

"Take Caroline Away": Catastrophe, Change, and the Tragic Agency of Nonperformance in Tony Kushner's *Caroline, or Change*

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It's a tragedy, I think, in terms of Caroline's journey.

– Tony Kushner, "Production: 'Caroline, or Change'"[\[1\]](#)

Little change, and strange to say,

Yesterday came crashing in.

Small domestic tragedies

Bring strong women to their knees

– The Dryer, *Caroline, or Change*[\[2\]](#)

There is a foresight that is given in and as the unforeseen. Change is the anticipation, the unanticipated that anticipates us. . . . We are sent in history, history comes for us. We come as history to history.

– Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nonperformance"[\[3\]](#)

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.

– Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach"[\[4\]](#)

Introduction: History as Catastrophe

"We are not looking for a new universal meaning of tragedy," writes Raymond Williams in *Modern Tragedy*, "we are looking for the structure of tragedy in our own culture."[\[5\]](#) The structure of tragedy in contemporary American culture is shaped, still, by the constitutional (and ontological) contradiction between promises of freedom and pursuit of happiness on the one hand, and the legacy of slavery and poverty on the other. This is not a static contradiction located somewhere back in the past but an ongoing process and conditioning experience. We might call it an extended *catastrophe*. In the tragic structure defined by Gustav Freytag, catastrophe refers to the section after the scene of total suffering has taken place; it is the final turning point in the tragic hero's journey.[\[6\]](#) Walter Benjamin revised this term as one of his "basic historical concepts." For him, catastrophe is the continuing action of failing to recognize history in the present and thus of maintaining conditions of suffering: "Catastrophe—to have missed the opportunity. Critical moment—the status quo threatens to be preserved."[\[7\]](#) Catastrophe, in this sense, is a situation in time—a too-lateness that comes again and again. In a similarly Marxist vein and with Brecht's late plays as his case study, Williams identified the emergence of a new tragic structure: "the

recovery of history as a dimension for tragedy.” He writes, “we should try to see what it means to drama when in recovering a sense of history and of the future a writer recovers the means of an action that is both complex and dynamic.”^[8] Playwright Tony Kushner, along with composer Jeanine Tesori, have recovered just such a “complex and dynamic” action in *Caroline, or Change*.^[9] The sung-through musical recomposes “a sense of history and of the future” in order to complicate claims to freedom and to question the meanings, limits, and costs of change.

When *Caroline, or Change* premiered at the Public Theater in November 2003, America was still reeling in the aftermath of 9/11. Terrorism was designated the dominant threat, and Islam the enemy to freedom and democracy. In *Caroline*, the death of JFK is the national crisis, and racial tensions and the Civil Rights movement the conflicts. The epoch bookended by 1963 and 2001 bears examining in relation to the question: What is the structure of tragedy in contemporary American culture? There are many possible answers, depending on where you look. In the finer-grained considerations of time, affect, and the material conditions of social change that *Caroline* develops, we can glean something of the tragic in US culture. Building from William’s definition of modern tragedy (which he sees paradoxically in Brecht’s rejection of tragedy) and drawing on Benjamin’s definition of catastrophe and Marx’s theory of alienation, I locate the tragic in *Caroline* in the relationship between the titular character’s suffering and alienation and the present’s failure to recognize her situation as part of a larger social condition that is neither fixed nor inevitable but rather reverberating as an ongoing historical present. Caroline Thibodeaux, a 39-year-old black maid and divorced mother of four, performs the domestic labor that sustains the conditions of the everyday, but refuses to perform either the affective labor that maintains an intimate public sphere or the gestures of change that uphold ideologies of progress and freedom in the United States.^[10] In her refusals to change, care, and cater to our expectations of her character, Caroline asserts the tragic agency of non-performance. It is an agency, for it is an action that produces effects in and beyond her; it is tragic, for in her refusals to perform she lays bare the impasse between freedom and blackness in American culture. As Saidiya Hartman explains, “Blackness marks a social relationship of dominance and abjection and potentially one of redress and emancipation; it is a contested figure at the very center of social struggle.”^[11] Here, in this space of suspended relationality, somewhere between abjection and emancipation, stands Caroline.

If *Caroline* is a tragedy, it is one that emerges from history understood as a recursive process, perpetually open to interpretation and modification. The most salient connection between Kushner and Brecht, in *Caroline* and elsewhere, is not so much in their stylistic similarities but in their Marxism, specifically their dialectical thinking and shared affinity for a Marxist theory of history as a material process made (and remade) by human labor. Perhaps the feature most distinguishing Kushner from Brecht is their respective attitudes toward time and change: Brecht’s faith in teleological progress as the engine of change becomes, for Kushner, an insistence on social change as multidirectional and multiscalar, emerging from clashes and convergences between cyclical and teleological temporalities, moments and epochs, personal stories and collective histories.

As Benjamin writes in “What is Epic Theatre?” Brecht sought the “untragic hero”—untragic because he wanted to depict the hero’s actions not as the result of tragic necessity but as the outcome of her own choices, which are formed from the conditions of capitalism and yet also changeable. Brecht’s task, according to Benjamin, was “to uncover those conditions. (One could just as well say: to *make them strange* [*verfremden*].)”^[12] *Gestus* was the term Benjamin used to describe the mechanism in Brecht’s drama that disrupts tragic inevitability, reveals unequal social relations, and makes visible the forces of

history. The tragic inevitability of poverty and suffering within capitalism is interrupted by the *gestus*, and the audience's subsequent understanding that this suffering is *not* inevitable, but changeable through a transition to a different economic structure (i.e. socialism). Caroline's tragedy is that she cannot change, "can't afford change" (116), and thus she does not possess the agency of a full political subject. Yet Caroline's refusal to change, in the ways expected of her, interrupts the logic that says social change is always positive, forward-moving, and open to everyone. Her story compels us to notice how deeply dominant understandings of change and freedom are rooted in teleological time—the time of progress when history is left behind and the future open for the taking. Foreclosing on the future, Caroline stands, instead, in the impasse of the present.

The title, *Caroline, or Change*, posits a dialectic between the character at the center of this forceful story and the forces of change swirling around and within her. The setting is Lake Charles, Louisiana, 1963, a time marked by social change and a location marked ideologically as the still-segregated South and geologically as a Gulf town where "they ain't no underground / . . . There is only under water."^[13] Caroline works as a maid in the basement of the Gellmans, a Jewish family adjusting to the loss of Betty Gellman, wife of Stuart, mother of Noah, and best friend of Rose Stopnick Gellman. Rose has left her liberal-Jewish Upper West Side life to come to the deep South and marry her best friend's widower, finding herself the employer of a black maid who refuses to be her friend, the stepmother of a boy who "hate[s] her" (24), and the wife of a man in deep mourning and emotionally unavailable to her. In Noah's 8-year-old mind, the loss of his mother and the death of JFK are conflated and cathected onto Caroline, whom he imagines as both the President (44) and his surrogate mother (63). The play-world is permeated by grief, loneliness, loss—and Caroline's anger. But Caroline's daughter, Emmie, embodies the spirited, hopeful revolutionary energy we associate with the Sixties and with American culture more generally.

As Kushner has repeatedly stated, *Caroline, or Change* is his favorite work.^[14] Based on his own childhood and dedicated to his childhood nanny, Maudie Lee Davis, the musical is not strictly autobiographical, but it does refract Kushner's memories through the lens of a critical historical moment. As James Fisher explains, "the merging of the historical and the personal—in this case for Kushner the deeply personal—drives *Caroline, or Change*."^[15] The musical is an expressionistic staging of the inner life of its central character, who is trapped in a life of poverty and longing for the life she surrendered to economic necessity. Having lived and worked most of her life in a racially segregated country, Caroline suddenly finds herself living in a moment where conflict is everywhere and everything seems to be changing. It is 1963, the height of the Civil Rights Movement. It is also the year George Wallace was elected governor of Alabama on his infamous inaugural promise, "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever"; Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom; Sam Cooke and his band were arrested at a "whites only" hotel in Louisiana, and their song "Change is Gonna Come" was released the next year; John F. Kennedy broadcasted his historic Civil Rights address on 11 June; Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers was killed two days later; and five months later, JFK was shot. Finally, the Moynihan report (*The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*), published in 1965, looms in the near future as a damning indictment against single black mothers, who were deemed the cause of the dissolution of the American family. Although these social tensions figure only as simmering subtext to Caroline's story, JFK's assassination punctuates the musical early on as the event that rips history open and the nation apart.

Spaces of Change

The main action of the musical takes place in the Gellman home. Upstairs, the Gellmans live in somber isolation; downstairs, Caroline keeps their home functioning. In the basement, animated objects—The Washer, The Dryer, The Radio, The Moon, The Bus—act as part Greek chorus, part historical consciousness, and part expressionistic extension of Caroline’s inner world. They give shape to a whole history of African American cultural production and voice to Caroline’s fantasies, grief, and disappointment (see figure 1). The Washer, played by a gyrating woman, swivels, “agitates,” and heralds “consequences unforeseen” (11). The Radio is played by a glamorous trio that visually recalls groups like Martha and the Vandellas and the Marvelettes. They perform sensually synchronous movements that contrast sharply with lyrics communicating Caroline’s broken situation: “How on earth she gonna thrive / when her life bury her alive?” The Dryer, played by a male actor, sings to the rhythms of Motown and blasts the dry heat of Caroline’s shame and indignation, singing “found your sinful self in hell / and the Pit of your abasement looks a lot like this basement” (16).[\[16\]](#)



Figure 1. L to R: T’shan Williams (Radio 1), Ako Mitchell (The Dryer), Sharon Rose (Radio 2), and Sharon D. Clarke (Caroline) in Caroline, or Change at the Hampstead Theatre, London, March 2018. Photo: Alastair Muir.

While the space of the basement and the embodied appliances express Caroline’s emotional world, they also visually recall the history of African American labor and possession of black bodies as objects of labor. Slavery, the most extreme form of alienation, divorces the worker not only from the objects of her

labor and means of production, but also from her life and body. Caroline's work as a maid is only a few small steps from this. By giving life to the machines of her labor, externalizing her emotional world, and staging the hidden, private space of her exploited labor, the musical materializes Caroline's alienated life. In his 1844 "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," Marx developed his theory of alienation, outlining the four-fold process of this condition. Under capitalism, the worker is alienated from the objects of her labor; from the processes of production; from her relations with others; and from her own conscious, sensuous humanity (what Marx called "species-being").^[17] The more the worker produces, the less she has to consume; the more value she creates, the more valueless her own life becomes. Trapped in a state of alienation, Caroline is estranged from Noah, her daughter, her friend Dotty, the Civil Rights movement, and, finally, her self. As if describing the Gellman's basement from Caroline's point of view, Karl Marx narrates the *mise en scène* of alienation: "My labour . . . appears still as merely the expression of my loss of self and my powerlessness that is objective, observable, visible, and therefore beyond all doubt."^[18]

And yet as poet and theorist Fred Moten writes, "The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist."^[19] In their hypervisibility and heightened theatricality, the animated objects accentuate the quotidian nature of Caroline's labor, and we are meant to see both kinds of labor—commercialized and domestic, public spectacle and private servitude—as the roles performed by African Americans in the ongoing reproduction of American culture. The set design renders porous borders between inside and outside, above and below, public and private, underscoring the fact that social change is not only historical but also shaped by the spatial arrangements of everyday life. The overlapping stage spaces put into view interrelations between near and far, public and private, The Moon and the basement, the Gellmans and the Thibodeauxs. The musical gives particular value to the downward, below, and underground, invoking a spatial concept of change that is not quite "history from below," but something more like what Moten and Stephano Harney call the "undercommon ground," a "social capacity" formed from the history "of those who were not just labor but commodity, not just in production but in circulation, not just in circulation but in distribution as property, not just property but property that reproduced and realized itself."^[20] "Caught tween the Devil and the muddy brown sea" (116), Caroline stands center stage, down below, where her stasis crystallizes a history of broken intimacies and stifled desires. The musical suggests that reproductive labor—care giving, domestic work—anchors the social and sustains the broader changes that are recorded as history. Caroline's acts of refusal to perform certain roles—to be a mother for Noah or to participate in struggles for black civil rights—interrupt our expectations of her character and the history that has given rise to those expectations, so that we might mark the multiple directions and unequal distributions of social change.

Musicals traffic heavily in optimistic promises of change. As Raymond Knapp argues, the musical, as a genre of utopian transformation, has taken on "a formative, defining role in the construction of a collective sense of 'America.'"^[21] Kushner and Tesori invoke the legacy of the American musical in order to question the racial images and emotional attachments that hold together "a collective sense of America." *Caroline* incorporates elements of from *Porgy and Bess*, *Show Boat*, *Hairspray*, and *Dream Girls* only to revise the stories of racial harmony that these have produced. Indeed, at every turn *Caroline* confounds our expectations of the musical, edging closer to opera in its affective texture. It unfolds in varying registers, styles, and scales, oscillating between domestic and national events, naturalism and expressionism. Its episodic structure of twelve scenes and an epilogue mimics both the structure of ancient tragedy and the movements of memory. Whose memory, however, is always in question, as the point of view shifts from Caroline to Noah to Emmie. The musical forms

Caroline incorporates—spirituals, blues, klezmer, Motown, and Mozart—operate as extensions of the characters’ psychic states and emotional dispositions. Each character has their own rhythm—Caroline’s Delta blues, Stuart’s klezmer clarinet, Rose’s stilted staccato, The Moon’s classical refrains, and Emmie’s youthful pop and Motown beats. Exceptionally rich in its stylistic, formal, and emotional complexity, Tesori’s score connects characters through cross-pollinated melodies, which reflect the broader transformations, intersections, and appropriations that have shaped American cultural forms.^[22] While African American culture has long functioned as the expressive element of American popular culture—emotional, theatrical, hyper-visible—Caroline gives to us nothing of herself. We cannot appropriate her or the emotions she attempts to keep at bay. Instead, *Caroline/Caroline* reorients the affects and imagery associated with blackness and black female subjectivity, staging an anger and grief that explodes with the force of history, but that also withholds catharsis. *Caroline*’s melodic structure directs the dramatic structure, illustrating the play’s theories of change, while Caroline stands as the stoic, unmovable center of a shape-shifting world.

Rhythms of Change

“All changes come from small changes” (69), The Radio announces midway through the musical. *Change* is the musical’s central conceit and a recurring leitmotif in Kushner’s work. For Kushner, change is a dialectical process that takes place somewhere between the material and the miraculous, the collective and the personal, the monumental and the minute. When The Bus comes on the stage, singing “*in a terrible voice of apocalypse*” (34), “the earth has bled! . . . the president is dead” (34), the seismic change of that historic moment serves as the backdrop to the more intimate interchanges we see unfold on stage. The Moon stands over the play-world as prophet and force of cyclical, yet unpredictable change, singing: “Inside, outside, / this ol world change with the tide. / Outside tears and disarray! Inside children disobey. / Change come slow, come right away!” (37). Grounded equally in natural cycles, everyday rhythms, and social movements, change is not defined here by any single theory, nor does it move in one direction toward the future; change is instead dynamic and multi-directional, proceeding at varying paces and consisting as much of small, intimate acts as of large crises and grand events.

Crucially, change is developed in the musical to mean both social transformation and money, small money; these two connotations are inextricable. The plot pivots around a lesson that Rose teaches her step-son Noah about the value of money. Noah habitually leaves change in his pockets, which Caroline finds when she does his laundry. Rose is embarrassed and infuriated by Noah’s carelessness, which renders all too visible the economic disparity between maid and employer. So, Rose makes a household rule that if Noah leaves any change in his pocket, Caroline can keep it. Caroline is initially incensed by the unintended humiliation of this new rule, but she eventually reconciles with it, realizing that Noah’s spare change will allow her to feed and clothe her kids properly. When Noah leaves a twenty-dollar bill in his pocket and Caroline claims it, a climactic fight erupts between them.

Change, the musical suggests, also means grief and loss. Caroline comes on stage for the first time humming a seemingly improvised strain, not fully identifiable as a style and never taking shape as a fully realized number. Stuart later echoes this refrain on his clarinet, suggesting the invisible connection between these two characters. Both Caroline and Stuart have lost their spouses and both vow to “never forget” (95, 97). Implicitly, this vow, “never forget,” connects historical memory of black and Jewish suffering. Their points of view contrast with characters who embody change as futurity and forward movement, such as Emmie and Dotty, Caroline’s friend and fellow maid. Noah is lost in his own

grief—suspended, in a way, like Caroline—and he sees in her a possible source of comfort and consolation. He even fantasizes about becoming part of her family, imagining the Thibodeaux children narrating his story: “They talk about how my mama died / they talk about my tragedy / they wish that they could take me in / and I could live with Caroline” (63). But Caroline cannot afford to care for or comfort Noah. Her first song, her “I want” song, is permeated, as Stacy Wolf notes, by “exhausted despair.”^[23] We hear enough of her story in this opening number to learn that Caroline has been cleaning for twenty-two years; makes thirty dollars a week; dreams of kissing Nat King Cole; and “wish every afternoon I die” (17-18).

At the center of the play, in a scene titled “Ironing,” we hear an important part of Caroline’s story. She recalls a time, 1947, when “life [was] sunny” (70), and she was married to a “handsome navy man.” In this postwar period of ostensible prosperity, there was “no work for Negro men” (71), and things changed. Her husband took to drink and began beating Caroline, who still remembers the pain of his punch: “Pain is white, remember pain? Pain is white, that is its color, bright as sunshine” (72). “One bad day / he hit again,” Caroline remembers, but the Washing Machine takes over to recall, “You beat him black and blue. / Then / he disappear from view” (74). Caroline’s painful recollection is interrupted by Rose, who comes to the basement to tell Caroline that she can keep the change that Mr. Gellman leaves in his pocket, as well. Caroline responds with pride, saying, “I don’t want it. / I ain’t some ragpick. / Ain’t some jackdaw” (75), while The Washing Machine and The Radio caution her, “Talk like that, talk like that, / you won’t be a maid no more” (77). Caught between subservience and obligation to her kids, Caroline’s anger is interrupted by Emmie, whose exuberant reaction to the loose change jars Caroline into realizing that material needs take precedence over her own dignity. Caroline has little agency here, and no privacy or space of her own, except mournful memories and soothing fantasies of Nat King Cole.

At the same time that Caroline grapples with the indecency of taking the Gellmans’ spare change, Noah joins the Thibodeaux children to play a game with The Moon. They fabricate a syncretic myth of Roosevelt Petrucius Coleslaw, who ascends to the heavens after his evil Amazon mother kills him, marries The Moon and becomes rich. Reciting the values of the culture in which they are coming of age, the kids formulate an allegory of romance and financial success that inspires them to reach into their pockets and “find me some.” The scene ends with the lines, “Free as the air” (66), sung in unison by Caroline and The Moon, Noah, Emmie, Jackie, and Joe. The word “free” is significant, for it foregrounds that change (as progress and money) and freedom go hand-in-hand as the ideological air America breathes. But who gains and who loses from change and whose freedom comes at the expense of progress are usually left out of the story. *Caroline* suggests that black labor is the devalued, abject border of America’s foundational values. Rose’s father, Mr. Stopnick, explains the law of capital at the Chanukah party, stating, “Money follows certain laws, / it’s worth how much it’s worth because / somewhere something’s valued less” (94). This principle defines the socio-economic relationship between Caroline and the Gellmans. For although Mr. Stopnick underscores the solidarity between Jews and African Americans in the Civil Rights movement, he also eats a Chanukah dinner prepared by Emmie and Caroline, in a house maintained by Caroline’s exploited labor.

Acts of Refusal and Angry Eruptions

In its central character, *Caroline* confronts the audience with a double-sided image of black female subjectivity: the angry black woman and the black domestic servant. The story unfixes these images, contextualizing them within Caroline’s story and within a historical situation. The visual image of an African American woman in a white maid’s uniform signifies powerfully on and off the American stage,

a reminder/remainder of the servitude and emotional labor of slavery. Caroline's anger disrupts the affective associations surrounding black domestic workers, who have traditionally been represented as smiling, long-suffering, and one-dimensional caricatures of a white imaginary. As Caroline tells Dotty, "Ain't my job to mind that boy" (29). Aside from their shared ritual—a daily cigarette—Caroline refuses any intimacy with Noah, telling him, "go muse yourself / I got no use for you" (15). In a scene titled "Duets," Noah, lying in his bed, interrupts Caroline's thoughts, while she sits smoking on her front porch. Reminiscent of the imaginary encounters between Prior and Harper in *Angels in America*, these exchanges demonstrate the entanglements that form despite distance or estrangement:

NOAH

Wish me good night?

CAROLINE

That not my job.

NOAH

How come?

(Little pause)

How come you're so sad
and angry all the time?

CAROLINE

That ain't your business, it just ain't your business.
You's a nosey child.

(Little pause)

How come you like me, I ain't never nice to you.

...

Noah, go to sleep.

Stop bothering the night,

All day I mind you, wash your things,

And it ain't right

In the nighttime, my own time,

I still think about you—

I gots to think of rent overdue (45-46).

Demanding privacy and rejecting Noah's yearning for closeness, Caroline reorients our perspective away from the affective associations attached to her character and toward the material conditions of her situation. Even time is alienated from her. Here and earlier, Caroline points out, "In the nighttime, my own time, / I still think about you— / I gots to think of rent overdue" (12). Hers is not the private sphere of the middle-class Gellmans, but the rented home of an underpaid worker, whose leisure time and inner life are not her own and whose wage fails to cover basic needs: "Thirty dollars ain't enough" (18), as she, *The Washing Machine*, and *The Dryer* proclaim in unison. Even as she resists the commodification of her emotional labor, Caroline's service labor reproduces the conditions of everyday life that make possible Noah's and her children's futures.

Literary critic Michael Hardt, along with cultural theorists such as Antonio Negri and Lauren Berlant, argue that, in our neoliberal era, affect has replaced ideology as the primary mechanism of hegemony.^[24] Hardt takes affect as the pre-personal point of departure to develop a rich theory of social and political change. Following Foucault, who showed how power is productive, producing not so much repressions as regularities, Hardt traces the way power informs us—shapes us from within—and is mediated by and through affect (especially fear and hope, the primary affective dialectic of late-capitalism). He argues that affective, or “immaterial labor”—such as care-giving, health care, domestic work—holds “enormous potential” to transform society because it produces “collective subjectivities and sociality, and society itself.” Adapting Foucault’s term “biopower,” Hardt calls this immaterial labor “biopolitics,” or the “the power of the creation of life.” He adds, “biopolitical production is strongly configured as *gendered labor*,”^[25] and racialized. Caroline refuses care to the young boy who is attached to an idea of her—as a pseudo mother and care-giver. Withholding the affects he/we expect of her and expressing instead negative ones, Caroline also refuses to nurture a public that is invisibly raced (as white) and classed (as middle).

For audiences of *Caroline*, the powerful imagery of the mammy worked, in performance, as an obstacle to seeing Caroline’s tragedy. Despite her stoic resistance to acting as an emotional surrogate for Noah, audiences nevertheless read her character through visual imagery and affective associations of “the mammy.” Kushner reports that hundreds of people have told him after performances, “I had a Caroline who raised me like a mother too,” ignoring the fact that Caroline is emphatically not “like a mother” to Noah.^[26] Kushner reflects,

It’s such a powerful image in this culture, the mammy, the maid who provides the emotional warmth to the, you know, frosty, cold white people. I mean that sort of thing that we’ve developed as a way of handling our terrible and deserved guilt about, you know, about race in this country. So people come to see the show, and they just rewrite it.^[27]

The revisions of *Caroline* suggest the powerful affective attachments that Americans have to images of black female labor and to the national body public those images construct. The willful deafness to Caroline’s anger and misrecognition of her relationship to Noah subsume her story within a white imaginary and allow her labor to remain invisible. Spending her days in the Gellmans’ basement, Caroline keeps her emotions “sixteen feet beneath the sea” (12), numbed by the relentless rhythms of her daily work. But her anger erupts in three pivotal exchanges with Emmie, Noah, and Dotty, each interrupting audience expectations of what both *Caroline* and a musical should be.^[28]

The fight between Emmie and Caroline takes place in the Gellmans’ kitchen during Chanukah and accentuates the different experiences of history between mother and daughter. Both dressed in white maid uniforms, Caroline and Emmie clash over gestures of subservience that Caroline sees as necessary, but that Emmie sees as submission to white authority. Rebellious and individualistic, Emmie rejects the past and craves the good life promoted by postwar US culture. She dreams of owning a car and a house with a TV in every room, singing confidently, “I’ll make it OK, / by myself, all alone” (96). Her ambition causes her to reject her mother as a model to emulate: “You tippy-toe till you get paid. / You the spoiled one. A maid! / I’ll never be a queen, that’s true, but I’m a damn sight better’n prouder than you! / Come on, teach me what you know! / Mama, teach me what you know! How to keep my head tucked low” (93). With this hurtful denouncement, Caroline slaps her daughter and leaves the kitchen. Emmie does not

know that her mother wishes she were “doing something finer” (18) and that every day she waits for the night, when she doesn’t need to “be polite” (47). While their generational differences are evident, it is also clear that both mother and daughter are circumscribed within a capitalist logic that defines their bodies and labor.

The musical’s climax is a shattering fight between Noah and Caroline over a twenty-dollar bill that Noah leaves in his pocket. He demands Caroline give back his money, a Chanukah gelt from his grandfather, but Caroline refuses, telling him, “Don’t leave your money all over the place! / Now I can take my boy to the dentist” (103). In Marx’s formulation, money is the externalization of labor, and as such “the externalized capacities of humanity.”^[29] In *Das Kapital*, Marx deploys theatrical metaphors, such as the stage (i.e. market) and the *dramatis personae* (i.e. buyer-seller-money),^[30] figurations that allow us to see *Caroline*’s shape-shifting world of animated objects as a kind of phantasmagoric expression of Marx’s theories of commodities and alienation. As Marx points out, money is “the metamorphosed shape of all other commodities, the result of their general alienation.”^[31] In its money form, a commodity, according to Marx, always performs two distinct roles as a “*measure of value*” and a “*standard of price*.”^[32] The measure of value is the social expression of human labor, in this case, the Gellmans’ household and Noah’s well-being; the standard of price is the quantified cost given to a commodity, in this case Caroline’s domestic labor.

The twenty-dollar bill, in this way, works as *Caroline*’s *gestus*, interrupting the course of action and making visible the social relations between the boy and his maid. The surplus value to which Caroline accidentally obtains access is surplus only because her labor is devalued. In its most devastating implication, this confrontation is a clash between the value, under capitalism, of Caroline’s life and the value of Noah’s life. It is no accident, after all, that each wishes a violent death on the other over the misplaced twenty-dollar bill. When she refuses to give back the twenty dollars, Noah explodes, “CAROLINE! / I HATE YOU . . . / There’s a bomb! President Johnson has built a bomb / special made to kill all the Negroes! / . . . I hope he drops his bomb on you!” (104). Caroline fires back: “Noah, hell is like this basement, / only hotter than this, hotter than August, / with the washer and the dryer and the boiler / full blast. . . . Hell’s so hot it makes flesh fry. (*Little pause*) / And hell’s where Jews go when they die. / Take your twenty dollars baby. / So long, Noah, good-bye” (104). This encounter confronts the audience with a whole history of alienated relations between black people and Jews in America.^[33] The breakdown of Noah and Caroline’s relationship in this scene powerfully links collective histories with the “small domestic tragedies” (79) that *Caroline* stages. Shaken and ashamed by the hate she expressed, Caroline stops going to work. However, as Wolf points out, “a careless little white boy has power over her. She must work; she has to go back.”^[34]

Caroline’s final break from social life is her rejection of Dotty. Unlike Caroline, Dotty is swept up in the swell of change around her, eager to participate. While she goes to school at night so that she can get better work, Caroline, who can barely read, continues her underpaid domestic work and turns away from the changes around her. Together with The Moon, Dotty reminds Caroline, “Things change everywhere, even here” (32), but a resistant Caroline insists on her refrain: “Nothing ever changes / under ground in Louisiana” (34). But as Dotty points out, Caroline’s refusal to change has, nonetheless, changed her: “Once you was quick . . . / you losin your courage, you losin / light / lost your old shine, / lost Caroline” (33). In their final confrontation, Dotty pleads with Caroline, “let go of where you been,” “move on from the place you’re in,” and even though “it hurt to change / . . . folk do it. They do. / Every day, all the time, alone, afraid, folks like you” (115). But Caroline replies with an unarticulated need, followed by

anger: “Dot, I need . . . / Dot. It too late. . . . When I talk to people, all that comes out is hate. / Cause I hate. That all. / I hate” (115). Caroline renounces her friend, insisting, “I need nothing from you. / I want you to go. / Out my yard” (115). Caroline rejects Dotty’s friendship, insisting that change, for her, is “too late.” This catastrophe of missed opportunities is the audience’s critical moment.

Caroline’s situation illustrates the difficult relationship of blackness to subjectivity, which is “defined by the subject’s possession of itself and its objects.”^[35] As Moten points out, subjectivity has been, in American history and in the philosophical tradition from Kant to Heidegger, “refused to the people who are called black, to the people to whom blackness is ascribed.”^[36] Caroline’s self-abnegation in the penultimate scene is a “withdrawal from that subjectivity, which is not itself, which is not one, which only shows up as a thwarted desire for itself.” This subjectivity, which was constructed with blackness as its abject border and yet which black people are compelled to seek, leads to the maddening task in which, Moten explains, “we must keep on learning not to want. We have to keep on practicing not wanting.”^[37] In a shattering scene of self-abjection, Caroline relinquishes her want, her desire to be a subject, so that she can continue to perform the labor that sustains the present.

Catastrophe, or Change: The Case of Caroline^[38]

Caroline’s emotional journey culminates in “Lot’s Wife,” the musical’s eleven o’clock number and its most powerful statement on change, performed here as a violent act of surrender. The title of the song refers to the Old Testament story, in which Lot’s wife, defying God’s command, looks back at Sodom and is turned into a pillar of salt (Gen 19:26). Typically understood as tale of punishment for an act of disobedience, the story is transformed here so that Sodom is not a city of sin but Caroline’s own past and the command she defies is the command to move forward, pursue freedom, change.^[39]

Marx defines an alienated existence as one in which even human speech becomes ineffective as a method for overcoming an alienated form of life. He writes, “on the one hand [speech] would be seen and felt as an entreaty or a prayer and thus as a humiliation and therefore used with shame and a feeling of abasement, while on the other side it would be judged brazen and insane and as such rejected.”^[40] Caroline has no access to speech beyond the poles of “shame and feeling of abasement” and an anger that “would be judged brazen and insane.” When she speaks, “all that comes out is hate.” Her only interlocutor left is God, since “only God can hear what my heart mean to state” (115). The audience, as silent witness, is challenged with knowing how to respond, ethically, to Caroline’s self-abnegation, as she prays to her God to “take Caroline away” (119).

Caroline’s aria shifts in tone and rhythm from spiritual to jazz to blues to rock to gospel, expressing, at once, the depth and range of her emotions and the history of African American musical forms. Beginning with a kind of overture in a low, slow register, Caroline acknowledges how the money changed her, stirring up resentments and hopes that she had already foreclosed on: “That money reach in and spin me about, / my hate rise up, rip my insides out . . . can’t afford change / changin’s a danger for a woman like me / . . . I got to get back to the way that I been / God! / Drag me back to that basement again” (116). Building to the faster, syncopated rhythms of spirituals, she sings, “Always they’s been people who / hold they head high getting through / I can’t” (116). With a prescient gesture toward the future destruction of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, she rejects the false promise of a groundless hope: “Hope’s fine. Till it turn to mud” (117).

Shifting to a driving rock beat, Caroline's prayer turns into a violent act of self-destruction: "I'm gonna slam that iron / down on my heart / gonna slam that iron down on my throat / gonna slam that iron / down on my sex / gonna slam it / slam it down / until I drown / the fires out / till there ain't no air left / anywhere" (117).^[41] Both the weapon and the body parts it strikes conjure violent images of captivity. The "iron" metonymically invokes the iron brands, bits and collars used to mark and constrain slaves, while the "heart," "throat," and "sex" signify the emotion, speech, and sexuality that slavery restrained or disallowed. Associations between black female sexuality and violence persist in the imagery of American popular culture, but they are typically expressed through narratives of heteronormative desire or as a sacrifice for the sake of white absolution.^[42] Adrienne Davis explains "how the unspeakability of slavery contains the seeds of the unspeakability, for black women, of our own sexuality."^[43] Moreover, the space of Caroline's work, a basement that is hot as hell, located "under water" (11, 18, 34) and referred to as her "purgatory" (18) and the "pit of [her] abasement" (16), duplicates the conditions of the ship hold, where slaves were held captive during the journey across the Middle Passage. Hortense Spillers explains how the "undecipherable markings on the captive body" are translated over time into "a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh," that is, history inscribed onto black bodies and projected as ideas of blackness. Spillers wonders, "if this phenomenon of marking and branding 'transfers' from one generation to another."^[44] Caroline enacts this transferal of historical memory, turning her body into an object of history, an object subjected to the violence of history. It is an act of tragic agency performed as/at the limits of freedom: "SLAM go the iron / SLAM go the iron / FLAT! / FLAT! / FLAT! / FLAT! / Now how about that then? / That what Caroline can do! / That how she rearrange herself, / that how she change!" (118). Dissonant notes and driving drum beats amplify Caroline's change.

As her song softens to surrender, Caroline asks to be released from both her memories and her hope—to be unshackled from a past that returns, again and again, only to fuel and forestall the promise of a better future. Here, the slower, gentler melody contrasts with the visceral language of Caroline's entreaty:

Murder me God down in that basement,
murder my dreams so I stop wantin
murder my hope of him returnin
strangle the pride that makes me crazy.
Make me forget so I stop grieving.
Scour my skin till I stop feeling.
Take Caroline away cause I can't be her,
take her away I can't afford her.
Tear out my heart
strangle my soul
turn me to salt
a pillar of salt
a broken stone and then
...
Caroline. Caroline.
From the evil she done, Lord,
set her free
set her free

set me free.
Don't let my sorrow
make evil out of me (119)

With verbs such as “murder,” “scour,” and “strangle,” Caroline reinforces her “dreams,” “hope,” and “pride” as living and embodied. Hers is not an abstract wish for freedom in some undefined future; it is the urgency of material survival in the present, which necessitates forgetting her longings and desire for life. As Wolf incisively points out, here, her song “moves from a first-person address to third person and back to first, as Caroline at once struggles to articulate and simultaneously dissociate from her pain.”[\[45\]](#) Moreover, the trans-morphic movements from “skin” to “salt” to “stone”—from woman to organic substance to geologic object—simultaneously dehumanize Caroline and render her body part of earth’s history. In her metamorphosis, Caroline removes herself from history, removes history from herself, and at the same time becomes history. She inhabits an ontological space of abjection—neither subject nor object—which is the “obscene scene” of freedom.[\[46\]](#)

Caroline’s refusals to perform forms of change, freedom, and subjectivity as they are defined under the normative logics of white supremacist capitalism lay bare the tragic impasse that Moten articulates, when he asks:

What if freedom and slavery are the condition of each other’s possibility? . . . What if the condition of the slave in general or generally speaking is that she is chained to a war for freedom, chained to the war of freedom, to the necessity in freedom, which freedom imposes, of the breaking of affective bonds, the disavowal in entanglement of entanglement. . . . The paradox—if freedom is inalienable, then the freedom to relinquish freedom must also be—disappears when it’s discovered that slavery and freedom are not opposed to one another; the relation between freedom and slavery is not mutually exclusive but mutually metonymic. [\[47\]](#)

Caroline withdraws from the “war for freedom” and the struggle for subjecthood, a withdrawal that “is obscenity—the nonperformance of freedom, consent not to be a single being.” [\[48\]](#) Turning away from everything she is supposed to want (change, freedom, individuality, desire), Caroline must also forget “what it is to want in the first place.”[\[49\]](#)

With Caroline’s searing prayer still ringing in the air, the final scene, “How Long Has This Been Going On?,” poses a question of history. The Radio sings us into the scene by transforming Caroline’s pillar of salt into “Salty / Salty / Salty / Salty teardrops” (120). After watching the Gellmans establish new rituals of intimacy, we see Noah lean out his bedroom window to interrupt Caroline, who sits smoking on her porch: “Will we be friends then?,” Noah asks. Caroline replies, “Weren’t never friends” (123). These “secret little tragedies” and “costly, quiet victories” (123) gesture toward the larger historical narrative that Caroline stages. The experiences of loss and grief shared by these two characters is, paradoxically, both a point of connection and of irrevocable distance; it is an historical entanglement that keeps them apart, even as it links them together. As Caroline explains to Noah, “Someday we’ll talk again / but they’s things we’ll never say. / That sorrow deep inside you, / it’s inside me too, / and it never go away. /

You'll be OK. / You'll learn how to lose things" (124). To this quietly devastating lesson, she adds: "When you stop breathing air you get / oh so calm, / no fire down there / so it's calm calm calm / and there's never any money / so it's very very calm" (124). Money is, for Caroline, anti-life, alienated life. Change – both money and social progress – promises not freedom or a better future for her, but loss. Persisting in his search for a connection with Caroline, Noah finally finds it in their ritual of a shared cigarette. "Do you miss sharing a cigarette?" he asks, to which she replies, in her final lines, "You bet I do, Noah / you bet, you bet" (124). Even as the distance between these characters is acknowledged, their uncertain futures hang together in the air.

Kushner acknowledges that *Caroline, or Change* "comes from sorrow, from anger and grief, ...our tragedies," but he also sees the redemptive possibilities of history, which "has shown us both the terrors and also the pleasures of change" (xv). Those possibilities can be realized only if those who have been oppressed socially and economically are not seen as the "accidents" of history, Kushner insists, but as "historical agents."^[50] In an essay titled "Copious, Gigantic, and Sane," Kushner writes, "I don't know how any African-American, any person of color stays sane in this country, given that the whole machinery of racism seems designed to drive them crazy or kill them. I don't know why every woman isn't consumed every day by debilitating rage."^[51] At a time when African American anger is criminalized and Black Lives Matter attests to the profound difficulty of forming a black subjectivity, it seems urgent that we see Caroline's anger and her suffering as, at once, expected and unnecessary. To do so is to recognize something of the tragedy of American culture. Williams defines this tragic structure as the recognition of suffering "that could have been avoided but was not avoided." He writes,

The recognition is a matter of history. . . . But while this is seen as a process it can be lived through, resolved, changed. Whereas if it is seen, even briefly, as a fixed position—an abstract condition of man or of revolution—it becomes a new alienation, an exposure stopped short of involvement, a tragedy halted and generalised at the shock of catastrophe. . . . It is the fixed harshness of a revolutionary regime . . . which finds, facing its men [and women] turned to stone, the children of the struggle who because of the struggle live in new ways and with new feelings, and who . . . answer death and suffering with a human voice.^[52]

Caroline's refusals (to care for Noah or change like Dotty) and her angry eruptions (turned outward) and irruptions (turned inward) implicitly say "no" to an entire social order. But she finds no outside of that order. Our task is not to turn Caroline into stone, not to fix her as "a tragedy halted and generalised at the shock of catastrophe," but instead to see her story as the counterpart to progress and freedom. Characteristic of Kushner's politics, the musical ends on a redemptive note, with an epilogue featuring Emmie and her brothers, "the children of the struggle who . . . answer death and suffering with a human voice." Caroline "*giv[es] her daughter the stage*" (125), and Emmie sings proudly, "I'm the daughter of a maid" (127). She then transforms her mother from a "broken stone" into a geologic force: "She stands alone where the harsh winds blow: / Salting the earth so nothing grow / too close; but still her strong blood flow . . . / Under ground through hidden veins, / . . . down the plains, down the high plateau / down to the Gulf of Mexico / Down to Larry and Emmie and Jackie and Joe. / The children of Caroline Thibodeaux" (127). Caroline becomes in "Emmie's Dream" a more-than-human force of change, pulsing downward, through the land worked by her ancestors, into the lives of her children, and as "history [that] comes for us."

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[1] Tony Kushner, "Production: 'Caroline, or Change' (Working in the Theatre #322)," *American Theatre Wing*, CUNY TV, taped April 2004, uploaded to YouTube October 8, 2013.

<https://youtu.be/TyxZFF7zjRE>

[2] Tony Kushner, *Caroline, or Change: A Musical* (New York: TCG, 2004), 79.

[3] Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nonperformance," in *Afterlives*, Museum of Modern Art, 25 September 2015. Steamed live and uploaded on YouTube on September 25, 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2leiFByIIg>

[4] Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 2nd ed., ed. David McKellan. (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2000), 173.

[5] Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press: 1966), 62.

[6] This definition of catastrophe comes from chapter two of Gustav Freytag's *Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art* (1863/1894). Freytag's theory of dramatic structure, though meant to define the structure of ancient Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, influenced playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen and Arthur Miller. See Gustav Freytag, *Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, 3rd ed, trans Elias J. MacEwan. (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1900, c1894). See especially 137–42.

[7] Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 474.

[8] Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 202. Williams saw the emergence of this form of modern tragedy in Brecht's mature plays, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, *Mother Courage*, and *Galileo*. It has often been noted that Tony Kushner has a markedly Brechtian aesthetic, in his use of episodic structures, his deployment of history as a device to question the present, and his penchant for a non-naturalistic presentational style. However, while both playwrights share a Marxist leaning, Kushner's lush language, his flair for the hyper-theatrical, and his political optimism distinguish him from Brecht's more anti-theatrical style. In *Dramatists and Dramas*, Harold Bloom characterizes Kushner's drama as an aesthetic mélange of "Bertolt Brecht's Marxist stage epics; the lyrical phantasmagorias of Tennessee Williams; and Yiddish theater in its long history from the earliest *purimshpil*." Harold Bloom, *Dramatists and Dramas* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2005), 288. Any definitive index of Kushner's influences is moot, however, since his theatre owes as much to Shakespeare and Corneille as to Yiddish melodrama as to

Shaw and Brecht and Elizabeth LeCompte.

[9] *Caroline, or Change* began in 1998 when Kushner was commissioned by the San Francisco Opera to write a libretto. While that project never transpired, Kushner took his draft script of *Caroline* to his frequent collaborator and then-Artistic Director of the Public Theater, George C. Wolfe, and the two convinced Jeanine Tesori to come on board to compose the score. Workshops commenced in 1999 and *Caroline* was eventually staged at the Public Theater in November 2003, with Tonya Pinkins originating the role of Caroline. It moved to Broadway's Eugene O'Neill Theatre in May 2004. Both productions were directed by Wolfe. My analysis of any performance details relating to *Caroline, or Change* is based on Wolf's production, which I viewed at the New York Public Library's Theatre on Film and Tape archive on 17 January 2016. The date of the recorded production is 30 January 2004. *Caroline, or Change* has since received revivals on Broadway and the West End. The most recent production, to date, was a critically acclaimed production in spring 2018 at Hampstead Theatre, directed by Michael Longhurst and featuring Sharon D. Clarke as Caroline. This production is set for a West End transfer beginning 20 November 2018.

[10] In *The Female Complaint* (2008) Lauren Berlant defines an intimate public as "a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an *x*. . . . The intimate public . . . provides material that foments enduring, resisting, overcoming, and enjoying being an *x*." Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), viii.

[11] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 57. Hartman writes, "blackness is defined here in terms of social relationality rather than identity. . . . Blackness incorporates subjects normatively defined as black, the relations among blacks, whites, and others, and the practices that produce racial difference" (56–57).

[12] Walter Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre? [Second version]," trans. Anna Bostock (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 17–18.

[13] Kushner, *Caroline, or Change*, 11. Hereafter cited in-text.

[14] See, for example, Kushner, "Production: 'Caroline, or Change'" and Tony Kushner, "Tony Kushner: 'Caroline, or Change,'" interviewed by Neal Conan, *Talk of the Nation*. NPR, 20 June 2006, audio, 16:59. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5498280>.

[15] James Fisher, *The Theatre of Tony Kushner* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 205.

[16] The songs of these and other black female groups sublimated a period rife with racial conflict into songs of romantic conflict. The oeuvre of these two groups, in particular, operates as an important intertext to Caroline's situation and state of mind, with songs like "Come and Get These Memories," "(Love is Like a) Heat Wave," "Nowhere to Run" and "Quicksand" (Martha and the Vandellas) and "Locking Up My Heart" and "Too Hurt to Cry Too Much in Love to Say Goodbye," (The Marvelettes) serving as the subtext of Caroline's dreams and longings. The Motown girl group and pop music more

generally were safe escape valves for black female desire in 1960s US culture—and still today.

[17] Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 85-90.

[18] Karl Marx, “On James Mill,” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 2nd ed., ed. David McKellan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 133. Marx writes, “The separation of work, capital, and private property from each other and similarly the separation of work from work, of capital from capital and landed property from landed property, and finally the separation of labour from wages, of capital from profit and profit from rent, and lastly of landed property from ground rent permits self-alienation to appear both in its own form and in that of mutual alienation” (129). This index of estrangements illustrates the complexity of alienation as multifaceted and woven into every aspect of social life under capitalism.

[19] Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.

[20] Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2013), 93.

[21] Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 103.

[22] Rock music’s debt to African American music is widely acknowledged. Likewise, since Jewish immigrants have arrived in America, klezmer music has been influenced by jazz and blues. And both African American and Jewish musical traditions have been readily absorbed into the machinery of American popular culture industry. See for example Mark Slobin, *American Klezmer: Its Roots and Offshoots* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 17-21.

[23] Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 178.

[24] In his collaboration with Antonio Negri, Hardt elaborates on the potential of affective labor (referred to also as immaterial or biopolitical labor) to produce social change. Affective labor is “labor that creates not only material goods but also relationships and ultimately social life itself.” They argue that affective labor is a direct product of capital and the dominant form of labor in our neoliberal capitalist economy, producing the languages we use, the social practices we establish, the modes of sociality that define our relationships. Together, these factors make up the means and the results of biopolitical production. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004). 109.

[25] Michael Hardt, “Affective Labor,” in *boundary 2* 26, no.2 (1999): 98.

[26] Kushner, interview, NPR.

[27] Kushner, “Production: ‘Caroline, or Change.’”

[28] Caroline's anger and emotional distance from those around her often induced unexpected laughter from the audience at the 30 January 2004 performance at the Public Theater. Notably, the audience laughed whenever Caroline rebuffed Noah's attempts at soliciting affection from her, perhaps a sign of surprise or even discomfort. These moments of laughter seemed to come when expectations were broken and unexpected encounters or affects were introduced.

[29] In his 1844 manuscripts, Marx describes money as both "visible god-head" and "universal whore" – standing in at once for transcendent value and embodied labor. Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," 118.

[30] Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2009), 68.

[31] Marx, *Das Kapital*, 66. Marx is using gold as his example of commodity-money, not the fiat currency of bills nor, of course, the bitcoins of digital economies. His ideas are still entirely relevant in the way all of these money forms abstract labor from value.

[32] *Ibid.*, 58.

[33] There is a similarly explosive fight between Belize and Roy Cohn in *Angels in America, Part Two: Perestroika*, in which racial rage bubbles forth from both characters and with it the parallel but incomparable histories of suffering of Jews and African Americans.

[34] Wolf, *Changed for Good*, 180.

[35] Moten, *In the Break*, 1.

[36] Moten, "Blackness and Nonperformance."

[37] *Ibid.*

[38] The word "case" is a gesture to Fred Moten's important essay, "The Case of Blackness," which responds to Franz Fanon's "fact of blackness." Moten uses the word "case" to attend to "the gap between fact and lived experience," that is "between blackness and being black." The "word 'case,'" he writes, serves "as a kind of broken bridge or cut suspension between the two" (180). By creating some distance between the historical construction of blackness and experiences of being black, Moten troubles the categories of the individual, property, and freedom that structure American culture. See Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," in *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008): 177–218.

[39] Fisher points out the connection between Caroline and Benjamin's Angel of History, which Kushner referenced more explicitly in *Angels in America*. As Fisher notes, Kushner "has Caroline realize that Lot's wife was warned not to look back, but only ahead at the 'unruined future'." This analysis drew from an early unpublished first draft of *Caroline, or Change*, dated 28 June 1998, and the quote "unruined future" comes from that version, but does not appear in the 2004 published version. This earlier version draws a closer parallel between Caroline and the Benjamin/Klee Angel of History featured in *Angels in America*. Fisher, *The Theater of Tony Kushner*, 204. In the later published version, however,

Caroline fixes her gaze not on the “unruined future,” but on the present. Or more precisely, by turning herself into “broken stone” (Kushner, *Caroline* 118), she becomes part of a present scattered with the remnants of unrecognized pasts and as-yet unrealized futures.

[40] Marx, “On James Mill,” 131.

[41] The frequent references Caroline makes to lack of air and breath are eerily prescient of Eric Garner.

[42] Examples visually linking violence and black female sexuality abound in American popular culture, and the visualization of The Radio as black female entertainers in *Caroline* is important in this regard. Consider such icons as Tina Turner, Whitney Houston, and Rihanna, whose private lives and sexuality is laced with real and fabricated images of masculinized violence. For an excellent analysis the connections between “erotic violence and desire in black heterosexuality” (421), see Nicole R. Fleetwood, “The Case of Rihanna: Erotic Violence and Black Female Desire,” *African American Review*. Special Issue: On Black Performance 45, no. 3 (2012): 493.

[43] Adrienne Davis, “‘Don’t Let No One Bother Yo’ Principle’: The Sexual Economy of American Slavery,” in *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work*, eds. Sharon Haley and the Black Women and Work Collective (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002) 104.

[44] Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 260.

[45] Wolf, *Changed for Good*, 180.

[46] Moten, “Blackness and Nonperformance.” Moten uses the phrase “obscene scene” to define a historical and interpretative space out of sight, off to the side of history and the law. He is reflecting in this lecture on the legal case of a slave named Betty, who declined her legal right to freedom, choosing instead to stay with her owners in Tennessee and remain a slave. He is presumably borrowing from folkloric definitions of *obscene*, which link it to the violence in Greek drama that was kept “off scene.” I use the term in that sense, as well, and as a counterpart to the notions of abjection and subjectivity, the latter broadly defined as a condition of agency and individuation. As Moten puts it, “While subjectivity is defined by the subject’s possession of itself and its objects, it is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed—infused, deformed—by the object it possesses” (*In the Break*, 1). That disruptive “dispossessive force” is the abject. The abject, following Julia Kristeva, is that which disturbs and also defines the borders between subject and object. The abject must be expelled in the formation of the “proper” subject, and yet it always remains as a disruptive force. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

[47] Moten, “Blackness and Nonperformance.”

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Tony Kushner, "Copious, Gigantic, Sane," in *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness: Essays, A Play, Two Poems and a Prayer* (New York, NY: TCG, 1995), 52.

[51] Kushner, "Copious, Gigantic, Sane," 52.

[52] Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 203–04.



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Table of Contents:

- "Introduction: Reflections on the Tragic in Contemporary American Drama and Theatre" by Johanna Hartmann and Julia Rössler
- "Rewriting Greek Tragedy / Confronting History in Contemporary American Drama: David Rabe's *The Orphan* (1973) and Ellen McLaughlin's *The Persians* (2003)" by Konstantinos Blatanis
- "Haunting Echoes: Tragedy in Quiara Alegría Hudes's *Elliot Trilogy*" by Nathalie Aghoro
- "'Take Caroline Away': Catastrophe, Change, and the Tragic Agency of Nonperformance in Tony Kushner's *Caroline, or Change*" by Joanna Mansbridge
- "The Poetics of the Tragic in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*" by Julia Rössler
- "Branding Bechdel's *Fun Home*: Activism and the Advertising of a 'Lesbian Suicide Musical'" by Maureen McDonnell

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