

The Art of the Contemporary Anti-Racist American Poem:  
'In-Between Spaces,' Exploding Conventions, and Listening as Form

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**Abstract**

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In this essay I describe and demonstrate, using close readings of Roger Reeves' "The Mare of Money," Natasha Trethewey's "Enlightenment," and a section of Martha Collins' *Blue Front*, defining characteristics of successful contemporary anti-racist American poems. Success, in this context, means the poems create Bhabhian "in-between spaces," explode conventions, and evoke emotions that assist anti-racist efforts. While these are by no means the only successful anti-racist poems written in the last few years, Reeves, Trethewey, and Collins provide ample evidence to debunk a pervasive myth regarding poetry and race: the myth that racial content and the subversion of convention are mutually exclusive. This essay culminates in a list of common tropes which I hope will be a useful resource and starting point for white poets wanting to engage with racial injustice on the page without proliferating or perpetrating racist ideas.

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It's worth trying to write about race, again

—*The Racial Imaginary*

We cannot leave the duty of elegy for black bodies... to the catalogues of solely black artists

—Danez Smith

Every poem challenges or supports the status quo

—Jericho Brown

What seems odd to me (and this I find most appalling about contemporary American poetry) is the dearth of poems written by white poets that address racial issues

—Major Jackson

How will a white poet speak freely—harder still, lyrically without reinforcing the perch from which she sings?

—Ailish Hopper

How do I use (poetic?) language to write—into (alongside? across?) a social construct that relies heavily on masking language and a 'not seeing'?

—Ira Sadoff

To end... with the nest of the phoenix, not its pyre

—Homi K. Bhabha

## *Context*

Right now, in my studio apartment, I face a shelf, upon which sits a line of books, spines too thin to bear text. Out the window to my right, just next door, is an abandoned Burger King. Into its walls, men are taking turns swinging a long mallet, periodically knocking bricks loose. Red dust shoots out and away in a plume.

Approximately 2,500 miles away, in my home state of Alabama, a white policeman just shot and killed an unarmed black man for looking “suspicious” yards away from his own front door.<sup>1</sup> Here, there’s a gale warning. It’s February in Seattle, a winter of wind. Bodies lean diagonal as they walk across the street below me to the bus.

The bus comes. The bricks fall. The workers break for lunch.

To all these people, I am, if anything, an amorphous shape in a high window. Attempting to orient myself in their relation, even physically, for just this small moment, proves frustrating. I’m reminded, as I am often, of Sylvia Plath’s absurd swan in “Winter Landscape with Rooks,” which “floats chaste as snow, taunting the clouded mind / which hungers to haul the white reflection down.” Right now I feel like both the absurd swan and the hungry watcher; what I reflect and represent—my context, my present—is so close, untouchable and ever shifting.

Any attempt to categorize one’s present, especially on a public scale, is myopic and therefore, to some extent, doomed. But while I cannot logically argue for how the poetic shifts I perceive in this America of the early 2010s will ultimately situate in terms of its future, I can point to moments and statistics that seem to differentiate it from its past. I hope this speedy contextualization—the product of personal observation as well as research—will provide a clear,

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<sup>1</sup> Policeman Aaron Smith (white) shot and killed Greg Gunn, a 58-year-old grocer, for looking “suspicious” on February 25, 2016 in Montgomery, Alabama

if rudimentary, backdrop before which the subsequent questions and close-readings can more meaningfully unfold.

Due in part to the proliferation of images via social media, vocal outrage appears to be growing for the racial injustice that persists in America, and by extension, American poetry. In fact, the now famous phrase and hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, described by Jelani Cobb in the *New Yorker* as both “a revelation aimed at whites” and a reminder to black people, has poetic roots—Alicia Garza, mother of the phrase, recognized in these three words an attribute she admires in haiku: a distillation of emotion in language.<sup>2</sup>

The connection between today’s large and endlessly nuanced Black Lives Matter movement and contemporary poetry is perhaps most visible in the hundreds of social media posts hashtagged #BlackPoetsSpeakOut. Begun by five Cave Canem Fellows in late 2014, Black Poets Speak Out is a digital, ground-sourced anthology that amasses hundreds of poems via video, blog post, tweets, and other media, each framed by the phrase, “I am a black poet who will not remain silent while this nation murders black people—I have a right to be angry.”<sup>3</sup> At first, participants primarily posted or recited poems by famous Black Arts Movement poets like Gwendolyn Brooks and Amiri Baraka, but contemporary poems quickly surged to the fore, and by its “end,” many people were posting original work.<sup>4</sup> This arc from past voices to present ones showcases how poets often operate on the individual level—scaffolding and emboldening their own work

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<sup>2</sup> See Cobb: “Garza sometimes writes haiku—she admires the economy of the form—and in those four syllables she recognized a distillation not only of the anger that attended Zimmerman’s acquittal but also of the animating principle at the core of black social movements dating back more than a century”

<sup>3</sup> Amanda Johnston, Jonterri Gadson, Mahogany Browne, Jericho Brown, and Sherina Rodriguez-Sharpe

<sup>4</sup> See Krause; I put quotes around “end” because while participation has slowed, this forum remains open

with what has come before. But while the arc itself is an established one, the observable ways in which this arc is playing out for us on a collective level in the digital sphere is new.

Technology, specifically social media platforms, are changing both the methods of political organization and the ways in which people interact with poems; and in current anti-racist movements, these two veins often meet. Over the past few years, this twinning of the political and poetic mediated by social media has correlated with some positive anti-racist results. For example, public recognition for the work of black poets is rising, and poetry that perpetrates racist ideas or constitutes a racist act in itself no longer goes unchallenged.<sup>5</sup> Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*, the first book to be named a finalist for the National Book Award in both poetry and criticism, quickly became a "runaway bestseller" in 2014, catalyzing many new conversations about racial micro-aggressions—and macro-aggressions—faced by people of color on a daily basis.<sup>6</sup> The "newness" of these conversations, however, only pertains to a specific group of Americans. As Holly Bass notes in a review of *Citizen*, "What passes as news for some (white) readers is simply quotidian lived experience for (black) others." Among this recent rise in white awareness, and perhaps related to it, I have come across many calls to poetic action from poets of color in which the bottom line is this: white poets cannot leave the work of engaging with race to black poets; they too must be willing to turn a critical eye on whiteness and white privilege.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> According to H. Ramsby's list of prestigious poetry awards won by black poets from 1975 to 2015, approximately 75% of those awards were won in the last 15 years; for examples of racist poetic acts being publicly challenged, see the *Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo* site; Gomez's "When Poetry is White Supremacist" regarding Kenneth Goldsmith's "The Body of Michael Brown"; and Kim Calder's "The Denunciation of Vanessa Place"

<sup>6</sup> See Charles (for quote) and the *Southern Humanities Review* online forum "Teaching Citizen" for an example of how *Citizen* has inspired new and far-reaching conversations among, primarily, white people about race

<sup>7</sup> For examples, see Major Jackson (*Sense of Regard* 143) and Danez Smith's "Open Letter"

Several white poets are attempting to answer this call. As Ailish Hopper writes in “Can a Poem Listen?” (2015), “There has been a recent flowering of books and poems published by white poets that address race and racism.” Of course, white poets engaging with anti-racism on the page is not purely a phenomenon of the last few years. Adrienne Rich, for example, reveals a commitment to grappling with such issues in the 1960s, primarily in her prose.<sup>8</sup> In general, however, there seems to be a very recent upsurge in the number of white poets attempting to turn a critical eye on their own whiteness in poetry.

When I speak of racism in this essay, I will be primarily referring to the racism experienced by black people in the United States, historically and today. This is not to discount the very real discrimination and violence experienced by many other groups. This black-and-white focus is an unfortunate necessity of time and space, as well as an acknowledgment of the “special history of polarization” that exists between American blacks and whites.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Rich’s *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*

<sup>9</sup> See *Arts of the Possible* 280

## *Introduction*

In this essay I will describe and demonstrate, using close readings of Roger Reeves' "The Mare of Money," Natasha Trethewey's "Enlightenment," and a section of Martha Collins' *Blue Front*, defining characteristics of successful contemporary anti-racist American poems. The first two poems are written by poets of color, and the third is written by a white poet. While these are by no means the only three successful anti-racist poems out there, I believe they will illustrate that story telling and the subversion of convention are not mutually exclusive.<sup>10</sup>

The damaging myth that poets of color have "stories to tell" about race, and, therefore, their poems are more simple, direct, and conventional than poems by whites can be traced back to, among other people and places, Ron Silliman in "Poetry and the Politics of the Subject." In this piece, Silliman draws a distinction between the poetry of "white male heterosexuals," which he says is "apt to call into question, if not actually explode, such conventions as narrative, persona, and reference," and everyone else—namely, "women, people of color, sexual minorities"—whose poems "appear much more conventional."<sup>11</sup> Silliman sets up a hierarchy of poetics here, situating the straight white male (surprise!) at the top, as a symbol of exciting language innovation, and relegating people of color below, in the realm of the old, tired hat. People of color, Silliman says, have *content* that makes their poems new and important, not craft.

Silliman publishes this claim in 1987 and defends the argument again in 2000, at which point he adds that while strides have been made, African American poets in particular, in contrast with Asian-American poets, are still finding it hard to publish "formally progressive"

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<sup>10</sup> See Silliman for an example of a poet who believes story telling and subversion of convention *are* mutually exclusive; this claim will be introduced and unpacked in the next section

<sup>11</sup> See Silliman

work.<sup>12</sup> He laments this lack of formally progressive black poetry, but uses the lack to bolster his original claim that a poetic hierarchy between whites (who he says are formally progressive) and people of color (who he says are formally conventional) is natural and unsurprising.<sup>13</sup> Sixteen years have passed since 2000, and who knows what Silliman would say now in the wake of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* and so many other award-winning, formally innovative books of poetry published by black poets. In a way, sadly, it doesn't matter. The argument Silliman proposes in 1987 and defends in 2000 is a damaging misconception that continues to taint aesthetic perceptions of poetry today. Many people, unfortunately, still operate under the false belief that if a poet is going to write about race, she must sacrifice craft innovation to do so.

If Silliman has a hard time finding formally innovative black poets in recent history or today, he's not looking very hard. Black poets, as Cathy Park Hong notes in her 2014 essay "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde," actually pioneered formal choices such as polyvocality, collage, and improvisation—craft techniques that have come to define formally innovative and experimental poetry.<sup>14</sup> Worse, white avant-gardists have long usurped without acknowledgment "radical languages and forms" from black literary movements such as the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement.<sup>15</sup> Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha are just a few of the many black poets whose groundbreaking texts "vitalized the margins [and] challenged institutions" in the 20th Century.<sup>16</sup> Today, as Hong proves, it's not difficult to argue the most ground-breaking and radical writings are being produced by poets of

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<sup>12</sup> See Gary Sullivan's Interview with Ron Silliman

<sup>13</sup> See Gary Sullivan's Interview with Ron Silliman

<sup>14</sup> See Hong, who also lists hybridity and stream-of-consciousness as defining avant-gardist moves inaugurated by black poets

<sup>15</sup> See Hong

<sup>16</sup> See Hong for descriptions of these particular writers' formally innovative works

color, who code-switch between and among so many different languages, mediums, and identity markers their works attest to an entirely new reading experience.<sup>17</sup>

Close readings of “The Mare of Money,” “Enlightenment,” and the opening section of *Blue Front* further repudiate Silliman’s false dichotomy. By unpacking the subversive uses of craft in these poems, I hope to demonstrate, as common sense suggests and several critics have already argued, that poetic conventions can be simultaneously invoked and exploded by all poets, not just straight white males who have been the subject of history.<sup>18</sup>

At the end of this essay, I present a list of common tropes—synthesized primarily from *The Racial Imaginary* (edited by Claudia Rankine), *A Sense of Regard: Essays on Poetry and Race* (edited by Laura McCullough), and *Playing in the Dark* by Toni Morrison—which I hope will be a useful resource and starting point for white poets wanting to engage with racial injustice on the page without proliferating or perpetrating racist ideas.

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<sup>17</sup> See Hong for more in depth description of code-switching as form, as well as examples of radically innovative contemporary poets of color

<sup>18</sup> See Silliman’s claim in “Poetry and the Politics of the Subject”

## *Theoretical Lens / Terms*

The theoretical lens through which I will be close reading poems is rooted primarily in Homi K. Bhabha's notion of the "in-between space" as described in *Location of Culture* (2nd Edition, 2012) and Shannon Sullivan's argument for agentially positive affects as outlined in *Good White People* (2014).<sup>19</sup> As I am a student of poetry, not theory, I don't presume nor intend to describe these theoretical concepts in great detail; these are the terms as I understand them, in relation to a small slice of contemporary poetry.

According to Bhabha, art—and for our purposes, poetry—becomes an "in-between space" when it "does not merely *recall* the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent" but "*renews* the past, refiguring it... innovat[ing] and interrupt[ing] the performance of the present."<sup>20</sup> The distinction Bhabha draws between recalling and renewing, presenting and interrupting, will serve as a crucial marker in this essay for what differentiates a well-written poem about race from a well-written racist poem. A "good" poem about race, like those I will be close reading, renews the racial past in such a way that it innovates and interrupts the racial present. A "bad" poem about race (or a racist poem) simply represents the racial past, proliferating it, and thereby assisting the racist systems of power rooted in these pasts. As uncritical performances of past performances, these "bad" race poems become, as Reginald Dwayne Betts says, akin to minstrelsy.<sup>21</sup> Anti-racist poems, if they are to actually be anti-racist, must create—or embody—a Bhabhaian in-between space.

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<sup>19</sup> Shannon Sullivan's argument stems and is corroborated by, among other critics, Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others* and Adrienne Rich, before that, in "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia."

<sup>20</sup> See Bhabha 10, emphasis my own

<sup>21</sup> See *The Racial Imaginary* 237

Furthermore, to be anti-racist, poems must embrace and induce emotions that aid anti-racist movements. As Sullivan argues in *Good White People*, different emotions (or affects) have different effects, and some are more apt to aid anti-racism movements than others. Guilt, for example, is a paralyzing and negative emotion that turns people inward in self-loathing, while love translates more readily into positive action and send people outward.<sup>22</sup> “Because of their guilt,” Sullivan elaborates, “white people sometimes feel incapable of making moral decisions about racial matters.”<sup>23</sup> In her 1978 essay “Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia,” Adrienne Rich provides a similar description, referring to feelings of guilt as “unuseful burdens” that “paralyze” rather than energize.<sup>24</sup> Rich and Sullivan agree the toxic inward spiral guilt and shame often provokes in white writers has a draining and silencing effect, which ultimately protects the power of whiteness. Love, on the other hand, allows white writers to digest their roles in racist histories and institutions, inspires action, and catalyzes work more apt to aid anti-racist movements.<sup>25</sup> If these claims regarding the distinction between the agential values of guilt (which paralyzes) and love (which energizes) are true, and I think they are, then the emotional undercurrent or tone of an anti-racist poem is directly related to its effectiveness as anti-racist. Truly successful anti-racist poems, therefore, generally embrace and induce agentially

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<sup>22</sup> See Shannon Sullivan 128 for description of guilt’s agential effects and 124 for description of love’s agential effects; see Rich 281 and Sontag 80 for examples of previous critics who have corroborated this claim that certain emotions are more energizing than others; see Curry 6 for another critic who argues white expressions of guilt hinder, rather than help, anti-racism movements

<sup>23</sup> See 129

<sup>24</sup> See 281 and 306

<sup>25</sup> See Sullivan 148

positive emotions like love and compassion, and reject unproductive emotions like guilt and self-loathing.<sup>26</sup>

While Bhabha's in-between space and Sullivan's agentially positive emotions are elements of what make for successful anti-racist poems, what generally differentiates a good anti-racist poem from a bad or mediocre one is the same as for any poem, regardless of content: attention to elements of craft. I refer here to the usual craft elements with which every student of poetry is familiar—rhythm, the line, image, etc. One might be tempted, especially if you're white, to see craft as an unbiased way to appraise the value of a poem. But like many appraisals of value, "craft" is bound-up with damaging and pervasive myths. As previously mentioned, this essay focuses on dismantling one of these myths: namely, the myth that poets of color have "stories to tell" about race, and that because of this, their poems are inherently more simple, direct, and conventional.

Innovation and content are not mutually exclusive, nor are subversion and identity. In fact, as Bhabha argues, if any group is more likely to reconfigure, innovate, and interrupt conventions, it's the people of color and women who are oppressed by conventions, not those—like white heterosexual males—who so often benefit from them. Fortified by, among others, Bhabha, Sullivan, Rich, and Sontag, I would like to turn Silliman's argument against itself and explore how the following three contemporary anti-racist American poems, no matter how "conventional" they may look on the surface, actively "call into question, if not actually explode, such conventions as narrative [and] persona."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> I have added Sontag's "compassion" to Sullivan's "love." Sontag writes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, "Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers" (80)

<sup>27</sup> See Silliman

*Part 1: The Building is a Slaughterhouse*  
Roger Reeves' "The Mare of Money"

My mother's photography studio, a five-story brick building on 1st Avenue North in Birmingham, Alabama, used to be a meat-packing plant. Everything from the drains in the concrete floor to the strategic absence of windows in certain rooms spoke of the building's original *raison d'être*. When my mother bought the building, she left many of the floors exactly how she found them—full of rusted machinery, dust covering the meat hooks. Years after the last cow was led through its doors, the structures of methodical slaughter remained around every corner.

As poets, we sometimes attempt to grapple with the abstract realities of history and memory by re-animating the mechanisms history has left us, using imagination and language to re-affix the animal to the meat hook, as it were, re-creating a lost moment viscerally on the page. But re-creation cannot be an end in and of itself, especially in regards to histories of racial violence. Poets must re-configure, not simply retell. As Roger Reeves says in a public craft talk for *Poets & Writers*, one difference between the original violent event and the violent event re-perpetrated in a poem is that, in the second occurrence, the violence has the potential to "occur critically." In other words, the poem has the power to create what Bhabha calls an in-between space.

Roger Reeves' emotionally and intellectually muscular poetry collection *King Me* (2013) tackles the racist violences of American culture from a slew of angles. Using conceits of persona like "Self-Portrait as Vincent Van Gogh in the Asylum at Arles" and "Self-Portrait as Ernestine 'Tiny' Davis," Reeves argues for black history as human history, black experience as human experience, and black trauma as human trauma. As he reveals in interviews, Reeves is "interested in corralling sound into patterns that hopefully bring delight, but [he is] also

interested in troubling [his] reader.” This marriage of discomfort and pleasure plays out in Reeves’ formal choices, as well as his subject matter.

In “The Mare of Money,” one of the first poems in *King Me*, Reeves re-imagines one of the most infamous and horrific individual instances of racial violence in American history—the murder of Emmett Till—through the conceit of a dead mare floating in the water next to the boy’s body. Bucking against racist divisions of aesthetic, Reeves presents through the poem’s fluid structure, polyvocality, and variation of lyric complexity, a slant yet powerful argument for self-critical poetic witnessing.

The structural fluidity of “The Mare of Money” first appears in how the poem is framed. The title “The Mare of Money” forefronts the poem’s fictive subject, positing a female animal, as well as currency, economy, and systems of exchange. Literally, Money refers to a city in Mississippi, but read preliminarily and on its own, the title constructs a surreal image: a horse made of dollar bills, coins perhaps in the place of eyes. The inclusion of Money in the title frames the poem as part of an institution—money being the inhuman object that is exchanged by humans, and which always accompanies political power. Before the poem has even begun, “The Mare of Money” is toying with our mind’s eye, causing us to question our own interpretations.

Reeves uses form and syntax in tandem to question conventional narrative in “The Mare of Money.” The poem is a one-page monostrophe with lines relatively equal in length, generally three or four stresses each.<sup>28</sup> But despite its length, the poem contains just four sentences: two very long, one very short, and one somewhere in between. Without even reading the words, a reader could sense a fluidity in this poem; the form itself is a largely uninterrupted forward motion in both structure and syntax.

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<sup>28</sup> Were the poem broken into quatrains, one might be tempted to read it as a kind of contemporary ballad

**Another dead mare waits  
in the shoals of some body  
of water, waits to be burden,  
borne into a foaming ocean,  
where it might become food  
for whales, or, simply empty  
signifier—hair latched to the sea’s undulation  
like Absalom’s beauty  
caught in the playful branches  
of a tree desiring union,  
entanglement, thick confusion—  
but not this mare;<sup>29</sup>**

Besides its obvious connection to the underwater scene being described, this structural fluidity also insinuates that this specific scene is part of a larger, ongoing narrative, especially when viewed in relation to the poem’s opening word: “Another.” “Another” tells us the poem is beginning in medias res, and the word brings with it to the poem’s commencement a history of similar instances past. With this frame, we are invited to read what proceeds as the latest in a long string of—what? Death? Waiting? Before we know what the instance is, we know it is not the first of its kind. Thus, Reeves frames the poem as a micro-incident for a macro-issue, without taking the reader out of the emotionally immediate scene. He tells the truth (this racist tragedy is part of a giant racist system), but he tells it slant, through subtle ruptures in narrative from the poem’s very onset.

The first sixteen-line sentence continues to flow like water down a carefully constructed series of troughs, forth and down. The syntax moves with as much fluidity as a submerged body moving toward sea, so satisfying the words at each line’s end: waits, body, burden, ocean, food, empty, undulation, beauty, branches, union, confusion. Reeves also achieves meaningful pivots

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<sup>29</sup> When I reach this line, I can’t help but think of Philip Levine’s famous line “Not this pig” in the poem “Animals are Passing from Our Lives,” a poem which, unlike Reeves’ poem, does employ narrative and persona (an anthropomorphized dramatic monologue) in very conventional ways

with these line endings. For example, by ending the line “in the shoals of some body” with “body,” Reeves allows the reader to linger for a split second on the surreal image of a dead mare inside a human body before clarifying it as a “body / of water”. Furthermore, the elegant way the syntactical skin is draped over the even bones of the lines creates eerie tension in conjunction with the poem’s horrific historical content.

We can discern Reeves’ awareness of this tension, and his ambivalence toward it, from the poem itself. When Reeves writes of the mare, “she does not get the luxury / of a lyric— a song that makes our own undoing / or killing sweet”, he defines lyricism as an act that makes “killing sweet”, thus turning the critical gaze upon himself as the lyrical poet.<sup>30</sup> Implicating himself and his medium allows Reeves to implicate his readers as well. By ending the poem on such a brutally honest and anti-lyrical statement as “horses don’t speak, besides / this one’s dead”, Reeves further condemns the highly lyrical language previously employed in the poem, even while reaping the benefit of its entrancing sonic qualities. As readers, we are vicariously imaginative and sobered by Reeves’ self-criticism.

**This horse must lie, eyes open,  
amongst the stones and fresh water  
crawfish in Money, Mississippi,  
listen to the men’s boots break the water  
as they drop a black boy’s body near her head,  
pick him up, only to let him fall again  
there: bent and eye-to-eye with her  
as though decaying is something  
that requires a witness  
—as though the mare might say:  
*on Tuesday after the rain fell,  
the boy’s neck finally snapped  
from the weight of the mill fan;  
he never looked at me again.***

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<sup>30</sup> See lines 14-15

While positioned as the poem's volta, this second long sentence, at fourteen lines, accomplishes a sonnet's work in and of itself. For me, it's a poem within the poem, a rupture as well as a crystallization of what has come before. By first re-establishing and clarifying the original scene, then complicating it by introducing new elements (most significantly, the human body), this sonnet-within-the-poem ratchets up the narrative pulse. Formally, this section sends the poem's narrative "down into the fire" again, that emotional intensity may rise even higher as the poem finishes.<sup>31</sup>

The turn of this embedded American sonnet, when the mare is allowed—hypothetically—to speak, pushes the poem against the door of anthropomorphism. This is the poem's peak of least restraint, when Reeves' imagination threatens to break loose from the real world from which his historical subject matter is retrieved.<sup>32</sup> But Reeves does not cross this threshold. Rather, he halts in the doorway ("as though the mare *might* say"<sup>33</sup>) and turns the critical gaze inward again, on his own poetic impulses. Ultimately, with "horses don't speak", he outright rejects his impulse to anthropomorphize.<sup>34</sup>

We see the speaker's refusal to claim what he cannot know from the very beginning of this poem with ambiguous words like "some" in "in the shoals of *some* body / of water" and "might" in "where it *might* become food." Poetry thrives on claiming the particular, but Reeves in this poem is not comfortable claiming particulars to which he does not have access. This includes an animal's mind. As vivid as his imagination is, the speaker of "The Mare of Money" refuses to leave the world of the real from the poem's beginning to its blunt end:

### **They part**

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<sup>31</sup> See "The Mare of Money" lines 16-17

<sup>32</sup> Assuming, as the poem does, that the presence of the mare in the water is real

<sup>33</sup> Emphasis my own

<sup>34</sup> See line 38

**here—the boy’s body found  
in another man’s arms, carried back  
to town, as the horse says nothing  
because horses don’t speak, besides  
this one’s dead.**

The move of positing fictional speech in a poem and then acknowledging that speech’s impossibility is not a new one, but the *style* of Reeve’s fictional speech here, combined with its refutation, yields explosive results. How the horse hypothetically speaks in the italicized portion of the embedded American sonnet—so matter-of-factly, like a captain’s log—aligns with the kind of straightforward poetic witness many white critics have (falsely) claimed is inherent to work by poets of color. By presenting this straightforward, conventional, and simple language, then undercutting it in the poem’s ending lines, Reeves rejects this false, racist claim about black poetry and simultaneously refutes it, rooting the poem in precisely the kind of “convention explosion” many whites have claimed are not black poets’ to employ. Furthermore, by making the hypothetical speaker of this matter-of-fact language an animal, Reeves highlights the offensive and dehumanizing nature of such claims and powerfully rejects the plain, straightforward aesthetic as, not only an unsatisfactory form of poetic witness, but a dead and impossible one as well.<sup>35</sup>

In “The Mare of Money,” Reeves claims decaying does not require a witness, and he’s right.<sup>36</sup> Poems of witness, like all poems, are not for the dead; they are for the living. Reeves operates under no delusions here—he knows this poem, this looking and lyricism, is for him.

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<sup>35</sup> I don’t mean to suggest Reeves had Silliman’s claim from “Poetry and the Politics of the Subject” in mind as he wrote this poem, of course. “The Mare of Money” is in conversation with a hugely complicated history of American racial violence that seeps into our present day lives, ideas, and poetics, and as such, it’s not difficult to read Reeves’ piece and Sullivan’s piece in conversation as well. As an anti-racist poem, “The Mare of Money” challenges and refutes a racist notion of aesthetic whether Reeves directly aimed his poem at this particular notion or not.

<sup>36</sup> “as though decaying is something / that requires a witness”

This said, Reeves never appears as a character in the poem. There is no “I,” no explicit human personality permeating the poem’s language. Statements like “but not this mare” and “besides / this one’s dead” are tonally rich and, therefore, sonically human, but overall, the poet himself remains behind the curtain, critiquing himself obliquely by flirting with and ultimately resisting certain poetic impulses on the page.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Reeves toys with conventional persona, questioning the ethics of its construction.

Highlighting from the onset the ongoing and cumulative nature of the scene, Reeves explodes conventional narrative without sacrificing the emotional immediacy of the images at hand. Furthermore, through form and syntax, he lays the groundwork for an argument that runs—subtle as a tributary—through the rest of the poem: not only are racial injustices perpetrated again and again; the act of poetic witness is *itself* a perpetration, which should not be taken up uncritically. By implicating himself, the poet, Reeves invites readers to turn a critical eye on themselves as well. What is our relationship to racist pasts? To racist presents? Is it enough to simply be in close proximity, to have our eyes open in its direction (as the mare’s eyes are open in the direction of Emmitt Till in the poem)? Or must we use our most human attribute—language—to turn this seeing against itself, to challenge the very structures we inherit, and put pressure on ourselves to never simply recall racist histories, but to reconfigure them, as Bhabha says, as in-between spaces?

*Part 2: The Building is a Body*  
*Natasha Trethewey’s “Enlightenment”*

As a child, I navigated my mother’s five-story building as a child does, with my whole body. I crawled into the rusted smokers, picked up long, reddish chains, and left footprints in the

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<sup>37</sup> I am thinking of Robert Frost’s notion “the sounds of sense” in regard to tone (see Frost 123) as well as Dickinson’s slantness here; for quotes from poem, see lines 12 and 38-39

thick dust. Once, I stood under a skylight on the fourth floor in a square of yellowy light and mooded. This physical, sensorial engagement with the past reminds me that good anti-racist poems—like all good poems—induce what T. S. Eliot calls “felt-thought” in readers.<sup>38</sup>

The body plays a crucial role in all good poetry, serving as the site of the reader’s visceral reaction to language. In an anti-racist poem, in addition to serving this feeling function, the body often also becomes the subject of intellectual meditation. In other words, in a good anti-racist poem, the body is often simultaneously the object of feeling and the subject of thought. After all, while socially constructed, race is a drama played out on the theater of shape and skin.

In her most recent, and arguably her best, collection of poems to date, *Thrall*, Natasha Trethewey employs ekphrasis and autobiographical adult-child persona to show how systems of racism and white privilege, rooted in American slavery, continue to negatively complicate even the most intimate contemporary relationships.<sup>39</sup> She presents the bi-racial body—her own, as well as artistic representations of others’—as palimpsests, arguing that we bear in our very physical, emotional, relational, and intellectual bones the proof of histories that precede us, despite attempts at silencing and erasure, despite the forward motion of time, evolution, and change.<sup>40</sup> In other words, *we* are Bhabhaian in-between spaces.

In *Thrall*, Trethewey is preoccupied with orientations—on the largest level, the orientation of the present in relation to the past, and on a more minute level, the orientation of bi-racial progeny to their white fathers.<sup>41</sup> She teaches us to see ourselves as in-between spaces by

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<sup>38</sup> See Eliot 233

<sup>39</sup> See Millichap, Warren, and Henninger

<sup>40</sup> See Warren 76: “Trethewey confronts this Southern history through the fabric of her own experience”

<sup>41</sup> See Millichap 195: Counting individual sections of sectioned poems as individual texts, “the book includes thirty-two poems by my count: twenty-six of these poems invoke various father

offering herself up, via nonconventional persona, as an example. The poem “Enlightenment” showcases *Thrall*’s major thematic concerns more clearly than perhaps any other poem in the collection.<sup>42</sup> This poem paints a portrait of a complex familial dynamic as mediated by historical racial hierarchies, presenting at its core the dual experience of visiting Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello with her father in her youth and again as an adult. While Reeves ghosts “The Mare of Money” as the poet-witness simultaneously constructing and exploding narrative, Tretheway presents herself as a character in the poem that she might take conventional binaries and, by taking them into her own persona, implode them.

**In the portrait of Jefferson that hangs  
at Monticello, he is rendered two-toned:  
his forehead white with illumination —**

**a lit bulb — the rest of his face in shadow,  
darkened as if the artist meant to contrast  
his bright knowledge, its dark subtext.**

These opening stanzas introduce that old familiar binary of light and dark. Pairs like this one, always some variation of light and dark, permeate the poem, the most central and specific one being “white father, black daughter,” as named in the poem’s final stanza. Tretheway is less interested in re-presenting these conventional binaries, however, than in laying herself over them, braiding the dichotomous together so tightly they cannot be seen in isolation. She lies her own body down, when necessary, to bridge the poles, transforming the conventional binaries into something inextricable and new.<sup>43</sup>

**I did not know then the subtext  
of our story, that my father could imagine**

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figures; twenty-three present diverse daughters with their fathers; and twenty involve Tretheway’s relations with own father in some manner, either personal or representational”

<sup>42</sup> See Millichap 201

<sup>43</sup> See Henninger 70: Tretheway counters “narratives of division with figures of overlay and acknowledgment”

**Jefferson's words made flesh in my flesh—**

*the improvement of the blacks in body  
and mind, in the first instance of their mixture  
with the whites—*

Using an oxymoronic, pseudo-autobiographical persona of the “adult-child” of white and black parentage, Tretheway invites readers to experience with her a coming into the in-between space of racial consciousness.<sup>44</sup> Her role as a daughter allows her to inhabit this double perspective of child and adult naturally, presenting the adult mind simultaneously with the child's experiences.<sup>45</sup> As Henninger points out in “What remains: race, nation and the adult child in the poetry of Natasha Tretheway”:

**This is not the familiar “awakening” to racial difference described most famously by W.E.B. DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright; it is not the movement from unraced childish innocence to raced experience that would echo a Romantic progression, or any number of “coming of age” narratives. Rather, Trethewey's corpus constitutes a schooling in racial consciousness, a representation of the process of our collective enthrallment to notions of racial hierarchy, which, by her fourth volume *Thrall*, are revealed to be at the very foundation of hemispheric American identity.<sup>46</sup>**

“Enlightenment” enacts a transformation from child-daughter to adult-daughter, forefronting her daughterhood in both. Tretheway describes herself as a child, in the past tense, listening to her father as he explains Jefferson's contradictions, following him “from book / to book” as he attempts to prove his intellectual greatness. Then, Tretheway fully embodies herself

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<sup>44</sup> See Henninger

<sup>45</sup> See Millichap

<sup>46</sup> See Henninger 59

as an adult daughter in the present tense, one who no longer simply listens unaware, but sees.

Time and slow epiphany divide the two selves—child and adult—but the poem and Tretheway’s stress on the daughter aspect of her persona’s identity binds these selves together.

**When I think of this now,  
I see how the past holds us captive,  
its beautiful ruin etched on the mind’s eye:**

**my young father, a rough outline of the old man  
he’s become, needing to show me  
the better measure of his heart, an equation**

**writ large at Monticello.**

Tretheway embodies via her autobiographical daughter persona the in-between space of this transformation from listening child to seeing adult. By embodying disparate colors (light and dark), emotions (pride and shame), ideologies (people are equal; whites are superior), and temporalities (past and present), Tretheway’s autobiographical persona becomes an in-between space in and of itself that quietly explodes these conventional binaries.

“Enlightenment”’s long-lined tercets work in tandem with its content to enact the poem’s “in-betweenness” as well. Intertwined in these tercets are the trio of main characters: the adult-child speaker persona, the literal father, and Thomas Jefferson (the philosophical, historical father). Furthermore, the middle line of each tercet is indented; visually, this move evokes a weaving motion, suitable for Tretheway’s smooth meandering among multiple elements: historical pasts, childhood memories, a present-tense scene, found text, dialogue, and ekphrastic description, to name only the most significant. If you’ve ever watched a woman absent-mindedly braid her own hair down the side of her face, you know something about the assurance and muscular memory that seems to drive this poem’s steady, sinuous form. Similar to Reeves in “The Mare of Money,” Tretheway’s masterful construction of form and syntax solidify craft

proWess as well as lay tracks for subtle subversion of conventional elements and traditional racist ideas.

Syntactically, Trethewey favors long, complex sentence structures that begin with a prepositional phrase. This move, which forefronts context and defers the subject, occurs in all but three of the poem's twelve sentences, underscoring the "Enlightenment"'s preoccupation with distance and intimacy as two sides of the same coin.<sup>47</sup> By using this syntax, the speaker (Trethewey's autobiographical adult-child persona), hints at her own anxious attitude toward the subjects at hand. The syntax allows for a constant wriggling and deferral, but the effect remains subtle. The length of the sentences and regularity of the stanza shape keep the syntactic anxiety from manifesting overtly or careening into paranoia. Were the poem utilizing fragments, short sentences, and irregular line lengths, the poem's anxiety might become frantic and dominate the poem rather than subtly pervade it.

The effect of a squirmy syntax paired with reliable continuity of form enables Trethewey to critique the subtle ways in which American history, racism, and systems of white privilege pervade our present-day relationships, language, and daily lives. In a way, Trethewey is using the methods whiteness uses to protect its power—pervasiveness, hiding in plain sight, masquerading as normal—against whiteness here. Insidiously, almost imperceptibly, she laces the poem's structure with emotional discomfort. Bhabha may as well be writing about Trethewey's poem when he says, "We find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See Millichap 196: "Trethewey's *Thrall* balances anxiously between love and knowledge"

<sup>48</sup> See Bhabha 2

As Tretheway's adult-child persona navigates the racial histories and hierarchies that surround her in "Enlightenment," we learn to notice the ones we are navigating. This poem teaches, not pedantically in any sort of "telling" way, but in the way the best poems teach, by conferring an immersive experience in language, re-surfacing from which, we experience the world differently. The narrative arc of the poem embarks from ekphrastic description and ends, after dipping deep into historical and personal pasts, with a present conversation. The experience of this arc models for us how to peel back the layers of whatever image hangs before us to reveal its historical and racial underpinnings. But not only that. After teaching us how to see what's underneath, the poem goes on to model what gets brushed over the top: our own personal relationships ("white father, black daughter") and our own spoken words within them (*This is where / we split up. I'll head around to the back*").

The poem teaches us by example a different way of using our senses and intellectual faculties than the way racist standards and beliefs mandate we use them. And after experiencing the connections Tretheway unearths between past and present, after following closely along as she pulls personal and political meaning from, among many things, the brush-strokes of an oil painting, snippets of conversation, and childhood memories, we return to our own lives, our own objects and conversations, seeing differently. We see the larger, racial meaning made flesh in our own flesh.

Indeed, as Tretheway whispers periodically throughout *Thrall*, "How not to see it?"<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> This question appears so often it comes to serve as a refrain for the book: "How not to see it?" (12); "How not to see / in this gesture" (22); "—see it!—" (33); "how not to see it?" (40)

*Part 3: The Building is a Photography Studio*  
*Martha Collins' Blue Front*

In the basement of my mother's photography studio, her assistant is pouring a mixture of whole milk and mayonnaise over my head. "Slower," my mother says, and a thick white drip travels down the right side of my nose, down my bare shoulder, and onto the black trash bag I am wearing as a dress. "Now faster." She taps the side of her camera. "Eyes right here."

But I can't help it—I blink.

Soon, the assistant's jug is empty. With whiteness completely covering my eyes, lids closed, the world is dark. Unable to see—and refusing out of disgust to smell, taste, or feel—my sense of sound intensifies. The *click, click, click* of what I know to be the shutter release of my mother's camera becomes an animal, and I ride it into myself.

**Given whiteness's history as a racial category of violent exclusion and oppression, one might think that white people need to focus less on their whiteness, to separate themselves from it. But just the opposite is the case. White people's flight from their whiteness is not necessarily the opposite of white narcissism. It instead tends to be another manifestation of it.<sup>50</sup>**

Before encountering Shannon Sullivan's *Good White People* and Adrienne Rich's "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia," both of which stress the importance of agentially positive emotions to anti-racism, all this critical thinking, reading, and writing about racism and white privilege was destroying me. Often, I was too anxious to sleep at night. So full of roiling self-loathing and sadness, if I attempted to breach the subject vocally in conversation, I cried. Meetings with professors ended with wet tissues and awkward hugs. Workshops grew

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<sup>50</sup> See Shannon Sullivan 145

uneasy as my physical discomfort with the emotional content of my work became more and more obvious. Now that I understand guilt and self-loathing are emotions that cripple the progress of anti-racist movements—now that I see these feelings as another way in which whiteness protects its power—I am free, on my better days, to set them aflame. Energizing emotions like love flicker now in those ashes, sending me back to the page again and again despite constant failed poems, endless reading, and a consistent onslaught of racial violence that seems to extend in every temporal direction. Now I have more endurance.

Endurance is a necessary quality for anyone hoping to write a book of poems, and perhaps especially crucial for poets hoping to write a single, book-length anti-racist poem like Martha Collins' *Blue Front*. At the heart of *Blue Front* is a lynching Collins' father witnessed in 1909 as a young boy in Cairo, Illinois. Like Tretheway, Collins uses her white father as a “main character” of sorts, through which she examines, critiques, and grapples with racist American histories and ideas. The long poem is notable, among other craft elements, for its looping syntax, abrupt omissions, and evolving repetitions in structure and content, all of which work to deconstruct the racist narrative under examination and turn a critical gaze on the typically invisible and unchallenged white perspective.

It is important to re-iterate that Collins, unlike Reeves and Tretheway, is white, and therefore, in regards to the topic of racial histories, inequalities, and injustices, she is, by birth, in the oppressor's camp. For *Blue Front* to become an anti-racist poem, as opposed to yet another instance in a long and ugly practice of louder, more privileged white voices drowning out those of color, Collins' poem must not simply re-present racist history or emote feelings of guilt, but must, like the pieces by Reeves and Tretheway, be emotionally active and re-configure racist

histories.<sup>51</sup> Silence, for Collins, becomes an important tool in ensuring that she pushes past retelling toward interruption.

Before discussing how Collins uses silence to question and explode narrative and persona in *Blue Front*, I first want to present two seemingly disparate views of silence as it pertains to poetry in general, one from Louise Glück and one from Adrienne Rich. In “Disruption, Hesitation, Silence,” Glück describes the function of the “unsaid” or “deliberate silences” in poetry this way:

**It is analogous to the unseen for example, to the power of ruins, to works of art either damaged or incomplete. Such works inevitably allude to larger contexts; they haunt because they are not whole, though wholeness is implied: another time, a world in which they were whole, or were to have been whole, is implied.**<sup>52</sup>

The silence Glück references is a structural one that manifests in poems themselves. She has a positive, almost reverential relationship this “eloquent, deliberate silence.”<sup>53</sup> “Often,” she writes, “I wish an entire poem could be made in this vocabulary [of the unsaid].”<sup>54</sup> While Glück focuses on how silence functions structurally in poems, haunting and implying pure wholes, Adrienne Rich focuses on how silence functions in the world, and how poems exist to fill those real-world gaps.<sup>55</sup> Rich describes her relationship to silence in *Arts of the Possible, Essays and Conversation*:

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<sup>51</sup> See Curry 8

<sup>52</sup> See Glück 1

<sup>53</sup> See Glück 1

<sup>54</sup> See Glück 1

<sup>55</sup> Related to Rich’s characterization of silence is Major Jackson’s claim that “There is a disturbing and relative silence [around racial issues] in American poetry that refuses to be filled by the majority of white American poets.” (*Sense of Regard* 143)

**The study of silence has long engrossed me. The matrix of a poet’s work consists not only of what *is there* to be absorbed and worked on, but also of what is missing, *desaparecido*, rendered unspeakable, thus unthinkable. It is through these invisible holes in reality that poetry makes its way — certainly for women and other marginalized subjects and for disempowered and colonized peoples generally, but ultimately for all who practice any art at its deeper levels. The impulse to create begins — often terribly and fearfully — in a tunnel of silence. Every real poem is the breaking of an existing silence, and the first question we might ask any poem is, *What kind of voice is breaking silence, and what kind of silence is being broken?*<sup>56</sup>**

Can Rich’s belief that “Every real poem is the breaking of an existing silence” and Glück’s belief that the most powerful poem would be made entirely in the vocabulary of “eloquent, deliberate silence” be reconciled? I don’t know if I can offer a satisfactory answer to this question, but I will say that if such disparate claims can both be true, the end result would probably have a lot in common with Bhabha’s in-between space: taking a real-world injustice (a silencing) and embodying it (structurally employing silence in the poem) in such a way that it “innovates and interrupts” that injustice.<sup>57</sup>

In *Blue Front*, silence manifests primarily as gaps in the poem’s fragmented, looping syntax, and we see this functional silence at work from the very beginning of the book. In fact, I believe this opening section of *Blue Front* will illustrate in microcosm many of the ways in which Collins uses silence to create an in-between space, interrupt narrative, and challenge persona in the long poem as a whole. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to this opening segment

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<sup>56</sup> See *Arts of the Possible* 150

<sup>57</sup> See Bhabha 10

of *Blue Front* (reproduced here in its entirety) as a poem and the five divisions within it as sections, which I have numbered.<sup>58</sup>

*Section 1*

**He was five. He sold  
fruit on the street in front**

**He sold fruit. People came  
He made change**

**came to see him  
make change**

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*Section 2*

**in front of the restaurant that faced  
the tracks that ran by the river  
one of the rivers a block  
from the street and up**

**to the double arch  
where in 1909**

**was it the blue of the**

**was it the river**

**front of the blue of**

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*Section 3*

**the rivers make  
a V where they meet  
a point**

**the rivers flow  
together but not  
at once two**

**colors blue  
and brown meet**

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<sup>58</sup> In the book the sections are indicated by dashes alone

**make a line**

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*Section 4*

**Boats came from the north they came from the south**

**Trains came from the south they came from the north**

**Boats came on the blue Ohio they came on the brown Mississippi**

**Boats came on the brown they changed for the blue**

**Trains crossed that river people changed for the north the south**

**People changed in the middle of the river they changed cars**

**In the middle of the river they changed colors made a line**

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*Section 5*

**the street was Commerical**

**Dowling Pressing**

**Saloon Drugstore Opera House**

**Three States Buggy Champion Tools**

**Dowling Pressing Club was where**

**his uncle's Blue Front Restaurant he was five**

The main way in which Collins uses abrupt silence, syntactical gaps, and loops to interrogate and resist conventional narrative is, perhaps, obvious. By refusing to present a narrative that unfolds surely and chronologically, Collins infuses the narrative with doubt, resistance, and tension. The poem's speaker is constantly swerving away from pieces of the narrative, returning to earlier bits that have already been articulated. Take, for example, the first three lines of Section 1: "He was five. He sold / fruit on the street in front // He sold fruit."

Silence manifests as a syntactical gap between “He sold / fruit on the street in front” and “He sold fruit.” Where the silence is—accentuated by the presence of a stanza break—a narrative question ghosts: *In front of what?*

Another example of this sort of abrupt, meaningful silence occurs in Section 2, when Collins never finishes the sentence that begins “in front of the restaurant that faced / the tracks that ran by the river / one of the rivers a block / from the street and up / to the double arch / where in 1909”. Instead of finishing this sentence, she abruptly swerves into the question fragment “was it the blue of the”. Again, in this syntactical gap in the narrative, a question ghosts: “Where in 1909” *what* happened? More than simply build suspense, this silence accomplishes little ruptures in the racist narrative and undermines—purposefully—the authority of the white speaker’s own voice.

The only two sections of this opening poem in which these sorts of abrupt syntactic gaps or silences do not appear are Sections 3 and 4, which focus on the rivers and the transportation that occurs, in a general sense, on the rivers. Thus, Collins aligns the loudest silence—and all the discomfort, shame, and doubt that silence might represent—with the personal and the human, rather than the general and environmental history under poetic investigation. The more coherent and whole syntax Collins uses to present the rivers in Section 3 is also significant in light of how the rivers function throughout the book, in contrast to the human agents of racial injustice, as a symbol of present-tense observation, continuation, and even hope. I’ll return to the emotional importance of these rivers, but first, a look at Collins’ uses of repetition.

Related to Collins’ use of abrupt silence is her use of repetition to create syntactic loops. Often, after employing an abrupt silence, Collins will return to an earlier piece of language. We see this move in those first three lines, when she returns to “He sold fruit” instead of finishing

the sentence “He sold / fruit on the street in front”. We also see these syntactic loopings in “was it the blue of the // was it the river // front of the blue of” at the end of Section 2. The repetition of “was it” and “was it”, “the blue of” and “the blue of” form little syntactic loops that circle around a piece of narrative information. Furthermore, the word “front” reverberates back and forth between Sections 1 and 2, creating another loop. As if we weren’t dizzy enough, the poem’s first sentence “He was five” are also the poem’s last words.<sup>59</sup> Thus, the first poem becomes a loop in and of itself, a loop that contains many syntactic others.

These loops, in conjunction with the abrupt silences, simultaneously disorient and re-ground the piece. Impeding the narrative’s progression, suffusing it with unease, ghosting questions, and obsession, Collins lays the groundwork at the very beginning for a long poem that will, rather than recall a racist history, break it down and interrogate its place in the present. Of course, it could be argued that what I see as Collins’ syntactic interruptions actually stem from tropes common to white writers attempting to write about race, namely, “patterns of explosive, disjointed, repetitive language” Toni Morrison describes in *Playing in the Dark*.<sup>60</sup> However, while clearly engaged with these tropes to an extent, I believe Collins’ work achieves anti-racist status by pushing past the narcissism and unproductivity affiliated with this trope and reaching toward an agentially positive affect of hope.

The book ends—after a long and looping interrogation of a horrific human incident of racial violence—with the rivers. As previously noted, Collins typically uses less fragmented, less silence-riddled syntax when describing the rivers. Unlike the people who appear in the book, who are mostly described in the past tense using glitchy syntax, the rivers are usually described in the present tense, with continuous, run-on sentences. In addition to highlighting the speaker’s

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<sup>59</sup> The final line reads “his uncle’s Blue Front Restaurant he was five”

<sup>60</sup> See Hopper for an explanation of the “I’m so stuck!” trope and Morrison 69

contrasting attitudes toward researched scenes and personally witnessed scenes, the effect of this more continuous syntax combined with the present tense imbues the rivers with a sense of ongoingness and an agentially positive tone. The book's final stanza reads:

*There is a blue and there is a brown the rivers  
flow together but not at once two colors meet  
make a point of land a line that sometimes  
wavers but still a line that we can cross  
or not disappearing beyond the point*

To end *Blue Front* with the rivers this way is to underscore a feeling of potential, if not hope, in relation to Collins' poetic endeavor, as opposed to an agentially negative feeling like guilt or self-loathing. This final stanza—while full of tension between colors (blue and brown), temporalities (“*flow together but not at once*”), and human choice (“*a line that we can cross / or not*”—ultimately highlights our human agency. Therefore, by Bhabha and Sullivan's standards, Collins' final tone is apt to energize anti-racist thought and movements.

## *Conclusion: Listening as Form*

In her essay “Can a Poem Listen?”, Ailish Hopper seeks to educate white poets about the subtle forms of racism that permeate their lives as artists. She points out many of the tropes and pitfalls that often accompany white poets’ attempts to write about race, and she poses important questions to inspire white poets to turn a critical gaze on themselves, as poets and poetry critics. One important question Hopper entertains at length, one which closely aligns with the project of this essay, is

**Are we [white poets] *writing race and racism*, reinforcing the white viewpoint, which is designed not to threaten its own power? Or, are we *rewriting* race and racism, not merely representing, but disturbing; showing not just whiteness—but what it is to be awake, and disruptive, inside it?**

What she never unpacks, or even mentions until the final sentence, however, is the title’s question, “Can a Poem Listen?” It’s this question, and its cousins, that tumbles in my brain at night. Can a poem listen? Poets can, of course. Poets can listen and learn and bring new awareness to the page with them. But can a *poem* listen? Doesn’t a poem always speak? Is listening in poetry, then, a matter of producing language (speaking) that turns against itself, that reacts “in real time” to another, different voice? What is the syntax of listening? What is the imagery? Would a “listening” poem forefront a sense of sound over, say, the visual? Would it be like me, sitting on that stool in a photography studio that used to be a slaughterhouse, covered in cold, goopy whiteness, listening to the camera’s clicks? Or is that what guilt—negative emotion of inaction—looks like?

The argument could be made that the poetry in *Blue Front* listens, or at least enacts listening through its use of silence, syntax, and form. Earlier, I mentioned the narrative questions

that ghost in the syntactical gaps. (In front of what? “Where in 1909” *what* happened?).

However, this is not the only voice that ghosts the syntactical silences. It is not difficult to imagine, each time the language stops abruptly and swerves backward, that the speaker of the poem is responding to something. Listening to something.

But if the poem is listening, who or what is it listening to? When I read *Blue Front* with this question in mind, the first voice I hear ghosting in the syntactic gaps sounds like *Shut up—Don’t go there*. This kind of command never appears in the book itself, but when Collins’ language suddenly swerves, it’s not difficult for me to imagine these swerves are responding to an internalized mandate like it. To me, it’s a white voice making these censoring demands, angry at how whiteness is being examined and critiqued in the book. Perhaps Collins—by listening to this imaginary voice and, to an extent, obeying it by stopping abruptly and backtracking—reveals whiteness’ power over her own mental processes. Collins’ syntax, in this case, would confront the myth that “the white way” is “the natural way” by enacting how eerie and constrictive whiteness’ mandates become when challenged. This listening, while deferent to whiteness’ silencing power, also shines a critical light on it.

This is one way to interpret *Blue Front*’s listening as manifest in Collins’ syntactical gaps, but might the abrupt silences and looping repetitions be indicative of an entirely different kind of listening? Contemporary poet Patricia Smith says, “When you’re witnessing, you’re always supposed to look for the voice you’re not hearing.”<sup>61</sup> With this in mind, might Collins’ broken syntax mirror that of someone attempting to determine what is being said by a voice so quiet—stretched across so many years and filtered through so many unreliable throats that it’s difficult, at times impossible, to make out? The gaps and loops become, in this interpretation,

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<sup>61</sup> See Divedapper interview with Patricia Smith

less of a flinching from whiteness' fearful anger and more of an earnest grappling with the present truth of a racist past. The silence becomes more akin to the haunting, ruin-like silence Louise Glück describes, and less like the silence Adrienne Rich points out, under the cover of which oppression thrives.

Much more could be written about the ways in which an anti-racist poem like *Blue Front*—through form, syntax, and other elements of craft—listens, just as much more can and will be written about the role of white poets in anti-racist movements. As previously noted, many white poets are on the precipice of reading and writing poetry with an awareness of their own racial identities for the first time. Being familiar with how anti-racist works like “The Mare of Money,” “Enlightenment,” and *Blue Front* successfully create in-between spaces, employ agentially positive affects, and enact listening may help these writers on the precipice engage with race on the page without perpetrating racist ideas. A familiarization with the common literary tropes that often plague the work of white poets attempting to write anti-racist poems might also be useful, and it is with this hope that I include the following resource.

*When White People Try to Write About Race:  
A List of Common Tropes*

This list of common tropes, by no means extensive or all encompassing, has been compiled from, among other resources, *The Racial Imaginary* edited by Claudia Rankine, Ailish Hopper’s “Can A Poem Listen?”, *Playing in the Dark* by Toni Morrison, and *Sense of Regard: Essays on Poetry and Race* edited by Laura McCullough. This is not a list of what never to do, per say; it is a list of tropes of which to be aware. As Martha Collins says, “If white poets are to deal with race, we need to know our limitations and mistakes.”<sup>62</sup> White poets should be aware, before using any of these tropes, that they are tropes—often damaging and antithetical to anti-racism efforts.

1. The one-dimensional, stereotypical, or caricatured other
  - A. The poor, homeless other
  - B. The hyper-sexualized or fetishized other
  - C. The “big ” other<sup>63</sup>
  - D. The other as experienced through their music
  - E. The other as abstraction
2. A focus on the burden of guilt
  - A. Often represented as a fog, mist, or
  - B. An object stuck in the throat
3. A sense of futility, frustration, and personal defeat
  - A. Manifests in tone
  - B. Manifests formally as “patterns of explosive, disjointed, repetitive language”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> See *Sense of Regard* 157

<sup>63</sup> See Jackson

4. Passive verb constructions, “subjectless sentences”<sup>65</sup>
5. Images of black death or pain
6. Race only in relation to scandal
7. Race = racism<sup>66</sup>
8. Race as historical fact, not present one
9. White self as “raceless”
10. Black / White as only racial divide
11. Only naming the race of nonwhite characters
12. “I met an other and it was hard!”<sup>67</sup>
13. “I needed to travel to see race”<sup>68</sup>
14. “My intentions are good! I’m misunderstood!”

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<sup>64</sup> See Morrison 69

<sup>65</sup> See *Sense of Regard* 183

<sup>66</sup> See *The Racial Imaginary* 15

<sup>67</sup> See *The Racial Imaginary* 15

<sup>68</sup> See *The Racial Imaginary* 15

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