

Assassinating “the muscular hook of my cock”: Hayes Condemns White Supremacy

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Professor John Smith, for the English 210 course *Reading & Writing Identities*. The assignment asked students to construct an argument that analyzes a single American sonnet from Terrance Hayes’s *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*. The paper uses MLA citation style.

This paper delves into the intricate literary and poetic techniques Terrance Hayes uses in his rhetoric against the state of America’s administration and ideological stance as of 2018, primarily such an ideology’s uncanny reflection of its bleak slave history.

Looser than the traditional Elizabethan English sonnet, with a rhythmic bounce akin to West Coast jazz, and an emotional tinge of blues music (ironic laughter mixed with tears), the American sonnet is profoundly, humorously, and innovatively explored by Terrance Hayes in his 2018 anthology entitled *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*. Within it are assassins of various creeds: from the monumental United States president, Donald J. Trump; to the deadly beauty and love of a woman; to the virtuosic — usually African American — writers that came before Hayes; to even Hayes, himself. Amongst these assassins, Hayes’ pinpoints an afro surrealist killer on page 17’s “American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin.” Thus, in concert with formal poetic techniques like *volta*s, enjambments, and end-stops, aesthetic imagery of the black male body, and connotative juxtapositions of gender and historical trauma, Hayes exposes the black male body’s assassin: America’s white supremacy.

To start, the reader is bombarded with assertive end-stops, which reinforce the black male body’s physical anguish embedded within the text.

Coupled with simple yet elegant metaphorical language, Hayes refers to vital bodily organs, including one that is exclusive to the male body. He writes “[t]he earth of my nigga eyes are assassinated./The deep well of my nigga throat is assassinated./The tender bells of my nigga testicles are gone” (Hayes 17). Effectively, Hayes enhances the factual nature of the physical damage done unto these organs — the “nigga eyes,” “nigga throat,” and “nigga testicles,” the truth of the black male body’s annihilation, by emphatically end-stopping them with periods. Also, the simple metaphorical power of the lines lends a hand in making clear the elemental woe inflicted upon the “earth” of the black male body, as well as the sheer vulnerability of its “tender bells,” which is also an allusion to the violent castrations African Americans would experience in historical lynchings — especially when purported to be lecherous towards white women.

Moreover, Hayes takes the opportunity to transfer this physical assertion, supported by end-stops, to the subsequent line’s emotional assertion through diction. Addressing the racist personification with “[y]ou,” he says, “assassinate the sound of our bullshit and blissfulness” (17). In this way, he links white supremacy’s factual, physical trauma towards black Americans with paralleled emotional damage, such being the assassination of their “bullshit and blissfulness.” Besides this apostrophe’s subtle connotations, greater transparency is evidenced in Hayes’ brazen repetition of “nigga.” The word carries a sense of a masculine, brotherly love thought to be freed from the shackles of white supremacy (as the “a” is a colloquial, and therefore autonomous, alteration of the etymological “er” end of the noun). Still, as the sonnet emphasizes, it is “assassinated” time and time again. So, the sonnet begins with a formally factual strength emphasizing the black male body’s destruction, a tone that is completely turned in the next line.

On that fifth line, the reader witnesses a volta featuring a full switch from end-stops to enjambments, thereby switching the tone of the verse from singular, factual statements to reflect the more fluid, continuous obliteration of the black male body in America. Where there once were punctuation marks consisting solely of periods, there are now no periods — nor punctuation of any kind for that matter. Hayes’s enjambment is visible here:

The bones managing the body’s business are cloaked
 Until you assassinate my nigga flesh. The skin is replaced
 By a cloak of fire. Sometimes it is river or rainwater
 That cloaks the bones. Sometimes we lie on the roadside

In bushels of knotted roots, flowers & thorns until our body
 Is found. You assassinate the smell of my breath, which is like
 Smoke, milk, twilight itself. You assassinate my tongue (Hayes 17).

This exudes a perpetual tone, highlighting the seemingly endless discrimination, exploitation, and destruction, or “assassination,” endured by centuries of black bodies. To clarify, time after time, the ideological constraint of white supremacy continues to succeed in plundering the black body, which can be manifestly seen throughout history’s recurring black movements, such as the: nineteenth century’s abolitionist movement, the twentieth century’s Civil Rights movement, and the contemporary twenty-first century’s Black Lives Matter moment. The abundant repetition of the word “assassinate,” too, empowers this notion. The word per se evokes connotations of stealth, insidiousness, calculated precision, and coldness, ideas that are likewise intrinsic to the methodical kidnapping, subjugation, and exploitation of black bodies by America’s slave history.

Hayes similarly hints at this in his agricultural allusion here. He writes “bushel” in lieu of where he could easily write ‘bush’ with: “Sometimes we lie on the roadside/In bushels of knotted roots, flowers & thorns until our body/Is found” (17). Referring to a term of American measurement, “bushel” is equal to four pecks or eight dry gallons, and is customarily used for agriculture. By inventively utilizing “bushel” instead of ‘bush’ to describe the eventual destination of African American corpses, Hayes deliberately suggests a connection through invoking the American agricultural industry, the industry that black slaves have been exploited most infamously for. It is from this historically insidious “assassinat[ion]” of the black body that American white wealth profits. Finally, Hayes formally flips the tone of the sonnet one last time, back to emphatic end-stops.

At the end of the sonnet, yet another volta changes the fluidity of the previous enjambments to a stated delivery, thence invoking the authoritative register embodied by the start of the sonnet for the exposition of the black male body’s killer. Again, the end-stopped lines have no other forms of punctuation aside from periods, which bolster the factuality of the figurative language. Most advantageous of this, the final line of the sonnet that is segregated (simultaneously alluding to the historical trauma of African American segregation) into two syntactic sentences, echoing the traditional Elizabethan sonnet’s conclusive couplet formation. “Still,” Hayes asserts, “I speak for the dead. You will never assassinate my ghosts” (Hayes 17). This, in itself, is a miniature volta, thereby

reflecting the quintessentially antithetical voltas of Elizabethan sonnets in their couplets; it has an antithetical, anti-“assassi[n]” nature, juxtaposing with the preceding confirmed assassinations. Additionally, by “ghosts,” Hayes means the spiritual remnants of America’s slave legacy and his ancestral victims. Intertwined with the end-stopped sentences, it affirms that while white supremacy has prevailed in “assassinat[ing]” the physical black body. It cannot prevail in erasing nor chaining the “ghosts” of the slaves who live on in the memories of future generations.

Hand in hand with the formal elements and tonal shifts, the beautifully juxtaposed imagery pervading the sonnet serves to not only enhance the poetic tranquility of its exposition of white supremacy, but also to materialize the tragedy of the black male body’s utter assassination. Briefly touched on at the sonnet’s start, the metaphorical imagery of: “The earth of my nigga eyes.../The deep well of my nigga throat.../The tender bells of my nigga testicles...” (Hayes 17) compels a consideration of the scale of damage done to such an elemental, “earth[ly]” figure as the black male body. Also, Hayes numerous revisits this elemental imagery. For instance, he beautifully portrays: “You assassinate the smell of my breath, which is like/Smoke, milk, twilight itself. You assassinate my tongue/Which is like the head of a turtle wearing my skull for a shell” (17). These similes paint an enriching imagery of all that is lost as the black male body is destroyed. From the sheer “twilight” it circulates, to the immense fear it experiences to merely speak — its tongue retreating into its mouth, afraid, akin to a “turtle” that retreats its “head” into its “shell” — white supremacy brings it all to ruin. Furthermore, Hayes entwines the literary devices of imagery and alliterations so as to sonically support the visual aspect of the violence done unto the black male body. As he transitions from an end-stopped line to an enjambed one, Hayes writes: “[y]ou assassinate the sound of our bullshit and blissfulness./The bones managing the body’s business are cloaked/Until you assassinate my nigga flesh” (17). Consequently, the alliterations with the consonant ‘b’ produce a linguistically harsh sound, akin to the harshness of physical abuse depicted towards the black male body in the lines’ imagery. In contrast, the penultimate line of the sonnet evokes juxtaposed feminine–masculine imagery. Specifically: “You assassinate my lovely legs...” (17), similarly uses the alliterative device to achieve a linguistic, albeit opposing, effect. Instead of a violent ‘b’ consonant sound’s rough phonetics, the alliterated ‘l’ consonants of “lovely legs,” along with the diction’s connotation of femininity, create a lullaby-like softness. Hayes consciously juxtaposes this softness with the

exceedingly personal and hypermasculine next part of the line: "... & the muscular hook of my cock" (17). In doing this, Hayes draws a connection between the feminine and the masculine individual, a recurring theme in his sonnets. For example, in how "[t]he first man was in fact a woman whose clit/Grew so swollen with longing it hung like a finger" (Hayes 34), the theme, again, is manifest. Such elucidates the deeply personal and ideal masculinity Hayes advocates: being intertwined with a man's feminine truth. The same feminine masculinity is the target of the radical right conservative ideology inherent in the "assassi[n]" of white supremacy. Another potent juxtaposition of imagery lies in a historical allusion to black trauma at the hands of white supremacy. "The skin is replaced/", Hayes describes, "By a cloak of fire. Sometimes it is river or rainwater/That cloaks the bones" (17). Here, the mere opposition of fire and water is not all that Hayes intends to artistically juxtapose. Profoundly, Hayes alludes to the skin set on "fire" amidst lynchings, the assassinat[ions], of African Americans in the historical context, and those who would attempt to escape a similar fate by wading through water, such as that of a "river," attempting to conceal their scent from tracking dogs owned by white slave owners.

Accordingly, a tapestry of formal poetic techniques featuring end-stops and enjambments, literary devices like metaphors, imagery, and alliterations, as well as connotative diction that juxtaposes black traumas, Hayes illuminates white supremacy to be the assassin of the black male body. Such a truth, one that Ta-Nehisi Coates so succinctly reveals in his book *Between the World and Me* — that is, America's posited "right to beat, rape, rob, and pillage the black body" (Coates 102) — summons a dismal reflection on the state of American racism. Nevertheless, Hayes does not fail to lighten even the bleakest sentiments with his verse's clever humour, heroically reprimanding America's "Mister Trumpet" (Hayes 34) for being too loud to be a proper assassin.

Works Cited

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. Text Publishing, 2015.

Hayes, Terrance. *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*. Penguin, 2018.

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