

“MUSIC BOX” AND
“MEAT GRINDER”:
CORPOREALITY
AND METAPOETICS IN
TERRANCE HAYES’S
*AMERICAN SONNETS FOR
MY PAST AND FUTURE
ASSASSIN*

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HOW IS A POEM like a meat grinder—or, for that matter, a music box? Such is the astonishing problem that opens Terrance Hayes’s seventh poem in *American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin*, whose first four lines run as follows:

I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison,
Part panic closet, a little room in a house set aflame.
I lock you in a form that is part music box, part meat
Grinder to separate the song of the bird from the bone.¹

1. Henceforth Sonnet 7. All quotations of *American Sonnets* from Terrance Hayes, *American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018).

In four short lines, Hayes situates us firmly in the realm of self-conscious metapoetics, prompting us to question how we define a sonnet and, more specifically, how we define an

American sonnet of the kind that Hayes is writing. The answers to these questions are metaphors, or perhaps riddles—“prison,” “panic closet,” room in a burning house, “music box,” “meat/Grinder”—answers so offbeat they pose a significant interpretative challenge. This essay partially meets that challenge. I will centre my discussion around the second couplet. I posit that this couplet is significant because the three images contained within it, “music box,” “meat/Grinder,” and singing bird, are among the most strongly programmatic in *American Sonnets*. These images carry substantial weight in Hayes’s rhetoric, serving as motifs that reappear in poetically and politically significant ways throughout the collection. Because of such numerous repetitions in different contexts, the three images accumulate a vast and complex collection of symbolic values that fit into two broad categories. First, they are an admittedly idiosyncratic variant on three crucial and interlinked metapoetic ideas in the Western tradition of lyric poetry (and literature more broadly). Second, they evoke various aspects of the systemic racial injustice that Hayes, as a Black American poet writing self-avowedly American sonnets, continually highlights in his series. These two categories will form the basis of my analysis in this article.

First, I return to the idea of Hayes posing an interpretative challenge. The metaphor of the sonnet “form” as “part music box, part meat/Grinder” is difficult, because the image it conveys, though easy to visualise, is logically incoherent. It is bizarre to think that a poetic form can be compared to a musical toy or a kitchen appliance, or how such pieces of metaphorical machinery can “separate the song of the bird from the bone,” as though excising a tumour. So wide are the leaps of logic that they bewilder initial attempts at interpretation. This is no failure, but an element of Hayes’s subversive strategy. With “music box” and “meat grinder,” Hayes baffles our customary

approach to language, and forces us into a new and fertile way of thinking. Where logic stutters, the mind's eye does its best work. The images of "music box," "meat grinder," and birdsong, sheered from bone, offer vivid juxtapositions of beauty and brutality, artistic delicacy and cold utility. For the sonnet to be both is for it to be essentially a contradiction: a synthesis of the fanciful and practical, art and violence. It is with these difficulties in mind that we must approach our analysis.

We begin with the "music box." This image taps into centuries of metapoetic discourse—poets writing about poetry—on the nature of the sonnet, and of lyric poetry more broadly. In Hayes's hands, it also carries a political message. In conceptualising the sonnet form as a "box," Hayes follows an authorial precedent stemming from at least the Romantic era, which comments on the sonnet's restrictive and formal properties.² "Nuns fret not at their Convent's narrow room," declares Wordsworth in the titular line of one sonnet, a poem that moves from images of physical confinement to an expression of the delight he finds in being restricted to "the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground" (11).³ Keats, in a sonnet that draws even more clearly on metapoetic images, complicates this idea, depicting the "Sonnet sweet" itself as "fetter'd" (2–3).⁴ Like Wordsworth and Keats, Hayes's interest in the sonnet is a keenly deliberate one. Parul Sehgal's review of *American Sonnets* for the *New York Times* comments on Hayes's interest in the restrictive aspects of the sonnet, quoting him as saying "half-jokingly" that "as a person raised by a soldier and a prison guard it would make sense that I would like boxes and structure a little too much."⁵ Yet the idea of confinement as represented by a "(music) box" holds a political significance as much as a literary or personal one. Various forms of being "boxed in" have dogged the footsteps of Black Americans for centuries: segregation, injustice in the judicial

2. See Tom Furniss and Michael Bath, "Chapter 12: The Sonnet" in Tom Furniss and Michael Bath, eds., *Reading Poetry: An Introduction* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007), 379–80.

3. William Wordsworth, "Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room," in Stephen Gill and Duncan Wu, eds., *Selected Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 137.

4. John Keats, "If by Dull Rhymes our English Must be Chain'd" in William T. Arnold, ed., *The Poetical Works of John Keats* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Co, 1884), 343.

5. Parul Sehgal, "Sonnets That Reckon with Donald Trump's America," *The New York Times*, June 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/19/books/review-terrance-hayes-american-sonnets-for-my-past-and-future-assassin.html>.

system, and racial stereotyping. The association is strengthened by the description of the sonnet as “part prison” in the first line. However, here it is the lyric “you” who is locked in a “box.”

Though the question of *American Sonnets*’s intended addressee is beyond the scope of this article, commentators agree that it is intriguingly multi-formed: at various times “a stinkbug, the gang that lynched Emmett Till, a bunch of white girls posing for selfies, Donald Trump” (the sonnets were, after all, written during the first 200 days of Trump’s presidency), time itself, America, “and, unsettlingly, Hayes’s own reflection.”⁶ Regardless of the precise identity of the lyric “you” at any one time, this list suggests a broad dichotomy between the assumed white listener versus the Black narrator. Therefore, if Hayes’s “box,” which imprisons the listener, does allude to the ways in which white America has historically imprisoned its Black citizens (both literally and metaphorically), it is an attempt to flip the script—to force white America to identify with the experiences of Black America.

However, this is a *music box*, a fanciful carnival object—a nod from Hayes to the peculiarity of his project, perhaps, and an acknowledgement of his continued intention to juxtapose the beautiful and imaginative alongside the gritty and corporeal. At the same time, the image associates the sonnet, and the lyric tradition to which it belongs, with music—a generic slippage which has existed since ancient times. The use of the Latin *carmen* both to refer to a song and to poetry in general finds a parallel in the modern word *lyric*. Here we may recall Keats’s statement that in writing poetry we must “inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress/ Of every chord.”⁷ The remainder of the sonnet, and indeed the collection, shows how Hayes revels in the expressiveness of the lyric “music box.” As Bruce Whiteman observes, “pleasure taken in the sound of words recurs again and again in *American Sonnets*.”⁸ The internal assonances of “crow” and “undergo” (7–8),

6. Sehgal, “Sonnets that Reckon,” 2018; Dan Chiasson, “The Politics and Play of Terrance Hayes,” *The New Yorker*, July 2, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/07/02/the-politics-and-play-of-terrance-hayes>.

7. Keats, “If By Dull Rhymes,” lines 7–8.

8. Bruce Whiteman, “How Little Writing Rescues,” review of *American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin*, by Terrance Hayes, *The Hudson Review* 71, no. 3 (2018): 621.

“floors,” “falling” and “walls” (10–11), the alliteration of “prison” and “panic closet” (1–2), the wealth of imagery and metaphor, are “verse at full verve.”⁹ The poet engages in a similar playfulness, an unabashed revelling in language, while simultaneously treating heavy political topics, in one of the sonnets most explicitly directed at Donald Trump. Here, relentless, jarring assonance and rhyme are used to lampoon and ridicule the president without mentioning his name: “The umpteenth thump on the rump of a badunkadunk/ Stumps us. The lunk, the chump, the hunk of plunder./ The umpteenth horny, honky stump” (1–3).¹⁰ If Hayes’s aim in *American Sonnets* is political commentary, his delight is in the sound and rhythm of words.

As we have seen, the image of the “music box” situates Hayes’s poetry within the broader lyric tradition, while also encapsulating an aspect of his political message. The metaphor of the “meat/Grinder” functions similarly. We have already examined how the idea that it “separate[s] the song of the bird from the bone” (4) suggests that Hayes seeks to separate language from its accustomed framework in order to generate new, subversive meanings. Moreover, according to the logic of the metaphor, the brutality of the meat grinder is necessary for the bird to sing. Here, I suggest that Hayes is justifying the more brutal and unsettling elements of his poetry as essential for his message to be heard. As I argue later in this article, the “bird” of line 4 refers to Hayes’s Black narrator who in turn acts as a mouthpiece for African Americans more broadly. The image of the “meat/Grinder” as a metaphor for the sonnet thus expresses Hayes’s conviction that in writing *American Sonnets* he is giving a voice to the Black American experience. At the same time, the image of the “meat/Grinder” also betrays Hayes’s interest in associating his poetry with corporeality—an interest which recurs time and again in the collection. As Sehgal suggests,

9. See Brian Boyd, *Why Lyrics Last* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 28.

10. Hayes, *American Sonnets*, 48.

There's a direct line between the sonnet and the body in Hayes's work. Just as the sonnet, derived from the Italian "sonetto" for "little song," can contain, in its courtly way, immensities of experience and feeling—so does the body, until the point of breaking.¹¹

If Hayes's is a poetic of the body, it is one of metamorphosis, fusing, or transforming familiar things in discomfiting and alien ways. The second sonnet of Hayes's collection begins with the line "Inside me is a black-eyed animal/ Bracing in a small stall" (1–2) and goes on to meld images of physical transformation ("a bird... /... breaking its shell," 2–3) with the metaphysical "grasp of time" and "space" (10–11).¹² The idea of containment reappears, but is visualised in paradoxical physical terms: "a huge black/ Bull balled small enough to fit inside/ The bead of a nipple ring" (6–8). Often it tips over into the grotesquery of mutilation or dissection: "You are the scent of rot at the heart/ Of love-making. The meat inside your exoskeleton/ Is as tender as Jesus" (10–12).

Elsewhere, Hayes uses language itself to pack an almost physical punch: the sonnet that begins, "Why are you bugging me you stank miniscule husk/ Of musk...?" (1–2)¹³ combines the abrupt evocation of smell and taste with driving internal rhymes ("husk," "musk"), assonance ("bugging," "husk," "musk"), and the forceful repetition of the plosive k. Sehgal refers to the body's ability to contain emotion and experience "until the point of breaking";¹⁴ the bodies in *American Sonnets* are generally at that point of fracture, or beyond it. Grotesquery and metamorphosis have a long literary history: since Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, if not before. However, Hayes uses these concepts to drive home a specifically politicised message: it is through a poetic of brutality and transformation that the "bird" sings most clearly.

The "meat/Grinder," like the metaphor of the box, evokes specific oppressive elements of the Black American experience—namely, sexualisation and violence. In addition

11. Sehgal, "Sonnets that Reckon."

12. Hayes, *American Sonnets*, 6.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Sehgal, "Sonnets that Reckon."

to the resonances discussed above, I posit that the poetic logic of this fourth line, where the “bird” becomes “meat,” is a live metaphor for this sexualisation and violence—for Black bodies being treated like “meat.” Sexual and violent imagery permeate the collection, prompting Dan Chiasson’s comment that *American Sonnets* “is one of the deepest accounts I have read in poetry of what it feels like to have one’s body fetishised as an object but criminalised as a force.”¹⁵ One example of Hayes’s interest in the intersection between sexualisation and violence is the sonnet that begins,

The 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.¹⁶

The sonnet goes on to directly address the “Assassin” of the title: “You assassinate the sound of our bullshit & blissfulness” (4). The tone when the speaker refers to the sexual organs is almost clinically detached. The n-word, interposed between the possessive “my” and the body parts in all three lines (“eyes,” “throat,” “testicles”) mimics the dispossession and loss of autonomy that is a consequence of racism and its most extreme outcome: death. Appropriately, racism itself (the n-word is a convenient cipher) comes between the Black narrator and his own body and autonomy, as literally within the poetic line as it does in real life. Later, the use of sensual adjectives displaces the clinical tone: “You assassinate my lovely legs & the muscular hook of my cock” (13). This is acutely uncomfortable. Hayes has already spent twelve lines establishing the racism-inflicted separation of the narrator from his body. The voice that compliments the narrator’s legs as “lovely” is therefore naturally read as that of the assassin, not the narrator. Ultimately, this line depicts the horror of a society happy to sexualise Black bodies while doing violence to and causing the unjust deaths of Black people through its deep

15. Chiasson, “Politics and Play,”

16. Hayes, *American Sonnets*, 17.

racial biases, including in the criminal justice system.

Perhaps too, given Hayes's ongoing interest in remoulding poetic traditions of all kinds, the line is a nod to the old poetic wordplay of "death" as a reference to orgasm, deployed here with a sinister twist. Similarly, the third sonnet of the collection begins "but there never was a Black male hysteria" and goes on to describe America's oppressive "economic formula" whereby "black men are paid with money stolen from their ancestors, only to have it again taken away from them."¹⁷ Once again, the mechanism of oppression involves degradation via sexualisation. Black men "must withstand humiliating sexual 'reviews' to participate in the economy at all."¹⁸

There was a black male review for ladies night
At the nightclub. There was a black male review
By suits in the offices, the courts & waiting rooms.
There was a black male review in the weight rooms
Where coaches licked their whistles.¹⁹

Other sonnets in the collection explore the themes of violence and sexualisation with reference to specific historical instances of violence against Black Americans. One such instance, the murder of Emmett Till, is alluded to a number of times throughout *American Sonnets*. Indeed, the metaphor of "meat/Grinder" may itself contain a veiled allusion to this historical episode. In 1944, the 14-year-old Emmett Till was brutally murdered by two white men, Roy Bryant and his half-brother, J. W. Milam, for allegedly whistling at and flirting with Roy's wife, Carolyn.

The pair... beat Till, shot him, and strung barbed wire and a 75-pound metal fan around his neck and dumped the lifeless body in the Tallahatchie River. A white jury quickly acquitted the men, with one juror saying it had taken so long only because they had to break to drink some pop. When Till's mother Mamie came to identify her son, she told the funeral director, "Let the people see what I've seen."²⁰

A photo of Emmett's parents standing in front of the funeral casket and gazing at his mutilated body was subsequently published in

17. *Ibid.*, 7; Chiasson, "Politics and Play."

18. Chiasson, "Politics and Play."

19. Hayes, *American Sonnets*, 7.

20. *Time*, "100 Photos: Emmett Till," accessed March 16, 2020, <http://100photos.time.com/photos/emmett-till-david-jackson>.

the magazine *Jet*, and became an ongoing symbol in the national consciousness for the horrors of racism.²¹

Hayes's third sonnet, which shows the sexual degradation of the Black body as part of an oppressive mechanism, plays repeatedly on the name of "Money," the town where Till lived and was murdered, to illustrate this confluence of commodified sexualisation and violence.²²

But there never was a black male hysteria
Because ... / ... a clutch of goons drove you through Money,
Stole your money, paid you money, stole it again. (1-4)²³

Similarly, the sonnet beginning "Drive like fifteen miles along a national parkway" references "a till of bodies bobbed at the piers" (8) before asking, "How much have black people been paid for naming/ Emmett Till in poems?" (9-10).²⁴ Given the ongoing significance of the death of Emmett Till for American and Black American history and politics, together with Hayes's repeated references to these events in the sonnet collection, it is likely this episode may also lie in the background of the image of "meat/ Grinder." Till's fatal encounter with Carolyn Bryant occurred in "Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market."²⁵ The phrase "meat/ Grinder" is reminiscent both of the location of this encounter and the violence of its outcome. On a metapoetic level, it is also a proclamation that the sonnet, as a literary form, has the capacity to tackle themes not just of love and desire but the horrors of racial injustice.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Chris Spielvogel, "Black Bayou Bridge, Glendora," *Till Memory Project*, accessed September 25, 2020, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20170203161959/http://tillmemoryproject.com/black-bayou-bridge-glendora/>.

23. Hayes, *American Sonnets*, 7.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Time*, "100 Photos: Emmett Till."

The final image of my analysis—that of the bird—is likewise significant, both politically and metapoetically. As previously discussed, "song" can be a cipher for literature, and particularly poetry. The mechanism of the sonnet "separate[s] the song of the bird from the bone" (4). Here we encounter the subversive possibilities of this separation: language, when separated from its accustomed framework, is free to generate

new meanings. This presumably grisly process allows the “song” to be freely heard, apart from the “bird” that voices it. Finally, the phrasing of this idea is significant because it implies that the “song” is in some way physically attached to the bird. This is of course impossible. However, wings and words have been associated on some level in the Western literary consciousness since Homer’s writings, if not before. ἔπεα πτερόεντα (“winged words”) appear throughout the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as part of a standard formula for introducing speech.²⁶ Paolo Vivante, in his analysis of “winged words” in Homer, writes that “[t]he epithet is self-explaining, words have wings in that they fly from the speaker’s mouth to the listener’s ears.”²⁷ Similarly, the swan appears in Ovid and the works of his contemporaries as a symbol of literary inspiration.²⁸ The Muses, goddesses of literary and artistic inspiration in Greco-Roman myth, are bird-like in Ovid²⁹; the “muse” of later English poetry is often winged too.³⁰ The association between wings and words seems to persist within the modern subconscious: “Dark wings, dark words” is an episode of the popular HBO series *Game of Thrones* and a recurring proverb within the original books. Vivante highlights how, for Homer, the solidity and vividness of the image of “winged words” is “hardly a metaphor [but] a concrete reality: breath gathering into voice, sound formed into meaning and travelling through the air.”³¹ In conceptualising his lyric as a “song” that must be almost physically torn away from the “bird,” Hayes assumes a similar solidity of language.

I stated earlier that the image of the singing “bird” in “Sonnet 7” represents the poetic narrator. In part, this is the logical conclusion of the idea that the “song,” along with the “music-box” and related concepts of music, lyricism, and singing generally, is a metaphor for poetry and the sonnet, and particularly Hayes’s American sonnet. The bird as narratorial figure, however, becomes clearer when it reemerges as “a crow...

26. For example, Homer, *The Iliad*, 4.203, 13.462, and 21.409; *Odyssey*, 16.7 and 22.

27. Paolo Vivante, “On Homer’s Winged Words,” *The Classical Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (1975): 2.

28. Sophia Papaioannou further argues that “the birds of Diomedes [in the *Metamorphoses*] serve as a metaphor for Ovid’s poetic style.” See Sophia Papaioannou, “‘Ut Non [Forma] Cygnorum, sic Albis Proxima Cygnis’: Poetology, Epic Definition, and Swan Imagery in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*,” *Phoenix* 58, nos. 1 and 2 (2004): 49.

29. See, for example, Patricia Johnson and Martha Malamud, “Ovid’s ‘Musomachia,’” *Pacific Coast Philology* 23, nos. 1 and 2 (1988): 35–36.

30. For example, “My drooping Muse folds up her fluttering wing,/ And hides her head in the green lap of spring” (7–8); Anna Laetitia Barbauld, “The Invitation” in *Poems* (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1820) 18, lines 197–198; see also the complaint against “servility to common law” because it “clips the Muse’s wing” in John Byrom’s poem “185” in Byrom, *Miscellaneous Poems* (vol. 1) (Manchester: J. Harrop, 1773), 185.

31. Vivante, “On Homer’s Winged Words,” 2.

trapped... in the shadows of the gym” (7–9)—a clear reference to the “Jim Crow” laws of the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and to “Jim Crow” as a derogatory term for a Black American.³² In the light of the “bird” of line 4’s reemergence as a (Jim) “crow,” it is natural to read Hayes’s description of sonnet form (freeing the “song of the bird from the bone”) as referring to the public and political voice that his poetry affords both him and, through him, other Black Americans.

Crows reappear as a motif throughout the sonnet sequence. For instance, they are illustrated in a sonnet that criticises an “autocrat” (3) who “cannot distinguish a blackbird/ From a crow or raven” (1–2), which may easily be read as a metaphor for racial insensitivity, and a not-so-veiled reference to Trump.³³ Another metapoetic sonnet begins,

The song must be cultural, confessional, clear
But not obvious. It must be full of compassion
And crows bowing in a vulture’s shadow.³⁴

Here, we encounter images of the horrors of racism—“a tangle of wire” (6) evokes the wire around Emmett Till’s neck, while “feathered & tarred” (10) refers to a practice with a long history, but notably inflicted both on “abolitionists” and “Negro criminals” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.³⁵ These images fuse with an interrogation of the demands that bear on a political poem or, rather, a “song.” The political “song” must combine beauty (“must turn on the compass/ Of language” (5–6) and “shed a noise so lovely it is sung at sunset” (13)) and political acumen (“The song must be cultural” (1)) with subtlety (“But not obvious” (2)). Again, in this sonnet, it is easy to find the “obvious” reading: the “crows bowing in a vulture’s shadow” (3) represent the oppression of Black Americans in the Trump era. Yet the satire in Hayes’s tone here warns that there is more to uncover than one-sided polemic. It prompts us to doubt whether

32. Anne Grimes, “Possible Relationship between ‘Jump Jim Crow’ and Shaker Songs,” *Midwest Folklore* 3, no. 1 (1953): 48.

33. Hayes, *American Sonnets*, 42.

34. *Ibid.*, 46.

35. Both the long history of tarring and feathering in earlier American history, and its uses in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are detailed in Benjamin H. Irvin, “Tar, Feathers, and the Enemies of American Liberties, 1768-1776,” *The New England Quarterly* 76, no.2 (2003): 197–238, esp. 227–228 and 228n.

this sonnet is a true statement of Hayes's poetic intent, or a wry comment on what is expected of a Black American political poet in today's America.

Ultimately, the second couplet of Hayes's *Sonnet 7* is an involved metaphorical statement on the nature of the sonnet, an extravagantly playful demonstration of the wonder of language, and a complex interweaving of poetic and political ideas. The three images it contains, and which have been examined above, are all images that reappear, in various guises, through the other sixty-nine sonnets in the collection. These images are at once ideas that haunt the canon of Western metapoetics, and images that, in Hayes's poetry, come to represent the Black American experience throughout history. The idea of literary containment in the image of a "box" acquires the added resonance of unjust imprisonment and segregation perpetuated by a racist America. The image of the "meat/ Grinder" evokes the idea of a revolutionary approach to language, but also the horror of the simultaneous sexualisation and criminalisation of the Black body in today's America, a country that, it may be said, treats its Black citizens like "meat." "[S]ong" and "music" continue the literary conceit of lyric poetry as analogous to song, while the "bird" that sings the song becomes identified as a (Jim) "crow"—a reclamation of a derogatory title for African Americans. Yet Hayes never loses sight of the idea of poetry as an exercise of language—an exercise in beauty, as much as an exercise in politics or polemic. With every line, Hayes draws us into the "music-box" beauty of his poetry. We are permitted to enjoy, as well as to reflect.

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