"Consequences unforeseen . . ." in *Raisin in the Sun* and *Caroline, or Change*

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Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We the people must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers
The mountains and the endless plain—
All the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!
—Langston Hughes (1938)[1]

Ecological sanity now requires social justice.
—Barry Commoner (1971)[2]

We all live in the wake of hurricane Katrina. The implications and implicated deposit now on everyone's doorsteps like the alluvial sludge from a mighty river burdened with the legacies of history. Past exploitations of land and people give rise to present litanies and lamentations. But for those whose faces, cries, and signs for help have been paraded across the media stream, the loss is ongoing, unrelenting, and disproportionately personal. These consequences were not unforeseen. (Witness, among other warnings, "Gone with the Water," *National Geographic*, October 2004.)[3] As officials tallied the dead, my attention was arrested by the lock step between systemic social injustice and environmental lunacy. The so-called natural disaster has exposed the un-natural systems of domination buried under decades of business as usual, unearthing a white supremacist patriarchy through which racism, poverty, and environmental degradation are inseparably institutionalized. Once again ecologically ill-conceived strategies for controlling, taming, and mining nature

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have revealed their common cause with institutionalized systems of domination along lines of race, class, gender, and, in Katrina's case, age.

The intersections of ecological and human catastrophe are not new, but ingrained cultural and discursive traditions often mask the mutually reinforcing dynamic between social constructions of "nature" and human oppression. Representations of nature are inherently ideological and political. Myths, conceptual frames, scientific understandings, economic models, as well as historical and religious narratives inform individual and collective regard for the natural world. These ideologies are demonstrated in power structures and economic systems; concretized in institutions and policies that govern land use; they are written in the land, water, and air; and in the bodies of women, children, workers, and the non-humans with whom we share ecological community. In *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism*, Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy call for an ecocrticisim "based not only on the recognition of connection between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women across patriarchal societies . . . [But] also based on the recognition that these two forms of domination are bound up with class exploitation, racism, colonialism and Neocolonialism."[4] Donna Di Chiro observes that environmentalism's continued primary concern for "wild and natural" places perpetuates "separation between humans and the 'natural' world.'"[5] Environmental justice activists, who are concerned with the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation and catastrophe on the poor, working class and communities of color, argue that mainstream environmental organizations (such as Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club, Nature Conservancy) have traditionally been "utterly indifferent to urban communities."[6] The price of this continued re-inscription of binary thinking (nature vs. culture, wilderness vs. civilization) is, as we have seen of late, catastrophic for both people and the more-than-human world.

The 2004 Broadway revival of Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* and Tony Kushner and Jeanie Tasori's musical *Caroline, or Change* (also 2004) create a dialogue within time and across time, reflecting ongoing ecological and social justice questions before the American public.[7] This theatrical concurrence, particularly in light of the catastrophe of hurricane Katrina one year later, makes for an unsettling point of departure from which to examine theatrical refractions of systemic environmental injustice. In the spirit of Erika Munk's 1994 clarion call for "critics and scholars . . . to investigate the way ecologies—physical, perceptual, imagined—shape dramatic forms," this paper interrogates the socio-political, geographic, and ecological contexts of *Raisin in the Sun* and *Caroline, or Change*.[8] I argue that a viable ecocriticism in theatre and performance must concern itself with injustices felt in the body—the body of experience, of community, of land. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa have articulated this "theory in the flesh" as one that arises from "the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings [that] all fuse to create a politic born

out of necessity."[9] I foreground the ecological conditions of lives represented in both works (including habitat, health, family, representation of place, and constructions of "nature") in order to reclaim the land and the body as the sources of metaphor and meaning-making.[10] Here I hope to open a conversation at the juncture of cultural, performance, and environmental studies, demonstrating that theatre is fertile ground for understanding the connection between the ideologies that cause oppression and those that underlie the ecological crises.

The environmental justice movement was ushered into the mainstream by the 1991 People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C., but the issues activists raise are not new. The environmental movement has been called out for its white, middle-class privilege since its halcyon days of the 1970s. In 1972 the Conservation Foundation held a landmark conference on Environmental Quality and Social Justice in Urban America, calling on environmental organizations to

> make the linkages between their traditional concern for the preservation of the natural landscape and the ecological health of the urban environment. Hunger, malnutrition, poor health, and premature death—induced by poisons from lead, air pollution, rats, and other disease-carrying rodents—are also indicative of America's unbalanced ecology.[11]

As a result of grassroots movements, primarily by women and communities of color, environmental justice concerns have recently become central to the environmental debate.[12] The lived experience of black women (like Kushner's Caroline and Hansberry's Ruth and Lena), who share concerns for, and vulnerabilities to, the environmental health threats that compound their struggle to provide for their families, have birthed a resistance movement that has fought new incineration sites, landfills, and industrial effluents in poor communities.[13]

The economic realities of black Americans represented in *Raisin in the Sun* and *Caroline, or Change* form a kind of tissue between past and present, between the conditions that gave rise to the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the inequities exposed by hurricane Katrina, specifically, that the socio-economic-environmental conditions of Hansberry's Youngers and Kushner's Thibodeauxs continue to be shared by communities of color across the United States. Together they call attention to conditions of systemic and institutionalized racism rooted in an ecological culture dependent on mining both the land and human labor for market profits. Both works are geographically located (Southside Chicago and Lake Charles, Louisiana, respectively)—geographies that have everything to do with the struggles and conflicts of the characters. The Youngers are connected to the Thibodeauxs by an experience of economic and ecological injustice, and by the gentle hold that place has on identity, on dreams, and the possibilities to realize them.

Both works begin with an invocation of place.[14] The Younger's Southside apartment is a location of "weariness" and compression where "too many people have lived for too long," where a "single window [is the] sole source of natural light."[15] The opening scene of Hansberry's play is driven by a press for space (a shared bathroom), and the arc of the play follows a quest for a place that can support and nurture the family's material/ecological and emotional/spiritual well being. Beneatha's diagnosis that her family suffers from "acute ghetto-itis" is more than a figure of speech; here, Hansberry speaks to the material/ecological situatedness of her characters' lives.[16] Almost fifty years after *Raisin in the Sun* premiered, conditions in Chicago's Southside remain reflective of deep economic/ecological inequities. A 2004 study conducted by the Center for Impact Research finds that the Southside is ninety-eight percent black, housing is seventy to ninety percent renter occupied, eighty-three to ninety-two percent of residents live in poverty, and unemployment hovers at twenty-five percent. Many lack plumbing and/or kitchen facilities.[17]

In *Caroline, or Change*, the Gulf Coast wetlands corridor simultaneously embraces and endangers:

> Nothing ever happen underground / in Louisiana
> cause they ain't no underground / in Louisiana.
> There is only / underwater.
> Consequences unforeseen. / Consequences unforeseen. . . .
> Sixteen soggy feet below / the Gulf of Mexico[18]

The lyrics constitute a chilling foreshadowing of the catastrophes of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. We ignore human ecological situatedness at our peril. Yet John Lahr claims in the *New Yorker* that "the terrain is a metaphor for Caroline's *internal landscape*: she is literally and figuratively swamped."[19] One of the central projects of ecocriticism in theatre studies is the re-literalization of such "natural" metaphors. Una Chaudhuri warns that the use of "ecology as metaphor is so integral a feature of the aesthetic of modern realist-humanist drama [and criticism] that, paradoxically, its implications for a possible ecological theater are easy to miss. Its very ubiquity renders it invisible."[20]

Location, for Caroline, is no metaphor. As she toils in inhumane humidity, washing, ironing, and listening to the radio, "[t]orn between the devil / and the muddy brown sea," she labors under a systemic racism that is both environmentally and socio-economically situated.[21] In Kushner's animation of the Radio as a Supreme-esque trio, a prediction of present grief is laid bare: "Tough and dreary and all disheveled / sixteen feet below sea level / Baby / Gonna *drown* . . . Doing laundry full of woe, / 'neath the Gulf of Mexico."[22] Re-literalizing Kushner's lyrics does not neutralize their metaphoric meaning; rather, it grounds the metaphor

in its material point of origin—in this case, the wetlands corridor of southern Louisiana. Forming both a natural barrier that softens the brunt of hurricanes as well as providing the nascent waters for a fishing economy, these wetlands have been eroding at a staggering rate of "an acre every fifteen minutes" since the 1930s.[23] More than a million acres have been lost to dredging, development, and the effects of long-term levee-control of the Mississippi river.[24] For Caroline, and her contemporary counterparts across the Delta, geography is jeopardy.

The legacies of slavery form the headwaters of both Lena Younger and Caroline Thibodeaux's stories. The two works stretch the distance of the Mississippi watershed and mark two tributaries of black American experience—one family that fled the rural South for opportunity in the North; the other, we can imagine, did not. Hansberry's Lena and Walter, Sr., were part of the Great Migration, and much in *Raisin* reminds of Lena's strong ties to the South: "In my time we was worried about not getting lynched and about getting to the North."[25] From the turn of the twentieth century to the 1970s black families moved in great numbers to the urban North, seeking economic opportunities, freedom from segregation laws and the terror of lynching, and leaving behind the uncertainty of the sharecrop system. The Great Migration gained additional momentum after racist emergency response to the 1927 Mississippi flood.[26] In that disaster, although authorities possessed the means, African American workers and their families were not included in evacuations because cotton growers feared loosing their labor force for the coming harvest. Instead, black families were herded onto levees where they were left without food, water, or shelter. As primarily poor residents of color were herded into New Orleans's superdome, where food, water, sanitation, and medical treatment were insufficient, Katrina has evoked collective memory of the injustices of the 1927 Mississippi flood.[27] As those displaced by hurricane Katrina were ultimately ushered off to "34 states and the District of Columbia," Peter Grier of the *Christian Science Monitor* has characterized a "great Katrina migration."[28] This "biggest resettlement in American history" is composed of people who lost family members, pets, property, culture, and community; and who, like Lena Younger, may always long for elements of home.[29]

Kushner has set Caroline's story in a Southern Louisiana basement in 1963. Post-Katrina, the imagination plays with what her fate might have been when hurricane Betsy hit in 1965. That year Governor John McKethen of Louisiana assured citizens, "We have cut the Mississippi in many places . . . We have built levees up and down . . . We feel like now we are almost completely protected."[30] Not long after his boast, hurricane Betsy breeched levees across the delta and sent waters "twelve feet [high] as it swept warehouses and railyards in the lower Ninth Ward . . . carrying corpses and cargo and cars."[31] Environmental justice analysts observe that in hurricanes Betsy (1965) and Camille (1969), as in Katrina and Rita,

those left out of disaster planning were/are disproportionately poor communities and communities of color—families like the Thibodeauxs.[32]

Homeplace

Ecological sustainability grows out of regard for home, for habitation. Underscoring one of the central tenets of environmental justice, bell hooks asks us to "reconceptualize ideas of homeplace, once again considering the primacy of domesticity as a site for subversion and resistance. When we renew our concern with homeplace, we can address political [and ecological] issues that most affect our daily lives."[33] When ecocriticism reclaims urban environments as ecological communities and terrain for ecological thought, poverty becomes an environmental issue. (Indeed ecology and economics both come from the same Greek *oikos*, meaning "house" and connoting home or dwelling.)[34] Like Caroline's oppressive underwater workplace, the Younger's apartment is a habitat on the edge. Despite her best efforts, Lena's home is increasingly threatened and unsustainable: space is inadequate; furnishings, tempers, and relationships fray; a woman contemplates abortion because there is no room for another mouth to feed; children are exposed to toxins and environmental dangers from rats to roach killer.

In its manifestations as malnutrition, infant mortality, and domestic violence, poverty is the most personal marker of ecological violence. The struggle facing Ruth (whose situation is often under-explored in analyses of *Raisin*) was a pivotal environmental concern for State Senator Richard Newhouse of Illinois who challenged environmental leaders at the 1972 conference to respond to environmental justice demands for healthy housing and safe neighborhoods:

> [W]hat are they going to do with this little thing? Who has the wherewithal to support it [sic], to buy it food? You loose 20 percent of your children there. Then, after that, you talk about what is required to get clothing and get it to school, and you lose another 20 percent. And then you talk about what is required to provide it with safety, both from thugs in the street and danger in the street and the police department, and you lose another 10 or 20 percent of these kids. By the time you get to high school, you've lost 70 percent of your children.[35]

Lena has already "done give up one baby to poverty."[36] Now Ruth is poised to bear the mark of systemic ecoracism on/in her body. Lena knows from her own lived experience, "When the world gets ugly enough—a woman will do anything for her family. *The part that's already living*."[37] In the face of inadequate homespace and economic means, Ruth believes she has no choice except abortion. Thus, poverty levies a kind of control on her reproductive autonomy as surely as the master's

control of female slaves dictated when, where, and with whom they would procreate. In *Killing the Black Body*, Dorothy Roberts unmasks the long history of "denial of Black reproductive autonomy [that] serves the interests of white supremacy."[38] Throughout United States history, the black female body has been terrain where "contradictions between slavery and liberty" are played out.[39] Roberts argues that the positioning of black women as root cause of the "the disintegration of the Black family and the consequent failure of Black people to achieve success in America" obfuscates and perpetuates the "unjust social order" of embedded and unacknowledged racism.[40] Through Ruth's subplot, Hansberry foreshadows the struggle of poor women of color to control and protect their reproductive ecologies and illuminates the sharp divide between the civil rights movement and the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which advocated population control as a solution to environmental ills.

Scene Two of *Raisin* opens with Lena and family members cleaning the small apartment they share. Stage directions explain that Beneatha, "with a handkerchief tied around her face, is spraying insecticide into the cracks in the walls"[41] The use of pesticides (DDT among them) and herbicides, which Rachel Carson would indict in *Silent Spring* (1962), was so pervasive and unquestioned in 1959 that it shows up in this drama as a sign of the times. New "miracle" chemicals promised pest free farms, gardens, parks, countrysides, and neighborhoods.[42] Playfully, Beneatha goes after her younger brother, Travis, with a spray-bottle of roach killer, while Lena calls, "Look out there, girl, before you be spilling some of that stuff on that child!" Beneatha retorts, "There's really only one way to get rid of them, Mama . . . Set fire to this building!"[43] Hansberry's chilling metaphor for the way that the white so-called welcoming committee hoped to keep "pests" out of its privileged community also implicates the health impact of pesticides on the bodies of communities like Southside Chicago, where their use was plentiful and less expensive than building maintenance and repair. During the 1950s, the United States government conducted mass pesticide sprayings along roadways in rural areas and in urban neighborhoods, particularly in the humid east and mid-west.[44] As Carson would later explain, repeated sprayings cause insect populations to return in exponentially greater numbers with new resistance to the very chemicals meant to kill them.[45] Ghetto residents did not need to be told, as Beneatha observes: "I can't imagine it would hurt him—it has never hurt the roaches."[46] Hansberry foreshadows the fight for environmental justice that would embattle black communities in coming decades when Lena warns, "Well, little boys' hides ain't as tough as Southside roaches."[47]

bell hooks maintains that the homeplace is a site of 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."[48] The ecological viability of

human habitats includes space for kinesthetic and imaginative well-being as well as clean water and air and healthy food. hooks honors the indefatigable nurturance of black women in the home as a kind of greening force as she recalls her own childhood in the south:

> In our young minds houses belonged to women. Were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place—the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls. There we learned dignity, integrity of being; there we learned to have faith. The folks who make this life possible, who were our primary guides and teachers, were black women."[49]

Women like Caroline, Ruth, and Lena have traditionally mitigated the floodwaters of degradation in poor urban neighborhoods, maintaining instead reservoirs of dignity within their homeplaces.

Raisin in the Sun is not merely a play about leaving the ghetto, but also about the struggle of resistance that is taking place *in* the ghetto. Lena's purchase of a new home in spite of both Walter Lee's loss of some of the insurance money and the racist threats by Mr. Linder and the "welcoming committee" is not her only act of resistance. The apartment, in which the Youngers already live, the place that Lena made even as she tended the homes of white employers, has been an ongoing site of resistance. hooks argues that:

> 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. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects.[50]

Reflected in the unflinching commitment to the welfare of her family, Lena's struggle, like that of her real-world counterparts, to make "a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination" must be seen as the force of greening itself.[51]

bell hooks particularly honors the "plight of domestic servant . . . black women laboring in white homes" who are worn down by the tension between "service provided to white folks, which took, time and energy and their longing to have time and energy to give their own."[52] Caroline, Lena, and Ruth struggle to

"conserve enough of themselves to provide service (care and nurturance) within their own families."[53] Dorothy Roberts observes that the vital energies of black women like them have been mined, appropriated, and negated through numerous cultural stereotypes.[54] Kushner writes against this subjugation of black women. Caroline does not give Noah the mother-love he desperately needs and misses since his own mother's death—an indication of agency for which she is characterized as "Saturnine" by one reviewer.[55] As hooks explains, Caroline must "keep something for [her] own" children.[56] In light of "the importance of homeplace in the midst of oppression and domination, of homeplace as a site of resistance and liberation struggle," Caroline's withholding is a "radically subversive political gesture."[57]

Lena's Garden, Walter Lee's Frontier, and Caroline's Bleach Cup

The suburban migration of the 1950s was accompanied by a do-it-yourself garden culture promoted by publications like *Sunset* magazine, which promised homeowners green lawns and bug-free tomatoes through an array of paramilitary fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides. In this way, middle-class aesthetic gardeners could enjoy benefits of a "better life through chemistry" on par with industrial agricultural.[58] In Act II, scene three, Lena's children give her garden tools, gloves, and sunbonnet in anticipation of the gardening she will do at the new house. So often read as a trope of the universality of the American dream, Lena's garden must be reclaimed as a site of resistance and a sign of autonomy. In "Earthbound," hooks reminds us of the "relationship to the earth" that verified for southern black folks that "white supremacy, with its systemic dehumanization of blackness, was not a form of absolute power" because no one, not even plantation owners, could make it rain.[59] Even as their bodies were commodified in service of the nation's first cash crop, slaves and then sharecroppers tended small gardens of their own, providing for their own families, nourishing an intimacy with the soil that maintained a "concrete place of hope" in the face of white supremacy.[60] Lena's garden is not merely an imitation of middle-class pastimes, but a signifier of political and ecological fecundity. Like the victory gardens of World War II in which Americans grew food for their families in order to insure that commercial crops could be used to feed the fighting troops, urban community gardens are local, domestic sites of resistance in a larger struggle. Inner city gardens on rooftops, in vacant lots and schoolyards enable poor communities to take collective food security and community health into their own hands.

Similarly, the potted plant that Lena cares for has also been a favorite metaphor for reading the American dream, but, when understood in terms of its ecological relatedness to Lena and her family, it unveils the white privilege in that dream. In the final moment of the play, Lena returns to retrieve a living being that has been the recipient of her care. The small, tenuous plant is a certain sign of the greening force of her determination to create and nurture a habitat of dignity. Lena feels for its struggle to survive with little light: "Lord, if this little plant don't get more

sun than it's been getting it ain't never going to see spring again."[61] A biochemical exchange between the Younger family and the plant insures a relatedness that is material, not merely metaphoric. The family produces carbon dioxide for its use, the plant, in turn, produces oxygen for exchange in human blood. The plant is family; the plant is blood.

Many prominent voices, including Barak Obama, have linked the tragedy of hurricane Katrina to poverty; but it is a poverty that must be seen as the legacy of racist social policy, institutionalized segregation, and as an economic remnant of slavery. In a deeply personal lamentation that is nonetheless politically charged with an implicit resignation that the "equal opportunity" of the 1960s without equal education and redistribution of wealth would leave folks like her behind, Caroline sings, "hope's fine / hope's fine / till it turn to mud. / And some folks goes to school at nights, / some folks march for civil rights. I don't / I ain't got the heart, / I can't hardly read."[62] Like the waters held back by the Louisiana levees, Caroline has constructed inner levees to hold her rage at bay: "I'm gonna slam that iron / down on my heart / gonna slam that iron / down on my throat." She subjugates her own ambition ("murder my dreams so I stop wantin'"), submerges her dreams and potentialities ("gonna slam it / slam it / slam it down / until I drown").[63] 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.[64] The musical leads us to believe that Caroline chose to flatten her pain so that her children may one day thrive. "Flat! Flat! Now how 'bout that then? That what Caroline can do! . . . that how she be changed."[65] And yet, New Orleans of September 2005 cries out, not enough has changed. Caroline's contemporary counterparts share a material fate with her dark prayers: "Murder me God down in that basement / murder my dreams . . . murder my hope . . . strangle the pride . . . make me forget."[66]

The economics of poverty hinges on small sums (bus fare, lunch money, gas money) and change, social and monetary, is at the heart of both works. Pocket change ignites an argument between Walter Lee and Ruth in the opening scene of *Raisin* when Travis asks for school money. When Caroline's employer, Rose, tells her to "keep the change" ten-year old Noah leaves in his pockets, Caroline is wedged into a narrow moral ground.[67] As Caroline becomes the foil that Rose uses to discipline Noah, Rose is able to exploit not only her maid's labor (in exchange for what we understand as an unfair wage) but also her need. Caroline's poverty becomes the tool that Rose manipulates to wedge Noah between Caroline and herself. Both plays turn on the significance of a larger sum—for Caroline, a twenty dollar bill Noah has left in his pants pocket might pay for her children's dental work; for Walter Lee, an insurance dividend could buy entry into what he believes is a

class of American entrepreneurs who turn "deals worth millions," drive Chryslers to downtown offices, and send their sons to any college.[68] Kushner and Hansberry implicate a system that idealizes the history of civil rights while it perpetuates the economic realities of black communities. In the recuperation of Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* as a deep critique of the economic base of racism in America (rather than a universalized American dream success story), the possibility of change requires more than pocket change; civil rights without economic justice results in catastrophes like Katrina.[69]

Raisin in the Sun and *Caroline, or Change* level a materialist critique on an economic system that perpetuates a master narrative of frontieresque entrepreneurial achievement while it institutionalizes disadvantage. Walter Lee has internalized the same economic model that propels Kushner's Rose—a kind of frontieresque opportunism, a *modus operandi* of finders-keepers—when he invests both his and Beneatha's share of the insurance settlement. That economic model turns on him when his business partner makes off with the money. Finders-keepers draws its amoral currency from Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier ethos in which an ideology of "free land" masked the theft and seizure of lands from indigenous peoples, rationalized the use of human slave labor for the production of a cash crop, or bought up allotments from Indians who were characterized as incapable of "improving" the land.[70] Like Walter Lee, the unforeseen consequences of finders-keepers undo Caroline. "Pocket change change me," she sings.[71] As the change gathers in the bleach cup, she wrestles with whether to take it home to satisfy her own children's unmet needs and desires. But no amount of bleach can wash away the economic double-bind that the coins represent. Caroline's moral dilemma ("A grown woman got no business / taking pennies from a baby") resounds in sharp contrast to economic order that tolerates children living in poverty as an acceptable by-product of a market economy.[72] And in another valence, no amount of money can bleach away the collective historical memory of slavery and racism. The aftermath of Katrina suggests that, for some, the change wrought through decades of struggle is still merely pocket change, not the fundamental system change, not meant to achieve a level of justice imagined by early civil rights leaders, not the vigorous re-imagining of society that fueled Hansberry herself.[73]

Marshes and Margins

In "Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy," Iris Marion Young distinguishes between "deliberative democracy" (in which positions are argued and decision made) and "communicative democracy" (in which difference is valued and disagreement becomes a source of new knowledge).[74] Young problematizes deliberative democracy in which "difference" is something to be transcended in a quest for so-called common ground. She emphasizes the importance of recognizing situated knowledge that arises from a particular lived

cultural/historical/geographic subject position and that, as such, may not be accessible to the majority. Young's argument underscores the particular power of theatre to reveal difference while not reducing or subsuming it.[75]

In *Caroline, or Change*, Kushner marks the character most closely representative of his own subject position "Noah"—after the man who, so the story goes, listened to the instruction of God, survived the flood, and helped insure the continuance of diverse species. Struggling in the flood of emotions and familial change following his mother's death, Noah longs for a relationship with Caroline. But Kushner's libretto does not presume such access. Caroline's experience, knowledge, and pain are inaccessible to Noah. Noah witnesses her from an emotional distance that Caroline herself inscribes: "That ain't your business, it just ain't your business. / You's a nosey child."[76] This distance allows both Caroline's autonomy and Noah's imaginative construction of her as "the president" and "stronger than my dad."[77]

Yet as the imaginal realm materializes on stage, so does the palpable understanding that Noah and Caroline do care for one another with an affection that does not erase difference but arises from it. Sitting in his child's bed, Noah speaks across the shared swamp heat of a Louisiana summer night to Caroline, who is smoking a cigarette on her porch. Place speaks to place, situated knowledge (of the child) speaks to situated knowledge (Caroline's). "Weren't never friends," Caroline tells him. Her suffering is her own, impenetrable, not universal, not neatly wrapped up, nor filled with a false hope for connection that often assuages white guilt and becomes a substitute for justice. Still, out of her own suffering, she can teach him how to cope with his own pain.

> 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.[78]

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 difference while not erasing it.

The Gulf Coast wetlands corridor, a creation of the Mississippi River itself, forms a margin that protects the land from erosive forces. With headwaters in almost every state between the Rockies and the Alleganies, the history of the Mississippi is the material and metaphoric watershed of America. Its flow, when unimpeded, literally builds ground as layers of sedimentation are deposited on its flood plain and then compressed.[79] The devastation of recent hurricanes is due in part, scientists tell us, to the erosion of the landmass that the river builds up and

outward. Under normal ecological circumstances, the barrier islands and wetlands of Louisiana constitute a disappearing margin that would provide both protection and new soil. But the river has been tamed; the sea presses inward, consuming and submerging the fragile landmass that the river has stored up over time. Viewed from the wetlands corridor of Louisiana, American democracy appears to be sinking, subsumed beneath an unsustainable economic system that perpetually erodes the health of the margins while ignoring the signals of its own demise. bell hooks reframes marginality as power to resist the forces of oppression through alternate views of the seeming permanence of the American center.

At the end of *Caroline, or Change*, it is Noah who recognizes the danger, questions the wisdom of a basement, and implicitly questions the wisdom of eroding the margins and burying the past:

> Why does our house have a basement?
> Underground is underwater.
> This is where the Great Plains end
> in the Gulf of Mexico . . .
> If there's only water underground
> is my mother buried underwater?[80]

The uncompromising end of this musical succeeds perhaps where the beaten-back waters of the Mississippi fail: it builds new ground. It builds ground for an exchange of diverse stories, told by and between groups of people traditionally divided by race and class; new ground for dialogue that does not submerge the multiple voices that come down from the headwaters of history.

> Underground through hidden veins,
> down from stormclouds 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 (36).

Conclusion

In George Wolfe's production of *Caroline, or Change*, the Bus, Washer, Dryer, and Radio constitute a living, if surreal, landscape, that surrounds and participates in the action. Kushner's character of the Bus, as an icon of Rosa Parks and the Freedom Riders, weighs in as a reminder that buses have been sites of community where the force of Jim Crow laws were resisted and ultimately undone. (Meanwhile, photos of rows and rows of idle yellow school buses, window deep in floodwaters, provide one of Katrina's most brutally ironic images, marking like gravestones those

who might not have died had the buses rolled.) Caroline's basement environment is reciprocal and alive, materializing what Edmund Husserl called the "life world"—that is, the animate world in which, as imaginative/ecological creatures, we simultaneously exist and reciprocate.[81] More than an inventive theatrical device, Kushner's animation of inanimate objects manifests what David Abram calls a "speaking landscape," composed of a "field of intelligences in which our actions participate."[82] On stage, these machines sing out in living voice, embodied and ripe with agency. Environmental justice activist James Braggs observes that in a history of suffering and struggle, where "strange fruit" ripened on the branches of southern trees, or where Hansberry's Mrs. Johnson brings news of homes firebombed and crosses burned, "the imaginary is . . . where the impossible becomes possible and the real surreal," confirming "the existence of alternative realities that dwell in the collective historical consciousness."[83] The embodied animation of the Washer, Dryer, and Radio resist the systems of oppression that objectify Caroline's labor. As locations of dignity, they speak back to Caroline: neither is she object, neither can she be made into a so-called labor saving device. This imaginary bridge to an alternative reality also suggests a standpoint for granting autonomy to the non-human world: whether or not we can access it, whether or not we can own it, and precisely because we *cannot*, any more than we can access and own one another, the more-than-human world must be respected and granted its own autonomy.

If hurricane Katrina unveiled the still-present face of racism and classism in American society, it also deconstructed the very notion of privilege afforded by skins of all sorts. The levees, like the doctrine of "separate but equal," were meant to function as a kind of protective skin, safeguarding property, privilege, and power. But the legal levees and topographical skins have been breeched repeatedly by rivers and tides that will not be tamed, by human struggle, and the courage that precipitated resistance at lunch-counters, in courtrooms, and on buses.

Katrina demonstrated that people are shot through with the terrain around them; identity and community are collaborations. Being part of an ecosystem—Chicago's Southside or the Louisiana wetlands—is a kind of marking and being marked. As series of estuaries, the wetlands corridor of the Gulf Coast is a threshold between freshwater and saltwater, between earth and sea, marking a boarder between worlds, between possibilities of being. Our communities, our bodies, like our identities, are permeable, awash with the tides, always/already engaged and interdependent with the more-than-human-world.

Notes

1. Langston Hughes, *Let America Be America Again and Other Poems* (1938; New York: Vintage, 2004) 7.

2 Qtd. in *Environmental Quality and Social Justice in Urban America*, ed. James Noel Smith (Washington D. C.: The Conservation Foundation, 1974) 13, from Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971).

3. See Joel K. Bourne, Jr., "Gone with the Water," *National Geographic* (Oct. 2004).

4. Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy, *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy* (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1998) 3.

5. Giovana Di Chiro, "Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environmental and Social Justice," *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996) 300.

6. Di Chiro 300.

7. *Raisin in the Sun*, directed by Kenny Leon, Royal Theatre, April 26 through July 11, 2004; *Caroline, or Change*, directed by George Wolfe, Eugene O'Neill Theatre, May 2 through August 29, 2004. National and international tours of *Caroline* are ongoing through the date of this writing.

8. Erika Munk, "A Beginning and End," *Theater* 25:1 (spring/summer 1994): 5-6.

9. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981; New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1986) 23.

10. Resources for ecocriticism as critical theory include Gabriella Giannachi and Nigel Stewart, eds., *Performing Nature: Explorations in Ecology and the Arts* (London: Peter Lang, 2005); Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996). For additional discussion of the application of ecocriticism in theatre studies, see Theresa J. May, "Greening the Theatre: Taking Ecocriticism from Page to Stage," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 7:1 (Fall 2005): 84-103.

11. James Noel Smith, ed., *Environmental Quality and Social Justice in Urban America* (Washington D. C.: The Conservation Foundation, 1974) 14.

12. For an introduction to multiple environmental justice concerns, see Robert Bullard, ed., *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1993); Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990); Luke W. Cole and Shelia R. Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement* (New York: New York UP, 2001). A useful teaching anthology is *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics and Pedagogy*, eds. Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein (Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2002).

13. See Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the Environmental Movement* (Washington D. C.: Island Press, 1993) Chs. 6 and 7. Also see *Confronting Environmental Racism* and *The Environmental Justice Reader*.

14. Lake Charles, Louisiana, lies west of New Orleans and was ground zero for Hurricane Rita, a category 3 hurricane that occurred only a few weeks after Katrina.

15. Lorraine Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun* (1958; New York: Random House, 1994) 24.

16. Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun* 60.

17. Rebekah Levin, Lise McKean, and Susan K. Shapiro, *Community Organizing in Three South Side Chicago Communities: Leadership, Activities, and Prospects* (n.p.: Center for Impact Research for the Woods Fund of Chicago, September 2004) 33-35. This Report on Community Organizing was prepared for the Woods Fund of Chicago. The data cited can be found in the Appendix.

18. Tony Kushner, librettist, *Caroline, or Change*, Hollywood Records, 2004, 7. The libretto is included with CD recording of the original Broadway cast.

19. John Lahr, "Underwater Blues: History and Heartbreak in "Caroline, or Change,'" *New Yorker* 8 Dec. 2003: 123; my italics.

20. Una Chaudhuri, "There Must Be a Lot of Fish in that Lake: Toward an Ecological Theater," *Theater* 25:1 (Spring/Summer 1994): 24. Chaudhuri further posits that theater's humanist origins make it generally "anti-ecological." Contemporary theater artists working with ecological themes have been hamstrung by a tradition that defines drama as conflict between and about human beings. She observes that even plays that "manage to bring an ecological issue to center stage" must "exist within a theater aesthetic and ideology (namely 19th century humanism) . . . that is programmatically anti-ecological." While it is beyond the scope of this paper, I suggest that decommissioning the humanist center can be a central task of ecocriticism in theatre and performance.

21. Kushner, *Caroline, or Change* 7.

22. 7.

23. Todd Shallat, "In the Wake of Hurricane Betsy," *Transforming New Orleans and Its Environs*, ed. Craig E. Colten (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2000) 136.

24. The rapid changes in Louisiana wetlands and their consequences for urban areas of Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and Lake Charles is documented through diverse voices in *Transforming New Orleans and Its Environs*.

25. Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun* 74.

26. See Gay M. Gomez, "Perspective, Power, and Priorities: New Orleans and the Mississippi River Flood of 1927," *Transforming New Orleans and Its Environs, 109-120.* In addition, the PBS documentary *The Fatal Flood*, WGBH, 2001, is an excellent teaching source on this period.

27. Peter Grier, "The Great Katrina Migration," *Christian Science Monitor* 12 Sept. 2005: 1.

28. 1.

29. 4.

30. Shallat 122.

31. 124.

32. See Robert Bullard and Beverly Wright, "Legacy of Unfairness: Why Some Americans Get Left Behind," Environmental Justice Resource Center, accessed 5 Oct. 2005, <www.ejrc.cau.edu>. In 1969, hurricane Camille sent twenty-four-foot waves hurling over the broken alluvial delta. See Shallat 136.

33. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990) 48.

34. The term was first coined by German biologist Ernest Haeckel in 1866 as "oecologie" from the Greek *okios*, referring to the family household. See Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 189-253.

35. Richard Newhouse, "In Defense of People: A Thesis Revisited," *Environmental Quality and Social Justice in Urban America*, 38.

36. Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun* 75.

37. 75; italics original.

38. Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1997) 5.

39. 6.

40. 16, 21, respectively.

41. Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun* 54.

42. See Gottlieb 81-105.

43. Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun* 55.

44. Gottlieb 83.

45. See Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (1962; New York: Mariner, 2002) 15-38.

46. Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun* 55.

47. 55.

48. hooks, *Yearning* 41.

49. 41.

50. 42.

51. 46.

52. 42.

53. 43.

54. See Roberts Chapter 2.

55. Lahr 123.

56. hooks, *Yearning* 43.

57. 43. bell hooks also dispels the long tradition of black "mother worship" and "extols the virtue of self-sacrifice [of domesticity] while simultaneously implying that such a gesture is not reflective of choice and will, rather the perfect embodiment of a woman's 'natural' role. The assumption then is that the black woman who works hard to be a responsible caretaker is only doing what she should be doing. Failure to recognize the realm of choice, and the remarkable re-visioning of both woman's role and the idea of 'home' that black women consciously exercised in practice, obscures the political commitment to racial uplift, to eradicating racism which was the philosophical core of dedication to community and home." See *Yearning* 43-45.

58. Gottlieb 81.

59. bell hooks, "Earthbound," *The Colors of Nature: culture, identity, and the natural world*, ed. Alison H. Deming and Lauret E. Savoy (Minneapolis: Milkweed, 2002) 69.

60. hooks, "Earthbound" 70.

61. Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun* 40.

62. Kushner, *Caroline, or Change* 34.

63. 34.

64. As a Jewish gay male, Kushner also understood internalized oppression. In an interview with Charlie Rose, Kushner recalls "claiming [his] identity" and realizing "I'm tired of hating myself for this." Charlie Rose, interview with Tony Kushner, *The Charlie Rose Show*, PBS, 28 May 2004.

65. Kushner, *Caroline, or Change* 34.

66. 34.

67. 16.

68. Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun* 109.

69. By "Katrina," I mean the socio-economic reality *exposed* by hurricane Katrina as well as the loss and suffering of hundreds of thousands of poor people of color, not, obviously, the hurricane itself. At this writing, the term "Katrina" has become a kind of short-hand for the socio-economic injustice still pervasive among communities of color in the United States.

70. See Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (1920; New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1947). For a compelling critique as well as complication of Turner, see Richard White and Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Frontier in American Culture*, ed. James R. Grossman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1994).

71. Kushner, *Caroline, or Change* 34.

72. 17.

73. For a useful analysis of Hansberry's activist stance, see Ben Keppel, *The Work of Democracy: Ralph Bunche, Kenneth B. Clark, Lorraine Hansberry, and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995).

74. See Iris Marion Young, "Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy," *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Behhabib (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996): 120-136.

75. See, in particular, Young 131-32.

76. Kushner, *Caroline, or Change* 15.

77. 7.

78. 35.

79. See, for example, Christopher Hallowell, *Holding Back the Sea* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), which provides a compelling and detailed account of the importance of the Louisiana wetlands and the impact of late-twentieth-century efforts to control the Mississippi River.

80. Kushner, *Caroline, or Change* 35.

81. See David Abram, T*he Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon, 1998) 40-44.

82. Abram 260. Also, see 44-72.

83. James Braggs, "Autonomy, Nature and the Imaginary," unpublished manuscript, 16 Nov. 2006: 3. Here Braggs invokes Bessy Smith's reference to "strange fruit" hanging from southern trees, a signifier of lynching.