



# The Shape of the Black Body in Experimental Poetics: A Study of Form, Identity and Historical Echoes in *Lighthead*

S. Abishaangel<sup>1</sup> & Dr. Candace Jessin Graceta<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, Nirmala College for Women (A), Coimbatore  
Affiliated to Bharathiar University, Coimbatore

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department of English, Nirmala College for Women (A), Coimbatore  
Affiliated to Bharathiar University, Coimbatore



Manuscript ID:  
BIJ-SPL2-NOV25-MD-088

Subject: English

Received : 25.07.2025

Accepted : 24.10.2025

Published : 14.11.2025

DOI: 10.64938/bijsi.v10si2.25.Nov088

Copy Right:



This work is licensed under  
a Creative Commons Attribution-  
ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

## Abstract

*This paper explores how Terrance Hayes's Lighthead reimagines the Black body through experimental poetic forms. By employing innovative structures such as the Golden Shovel and pecha kucha, Hayes challenges conventional representations of racial identity, embodying a poetics of fragmentation, fluidity, and historical echo. The poems negotiate personal and collective memory, positioning the Black body as both subject and medium of formal disruption. Grounded in the theories of Fred Moten (fugitivity), Hortense Spillers (the flesh), and Christina Sharpe (wake work), this study examines how Hayes's poetic techniques resist fixed identities and reframe Black embodiment as unstable, relational, and historically charged. The research argues that Lighthead enacts a poetics of resistance, where formal experimentation becomes a mode of reclaiming and reshaping Black identity within a broader historical and cultural matrix.*

**Keywords:** black body, experimental poetics, golden shovel, fugitivity, cultural memory

## Introduction: Terrance Hayes and the New Black Poetics

Terrance Hayes is among the most vital voices in contemporary American poetry. Hayes was born in 1971 in Columbia, South Carolina. He is celebrated for his inventive forms, musical language, and profound examination of African American identity. His poetry fuses personal story, cultural critique, and formal innovation to inquire about race, masculinity, and history in America. Winner of the 2010 National Book Award for Poetry, Hayes's *Lighthead* is a masterwork collection that probes the interstices

between personal life, racial identity, memory, and form in poetry.

*Lighthead* is remarkable not just for its thematic breadth but for its play with form. Hayes pushes the limits of poetic language further by incorporating musical rhythms, intertextual allusion, visual arts, and formal invention in the form of the Golden Shovel, a structure he created, and use of pecha kucha, a Japanese presentation mode of 20 images for 20 seconds each, transposed into poetic form. This series engulfs issues of visibility, trauma, survival, and freedom of the artistic form, presenting



a complex picture of what it is to be and write as a Black subject in America.

The pecha kucha form of poetry in Hayes's text, most notably in "Twenty Measures of Chitchat" (p. 13), works as a means of fractured consciousness. Emerging from the discipline of design and narrative, the pecha kucha style's limitation—20 images x 20 seconds—is equated to 20 short, powerful poetic flashes in Hayes's work. These micro-poems capture the fragmentation of cultural memory, violence, and mundane incongruity, resonating Christina Sharpe's definition of "wake work"—the constant negotiation of the afterlives of slavery (Sharpe 5).

Moreover, *Lighthouse* employs a dialogic structure that addresses the past and present. Hayes is not just in conversation with African American poetic traditions, from Gwendolyn Brooks to Amiri Baraka, but also with Western canonical forms. His formal agility enables him to critique, rewrite, and reimagine universalizing narratives about Blackness and beauty.

### **Fugitivity and Formal Disruption: The Poetics of Resistance**

Hayes's employment of avant-garde form breaks with conventional lyric tradition, representing what Fred Moten refers to as "fugitivity"—a politics of extreme resistance and imaginative flight. Hayes has written in "Twenty Measures of Chitchat":

"Because I was waiting to shatter these legs loose, / one to each coast, to be sweat-dressed on the head, my job, / a kind of rhythm like the initial sex, like the destruction / of death and distance and depression" (Hayes 14).

The imagery here is one of bodily fragmentation and affective rupture, indicating how Black bodies are suspended between historical trauma and current labour. The statement "my work, a form of rhythm like the first sex" is in alignment with Moten's definition of Black aesthetics as performative and improvisational (Moten 10). Hayes's poetic labour is not only a creative process but a reperformance of a bodily struggle against the burden of history.

### **Another excerpt from the same poem is:**

*"When everything is a spell, when my cries reverse in mid cry (and here I am talking voodoo), / I wake as a small black dog shucked in uncertainty" (Hayes 13).*

The dreamlike, de-centred image reassembles the Black self as forever displaced and haunted, affirming Moten's characterization of fugitivity as one of being "partially visible and partially audible" (Moten 1). The syntax of Hayes is anti-linear and astrophic, paralleling the improvisational structures of jazz and hip-hop.

### **The Flesh and the Disfigured Identity**

Hortense Spillers's theory of "the flesh"—the condition of dehumanization placed on enslaved African bodies—metaphorically comes to life in Hayes's "The Mustache" (p. 45). Hayes writes:

*"As if the lip could bear so much history" (Hayes 45).*

The mustache, a minor facial feature, turns into a signifier of violence and inheritance, positioned just above the mouth—the place of speech, silence, and resistance. For Spillers, the mustache is inscribed upon the flesh, a place of gender and racial inscription (Spillers 67). It is a metaphor for how the Black body is read, misread, and racialized on the surface.

### **Additional lines like**

*"The smell of greased metal, smoke / So thick it thins but does not vanish" (Hayes 45),*

It recalls the leftover marks of industrialization, war, or violence—history that is imprinted on the body and never left. The sensory details carry the weight of the way trauma is stuck in the flesh, imprinting the speaker even in ordinary sight.

In "Twenty-Six Imaginary T-Shirts" (p. 88), Hayes employs absurdity, satire, and surrealism to perform wake work, approximating Christina Sharpe's conceptual framework of living in the wake of Black death. The Line 7 states:

*"The best way to wipe out poverty is to wipe out poor people. Signed—the GOP." (Hayes 88)*



This violent, ironic slogan is a commentary on structural violence against racialized and poor people. The t-shirts are mnemonic prompts that gesture toward hidden histories and present denials. The phrase, "FDA-approved pill for inducing amnesia," represents the wilful ignorance of societal atrocities, and falls in line with Sharpe's argument that "the past that is not past reappears" (Sharpe 9).

#### Line 21 Presents a More Obvious Condemnation

*"U.S. map superimposed over the caption: The only thing that fucks you up more than poverty is wealth" (Hayes 89).*

Here, Hayes points out the contradictions of capitalist ideology, showing us the psychological and structural harms inflicted by both extremes of the economic scale. The mad slogans work like what Sharpe refers to as the "residues of Black life"—the afterimages of oppression transported through culture (Sharpe 39).

#### Love, Silence, and Fugitivity in the Domestic Sphere

The poem "Nothing" (p. 27) vents about emotional distance, intimate silence, and quiet fear in relationships. Hayes puts it thus:

*"I love the way love makes us say nothing like a good song, but I believe it could be fear" (Hayes 28).*

This ambivalence-love or fear-discloses the ruptured affective landscape of the Black subject. Moten's fugitivity here is not flight from a physical space but emotional withholding, the refusal to be seen or read in any complete way (Moten 32). The repeated silence at the dinner table, "not God saying you are blessed, not the meat cooling," is a metaphor for racialized silence, imposed both by family ritual and inherited trauma.

Hayes blends this inner silence with cultural commentary. The withheld joke of the speaker, the silence at dinner tables, and the unspoken realities in domestic and loving relationships capture the

sociocultural expectations surrounding Black emotional life. Silence is a refuge and symptom alike—love's inner strength is perhaps terror, and invisibility is survival.

#### Conclusion: Rewriting the Black Body Through Form

Terrance Hayes's *Lighthead* shows us how poetic form can be a radical refiguring of the Black body. In calling on the theories of Fred Moten, Hortense Spillers, and Christina Sharpe, we read Hayes as a poetics of fugitive flight, scarred skin, and wakeful bereavement. Hayes eschews fixed identity; rather, his poetic voice shatters, moves, and remakes the Black body into one that escapes capture. From the dreamlike slogans of "Twenty-Six Imaginary T-Shirts" to the provocative, worried whisper of "God is an American," from the breathless rhythmicity of "Twenty Measures of Chitchat" to the serious meditations of "The Mustache," Hayes produces a work in which form is not distinct from subject—this is the body's utterance, struggle, and song. The experimental poetry of *Lighthead* presents a dynamic, fluid vision of Black embodiment that defies encasement and claims narrative power.

#### Works Cited

1. Hayes, Terrance. *Lighthead*. Penguin Books, 2010.
2. Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
3. Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Graywolf Press, 2014.
4. Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press, 2016.
5. Smith, Tracy K. "The Body's Question." *The Body's Question*, Graywolf Press, 2003.
6. Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, pp. 64–81.