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Aleshea Harris's *Is God Is* (world premier directed by Taibi Magar at Soho Repertory Theatre, 2018) won the Relentless Award, an Obie for playwriting, and the Helen Merrill Playwriting Award. *What to Send Up When It Goes Down* (premier directed by Harris, 2018, New York premier directed by Whitney White for the Movement Theater Company) was featured in *American Theatre Magazine* and received a special commendation from the Blackburn Prize. The play was subsequently remounted at Woolly Mammoth, A.R.T., Brooklyn Academy of Music and Playwrights Horizons. *On Sugarland* (directed by White) premiered at New York Theatre Workshop in 2022 and received the Windham-Campbell Literary Prize, Mimi Steinberg Playwriting Award, Hermitage Greenfield Prize, Horton Foote Playwriting Award, Arts and Letters Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Alpert Award. Harris is a two-time MacDowell Fellow and has enjoyed residencies at the Hermitage Artist Retreat, Hedgebrook, and Djerassi.

Harris's work is highly poetic and political. She reinvigorates ritualistic performance, community building, and meta-theatrical explorations of the stage, thanks to a chiseled script. Her attention to sound, body, and movements offers a singular and plural address to debunk simplistic social constructs on Blackness in the United States. In *Is God Is*, Harris breaks the mythological molds of Greek dramaturgy (among many other matrixes) by sending twin sisters from the South on a quest for revenge. Harris creates a vibrant contemporary Black American theater that illuminates the complexity and thorniness of being represented beyond realism. Her work is transformational in ways that make Blackness infinite in its possibilities on stage.

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This interview took place at the CDE Annual Conference on "Theatre and the City" at the Fondation des États-Unis in Paris on 23 June 2022.[1]

Julie Vatain-Corfdir: Where does theater fit in your cities, in the cities where you grew up, the city you live in now? What kind of connection do you feel – organic or not – between theater and the cities that you experience?

Aleshea Harris: I am an army child, my mother was in the US Army. I was born in Germany but moved around quite a bit. So there isn't one locale that I associate with my upbringing necessarily: I'm a traveler. When I think about theater and the city, I think about my connection to one place I lived in after my mother had retired and I was on my own, a city called St Petersburg, Florida. It's a city where I became an adult artist. It was post-undergrad, I had studied acting, and I wanted to act, but I didn't have institutional connections. I really had to be an upstart, doing theater and a great deal of spoken word poetry on my own. It was just like crowdsourcing the work, finding collaborators willing to work for not a lot of money. The first play I produced, I used a bunch of mulch in the space, the ground was covered in it, so I had to go and find that. I had a partner at the time who helped me to pay the musicians. It was very much like: you had to do it yourself, which I think has served me in my career.

So when I think about theater and the city of my beginnings, I think about St Pete, the energy of that town, with its dive bars. It was really cheap to live there. It was really hot. There were a lot of people doing fire-dancing, especially on the edges of the spoken word scene. Just a very hippie vibe. It was a tremendous landscape if you were willing to get your hands dirty and make it happen. Spoken word poetry has been very instrumental in my work. Before I was producing plays on my own, I knew that I could write a piece in the morning and perform it that night because there were so many open mics. It was the most easily accessible theater. I didn't need anyone else, I could do it myself and have an audience. I did that pretty rapidly for a few years.

Now I live in Los Angeles but a lot of my work goes up in New York City. I don't have a great connection, honestly, to theater in L.A. It's not a very vibrant theater town, unfortunately. It's very scattered. There is a major institution called Center Theatre Group, but I had to get popular in New York for them to pay attention to me, even though I live in L.A. A lot of L.A. theater artists talk about that, the difficulty of being embraced by local institutions until their work receives a stamp of approval in New York.

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1 The editors warmly thank Agathe Faucourt, a master's student at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon, for the transcription of this interview and her help for finalizing the text with Aleshea Harris.

I feel a different kind of disconnect with New York. Although I have community there, I don't live there. I feel that there are nuances to that context that I don't have as a person who is not a New Yorker. I sort of come, visit, put up my work, hang out with a few friends, and then go home. It's not like my home. But I feel a bit of a connection to the art of theater in New York and a little more even to the community in New York. I don't feel like I actually have an artistic community in Los Angeles but I'm working to change this.

Jaine Chemmachery: Picking up on what you've just said, I want to ask whether your playwriting grew out of performance or if it was the other way around. What moved you to start writing plays?

AH: I actually was led to write plays because, as an actor, I was frustrated by what I felt were very narrow perceptions of how I could exist onstage. I just felt that people had these weird ideas. The African American theater that I had been studying at the University of Southern Mississippi was very much rooted in realism. Which I think is great but I didn't want to be rooted in it. I felt weird, quirky. I also felt that there were these narrowly held tropes – many of which still exist today – about what a Black story is and can be. I was just not feeling that.

So I set up to write things that I was hungry for. I think the writing came out of being a performer and wanting to experience certain things. I don't have headshots like a real actor, so at this point it's more about writing for others' performance. I am working on a solo piece for my own performance because I feel like it has to come through me.

JC: What were the main influences on your work?

AH: There's an army of influences. I was greatly influenced by Toni Morrison. The experimental quality of her work, the way that she seems really able to breathe in, to nuance the details of character and emotion, I find it incredible. She really is the gold standard of writing, of storytelling. I also really enjoy and feel influenced by Octavia E. Butler. She's also a novelist of what she calls "speculative fiction." She was a tremendous, wildly imaginative Black woman who seated Black characters in compelling situations and narratives.

For the stage, Suzan-Lori Parks is a great influence – *Fucking A* (2000) is still my favorite play of hers. I studied her and her essays in school. Heiner Müller is another one – for a time I would take *Medeamaterial* (1983) with me anytime I went on a writing retreat, just to have it. I loved the play that just won the Pulitzer Prize, *Fat Ham* (2022) by James Ijames, which is an adaptation of *Hamlet*. I saw a video production of it because of COVID last summer and I just loved it, so I'm so glad that he's

getting his flowers. It's really strong work. There are also so many poets that I encountered in Florida, so many masterful artists.

JVC: As far as spaces are concerned, could you tell us more about the kind of environment you like to write in?

AH: It's a really quiet space, I'm not someone who can have music going. I would love to be in the woods, in nature. I did a retreat a few weeks ago that was on the beach – that was really nice. But usually, I'm in my apartment in L.A., at my desk. I do a lot of pacing, so I need privacy. I'm not someone who can do work in a coffee shop, I do a lot of talking aloud to myself, trying to work things out loud. I walk around, talk to myself, draw pictures, and just try to sort it out, usually in my apartment.

JVC: How do you visualize the space that you are writing for – probably not a traditional theater?

AH: It's tricky. I have to be realistic and I want to make the best use of the space I'm going to have. I think in order to do that, I do have to imagine a theater space and how I can be disruptive inside that space. How can I play with the actual space? There is often a fourth wall but I like to dissolve it. To know what's really in the space is very exciting to me. But mostly when I write, I'm just imagining the characters' lived space. It's a little of both, it's like: what is this room? Where is the window in the room? I'm also thinking about how to articulate it with some adventurousness in the actual theater space.

JVC: It's not so much the scenography as how it's going to fit into the narrative and how you can disrupt the theatrical space and the relationship with the audience?

AH: Right. I don't think too much about what the set is but I do think about what it needs to be able to do.

JC: You mentioned the fact that you were doing a lot with a little as a sort of principle for your work. Does that relate to the type of scenography that you imagine for your plays?

AH: Absolutely. I get very nervous when people want to have what I call a "designgasm" with my work – doing the most because they can and not really paying attention to what the work needs. I think because the language of my plays tends to be quite dense, you don't need to add a bunch of stuff. People need to be able to use

their imagination. If it's one-to-one, and you're trying to realistically create the world, it's too much.

Figure 1: Movement Theatre Production of *What to Send Up When It Goes Down*. Photo: Ahron R. Foster.

JVC: Could you explain how the space works in this picture [figure 1] of your play *What to Send Up When it Goes Down*?

AH: I really love this space. What the scenic designer, Yu-Hsuan Chen, and the director, Whitney White, came up with was a chalk circle on the floor. The play is a ritual response when a Black person is killed due to anti-Blackness. The circle is quite ritualistic, and the play does a lot of work on repetition and revision, "rep and rev," as Suzan-Lori Parks called it. It uses repetitions, and the circle is also a space that the actors step into. The piece calls for margins that people are sort of outside of, and that's a commentary on the way Black people are marginalized. This isn't in my text but as this piece went on tour, there's a moment in the play where we invite people to write love letters to Black people. We started collecting them, and they found their way into the space. They surround the space. Oftentimes after the performance, people would read the notes on the wall.

Figure 2: Movement Theatre Production of *What to Send Up When It Goes Down*. Photo: Reginald Eldridge Jr.

The space is meant to be very fluid. The piece moves very swiftly from time and space, and it exists in a liminal space. There's nothing anchored. What we needed was a flat and open space that could be accessed easily and that could be transformed through the articulation of the actors' bodies and language versus furniture.

JVC: Who do you write for and how does that inform your writing?

AH: I write for myself first. Sometimes I do this silly thing where I'm writing because I know the characters need to greet each other, so I'm writing greetings. But I'm not interested in that at all. You can't write the thing that you're bored with, and I have to constantly remind myself of that. The short answer is: I write for myself first because I feel like "if I'm not into it, why should anyone else be?"

Some people have commented – and I'm very conscious of this, especially with the play that I'm working on now – that I write for Black people. I try to decenter whiteness and white supremacy, so I don't want to write a play that explains things about Black people to people who don't know, who are outside of that community, or apologizes in any way or tries to translate. I just try to write from truth. And my context is a Black context. I really want Black folks to feel comfortable in the theater, it's really important to me. You may know or can guess that it's not often the

case. You can't even assume that if a work is written by a Black person, then it is for Black people necessarily.

JC: You've described *What to Send Up When It Goes Down* as a tool that communities can access when they are in crisis. And the play was written when George Zimmerman walked free in 2013 after the shooting of Trayvon Martin. Can you talk about this notion of theater as healing? How it can be seen as a ritual? And can it be both a ritual and a place for protest?

AH: Yes, it certainly can. Theater has great potential to be a space of reclamation. At the start of *What to Send Up*, the language is: "We're here first and foremost for Black people," just as a way to bless the space because the standard is: we are here for white people. That's how deeply entrenched white supremacy is. If you don't say it, we know that we're in a white space, we know that we're centering whiteness. So I think it can be disruptive and it can be healing. That's what has been communicated to me, to say: "we're here and we're thinking about you, and we care about you, a person who isn't often cared about or given a shit about."

Theater has its beginning in ritual across cultures. When I was working on that piece, I was reminded that the job of a ritual is to bring something into being. We're always doing that, I think, in the theater. With *What to Send Up*, I really wanted to bring catharsis into being. I wanted to bring a space of affirmation into being. I have this quote that I actually didn't find until after I wrote this piece: "Any blow in life will have longer-lasting and more serious consequences if there is no opportunity to communalize it. This means some mix of formal social ceremony and informal telling of the story with feeling *to socially connected others* who do not let the survivor go through it alone" (Shay 39). You have to talk about it with other people who are sympathetic. I think that's what I'm up to. It's absolutely possible for the theater to be a space of healing and of protest. By virtue of saying "this is a space first and foremost for Black people," some people are gonna get mad about this. I don't care. But they're gonna get mad, and what we're doing is protesting the many spaces where we can't do that. In my program, as a degree-seeking student, I wasn't centered. Just to be able to say with a piece of theater "anti-Blackness is real, this pain is real, you won't gaslight me," is quite liberating. It is a form of protest for sure.

JVC: You also enable your audience to come and protest as well by asking them to share the names of victims and to participate in the ritual.

AH: Certainly, they're said to be very participatory. There's a moment in the play when we ask "if you've ever seen someone experience something that you don't think would have happened if they weren't Black, step forward." There are these

prompts that allow audience members to self-identify. The last one is: "if you have ever had the police pull a weapon on you, and you believe your being Black had something to do with it, step forward." And I have. So to step forward and have my friends – who don't know this, because it's not a story I'm gonna tell at a party – bear witness to that, it doesn't allow the issue at hand to live in abstraction. And that is protest, to say: "you can't deny this thing." People don't have to participate if they don't want to but I do think there's something about the gentle nudge towards acknowledging that this is real. That's healing for those of us who experience it potentially, and it's a protest to this idea that we shouldn't talk about it.

Figure 3: Movement Theatre Production of *What to Send Up When It Goes Down*.

JVC: It comes across very powerfully, even just from reading the script. Could you comment on this clip of *What to Send Up When It Goes Down*? [excerpt of the Movement Theatre Company's production is shown, "Second Movement" from TWO's monologue to "Fixing Miss: A Play within a Play" (Harris 58). Figure 3]

AH: Just a little context: that's after a series of prompts where we invite the audience to step forward if they experienced certain things or bore witness to certain things. What they're about to get into is what I have created inside of this piece, a sort of take down of this play, *Driving Miss Daisy* by Alfred Uhry (1987). I didn't break any copyright law or anything but I'm really playing on the idea of Black people as furniture. I don't know if you know that play but there's a woman who has this Black driver and she comes into consciousness about how bad racism is by

way of her engagement with him. I find it to be deeply racist and offensive, and the actors on stage are about to launch into this send-up of that play.

I very much wanted to make a piece that folks could step into and bring their own energy. These people all understand anti-Blackness in their flesh. I wanted to make something that allowed them to bring that with them. Something that happens when you're an acting student in a classical play, you have to think about your context as a Black person who Shakespeare was not writing for. But you bring yourself into it, and it can be a space of true catharsis for the actor because they're able to shed something that they have been carrying for a time. It gets very real. I don't want to be exploitative of what the actors have been through, I don't want to play with their real pain in front of an audience. Doing that is reaffirming the very thing you're trying to disrupt. We're not putting on a show of our grief for other people to come and salivate over.

The other thing is: I don't know if you all know about Black Greek culture or step culture in the United States. It's not Greek as in from Greece, but fraternities' and sororities' use of Greek letters. This production directed by Whitney White is the version that went up to New York. But I directed it in California and from the beginning that sort of step culture was always a part of the show, because it's deeply Black and it's such a visceral form of expression, stomping the ground. I wanted women to wear heels – if they were comfortable in them – and everyone was dressed up. I think there is something about watching people dressed to the nines, stomping, and articulating their bodies with such grace while also letting their anger, their grief, be in there. This does something that I could never do with written words.

JC: This is something I wanted to pick up on, your use of song and sounds but also silence. How do you stage them?

AH: I pay a great deal of attention to the sonic experience. You have to know what the language is doing as a word but also a sound. There's a quote from Suzan-Lori Parks: "words are spells in our mouths" (Parks 11). I really try to think about the spell that I'm creating. I'm very particular about what the scene should sound like. If it sounds wrong, I'm quite sensitive to that. I have a thing about urgency, so I often find that the characters are moving too slow. Don't let it resettle! Keep it moving, so we don't have to start the engine anew, especially with *What to Send Up*. I'm not a trained musician but I made music and I think that there's another plateau that music can take one to, as a recipient of a work. There are things that music can do that just the written or spoken word can't do. So I try to use as many colors as seems necessary to drive the point home. I want to do too much, I have been accused of that. But, yes, I love thinking about music and musicality of language.

JC: Do you leave some space for silence?

AH: Definitely. It's so powerful. If you pay attention to sound, then you have to pay close attention to silence. It's very useful to you: going from sound to sound and suddenly stopping, allowing everyone to sit in silence.

JVC: There are very powerful symbols in your plays that speak to the fact that the characters don't just stand for themselves but for generations that have suffered before them. The Y incision in *What to Send Up* or Sadie's monologue in *On Sugarland* or the mouth that speaks on its own. Is it fair to say that your theater is also a way to honor the voices of the dead?

AH: Absolutely. There's something about being a human being and knowing that the time is limited that I can't stop thinking about. I feel called – because of my history and the history of my folks – to honor these voices by invoking them. There are so many lost names, so many lost stories. Hopefully it's not a rude or exploitative invocation. It's a way to say that these folks weren't spoken about. I think about the folks I know who passed on. I feel it serves one's humanity to think about those who have passed on.

I also like to think about the collective. If somebody didn't treat me well because I'm a Black woman, I draw strength from remembering that my mother experienced the same. I'm not happy that she experienced the same. But if I can point to her as an example of another Black woman whom I know went through this and is fine and is still joyful: it emboldens me. To reach even further back, as Sadie does, I can be sad but I try to think about it as a source of strength as well. Unfortunately, a lot of people interested in Blackness fetishize the pain. But our story is so much more complex than that. I want to be able to talk about the dark things but also about the joy and find the light in the dark. I think that's something marginalized people are very good at doing – unfortunately, out of necessity.

JC: I was wondering if your works could be seen as providing some form of ethics that cares for the dead people but also provides some form of relief, enabling the ones who passed away to return to the world of the living.

AH: I hope so. In my work, the dead often tread the same ground as the living. What you said made me think of coming out of *What to Send Up*, when the actors go back out into the world. What they told me is that the ritual works. They actually go through a thing that allows them to move back out into the world and be okay. That is my hope.

JVC: Reading your plays, something that comes across is the powerful Black women. In *Is God Is*, you're giving us a new take on American mythologies and carving out a place for strong Black women within them.

AH: I'm definitely taking space. I said that I'm a really greedy woman. There's so much that is denied to me but when it comes to my work, I can do anything. If I want to draw on Spaghetti Westerns, if I want to take my cues from ancient Greek theater, or draw on the language of Black folks in Mississippi where I lived with my mother, then I'm gonna do that. There are a lot of strong Black women but I also don't want to fall into the trope of the strong Black woman. There's this idea that Black women are strong and don't need help. That we are mules for American society and perhaps other societies. I just want to disrupt that because I want to allow Black women the full measure of our humanity. I'm not really interested in being seen as a superwoman who isn't quite as human as a white woman.

JC: Considering *On Sugarland*, could you explain how Black women fit into the American imagery of the military?

AH: *On Sugarland* is inspired by Sophocles's *Philoctetes* and it's about folks who live in a cul-de-sac who are dealing with an endless war. As I mentioned, my mother was in the Army, and I had never seen a story on stage about a Black woman in the military. In the play, there is no Black woman in the military who is seen. But there's one who is spoken about, who is larger than life, and who looms over the entire piece. But in terms of how Black women in the military exist in the American imaginary, I don't think they exist very prominently. When people say "soldier," what comes to mind is the image of a white man. But I know the story of my mother, that's how she fed us. I helped her unlace her boots at the end of the day, it's very close to me.

RACINE

You
ain't
n o t h i n
now

ANAIA

Yeah
Yeah
N o t h i n

RACINE

J
u n d
s o u
t r
a s o f t g
s p o t on the
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 bïiiitch
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 a i t

Figure 4: *Is God Is*.

JVC: About the texture of your writing, I want to show a couple of pictures [figures 4 and 5] of how you arrange text on the page. A frequent invitation at the beginning of your plays is: "This play contains adventures in typography." And they do. Would you like to comment on what you're going for in those examples taken from *Is God Is*?

AH: *Is God Is* is a tale of twin sisters whose mother impels them to go and kill their father because he set her on fire. This [figure 4] is the moment in the play when those twin sisters kill their father. Typography is another tool in the arsenal, another way for the reader to bring themselves closer to the work. I try and be expressionistic even in the performance of the language on the page. It's fun for me, and I think it can be useful to a certain kind of reader. Throughout the play, their father has been sort of held high and he is a source of fear. But here, they bring him low. And through language, I'm trying to make him a soft spot on the ground. I also use a lot of space between the letters. It's a tool of emphasis. In a normative way of writing, these lines wouldn't have the same feeling and they wouldn't drive home the sense of rage that the twins are feeling.

(ANAIA takes a few more steps back.)

ANAIA

i
i can't, Twin

RACINE

Get b u r n i n G e t Twin b u r n i n
him Twin hi m i s ss i s sss
b u r n i n iss iss is b u r n i nn iss s ss ssss b u r n i n iss ss sss
ssss s sss s ss s ss sss s sss ss s sss s sss s ss s ssssss s s s s s s s

ANAIA

t'n s C

RACINE

Twin? T w i n? T
w n?
t w i n
w n?
t

(ANAIA runs and hides as her sister screams. The fire burns until everything is ash.)

Figure 5: *Is God Is*.

This second picture [figure 5] is when the twins set their father on fire and he grabs Racine at the last moment and pulls her into the fire with him. So she's saying to her sister Anaia "help me," and Anaia – who is pregnant – is feeling a sense of self-preservation that makes total sense to me and she says "I can't." And here, this is Racine dying. Again, I'm playing with space, playing with a heightened distress, and the letter S that looks like flames. To me, it was very interesting. Then under that is the word *can't* but backwards and that to me is true experimentation. I just don't even have a word for what happens when one's twin sister burns alive in front of them. It's just a placeholder for what the actor could do with that moment. At the very beginning of the play, Racine and Anaia both say different versions of this line together: "Burnin/Them burnin twins," but now Anaia is by herself, saying it. Then we read: "Anaia looks out at us." To me that's a moment when this Black young woman, who is described as "ugly," ignores the fourth wall and becomes bigger than just her character. She's both herself and so many other Black women.

JVC: What's wonderful about it is: you're also giving your reader a very expressive experience, which is not something that playwrights often think about.

AH: I was inspired by Suzan-Lori Parks again but also a graphic version of Eugène Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950). It's amazing just to see this version of the play, which sometimes has words stacked on top of one another. It was very exciting and I felt like Ionesco and whoever else worked on that were giving me permission to do it.

JC: I watched *Is God Is* before reading the play and the effect was completely different, with this dislocated writing. You said in an interview (Myers) that you were interested in the readers' experience and in the way words can have an impact on the page. I was wondering if you were meticulous about how this experience on the page should be translated on the stage.

AH: I leave space. I just want it to feel right. It's a clue for the characters' state of being. Typically, when they're okay, it's a little more normative. When actors ask me about it, I just tell actors to try something and we work to shape it together.

JVC: Could you tell us about the place of violence and rage in your theater? There's the recurring image of fire, the burnt body of the mother, Racine slinging a sock with a stone in it. How do you want this violence to be represented on stage – through suggestions or by showing it straightforwardly? How do you intend it to be received by spectators?

AH: I think violence is exciting to me because it is something that feels – or felt even as a girl – so off limits. You could see so many images in action movies of another kind of person being violent. The violence in my work is not a literal proposition, it's a psychic proposition. I feel liberated through inviting violence into a narrative. Also, violence is very much part of my country. The American history is a very violent one, and I'm not going to stray from that.

What I want to say is not to go out and put a rock in a sock and beat people to death, but to think about Black women differently. We're not perpetual victims. This is for Black women. Don't think about yourselves as on your knees, crying, being the weeping wailing Negro woman who is sad about a lynching. That's true to our history and should be honored. But I'm not interested in Black women being sort of frozen in amber as these simple versions of someone else's idea of us. There's a version of us that Hollywood is addicted to. As a mythmaker, I have to challenge those myths. Using violence is a way to do that.

As far as how I want it to be articulated on stage, it really depends on the piece itself. The moment you mentioned with the mouth in *What to Send Up*, the actor literally just mimes holding a mouth in her hand. In the New York production of *Is God Is*, they had a sponge soaked in blood for the stone in the sock. So there was splatter when they would strike people with it. In London, there was no blood. Both were quite effective to me. More important than blood is that we see the articulations of the actors' bodies. We see them actually swinging the weapon with some heft. To me, there's no substitute for watching a real human body attempt something strenuous. *What to Send Up* is designed to be exhausting because it mirrors the exhaustion of constantly dealing with anti-Blackness. The journey the young women go on in *Is God Is* is very physical, visceral. I had very strong feelings about it. In London, I remember taking over and saying "no, this is what the fight needs to be," because I didn't want it to be clumsy or silly. I wanted them to swing that rock, to build suspense, and I wanted it to be exciting to watch. It's violent, it's terrible, but it's also funny. So, let it be theatrical in its complexity.

JC: Your plays are specifically rooted in an American context. How does it feel to have them performed abroad? Do they resonate differently? How would they resonate here in France?

AH: I feel so fortunate that my work has been performed outside of my country. There was a production of *Is God Is* that was mounted twice in Korea. There is also a production that will go up to Australia; there were another two in London and Canada. I didn't see the Korean production. I probably won't see the Australian production. But I was there for the British one, helping to mount it. And the history of Black folks in Britain is different to my context. So it was important to me to explain where I was

coming from, what I was up to, and not presume that they understood. They were very curious and lovely. You don't always know how people are going to react to the play.

For Black Americans, there's the question of respectability politics. When people are part of a marginalized group, sometimes in order to protect themselves, they believe that they have to conduct themselves in a particular way. They have to behave. If you're Black, make sure you dress well, don't talk too loud in public. I think this is to the detriment of the full measure of the humanity of Black people.

JC: What do you think about French color-blind productions? Some of your plays have been staged in France, one in Saint-Etienne, could you tell us more about this experience?

AH: Yes, there was a reading during the *fête du livre* at La Comédie de Saint-Etienne. I also had a play called *Fore!* (2018) that toured in Belgium and France – it was an unfinished draft for anyone who saw it. I didn't see *Fore!* but I saw the piece that was in Saint-Etienne. I'm not fluent in French so I can never know how good that translation is. There are so many nuances that I almost can't imagine my work translated. Some French folks are endeavoring to translate a play I wrote called *Dance the Fallen* (2012), but I just think that the nuances of the speech that I employ are difficult to translate. But it's exciting that they want to try. This cross-cultural experience is interesting.

About color-blindness, I experienced some of it and was told about it before the first time I came to France for work. I don't pretend to know the whole French context around colonialism, but I know that what people do might be different to what they say. Even if people are practicing color-blindness, it doesn't mean that racism doesn't exist. I'm very proud to be a Black American, and I don't want to pretend that I'm not. But it was a little weird to be told that the French don't identify as Algerian-French, that everybody is French. And it's taboo. That's for you all to fix in France and Europe, I have my own problems in my country!

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