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

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PMLA 136.3 (2021), doi:10.1632/S003081292100033X

https://doi.org/10.1632/S003081292100033X Published online by Cambridge University Press

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]

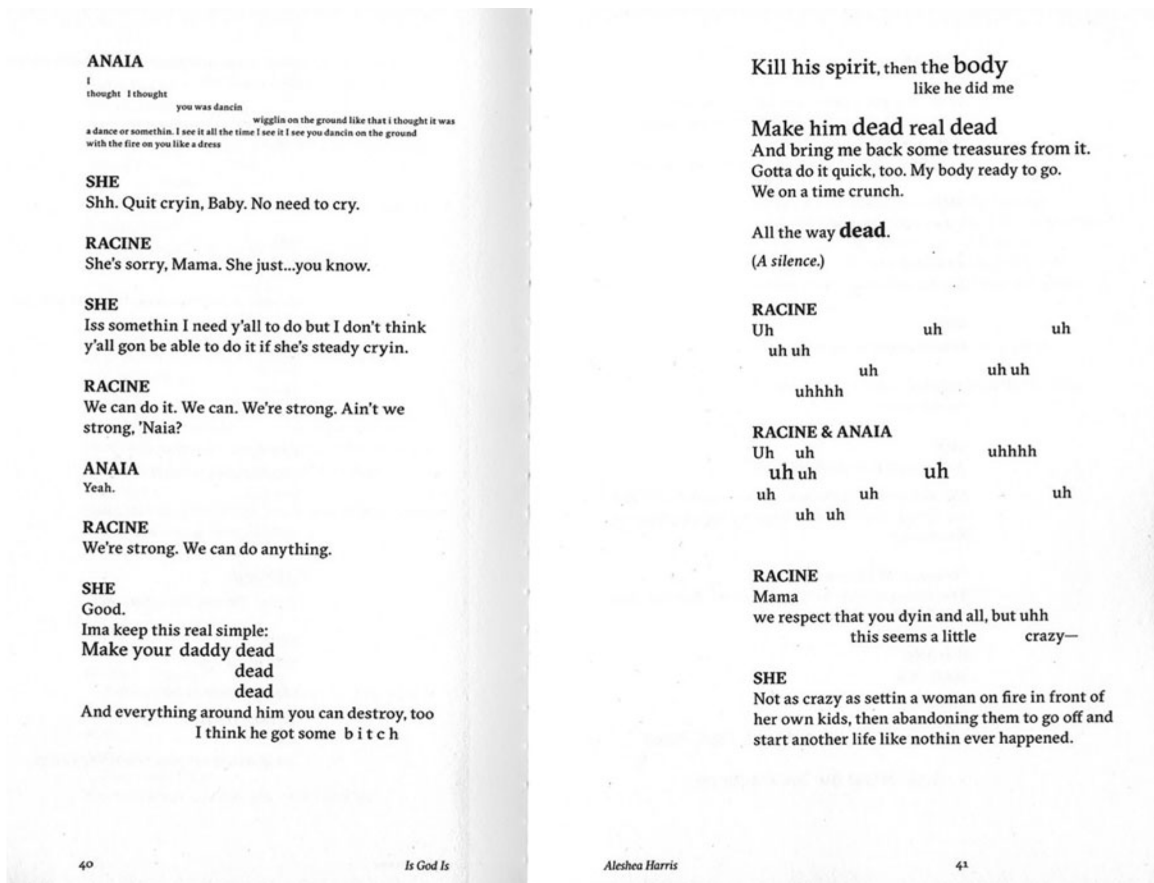
The unattributed statement points to the generic hybridity of Harris's influences at the level of representation, but it also identifies how Harris transmits resonance. "Adventures in typography" names Harris's experimentation with the script form—its standardized layout, its segmented columns, its separation 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

https://doi.org/10.1632/S003081292100033X Published online by Cambridge University Press

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



ANAIA
I
thought I thought
you was dancin
wigglin on the ground like that i thought it was
a dance or somethin. I see it all the time I see it I see you dancin on the ground
with the fire on you like a dress

SHE
Shh. Quit cryin, Baby. No need to cry.

RACINE
She's sorry, Mama. She just...you know.

SHE
Iss somethin I need y'all to do but I don't think
y'all gon be able to do it if she's steady cryin.

RACINE
We can do it. We can. We're strong. Ain't we
strong, 'Naia?

ANAIA
Yeah.

RACINE
We're strong. We can do anything.

SHE
Good.
Ima keep this real simple:
Make your daddy dead
dead
dead
And everything around him you can destroy, too
I think he got some b i t c h

40 *Is God Is*

Kill his spirit, then the body
like he did me

Make him dead real dead
And bring me back some treasures from it.
Gotta do it quick, too. My body ready to go.
We on a time crunch.

All the way **dead**.

(*A silence.*)

RACINE
Uh uh uh
uh uh
uh uh uh
uhhhh

RACINE & ANAIA
Uh uh uhhhh
uh uh uh
uh uh uh
uh uh

RACINE
Mama
we respect that you dyin and all, but uhh
this seems a little crazy—

SHE
Not as crazy as settin a woman on fire in front of
her own kids, then abandoning them to go off and
start another life like nothin ever happened.

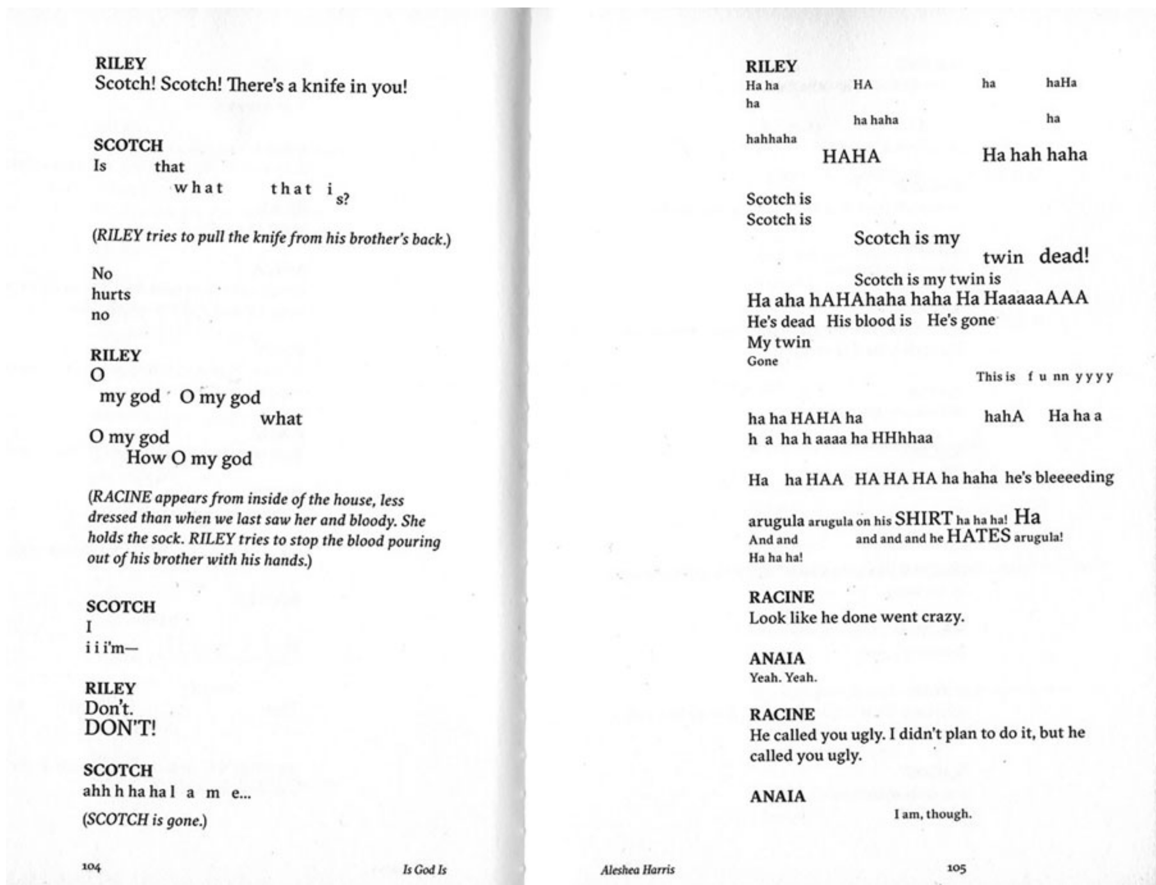
Aleshea Harris 41

FIG. 1. A page spread from Aleshea Harris's play *Is God Is*.

https://doi.org/10.1632/S003081292100033X Published online by Cambridge University Press

separate from the in-breaking of life into the world but constitutive of it. There is no new birth without destruction, no life without a certain version of the world coming to a close" (151). This dog, China, does not stand in for the absent mother, Mama, so much as limn her absence, which is "felt everywhere" after Mama dies while giving birth to her third child, Junior (153). That birth hews so closely to death is an insight the dog veritably performs in Mama's wake. For Bennett, China's status as a nonhuman being holds up a mirror to the family's unreconciled feelings of anger and loss. China conducts such feelings in her very animality, her noncorrespondence with personhood. The audio play echoes Ward's representation at the precise moment when Racine and Anaia are reborn in the wake of their mother's violent demand.

Propelled by righteous anger, Racine and Anaia travel cross-country to Castaic, a rural community in northern Los Angeles County, where their father has settled with his second family: Scotch and Riley, sixteen-year-old twin brothers, and their mother, Angie. Though Harris does not have the family dog appear on stage, the words on the page assume canine ferocity when the twin sisters tangle with Angie. They call her "bitch" (83, 86–87); she hits back with "animals" (84, 87). The repetition of these fighting words escalates the conflict to the point of no return. Racine pummels Angie to death with a rock in a sock as Anaia "whimpers" off to the side (87). As terrible as the violence is, there is a surreal quality to its execution, notably when silence punctuates the combatants' brief détentes. When Angie yells, "She should've left


RILEY
Scotch! Scotch! There's a knife in you!

SCOTCH
Is that
what that is?

(*RILEY tries to pull the knife from his brother's back.*)

No
hurts
no

RILEY
O
my god O my god
what
O my god
How O my god

(*RACINE appears from inside of the house, less dressed than when we last saw her and bloody. She holds the sock. RILEY tries to stop the blood pouring out of his brother with his hands.*)

SCOTCH
I
i i i'm—

RILEY
Don't.
DON'T!

SCOTCH
ahh h ha ha l a m e...

(*SCOTCH is gone.*)

104 *Is God Is*

RILEY
Ha ha HA ha haHa
ha
ha haha ha
hahhaha
HAHA Ha hah haha

Scotch is
Scotch is
Scotch is my
twin dead!
Scotch is my twin is
Ha aha hAHAhaha haha Ha HaaaaaAAA
He's dead His blood is He's gone
My twin
Gone
This is f u nn y y y y

ha ha HAHA ha hahA Ha ha a
h a ha h aaaa ha HHhhaa

Ha ha HAA HA HA HA ha haha he's bleeeeding

arugula arugula on his SHIRT ha ha ha! Ha
And and and and and he HATES arugula!
Ha ha ha!

RACINE
Look like he done went crazy.

ANAIA
Yeah. Yeah.

RACINE
He called you ugly. I didn't plan to do it, but he called you ugly.

ANAIA
I am, though.

Aleshea Harris 105

Fig. 2. A page spread from Aleshea Harris's play *Is God Is*.

https://doi.org/10.1632/S003081292100033X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Him!" to the sisters, referring to their mother, the irony is that we know she has grown disillusioned with her husband and is preparing to leave him herself (85). Harris observes the suppressed truth of the statement—that it redounds on Angie—by having all three characters "speak" a pause, denoted by a dotted line (85). A similar thing happens when the sisters go undercover to catch Scotch and Riley unawares: they introduce themselves as "Twins," a word that all four characters say at the same time, followed by another dotted line (91). Even though they do not know yet that they are related to Racine and Anaia, the brothers intuit the sisters are somehow more kin than kind. This moment of connection is fleeting, however, and the tragedy grinds on when Racine stabs Scotch. After seeing his twin perish before his eyes, Riley suffers a verbal breakdown similar in layout to the sisters' subjection to God (fig. 2). Consumed by rage, Riley comes after Racine, calling her a "dog bitch" (109). The epithet is wielded like a weapon; it provokes Anaia into socking him in the head.

The complex gender and family dynamics of Harris's pagecraft align it with a black feminist tradition of typographic experimentation (Goldsby). Jacqueline Goldsby reminds me that Sonia Sanchez, for instance, deploys pagecraft not only to articulate women's self-determination in the age of Black Power but also to acknowledge black masculinity's silenced experiences of trauma and vulnerability. In her second poetry collection, *We a BaddDDD People* (1970), Sanchez inserts spaces to query men who conceal weakness beneath a heroic facade. In "a poem for my father," she writes:

> when i remember your
> deformity   i want to
> do something about your
> makeshift manhood.
> i guess
>   that is why
> on meeting your sixth
> wife,   i cross myself
> with her confessionals.

Though the "i" only appears in lowercase, the speaker's voice carries through this memory and holds the power of withholding over her father. His sexual drive, which is recalled by the speaker as "your pvt dungeon," appears desperate in the face of her pauses. Sanchez is not identified as one of Harris's influences, yet resonance travels on frequencies of which we are never entirely aware. She, Sarah Webster Fabio, Toni Morrison, Harryette Mullen, Suzan-Lori Parks, Alexis Pauline Gumbs: all could be said to practice pagecraft in the ways I describe here.

The performative aspect of Harris's pagecraft reaches its climax in Racine and Anaia's showdown with their father. His rage over the murder of his sons, expressed in the phrase "Dog bitch" (117), is typographically matched by their joining forces to throttle him into nothingness (fig. 3). In the audio play, the *thwups* of rock on cloth turn into the *squishes* of rock on flesh. Their father, a character only referred to as Man, is pulverized. Racine then pours liquor over his body, strikes a match, and sets him on fire in an act of symmetrical violence for what he did to their mother. However, just after being set alight, Man manages to drag Racine into the blaze, taking her with him into death. Here Harris's pagecraft realizes its most profound force. As Racine burns alive, her dialogue stands in for the searing of the conjoined flesh of father and daughter: "b u r n in iss iss is b u r n i nn iss s ss ssss b urnin iss ss" (120). Realizing that trying to save Racine would spell her own death, Anaia shrinks back, refusing her twin and thereby separating herself from that which would consume her (121). The sibilant searing of Racine's flesh severs sibling connection through its utterance. In her final act of destruction, Racine has become not her mother's avenger but her father's child.

This fire in Castaic, California, burns in my ear and burns throughout the summer of 2020. Castaic was one of the many West Coast communities that experienced devastating wildfires from June through September of that year. Discrete human actions—some of them gender-reveal parties gone awry—that are magnified and fueled by conditions of global warming leave a scorched earth in their wake. But the searing of flesh, Harris's sibilance, echoes a tragic script even longer in the writing. Though Man is hardly excused for his actions,

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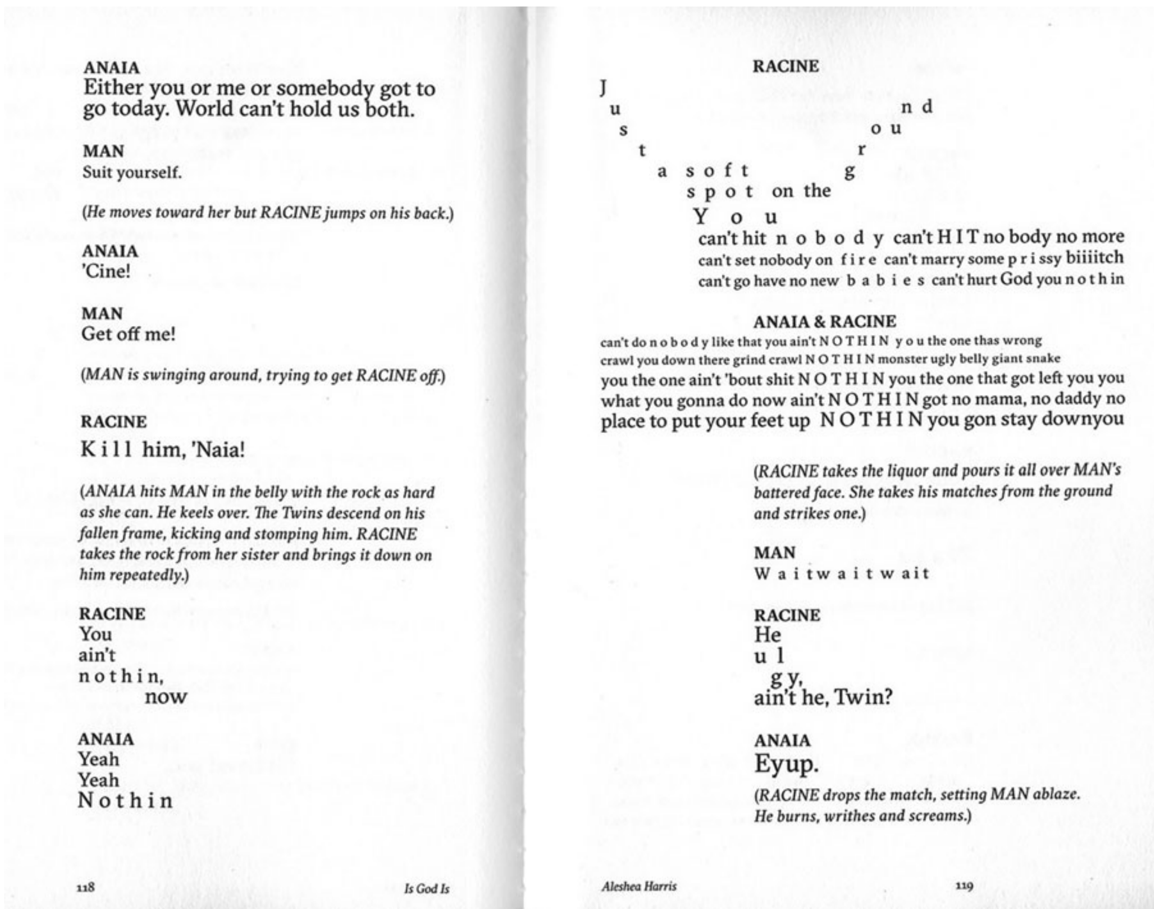

ANAIA
Either you or me or somebody got to go today. World can't hold us both.

MAN
Suit yourself.

(He moves toward her but RACINE jumps on his back.)

ANAIA
'Cine!

MAN
Get off me!

(MAN is swinging around, trying to get RACINE off.)

RACINE
K i l l him, 'Naia!

(ANAIA hits MAN in the belly with the rock as hard as she can. He keels over. The Twins descend on his fallen frame, kicking and stomping him. RACINE takes the rock from her sister and brings it down on him repeatedly.)

RACINE
You
ain't
n o t h i n,
now

ANAIA
Yeah
Yeah
N o t h i n

118 *Is God Is*

RACINE
J u s t a s o f t s p o t on the g r o u n d
Y o u
can't hit n o b o d y can't H I T no body no more
can't set nobody on f i r e can't marry some p r i ssy biiiitch
can't go have no new b a b i e s can't hurt God you n o t h in

ANAIA & RACINE
can't do n o b o d y like that you ain't N O T H I N y o u the one thas wrong
crawl you down there grind crawl N O T H I N monster ugly belly giant snake
you the one ain't 'bout shit N O T H I N you the one that got left you you
what you gonna do now ain't N O T H I N got no mama, no daddy no
place to put your feet up N O T H I N you gon stay downyou

(RACINE takes the liquor and pours it all over MAN's battered face. She takes his matches from the ground and strikes one.)

MAN
W a i t w a i t w ait

RACINE
He
u l
g y,
ain't he, Twin?

ANAIA
Eyup.

(RACINE drops the match, setting MAN ablaze. He burns, writhes and screams.)

Aleshea Harris 119

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-membering 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

https://doi.org/10.1632/S003081292100033X Published online by Cambridge University Press

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

https://doi.org/10.1632/S003081292100033X Published online by Cambridge University Press

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).

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