

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Black Pagecraft

KINOHI NISHIKAWA

The year 2020 revitalized public discussion of books and reading. Once the isolation of lockdown set in, the reading lists followed, with many recommending books—Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), Albert Camus’s *The Plague* (1947)—that remain remarkably attuned to what it feels like weathering a pandemic. As most teaching and cultural institutions transitioned online, book clubs brought people together in the now widely recognizable frame of Zoom’s gallery view. Then there were the lists and clubs that formed in response to news of police and vigilante violence against unarmed black people. Though Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor had been killed earlier in the year, the failure to hold anyone accountable for their deaths delayed a necessary reckoning. That arrived in May, when the release of cell-phone video of Arbery’s killing and the sharing of witness videos of George Floyd’s death reignited the Black Lives Matter movement and spurred what experts contend was the largest civil rights demonstration in American history (Buchanan et al.). Ibram X. Kendi’s 2019 antiracist reading list suddenly became a template for similar efforts that sought to educate, inspire, and inform readers on why the phrase “I’m not racist” is “a slogan of denial” (Kendi).

Yet how deeply did these recommendations resonate?¹ Looking back over the past year, we could say a lot of reading was encouraged, and many books were ordered online, but there was little discussion of how we might read *differently* in the face of so much dread and suffering. The prevailing assumption was that literature could be read for its prescience or relevance, its correspondence with the now. While gratifying in some respects and useful in others, this approach tends to blunt our capacity to be surprised by what we read. By “surprised,” I mean the feeling that attends not to the small identifications we latch on to in making a text relatable but to the profound

KINOHI NISHIKAWA, associate professor of English and African American studies at Princeton University, is the author of *Street Players: Black Pulp Fiction and the Making of a Literary Underground* (U of Chicago P, 2018). His current book project, “Black Paratext,” is a history of modern African American literature and book design.

recognition of our present situation in a fictional world. I mean the feeling of resonance on levels we can barely anticipate. Surprise like this comes from a kind of reading that doesn't just hold up a mirror to our present but actively changes our perception of it.

The most surprising reading experience I had in 2020 did not begin as a conventional act of reading. It began as an act of listening. In July 2020 I sat down in front of my laptop and listened to the Philadelphia-based Wilma Theater's production of Aleshea Harris's *Is God Is*. The play, which debuted at New York's Soho Rep. in 2018, follows twin African American sisters, Racine and Anaia, as they avenge their mother's nearly fatal burning at the hands of their father eighteen years ago. Harris's drama does not speak of viruses, and it does not mention police. There are no white characters, well-meaning or otherwise, and there is scant sense of the environment, much less of climate disaster. Yet the Wilma's audio play allowed me to hear all these things, and more, in the course of listening. It compelled me to feel their accumulated weight.

How did it do this? I later learned that my attentive listening was in fact an open-ended reading all along. After the lockdown in Philadelphia was announced, the director, cast, and crew returned to the script to figure out how to move forward with a remote production in a time of roiling national crisis. Much of their plans for an embodied production, which entailed "big design" and "really cool costumes," had been lost (Ijames and Adams). But rereading *Is God Is* allowed them to see how the resources for an audial performance were right there in Harris's words. Specifically, the way Harris arranges type on the page constitutes the drama's own dynamic enactment ("Cafe Chat"). The Wilma Theater's team discovered for themselves and then transmitted to me a timely lesson in reading. I picked up the script for myself and heard what they meant.

Published in 2017 by 3 Hole Press, *Is God Is* stages a hearing of characters' efforts to reconcile past trauma with present-day anguish not only through dialogue and action but also through graphic design. In lieu of presenting the customary front matter, the script's third page announces:

*This epic takes its cues
from the ancient, the
modern, the tragic,
the Spaghetti Western,
hip-hop and Afropunk.*

*This text also includes
adventures in typography.²*

The unattributed statement points to the generic hybridity of Harris's influences at the level of representation, but it also identifies how Harris transmits resonance. "Adventures in typography" names Harris's experimentation with the script form—its standardized layout, its segmented columns, its separation of dialogue from direction—in order to inscribe performance onto the page itself. It is a powerful instantiation of what I call black pagecraft, or the deployment of visual and spatial cues to create a soundscape for imaginative listening. In the published script of her play, Harris uses typographic experimentation not as a substitute for stage direction but as a guide for audial attention. This kind of attention, I propose, facilitates a more meaningful connection between reading and reckoning with a world on fire. It requires opening ourselves up to the way texts sound in their material forms. In what follows, I combine a listening to and a reading of the play to elucidate how 2020 resonates through embodied pagecraft.

Harris begins with a scenario that rings true to the experience of life under a pandemic. Racine and Anaia have been summoned from their apartment in the Northeast to a rest home in the South, where their mother is dying of an unidentified illness. The mother is simply referred to as She. In the Wilma Theater's audio play, we hear the inhale of a respirator and beeps of a monitor. She is unable to breathe on her own—a trait suggested by Harris's jagged typesetting, where spaces between and within lines mark the labor of utterance (29–30).³ But this deathbed summons, She discloses, concerns a pain that runs deeper than her current predicament. When the twins were three years old, their father, in a fit of possessive rage, set fire to She, from whom he had been estranged. She says the girls

tried to save her—an act of which they have only a dim memory but to which their bodies give scarred testament (38–39). Though She’s monologue intends to bind the twins together more closely, Anaia shrinks back, lost in her own foggy recollection of the event. Her hesitation is conveyed in minute type size, as if she is struggling to make sense of the revelation in a whisper (40). Seeing this retreat, the ailing mother finds her strength and demands that Anaia and Racine kill their father as revenge (fig. 1). Hers is the voice of God, erratically yet emphatically laid out, and her will is made known in a way that confounds the twins’ subjective orientation (40–41). In the audio play, the chaos of “uh”s is echoed by the faint sound of a dog barking in another room.

Harris’s pagecraft makes this soundscape available with the exception of the last sound effect. There is no mention of a dog in the rest home in the script, so its inclusion is a creative choice by the production team. The bark is a key element of the sonic disarray into which the twins are thrust, but it also creates its own form of resonance, one that loops into contemporary literature about black families living at the edge of humanity. Consider Joshua Bennett’s deft analysis of the opening scene of Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* (2011), in which a pit bull gives birth to her litter in a display of almost violent self-dissolution: “Motherhood, as it is described here, is inextricable from the proliferation of brute force, chaos deployed in all directions. And this destruction is not at all

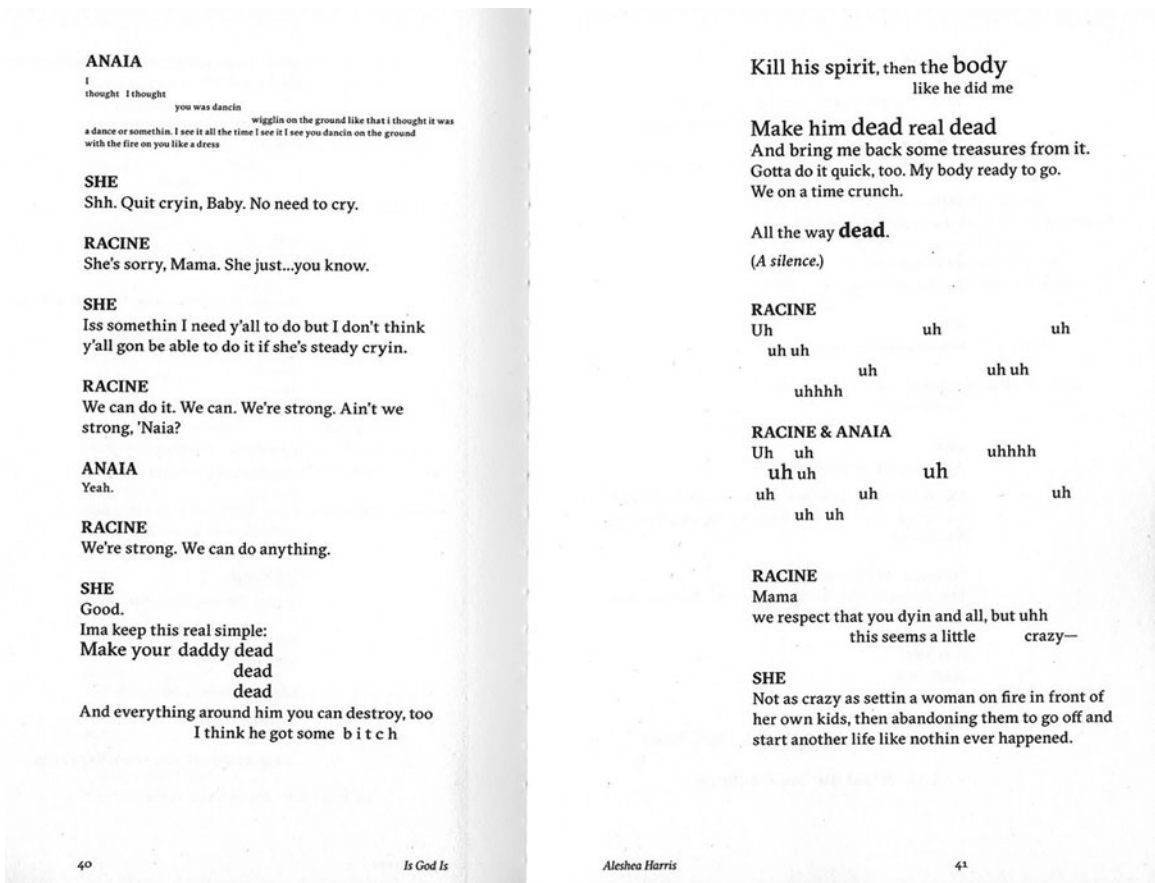


Fig. 1. A page spread from Aleshea Harris’s play *Is God Is*.

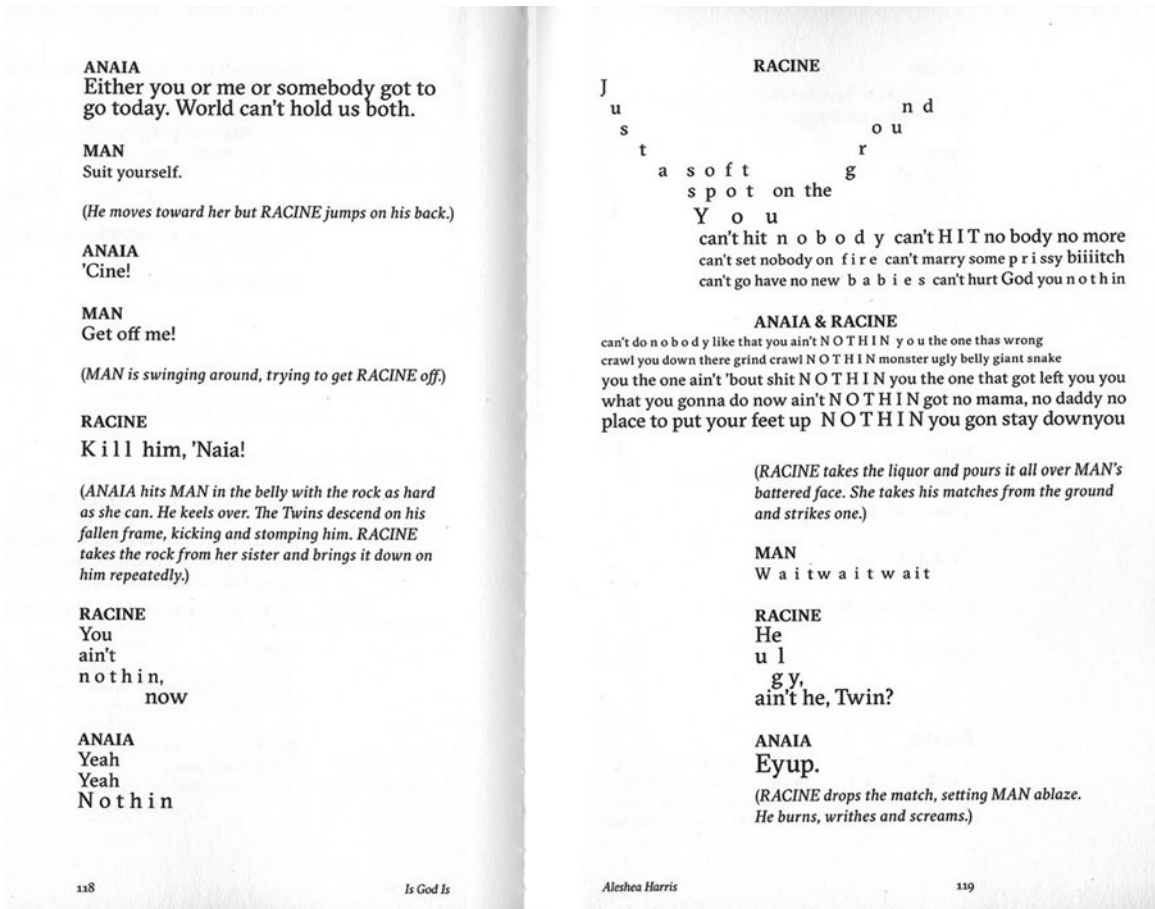


Fig. 3. A page spread from Aleshea Harris's play *Is God Is*.

Harris aims to depict a whole family struggling under the weight of cyclical retribution. This cycle, as Hortense J. Spillers argues in her 1987 essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," is one of the enduring features of the afterlife of slavery. To the extent that enslavement "displac[ed] the Name and the Law of the Father to the territory of the Mother and Daughter" in social relations and cultural life (i.e., in the symbolic realm), "Daughters and Fathers . . . embody the double and contrastive agencies of a *prescribed* internecine degradation." The wayward daughter, figured by Spillers as "Sapphire," and the father barred from fatherhood, "her 'Old Man,'" thus are mirror images of each other, enactments of the traumatic severance of family and personhood by property and the commodity relation. Black fathers and daughters "make doubles," and,

in their interaction, we begin to see "the socio-political order of the New World" (66, 67). Based on Spillers's account, we can understand Man and Racine's conjoining as a tragic reconciliation. It is a black feminist re-membling of a bond that has not been given a chance by our culture. In hearing it (again), I cannot help but think of all the black fathers—Kobe Bryant, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, and many others—whose love for their daughters is somehow intelligible only after their lives have been cut short.

Racine's sibilance, which leans on the word "is," inevitably brings us back to the title of the play. Before he dies, Man contends that Racine and Anaia's mother deliberately dragged them into the fire he had set. The girls were not trying to save her—they were caught up in her embrace. This revelation

flips the world on its head yet again. In the final scene, as She lies on her deathbed, Anaia says she has a “baby comin” who will be named “Enica,” which is “almost Racine spelled backwards” (124). This entails the ultimate realization: *God* and *Dog* are mirror images, forward and backward. The directive to kill the father was thus not righteous or good but “cursed” from the beginning (124). In the script, Anaia is ready to strike She with the sock, but she lowers it in an apparent effort to short-circuit the cycle, to save her child from being swept up by it. The audio play cannot convey this silent act, so it delivers reverberation instead. When She says, “Iss real q u i e t now,” Anaia brings the play to a close with “Funny / I still hear noise” (125). Unsure of what that admission signifies (the recording ends on this note; the rest is silence), I am left to wonder about Anaia and Enica’s fate. As I adjust to my surroundings in the present, I am given over to contemplating how the soundscape of *Is God Is* has amplified the “noise” of 2020 with almost striking clarity. I rewind the sounds in my head.

The resonances are unmistakable and overwhelming. How else to describe listening to She’s labored breathing and thinking her days have been numbered by COVID-19? I could not escape the idea, nor the recognition that the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on black communities, when Racine says she works at a day-care center and Anaia at a warehouse—a bit of dialogue that would identify them as essential workers (31). How else to describe listening to Angie, after Racine tries to grab her car keys, defend “her property” from being “stolen by a couple of thieves,” when it is the sisters whose childhoods have been stolen by Man (85)? One does not need a police presence in *Is God Is* to query why protecting property incites people’s anger more than the damage done to human lives. And how else to describe listening to father and daughter’s searing flesh and then hearing the lone survivor self-narrate, “Naia lookin out like somebody could see her / without f l i n c h i n g” (122)? Harris slows the last word down so that we hear the echo of antiblack violence that subtends this story about two families torn apart from within.

Black pagecraft sets the stage not only for readings in the present tense, through what Nathaniel Mackey calls the “congeries of apprehension” facilitated by “mind’s eye, mind’s ear” (229), but also for future hearings, which are ultimately readings in the ear of the other. “The most important thing about the ear’s difference,” writes Jacques Derrida, “is that the signature becomes effective—performed and performing—not at the moment it apparently takes place, but only later, when ears will have managed to receive the message” (50). The capacity to “receive the message” is not guaranteed, of course. It requires a reading practice open enough to allow for contingency and specific enough to activate a hearing at all. The “black” in “black pagecraft” moves along both axes, drawing on the resources of collective experience to meet the moment of history’s unfolding. Which is why when the Wilma Theater had to go back to the text to figure out how to go on, they heard a script waiting to be read amid a pandemic, a movement for racial justice, and a summer of continued environmental devastation.

In its tragic key, black pagecraft lends us equipment for listening to the cumulative pain of our histories and to the present-day suffering around us.⁴ It neither prescribes social action nor diagnoses social ills. In its almost interior attention to the mechanics of how the page signifies, black pagecraft resists the contextual compulsion to mean something *now* as demanded by reading lists and book clubs, or for that matter diversity statements and revised syllabi. In the way I have described listening to *Is God Is*, black pagecraft affirms literature as a resource for attunement, for a bone-deep hearing of the world as it exists, whenever that may be. Imagine the work we could do together, as scholars and teachers, if we trained our eyes to listen to black women’s adventures in typography.

NOTES

My thanks go to Harvard University’s History of the Book seminar and to Deidre Lynch and Hannah Marcus, for inviting me to present an early version of this essay at the seminar. I am

grateful to Jacqueline Goldsby and Koritha Mitchell for their feedback and suggestions.

1. The account of resonance I develop here is a materialist adjunct to what Wai Chee Dimock calls the “traveling frequencies of literary texts: frequencies received and amplified across time, moving farther and farther from their points of origin, causing unexpected vibrations in unexpected places” (1061).

2. All references to the printed text of the play refer to the 3 Hole Press edition, and all references to the audio version of the play refer to the Wilma Theater’s production.

3. Though I attribute typesetting choices to Harris, the design was executed by Omnivore, “a Brooklyn-, Portland- and Los Angeles-based design studio comprised of Alice Chung, Karen Hsu and Julie Cho” (“Omnivore”). More broadly, Harris’s experimentation was facilitated by 3 Hole Press, a nonprofit organization that “publish[es] titles that expand our notions of plays, scripts, and scores, how we engage with them, and how we distribute them” (“About Three Hole”). Every book from the press has a distinctive grouping of three holes punched through the front cover.

4. “Equipment for listening” plays on Kenneth Burke’s notion of “literature as equipment for living.” For Burke, a literary work may be thought of as a “strategic naming of a situation. It singles out a pattern of experience that is sufficiently representative of our social structure, that recurs sufficiently often *mutandis mutatis*, for people to ‘need a word for it’ and to adopt an attitude towards it” (300). The pragmatic or tactical nature of any strategy is not anathema to aesthetics but an essential part of its realization. As he puts it, “One cannot accurately know how things *will be*, what is promising and what is menacing, unless he accurately knows how things *are*. So the wise strategist will not be content with strategies of merely a self-gratifying sort. He will ‘keep his weather eye open.’ He will not too eagerly ‘read into’ a scene an attitude that is irrelevant to it” (298).

WORKS CITED

- “About Three Hole.” *Three Hole Press*, www.3holepress.org/about.
- Bennett, Joshua. *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man*. Harvard UP, 2020.
- Buchanan, Larry, et al. “Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History.” *The New York Times*, 3 July 2020, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html.
- Burke, Kenneth E. “Literature as Equipment for Living.” *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, Louisiana State UP, 1941, pp. 293–304.
- “Cafe Chat and Closing Toast: *Is God Is*.” *YouTube*, 26 July 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFdsQ75pdxQ&t=5s.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*. 1982. Edited by Christie V. McDonald, translated by Peggy Kamuf, Schocken Books, 1985.
- Dimock, Wai Chee. “A Theory of Resonance.” *PMLA*, vol. 112, no. 5, Oct. 1997, pp. 1060–71.
- Goldsby, Jacqueline. E-mail to the author. 20 Nov. 2020.
- Harris, Aleshea. “An Audio Production of *Is God Is*.” Directed by James Ijames, produced by the Wilma Theater, *Wilma*, 23–26 July 2020, wilmatheater.org/event/is-god-is/.
- . *Is God Is*. 3 Hole Press, 2017.
- Ijames, James, and Patreshettarlina Adams. “A Conversation with *Is God Is* Director James Ijames and Stage Manager Patreshettarlina Adams.” Interview by Alexandra Esperanza, *Wilma Theater*, 22 July 2020, wilmatheater.org/blog/james-ijames-pat-adams-is-god-is-conversation/.
- Kendi, Ibram X. “An Antiracist Reading List.” *The New York Times*, 19 May 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/05/29/books/review/antiracist-reading-list-ibram-x-kendi.html.
- Mackey, Nathaniel. “Sight-Specific, Sound-Specific . . .” *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews*, U of Wisconsin P, 2005, pp. 228–36.
- “Omnivore.” *Image of the Studio*. Herb Lubalin Study Center at the Cooper Union, 2021, imageofthestudio.com/studio/omnivore.
- Sanchez, Sonia. “a poem for my father.” *We a BaddDDD People*, Broadside Press, 1970, p. 14.
- Spillers, Hortense J. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, pp. 64–81.