

RADICAL READINGS

AN ANTI-RACISM DIGEST

“Radical simply means ‘grasping things at the root.’” - Angela Davis

July 8, 2020

Dear students, neighbors, alum—

This is the first in a series of *Black Lives Matter* digests, prepared by faculty in English & Communications, which we'll be sending you across this summer, as we attempt to get *through* the summer, as we await our collective return to class action in the fall.

I teach courses in creative writing and so my mind has been on what kinds of writing matter right now— at a time when it's hard think straight. Fortunately, poetry never thinks straight. It dodges, darts, alights, goes dark, flares bright, parries and thrusts, between rupture and rapture, from zig to zag.

One of my favorite examples of this kind of lyrical dexterity is Terrance Hayes's book *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*, from 2018. If you've taken a poetry course with me recently, you might have read a few. All seventy poems in the book are the same length (14 lines) and have the same title, "American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin."

I want to devote this post to Terrance Hayes because he shows us that writing is a technique for survival and for creative thriving in the midst of survival. A fourteen-line sonnet is a small box, yes, but it's not a prison, it's a prism. It's a jukebox. It's an archaic phone booth you can step into and call or cry or sing or curse collect, into the past, present, future. Hayes's poems are both playful and angry. They are strident and they are ambivalent. They are generous, because they generate so many feelings inside me. They make me want to write, too.

Here are a few links to Hayes's work. I'll start with an experimental poem called "George Floyd" published just this week. Then I'll link you to a selection from *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*. Finally, I want to issue you a challenge. You'll notice that the first of the "American Sonnets" is an ABC poem, just a list of words and phrases mostly in alphabetical order. I challenge you to write your own ABC poem (the technical term: an "abcedarian" poem) collaged of alphabetical words

and phrases that resonate for you right now. Email it to me when you're done, and perhaps later this summer, we'll share some of them via this digest.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/06/22/george-floyd>

<https://aprweb.org/poems/american-sonnet-for-my-past-and-future-assassin>

For those who want a deeper dive into Hayes, here's an interview to listen to while you're walking or working this summer, not thinking straight.

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/writersandcompany/terrance-hayes-examines-race-and-politics-in-the-age-of-donald-trump-in-his-new-poetry-collection-1.4870308>

Sincerely,

Prof. Finch

Dr. Zachary Finch (he/him/his)
Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing
Director of the Honors Program
Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts
375 Church Street
North Adams MA 01247
413.662.5137