

“To be Free is to Live:” Antiauthoritarianism through a Christian Lens

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It is only through the rejection of authoritarian power that we are able to be truly free. Terrance Hayes, an African-American poet from South Carolina, is the author of a 2018 poetry collection entitled *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*, written immediately after the 2016 election of President Donald Trump (Hayes, 2025). In an era with a notable amount of political and cultural unrest within the United States, Hayes' poetry added a level of artistry and resistance through his subject matter and formal decisions alike. He creates a synthesis of art, using influences from painting, art, and past writers to breathe new meaning into his poetry (Simpson 128-129). I argue that Terrance Hayes, through his sonnet "I only intend to send word to my future self," takes an antiauthoritarian approach to the Christian faith, pushing back against its colonial roots through his Biblical allusions and his description of God.

In discussing Black Americans' relationship to Christianity, scholars such as Yusef Komunyakaa note the importance of understanding the longstanding effects of colonial history. European colonizers imposed Christianity on African Americans as a way to "assimilate" them, because American society was not tolerant of differing belief systems—especially those of African nations. Despite the constrictive reasons Christianity was introduced to Black Americans, it also took on a liberating and hopeful symbol; Komunyakaa describes this relationship in his article, "Sorrow Songs and Flying Away: Religious Influence on Black Poetry," as a "strange and complex bond" (281). The people who were enslaved were at first unwilling converts, but, according to Komunyakaa, eventually the "idea of God protected them" (281). Looking into pieces from Black artists, motifs of flight, angels, and perseverance through suffering repeatedly come up. During the Harlem Renaissance, Komunyakaa asserts that authors such as W.E.B. Du Bois use religious symbolism in a critical way, pointing to the intellectual and cultural tensions the Christian faith brings up (283). In contemporary Black poetry, scholars such

as Tiffany Eberle Kriner expand on Komunyakaa's ideas, arguing that poets deliberately draw upon Christian imagery to highlight the tensions between the oppression and freedom religion can bring and to push back against the racism and stereotypes still prevalent in American culture today.

In Tiffany Eberle Kriner's article "Conjuring Hope in a Body: Lucille Clifton's Eschatology," Kriner argues that Lucille Clifton uses Biblical allusion and themes in unorthodox manners in order to "revise history/hermeneutics" (199). While Kriner looks exclusively at Clifton's body of work, I believe that the manner in which she evaluates Clifton's poems can be extended to Terrance Hayes' works. Clifton and Hayes are similar in that they are both contemporary Black poets who write on the experience of African-American individuals within American society, both utilizing a lack of punctuation to add layers of meaning. Hayes uses Biblical allusions in a similar, unorthodox sense as Clifton in his sonnet "I only intend to send word to my future self;" he presents an image of God as being limited in knowledge and scope by asking if "forbidden is the only word God doesn't know" (Hayes). His unorthodox and what may typically be seen as blasphemous treatment of the word "God" is reminiscent of Clifton's humanist treatment of biblical characters, such as highlighting Mary's loss of innocence (Kriner 201).

Kriner's argument that Clifton uses the Bible to reflect on the individual experiences of specifically Black Americans is in agreement with Alex Mouw's assertions on Hayes in his article, "'I lock you in an American sonnet': Terrance Hayes's Public Lyric and American Antiauthoritarianism." Mouw argues that Hayes uses his references and formal style to not only comment on the rise of authoritarianism that was becoming relevant in President Trump's 2016 election, but also to provide deeply personal insights into his relationship with his sexuality, his

history, and his identity. Although Hayes writes as a form of political commentary and rebellion, he “reminds us time and again that he’s talking to himself as much as he’s talking to us” (Mouw 337). Much like in Clifton’s works, where Kriner argues she uses biblical allusion to add individual relatability, Hayes uses his allusion and unique poetic style to take a rebellious stance in his personal as well as political life. He is deliberate in his references to society at large, but that does not mean he avoids making personal statements and works.

Kriner's argument is also in agreement with William M. Ramsey's, as both argue that the poets they study are able to create unique perspectives on historically complex situations. While Kriner focuses on Clifton's ability to use religion as a way to depict freedom despite its racist roots, Ramsey offers an argument that Hayes sees history as something that can be transformed. I agree with Ramsey’s assertion that when it comes to history, Hayes is “[resisting the] frozen fixity in favor of creative improvisation,” meaning that Hayes does not see history as something with one objective and fixed implication, but rather as something that can be observed and altered freely (Ramsey 129). However, while Ramsey looks to Hayes’ relationship with the American South as a demonstration of this idea, I would like to point to his brief biblical allusion in “I only intend to send word to my future self.” I believe that within these few words, Hayes offers a perspective on God and religion that is not fixed or objective, but rather one that has room for interpretation. Ramsey argues that Hayes’ poetry can offer a glimpse into a complicated and layered memory, be it historical or personal. His argument can be extended into Hayes’ syntax, as in this specific sonnet, he writes in a daisy-chain fashion with no punctuation, leaving room for personal interpretation as to where the sentences begin and end.

Due to the complicated background of Black Christianity described by Komunyakaa, I believe that Terrance Hayes' sonnet "I only intend to send word to my future self" is showing

Hayes' antiauthoritarian relationship to God and Christianity. I believe that Kriner's argument, that Lucille Clifton uses religious symbolism and allusion to make a statement on the historical implications of Black Christianity, can be extended to Hayes' work. I also believe that Mouw's argument can be extended to this sonnet in order to argue that Hayes' relationship to God is in direct response to the rise of authoritarianism. Hayes' inclusion of God, specifically to His limits, reflects the complicated relationship of African-Americans and Christianity. While there is a hopeful religious motif of flight and salvation in earlier Black poetry, during and after the Harlem Renaissance, more artists point out the oppressive beginnings of the Christian faith and Christianity as a representation of oppression and erasure. Hayes, in his sonnet, questions God's authority, just as he questions the authority of the government and society at large.

In his sonnet, "I only intend to send word to my future self," Hayes uses enjambment and a lack of punctuation to emphasize the complicated nature of identity and fault, showcasing an antiauthoritarian relationship with God and Christianity. The final six lines of the poem indicate a shift from a focus on Hayes' future self and Blackness in America to a universal "you" and God's knowledge:

Is forbidden the only word God doesn't know

You have to heal yourself to truly be heroic

You have to think once a day of killing your self

Awareness requires a touch of blindness & self

Importance is the only word God knows

To be free is to live because only the dead are slaves (Hayes)

These five lines, in relation to the poem, mean that a sense of self-preservation is essential to escaping the confines of societal structure: no man is a slave, so long as he has life. Hayes uses

this allusion to God in order to comment on our relationship to broader systems of power, highlighting his antiauthoritarian approach to both religion and politics.

When looking at this sonnet, the first step to reaching a deeper syntactical understanding of it is to lay out a personal reading of the punctuation. My reading is as follows: “Is ‘forbidden’ the only word God doesn’t know?/You have to heal yourself to truly be heroic;/You have to think once a day of killing your self (-Awareness)./(self-) Awareness requires a touch of blindness & self (importance)./(self-) Importance is the only word God knows./To be free is to live, because only the dead are slaves.” The parenthetical words are those that are implied to be duplicative in their meaning; for example, at the end of the first clause, in the line about “killing your self:” Hayes does not use the word “yourself,” instead opting for a space in between “your” and “self.” By doing this, he is drawing attention to the word “self.” In one sense, it acts as a direct object to the verb “kill.” You have to kill your ego in order to be truly heroic as a means of “healing yourself.” However, you can also read the space between “your” and “self” as an indicator that “self” is not meant to stand alone, that it is paired with the beginning of the next line, “Awareness,” connected with a dash. If you read the poem in this manner, it is not the killing of ego that renders one heroic—it is the killing of self-awareness. The lack of punctuation forces the reader to add their own interpretation, which can severely alter the overall meaning of the poem. This element adds to the themes of self Hayes lays out—in “killing your self,” “self awareness,” and “self importance.” These lines take on a connotation of irony, arguing that heroism (something typically considered positive) is only achievable if you disregard yourself entirely, and effectively destroy your self.

The next portion of Hayes’ poem deals with the definition of “(self-)/Awareness.” He writes that it “requires a touch of blindness & self(/Importance).” By putting the sentence in an

active voice, he is saying that you are able to foster a sense of awareness, that it is not something necessarily inherent to us. Had the phrase been in the passive voice (“your self-awareness must be killed,” perhaps), we would lose the individualistic approach Hayes lays out. Heroism is not something that we are necessarily born with, it is something that is fostered. In addition to this, the enjambment forces the reader to pause in between “self” and “awareness,” placing direct emphasis on the individual nature of these ideas. When reading, you are unable to think solely about “self-awareness;” instead, Hayes forces you to see the two words as individuals separated by a line break, being brought together as an afterthought. Hayes presents an unconventional reading of self-awareness, where it is paired directly with self-importance. The use of an ampersand here connects the blindness and self, pointing the reader away from a reading where the clause ends after “blindness,” this reading would limit the use of the word “self” to only be in connection with the following line (“self/Importance is the only word God knows”). I personally tend to give positive connotations to self-awareness, and I give negative ones to self-importance. Often, these two ideas are placed in juxtaposition; in one, you are cognizant of the effects you may have on others through your actions and words, while in the other, you are looking at yourself with a sort of grandeur and egoism. Hayes flips this conception by linking the two, and arguing that in order to be self-aware, you have to be a bit arrogant. In order to really understand your impact on the world around you, you have to be a bit blind to yourself (to prioritize and observe others), while simultaneously being aware of everything you are doing. It seems oxymoronic to create a direct link between self-awareness, blindness, and self-importance, but Hayes is able to point to the ironic nature of killing your self—that is, that in order to transcend the typical feelings of self-obsession, you have to think deeper about yourself.

Hayes' next line brings in God again, after mentioning Him in the first line of my section. With the first mention of God, Hayes writes "Is forbidden the only word God doesn't know?" (the question mark is my addition). In his second mention, Hayes mirrors this by writing "self/Importance is the only word God knows." In both of these lines, Hayes brings up what God does and does not know, bringing into question his omnipotence and status as an "all-powerful" being. With the questioning of God's knowledge on the word "forbidden," my mind immediately went to the fall of man. In the Biblical story, God specifically forbade Adam and Eve from eating the apple, which, when they disobeyed, caused them to introduce sin to the world. As someone who grew up surrounded by Christianity but who did not fully believe in it, the question at the forefront of my mind when talking about the fall of man was, "why would God even put the apple there if he was going to forbid them from eating it?" This sentiment seems to be what Hayes is pointing to in the first mention of God; if God didn't want us to sin, he wouldn't have put the apple there in the first place. He seems to have a core misunderstanding of what it means to forbid something, because He has complete control over his creations. He had every power to prevent the fall, and yet he did not. For someone with omnipotence, how could He overlook this vital detail? The second mention of God, "self/Importance is the only word God knows," offers a cynical look at Him. In both lines, Hayes does not make "God" the subject. He decenters Him, placing the words He either knows or does not know at the forefront and in the reader's immediate sight. "Forbidden" and "self-/Importance" become the subjects of these sentences. For all his power, God does not seem to understand "forbidden" or any other word other than "self-importance." Self-importance is the *only* word God knows, because He lacks the insight to understand human faults. He did not prevent man's fall, when he had the full capability to. He

figured his word alone would be enough to dissuade Adam and Eve from eating the fruit, when it was not.

The final line of Hayes' poem, "To be free is to live, because only the dead are slaves," also happens to be one of two lines that I believe stands completely alone, with no enjambment; the second being the initial line, "Is forbidden the only word God doesn't know?" By framing the final sextet with two standalone lines, Hayes is able to use these two thoughts to clearly and effectively frame his poem. Considering Hayes' skepticism on God's ability to know things clearly, set forth with his two lines mentioning Him, I do not believe Hayes would pivot in this line and argue that "God knows/ To be free is to live." In addition, by taking away the daisy-chain effect in the final line, we are given a truly independent clause with a significant amount of philosophical weight. The line starts with an infinitive phrase, which, considering the literary allusions in Hayes' other works, evokes a reference to other standalone infinitive phrases: the one that immediately comes to my mind is "to be or not to be," from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. By starting a claim with an infinitive, Hayes provides a very persuasive and strong declaration. He could have created a "weaker," less bold sentence by formatting it like "living is freedom," or "being free is the only way to live," but those do not encapsulate the strength behind his words. Hayes is arguing that living our flawed lives is the only way to truly escape slavery, especially in relation to God.

Returning to the Biblical allusion, the main consequence of Adam and Eve's disobedience was to live separate from God and heaven. They are expelled from the Garden of Eden and forced to live upon the Earth. They are also cursed to mortality, facing the concept of time and loss (Romans 5:12-21, KJV Bible). However, in their condemnation, there is an argument to be made that the introduction of death and sin added a new weight to the human

relationship with God; now, instead of being automatically granted access to heaven, we have to actively choose righteousness. This sentiment is, in my opinion, where Hayes is taking his sonnet on human fault. The very act of living is what grants us our freedom, and the only way that can be taken away is through death. You have to be blind to yourself in order to see, be self-important in order to be aware, eat the apple in order to live. Hayes' sonnet presents an extremely interesting look into how we seemingly need to embrace the selfish parts of ourselves in order to become good, and how we need to actively live in order to escape confinement.

Hayes' unique interpretation of religious allusion can be extended to the questioning of authority as a whole, especially considering the heavy emphasis Hayes places on the ambiguity of power structures. In this sonnet, Hayes is bringing some doubt in as to God's omnipotence and knowledge, through both his actual words and his formal tendencies (namely, his enjambment creating pauses between otherwise compound words and his lack of punctuation creating questions of where phrases begin and end). It is important to note the time period in which Hayes was writing these sonnets: directly following the 2016 election of President Trump. He was in clear opposition to the ideas that the president stood for, and wrote to dispel the following rise of authoritarianism (Mouw 337). By calling the power of God into question in his sonnet, Hayes forces the reader to ask themselves, "what other powers are fallible?" If God—who is meant to be omnipotent—has gaps in knowledge or scope, it's only fair to assume that every other structure that poses itself as all-knowing has those gaps as well. It is through these questions that Hayes makes his stance clear: we cannot place any authority, even that of God, above our own freedom.

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