Abstract: This paper suggests that beyond the overt – and abundantly discussed – concern with history, Tony Kushner’s famous play *Angels in America* represents – in the phrasing of Walter Benjamin – a figurative ‘shooting at the clocks’ not in order to end history but to instigate new histories. The main characters, one of them modeled after the infamous historical Roy Cohn, employ different performative strategies to cope with their infection with AIDS and the impending millennium. Through constantly transfiguring their identity by subverting the names given them and the according discursive power structures, the characters 1. manage to invest the names given them with alternative/new meanings, 2. are able to maintain/obtain individual agency and 3. thus escape the fate that an apparently pre-ordained (i.e. teleological, fixed and heteronomous) history has in store for them. Accordingly, they write their own histories in the new millennium, inverting the assumption that history determines identity by making their identity determine history. This paper will examine how this is achieved, and through which performative strategies.

A Disclaimer: Roy M. Cohn, the character, is based on the late Roy M. Cohn (1927-1986), who was all too real; for the most part the acts attributed to the character Roy […] are to be found in the historical record. But this Roy is a work of fiction; his words are my invention, and liberties have been taken.’ (I, 7)

1. Cracking History

The popularity and success of Kushner’s play have engendered a resurgence of interest in the historical figure who reached the apex of his infamy during the prosecution, trial and eventual execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg: Roy Cohn. Situated before the actual beginning of the play, the disclaimer quoted above illustrates not only the play’s concern with history, but also with the processes that inextricably bind any person to their historical context. In the course of the play, Kushner uses his characters, in particular Roy Cohn, in order to il-

1 References to the two volumes of Kushner’s *Angels in America* will be distinguished by the Roman numerals I and II.
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luminate how conventional concepts of representation and identity may be con-
fronted and subsequently discarded and disrupted. These processes reveal strategies
of performative subjectivization, which may lead either to denial or to tentative
liberation. In as much as individuals are part of historical structures and con-
texts, their performative agency endows them with a political responsibility that
transcends distinctions of public and private. Considering the impact of Walter
Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” on Kushner’s play, I want to
argue that in the play itself, the disruption of conventional modes of self-re-
presentation and identity simultaneously necessitates and implements the un-
dermining and rejection of conventional representations of history. Thus, the
individual’s agency and cognition assume powerful, historically disruptive effects
by creating new communities, new discourses, new power relations and new his-
tories.

In addition to being a remarkably successful epic play, Kushner’s rendering
of Cohn follows on the heels of an autobiography as well as a biography of
Hoover’s right hand man, hence creating another narrative layer around this fig-
ure. Moreover, the play has also engendered serious academic and critical at-
tention in the form of numerous essays and interviews, which in turn have investi-
gated the character of Cohn as he is portrayed in the play. As a result, the his-
torical person Cohn is enveloped in a series of multilayered narratives whose ef-
forts at circumscribing the “real” Cohn, grounded in the belief of reliable his-
torical data, effectively set adrift and shroud the identity of that person in a pas-
tiche of contradictory writings. Thus, any notion of authenticity is inadvertently
refuted and, considering the fact that Cohn’s autobiography, written by yet an-
other author, exists in the same narrative space, the authorship of identity is like-
wise called into question. But while these narratives seldom concede that their
investigation of the character is impinged upon by their own performativity,
Kushner’s play by its very nature creates its own performative space, and any
character’s identity (per)formed within that space subsequently constitutes itself
as performative. Consequently, the distinction between the play and reality, be-
tween the character Cohn and the person Cohn becomes difficult to distinguish
in the examination of the processes of identity formation. The mimetic premise
of this argument can be bracketed since the characters as well as the play are sub-
jected to analysis only in so far as they are performed through language.

2. Performing Identity: Evil Surfaces

Within the play, the character of Roy Cohn is juxtaposed to Prior Walter, an an-
tithesis which is ironically echoed in their names: while Prior’s name overtly re-
fers to the office of a priest in a monastery, Cohn’s name can be traced etymol-
ogically to the Hebrew word “cohn” which means “priest.” Establishing a con-

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2 Jewishness, particularly Cohn’s and Louis’, poses an important subtext to the play. See also
Jonathan Freedman’s essay on intersections of queer and Jewish identity.
nection between the two characters becomes pertinent in view of the fact that they both employ similar processes in order to (re)define themselves. While the attribution of negativity or positivity to these strategies does not aid in their examination, the categories of “good” and “evil” constitute a significant aspect of the identity formation of the two characters, even if these notions are constantly deconstructed and utilized in order to vitiate their mythological premise.

Even outside the play and its critical discourse, Cohn is frequently referred to as “evil incarnate,” “demonic” or simply “Satan,” all of which allude to the alleged millennial manifestation of the adversary of Christ. Evidently, Cohn’s subsumption under this category precedes and implicates all further considerations regarding his race, gender, etc., especially since the principle of evil and its embodiment, Lucifer, is itself internally conflicted. The original meaning of the word “demon” connotes an “influencing spirit,” an entity with the power to affect and transform a human’s mind, without any allusion as to the quality of this influence. In this regard, demons possess a strong affinity to angels and were only later imbued with negativity, as servants of Lucifer or Satan. The name “Lucifer” denotes “Lightbringer” or “Fallen from Light” and constitutes an extremely heterogeneous principle throughout Western religious and literary history. While, contrary to the widely held misconception, the name of Satan is never mentioned in Genesis, he appears with increasing frequency in later books such as Ezekiel, Daniel and Job; his most significant description, however, is found in Isaiah. Here, Satan is revealed as a creature of God, a former angel who defied his progenitor by attempting to instigate a heavenly revolution:

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God. (Isaiah 14: 12-13)

Throughout the entire Bible, Lucifer is portrayed as the eternal tempter trying to divert humans from the “right” course. His character and deeds are marked by frequently ambiguous and occasionally contradictory descriptions, a circumstance which evidently prompted Milton and Goethe's rendering of a fascinating and alluring figure, equally attractive and repulsive. By being described as the manifestation of evil, Cohn is brought into line with a concept traditionally contradictory and elusive. At this point in the play the investigation of Cohn must commence. The play’s predominant concern with the formation of identity in a post-structuralist world of Derridean *différance* and Baudrillardian simulacra, of theories conceptualizing a decentered and non-unitary identity, is displayed in all of Kushner’s characters, but most vividly in Roy Cohn. All efforts at placing him within essentializing categories are continually thwarted by his persistent reinvention and reformation of himself. Instead of subjecting himself to questionably stable notions of race or sexuality, Cohn empties those categories of reference at his own will and whim. He habitually performs himself into new or re-

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3 It is the snake, one of God’s creations, that tempts Eve.
fashioned classifications emptied of their former significations. At any given instance, he assumes a subject position deemed suitable to his situational needs, illustrating Judith Butler’s phenomenological approach to performativity and identity formation:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts. (Butler, 271)

Butler’s elaboration of gender representation can also be expanded to encompass the processes of identity formation along the axes of ethnicity and sexuality. The emphasis here must be put on the performatve aspect of such repetitive and differential acts. Rather than assuming an independent agency preceding the body as the site of such acts, “one is not simply a body, but […] one does one’s body […]. In other words, the body is a historical situation” (272; emphasis mine). During the first appearance and performance of Cohn, this principle is condensed into a specific metaphor: “I wish I was an octopus. A fucking octopus. Eight loving arms and all those suckers” (I, 2). Thus, while the identity constitutes itself through a series of acts, none of these acts are exactly the same, so that any attempt at a unifying category inevitably eliminates the difference between these acts. Simultaneously, an actor who is always already on stage must be assumed to have an identity that establishes itself diachronically as well as synchronically. Obviously, any attribution of falsity or truth, reality or distortion to these acts becomes unfeasible, since there is no center against which to measure such attributes. The fact that these acts are performative as well as historical also necessitates their communal nature: such an act “is clearly not one’s own” (276). Roy Cohn’s identity is thus verified through incessant subject positions across the lines of extrinsically imposed and constructed categories, enabling him to name and re-name himself, acts which are not only personal but also political. Indeed, such a distinction is rendered redundant due to the fact that the performative space of the stage does not allow for a reprieve, or a “private” area into which to recede. The invisible space off-stage remains the domain of the unconscious (Green, 138-39). The most impressive demonstration of these strategies can be witnessed in an exchange between Cohn and his doctor:

Roy: Your problem […] is that you are hung up on words, on labels, that you believe they mean what they seem to mean […]. Because what I am is defined entirely by who I am. Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man […] who fucks around with guys. (I, 31-32)

Clearly, Cohn repudiates his subjugation to labels by either rejecting them completely or infusing them with new meanings. Figuratively, he skims over a pastiche or collage of one-dimensional names, which brings into play the — only temporarily useful — concept of surfaces. In order not to regress into essentialism, acts constituting subject positions cannot be conceived of as three-dimensional or

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4 As Werbner points out, even racism is performative, illustrated powerfully in Cohn’s anti-semitism, while being himself Jewish; see Werbner, 234.
as offering access to a deep structure “behind” the surface. There may exist an overlapping and criss-crossing of surfaces, a collage, but the endeavor to uncover a veiled or hidden center, a unified “I,” repeats the frustrated crusade for a logos, for the pristine relation of signifier and signified. These surfaces mark the “ever fragmenting articulations of subjectivity” (Lutterbie, 122), or, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, the body without organs:

The body without organs is an egg: it is crisscrossed with axes and thresholds [...] traversed by gradients marking the transitions and becomings, the destinations of the subject developing along these particular vectors. (Deleuze/Guattari, 19)

Consequently ethnicity, gender, sexuality etc. can be regarded as the wedges with which an individual may carve longitudinal and latitudinal axes across the egg-shell of its identity, evading the pitfall of constituting an interiority by claiming that this particular body does not have any organs. This would lend substance to the claim that Cohn has “no interior to speak of,” only a powerful gaze (Posnock, 67). Consistently, the efforts of critics to separate Cohn’s sexual from his political identity are deprived of their premise. The acts manifesting Roy’s subject position are governed by a libidinal economy that circulates around one pole of intensity rather than moving from one distinct domain into another. In his own words, Cohn equates politics with being alive, both inseparable from each other:

Roy: This is … this is 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 […] the game of being alive. (I, 50)

Evidently, being alive implies being politically conscious; political rules exist to be transgressed, serving as a framework within and against which to affirm one’s own identity (I, 84). Therefore, politics functions as another field across which identity-formation occurs; politics is bodily, and since the body also constitutes the site for sexuality-formation, politics inevitably are and have to be sexual. Furthermore, since the rules of politics, according to Cohn, may operate as the other, through the transgression of which one affirms oneself as “being alive,” the following relations becomes not only reasonable but inevitable:

Subjectivity : Sexuality : Politics

All of these serve as surfaces across which Cohn enacts his performative gestures, and relying on Butler’s argument that each act is simultaneously historical, each of these surfaces likewise becomes historical. Consistently, individual identity-formation and representation assume historical relevance: an individual could just as soon escape its historical context as its identity.

In this regard, political subjectivity becomes of paramount importance. Political power is manifested in terms of the power to name – to name oneself as well as others – as seen in the acts of Cohn. Rather than a process of identifica-
ination, which would imply a restrictive subjection to categories, the realization of

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5 See also Peter Cohen on love and politics in the play.
one’s political consciousness is constituted in a process of subjectivization, the “formation of a one that is not a self but is the relation of a self to an other. […] We could act as political subjects in the interval or the gap between two identities, neither of which we could assume” (Ranciere, 66-67). And, furthermore:

The logic of subjectivization […] is a heterology […]. First, it is never the simple assertion of an identity; it is always, at the same time, the denial of an identity given by an other […]. Second, it is a demonstration, and a demonstration always supposes an other. (Ranciere, 68)

3. Performing Identity: Evil Depths

At this point it becomes unavoidable to abandon the concept of the body without organs, of surfaces without an underneath. These concepts may affect the analysis of the processes disrupting categorization and conventional self-representation; however, the investigation of Cohn’s motivation and agency – the existence of which is implicitly presumed in Butler’s and Ranciere’s argument – requires a return to the guttural and visceral aspects mentioned above, in this instance by means of the discussion of skin. Even in view of a non-unitary and de-centered identity, the theoretical concepts utilized so far have proposed the existence of a subject with the capacity to act and/or with the property of agency, proposals that spring from the mutually perceived need for politically active individuals. The emphasis, though, rests on the processual, relational and situational aspects of identity formation, aspects which the play’s characters display and engage, but which Kushner instills with a visceral depth that the theoretical approaches lack or disavow. At first glance, Lutterbie’s insistence on the existence of intrinsic psychological processes, which canalize and solidify external environmental responses to an individual’s varied internal drives into habitual passages and channels of dealing with these responses, seems to provide a conceptual depth beneath the bodily surface, i.e. the skin. This perspective, however, fails to account for Kushner’s stress on bowels and guts. The latter emphases constitute the premise for being alive and, in Cohn’s terms, for acting and performing politically as well as sexually. On the premise elaborated earlier, viscera and abdomen form the bodily depth over which the surfaces of libidinal and performative gestures are drawn out. It follows that there exist, at least in Kushner’s view, bowels underneath the egg shell, intestines that inform and are informed by the traversing axes across the surface. Within the bodily metaphor, the friable egg shell is replaced by the skin, a site of struggle and contention in the play. The skin is the initially visible location of another being, the first sight of contact whose significance cannot be overemphasized in the perennial controversy over the consequences of its color. It serves as a protective layer insuring integrity, posing as the physical boundary of the body, but also as the location for interrelation and connection between characters, a potential source of pleasure. Simultaneously, the skin is vulnerable and susceptible to pain and attacks from the outside as well as from the inside:
If the snake sheds his skin before a new skin is ready, naked he will be in the world, prey to the forces of chaos. Without his skin he will be dismantled, lose coherence and die. (II, 14)

Metaphorically as well as metonymically, the skin carries the first marks – lesions – that the immune system of a body has lost the first battle against AIDS, which constitutes a prominent theme of the play. As a consequence of the skin’s identity-forming capacity, AIDS as well as illness in general, become conflicted categories of performing identity, a fact particularly relevant for the later discussion of Prior Walter.

This play on surface and depth pervades all of the characters’ actions, but most markedly, of course, Roy Cohn’s. Not only does the skin become invested with sexual and political pertinence, but Roy’s desire to assume the shape of an octopus elucidates his concept of skin: an active device for grabbing and clutching objects as well as subjects, a tough layer offering protection against, as well as gratification from, the “raw wind”:

Roy: Love; that’s a trap. Responsibility; that’s a trap too […]. Life is full of horror; nobody escapes […]. Whatever pulls on you, whatever needs from you, threatens you […] don’t be afraid to live in the raw wind, naked, alone. (I, 42)

To summarize, then, one could be tempted to say that Cohn manifests the Nietzschean Übermensch, the superior individual who has succeeded in discarding all societal and moral constrictions, the true “outsider” oblivious of, and invulnerable to, any extrinsic forces in the constitution of its identity. This assumption, however, not only does injustice to the character, but also neglects the fact that Kushner stresses the individual’s responsibility to the community in which he or she lives, a responsibility which repudiates the possibility of “stepping outside” of that system. This is not to say that Cohn in any way feels a responsibility towards his fellow human beings; nevertheless, despite rejecting the categories imposed on him, he defines himself against others, by enacting power over others through naming, manipulating or killing them. Without others for whom to perform, and from whom to elicit recognition, his identity is shattered and disintegrated. Cohn acts as a cyborg without morals, but his fear of disbarment renders him vulnerable. Even at his most insidious, Cohn remains human. His craving for recognition ultimately eliminates the possibility of his liberation; instead of transcending the categories he so violently contests, he denies them. He may have accomplished the reconfiguration of some of these names and labels, but he has failed to challenge their constitutive structures and relations. In the end, he resembles Nietzsche’s “last men” more than the Übermensch.

Roy Cohn’s antithesis is found in the character of Prior Walter, an opposition echoed not only in their names but also in the strategies they employ in order to act and perform, in the processes of naming. Prior functions as the play’s protagonist. Himself a homosexual WASP, he is chosen as the prophet who is supposed to promulgate the Angels’ divine ordainment of stasis; as a sign of this divination, he contracts AIDS. Nonetheless, he instantly rebels against his appointment, utilizing strategies similar to those of Cohn. He finds himself sub-
ject to the same conflicted categories that govern, however insufficiently, all the play’s characters: race, sexuality, politics and, as demonstrated, illness. Instead of disavowing these categories, though, he recognizes their status as artificial and arbitrary constructions, the semantic voids that are only situationally filled with content. He challenges their relational power-base rather than futilely disputing the constantly deferred content. This approach enables him not only to ignore his past heritage, in the form of visitations by his forefathers, but also his purported future destiny. Although he immediately becomes aware of the powerful influence of AIDS on his identity through his skin, he denies his illness the power to determine him as fatally ill or soon-to-be-dead. This he achieves by rejecting the angels’ project even in the face of pain and sexual pleasure. Aware of the same historical relevance and responsibility of his performative acts that influenced Cohn’s identity-formation, he does not deny his position as a prophet, but infuses it with his own design. Re-enacting the biblical Joseph, Prior (temporarily at least) forces his way into heaven by wrestling with the angel, subsequently arguing that the angels suspend the fatality of his illness. Again, rather than denying that he has AIDS, Prior refuses the alleged fatality with which that category is conventionally filled. Instead of staying in the heavenly and implicitly metaphysical realm, as Cohn does as God’s attorney, Prior descends to earth in order to continue his work as a prophet, acknowledging the historical responsibility inherent in performing his subjectivity. Instead of attempting to place himself outside societal confines – an attempt which constitutes the main reason for the failure of Cohn’s liberation – Prior struggles from within Plato’s cave, from within the mirrors of representation and from within the historical processes in which he is bound up. At this point, the consequences of the individual’s struggle within historical representation become most evident.

4. Shooting at the Clocks

As has previously been discussed, the identity and subjectivity of the characters in the play is inextricably linked, not in a unilateral, but in a reciprocal manner. As much as the historical surface influences the individual’s performance across it, so does each performance, each act, shape and alter that surface. Since that surface is largely determined by the conceptualized representation of history within a given society, Kushner’s concern with identity requires a simultaneous elaboration of historical concepts. In the course of the play, it becomes conspicuous that Kushner endorses Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” while discarding and ridiculing the teleological concepts of Hegel and Marx. Benjamin utilizes Paul Klee’s painting Angelus Novus in order to illustrate his stance on history:

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling

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6 Prior claims, “I’m a lesionaire” (I, 11).
wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin, 257-58)

This metaphor illuminates a concept that describes history as non-linear, non-teleological, and beyond any efforts at constructing a cause-and-effect relationship between the events in which humans are entangled. Being persecuted as a Jew by the Nazi regime and later committing suicide, Benjamin clearly discerned the conceptual premises upon which the Third Reich built its claims both to superiority and to its alleged destiny as the model for other nations. Linear concepts of history imply a predetermined chain of progression towards the inevitable, utopian state of perfection. In such views, history could be imagined as the unfolding of a rolled carpet. With the assumption of a teleological chain of cause-and-effect relationships, however, the past can be subjected to manipulations by a present power in order to vindicate its status and ideology. In Orwellian terms, whoever controls the past controls the present, and hence controls the future. The very real Third Reich attempted to explicate its ideology and practices by seeking out evidence in the past to establish, however spuriously, the inevitability and preordainment of its existence. If history is conceived as a process with a point of completion or possible closure, a prevailing government could lay claim to its ideology as the “state of perfection” on a political level, while human beings in general could be perceived as able to escape the binds of history. Benjamin’s concept is directed precisely against the pitfalls of such representations of history. There only exists a pile of wreckage and debris, the past consists of chaos, and the future hence remains inaccessible and unpredictable. As regards revolutionary forces striving to disrupt such teleological representations of history, Benjamin cites an interesting incident during the July-Revolution in Paris. Throughout the city in various locations, revolutionary forces simultaneously directed their bombardment against the tower clocks. Clearly, this was done not simply to destroy the mechanics of the clocks as such, but to bring to a standstill the concepts that those clocks represented, namely the progression of time and with it the ideological representation of history valorized by such an uninterrupted progression. Literally and figuratively, the revolutionaries strained to crack history open, an act in many ways analogous to the performance of Prior Walter. Kushner’s frequent endorsement of Benjamin’s theses is most vividly suggested by the prevalence of angels throughout the play.

7 Unless the “end of history” also marked the end of humankind.

8 There is a continual allusion to the looming possibility of the apocalypse and the millennial age (a period of one thousand years before the final judgment day) in the play. In fact, one might wonder whether the apocalypse is not insinuated as already taking place. For an elaboration of apocalyptic and millenarian aspects in the play, see also Michelle Elkin-Squitieri and James Fisher.
The term “angel” derives from the Greek *angelos* and the Hebrew equivalent meaning “messenger.” In Christianity as well as in Judaism and other religions, angels are believed to be benevolent messengers serving God’s design by conveying divine revelation to human beings. As such, their presence in *Angels in America* alludes to the notion of a divine scheme, a master plan for the advent of the Millennium. In addition, the play’s treatment of Mormons introduces their belief that an angel appeared to their church founder, Joseph Smith, with the revelation of the eventual reinstitution of paradise on the American continent. All through the play, however, the conventional representation of angels is deconstructed and satirized. They are depicted as powerful, but conservative and incredibly dumb. God has abandoned them, and heaven resembles San Francisco after the big quake. They have elected Prior to disseminate their promotion of Stasis, since every progression of humankind causes another quake in heaven. In other words, they advocate the eternal perpetuation of the existing power relations. Hence the play is quite obviously not a Messianic project, as some critics would have it. On the contrary, Kushner calls into question the entire philosophical concept of a metaphysical entity governing earthly affairs as well as the idea that there exists a utopian realm upon which to displace the responsibility to act as a political individual (Laclau, 96-97). If paradise constitutes the location of stasis, earth must serve as the site for constant change, for the potentiality of a utopian society precariously erected on the ruins of the past. In Benjamin’s view, teleological theories propagate the possibility of closure or stasis; the revolutionary impulse to shoot at the clocks, to halt time, hence does not imply the desire for a standstill so much as a realization of the violence inherent in conventional representations of history. The clocks must be stopped in order to open up the discourse to new conceptualizations of history.

Consistently, Hegel’s and Marx’s philosophies of history are similarly ridiculed and deconstructed. The futility and insufficiency of Hegel’s teleology is illustrated by Louis, who abandons his AIDS-stricken boyfriend Prior and fails to incorporate the idea of illness into the formation of his identity:

Louis: Maybe because this person’s sense of the world, that it will change for the better with struggle, maybe a person who has this neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant historical progress towards happiness or perfection or something […] maybe that person can’t […] incorporate sickness into his sense of how things are supposed to go. (I, 14-15)

Evidently, notions of illness or, for that matter, sexuality and race, cannot be affiliated with Hegel’s *Höherer Geist*. Indeed, for Hegel history had already ended in 1806 with the widely accepted validity of the democratic principles promoted during the French Revolution. The resort to Hegel, then, equals the denial of the necessity of change and the responsibility of continually redefining one’s identity across a historical surface.

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9 There appears to be no end to the claims of the ‘end of history.’ Compare Francis Fukuyama’s notorious essay of the same title.
In a similarly amusing yet sophisticated style, the second prominent Western teleology is unraveled. At the beginning of the second part of the play, the words of the World’s Oldest Living Bolshevik are unveiled for their philosophical foundation by his telling name Antediluvianovich Prelapsarianov, the Latin basis of which denotes “before the flood” and “before the lapse;” thus his name alludes to the idea of a falling away from a state of perfection that must be recovered, instead of displacing hope towards prospective perfection:

The Great Question before us is: Are we doomed? [...] Will the Past release us? [...] Can we change? In Time? [...] How are we to proceed without Theory? What System of Thought have these Reformers to present to this mad swirling planetary disorganization, to the Inevident Welter of fact, event, phenomenon, calamity? (II, 13-14)

On the one hand, these words summarize the motivation and aim of the angels in the play, their dread of progressing without a theory that would ostensibly allow a prediction of the future based on the past. On the other hand, the Bolshevik’s name refers back to Marxism, which relies upon a reworked Hegelian teleology. Contrary to Hegel, who posits a superior consciousness that eventually transcends its material bounds through a dialectical sublation, Marx described consciousness as subject to influences by the modes of production. Nevertheless, Marx also announced an inevitable utopian state, that would be brought about by the revolution of the proletariat. At the approach of the new millennium, the collapse of most of the socialist states has demonstrated at least the difficulty of a practical implementation of Marxist or socialist ideals without stumbling into a totalitarian form of government that diminishes individual agency.

In terms of identity and representation, the consequences are readily apparent: it has been shown that identity formation and the enactment of subjectivity and representation are inextricably linked, shaped and informed by their historical context. Accordingly, a disruption in the representation of identity possesses the potential for undermining and rejecting conventional representations of history, each act a figurative shooting at the clocks. Roy Cohn failed to secure himself a place in history because he wedged himself into the static representation of the prevailing ideology, into the “history […] about to crack wide open.” In contrast, Prior becomes his own prophet, the messenger whose work is just beginning in a precarious world, where one lives past, but not without, hope, and where one remains rooted in the bleakest moments of the past (Savran, 25). At least in this regard, the play seems to offer a way out of the Baudrillardian apocalyptic postmodern world: it is not beyond the historical, but skimming on the surface of a continually altering history.

10 ‘Living past hope’ is also the subtitle of James Fisher’s recent monograph on Kushner; cf. Fischer, 2002.
5. Conclusion

It should be noted that at this point in the play, critics have accused Kushner of being too overtly optimistic, of promising hope where there should be none. I would agree that the conclusion of the play strikes a rather doubtful tone, but for a different reason: taking my argument to its logical conclusion, one individual's cognition may assume the power to affect historical representation, to act with the authority of a political community and not with that of one individual. The threat of totalitarianism and authoritarianism is imminent: what if Cohn had succeeded rather than Prior Walter? For that reason the challenge rests in the perpetual (re)formation of a politically responsible identity with the capacity to contest categories and power relations, but also with the innate cognizance that history cannot reach a closure which an individual might transcend.

Works Cited


