

THE AMERICAN MUSICAL STAGE AS A SITE OF UTOPIAN POSSIBILITIES:  
SUBVERSIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF RACE AND GENDER IN  
*VIOLET AND CAROLINE, OR CHANGE*

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A Dissertation  
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the Faculty of the Graduate School  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
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Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the  
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THE AMERICAN MUSICAL STAGE AS A SITE OF UTOPIAN POSSIBILITIES:  
SUBVERSIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF RACE AND GENDER IN  
*VIOLET AND CAROLINE, OR CHANGE*

presented by Brett D. Johnson,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy,

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## ABSTRACT

When considering American musicals as social barometers that both reflect and shape the national zeitgeist, two major traditions have been identified: the mid-twentieth-century Golden Age model, which champions the mainstream ideology, and the “anti-musical,” or “counter-mythology,” which challenges the social and aesthetic status quo. The latter, which originated in *West Side Story* (1957) but proliferated in the musicals of Stephen Sondheim, often include outsider characters who challenge the hegemonic structures of racism, sexism, and middle-class privilege. This study draws upon a range of theories from theatre, history, musicology, sociology, critical race theory, feminist theory, religious studies, and cultural studies to investigate how two contemporary musicals – *Violet* (1997), an adaptation of Doris Betts’ short story “The Ugliest Pilgrim,” which tells the story of a disfigured Southern woman’s journey of spiritual healing, and *Caroline, or Change* (2003), an original musical about a middle-aged African American maid, emotionally scarred by racism and sexism, working for a Jewish family in Lake Charles, Louisiana, circa 1963 – function as social documents and in relation to these two traditions in American musical theatre. This study also examines how the works were created, with special attention to the relationship between convention and subversion within the creative process. The study concludes that both female protagonists challenge essentialist cultural representations of race and gender, and both musicals create a site of utopian possibilities within a dystopic social reality.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

For nearly a century, musical theatre, as one of the few indigenous American art forms, has both reflected and shaped the national zeitgeist. In defining “musical theatre,” I rely on John Bush Jones’ concise yet inclusive definition – “book shows (musicals with a plot or story) and revues (anthologies of separate and usually unrelated songs, dance numbers, and comedy routines)”<sup>1</sup> – as it allows the inclusion of works that employ a fragmentary, non-linear structure, such as some of the musicals of Stephen Sondheim. Furthermore, following standard usage in musical theatre historiography, I use “American” throughout to refer specifically to the United States, in full awareness that the term excludes Canada, Mexico, and Central and South America. Lyricist Sheldon Harnick suggests that because of their far-reaching influence, American musicals function as “social documents that tell us who we were and who we are – as individuals, as members of a community, as citizens of a nation.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*, Larry Stempel argues that “musicals provide one way of taking the pulse of American culture.”<sup>3</sup> In *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, Raymond Knapp goes a step further by suggesting that “the American musical has done more than merely *interact* with the local – that is, its

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<sup>1</sup> John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>3</sup> Larry Stempel, *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 13.

American – context. It has played a significant part in *shaping* that context, as well, by addressing both the ideals of America and its realities, and helping us deal with the frequent disparity between them.”<sup>4</sup>

In examining musicals as social barometers, two major traditions have been identified. The first, embodied by the mid-twentieth-century Golden Age musical, champions the mainstream ideology. The Golden Age of American musical theatre is generally considered to begin in 1943, with the premiere of *Oklahoma!*, and end in the 1960s or 1970s, with the advent of the rock musical. The term “Golden Age” may also signify a set of conventions related to the formally integrated, or “book,” musical, in which the elements of music, lyrics, libretto, dance, and stagecraft come together to tell a story. Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II pioneered the integrated musical with *Show Boat* in 1927, but it was Rodgers and Hammerstein who popularized it during their seventeen-year partnership. The characteristics of a Golden Age musical typically include a heteronormative narrative that revolves around marriage, stock characters drawn from Roman comedy and commedia dell’arte, a substantial libretto, conventional song types, formal integration, a chorus that embodies the values of the community, and an optimistic message. Writing of *Oklahoma!*, the quintessential Golden Age musical, Ann Sears contends that “the book, lyrics, costumes and music ... reflected currents in American art, music and popular culture that looked at American life past and present

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<sup>4</sup> Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 284.

through a haze of romanticism and nostalgia.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Sondheim opines that “most of all, it’s a very *comfortable* show, both for the cast and the Middle American audience.”<sup>6</sup>

The legacy of the Rodgers and Hammerstein-inspired Golden Age musical is far-reaching, perhaps partially because, as Stempel has suggested, their work was preserved in “media more durable than live performance,” including original cast recordings, published libretti, and motion pictures.<sup>7</sup> Stacy Wolf has asserted that from the 1950s to 2000s, “virtually all Broadway musicals had to contend with the formidable legacy of Rodgers and Hammerstein” and that “their conventions have been internalized by musical theatre audiences.”<sup>8</sup> That is, for nearly six decades, new musicals have been judged based upon how closely they follow Golden Age conventions of form and content. Examples of works in this tradition abound, including *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946), *Brigadoon* (1947), *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948), *Guys and Dolls* (1950), *The Pajama Game* (1954), *Damn Yankees* (1955), *My Fair Lady* (1956), *The Music Man* (1957), *Gypsy* (1959), *Bye Bye Birdie* (1960), *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (1961), *Funny Girl* (1964), *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), *Hello, Dolly!* (1964), and *Man of La Mancha* (1965).

In contrast to the Golden Age tradition are those musicals that challenge the social

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<sup>5</sup> Ann Sears, “The Coming of the Musical Play: Rodgers and Hammerstein,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 154.

<sup>6</sup> Max Wilk, *Ok!: The Story of Oklahoma!* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2002), 258.

<sup>7</sup> Stempel, 334.

<sup>8</sup> Stacy Wolf, *Changed For Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10.

and aesthetic status quo. This tradition can be traced to *West Side Story* (1957), which, according to Jones, was the first Broadway musical to challenge the American Dream: “The aspect of the Dream under scrutiny is the myth of the United States as the land of opportunity for *all*, where the streets are paved with gold.”<sup>9</sup> Knapp observes that musicals like *West Side Story* which critique mainstream values, although a minority in the 1950s, began to proliferate in the following decade:

The political and musical turmoil of the 1960s precipitated a two-fold crisis for the American musical stage. Politically, central events of the 1960s seemed to cry out for theatrical representation, including the Vietnam War and the protests it engendered among the nation’s youth, the civil rights movement and its attendant protests and repressive police actions, women’s liberation, ecology, a wave of political assassinations, and increased sexual promiscuity and recreational drug use among the younger generation. Musically, the 1960s saw not only a tremendous surge in the popularity of politicized folk-based music ... but also the development of various genres that remained grounded in regionally based African American performance traditions but that were widely embraced by whites and others across the United States ... and the explosive emergence of an increasingly diverse rock music from the waning momentum of the rock-and-roll movement of the 1950s.<sup>10</sup>

Knapp uses the term “counter-mythologies” to describe musicals like *Hair*, *The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* (1967-68), which “marked a deliberate attempt to create a viable alternative to the musicals of the older generation, grounded in a documentary-like approach to life as it is actually lived, and steeped in the emergent political issues, alternative life-styles, iconoclastic manner of appearances – and of course, the music – of the younger generation,”<sup>11</sup> and *Assassins* (1991), which focuses “not on an emergent

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<sup>9</sup> Jones, 192.

<sup>10</sup> Knapp, 153.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

ideology but rather on a disturbing presence that has always been there.”<sup>12</sup>

As exemplified by *Hair* and *Assassins*, this subversive genre of American musical theatre often features outsider characters who challenge the hegemonic structures of racism, sexism, middle-class privilege, and heteronormativity. In his article “Stephen Sondheim and the Musical of the Outsider,” Jim Lovensheimer observes that “non-conforming outsiders are indeed inherent in much dramatic literature. American musicals, however, have generally avoided them, and certainly their presence as protagonists in musicals before *Carousel* is rare.”<sup>13</sup> Lovensheimer cites *Pal Joey* (1940), which centers on the sexual exploits of antihero Joey Evans, and *Carmen Jones* (1943), an all-black musical adaptation of Bizet’s opera, as notable exceptions. However, *Carousel*, as Lovensheimer points out, seems to mark a turning point. This Rodgers and Hammerstein musical features an outsider protagonist – Billy Bigelow, a roughneck carnival barker who marries (and then physically abuses) Julie Jordan. When Billy, who is out of work, learns that his wife is pregnant, he participates in a robbery but commits suicide when it fails. Billy redeems himself by returning to earth for one day, where he instills confidence in his daughter, Louise, and tells Julie that he loved her. The musical’s ending confirms Billy’s redemption: he climbs a stairway to heaven as the community sings a reprise of the musical’s anthem, “You’ll Never Walk Alone.” Therefore, although *Carousel* displays subversive characteristics in telling the story of an outsider, it remains firmly entrenched in the Golden Age tradition by reifying the status

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>13</sup> Jim Lovensheimer, “Stephen Sondheim and the Musical of the Outsider,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 181.

quo. Lovensheimer claims that, “only after *Carousel* ... do we find the outsider increasingly cast as the principle figure in a musical, particularly a musical with a score by Stephen Sondheim. ... He seems always to have been attracted to characters whose actions place them outside mainstream society.”<sup>14</sup> Examples from Sondheim’s oeuvre include the emotionally detached Robert in *Company* (1970), the disillusioned and deluded married couples in *Follies* (1971), the murderous Benjamin Barker in *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1979), the cadre of unhappy loners in *Assassins* (1990), and the physically unattractive and emotionally unstable Fosca in *Passion* (1994).

A new generation of musical theatre composer/lyricists has inherited and, in some cases, extended Sondheim’s subversive aesthetic. In a February 2000 article for *American Theatre* magazine, David Patrick Stearns identified Jeanine Tesori, Michael John LaChiusa, Adam Guettel, Jason Robert Brown, and Ricky Ian Gordon as the “Sons of Sondheim,”<sup>15</sup> a new breed of songwriters who have attempted to push the American musical theatre in serious and challenging new directions.<sup>16</sup> To date, their ambitious musical offerings reflect their namesake’s appetite for the difficult; these include, respectively, an original work about a middle-aged African American maid, emotionally scarred by racism and sexism, working for a Jewish family in Louisiana, circa 1963 (*Caroline, or Change*); a re-fashioning of Euripides’s *Medea*, set in late-nineteenth-century America (*Marie Christine*); a musical based on the true story of a Kentucky man

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 205-6.

<sup>15</sup> Others have called them “Sondheim’s Children” or “Friends of Audra [McDonald],” who included many of them on her 1998 debut album “Way Back to Paradise,” and who continues to champion their work.

<sup>16</sup> David Patrick Stearns, “The Smart Set,” *American Theatre*, February 2000, 76.



who got trapped and died in a cave (*Floyd Collins*); a dramatization of the Leo Frank case, in which a Jew in the deep South was falsely accused of murder and lynched (*Parade*); and a musical inspired by George du Maurier's 1891 novel *Peter Ibbetson* (*Dream True: My Life with Vernon Dexter*). In a November 1999 article for *The New York Times* entitled "I Sing of America's Mongrel Culture," LaChiusa explained the contemporary relevance of his – and by implication, his colleagues' – aesthetic:

This country's cultural psyche is darker today. It's no exaggeration to say that America is having an identity crisis: we need more and more of less and less. Our national sense of humor has dulled; it's hard to tell actual politics from political satire. Today's musicals and their creators can't help but be influenced by and reflect the times, which are even more cynical and caustic than when Stephen Sondheim and his collaborators were creating the 1970 *Company* and the 1971 *Follies*.

Furthermore, as Stearns points out, the work of these songwriters is marked not only by seriousness of content but also by unprecedented harmonic sophistication and stylistic eclecticism: "These composers arguably absorb their genres with greater depth and respect [than Sondheim] ... and depart from Broadway song forms more readily."<sup>17</sup>

Wiley Hausam, former associate producer of musical theatre at the New York Shakespeare Festival, coined the term "anti-musicals" in 2003 to describe the subversive strategies of this new genre. According to Hausam, anti-musicals

confound the expectations, responses and needs of the Broadway musical audience. They have dispensed almost entirely with the two most cherished conventions of the form: Song (simple in its traditional structure and therefore memorable) and the Happy Ending. Next, entertainment has been made secondary to the political concerns that were the heart of the not-for-profit theaters in the 1980s and 1990s – especially the politics of race, sexual preference, and gender. Finally, the mythology of the American Dream, which was merely questioned by Prince and Sondheim, has been indicted by this new generation. Consequently, the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 79.

work is ironic, skeptical, and sometimes disenchanting and disbelieving. When it's funny, it's biting. It leaves teeth marks. Obviously, this is no way to be popular.<sup>18</sup>

Stempel concurs with Hausam, writing that anti-musicals “avoid happy endings, indict the American Dream, and engage in the socially sensitive issues of ‘identity politics,’ that is, ‘political claims made or resisted in terms of group-based identities, such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and disability.’”<sup>19</sup> In the course of my study, I will engage with the somewhat problematic term “anti-musical” and suggest an alternate vocabulary for these subversive works.

Tesori, the singular woman among the “Sons,” has written the score for two musicals that seem especially ripe for analysis in relation to a subversive tradition: *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change*. Both musicals feature unorthodox female protagonists: Violet is a poor, disfigured Southern woman who embarks on a journey of spiritual healing, and Caroline is a middle-aged African American maid working for a Jewish family in Louisiana. In addition to their outsider female protagonists, *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change* have much in common. Both musicals situate their action in the South during the mid-1960s, an historical moment of cultural transition; both musicals feature a soundscape of indigenous American music, including folk, bluegrass, rhythm and blues, soul, gospel, and Motown; both musicals had limited New York engagements but have enjoyed more substantial lives in collegiate and regional theatre productions; and both musicals engage in the politics of race, gender, and class.

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<sup>18</sup> Wiley Hausam, ed. *The New American Musical: An Anthology from the End of the Century* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2003), xviii-xix.

<sup>19</sup> Stempel, 658.

*Violet*, a musical adaptation of Doris Betts' widely anthologized short story "The Ugliest Pilgrim," tells the story of a disfigured Southern woman's pilgrimage from her home in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina to the headquarters of a televangelist in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Violet Karl hopes the television preacher will grant her a miracle and remove a grotesque facial scar that stretches across her cheek and the bridge of her nose – the vestiges of an accident she suffered at age thirteen, when her father's axe blade flew off its handle and split her face in two. After workshops at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, Playwrights Horizons, and Lincoln Center Theater, *Violet* – featuring a book by Brian Crawley and direction by Susan H. Schulman – opened at Playwrights Horizons on March 11, 1997, to generally positive reviews. Linda Winer of *Newsday* commended Lauren Ward's portrayal of Violet, asserting that "she creates a brave, curious, totally original heroine – a savvy force of nature stunted by a childlike trust in a miracle that would make her look like a movie star,"<sup>20</sup> and Greg Evans of *Variety* argued that "this tale of tolerance and acceptance overcomes its weaknesses with the same brio of its scarred title character, who triumphs over conventional standards of beauty."<sup>21</sup>

*Caroline, or Change* centers on Caroline Thibodeaux, a thirty-nine-year-old African American maid working for a Jewish family in Lake Charles, Louisiana, circa 1963. Caroline is nearly paralyzed by her desperate circumstances: she is a divorcee, the single mother of four children (one of whom is stationed in Vietnam), and has worked as

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<sup>20</sup> Linda Winer, review of *Violet*, by Brian Crawley and Jeanine Tesori, directed by Susan H. Schulman, Playwrights Horizon, New York, *Newsday*, March 12, 1997.

<sup>21</sup> Greg Evans, review of *Violet*, by Brian Crawley and Jeanine Tesori, directed by Susan H. Schulman, Playwrights Horizons, New York, *Variety*, March 19, 1997.

a maid for twenty-two years. The original production of *Caroline, or Change*, directed by George C. Wolfe, premiered at New York City's Public Theater in December 2003, and transferred uptown to the Eugene O'Neill Theatre in April 2004, where it ran for 136 performances. In his *Theatre Journal* review, James Fisher declared that "the variety [Tonya] Pinkins brings to Caroline's suppressed anger and desperation is compelling and unforgettable," and he stated that she "raises ... the image of Caroline ... to heroic levels."<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Daphne A. Brooks, author of the monograph *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*, suggested that Pinkins' "soon-to-be-legendary" interpretation of the role gave Broadway its newest, richest, and most densely textured representation of a black female character."<sup>23</sup> Writing of the Public Theater incarnation, John Lahr described *Caroline, or Change* as a "moment in the history of theatre when stagecraft takes a new turn" in the "complexity of psychology and history."<sup>24</sup>

As indicated by the above, critics and scholars have suggested that *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change* are important works in a subversive tradition and, moreover, that their protagonists challenge essentialist cultural representations of race, gender, and class. Winer and Evans dubbed Violet "a brave, curious, totally original heroine" who

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<sup>22</sup> James Fisher, review of *Caroline, or Change*, by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori, directed by George C. Wolfe, Eugene O'Neill Theatre, New York, *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 4 (2004): 667-70.

<sup>23</sup> Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 346.

<sup>24</sup> John Lahr, review of *Caroline, or Change*, by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori, directed by George C. Wolfe, Public Theater, New York, *The New Yorker*, December 2003.

“triumphs over conventional standards of beauty.” Fisher declared that *Caroline* subverts the Mammy stereotype, raising the character’s image to “heroic levels,” and John Lahr claimed that *Caroline, or Change* marks a “major turn in the road for musical theatre.” Accordingly, *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change* seem to be rich in potential as social barometers that both reflect and shape our collective identity. Through a thorough, critical analysis of both texts, with special attention given to the representations of their eponymous characters, I investigate the claims made by Winer, Fisher, Lahr, and others. It is not my goal to force these works into one of the traditions of musical theatre; rather, I address their inherent complexities and ambiguities, thereby connecting them to a variety of traditions. Questions that guide my research include: How do *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change* function as social documents? What can they tell us about American identity, especially in terms of race, gender, class, and physical ability? What is their relationship to the ideological status quo? What is their relationship to the aesthetic status quo? What is the implication of presenting visions of the 1960s on the cusp on the twenty-first century?

I begin this investigation by chronicling the process of their creation, with special attention to the ways in which the process was conventional and/or transgressive in nature. I draw upon printed sources, videos and podcasts from the American Theatre Wing, and two documentaries – Dori Berinstein’s *Show Business: The Road to Broadway* and Freida Lee Mock’s *Wrestling with Angels* – that offer a behind-the-scenes look at the development of *Caroline, or Change*, including interviews with the cast and creative team as well as workshop and production footage. I supplement these sources with personal interviews with Jeanine Tesori and Brian Crawley, both of whom provide

invaluable information about the creation of the musicals. In addition to serving as a record of the development of these important works, this information allows me to consider *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change*'s relationship to the ideological and aesthetic status quo.

Next, I perform a critical analysis of the created products, examining both form and content. I gather evidence from a plethora of sources, including the libretti, cast recordings, archival videos of the original productions, photographs, published reviews, printed sources (books, articles, and dissertations), and online videos and podcasts. I then perform a close reading of the "texts" of both musicals, including the book, music, lyrics, and original performance, to assess what meanings they may hold for audiences. To extract meaning, I draw upon a wide range of theoretical lenses from theatre, history, theoretical studies of identity formation, musicology, and cultural studies.

Notably, my study considers Tesori's score as a vital component of both musicals. Most scholarly considerations of musical theatre have approached the genre from either a theatrical or musicological perspective, but have rarely synthesized the two. A few recent studies have attempted to bridge the gap between the two disciplines, and can therefore serve as models for my dissertation; these include Bruce Kirle's *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process*, Raymond Knapp's two-volume *The American Musical and the Formation of National/Personal Identity*, and Judith Sebesta and Jessica Sternfeld's "'I'll Cover You': An Interdisciplinary Duet on *Rent* and Collaborative Musical Historiography." Rather than undertake a systematic analysis of Tesori's score, I provide an overview of the role and nature of music in each work, followed by a reading of representative passages that amplify the characters,

themes, and historical context of both pieces. Therefore, limiting my study to two works is necessary and allows a deeper and more complete reading of both musicals.

In *Unfinished Show Business*, Bruce Kirle imagines an analysis of musical theatre that “involves the wedding of text not only with performance and reception but also with historical context.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, to understand the context of the setting in *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change*, I consult social histories of America such as Jon Margolis’ *The Last Innocent Year: America in 1964 – The Beginning of the Sixties*, Howard Brick’s *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960’s*, and *African Americans and Jews in the Twentieth Century: Studies in Convergence and Conflict*, edited by V. P. Franklin, Nancy L. Grant, Harold M. Kletnick, and Genna Rae McNeil.

My study contributes to the burgeoning field of musical theatre scholarship. Writing in 2004, David Savran notes that, although the field has become “more fashionable of late,” inept scholarship predominates:

what passes for musical-theatre scholarship – with a handful of notable exceptions – oscillates between dreary, encyclopedic catalogs and wildly impressionistic flights of the imagination. Certainly no other theatre form has inspired such a cornucopia of idolatrous and anecdotal narratives that scorn analysis in favor of narcissistic rumination and fantasy.<sup>26</sup>

Even more recently, in their introduction to *Women in American Musical Theatre*, Bud Coleman and Judith A. Sebesta observe that “although a number of works have treated the subject of musical theatre from a fairly traditional, almost ‘positivist’ historical perspective, few have approached it theoretically or using a less ‘traditional’ historical

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<sup>25</sup> Bruce Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), xviii.

<sup>26</sup> David Savran, “Toward a Historiography of the Popular,” *Theatre Survey* 45, no. 2 (2004): 213.

methodology, such as feminism, Marxism, postmodernism, etc.”<sup>27</sup> Such is the intent of my dissertation, which will synthesize theories from an assortment of fields to provide the most thorough analysis possible. Additionally, my study contributes to the new investigation of the “anti-musical.” These works, which dramatize segments of our collective identity that are often marginalized or silenced, are especially worthy of scholarly attention, as they may suggest new ways of examining our past, considering our present, and imagining our future.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, this study contributes to the scholarly conversations on playwright Tony Kushner and director George C. Wolfe, both recognized as important voices in American theatre, and initiates a conversation on composer Jeanine Tesori. Despite her emergence as one of the most important voices in contemporary musical theatre, no scholarly study exists that considers Tesori and her contributions to the genre. These include, in addition to *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change*, a “movical” based on the 1967 Julie Andrews vehicle *Thoroughly Modern Millie*; a new score for the Public Theater’s production of *Mother Courage and Her Children*; a stage version of the popular DreamWorks film *Shrek*; and, most recently, a musical adaptation of Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. The dearth of scholarship on Tesori

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<sup>27</sup> Bud Coleman and Judith A. Sebesta, *Women in American Musical Theatre: Essays on Composers, Lyricists, Librettists, Arrangers, Choreographers, Designers, Directors, Producers, and Performance Artists* (Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland & Company, 2008), 3.

<sup>28</sup> Ian Bradley ponders in his book *You’ve Got to Have a Dream: The Message of the Musical*, “Is it escapism or is it rather their strangely spiritual, almost sacramental quality which makes musicals deal in dreams, possibilities, and visions of what might be if only we lived in a better world?” Ian Bradley, *You’ve Got to Have a Dream: The Message of the Musical* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 19.



seems to reflect a scholarly tendency to marginalize women's contributions to the *creation* of this most popular of theatrical forms. Coleman and Sebesta maintain that, "most written histories of musical theatre discuss the work of female performers but make only a cursory nod to the work of its other female creators."<sup>29</sup>

To complete this study, I draw upon the following major categories of literature: primary sources for *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change*, including libretti, scores, cast recordings, photographs, and archival videos of the original productions; secondary sources, including reviews, articles, and dissertations that analyze the musicals; musical theatre histories; theoretical analyses of musicals; books that consider the form and conventions of musical theatre; theoretical studies of identity formation; books on musicology; and cultural studies.

The libretti, scores, and cast recordings for *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change*, all of which are readily available, are my principal sources. Because my study also considers how the eponymous characters were portrayed onstage in the original productions, I utilize archival videos of the productions from the Theatre on Film and Tape Archive at Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts. I also attended two performances of *Caroline, or Change* at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre in May 2004 and one performance at the Guthrie Theater in June 2009. Thus, I supplement my analysis with written notes from my live theatrical experience. Finally, I rely upon two documentaries – Dori Berinstein's *Show Business: The Road to Broadway* and Freida Lee Mock's *Wrestling with Angels* – that offer a behind-the-scenes look at the development of *Caroline, or*

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<sup>29</sup> Coleman and Sebesta, 2. Notably, *Women in American Musical Theatre* does reference Tesori, but the comprehensive nature of the book precludes an in-depth analysis of her oeuvre.

*Change*. I supplement these with personal interviews with Tesori and Crawley, chosen not only for the insights they offer about the development of *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change* but also due to availability.

To gauge the critical response to these works, I study a plethora of reviews for both *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change*. Major print publications, including *The New York Times*, *The Daily News*, *The Washington Post*, *Variety*, and *Newsday*, covered the New York premiere of both musicals. Reviews for subsequent productions of *Violet* are rare. Productions in New York, Philadelphia, and Minneapolis garnered reviews in local newspapers as well as more informal critiques via online blogs. Reviews for *Caroline, or Change* are more abundant, with high-profile productions in San Francisco, London, Chicago, Minneapolis, and Washington, D.C.

My research revealed scanty scholarship on *Violet*, a situation that calls for remedy. Musical theatre historians Scott Miller, Barry Singer, and Thomas S. Hischak have all recognized the significance of *Violet* but, given the scope of their studies, do not afford the musical any in-depth analysis. Hischak, in *Off-Broadway Musicals Since 1919: From Greenwich Village Follies to The Toxic Avenger*, writes, “Violet was a complex, bitter character who was scarred inside and out.”<sup>30</sup> Miller, in *Strike Up the Band: A New History of Musical Theatre*, summarizes the show’s theatrical power: “On a minimalist set and with Violet’s horrible scar visible only in the audience’s imagination, the show charted a profound and thrilling emotional journey, inescapably mixed up with the beginning of the most turbulent decade in American history, Vietnam,

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas S. Hischak, *Off-Broadway Musicals Since 1919: From Greenwich Village Follies to The Toxic Avenger* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2011), 300-01.

race issues, and other challenges.”<sup>31</sup> Singer, in *Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theater and Beyond*, concludes that “*Violet* was an extremely well-realized, original, yet accessible piece of work. It deserved to be treated better.”<sup>32</sup>

*Caroline, or Change* has received more attention, with three scholarly articles and chapters in two collections of essays, two dissertations, and two books. Catherine Stevenson’s article “Seek for Something New”: Mothers, Change, and Creativity in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, *Homebody/Kabul*, and *Caroline, or Change*” draws upon the dialectic of thesis and antithesis to consider how, in each of these plays, “mothers contradict the premises of the ‘given state of affairs,’ enlarge the consciousness of their children (or surrogate children), and open avenues for new potentialities to emerge.”<sup>33</sup> Stevenson addresses the proliferation of mother figures in *Caroline, or Change*, including two biological mothers (Noah’s deceased mother and Caroline), a stepmother (Rose), and a mother double played by the Moon. Importantly, Stevenson states that “it is the mother’s dreams, sufferings, hopes, and anger that this work explores in much more depth than its predecessors, as it probes the question: can the change-agent change herself?”<sup>34</sup>

Chapter Three of L. Bailey McDaniel’s dissertation, entitled “Nurturing Fallacies:

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<sup>31</sup> Scott Miller, *Strike Up the Band: A New History of Musical Theatre* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007), 197.

<sup>32</sup> Barry Singer, *Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theater and Beyond* (New York: Applause, 2004), 138.

<sup>33</sup> Catherine Stevenson, “Seek for Something New: Mothers, Change, and Creativity in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, *Homebody/Kabul*, and *Caroline, or Change*,” *Modern Drama* 48, no. 4 (2005): 759.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 770.

Constructing the Maternal in Twentieth-Century American Drama,” examines the popular image of The Mammy in *Caroline, or Change*, Alfred Uhry’s *Driving Miss Daisy*, and Cheryl West’s *Jar the Floor*. These three works, McDaniel observes, “present caretakers of color who provide nurturance to white, southern, Jewish recipients, subjects who themselves surface in the texts as simultaneously marginalized and privileged.” McDaniel argues that when these works are read against expectations, they reveal “very American, culturally-determined miscegenation anxieties.”<sup>35</sup> Whereas McDaniel interprets *Caroline* as a Mammy figure, I investigate the ways in which she subverts that essentialist representation. Moreover, his analysis is limited insofar as he privileges the libretto, as indicated by his references to “Tony Kushner’s *Caroline, or Change*,” as well as the fact that his analysis of *Caroline* is part of a much larger work.

Chapter Five of James Fisher’s *Understanding Tony Kushner* examines the ways in which *Caroline, or Change* continues Kushner’s characteristic interrogation of individual and national identity, including morality, politics, religion, history, gender, and sexuality. Fisher devotes considerable attention to the central character of *Caroline*, and argues that she subverts the Mammy trope: “Kushner takes pains to push *Caroline* ... in the opposite direction of the stereotype of a black woman in a crisp, white maid’s uniform ... *Caroline* is street smart, sharp tongued, and angry with the God she fervently believes in, who seems to have forgotten her.”<sup>36</sup>

Like Fisher, Stacy Wolf contends, “The character of *Caroline* is an anti-Mammy

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<sup>35</sup> L. Bailey McDaniel, “Nurturing Fallacies: Constructing the Maternal in Twentieth-Century American Drama” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2007), 12-13.

<sup>36</sup> James Fisher, *Understanding Tony Kushner* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 90-91.

image, drawn in sharp distinction to the romanticized selfless maternal figure in *Gone with the Wind* and Aunt Jemima pancake mix boxes.”<sup>37</sup> She further asserts that “the musical underlines how, although Caroline is the employee and has no economic or material power, she holds tremendous affective power over the Jews with whom she has contact, as they misread her and project their desires onto her.”<sup>38</sup> Wolf focuses on the conventional first and last songs. She writes, “Since musical theatre values and celebrates the individual, the distance from the first to the last number telescopes the character’s growth.”<sup>39</sup>

Aaron C. Thomas’ article, “Engaging an Icon: *Caroline, or Change* and Politics of Representation,” does focus exclusively on the ways in which the eponymous character conforms to and deviates from the literary tradition of the Mammy, concluding that, “Even more than acknowledging and *deconstructing* the stereotype of the mammy, Kushner *reconstructs* the image of the black woman as struggling, conflicted, sensual, powerful, and quietly heroic.”<sup>40</sup> The distinction between “deconstruction” and “reconstruction” is an interesting one that points to a significant difference between Thomas’ interpretation and my own. These differing perspectives may be explained in part by the fact that Thomas’ analysis primarily considers the libretto, whereas my consideration of a wide range of factors, including the music, staging, casting, and especially the function of the anthropomorphic characters, has led me to a different

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<sup>37</sup> Wolf, 174.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>40</sup> Emphasis added. Aaron C. Thomas, “Engaging an Icon: *Caroline, or Change* and the Politics of Representation,” *Studies in Musical Theatre* 4, no. 2 (2010): 209.

conclusion. This study extends the work of previous scholars who have laid an important foundation for a more in-depth analysis of this provocative and complex character.

Two additional works consider *Caroline, or Change*, but are less relevant to my study. Bert Stein's essay, "The Therapy of Desire," which concludes *Tony Kushner: New Essays on the Art and Politics of the Plays*, purports to examine the tensions of race and ethnicity in *Caroline, or Change*. Yet, Stein's contribution is, in many ways, a synopsis and includes little analysis. Reid Adam Davis's dissertation "Sissy Warriors: Perversity, Performance, and the Unruly Child" examines the familiar stereotype of the sissy in twentieth-century American cinema and theatre, and includes some analysis of Noah Gellman, the eight-year-old son of Caroline's employer.

To contextualize *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change* within the American musical theatre canon, I have consulted a number of histories of the genre. Of great importance to my study are Larry Stempel's *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*, John Bush Jones' *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre*, Denny Martin Flinn's *Musical! A Grand Tour: The Rise, Glory, and Fall of an American Institution*, Allen Woll's *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls*, Barry Singer's *Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theater and Beyond*, and *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, edited by William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird.

Book-length theoretical analyses such as Raymond Knapp's two-volume *The American Musical and the Formation of National/Personal Identity* and Stacy Wolf's two monographs, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* and *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, and article-length

studies such as Judith A. Sebesta's "Just Another Puerto Rican with a Knife? Racism and Reception on 'The Great White Way,'" Richard M. Goldstein's "'I Enjoy Being a Girl': Women in the Plays of Rodgers and Hammerstein," and Andrea Most's "'You've Got to Be Carefully Taught': The Politics of Race in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*" have served as models and theoretical frameworks for my study.

In considering the form and conventions of musical theatre, I am heavily indebted to Scott McMillin's *The Musical as Drama* and Bruce Kirle's *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Progress*. McMillin proposes a "poetics of the stage musical" that is more indebted to Brecht's spirit of disunification than Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*. He suggests that the defining feature of musicals is not the integration of plot, character, song, dance, orchestration, and setting into an organic whole but rather the incongruity between book time, which is organized by cause and effect, and lyric time, which operates on the principles of repetition. McMillin coins the term "coherence" to refer to "different things holding together by adherence to common principles, when they could very well be flying apart."<sup>41</sup> Importantly, McMillin notes that integration theory holds political connotations: "Integration means the blending of difference into similarity, as though things are being melted in a pot. It would produce a unified whole, both in its political idealism and in its aesthetic meaning." Coherence, on the other hand, "means things stick together, different things, without losing their difference."<sup>42</sup> Kirle's *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-*

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<sup>41</sup> Scott McMillin, *The Musical as Drama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 208.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

*Process* draws upon a number of theoretical lenses from performance studies, cultural studies, queer studies, and ethnoracial studies to examine the ways in which musicals create meaning in particular cultural contexts and are, therefore, products of an historical moment. Importantly, Kirle deconstructs the privileging of an autonomous text,<sup>43</sup> and advocates an analysis of musicals that recognizes their incompleteness: “Works-in-process, they are open and fluid, subject to a great deal of variation, even subversion, in the way they are performed.”<sup>44</sup>

To analyze the titular characters of *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change*, I draw upon a number of theoretical studies on identity formation. These include Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* Anthony Synnott’s “Truth and Goodness, Mirrors and Masks – Parts I and II: A Sociology of Beauty and the Face,” and Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*; critical race theory, including Lisa M. Anderson’s *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen*, bell hooks’ *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, and Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*; and disability studies, such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, Carrie Sandahl’s

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<sup>43</sup> Notably, Kirle points to the Rodgers and Hammerstein organization as a major force in championing the autonomy of the closed text. According to Kirle, the published scripts “included stage directions taken from performances of the original Broadway productions that became a mark of textual authenticity.” Moreover, “the Rodgers and Hammerstein office was notoriously vigilant in assigning the rights to their canon, both to professionals and to amateurs, and often sent representatives to monitor mountings throughout the country and abroad to guarantee the authenticity of the performance.” Kirle, 8.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.



“Ahhhh Freak Out! Metaphors of Disability and Femaleness in Performance,” and *Staring Back: The Disability Experience From the Inside Out*, edited by Kenny Fries, and *The Body and Physical Difference*. I supplement these works with Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, and Robert A. Orsi’s “‘Mildred, Is It Fun To Be A Cripple?’ The Culture of Suffering in Mid-Twentieth Century American Catholicism.”

Books on musicology have allowed me to examine and interpret the role that Tesori’s music plays in the creation of Violet and Caroline’s identities. Of particular interest are Charles Hamm’s *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America*, Eileen Southern’s *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, Bill C. Malone’s *Southern Music/American Music*, Julie A. Noonan’s dissertation entitled “The Sound of Musicals’ Women: Tessitura and the Construction of Gender in the American Musical,” and *The Cambridge Companion to Singing*, edited by John Potter.

Social histories, including Howard Brick’s *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s*, M. J. Heale’s *The Sixties in America: History, Politics, and Protest*, and Sharon Montieth’s *American Culture in the 1960s*, have provided a context for understanding the socioeconomic conditions of the American South in the 1960s. More recent cultural studies, such as Colin Harrison’s *American Culture in the 1990s*, *American Thought and Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, edited by Martin Halliwell and Catherine Morley, and *American Multiculturalism after 9/11: Transatlantic Perspectives*, edited by Derek Rubin and Jaap Verheul, have aided me in considering the context in which *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change* were created and how these works function as social barometers.

My study consists of six chapters. The first outlines the project, its purpose, and justification. The second and fourth document and analyze the creative processes for *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change*, respectively, including an account of how the works were created, a discussion of the goals of their creative teams, and an investigation of the relationship between tradition/convention and innovation/subversion within the creative process. The third and fifth chapters analyze the “texts” of *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change*, respectively, and their relationship to the ideological and aesthetic status quo. Through a close reading of the book, music, lyrics, and original performance of both musicals, with special attention to the eponymous characters, I investigate how *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change* subvert traditional representations of race and gender on the American musical stage. The sixth, and final, chapter summarizes my findings and considers how *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change*, as social documents, are situated in an ongoing trajectory of musicals that reflect and shape our identity as Americans, particularly in terms of race, class, gender, and physical ability.

## Chapter 2

### Bringing *Violet* to Light

Reviewers of the premiere production have suggested that *Violet* is an important work in an anti-musical tradition and, moreover, that its female protagonist is representative of new outsider characters. A fuller understanding of these claims, however, is aided by a consideration of the process of *Violet*'s creation. In undertaking this exploration, I am guided by Audre Lorde's famous essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in which Lorde poses the question, "What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy?" Lorde responds, "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support."<sup>1</sup> Lorde's essay raises an important question for my study: To what degree were the master's tools, i.e. the Golden Age tradition, and the master's house, i.e. conventional theatre practice, employed in creating *Violet*? To address this question, I look closely at the ways in which the creation of *Violet* was conventional and/or transgressive in nature. I then consider what implications that process has for the work being dubbed an anti-musical featuring a "totally original heroine." This chapter, then, not only documents the creation of *Violet*, a worthwhile undertaking in itself given the relative lack of scholarship on the

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<sup>1</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (New York: Routledge, 2003), 27.

piece, but also allows me to consider the relationship between process and product in musical theatre creation.

*Violet*'s origins are rooted in a longstanding tradition, that of adapting known properties for the musical stage. In *Words with Music: Creating the Broadway Musical Libretto*, Lehman Engel writes, "Out of the dozen or so longest lasting musicals, six were based on plays, seven on collections of short stories, three on motion pictures, three on biographies, three on novels, one on a single short story, and one on history."<sup>2</sup> Engel discusses several works at length, including *Oklahoma!* from *Green Grow the Lilacs* (Lynn Riggs), *Carousel* from *Liliom* (Molnár), *The Most Happy Fella* from *They Knew What They Wanted* (Sidney Howard), *West Side Story* from *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare), *My Fair Lady* from *Pygmalion* (Shaw), *Fiddler on the Roof* from *Tevye and His Daughters* (Sholem Aleichem), *South Pacific* from *Tales of the South Pacific* (James A. Michener), *Guys and Dolls* from "The Idyll of Miss Sarah Brown" and "Blood Pressure" (Damon Runyon), and *Pal Joey* from the novel of the same name (John O'Hara). Engel was writing in the late 1960s and 1970s, but adaptations still constitute a significant portion of new musicals, and *Violet* is no exception.<sup>3</sup> Jeanine Tesori came

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<sup>2</sup> Lehman Engel, *Words with Music: Creating the Broadway Musical Libretto*, updated and revised by Howard Kissel (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2006), 293.

<sup>3</sup> More recent examples include *Spring Awakening*, from Frank Wedekind's play *Spring's Awakening*; *The Light in the Piazza*, from Elizabeth Spencer's novella of the same name; *Wicked*, from Gregory Maguire's best-selling novel; and *The Wild Party*, from Joseph Moncure March's Jazz-age poem. A popular trend in contemporary musical theatre is "movicals," or stage adaptations of films. Tony-nominated examples from the past ten years include *Catch Me If You Can*, *Sister Act*, *Billy Elliot*, *Shrek the Musical*, *Xanadu*, *Grey Gardens*, *Mary Poppins*, *The Color Purple*, *The Wedding Singer*, *Spamalot*, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, *Hairspray*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, and *Sweet Smell of Success*.

across the idea for the musical in 1981, when she saw a televised version of Doris Betts' "The Ugliest Pilgrim," starring Didi Conn. Tesori remembers, "I found out it had been based on a short story ... which I read and loved."<sup>4</sup>

Betts' tale, first published in *Beasts of the Southern Wild and Other Stories* in 1973, tells the story of Violet Karl, a poor Southern woman from the mountains of North Carolina, who makes a pilgrimage to Tulsa, Oklahoma, in hopes that a famous television evangelist will heal a disfiguring scar on her face, the result of a childhood accident: "I ... see again Papa's ax head rise off its locust handle and come floating through the air, sideways, like a gliding crow. And it drops down into my face almost daintily, the edge turned just enough to slash loose a flap of skin the way you might slice straight down on the curve of a melon."<sup>5</sup> Violet, now twenty-eight years old, believes she is entitled to her healing: "Maybe the preacher will claim he can't heal ugliness. And I'm going to spread my palms by my ears and show him – this is a crippled face! An infirmity! Would he do for a kidney or liver what he withholds from a face? The Preacher once stuttered, I read someplace, and God bothered with that. Why not me?"<sup>6</sup> Comparing herself to Job, Violet avows that she has learned enough from her affliction and wants to be healed.

On her journey by bus, Violet befriends two men – a white paratrooper named Monty Harrill and a black soldier named Grady Fliggins, or "Flick" – who are traveling to Fort Smith. It is May 1969, the height of the Vietnam War, and both men are

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<sup>4</sup> Jeanine Tesori, interview by author, New York, January 11, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Doris Betts, "The Ugliest Pilgrim," in *Beasts of the Southern Wild and Other Stories* (New York: Touchstone, 1998), 20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

preparing to join the conflict. Violet befriends Monty, who is also from North Carolina, but she treats Flick with suspicion: “Then I see I’ve sat down by the nigger soldier. I do not want to meet his gaze, since he’s a wonder to me, too. We don’t have many black men in the mountains. Mostly they live east in Carolina, on the flatland, and pick cotton and tobacco instead of apples. They seem to me like foreigners.”<sup>7</sup>

Violet stays overnight with Monty and Flick in a ratty hotel in Memphis, where she dreams about them visiting her mountain home. When she awakens, she overhears the two men discussing her appearance. Monty remarks, “Without the clothes, it’s not a hell of a lot improved,” but he goes on to conclude, “There’s one thing, though ... Good looks in a woman is almost like a wall. She can use it to shut you outside. You never know what she’s like, that’s all.” Flick responds, “I knew that much in grammar school. You sure are slow. It’s not the face you screw ... After a while, you don’t even notice faces.”<sup>8</sup> Later that night, after dinner in a noisy restaurant and a movie at the picture show, Monty sneaks into Violet’s room and has sexual intercourse with her.

When Violet leaves the men at Fort Smith, Monty implores her to meet him at the bus terminal on Monday, after her healing. She refuses, and continues to the preacher’s headquarters – the Hope of Glory Building in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Violet despairs when she first sees the words “Hope of Glory Building” carved into the arch over the entrance. She had mistakenly been hearing the name on television as the “Hope *and* Glory Building.” She admits, “You wouldn’t think one word could make that much

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 16.

difference.”<sup>9</sup> Violet’s fears are soon confirmed. She meets with an assistant because the Preacher is speaking in Tallahassee. Violet cites verses from Scripture that justify her healing, but the assistant counters with passages that paint Violet’s suffering as a gift of grace, an opportunity to grow in her faith. Frustrated by the assistant’s resoluteness, Violet flees the office and runs into the chapel, where she pleads her case: “‘I have been praising you, Lord, but it gets harder every year.’ Maybe that sounds too strong. I try to ease up my tone before the Amens. Then the chapel is very quiet. For one minute I hear the whir of many wings, but it’s only a fan inside an air vent.”<sup>10</sup>

Traveling back to Fort Smith, Violet is hopeful that her face has been transformed and that Monty won’t recognize her. But when she arrives, Monty notices her immediately: “So I know. I can look, then, in the wide mirror over a jukebox. Tired as I am and unfed, I look worse than I did when I started from home.”<sup>11</sup> Violet dashes away from the terminal and toward her mountain home, with Monty in close pursuit. The final lines of Betts’ story suggest a happy ending, if only momentary, for Violet: “Praise God! He’s catching me!”<sup>12</sup>

As written by Betts, the character of Violet is vulnerable to a number of essentialist cultural representations of women. Chiefly, Violet embodies the madonna/whore duality. Having never left her mountain home, Violet is an innocent young girl, unschooled in the wisdom of the world. But she is also depicted as sexually

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 29.

rapacious. When Violet first meets Monty, she thinks she is “young enough for you, blue-eyed boy, and your brothers.”<sup>13</sup> After their night on the town, Flick knocks on the door of Violet’s hotel room and whispers, “Vi-oh-LETTE?” Violet declares, “Oh, I could love anybody! There is so much of me now, they could line up strangers in the hall and let me hold each one better than he had ever been held before!”<sup>14</sup> By the time Violet opens the door Flick is gone. Later that night, Monty drunkenly stumbles into Violet’s room and makes love to her: “One time he stops. He’s surprised, I guess, finding he isn’t the first. How can I tell him how bad that was? How long ago? The night when the twelfth grade was over and one of them climbed with me all the way home? And he asked. And I thought, *I’m entitled*. Won him a five-dollar bet. Didn’t do nothing for me.”<sup>15</sup> Violet’s identity vacillates between virgin and whore throughout Betts’ story; however, the ending suggests that Violet’s true healing lies in being “caught” by Monty and, as a result, embracing her chaste nature.

Violet, as written by Betts, might also be labeled a redneck. More than once, Violet calls Flick a “nigger” and, when she attempts to run away at the end of the story, with Monty and Flick in pursuit, she describes Flick as “a floating dark blade,”<sup>16</sup> a weapon that can harm, and potentially destroy, her. In the next chapter, I will investigate how the creative team complicated these stereotypical representations in the libretto, music, and original production. Despite these shortcomings, “The Ugliest Pilgrim”

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 29.



contains all but one of Engel's five elements of a "workable musical show" – feeling, subplot, romance, particularization of character and situation, and comedy,<sup>17</sup> subplot being the one exception.

Tesori admits that she was attracted to the story and central character, who she thought was "so singular," and was not concerned about writing a commercial hit: "It was my first impulse ... to do something on my own. And I thought, I want to see a character like that. I want to write a character like that."<sup>18</sup> Additionally, Tesori has mentioned that, in musicalizing Violet's story, she was interested in exploring the societal pressures that young women face: "They talk about themselves as if they're repulsed by what they see. Something in our society presses against them and how they view themselves. They're just never enough."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, lyricist/librettist Brian Crawley has noted,

I had been teaching playwriting to schoolchildren in New Jersey, and I noticed the phenomenon, which I'd also read about, of girls shutting themselves down around age thirteen. In sixth or seventh grade, girls are still bubbly and interested in talking in class, and then suddenly in eighth or ninth grade they're gone. And because I taught playwriting, I taught all different grades; I wasn't stuck in one. I would see how different the social scene was, from grade level to grade level. So I said, what about doubling [Violet]? Having the young girl at thirteen and the adult version of herself. That's opening instead of closing. Violet has an actual injury that shuts her off from the rest of the world, but a lot of young women do that to themselves. It's many women's story.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Engel, 284.

<sup>18</sup> Tesori, interview.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., interview.

<sup>20</sup> Brian Crawley, interview by author, telephone, March 4, 2012.

As indicated by these comments, Tesori and Crawley's primary motivation for writing *Violet* was not to create a commercial hit; rather, they wanted to dramatize the "singular" story of a poor Southern woman who is disfigured and, in doing so, address the damaging effects of the beauty myth in America. In her seminal book, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, Naomi Wolf examines how this social fiction has been used as a "political weapon against women's advancement."<sup>21</sup> The beauty myth, Wolf writes, is "composed of emotional distance, politics, finance, and sexual repression. The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men's institutions and institutional powers."<sup>22</sup> Tesori and Crawley's desire to explore the beauty myth suggests *Violet*'s unconventionality because, as Wiley Hausam notes, one characteristic of anti-musicals is that "entertainment has been made secondary to the political concerns that were the heart of the not-for-profit theaters in the 1980s and 1990s – especially the politics of race, sexual preference, and gender."<sup>23</sup>

The development of *Violet* was innovative, in part, because of the artists involved: two novice musical theatre writers, one of whom was a woman, and a female director who had gained a reputation for her "feminist" aesthetic. Tesori met Crawley, a playwright and screenwriter who was also making his first foray into writing for the musical theatre, at the BMI/Lehman Engel Musical Theater Workshop, which for the past fifty years has served as a training ground for musical theatre writers. Tesori and

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<sup>21</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 10.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Wiley Hausam, ed, *The New American Musical: An Anthology from the End of the Century* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2003), xviii-xix.

Crawley collaborated on their final project for the workshop, a ten-minute musical, and discovered that they enjoyed working together. Tesori then approached Crawley about serving as lyricist/librettist for *Violet*, and he accepted. In addition to bringing his talents as a book writer to the table, Crawley also brought an interest in folk music.

Concurrently with the BMI/Lehman Engel workshop, Crawley was working with Fast Folk, a laboratory founded in the 1970s by Jack Hardy for performers in the modern folk tradition. Crawley remembers,

It was interesting – two very different approaches to songwriting and not a whole lot of people, other than myself, liked both. I was taking guitar lessons and was very much into that kind of music. So when Jeanine gave me the story, my first reaction was, “Yeah! This is what I’m made to write.” I’m sure there were other people in the world that could write it, but I didn’t know any.<sup>24</sup>

Although Tesori would later travel from Memphis to Orlando to the Appalachians, immersing herself in the sounds and settings of *Violet*’s story, she already “knew the front-porch style very well. I recorded a ton of it, so I had the sound in my head. It’s a very self-contained type of music. It would be improvised. And that’s what I wanted for her.”<sup>25</sup> Crawley’s knowledge of folk music most likely gave him the proper tools to craft conversational lyrics that melded perfectly with Tesori’s music.

Several weeks into their collaboration, Tesori and Crawley found their ideal director in Susan H. Schulman, who had gained a reputation for helming intimate musicals featuring female protagonists. Schulman had attended New York’s prestigious High School of the Performing Arts, studied drama at Hofstra University, and earned a

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<sup>24</sup> Crawley, interview.

<sup>25</sup> Tesori, interview.

master's degree from Yale. Although planning to enroll as a directing student, Schulman had entered Yale as a playwright because the graduate directing program did not accept women in the 1960s. Schulman explains, "They didn't want to invest the time and money training a woman who, in their view, would get married, ultimately have a family and drop out of the profession."<sup>26</sup> Schulman's early directing credits included productions at the Buffalo Studio Arena Theatre, the Equity Library Theatre, and the Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera, but her break came during the 1988-89 New York season, when her small-scale production of *Sweeney Todd* at the York Theatre drew raves from critics. Frank Rich of the *New York Times* commented on Schulman's "feminist" approach: "She gives equal weight to female characters who originally came off as stylized slatterns in a man's story. It may be simply that she sees the play's women more fully or has more compassion for them."<sup>27</sup> When the production transferred to Circle in the Square the following year, Schulman earned a Tony nomination as Best Director of a Musical. Tesori met Schulman the following year, when she served as associate conductor for the Broadway production of *The Secret Garden*, which boasted a creative team comprised of all women: Susan H. Schulman (director), Marsha Norman (lyricist/librettist), Lucy Simon (composer), Jeanine Tesori (associate conductor), Heidi Landesman (set designer), Theoni V. Aldredge (costume designer), and Tharon Musser (lighting designer). Martin Gottfried, echoing Rich's appraisal of *Sweeney Todd*, has

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<sup>26</sup> Lisa D. Horowitz, "Inside the Secret Garden: Women Directors Make Inroads on Broadway," *TheaterWeek*, February 10, 1992, 22.

<sup>27</sup> Frank Rich, review of *Sweeney Todd*, by Hugh Wheeler and Stephen Sondheim, directed by Susan H. Schulman, York Theater, New York, *New York Times*, April 19, 1989.

written that “the resulting musical was not only artistically different but different in sensibility from traditionally ‘tough’ shows.”<sup>28</sup> Rich and Gottfried’s comments, though based in essentialist notions of gender, point to the relative lack of women directors on- and off-Broadway in the 1990s. In fact, Anne Fliotsos notes in her essay “Open a New Window, Open a New Door: Women Directors Take the Stage,” that “although women have worked on Broadway in each decade [of the twentieth century], their numbers are woefully low in comparison to their male counterparts.” Fliotsos further states that “women fared better directing Off Broadway, but the number of women directing musical works was only 19.3 percent out of 1596 titles reported.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, *Violet* is remarkable for having both a woman composer and a woman director.

Tesori recognizes that, although her upbringing was more privileged than Violet’s, the character’s journey of self-discovery mirrored her own. After studying music at Barnard College and Columbia University, she spent nearly a decade working as a pianist, arranger, and conductor on- and off-Broadway. She served as the associate conductor for *The Secret Garden* (1991) and *The Who’s Tommy* (1993), and it was when she was working on the latter that Tesori pulled “The Ugliest Pilgrim” out of her drawer: “...it just struck me one day that it was time.”<sup>30</sup> The impulse to write *Violet* came, in

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<sup>28</sup> Martin Gottfried, *More Broadway Musicals: Since 1980* (New York: Abrams, 1991), 191.

<sup>29</sup> Anne Fliotsos, “Open a New Window, Open a New Door: Women Directors Take the Stage,” in *Women in American Musical Theatre: Essays on Composers, Lyricists, Librettists, Arrangers, Choreographers, Designers, Directors, Producers and Performance Artists*, ed. Bud Coleman and Judith A. Sebesta (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008), 174.

<sup>30</sup> Barry Singer, *Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theater and Beyond* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2004), 136.

part, from Tesori's need to find her voice as a writer: "It began everything for me because I had been a music director and I wanted to claim a different life."<sup>31</sup> The consonances between crafts(wo)man and character are significant: both moved from abjection (Tesori as a woman in a male-dominated musical theatre scene) to agency (as Jennifer Jones Cavanaugh observes, Tesori became "one of the few women composers whose work was produced in American musical theatre at the end of the twentieth century"<sup>32</sup>).

After securing a verbal agreement from Doris Betts, Tesori rented a nineteenth-century lighthouse near Montreal, and spent a year composing and reading. In a personal interview, Tesori cited Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face* and Ann Patchett's *Truth & Beauty: A Friendship* as books that influenced her while creating *Violet*. Grealy's memoir describes her childhood battle with Ewing's sarcoma, which necessitated the removal of part of her jaw, as well as chemotherapy and radiation, and dozens of reconstructive surgeries. A passage early in the book, in which Grealy articulates her contradictory impulses, has special resonance for the character of Violet:

This singularity of meaning – I *was* my face, I *was* ugliness – though sometimes unbearable, also offered a possible point of escape. It became the launching pad from which to lift off, the one immediately recognizable place to point to when asked what was wrong with my life. Everything

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<sup>31</sup> Tesori, interview.

<sup>32</sup> Jennifer Jones Cavanaugh, "A Composer in Her Own Right: Arrangers, Musical Directors and Conductors," in *Women in American Musical Theatre: Essays on Composers, Lyricists, Librettists, Arrangers, Choreographers, Designers, Directors, Producers and Performance Artists*, ed. Bud Coleman and Judith A. Sebesta (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008), 80.

led to it, everything receded from it – my face as personal vanishing point.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, in “The Ugliest Pilgrim,” Violet identifies herself through her facial scar. In a particularly memorable passage, she describes how she has seen the Preacher place his hands on an afflicted person and “cry out ‘HEAL!’ in his funny way that sounds like the word ‘Hell’ broken into two pieces.”<sup>34</sup> By linking these two words, Betts suggests that, for Violet, the loss of her affliction would be a torment in itself, a loss of her identity.

Moreover, Grealy’s description of how she disenfranchised herself echoes the way in which Violet distances others:

Over the years my perspective on “what it was all about” has shifted, but the most important point then was that there *was* a reason for this happening to me. No longer feeling that I was being punished, as I had during the chemo, I undertook to see my face as an opportunity to find something that had not yet been revealed. Perhaps my face was a gift to be used toward understanding and enlightenment. This was all noble enough, but by equating my face with ugliness, in believing that without it I would never experience the deep, bottomless grief I called ugliness, I separated myself even further from other people, who I thought never experienced grief of this depth.<sup>35</sup>

Until Violet meets Monty, her only interest in other people is as specimen; she creates an inventory of their physical attributes in her composition book in an effort to construct her perfect face. For example, shortly after boarding the Greyhound bus, she studies the driver, Mr. Wallace Weatherman: “His nose is too broad, his dark eyes too skimpy –

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<sup>33</sup> Lucy Grealy, *Autobiography of a Face* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), 7.

<sup>34</sup> Betts, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Grealy, 180.

nothing in his face I want – but the hair is nice. I write that down, ‘Black hair?’ I’d want it to curl, though, and be soft as a baby’s.”<sup>36</sup>

Patchett’s book, *Truth & Beauty*, is about her friendship with Grealy, whom she met as an undergraduate in 1981. Patchett writes about not only the moments of joy in her friendship with Grealy, but also times of anguish:

She was trapped in a room full of mirrors, and every direction she looked in she saw herself, her face, her loneliness. She couldn’t see that no one else was perfect either, and that so much of love was the work of it. She had worked on everything else. Love would have to be charmed.<sup>37</sup>

Both *Autobiography of a Face* and *Truth & Beauty: A Friendship* pose questions that have important implications for *Violet*: How does a normative discourse of beauty oppress those who do not adhere to its prescription? In what ways is that oppression internalized? What might a more inclusive discourse look like?

Tesori’s knowledge of, and immersion in, Southern music allowed her to move beyond traditional Broadway song forms, as standardized in the Tin Pan Alley<sup>38</sup> genre. Charles Hamm observes that, during the Golden Age, Tin Pan Alley’s verse-chorus songs consisted of one or two verses (optional), with the most important melodic material

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<sup>36</sup> Betts, 2.

<sup>37</sup> Ann Patchett, *Truth & Beauty: A Friendship* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 171.

<sup>38</sup> Raymond Knapp writes, “The term ‘Tin Pan Alley,’ coined by Monroe H. Rosenfeld, referred specifically to the high concentration of music publishers on 28<sup>th</sup> Street in the 1890s, where showrooms filled the street with the din of upright pianos banging out their offerings. As with the derogatory ‘Yankee Doodle’ of over a century earlier, the intended insult became a badge of honor, and the term ‘Tin Pan Alley’ came to stand for the ostentaciously ‘popular’ genre of American song that emerged in the final decade of the nineteenth century and held sway throughout the first half of the twentieth (that is, before the advent of rock and roll).” Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 71.



appearing in the chorus. Further, Hamm notes, “the chorus is almost always 32 measures in length, the only exceptions coming from a doubling of measures in songs of lively tempos (to 64 measures) or from extensions of the last phrase. The four sections are most often in AABA or ABAC patterns, with occasional variants such as AABC and ABCA.”<sup>39</sup> Examples include “Night and Day” (Cole Porter), “Blue Moon” (Richard Rodgers), and “White Christmas” (Irving Berlin).” Importantly, Hamm points to the intended audience for this genre of music in the mid-twentieth century:

It seems fair to generalize that Tin Pan Alley songs were for white, urban, literate, middle- and upper-class Americans. They remained practically unknown to large segments of American society including most blacks (excepting musicians and a handful of urban blacks aspiring to a life-style approaching that of whites), and the millions of poor, white, rural Americans of English, Irish, and Scottish stock clustered in the South and scattered across the lower Midwest.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, given the subject matter of *Violet*, not to mention Tesori’s objective in bringing this story of a disenfranchised outsider to the American musical stage, it seems fitting that she abandons the Tin Pan Alley style for a more “authentic” sound that denotes the musical’s locale as well as Violet’s class. Bill C. Malone writes that Southern music, an amalgamation of British and African musical traditions, “acquired a special character because it developed in a society long known for its limitations: a social context of poverty, slavery, suffering, deprivation, religious fundamentalism, and cultural isolation.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), 360-61.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 379.

<sup>41</sup> Bill C. Malone, *Southern Music American Music* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 3.

The readiness with which Tesori departs from conventional song forms is, as David Patrick Stearns acknowledges in a February 2000 article for *American Theatre*, a trait she shares with her fellow “Sons of Sondheim”:

These composers also share common ground in their insistence on allowing content to dictate form. This is hardly a new notion – Sondheim has done it for decades – but what is new is the extent to which they’re taking it. While Sondheim has always absorbed whatever musical genre his subject matter suggested (whether 1920s pop songs in *Follies* or kabuki drumming in *Pacific Overtures*), he has usually done so within the basic outlines of the Broadway song form. These composers arguably absorb their genres with greater depth and respect (Guettel learned to play guitar in the process of exploring the country forms he utilized in *Floyd Collins*) and depart from Broadway song forms more readily.

That means greater freedom of key modulations and lack of conventional melodic symmetry, musical gestures that break the most basic unwritten rules of Broadway.<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, in his review of Tesori’s music for Lincoln Center’s American Songbook series, *New York Times* critic Stephen Holden observes that Tesori

burrows so deeply into the styles she embraces, especially gospel and its offshoots, that the music in her more serious scores becomes an organic dramatic element. Cliché-free pastiche may be an oxymoron, but that concept applies to her music for the shows “Violet” and “Caroline, or Change.”<sup>43</sup>

In fact, Thomas S. Hischak writes that, “The folk number ‘Water in the Well,’ which opened [*Violet*] sounded so authentic that one mistook it for a standard.”<sup>44</sup> To Hischak’s example I would add “Who’ll Be The One (If Not Me),” the folk song that underscores

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<sup>42</sup> David Patrick Stearns, “The Smart Set,” *American Theatre*, February 2000, 20-21.

<sup>43</sup> Stephen Holden, review of Lincoln Center American Songbook series, by Jeanine Tesori, Allen Room, New York, *New York Times*, March 8, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas S. Hischak, *Off-Broadway Musicals Since 1919: From Greenwich Village Follies to the Toxic Avenger* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2011), 300.

Violet's fantasy dream sequence. As sung by the Jordanares, an American vocal quartet that has performed with a plethora of country artists, the song is perhaps the most "authentic"-sounding folk number in the musical.

Importantly, Tesori's score does not privilege a particular style over another, thereby creating a hierarchy of musical tastes. In a personal interview, she attributed her breadth of interests to her training:

I had an amazing piano teacher who I talk about a lot named Richard Bender. He introduced me to all literature at the same time. And it's something, if I had a school of music, I would do. I would have kids improvising; they would learn the circle of fifths; they would play Bach; they would play tv themes; they would play jazz; they would learn how to drum, play the djembe; so there is no distinction of the idea for judgment in music. And he freed my ear up so totally, and the really hard study came later, but what he first did was say, "Do you want to play *Hawaii 5-O*? Here you go." And then I was very popular at school because I could play that tv theme. But I was studying Kabalevsky, I was studying Bach and Mozart, I was sight singing. And it was the most incredible holistic way to approach music that I believe in. And so when people are saying, "You're eclectic," I think, well, it just reflects the way I was taught. You know, and pastiche, whatever it is ... that's a word that's not very kind. I only write what I hear.

One example from the score of *Violet* will serve to explicate how Tesori's music departs from convention. The song "You're Different" begins with a recitative section. In this moment, Monty is reading the notes that Violet has scrawled in her Baltimore Catechism, and the inscriptions correspond to melodic lines that appear earlier in the score:

Mister Wallace Weatherman ... His black hair, is it Cherokee...  
("On My Way")  
and her skin, china white, tissue thin...  
("On My Way")  
Two kinds of people in this world, Some say yes and some say...  
("Let It Sing")

I'd like a pair of Gene Tierney eyes, try Monty's mouth on for size, A  
little fuller though...  
("All to Pieces")

The next section, marked "Swing 8ths," changes from  $4_4$  to  $3_4$  to  $2_4$ , with the irregular rhythms suggesting Monty's agitation at what he has read and the music quoting an earlier showdown between Monty and Violet ("Question & Answer"). The main section of the song, marked "Easy Swing (Swing 8ths)," follows an AABA pattern, with four sections of unequal length, for a total of seventy-eight measures.

Where Tesori's score for *Violet* is more conventional is in its adoption of well-worn song types, each of which serves a function in the narrative. *Violet* contains an "I am/I want" number ("Surprised"), two ensemble numbers ("On My Way" and "Bring Me to Light") a list song ("All to Pieces"), several song and dance numbers ("Who'll Be the One (If Not Me)" and "Lonely Stranger/Anyone Would Do"), a ballad ("Lay Down Your Head"), and an eleven o'clock number ("Look At Me"). In *Musical! A Grand Tour*, Denny Martin Flinn maintains that an eleven o'clock number might take the form of a star turn ("I'm Goin' Back" in *Bells Are Ringing*) or a showstopper led by a supporting character ("Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat" in *Guys and Dolls*), and it usually dramatizes a climactic moment ("Is Anybody There?" in *1776*) or restates the theme of the musical ("The Impossible Dream" in *Man of La Mancha*). Regardless, Flinn argues, "the interior rhythm of the musical demands that the story's climax be musicalized."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Denny Martin Flinn, *Musical! A Grand Tour* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 416.

Tesori's score departs from tradition in that she does not essentialize the music based on race, gender, or class. In *Music and the Racial Imagination*, Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman affirm that

race contributes fundamentally to the issues of belonging and ownership that music articulates. At individual, group, and broader social levels alike, few deny that one type of music can be possessed and claimed as one's own, while there are other musics [*sic*] that belong to someone else. The music of this variously constructed Self is different from the music of the Other, therefore making it possible to articulate and even conceptualize the most basic differences through our musical choices.<sup>46</sup>

Radano and Bohlman further assert that, "Music is a domain that different races, depending on interpretation and case, can potentially share, appropriate, and dominate; or that contains common syncretic practices."<sup>47</sup> For example, Flick, an African American character, does not sing exclusively blues or gospel music. Rather, Tesori uses the music to suggest how the characters influence one another, a topic that I shall explore in more depth in the next chapter.

Overall, the creation of *Violet*, including its journey from page to stage, followed what has become standard procedure. In an article for *American Theatre* magazine, Terry Berliner identifies six arenas of contemporary musical theatre development: the commercial world, not-for-profit resident theatres, universities, developmental programs, and the festival circuit.<sup>48</sup> *Violet* followed a traditional nonprofit development track.

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<sup>46</sup> Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman, introduction to *Music and the Racial Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>48</sup> Terry Berliner, "A Game of Love and Chance," *American Theatre*, April 2006, 26-37. The methods of musical theatre development that Berliner mentions have supplanted the mid-twentieth-century Golden Age process that typically involved an out-of-town tryout.

After several weeks at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's National Music Theatre Conference in 1994, the musical received a series of readings and workshops over a period of three years before Playwrights Horizons mounted a full production in March 1997.

It was Schulman who recommended that Tesori and Crawley apply to the O'Neill Center. According to Tesori, the early draft of *Violet* "had a tone poem quality to it ... there were all these things about rosemary and sachet and lavender ... and you just wanted to take a big scented nap."<sup>49</sup> Crawley concurs: "What we found when we got to the O'Neill was that we were responding to the things that we found heartbreaking and beautiful in the story, and they were very soft and very poetic, and there wasn't much conflict."<sup>50</sup> After the first reading, the creative team made significant changes to the text, especially in terms of the central character. Tesori observes, "We wanted to make a piece that had a musculature ... not just sepia tones. This is a woman that has a ferocity. She has a desire that brings her out of comfort to total discomfort. And therefore the piece itself has to live in there as well."<sup>51</sup>

One important change involved Violet's romantic entanglements. Crawley remembers that, although they had only written the first portion of the musical, it was clear that Violet would end up with Monty, and audiences were not happy. Crawley has stated that, in Betts' story, it is more palatable to leave Violet with Monty because "this is the kind of experience that she's been looking for, and she's going to have it." However,

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<sup>49</sup> Tesori, interview.

<sup>50</sup> Crawley, interview.

<sup>51</sup> Tesori, interview.

“when you spend forty-five minutes with a theatre piece, identifying with these characters, you don’t want her to end up with somebody who’s only going to be there for a week or two. You’re more powerfully disposed to want her to find someone steadier, and Flick was steadier.”<sup>52</sup> This important change, although preferable to the ending of Betts’ story, suggests an impulse toward commercialism in its desire to provide a happy ending, secured through the promise of heterosexual marriage between a disfigured Southern woman and an African American soldier. Writing of *Oklahoma!*, John Bush Jones identifies this happy ending as a hallmark of the Rodgers and Hammerstein formula: “These marital unions of opposites signal old rivalries, prejudices, and animosities stripped away, and the birth of a new, harmonious society.”<sup>53</sup>

After the O’Neill conference, Tesori and Crawley did a reading of *Violet* at Theater Row, which caught the attention of Ira Weitzman, then the Director of Musical Theater at Playwrights Horizons, who had gained a reputation for championing new work by young writers, such as Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty, William Finn, and Michael John LaChiusa. Weitzman was unable to attend the reading for *Violet*; however, he knew Tesori and listened to a recording of the score. In his liner notes for the original off-Broadway cast recording, Weitzman reveals, “When I heard it for the first time in 1994, it touched me so deeply that I began a pilgrimage of my own, shepherding this extraordinary show to its first production.”<sup>54</sup> Weitzman organized two workshops at

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., interview.

<sup>53</sup> John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 145.

<sup>54</sup> Ira Weitzman, liner notes, *Violet*, Pony Proof Records, 1999.

Lincoln Center Theater in March and August of 1995. Tesori affirms, “We were ready at that point. It’s always amazing to me what you learn when you see your work onstage in a workshop with staging and everything. Things that you believed to be right and precise and true somehow don’t work and you not only see that but you also see why.”<sup>55</sup> Lincoln Center Theater had a one-year option on *Violet* but never scheduled a production. Consequently, Weitzman took the show with him when he left Lincoln Center Theater for Playwrights Horizons, where he founded a musical theatre program.

In discussing the collaborative nature of the rehearsal process, Crawley observed that the cast informed the evolution of *Violet*. More specifically, there were sections that Paula Newsome and Michael McElroy, two of the African American cast members, reacted strongly against. One involved Crawley’s decision to have Violet call Flick a “nigger” during an argument after she sleeps with Monty. Crawley’s intention was to push the scene toward a climactic moment, but Michael McElroy, who originated the role of Flick, remarked that it would irrevocably change his character’s relationship with Violet; he could not possibly harbor romantic feelings for her after she invoked a racial slur. Crawley excised the epithet but decided to retain an earlier incident, when a racist waiter uses the term, to establish the time and place. This change, which diminished Violet’s essentialized redneck identity, marks one important way in which Crawley’s libretto departs from Betts’ story. *Violet* finally opened at Playwrights Horizons on March 11, 1997.

The musical begins on a sleepy street in the small town of Spruce Pine, North Carolina. Two scenes are occurring simultaneously: Violet kneels on a bench, reading a

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<sup>55</sup> Singer, 137.



bus schedule and daydreaming about her miracle, while her younger self (Young Vi) gathers kindling to the percussive sounds of a creaking window shutter and wood being chopped. The voice of Violet's father breaks her reverie, "Violet, watch out!" The stage directions read: "Young Vi straightens, her mouth wide, terrified by something we can't see. Violet stiffens."<sup>56</sup> As Violet waits for the bus, Leroy Evans passes by but refuses to look her in the face. Violet sings:

Lord, I'll call the whole trip off  
If Leroy Evans looks me in the face  
Nope, I win, he's terrorized  
This town is a superstitious place –  
Next week, won't they be surprised<sup>57</sup>

Armed with a suitcase and her mother's Baltimore Catechism, Violet boards a Greyhound bus, eager to escape the "stupid" people of her provincial hometown. She is traveling to Tulsa, Oklahoma, in hopes that a television evangelist will heal her scar. Like her Biblical counterpart Job, Violet searches for answers that will end her suffering rather than waiting for someone else to rescue her.<sup>58</sup> A local doctor had tried to mend

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<sup>56</sup> Brian Crawley, *Violet* (New York: Music Theatre International, 1998), 7. In both the libretto and the original off-Broadway production, the past and present exist as two separate domains, and the characters are unaware of each other's presence. The exception is Violet's cathartic moment in the Preacher's chapel, described below, when she acknowledges her younger self and they join together to confront her father.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>58</sup> The consonances between Violet and Job are intriguing. Both figures are innocent sufferers; both encounter others who look upon their afflictions as a sign of God's chastisement (Violet, the Elum brothers; Job, his friends); and, importantly, both challenge God. As Matitiah Tsevat writes in "The Meaning of the Book of Job," "Job is not satisfied with accusing, begging, and hoping; he takes more efficacious action compelling God to leave His uncommitted, whimsical transcendence and to take a stand, to relate Himself to his problems." Matitiah Tsevat, "The Meaning of the Book of Job," in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, ed. James L. Crenshaw (New York: Ktar Publishing, 1976), 345.

Violet's wound, but he "sew[ed her] up like a pair of old shoes."<sup>59</sup> Violet's father had saved his money and had taken her to a plastic surgeon on her eighteenth birthday, but the doctor said they had waited five years too long. In the three years since her father's death, Violet has saved enough money to finance her pilgrimage. It is September 4, 1964; racial tensions are escalating as a result of the civil rights movement, and the conflict in Vietnam is in its ninth year. Violet will be forever altered by both of these events as she travels across America.

In a phone interview, Crawley addressed the creative team's decision to transpose the action from Betts' 1969 to 1964:

It has everything to do with audience perception. The story easily could have happened in 1969. You don't have any trouble buying it when you're reading the story. When you see it, what we, as Americans, think about 1969 is Summer of Love, rock and roll, long hair, and hippies. We don't think of soldiers with crew cuts and a square young woman. These are three young characters that are not in tune with the times, as popularly remembered. I was born in 1962. I remember 1969. There were plenty of people with crew cuts running around, plenty of people who were not off in San Francisco, listening to Jefferson Starship. But, in terms of people's expectations, it was distracting ... Now it feels, to people, more of its era than it did.<sup>60</sup>

In *The Last Innocent Year: America in 1964 – The Beginning of the Sixties*, Jon Margolis states that "there was a time when the delusion of innocence was easy to believe, when

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Similarly, in the Preacher's chapel, Violet confronts God:

*Look at me  
Is this the tender mercy  
That you're known for  
My God  
Don't be so hard.*

Crawley, 76.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>60</sup> Crawley, interview.

the myth was at least as useful as it was deceiving.” Margolis argues that Kennedy’s assassination on November 22, 1963, had shaken but not destroyed the country’s optimism because “beliefs do not die as cleanly as people do.”<sup>61</sup> In the months preceding Violet’s cross-country journey, the Beatles had invaded America, President Johnson had signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law, and U. S. ground troops had not yet been sent to Vietnam, although the conflict was in its ninth year. However, as Margolis convincingly argues, America’s innocence ended in 1964, “for 1964 was the first year since the end of World War II, if not in the twentieth century, in which events challenged, if they did not overwhelm, America’s habitual optimism.”<sup>62</sup> The remainder of the decade would see the Watts Race Riots, the escalation of the Vietnam War, and the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., among other social and political turmoil. With this historical context in mind, the creative team’s decision to transplant Violet’s journey to 1964 positions their central character in a time when the country’s optimism mirrors her own.

In Kingsport, Tennessee, Violet befriends an African American soldier named Sergeant Grady Fliggins, or “Flick,” who knows what it means to be an outsider in 1964 in the Deep South, and a womanizing white paratrooper named Montgomery Harrill, or “Monty”; the two men are heading to a military base in Fort Smith, Arkansas. Violet impresses Flick and Monty with her poker playing skills, but the soldiers scoff at her plan to become beautiful. Violet imagines her ideal face as an amalgamation of celebrities

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<sup>61</sup> Jon Margolis, *The Last Innocent Year: America in 1964 – The Beginning of the Sixties* (New York: William Morrow, 1999), vii-viii.

<sup>62</sup> Crawley, 6

that she sees in movie magazines:

Give me just a minute though  
To ransack my portfolio  
Borrow Elke Sommers' hair  
And Judy Garland's pretty chin  
Put Grace Kelly's little nose  
With Rita Hayworth's skin  
But Ava Gardner for the eyebrows  
Bergman cheekbones  
Under gypsy eyes.<sup>63</sup>

Over time, a love triangle forms between the three passengers: Violet and Flick harbor feelings for one another, but Violet makes love to Monty after a drunken night in Memphis. The next morning, Violet decides to travel to Tulsa via Fort Smith so she can spend more time with the soldiers. Monty asks her to meet him at the bus station after her healing, but she promises nothing.

In Tulsa, Violet encounters the televangelist in rehearsal with his choir and realizes he is a fraud. Violet corners him in the empty chapel, demanding that he see her for what she is – disfigured and hideous. Realizing that her “savior” will not be able to invoke a miracle, Violet begins her own healing ceremony: The Preacher magically transforms into her father, whom she confronts, demanding an apology for what he did. When her father's apology proves insufficient, Violet accuses him of deliberately isolating her from the world: “You did it on purpose. You were afraid I'd leave if I were pretty, so you took care of that. You made damn sure no one else would come within a mile of me.”<sup>64</sup> Violet's father claims he did his best to help her and says he would take away the scar if he could. The moment is cathartic for Violet.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 79.

Believing that her miracle has occurred, Violet returns to Fort Smith, where Monty is waiting for her. He discloses that her healing is an illusion; she touches her cheek and runs to the glass door of the bus station, which reflects her bedraggled image, looking worse than when she left. Monty has volunteered to go to Vietnam and asks Violet to accompany him as far as San Francisco. She declines his invitation. Flick arrives at the bus station and notices a change in Violet:

But look at you, you're different  
You're not the girl you were  
When you began."<sup>65</sup>

He implores her to stay with him, and – after some initial misgivings – she accepts. Flick caresses and kisses Violet's face, and she decides to stay with him. The other characters join Flick and Violet onstage, and sing about how they have been transformed:

If I tell you my heart has been opened wide  
If I tell you I'm frightened  
If I show you the darkness  
I hold inside  
Will you bring me to light?<sup>66</sup>

In conclusion, the process of creating *Violet* was innovative in many ways: Tesori's intention was not to write a commercial hit but to bring a character like Violet to the musical stage and, in doing so, explore the hegemony of the beauty myth in America; the creative team included three artists who challenged tradition – Tesori, a woman composer in a predominantly male profession, Crawley, a novice lyricist/librettist with a background in folk music, and Schulman, a director who had gained a reputation for her “feminist” productions that frequently featured women artists; and Tesori's music

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 89-90.

departed more readily from Broadway song forms than that of her aesthetic predecessors, including Stephen Sondheim.

Yet, for all its innovation, the creative process was also conventional: *Violet*, like many American musicals, was adapted from a known literary property; the development process was fairly standard – a series of workshops and readings followed by a full production (however, it should be noted that Ira Weitzman’s involvement, given his history of championing new writers and non-commercial works, suggests that, in some ways, *Violet* was not standard musical fare, a claim that I will investigate further in the following chapter); Tesori’s score utilized traditional song types; and, finally, the ending, changed from Betts’ story, conforms to the Golden Age model of an optimistic ending secured through heterosexual union.

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore the creative process, with special attention to the degree to which the production team employed the master’s tools, i.e. the Golden Age model of musical theatre, in creating *Violet*. Despite its innovations, the process was primarily conventional, and adhered to the Golden Age tradition in adapting a known property, following a standard development process, utilizing traditional song types, and including an optimistic ending. Now it remains to be seen what the impact is on the work itself. In the next chapter, I will investigate to what degree the creative team can dismantle the master’s house, i.e. conventional theatre practice, using the master’s tools, i.e. the Golden Age tradition.

## Chapter 3

### *Violet: When Hope is Subversive*

American musical theatre history reveals only one significant forerunner to *Violet*: Fosca, the central character in Sondheim's *Passion*. This musical, based on Ettore Scola's 1981 film *Passione d'Amore*, which in turn was based on Iginio Ugo Tarchetti's 1869 novel *Fosca*, concerns a love triangle between Giorgio, a handsome, young Italian army captain; Clara, his free-spirited and attractive mistress; and Fosca, the melancholy cousin of Giorgio's commanding officer who is living at the remote provincial outpost where Giorgio is stationed. When Giorgio first meets Fosca, he is stunned by her appearance. The stage directions read, "As she turns from the shadows, revealing herself, we discover that she is an ugly, sickly woman; incredibly thin and sallow, her face all bones and nose, her hair pulled tightly back."<sup>1</sup> Fosca admits to Giorgio that her ugliness has limited her choices in life:

An unattractive man – ...  
– Can still have opportunities ...  
Whereas, if you're a woman,  
You either are a daughter or a wife ...  
You marry – ...  
– Or you're a daughter all your life.<sup>2</sup>

Giorgio at first pities Fosca but ultimately surrenders to her advances, finding in her a love

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, *Passion* (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 1994), 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-77.

Without cause,  
Without sense,  
Without laws.<sup>3</sup>

In “‘The Mother’s Part’: Love, Letters, and Reading in Stephen Sondheim’s *Passion*,” Sandor Goodhart conceives of Giorgio’s transformation not as movement from one relationship to another, but “from one level of relating to another, a movement considerably more difficult to examine ... It is a movement from the lush erotic comfort of Clara’s bed (from which perspective Fosca’s unattractiveness and clothedness is paramount) to the soul-searching ominous underworld of Fosca’s (from which Clara may seem considerably more superficial and clothed).”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in a *New York Times* interview, Sondheim observed, “*Passion* is about how the force of somebody’s feelings for you can crack you open, and how it is the life force in a deadened world.”<sup>5</sup> As is typical in grand opera, however, the lovers are punished for their transgression; Fosca’s inability to control her passion leads to her own death and Giorgio’s destruction.

Sondheim remembers that early audiences were resistant, if not hostile, to the idea of Giorgio leaving the beautiful Clara for the unsightly Fosca: “It became distressingly clear to [librettist/director] James [Lapine] and me that although audiences could enthusiastically accept the notion of an attractive and charming female stalker (Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction*, for example) they simply wouldn’t accept an unattractive

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>4</sup> Sandor Goodhart, “‘The Mother’s Part’: Love, Letters, and Reading in Sondheim’s *Passion*,” in *Reading Stephen Sondheim: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Sandor Goodhart (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), 225.

<sup>5</sup> Michiko Kakutani, “Sondheim’s Passionate ‘Passion,’ *New York Times*, March 20, 1994.



charmless one, especially one given to convenient hysterical fits.”<sup>6</sup> In *Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theater and Beyond*, Barry Singer contextualizes the audience response in terms of other musicals running concurrently on Broadway:

Here was a nutty predicament emblematic of the level Broadway patrons had reached by the ‘90s. Audiences could readily weep at the sight of a prosthetically outfitted Walt Disney beast in love or a masked phantom in romantic torment. A real woman, however, with a mole (admittedly planted) and a very plain face pleading for love got laughs.<sup>7</sup>

*Passion* garnered largely negative reviews and closed after six months. Despite this tepid reception, the musical, as Hanson asserts, marked an important departure from traditional representations of women in American musical theatre: “The musical theatre has come full-circle, from the lovely and lovable heroines who inevitably end up happily married to the man they love, to the ‘irredeemably ugly’ Fosca, who, in the words of Sondheim, himself, ‘has not one redeeming quality’ (qtd. in Buck 278).”<sup>8</sup> Fosca, a woman who has been discarded because of her physical appearance and lack of charm, shares with Violet the following traits: Both women are young, unattractive, and in love. However, differences abound. Whereas Fosca is physically unappealing, Violet is disfigured; whereas *Passion* is operatic in its emotional tenor and set in nineteenth-century Italy, *Violet* is vernacular and set in twentieth-century America; whereas Fosca is punished,

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen Sondheim, *Look, I Made a Hat: Collected Lyrics (1981-2011) with Attendant Comments, Amplifications, Dogmas, Harangues, Digressions, Anecdotes and Miscellany* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 171.

<sup>7</sup> Barry Singer, *The Last Years of Musical Theater and Beyond* (New York: Applause, 2004), 96.

<sup>8</sup> Laura Hanson, “Broadway Babies: Images of Women in the Musicals of Stephen Sondheim,” in *Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook*, ed. Joanne Gordon (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 20.

Violet is rewarded. Violet, then, seems even more unique than Fosca and, as an American character, may have even more to tell us about American identity, especially in terms of race, gender, class, and physical ability. In this chapter, I perform a close reading of the “texts” of *Violet*, with special attention to the representation of the eponymous character.

In addition to analyzing the libretto and lyrics, I consider the representations of Violet’s identity that emerge from Tesori’s score. In his book *The Musical as Drama*, Scott McMillin suggests the benefits of such an analysis. McMillin contends that the defining feature of musicals is not the integration of plot, character, song, dance, orchestration, and setting into an organic whole but rather the incongruity between book time, which is organized by cause and effect, and lyric time, which operates on the principles of repetition. It is this second order of time, McMillin suggests, that makes the musical complex. Similarly, Raymond Knapp suggests that “music notoriously does not unfold in ‘real time,’ but rather imposes a kind of suspended animation so as to intensify selected emotional moments, and through this dramatic hiatus directs us all the more urgently to see behind the mask/makeup/costume of the performer – even as he or she embodies the role being played even more fully through the enactment of song.”<sup>9</sup> D. A. Miller concurs, arguing that the musical reveals “not the integration of drama and music found on the thematic surface, but a so much deeper formal discontinuity between the two that no makeshift for reconciling them could ever manage to make the transition

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<sup>9</sup> Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 12.

from one to the other less abrupt or more plausible.”<sup>10</sup> Recognizing that musical theatre has more to do with Brecht’s spirit of disunification than Wagner’s total artwork, then, complicates an analysis of the representations of identity in musicals by foregrounding the contrasting performance modes of book time and lyric time.<sup>11</sup> In her essay “Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism,” Elin Diamond suggests incorporating Brechtian theory in feminist criticism, “the purpose of which is to denaturalize and defamiliarize what ideology makes seem normal, acceptable, inescapable,” to expose oppressive notions of gender.<sup>12</sup>

Taking musical analysis into the realm of psychoanalytic theory, Catherine Clément writes in her book *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, that “conscious and unconscious: the words are aligned with the legible, the rational side of a conscious discourse, and the music is the unconscious of the text, that which gives it depth of field and relief, that which attributes a past to the text, a memory, one perceptible not to the listener’s consciousness but to his enchanted unconsciousness.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Susan

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<sup>10</sup> D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>11</sup> A contemporary musical that emphasizes the disruption between book time and lyric time to great effect is *Spring Awakening*, featuring music by Duncan Sheik and book/lyrics by Steven Sater. The characters, a group of school children in late-nineteenth-century Germany, frequently interrupt the narrative by pulling microphones from inside their school uniforms and singing anachronistic, angst-ridden rock songs that unleash their repressed adolescent sexuality.

<sup>12</sup> Elin Diamond, “Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism,” *The Drama Review* 32 (1988): 85.

<sup>13</sup> Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 21.

McClary, in her foreward to Clément's book, acknowledges the insights to be gleaned from this approach:

A psychoanalytic model permits the following sort of explanation: music is able to stimulate that state when the infant still feels itself to be coextensive with the mother's body, a state in which all sensation appears to be authentic – before the alienating social codes of language and culture intervene. Musical patterns act upon most listeners in ways that are not rationally explicable; it is as though one is connected to the subjectivity of another *without mediation* – as though still linked directly to the mother's body. This medium is therefore privileged above others (all of which bear more obviously the signs of their social, symbolic constructedness) because of that illusion of authentic communication.<sup>14</sup>

Violet's vocal range, according to the unpublished libretto, is "mezzo (belt)." In their book *Acting in Musical Theatre: A Comprehensive Course*, Joe Deer and Rocco Dal Vera suggest that a character's vocal range can provide "subtle information" about her personality. Of interest here are the two classifications of soprano and mezzo-soprano. Oxford Music Online defines soprano as "a term signifying in normal practice the highest musical range, used both in instrumental and vocal music." The entry further notes that "the word itself is built upon the root 'sopra' or 'sovera' ('above', 'over') and derives (through such forms as 'supremus', 'supranus', 'soveranus' and 'sopranus') from the Latin 'superius', the commonest term for the top voice in 15<sup>th</sup>-century polyphony."<sup>15</sup> According to Deer and Dal Vera, legitimate lyric sopranos are "almost exclusively the province of romantic female roles in traditional musicals."<sup>16</sup> Moreover, as Julie A.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>15</sup> *Oxford Music Online*, s.v. "Soprano," <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com:80/subscriber/article/grove/music/26243> (accessed March 14, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Joe Deer and Rocco Dal Vera, *Acting in Musical Theatre: A Comprehensive Course* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 73.

Noonan observes in her dissertation “The Sound of Musicals’ Women: Tessitura and the Construction of Gender in the American Musical,” the term “legitimate” suggests a hierarchy that “preferences the European, operatically trained, ‘white’ and ‘feminine’ sound above the others.”<sup>17</sup> Examples of legitimate sopranos in American musical theatre include many of the central female characters in the Rodgers and Hammerstein canon, including Laurey in *Oklahoma!* and Julie Jordan in *Carousel*, as well as a multitude of roles in the Golden Age tradition, including Sarah Brown in *Guys and Dolls*, Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*, and Marian Paroo in *The Music Man*.

The term mezzo-soprano, according to Oxford Music Online, refers to “a voice, intermediate in pitch between contralto and soprano.”<sup>18</sup> Deer and Dal Vera observe that mezzo-sopranos are “strongly associated with comic characters or with secondary romantic storylines,” and they distinguish between “Broadway belt,” referring to the type of voice commonly associated with singers like Ethel Merman and Judy Garland, and “rock belt,” which, they observe, “has now become the dominant range for most musicals since about 1980.”<sup>19</sup> Characters with mezzo-soprano/belt vocal ranges such as Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl* and Millie in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, both the protagonists of their respective musicals, are ultimately comedic in nature, whereas characters like Ado Annie in *Oklahoma!* and Adelaide in *Guys and Dolls* form the secondary, comic couple.

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<sup>17</sup> Julie A. Noonan, “The Sound of Musicals’ Women: Tessitura and the Construction of Gender in the American Musical” (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2007), 33.

<sup>18</sup> *Oxford Music Online*, s.v. “Mezzo-soprano,” <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/80/subscriber/article/grove/music/18571> (accessed March 14, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Deer and Dal Vera, 72-73.

Of particular interest are those female protagonists with a mezzo-soprano/belt range who do not fit into either category; these include Eva Peron in *Evita*, The Baker's Wife in *Into the Woods*, Fosca in *Passion*, Elphaba in *Wicked*, Diana in *Next to Normal*, and the eponymous Violet.

Notably, all of the aforementioned mezzo-soprano/belt roles are marked by alterity: Eva Peron comes from an impoverished family, and is portrayed as an opportunistic whore who sleeps her way to the top; The Baker's Wife discovers, as Hanson observes, that "motherhood – supposedly the goal of every heroine – does not cause her life to turn suddenly into that long-awaited happily-ever-after";<sup>20</sup> Fosca is physically unattractive and mentally unstable; Elphaba, whose "green skin," according to Wolf, "is a synecdoche for her other differences,"<sup>21</sup> is a political outcast; Diana struggles with bipolar disorder; and Violet is a poor Southern woman with a disfiguring facial scar.

In addition to suggesting her status as an unorthodox female protagonist, Violet's vocal range seems to point to an underlying affinity with Flick. Scott McMillin notes that "lovers have an underlying similarity no matter how different they appear to be on the surface."<sup>22</sup> In his article "Stage and Screen Entertainers in the Twentieth Century," Stephen Banfield considers the origins of the "belt":

To trace the belt back to the pseudo-southern may be to uncover the original appearance of an American accent in the sung voice, which seems therefore to have entered vernacular performance practice (it is still not

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<sup>20</sup> Hanson, 23.

<sup>21</sup> Stacy Wolf, "'Defying Gravity': Queer Conventions in the Musical *Wicked*," *Theatre Journal* 60, no. 1 (2008): 9.

<sup>22</sup> Scott McMillin, *The Musical as Drama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 67.

acceptable for art music performance) as a matter of regional parody. It was not only a matter of regional parody, however, but of racial parody too: with the pseudo-southern went the pseudo-black, often in blackface make-up. This is to say that the belt originated in the coon song as sung by the coon shouter, a type of white female vaudeville star (such as May Irwin).<sup>23</sup>

Violet's "mezzo (belt)" vocal range, however, is removed from its original context of racial parody; in fact, Violet, like Flick, is in danger of being marked as culturally inferior. Bill C. Malone points out that Southern music (and more specifically, the Appalachian repertory), when appropriated by the mainstream culture, circulated a romantic view of mountain life, "marked by social conservatism, fierce individualism, simplicity, and morality."<sup>24</sup> Tesori subverts this tradition of romanticizing Southern music by grounding the music in its cultural milieu and, taking advantage of the doubleness of book time and lyric time, using the score to create a surplus of identity.

Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject seems an especially useful lens to interpret the representation of Violet, who is doubly abject by virtue of her gender and physical body. Abjection, because it has been variously employed, needs some explication. Borrowing heavily from Lacanian theory, Kristeva conceives a model of identity/subject formation that entails a movement from the maternal semiotic realm, when a subject cannot distinguish between self and (m)other, into the symbolic order, the phallogocentric system of law, language, and cultural institutions. In other words, the maternal object, marked as it is by submission and ambiguity, must be repressed in order for the subject to

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<sup>23</sup> Stephen Banfield, "Stage and Screen Entertainers in the Twentieth Century," in *The Cambridge Companion to Singing*, ed. John Potter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 67.

<sup>24</sup> Bill C. Malone, *Southern Music/American Music* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 34.

join the paternal symbolic order. Kristeva describes this process as “a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of power as securing as it is stifling.”<sup>25</sup> That is, the object constantly threatens to send the subject back into the semiotic. As Kristeva states,

The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. A certain “ego” that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter’s rules of the game. And yes, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. Without a sign (for him), it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out.<sup>26</sup>

The subject’s indoctrination into the patriarchal system requires the repression of the antithetical other; in this case, the maternal.

For Kristeva, the maternal – what has been cast off to live – is regarded as quintessentially abject. Violet is associated with the maternal from the outset, as Young Vi sings:

Mama, why’s a man have eyes?  
If I tell you, don’t you tell –  
So he can try you on for size  
There’s honey in the bushes, Lord  
And water in the well<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 13.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>27</sup> Brian Crawley, *Violet* (New York: Music Theatre International, 1998), 7.



Violet's connection to her mother is accentuated throughout the musical: Young Vi wears her mother's hat and eagerly reads her Baltimore Catechism; Violet prays to her mother throughout her pilgrimage; and, in the climactic song "That's What I Could Do," when Violet confronts her father in the Preacher's chapel, he sings:

You're the image of your mama  
She's in everything you are  
You've got her eyes, you've got her smile –  
But your own spirit carried you this far  
If I could  
I'd take away your scar<sup>28</sup>

The subsequent stage direction reads, "He places both hands on her cheeks, across her scar, then removes them." One likely reading of this moment, and of Violet's journey altogether, is a "violent, clumsy breaking away"<sup>29</sup> from the (m)other. Kristeva writes, "By refusing to relinquish her hold on the child, [the mother] prevents it from taking up its proper place in relation to the Symbolic."<sup>30</sup> Violet's father exacerbates matters by repeatedly associating Violet with her mother, thereby preventing Violet from transcending her abject status. Violet's moment of "healing," then, involves confronting her father, but, more importantly, rejecting the maternal to join the symbolic order.

Kristeva argues that "beyond the unconscious" is a prior construction in which "the fundamental opposition is between I and Other or, in the more archaic fashion, between Inside and Outside."<sup>31</sup> As Cheryl Black notes in her article "'A' is for Abject:

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>29</sup> Kristeva, 13.

<sup>30</sup> Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," *Screen* 27, no. 1 (January 1986): 45.

<sup>31</sup> Kristeva, 7.

*The Red Letter Plays* of Suzan-Lori Parks,” in cultures that perceive the “universal subject” as a white, heterosexual, property-owning, law-abiding, physically able man, “abject beings . . . may include women, racial minorities, lower economic classes, convicts, prostitutes, and members of the LGBT community.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Iris Marion Young writes, “Racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, and ableism, are partly structured by abjection, an involuntary, unconscious judgment of ugliness and loathing.”<sup>33</sup> In her book *Extraordinary Bodies*, feminist disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson elucidates how femaleness and disability share social meanings: “Both the female and the disabled body are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority.”<sup>34</sup> Garland-Thomson goes on to illustrate how the disabled, as abject, are positioned as counterpart to the foundation of masculine normalcy: “Without the monstrous body to demarcate the borders of the generic, without the female body to distinguish the shape of the male, and without the pathological to give form to the normal, the taxonomies of bodily value that underlie political, social, and economic arrangements would collapse.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Cheryl Black, “‘A’ is for Abject: *The Red Letter Plays* of Suzan-Lori Parks,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 26, no. 2 (spring 2012), forthcoming.

<sup>33</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 145.

<sup>34</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 19.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

Kristeva writes that “abjection has to do with what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.”<sup>36</sup> Violet challenges the South’s legal and social taboos early in the musical, when she confronts a racist waiter:

WAITER: Problem with putting a nigger in uniform is, he comes to think he’s just as good as anybody else.

*Flick stiffens; Monty looks up at the waiter and waits for Violet’s answer.*

VIOLET: You mean him?

*Pause.*

VIOLET: What if I told you we’re traveling together.<sup>37</sup>

Crawley notes that, on a personal level, “it’s a big step for Violet to take”<sup>38</sup> because, as she later admits, “I never knew a negro to talk to before; we don’t see too many in the mountains. You’re like a foreigner to me.”<sup>39</sup> Violet also challenges deeply ingrained attitudes against interracial conduct. A mere two months before Violet’s pilgrimage, the Civil Rights Act was signed into law. This piece of legislation, proposed by President John F. Kennedy and signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson, targeted discrimination in voting, education, housing, public facilities, and employment. Despite this legislation, the spirit of segregation is omnipresent in *Violet*, as indicated by the waiter’s racial slur, the mechanics’ physical assault, the black landlady’s reluctance to allow Monty and Violet to stay in her establishment, and, in the original production, the fact that the African American characters sat at the back of the bus.

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<sup>36</sup> Kristeva, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Crawley, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Brian Crawley, interview by author, telephone, March 4, 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Crawley, 37.

Kristeva asserts that “abjection is above all ambiguity,” and Violet’s heterogeneity of roles subverts the symbolic order by defying categorization.<sup>40</sup> For one thing, she blurs the socially constructed boundaries between male and female. On her way to Tulsa, Violet catalogs the facial features of both men and women, appropriating whatever quality she most desires in constructing her ideal face. The first instance occurs at the Greyhound bus station in Spruce Pine, when she notices the driver, Wallace Weatherman:

Lips? Thin. Cheeks? Flat.  
I sure don’t want mine like that.  
Nose? Bent. Ears? Runts.  
Got four eyes and he can’t see once.  
Nothing in his face for me  
His hair though – is it Cherokee?  
It’s black enough to be  
I want my own as soft as a breeze –  
And also curlier please<sup>41</sup>

Further, when Monty jokingly tells Violet that she should ask the Preacher to make her a man, she responds: “If I could be a man like you? Maybe I would ask. With hair like yours, and I’d want a beard to match. I bet your hair gets lighter in the summers, doesn’t it.”<sup>42</sup> Also, Violet frequently engages in “masculine” behavior that baffles the men: she plays poker (Monty cries out, “Da-yumn! What kind of girl knows poker like that?”<sup>43</sup>), she drinks liquor (and has since she turned fifteen), she curses and makes crude remarks (she compares Monty and Flick to “Coupla barnyard cocks. Ever chop the head off one?

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<sup>40</sup> Kristeva, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Crawley, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 23.

Brain the size of a walnut. Tiny little peckers too.”<sup>44</sup>), and she fights a gang of mechanics who attack her in Memphis (Monty says to Flick, “Hot damn! I ever get in another fight? Make sure you’re on my side. Vii-lut too.”<sup>45</sup>).

Violet’s gender ambiguity resembles the pre-lingual diffusion of the maternal, and is in stark contrast to Monty, the paragon of the Symbolic, who represents the hegemony of social institutions. Monty speaks for the patriarchy when he tells Violet, “Things are mean and ugly in this world – I mean act ugly, do ugly, be ugly.” But Violet rejects his social code, saying, “That could only be the motto of a pretty boy.”<sup>46</sup> Violet fascinates Monty, in part, because she resists categorization. He sings:

You’re different, that’s it,  
And more than I care to admit –  
There’s somethin’ you got goin’ for you  
Means that there’s no way I can ignore you  
You’re different, that’s all<sup>47</sup>

Violet troubles Monty’s ideas of women through her actions – drinking, playing poker, fighting, and traveling alone, all of which Monty considers masculine behavior – and by her appearance. The best descriptor he can come up with is “you’re different.” Yet, it is Violet’s very ambiguity that also fascinates Monty. Kristeva writes, “One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully. A

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 49.

passion.”<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Young observes that the abject “draws the subject in order to repel it.”<sup>49</sup>

Having sex with Violet aligns Monty with abjection, as indicated by his discharging of bodily fluids – semen and tears (Violet later sings, “When you started to cry, boy/I tell you, that was a first.”<sup>50</sup>). For Kristeva, abject associations include bodily emissions, signs of health when inside the body but of transgression when outside, as well as anything that threatens the boundary between “inside” and “outside.” Faced with this threatened breakdown in meaning by coming too close to the abject, Monty attempts to regain himself. In the next scene, he rehearses strategies for putting an end to their affair, saying “Least I won’t be with her when it hits.”<sup>51</sup>

Violet’s facial disfigurement, a deviant and unnatural condition, exacerbates her abjection. Violet’s first words in the musical attest to how she defines her identity almost exclusively through her face: “A battered nose, a pimpled chin—/Uneven eyes to take it in.”<sup>52</sup> Sociologist Anthony Synnott articulates the importance of the face in subject formation: “The face indicates the age, gender and race of the self with varying degrees of accuracy, also our health and socio-economic status, our moods and emotions, even perhaps our character and personality.” Accordingly, Synnott observes, “the face is also the principal determinant in the perception of our individual beauty or ugliness and all

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<sup>48</sup> Kristeva, 9.

<sup>49</sup> Young, 143.

<sup>50</sup> Crawley, 61.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

that these perceptions imply for self-esteem and life-chances. The face indeed symbolizes the self, and signifies many different facets of the self. More than any other part of the body, we identify the face as *me* or *you*.<sup>53</sup> Synnott terms this pervasive belief that one's face reflects the character of an individual as "facism," and affirms that "facism" and "beautyism," which he traces back to Homer's epic poem *The Iliad*,<sup>54</sup> "may be as problematic as other 'isms' and ideologies in the stigmatization of minorities."<sup>55</sup> The common reaction from those encountering Violet for the first time is shock or disgust: Wallace Weatherman, the bus driver, involuntarily exclaims, "Oooh. Miss."; the Old Lady cries out, "Oh! My goodness."; and the Waiter remarks, "That is some scar!" Referring to her face, Violet confesses to Flick that, "People take one look at this, and figure that's all there is to me."<sup>56</sup>

Flick is the only character who refuses to identify Violet through her face. Early on, Violet says to Flick, "Remember the first time you looked at me? Like you'd seen

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<sup>53</sup> Anthony Synnott, "Truth and Goodness, Mirrors and Masks – Part I: A Sociology of Beauty and the Face," *The British Journal of Sociology* 40, no. 4 (1988): 607.

<sup>54</sup> Synnott points to a passage from Book 2, in which Homer equates evil with ugliness in his description of Thersites:

Here was the ugliest man who had come to Troy.  
Bandy-legged he was, with one foot clubbed,  
both shoulders humped together, curving over  
his caved-in chest, and bobbing above them  
his skull warped to a point,  
sprouting clumps of scraggly, woolly hair.

Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 106.

<sup>55</sup> Anthony Synnott, "Truth and Goodness, Mirrors and Masks – part II: A Sociology of Beauty and the Face," *The British Journal of Sociology* 41, no. 1 (1990): 67.

<sup>56</sup> Crawley, 38.

worse things? It's what I liked about you."<sup>57</sup> When Violet leaves the soldiers at Fort Smith before traveling to Tulsa, Flick confesses (without being heard by Monty or Violet),

I've been waiting, for a lifetime  
For someone simply  
To look and see me  
The way that I see you<sup>58</sup>

At the end of their journey, Flick tells Violet, "You're not the girl you were/When you began,"<sup>59</sup> and he caresses and kisses her face. However, Violet is not immune to practicing "facism," as seen in the following encounter with Flick:

FLICK: How 'bout we just swap faces, clean and simple.  
VIOLET: But what do I want with colored skin? No offense, but I want people to think I'm pretty.  
*But Flick is offended, and he gets up and goes back to the bus bathroom.*  
VIOLET: Well, you said you'd swap it off! What's wrong if I don't want it any more'n you?<sup>60</sup>

In line with dominant oppressive ideologies, Violet equates beauty with white skin.

Perhaps more invidious than the oppression Violet encounters from others are the ways in which she has disenfranchised herself by clinging to an unrealistic image of beauty. Violet's ideal stems in part from a set of values propagated by mid-twentieth-century American cinema, and her body becomes the text upon which those social meanings are inscribed. As Anne Balsalmo states, "The body becomes ... the site at

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 24.



which women, consciously or not, accept the meanings that circulate in popular culture about ideal beauty ... The female body comes to serve as a site of inscription, a billboard for the dominant cultural meanings that the female body is to have in postmodernity.”<sup>61</sup> When the Elum brothers torment Young Vi, her father, rather than validating his daughter’s worth, gives her a quarter for the “new picture show in town” and, as he watches her go, adds, “Hey! Go the back way so nobody sees you!”<sup>62</sup> Young Vi goes to the movies to escape and is seduced by the romance of Hollywood’s illusions. In her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey describes what she calls “the birth of the long love affair/despair between image and self-image which has found such intensity of expression in film and such joyous recognition in the cinema audience.”<sup>63</sup> Mulvey writes,

the cinema has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing the ego. The sense of forgetting the world as the ego has subsequently come to perceive it (I forgot who I am and where I was) is nostalgically reminiscent of that pre-subjective moment of image recognition. At the same time the cinema has distinguished itself in the production of ego ideals as expressed in particular in the star system, the stars centering both screen presence and screen story as they act out a complex process of likeness and difference (the glamorous impersonates the ordinary).<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 78.

<sup>62</sup> Crawley, 13.

<sup>63</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 836

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 836.

Accordingly, Young Vi, in a process that resembles what happens to a child during the Lacanian mirror phase of psychosexual development, likely recognizes and misrecognizes herself in the images onscreen. In other words, her fascination with a romanticized ideal of beauty collides with suspicions of self-awareness, i.e. that she does not resemble the women onscreen.

Importantly, the first time Violet and Vi sing together in the musical, the lyrics express their desire for “promises that can’t go wrong,” and the second time, sixteen bars later, the stage directions read, “Violet looks at the cover of a magazine she has brought along; young Vi echoes the action,” and the two sing, “A head full of curls/Like Judy Holliday.”<sup>65</sup> A few scenes later, in one of the show’s most memorable songs, Violet confesses that her ideal face is a hybridization of the best features of her favorite actresses:

Give me just a minute though  
To ransack my portfolio  
Borrow Elke Sommers’ hair  
And Judy Garland’s pretty chin  
Put Grace Kelly’s little nose  
With Rita Hayworth’s skin  
But Ava Gardner for the eyebrows  
Bergman cheekbones  
Under gypsy eyes  
I could shine like a moonbeam  
On the silk of a ball gown  
I could be someone lovely  
Turning heads on her first night in town  
In town

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<sup>65</sup> Crawley, 11-12.

All I need is someone  
To wonder, who is she  
To ask how to meet me  
[...]  
To love me all to pieces<sup>66</sup>

A more complex reading of “All to Pieces” considers Violet’s body as the locus of both oppression and empowerment. In doing so, it is useful to keep in mind Judith Butler’s notion of gender as performance. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler writes that “the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all.”<sup>67</sup> In *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* Raymond Knapp applies Butler’s theories of performativity to musicals, conjecturing that “musicals provide material for *performance*, material that may be performed not only by the cast of the show but also, eventually, by those in the audience who might want to appropriate or adapt that material to their own needs.”<sup>68</sup> Knapp goes on to state that exaggeration is central to how gender is portrayed onstage, and, for an audience, that exaggeration has functioned in at least three ways: as a “liberating model, a demonstration of how one might more aggressively control and challenge the boundaries that traditionally circumscribe one’s own gendered, sexual self,” as “a voyeuristic glimpse into alternatives that may be both relished and ... satisfyingly set aside as morally flawed, however intriguing,” and as “a special realm in

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>67</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 140.

<sup>68</sup> Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 205.

which performance as such was privileged” by many closeted gay men.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Stacy Wolf affirms that “musicals offer interpretive entries for spectators (queer self-identifying and not) who are willing to see and hear resistantly.”<sup>70</sup>

The transition from the “country 2 feel” to the softer, *colla voce* section in “All to Pieces” mirrors Violet’s wished-for transformation from poor Southern woman to leading lady, or, as she sings,

From down-at-heel to tippy toe  
From no big deal  
To the star of a picture show.”<sup>71</sup>

The ascending scales indicate an ascent up the ladder of beauty.<sup>72</sup> At its highest point – on the first word of the phrase “I could shine like a moonbeam” – the music changes key and tempo, and the score is marked “Slower – *colla voce*,”<sup>73</sup> meaning “with the voice” and indicating that the instrumentalists should follow the singer. In this moment, Violet abandons the symbolic order, governed as it is by rules (i.e. strict tempos), and retreats into the semiotic. The first portion of the song, which is highly performative in that

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>70</sup> Wolf, 5.

<sup>71</sup> Crawley, 33.

<sup>72</sup> In Plato’s *Symposium*, Diotima describes what comes to be known as the Socratic ladder, a fundamental element of the beauty mystique in Western culture: “One goes always upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs: from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs, and from customs to learning beautiful things, and from these lessons he arrives in the end of this lesson, which is learning of this very Beauty, so that in the end he comes to know just what it is to be beautiful.” Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), 59.

<sup>73</sup> Jeanine Tesori, “Violet,” score, 1997, Music Theatre International.

Violet sings and dances for her male companions, gives way to the second part, in which Violet draws upon the movie magazines as a liberating model and rehearses her ideal image of womanhood.

Interestingly, the highest note that Violet sings in the score – and the only note higher than the word “I” in “All to Pieces” – is in “Lay Down Your Head,” the lullaby Violet sings to Monty after they have sex. Violet confesses that her “skin is singing” in the bridge and builds to “Lay down your head,” with “head” being the climax of the phrase, and the song. That Violet’s voice soars into legitimate soprano territory in this moment not only captures her post-coital exuberance, but also signifies the moment in the musical when she comes closest to a traditional musical theatre heroine.

Violet’s physical suffering heightens her abject status. Although Violet’s scar has healed, her pain is made palpable through the flashback scenes involving Young Vi, who is seen immediately after the accident, bloodied and crying in pain. In her monograph *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry posits that physical pain achieves its evasiveness in part through the difficulty that arises in trying to articulate it. “Physical pain,” Scarry writes, “does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.”<sup>74</sup> Garland-Thomson similarly notes, that “because disability is so strongly stigmatized and is countered by so few mitigating narratives, the literary traffic in metaphors often misrepresents or flattens

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<sup>74</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

the experience real people have of their own or others' disabilities."<sup>75</sup> The way in which pain resists verbal objectification, Scarry posits, may account in part for the near-absence of literary representations of physical pain:

The rarity with which physical pain is represented in literature is most striking when seen within the framing fact of how consistently art confers visibility on other forms of distress (the thoughts of Hamlet, the tragedy of Lear, the heartache of Woolf's "merest schoolgirl"). *Psychological* suffering, though often difficult for any one person to express, *does* have referential content, *is susceptible* to verbal objectification, and is so habitually depicted in art that, as Thomas Mann's Settembrini reminds us, there is virtually no piece of literature that is *not* about suffering, no piece of literature that does not stand by ready to assist us.<sup>76</sup>

Scarry further observes that "alarmed and dismayed by his or her own failure of language, the person in pain might find it reassuring to learn that even the artist – whose lifework and everyday habit are to refine and extend the reflexes of speech – ordinarily falls silent before pain."<sup>77</sup>

The paucity of literary representations of physical pain has political consequences because "the relative ease or difficulty with which that phenomenon comes to be *verbally represented* also influences the ease or difficulty with which that phenomenon comes to be *politically represented*."<sup>78</sup> Thus, in its very depiction of a woman suffering from a disfiguring wound, *Violet* makes visible that which has remained hidden for too long and, importantly, it does so without merely deploying a disability metaphor as dramaturgical

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<sup>75</sup> Garland-Thomson, 10.

<sup>76</sup> Scarry, 11. Lodovico Settembrini, a character in Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain* (1924), is concerned with *psychological* suffering.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

device. Kenny Fries, editor of *Staring Back: The Disability Experience from the Inside Out*, observes that “disability becomes a stand-in, a metaphor, for the social outcast, who is marginalized, misunderstood.”<sup>79</sup> As a result, these metaphors ignore the material conditions of the lived disability experience. In her article, “Ahhhh Freak Out! Metaphors of Disability and Femaleness in Performance,” Carrie Sandahl cites numerous examples from the Western canon, including *Oedipus Rex*, *Richard III*, *Mother Courage and her Children*, *Happy Days*, *Endgame*, *The Glass Menagerie*, and *Night Mother*.<sup>80</sup>

In classifying Violet as disabled, I rely upon the definition that David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder propose in their introduction to *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*:

We use the term *disability* to designate cognitive and physical conditions that deviate from normative ideas of mental ability and physiological function. Borrowing from the legislative definition of disability that was outlined in section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 USC 794), the Americans with Disabilities Act recognizes three distinct facets of disability: (1) the impairment of a major life function, (2) an official diagnostic record that identifies a history of an individual’s impairment, and (3) a trait or characteristic that results in the stigmatization of the individual as limited or incapacitated.<sup>81</sup>

Given the way she is alienated from the normative discourse of beauty as a result of her facial scar, Violet meets Mitchell and Snyder’s criteria. Garland-Thomson notes America’s obsession with normalcy in beauty and, in particular, how “the gender, race,

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<sup>79</sup> Kenny Fries, ed., *Staring Back: The Disability Experience From the Inside Out* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 6.

<sup>80</sup> Carrie Sandahl, “Ahhhh Freak Out! Metaphors of Disability and Femaleness in Performance,” *Theatre Topics* 9, no. 1 (1999): 13-14.

<sup>81</sup> David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, introduction to *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 2.

ethnicity, sexuality, class, and ability systems exert tremendous social pressure to shape, regulate, and normalize subjugated bodies” through medicine and appearance: “What is imagined as excess body fat, the effects of aging, marks of ethnicity such as ‘jewish’ noses, bodily particularities thought of as blemishes or deformities, and marks of history such as scarring and impairments are now expected to be surgically [or miraculously, in the case of Violet] erased to produce an unmarked body.”<sup>82</sup>

In his essay, “‘Mildred, Is It Fun to Be a Cripple?’” scholar of religion Robert A. Orsi traces the culture of suffering in mid-twentieth century American Catholicism by identifying the main tropes that have served simultaneously to celebrate and revile the afflicted, strategies of oppression that continue into the present day. Orsi asserts that pain is viewed as “an individual’s main opportunity for spiritual growth ... a ladder to heaven.”<sup>83</sup> Although not a Catholic herself, Violet carries a copy of the Baltimore Catechism that belonged to her mother, who was devout in her faith, much to the chagrin of her husband: “Your Mama was so mindful of heaven, she was no earthly good.”<sup>84</sup> Given Violet’s connection to the maternal, it is surprising that she has not internalized the

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<sup>82</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis. 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 262.

<sup>83</sup> Robert A. Orsi, “‘Mildred, Is It Fun to Be a Cripple?’ The Culture of Suffering in Mid-Twentieth Century American Catholicism,” in *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 21.

<sup>84</sup> Crawley, 27. Compiled by the Bishops of the United States in the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884, the Baltimore Catechism remained the standard Catholic school text in the United States until the 1960s. It was organized in a question-and-answer format and provided a skeletal outline of the Catholic faith. From Catechism No. 1, Lesson First: On the End of Man: “Q. Who made the world? A. God made the world.”



aesthetics of suffering. When the Preacher's assistant, Virgil, tells Violet that "all suffering has a purpose," she responds, "Maybe that's true, but it doesn't make it right!,"<sup>85</sup> and she dashes into the chapel to effect her own healing. There, she encounters the Preacher, who quotes Ecclesiastes 7:3: "By the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better."<sup>86</sup> Again, Violet refuses to see her affliction as a prescription from the Divine Physician.

The Preacher's assistant, who remains unnamed in Betts' short story, is aptly named if one considers his ancient Roman counterpart, Publius Vergilius Maro. As Dante's guide in *The Divine Comedy*, Virgil leads the poet on a journey of spiritual awakening, the first leg of which is a descent through the nine circles of hell. Shortly after Violet meets Virgil in the Preacher's headquarters, the scene fades to the night after the accident, as Violet's father carries Young Vi down the mountain. The scenes are similar not only in their descent into the abyss, both physical and psychological, but also in the ways in which – like Virgil does for Dante when the journey becomes too arduous – the Preacher's assistant and Violet's father carry her, physically and psychologically. Virgil says, "We'll get you taken care of in a jiffy,"<sup>87</sup> and Violet's father promises, "We'll get you taken care of, somehow."<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, the climaxes of *The Divine Comedy* and *Violet* are similar when considered from a teleological perspective. Both works involve a journey toward the light: At the end of *Paradiso*, Dante disappears into

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 70.

the Divine Light of God, and at the conclusion of *Violet*, Violet and Flick ask one another, “Will you bring me to light?” In both instances, light functions as a symbol of love.

Additionally, in the aesthetics of suffering, the afflicted are considered “fortunate unfortunates,” or “special people, God’s children, chosen by him for a special destiny.”<sup>89</sup> The suggestion of the inevitability of Violet’s fate is subtly woven into the score. Early in the musical, Violet’s father teaches Young Vi how to play draw poker because it will “learn you to subtract” and because “poker’ll give you something to do with the boys, when the time comes for that, and you’ll never have to leave town because of it.”<sup>90</sup> During the song, entitled “Luck of the Draw,” past and present intertwine: Young Vi’s father teaches her the fundamentals of the game, while Violet schools Monty and Flick in the bus station. The refrain goes thus:

Some say things happen by design  
By demand, decree, or law  
I say most things fall in line  
By the luck of the draw<sup>91</sup>

Later in the musical, as Violet’s father carries his bloodied daughter down the mountain immediately after the accident (“Down the Mountain”), the tune recalls “The Luck of the Draw.” Thus, Violet’s father intimates that his daughter’s fate was beyond their control.

At the same time that it valorizes suffering, the mainstream culture is “also deeply resentful and suspicious of sick persons.” Sickness is equated with moral corruption, and

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<sup>89</sup> Orsi, 21.

<sup>90</sup> Crawley, 17.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

suffering serves as chastisement and judgment from heaven.<sup>92</sup> In an early flashback scene, Young Vi tells her father that the Elum brothers have been pestering her: “Their deacon says the accident is just desserts cuz we never go to church. Papa is it true?”<sup>93</sup> Additionally, the aesthetics of suffering declares that “pain purge[s] and discipline[s] the ego, stripping it of pride and love.”<sup>94</sup> When Violet confronts the Preacher in his chapel, he accuses her of vanity:

PREACHER: You realize, there’s nothing really wrong with you.

VIOLET: Maybe it’s vain to *worry* you’re ugly, but if you’re worse than ugly? If you’re *disfigured!* That’s not vanity, that’s pain, pure and simple.<sup>95</sup>

Violet tries to impress upon the Preacher the severity of her condition, the physical and mental anguish that she has experienced, but his reply betrays his ignorance: “But your scar is healed though, right?”<sup>96</sup>

In this culture of discomfort, “there [is] only one officially sanctioned way to suffer even the most excruciating distress: with bright, upbeat, uncomplaining, submissive endurance.”<sup>97</sup> Healing is shunned because to seek relief is to deny the soul’s superiority to the body, to reject the opportunity for saintliness. According to Orsi, sufferers become “blank slates for the articulation and vicarious experience of desire.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>94</sup> Orsi, 21.

<sup>95</sup> Crawley, 74.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>97</sup> Orsi, 26.

Violet refuses to look upon her scar as a challenge of spiritual proportions. Shortly after boarding the bus, she sings:

Mama, your book says 'It's blessed to pity'  
Mama, just look, I'm a long ways from pretty  
Be an angel Mama, help to save me  
Make the Lord restore the face you gave me –  
And I will praise his grace,  
Rain or shine<sup>99</sup>

Using her mother as an intermediary, Violet proposes a conditional agreement: *if* God heals my disfiguring scar, *then* I will worship him. Moreover, her journey to Tulsa is not a pilgrimage in the traditional sense of a spiritual awakening; rather, it is the latest in a series of attempts to ease her suffering:

VIOLET: After Papa died, I tried everything else. Doctors, snake handlers, even a Catholic Church once, like Mama's? They were no help. Plus I tried to be healed at home. The Preacher stretches out his fingers? And you match them on the screen? But God's power was too filtered and thinned down for me.

*Flick chuckles.*

VIOLET: What. Don't you believe in God?

FLICK: I sure don't believe he's gonna come at me through a TV screen.

VIOLET: You would if you needed to bad enough.<sup>100</sup>

In refusing to passively accept her affliction, Violet enacts what bell hooks calls “one of the most significant forms of power held by the weak,” namely “the refusal to accept the definition of oneself that is put forward by the powerful.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>99</sup> Crawley, 9.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>101</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: South End Press, 2000), 90.

For *Violet*'s original incarnation at Playwrights Horizons, the creative team decided to forego a prosthetic scar, leaving Violet's affliction to the imagination of the audience. The unpublished libretto includes "A word about the scar," which is worth quoting at length because of the insight it offers into this important decision:

But using a cosmetic scar in the piece we've written isn't feasible. Young Vi appears in scenes before and after the accident; she'd have to run backstage repeatedly to put a scar on, or take it off. At one point during the bus ride, Violet daydreams that Young Vi is healed by the Preacher's touch. What else could he do, but pull the scar off Young Vi's face? Violet believes herself to be healed in Tulsa, in the second act, and isn't disabused of the idea until she sees Monty at Fort Smith. If she wears a scar for the whole act, the audience will be impatient during the entire scene preceding the finale, knowing that whatever she herself might think there is no possibility that she's been healed. But if she's taken off her usual scar temporarily Monty has to come up with a clever way to sneak it back onto her face.

In the second production we did together, at A Contemporary Theater in Seattle, Susan used a slide with an abstract image of a scar towards the end. It was quite an effective solution, to a problem the three of us were never completely convinced was important. A production that relied on projections might even make good use of scar images throughout the evening. But make-up? There's no need for it.<sup>102</sup>

Crawley's justification for not using a prosthetic on grounds of dramatic necessity makes sense. Yet, an unfortunate side effect of choosing not to visualize Violet's scar is that it diminishes what is at stake for the central character. Singer concurs, writing that this choice "may have deprived the show of its central drama. What was this pretty, pretty young girl so worried about, audiences couldn't help but wonder? One tended to lose sight of the show's fundamental premise."<sup>103</sup> The purpose of Violet's cross-country road trip would have been lost altogether had it not been for Lauren Ward's masterful

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<sup>102</sup> Crawley, 93.

<sup>103</sup> Singer, 138.

performance. Clothed in an oversized floral-print dress, she wore one strand of hair across her face in an effort to hide her disfiguring scar and frequently kept her head bowed when interacting with her fellow passengers.

When Violet returns to the Greyhound bus station in Fort Smith, Monty greets her:

VIOLET: Monty? (*Excited*) It was all I could do not to sneak a look before I got here. Well? What do you think?

MONTY: I tried to tell you what would happen. But you didn't wanna hear it.

VIOLET: Oh!<sup>104</sup>

The stage directions read, "Her hand flies to her cheek. She takes off running. The sun makes a funhouse mirror of the glass door Flick holds open, and in it Violet sees her own image reflected. Perhaps this is the one time we see her face, scar and all, as she sees it. She stares at herself, too stunned to speak. When the glass door closes, the spell is broken."<sup>105</sup> The funhouse mirror effect amplifies Violet's disfigurement to the point of grotesqueness. She tells Monty and Flick, "Don't look at me!," and begins to cry. Violet's tears signify a violation of the boundary between "inside" and "outside," an act of expulsion similar to the feeling of loathing that Kristeva describes when a subject encounters the abject: "I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself* ... 'I' am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which 'I' become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit."<sup>106</sup> Having previously misrecognized

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<sup>104</sup> Crawley, 85.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>106</sup> Kristeva, 3.

herself in images of her mother, her favorite actresses, and her fellow passengers, Violet recognizes her reflection in the glass door. Through her tears, Violet expels the distorted image to “give birth” to herself.

McMillin’s conception of the doubling of book time and lyric time further complicates this moment. He writes, “The repetitive time of song and dance lets characters see themselves in a new way.”<sup>107</sup> As Violet sobs, Young Vi (before the accident) emerges from the bus station, walking through one of the glass doors on which Violet saw her reflection a few moments earlier. That Young Vi walks through the reflective surface suggests a shattering of the distorted self-image that Violet has adopted and a reclaiming of the part of herself that has been disenfranchised. Young Vi sings:

Don’t pull back  
Don’t shudder  
Look elsewhere  
Give me the wings  
Of an angel  
I’m almost there<sup>108</sup>

Of great importance is the fact that Violet’s younger self, not Flick, facilitates her healing. In a tune that incorporates melodic lines from “All to Pieces,” Violet mourns her failed miracle, with the recycled music suggesting that she is still holding onto an ideal “I.” However, perhaps prompted by the ghost of her younger self, Violet confesses to Flick, “If I could/I’d stay with you.”<sup>109</sup> Flick then serenades Violet, assuring her that, “You’re not the girl you were/When you began.” But neither is Flick the same man; he also has been changed. His lyrics attest to this fact – “I’m not at all the man/You first

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<sup>107</sup> McMillin, 182.

<sup>108</sup> Crawley, 87.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 87.

laid eyes on” – but more convincing is his music, which recalls Violet’s song “Look At Me” from the Preacher’s chapel. Thus, as McMillin asserts, “the characters are influencing one another through their songs.”<sup>110</sup> Flick adopts Violet’s musical language from a moment that he did not witness, which strengthens the connection between the two characters, and, importantly, precludes a simplistic reading of Flick redeeming Violet at the musical’s conclusion. Both have been changed as a result of Violet’s odyssey.

Young Vi sings the musical interlude that connects “Promise Me, Violet” to the finale, “Bring Me To Light”:

YOUNG VI: Mama, why’s a man have eyes?/If I tell you, don’t you tell  
VIOLET: Flick. What do you see when you look at me.  
YOUNG VI: Mama, why’s a man have hands?/If I tell you, don’t you tell  
*Flick reaches out to caress and kiss Violet’s face.*  
YOUNG VI: Go ask your beau, he understands/There’s honey in the  
bushes, Lord/And water in the well

*Violet’s* finale, “Bring Me To Light,” welcomes Violet and Flick into the community of disparate travelers:

Left my troubles  
Back there when I climbed on board  
Jordan River’s where you’ll find me  
It’s wide, but not too wide to ford  
And as I go, and as I go  
And as I go, and as I go along  
I want you with me<sup>111</sup>

Musically, this song echoes “On My Way,” the ensemble number that begins Violet’s journey by bus. An important difference is that, in the earlier incarnation, the passengers sing “I carry with me” instead of “I want you with me.” The finale unifies the

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<sup>110</sup> McMillin, 67.

<sup>111</sup> Crawley, 89-90.



community of pilgrims: Violet begins the number, Flick takes over, and slowly their voices are overtaken by the sound of the chorus, which sings, “Will you bring me to light?” Importantly, this utopian vision happens in lyric time, which, as McMillin notes, “lets characters and audiences see themselves in a new way.”<sup>112</sup> Violet is reborn in the finale, a reading that is supported by the final simile in “Bring Me To Light” – “Like a baby the first time she opens her eyes” – as well as the reference to Jordan River, the site where, in Christian tradition, John baptized Jesus (baptism being the Christian sacrament of purification and rebirth). However, Violet’s journey has just begun, as indicated by the final lines of the song:

If I tell you my heart has been opened wide  
If I tell you I’m frightened  
If I show you the darkness  
I hold inside  
Will you bring me to light<sup>113</sup>

These lines, in concert with the song’s title, resemble a prayer – something that is wished for as opposed to something that has already occurred. Moreover, Schulman’s decision to stage the final portion of the song on the bus emphasized that Violet and her fellow passengers have not yet arrived at their destination. The ending of *Violet*, then, is the beginning of the central character’s story and, importantly, of a new type of musical that seeks to transform traditional musical theatre practice and, ultimately, society at large.

*Violet* is, in many ways, entrenched in the Golden Age tradition. The musical features a heteronormative narrative that revolves around marriage, or the promise of marriage (although this point could be contested due to the fact that Flick disappears for

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<sup>112</sup> McMillin, 182.

<sup>113</sup> Crawley, 89-90.

twenty-one pages of an eighty-three page libretto, when Violet travels to Tulsa), conventional song types, a chorus that embodies the values of the community, and an optimistic ending. However, *Violet*'s importance lays not in how it adheres to Golden Age traditions, but in how it departs from them.<sup>114</sup> The most subversive element of the musical is the central character. This analysis confirms Linda Winer's assertion that Violet is a "totally original heroine," even more so than Fosca, the female protagonist who most closely resembles her. Violet is marked by abjection: she is physically disfigured in a society that equates beauty with virtue and ugliness with evil; she troubles essentialized notions of gender by engaging in stereotypically masculine behavior such as drinking, playing poker, fighting, and traveling cross-country without a male companion; and she challenges social taboos by initiating a relationship with an African American soldier in the South in the 1960s.

Adding to the complexity of Violet's character is the surplus of identity that emerges when one juxtaposes her book self with her lyric self. Violet's book self is shrewd and confident, if not always articulate, and adapts easily to new situations; on the other hand, her lyric self, as McMillin explains, achieves a "formality of expression unavailable to [her] in the book."<sup>115</sup> A case in point is the song "Lay Down Your Head," a beautiful ballad whose lyrics read, in part:

Lay down your head, and dream, dream  
You're so much gentler than you seem

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<sup>114</sup> A similar idea was recently expressed in Judith Sebesta's *Theatre Journal* review of *The Book of Mormon*. See Judith Sebesta, review of *The Book of Mormon*, by Trey Parker, Robert Lopez, and Matt Stone, directed by Casey Nicholaw, Eugene O'Neill Theatre, New York, *Theatre Journal* 64, no. 1 (March 2012): 99-101.

<sup>115</sup> McMillin, 20.

Is there a chance you might redeem  
My days gone by, my days gone by<sup>116</sup>

This song hints at the woman behind the tough exterior; she is vulnerable and possesses a lyricism and intelligence (suggested by the triple end-rhyme) that she conceals during her conversations with Monty and Flick.

*Violet* subverts the beauty mystique that is rooted in our literary and musical heritage. As Synnott notes, the moral of fairy tales like *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Snow White* “is not only that virtue triumphs but so does beauty.”<sup>117</sup> Even more so, in these fairy tales, beauty and virtue are inextricably linked. Additionally, Synnott argues, literature such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* feature characters who are destroyed “by the beauty mystique: the hatred and fear of ugliness.”<sup>118</sup> A similar trope exists in American musical theatre, predominantly in the Golden Age tradition: beautiful heroines tend to get married and live happily ever after, while unattractive women remain single or, in the case of Fosca, die as punishment for their transgression. *Violet*, although belonging to the latter group, is redeemed at the end of the musical. She rejects the normative discourses of beauty and femininity, both of which rest on a mistaken view of her face as an essential attribute that defines her identity and, in doing so, transforms her own sense of self.

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<sup>116</sup> Crawley, 54.

<sup>117</sup> Synnott, “Truth and Goodness, Mirrors and Masks – Part II,” 57.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

Violet's journey from abjection has significant political and aesthetic implications. In *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self, and Society*, Synnott writes, "Beautyism, and its attendant, facism, the prejudice and discrimination in favour [*sic*] of the beautiful and attractive (however defined) and against the ugly and less attractive, are virtually institutionalized in our society, and they are the last major bastion of inequity."<sup>119</sup> Synnott further asserts, "Aesthetic relations are perhaps as significant as class, gender or ethnic relations as determinants of life chances; and aesthetic stratification as power as class, gender, or ethnic stratification."<sup>120</sup> In its portrait of a disfigured woman, *Violet* not only brings a much neglected subject to the American musical stage, but also, by allowing its central character to triumph, works to counteract the hegemonic discourses of "beautyism" and "facism." Additionally, *Violet* may open the door for further representations of physical (dis)ability and suffering on the American musical stage.

*Violet* is also subversive in its union of a white Southern woman and an African American man. Interracial relationships are rare in American musical theatre and, when they do occur, typically end in separation or death. Examples include *Show Boat* (1927), *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951), *West Side Story* (1957), Elton John and Tim Rice's *Aida* (2000), and *Marie Christine* (1999). *Violet* and *Flick*, unlike the sets of lovers in the aforementioned musicals, join the community in the finale and, importantly, do so without sacrificing their individualism. That the ending does not elide their

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<sup>119</sup> Anthony Synnott, *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self, and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 100.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

differences has important political implications, as McMillin notes: “Most musicals, including most good musicals, are not overtly political. But they belong to a theatre aesthetic that looks toward the political ... with full regard for the principles of difference ... at the heart of the genre.”<sup>121</sup> One possible way of interpreting the finale is in light of Henry A. Giroux’s essay, “When Hope is Subversive”: “Hope becomes meaningful to the degree that it identifies agencies and processes, offers alternatives to an age of profound pessimism, reclaims an ethics of compassion and justice, and struggles for those institutions in which equality, freedom, and justice flourish as part of the ongoing struggle for a global democracy.<sup>122</sup> Thus, *Violet*’s optimistic ending may suggest, to both the characters and the contemporary audience, the promise of a future in which American musical theatre becomes, in the words of McMillin, “a complex form of drama ... a drama of difference, a drama of the multiple,”<sup>123</sup> and a future in which American society adopts a more inclusive attitude toward persons of different races, genders, and classes. Tesori’s next musical, a collaboration with Tony Kushner and George C. Wolfe, continues in that tradition.

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<sup>121</sup> McMillin, 199-200.

<sup>122</sup> Henry A. Giroux, “When Hope is Subversive,” *Tikkun*, November/December, 2004, 62-64.

<sup>123</sup> McMillin, 210.

## Chapter 4

### Creating *Caroline*...and Change

Reviewers have called *Caroline, or Change* a “monumental achievement in American musical theater”<sup>1</sup> and a “moment in the history of theatre when stagecraft takes a new turn” in the “complexity of psychology and history.”<sup>2</sup> Scholars Stacy Wolf, James Fisher, and Aaron C. Thomas have maintained that the central character subverts the Mammy trope, with Daphne A. Brooks going so far as to call *Caroline* Broadway’s “newest, richest, and most densely textured representation of a black female character.”<sup>3</sup> Although these writers have recognized *Caroline*’s innovations, none of them has conducted an in-depth analysis of the text, including the libretto, lyrics, music, and original production.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, to date, no one has explored the process of creating *Caroline, or Change*. As with *Violet*, an understanding of the process itself can enhance our understanding of the product and its relationship to the ideological and aesthetic status quo. In the next two chapters, I expand the scholarly investigation begun by Wolf, Fisher, and Thomas, all of whom have recognized the uniqueness of *Caroline*, to enrich

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<sup>1</sup> John Heilpern, review of *Caroline, or Change*, by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori, directed by George C. Wolfe, Public Theater, New York, *New York Observer*, December 15, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> John Lahr, review of *Caroline, or Change*, by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori, directed by George C. Wolfe, Public Theater, New York, *The New Yorker*, December 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 346.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted Wolf and Fisher’s purpose was not to provide a thorough analysis of *Caroline, or Change*; rather, their explorations of the work are in much broader contexts.

our understanding of the work and, as a result, of similar works on the American musical stage. I begin by investigating the process of creating *Caroline, or Change*, again using Lorde's framework of the master's tools to assess the degree to which the creation of this musical adhered to or departed from the Golden Age tradition.

Whereas *Violet* originated in Jeanine Tesori's desire to see a character like Violet onstage and a need to find her own voice as a writer, *Caroline, or Change*, Tesori says, "came from Tony [Kushner]'s need to tell that story."<sup>5</sup> As a student at Columbia University, Kushner had written a series of six short monologues entitled "Songs in a Louisiana Basement." One of these pieces was the story of Caroline, an African American maid working for a Jewish family in Lake Charles, Louisiana. In the mid-1990s, a commission from the San Francisco Opera prompted Kushner to revisit this story, which was inspired by his boyhood. According to Kushner's introduction to the published libretto, he wanted to write a story "about race relations, the civil rights movement, and African-Americans and Jews in the early 1960's, a time of protean change sweeping the country – and to write about these things from the perspective of a small, somewhat isolated southern town."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Kushner admits that "writing text for an opera connected the story I wanted to tell to music, a central component of my childhood, and perhaps the missing key to my memory of these characters, these incidents, that time."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jeanine Tesori, interview by author, New York, January 11, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Tony Kushner, *Caroline, or Change*, Book and Lyrics by Tony Kushner, Music by Jeanine Tesori (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2004), xi.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, xi. Of *Caroline*, Kushner has said, "Some of it is memory. Some of it is misremembered. A mis-memory play." Although born in New York City, Kushner grew

*Caroline, or Change* is significant, in part, for bringing together three iconoclastic figures in American musical theatre – Tony Kushner, George C. Wolfe, and Jeanine Tesori. Kushner’s sprawling plays, always political in nature, tackle subjects like German fascism and American conservatism (*A Bright Room Called Day*), capitalism (*Hydriotaphia, or the Death of Dr. Brown*), the AIDS pandemic and Mormonism in Ronald Reagan’s America (*Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*), and Afghanistan under Taliban rule (*Homebody/Kabul*). In his article “After Angels,” John Lahr writes that Kushner “gives voice to characters who have been rendered powerless by the forces of circumstance ... and his attempt to see all sides of their predicament has a sly subversiveness. He forces the audience to identify with the marginalized – a humanizing act of imagination.”<sup>8</sup>

Kushner shared an early draft with director George C. Wolfe, who had helmed the Broadway production of Kushner’s two part, seven-hour epic *Angels in America*. Wolfe had gained national attention in 1986 with his groundbreaking play *The Colored Museum*, which features eleven “exhibits,” or vignettes, that satirize what it means to be black in America. The play ignited a storm of controversy; some critics commended Wolfe for critiquing black stereotypes while others found him complicit in perpetuating them. As Cynthia A. Bily writes, “An exchange of analyses in *The Village Voice*, a

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up in Lake Charles, where his family had a maid named Maudie Lee Davis. In 1969 Kushner’s mother, Sylvia, a bassoonist and actress with whom he had a close relationship, was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent a mastectomy. Kushner’s mother died in August 1990, while he was working on *Angels in America*. Kushner’s libretto for *Caroline, or Change* is dedicated to Maudie Lee Davis, who attended the opening night of the musical. Her presence, but not her response to the work, has been captured in the documentary *Wrestling with Angels*.

<sup>8</sup> John Lahr, “After Angels,” *New Yorker*, January 3, 2005, 42-52.



liberal New York newspaper, demonstrates the controversy surrounding the play: Thulani Davis, an African American critic and playwright, challenged the play as misogynist and reflective of self-hate, while critic Michael Feingold celebrated the play's use – and abuse – of stereotypical characters.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1991, Wolfe made his Broadway debut with *Jelly's Last Jam*, an impressionistic biography of jazz musician Jelly Roll Morton, which starred the late Gregory Hines. The title (and the musical's framework) refers to Morton's Last Judgment, in which he must address his lifelong denial of his African American heritage. As Larry Stempel writes in *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*, “The show ... examined the ambiguities of racial identity while indicting the immorality of racism within the larger African American community itself.” Stempel goes on to call *Jelly's Last Jam* “a celebration of the black musical tradition whose conventions it undermined: a black anti-musical.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, in his *New York Times* review, Frank Rich assessed the revolutionary nature of this work: “*Jelly's Last Jam*, a show in part about what it means to be African-American, is itself an attempt to remake the Broadway musical in a mythic, African-American image.”<sup>11</sup>

From 1993 to 2004, Wolfe served as artistic director and producer of the Public Theater, where he helmed a number of provocative plays and musicals that showcased his

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<sup>9</sup> Cynthia A. Bily, “The Colored Museum,” in *Masterplots II: African American Literature*, ed. Tyrone Williams (Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, 2008), 147.

<sup>10</sup> Larry Stempel, *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 661.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Rich, review of *Jelly's Last Jam*, by George C. Wolfe and Susan Birkenhead, directed by George C. Wolfe, Virginia Theater, New York, *New York Times*, April 27, 1992.

confrontational, unsentimental aesthetic. Two are especially relevant to my study. The first, *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk* [*Noise/Funk*] (1996), which Wolfe conceived and directed, is a musical revue that tells the story of African American history through tap. As Barry Singer writes, “To describe *Noise/Funk* ... [is] to deprive it of nearly everything that gave it brilliance – its spontaneity, its unpredictable structure, its soul, its seething rhythms, and, most significantly, its furious, electrifying performances.”<sup>12</sup> The second, Suzan Lori-Parks’ Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Topdog/Underdog* (2001), which Wolfe directed, chronicles the lives of two African American brothers named Booth and Lincoln. In his *New York Times* review, Ben Brantley said *Topdog/Underdog*, “considers nothing less than the existential traps of being African-American and male in the United States, the masks that wear the men as well as vice versa.”<sup>13</sup>

Importantly, during his tenure at the Public, Wolfe also nurtured the careers of artists such as Tony Kushner, Suzan Lori-Parks, Anna Deveare Smith, Nilo Cruz, and Savion Glover, all of whose works contain strong social and political messages. In a 2002 interview, Wolfe recognized that his identity strongly influences his choice of projects: “But given who I am and when and where I was born – black and southern at a time of segregation and the fact that I’m gay – has dictated the kind of theater I want to craft. It’s a theater that’s full of delight but also has edge and a sense of responsibility to the world.”<sup>14</sup> Because of his interest in plays and musicals with strong political

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<sup>12</sup> Barry Singer, *Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theater and Beyond* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2004), 115-16.

<sup>13</sup> Ben Brantley, review of *Topdog/Underdog*, by Suzan Lori-Parks, directed by George C. Wolfe, Ambassador Theater, New York, *New York Times*, April 8, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Jackson R. Bryer and Richard A. Davison, *The Art of the American Musical:*

messages, his unsentimental directorial style, and his tendency toward radical innovation, Wolfe proved to be the ideal director for *Caroline*.

Interestingly, it was her scores for *Violet* and *Twelfth Night* that led Kushner and Wolfe to approach Tesori to write the music for *Caroline, or Change*. At the same time that Bobby McFerrin, the designated composer for the San Francisco Opera, backed out of the project, Wolfe suggested turning *Caroline* into a musical-theatre piece, and the two collaborators began searching for a composer. Kushner remembers, “Our first choice was Jeanine Tesori; we both loved her musical, *Violet*, and her score for Nick Hytner’s production of *Twelfth Night*.”<sup>15</sup> Tesori’s incidental music for Lincoln Center Theater’s production of the aforementioned Shakespearean comedy had earned her the 1999 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Music in a Play as well as her first Tony nomination. Around the time Kushner and Wolfe approached Tesori, she was working on *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, a “movical” based on the 1967 Julie Andrews vehicle of the same name; *Millie* would bring Tesori her first commercial success, and her second Tony nod. Initially, Tesori turned down the offer to work on *Caroline* but, after collaborating with Kushner on a project that never came to fruition, she agreed to write the score. The iconoclastic trio of Kushner (who is gay and Jewish), Wolfe (gay and African American), and Tesori (a woman) began working on the musical in 2000.

Early in the development of *Caroline*, Wolfe recommended Tonya Pinkins to play the eponymous character. Pinkins’ involvement is significant because, unlike Lauren Ward who originated the eponymous role of *Violet*, Pinkins was well known as a

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*Conversations with the Creators* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 286.

<sup>15</sup> Kushner, xii.

television and theatre actress, and, moreover, her reputation, both personally and professionally, contributed to the development of *Caroline*. As Raymond Knapp contends, “the specific actress or actor who performs each character will matter tremendously, in a reciprocating relationship, so that the performer’s public persona and the specific character he or she plays will inflect each other in intimate ways.”<sup>16</sup> *Caroline* marked Pinkins’ first starring role in a Broadway production since her much-publicized divorce in 1992, in which she lost custody of her children and was ordered to pay \$25,000 a year in child support. In a May 2004 interview with the *New York Times*, Wolfe explained his reason for casting Pinkins, aside from the parallels between her own life and the role: “She’s able to do something thrilling. Take a composer’s notes and make it seem that she’s making them up as she goes along. I knew that ‘Caroline’ required someone with that kind of command. Someone not scared of her own power and rage – and Tonya has easy access to her rage.”<sup>17</sup> That Wolfe identifies rage as a necessary factor in casting *Caroline* suggests how atypical the role is. In a February 2012 interview with *broadway.com*, Tonya Pinkins named *Caroline* as the “Role That was Most Like Me”:

When I first read *Caroline, or Change* [Tony nomination, 2004], there were so many things that made me say, “Wow, that’s my life.” *Caroline* was 39 years old and she had four kids; I was 39 and I had four kids. She’d had a betrayal by a husband, and I was like, “That’s my story. Got it!” It was so meaningful to me to see a maid – a person who is normally invisible – on a Broadway marquee.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 205.

<sup>17</sup> Jesse Green, “The Trials of Tonya Pinkins,” *New York Times*, May 2, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Kathy Henderson, “*Hurt Village* Star Tonya Pinkins on *Caroline*, Sweet Anita and Other Unforgettable Roles,” *broadway.com*, <http://www.broadway.com/shows/hurt->

*Caroline, or Change* resists the type of racist representation that Lisa M. Anderson's critiques: "In the representations of whites, black women are constructed as they are seen through the veils of racism and sexism. Their knowledge of the lives of African Americans is restricted by their limited interactions with blacks, and to the historical images with which they are familiar from mass culture."<sup>19</sup> Not only was Wolfe, an African American director, instrumental in shaping the text with Kushner, one of America's most socially conscious playwrights, but also Wolfe's preconception of who would play the role (Tonya Pinkins) may have shaped the characterization. In fact, Kushner recognizes that the Mammy icon is, as Anderson says, a powerful "myth created in the white imagination," and that we have developed this image "as a way of handling our terrible and deserved guilt about race in this country."<sup>20</sup> In an act of subversion, Kushner and his collaborators – Tesori, and Wolfe (whose play *The Colored Museum* includes an exhibit called "Cookin' with Aunt Ethel," which parodies images of the Mammy in twentieth-century America) – invoke the Mammy image not to reinforce, but

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village/buzz/159898/hurt-village-star-tonya-pinkins-on-caroline-sweet-anita-and-other-unforgettable-roles/ (accessed March 16, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Lisa M. Anderson, *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), 38.

<sup>20</sup> CUNY TV, "American Theatre Wing's Working in The Theatre: Production Seminar: *Caroline, or Change*," CUNY TV Web site, Windows Media Player video file, 1:08:41, <http://www.cuny.tv/audiovideo/action.lasso?database=CUNYPROG&-response=detail2.lasso&table=webprogdetail2&sortField=TapeDate&sortOrder=descending&sortField=SeriesTitle&-sortOrder=ascending&-sortField=Title&sortOrder=ascending&logicalOperator=OR&-op=bw&SeriesTitle=caroline%20or%20change&op=bw&Title=caroline%20or%20change&-maxRecords=1&-skipRecords=78&-search> (accessed November 24, 2008).

rather to deconstruct it, or, as Anderson says, “to resist and dismantle structures and imagery that assault and deny our lives meaning.”<sup>21</sup>

The vignette-like structure of *Caroline*, which, in following Sondheim’s maxim that content dictates form, mirrors the *mélange* of races, classes, and political ideologies in the text, signals a departure from the Golden Age tradition. In a personal interview, Tesori observed that neither the musical’s structure (twelve scenes and an epilogue) nor its central figure changed during its development: “We just got better at revealing what it was that Tony was trying to do. Tony really had the piece in his mind when he wrote it out. And he wrote it out very quickly”<sup>22</sup> (in four and a half months, to be precise).

Similarly, in the published libretto, Kushner notes that

The text has been transformed, but the core of *Caroline* has, like its title character, resisted change. The play comes from sorrow, from anger and grief, and also from hope learned from history, from recent history, which has shown us both the terrors and also the pleasures of change, which has shown us that change, progress, is difficult, uneven, uncertain, but also absolutely possible.<sup>23</sup>

Kushner’s comment that *Caroline, or Change* “comes from sorrow, from anger and grief” suggests the ways in which this musical – which, notably, he calls a play – has more in common with Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* and Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* than a traditional Broadway musical.

In setting *Caroline* to music, Kushner and Tesori went through the script, line by line, beat by beat, note by note. In a seminar for the American Theatre Wing, Tesori

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<sup>21</sup> Anderson, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Tesori, interview.

<sup>23</sup> Kushner, xv.

explained that Wolfe emphasized the importance of finding the correct rhythm for the characters. He said, “We put people in a kind of rhythm, or meter, prison, and we make decisions about the way that they’re going to play an acting beat by saying, ‘It’s going to be in three, or it’s going to be in a waltz time, or in this.’ So we had to be very clear about what we were doing so that they could follow through in acting.”<sup>24</sup> In a December 2003 interview with the *New York Times*, Tesori explicated her function as a composer: “The music serves up the text all ways: the text rules. I’m not a symphonic composer. I need something to illuminate. I always loved the way Michelangelo talked about releasing the statue inside the block of marble he was carving; that’s how I felt about Tony’s libretto. My job was to release it.”<sup>25</sup>

Tesori’s eclectic score for *Caroline*, which combines field hollers, Delta blues, gospel, rhythm and blues, pop, Mozart, and klezmer music, is even less indebted to traditional Broadway song forms than her score for *Violet*. *Caroline*’s score features recurring themes and motives that create a sonic world, connecting the Gellmans and Caroline to the social and political turmoil of the era. Kushner asks, “What’s the connection between these amazing popular musical forms and the world that created them? The minute you ask that question about the world, you’re into the realm of politics.”<sup>26</sup> The different musical idioms come together in the Gellman household,

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<sup>24</sup> CUNY TV, 15:40.

<sup>25</sup> Robin Finn, “The Words Rule, But Her Music Sets Them Free,” *New York Times*, December 16, 2003.

<sup>26</sup> All About Jewish Theatre, “Tony Kushner and Tonya Pinkins on ‘Caroline, or Change’ at Broadway’s Eugene O’Neill Theatre,” [http://www.jewish-theatre.com/visitor/article\\_display.aspx?articleID=643](http://www.jewish-theatre.com/visitor/article_display.aspx?articleID=643) (accessed February 1, 2012).

“permeating the floorboards,”<sup>27</sup> as Tesori said in an interview with the American Theatre Wing. Two moments from the score will serve to demonstrate the work’s structural complexity. The first is Caroline’s lament at the beginning of the musical, which reappears in Stuart Gellman’s clarinet solo late in the second act, thereby mapping how one family has informed the other. The second is Emmie’s argument with Mr. Stopnick at the Chanukah party, when the two are debating the efficacy of nonviolent protest; Mr. Stopnick, an elderly Jewish man from New York City, begins to sing in Emmie’s musical language of rhythm and blues, which suggests her ideological impact on him.

Moreover, during rehearsals, Tesori told the cast that she didn’t want their vocalizing to sound like “singing,” or for the audience to feel like they were watching a musical. In a personal interview, Tesori explained that her intention was to privilege the text:

I was trying to say that sometimes in musicals, I feel like the text is here <indicates a lower position> and the music is here <indicates a higher position>. And sometimes it just needs to be that so you can relax and listen. Sit inside “Shipooopi” or “The Motion of the Ocean,” which all it does is whip people into a frenzy and they’re just glad they’re alive, and it’s a good time. But sometimes the text has to be here <indicates a higher position>. And *Caroline* – maybe it makes it even more challenging – the text lives here <indicates a higher position> much more and the music supports it. And every once in a while there’s a ritornello or something that you don’t have to listen to. But most of the time it’s challenging. We made it that way because it sits here <indicates a higher position>. It’s really, in a way, a play with music. It operates on what George [C. Wolfe] called “the third rail,” the other. It makes it perhaps not a commercial piece, but it’s what we wanted it to be.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> CUNY TV, 17:25.

<sup>28</sup> Tesori, interview.



Wolfe's metaphor refers to the third rail in train systems, the exposed electrical conductor that carries high voltage power and, when touched, results in electrocution. In politics the phrase denotes a topic that is so controversial (e.g. Social Security) that touching it will result in political death.

*Caroline* is also noteworthy because, as a through-composed musical, it circumvents many of the pitfalls of the genre. In *The Rise and Fall of the American Musical*, Mark N. Grant bemoans the dis-integration of contemporary through-composed musicals:

The sung-through, pseudo-operatic aspects of contemporary poperas like *Miss Saigon* have nothing to do with the genuine musical continuity of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, or of Bernstein's *Candide*, or of Herbert, Blitzstein, Duke, or Moross. The music in these ambitious works supplies the emotional information missing from the text. Poperettas do not do this; they simply string together a daisy chain of all-sung segments and glue them together with an undeviating rock groove. That is not the same thing as psychologically developed through-composition.<sup>29</sup>

Although not a "popera" in the style of *Miss Saigon* or *Les Misérables* (these works have also been called "megamusicals" due to their reliance on spectacle), *Caroline, or Change* marries music and lyrics to chart the emotional journey of the characters. Additionally, Scott McMillin writes, "The through-sung musical *characteristically* turns to technology" instead of "seeking a lyrical and musical climax in the singing of the principals."<sup>30</sup> Unlike *Phantom of the Opera*, which deprives the audience of a satisfying climax by allowing the Phantom to disappear, *Caroline* sets the central character's emotional climax to song.

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<sup>29</sup> Mark N. Grant, *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 113.

<sup>30</sup> Scott McMillin, *The Musical as Drama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 170.

Another innovative element of *Caroline, or Change* is the anthropomorphic characters. A washing machine, a dryer, a radio, a bus, and even the moon adopt human characteristics and interact with the inhabitants of Lake Charles; however, as Tesori notes, these figures are unlike the whimsical household items of *Beauty and the Beast*. Speaking of the appliances, Tesori notes, “The things don't have a life of their own. They're a reflection of the character of Caroline, who runs these machines. These machines are part of her.”<sup>31</sup> Tesori did not elaborate on her comment nor have scholars followed up on it, so part of my purpose in Chapter 5 is to explore the role of the anthropomorphic characters and, more specifically, their relationship to Caroline.

*Caroline, or Change* is also subversive in dramatizing the precarious relationship between African Americans and Jews in the American South. As James Fisher observes, “Although a few black-Jewish ‘buddy’ plays, like *The Zulu and the Zayda*, *I’m Not Rappaport*, and *Driving Miss Daisy*, have appeared with attention focused on the oppressions both groups have experienced, this fractious relationship has rarely been explored in mainstream American drama.”<sup>32</sup> In her article “The Southern Jewish Community and the Struggle for Civil Rights,” Cheryl Greenberg articulates the complexity of this relationship:

The Jews of the South proved ambivalent actors in the struggle for civil rights. While racism on the one hand and morality on the other exerted their own pressures, the primary self-interest of southern Jews lay in

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Simonson, “Goodnight, Moon: Kushner-Tesori Musical *Caroline, or Change* Begins Previews, playbill.com, October 29, 2003, <http://www.playbill.com/news/article/82435-Goodnight-Moon-Kushner-Tesori-Musical-Caroline-or-Change-Begins-Previews> (accessed January 7, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> James Fisher, *Understanding Tony Kushner* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 95.

minimizing the dangers of anti-Semitism in a region that appeared inhospitable to religious as well as racial minorities. However, the self-interest argument was double-edged: it suggested both a fight for civil rights, in order to protect minority rights, and resistance to civil rights advances, since breaking down racial barriers might raise religious ones.<sup>33</sup>

*Caroline*'s only significant forerunner in dramatizing the relationship between African Americans and Jews on the musical stage is *Parade*, featuring a book by Alfred Uhry (playwright of the aforementioned *Driving Miss Daisy*) and music/lyrics by "Son of Sondheim" Jason Robert Brown. The musical, which opened at Lincoln Center's Vivian Beaumont Theatre in December 1998 and closed after a meager eighty-four performances, tells the true story of Leo Frank, a Jewish factory worker who was convicted of raping and murdering a thirteen-year-old girl named Mary Phagan. As he was being transferred to a prison in Milledgeville, Georgia, where he would serve out a life sentence, Frank was kidnapped, taken to Phagan's hometown of Marietta, and hanged from an oak tree. The only other suspect was an African American janitor and, as Greenberg notes, "the fact that racist southerners chose to accept the word of the Black man in this case reminded Jews that while racism might be the stronger, suspicion of Jews did not lag far behind."<sup>34</sup> Writing of the similarities between *Parade* and *Caroline, or Change*, Stacy Wolf argues, "By setting these shows in hostile geographic locations, Kushner, Tesori, and Wolfe, like Brown, Uhry, and [director Harold] Prince, create immediate empathy for their otherwise unlikeable protagonists, and also raise the stakes

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<sup>33</sup> Cheryl Greenberg, "The Southern Jewish Community and the Struggle for Civil Rights," in *African Americans and Jews in the Twentieth Century: Studies in Convergence and Conflict*, ed. V. P. Franklin, Nancy L. Grant, Harold M. Kletnick, and Genna Rae McNeil (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 163.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

of power between the two disenfranchised groups.”<sup>35</sup> In the next chapter, I will consider the nature of this depiction, with special attention to the relationship between Caroline and Noah.

Notably, *Caroline, or Change* dispenses with one of the central elements of the Golden Age formula: romance. In *Words with Music: Creating the Broadway Musical Libretto*, Lehman Engel writes, “It should be clear that – to date [Engel was writing in the 1960s and 1970s] – no musical without principal romantic involvement has worked. Romance is the fuel that ignited the music and lyrics.”<sup>36</sup> Although *Caroline* is certainly not the first Broadway musical to forgo a love story, it remains in the minority. Of the ten longest-running Broadway musicals to date, only one – *Cats* – does not include a romantic story (*Oh! Calcutta!*, though a revue, includes scenes depicting various sexual exploits). Moreover, of the anti-musicals that Stempel discusses in *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*, only two – *Floyd Collins* (1996) and *Dream True* (1999) – lack a central love story (although *Floyd Collins* depicts the titular character’s loving relationship with his family, and *Dream True* dramatizes the close friendship between two orphaned boys, Peter and Vernon). *Caroline, or Change* forgoes romance altogether: Caroline does not have a love interest, and Stuart and Rose are virtual strangers.

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<sup>35</sup> Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 176.

<sup>36</sup> Lehman Engel, *Words with Music: Creating the Broadway Musical Libretto*, updated and revised by Howard Kissel (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2006), 113.

Perhaps the most subversive aspect of *Caroline, or Change* is the titular character, around whom the work is constructed. Caroline is utterly abject: she is middle-aged, illiterate, and impoverished, the single mother of four children (one of whom is stationed in Vietnam). But Caroline is not like the Mammies immortalized onscreen by Hattie McDaniel, Ethel Waters, and Louise Beavers, nor does her relationship with Noah resemble that of Frankie Addams and Berenice Sadie Brown in *The Member of the Wedding*. In fact, as James Fisher observes, “Kushner takes pains to push Caroline . . . in the opposite direction of the stereotype of a black woman in a crisp, white maid’s uniform.”<sup>37</sup> Caroline is consumed with bitterness and sorrow, and she refuses to play surrogate mother to Noah, whose own mother recently died from cancer and whose father has, in the words of Kushner, “drifted into the ether of music.”<sup>38</sup> In fact, rather than put Noah’s needs above those of her own children, Caroline pockets his loose change (to teach him responsibility, Noah’s stepmother, Rose, creates a rule that Caroline can keep any change that she finds in Noah’s pockets) to provide food and medical care for her children. Pinkins has commented on Caroline’s originality as an African American character:

And it was the first time I played a character where the creators weren’t asking me to make her likeable. Many times, people hire me as a black woman and want me to be strong; they want me to be tough; and then I bring them that, and they go, “Wait a minute: People are not going to like her.” Caroline didn’t do things that were likeable, but she did things that were understandable, so people could relate to her whether they agreed with her or not. Even if they didn’t like her, they could find a piece of themselves in her.

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<sup>37</sup> Fisher, 90-91.

<sup>38</sup> CUNY TV, 12:10.

Thus, part of Caroline's significance derives from her stature as an antihero because unlikeable protagonists are rare on the American musical stage (the central character in *Pal Joey* is a notable exception, along with many of the protagonists in Sondheim's musicals).

Although remarkable for its subversive elements, *Caroline's* development followed what has become standard practice. As a play, *Caroline* had received two readings; the first, in May 1999, was part of The Public Theater's New Work Now! Reading series, and the second, in August 2000, was a private reading. Its first workshop with music, with only the score for the first act composed, took place on August 5-17, 2001, at the Public. Another developmental workshop followed in October 14-November 1, 2002, this time with both acts finished. *Caroline's* third, and final, workshop happened from May 27-June 20, 2003. *Caroline, or Change* premiered at the Public Theater on November 30, 2003.

*Caroline, or Change* is the story of Caroline Thibodeaux, a thirty-nine year-old African American maid living in Lake Charles, Louisiana, circa 1963. Caroline has lost two men to the ravages of war. Her husband returned from Korea, resorted to alcoholism, and started hitting her; consequently, Caroline beat him and kicked him out of the house. Her first son, Larry, is stationed in Vietnam. Caroline lives with her two sons, Jackie and Joe, and her daughter, Emmie, a follower of Dr. Martin Luther King and a budding activist in the Civil Rights movement. Emmie's progressive racial attitudes contrast sharply with Caroline's more conventional outlook, as exemplified by Emmie's

use of the word “black man,” as compared to Caroline’s preference for “Negro” or “colored.”<sup>39</sup>

Caroline works for the Gellmans, a middle-class Jewish family caught in a moment of familial change. Stuart Gellman’s wife died from lung cancer, and he recently married a friend from New York City named Rose Stopnick. However, Stuart is still depressed about his wife’s death; he withdraws from the family and spends hours practicing his clarinet. His forlorn son, Noah, hates Rose, and handles his grief by moping around the house. Noah’s only friend is Caroline, whom he visits every afternoon in the basement while she does the laundry. Caroline allows Noah to light her daily cigarette, a secret they share, but chases him away when he tries to get closer:

Now muse yourself,  
I got no use for you.  
This basement too darn hot for two.”<sup>40</sup>

Noah interprets Caroline’s anger and grief as strength and calls her the “President of the United States.”<sup>41</sup>

The “change” of the title also has monetary significance, referring in part to Noah’s careless disregard for money. To teach him responsibility, Rose decides that Caroline can keep any loose change that she finds in the dirty laundry. Driven by her pride, Caroline at first refuses to accept the gift, but she desperately needs the money to pay her overdue rent, to take her children to the dentist, and to buy meat for dinner. When Caroline starts to pocket the money, Noah tests the maid: he leaves more and

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<sup>39</sup> Kushner, 43.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 14.

more change in his pockets to see if Caroline will claim it. This experiment erupts when Noah accidentally leaves his Chanukah gelt, a twenty-dollar bill, in his pants, and Caroline takes it. Noah confronts Caroline after school, but she refuses to return the bill. They both lose their tempers. Noah declares that President Johnson has built a bomb to kill all Negroes, and Caroline, a thirty-nine-year-old woman, unleashes her rage on an eight-year-old boy:

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 hotter than goose fat,  
Much hotter than that.  
Hell's so hot it makes flesh fry.  
(Little pause)  
And hell's where Jews go when they die.<sup>42</sup>

Following this confrontation through curses, Caroline returns the twenty dollars and walks away from the Gellman household. Her final encounter with Noah takes place in a nighttime fantasy sequence, and we learn that Caroline returned to work but Noah hid from her. Caroline promises that they will talk again someday, but “they’s things we’ll never say.”<sup>43</sup> Caroline goes into her house, giving the stage to Emmie, who concludes the musical with a paean to her mother:

I'm the daughter of a maid  
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 from storm clouds when it rains,  
down the plains, down the high plateau,  
down to the Gulf of Mexico.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 124.



Down to Larry and Emmie and Jackie and Joe.  
The children of Caroline Thibodeaux.<sup>44</sup>

The creative team continued to work on the show during its off-Broadway premiere. *Caroline, or Change*, advertised as “a new musical on the search for hope, identity, and the American soul,”<sup>45</sup> opened at New York City’s Public Theater in December 2003, and garnered mixed reviews. Calling *Caroline* “the brooding person’s *Hairpray*” in the *New York Times*, Ben Brantley was nevertheless intrigued by its central character. He described Caroline as “stoical,” “uncompromising,” and “formidable,” and lauded Pinkins’ performance, saying she “has never been better than she is here, in an intense, controlled performance that somehow always hints at the currents of rage and helplessness beneath Caroline’s rigid dignity.”<sup>46</sup> Similarly unimpressed by the work as a whole, Howard Kissel of the *Daily News* praised Pinkins’ performance, noting that she brought “great strength and dignity to Caroline, especially in her big number [“Lot’s Wife”].”<sup>47</sup> Referring to the musical as “brutally beautiful,” Peter Marks of the *Washington Post* called *Caroline* a “wrenching musical that paints a telling portrait of the complex relationship between blacks and Jews, groups that in this country have come to

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>45</sup> “Sweet Caroline: Tony Kushner Gets Lyrical,” *New York*, October 27, 2003, 102.

<sup>46</sup> Ben Brantley, review of *Caroline, or Change*, by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori, directed by George C. Wolfe, Public Theater, New York, *New York Times*, December 1, 2003.

<sup>47</sup> Howard Kissel, review of *Caroline, or Change*, by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori, directed by George C. Wolfe, Public Theater, New York, *Daily News*, December 4, 2003.

know each other well – and not at all.”<sup>48</sup> Michael Sommers of the Newark *Star-Ledger* recognized that *Caroline* marked a departure from traditional musical theatre fare, calling it “a must for aficionados of new musical theater forms.”<sup>49</sup> In his *New Yorker* review, John Lahr went a step further, describing *Caroline* as a “moment in the history of theatre when stagecraft takes a new turn” in the “complexity of psychology and history.”<sup>50</sup>

Despite the creative team’s efforts, Kushner laments that some critics “thought we were going for a big sort of Mammy story but we blew it and they didn’t get that *Caroline* is an attempt to turn that on its head.”<sup>51</sup> This critical response suggests the degree to which the Mammy figure has permeated the cultural imagination and, even more so, the resistance to subversions of that familiar figure. Micki McElya writes,

The image of the faithful slave lingers because so many white Americans have wished to live in a world in which African Americans are not angry over past and present injustices themselves, a world in which white people were and are not complicit, in which the injustices themselves – of slavery, Jim Crow, and ongoing structural racism – seem not to exist at all. The mammy figure affirmed their wishes.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Peter Marks, review of *Caroline, or Change*, by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori, directed by George C. Wolfe, Public Theater, New York, *The Washington Post*, January 4, 2004.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Sommers, review of *Caroline, or Change*, by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori, directed by George C. Wolfe, Public Theater, New York, *Star-Ledger*, December 1, 2003.

<sup>50</sup> Lahr, December 8, 2003.

<sup>51</sup> Karen D’Souza, “Mixed Reception Doesn’t Dim Playwright’s Pride in Musical,” *Mercury News*, January 16, 2005.

<sup>52</sup> Micki McElya, *Clinging To Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

Similarly, Wolfe, in an interview with David Savran, has said, “Americans are so frightened of dealing with the true history of the country because everybody is indicted, either from guilt or rage or responsibility or fear.”<sup>53</sup>

Audiences were similarly divided about *Caroline*. In a personal interview, Tesori noted, “People worship now at the altar of *Caroline*, and I don’t know what it is. I found that either with *Caroline*, the people were bored out of their minds or they were devastated. And I’ll take it.”<sup>54</sup> In the documentary *Wrestling with Angels*, Kushner confessed,

I just really thought, “Well, no one will be able to resist this. It’s so short. I mean, it’s two hours with an intermission. It’s a musical, and it’s incredibly moving.” I thought people [would] just go nuts. And some people *did* go nuts. We got a series of flat-out raves and then this raft of people who said, “Well, you know it’s cold,” or “it’s dull” or “it’s empty-hearted” is the one that really sticks in my head. I wish I hadn’t read that review.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the mixed critical reception, Kushner, whose television adaptation of *Angels in America* had just premiered on HBO, took the unusual step of pitching the show to potential investors. In a February 2004 interview with the *New York Times*, Kushner addressed the importance of a Broadway transfer: “When a play or, more so, a musical gets to Broadway, it is looked at and discussed in an important way. I think we all felt

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<sup>53</sup> David Savran, *The Playwright’s Voice: American Dramatists on Memory, Writing and the Politics of Culture* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1999), 341.

<sup>54</sup> Tesori, interview.

<sup>55</sup> Freida Lee Mock, *Wrestling with Angels*, DVD (Santa Monica, CA: American Film Foundation, 2006).

that 'Caroline' needed to be seen in that way."<sup>56</sup> Kushner's efforts were successful: a consortium of twenty investors supplied the necessary five million dollars to mount the production, and *Caroline* transferred uptown to the Eugene O'Neill Theatre in April 2004.<sup>57</sup>

In conclusion, the process of creating *Caroline, or Change* was highly innovative: the creative team consisted of three iconoclastic figures whose primary concern was not to create a commercial hit; following Sondheim's rule that content dictates form, Kushner structured the musical as a series of vignettes; the anthropomorphic characters, although predated by *Beauty and the Beast*, were utilized in an original way; Tesori's score, for the most part, relinquished traditional Broadway song forms in favor of through-composition; Kushner dispensed with a romantic plot, one of the hallmarks of the Golden Age tradition; the story explored the tenuous relationship between African Americans and Jews in the American South; the central character was not crafted, or played, to be likeable; and the musical resisted generic labels, as indicated by the variety of descriptors that have been employed in writing about it. The process of creating *Caroline* was conventional in one respect: the creative team followed a development process that has become standard, i.e. a series of readings and workshops, both public and private, followed by a transfer from off-Broadway to Broadway. Thus, it appears that the creative team largely dispensed with the master's tools, i.e. the Golden Age model, in creating

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<sup>56</sup> Jesse McKinley, "A Matter of No Small Change: 'Caroline's' Broadway Angels," *New York Times*, February 22, 2004.

<sup>57</sup> When *Caroline, or Change* transferred uptown from the Public Theater to the Eugene O'Neill Theatre in May 2004, Tesori was recognized by ASCAP for becoming the first woman composer to have two new musicals running concurrently on Broadway (the other being *Thoroughly Modern Millie*).

*Caroline, or Change*. However, it does not necessarily follow that an innovative process generates a groundbreaking product; therefore, it still remains to be seen what the product of this creation yielded. To answer that question, the following chapter examines *Caroline, or Change* in performance.

## Chapter 5

### *Caroline, or Change*: Transforming a Shadow of a Life

In her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins observes that “the controlling images of Black women that originated during the slave era attest to the ideological dimension of Black women’s oppression.” Collins identifies a plethora of interrelated, socially constructed images of black womanhood: “From the mammies, Jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, the nexus of negative stereotypical images applied to African-American women has been fundamental to Black women’s oppression.”<sup>1</sup> Many, if not all, of these stereotypes have appeared on the American musical stage. While a survey of representations of black womanhood in American musical theatre is beyond the scope of this study, several works are noteworthy as precursors to *Caroline, or Change*.

In particular, two pre-Golden Age musicals seem especially relevant to my study. The first, *Show Boat* (1927), was firmly entrenched in old traditions, as evidenced by its use of musical interpolation, its indebtedness to European operetta, and its handling of race (e.g. the character of Queenie was played by Italian-American actress Tess Gardella, better known by her stage persona “Aunt Jemima,” in blackface); however, *Show Boat* is also notable for its innovations, including a realistic plot, serious themes, an American setting with American songs, an epic story (1870-1926), and a racially integrated cast.

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 7.

As John Graziano observes in his essay, “African-American Musical Theatre, *Show Boat* and *Porgy and Bess*,” *Show Boat* was not the first Broadway musical to employ a multiracial cast; however, “the popularity of Hammerstein and Kern’s musical brought these sensitive issues to the forefront of public attention.”<sup>2</sup> The secondary story concerns Julie La Verne, a mixed race actress passing for white, who is married to her white co-star, Steve Baker. Julie and Steve are forced to leave the *Cotton Blossom* when another character discovers that she has African American blood in her. Shortly thereafter, Steve abandons Julie and she self-destructs. Julie is the prototype of the tragic mulatta, who is, in the words of Lisa M. Anderson, a “mythic woman who is always (and only) a mixture of black and white.” Anderson notes that, “one of the elements of the tragedy surrounding the mulatta is her lack of access to power and her essentially female position.”<sup>3</sup> As John Bush Jones observes, “In Julie’s story, Hammerstein has embedded three social issues: racial bigotry, spousal desertion, and alcoholism,”<sup>4</sup> all of which appear in *Caroline, or Change*.

*Porgy and Bess*, the 1935 folk opera by George and Ira Gershwin and DuBose Heyward, depicts the lives of the residents of Catfish Row, a tenement in Charleston, South Carolina, and focuses on the story of a disabled black beggar (Porgy) and a former prostitute and drug addict (Bess). Graziano suggests that, despite Heyward’s attempt to

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<sup>2</sup> John Graziano, “African-American Musical Theatre, *Show Boat* and *Porgy and Bess*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird, 2d ed (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 99.

<sup>3</sup> Lisa M. Anderson, *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), 45-46.

<sup>4</sup> John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 75.

offer a non-stereotypical view of African Americans, his depiction “has been controversial, with some critics asserting that he was dealing only with stereotypes and did not understand the black character.”<sup>5</sup> Allen Woll concurs, arguing that “the prevalence of superstition, gambling, and spirituals seemed to spring from stereotypes that were common in white plays about black life that had appeared on Broadway since the early 1920s.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Raymond Knapp maintains that “*Porgy and Bess* is at bottom a story told *by* whites and *for* whites, since its mythological ‘archetypes’ are often little more than standard racial *stereotypes*: the brutish savage (Crown), the slick, shiftless ‘Zip Coon’ (Sporting Life), the ‘Mammy’ (Serena Robbins), the mystic Porgy, and the wayward Bess.”<sup>7</sup> Anderson, in analyzing how Bess epitomizes the jezebel

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<sup>5</sup> Graziano, 101.

<sup>6</sup> Allen Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989), 163.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 197. The current Broadway revival, billed as “The Gershwins’ *Porgy and Bess*,” with a stripped-down libretto by Suzan Lori-Parks, ignited a firestorm when *New York Times* writer Patrick Healy penned an article about the revamped show and Stephen Sondheim responded with an open letter to the *Times*, castigating the creative team for their “arrogance.” Among the changes that Sondheim took issue with was director Diane Paulus’ desire to create back stories for the characters. Sondheim’s response reads, in part, “For example she (or, rather, Ms. Parks) is supplying Porgy with dialogue that will explain how he became crippled. She fails to recognize that Porgy, Bess, Crown, Sportin’ Life and the rest are archetypes and intended to be larger than life and that filling in ‘realistic’ details is likely to reduce them to line drawings.” Sondheim’s indignation with the creative team for assuming authorial intent is understandable (Parks told the *Times*, “I wanted to flesh out the two main characters so that they are not cardboard cutout characters. I think that’s what George Gershwin wanted...”), but his comment about archetypes fails to acknowledge the fact that any American production of *Porgy and Bess* cannot be removed from its original context, which includes the pernicious legacy of racism. The opera in performance is rich in possibilities for subverting the stereotypical representations, but the text itself is constructed around those same essentialist cultural representations of blacks. “Stephen



stereotype, observes that “while Catfish Row may have verisimilitude, placing it on stage without contrasting images creates a myth.”<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Allen Woll argues that *Porgy and Bess* “symbolizes the end of the black musical tradition that flourished in the early part of [the twentieth] century” because “while the faces onstage were clearly black, this musical ... revealed the height of white usurpation of what had initially been a black cultural form.”<sup>9</sup> This practice has continued into the present day. More recent examples of black-oriented Broadway musicals by all-white or predominately white creative teams include *Dreamgirls* (1981), *The Lion King* (1997), *The Color Purple* (2005), and *The Scottsboro Boys* (2010).

The jezebel stereotype reappears in *Carmen Jones*, an all-black musical adaptation of Bizet’s opera that appeared on Broadway in 1944. Librettist/lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II transplanted the story to an African American community during World War II but remained faithful to the plot of Bizet’s opera: Carmen, a parachute maker, seduces a soldier named Joe but eventually abandons him for a boxer named Husky Miller. On the evening of Husky’s big fight, Joe attempts to reclaim Carmen and, when she refuses him, Joe stabs her to death. Hammerstein’s introduction to the published libretto contradicts his socially progressive views. He writes, “The nearest thing in our modern American life to an equivalent of the gypsies in Spain in the Negro. Like the gypsy, he expresses his feelings simply, honestly, and graphically. Also, as with the

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Sondheim Takes Issue with Plan for Revamped ‘Porgy and Bess,’” *New York Times*, August 10, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, 89.

<sup>9</sup> Woll, 154.

gypsy there is rhythm in his body, and music in his heart.”<sup>10</sup> As Anderson observes, Carmen epitomizes the jezebel, a stereotype that was exacerbated in the film version by the casting of Dorothy Dandridge, who was “famed in real life as a ‘mulatta’ who frequently portrayed tragic mulattas.” Thus, Anderson concludes, “beyond the already tragic circumstances of the jezebel, Dandridge carries the ‘ghosts’ of her other performances of tragic mulattas and her own tragic life with her into this role.”<sup>11</sup>

Two blockbuster musicals of the late twentieth century are notable for featuring black female protagonists. *The Wiz* (1975) is a modernized version of L. Frank Baum’s tales with a Motown-infused score. Although not vulnerable to the mulatta or jezebel stereotypes, Dorothy, like many of her white counterparts, is young and beautiful.

*Dreamgirls* (1981), a black-oriented show with an all-white creative team, is perhaps more relevant because the central character, Effie, is overweight in a society that values being slender. However, *Dreamgirls* uses Effie’s weight as a device, dramatizing how the Motown music industry was, in the words of Jones, “a world where not only whites exploited blacks but black performers and promoters exploited black singers until they were exhausted, only to cast them aside for new talent.”<sup>12</sup>

A new musical by Michael John LaChiusa, one of the “Sons of Sondheim,” is even more relevant to *Caroline, or Change* in its unforgiving portrait of a disenfranchised outsider. *Marie Christine*, a re-fashioning of Euripides’ *Medea* set in late-nineteenth-century America, is, LaChiusa affirms, about “misogyny, racism, the theme of how the

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<sup>10</sup> Oscar Hammerstein II, *Carmen Jones* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1945), xviii.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, 94.

<sup>12</sup> Jones, 229.

country treads the line of indulging in passion and then becoming completely cold to passion.”<sup>13</sup> Like Tesori does in *Caroline, or Change*, LaChiusa takes advantage of New Orleans’ musical heterogeneity, melding European, African, and American styles to accentuate Marie’s hybridized identity (she is a Voudon<sup>14</sup> priestess in an upper-class Creole home). *Marie Christine* premiered at Lincoln Center’s Vivian Beaumont Theatre on December 2, 1999, the last new musical to open on Broadway in the twentieth century. In his liner notes for the original cast recording, Ira Weitzman considers the show’s contemporary significance:

As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, society is once again examining itself, trying to find out what makes humans commit inhuman acts. It is a study as old as the Greeks and Euripides’ *Medea* – it is, in fact, as old as the first rituals of theatre when our ancestors gathered around a fire and told stories to try to explain the miracles and mysteries of life.<sup>15</sup>

In the way that it dramatized the story of an African American woman marked by abjection and, like *Porgy and Bess*, confounded generic labels by blurring the boundaries between conventional musical and opera, *Marie Christine* is *Caroline*’s most obvious forerunner on the American musical stage. However, Marie, like Bess and Carmen, is vulnerable to the jezebel stereotype. Anderson writes, “Sometimes the jezebel represents dangerous sex; falling prey to her charms means trouble to her and her male victim.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> David Finkler, “Michael John LaChiusa Makes the Story Sing.” *BMI*, November 30, 1999, <http://www.bmi.com/news/entry/233332> (accessed January 17, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> I use LaChiusa’s spelling of “Voudon” here, referring to the various traditional polytheistic religions of West Africa.

<sup>15</sup> Ira Weitzman, liner notes, *Marie Christine*, RCA Victor Broadway, 1999.

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, 89.

Marie's unrestrained sexuality and amorality lead to the death of her brother and her children, as well as her own imprisonment and execution. Caroline, like Marie, is vulnerable to a host of race and gender stereotypes and to a condition of abjection in the Kristevan sense of a radically excluded Other. Therefore, as with *Violet*, I look at manifestations of abjection in *Caroline, or Change*.

Also, as with *Violet*, I consider Tesori's score in my analysis of *Caroline, or Change*. Whereas Violet's vocal range is "mezzo (belt)," Caroline is an alto. Oxford Music Online states that alto is "derived from the Latin *altus* (the vocal part lying above the tenor), now applied to a singer whose voice lies in the region *f-d*." The entry further notes that "in English usage a distinction is sometimes drawn between alto and contralto voices in solo singing, the former referring either to a boy or (more often) a falsettist, the latter to a female voice, although in practice this distinction is too often blurred to be useful."<sup>17</sup> Female protagonists with an alto/contralto range are common in rock musicals, but less so in more traditional musicals. Examples include Dolly Levi in *Hello, Dolly!*, Mama Rose in *Gypsy*, Sally Bowles in *Cabaret*, Velma Kelly in *Chicago*, and Desirée Armfeldt in *A Little Night Music*. All of these women are gender outlaws who defy essentialist notions of womanhood. In "Broadway Babies: Images of Women in Sondheim," Laura Hanson argues that "traditional musical heroines are usually virginal or, perhaps, chaste in the remembrance of a past love."<sup>18</sup> The only chaste character in the

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<sup>17</sup> *Oxford Music Online*, s.v. "Alto (i)," <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.mul.missouri.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/00693> (accessed March 14, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Laura Hanson, "Broadway Babies: Images of Women in Sondheim," in *Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook*, ed. Joanne Gordon (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), 21.

above list is Dolly, a widow, whose pursuit of Horace Vandergelder is decidedly non-sexual. Rose, on the other hand, uses her sexuality to propel her daughter Louise to international stardom and, in her musical nervous breakdown “Rose’s Turn,” performs a mock striptease, authenticating what Tessie Tura says earlier in the musical, “You know, from the way that dame walks, she would have made a damn good stripper in her day.”<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, both Sally and Desirée are sexually indiscriminate. Hanson further observes that “from the early days of musical theatre, the majority of heroines sweetly sang their way to a fulfilling life as a wife and mother.”<sup>20</sup> However, of the aforementioned characters in maternal roles, Mama Rose is a possessive and destructive mother, Sally Bowles refuses motherhood by having an abortion, and Desirée lacks the mothering instinct, leaving her daughter with her mother as she pursues her acting career. Like her dramatic counterparts, Caroline subverts gender norms: she is chaste but not desexualized and, although a mother, her motherhood is not sufficient to bring her fulfillment. By resisting expectations of gender, these alto characters enact what Suzanne G. Cusick describes as “a crucial feature of Butler’s theory about gender as performative: that the field of possible individual performances is extremely broad, allowing for a tremendous number of variations that are intelligible, permissible, and capable of being subversive only insofar as they cite or allude to prevailing cultural norms.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Arthur Laurents, *Gypsy: A Musical Suggested by the Memoirs of Gypsy Rose Lee*, Book by Arthur Laurents, Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994), 75.

<sup>20</sup> Hanson, 30.

<sup>21</sup> Suzanne G. Cusick, “On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex,” in *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*, ed. Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley (Los Angeles: Carciofoli, 1999), 38.

Critics and scholars have argued that the titular character of *Caroline, or Change* subverts the Mammy trope. Reviewing the Broadway production, Ben Brantley wrote, “Ms. Pinkins’s artful study in passive aggression still reads piercingly clear. Who else, after all, stops a show these days with a long, measured ballad of self-reproach and resignation in which the singer never smiles?”<sup>22</sup> In his review for *Theatre Journal*, James Fisher was more discerning:

The variety Pinkins brings to Caroline’s suppressed anger and desperation is compelling and unforgettable. Her second-act aria, “Lot’s Wife,” is not a traditional “showstopper” in that it is a grim, angry accounting of the sacrifices of her stagnant life, but the intensity of Pinkins’s delivery, coupled with Kushner’s scalding lyrics and Tesori’s soaring music, raises the number – and the image of Caroline – to heroic levels.<sup>23</sup>

Stacy Wolf and Daphne A. Brooks are in agreement that Caroline subverts the essentialist cultural representation of the Mammy; however, the broad scope of those studies in which their comments appear precluded an in-depth analysis of *Caroline*. Aaron C. Thomas, on the other hand, argues that Caroline both conforms to and deviates from the Mammy trope, and he concludes that the character *reconstructs* this image. This chapter, then, carries forward the work begun by these scholars by offering a more thorough exploration of the relationship between the musical and its unique protagonist in relation to conventional representations and practices.

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<sup>22</sup> Ben Brantley, review of *Caroline, or Change*, by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori, directed by George C. Wolfe, Eugene O’Neill Theatre, New York, *New York Times*, May 3, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> James Fisher, review of *Caroline, or Change*, by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori, directed by George C. Wolfe, Eugene O’Neill Theatre, New York, *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 4 (2004): 667-70.

The beginning of the musical sets up the stereotypes to be dismantled. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders identifies the Mammy's stereotypical attributes as "her deeply sonorous and effortlessly soothing voice, her infinite patience, her raucous laugh, her self-deprecating wit, her implicit understanding and acceptance of her inferiority and her devotion to whites."<sup>24</sup> In Wolfe's original staging, the show began with Caroline offstage, humming an *a cappella* lament that hinted at her inexpressible sorrow. Pinkins, as Caroline, entered the basement, wearing a white maid's uniform and carrying a basket of laundry. The image reinforced the comfortable stereotype with which many audience members would be familiar due to its hypervisibility in American culture. Caroline then took center stage to announce the ordinariness of her situation:

Nothing ever happen under ground  
in Louisiana.  
Cause they ain't no under ground  
in Louisiana.  
There is only  
under water.<sup>25</sup>

However, kitchen-sink realism quickly gave way to surrealism, as the Washing Machine sprang to life, singing "Consequences unforeseen./Consequences unforeseen," followed by the Radio, played by a trio of singers, who teased Caroline about "Doin laundry, full of woe/neath the Gulf of Mexico."<sup>26</sup> Caroline switched off the Radio and amended her previous pronouncement:

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<sup>24</sup> Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>25</sup> Tony Kushner, *Caroline, or Change*, Book and Lyrics by Tony Kushner, Music by Jeanine Tesori (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2004), 11.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

Nothing happens under ground  
in Louisiana. Cept in this house  
cept here, cept here:  
At nine-thirteen Saint Anthony Street  
in Lake Charles Louisiana:  
This house got  
a basement.”<sup>27</sup>

As the lyrics indicate, Caroline’s realm is an unusual one. Three everyday appliances – a washing machine, a dryer, and a radio – adopt human characteristics and embody Caroline’s inner life. Tesori has declared, “They don’t talk in the sense that the cheese grater dances, as in *Beauty and the Beast*. The things don’t have a life of their own. They’re a reflection of the character of Caroline, who runs these machines. These machines are part of her.”<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps because Kushner had just collaborated with Maurice Sendak on a children’s book featuring talking animals,<sup>29</sup> it is not surprising that many critics focused on the non-human characters in their reviews. For example, in his December 2003 appraisal of *Caroline, or Change* for the *New York Times*, Brantley devoted considerable

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Simonson, “Goodnight, Moon: Kushner-Tesori Musical *Caroline, or Change* Begins Previews, playbill.com, October 29, 2003, <http://www.playbill.com/news/article/82435-Goodnight-Moon-Kushner-Tesori-Musical-Caroline-or-Change-Begins-Previews> (accessed January 7, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> The book, *Brundibar*, is based on the Czech opera of the same name that was performed by children in Terezin, a Nazi concentration camp. The story concerns a brother and sister, Aninku and Pepicek, who sing in the town square in an attempt to earn money to buy milk for their sick mother. The town’s sinister organ grinder, Brundibar (Czech for “bumblebee”), thwarts their plan by chasing away the siblings. With the help of three talking animals and 300 schoolchildren who drown out Brundibar’s song, Aninku and Pepicek defeat the bully, buy the milk, and return home to their mother. In May 2006 the opera, featuring Hans Krasa’s original music, an English libretto by Kushner, and production design by Sendak and Kris Stone, played a three-week engagement at the New Victory Theater in New York City.



attention to the “whimsical assortment of anthropomorphic characters” used “to articulate Caroline’s unspoken desires and resentments.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, John Lahr singled out the imaginary characters in his *New Yorker* review: “The most extraordinary of this musical’s many thrills is its ability – through an idiom in which the Washer, the Dryer, the Radio, and even the local Bus are incarnated and sing to Caroline – to plumb and to honor the ordinary.”<sup>31</sup> I concur with Fisher and Wolf, who, like Tesori, have suggested that the anthropomorphic characters are a reflection of Caroline. The following offers a further explication of the kinds of information that can be gleaned from reading them as such.<sup>32</sup>

Riccardo Hernández’s set for the original production included a realistic basement with a period-appropriate washing machine, radio, and dryer. The actors who played the appliances stood on platforms upstage of their respective machines; Wolfe’s stage picture, then, suggested how the devices were contributing to Caroline’s oppression. At select moments, the actors reached into the space, pressing down upon Caroline and thereby heightening the sense of claustrophobia and hopelessness. Pinkins, as Caroline, interacted with the actors playing the appliances. For example, as she loaded the dryer with clothes, Pinkins looked at Chuck Cooper, who stood several feet above the set piece.

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<sup>30</sup> Ben Brantley, review of *Caroline, or Change*, by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori, directed by George C. Wolfe, Public Theater, New York, *New York Times*, December 1, 2003.

<sup>31</sup> John Lahr, review of *Caroline, or Change*, by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori, directed by George C. Wolfe, Public Theater, New York, *The New Yorker*, December 2003.

<sup>32</sup> Fisher writes that “Caroline’s despair is reflected by these singing appliances” (101), and Wolf similarly proposes that they “add details about Caroline’s situation” (179).

In a production seminar for the American Theatre Wing, Kushner remembers that, at first, Wolfe staged the musical as if the anthropomorphic characters were in Caroline's head, but later decided to have her interact with them. This directorial adjustment was instrumental in establishing the appliances as symbols of Caroline's oppression.

The "brand-new Nineteen-Sixty-Three/seven-cycle wash machine"<sup>33</sup> is, in one sense, a peaceful presence in the basement. Caroline starts the appliance, and it sings:

round and round I agitates  
while them what does the clothes awaits,  
they contemplates and speculates,  
in the peace my one-horsepower  
lectric mother's hum creates<sup>34</sup>

Tesori's music captures the cyclical rhythm of the apparatus by repeating a simple four-note phrase three times, beginning with the words "in the peace." The Washing Machine, then, offers Caroline a brief respite from her drudgery, during which she smokes her "daily cigarette" and considers her present situation. What is more, this appliance goads Caroline onward toward the future. Throughout the musical it intones "consequences unforeseen," and asks, "What shall be? What lies in store?/in Nineteen-Sixty-Three? or - Four?"<sup>35</sup> However, the Washing Machine, like the other appliances, also torments Caroline by exposing her faults and chastising her for her mistakes. For example, when Caroline cautions Rose to leave the basement so her "arm can swing/with this hot iron/and not hit nobody,"<sup>36</sup> the Washing Machine scolds her:

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<sup>33</sup> Kushner, 11.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 76.

Oooh child, watch yourself,  
struck boss lady like a hammer!  
Leave them coins up on that shelf!  
Oooh, child, gone too far!<sup>37</sup>

The Radio, portrayed as a glamorous Martha and the Vandellas-type singing group, represents pleasure and possibility, which is in stark contrast to Caroline's present condition. Tesori has recognized the Radio's similarity to Martha and the Vandellas, while many critics and scholars have equated them with the Supremes. The distinction seems important. The Radio's musical language is a harder type of rhythm and blues that preceded the processed sound of the Supremes, and their look, as Kushner notes in the American Theatre Wing seminar, is "not deracinated"; their gowns are "beautiful but slightly homemade."<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, their musical language features vocal acrobatics, including complex three-part harmony and melisma, as well as elaborate descriptions: "Singing them sediment topsoil blues,/alluvial delta-silt saltwater ooze."<sup>39</sup> The Radio's

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>38</sup> CUNY TV, "American Theatre Wing's Working in The Theatre: Production Seminar: *Caroline, or Change*," CUNY TV Web site, Windows Media Player video file, 28:50, <http://www.cuny.tv/audiovideo/action.lasso?database=CUNYPROG&-response=detail2.lasso&table=webprogdetail2&sortField=TapeDate&sortOrder=descending&sortField=SeriesTitle&-sortOrder=ascending&-sortField=Title&sortOrder=ascending&logicalOperator=OR&-op=bw&SeriesTitle=caroline%20or%20change&-op=bw&Title=caroline%20or%20change&-maxRecords=1&-skipRecords=78&-search> (accessed November 24, 2008). In "A Whiter Shade of Black," Jon Landau notes that, "Apparently the Vandellas could only go so far. Martha has a straight, tough, soul voice and probably was not right for the more commercial records being planned. So attention was soon turned to the Supremes. The one advantage Diana Ross had over Martha, on a record, was her cooling sexy voice." Jon Landau, "A Whiter Shade of Black," in *Rock Recall*, ed. Michael J. Budds and Marian Ohman (Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 1993), 118.

<sup>39</sup> Kushner, 13.

psychological function is exemplified at the beginning of act 2, when it sings a Christmas jingle to remind Caroline of Santa's impending arrival:

Season's greetings, Caroline!  
Take the change! Why you disincline?  
Does it taste like a bitter wine?  
Miseltoe hangin low –  
Go on,  
bend your spine!<sup>40</sup>

As the singular display of luxury in the basement, the Radio prompts Caroline to imagine how her life could improve by pocketing Noah's loose change.<sup>41</sup>

Together, the Washing Machine and the Radio represent how Caroline is paralyzed between her current situation and an unknown, and unimaginable, future. When Noah first enters, he sings, "every day she stands between/the radio and the washing machine,"<sup>42</sup> a symbolic position that indicates how Caroline is locked in stasis. Her immobility is exacerbated by also being trapped vertically, "caught tween the Devil and the muddy brown sea,"<sup>43</sup> as she later sings in the song, "Lot's Wife."

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 67-68.

<sup>41</sup> The importance of the Radio's psychological function can be further appreciated when compared to similar trios from two Broadway musicals that ran concurrently with *Caroline, or Change*. *Hairspray* features the Dynamites, a black trio of singers who sing, "Welcome to the 60's," and *Little Shop of Horrors* includes a doo-wopping Greek chorus known as the street urchins. In both instances, the trio is little more than a storytelling device. In a seminar for the American Theatre Wing, Tesori compared the Radio to these more familiar trios: "It is not *Hairspray*. It is not *Little Shop*. It uses the same iconic images and it spins them in a way. You have to be willing to go on the spin." CUNY TV, 1:10:25.

<sup>42</sup> Kushner, 14.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 116.

Completing the anthropomorphic trio is The Dryer, which torments Caroline by unearthing painful memories. When Noah asks if God made the Dryer, Caroline responds, “No, the Devil made the dryer./Everything else, God made.”<sup>44</sup> Kushner has stressed that “Caroline is a woman who loses her mobility. She can’t stop grieving over losses, and like [Walter] Benjamin’s angel, her face is turned to the past. She wants to go back, but the terrible lesson of history is that she can’t.”<sup>45</sup> When Caroline turns on the Dryer, the temperature in the tiny basement climbs high enough to “melt the hairspray in your hair,”<sup>46</sup> and Caroline delves into the “pit of her abasement.” The Dryer sings:

Laundry mine now!  
You know the story:  
let’s make this basement  
a purgatory.<sup>47</sup>

While the Dryer hums its work song, Caroline agonizes over the shortcomings of her life, unable to let go of her haunted past. In Wolfe’s original staging, Chuck Cooper, who played the Dryer, smoked a cigar. With each puff, he released a cloud of smoke into the small performance space, thereby externalizing the anguish choking Caroline’s world.

Some directorial insight from Wolfe may suggest a deeper significance for these non-human characters. In a seminar for the American Theatre Wing, Kushner admits that, initially, Wolfe struggled with how to stage the anthropomorphic characters, but eventually decided that the Washing Machine, the Dryer, and the Bus are the ghosts of

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>45</sup> Fisher, 91.

<sup>46</sup> Kushner, 16.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 17.

former slaves who have died and inhabited the machines.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, in *Show Business: The Road to Broadway*, Wolfe claims, “This piece is a memory piece. In some strange way, it has more to do with *The Glass Menagerie*<sup>49</sup> than *The Music Man*.”<sup>50</sup> Using Wolfe’s comments as a guide, I suggest another possible interpretation for the anthropomorphic characters, as the “ghosts” of black stereotypes that haunt the cultural imagination and, as previously noted, the American musical stage. Outfitted in a turban, which recalled the Mammy’s kerchief, and a dress that added dimension to her frame, thereby suggesting the Mammy’s physical largess, Capathia Jenkins as the Washing Machine suggested the iconic figure of the Mammy. Strengthening the connection was the fact that the Washing Machine, like the Mammy, is the property of the white family

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<sup>48</sup> CUNY TV, 31:55.

<sup>49</sup> That Wolfe invokes Tennessee Williams is fitting, given Williams’ propensity for memory/ghost plays that explore the impingement of the past on the present, as well as his influence on Kushner’s playwriting. In his article “‘All Truth Is a Scandal’: ... Tony Kushner’s Plays,” included in *The Influence of Tennessee Williams: Essays on Fifteen American Playwrights*, ed. Philip C. Kolin, Kirk Woodward outlines the consonances between *Caroline, or Change* and Williams’ plays: “The plot of that play [*Caroline*]...does not resemble that of a particular Williams play, but Caroline’s life story, as described by the Radio in the play, shares the trajectory of Blanche’s life in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and of other Williams heroines: they ‘took a wrong step/slip and fell.’ The basement of *Caroline* ‘planted in the swampy soil’ recalls the house in Williams’s *Period of Adjustment* built over a crevice into which the house is sinking, echoed in *Angels* where Louis refers to the ‘cracks that separate what we owe to our selves, and...what we owe to love (77). Public statuary in a Southern town plays a role in *Caroline* in the statue honoring the Confederate Soldier with its head knocked off, reminiscent of the statue of an angel named Eternity in *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale* with an inscription so faded that it has to be read like Braille, with the fingers.” Kirk Woodward, “‘All Truth Is a Scandal’:... Tony Kushner’s Plays,” in *The Influence of Tennessee Williams*, ed. Philip C. Kolin (Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland & Company, 2008), 176.

<sup>50</sup> Dori Berinstein, *Show Business: The Road to Broadway*, DVD (Santa Monica, CA: Genius Entertainment, 2007).

and does her job without complaint; in fact, she scolds Caroline for getting feisty with Rose. However, true to fashion, the creative team complicated this familiar image through Hope Clark's sexually suggestive choreography, which confirmed that this Washing Machine was no desexualized Mammy. By subtly invoking the essentialist cultural representation of the Mammy, Wolfe and his collaborators provided a foil for Caroline, thereby emphasizing how she deviates from the more stereotypical representation of an African American maid.

The Radio, on the other hand, might be seen as embodying the jezebel stereotype. In contrast to Caroline and the Washing Machine, both of whom wore loose-fitting clothes, the Radio was attired in form-fitting gowns that accentuated their curves; like the jezebel, as Anderson notes, their "body [was] on display."<sup>51</sup> Additionally, the fact that the trio moved freely from pop sounds to blues music, as well as the fact that they were not confined to the Gellmans' basement, emphasized the potential threat associated with the jezebel figure. Notably, Caroline's onstage position "between the radio and the washing machine," symbolized her sexual identity, a median between the asexualized Mammy and the oversexed jezebel.

The Dryer, with his guttural sounds, lascivious glances, and violent choreography, which included striking the set with a cane, engaged the predominant stereotypes of black men as hypersexual, aggressive, and even bestial. In this way, The Dryer served as a double for Caroline's ex-husband, the most unflattering portrait of a black character in the musical. He is unemployed, alcoholic, and abusive; after he broke her nose, Caroline

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<sup>51</sup> Anderson, 99.

struck back and “beat his face in.”<sup>52</sup> However, just as Caroline is powerless against the Dryer, so too is she unable to relinquish her longing for her ex-husband. In an extended flashback scene at the beginning of act 2, Caroline, the Washing Machine, and the Radio sing:

THE WASHING MACHINE: Even now, your scar hand miss  
CAROLINE: the handsome boy, the navy man.  
CAROLINE, THE WASHING MACHINE AND THE RADIO: Sorrow  
bleed you.  
CAROLINE: Where is he?<sup>53</sup>

The Dryer’s musical language, rooted in its historical context, complicates this portrayal. Brian Ward writes that in the blues tradition forged in the South during the mid-twentieth century, “the portrayal of relationships between the sexes was often pessimistic, vicious, exploitative, and sometimes just plain petrified.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, the Dryer both signifies stereotypes of black masculinity and embeds Caroline in her social context.

As indicated earlier, Wolfe has a penchant for engaging stereotypes in order to subvert them, and that may have been his intention with the anthropomorphic characters in *Caroline*. Placing these images onstage with Caroline accentuates her singularity within the history of stereotypical black representations in American musical theatre. Moreover, by presenting essentialist cultural representations of African Americans as machines, Kushner, Tesori, and Wolfe highlight the social constructedness of these

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<sup>52</sup> Kushner, 74.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>54</sup> Brian Ward, “‘Down in the Alley’: Sex, Success, and Sociology Among Black Vocal Groups and Shouters,” in *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 72.



stereotypes; they do not exist in nature, they are man-made. Like the anthropomorphic characters, however, these man-made “identities” oppress real people, like Caroline.

In Brechtian fashion, the anthropomorphic characters in *Caroline, or Change* create a distancing effect, or, what Brecht describes as “a technique of taking the human social incidents to be portrayed and labeling them as something striking, something that calls for explanation, is not to be taken for granted, not just natural. The object of this ‘effect’ is to allow the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view.”<sup>55</sup> In other words, the anthropomorphized appliances disrupt the audience’s emotional investment to allow for a critical perspective on the reality presented onstage. This distance is of great importance because *Caroline, or Change*, unlike *Violet*, is through-composed; it does not alternate between book time and lyric time and, therefore, does not offer what Scott McMillin describes as “the resistance that occurs between book and number” that serves to “rule out simple answers to questions of identity.”<sup>56</sup> Eliminating the fantastical characters increases the likelihood of romanticizing Caroline’s struggle or losing sight of the socioeconomic import of her story. As McMillin writes, “the aesthetic of disunification ... has the potential for resisting structures of wealth and power. It is a tough aesthetic, originally rooted in black and immigrant culture and capable of turning the established pieties into song-and-dance routines fraught with social criticism.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, the anthropomorphized characters point to Kushner’s political agenda. In the

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<sup>55</sup> Bertolt Brecht, “The Street Scene,” in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 125.

<sup>56</sup> Scott McMillin, *The Musical as Drama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 191.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

documentary *Wrestling with Angels*, Kushner articulates what he hopes audiences will take away from the musical: “One of the things that I wanted when people watch *Caroline* is to say, ‘This is wrong! A woman like this, any woman, shouldn’t be in circumstances like these. There should be more economic justice in the world.’”<sup>58</sup> Thus, the anthropomorphic appliances dramatize Caroline’s psychic wounds, thereby enlarging her individual suffering and placing it in a larger social context; they embody the ghosts of black stereotypes that have subjugated and suffocated Caroline; and, in a Brechtian fashion, they offer critical detachment.

Another fantastical character, the Moon, described by Brantley as “Josephine Baker via Maxfield Parrish,”<sup>59</sup> serves as a calming presence, a vehicle for the musical’s fantasy sequences, a sign of the maternal, and a link between the personal and the political. In Wolfe’s production, a realistic-looking moon illuminated the sky, and the actress playing the Moon stood on a crescent-shaped base in front of it. The Moon first appears at the end of Caroline’s work day, as she and Dotty wait for the bus. The Moon sings:

Moon change, moon change,  
glowing bright, light up the night,  
make your dress of spotless white

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<sup>58</sup> Frieda Lee Mock, *Wrestling with Angels*, DVD (Santa Monica: American Film Foundation, 2006).

<sup>59</sup> Ben Brantley, review of *Caroline, or Change*, by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori, directed by George C. Wolfe, Public Theater, New York, *New York Times*, December 1, 2003. A native of St. Louis, Missouri, Josephine Baker, whose nicknames included “Black Venus” and “Creole Goddess,” was a world-famous actress, singer, and dancer, as well as a civil rights activist. Maxfield Parrish was an American painter and illustrator whose characteristic style included androgynous figures, fantastical settings, and vivid colors. Brantley’s description of the Moon further emphasizes its function as a catalyst for the “crossover” fantasy sequences.

turn to purple, turn to gleam...  
Cool and dry,  
free and high,  
miles free from basement steam.  
Change come fast and change come slow  
but change come, Caroline Thibodeaux.<sup>60</sup>

The Moon's promise to change Caroline's uniform from white to purple points to its function as a healing agent. As Ellen Conroy writes in *The Symbolism of Color*, purple is "symbolic of the basic qualities in our nature that form a sure foundation on which to build the very highest qualities – patience, endurance, perseverance, ability to be long suffering and slow to anger. All these qualities are a *sine qua non* of the evolved soul. This is why the suffering Christ was given a purple robe before his crucifixion."<sup>61</sup> The allusion to Christ is also significant because, just as Christians believe that Jesus' death on the cross redeemed the sins of humanity, so does Caroline's suffering rescue her daughter, Emmie. Additionally, the Moon represents freedom, a utopian space where Caroline can self-reflect without worrying about the Gellmans. When Noah interrupts Caroline in a nighttime fantasy sequence, she reprimands him:

Noah, go to sleep.  
stop botherin 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 about rent overdue<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Kushner, 32.

<sup>61</sup> Ellen Conroy, *The Symbolism of Color* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), 37.

<sup>62</sup> Kushner, 46.

In slave cultures, the nighttime held special significance. Hilary McD. Beckles writes, “While the day-life of slaves was fashioned by persistent struggle to survive debilitating hard labour under an unrelenting tropical sun [or, in Caroline’s case, in a blisteringly hot basement], their night-life beneath softly caressing moons was textured by an irrepressible pursuit of leisure, entertainment and ontological freedom.”<sup>63</sup>

The Moon also represents freedom for Noah, allowing him to transcend space and engage in nocturnal conversations with Caroline. In the act-one finale, Noah imagines himself as a member of the Thibodeaux family. He longs for the depth of emotion that he is lacking in his own home:

Caroline shows each silver quarter  
to her kids –  
she’s a divorcee!  
“Thank God we can eat now  
thanks to poor crazy Noah,  
who’s just a stoopnagle  
can’t hang on to a quarter!”  
But at least now at supper  
they talk about me.<sup>64</sup>

Tesori realizes this moment through a Motown-style production number that features a driving back beat, a prominent bass guitar line, and a tambourine, all of which defined the sound of Barry Gordy’s record label. Moreover, as the soul-influenced music of racial integration, the Motown sound effectively underscores the underlying affinity between a thirty-nine-year-old African American maid and an eight-year-old Jewish boy who,

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<sup>63</sup> Hilary McD. Beckles, “‘War Dances’: Slave Leisure and Anti-slavery in the British-Colonised Carribean,” in *Working Slavery, Pricing Freedom: Perspectives from the Caribbean, Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. Verene A. Shepherd (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 223.

<sup>64</sup> Kushner, 60.

especially if read as a dramatized version of Kushner, is also gay (the libretto hints at Noah's effeminacy: Rose tells her father, "the kid's a little funny,"<sup>65</sup> and Noah imagines everything he can buy with his allowance money, including "Barbie doll dresses on the sly!"<sup>66</sup>). However, because of the assembly-line nature of the Motown industry and its emphasis on the working class, Tesori's musical choice also foregrounds the sacrifices that Caroline makes for her children. In the original production, Wolfe placed Noah and the Thibodeaux children in one frame, as they sang and danced about material wealth, and Caroline in another, as she sang a counter to the children:

Change in his pockets just lyin there  
I reach in his pockets and  
I find me some  
For free!<sup>67</sup>

Considering Kushner's fondness for, not to mention his dramaturgical indebtedness to, Arthur Miller,<sup>68</sup> the final moments of act 1 of *Caroline, or Change* recall Linda's exclamation at the end of *Death of a Salesman*, when she stands over Willy's grave and tells him that she made the final mortgage payment: "We're free and clear. *Sobbing more fully, released.* We're free. *Biff comes slowly toward her.* We're free... We're

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>68</sup> At Miller's 2005 memorial service, Kushner said, "For American playwrights who come after Arthur Miller, there is of course an unpayable debt. Those of us who seek mastery of dramatic realist narrative have his plays to try to emulate. Scene after scene, they are perhaps our best constructed plays, works of a master carpenter/builder. Those of us who seek not mastery but new ways of making theater have to emulate his refusal to sit comfortably where *Salesman* enthroned him" Tony Kushner, "Arthur Miller: 1915-2005," *The Nation*, June 13, 2005.

free...”<sup>69</sup> Kushner, like his leftist forerunner Miller, expertly melds the personal and political throughout *Caroline* to point to the institutionalized mendacity that crushes the dreams of countless Americans. In the act-one finale, the dreams of the children, expressed through pop music, stand in sharp contrast to the reality of Caroline’s guilt-ridden confession, thereby emphasizing the demoralizing disparity between the American Dream and the American Reality for those who have been discarded by mainstream society.

The Moon is also associated with the maternal. In her article “Mothers, Change, and Creativity in Tony Kushner,” Catherine Stevenson asserts, “Caroline ... the fantasy double of Noah’s dead mother ... is doubled by the Moon.” Stevenson convincingly argues that the two “exist in the relation of thesis to antithesis”: “Caroline remains rooted, the Moon changes from gibbous to new ... Caroline inhabits the underworld of the basement; the Moon dominates the sky. Caroline embodies harsh economic realities; the Moon symbolizes imaginative freedom.”<sup>70</sup> I suggest another possible interpretation of the Moon, as Yemanjá, the Yoruban mother goddess of the ocean. As Nathaniel Altman writes in *Sacred Water: The Spiritual Source of Life*,

Yemanjá is known both in Africa and Brazil as the mother of all *orishas* (gods and goddesses in nature) and is compared to Our Lady of Conception in the Roman Catholic Church. As one of the most popular and revered orishas in Brazil, Yemanjá’s domain includes the ocean and all bodies of salt water. Representing the maternal forces of nature, she is

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<sup>69</sup> Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 139.

<sup>70</sup> Catherine Stevenson, “Seek for Something New: Mothers, Change, and Creativity in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, *Homebody/Kabul*, and *Caroline, or Change*,” *Modern Drama* 48 (2005): 771.

often depicted as a beautiful and exalted figure dressed in flowing white robes.<sup>71</sup>

Like Yemanjá, the Moon in *Caroline, or Change* is nurturing and protective. As indicated earlier, she serves as a catalyst for nighttime conversations between Caroline and Noah, who is motherless, and, in the act-one finale, “Roosevelt Petrucius Coleslaw,” the Moon magically interacts with Noah and Caroline’s children, assuming Caroline’s maternal role because she is too exhausted to participate. Strengthening the connection between the Moon and Yemanjá in the original production was Paul Tazewell’s costume – a shimmering white gown with a headdress – and the actress’s graceful gestures that suggested the Moon was working its magic on the human characters.

Finally, the Moon connects individual strife to the social turmoil of 1963. The Moon first sings its oft-repeated phrase “moon change” immediately before Dotty tells Caroline about the statue of the Confederate soldier in the courthouse square, which was vandalized the previous night (Caroline’s daughter, Emmie, later confesses that she was among the protestors who decapitated the “ol copper Nightmare Man”<sup>72</sup>). The Moon next appears when Noah quarrels with Rose; she tells Noah that Caroline is poor, but he refuses to believe it, singing, “it isn’t true ... she’s a lot stronger, stronger than you.”<sup>73</sup>

The Moon sings:

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<sup>71</sup> Nathaniel Altman, *Sacred Water: The Spiritual Source of Life* (Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2002), 221.

<sup>72</sup> Kushner, 125.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

Outside tears and disarray!  
Inside children disobey.  
Change come fast, come right away!<sup>74</sup>

A few moments later, as Grandma and Grandpa Gellman arrive to tell their family about JFK's assassination, the Moon again sings, "Moon change."

The anthropomorphized Bus, with its evocations of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, strengthens the connection between the personal and the political in *Caroline, or Change*. As the primary means of transportation for the African American characters, the Bus represents progress, taking its passengers "Into the nighttime,/toward what lies ahead."<sup>75</sup> As such, the Bus' late arrival in scene 4 suggests that something is amiss. When it finally appears, it sings "in a terrible voice of apocalypse,"

I am the Orphan Ship of State!  
Drifting! Driverless!  
Moving slow  
neath my awful freight of woe.  
The earth,  
the earth has bled.  
The president  
Oh blight November winter night  
the president is dead.<sup>76</sup>

As Robert C. Smith observes, Kennedy was "the first American president to declare unambiguously that the problem of civil rights and equality for blacks was a moral

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 34.



issue.”<sup>77</sup> Although, as Smith writes, “Kennedy procrastinated in submitting civil rights legislation until forced by circumstance,”<sup>78</sup> (Dotty recognizes this when she sings, “Sure he was a little slow,/getting round to doing so,/but he swore it and I know/he was set to help our cause/meant to pass some proper laws”<sup>79</sup>), his death nevertheless seemed to be a tremendous loss for the civil rights movement. The Bus, emblematic of both American progress, signified by Parks’ movement from the back of the bus to the front, and African American oppression, is left an orphan, drifting and driverless. And yet, the Bus’ “awful freight of woe,” i.e. the efforts of first-generation civil rights activists like Parks whose efforts appeared nullified by Kennedy’s death, gives way to a new type of progress, embodied in Emmie, the budding civil rights activist who unapologetically declares, “I hate the bus, I want my own car.”<sup>80</sup>

Having investigated how the anthropomorphic characters function as extensions of Caroline, as parodic representations of stereotypes, and as instruments that contextualize Caroline’s individual struggle within the social framework of 1963, I will now turn to the central character in relation to the essentialist cultural representation of the Mammy. Collins writes that the Mammy stereotype “represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women’s behavior. By loving, nurturing, and caring for her white children and ‘family’ better than her own, the Mammy symbolizes the

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<sup>77</sup> Robert C. Smith, *Encyclopedia of African American Politics* (New York: Facts on File, 2003), 196.

<sup>78</sup> Kushner, 196.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

dominant group's perception of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power."<sup>81</sup> Similarly, Anderson notes that the Mammy is a symbol of black motherhood, "the caretaker of the whites' homes and children first, and her own second ... She must sacrifice the needs of her own family for those of the white family that employs her."<sup>82</sup> Despite Noah's affection for Caroline – he calls her the "President of the United States,"<sup>83</sup> sings that "Caroline is king/and Caroline is queen," and asserts that she's "stronger than my dad" and "stronger than you," i.e. Rose<sup>84</sup> – Caroline refuses to put Noah's needs above those of her own family. When Dotty asks about Noah, Caroline responds, "Ain't my job to mind that boy ... Ask him yourself."<sup>85</sup> Caroline's attitude toward Noah is perhaps best expressed in a nighttime fantasy sequence, in which Noah, who is in bed at 913 Saint Anthony Street, interrupts Caroline, who is relaxing at home after a long day's work:

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.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Collins, 71.

<sup>82</sup> Anderson, 10.

<sup>83</sup> Kushner, 14.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 46.

Noah confesses that he likes Caroline because his mother did, and calls Caroline “implacable” and “indestructible.” Regardless, she refuses to coddle the young boy.

Anderson writes that “usually [the Mammy] is not shown to have a family of her own at all,” which serves to “accentuate her status as property.”<sup>87</sup> Not only do three of Caroline’s four children appear in the musical, but several scenes take place on the front porch and yard surrounding Caroline’s house. bell hooks argues that the homeplace is a site of subversion and resistance, the location of “an oppositional world view, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle which opposes dehumanization but as that movement which enables creative, expansive self-actualization.”<sup>88</sup> hooks continues:

Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension, one’s homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issues of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects.<sup>89</sup>

Caroline has a home, but it proves to be an unsatisfactory refuge because Noah intrudes upon her freedom.

Another characteristic feature of the Mammy, according to Anderson, is that “she is content in her life as a slave.”<sup>90</sup> Caroline, unlike the stereotypical domestic, refuses to

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<sup>87</sup> Anderson, 10.

<sup>88</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 41.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>90</sup> Anderson, 12.

greet her suffering with cheerful and compliant silence. When Rose offers the loose change to Caroline, she rejects the offer outright:

I don't wanna take pennies from a baby.  
Give him a whupping,  
stop giving him money.<sup>91</sup>

Caroline is similarly contentious with Noah, her own children, and her friend Dotty Moffett, who pities Caroline for “drinking misery tea.”<sup>92</sup> In this way, Caroline counters the American myth of the “happy poor,” which, as Sari Thomas and Brian P. Callahan contend, “is central in limiting social mobility so as to preserve the status quo.”<sup>93</sup> In the song “I Got Four Kids” Caroline tumbles into the depths of despair as she sings about her shattered dreams and broken spirit:

It Nineteen-Sixty-Three and I  
wish every afternoon I die.  
Cook and clean and mind that boy,  
doing housework doing laundry.<sup>94</sup>

Tesori's music evokes a work song, with call-and-response patterns, vocal wailing, and the sound of chains. As a woman trapped in the past, Caroline conjures the music of her enslaved ancestors to articulate her spiritual bondage. This song exemplifies how Tesori's musical language differs from more traditional expressions of alterity in musical theatre, such as, for example, Jerome Kern's music for “Ol' Man River” in *Show Boat*.

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<sup>91</sup> Kushner, 49.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>93</sup> Sari Thomas and Brian P. Callahan, “Allocating Happiness: TV Families and Social Class,” *Journal of Communication* 32, no. 3 (1982): 184.

<sup>94</sup> Kushner, 17-18.

Despite its stylistic innovations,<sup>95</sup> the song follows standard AABA Tin Pan Alley conventions. Tesori, unlike Kern, departs from traditional Broadway song forms and, importantly, points to the original context of the source material; as Olly Wilson writes regarding work songs, “the work becomes the music, and the music becomes the work.”<sup>96</sup> Moreover, Lawrence Levine points to one of the most important functions of the work song: “Work songs may not have been able to change the external conditions under which black laborers worked, but they did help them survive those conditions both physically and psychically.”<sup>97</sup>

Caroline also subverts the image of an “asexualized guardian.”<sup>98</sup> Collins writes that, “The mammy image is one of an asexual woman, a surrogate mother in blackface devoted to the development of a white family.”<sup>99</sup> The song “Gonna Pass Me A Law” dramatizes Caroline’s human sexuality. She imagines authorizing legislation that will, among other things, satisfy her carnal desires with nocturnal visitations from Nat King Cole. Tesori’s music is a traditional blues song, a style that voices worldly desires and frequently employs euphemistic sexual language. Tera W. Hunter writes, “Despite the connotations of its name, the blues were ‘good-time’ music that generated a profound

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<sup>95</sup> See Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 188-90.

<sup>96</sup> Olly Wilson, “Black Music as an Art Form,” *Black Music Research Journal* 3 (1983): 12.

<sup>97</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 213.

<sup>98</sup> Anderson, 15.

<sup>99</sup> Collins, 72.

positive rhythmic impulse to divert and drive away depression and resignation among a people whose everyday lives were filled with adversity.”<sup>100</sup> “Gonna Pass Me A Law” adds complexity to the figure of Caroline by revealing a hidden playfulness and, perhaps more importantly, by underscoring Caroline’s sexuality. She becomes an embodied woman with fully human needs and desires. Wallace-Sanders recognizes the importance of such a depiction: “Focusing on the mammy’s body, and by extension her maternity, means seeing the body in a metonymic relationship to personhood, an essential component of recasting the mammy as more than a turban and a smile – as a transitional object for a nation moving from one developmental stage to another.”<sup>101</sup> Further, in “1943” Caroline and the Radio reminisce about Caroline’s ex-husband:

Even now your hand can summon  
how his neck, his belly feel,  
shoulders, what his breath was like.  
Hands burn then with happy fire,  
every inch of you, desire,  
longing set your skin aflame.<sup>102</sup>

Notably, the first song of act 2 (“Santa Comin’ Caroline”) marked the only moment in Wolfe’s production when Pinkins, as Caroline, hazarded a few dance steps. As the Radio tempted Caroline to pocket Noah’s change, singing, “Loose change in the laundry/ring like Santa’s sleigh!,”<sup>103</sup> Pinkins executed a simple step-touch pattern,

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<sup>100</sup> Tera W. Hunter, “‘Sexual Pantomimes,’ the Blues Aesthetic, and Black Women in the New South,” in *Music and the Racial Imagination*, ed. Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 152.

<sup>101</sup> Wallace-Sanders, 3.

<sup>102</sup> Kushner, 70-71.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

shaking the bleach cup full of coins above her head. Pinkins' one instance of choreographed movement seems important in light of Hunter's analysis of blues and dance as political actions in the African American community. She observes that, "The blues and dance marked a new departure in the assertion of individualism, as well as a redefinition of the conventional Western meaning of that term." More specifically, Hunt writes, "Blues were personal music; dance was a reclamation of one's individual body; yet both allowed and demanded an integral link between the person and the group."<sup>104</sup> In light of Hunt's comments, Caroline's dancing marked an attempt to reclaim her subjectivity, which is divided between herself and the three appliances. Furthermore, the anthropomorphic appliances notwithstanding, the limited use of dance in *Caroline, or Change* mirrors the relative lack of choreographed dance sequences in Sondheim's musicals. In her essay, "Dance in a Sondheim Show? Yes (sometimes)," Judith Sebesta argues that in Sondheim's shows from *Sweeney Todd* onward, "carefully directed stage movement, punctuated by moments of actual 'dance,' is the norm. In those moments, dance usually serves one of two functions: as an expression of community, or as an expression of individual freedom or joy."<sup>105</sup> Similarly, Caroline's few dance steps punctuate her happiest moment in the musical, when she, as the Washing Machine sings, "erase[s] that frown" and "start[s] to let [her] guard down."<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Hunter, 160.

<sup>105</sup> Judith Sebesta, "Dance in a Sondheim Show? Yes (sometimes)," *The Sondheim Review* 6, no. 1 (1999): 24.

<sup>106</sup> Kushner, 69.

Anderson notes that the “mammy is also perceived as a threat to society and order.”<sup>107</sup> There is evidence within the text that Rose sees Caroline as competition for Noah’s affections, indicating the degree to which she has internalized the Mammy image. Caroline, in fact, has no interest in usurping Rose’s authority. Although not a conscious choice, Rose’s “household rules and small decrees”<sup>108</sup> dissolve the already tenuous relationship between Caroline and Noah. Late in the musical, Rose’s outspoken Marxist father says what his daughter will not:

Given the givens, she’s in  
perfect position  
for the boy to adore her  
She’s competition.<sup>109</sup>

Rose denies her father’s accusation outright, saying, “Oh, yes! And I *meant* to destroy the silly attachment of that little boy for the maid.” Mr. Stopnick responds:

Well, not by design  
But maybe you had to –  
one way or another.  
It’s hard, but not mean.  
You got in between.  
Maybe Rosie, now you can be his mother.<sup>110</sup>

Mr. Stopnick’s words prove prescient, as the final scene between Noah and Rose, in which he asks whether his mother is buried underground, hints at a new understanding between the two. Rose’s rule about the change, then, severs the relationship between Noah and Caroline in a way that will allow Rose to assume the role of surrogate mother.

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<sup>107</sup> Anderson, 40.

<sup>108</sup> Kushner, 123.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.



Perhaps the most radical inversion of the Mammy stereotype in *Caroline, or Change* is the central character's downright cruelty to her young, white charge. After Caroline refuses to return Noah's twenty-dollar Chanukah gift, he tells her that President Johnson has built a bomb "to kill all Negroes." She responds:

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 hotter than goose fat,  
much hotter than that.  
Hell's so hot it makes flesh fry  
(*Little pause*)  
And hell's where Jews go when they die.<sup>111</sup>

In the original production, Pinkins spoke the first six lines and sang the final one, softly and sweetly, as a secret between herself and the little boy. Pinkins' delivery, a perversion of a lullaby, undermined notions of the Mammy as a nurturing figure. Even though Caroline has declined the invitation to become Noah's surrogate mother throughout the musical, this moment reaches a new level of emotional and psychological violence. Courageously, Kushner and Tesori do nothing to alleviate the tension. Caroline returns Noah's money and walks out the door. Days pass with no sign of her, and Noah comes to the conclusion that, "I did it. I killed her. I did it she died."<sup>112</sup>

Through Caroline and Noah, Kushner dramatizes the tenuous relationship between African Americans and Jews in the American South. After Caroline unleashes her anger at Noah, the two meet in another nighttime fantasy sequence. Caroline assures the little boy that they will meet again soon:

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 108.

NOAH: Will we be friends then?  
CAROLINE: Weren't never friends.<sup>113</sup>

When Noah asks Caroline, "What's it like under water?,"<sup>114</sup> which marks the first time that he acknowledges her abject status, Caroline softens and reaches out to him:

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 be OK.  
You'll learn how to lose things...<sup>115</sup>

Caroline empathizes with Noah's profound sadness (she also lost her mother to cancer) and his sense of not belonging but, at the same time, she refuses to take on his suffering. Thus, Kushner and Tesori acknowledge the historical tension between African Americans and Jews while also opening the door to the possibility of cooperation and concord. Theresa J. May writes, "Kushner's construction of Caroline has a kind of integrity that grants autonomy, while at the same time suggesting that theatre can function as a bridge, speaking across the difference while not erasing it."<sup>116</sup> Kushner envisions this future in his introduction to the published libretto:

The African-American civil rights movement changed not only America but the entire world. A new model for human liberation was born of that movement, of that moment, a model that oppressed people around the

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>116</sup> Theresa J. May, "'Consequences unforeseen...'" in *Raisin in the Sun and Caroline, or Change*, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* XX, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 138.

world have embraced. And the struggle goes on. Jewish-Americans, with their deep understanding of the vital role of the federal government in protecting minority rights, with their deep commitment to social and economic justice, were and are critically important participants in that struggle.<sup>117</sup>

Caroline's eleven o'clock number, "Lot's Wife," shatters all remaining vestiges of the Mammy trope. Writing of the traditional eleven o'clock number, Stacy Wolf notes that it is "composed and designed as an emotional tour de force, this number tends to be when the heterosexual couple sings of their finally achieved love for one another or when the leading female principal sings her most expressive song."<sup>118</sup> Tesori has called "Lot's Wife" an "anti-eleven o'clock number"<sup>119</sup> and Lahr has described it as "an act of psychic demolition."<sup>120</sup> In this song, Caroline releases her rage and, in the words of Tesori, speaks "what dare not speak its name."<sup>121</sup> Like "Rose's Turn" in *Gypsy*, "Lot's Wife" quotes musical material from earlier in the show. The first section of the song resembles an incantation; Caroline sings, "Pocket change change me, pocket change change me,"<sup>122</sup> the repetition of which produces a trance-like state, allowing Caroline to delve deeper into her psyche than ever before. The music then segues into a work song beat, as Caroline calls up images of the happy domestic that she cannot bring herself to become,

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<sup>117</sup> Kushner, xv.

<sup>118</sup> Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 167.

<sup>119</sup> CUNY TV, 35:20.

<sup>120</sup> John Lahr, "Underwater Blues," *The New Yorker*, December 8, 2003.

<sup>121</sup> CUNY TV, 59:35.

<sup>122</sup> Kushner, 116.

people who “hold they head high gettin through” and find joy “they way you should.”<sup>123</sup>

Next, Caroline denounces those folks who “goes to school at nights” and those who “march for civil rights,”<sup>124</sup> and the music transitions into a rhythm and blues beat, the musical idiom that throughout has been associated with Emmie and Dotty, the socially progressive characters. The music gradually becomes faster and edgier, as Caroline sings,

This also true  
Ya’ll can’t do what I can do  
Ya’ll strong but you ain’t strong like me<sup>125</sup>

In the next section, Caroline initiates her destruction. She imagines slamming the iron down on her body

until I drown  
the fire out  
till there ain’t no air left  
anywhere.<sup>126</sup>

Theresa J. May has insightfully delineated the many ways in which Caroline’s iron is haunted by the weapons of her racial heritage, which she has internalized:

The iron she uses to press a white family’s clothing becomes an instrument of oppression when its valences spin out in all directions invoking the irons of slave ships, work crews, prison doors, branding irons. As the domestic counterpart to instruments of torture, the iron is, in part, a tool with which she has learned to oppress herself, pressing out, erasing the wrinkles of white oppression that run through the fabric of her life.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 116-117.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>127</sup> May, 136.

The final section of the song becomes a prayer, as Caroline calls out for the end of her life:

Murder me God down in that basement,  
murder my dreams so I stop wantin,  
murder my hope of him returnin,  
strangle the pride that make me crazy.  
Make me forget so I stop grievin.  
Scour my skin till I stop feelin.  
Take Caroline away cause I can't be her,  
take her away I can't afford her.<sup>128</sup>

In a Kristevan sense, Caroline enacts a symbolic purification. Kristeva writes,

I *expel* myself, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* with the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself. That detail, perhaps an insignificant one, but one that they ferret out, emphasize, evaluate, that trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling; it is thus that *they* see that 'I' am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death.<sup>129</sup>

Caroline attempts to expel an identity that has been contaminated by the hegemony of the patriarchal society. Her act of “becoming an other at the expense of [her] own death” is supported by the shifting pronouns in Kushner’s lyrics: Caroline alternately refers to herself in the first and third person.

Kushner and Tesori have acknowledged that in its earliest incarnations, “Lot’s Wife” was more directly related to the Old Testament story. In Genesis 18, God reveals to Abraham his plan to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness. Lot, a righteous inhabitant of Sodom, recognizes the three angels sent by God and treats them with hospitality. In return, the angels lead Lot and his family from the city, commanding them not to look back. However, Lot’s wife, yearning for the life

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<sup>128</sup> Kushner, 118.

<sup>129</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.

she left behind, disobeys, looks back, and turns into a pillar of salt. Like Lot's wife, Caroline is both disobedient, overstepping her boundaries as a maid by talking back to Rose and terrorizing Noah, and backward-looking, fixated on the past and unable to envision the future, and she is punished for her actions. Moreover, in "Lot's Wife," Caroline's plea, "turn me to salt/a pillar of salt"<sup>130</sup> points to her function as the "salt of the earth." This phrase derives from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount speech, in which he tells his disciples, "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men."<sup>131</sup> Caroline, like the salt that has lost its flavor, has been corrupted and, consequently, believes she should be discarded. However, Caroline has not lost her potential to impact the world. As John Reid writes in *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, salt, "as a fitting emblem of incorruptness" was "habitually offered along with the sacrifices. The preservative qualities of salt probably led to its being regarded as an essential element in the making of any enduring covenant."<sup>132</sup> Caroline's sacrifices, then, allow her children to go on toward a better future. In the final moments of the musical, the Moon sets the stage for Caroline's daughter:

Mornin, mornin in the air  
silver sparkle on the green.  
World awaken to prepare  
for the consequence unforeseen<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Kushner, 118.

<sup>131</sup> Matthew 5:13 (NIV).

<sup>132</sup> John Reid, "Salt," in *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, vol. 2, part 2, ed. James Hastings (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2004), 552.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

The darkness of Caroline's night is giving way to the light of Emmie's new day. Caroline seems to acknowledge this transfer of power, as the stage directions read, "Caroline looks at her, then goes inside, giving her daughter the stage."<sup>134</sup> Having previously told Caroline that "I'm a damn sight better'n prouder'n you,"<sup>135</sup> Emmie now recognizes her mother's sacrifice:

I'm the daughter of a maid.  
She stands alone where the harsh wind blow:  
Salting the earth so nothing grow  
too close; but still her strong blood flow.<sup>136</sup>

Interestingly, in the Public Theater production, which included an earlier version of the epilogue, Emmie more overtly sang, "I'm the consequence unforeseen." Thus, even though Caroline cannot bring herself to renounce the sorrow embedded in her soul, her daughter, Emmie, has the potential to realize her dreams. Seen this way, the main character's suffering is more than a repository for the desires of the mainstream, it becomes a vehicle for transformation and a beacon of hope. In fact, Emmie imagines that Caroline's "strong blood," despite its abject associations, becomes part of the earth, fostering the next generation:

Under ground through hidden veins,  
down from storm clouds when it rains,  
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.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 127.

Unlike Violet, who moves from exclusion to inclusion, Caroline remains marginalized; however, the end of the musical suggests that, because of her sacrifices, her children will occupy a less abject position.

Pinkins' performance of "Lot's Wife" was unsettling in its portrayal of a woman *in extremis*. Along with one or two others that I have witnessed, Pinkins' performance comes closest to Stanislavsky's goal of *perezhivanie*, or "living through" the role. Her rendering of Caroline was so complete that I never thought I was watching an actress onstage. Furthermore, at both performances I attended, Pinkins was suffering from vocal fatigue, which is also apparent, although to a lesser degree, on the original cast recording. Her voice wavered and cracked on the more demanding passages. Rather than detract from the performance, however, Pinkins' vocal problems enriched her characterization by underscoring the character's abject exhaustion. In a 2004 interview, Kushner articulated the effect of such suffering on a theatrical audience:

There are ways in which the ritualistic origins of theatre still manifest. A stage actor's job in a certain sense has to do with suffering for hire. It is an extremely difficult thing to do and it puts immense demands on the people who do it. People pay to see Fiona Shaw go through that hellacious role when she does *Medea*; Brian Cox doing *Titus Andronicus*; John Lithgow, Eileen Atkins, and Ben Chaplin doing *Retreat from Moscow*; or Tonya Pickens [*sic*] doing *Caroline*. Stunning: very painful, beautiful, and really, really just amazing. I mean, that's not faked. And you know while you are watching it that they are finding it inside themselves to go through that every single night. It's a little bit like killing the bull; there's a part of the human spirit that needs a surrogate ... It's profound, and it tell us something about ourselves that is, I think, the deepest and most powerful and most un-ignorable aspect of human beings, which is our incredible genius for connectedness and for boundarylessness.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Anne Nicholson Weber, *Upstaged: Making Theatre in the Media Age* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 161.



For those who missed Pinkins' performance, Brooks has vividly described her rendition of "Lot's Wife," albeit of a condensed version of the song, at the 2004 Tony Awards:

Pinkins compressed and delivered all the smoldering intensity, rage, bitterness, discontent, and tender longing that she had originally instilled in the character ... With a voice that climbed to emotional highs and swooped to wrenching lows, croaking in despair, soaring in hopelessness, and pulsating with palpable, aching sorrow, Pinkins held the concert hall's attention and delivered Kushner's searing lyrics with vigor and passion.<sup>139</sup>

As Brooks suggests, *Caroline*, especially as realized by Pinkins, is poised to become a historic role in American musical theatre.

That *Caroline* defied critical expectations is apparent in the raft of generic labels that were invoked in describing it. The piece was variously called a "chamber musical," an "opera," an "American folk opera," a "pop opera," a "through-sung musical," and a "musical play." The amount of space that critics devoted to categorizing this new work suggests an underlying, and deeply essentialist, notion of what constitutes "musical theatre," especially in terms of audience response. *Caroline's* biggest flaw, in many critics' opinions, was that it was too intellectual, too calculated, or as Brantley called it, "too good to be good."<sup>140</sup> In an interview with playbill.com, Tesori weighed in on the debate:

I just call it a piece of theatre. Labels are difficult only in that then I think there's an expectation in going in to see something. Labels, in a sense, are about comfort. We get caught in the language, understandably, because at this point you're trying to synthesize what *is* from what *was*. Many people have been searching for a term for it, and basically I've been saying, "Go see it and experience it and don't worry about a name." Someone will

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<sup>139</sup> Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 346.

<sup>140</sup> Brantley, December 1, 2003.

come up with something; they did for “symphonic form.” [Definitions] tend to happen afterward.<sup>141</sup>

*Caroline, or Change* was nominated for six Tony Awards, winning one for Best Featured Actress in a Musical (Anika Noni Rose).<sup>142</sup> In an effort to boost box office receipts, producers changed their marketing strategy; they released newspaper ads that captured Caroline smiling while her children danced (in the act-one finale, “Roosevelt Petrucius Coleslaw”). This image was in stark contrast to the original advertisement, which showed Caroline sitting on a bench wearing a white maid’s uniform. Her face denotes an expression of suffering – downcast eyes, lips pressed into a frown, and a furrowed brow – and her posture is similarly dejected, with shoulders stooped and arms crossed in a protective embrace. That the producers and creative team of *Caroline* attempted to make the work more palatable to a mainstream Broadway audience can also be seen in a May 2004 speech that Kushner delivered to the Drama League, in which he answered some frequently asked questions, one of which involved *Caroline*’s innovations. The transcript, available on playbill.com, reads:

Q: How does *Caroline, Or Change* differ from the traditional Broadway musical?

A: I don't know what that is, a traditional musical. I think *Caroline's* in the tradition of what I love in the Broadway musicals I love: it celebrates and works variations on American musical idioms from blues to klezmer, it's funny, it's sad, it's historical, it's political, it's personal, it's about love

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<sup>141</sup> Kenneth Jones, “Moon Change: *Caroline* Wanes on Broadway August 29,” playbill.com, Aug 29, 2004. <http://www.playbill.com/news/article/88127-Moon-Change-Caroline-Wanes-on-Broadway-Aug-29> (accessed July 19, 2009).

<sup>142</sup> Pinkins, whose performance drew critical accolades, lost to Idina Menzel, who originated the role of Elphaba in *Wicked*. Although any number of factors may have contributed to Menzel’s victory, one can speculate that the nature of Caroline’s character, including the fact that she tells an eight-year-old Jewish boy that he is going to hell, may have been distasteful to some Tony voters.

and loss, you leave humming the tunes, it's indebted to Rodgers and Hart and Hammerstein and the Gershwins and Bernstein and Sondheim. The traditional musicals we treasure have mostly been pretty untraditional.<sup>143</sup>

In light of everything else that Kushner has said about *Caroline*, his comments about its indebtedness to tradition are puzzling. As this study reveals, the musical was highly innovative in both form and content, and signaled a notable departure from the Golden Age tradition of American musical theatre. Therefore, like the aforementioned marketing strategy, Kushner's comments may betray a desire to change the image of *Caroline*, which had been labeled "solemn" and "brooding" and, in doing so, find a home in the commercial theatre for a musical that began with non-commercial intentions. Also, given Kushner's responses to other questions in the same speech, it is possible that he is being disingenuous. For example, in response to the question, "What conversation do you envision people having as they leave the theatre?," he responds facetiously:

A: "WOW that was GREAT!"  
"I feel moved to thought. I have questions! I need a kleenex do you have any?"  
"NO, use your sleeve. I bet Aunt Trista and Uncle Luigi would LOVE this!"  
"A Singing Washing machine! How do they come up with this stuff?!"  
"I can't stop humming the tunes!"  
"Let's buy 700 tickets for our closest friends!"<sup>144</sup>

It is possible that Kushner is having fun at the expense of his audience but also disclosing his frustration with conventional musical theatre practice, including those elements deemed necessary for a commercial run.

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<sup>143</sup> Robert Simonson, "Kushner Addresses Caroline, Producers, Critics in League Speech," playbill.com, <http://www.playbill.com/news/article/86124-Kushner-Addresses-Caroline-Producers-Critics-in-League-Speech> (accessed October 5, 2010).

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., October 5, 2010.

Kushner's use of the word "traditional" also points to the never-ending cycle of innovation, in which every new path, if successful, is fated to become outmoded. For example, Kushner invokes the names of musical theatre artists who were pioneers in the field but whose work has become the standard against which contemporary artists rebel: Rodgers and Hart created what has been recognized as the musical theatre's first antihero (*Pal Joey*); Rodgers and Hammerstein developed the Golden Age model; the Gershwins, in concert with DuBose Heyward, penned America's first folk opera (*Porgy and Bess*); Bernstein wrote the score for *West Side Story*, which has been called the first Broadway musical to challenge the American Dream<sup>145</sup>; and Sondheim's redefined musical theatre through his experimentations with form and content, including his proclivity for creating protagonists who are disenfranchised outsiders. By invoking these names, then, Kushner associates himself and his collaborators on *Caroline, or Change* with artists who have forged a new path in American musical theatre by reacting against the work of their predecessors.

*Caroline, or Change* marks a radical departure from the Golden Age tradition. The most subversive element of the musical is the eponymous character, depicted both individually and through the anthropomorphic characters, especially the three that function as extensions of her. Caroline occupies an abject position: She is black, middle-aged, divorced, poor, and illiterate. In fact, Caroline is even more unequivocally abject than her musical theatre predecessors in that there is no mitigation of her oppression, either through heterosexual romance, as with Bess, or through death, like Marie. However, every aspect of Caroline's identity resists her abject position. Of great

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<sup>145</sup> Jones, 192.

importance is the ways in which she defies the essentialist cultural representation of the Mammy: she refuses to put Noah's needs above those of her own children, she is not content with her lot, she is not amiable and submissive to her white employers, she is not an asexual guardian, and, in the musical's most shocking moment, she unleashes her anger on an eight-year-old Jewish boy, telling him that he is going to burn in hell. Another device that contributed to *Caroline's* anti-essentialist critique was Pinkins' unsentimental portrayal of the central character.

The anthropomorphic characters in *Caroline, or Change* are also highly innovative. As extensions of Caroline, the household appliances embody Caroline's internalized oppression, thereby enlarging a woman who has been diminished by social and economic inequity. Additionally, Wolfe's conception of the appliances as ghosts of former slaves points to how they might suggest stereotypical representations of African American characters in musical theatre. Finally, the anthropomorphic appliances function as Brechtian distancing devices that direct the audience's attention toward the political message of the piece. The Moon and the Bus, on the other hand, connect the individual struggles of the inhabitants of the relatively isolated community of Lake Charles to the social turmoil of 1963.

*Caroline, or Change* is contributing to an ongoing, anti-essentialist critique widely manifested in our art and society. By placing Caroline's story in its historical context and by employing Brechtian devices, the creative team allows Caroline to be seen as not only an individual but also as representative of larger social groups (linked by gender, race, class) that have been disenfranchised. The musical's critique, then, is not of

Caroline or her abusive husband, but rather of the racist, sexist, capitalist society that created the conditions in which Caroline is exploited.

*Caroline, or Change* is also significant as a ghost story, i.e. an account of an ordinary woman who has been lost to the pages of history. In her book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and Sociological Imagination*, Avery F. Gordon considers the social phenomenon of haunting, or “how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities.” Gordon explains that “a ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life.”<sup>146</sup> She asserts that “to write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories. To write ghost stories implies that ghosts are real, that is to say, that they produce material effects.”<sup>147</sup> Gordon lays out three characteristic features of haunting: (1) “The ghost imports a charged strangeness into the place or sphere it is haunting, thus unsettling the propriety and property lines that delimit a zone of activity or knowledge”; (2) “The ghost is primarily a symptom of what is missing. It gives notice to itself but also to what it represents. What it represents is usually a loss, sometimes of life, sometimes of a path not taken. From a certain vantage point the ghost also simultaneously represents a future possibility, a hope”; and (3) “The ghost is alive, so to speak. We are in relation to it and it has designs on us such that we must reckon with it

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<sup>146</sup> Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

graciously, attempting to offer it a hospitable memory *out of a concern for justice*.<sup>148</sup>

*Caroline, or Change* fits Gordon's formulation for haunting: The central character enters the Gellmans' basement at the beginning of the musical, infusing the space with a "charged strangeness," manifested most obviously through the anthropomorphic characters; Caroline is one of the "lost subjects of history," representing both loss and, through her daughter, future possibility, and her story is one that we must reckon with *out of a concern for justice*.

Gordon asserts that haunting is a site of utopian possibilities, but we must first learn how to "imagine beyond the limits of what is already understandable,"<sup>149</sup> to look for the gaps in the narrative and to search for the missing and lost ones. Furthermore, Gordon maintains, we must be willing to confront the frightening aspect of haunting, namely that "you can be grasped and hurtled into the maelstrom of the powerful and material forces that lay claim to you whether you claim them as yours or not."<sup>150</sup> Ultimately, Gordon claims, "haunting is about how to transform a shadow of a life into an undiminished life whose shadows touch softly in the spirit of a peaceful reconciliation."<sup>151</sup> With *Caroline, or Change*, Kushner, Tesori, and Wolfe have addressed a significant gap in the narrative of American musical theatre by offering a penetrating, and anti-essentialist, representation of an African American maid whose

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<sup>148</sup> Emphasis in original. *Ibid.*, 63-64.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

story harbors both the maelstrom of America's legacy of racism, sexism, and classism, but also utopian possibility.



## Chapter 6

### Conclusion: Sites of Utopia

Although it closed at Playwrights Horizons after a relatively brief run, *Violet* has enjoyed a substantial life since on collegiate and regional theatre stages around the country, suggesting that the work and its unique heroine may be destined for a significant place in American musical theatre history. In 1998 Schulman recreated her off-Broadway staging at Seattle's A Contemporary Theatre, with Lauren Ward reprising her performance as Violet. Writing for the *Seattle Times*, Misha Berson singled out the central character as the show's greatest strength: "Baggily dressed (by designer Catherine Zuber), her face unearthly pale and limbs gawky, Ward's Violet exudes radiance and torment, dreaming over movie magazines but yearning for real redemption."<sup>1</sup> In his review of the Arden Theatre Company's May 1999 production, Clifford A. Ridley called *Violet* "a life-affirming jewel" and praised the musical's eponymous character: "Violet, especially as invested by Linda Pierson with irresistible spunk and vulnerability even when she's most grumpy, is a heroine you're happy to spend an evening with."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most visible production in recent years was the Guthrie Theater's spring 2010 incarnation. Writing for examiner.com, Brad Richason lauded the musical's ability to "transform a theater stage into a place of transcendent

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<sup>1</sup> Misha Berson, review of *Violet*, by Brian Crawley and Jeanine Tesori, directed by Susan H. Schulman, A Contemporary Theatre, Seattle, *Seattle Times*, October 23, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Clifford A. Ridley, review of *Violet*, by Brian Crawley and Jeanine Tesori, directed by Terrence J. Nolen, Arden Theatre Company, Philadelphia, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 20, 1999.

emotional power.” He noted that Britta Ollman excelled as the title character, “capturing a fragile self-image that contrasts sharply with her stubbornly determined exterior.”<sup>3</sup> The Kennedy Theater’s<sup>4</sup> summer 2011 production marked a North Carolina homecoming for *Violet*, Doris Betts, and Broadway veteran Lauren Kennedy, who played the title role. Kate Dobbs Ariail declared that, “One might not think of [Doris Betts’] work as readily adaptable to musical theatre, but Brian Crawley has written a fine, cliché-free book and mush-free lyrics set to Jeanine Tesori’s solid score, and director Eric Woodall’s cogent staging makes this version of Betts’ story, ‘The Ugliest Pilgrim,’ a most satisfying evening of serious theater.”<sup>5</sup> Susan H. Schulman has commented on the longevity of *Violet*:

It’s like *The Secret Garden*. I look at résumés and royalty statements today, and I’m amazed at how many people have done a production of *The Secret Garden* somewhere. Both shows were not perceived as “commercial,” but in the end they had long legs. Shows that have legs are shows that people relate to emotionally – timeless stories.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, *Caroline, or Change* has garnered more attention in recent years, which may be a result of the work’s emergence in much-lauded regional theatre productions or because of the way it evokes the spirit of the current Obama administration through its theme of change. Productions in London (a transport of the New York mounting),

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<sup>3</sup> Brad Richason, review of *Violet*, by Brian Crawley and Jeanine Tesori, directed by Peter Rothstein, Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis, *examiner.com*, February 28, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> This production played the Kennedy Theater in Raleigh, North Carolina, not to be confused with the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

<sup>5</sup> Kate Dobbs Ariail, review of *Violet*, by Brian Crawley and Jeanine Tesori, directed by Eric Woodall, Kennedy Theater, Raleigh, CVNC, August 18, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Terry Berliner, “A Game of Love and Chance,” *American Theatre*, April 2006, 26.

Chicago, and Minneapolis have been met with almost universal acclaim, including accolades for the actress playing Caroline. Michael Billington of *The Guardian* praised Tonya Pinkins' "magnificent" performance, calling it "unsentimental, indestructible, large-voiced, and yet capable of demonstrating the pain of personal change."<sup>7</sup> Barbara Vitello of the *Chicago Daily Herald* called the Court Theatre's 2008 production "impeccable," and singled out actress E. Faye Butler, "who held the audience rapt and then brought them to their feet ... her titanic performance as Caroline ... ranks among the most thoroughly realized work I've seen on stage this year."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Rohan Preston's *Star Tribune* review of the Guthrie Theater's 2009 production extolled Greta Oglesby's "ravishing and powerful" performance: "Caroline is heartbroken and heartbreaking, and Oglesby plays her with deep and bitterly affecting honesty. She has a well of a voice full of the hurts and hopes of history. She dips into it liberally to give her character a pathos and poignancy that makes the Guthrie feel as hot as a live wire."<sup>9</sup>

I attended a performance of *Caroline* at the Guthrie, and, having seen Pinkins in the role, I was struck by the ways in which Oglesby softened Caroline's tough exterior. Her performance lacked the intensity and unapologetic attitude of Pinkins' portrayal, the unfortunate result of which was to diminish Caroline's subversive stature. Oglesby's

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Billington, review of *Caroline, or Change*, by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori, directed by George C. Wolfe, National Theatre, London, *The Guardian*, October 20, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Vitello, review of *Caroline, or Change*, by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori, directed by Charles Newell, Court Theatre, Chicago, *The Daily Herald*, September 26, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Rohan Preston, review of *Caroline, or Change*, by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori, directed by Marcela Lorca, Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis, *Star Tribune*, April 27, 2009.

performance points to Bruce Kirle's conception of musicals as works-in-process. He writes, "Rather than closed, the texts become unfinished, because the characters must be played to conform to changing societal conventions and audience tastes."<sup>10</sup> Thus, it seems that one of the dangers in playing Caroline, despite all of the textual clues, is the potential through performance of mitigating the revolutionary aspects of the role.

This study, however, has revealed *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change* as groundbreaking achievements in the American musical theatre. Both works feature unorthodox female protagonists who challenge essentialist cultural representations of race and gender. *Violet* subverts the normative discourse of beauty and begins a relationship with an African American man in the mid-1960s American South, and she is rewarded, not punished, for her actions. *Caroline*, an embittered, illiterate, and impoverished maid, refuses to play the Mammy and unleashes her rage on an eight-year-old Jewish boy; although *Caroline* cannot bring herself to change, her sacrifices will allow her daughter to pursue her dreams. Additionally, both *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change* depart from the Golden Age tradition (*Caroline* to a greater degree), the characteristics of which include a heteronormative narrative that revolves around marriage, stock characters drawn from Roman comedy and commedia dell'arte, a substantial libretto, conventional song types, formal integration, and a chorus that embodies the values of the community. Although *Violet* includes a romantic story, it is the main character's journey of self-discovery that drives the plot. Also, the ending, with its images of rebirth, suggests a new beginning, as opposed to the conventional happy

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<sup>10</sup> Bruce Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 12.

ending of Golden Age musicals. Formally, *Caroline, or Change* is even more innovative than *Violet* in terms of its structure, its blurring of generic boundaries, its anthropomorphic characters, and its lack of romance. However, it remains to be seen to what degree *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change* have generated similarly groundbreaking representations on the American musical stage.<sup>11</sup>

Several months after *Violet* closed at Playwrights Horizons, another new musical featuring unorthodox protagonists opened at the Richard Rodgers Theatre on Broadway. *Side Show*, with music by Henry Krieger and book/lyrics by Bill Russell, tells the story of Daisy and Violet Hilton, a pair of conjoined twins who gained international stardom during the Depression, appearing in circus, vaudeville, and film (most famously in the 1932 movie *Freaks*). The musical foregrounds how the Hilton sisters found fame but not love, as exemplified in one of the show's most popular songs, "Who Will Love Me As I Am?" Daisy and Violet employ a number of similes to characterize their unique situation: "like a fish plucked from the ocean/tossed into a foreign stream," "like an odd exotic creature/on display inside a zoo," and "like a clown whose tears cause laughter/trapped inside the center ring."<sup>12</sup> *Side Show* received largely negative reviews and closed after ninety-one performances, but is noteworthy, in part, because it marked the first time that two actresses were co-nominated for the Best Actress in a Musical

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<sup>11</sup> My study is limited to musicals that achieved some degree of critical and/or commercial success on- or off-Broadway; therefore, it is possible that successors to *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change* have emerged in regional theatres around the country. However, to date, none have appeared in New York.

<sup>12</sup> Bill Russell, *Side Show*, Book and lyrics by Bill Russell, Music by Henry Krieger (New York: Samuel French, 1999), 66-67.

Tony Award. Broadway did not see another such heroine until 2003, when *Wicked* opened at the Gershwin Theatre.

*Wicked*, based on Gregory Maguire's best-selling novel, itself a retelling of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, tells the story of an unlikely friendship between Elphaba, a green-skinned political outcast, and Galinda, a popular blonde girl. *Wicked* opened on October 30, 2003, and, despite receiving mixed reviews, has enjoyed a successful commercial run (as of this writing, the musical has played over 3,500 performances). In her article "'Defying Gravity': Queer Conventions in the Musical *Wicked*," Stacy Wolf maintains that Elphaba's family and fellow classmates "judge her skin color not simply as different, but as a disfigurement."<sup>13</sup> However, Wolf goes on to argue, the musical presents Elphaba as neither a person of color nor disabled:

Two potential ways of explaining Elphaba's difference ... are displaced onto other characters: the race of Animals [marked, Wolf argues, as "Jewish and as racialized"], and Nessa's disability [Elphaba's sister, who is wheelchair-bound, becomes the Wicked Witch of the East]. These gestures are necessary for the musical to show that Elphaba's green skin makes her neither disabled nor of a racial minority; she is solely a unique and special individual, the presumed subject of the audience's identification and attachment. *Wicked's* producers, not surprisingly, emphatically stress that Elphaba's "difference" stands in for all difference. As producer Mark Platt is frequently quoted as saying, "We all have a green girl inside of us."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Stacy Wolf, "'Defying Gravity': Queer Conventions in the Musical *Wicked*," *Theatre Journal* 60, no. 1 (2008): 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. Of Nessarose, Wolf writes that her "existence in the musical puts pressure on Elphaba's meaning from the other side: the green girl is not disabled, just different. Nessa emerges as what David Van Leer calls an 'unintended Other.' For a musical like *Wicked* that works overtime to send a politically correct message, its use of disability as a metaphor for evil is, simply put, an ideological blind spot." Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 205.

In this way, *Wicked* is similar to works like *Richard III* and *Night Mother* that use disability as a dramaturgical device. In these plays, Kenny Fries writes, “disability becomes a stand-in, a metaphor, for the social outcast, who is marginalized, misunderstood.”<sup>15</sup> *Violet*, then, remains a singular achievement in its portrait of the lived experience of a woman with a disfiguring scar. However, if productions of *Violet* continue around the country, the likelihood for successors may increase.

*Caroline, or Change*, on the other hand, appears to have been in the forefront of a trajectory of black musicals that challenge essentialist cultural representations of race and, in some cases, subvert traditional musical theatre practice. *The Color Purple*, based on Alice Walker’s 1983 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, features a female protagonist marked by abjection. The musical, Wolf writes, “follows Celie’s life from childhood, through her unhappy marriage to Mister, her lesbian relationship with singer Shug Avery, and her eventual independence and creation of a business sewing pants for women.”<sup>16</sup> Like Caroline, Celie is uneducated, poor, and the victim of domestic abuse. However, the two characters are different in many ways. Wolf writes, “Unlike *Caroline, or Change*, which places an African American woman in relation to a Jewish family and which limits Caroline’s community to her relationship with her friend Dotty and her children, Celie acts entirely within an African American context.” Moreover, Wolf contends, “Her struggles are about gender; the musical thematizes male and female relationships, power between the sexes, and the importance of female self-knowledge,

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<sup>15</sup> Kenny Fries, ed., *Staring Back: The Disability Experience From the Inside Out* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 6.

<sup>16</sup> Wolf, 181.

growth, and empowerment.”<sup>17</sup> Despite its seriousness of purpose, *The Color Purple* adopts many of the formal elements of that genre, including a substantial libretto, conventional song types (including an overture and an eleven o’clock number), formal integration, a chorus that embodies the values of the community, and an optimistic message. In her review for *Theatre Journal*, Nicole Hodges Persley asserts that this adherence to tradition ultimately diminished the overall product: “While this adaptation drew upon various modes of black cultural expression, the conventional Broadway musical form itself may ultimately limit Walker’s more complex exploration of race, class, and sexuality.”<sup>18</sup> Importantly, Persley further notes that, like *Wicked*, “the production arguably does little to support systematic change by focusing on ‘universal’ access.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, although *The Color Purple* features a disenfranchised protagonist who engages in a lesbian relationship, the creative team’s desire to reach a mainstream audience (as indicated by principal investor Oprah Winfrey’s above-the-title billing) softened Walker’s novel considerably. Commercially, however, their efforts were successful: the musical ran for 910 performances on Broadway and, as of this writing, has launched three national tours.

*The Scottsboro Boys* does not feature a female protagonist but is notable as a successor to *Caroline, or Change* in its subversion of essentialist cultural representations of race, and its depiction of the relationship between African Americans and Jews. The

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>18</sup> Nicole Hodges Persley, review of *The Color Purple*, by Marsha Norman, Brenda Russell, Allee Willis, and Stephen Bray, directed by Gary Griffin, Broadway Theatre, New York, *Theatre Journal* 60, no. 1 (2008): 143.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 143.



musical, featuring a book by David Thompson and a score by John Kander and Fred Ebb, tells the story of the infamous 1931 Alabama trial of nine black teenagers who were falsely convicted of raping two white women. The creative team, including director/choreographer Susan Stroman, employs the storytelling device of a minstrel show, complete with “end men” Tambo and Bones, and an Interlocutor, played by the only white actor in the cast. In an interview with the *New York Times*, John Kander explicated the creative team’s decision to employ the minstrel format: “The minstrel show elements are, I like to think, part of the entertainment, but in a way that makes you think about how we tell stories, tell our history as Americans.”<sup>20</sup> The minstrel format was innovative but also controversial. In an article for *American Theatre* magazine, Marshall Jones III argued that the all-white creative team’s appropriation of the minstrel format precluded empathy: “If any of the core storytelling creative team had been black, or if some of the producers were black, or if there had been an increased level of sensitivity among those holding the show's reins, I believe *The Scottsboro Boys* would have been a fundamentally different show than the one I saw.”<sup>21</sup> Having attended a performance of *The Scottsboro Boys* in November 2010,<sup>22</sup> I question whether the

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<sup>20</sup> Patrick Healy, “Blackface and Bigotry, Finely Tuned,” *New York Times*, October 12, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Marshall Jones III, “The Last Minstrel Show?”, *American Theatre*, March 2012, 53.

<sup>22</sup> The playbill for the Broadway production included contextual information about the Scottsboro Boys and minstrelsy. The one-page note on the latter begins, “Minstrelsy is a uniquely American art form, built on racial stereotypes and blind bigotry. In the 1930’s, when the Scottsboro trials took place, the minstrel show was considered mainstream entertainment, especially in the south. *The Scottsboro Boys* uses the free-for-all atmosphere of the minstrel show to provide a fitting background for the racially charged media and legal circuses that surrounded the real Scottsboro Boys trials. *The*

creators' race negated their ability to subvert racism. In fact, I found the work to be effectively anti-racist in the way that it employed the minstrel format in order to destabilize it. The most striking example occurred when the Interlocutor called for the finale. The entire cast entered in blackface, singing "The Scottsboro Boys," a traditional song-and-dance number that recounts the fate of the nine men, each more grim than the one before. When the Interlocutor announced the cakewalk, the men refused, wiped off their make-up, and exited the stage. The musical ended with a woman, who had watched the action transpire, boarding a bus and refusing to move to the back, thereby connecting the Scottsboro case to the larger social context of the civil rights struggle. In the original production, the subversion of the minstrel format was further emphasized through Beowulf Boritt's slanted false prosceniums, which accentuated the performance within the performance, and through the ironic, detached performances of Forrest McClendon as Mr. Tambo and Colman Domingo as Mr. Bones. Moreover, by having the actors playing Tambo and Bones take on multiple roles, the creative team pointed to the performative nature of race. Julie A. Noonan describes double casting as "a technique used to highlight the 'performance' by placing the same actor in different characters. It calls on the audience to recognize the possibility of change or the performativity of personality traits."<sup>23</sup> Overall, my reaction to the musical was similar to that of Sara Garonzik, producing artistic director of the Philadelphia Theatre Company, who penned a response

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*American Historical Review* wrote that the rhetoric of the Scottsboro case was 'deeply entrenched in the racial stereotypes derived from the legacy of minstrelsy in American culture.'"

<sup>23</sup> Julie A. Noonan, "The Sound of Musicals' Women: Tessitura and the Construction of Gender in the American Musical" (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2007), 218.

to Jones' article for the April 2012 issue of *American Theatre*. Garonzik writes, "*The Scottsboro Boys* is not a minstrel show. The creators have taken the minstrelsy idea and turned it upside down in a manner so drenched in irony that it ultimately empowers and ennoble the performers."<sup>24</sup>

*The Scottsboro Boys* also treats the relationship between African Americans and Jews in the American South, although to a lesser degree than *Caroline, or Change*. Samuel Leibowitz, the New York lawyer who represented the Scottsboro Boys, is depicted in the musical. Played by the actor who also plays Mr. Tambo, Leibowitz sings "That's Not The Way We Do Things," a caustic commentary on civil rights. Leibowitz sings:

Back in Manhattan ask anyone  
There's no bigger voice  
For equal rights than me  
I fight for it!  
I live for it!  
Just ask my maid, Magnolia  
And I'm sure she'd agree<sup>25</sup>

The song continues, with Leibowitz imploring the boys, "just ask my cook, Jemima," "just ask my chauffer, Rufus," and "just ask our colored laundress," and the boys responding, "Mammy just loves you, Mr. Sammy!" "What a mensch!", and "That's right! Give 'em hell, Mr. L!," respectively.<sup>26</sup> Later, the attorney general (played by Mr. Bones) accuses Ruby, one of the white women who charged the men with rape but later

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<sup>24</sup> Sara Garonzik, "Defending 'Scottsboro,'" *American Theatre*, April 2012, 6.

<sup>25</sup> John Kander and Fred Ebb, *The Scottsboro Boys*, JAY Productions LTD, 2010, 20.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

rescinded her accusation, of accepting “Jew money” from Leibowitz. He sings:

They’ve got it all  
They hide it well  
They must have made a pact  
With the Devil in hell<sup>27</sup>

His final advice to Ruby is, “Keep that money/But lose that Jew.”<sup>28</sup> In a similar vein as *Caroline*, the creators of *The Scottsboro Boys* acknowledge the minority status of both blacks and Jews in the American South, which is portrayed as racist and anti-Semitic, while also recognizing the historical tension between the two groups, as represented by the sole Jewish character in the musical being complicit in oppressing blacks.

Like *Caroline*, *The Scottsboro Boys* divided critics. In his *New York Times* review, Charles Isherwood called the musical “a bold-hued attempt to rewrite a chapter of America’s past as musical comedy.” However, he concluded, “The musical never really resolves the tension between its impulse to entertain us ... and the desire to render the harsh morals of its story with earnest insistence.”<sup>29</sup> Writing of the ironic contradiction between form and content that characterizes much of Kander and Ebb’s work, Charles McNulty of the *Los Angeles Times*, declared, “Audiences – especially those of a sensitive nature – are bound to feel squeamish about tapping their feet to the infectious ragtime

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Isherwood, review of *The Scottsboro Boys*, by David Thompson, John Kander, and Fred Ebb, directed by Susan Stroman, Lyceum Theatre, New York, *New York Times*, October 31, 2010.

beat as police brutality is depicted and the jokes about lynching pile up.”<sup>30</sup> To be clear, McNulty does not censure the creative team for their experiment; rather, he concludes that the musical belonged off-Broadway, where, like *Caroline, The Scottsboro Boys*<sup>31</sup> had enjoyed a successful run. After transferring uptown, it lasted a meager forty-nine performances.

*Passing Strange*, like *The Scottsboro Boys*, does not feature a female protagonist, but is noteworthy as a musical about the black experience that departs radically from Golden Age conventions. Written by Stew and Heidi Rodewald, *Passing Strange*<sup>32</sup> concerns the Youth’s journey to find “the Real.” In his article “Negotiating the ‘Negro Problem’: Stew’s *Passing (Made) Strange*,” Brandon Woolf describes the musical in this way: “*Passing Strange* is the semi-autobiographical tale of Stew’s ‘pilgrimage’ in and

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<sup>30</sup> Charles McNulty, review of *The Scottsboro Boys*, by David Thompson, John Kander, and Fred Ebb, directed by Susan Stroman, Lyceum Theatre, New York, *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 2010.

<sup>31</sup> According to the American Theatre Wing, *The Scottsboro Boys* set a record by becoming the most nominated show to receive no Tony Awards (it was nominated for 12).

<sup>32</sup> The title, *Passing Strange*, has multiple associations, including Othello’s speech in act 1, scene 3 of the Shakespearean tragedy. The Moor is telling the Duke how he wooed Desdemona by recounting stories of his “battles, sieges, fortunes”:

My story being done,  
She gave me for my pains a world of sighs;  
She swore, in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange;  
'Twas pitiful. 'twas wondrous pitiful,  
She wish'd she had not heard it, yet she wish'd  
That heaven had made her such a man. (1.3.158-63)

In an interview with Madeleine Oldham of Berkeley Rep, Stew addressed the title’s other allusions: “Obviously, the term ‘passing’ has deep historical meaning for any African American my age or older. My grandmother was light enough to pass. But the kid in this play discovers there’s more to passing than just black folks passing for white. The term ‘passing’ also has to do with time passing, of course.” *Passing Strange* Web site, <http://www.negroproblem.com/passing/pages/stew3.html> (accessed April 2, 2012).

through song, and its song(s) forge a time and space in which he searches for an authenticity, a Real – with a capital “R” – that is necessarily multiply defined, multiply located, unstable, in motion even.”<sup>33</sup> The Youth travels from the suburbia of 1970s Los Angeles to the hash bars of Amsterdam to the cabarets of Berlin, and back again, searching for the Real in sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Stew, who plays the Narrator and the adult version of the Youth, concludes the musical by singing,

Cuz the Real is a construct  
It’s the raw nerve’s private zone...  
It’s a personal sunset...  
You drive off into alone.<sup>34</sup>

Formally, *Passing Strange* is a hybrid of book musical and rock concert. Woolf affirms that *Passing Strange* “is not a typical Broadway musical – certainly not a typical black musical, not even a typical rock musical.”<sup>35</sup> Likewise, in his foreword to the published libretto, Bill Bragin, the former director of Joe’s Pub, describes the musical as follows:

*Passing Strange* was an unconventional hybrid of ensemble theatre piece and rock concept album ... an all-black cast and experimentalist director, layered with complex themes about the mutability of racial identity, what it means to be an artist, the love between a mother and a son, a search for self and a search for home.<sup>36</sup>

Stew’s rejection of traditional musical theatre conventions, Woolf argues, reflects his

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<sup>33</sup> Brandon Woolf, “Negotiating the ‘Negro Problem’: Stew’s *Passing (Made) Strange*,” *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 2 (2010): 193.

<sup>34</sup> Stew, 101.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>36</sup> Bill Bragin, “Foreword,” in Stew, *Passing Strange: The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2009), xii-xiii.

denial of “the strictures of racial authenticity, and any neat and tidy process of identity formation” as well as “his refusal to accept any attempt at singular, stagnant, positivistic interpretation.”<sup>37</sup>

*Passing Strange* also resembles *Caroline, or Change* in that it played a limited run at the Public Theater before transferring to Broadway, where, despite rave reviews, it could not sustain a commercial run. Charles Isherwood wrote the following in his *New York Times* review: “Call it a rock concert with a story to tell, trimmed with a lot of great jokes. Or call it a sprawling work of performance art, complete with angry rants and scary drag queens ... I'll just call it wonderful, and a welcome anomaly on Broadway.”<sup>38</sup> *Passing Strange* closed after 165 performances, but director Spike Lee captured the production on film.

Another important outcome of *Caroline, or Change* is that Kushner and Tesori have continued their collaboration. Two years after *Caroline, or Change* premiered on Broadway, they again teamed up with George C. Wolfe for the Public Theater's production of *Mother Courage and Her Children*, starring Meryl Streep.<sup>39</sup> Kushner penned a new translation of the play that replaced the historical idioms found in Eric Bentley's much-anthologized version with a conversational tone more pleasing to the ears of modern audiences, and Tesori composed original music for the show's twelve

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<sup>37</sup> Woolf, 193.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Isherwood, review of *Passing Strange*, by Stew and Heidi Rodewald, directed by Annie Dorsen, Belasco Theater, New York, *New York Times*, February 29, 2008.

<sup>39</sup> See John Walter, *Theater of War*, DVD (New York: While Buffalo Entertainment, 2008).

songs, creating an eclectic blend of war-related sounds ranging from Sousa marches to highland bagpipes. More recently, Tesori and Kushner created *A Blizzard on Marblehead Neck*, a one-act opera inspired by an episode in the life of Eugene O'Neill and his wife Carlotta from the winter of 1951. Like *Caroline*, the opera is episodic, structured around five medication-induced hallucinatory episodes, and incorporates elements of phantasmagoric theatricality, including an Angel of Death character that resembles O'Neill's estranged daughter Oona O'Neill Chaplin. The opera also features a moon, to whom O'Neill sings as he lies down in the snow to die,

Goodbye old moon,  
Drop into the sea  
I don't need you anymore.<sup>40</sup>

In his *New York Times* review of the August 2011 Glimmerglass premiere, Anthony Tommasini wrote, "It's an intense and strangely involving work, with a brilliant libretto by Mr. Kushner and an eclectic score by Ms. Tesori."<sup>41</sup> Tesori and Kushner are currently at work on an original opera commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera under the management of Peter Gelb.

Tesori, in collaboration with playwright Lisa Kron, is also working on a musical version of Alison Bechdel's 2006 graphic memoir, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. *Fun Home* chronicles Bechdel's childhood in Beech Creek, Pennsylvania, and centers on her attempt to understand her closeted homosexual father, Bruce, who committed suicide

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<sup>40</sup> Robert S. McLean, review of *A Blizzard on Marblehead Neck*, by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori, directed by Francesca Zambello, Cooperstown, NY, *The Eugene O'Neill Review* 33.1 (2012): 153.

<sup>41</sup> Anthony Tommasini, review of *A Blizzard on Marblehead Neck*, by Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori, directed by Francesca Zambello, Cooperstown, NY, *New York Times*, August 2, 2011.



shortly after Bechdel wrote her parents a letter, disclosing that she was a lesbian (Bruce was the town funeral director and the title refers to the family's name for the funeral home). In his *New York Times* book review, Sean Wilsey called *Fun Home* "a pioneering work, pushing two genres (comics and memoir) in multiple new directions, with panels that combine the detail and technical proficiency of R. Crumb with a seriousness, emotional complexity and innovation completely its own."<sup>42</sup> In a personal interview, Tesori discussed part of what attracted her to the project:

I've never heard a young gay character sing about being gay without it being twee or funny. And we have a song in *Fun Home* that's about an eight-year-old girl who sees a very butch woman and sings a song of identification. And I thought, that's right. We exist. Those women are us. And so I've been trying to shed a spotlight and have these characters sing.<sup>43</sup>

*Fun Home*, in its treatment of sexual orientation and gender identity, might prove to be another groundbreaking work in the anti-essentialist tradition of musical theatre.

Before considering how *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change* function as social documents, it is necessary to grapple with the term "anti-musicals." Wiley Hausam, who coined the term, has argued that anti-musicals

confound the expectations, responses and needs of the Broadway musical audience. They have dispensed almost entirely with the two most cherished conventions of the form: Song (simple in its traditional structure and therefore memorable) and the Happy Ending. Next, entertainment has been made secondary to the political concerns that were the heart of the not-for-profit theaters in the 1980s and 1990s – especially the politics of race, sexual preference, and gender. Finally, the mythology of the American Dream, which was merely questioned by Prince and Sondheim, has been indicted by this new generation. Consequently, the work is ironic, skeptical, and sometimes disenchanting and disbelieving.

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<sup>42</sup> Sean Wilsey, "The Things They Buried," *New York Times*, June 18, 2006.

<sup>43</sup> Jeanine Tesori, interview by the author, New York, January 11, 2011.

When it's funny, it's biting. It leaves teeth marks. Obviously, this is no way to be popular.<sup>44</sup>

Hausam's definition operates on an exclusionary principle that privileges the Golden Age model as "a musical" while simultaneously dismissing anything that does not conform to its tenets as "not a musical." In addition to perpetuating the hierarchy of the Rodgers and Hammerstein legacy, the term also strengthens the binaries between the mainstream culture and the disenfranchised that many of these innovative musicals strive to eradicate. Therefore, contemporary musical theatre scholars need to move beyond the "anti-" mindset and adopt a more liberatory practice that investigates these works by what they *are* rather than what they *are not*.

Both *Violet* and *Caroline* are contributing to an ongoing interrogation of the dominant, oppressive discourses of essentialism. In its portrait of a disfigured Southern woman who moves from abjection to agency, *Violet* subverts the hegemonic discourses of "beautyism" and "facism." As Anthony Synnott argues, these normative discourses are both intrinsic parts of Western culture, rooted in our musical and literary heritage: "The beauty mystique [i.e. the belief that the beautiful is good, and the ugly is evil] ... dates back to Plato, and perhaps to Homer, and has had profound implications for the beautiful, as well as for the physically handicapped and the ugly, in Graeco-Roman cultures."<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Synnott maintains, "aesthetic relations are perhaps as socially significant as class relations, gender relations or race relations, despite, or perhaps

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<sup>44</sup> Wiley Hausam, ed. *The New American Musical: An Anthology from the End of the Century* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2003), xviii-xix.

<sup>45</sup> Anthony Synnott, "Truth and Goodness, Mirrors and Masks – Part I: A Sociology of Beauty and the Face," *The British Journal of Sociology* 40.4 (1988), 608.

because of, their *non-institutionalized* status. Aesthetic relations are so taken-for-granted as to be invisible. Yet ‘facism’ and ‘beautyism’ may be as problematic as other ‘isms’ and ideologies in the stigmatization of minorities.”<sup>46</sup> Likewise, Shaun Best writes, “The social construction of femininity is particularly harmful to women with disabilities. The discourses that construct the female beauty myth define the body of a woman with disability as unfeminine, unappealing and asexual.”<sup>47</sup> That *Violet* remains unique in its depiction of a woman who triumphs over conventional standards of beauty – again, Wolf has convincingly argued that Elphaba’s skin color in *Wicked* is little more than a synecdoche for her political difference – indicates how deeply entrenched the beauty myth is in American society.

Likewise, in its unsentimental portrait of an embittered African American maid, emotionally scarred by racism and sexism, *Caroline, or Change* challenges essentialist cultural representations of race, class, and gender. In particular, the creative team’s attempt to subvert the Mammy trope was an ambitious undertaking, given how deeply entrenched the stereotype is in American culture. In *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics*, Ronald L. Jackson II indicates that modern televisual and cinematic images of the mammy “have bec[o]me even more sophisticated and somewhat difficult to detect because they [a]re sometimes not cooks and maids in

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<sup>46</sup> Anthony Synnott, “Truth and Goodness, Mirrors and Masks – Part II: A Sociology of Beauty and the Face,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 40.1 (1990), 67.

<sup>47</sup> Shaun Best, *Understanding Social Divisions* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2005), 113.

White families' houses."<sup>48</sup> Jackson mentions *Gimme a Break*, *Thea*, *What's Happening?*, *What's Happening Now?*, *Family Matters*, *Amen*, and *Young & the Restless* as television programs featuring contemporary Mammy figures. K. Sue Jewell even identifies Oprah Winfrey as a Mammy. Writing of the early days of her talk show, Jewell asserts, "She, like mammy, was able to transcend the color line, winning the hearts of White Americans as well as African Americans." Jewell further argues that many viewers "were unaware of the subconscious correlation between the large stature of an African American woman, her credibility and capacity to provide comfort to adults and children."<sup>49</sup> Patricia Hill Collins similarly contends that "A good deal of Winfrey's success lies in her ability to market herself within the familiar realm of the mammy, not violate the tenets of being a Black lady, yet reap the benefits of her performance for herself."<sup>50</sup>

A more recent example is the 2012 Oscar-nominated film *The Help*, which is based on Kathryn Stockett's best-selling novel of the same name. Although Aibileen (played by Viola Davis) and Minny (Octavia Spencer), both maids, move from abjection to some degree of agency, the very premise of the film perpetuates the Mammy trope. As Claire Potter observes in her August 2011 article, "For Colored Only? Understanding 'The Help' Through the Lens of White Womanhood" in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the film espouses the belief that, "'They' love 'us,' and it is 'our' inability to

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<sup>48</sup> Ronald L. Jackson II, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 40.

<sup>49</sup> K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 185.

<sup>50</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 142.

return that love and loyalty in equal degree that is the source of inequality between white mistress and Black servant.”<sup>51</sup> The commercial success of *The Help* reveals what Micki McElya describes as “the terrible depths of desire for the black mammy and the way it still drags at struggles for real democracy and social justice.”<sup>52</sup> Therefore, given the degree to which this socially constructed stereotype has entered American culture, it is perhaps not surprising that *Caroline, or Change*, which features a truly unique representation of a black woman, has not generated similar efforts on the American musical stage.

Part of what makes *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change* subversive is how they move within abjection from exclusion to inclusion, or from margin to center, by making abjection (in a Kristevan sense of a radically excluded Other) the condition of their protagonists. However, abjection functions differently in each work. In *Violet*, the eponymous character’s abject status, as a poor, disfigured Southern woman, challenges traditional representations of the beautiful musical theatre heroine. Caroline’s abject position, on the other hand, is part of the essentialist cultural representation to which she is vulnerable; however, everything about her identity resists this abject position. Finally, whereas Violet moves toward inclusion at the end of her musical, no one rescues Caroline, although the musical’s epilogue suggests that her children will occupy a less abject position.

Considered in concert with the aforementioned musicals, *Violet* and *Caroline, or*

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<sup>51</sup> Claire Potter, “For Colored Only? Understanding ‘The Help’ Through the Lens of White Womanhood,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 21, 2011.

<sup>52</sup> Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 14.

*Change* can also yield important insights regarding the degree to which the master's tools, i.e. the Golden Age model, can dismantle the master's house, i.e. conventional theatre practice and conventional cultural attitudes. Formally, *Violet* is entrenched in the Golden Age tradition, displaying many of the central tenets of the Rodgers and Hammerstein formula, including a heterosexual romance, conventional song types, a chorus that embodies the values of the community, and an optimistic ending. In fact, *Violet*'s adherence to convention may have prompted some reviewers – including Ben Brantley of the *New York Times*, who concluded that the musical “isn't quite as different as its creators intend [it] to be”<sup>53</sup> – to dismiss the work as conservative without fully considering the central character, who is undoubtedly the work's most subversive element. *Violet* is a remarkable creation in American musical theatre: a physically disfigured woman who challenges essentialized notions of gender as well as social taboos, and who is rewarded, not punished, for her transgression. Therefore, although *Violet* the musical may not have enacted the genuine change that Lorde envisions, *Violet* the female protagonist still marked a significant advancement in challenging essentialist notions of gender and beauty on the American musical stage.

The iconoclastic creators of *Caroline, or Change*, on the other hand, largely dispensed with the master's tools, and the resulting musical was innovative in a number of ways, including its structure, its score, its lack of romance, its depiction of the relationship between African Americans and Jews in the American South, and, importantly, its central character, another singular representation, who profoundly

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<sup>53</sup> Ben Brantley, review of *Violet*, by Brian Crawley and Jeanine Tesori, directed by Susan H. Schulman, Playwrights Horizons, New York, *New York Times*, March 12, 1997.

challenges essentialist cultural representations of race and gender. By confronting the “ghosts” of racial oppression that haunt the American musical stage, including the Mammy trope (*Caroline, or Change*), the minstrel show (*Passing Strange*), and black musical theatre conventions (*Passing Strange*), these new works mark important steps in creating new cultural myths. Avery F. Gordon writes,

The willingness to follow ghosts, neither to memorialize nor to slay, but to follow where they lead, in the present, head turned backwards and forwards at the same time. To be haunted in the name of a will to heal is to allow the ghost to help you imagine what was lost that never even existed, really. That is its utopian grace: to encourage a steely sorrow laced with delight for what we lost that we never had; to long for the insight of that moment in which we recognize, as in Benjamin’s profane illumination, that it could have been and can be otherwise.<sup>54</sup>

In *Unfinished Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process*, Bruce Kirle draws upon Richard Dyer’s theory that “popular entertainment provides solutions to social problems experienced by audiences during specific cultural moments”<sup>55</sup> to investigate how popular musicals function as utopias. Kirle analyzes *Oklahoma!* (“the endorsement of community over fragmentation helped to heal wartime tensions not only between isolationist and interventionist but also between conservative and New Dealer”), *Fiddler on the Roof* (“the generational conflicts that threaten tradition ... reflect the generational conflicts between Broadway audiences in the 1960s and an emerging youthful counterculture that threatened hegemonic, middle-class values”), *A Chorus Line* (“the musical tries to resolve the anxieties created by valuing one’s individual autonomy while simultaneously capitulating to an increasingly corporate America”), and *Les*

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<sup>54</sup> Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 57.

<sup>55</sup> Kirle, 128.

*Misérables* (“although conceding the futility of social revolution, [the musical] optimistically endorses the power of the individual to create change”).<sup>56</sup> “These musicals,” Kirle writes, “provided hope that tensions in society, seemingly insoluble and bitter, could indeed be bridged. Their enormous popularity sprang, at least in part, from their affirmation that the system could be fixed.”<sup>57</sup> *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change* differ from the aforementioned musicals in that they present what Gordon calls a “site of utopian possibilities” in a dystopic social reality. Both central characters live in societies characterized by oppression: Violet is repressed by a racist, classist society that values physical beauty, while Caroline is figuratively drowning in the basement of the Gellmans’ home. Deborah Taylor investigates “what happens when we read literary dystopias as utopias. Instead of despair, oftentimes the works subvert heroic, patriarchal ideals, with a ‘new’ hero who may be fragmented or multiple but who may embody a ‘collective,’ and powerfully gendered discourse.”<sup>58</sup> Taylor’s reading of dystopias might be applied to *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change*, both of which feature fragmented protagonists (Violet is doubled by Young Vi, Caroline by the fantastical appliances) who subvert dominant cultural myths. This act of subversion is what creates the “site of utopian possibilities.” Additionally, both musicals premiered around the end of the twentieth century, a time characterized by what Martin Halliwell and Catherine Morley

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>58</sup> Deborah Taylor, “Reading Utopian Narratives in a Dystopian Time” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2005), 20.



call a “shuttling between the hope of renewal and the potency of critique.”<sup>59</sup> In her book *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*, Jill Dolan writes, “Theater and performance offer a place to scrutinize public meanings, but also to embody and, even if through fantasy, enact the affective possibilities of ‘doings’ that gesture toward a much better world.”<sup>60</sup> *Violet* and *Caroline, or Change*, then, are important works in a tradition of musicals that challenge essentialist notions of gender, race, class, and physical ability both on stage and in American society at large.

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<sup>59</sup> Martin Halliwell and Catherine Morley, “Introduction: The Next American Century,” in *American Thought and Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Martin Halliwell and Catherine Morley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 10.

<sup>60</sup> Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 6.

APPENDIX 1

Scenes and Musical Numbers for *Violet*

SPRUCE PINE, NORTH CAROLINA TO KINGSPORT, TENNESSEE

Opening/Surprised.....Young Vi, Violet  
On My Way.....Violet, Company  
Luck of the Draw.....Father, Young Vi, Violet, Monty, Flick

KINGSPORT TO NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Question & Answer.....Monty, Violet  
All To Pieces.....Violet, Monty, Flick

NASHVILLE TO MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

Let It Sing.....Flick

MEMPHIS

Who'll Be The One (If Not Me).....Radio Singers  
You're Different.....Monty  
Lonely Stranger/Anyone Would Do.....Music Hall & Hotel Singers  
Lay Down Your Head.....Violet

MEMPHIS TO FORT SMITH, ARKANSAS

Hard To Say Goodbye.....Violet, Flick  
Promise Me, Violet.....Violet, Monty, Flick

TULSA, OKLAHOMA – HOPE AND GLORY BUILDING

Raise Me Up.....Gospel Soloist, Preacher, Gospel Choir  
Down the Mountain.....Young Vi, Father  
Raise Me Up (reprise).....Violet, Preacher  
Look At Me.....Violet, Young Vi  
That's What I Could Do.....Father

TULSA TO FORT SMITH, ARKANSAS

Promise Me, Violet (reprise).....Flick, Violet  
Bring Me To Light.....Young Vi, Flick, Violet, Monty, Father, Company

APPENDIX 2

Scenes and Musical Numbers for *Caroline, or Change*

SCENE 1: WASHER/DRYER

16 Feet Beneath the Sea.....Caroline, The Washing Machine  
The Radio..... The Radio  
Laundry Quintet..... The Radio, Caroline, The Washing Machine  
Noah Down the Stairs.....Noah  
The Cigarette.....Caroline, Noah, The Washing Machine  
Laundry Finish.....The Radio  
The Dryer.....The Dryer, The Radio  
I Got Four Kids.....Caroline, The Dryer, The Washing Machine

SCENE 2: CABBAGE

Caroline, There's Extra Food.....Rose, Caroline, Grandma Gellman,  
Grandpa Gellman, Noah  
There is No God, Noah.....Stuart  
Rose Stopnick Can Cook.....Grandma Gellman, Grandpa Gellman,  
Stuart, Rose, Caroline, Noah

SCENE 3: LONG DISTANCE

Long Distance.....Rose

SCENE 4: MOON CHANGE

Dotty and Caroline.....Dotty, Caroline, The Moon  
Moon Change.....The Moon  
Moon Trio.....The Moon, Dotty, Caroline  
The Bus.....The Bus  
That Can't Be.....Dotty, Caroline, The Moon  
Noah and Rose.....Noah, Rose  
Inside/Outside.....Moon, Noah, Rose  
JFK.....Grandma Gellman, Grandpa Gellman,  
Dotty, The Moon, Noah

SCENE 5: DUETS

Duets: No One Waitin'.....The Radio, Emmie, Caroline  
Duets: 'Night Mamma.....Emmie  
Duets: Gonna Pass Me a Law.....Caroline, Noah  
Duets: Noah Go to Sleep.....Caroline, Noah

SCENE 6: THE BLEACH CUP

Noah Has a Problem.....Caroline, Rose  
Stuart and Noah.....Stuart, Noah, Caroline

Quarter in the Bleach Cup..... Noah, Caroline, The Washing Machine  
 Caroline Takes My Money Home.....Noah, Caroline, Emmie, Jackie, Joe  
 Roosevelt Petrucius Coleslaw.....Noah, Emmie, Jackie, Joe, Caroline

SCENE 7: IRONING

Santa Comin' Caroline.....The Radio, The Washing Machine  
 Little Reward.....The Washing Machine, Caroline, The Radio  
 "1943".....Caroline, The Radio, The Washing Machine  
 Mr. Gellman's Shirt.....Rose, Caroline  
 Ooh Child.....The Washing Machine, The Radio  
 Rose Recovers.....Rose, Caroline, The Dryer  
 I Saw Three Ships.....Jackie, Joe, Emmie, Caroline

SCENE 8: THE CHANUKAH PARTY

The Chanukah Party.....Stuart, Noah, Rose, Grandma Gellman  
 Grandpa Gellman, Mr. Stopnick  
 Dotty and Emmie.....Dotty, Emmie, Caroline  
 I Don't Want My Child to Hear That.....Caroline, Mr. Stopnick, Grandma  
 Gellman, Grandpa Gellman, Rose  
 Mr. Stopnick and Emmie.....Emmie, Mr. Stopnick, Caroline, Rose  
 Kitchen Fight.....Dotty, Emmie, Caroline  
 A Twenty Dollar Bill and Why.....Mr. Stopnick, Rose, Noah  
 Grandma Gellman, Dotty  
 I Hate the Bus.....Emmie  
 Moon, Emmie and Stuart Trio.....Moon, Emmie, Stuart, Rose

SCENE 9: THE TWENTY DOLLAR BILL

The Twenty Dollar Bill.....Noah, Rose, Mr. Stopnick, Grandpa Gellman,  
 Grandma Gellman, The Washing Machine  
 and Caroline  
 Caroline and Noah Fight.....Noah, Caroline, The Dryer

SCENE 10: AFTERMATH

Aftermath.....Rose, Noah, Stuart, Mr. Stopnick

SCENE 11: LOT'S WIFE

Sunday Morning.....Caroline, Dotty  
 Lot's Wife.....Caroline

SCENE 12: HOW LONG HAS THIS BEEN GOING ON?

Salty Teardrops.....The Radio  
 Why Does Our House Have a Basement?.....Noah, Rose, The Washing Machine  
 Underwater.....Caroline and Noah

EPILOGUE

Epilogue.....Moon, Emmie, Jackie, Joe

## APPENDIX 3

*I conducted the following interview with Jeanine Tesori on January 11, 2011, at Le Pain Quotidien in New York City.*

### **What about Doris Betts' short story "The Ugliest Pilgrim" appealed to you?**

I'll tell you exactly what it was. When I read it, there was one sentence about the way that the chocolate felt in her mouth. Remember that sentence? I think it was a Milky Way. I haven't read it in years and years. And there was something about that sentence that I remember thinking, "I want this character to live onstage." I saw the movie. There was a dissertation that was made into a movie by Shelley Levinson. It's out there somewhere. Didi Conn played Violet. I don't remember anything about it. It was on Showtime as one of their filler pieces. Except I remember the bus opening and there was Didi. I would love to see it now. It's somewhere. I think it must be in the Library of Congress. It's interesting. It was her dissertation; you're writing a dissertation. It's very telling about this character and how I thought she was so singular. I hadn't really read a piece like that that. It was my first impulse, I will say, to do something on my own. And I thought, I want to see a character like that. I want to write a character like that. I didn't have a lot of tools in the tackle box for writing, so a lot of it was just on sheer impulse.

### **What changed most significantly about the structure of *Violet* and the central character specifically?**

When we first started writing – Susan Schulman was great about this – it had a tone poem quality to it, a kind of a bullshit-y quality. And she was *so* helpful. When we went to the O'Neill, I remember exactly, we were at a picnic. I don't know if you've ever been there. It's a beautiful place, a place where a lot of musicals get their start, and certainly a lot of plays. And we did the first reading, and there were all these things about rosemary and sachet and lavender, and you just wanted to take a big scented nap. We came out to the picnic table right outside of the barn, where you rehearse, and we just got to work. We were ripping out pages. Brian Crawley had to leave. I had been music directing so much that I knew the process from the other side of it. He was amazed. He was willing, but he had to collect himself. We were literally taking pages and ripping them out and saying, "Nope. Nope." You just don't know until people read it out loud what it is that you don't want to do. That was the biggest jump, I'd say. We wanted to make a piece that had a musculature, that had something, not just sepiatones. This is a woman that has a ferocity. She has such a desire that brings her out of comfort to total discomfort. And therefore the piece itself has to live in there as well.

### **How do you find the "voice" of a character like Violet?**

I've been going to Nashville for a long time. I worked there a ton, starting when I was 24. So I knew the front-porch style very well. I recorded a ton of it. I had been to a lot

of those places, where people just played and listened. So I had the sound in my head. I also went down there. I went to Memphis, and I did a lot of traveling around, soaking it in. Went to Beale Street, all that stuff. And where she was from, in terms of the Appalachians and the dulcimer work. It's a very self-contained kind of music. They literally...it's out on the porch. It wasn't announced. It would be improvised. So that's what I wanted for her. But inside she has this unbelievable...the essence of who she is is so desperate to be released.

**You already touched upon this, but when you're doing a piece like *Violet* or even *Caroline*, or *Change*, what kind of research do you do?**

I try to do research more for the orchestration, and I'm still learning about the orchestra. So for *Caroline*, I listened to Etta James because I wanted that. Tonya reminds me of her; she strikes me as a theatrical version of her. So I wanted to see where her voice sat against rhythm. I did a lot of research into the clarinet repertoire because I had to really understand what a player would be doing and how they would practice and what was different about practicing a clarinet from the piano. I didn't do anything past that. The orchestrators and the team, they complete it. And I had Tony. He was the source, so I really didn't need to do that much.

**Can you describe your creative process? Do you work at the piano?**

I write in my head a lot more. I go to the piano to check what I've been thinking about. But I do it a lot more as I'm walking, first thing in the morning, when I'm lying in bed and thinking about how something would arrange, and the idea, so that it doesn't become a piano piece. I was taught that a long time ago. It's much harder to enforce. Because it's much easier, especially if you're a pianist, to make due as opposed to design something in big building blocks, like, I think, beautiful things are designed. You take an impulse and you check it against craft, and where it might go and why, harmonically. So, it's a combination of both.

**What kind of response did you get from audiences of *Violet*?**

I don't remember a lot because I was pregnant, but I remember them being very moved by it. Very moved. And then the *Times* piece came out, and they had to rediscover it for themselves. That's the power of a review like that, which basically says it's very nice and not very different.

**What does *Violet* mean to you?**

It began everything for me because I had been a music director and I wanted to claim a different life. So I left the city for a year, I restructured my life, and I came back as a writer. So, in a way, I was doing what she did, at a much colder climate and by myself. So, I think one of the reasons I did that was because I was trying to do the same thing in my life that she was doing, and I needed to write it to also understand what I was doing on some level. Which I don't understand until *ex post facto*, until now, what I was doing

and why I needed to do that. Because I was raised in a very tough way, as one of four girls. We were raised like boys. I needed to try to put those two things together. And I found that toughness really helps. Really, really, really helps. But kindness helps. And to combine those two things to oneself and to other people, and also how one promotes change is probably one of the reasons I was so taken with *Caroline*. How does change happen? Who are the agents of change? I'd always read a lot about it. There's this book called *Better* by a surgeon. I loved his book forever. He just writes about, How do you make things better? How does it happen? What's the science? You know, it's not rocket science. It has to be with a consciousness and an awareness of seeing something and wanting to get there and then plotting how to get there. That's the movement forward for a lot of theatrical characters. And then what's in their way to get there.

**How do you choose your collaborators? Brian Crawley was a first-time lyricist.**

All of them. Lisa Kron. Dick Scanlan. Tony Kushner. David Lindsay-Abaire. I love playwrights. I love working with playwrights because their transition into lyric writing is really interesting. I like taking that journey with them. I don't want to do it too much more. That's why I like the second project. So by the time that Tony and I got to our second, our third project we have a...It's beautiful. It takes old age, though, because one has to go through a show together. But I think these great playwrights with a dynamic ear and an ear for dialogue write very interesting lyrics. Not everybody. You know, Lisa Kron is a first-rate lyricist. And that's how it happens, I think. You just have to do it. I wouldn't want to do it. I can't do it. It's too hard.

**In a seminar on *Caroline, or Change* for the American Theatre Wing, you talked about all the musical languages coming together in the Gellman household. Can you talk a little bit about that process? How do you choose the musical idioms for the world that you're creating?**

They kind of choose themselves, I think. It's the story. I had this incredible – I am so grateful to this man – I had an amazing piano teacher who I talk about a lot named Richard Bender. He introduced me to all literature at the same time. And it's something, if I had a school of music, that I would do. I would have kids improvising; they would learn the circle of fifths; they would play Bach; they would play tv themes; they would play jazz; they would learn how to drum, play the djembe; so there is no distinction of the idea for judgment in music. And he freed my ear up so totally, and the really hard study came later, but what he first did was say, "Do you want to play *Hawaii 5-O*? Here you go." And then I was very popular at school because I could play that tv theme. But I was studying Kabalevsky, I was studying Bach and Mozart, I was sight singing. And it was the most incredible holistic way to approach music that I believe in. And so when people are saying, "You're eclectic," I think, well, it just reflects the way I was taught. You know, and pastiche, whatever it is...that's a word that's not very kind. I only write what I hear.

### **You don't like the word "pastiche"?**

Pastiche has a negative connotation that makes it sound like it's not owning a style. That it's ersatz. But, you know, in a household like that, which reminded me...in my household, which was a very tense household...my father was very...really strict and tough...but classical music was being played. My mother played the flute, my sister played the flute, my other sister was a beautiful ballerina, and I played the piano. We played duets. So there was this incredible tension constantly, this quotidian tension, and the most beautiful music being played. And I remember thinking, "There is something really weird about how they absolutely coexist, these two. There's the rhythm of tension, the staccato of unhappy, unhappy, angry people, and then the beauty. And how do they inform each other? How do they cover up? How do they release? How do they...? *Do they?*" So, I think that when you grow up in a household that you're not quite sure what to expect, I think you study behavior like a zookeeper. So I also had that when I was really young. I studied people constantly. I watched people – what they do, why they do. And I think that it makes me a frustrating partner in a lot of ways because people have to do this <snapping fingers>. Sometimes I get caught up in what motivates people and why they're here versus there, why they're wearing that versus that, and I think it just comes from having to study a very mercurial father to try to understand where he was going to be pouncing next. Usually people in the theatre have some very strange childhood, and I am one of them.

### **In the American Theatre Wing seminar, I was intrigued by one particular comment. You said to the cast that you didn't want it ever to sound like "singing" or an audience watching a musical. What were you trying to get at?**

I was trying to say that sometimes in musicals, I feel like the text is here <indicates a lower position> and the music is here <indicates a higher position>. And sometimes it just needs to be that so you can relax and listen. Sit inside "Shipooopi" or "The Motion of the Ocean," which all it does is whip people into a frenzy and they're just glad they're alive, and it's a good time. But sometimes the text has to be here <indicates a higher position>. And *Caroline* – maybe it makes it even more challenging – the text lives here <indicates a higher position> and the music supports it. And every once in a while there's a ritornello or something that you don't have to listen to. But most of the time it's challenging. We made it that way because it sits here <indicates a higher position>. It's really, in a way, a play with music. It operates on what George [C. Wolfe] called "the third rail," the other. It makes it perhaps not a commercial piece, but it's what we wanted it to be.

### **Can you talk about the evolution of "Lot's Wife"?**

We couldn't get it. We just had to chip away and chip away and chip away at it. The first incarnation was absolutely impenetrable. I remember, I didn't know what to make of it, I didn't know what it was trying to do, so I just set it. Tony had these amazing lyrics, and it was just like setting something on a collage. And I think it went all over the place, and there was, I don't know, singing frogs or something. One of the things that I



did with *Caroline* was, when we were done with it, we recorded the whole thing. A week later I sat and listened to see what we had, trying to be objective, and we got to that moment, and I thought, “I don’t know what the hell that was. I think it was impressive, but I don’t know what it was,” which is an issue because you only get one listen. So we tried another version. We kept bringing them in to Tonya, and Tonya, rightly so, put down the paper and said, “I don’t know what the hell this is.” And I thought, “Oh, Lord. This is going to be a long night.”

### **How did you approach the anthropomorphic characters in *Caroline*?**

It wasn’t that hard. That was Tony’s idea right from the get-go. The way we made *Caroline* is that we would sit and we talked about each scene, each beat, each note, each lyric, each punctuation. And then we’d argue the beat: “I don’t agree with you. I think it’s this.” “Is it that?” “Could it be this?” That completely changes what the music has to do, so we had to be very agreed to chip away and chip away. Lots of coffee. You know, those kinds of machines, they have a rhythm. And once you decided that they weren’t really machines, they’re just people. It’s not *Beauty and the Beast*. And some of it can’t be explained. It exists in a kind of ambiguity. I remember when I first went to Barnard, you face those giant washing machines. And every once in a while, one would get loose and go “Guh-guh-guh-guh-guh” and go after you. I remember that, and the rhythm, and feeling like it’s after me. It’s not about it being alive. There’s this idea that this machine is actually a character of some kind, and the dials are the eyes. And there is something that’s existing down there, and it’s not kind. So we just had to be very clear about what we wanted the characters themselves to be.

### **How did the character of Caroline change in the development of the musical?**

You know, I don’t think she changed in the development. We just got better at revealing what it was that Tony was trying to do. Tony really had the piece in his mind when he wrote it out. And he wrote it out very quickly. And I just love his writing so much because his writing is *so alive*. Something happens to so many writers and especially lyricists that their words deaden. They feel like this <makes a gnarled fist> in a way as opposed to an organism. Because the unbelievable gift of Steve Sondheim is he makes the rhyme inevitable. I mean, there’s nobody better. I just think he’s the most fantastic teacher. He’s just all around...I don’t know, I can’t say enough about him. One of the things about this business – and I do believe it comes from having kids and students – there are times when I look around and think I want to get better at what I do. I would love at some point to feel like I’m a master of it, which I don’t feel. But mostly, I can’t believe how lucky I got to hook up with certain people. And they took me like a fish and hooked me and zoomed me forward. I’m sure, of course, I impacted them with music, but then there’s something else that happens in a collaboration with music, I think, if you’re lucky...even with the shitty ones. You all get there together. And I’m very clear when I do something that has other needs, but I need that work. But then when I have a *Fun Home*, a *Caroline*, a *Violet*... We had this roundtable last night at Playwrights, and we were talking about how many works come out of commissions that are major impulses and how many works just started because you had that great need to write it.

You had the need to write this piece. It was so interesting. I never really thought about that, but that's true. *Caroline* came from Tony's need to tell that story. *Violet* came from my need to actually have a character like that onstage and to figure out my place as a writer. *Fun Home* was Joe Mantello's idea, but I latched onto it as if...this is not a commercial piece. And I think that's what makes these significant works interesting.

**Given that you're dealing with issues of race, gender, class, and religion, are there political meanings/messages that you want audiences to take away?**

That is such a good question because someone had mentioned that – I think George said to me – there are writers who write for the discarded. And that I identified with. *Violet* is a disfigured person, but what I found from most women is, especially young women...and I think that's changing now. I have a thirteen-year-old girl and she does *not* talk about herself this way, but they talk about themselves as if they're disfigured, as if they're repulsed by what they see. Something in our society presses against them and how they view themselves. They're just never enough. They're never, never enough. And I think *Caroline*, as a character, is the discarded. Those people whose labor, from slavery to cheap labor, pulled the country up. And no one writes about them. They're not interested. They're invisible. And I think in terms of gay culture, I've never seen a butch woman sing onstage. It's time. It's incredible to me. I've never heard a young gay character sing about being gay without it being twee or funny. And we have a song in *Fun Home* that's about an eight-year-old girl who sees a very butch woman and sings a song of identification. And I thought, that's right. We exist. Those women are us. And so I've been trying to shed a spotlight and have these characters sing. It's really interesting to me. And also these women. I like writing for women. I like writing for that voice. I can write for men, but I really, really love writing for women. Give me Sutton [Foster]. And Tonya. In *Fun Home*, we have a character, Young Alison, who's eight-years old. I knew. I knew what to do with her. Like Young Violet. We have the same thing. We have a Young Violet and Violet, and we have a Young Alison and Alison. In *Shrek*, there were three Fionas. I'm very interested in putting those onstage, how we shift, and having in the Russian doll-ness of ourselves, especially with women, what the impulse was that got cut off. I read this amazing dissertation when I was in the lighthouse because I was just reading everything I could get my hands on, including *Autobiography of a Face*. I don't know if you've read that? Must read. And also *Truth and Beauty*. That was a big, big book for me with *Violet*. That was a major book for me. Are we who we've been? Do we disenfranchise from ourselves? Do we make part of ourselves invisible? And I think the girls – I used to see this much more – that there was a part where their impulses started getting cut off and they do this <a retreating gesture>. I try to raise my daughter to be very vocal. Not to be overbearing, but to say, if you have an impulse to speak and you're not taking up all the oxygen, I want to hear from you. If you want to say something, engage in the dialogue. Show up. And I was taught to debate when I say it's okay in terms of patriarchal society: "Enter the scene when I want to hear from you, otherwise I don't want to hear from you." So you're waiting for external cues. Is it too much? Is it not? I think that's the dance that I go around a lot in my head.

**What response did you get from audiences of *Caroline*?**

People worship now at the altar of *Caroline*, and I don't know what it is. I found that either with *Caroline*, the people were bored out of their minds or they were devastated. And I'll take it. So many people came up and said, "I was that boy." There were a group of young boys that were raised by these amazing women, these women who were strong like trees, and then got taken away because they weren't really their mothers. They were employees. It's a really tough situation. I had one myself. I had an African American woman from Alabama. She raised my daughter with me. And there gets to be a point where it's really clear that she's not really family. It's very, very murky waters. So where do you go from there, when the child doesn't need that...? It's very, very murky. And painful on all accounts. And necessary. I couldn't work unless I had her, but it perpetuates these young white kids getting taken away from these incredibly strong, maternal figures.

**In addition to *Fun Home*, where do you see your work heading?**

I've become very interested in opera. So, I think that's one place that it's going to go. And Idina Menzel is starting a program called "A Broader Way," and I'm going to do it with her this summer. To try to keep the generations engaged with each other, so it doesn't take so much maneuvering to get to each other. It's a lot of maneuvering. I think that's one of the beauties of Tony. There's not a lot of maneuvering to get Tony to come out, and I think that's one of the reasons he's so beloved. He's so approachable. So, after that, I don't know.

## APPENDIX 4

*I conducted the following telephone interview with Brian Crawley on March 4, 2012.*

### **What attracted you to *Violet*?**

Jeanine saw the short movie, so it was something she was looking for and it took her a while to find it. She had in mind writing that piece. And, for a year, we were both involved with the BMI/Lehman Engel workshop. Most of the people went in either as a lyricist or a composer and got coupled together. I always liked what Jeanine had to say about other people's work, and I liked her music. I didn't always like what people were doing with her, but she seemed very interesting. I guess she sort of felt the same way about me. At the end of the year, we were supposed to write a ten-minute musical. When I heard that assignment – it was the first chance we had to pick our own collaborators – I went up to her after class and asked if she was interested in writing something, and she was. So we wrote a fifteen-minute piece, and it was fun. We enjoyed working together, and the piece came off well. Other people liked it. I guess she had been intending to work on “The Ugliest Pilgrim” with her ex-husband. She was realizing that was probably not a great idea. I happened along, and she said, “Hey, what do you think about working on this?” She gave me the story to read. That's how I encountered it. At the same time I was doing the BMI workshop, I was doing something called Fast Folk in the Village that a man named Jack Hardy, a folk guitarist, ran. It was kind of the folk version of the BMI workshop. We got together, had pasta dinners, and everyone played the songs they had written and we commented on them. It was interesting – two very different approaches to songwriting and not a whole lot of people, other than myself, liked both. I was taking guitar lessons and was very much into that kind of music. So when Jeanine gave me the story, my first reaction was, “Yeah! This is what I'm made to write.” I'm sure there were other people in the world that could write it, but I didn't know any. Not that it necessarily had to be written with that kind of music, but it seemed like an invitation to do that. And I knew it'd be something I was good at. So I said, “Yeah, that'd be great. I'd love to work on it.”

### **What was the biggest challenge you faced in adapting “The Ugliest Pilgrim” for the musical stage?**

Different challenges happen at different times. Very early on, Jeanine wanted to get a director involved because she felt that, in watching other people's experiences, they moved much more quickly when they had a focus. Not only somebody to play their songs to and react to them, but somebody to set goals and all that stuff. So, maybe within a couple of weeks of my reading the story, we met with Susan, with whom Jeanine had worked before, to explore it as a possible idea. Susan's idea was to list everything in the story that we wanted to write about. We made a list in the meeting of, I think, a dozen things, moments in the story, that we were most interested in. Keith, Jeanine's ex-husband, had the idea of having two Violets. His idea was to have one be the pretty one

and one be the one with the facial scar, two of the same age. Jeanine liked that idea, but Susan didn't like it at all. It becomes a difficult casting issue, and who are we to tell the audience what's pretty and what isn't? When you do it that way, you're making an aesthetic prescription that you're expecting people to follow. And that's closing the book down rather than opening it up. I had been teaching playwriting to schoolchildren in New Jersey, and I noticed the phenomenon, which I'd also read about, of girls shutting themselves down around age thirteen. In sixth or seventh grade, girls are still bubbly and interested in talking in class, and then suddenly in eighth or ninth grade they're gone. And because I taught playwriting, I taught all different grades; I wasn't stuck in one. I would see how different the social scene was, from grade level to grade level. So I said, what about doubling it? Having the young girl at thirteen and the adult version of herself. That's opening instead of closing. Violet has an actual injury that shuts her off from the rest of the world, but a lot of young women do that to themselves. It's many women's story. It felt like it had more of a reach. They both liked that idea. I guess that was the first big change to the story. Susan suggested that we write half a dozen songs and apply to the O'Neill and see if we could get in. We were two or three months away from the deadline. We did write half a dozen songs and sent in an application, and they liked the project, but we had to write a couple of songs for characters that we'd mentioned in an outline but hadn't written for yet. What we found when we got to the O'Neill was that we were responding to the things that we found heartbreaking and beautiful in the story, and they were very soft and very poetic, and there wasn't much conflict. Much of what we arrived at the O'Neill with, we discarded. We were coming to grips with what we wanted the story to be, and how we could make it interesting theatrically. The story is all in first person, so you get a very strong idea of who Violet is. All of the other characters are filtered through her. Much of the work in writing the piece was finding the other characters and filling them out. We were at the O'Neill for two weeks, but it felt like we did months of work there. The first page was filling those characters out. We were writing with a view to Violet getting together with Monty like she does in the story. And, there were two really good actors – Christian Hoff was Monty and Michael McElroy was Flick, and Michael McElroy was always Flick after that – and they became part of it. Once you have someone to write for, it makes that part of it easier. We had two different public performances. The first performance, we had already discarded a lot of stuff that we'd come to the O'Neill with, and written other things, which were working really well. Immediately, we found that people were sad that Violet was going to end up with Monty. You have these little surprises when you're writing a piece. We came to the O'Neill with some version of "Promise Me, Violet." That's where Monty declares his love for her. That's pretty much where we ended it at the O'Neill. The rest of the trip to the Preacher never happened. We had Flick's song "Let It Sing," which we thought was pretty shaky and we were probably going to cut. But then Michael got a hold of it, and everybody loved it. "Surprised" was also written. The first day we were at the O'Neill, we wrote "The Luck of the Draw." That was a multi-page lyric that would have been fifteen minutes long if Jeanine hadn't set it and we hadn't figured out the night before we taught it to the actors how to compress it down and cross-cut it. That was fun. That was a very alive night of writing. We had enough that you could see she was going to end up with Monty. And they were not happy about that. They thought it wasn't going to be the greatest thing for her. As I've lived with it longer, the idea is that when you're reading

the story – it’s all from Violet’s perspective – she’s going to end up with Monty and have a couple of happy weeks, and he’s going to leave her life forever. And she’ll be brokenhearted or not, depending on how those two weeks go. And it’s fine to leave her with him at that point. You think, this is the kind of experience that she’s been looking for, and she’s going to have it. But when you spend forty-five minutes with a theatre piece, identifying with these characters, you don’t want her to end up with somebody who’s only going to be there for a week or two. You’re more powerfully disposed to want her to find someone steadier, and Flick was steadier. And there’s that sort of hint in Doris’s story, where they’re in Memphis, that they’re both interested. So, it was a gift that we ended up having a love triangle in the piece because we started off intending to bring Monty and Violet together. And then we had the option of Flick. We must have written “On My Way” in and around the O’Neill. I remember someone complaining that we had two opening songs, “On My Way” and “Surprised.” And the other song was “Lay Down Your Head,” but it was in a different place. Now it’s in Memphis, after she has sex with Monty. Earlier it was on the bus – that moment of having someone fall asleep on you, and you letting them. We realized the song had to go someplace, but we hadn’t written any of the Memphis section, so we didn’t know where it would land. And with “On My Way,” Susan’s comment was something about meeting the whole gang so you have a picture of everybody before you iris in on the main character. Jeanine and I tended to write in a modular kind of way. You know that old question of who goes first? It’s different with every composer I work with. For her and me, whoever had the strongest feeling about something would go first. When we left that first meeting with Susan, Jeanine had a moment she wanted to write and I had a moment I wanted to write. She wanted to write “Lay Down Your Head,” so she wrote a song with a dummy lyric and sent it to me. I wanted to write “Surprised.” This is a little odd, but when I first lived in New York, I worked in a chocolate store and we would dip strawberries in chocolate. People would come in and ask, “Are you dipping strawberries in chocolate?” I’m standing there, dipping strawberries in chocolate, and I’d say, “Yes, I am!” I had all these sarcastic answers prepared that I would tell my boss when customers weren’t around. It’s like that moment when Violet is in Spruce Pine and someone asks her if she’s going somewhere, and she’s like, “What the fuck do you think?” That’s where I wanted to start, so I wrote a lyric for that. We swapped back and forth: she’d send me a tune, and I’d work on lyrics for it, and I’d send her lyrics, and she’d work on it. Often, either I would only write a section or she would focus on a section that she liked the best and not write the other bits. So, we had a brick-by-brick approach. I don’t think I ever wrote a full lyric that she set or she had a full tune that I would write to.

**Betts’ short story takes place in May 1969. Why did you decide to set the musical in September 1964?**

It has everything to do with audience perception. The story easily could have happened in 1969. You don’t have any trouble buying it when you’re reading the story. When you see it, what we, as Americans, think about 1969 is Summer of Love, rock and roll, long hair, and hippies. We don’t think of soldiers with crew cuts and a square young woman. These are three young characters that are not in tune with the times, as popularly remembered. I was born in 1962. I remember 1969. There were plenty of people with

crew cuts running around, plenty of people who were not off in San Francisco, listening to Jefferson Starship. But, in terms of people's expectations, it was distracting. At the O'Neill, I moved it too far back and someone pointed out some civil rights history that I was aware of, but not year-by-year, what happened when. So I had to figure out what's the earliest possible moment for this to happen. Now it feels, to people, more of its era than it did.

**You mentioned how audiences influenced the development of *Violet*, but when it finally opened at Playwrights Horizons, do you remember what response you got from audiences?**

Audiences were very enthusiastic. At Playwrights Horizons, most of our performances were previews nominally because you don't have a long rehearsal process. People enjoyed it very much, but the kind of audience response that affects the writing is much earlier. We did the O'Neill, we did a reading at Playwrights Horizons with an extra song that we didn't have at the O'Neill, we did several short workshops at Lincoln Center, we did a full workshop at Lincoln Center, and then we did a pre-production few weeks at Playwrights Horizons. All of these things had invited audiences – friends, theatre people, staff members of the two theatres. Those are the people that really affect it because you listen to your friends and family, for one thing. And the theatre people that are there are generally pretty savvy. The other thing that took a while to come to was the Preacher, which was a change from the story. Susan said from the outset that we had to have a scene with the Preacher, and I really wanted to avoid it. There are so many representations of outsized t.v. preachers, where the preacher's a fake. It seemed to me that we didn't want to do that, so I was strongly against it. The issue didn't come up at the O'Neill because we weren't writing that far. So, I still felt that way, Susan felt her way, and Jeanine was divided. Nine months after the O'Neill, we did a reading at Playwrights Horizons, and we wrote a song where "On My Way" is used in a gospel context. Initially, we had Stephen Lee Anderson, who was playing the Father, be the Preacher's stand-in so that identification between the Father and the Preacher was embodied. Was that something that was really happening? I don't remember if it's in her head, or if it's really happening. Everything gets adjusted all the way through the process, so everything's quite different from how it was. Another song that she wanted to write – and we had several trials of writing it – was when the Preacher and Violet are trading Biblical quotes. It's nearly impossible to write a lyric for, but I tried. We had someone sing it at Playwrights Horizons, but we cut it before any audience saw it completed. Something that Susan suggested about how we had the Father turn into the Preacher made it more palatable to me. My objection took another track. I said if we're going to do it, he has to be real. He's got to be someone that believes it. Michael McElroy directed it at NYU, and the actor playing the Preacher asked why the Preacher doesn't sing. I explained, when we wrote it, the Father was playing the Preacher, so we weren't worried about the Preacher's song. It was also a conscious thing of ours not to waste actors. Everybody has their moment in this show; everybody has their song or something to do.

## What does *Violet* mean to you?

A vein that runs through the play is that I had talked with my father about his experiences in the military. My dad served during the Korean War but never went there; he was stationed in Pittsburgh. He was mobilized for two days to go to the Suez Canal. They never sent soldiers there, but they were ready to. In training camp, the staff sergeants were all African American. They had received battle promotions in Korea, but because they had never gone to college, they couldn't hold those ranks stateside. He worked in an anti-aircraft unit, where a lot of the enlisted men were pretty stupid; they were big and brawny and loading shells into guns. Dad was a radar specialist, so he was pretty smart, and the staff sergeants, although they hadn't gone to college, were smart too, and that was his first experience of knowing African Americans well enough to call them friends. It opened his eyes. Later, when he was the manager of a corporation, he was very much ahead of the curve in hiring minorities, and that played into how he raised us. That all plays into how we wrote Flick. He sees the army as an occupation where you can be usefully employed and also make a reasonable amount of money. There's a ceiling to how far you can go, which I think Flick alludes to in his comment about becoming a quartermaster. Those were the venues – you could join the post office, which was not segregated, or the army, or you were stuck with whatever local industries there were. What *Violet* meant to me in bigger terms... What did that one review say? "Sweet but small potatoes." That was John Simon, I think. It was a big deal in some ways because we won a lot of awards, got noticed, and started our careers. But in other ways, nothing happened. There were producers who told *Variety* that they were moving it to Broadway, and they hadn't even talked to us. It was so frustrating because it was the musical that everyone was interested in at that moment in history. There were a bunch of crappy musicals on Broadway that year, and some of them went on to win awards, and we were waiting for them to fail. And you feel like a ghoul. You want them to get the hell out of the theatre they're in, but you don't wish ill on anybody. So there was a period where we were all waiting for the Broadway thing to happen, and it didn't. And then, for six months, each month some head of a regional theatre would get a hold of it, read it, think it was brilliant, and want to do it at their theatre and then bring it into New York. And then, by the end of the month, they had figured out that it wasn't going to be fiscally possible, and they sheepishly called and said they couldn't do it. And the next month it would happen again. And then again. And then again. And then again. So, you're on this enormous roller coaster where you think it's going to happen again...no, it's not. But it did put my name on the map. And the experience of working on *Violet* was really joyful. The nice legacy of it that I try to carry into other projects is, once we developed a trust for each other – first, Susan, Jeanine and myself, and later, Michael Rafter and Kathleen Marshall – we were free to say anything because the best ideas come out of being open. We let each other try things. The idea was, we'll try it and if we don't like it, we'll change it. A lot of good things happened because, if Jeanine and I weren't in the room, Susan would try something and show it to us. In "Promise Me, Violet," she felt like Flick needed to have a voice in the song. When we first wrote it, it was Monty's song and Flick didn't sing any lyrics in it. So, she had him sing some of Monty's lyrics as an experiment. We came back and saw it. I hated the lyrics he was singing, but I loved the *fact* that he was singing. That was the thing that we had enough trust to try.



Then Jeanine and I wrote something for Flick to sing, which I never would have thought of. That's why people look back fondly on *Violet*. I've heard from people, either directly or indirectly, on the creative team and the actors; they look back on the experience as being very collaborative and generous. It was a profound moment in their lives. I've found that shows go awry when that doesn't happen. They don't necessarily have to, but they can. If you shut down somebody, then they can't help you any more; you've taken that out of the realm of possibilities, there are places the piece can't go. There were sections in it that Paula and Michael, the African Americans in the cast, reacted strongly against and that informed what we were doing.

### **Can you think of an example?**

We had a scene where Flick and Violet were angry with one other, after she hooks up with Monty. In the scene, Violet calls Flick a "nigger." I wanted to push the scene to a certain point of climax, where they're really mad at each other. Michael said, "I would never recover from it. Call me that and I might act friendly toward you in the future, but I won't be harboring any romantic feelings. That door would be shut forever." It was a problem for me because I couldn't see the way forward. I didn't want to use the word; I didn't want that effect, but I needed something to happen in the scene. I eventually found a solution for it. And, I think, if Michael had his druthers, I would have written it out of the other scene, with the waiter. But I felt like you had to set the time and place. It was necessary to that scene, whereas it wasn't necessary later. Because then the audience knows where they are. The racist character is introduced and we can loathe him without any problem; you can't really loathe Violet without a problem. Also, there was a very significant line change between New York and Seattle. There was a moment in that diner scene where I couldn't get Susan to direct it the way I wanted her to. Violet was playing it in a very offhanded way, when she says something like, "Flick, we're traveling together." She said it in a very casual way. For me, the importance of that moment is whether you decide to say something or not. Do you comment that you're incredibly uncomfortable, or do you drift away and find somebody else to talk to? I changed the line to, "What if I told you we're traveling together," which is difficult to say flippantly. It's a big step for Violet to take, and she immediately distances the two soldiers by saying, "Don't think that means anything, mister."

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## VITA

Brett D. Johnson holds a BA in Theatre from Susquehanna University, where he graduated valedictorian of his class, and an MA in Theatre from the University of Missouri-Columbia. His primary research interests include American musical theatre, Tennessee Williams, and acting pedagogy. Brett is the recipient of the Donald K. Anderson Graduate Teaching Award, a Huggins Fellowship, a University Fellowship, a Chancellor's Excellence Award for Graduate Student Leadership, a Larry Clark Travel Award, and a Graduate Professional Council Travel Award. He was also selected as an MU Difficult Dialogues Faculty Fellow for fall 2009. Brett's scholarship has appeared in such publications as *Theatre Journal*, *Ecumenica*, *The Player's Journal*, and *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*.

As an actor, Brett has appeared in productions at both the collegiate and professional level. Favorite roles include Serge in *Art*, Bluntschli in *Arms and the Man*, Warwick in *The Lark*, Trigorin in *The Seagull*, Horace Giddens in *The Little Foxes*, and various roles in *Greater Tuna*. He received KC/ACTF Irene Ryan nominations for his portrayals of Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot* (SU) and Rev. John Hale in *The Crucible* (MU).

Brett's directing credits include productions of William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*; Tennessee Williams' *Confessional*, *Vieux Carré*, and *The Gnadiges Fraulein*;

Charles Busch's *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*; Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*; and multiple works by Missouri playwright Mary Barile, including *The Irish Rogue*, for which he received the KC/ACTF award for Achievement in Directing. Most recently, Brett collaborated with Pulitzer Prize-winning author Ron Powers on his new play entitled *Sam and Laura*. Brett developed the script with Mr. Powers and directed the first full production, which performed to standing ovations in Columbia and Warsaw, MO, and at the Mark Twain Centennial Gold Rush Festival in Calaveras County, CA.

Brett also organized a March 2011 Tennessee Williams Centennial at the University of Missouri. Entitled "Tennessee Williams: The Art of Endurance," the three-day celebration included conversations with Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Edward Albee and Tony Award-winning actress Elizabeth Ashley, scholarly panels and presentations, an acting master class, readings from the Williams canon, and a new work by the Missouri Contemporary Ballet.