October* 43, no. 1 (1987): 37.
  9. Gould, *Moving Politics*, 121–214.
  10. Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*, 145.
  11. See Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*; Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); and Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
  12. The horrific lived realities of the AIDS epidemic—including facing social and familial homophobia, mourning the loss of countless friends and loved ones, and dealing with the physical and emotional effects of surviving with AIDS—are far from over for those who lived through the height of the epidemic, as well as those who deal with the disease in the present day. In their recent writings, Sarah Schulman, Gregg Bordowitz, and Crimp capture the ongoing consequences of having to mourn both the initial event of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s as well as the negligent erasure of the history of AIDS activism in contemporary queer culture and politics (not to mention the impact of late-in-life HIV diagnosis). See Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); the introduction to Crimp’s *Melancholia and Moralism*; and Bordowitz’s discussion of the fears and anxieties that attend long-term HIV management in *General Idea: Image Virus* (New York: Afterall Books, 2010), 4–5.
  13. David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 108.
  14. “I Sing the Body Electric,” interview with Chuck Nanney, *Poz Magazine*, October 1999, [www.poz.com/articles/219\\_12051.shtml](http://www.poz.com/articles/219_12051.shtml).
  15. See Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” *October* 43, no. 1 (1987): 211–12.
  16. Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, 114.
  17. Román, *Acts of Intervention*, 213.
  18. On the play’s staging of conflicts between the mind and the body, and the body and spirit, see David Savran, “Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the Nation”; and James Miller, “Heavenquake:

- Queer Analogies in Kushner's America," in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on "Angels in America,"* ed. Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).
19. Belize's use of the word *peculiar* to describe Louis's tirade invokes the historical description of slavery as America's "peculiar institution," as well as the historian Kenneth Stampp's classic study of slavery, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Knopf, 1956). Stampp's book sought to divest historians of the fantasy that slavery served the interests of both white and black Americans by promoting racial harmony; similarly, Belize attempts to disabuse Louis of his own fantasy that race is a benign ideological fallacy in the United States.
  20. "FDA Action Handbook," Jim Eigo, Mark Harrington et al., September 2, 1988, ACT UP: New York website, [www.actupny.org/documents/FDAhandbook1.html](http://www.actupny.org/documents/FDAhandbook1.html).
  21. Bersani, "Rectum," 201–2.
  22. Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Disability and Queerness* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 31.
  23. Ben Highmore, "Bitter after Taste: Affect, Food, and Social Aesthetics," in *The Affect Studies Reader*, 135–36.
  24. Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind*, 51.
  25. Thanks to Michael Horka for gifting me the heading "I Hate Your Guts."
  26. McRuer identifies this messiness as central to the play's sexual politics and calls it "queer perestroika: that is, a politics of sexuality emphasizing . . . coming together, mingling, messiness, and disruption." See McRuer, *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Lesbian and Gay Identities* (New York: New York University Press 1998), 171.
  27. Román similarly asserts that Belize is "the political and ethical center of the plays" (*Acts of Intervention*, 213).
  28. See Miller, "Upward Contempt."
  29. Gregg and Seigworth, *The Affect Studies Reader*, 14.
  30. John Lahr, "After Angels: Tony Kushner's Promethean Itch," *New Yorker*, January 3, 2005, accessible at [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/01/03/after-angels](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/01/03/after-angels).
  31. Gary Fisher, *Gary in Your Pocket: Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 239.
  32. Anthony Paul Farley discusses Fisher's depiction of submission as resistance in "The Black Body as Fetish Object," *Oregon Law Review* 76, no. 3 (1997): 517.
  33. *Space Oddity (lesson in survival)*, exhibition catalog for Chuck Nanney (New York: Debs & Co., 1999). Many thanks to David Getsy for introducing me to this fascinating artist.
  34. Treichler, "An Epidemic of Signification," 68.