Finally in the coherence / we weep": the words are in serif font and the letters slightly effaced. The w in "weep," in particular, is missing flecks of ink, and I know that Kameelah Janan Rasheed must have considered its acutely threadbare shape when she placed this word on the bottom right corner of an unnumbered page about three-quarters of the way through her 2019 book No New Theories. Throughout the book, and across her art practice, Rasheed attends to text that is tentatively legible and partially withheld.

Rigorously interdisciplinary and a self-named "learner," Rasheed often makes work in the form of immersive installations stuffed with scraps of text that she finds or writes. Taking over surfaces like the facade of the Brooklyn Museum, a massive digital billboard in Times Square, or the walls and crevices of a gallery in Berlin, the artist makes architectural elements from poetic language, using her fine-tuned eye for typeface, color contrasts, and scale to bring viewers into a physically active reading experience.

Rasheed, born and raised in East Palo Alto, California, began as a high school teacher, after receiving a BA in public policy from Pomona College and a master’s in education from Stanford University. Still working full-time in curriculum development, Rasheed intertwines her educational impulses with her artistic production, pairing exhibitions and book publishing with public lectures, workbooks, and on-site workshops.

Like the radical Black publishers who preceded her, Rasheed wants to own all the means of her production. In her home studio, she keeps a negative scanner, a Xerox scanner, a Risograph, and an etching press. She also keeps an extensive collection of books.
stacked around her workspace, many of which became verbal footnotes during our conversation—at the moment, she’s reading and referencing volumes by cultural geographer Katherine McKittrick, *Blackpentecostal Breath* by Ashton T. Crawley, and *Shadow Archives: The Lifecycles of African American Literature* by Jean-Christophe Cloutier, to name just a few.

Rasheed is equally interested in algorithmic literatures—the language of artificial intelligence and text generation—and the juxtaposition of machine learning and predictive text with handwritten annotation. In our conversation, Rasheed spoke about these autocorrect algorithms as being almost oracles that can point the reader in unexpected directions. It feels like more than coincidence, then, that when I downloaded a robo-transcription of our interview, the document was filled with lucky incoherences. The software refused to write “No New Theories,” instead offering enigmatic alternative titles (“know me very,” “nonappearance”) for this intentionally fragmented and elusive book. When Rasheed mentioned understanding “myself,” the machine heard “my father,” coalescing the artist with the family member whose reading and note-taking process so closely resembles her own. “Unlearning” became “I’m learning” became “unlearning” once more in the robo-transcription and in our actual conversation, as Rasheed enacted a close reading and generous rereading of her practice, her precedents, and her translation of complex, expansive care.

**NICOLE ACHEAISON** So many of your installations are site-specific. Could you talk about how you engage with architecture? Does the space ever end up affecting the content of the work?

**KAMEELAH JANAN RASHEED** When I enter a space where my work will be displayed, I like to think about how people are going to move in that space. Will they have the option of lingering, of stepping back and moving forward? I like to be responsive to the architecture. If a space has many 90-degree angles, I can think about it as a book. If a space has really high walls, it’s an opportunity for me to think about the affordances of such height and what I can do with wall painting and wall drawing. None of my work is “pick up and pack and put in.” I have to physically be there. I have to sit with the spatial realities. I have to annoy the installers: “Over there! Just kidding, I changed my mind, move it over here.” I’ve had the privilege of actually being able to change the work during the show. That’s been really important for me in thinking about knowledge and unlearning and unknowing.

**ACHEAISON** I’ve seen a lot of scientific vocabulary sprinkled in your writing about your art. You’ve discussed your interest in ectopias, or abnormal positions of bodily organs, and you appropriate that term to talk about displacement of language rather than of biological function. Another word that comes up again and again in your artist statements is “ecosystem.”

**RASHEED** When I was in elementary and middle school, the science lab teacher happened to be a Black man. He took me under his wing. He would let me order supplies and insects from the biology catalogue. From a young age, I was interested in doing experiments as a form of play. By the time I got to college, I had written off science as a career path. Now I feel like my eleven-year-old self is resurfacing. Scientific language is important to my art practice not because I believe that science is the only way to understand the world, but because I think of myself as an interdisciplinary person. I used to struggle to describe what I do because I didn’t have language that implied relationality and changeability and adaptation and experimentation.

“Ecosystem” is a term I can use to think about that. I grew up in Silicon Valley, so there
was an implicit interest in technology and the internet. We were the recipients, I guess is the word I’ll use, of a lot of tech programs, and so I was interested in computers and networks from a very early age. Even thinking about what Octavia Butler talks about as “primitive hypertext.”

ACHEAMPONG That’s another term that pops up frequently in your work. I was prompted to read the transcript of a 1998 panel discussion at MIT in which Butler uses it, where she’s talking about how she’s engaged in analog research.

RASHEED Butler did in a few sentences what I had been trying to articulate for several years: she asserted the right to move laterally across many disciplines and ideas, described it as a physical process. When I’m building out installations, I am interested in what it means to read with the body. When I put a large work next to a tiny thing, you can stand back from the large piece, but you have to move in close to see the small one. One time after I finished an installation, I sat in the corner and watched people move. It looked like they were dancing.

ACHEAMPONG After reading some of your thoughts on hypertext, as in your 2017 interview with the Creative Independent, I felt more conscious of how algorithms determine my daily learning habits. Do you find AI and machine learning to be a generative partner to your own learning?

RASHEED I have more than four thousand photos of Black families, which I’ve been collecting since 2010. I’m interested in the care that’s given to Black people in our lifetime but also in what happens to our material remains, the little stuff that is left behind. I got really interested in digital afterlife. I’ve been researching GANs, the use of AI to create fictional faces and voices and videos, and the destructive potential of this technology. If you go to thispersondoesnotexist.com, it generates a face for a fictional person, using a GAN that has been trained on data sets of photos. I imagine an entire world populated with Black folks who have passed away, who are somehow living on through these avatars they never consented to. My interest in AI and neural networks and GANs and machine learning in general comes out of a desire to understand how the abuse of afterlife, of material culture, of organic material extends into the digital landscape as well. While these technologies can be generative in many ways, so far we’re on a path of extractive policies.

But an autocorrect algorithm can be like an oracle, an act of divination that points somewhere you didn’t expect. Sometimes I’m typing one word and another word pops up, and that asks me to go somewhere else with my thinking.

ACHEAMPONG The main text of your book No New Theories is a conversation between you and critic Jessica Lynne, with annotations and citations that seem made in the spirit of primitive hypertext that Butler speaks of.

RASHEED What’s funny about this book is that the first edition came out in 2018. It had some printing errors, so we pulled all the copies from the shelves. Then, early in 2019, Printed Matter said they had some funding to reprint the book. My first thought was just to correct everything. But then I thought about making the revision process public, to embrace the fact that this is a revised text and that revision is part of learning—a notion of publishing as call-and-response. When I publish something, I want people to respond. I want it to be annotated, literally and figuratively.
Jess and I did that interview in 2017. By mid-2019, we still believed most of the stuff in it, but there were other things we were thinking about. I printed out the interview and passed it off to her. She wrote a bunch of notes, which I included as footnotes. And then I went back and annotated on top of that. Even as we were wrapping up the book, I thought of another thing I wanted to add. And I said to myself, “Kameelah, a book is not the final time you get to speak.” The book becomes the temporary gathering of ideas. The only thing that holds them together is the structure of the book. But that doesn’t mean you can’t publish another book. I later noticed that the annotated pages in *No New Theories* look like my dad’s notes from his religious studies in the 1980s. He has a binder of excerpts from the Quran, along with photocopies, typed and handwritten notes, sometimes on the back of handouts he got at pharmacy school. *No New Theories* ended up following almost the same format as his process for learning and revising and processing. My dad’s notes are this singular plane where all of these life cycles have collapsed onto one page, and I think about the interview in *No New Theories* as being very similar, where all these different life cycles of revision and thinking and learning and unlearning are collapsed onto one page. Now I’m working on the third edition of *No New Theories*, because I’m interested in what it means to keep a publishing project in perpetual processing—what it means to say the book is never finished. I want it to be almost a ritual, returning to this book every few years to revise it.

**ACHEAMPONG** Your bookmaking process has an accidental lineage with your father. I am also wondering about your relationship to a lineage of Black radical publishing. In your exhibition at the New Museum with the Black School, you presented your research on independent Black presses. How are you connecting your own publishing practice to your historical precedents?

**RASHEED** Through my recent research, I started learning more about small publishing projects that were happening in East Palo Alto, where I grew up. There was the Mothers for Equal Education bookshop. I also found a publisher who wrote a book about Black curriculum. He has an opening section where he says: “This book was made by Black people. The words were written by Black people. It was printed by Black people.” During the New Museum program, I was really interested in building an archive of Black printed matter. Now there are more than three hundred pieces—and more every day—from Black publications from the ’60s through the ’80s. Everything from Ache, which was a Black lesbian newsletter up in the Bay Area, to examples produced by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. I’m collecting these things because I want not only to talk about them, but to hold and touch them. I had library hours at the New Museum show so anyone who could get there could look at everything and engage the material with their hands. That was important for me because sometimes these publications are behind paywalls or at institutions where people can’t touch the things that are connected to their lived experience.

For me, the legacy of radical Black publishing lies not only in the concept, but also in the design, in the production, in modes of distribution, in the use of bookstores not just to sell books but to organize and get together. When I think about *No New Theories*, I’m thinking about what it means to widen the scope of what’s considered a publication, to bring those histories back in. I’m still building this archive, and my assistant and I are going to start scanning again. The goal is to have access to Black design aesthetics, especially vernacular typesetting and handwriting. People used to have these beautiful handbills that were drawn by hand. It’s amazing to think about Black folks who made do with what they had, and became skilled print technicians and makers of beautiful objects.

**ACHEAMPONG** That’s a perfect segue into the physicality of the book objects that you’re creating. *An Alphabetical Accumulation of Approximate Observations* [2019] is a spiral-bound book; Scoring the Stacks (experiment ii), also from 2019, is saddle stitch. The common thread across your binding choices seems to be that these are books you can very easily lay flat and open wide. It seems like an anti-precious tactic.
RASHEED The spiral-bound book, which I published with Endless Editions, was such a fun product because with the Risograph there’s so much imperfection. Sometimes I buy books that seem too pretty for me to read. I wanted the book that I made to be beautiful, but not precious. I would love to go to someone’s house and see No New Theories with Post-it notes and marginalia. That kind of reader engagement is important to me because I have a hard time reading books without writing in them. I want to invite people to do that.

I’m also interested in intentionally leaving literal and figurative gaps in the book that invite people to participate—things that will get people to do something with their body or say something as they’re reading. When I did the Scoring the Stacks project at Brooklyn Public Library in 2019, people had score cards that they carried as they moved throughout the library to find things and then create something new. We just finished our catalogue workbook for that, and there’s a series of activities in it. The oils in your hand can smudge the cover. I never want to make something that people feel like they can’t touch. I would not be sad if there was a finger smudge on the wall. That’s exciting to me. I like the tactility of making work that is partially on the wall, but because of the humidity in the space or the quality of the paper, it’s kind of coming off the wall as well. I like the markings of living-ness in my work.

ACHEAMPONG How do you determine which typeface to use?

RASHEED I have a bias toward serif fonts. I feel like they have a bit more attitude, a little more noise. My husband makes music, and my process of selecting a typeface is similar to how he finds samples. He might hear a particular bass line or half a bar that interests him and save it in a folder. If I’m reading a book, I might just like the curve of an a. So I take out my phone and use the Genius Scan app to save that a, or photocopy it on the spot and put it to the side. I collect texts in a very intuitive way. I’ve started to read this book called Understanding Molecular Typography. It’s about how letters have physical and chemical properties because of the ink. I thought that was kind of amazing, and it made sense to me. I recently published this essay in Active Cultures about a West African practice in Quranic schools, where after writing a verse on a tablet with ink, some folks wash it off and ingest the water with the ink in it because they want to ingest these passages of the Quran for their spiritual properties.

ACHEAMPONG While looking at images of one of your recent works, the all things are organized as uncertainty flag at Ballroom Marfa, I was struck by how the words aligned with the movement of the flag, to see the italics on their own kind of tilt.

RASHEED When something isn’t typeset using a computer, you get these small imperfections that are really beautiful. I like using things that are not typed out, because I need the noise. I need the tonality. I need the texture. There’s a certain texture that comes out of photocopying a page in a book and then cutting out one letter and enlarging it. I can’t achieve that noise with standard text from a machine that is designed to be perfect.

ACHEAMPONG Right before I received the assignment to interview you, I read an essay by Jane Gallop called “The Ethics of Reading: Close Encounters.” It’s about how reading, as we typically process it, is projection. She defines close reading as a form of
disruption that allows us to see things that we don’t already know. Does that idea resonate with how you move viewers into a more intentional kind of reading?

**RASHEED** Some people come to my work and read it like a book. One person said, “I went to your show, and I googled every sentence, because I wanted to understand the source information.” And others say, “Girl, this is pretty. I just like the shape, and I don’t know what the words are, but I like how the text creates this shape on the wall.” All that counts as reading. Going into a space and trying to make sense of what’s there is a reading process. That’s the case for all art. But when it comes to my work, because I’m using text and words and language, people tend to over-intellectualize it.

“Are we reading closely?” [2020] at the Brooklyn Museum involved two public programs. At the first, I talked about the importance of being engrossed in the text and what a text can possibly be. The second was about close reading in the context of surveillance: some texts are not supposed to be read and deciphered by everybody. What does it mean when a text enters an institutional archive, and people close-read it? What does it mean when someone goes to study a particular community and make sense of a ritual, despite not being invited? I think that close reading is important in terms of having an engaged, embodied, intentional reading process. But I also think about what it means to refuse to be read. Zora Neale Hurston in *Mules and Men* talks about Black folks being particularly evasive. She says something like: Folks always trying to get in your business. Slip a little bit of something outside the door, so they go away, but hold onto something for yourself. What gets unread is just as important as what is read. Yes, it’s important for you to read everything, but the choice not to read something is important too—either out of respect or a desire to let mystery persist.

**ACHEAMPONG** You talk about “unread,” and another word that I’ve heard in this conversation is “unlearning.” What are you unlearning?

**RASHEED** I am unlearning the urge to ascribe scientific certainty to everything. It’s not because I don’t believe in science. I just don’t think that everything needs to be deciphered or assigned a certain meaning. It’s OK for things to be messy and murky and opaque. When I think about unlearning, I think about what it means to unpick some of the ideas that make us comfortable. What does it mean to be able to sit with discomfort? You can enjoy the moment without understanding what’s happening.

I spoke about *No New Theories* in terms of all these sexy curatorial ideas around incompleteness and revision and uncertainty. But then when it happened to me, I said, “I don’t want this! I meant it could be cute for an idea.” But if uncertainty is part of my ethos, then I need to live it. Unlearning for me means drawing a stronger alignment between the things that I hold true as ideas and how I actually live my life. Part of that is letting go of certainty and finality. This is why I’m going to keep coming back to *No New Theories*. This is why, if someone asks me a question about something, I say, this is what I think right now, at 7:20 pm. But tomorrow it could change. I’m trying to be comfortable with my discomfort. To understand myself as a learner means complete surrender. And that surrender is hard. That’s what unlearning is for me: surrendering.

**ACHEAMPONG** I was sitting with your work *My husband is an Essential Worker* [2020] and particularly with the words, “let’s take care of one another.” From there my thoughts wandered to Saidiya Hartman’s words: “care is the antidote to violence.” Do you think of reading as an antidote?

**RASHEED** I had this conversation with someone else. They asked: “What do you think art can do? Can it change people?” No, art
doesn’t change people. People see art. They engage with it. And there may be a series of actions that result from that engagement. Reading is an invitation to do many other necessary things in the world. So much of what I’ve learned has come through the practice of reading. But I could have easily read and said, “that’s cute,” and then just kept on with whatever I was doing. I’m interested in how people read, but what I’m really interested in is how that process can invite other ways of being and engaging. Can reading combine with other rituals and practices to make you a person who engages differently? Last summer, at the peak of the Black Lives Matter protests, everyone was like, “Read all these books!” Then everybody read the books about anti-racism and kept on acting the same. Stop wasting people’s time!

**ACHEAMPONG** Exactly.

**RASHEED** Genuine change is going to take many more steps. Reading saved me. But do I think that reading alone is going to be the antidote? Absolutely not. People have to have the desire to enact the world that they’re reading about. Otherwise it’s just a recreational activity

*This article appears under the title “In the Studio: Kameelah Janan Rasheed” in the July/August 2021 issue, pp. 70–79.*