Universal Love and “Ageless Ambiguity”: Political Erasure in *Call Me By Your Name*

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INTRODUCTION

*Call Me By Your Name: Why Do We Love It, Why Do We Hate It, Why Do We Love to Hate It, and Why Am I Writing About It?*

“Film is a mirror of reality and it is a filter,” raves an Italian dinner guest in Luca Guadagnino’s 2017 same-sex romance film, *Call Me By Your Name*. How can cinema both mirror and filter reality? *Call Me By Your Name* (which I will henceforth refer to as *Call Me* for convenience) answers this paradox simply by existing. In its breathtaking, sunlit world full of beautiful people with no concerns other than their burning desire for one another, all the bad seems to have been filtered out—but if we look closer, we can see the hidden reflection of a far more complex world: our own.

Based on André Aciman’s 2007 novel of the same name, *Call Me* premiered on January 22, 2017 to wide acclaim. Directed by Luca Guadagnino and written by James Ivory, the film is a passionate story of first love splashed across the celestial landscape of the Italian countryside in 1983. A perpetually slouched Timotheé Chalamet plays the precocious Elio, a French-Italian-American teen who spends summers at his grandiose Italian family home, and the towering Armie Hammer plays Oliver, the self-assured American houseguest who has come to carry out his graduate studies with Elio’s professorial father. Elio and Oliver then pursue a romance that simmers under the Lombardian sun and ultimately leaves audience swooning—and I use the word because countless publications including *Vanity Fair, The Atlantic,* and *The Daily Beast*...

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have done so to describe the film.\textsuperscript{3} John Cooper, director of the Sundance Film Festival, cried while introducing \textit{Call Me} at its world premiere.\textsuperscript{4} The film received a standing ovation at Sundance\textsuperscript{5} and a ten minute-long ovation at the New York Film Festival, setting a new record.\textsuperscript{6}

\textit{Vanity Fair}'s Richard Lawson called it a "modern gay classic."\textsuperscript{7} The Internet exploded with praise for the film’s spectacular beauty. The movie currently boasts a 95% “Certified Fresh” rating on Rotten Tomatoes.\textsuperscript{8} It was nominated for four Academy Awards, including Best Picture, and won Best Adapted Screenplay.\textsuperscript{9} Alongside the film’s commercial and critical success came its cultural impact, especially apparent in Internet meme culture.\textsuperscript{10} The movie’s immense popularity even convinced André Aciman to write a sequel to his original novel, which will be entitled \textit{Find Me} and is expected to be published in the fall of 2019.\textsuperscript{11}

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\textsuperscript{8} "\textit{Call Me By Your Name} (2018)," \textit{Rotten Tomatoes}, accessed April 14, 2019, \url{https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/call_me_by_your_name}.

\textsuperscript{9} "\textit{Call Me By Your Name}: Nominations and Awards - The Los Angeles Times," \textit{Los Angeles Times}, accessed April 14, 2019, \url{https://envelope.latimes.com/awards/titles/call-me-your-name/}.


\textsuperscript{11} Hunter Harris, "André Aciman Is Officially Writing a Call Me By Your Name Sequel," \textit{Vulture}, March 20, 2019, accessed April 14, 2019, \url{https://www.vulture.com/2019/03/call-me-by-your-name-sequel-find-me-andre-aciman.html}.
In 2018, after hearing all this buzz, I had high expectations for *Call Me*—and those expectations were exceeded when I finally attended a screening of the film on a dreary night in February of that year. After shuffling into the theatre with my shoulders damp from the cold drizzle of the east coast winter, I sat down and tossed my dripping umbrella under my seat, and suddenly, the verdant scenery of northern Italy swept across the screen in front of me. I was immediately transported to a place and time I had never precisely been but felt nostalgic for. It was a fairytale, but with some sensual relics of my own world at which my heart ached with recognition: the summer feeling of sweat and sticky limbs, bare feet padding across wooden floors, lying in bed at night with the balmy air floating in through moonlit windows. I left the theatre in somewhat of a haze and spent the following days slipping into a daydream where I basked on warm stone beside a gently lapping pool, or biked down endless gravel roads through a botanical paradise. My friends were equally wooed.

However, as time went on and that haze began to clear, I wondered why exactly we were all so taken with *Call Me*’s idealized world, and why it was so idealized in the first place. Despite the fact that *Call Me* centers on a same-sex romance in the 1980s, it does not explicitly mention AIDS, homophobia, or even the very notion of homosexuality. Its protagonists are also Jewish, yet anti-Semitism is mostly swept under the rug. There is only one line of dialogue about the socialist politics of then-Prime Minister Bettino Craxi, yet the word “socialism” is not used. With all of this in mind, I eventually landed on one central question: Why does *Call Me* take place in a utopia where all politics are simply erased, and why do we, as audiences—perhaps especially as young, left-leaning people who came of age in the Obama years—generally support (or ignore) this erasure?
In this thesis, I will attempt to answer this question using several strategies. First, I will outline how *Call Me* expunges politics in favor of a perfect world. I will then look to the opinions of critics and everyday audiences about why the film’s utopia is or is not appealing. Then, I will suggest understanding *Call Me* as a text that is engaged with what Freud termed “acting out” as opposed to his notion of “working through” a trauma. As Eric Santner and Dominick LaCapra re-articulate Freud’s ideas in their work on trauma and German history, “working through” can be understood as a productive and difficult coming to terms with past trauma, while “acting out” describes a very unproductive process of ignoring, erasing, rewriting or fetishizing that trauma in order to avoid it. Thus I will be referencing the works of Eric Santner and Dominick LaCapra, as well as Cathy Caruth and Jo Labanyi, who also work on trauma and representation. Furthermore, I will support this reading using Sander Gilman’s analysis of the Italian film *Life is Beautiful* (1997) as a fetishized narrative about Italian history during World War II. I will also compare *Call Me* to *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *Angels in America* (2003), two films depicting gay male relationships that fully expose the sort of utopia that *Call Me* maintains as dangerous omission. I will end my paper by ruminating on the cultural context that led to the success of *Call Me*, asking, what is it about 2017 that makes us crave such a fairytale?

I believe these questions are important to consider because they may reveal underlying cultural conditions or sentiments of today’s society or, at the very least, encourage us to think critically about it. The conversation surrounding *Call Me* is still fresh, and certain spaces in it are


lacking. I hope to shine a light on those areas that need further examination, and I urge others to continue dissecting the fascinating cultural phenomenon that is *Call Me*. 
Unlike other successful films featuring gay protagonists, such as *Brokeback Mountain* (dir. Ang Lee, 2005) and *Angels in America* (dir. Mike Nichols, 2003), which place an explicit focus on the sociopolitical and medical dangers associated with homosexuality in their respective settings, *Call Me* takes place in a utopia. Its protagonists inhabit a 1980s Italy which appears to be free of all political, social, and cultural conflicts. Elio and Oliver, who are both depicted as gay or bisexual and Jewish, are not confronted by the threat of AIDS, homophobia, or anti-Semitism and are therefore absolutely free to explore their individual identities as well as their relationship to one another. The film tells the story of Elio, a reserved 17 year-old musical prodigy vacationing with his academic, multilingual family at their Italian summer villa, and Oliver, their 24 year-old American houseguest and graduate student. Oliver—sun-kissed, handsome, and charming—has come to intern with Elio’s father, a renowned archaeology professor. At first, Elio expresses disdain for Oliver’s brash ways and invasion of his home, but their unspoken sexual attraction eventually grows into a passionate love affair. When the summer comes to an end, however, Oliver returns home to America. The film ends with Elio looking thoughtfully into the fireplace, tears rolling down his cheeks, after receiving a phone call from Oliver announcing his engagement to a woman.

**Peachy Keen: *Call Me as a Utopia***

From its first moments, *Call Me* establishes Elio’s home and the Italian surroundings as a paradise. After the opening credits cut to black, the dreamy sounds of summer fill our ears:
insects buzz, birds sing, and leaves rustle in the breeze. Next, the film cuts to a pretty teenage girl lying on Elio’s bed. The girl is Marzia, Elio’s friend and partner in sexual experimentation. Across Marzia’s image, non-diegetic text suddenly appears, which reads, “Summer 1983.” Written in a hasty but graceful scrawl, this text introduces the movie as a fairytale; the handwriting’s aesthetic is academic, intimate, and romantic all at once and harkens back to the opening credits, during which the titles played over a birds-eye view of a desk cluttered with film canisters and photographs of ancient bronze figures. With this association in mind, the script evokes the elegant shorthand of a scholar, or perhaps an artist’s signature—maybe even Elio’s, or that of director Luca Guadagnino, or that of Call Me book author André Aciman. The handwritten style of the text is personal, as if we are flipping through the pages of a diary, an object dedicated to the preservation of memories—memories which are, upon recording and revisiting, inherently fabricated. The film becomes a time capsule for a fictionalized adolescence. This text, along with all images in the opening shot—the brightly colored clothing, the red Keds, the Porsche poster on the wall, and Marzia herself—are emblematic of “Summer 1983.” As Call Me sets up its utopia, it recognizes its subjective, filmic nature by marking it with nostalgic personal touches and cultural motifs.

The film continues to cast its fairytale aura in the next shot. This is the first moment we see the gangly Elio, and a Robert Mapplethorpe poster behind him reaffirms the time period. Elio is clearing out his closet. When he leans out his window to catch a glimpse of his arriving houseguest, another caption appears in the same dainty scribble: “Somewhere in northern Italy.” The camera pans from Elio’s window to the driveway down below, where sunlight shines through trees’ luscious green leaves, and an emerald car—nearly blending in with the surrounding vegetation—can be seen creeping up the drive.
This caption may as well have read, “In a land far, far away.” Italy immediately becomes a vague notion of itself, stripped of many of its political particularities but brimming with its most alluring cultural ones; the film is a sensory overload of nature at its most exquisite. Elio romps half-naked through forests with his friends. Plump, sensuous peaches are grown and plucked in his own yard. He and Oliver laze in fluttering fields of grass until the sun simmers their skin, and they cool off by dipping into crystal clear pools of water. They visit gleaming beaches and hike up misty mountainsides where waterfalls boom like thunder and cascade into the earth’s open mouth. This film is the most beautiful advertisement for Italy anyone has ever seen.

Elio and Oliver are beautiful, too. They both possess a classical, sculptural allure akin to the film’s omnipresent Greco-Roman statues, which we see in the opening montage of busts, chiseled faces, spaghetti-like hair, and sinewy torsos that twist as if in aerobic motion. Elio’s parents are idealized as well, offering Oliver and their son total freedom and encouraging them to seek pleasure and happiness. Both the elegant and stunning Mrs. Perlman and her jovial, bespectacled husband carry a worldly intellectualism; they are fluent in several languages and well versed in all things classical. Elio spends his time transcribing and playing music, reading, basking in the sun, snacking on delicacies prepared by his maid, Mafalda, and biking through the heavenly countryside into the nearby town, where he and his friends often go dancing.

**Sickly Sweet: Threats beneath Call Me’s Flawless Facade**

Thus, while all the cultural signposts are showcased in the film’s fictional depiction of 1980s Italy—whether it be the New Wave domination of music and pop culture or the Italian landscape, language, and lifestyle surrounding the Perlmans—the sociopolitical details of the
time and place bubble beneath the film’s surface, only occasionally materializing during the film. The only mention of 1980s Italian politics in the film takes place during a dinner scene nearly an hour into the movie, when two Italian guests share a meal with the Perlmans. The visiting couple speaks in Italian loudly and rapidly, arguing, cursing, and talking over one another. They cover a variety of topics, including art—referencing the death of legendary surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel—and politics, specifically those of their new socialist Prime Minister, Bettino Craxi. Craxi would be charged with corruption and forced to resign ten years later in 1993; he remains a highly polarizing figure in Italy.\textsuperscript{14} Although this line of dialogue is an explicit political reference in \textit{Call Me}, it is still muddled by its chaotic context; the dinnertime chatter is so all over the place that the allusion to Craxi is swiftly buried under a pile of other conversation topics. For American audiences, the fact that the discussion takes place in Italian further veils the political comment; although the film translates the Italian in English subtitles, the words’ content and meaning are pushed to the periphery—or to the bottom of the screen. Reading them is optional. Oliver, who tries to keep up with the conversation but fails, is a proxy for non-Italian viewers who find themselves lost in the confusion. In this way, the film draws attention to its own muddling of reality. Even as the film hides the political reality of 1980s Italy by pulling linguistic tricks, it simultaneously exposes that trickery. Additionally, this scene contrasts the stereotypically boisterous, bourgeois Italians at the table with their quietly omnipresent servants by cutting to Anchise the gardener, who lies peacefully in the grass, chuckling softly at the chaos. This may come across as socioeconomic commentary by painting Anchise, the “help,” as the benevolent simpleton next to his self-absorbed employers; perhaps it also reveals a

generational gap between old and young Italians. Some of the film’s repressed politics ultimately leak out.

Several other inadvertent traces of both AIDS and homophobia crop up in the film despite the fact that neither are overt subjects. There is also no explicit mention of the AIDS crisis in the imaginary ‘80s of Call Me, despite the fact that it is set during the height of the AIDS panic, nor are there any overtly homophobic characters. However, the dangers and pressures associated with homosexuality are implied when, for instance, Oliver is initially hesitant to engage in a sexual relationship with Elio, his reason being that he “want[s] to be good”—implying that homosexual behavior is bad. At the end of the film, Oliver returns to America and marries a woman, presumably at least partly out of obligation to traditional gender roles. Additionally, when a gay couple visits the Perlman household for dinner, Elio lightly makes fun of their homosexuality by calling them “Sonny and Cher” to his father, which the professor scolds him for. Some critics have also suggested that the constant presence of houseflies represents the threat of AIDS, and others argue that it is merely an embodiment the “fester of repressed desires.” Some have also read Elio’s nosebleed as symbolic of the AIDS epidemic, as well. While the word “gay” never comes up, and as I said before, both of Elio’s parents are supportive of his relationship with Oliver, threats associated with homosexuality make themselves known in a far more indirect way, which I will explain more thoroughly later in this paper.

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15 Call Me By Your Name, dir. Luca Guadagnino.
The Perlmans and Oliver are, moreover, all Jewish and living in a predominantly Catholic Italy, but the film barely acknowledges anti-Semitism. (Anti-Semitism and homosexuality are thus paralleled by their hiddenness, though I will also further analyze this conflation later.) For instance, Oliver wears a Star of David necklace but Elio doesn’t, because his mother asks that they be “discreet Jews.” While out in town, the two men joke about being the “odd Jew out.” They pass a portrait of Benito Mussolini, fascist leader and ally to Adolf Hitler, hanging over a woman’s door. Yet, just like homophobia, anti-Semitism does not act as a tangible negative force against the protagonists. Most of the Jewish themes within the movie are covert—“discreet,” even.

The film then is constantly engaged in revealing traces of the very traumatic history that it seeks to repress. The utopian picture subtly acknowledges its own artifice and lets viewers peek at its underlying reality. Why does Call Me try to rid its world of flaws and complexities in the first place, though, and why does it teasingly expose its erasure of history?

From Lavish Landscapes, to “Love is Love,” to Something Much More Concerning: Some Explanations for Call Me’s Erasure

Although the filmmakers claim to have crafted this utopia for mere aesthetic reasons, I remain skeptical about their various arguments. Screenwriter James Ivory, for example, explains his view of the film’s politically and economically untroubled paradise:

I think it's that people love romances told in this kind of way, romances which have a kind of glamour to them. The glamour is partly supplied by Italy and partly supplied by Luca [the director], the world he chooses to depict in his movies: Upper-middle-class, well-off worlds of people living privileged lives, usually in some wonderful house. That appeals to people. I'm not saying it's anything bad or good, it's just simply something that we like and I, too, like it. My films are like that. Most of my films are set in an upper-

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18 *Call Me By Your Name*, dir. Luca Guadagnino.
19 Ibid.
middle-class world of well-off people who may have all kinds of emotional problems, but they live well. Part of the appeal of *Call Me by Your Name* is it's a world people would like to be in. It's summertime in Italy. That's something we all crave.\(^{20}\)

This is true; a large part of why people adore *Call Me* is that it offers audiences a chance to briefly inhabit a dazzling landscape and highbrow world. *The Guardian* goes so far as to call the film “an irresistible seduction in itself.”\(^{21}\) But the film could achieve its visual polish and commercial success without deleting its context; after all, Ivory managed it in his 1987 film *Maurice*, a gay romance that enraptured audiences with its upper class Edwardian world but also addressed early 20th century societal pressures and homophobia. Could the creators of *Call Me* be afraid that its gay love story would be less palatable or less romantic than a straight one if it took place anywhere other than a utopia? Perhaps, in some ways, the backdrop is used as a tool to lure straight audiences and persuade them to view the film’s homoerotic love affair as nothing but beautiful and natural. In this vein, the film contrasts itself with *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), which—although it, too, depicts two handsome men—surrounds its love story with far more grit and the constant threat of persecution and death in rural America.

Many have lauded the film for simply offering gay filmgoers a break from constant onscreen tragedy. The “glamour” and unblemished world of *Call Me* might, in fact, let its central gay romance exist in a utopia simply because it can. Peter Spears, a producer of the film, tweets—seemingly, on behalf of all gay audiences—that *Call Me* is “the movie we needed when we were growing up, a great cinematic romance that challenged conventions.”\(^{22}\) Additionally,


Eric Eidelstein writes in *Mic* that the film “avoids the thing that hangs over too many LGBTQ films—tragedy.”

*Call Me* breaks the mold by offering queer viewers a rare opportunity to project themselves into an alternate reality without negative forces like homophobia or AIDS. Additionally, if we think about the film’s use of homosexuality and Jewishness as metaphors for each other—a connection I will explore in detail later—then it provides the same freeing experience for Jewish viewers. Audiences appreciate the film’s refreshing choices that seem to just let people be people rather than box them into prescribed sexual identities and conventions.

Anthony Lane of the *New Yorker* writes:

> The film’s release could not be more propitious. So assailed are we by reports of harmful pleasures, and of the coercive male will being imposed through lust, that it comes as a relief to be reminded, in such style, of consensual joy. “I don’t want either of us to pay for this,” Oliver says. By falling for each other, he and Elio tumble not into error, still less into sin, but into a sort of delirious concord, which may explain why Elio’s parents, far from disapproving, bestow their tacit blessing on the pact. More unusual still is that the movie steers away from the politics of sexuality. Elio makes love to Marzia, on a dusty mattress, in a loft like an old dovecote, only hours before he meets with Oliver at midnight, but you don’t think, Oh, Elio’s having straight sex, followed by gay sex, and therefore we must rank him as bi-curious. Rather, you are curious about him and his paramours as individuals—these particular bodies, with these hungry souls, at these ravening moments in their lives. Desire is passed around the movie like a dish, and the characters are invited to help themselves, each to his or her own taste. Maybe a true love story (and when did you last see one of those?) has no time for types.

As Lane contends, the film maneuvers its way around what many consider to be tired tropes of gay cinematic relationships and casts a nonchalant attitude and sense of universality over the narrative.

This brings us to another explanation for *Call Me*’s removal of political specificities; the film makes its romance attractive to audiences not only by furnishing it with “glamorous”

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bourgeois decor, but also by generalizing it into a universal love story rather than a uniquely gay love story. Some argue that eliminating political external factors allows the romance to become more relatable and thoroughly examined. According to producer Peter Spears, by highlighting all of 1980s Italy’s positive traits and very few of its negative ones, *Call Me* begins a case study of human desire, focusing on the emotional turmoil of its protagonists. Elio and Oliver’s perfect world allows the film to deeply explore the raw vulnerability of first love. Spears says that financiers were confused by the fact that “nothing bad happens” in the film, to which he replied, “That’s kind of the point.” He wanted the only stakes to be “the human heart.”

The film further establishes this universality by implying that everyone and everything, even a peach—is sexual. As Lane explains, the movie makes itself out to be very nonchalant about Elio’s three consecutive sexual exploits with a man, a woman, and a piece of fruit; all three of these exploits are treated as equal. Additionally, the film itself is extremely voyeuristic, lingering on every pretty thing it passes. It unabashedly lusts after its subjects, whether that be sweat-beaded bodies, sun-soaked bedspreads, lush vegetation, or any of Mafalda’s delicious concoctions. It immediately invites us into this celebration of desire in its opening credits, which fill the screen with beautiful bronze forms. Later on, Professor Perlman looks through photographs of the statues and gushes about their sexual appeal and “ageless ambiguity.” Such ambiguity means everything is the same at its essence, something to desire and be desired by. In the world of *Call Me*, lust is universal and not limited by gender or even taxonomic rank (after finding the peach, Oliver jokes that Elio has moved onto the plant kingdom); this is a world where desire is *human*, not necessarily queer.

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The film does not simply tolerate Elio and Oliver’s relationship but rather depicts it as no different from a heterosexual one—as if Guadagnino or Aciman do not even notice both characters are men and instead merely see them as humans in love. In fact, the story’s creators may even condemn my tendency to label the film, as well as Elio and Oliver’s relationship, as “gay”; they may prefer I use the term “pansexual”—meaning gender and sex are totally irrelevant to sexual or romantic desire—or reject any sort of terminology on principle. The film posits itself as genderblind by creating a utopia that truly embodies the notion that “love is love.” Stephen Garrett of The Observer argues, too, that “Guadagnino’s intent was never sexual politics but simply to explore the nature of desire.”26 This genderblindness is not just a positive thing, however; the film’s idea of not seeing gender is essentially similar to the notorious “colorblind” mantra, “I don’t see color”; of course, not seeing color or race is commonly regarded as erasure rather than an acceptance or celebration of differences. However, the film’s choice to wipe itself clean of social and political particularities to explore universal desire rather than necessarily gay desire is inherently a political move.

While Lane appreciates the universal, “true” love story of Call Me, some view the film’s universalism as a watered-down or even—as Billy Gray of Slate writes—“neutered” depiction of homosexuality.27 Specifically, the film drew criticism for averting its cinematic gaze during Elio and Oliver’s sex scene. While Ivory’s original script took after its literary source material and explicitly described the protagonists’ first intimate encounter, Guadagnino ultimately chose to omit any graphic depiction of anal sex; instead, the camera politely turns away from the two men.

26 Stephen Garrett, “Director Luca Guadagnino on Why ‘Call Me by Your Name’ Is Making Everyone Cry.”
and floats over to the window. This approach goes against Aciman’s alleged intent; in an interview with the author, Out magazine writes that Aciman wanted to “depict the preciousness, and precariousness, of human intimacy, and definitely not pull the old train-through-a-tunnel trick when the clothes start to come off.” Guadagnino nevertheless pulls this trick. Regarding the book’s explicit language, Aciman also explains, “I wanted to be in bed with them. I wanted to focus on that.” Meanwhile, Guadagnino’s lens literally shifts away from the bed. He chooses to exclude the homosexual sex scene but include a heterosexual scene and, famously, a persicosexual (man-on-pear) scene.

Maxwell Heller, also known as the drag queen Miz Cracker—star of RuPaul’s Drag Race—claims that Call Me is not even a gay film at all, despite the public’s tendency to praise it as such. Writing in her drag queen persona, Miz Cracker contemplates what she calls the film’s “straightness”:

The straightness is everywhere once you clear the lust from your eyes. The book was penned by a straight author who says that he has never had a gay relationship in his life, and it tells the story of two apparently heteroflexible but largely hetero-leaning men who seem to experiment with same-sex sex only furtively in their lives. The film is even straighter. Its leading lovers are played by straight actors who have been winking and giggling on the press circuit about having to pretend to (sort of) fuck. Indeed, all “gay” sex takes place off screen—only boy-girl or boy-fruit sex happens within the frame. And the only openly gay characters—a pair of “boyfriend twin-ed” academics who visit Elio’s parents for dinner—are portrayed as ridiculous Tweedledum-and-Tweedledee types.

The dinner scene Cracker refers to portrays the flamboyant gay couple whom Elio makes fun of to his father. The film contrasts Elio and Oliver’s timeless, universal love against the dinner

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guests’ queer love, and it appears to favor the former by presenting the latter as a stereotype. If Call Me posits itself as a “true love story” with “no time for types,” as Lane says, then that must include the gay type. If Elio and Oliver also possess the “ageless ambiguity” Professor Perlman speaks of, then their sexuality loses its homosexual particularity, and the story cannot be gay either.

In this reading, the film may strip itself of social and political context related to homosexuality in a (largely successful) attempt to appeal to audience members of all sexual orientations. Guadagnino himself also claims he was interested in showing a “powerful universality” that all audience members can relate to, and as I previously stated, Stephen Garrett argues that the film’s “ostensibly … niche story about two gay men falling in love” has “the traction to go mainstream” specifically because it is about “the nature of desire” rather than “sexual politics.” It appeals to straight viewers because it is gay, but not too gay; even though the love story is between two men, it mostly does away with the specificity of a gay relationship by avoiding topics like AIDS and homophobia. In turn, straight audiences have an opportunity for a sexual tourism of sorts—the chance to vicariously experience queer love without its labels or repercussions. Meanwhile, as Miz Cracker argues, the film also appeals to gay audiences because of its straightness. She ponders, “Perhaps we gay boys have fallen for this ungay romance because it’s so straight—and if we gays love anything, it’s chasing after straight guys.” She also suggests that gay viewers are lured in by the character of the “tragically embattled straight-man,” or the “tortured closet case.”

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32 Miz Cracker, "Call Me by Your Name Is Not a Gay Story."
33 Ibid.
draws in straight audiences, the straight-but-not-too-straightness of the film is the perfect balance between sexual unattainability and possibility. Cracker explains how this glimmer of hope appeals to gay audiences:

We love this sort of playful teasing from straight guys—the grinning suggestion that we might get a swat on the butt or a drunken cuddle as long as we don’t push it too far. So when we consume this film, we’re willing to call it a gay masterpiece without any of the usual demands, such as real gay actors playing realistic gay characters in some sort of gay cultural or historical context. No, we’re going to get all flustered and delight in the straight presence, just like we would if Hammer, as his Oliver does with Elio, unexpectedly squeezed our shoulder during a sporting event in real life. We’re all going to skim these interviews with sweaty palms, searching for more evidence that one of the straight actors questioned his sexuality for just a moment. After all, we readily accepted a straight man’s right to tell this story in the first place.\(^34\)

Cracker concludes with the idea that gay audiences are ultimately willing to accept the film’s straightness because of this fascination with the “closet case” and because of the film’s beauty. Because they do not see themselves represented on screen, they wind up fetishizing what they do see:

... here we are, genuflecting as a group before a gay masterpiece that is absolutely not gay. But because \textit{Call Me by Your Name} so perfectly captures one still-powerful facet of man-on-man desire, the straight crush, it has given us a unifying common text—even though we’re not truly represented within its pages ... Sure, it’s a primarily straight book, but it’s so breathtakingly beautiful that just to have it glance in our direction seems like enough.\(^35\)

According to Cracker, then, the film draws audiences in with either censored homosexuality or the fantasy of closeted homosexuality instead of being a truly gay film. This hints at something more problematic than the mere “straightness” of the film. It is not entirely compelling to argue that the film is completely straight simply because it is made by straight people; after all, all

\(^{34}\) Ibid.
\(^{35}\) Ibid.
kinds of people write about all kinds of identities in art. The film’s total erasure of AIDS and homophobia is actually far more insidious.

Perhaps the film erases such realities and floats in sexual limbo as a purely conservative measure, either out of subconscious homophobia or in order to avoid controversy. Even though Aciman wrote an explicit love scene in his book, he told Out magazine that he was actually glad the film was not as graphic:

> When I started seeing the sex scenes, I was hoping they would not go overboard. They did it in a subdued, chaste manner that was not ashamed of what was going on, but also did not give you the gory, chilling details of real sex. I didn't want to see that, and I was afraid of the peach scene because it could have easily been a pornographic scene.

Aciman’s words here are paradoxical; how could the scene be simultaneously unashamed and toned down? Why does he want it to be toned down in the first place? Perhaps Aciman is in the same camp as Guadagnino, who argues that it is more empowering *not* to show Elio and Oliver having sex. While speaking at the New York Film Festival, he responded to backlash regarding the film’s choice to exclude a graphic sex scene:

> To put our gaze upon their lovemaking would have been a sort of unkind intrusion. I think that their love is in all things, so when we gaze towards the window and we see the trees, there is a sense of witnessing that. I refuse with strong firmness that I was coy in not showing that, because I think that Oliver and Elio and Armie and Timothée, the four of them displayed a very strong intimacy and closeness in so many ways and it was enough.

Guadagnino’s insistence that Oliver and Elio’s love is “in all things” brings us back to the idea of a natural, universal, pansexual desire. This answer, however, still does not explain why Guadagnino chose the gay love scene, out of all the love scenes, to be implied through vague symbolism instead of either showing the real thing or making all the other sex scenes equally

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36 Ibid.
implicit. He has no problem exposing the naked body, arguing that he dislikes the “prudishness” behind “the sense of sacredness that happens when you film naked actors and actresses,” but for whatever reason, he does not treat homosexual sex in the same way.\textsuperscript{38} The question still stands: if the film is so open-minded about gender dynamics, then why does it choose to eliminate them instead of celebrate their unique qualities? It seems as though Guadagnino masks the film’s conservatism with an illusion of extreme tolerance.

Guadagnino himself confirms his conservative perspective. His own words, also from his talk at the New York Film Festival, are highly enlightening and disturbing, and perhaps reveal why the film erases so much political and sexual content:

I remember the script was pretty graphic in the description of the first time they make love. I was struggling with that because coming from someone who debuted in 1993 with a short film that was pretty out there, called \textit{Here}, I think I’m interested in the representation of sex between people if that is in an insight about their behavior and who they are. But if it’s an illustration or transition, I just don’t care. I think we had everything we needed in the movie about their intimacy, about the necessity of attraction to one another. I found it erotic when they put their feet on top of the other’s feet. That moment is so strong and so powerful because it dictates an urgency of intimacy. What would we have gained in seeing the actual physical act between the two of them? I think not much. I also like the idea that we gaze toward the window and to the trees like a \textit{McCarthy-era} [italics added] movie. We were free to show everything and we decided not to. And in a way it was a very liberating experience.\textsuperscript{39}

First, I believe that Elio and Oliver’s sex scene could indeed provide insight about their behavior and who they are, if Guadagnino were to put it in the film. He and James Ivory’s jobs are to convey those insights in every scene, and they are clearly good at it, so they could have done the same in a lovemaking scene; it would not need to be a mere “illustration or transition.” Second, when Guadagnino asks what we would have gained in seeing the physical act of sex between

\textsuperscript{38} Kyle Buchanan, "Why Sundance Fell in Love With the Gay Romance \textit{Call Me by Your Name}.”
\textsuperscript{39} Joshua Encinias, "Call Me by Your Name’ Team on Romance, Sufjan Stevens, Maurice Pialat, and Sequel Potential," \textit{The Film Stage}, October 11, 2017, accessed April 13, 2019, \url{https://thefilmstage.com/features/call-me-by-your-name-team-on-romance-sufjan-stevens-maurice-pialat-and-sequel-potential/}. 
Elio and Oliver, I would argue that we would have gained quite a lot. Specifically, the sex scene would have served as on-screen representation of homosexuality and perhaps helped normalize seeing gay sex in cinema, especially the kind of “serious” arthouse cinema like Call Me which gets nominated for prestigious awards. However, Guadagnino probably means that the film would not have gained much thematically or artistically rather than in terms of cultural impact; if so, I would direct him back to my first point. Third, Guadagnino’s comparison of the film’s averted gaze to a McCarthy-era movie gimmick—more importantly, his positive attitude about the idea—is deeply unsettling, at best.

This striking reference to McCarthy comes with a plethora of unpleasant associations and memories. What Guadagnino is referring to is the censorship of movies that took place in the 1930s-1960s under the Motion Picture Production Code, commonly known as the Hays Code. Why does Guadagnino choose to define his suggestive film trickery as characteristic of the “McCarthy era” rather than the Hays Code era? While fifties film censorship and McCarthyism were different things, the Hays Code temporally aligned with the blacklisting of suspected communist sympathizers in Hollywood. Senator Joseph McCarthy spearheaded this blacklisting during the “Second Red Scare” of the 1950s as part of his campaign to weed out communism through wild accusations and harsh punishments.40 Paralleling this Red Scare was a “Lavender Scare,” the interrogation and mass firing of LGBTQ American government employees.41 It is also worth mentioning that McCarthy was rumored to be a closeted gay man himself.42

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could this mean for *Call Me*? Guadagnino points to a man who allegedly hid his own homosexuality, praising and even saying that he wanted to emulate the repressive tactics of the McCarthy era.

In a time when film no longer must undergo McCarthy-era censorship, Guadagnino chooses to do it himself anyway; he even suggests that he “likes” hiding the film’s homosexuality. His insistence that using the tunnel-through-the-train trick is “liberating,” as well as his description of the would-be sex scene as an “unkind intrusion,” suggest that Guadagnino considers this a reclamation of sorts, as if he is subverting the idea of censorship to take back privacy and agency for what used to be censored. However, the sentiments behind Guadagnino’s words seem so muddled and off-putting that it is possible he is reaching for excuses to defend himself; I am not fully convinced that he is subverting anything. It is possible that, like McCarthy, he is hiding the film’s gay identity in some psychological maneuver, and that by referencing McCarthy himself, Guadagnino is calling attention to that repression.

Amidst a paragraph of pretty words about true “intimacy” and “closeness,” Guadagnino leaks out his true intentions with a single word: McCarthy. Guadagnino’s revelation that 1950s McCarthyism informs *Call Me*, alongside his description of the film as a contemporary celebration of gay romance, shows how he hides homosexuality and politics in the film and simultaneously exposes that hiddenness. He filters reality out of his movie by repressing any graphic homosexual content, and yet he simultaneously acknowledges that repression, albeit indirectly. This is analogous to how I will be reading *Call Me*; as the film stifles its more difficult or controversial realities in favor of a utopia, it also lets slip many of those realities and calls attention to its erasure. To further this argument, I will place it in the theoretical framework of psychological repression.
CHAPTER 2
“Working Through” and “Acting Out”: Some Theoretical Considerations

Eric Santner’s reading of the German historians’ debate of the 1980s, in which right- and left-wing historians argued about how to tell the story of the Nazi past, offers some productive strategies, based in a Freudian framework, for thinking about how we might read Call Me’s political erasure. Even though Santner tackles a very different subject and context, the German historical controversy is partially analogous nonetheless, because Call Me displays several symptoms of what Santner labels “narrative fetishism,” a psychological response to trauma. When confronted with an inescapable past, two potential responses are mourning and narrative fetishism; while mourning remembers and productively acknowledges the history in question, narrative fetishism diverts and reimagines it. Using competing narratives of Germany’s role in World War II as an example, Santner describes narrative fetishism as a "construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place.” By the same token, we can understand Call Me as a fetishized text that presents us with a fairytale world which largely ignores real historical crises such as AIDS, homophobia, and anti-Semitism. In his article “Representing the Holocaust: Reflections on the Historians' Debate,” Dominick LaCapra, too suggests ways to think about such narratives, rearticulating Freud’s idea of “acting out” as

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44 Santner, 144.
45 Ibid.
opposed to “working through” in mourning.\(^4^6\) When a subject is willing and able to face trauma, they “work through” it, often in ritual enactment or repetition of the event. “Acting out,” on the other hand, is similar to Santner’s idea of narrative fetishism, especially on the national level; LaCapra describes the process as the construction of an “uncritical, customary identity that seeks an affirmative conception of the past and a self-confirming normalization or national identity even at the price of denial and distortion.”\(^4^7\) In other words, acting out means lying to oneself about the past. Insofar as Call Me is a text which acts out rather than works through the 1980s, we can read it as conjuring a national identity which is blind to religious and sexual differences as well as the AIDS crisis.

**Italy, We Have a Problem: Life is Beautiful, Call Me By Your Name, and a National Myth**

Before turning to the narrative fetishism in Call Me, I would like to consider one more valuable tool which might be helpful in reading that film. Sander Gilman’s reading of the 1997 Roberto Benigni film *Life is Beautiful* may help place Call Me in the context of Santner’s theory and understanding why a text might fetishize its narrative. Gilman reads *Life* (as I will abbreviate it for the remainder of this text) as a fetishized text echoing Santner’s discussion of repression in historical debates, and he points to the film’s idealized portrait of Italy as an example of revised political history. Just as Santner argues in his article that certain German historians are deflecting the lasting trauma of Germany’s involvement in the Holocaust, Gilman proposes that the film’s fetishism is a reflection and reinforcement of a national Italian myth in which no anti-Semitism existed in Italy before Germany brought it there. *Life* also happens to take place in a fairytale


\(^{4^7}\) LaCapra, 117.
version of Italy similar to that in *Call Me*. So, Gilman’s reading of *Life* is a helpful example of Santner’s theory, but it is especially relevant because the answer in his particular example of fetishism may also be the answer to the fetishism in *Call Me*.

I would like to briefly outline the plot of *Life* before going into Gilman’s reading of it. The story begins with its narrator calling it a fairytale, and the first half of the film plays out as such. Set in 1939, the film follows its eccentric Jewish protagonist, Guido Orefice, through a series of comical situations and adventures in his Italian town. He meets and falls in love with a Catholic woman named Dora, and through a series of happy coincidences, their magical world seems to pull them together. However, the film’s second half totally disrupts the first half’s absurdist, comedic style. Guido and his son Giosué are sent away to a concentration camp, and Dora voluntarily follows them. This grim portion of the movie follows Guido as he struggles to keep Giosué alive by telling him the regulations of the camp are merely the rules of a game which they must follow in order to win a shiny new tank—a real one, not just a toy like Giosué’s. At the end of the film, Guido is killed by a Nazi officer the day before American troops liberate the camp. The next morning, an American soldier rides in on a Sherman tank and puts Giosué on his shoulder. As the surviving Jews march out of the camp, led by the US Army, Giosué spots Dora and is reunited with her.

In some ways, this structure mirrors that of *Call Me*. Both begin with a fairytale—although it only takes up about half of *Life* but stretches on until the second to last scene in *Call Me*—and abruptly transition into a rude awakening. (It is, however, worth noting that the fairytale somewhat lingers in the second half of *Life*, because Benigni intersplices the harsh objective reality of the concentration camp with the happier, subjective memory of Giosué as he plays Guido’s “game.”) The fairytale portion puts the would-be oppressed characters in a world
seemingly without any oppressive forces, although hints of discrimination crop up. I already outlined those hints in *Call Me* and will discuss them in more detail later. In *Life*, warnings of the coming Holocaust include the Heil Hitler salute, anti-Semitic vandalism and violence against Guido’s uncle, and the fact that Ferruccio’s boss has sons named Benito and Adolf. All of these signs are either brushed off or laughed off by Guido and, ultimately, by the film. The fairytale of *Life* is shattered when the Germans arrive, and the fairytale of *Call Me* ends when the summer does; Oliver leaves, and a couple months later in the cold winter, he informs Elio of his engagement. Both *Call Me* and *Life* create a temporary, perfect parallel universe for its minority protagonists by ridding their worlds of real cultural and political conflicts, but traces of those conflicts repeatedly reveal themselves throughout.

Gilman suggests that *Life* reflects and promotes a national Italian myth that the country was totally without anti-Semitism before World War II. According to this narrative, even Mussolini and the Fascist Italians displayed no discrimination against Jewish Italians until the Germans invaded their society and, subsequently, their ideologies. Thus, Gilman argues, Guido’s character “is Jewish only within the Italian model of the “hidden Jew,” a model in which “Jews were literally invisible within Italian culture and that only the bestiality of the Germans differentiated them from their non-Jewish Italian neighbors.” According to Gilman, *Life* erases Italy’s fascist history through enforcing this model.

The fairytale half of *Life* represents life in Italy before Germany supposedly introduced anti-Semitism into the country. As I mentioned before, there are a few signs of anti-Semitism, but all of them come from Germans, and most of them are used for comedic purposes.

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49 Ibid.
Additionally, the audience does not even know that Guido is Jewish until quite some time into the film. From this perspective, Italy is blind to anti-Semitism before the war.

Then comes the dismal second half, which shows life in the concentration camps as Guido dedicates his life to protecting his son by keeping the illusion of the “game” alive. On their first day, a Nazi soldier arrives at Guido’s sleeping quarters and asks if anyone in the room speaks German. Guido lies and volunteers to translate. As he stands in front of the small crowd of Jewish Italians, he does not only “translate” the soldier’s words from German to Italian—he translates the harsh regulations of daily life at the camp into the rules of a silly game. In this way, Benigni assigns each language an inherent quality, a true essence; German is the language of hate, embedded with prejudice and cruelty, while Italian is the language of love, embedded with laughter and benevolence. Gilman explains, “This juxtaposition again emphasizes the ‘good’ Italians and their relationship to ‘their’ Jews as opposed to the bad, murderous Germans of the camps.”

Perhaps according to Benigni and the myth which Gilman dissects, Italy in its purest form—untainted by Germany—is as perfect, playful, and compassionate as it is depicted in the first half of the film. By preserving the “game,” Guido also preserves this idealized Italian identity.

Benigni claims that he made Life to show that “laughter can save us,” but the implications of the film are far more complex. Laughter does indeed save Giosué’s life, but if we think of Guido’s game as his way of rewriting a bleak reality into a happy one, then what does that say about historical reimaginings in general, or the Italian myth which Gilman deconstructs in particular? Does such an illusion actually serve people well or does it hinder them? Jennifer

50 Ibid.
Taylor compares *Life* to the 1999 film adaptation of Jurek Becker’s *Jakob the Liar*, arguing that, “In Becker’s fictional world, stories allow the living to engage with a past they cannot change and with a present society that must admit culpability and guilt; in the Benigni text, stories literally save lives and allow the living to continue to believe in the myth of total assimilation.”

Indeed, Giosué grows up to realize that the “game” was not real and was merely a “gift” from his father, so that specific illusion dissolves. However, the myth of a total absence of anti-Semitism in Italy before the war—what Taylor calls the “myth of total assimilation”—remains. As Taylor suggests, this myth does not help its target audience work through its regrettable past; instead, it simply rewrites it and displaces all blame. In other words, we can think of *Life* as a fetishized narrative. Its focus on a humanist story of love and selflessness paints the Holocaust as more of a tragedy or a tale of heroism than a mass murder. It also idealizes an Italy where Jews are either invisible or absent; its fairytale beginning takes place in a pre-war Italy in which Jews supposedly blended in with everyone else, and its happy ending takes place in a post-war Italy in which Jews were eliminated. *Life* begins with Guido as a “hidden” Jew and ends with him—and the countless other Holocaust victims—dead. It also ends with Giosué alive and well in his non-Jewish mother’s arms in an image of dramatic redemption or even, as Taylor proposes, citing Gilman, a “restored” Catholic world and reunion of mother and son. The film’s happy ending centers on Giosué thanking his father for his sacrifices, or his “gift.” However, because of that “gift,” Giosué now has a life ahead of him free of Jewishness; thus, the happy ending becomes disturbing, because it can only take place in a Jew-less Italy. According to Taylor, the film then “exposes the ‘gift’ as a problematic and false belief in the transcendence of humanism and the

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power of the human spirit.” This fetishized memory of an unblemished Italy literally displaces Jews from its narrative and draws attention to its own repression in the process.

Gilman's reading of *Life* presents us with useful strategies for unpacking the problem of Jewish identity in *Call Me*. Like Guido, Elio begins as a hidden Jew. His entire family keeps their religious faith “discreet.” Then, Oliver strolls onto the scene literally wearing his Jewishness on his body, in the form of a Star of David necklace. He inspires Elio to do the same. In film’s coda, however, Elio dons a shirt buttoned up to his neck, with the necklace nowhere in sight—perhaps it still lies beneath his collar, concealed, as his mother would prefer. His family also still maintains their cautious manner of Jewishness at the film’s close; as they prepare to celebrate Hanukkah amongst themselves, the snow falling outside their windows creates a sense of guardedness. The home, cozy and safe with both its fireplace and Menorah flickering, almost feels like a secret place of worship, obscured by (and protected from) the world outside. The Perlmans are, once again, hidden Jews, like in Gilman’s model.

Just as the Perlmans begin and end their story as hidden Jews, both Elio and Oliver begin and end keeping their homosexuality under wraps. As Elio’s family readies the Hanukkah festivities, he speaks on the phone with Oliver, who reveals his wedding plans. Now that the fairytale of summer is over, both men have returned to the real world and to their concealed identities. Like Jewishness in *Life is Beautiful*, the homosexuality has been eliminated—and like Giosué, Oliver can now live his life with a woman. He can fulfill the Catholic image and shroud the parts of his identity which do not adhere to that image. Elio’s father also reveals his own repression in his monologue to Elio near the end of the film:

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53 Ibid., 172.
You had a beautiful friendship. Maybe more than a friendship. And I envy you. ... I may have come close, but I never had what you two had. Something always held me back or stood in the way.⁵⁴

In these ways, *Call Me* and *Life* are both idealized worlds which simultaneously repress the flawed realities of their histories and draw attention to that repression by acting it out through their characters’ inner turmoil.

Each film’s tendency to both repress and inadvertently expose its lasting historical traumas shows that its diversion from reality is ultimately unsuccessful. For instance, *Life* blatantly tells us that it is a fairytale—that is to say, it underscores the unreality of its story. The film also reminds viewers that the “game” is a fantasy by showing Guido’s desperate struggle to keep the illusion and, subsequently, his son, alive. I have mentioned some of the ways *Call Me* also calls its own utopia into question, such as through Elio’s nosebleed and the housefly motif, which I am about to explore more thoroughly. In these moments of unintentional exposure, trauma finds its way around the coping mechanisms of narrative fetishism and acting out, and it often does so corporeally. In the introduction to *Trauma and Cinema*, E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang assert that trauma is “engraved on the body” and is thus a “special form of bodily memory”:

The memory tries to find a way into consciousness, but ends up only leaking its disturbing and ambivalent traces in the typical traumatic symptoms of flashbacks, hallucinations, phobias, and nightmares.⁵⁵

They argue, in other words, that trauma is inescapable. Because the mind is unable to face the traumatic event, it shuts it out, and the memory locates itself on the body or in the mind. The memory thus debilitates and, as Cathy Caruth argues in her work on trauma, possesses the

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⁵⁴ *Call Me By Your Name*, dir. Luca Guadagnino.
traumatized subject.\textsuperscript{56} Like a ghost, it simply refuses to go away. A film, like a body, is not immune to reality; \textit{Call Me}, despite its best efforts, cannot remove itself from the political realities of 1980s Italy because those realities are etched on the dark underbelly of its utopia.

\textbf{Haunted Heavenly Bodies: How \textit{Call Me}'s Sculptural Perfection is Anything But}

The things that \textit{Call Me} does not mention are still deeply embedded in the film. Those traumatic elements are pushed down in favor of creating a fairytale, but eventually, the repressed trauma leaks out. (Besides, the film, as a well-made piece of art, cannot help but betray its own meaning; good artists create things that can be read any number of ways.) \textit{The Atlantic}’s Spencer Kornhaber calls these leaks \textit{Call Me}’s “horror-film flashes.”\textsuperscript{57} We might also think of these repressed traumas as what Kaplan and Wang call “bodily memory” or, in Jo Labanyi’s words, filmic “ghosts” which haunt subjects who refuse to confront their troubled pasts. Labanyi, a professor of Spanish film, links her idea of cinematic ghosts that “confront the traumas of the past” to “oppressive silences,” like the aggressive silences in the Spanish films \textit{El espíritu de la colemna} (1973) and \textit{El sur} (1983).\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Call Me}’s silence is certainly also deafening. The silence between Oliver and Elio is probably the most sexually charged thing in the film, even more so than actual sex; after all, Guadagnino fills the movie to the brim with those silences but opts out of showing the two men making love. The silence between Elio and his parents is perhaps equally loud; his father does not break it until the end of the story, and his mother spends most of the film passing Elio smug, knowing glances. The silence of the servants, particularly Anchise,

\textsuperscript{56} Cathy Caruth, \textit{Trauma: Explorations in Memory} (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1995), 151.
\textsuperscript{57} Spencer Kornhaber, “The Shadow Over ‘Call Me by Your Name.’”
\textsuperscript{58} Jo Labanyi, ““History and Hauntology; or, What Does One Do with the Ghosts of the Past? Reflections on Spanish Film and Fiction of the Post-Franco Period,” in \textit{Disremembering the Dictatorship: The Politics of Memory in the Spanish} (Atlanta: Amsterdam, 2003), 67.
allows some unease and class-related concerns to creep into our glossy perception of the Perlman’s lifestyle. Each of these empty spaces force us to consider exactly why they are empty. The film’s literal silence reflects its own neglectful silence on topics like AIDS and homophobia. Perhaps, just as Elio and Oliver’s love is in the trees, the film’s relationship with those issues is hidden in plain sight. The posters, the statues, even the charming array of brightly-colored swimming trunks drip-drying in Elio’s bathroom—all these unassuming bodies or bodily objects function both as utopian modes of escape from the trauma associated with homosexual desire and the ghosts which Cathy Caruth and Jo Labanyi describe, possessing the traumatized subject as reminders of repressed anxieties.

These ghostly objects—all resembling or relating to the body—become symbolic of a link between homosexual desire and death or disease, and thus signify trauma’s corporeal engraving. Oliver’s scrape wound becomes infected and, as he and Elio become more sexually involved, it begins to fester and spread. It is more than just a symptom of their guilt; it imitates an AIDS lesion. When Elio gets a nosebleed at dinner, Oliver’s joke about whether the bleeding is his fault veils the darker implication that their sexual relationship has caused Elio’s physical suffering. We could also easily overlook the Mapplethorpe poster in Elio’s room, but we should not forget that the artist himself died of AIDS in 1989. His photographs have a lot in common with Call Me, emanating a strong fascination with the beauty and eroticism of the human figure that harkens back to classical Greek sculptures.\(^5^9\) Professor Perlman shares this fascination, as we can see when he excitedly narrates the historical journey of a statue that his archaeological team carefully lifts out of the rolling waves of Lake Garda. While beautiful, the sculpture is corroded and fractured. The tension between the statue’s sexual appeal and decay suggest that

this body, obscured far below the water’s surface, is a relic representative of homosexuality as a
death instinct—or more specifically, a deeply buried trace of AIDS.

The motif of the bathroom also brings up negative perceptions of homosexuality in the
1980s. Nathan Abrams, professor of Film Studies at Bangor University in Wales, explains how
the bathroom space is more generally culturally defined:

It is a place of structural oppositions: clean/dirty, public/private; hygienic/unhygienic;
technical/organic. It is the boundary between the acceptable and unacceptable; a place in
which submission to or defiance of authority is negotiated. The bathroom is also ‘a place
where masks are assumed and dropped’ to show us how and what people really are.\textsuperscript{60}

The bathroom which separates Elio and Oliver’s room in \textit{Call Me} aligns with Abrams’
definition. It stands between the two men as they desire each other from their respective
bedrooms, working as a literal boundary. It is where they allow themselves to become vulnerable
and perform private acts they are otherwise tentative about; for example, Oliver performs oral
sex on Elio in the bathroom. It is where “masks”—and swimming trunks—are dropped.
However, men’s public bathrooms in particular hold certain connotations; according to Abrams,
the men’s bathroom is a “space invested with associations of prostitution, AIDS, [and] casual
homosexual (including anal) sex.”\textsuperscript{61} With this in mind, Elio and Oliver’s sexual encounter in the
bathroom takes on a new meaning. Abrams also cites Philip Kuberski, who explains that the
bathroom is “a room for bathing, washing, cosmetics, and self-preparation, but it is also a room
for urination, defecation, masturbation and regurgitation.”\textsuperscript{62} In the novel, Elio and Oliver look at
each other’s feces in the toilet and help one another defecate by massaging each other’s
stomachs.\textsuperscript{63} Bathrooms evoke an odd clash of purity and impurity. In terms of homosexuality,

\textsuperscript{60} Nathan Abrams, \textit{The New Jew in Film: Exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema} (London:
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} André Aciman, \textit{Call Me by Your Name} (New York: Picador, 2007), 171.
sexual acts performed in bathrooms become linked with waste and disease. In the context of Judaism, the bathroom becomes a space in which the Torah’s laws of ritual purity are brought into question. Bodily liquids and discharges such as blood, feces, and semen are all considered unclean, and those who are tainted by them require a ritual cleansing to regain a state of purity. In a bathroom, impure and purifying processes both take place. The film also repeatedly uses water and washing to allude to baptism, such as when Oliver and Elio wade through the spring water which comes down from the Alpi Orobie, or when they eventually journey to its source—the alps themselves—and “disappear into the cascade” of the Cascate del Serio “as they call each other by their own names.” The bathroom is a place where similar cleansing can occur, but also where religiously impure acts take place; the film plays with this paradox. Call Me fetishizes, subverts, and perverts religious and sexual connotations of the bathroom, where the men both cleanse and dirty their bodies.

The houseflies which buzz through every room in Call Me also call attention to the film’s repressed medical anxieties about homosexuality. Flies have a disturbing dual nature; they can signify the presence of something sweet and ripe, like Elio and Oliver’s budding romance, but they are also a symptom of death and rot. Houseflies in Call Me manifest in moments of desire or indulgence. They pester Elio with lustful thoughts of Oliver that he cannot swat away. They float through the sunlit halos which outline the two men as they share their first kiss. They rove over the Perlman’s decadent breakfast feast like a still-life oil painting, illustrating the family’s excess and forewarning of moral decay. They flit around Elio’s face in the melancholy final scene, haunting him with memories of Oliver and perhaps the threat of AIDS. Even when they

are not visible, their droning pervades the Italian soundscape. Eleanor Cummins of *Slate* explains the sickly sweet implication of flies in the film:

According to the *Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in World Art*, flies, the “bringers of disease,” symbolize “evil, pestilence, and sin” in Christian painting of the second millennium. This interpretation aligns well with my own personal experiences of flies being absolutely disgusting. Guadagnino, who is Italian and therefore born a scholar of art and history, could certainly have been influenced by art that employed houseflies as dark symbols of destruction. But since no one actually dies in *Call Me By Your Name*, I’d be inclined to think that Guadagnino is using the notion of “rot” differently here. Flies—and more specifically, maggots—are obviously known for eating flesh, whether it’s that of a peach or a human being. In this way, flies might not be about death so much as carnal desire; the fixation on the flesh, the festering of repressed desires.\(^6^5\)

The flies’ infestation in the film is any and all of these things: a reminder of AIDS, a trace of repressed desires, a palpable unease over the threat of sexual or economic corruption.

Just as threats of AIDS and homophobia leak out despite *Call Me’s* attempt to repress them, traces of Italy’s political past also rise to the surface. There is one curious moment when Elio and Oliver come across a painting of Mussolini hanging above a woman’s doorway as they stop to ask her for water. “Il duce,” Oliver chuckles, pointing. Elio imitates Mussolini and pretends to yell, “POPOLO ITALIANO!” After a moment’s pause, he concludes, “That’s Italy”; fascism clearly lives on. And yet, the woman still welcomes both protagonists and gives them water. She easily could have seen Oliver’s necklace; it is visible with his shirt unbuttoned. If she did know the men were Jewish, then how do we interpret this paradox? We could potentially read this scene as affirming the notion that Mussolini—and therefore, the real Italy—held no anti-Semitic attitudes before Hitler came along, and that Jews are once again integrated and “invisible” in Italian society as Gilman suggests. This would make sense in the context of the idyllic bike ride through the celestial Italian landscape which takes place right before this scene. In this view, Italy is a free and welcoming space, because Jewish people like Oliver and Elio are

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\(^{6^5}\) Eleanor Cummins, "Why Are There So Many Flies in *Call Me By Your Name*?"
seen as no different from anyone else; this woman supports the mythical, original Mussolini, untainted by German anti-Semitism, and that explains why she herself is not anti-Semitic. Again, the film denies the reality of anti-Semitism while simultaneously exposing that erasure.
CHAPTER 3

Call Me in Dialogue with Brokeback Mountain and Angels in America: What Makes a Productive Text?

I have argued that the film represses and reveals social and political anxieties through narrative fetishism. However, the question still stands: why does Call Me fetishize and repress these things in the first place, and why do so many viewers respond positively to it? In other words, what about our present historical context prompted Guadagnino to make such a politically conservative and, in his own words, McCarthy-esque move, and why are audiences okay with it? Gilman’s proposition of the Italian myth as the reason for narrative fetishism in Life is Beautiful can only go so far in providing answers for Call Me. Gilman’s analysis makes sense in the context of Life, which takes place in World War II and came out in 1997, after historical debates about the Holocaust emerged in the 1980s. Call Me, on the other hand, takes place in the ‘80s and came out in 2017. What social, cultural, or political affairs surrounding Call Me’s release can explain its evasions? Perhaps, as I have mentioned, it reflects and provides a common desire for sexual and cultural tourism and voyeurism. Alternatively—or in addition—maybe it meets our need to feel good about ourselves by offering a self-congratulatory illusion of tolerance. Regardless of the reasons behind the film’s delusional narrative and popularity, it could be ultimately regressive; like Life is Beautiful, it essentially upholds a seductive lie. I will conclude my thesis by attempting to explain why this lie is so seductive in our current society; for now, however, I want to look at two films which do similar things to Call Me but do not push reality aside, beginning with Brokeback Mountain (2005) and followed by Angels in America (play 1991, miniseries 2003). In comparing these texts to Call Me, I will read them as more critical and
productive films about gay men which dabble in fantasy but acknowledge the falsity of such delusions in the end.

**“Some Pretend Place”: Different Uses of Utopia in Brokeback and Call Me**

Ang Lee’s gay cowboy romance film *Brokeback Mountain* (henceforth referred to as *Brokeback*) delivers a two-pronged story, one a fetishized utopian narrative which is similar to *Call Me*, and a second story in which reality destroys the love relationship. *Brokeback and Call Me* both infect their utopias with hints of political threats and anxieties, underscoring many of their most beautiful and sacred moments with some subversion of the romance warning against its potential consequences; however, *Call Me* uses those symbols and motifs to cast a subtle, looming sense of unease over the story without fully acknowledging it, while *Brokeback* also laces its utopia with some of these “horror-film flashes” of oncoming threats but then uses its second half to confirm them through actualization. This makes *Brokeback* potentially a more socially and politically constructive text.

Like *Call Me*, *Brokeback* makes use of fetishized religious imagery to romanticize the bond between its main characters. Both films drop their beautiful gay protagonists into an idyllic landscape, framing them as Adam and Steve—rather than Adam and Eve—in the Garden of Eden. The lavish Perlman property comes pretty close to paradise, and Oliver and Elio wander about its gardens like two Adams. *Brokeback*’s Ennis del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) are also two men, alone in nature, paired together to carry out the task of caring for the animals—a task similar to the one God gives his creation in Genesis. We see countless shots of the two of them roaming the land, guiding and nurturing the sheep. The creation narrative is all about organizing the world, giving things monikers and functions, so that
each entity may have a distinct identity and purpose. In Genesis 1, God names the elements of the Earth, but in Genesis 2, Adam names the animals. Ennis and Jack must keep their sheep marked and separated from other sheep on the mountain. Both couples—Oliver and Elio and Ennis and Jack—and the surrounding nature are romanticized as primordial beings in God’s divine creation.

However, *Brokeback* uses these same idealized elements to subtly foreshadow oncoming threats of homophobia. Nature, which once framed Jack and Ennis’ love as sacred, begins to send them dark omens; the storm which ends their time on Brokeback brews with judgment and brings them back to reality. The film begins with Ennis hitchhiking towards Brokeback Mountain, where he will meet his future lover Jack Twist, and as he leaps down from the truck, the telephone poles behind him form the shapes of crucifixes. Just as we ask ourselves whether we may interpret this as God’s looming wrath, non-diegetic text at the bottom of the screen tells us it is 1963 in Signal, Wyoming; the town’s name warns the audience of the film’s many coded messages. One such “signal” is the outfit we first see Jack in; not only does his bright blue shirt characterize his radiant optimism against Ennis’ worn brown jacket, but it is also the shirt he will later die in. Jack dons this shirt when he and Ennis meet for the first time while getting their assignment to camp on Brokeback, the cowboy wonderland which will soon become their love nest. We see a sign on the trailer door of Ennis and Jack’s future boss, who will later spot the two men kissing and refuse to hire back Jack the next year. The sign reads: “Trespassers will be shot. Survivors will be shot again.”66 There is something oddly biblical about this engraving. It sounds like a primitive law—something out of Hammurabi’s Code, perhaps; an eye for an eye. This foreshadows Jack’s death, which his wife describes as a freak accident but Ennis imagines as the

result of a violent homophobic attack. After Jack dies, his wife Lureen tells Ennis that, from Jack’s ramblings about Brokeback, she has always assumed it “might be some pretend-place,” sealing our perception of the mountain as a fleeting utopian space separate from reality.\textsuperscript{67} This line also makes us think back to when Jack and Ennis are together, and Jack says, “It could always be like this, just like this, always.” Ennis knows better and acknowledges the naivety of Jack’s fantasy: “Yeah, how do you figure that?”\textsuperscript{68}

\textit{Brokeback}’s first half then plays out in a utopian space and leaks out glimpses of its repressed trauma related to homosexuality just as \textit{Call Me} does. However, that trauma mostly emerges in the second half of \textit{Brokeback}, while the trauma in \textit{Call Me} never fully reveals itself. As I have previously explained, \textit{Call Me}’s anxieties about homophobia and AIDS remain coded until the very end. This comparison allows us to read \textit{Call Me} as a repressed text which buries its trauma and, unlike \textit{Brokeback}, is unable to fully unearth it. I have compared the two films to show how they do similar things but ultimately diverge when it comes to realistically depicting, and thus critiquing, history. \textit{Brokeback} shows that a film may provide comparably swoon-worthy content to \textit{Call Me} without rewriting the past. One could even argue that \textit{Brokeback}’s breadcrumbs to reality gain their worth from their eventual realization in the film, while \textit{Call Me}’s breadcrumbs are meaningless because they never lead anywhere.

\textbf{Land of the Unfree: Call Me’s Pragmatic America}

Before transitioning into my discussion of \textit{Angels in America}, it may be helpful to think about the role of America in \textit{Call Me. Brokeback} and (as I will explain) \textit{Angels} (as I will abbreviate it) give us a far more nuanced portrait of America than \textit{Call Me} does with either

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
America or Italy. If Italy in *Call Me* is a space that is both explicitly utopian and implicitly problematic, America is depicted as a place of limitations and obligations, as embodied by Oliver, the American. On his Adonis-esque exterior, Oliver is a hedonist who quite literally glows with confidence; he sleeps in, charms the local girls, and lights up the dance floor. In one scene, he delightedly devours a soft-boiled egg at breakfast. But perhaps Oliver is selective about what he allows himself to enjoy; when urged by Elio’s mother to have another egg, he refuses because he “knows himself”—knows that he will just have another, and then another. Pleasure to him, in this moment, is excessive, maybe sinful. After sharing their first kiss, Oliver tells Elio, “We haven’t done anything to be ashamed of … I want to be good.” When it comes to true pleasure and happiness, he is secretly filled with guilt and hesitation. Meanwhile, Elio is reserved on the outside but can become cocky when, for example, playing the piano. Elio is also the one who—albeit, after Oliver makes the first move—repeatedly tries to be sexual with Oliver, but Oliver pulls the brakes. In the end, Elio is available and more than willing to continue their relationship, but Oliver cuts their romance short. The multi-ethnic Elio has been raised, at least partially, in an Italian lifestyle of seemingly unabashed pleasure-seeking. The American Oliver, meanwhile, sticks to a strict set of rules that deem desire not “good.” In *Call Me*, Italy’s rules are more implicit, while America’s are more explicit. The film’s fictionalized Italy is silently repressive, and so is the film itself. Meanwhile, America has no false image of tolerance in the film; it is what makes Oliver discipline himself again and again, and it is what disrupts his relationship with Elio in the end.

We can take this a step further and say that America in *Call Me* plays a similarly antagonistic role to Gilman’s rendering of Germany in *Life*, perhaps in a modern twist on the

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69 *Call Me By Your Name*, dir. Luca Guadagnino.
Italian myth which villainizes America rather than Germany. After all, the film first shows Elio emptying his closet in preparation for Oliver’s takeover of his bedroom; when he hears a car outside, he smirks at Marzia, announcing the arrival of “the usurper.” Oliver, the American—the “movie star” (as Anella so affectionately calls him)—invades the beautiful, perfect, Italian space and brings his Americanness with him. However, it is difficult to draw such a comparison when the figurative invasion of Germanness in *Life* is so explicitly based on a historical one; it feels a little far-fetched to equate the German invasion with the Allied invasion by suggesting that *Call Me* represents a literal American invasion of Italy. So, perhaps we can instead simply view Oliver the American as a tourist. He comes into Italy—and into Elio’s life—on a breeze, and lives a life of freedom and experimentation for a fleeting moment, only to eventually return home to his pragmatic world. Because Oliver is so far removed from his home and his normal life, he risks nothing. (He even gets to maintain some anonymity with the audience, as his last name is never even revealed to us.) Elio, on the other hand, risks everything; this *is* his normal life. Elio and Italy become an exotic getaway in which Oliver may “find himself” at no real cost to him.

In this way, the film also seduces the audience into playing the role of the tourist. Viewers can project themselves into the gorgeous Italian scenery and lifestyle for about two hours and try on a different culture like a dress. They even get to try out a homosexual relationship, without any of the repercussions. This is a prevalent part of why people love *Call Me* so much; as James Ivory says, we are drawn to the film’s privileged, sensuous, intellectual world. As the film lives in its fantasy, it invites the audience to also partake in it and enjoy the faux-’80s-Italian playground, and it makes this collaborative deflection known through Oliver.
This notion of sexual tourism is another potential answer to the question of why *Call Me* feels the need to fetishize its narrative and silence its political realities in the process.

It is still unclear why exactly *Call Me* deflects reality through a fetishized narrative. Perhaps it is to grant audiences this tourism and voyeurism, but why exactly audiences desire this is something I will explore near the end of my thesis. Again, Gilman’s theory is another option, but proves insufficient; the Italian myth from his analysis explaining *Life* may also be applicable to *Call Me* to a certain extent, but its temporal setting is vastly different and, as I mentioned, it seems to villainize America rather than Germany. Additionally, while there is currently no prominent American myth that the AIDS epidemic never happened, or that no homophobia existed in the 1980s, the Reagan administration is notorious for its fierce denial of AIDS during the height of its pandemic. Perhaps this delusion was America’s way of constructing a myth to erase the illness, akin to Gilman’s proposed Italian myth, which erased anti-Semitism. In this line of thought, by ignoring homosexual plight, America attempted to render gay citizens invisible, just as Italy did to its Jewish inhabitants. *Angels in America*, another film (adapted from a play) featuring gay characters, is also explicitly about America; there is no tourism here. America is front and center, and the problems facing gay men in America in the 1980s are very visible.

**Closet Cases and Chosen Ones: Comparing *Angels’* Reality to *Call Me’s* Delusion**

Tony Kushner’s award-winning play, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, is a response to Reagan’s failure to effectively respond to the AIDS crisis. While the popular appeal of *Call Me* largely came from erasing AIDS, homophobia, and politics in the 1980s, *Angels* found its success by shining the spotlight directly on each of those things. Unlike
Call Me, which may be considered uncritical at best and revisionist at worst, Angels is an explicit critical commentary on the politics of its era.

A brief synopsis of Angels’ plot is necessary before moving to analysis. The play tells the story of Prior and Louis, a gay couple in Manhattan in 1985. When Prior reveals to Louis that he has AIDS, Louis abandons Prior out of fear of what is to come. Their friend Belize, a nurse and drag queen, acts as a sort of go-between throughout the breakup, consoling Prior in the hospital and begrudgingly listening to Louis’s guilty rants. There are also Harper and Joe, a Mormon couple whose marriage is falling apart at the seams; while Joe goes off to work every day as a Republican clerk and mentee to notorious McCarthyist red-baiter Roy Cohn, a Valium addiction and bad case of agoraphobia keep Harper housebound. Harper suspects Joe is gay, and once he finally confesses this is true, he leaves and enters a relationship with Louis, who works in his building. Joe also comes out to his conservative mother, Hannah, over the phone, causing her to abruptly leave Salt Lake City and fly to New York. Meanwhile, Prior is repeatedly visited by an angel who bears an uncanny resemblance to his nurse and tells him he is a prophet chosen to carry out the “Great Work.” As he struggles to make sense of this calling, Prior forms an unlikely friendship with Hannah. Belize also finds himself assigned to nurse duty for Cohn, who insists he has cancer when he really has AIDS. Eventually, Cohn dies, and Louis recites the Kaddish over his bed. Louis breaks up with Joe because he cannot get over Joe’s political ideologies, and he apologizes to Prior. The play concludes with Harper leaving town to start over, and Louis, Prior, Belize, and Hannah walking through Central Park as friends.

At the time of Angels’ conception, the threat of AIDS was at large and yet widely neglected in politics, so the play was eagerly welcomed by gay communities. The first half of Kushner’s two-part work premiered in 1991; this was the same year that Earvin “Magic”
Johnson retired from the NBA after announcing he had HIV. It was also the same year Freddie Mercury revealed his AIDS to the world and died the very next day. At the end of 1990, the World Health Organization had estimated that there were nearly one million AIDS cases. After years of the Reagan administration’s fierce denial of the epidemic—Reagan himself did not publicly utter the word “AIDS” until 1985 and did not formally address it in a speech until 1987—followed by its insistence on centering the narrative around anyone but gay men, with the subtextual suggestion that children were not to blame for their AIDS but homosexuals were, the gay community finally had some form of validation, and in a big way. Theatre critic Daniel Mendelsohn describes the overwhelming response to *Angels* upon its release:

*Angels in America* came as an enraged, seethingly articulate, intellectually ambitious, high-flown response to that stultifying and smug atmosphere of denial, silence, and willful ignorance. The admiration and, in a way, relief that immediately greeted its premiere . . . had to do with the general sense that finally someone was saying something grand, if occasionally grandiose, and important not just about AIDS, but about AIDS as a symptom of a profound rupture in American life. ... The message—that what the AIDS crisis was revealing wasn't a moral flaw on the part of gay men, as the conservatives running the country would have it, but rather a moral failing in America itself—may not have come as a surprise to many in those first audiences, but it came as a profound relief to many that someone, finally, was delivering it with such fervor.

As Mendelsohn points out, the play was not only a relief in its pointed acknowledgement that AIDS did indeed happen and destroy countless lives, but also in its insistence that America, not gay men, was at fault for the epidemic. *Angels* was more than just a portrait of homosexual plight in the 1980s; it was determined to criticize exactly what brought America to that point rather than merely dwell on the effects. It said, with conviction, what so many people had been wanting to say.

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71 Ranen Omer-Sherman, "The Fate of the Other in Tony Kushner’s ‘Angels in America,’” *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2007).
*Angels* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Best Drama, the Tony Award for Best Play, and the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play. Its HBO adaptation was also met with critical acclaim, taking home five Golden Globe awards. By being nominated for 21 Emmy awards and winning 11, *Angels* also broke the record for most Emmys awarded to a program in a single year (a record previously held by *Roots*). It currently holds a 90% “Certified Fresh” rating on Rotten Tomatoes. The miniseries’ success suggests that the relevance of Kushner’s story has not faltered since its timely debut in 1991, even if political situations have shifted; however, film critic Michael Bronski feels more ambivalent. Bronski sees the political turmoil of 2003 as a somewhat appropriate—or at least, fascinating—canvas for *Angels* but thinks the story functions best within the specific context of the ‘80s and ‘90s:

...while the urgency over AIDS has abated, progressives are now faced with a wide range of other concerns - the Bush Administration's war on terror, the appointing of far-right ideologues to the courts, environmental concerns, and the slashing of federal programs and the intrusion of religion into secular/political life that makes anything that Reagan did look like child's play. Does *Angels in America* hold up to the test of timely politics as well as timeless art? … For the most part it does, and quite well. Kushner's writing is exact and potent enough that the writing about AIDS does not feel old, or shop worn… Progressives are now faced with a presidential agenda that feels not only draconian, but also, at times, leviathan. As Kushner's characters fight against the social ideology of Reagan, they are faced - almost literally - with the ghost of Roy Cohn. Today we are faced - almost literally - with the ghost of Reagan and all that came before him. In many ways, *Angels* embodied the spirit of political resistance of the early 1990s. It was brave and imaginative and forthright in its vision of the future. While its vision still burns brightly, the play no longer quite fits our current political needs. As beautiful and moving as it is, *Angels in America* is too measured, too subtle to work as powerfully as a political piece in the ways it did a decade ago. Quite possibly, a play that did carry that power would probably not be as sophisticated or nuanced as *Angels*.

Bronski argues here that the particularities of *Angels* are what make it great. The very fact that it cannot seamlessly carry over to another context is its strongest asset, because it proves how poignantly it observed its original time period. *Call Me*, on the other hand, is not characterized by its specificity but rather by what audiences have deemed a universal portrayal of first love; *Refinery29, Out* magazine, *Good Times*, the Jewish Women’s Archive, and Boston College’s *The Heights* all use the word “timeless” to describe the film.\(^75\) And as I mentioned earlier, Eric Eidelstein praises the film’s exclusion of real gay plight by titling his *Mic* opinions piece, “‘Call Me By Your Name’ avoids the thing that hangs over too many LGBTQ films—tragedy.”\(^76\)

*Call Me* was celebrated for its utopian portrayal of homosexuality in the ‘80s because such a utopian portrait was rare in 2017, while *Angels* was lauded for its dystopian, semi-apocalyptic depiction of being gay in the ‘80s because such a raw and personal account of living with AIDS was certainly rare in 1991. Despite these different takes on LGBTQ representation, both films were met with immense enthusiasm. Both texts filled a space which was lacking and validated the gay community in a different way; *Angels* acknowledged the horrors of AIDS in a society which had tried to ignore it, and *Call Me* can be read as a film which showed that gay love stories need not be tragic or melodramatic to be significant. As a result, each film found a place in the gay cinematic canon.

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\(^76\) Eric Eidelstein, "'Call Me By Your Name' Avoids the Thing That Hangs over Too Many LGBTQ Films - Tragedy."
In 1991, people wanted specificity, but in 2017, they seemed to want timelessness. Our first instinct may be to explain this paradox away exclusively through historical context. In other words, people once had no realistic depictions of gay struggle, so they wanted the gritty truth onscreen; now, people are tired of seeing such harshly realistic depictions of homosexuality and oppression, so they want a beautifully unrealistic one for a change. However, as I discussed above, *Call Me* achieves its timelessness by erasing the unpleasantness, and that sort of erasure is exactly what so angered the gay community in the ‘80s and drew them to *Angels in America* in the first place. So, the question remains: if *Call Me* mutes the political turmoil of the ‘80s in order to create a utopia, how can its success be reconciled with that of *Angels in America*, which turns ‘80s political turmoil up to its full volume? Again, I will ponder this question in the conclusion of my thesis. For now, I wish to show how *Angels*, similarly to *Brokeback*, shares several elements with *Call Me* on the surface, and yet *Call Me* strips itself of unpleasant realities while *Angels* practically grabs audiences by the collar and demand they see the world for what it is, warts and all.

At first glance, *Angels* and *Call Me* have a lot in common. Obviously, both feature gay protagonists; a more interesting similarity, however, is the conflation between Jewishness and homosexuality, or at least, the inclusion of both as related overarching themes. This conflation is one of the first things that struck me about *Call Me*, and it has also not gone unnoticed by film critics and scholars. For instance, everything about the film evokes a sense of wandering. Its structure, characters, dialogue, and music all flutter about with a certain aimlessness; the film drags on like the lazy Italian summer. Elio and Oliver carry out cryptic conversations that tiptoe

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around what each of them really wants to say. This wandering is characteristic of the Jewish experience during both the exodus and exile. In the exodus, the ancient Israelites were in desperate search of their collective identity and their relationship with God, because the two went hand-in-hand; perhaps Elio and Oliver consider their relationship to each other as the defining factor of their own identities. Elio’s family constantly bounces between three cultures; when they are in one, they are considered foreigners because of their association with the other two. Aciman himself experienced a similar identity crisis growing up in Egypt while his family—“Sephardic Jews” of Italian and Turkish descent—struggled to exist in a country that did not accept them.78

There are also scattered visual cues which link Judaism and sexual desire throughout the Call Me. For example, characters’ relationships with their Jewish faith can be tracked in the film through the motif of the Star of David. There seems to be a strong correlation between Elio’s growing outwardness with his sexual and religious identities; as he gets more involved with Oliver, he also becomes more secure with his Jewishness, eventually wearing the Jewish symbol around his neck like Oliver. In addition, during their intimate scenes, Elio and Oliver clumsily bound around each other, their movements animating their impulses. Timothée Chalamet, who plays Elio, calls the film “a physical dialogue, and a push-pull and a wrestling match of sorts.”79

In the Torah, it is a wrestling match which gives Jacob his name; after spending an entire night wrestling with an angel presumed to be a manifestation of God, God gives Jacob the name Israel, meaning “wrestles with God.”

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Religion’s nuanced role in the *Call Me* is enhanced by the musical work of Sufjan Stevens, who is a rare breed of progressive, Christian, indie musician. Throughout his career, the musical artist has consistently weaved his religious identity into his music, meditating on childhood experiences of sexual awakening and same-sex attraction. Stevens recorded three songs for *Call Me*, the two most well-known of which contain a variety of religious allusions. In “Mystery of Love,” Stevens seems to find not only a tolerance or compatibility but a powerful, inherent connection between his faith and romantic desires: “Blessed be the mystery of love.” Perhaps this connection exists, too, between Jewish spirituality and the romance between Oliver and Elio.

Because Stevens’ other religious song in the soundtrack, “Visions of Gideon,” plays during the end credits as Elio stares into the fire, the film implies that the lyrics narrate Elio’s memories of Oliver through religious metaphors. In the book of Judges, God selects Gideon to lead the Israelites into battle and steer them away from idol worship and back towards YHWH. Although Gideon succeeds, Israel strays from YHWH yet again after Gideon’s death forty years later. Perhaps Stevens’ narrator, a proxy for Elio, takes on the perspective of Gideon, who has a fleeting ethereal experience before being abandoned again; the divine experience is Oliver. Or perhaps Stevens and Elio see themselves in the larger nation of Israel, with Oliver taking the role of Gideon; once he leaves, everything returns back to the way it was, as if such magnificent events never happened. By drawing a comparison between God’s sacred selection of the Jews as His chosen people and Oliver’s sacred selection of Elio as his lover, the song locates a shared sense of chosenness in both religion and love.

We may also read *Call Me* in the context of the intellectual Jew archetype. According to Nathan Abrams, there were two types of Jewish stereotypes in cinema before 1990: the “Muscle-
Jew” and the intellectual “Diaspora Jew.”80 The concept of the Muscle-Jew can be traced back to Max Nordau speech at the Second Zionist Congress, in which he argued that the intellectualism of the Haskalah had made Jews weak and called for them to return to a stronger physical form.81 Abrams describes the muscular Jew as masculine, “muscled and bronzed, though not very intellectual.”82 In contrast, the “queer,” “sissy” diaspora Jew is portrayed as weak, passive, sickly, hysteric, pale, “feminised, effeminate, gentle, timid, studious, and delicate.”83 Meanwhile, Jean-Paul Sartre writes that, in the anti-Semitic portrait of Jews, the Jew is “a pale, slouched identity nurtured in the stale air of their exclusion from the worlds of work and war.”84 Elio’s introverted and bookwormish disposition, ivory skin, and awkward, lanky physicality all play into this stereotype. Professor Perlman, who is constantly peering over glasses and whose entire career is defined by study, also fits the bill. Abrams also cites religious studies scholar Daniel Boyarin in claiming that people often conflated being Jewish with being gay, because both things were associated with “hypersexuality, melancholia, and passivity.”85 Elio is gay, and implications of his homosexuality frequently match up with implications of his Jewishness. Professor Perlman, who represses his gay desires, may also embody this passive homosexuality. In The Jew’s Body, Sander Gilman contends that the Jew is depicted as “a man who menstruates, with menstruation a signifier of illness, incompletion and incapability, and not a man at all”; we can read Elio’s nosebleed as a kind of menstruation.86 However, it is unclear why the the film employs these stereotypical characteristics. Perhaps it does so accidentally or unconsciously.

80 Abrams, 19.
82 Abrams, 19.
83 Ibid., 20.
84 Ibid., 92.
85 Ibid., 21.
Alternatively, it could be attempting to subvert or reclaim the archetypes, similarly to how Guadagnino views his exclusion of a graphic sex scene as “liberating”; maybe he finds it equally liberating to not only use these stereotypes but romanticize them through his worldly and scholarly characters, as a part of the academic glamor which producer Peter Spears points to as a major source of the movie’s charm. The intent behind the film’s homage to stereotypical Jewish characterizations remains ambiguous. Regardless, Call Me seems to use the stereotypes to reveal the repression of its characters, like using Elio’s “menstrual” nosebleed to signify his anxieties, or by linking hidden Jewishness to hidden homosexuality in general.

Names and the spoken word also play an important role in the film’s metaphorical link between Judaism and homosexuality. The characters are often cautious with what and how they speak; they curate their words to the extreme, on both ends of the spectrum—whether it be curt and guarded or exaggeratedly adoring. When they become more intimate with one another, the characters make a point of saying each other names. After an afternoon swim, the pair lies dreamily in the grass. Elio sighs and murmurs, “I love this, Oliver.” Later in bed, Oliver whispers the film’s titular phrase: “Call me by your name, and I’ll call you by mine.” It’s childish and doting in some endearing way, like writing a crush’s name all over a notebook. But it also allows Elio to finally say his own name with the same amount of love and adoration he pours into Oliver’s. “Elio, Elio, Elio…” The love Elio devotes to his own name is dedicated knowingly to Oliver and unknowingly to himself.

As the star of David shimmers on Oliver’s neck in this same scene, we are reminded of the weight and power of spoken word in ancient Israel; to speak in Hebrew is a concrete act in itself rather than simply a reference to action. When Jacob tricks Isaac into giving him his birthright instead of to his older brother, Esau, Isaac is unable to take back his blessings once he
learns the truth. He has already spoken, and thus given, his blessings to Jacob. Speech and names are sacred; one’s name is not merely an individual label but instead a proclamation of one’s people and their relationship with God. When God calls Jacob, “Israel,” the name goes beyond Jacob himself; it establishes the nation which will rise from Jacob’s lineage. By calling each other by their own names, Oliver and Elio speak themselves into a single entity.

The person who assigns a name also shows authority and deep understanding. When Adam names all the living things of the earth in the second creation narrative of Genesis, he determines each creature’s essence. And let us not forget the meaning of Yahweh’s name; when Moses asks for God’s name, God responds with the name, which translates to English as “I am what I am,” or more commonly, “I will be what I will be.” God is what God does; once again, spoken word and action are intertwined. In Exodus, when God tells Moses, “This very thing that you have spoken I will do; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name,” it shows that God sees Moses’ true nature. By calling Elio by his own name, Oliver is recognizing Elio’s identity as the same as his own, and vice versa. Each tells the other that they see them for who they truly are, and that their identities are one and the same.

This theme of sameness extends throughout the film. First, Elio and Oliver are essentially the same physically, as men. This likeness is further emphasized by the characters’ admiration of classical male bodies in Greco Roman art. As I mentioned earlier, the first shot of the film is a desk scattered with photos of bronze statues. Later in the film, as Elio’s archaeologist father clicks through a slideshow of classical sculptures, he expresses a fascination with the sensuality of those athletic bodies:

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Muscles are firm, not a straight body in these statues, they’re all curved. Sometimes impossibly curved, and so nonchalant. Hence, their ageless ambiguity, as if they’re daring you to desire them.  

While the film seems to unabashedly appreciate and lust after the male body, and although there is an undeniably open sensuality in the air of the rustic Italian setting, Elio and Oliver are still very insecure about their own sexual identities and attraction to each other. But perhaps their admiration of the inherent sexuality in ancient bronze statues aids Elio and Oliver in their acceptance (and indulgence) of their own inherent sexualities; when they accompany the Professor to raise a statue from the sea, they sit side-by-side, both wearing blue stripes, delicately touching the ancient bronze in total awe. Oliver even runs his fingers over the statue’s lips as he will later do to Elio. This is another common theme in the film: finding love for oneself through finding love for someone, or something, that is like you.

This idea—that seeing beauty in an image similar to your own ultimately results in seeing beauty in yourself—can also be seen in the film’s title, as I briefly mentioned earlier in my discussion of the bedroom scene. When Elio adoringly calls Oliver “Elio,” he is able to pour all the love he has for Oliver into his own name. These concepts of likeness and love can be tied back to God’s creation of man. In the book of Genesis, God creates man in his own image; thus, to reject one’s own image is to reject God. The likeness between man and God is not just holy—it is what connects them. Elio and Oliver are connected through their likeness in a highly sacred way.

The romanticization of the sameness in both Judaism and homosexuality is one of the film’s central modes of deflection; instead of displaying the difficult realities of being gay or Jewish, Call Me brings together the most appealing aspects of each identity and creates an image

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88 Call Me By Your Name, dir. Luca Guadagnino.
of tragic beauty rather than oppression. This harkens back to the writings of Gilman, Taylor, and the other scholars who employ a Freudian framework. Taylor argues that Gilman’s reading of Life places Italy in a regressive myth which views the Holocaust as a tragedy rather than an active atrocity in which they played a role.\(^{89}\) Similarly, Elio and Oliver’s insecurities are kept vague so that the focus is not on the oppressive forces at work, but instead on the romantic struggle taking place as a result of those forces.

Elio and Oliver are depicted as similar intellectually, as well, not only in their shared interest in the classics but also in how they use that intellectualism to code or veil their true religious and sexual identities. Both men have a reverence for older things. Elio’s constant transcription of music shows his love of not only preserving classical masterpieces, but working through them himself in great detail. Why would Elio choose to transcribe a piece by ear rather than purchase the sheet music? Perhaps because it is simply a more personal and tactile process to transcribe them yourself. I wonder if this can be linked to the Torah and its value in the Judaic faith. Christians read the Bible with their religious compasses pointing towards the New Testament, believing the more recent writings to hold the ultimate truth; alternatively, Jewish people look to their ancestors in the Torah for their answers, because their identities are directly linked to those narratives. Elio looks to music for his own truth. When Oliver hears Elio playing a song he likes and asks him to play it again, Elio teases Oliver with a variety of imaged reinterpretations by different musicians. Oliver exasperatedly demands that Elio play it the way he did outside, and Elio eventually obeys, doing away with the layers of artifice atop his dramatic reimaginings of the piece. He moves through the song with the sincerity Oliver seemed to be

\(^{89}\) Taylor, 173.
begging for. Ivan Raykoff, author of *Dreams of Love: Playing the Romantic Pianist*, provides an interesting analysis of this scene:

> Despite Oliver’s entreaties for Elio to play the version he had played on the guitar, Elio teasingly alters it in these different pianistic guises, emoting dramatically. After this passive-aggressive foreplay he finally offers the original tune, revealing his true feelings through the gentler sounds his touch produces.\(^9\)

In this way, Elio also goes back to the song’s roots, similarly to how the Jewish faith works backwards to find its own origins. When Elio plays with the piece’s musical genealogy, Oliver sees it as a convolution of the song; thus, he is relieved when its original lineage is revealed, like the characters of the Torah being traced back to their ancestors, or the Pentateuch emerging from the Tanakh. This moment also shows how people as well as art can hide what they really mean under layer upon layer of artifice; the film yet again draws attention to its own deflective tendencies. Meanwhile, Oliver struggles to find himself in his scholarly work, rewriting his scattered thoughts over and over again, confusing both Professor Perlman and himself. Both Elio and Oliver look to the love story in *Heptameron* as a means through which to express their true emotions to each other. Both characters are frustrated by their own coded language. As Elio and Oliver hide their sexual desires and their Jewishness and tiptoe around their real anxieties, the film does the precisely same thing, occasionally leaking out what it has hidden.

> Why have I launched into such an in-depth analysis of homosexuality and Jewishness in *Call Me*? It is possible that the coded way in which the film represents homosexuality and Jewishness through one another, instead of through themselves, exposes the film’s repressive process of “acting out.” Rather than simply address either of these sensitive subjects, *Call Me* creates a complex language with which to discreetly address them. The film then parodies its

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own cryptic nature by showing its characters struggle with language and translation and ultimately fail to effectively communicate. As the characters deflect their trauma through art, infinitely layered with implicit meaning, so does the cinematic text. In this reading, the thematic partnership between religion and sexuality serves as the film’s sneaky way out of realistically portraying either subject. The film uses this whimsical metaphorical link to further construct its utopia, generalizing the Jewish and gay experiences in the process rather than giving them nuance.

Angels, on the other hand, crafts a similar metaphorical relationship between Jewishness and homosexuality, but for the very purpose of nuance. The film mainly does this by underlining the “sacred status of the stranger.” As I mentioned before, the play opens with a rabbi’s eulogy for Louis’s grandmother, chronicling the saga of her life like some sort of sprawling epic and transforming her into a personification of the Jewish plight:

This good and righteous woman... she was not a person, but a whole kind of a person - the ones that crossed the ocean that brought with us to America, the villages of Russia and Lithuania. And how we struggled! And how we fought! For the family... for the Jewish home! Descendants of this immigrant woman, you do not grow up in America - you and your children, and their children with their goyische names. You do not live in America - no such a place exists. Your clay is the clay of some litvak shtetl, and your air is the air of the steppes, because she carried that Old World on her back, across the ocean, in a boat! And she put it down on Grand Concourse Avenue... on Flatbush. You can never make that crossing that she made, for such great voyages in this world do not anymore exist. But every day of your lives, the miles - that voyage from that place to this one - you cross. Every day! You understand me? In you, that journey... is.

According to the rabbi’s paradox, the Jewish audience cannot ever experience the legendary migration which Louis’s grandmother made, but they also live in such a migration every day. Her descendants will never know her particular hardship or fully understand the sacrifices she

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92 Angels in America, dir. Mike Nichols (HBO, 2003).
made to bring them to America, and yet, they will never truly be “in America.” They are always journeying, always wandering, and always displaced, but perhaps they are also always home; their home is no literal place—and certainly not America—but instead their ancestry, their history, their Jewishness. After leaving the service, Prior pokes fun at Louis for acting straighter around his Jewish relatives; Louis is even displaced in his Jewishness as a gay man. This moment alone provides a far more explicit, specific, and complex image of the social issues which confront gay and/or Jewish people than *Call Me* ever offers.

*Angels* also depicts Prior, a non-Jewish gay man with AIDS, as a sacred outsider. He is selected by the angels as a prophet to carry out the “Great Work.” Jewish literature professor Ranen Omer-Sherman contends that Prior’s role as a prophet allows his AIDS to become somewhat of a superpower, similarly to how Jewish hardship has historically been presented as a sacred chosenness:

> In recasting the biblical outsider as AIDS victim, Kushner sought to reconfigure the encoded tribalism of ancient Judaism as liberation, to ensure that the prophetic message of the sacred texts was restated in the most inclusive terms possible. Moreover, the prophet is understood by Kushner to be the "stranger in the strange land." Just as earlier generations of Jewish comic book writers and illustrators masked ethnic and immigrant difference in the guise of superhuman traits with redemptive capacities for humanity, Prior's affliction transcends its social stigma, proving transformative for society as a whole. As Allen Frantzen observes, "Prior moves ahead, not in spite of AIDS but rather because of AIDS. The 'virus of time' has jolted him out of torpor and self-pity and eventually transforms him into the play's strongest character."93

In this way, *Angels* romanticizes the burdens of the “other” and rewrites its outsiders as reluctant heroes; after all, Prior rejects his prophetic calling in the end. Prior is of course, not the only character whose outsider status allows him a special power; Belize, who is both black and gay, serves as a moral beacon for the characters and the play overall. While *Angels* explicitly addresses the sociopolitical particularities of homosexuality and Jewishness in a way that *Call

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93 Ibid.
Me does not—for starters, by actually using the word “gay”—it draws a similarly sacred line between the two experiences. Through metaphor, the displacement of the gay man and of the Jewish man are both romanticized. Call Me tries to erase the complexity of those religious and sexual identities, while Angels magnifies them.

Angels has created what Ranen Omer-Sherman calls “unspoken alliance between religion and gay struggle” specifically for political purposes, which contrasts against Call Me’s aversion to politics.94 Kushner himself says that he sees politics and religion as inherently intertwined in art. Proclaiming himself a “theological writer,” Kushner has said that he believes in “a kind of relationship of complaint and struggle and pursuit between the human and the divine," and that "part of that struggle involves politics”; thus, for Kushner, “drama without politics is inconceivable.”95 This is illustrated by Louis’ refusal to accept the contradictory coexistence of Joe’s religion, politics, and sexuality, as well as Joe’s eventual reevaluation of all three. Following Kushner’s logic, we could condemn Call Me’s use of a glorified bond between Judaism and homosexuality as a tool of deflection to avoid explicitly confronting social and political issues.96

Perhaps one could argue that Angels is not so different from Call Me in its symbolic relationship between religion and sexuality, and that Angels is just another example of the narrative fetishism which Santner describes. In such an argument, one might point to the religious and magical elements in Prior’s storyline, in which Prior’s AIDS mark him as a “chosen one.” However, while Angels provides an alternative narrative—or a delusion—with which to ease the pain of the past, it does not erase true events in the process. Instead of crafting

94 Omer-Sherman, "The Fate of the Other in Tony Kushner’s ‘Angels in America,’” 8.
95 Ibid., 9.
96 It does not seem Kushner has expanded on opinions of Call Me anywhere in print.
an entirely new story, it explains—but does not fundamentally alter—its traumatic memories of AIDS through fantasy. The AIDS crisis still occurred, and America was full of hatred, discrimination, and pain—and it is America’s own fault. The Angel tells Prior that God created angels before humans, but He became dissatisfied with their omniscience and predictability. God then created humans to think and act for themselves, and to grow and change. When the Angel tells Prior that humans must stop moving, he insists that they must continue to progress. *Angels in America* romanticizes its characters’ struggles through myth, but it does not remove the blame from those who caused the political mess of the 1980s. *Angels* does not suffer from the mass amnesia which *Call Me* might.

While *Angels* does not repress the trauma of homophobia and anti-Semitism like *Call Me*, it illustrates such repression within its story, similarly to how *Call Me* depicts the repression of Oliver and the Perlmans. It heavily features a character who denies his outsider’s burdens by erasing his religious and sexual identities: Roy Cohn. Cohn is the embodiment of repression. Based on the infamous lawyer, red-baiter, advisor to Joseph McCarthy, and mentor to Donald Trump, Cohn’s character rejects any association with homosexuality, because he says homosexuals have no power or influence. Instead of recognizing his displacement in America as a Jew like the rabbi says, as well as his displacement as a gay man, Cohn renders those aspects of himself invisible. According to Omer-Sherman, Kushner contrasts Cohn’s character against Prior, who embraces his otherness as a strength:

As Prior says, "I can handle pressure, I am a gay man and I am used to pressure, to trouble, I am tough and strong" (Perestroika 117). Conversely, Roy declares, "Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout" (Millennium 45), and perhaps the existence of a monster like Roy Cohn is proof enough that Jews are all too much at home in America. For Kushner, there is clearly a paralleled condition of vulnerability between homosexuality and Jewishness. And being at home with comfort and clout (while overlooking the plight of those recently assigned the category of "Other") means failing to grasp the rabbi's message about the "journey."
Ironically, even Cohn's mask of hyper-aggressiveness and confidence slips away when, in the face of professional and political ruin, he sadly acknowledges: "The disbarment committee: genteel gentleman Brahmin lawyers, country-club men. I offend them, to these men . . . I'm what, Martin, some sort of filthy little Jewish troll?" (Millennium 66-67).⁹⁷

Through Cohn’s character, Angels illustrates the sort of deflection that takes place in Life according to Gilman’s reading and Call Me according to my own reading. Because Omer-Sherman goes so far as to argue that “the self-hatred of both Jews and homosexuals produce some of Angels’ most powerful examinations of moral failure,”⁹⁸ perhaps he would also view these other two films as immoral. Cohn’s character in Angels serves as an actualization of, and scrutinizes, Call Me’s repression of Jewishness and homosexuality. After all, Cohn is visited by a literal ghost—that of Ethel Rosenberg—not unlike the figurative ones in Call Me. The connection between Judaism and homosexuality is also part of a larger trend of linking religious outsiders in general to queerness in Angels; Kushner also draws parallels between Jewishness, homosexuality, and Mormonism as a way of highlighting the complexities of each identity. The conflation is partially based, again, on the notion of chosenness—after all, Joseph Smith received a holy book, like Prior and Moses. Kushner also bases his symbolism around the “widely shared, intrinsically American immigrant experience,”⁹⁹ comparing the migration and dislocation of Jews and Mormons, largely through one scene at the Mormon Visitors Center in which Harper helps Hannah set up a tableau portraying a Mormon family travelling from Missouri to Salt Lake in a wagon train. One of the mannequins in the family is modelled to look exactly like Joe, whose character is also a physical manifestation of Kushner’s link between homosexuality and Mormonism or religiosity in general. This is underlined in Joe’s

⁹⁷ Ibid., 19.  
⁹⁸ Ibid., 26.  
⁹⁹ Edgerton, 140.
monologue to Harper about a picture in a book of Bible stories which he looked at “twenty times every day” as a child:

Jacob wrestles with the angel. I don’t really remember the story, or why the wrestling—just the picture. Jacob is young and very strong. The angel is . . . a beautiful man, with golden hair and wings, of course. I still dream about it. Many nights. I’m . . . It’s me. In that struggle. Fierce, and unfair. The angel is not human, and it holds nothing back, so how could anyone human win, what kind of fight is that? It’s not just. Losing means your soul thrown down in the dust, your heart torn out from God’s. But you can’t not lose. 100

Here, Joe eroticizes a religious myth to encode his homosexual desire. Professor of theatre and Judaism Yair Lipshitz suggests that the story, which “oozes homoerotic tension,” represents Joe’s struggle against his own sexual orientation. Because the story itself also arouses Joe, Lipshitz argues that it is “presented as an intrinsically paradoxical metaphor for the fight against the passion it evokes.” 101 (Joe’s story also mirrors Prior’s literal wrestling match with the Angel, who possesses an overwhelming, transcendental sexuality which brings both Prior and Hannah to orgasm.) Earlier, I claimed that Elio and Oliver’s wrestling in Call Me alludes to Jacob’s struggle with the angel; perhaps, in addition, Call Me as a body of work is similar to Lipshitz’s reading of the Jacob story as Joe sees it. Like Angels, the film simultaneously portrays the internal struggle against homosexual desire and uses that conflict to evoke desire within the viewer, inviting viewers to join the fetishism taking place. By evoking this battle of desire through a religious allusion, Angels both celebrates the beauty of religion and recognizes its oppressive potential. It also both romanticizes homoerotic desire while revealing the unfortunate repression which may accompany that desire.

Overall, Angels’ portrayal of religion is incredibly nuanced and conflicted. Sometimes its conflation of religious—specifically Jewish and Mormon—plight and gay plight creates a

100 Angels in America.
narrative of a beautiful yet tragic existence, a noble fight, a persevering spirit. Louis’ recitation of the *Kaddish* for Roy Cohn is an especially poignant moment which seems to spiritually heal Louis, and Hannah’s kiss with the angel is a literally orgasmic religious experience. Other times, *Angels* ensures that we not take this conflation so far as to view religion as completely romantic or beautiful; unlike homosexuals infected with AIDS, religion is not an innocent victim. After all, the angels are revealed to be oppressive and even bureaucratic, as religion as an institution can be. Louis also feels the need to hide his homosexuality in Jewish settings, as Prior exasperatedly points out. Religion and homosexuality clash within Louis and Joe’s relationship and cause irreconcilable differences. In addition, if Louis functions as a proxy for Kushner himself (as scholars believe), then Belize may show how conflations like that between homosexuality and Jewishness are problematic; Belize repeatedly criticizes Louis’ broad generalizations about race, religion, and politics in America throughout the miniseries, frequently having to remind Louis and the viewers about his struggles as a black man. At the same time, however, at the end of the series, Hannah, Prior, Belize, and Louis are able to not just put aside their religious and political differences but bond over discourse about them. These conflicting elements come together in Kushner’s unashamedly confused and complex portrait of religion in America, painting it as both wonderful and oppressive.

*Call Me*’s depiction and fetishism of religion is far more simplified than that of *Angels in America*. It is used as a symbolic stand-in for homosexuality as a tool of deflection. Judaism is romanticized as a part of the film’s process of “acting out” through an elaborate fantasy. While both texts locate a bond between religious and sexual identity, *Angels in America* challenges and complicates that bond, and *Call Me* uses it as a crutch. Perhaps *Angels* even warns against the

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danger of *Call Me’s* oversimplified or straight-up false representations of homosexuality, Jewishness, and national identity; after all, Belize, who I mentioned is *Angels’* moral compass, defiantly tells his delusional friend Louis, “I live in America, Louis. I don’t have to love it. You do that. Everybody’s gotta love something.” Kushner may say the same to Guadagnino, though not necessarily about America, but rather about the real world of hateful politics which Guadagnino completely ignores.

In addition to the shared association between Judaism and homosexuality, the two texts share a temporal setting; *Call Me* takes place in 1983, and *Angels* spans from 1985 to 1990. This was an era in which homosexuality was far less accepted than it is today—and today, we are still far from acceptance—and AIDS had the world in a panic. Despite their overlapping historical context, however, the two films differ vastly in their depiction of the time period. This is, of course, partly due to their geographical settings; the ‘80s of Italy is bound to differ from the ‘80s of America. However, the stark contrast between the two films’ respective portrayals of the decade go beyond mere cultural distinctions. It boils down to this: *Call Me* does not mention AIDS once. It does not mention homophobia or even utter the word “gay,” “homosexual,” or “queer.” This is the most striking contrast between Guadagnino’s film and *Angels*; *Call Me* ignores the political particularities of the 1980s, while *Angels* is an overt sociopolitical commentary on homosexuality and AIDS in 1980s America. *Call Me* presents itself as an apolitical film in an idyllic space, but that itself is an inherently political move which results in an erasure akin to the fictional Italy in Gilman’s reading of *Life*. In fact, the novel upon which *Call Me* is based takes place in 1987, but Guadagnino chose to push the setting back four years out of the delusional belief that the ‘83 Italy is “untouched by the corruption of the ‘80s”—in the

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103 *Angels in America*, dir. Mike Nichols.
For context, 1983 was the year the New York Native published AIDS activist Larry Kramer’s essay “1,112 and Counting”—since called the “scream heard round the world”—which vehemently warns the gay community their lives are at stake and demands they get furious about the government’s failure to help AIDS victims; the title refers to the number of AIDS cases at the time. By the end of the year, this number had risen to 3,064, with 1,292 victims dead. So, Guadagnino’s claim for an untainted Italy is a bold one.

Nevertheless, Call Me was generally welcomed into the world of LGBTQ art, as Angels was, so two large questions remain: Why does Call Me plant its characters in a utopia free from real-world gay trauma, and why are viewers so eager to also enter that idyllic world? After all, Call Me does the very thing which Larry Kramer and Angels screamed out against: erase AIDS. The answers to these questions may be found by dissecting Angels’ realistic representation of the 1980s in which the homosexual struggle is relentless.

Obviously, the two films differ in their setting—Angels takes place in gritty, urban America rather than lush northern Italy—and while Call Me’s Italy may be, as I already explored, a place where Jewish people and gay people may blend into society seamlessly, Angels takes no issue with presenting America as a place where blending is virtually impossible. Mike Nichols’ 2003 HBO miniseries adaptation begins with a monologue by an orthodox rabbi—one of Meryl Streep’s four characters in the series—recounting the remarkable life of Louis’ recently deceased grandmother, in which he describes America as “the melting pot where nothing melted.” The characters in Angels certainly struggle with the harsh American reality of the

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104 Stephen Garrett, "Director Luca Guadagnino on Why 'Call Me by Your Name' Is Making Everyone Cry."
impossibility of assimilation, beyond just the focal point of Prior’s AIDS; Cohn also has AIDS but refuses to even call himself gay, Louis acts straighter around his Jewish family, Joe and his mother Hannah are Mormons, Joe is a Mormon who is secretly homosexual, Harper deals with substance abuse and neurosis while being married to a gay man, and Belize is an African American gay man. Their political views also vary widely and often clash.

However, despite the fact that nobody in this cast of character “melts,” the story suggests that they cannot only coexist but bond over their struggle to assimilate. The miniseries ends with Louis, Prior, Hannah, and Belize walking through Central Park, arm-in-arm. They have come together as friends not by sweeping political and religious talk aside, but rather, by openly and civilly—light-heartedly, even—arguing about such would-be taboo topics and accept their differences in beliefs. Omer-Sherman suggests that the final scene “drift[s] toward a utopian closure in which outcast blacks, Jews, Mormons, and gays learn to come to terms with the messy reality of human existence.” Perhaps this imagining of America is a delusion, or another example of Santner’s narrative fetishism. However, it is more complex than the total idealism in Call Me or Life. Film and television scholar Gary R. Edgerton explains this nuance:

The depth and subtlety of Tony Kushner and Mike Nichols’s magic realist miniseries thus has a resonance that goes far beyond the immediate concerns of the bygone Reagan era. It penetrates, laserlike, into the heart of the American experience itself. Angels in America’s unflinching honesty, its brilliant insights, and its empathy and understanding for each and every one of its characters are an aesthetic, political, and even spiritual embodiment of a much freer, more generous, and increasingly tolerant version of the United States as it could and should be in the years to come.

Edgerton does not interpret Angels in America as a false depiction of a tolerant America; instead, he views the ending image as a microcosm of America’s potential for a tolerant future. As Belize

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107 Ranen Omer-Sherman, ”The Fate of the Other in Tony Kushners ‘Angels in America,’” 24.
says, America is “terminal, crazy, and mean”—but this does not mean there is no hope for the coming years.109

Instead of rewriting America’s national identity, Angels sees the country for what it is and explicitly acknowledges its unfortunate reality. The play does not only shatter the national delusion of America’s melting pot, but it seems to have a distinctly anti-melting-pot sentiment, suggesting that it is better to brandish one’s differences and clash with those around you than to disguise or alter them and merely coexist. It makes a bold political statement by arguing that America is a place where being one’s authentic self is torturous but better than blending in. And after all its dystopian events, Angels ends with this hopeful image of a very utopian future America, where nobody has to hide or change who they are to get along. This starkly contrasts against Gilman’s reading of the mythical, integrated Italy in Life, where Jews are virtually invisible before and after the war, as well as the idealized Italy in Call Me. Kushner’s America is also juxtaposed against Guadagnino’s America, whose pragmatism comes between Elio and Oliver and convinces them to remain discreet. Ironically, the characters in Angels are more able to openly grapple with their sexual and religious identities despite the oppression working against them, while the characters in Call Me maintain a veil of protection over their own identities in a world where oppression appears to have been taken out of the equation. The negative forces are still present in Call Me—just as sinister, but less readily visible. In Kushner’s America, there is an explicit intolerance, and people can openly be who they are, but it is dangerous and even lethal. The highs are high and the lows are low. In Guadagnino’s Italy, there is an implicit intolerance, and the characters are unable to openly be themselves and are constantly caught in the middle—never experiencing the harsh punishments taking place in

109 Angels in America, dir. Mike Nichols.
Kushner’s America, but also never able to fully express themselves and pursue their desires. Because Kushner’s portrait of America is more honest, so are its characters, while Guadagnino’s Italy forces its characters into repression.

By crafting a narrative based on true historical atrocities rather than overwriting them, Angels joins Brokeback in being far more productive than Call Me. The three texts do, of course, share several similar elements, beyond just those I have already covered; for instance, they all involve romanticization of gay and religious conventions. Call Me emphasizes the statuesque eroticism of the classical male form, as portrayed by Greco Roman art motifs as well as Elio and Oliver themselves. As I have previously discussed, the film also idealizes Italy to such an extent that it (deliberately or not) reflects Sander Gilman’s proposed national Italian myth of pre-war total Jewish integration. Additionally, Call Me romanticizes the archetype of the intellectual Jew and adorns its love story with Biblical allusions and Eden-esque imagery. Brokeback similarly makes use of creationist iconography, but its protagonists are molded in the robust image of Americana; the film may bleed red, white, and blue, but it breathes dust, sweat, and leather. By taking on the iconic image of the cowboy, Jack and Ennis actualize a national fixation and bring forth the homoeroticism which simmers beneath it. Lastly, Angels takes on a romanticized religious narrative to help explain the suffering of AIDS. All of these may initially be read as fetishisms used to deal with trauma; however, Call Me represses its trauma and deflects reality completely, while Brokeback only does so for part of its runtime before working through its trauma by reliving it in the second half, and Angels reenacts its trauma throughout the entire story.
CONCLUSION

Why Do We Swoon at Call Me, and Should We?

I have explained how Call Me’s utopian portrayal of 1980s Italy is a deliberate erasure which prevents the film from making critical observations about its historical context. However, it presents a fascinating opportunity for us, as viewers, to think about both its diegetic and non-diegetic context. I have offered several potential reasons why Luca Guadagnino censored political content from his own film in a bizarre homage to McCarthyism, but it remains a mystery; meanwhile, we should ask, why do audiences so adore Call Me—not despite this erasure, but explicitly because of it? It may simply be soon to tell why the film is so successful; while Gilman has years of distance through which to look back on Life, we are still in the middle of whatever social context Call Me embeds itself in. It is like looking at a Monet with our noses only an inch from the canvas. Despite our limited vision, however, I will attempt to explain what cultural needs this film meets.

The allure of Call Me’s beautiful lie may have something to do with young people who grew up in the, some would argue, naively optimistic age of Obama, who was the literal emblem of “HOPE.” Douglas Greenwood of the online publication i-D dedicates an entire article to Call Me’s millennial fanbase, emphasizing their unwavering and borderline obsessive support:

So what kind of person professes their infatuation with an indie queer romance film set in 1980s Italy to the world, all via their social media? Wise, free-thinking millennials, that's who.110

Greenwood pokes fun at *Call Me* fans by suggesting that they pronounce an emotional connection with the film and pledge their devotion to it before even seeing it. He also attributes much of the film’s popularity to online meme culture, where superfans reproduce and share images from or relating to the film or its cast. Twenty-somethings clearly adore *Call Me*—but why this correlation? It is possible that *Call Me* meets the millennial need to sustain a naive image of a post-bigoted society.

By creating a genderblind universe in which love is “in all things,” perhaps *Call Me* reflects an idealistic worldview characteristic of Generation Y. As I child, I knew major politicians’ names and occasionally parroted my parents’ opinions on them; however, I did not really become politically sentient until the elections of 2008, when Barack Obama was voted into office. I attended his inauguration—and four years later, I attended his inauguration again. I was under the impression that America was on a one-way track to true progress, and that only net positive social change would occur from then on. Sam Brody of *The Point* magazine sees Obama’s campaign as targeted towards this sort of idealism, describing HOPE and CHANGE as “poll-tested buzzwords, to be filled in later by ‘content.’”¹¹¹ Does *Call Me* function similarly to these buzzwords—as an empty confirmation of our optimism?

Alternatively, perhaps instead of reflecting a naïve image of an absolutely tolerant America, *Call Me* fulfills our desperate fantasy and desire for one. Since the age of Obama ended and Donald Trump took a seat in the Oval Office, I believe that image has shattered as more intolerance has been exposed. Emboldened by today’s incendiary political discourse, more discriminatory and violent forces have come out of the woodwork. For instance, according to the Anti-Defamation League, anti-Semitic incidents in the United states increased by 57 percent in

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Additionally, the FBI found that hate crime reports increased by 17 percent in 2017. Social progress has not backtracked; rather, we now see the divisions that were always there. Compare this to Call Me’s dream world, where love is love, and the only discernible problems are matters of the heart. With hate and tragedy constantly surrounding us—and also, as The New Yorker’s Anthony Lane complains, frequently showing up in movies featuring gay characters—projecting ourselves into a world with none of it is a breath of fresh Italian air.

All my suggestions so far address the film’s non-diegetic context, explaining why 2017 is so special, but how does that interact with the film’s diegetic setting in 1983? I have no doubts that the millennial infatuation with Call Me is a result of our rampant nostalgia; after all, we have been called the most nostalgic generation ever. Of course, nostalgic cycles in pop culture and art are no new fad. The seventies, yearning for the fifties, gave us Grease, American Graffiti, The Godfather, and ABC’s hit sitcom Happy Days. The seventies later got their own tribute in the nineties with Dazed and Confused. But as time went on, new technology introduced wider access to material from across space and time with the touch of a button (or even the utterance of, “Hey, Siri”). The Internet and social media have certainly been important vehicles for nostalgia for most, but they have affected millennials in a unique way. Our lives have been shaped by arguably the most revolutionary technological age yet; we have sped through so many milestones that we never quite got our footing. Our unplugged, “nineties kid” existence of dial-up and landlines was incredibly short-lived, so much so that we might barely remember it. In turn, we find ourselves fascinated with everything from our early childhood, as well as everything that

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came before it. And because the digital age so constantly bombards us with cultural motifs from virtually every era, and because we are so keen on digging up even more, we have injected these glorified relics into every aspect of our lives—what we watch, wear, and listen to—and condemned ourselves to a perpetual state of nostalgia. One particularly prevalent recent nostalgic trend among Gen Y-ers is the ‘80s craze which, for example, gave rise to the overwhelming popularity of Netflix’s hit series *Stranger Things*, a resurgence of synth pop and Nike Cortez sneakers, and, of course, the *Call Me* mania.

The terrorist attacks of September 11th might play just as big a role as technological progress in this overwhelming millennial nostalgia. According to Neil Howe, who has written several books on Generation Y, we tend to look back on the pre-9/11 age with rose-tinted glasses:

> Millennials see the world before Sept. 11 as a period of innocence. Our biggest worry was the Y2K bug. That all seems a world away now.\(^{115}\)

He compares 9/11 as a nostalgia-catalyst to the assassination of JFK, which triggered a similar nostalgia wave for Baby Boomers and led to the success of films like George Lucas’ *American Graffiti* (1973). Another author, Jeff Gordinier, points to the economic recession as another factor in Generation Y’s nostalgia; “Nostalgia comforts people and the Millennials are probably craving comfort right now,” he explains.\(^{116}\) Because our contemporary political context is a mess, *Call Me* provides a much-desired escape two times over; not only does Guadagnino offer viewers the chance to enter the colorful aesthetics of the 1980s, but he also wipes the decade clean of all of its political unpleasantness.

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\(^{116}\) Ibid.
I still feel uneasy about the implications of these societal cravings for fantasy worlds which rewrite history in the process. I am unsure whether we can balance indulging our escapism with remembering the truth. Just as it is too soon to see what contemporary cultural phenomenon gave rise to *Call Me’s* popularity, we cannot know what lasting impact the film will have. Years down the road, will this movie have affected our memory of 1983, or perhaps also of 2017, creating an illusion that we were far more tolerant than we really were? Questions like these are precisely why the discourse about this film and others like it must continue. I am not saying we should never again take a pleasant stroll through *Call Me By Your Name’s* Converse-clad “Summer 1983” or return to Guadagnino’s ambrosial northern Italy; in fact, I plan on doing so myself. I only ask that we consider why we keep going back.
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