

THE SRPR REVIEW ESSAY:
BLACK POEMS, WHITE SPACE

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dark // thing: poems
Ashley M. Jones
Pleiades Press, 2019
80 pages; paperback, \$17.95

Here is the Sweet Hand: Poems
francine j. harris
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020
96 pages; hardcover, \$25; paperback, \$15

The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre
Don Paterson
Faber & Faber, 2018
752 pages; hardcover, \$35

*You are white—
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.*
—from “Theme for English B,” by Langston Hughes

A typical review essay has a flexible but fairly standard format: the reviewer introduces a central concern—a theoretical viewpoint, or critical perspective or debate—and then structures the review essay by employing that concern as the lens through which the individual works under consideration will be examined and assessed. Occasionally, one of the exhibits—often the last one—will have something significant to say back to the framework or perspective.

This is how review essays typically work. But not this one.

Out of necessity, I’m writing this review essay in what feels to me like reverse. Early in the reviewing process, I’d imagined I’d begin with

Don Paterson's *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre*—a book about poetry—to then consider some urgent books of poems, including, potentially, Ashley M. Jones's *dark // thing* and francine j. harris's *Here is the Sweet Hand*, the books I in fact review here. But it became clear to me that I needed to flip this order, giving Jones and harris a more primary place over Paterson's book. I do this, largely, to be clear: Jones and harris—excellent poets who also are excellent Black women poets—do not need to answer to anyone, and they certainly do not need to answer to Paterson's book. Let me explain.

In spring 2020, during the ramping up of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the few books I read was Paterson's *The Poem*. Though it doesn't seem to make sense that as my attention was unspooling I'd be attracted to a 752-page tome, I was taken by *The Poem* because I've long been deeply interested not only in contemporary poetry but in books about contemporary poetry, and specifically books about poetic form, and even more specifically books about poetic form that seem to reveal that they're actually quite interested in poetic structure—that is, the pattern of poems' turns.¹ Attracted to Paterson's book because of its interest in form, I flipped through it and discovered to my delight the subsection "Closure." I leaped to reading and analyzing this section and found that, yes, this largely formalist book, as well, is deeply interested in turns: the major closures Paterson describes really are sections of poems that occur after major turns. Paterson even offers an admittedly incomplete list of closural maneuvers, including "the non-sequitur," "the punchline," "the clincher," "the dying fall," "the anti-climax," and "the non-ending," which Paterson refers to as "a rather silly cline," while still noting that "nonetheless it may propose a more systematic one that others will have time to pursue" (422–35).

Of course, I wanted to pursue that, and to think more deeply and write about what I was finding to be an extraordinary book. But as I was doing that, two other connected, relevant things were happening. Spring and summer 2020 was not only a time of pandemic, but it also was a time of the resurgence of and refocusing on racial inequality

¹ For example, see my analysis of Robert Hass's *A Little Book on Form: An Exploration into the Formal Imagination of Poetry* (<https://structureandsurprise.com/2017/06/20/dont-know-what-to-call-it-robert-hasss-elision-of-the-poetic-turn/>).

in America, inequality that is long-standing, thoroughgoing, and continuing, but that revealed itself, during that time, in specific ways: the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. This was a time of renewed interest in the Black Lives Matter movement. The increased attention to racism in its many manifestations that Black Lives Matter generated and resulted in—and continues to generate and result in—comprise a host of significant, new conversations, initiatives, and reforms at a variety of levels, from the state to the institutional and communal to the individual. At the individual level, for me, among many other things, these events and perspectives began to throw into stark relief another aspect of Paterson's book: even as my admiration for it was growing, I also was realizing that *The Poem* was deeply invested in whiteness. I was seeing that very rarely was a poet of color referred to in its pages, and in fact, there were some indicators that this bias might even be, if not intentional, deeply woven into the fabric of this text.

My aims with this review essay, then, are to draw attention to two vital, timely books of poems by Black women poets and to try to honor what is good in Paterson's book, while also calling out where it falls short. A final note, though, before starting out: though the genre of the review essay would demand it, I won't be particularly interested in creating a conversation between Jones and harris, on the one hand, and Paterson, on the other. I'll certainly point to where Jones or harris might have concerns about Paterson's work, but I won't explicitly point back from Paterson to Jones or harris to show how Paterson makes a point relevant to the work of those poets. I fear *The Poem* has not earned that right.

dark // thing

Ashley M. Jones's *dark // thing* takes place in and conveys a world in which it is necessary to assert repeatedly and forcefully that Black lives matter. As its terrifying title suggests, the book does this, centrally, by highlighting the diminishment of Black persons, the belittling of blackness through both violence—those slashes indicate the brutal work it takes to turn a human into a thing—and the continuing violence of commodification. In the prose poem "Antiquing," the speaker rummages around at a flea market only to come across "Smilin' Sam From Alabam'," a coin-operated salted peanut vending machine in

the shape of a Black man's head. This encounter leads to a moment of ekphrasis, with the speaker reinterpreting what seems like the figure's smile so that it reads as a death's head, so that the figure's "flapping tongue and big eyes are not markers of your happiness ... but the startled result of another night in dark Alabama, illuminated by the stars, white and pointy as hoods made of sheets" (24). The extended epigraph to the prose poem "Uncle Remus Syrup Commemorative Lynching Postcard #25" informs readers of the tradition of sending postcards with photographs of lynchings, often accompanied by "a racist poem to 'warn' Black people what would happen to them if they didn't behave," a practice finally banned in the early twentieth century (34). The poem that follows is precisely that racist poem. Operating by pure juxtaposition, the poem employs the slogan for Uncle Remus Brand Syrup—"Dis sho am good"—as an obsessive refrain—it appears in the one-page poem over thirty times until the slogan itself begins to break down into the repetition of smaller and smaller units—while spliced into it is a narrative of a lynching (34). The horror of this form of torture, murder, and spectacle is, paradoxically, heightened by the fact that this narrative, told from the perspective of one of the white perpetrators, indicates the banality of the evil transpiring: there's "perfect weather" for the lynching; an engagement takes place there; and perhaps, for a better photo op that might make the newspaper, a suggestion is made that maybe next time the crowd should hang two people (34). Mere things—mere goods—require no responsibility.

These poems and others like them reach their apotheosis in the poem "Today, I Saw a Black Man Open His Arms to the Wind," a terrifying and righteous anti-poem. The poet-speaker sees a "black man, tall, lanky, just at the edge of a Birmingham sidewalk, arms outstretched," and knows what readers will think: she is going to make a commodity out of him by turning him into a Christ figure: "you think I will call him Christ, because the whole scene was very poetic" (48). But the speaker refuses: she has witnessed too many such Black bodies be murdered: "a man dead for selling CD's [while black], for driving with his girlfriend and her child [black], for walking back from the corner store [black], for not being able to breathe [black], for being alive [black]" (48; bracketed material is original). With all of this real-life death—references to the deaths of Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, and, alas, so many others—the

speaker states, “A metaphor is a luxury I can’t quite afford” (48). The poem ends with a sense of the literalness of the moment: that man in “his literal skin, his body, standing in-real-life before me,” draws attention to himself and so exposes himself and the speaker to real-life danger so that “this moment ... could be his last, or mine” (48).

In many respects, many of the poems—a number of which, including all those discussed above, are prose poems—in *dark // thing* chime with the project in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric*, a book of prose poems that works mainly to reveal the microaggressions that constitute a significant portion of the lived experience of Black people.² However, as the above poems also demonstrate, whereas Rankine is razor sharp in her excavations of moments in contemporary life, Jones casts her attention further afield, looking to history and also revealing how what happens to her speakers affects their outlook and even their imaginations, how it conditions their perspective and sense of what is possible. Jones also delves more deeply into violence—often state violence—against Black bodies, and she sees the ideas and institutions not only of white privilege but of white supremacy that create these conditions.

One poem at the heart of this book shows this in brutal, gut-wrenching fashion. Its title alone—“I See a Smear of Animal on the Road and Mistake It for Philando Castile”—is disturbing, and the poem follows through on the title’s nightmare logic, comparing the nonmurder—the poem was written “[a]fter Officer Jeronimo Yanez is acquitted on June 16, 2017”—of Philando Castile with the common-enough occurrence of making roadkill:

What law says a man can’t bleed like a possum
a greedy raccoon
in his own car?

What law says stop? (50)

(The reader is left to fill those white spaces with any and all of the expletives they might wish to.) The end of the poem leaps to a phantasmagoric image of the jury eating “the meal they’d made of him—filet of buck,” then pauses as they “swore they all smelled something

² Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf, 2014).

burning, / / / perhaps a laughing gun—" (50). Jones makes a gruesome poem that works through image and ideation to approach the visceral and awful event it ponders.

dark // thing, however, also includes a number of poems that serve as odes to vital—and often, though not always, maternal or sisterly—counterforces to racism and racist violence. "Harriette Winslow and Aunt Rachel Clean Collard Greens on Prime Time Television" praises a mother "to rival every black mom on cable [television]," including *Family Matters*'s Harriette Winslow and Aunt Rachel (15). "(Black) Hair," a crown of prose poems (as with a crown of sonnets, the final line or gesture of one unit—here, a paragraph of prose rather than a sonnet—becomes the beginning line of the next), includes a section that sings praises to tennis stars Venus and Serena Williams, reveling in the sense of identification that the sisters offer the speaker: "We watched them serve and volley, marveling at how much like our faces theirs were. And their hair, their hair..." (69).

dark // thing even includes a series of poems that focus on Harriet Tubman. It's a strong series, and the penultimate poem of the sequence is particularly powerful. "Broken Sonnet in which Harriet is the Gun" opens with Tubman taking a stand and not allowing herself to be easily commodified or turned into mere exchange value. The poem opens: "You can twentydollarbill me and still / won't hold me—you silly, you think / I'm knowable? Ownable?" (30). The poem proceeds to spell out the mystery that was Tubman: known to be firm, demanding, and even—when necessary—violent, the poem declares that it is love that led Tubman's efforts. The poem concludes with a knockout image for the righteous robber: "What I gave them [the enslaved persons she helped to free] was a smile (asylum). / My bullet, a tooth plucked from God's gums—" (30).

The final poem in the Tubman sequence reveals Jones shifting into another—and, for her collection, much rarer—register: comedy. In "Recitation," the poet-speaker tells the story of when, as a seven-year-old schoolgirl, she dressed as Tubman for her part in a school program, and she and her mother—who came to the school that day, the speaker says, "to protect me from the blacktop bullies and my gifted teacher who treats us like adults"—engage in final preparations for the event (31). Though the differences between Tubman and the speaker—who happens to be asthmatic—are played up for humorous

effect, the poem ends in true comedy: a marriage, a joining through imaginative identification of the girl and her hero, the beginning of an understanding and a feeling of, as the last words of the poem state, “freedom, sweet respiration” (31).

dark // thing's range of tones is matched by its formal range; it includes sonnets and broken sonnets; prose poems, including a crown of them; sestinas; abecedarians; a variation on the golden shovel form; and villanelles. Even with such experimentation and playfulness, Jones almost always finds ways to make her poems arrive at endings that feel consequential: she consistently delivers significant turns. This is especially interesting in “Kindergarten Villanelle,” a poem using a form in which one, very early on, largely knows how the poem will end. “Kindergarten Villanelle” offers a tale of how the poet-speaker and a young friend who is not a Black person would play together, becoming so close that they in fact pretended to marry each other. After the boy’s family comes to visit, though, things change, and the boy won’t play with the speaker, choosing instead to play with a blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl, casting the speaker away. The poem opens with the line, “I’m brown, he’s not. The blocks are blue and red” (75). It closes similarly, though registering how the new friendships have drawn new lines: “I’m brown, they’re not. The blocks are blue and red” (75). The shift is subtle, but also significant, and spreading: at the beginning of the poem those blocks are merely blue and red, or else they’re the combined blue and red of the American flag, but by the end, the blue and red seem more like the divide between blue and red states, between Democrat and Republican, or else the blue and red lights on many police cruisers. Among the many dark things that *dark // thing* uncovers and powerfully conveys are the ways that subtle actions turn significant, the intimate turns overtly political, what citizens do divide nations. It is a bracing book.

Here is the Sweet Hand

Race and politics certainly also are key features of the world of the poems in francine j. harris’s *Here is the Sweet Hand*. Like Jones’s, harris’s America is one with an ugly, brutal history of lies and violence that still persists today. So, “Oregon Trail, Missouri” in part offers an account of the fact that enslaved people were part of a migration of

settlers from the Midwest to the West Coast of the evolving United States. However, in harris's book, this history is so well known that the poem does not ask but rather states, "How used, you" (65). For harris, the history and social/racist realities are so present that they are just there, facts among other facts.

As are the discussions about it. The poem "The day after *12 Years a Slave*" begins, "I make a stew" (59).³ Much of the rest of poem has little to say about the movie—which tells the story of Solomon Northup, who was born free but then stolen into slavery—and instead mostly describes the brokenness around the poem's speaker: "the landlord's futon gives out"; the stew's "meat is off ... smells like a / slaughterhouse"; the "control is / out" (59). The movie becomes briefly present: the speaker recalls that "Northup had his own tune," but then this moment dissolves back into the broken present: "choke sometimes. an ulcer of blear. // I cry at the black rendering. the festival finish. / The chair squeals when I forget and fall on it" (59–60). The poem does not work to make any connection between the brutal history of America and the present-day circumstances of Black Americans; rather, it juxtaposes and lets the implications simmer.

Here is the Sweet Hand also moves into territory that Jones's book does not by examining whiteness as its own phenomenon. Whiteness happens. "The Neighbor's Buddy Through the Window" simply observes a young white man in a leather coat on the ledge outside of the speaker's window, where he has gone to smoke. The poem is fantastically strange for how understated it is. The speaker takes on the role of bird-watcher—the white boy's cough is "a cough of pigeons. a hack of grackle. a bird out the window" (57)—and describes her subject in the flattest, most factual way. She notices his tiny movements, how he places his body: "propped and sunglassed"; "[h]e has one foot on ice porch / and one foot wiggle" (57). The speaker even identifies the specimen: "white boy, northern. Of a Michigan leather" (57). It's a fine objectification, pushing Jones's critique of commodification by making a thing of the white other. It's also a poem inherently about privilege: the white boy can be outside someone else's window making noise, and no one calls the cops.

³ This poem first appeared in print in SRPR (Spoon River Poetry Review) 39.2, winter 2014.

The blandness of “The Neighbor’s Buddy...” in part is so effective because it is so different from the vast majority of poems in the collection. harris’s world is passion-filled, replete with love and suffering, sex and violence. Consider “So is we thinking up new ways to fuck, or nah.” This poem is largely an overwriting of the song “Or Nah,” by Ty Dolla \$ign.⁴ However, whereas Ty Dolla \$ign’s song serves up mainly heteronormative, masculine desire with lines such as, “Can you lick the tip then throat the dick or nah?” and “I’m tryna fuck her and her friends,” in her poem, harris, whose previous book won the Audre Lorde Award for Lesbian Poetry, engages in scintillating frisson, composing a new kind of *l’écriture new-wave feminine*, and in so doing in fact imagines new ways for sex to take shape: “We wrecking sexes’ demirep. We trying to take the flitch as breath. ... We trying to buck their gender vends. So. you going to fix it with these / flatheads, pearl or saw” (48). The result is a poem that’s sexy, raw, transgressive, funny, and inventive. It’s a wild ride. Anyone addressed by this poem would be hard-pressed to say no.

harris’s impassioned poems go off—whether, as in “White People Eating White Food,” it be against the conspiracy of whiteness against what is really good for the tongue, or even against family members. In “Unlike my sister” the speaker delineates the many ways she isn’t and won’t deign to be like a sister who seems overly seduced by mainstream, white, commodified America: “I don’t track sperm into cookie jars. or drag Budweiser blankets to the pines. ... I don’t use pink makeup. I don’t / like to lie” (53). The poems “Ask me now and I would say” and “She is what I undo” both meld the violent and the erotic, but in two different ways: “Ask me now...” seems to be about a fight the passion of which spills over into the erotic; “She is what I undo” is largely about a sexual encounter that culminates in violence.

Even in poems that are not explicitly raw and passionate, a barely submerged passion is present. “It Takes” portrays two people, “the Negro” and “the country boy poet,” in a natural landscape that they seem to have entered in order to test each other, to see how observant and knowledgeable about the landscape the other is: “The Negro / knows watching, how much standstill is twill in prairie. ... / He has

⁴ Ty Dolla \$ign, featuring Wiz Khalifa and DJ Mustard, “Or Nah,” Beach House EP (Atlantic, 2014).

tree vision, the crawl of summer / bugs stuttering nameless" (67). This vague competition winds up in a "standoff," and so the two "[b]reak / over pinball and dartboard and a bartender who makes bourbon barrel in a bath / where epithets infuse," and the passions may shift a bit, or simply become the actual desire that they were all along: she seems to imagine "a white meat for a bone and churn in her mouth" (67). And, as revealed near the poem's end, it turns out that, in fact, the passions they feel for each other may in fact be both violent and desirous: "[m]aybe they want one another's head. They don't know the difference" (67). "It Takes," indeed: it takes two, baby; and it takes two to tango.

As many of the above quotations indicate, harris's poetry mainly uses nonstandard language, including seemingly broken syntax and irregularly deployed punctuation and capitalization. In fact, harris's poetry is elliptical, taking place in a middle space between the experimental and the lyrical. harris makes great use of this position, employing her estranging techniques—skittishness; strange, unexpected leaps; dislocations—to create an active, involved reading experience which is anti-absorptive, and therefore charges the reader with knowing that they play a role in making the poem's significance, and yet somehow manages to still be deeply absorbing, inviting—sometimes cajoling, sometimes seducing—readers to lean in and attend more closely to the poem.

harris's terrific poem "Rabbit," in fact, makes the rabbit an emblem of a nonstandard, irregular relation to the world. The poem describes the rabbit's "funny set of tools," how "[h]e jumps. / or kicks. muffled and punching up," how "[h]e hobbles and eyes," can still be "vicious," in part because "[t]here is no ease": if he seems calm, it's because he is "stuck in a calm" (23). At its single stanza break, the poem turns to consider the rabbit as representative of us, of people, we who "stab at gratitude," who "jump" and "kangaroo," who "soft seeming, / [still] scatter and gnaw," who might take lessons from the rabbit and, so, realize that "[m]aybe the only way forward / is to sleep all day. / ... we could sit in our shit. / ... linger the dark / until it is safe to come out," who realize, perhaps, that "[n]othing / makes us happier than another rabbit" (23–24). "Rabbit" is a nearly perfect pandemic poem, allowing readers to be skittery and jumpy and to feel comforted, a bit, by knowing that others feel this way, as well.

Hybrid techniques are used in virtually all of harris's poems, but I find an apotheosis in the poem "It is a Choice (because Kanye)." In 2018, rapper Kanye West made the claim that 400 years of slavery was a choice. West's comment, as many have pointed out, revealed a deep privilege: the rapper could not even imagine the brutality that perpetuated slavery. harris knows those systems and recognizes the artist's privilege, but we also know how seduced by passion harris can be—the notion, even if just a fantasy, of armed revolt against oppressors would be appealing to her. And, in fact, the poem—written in two-lined stanzas, which alternate between being left- and right-justified, that is, as a concrete poem that represents debate—poses as a debate, though the viewpoints don't align easily as left or right, or right and wrong, but rather they prod, startle, scintillate.

Mainly, the poem counters West's claim. There is no significant choice in a world in which "[t]he seating charts of airplanes / look like the Middle Passage," and choice is illusory so far as any group could imagine that they are in control when they are removed "from the store by / cuffed security" (61). And there was no choice prior to emancipation:

...The choice couldn't be, dear
 prophet of rap, a choice against
 monster or its poisoned tip. The slave
 is a dance and a rope stood still, in its choice
 of whip. its choice of lynch orifice to swallow
 its sawed-off dick. (61)

The poem, however, can at least dream there was choice: "Which exit to design, which / disemboweled master" (62). And it recognizes that others get to choose: "Other people / decide what to do with their bodies" (62). And yet, the poem notes, opening into a bigger, more democratic vista: "But we choose, we / choose" (62): among other things, about the environment and about allowable forms of policing, including how the police are policed: "We choose / if the land the land is green and owned. / If ... / our cops with fists" (62). But the poem ends by acknowledging how choice ultimately isn't—can't be—made; that each day, particularly for people of color, involves compromise and negotiation with a violent world in order to just get by:

The body we submit
 and stays and refuses

to give way. withstood
so could get dressed.

and choose what lingers
in order to get home.

what crawls in the muck.
what washed beneath in seawater. (63)

harris's poems crawl through the muck, yet still are uncompromising, heartfelt and hurting.

The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre

Don Paterson's *The Poem* consists of three extended essays: "Lyric: The Sound of the Poem," "Sign: The Domain of the Poem," and "Metre: The Rhythm of the Poem." Though separate, they also are deeply connected: they share a perfectly plausible yet still paradoxical view of the human's shared existential and creaturely condition. On the one hand, humans are born into a universe without any meaning that we do not give it. According to Paterson, "[A]lmost everything...in life...is not intrinsic but determined by contextual forces" (389). There are no "shadowy and invisible forces"—no God, no Meaning—that participate in the world, including in the creative process; instead, *The Poem* offers "material explanations"—though Paterson will find them "wilder and altogether far more slack-jawed amazing" than any theory that invokes the unknown or supernatural (351). The material explanations that Paterson will deliver are based on "an inbuilt condition of existential crisis," with "roots [that] may lie in a kind of ingrained 'fear of nothingness'" (452). According to Paterson, we have a "fundamental rage against the absence of intrinsic meaning in the universe, a rage against the curse of being born a sense-making creature into a place where nothing but neutral process is to be found" (220).

And yet, on the other hand, there are aspects of existence every human creature obeys, including, chief among them, the facts of intra-uterine existence and death. Humans are born with innate tendencies and abilities: "I suspect by the time we emerge [from the womb]—albeit born with grammar-capability and largely 'good-to-go'—we have already forged a direct, unmediated, iconic and motivated mapping between intonationally discriminated vowel and emotion" (250). And our mortality "causes us to 'structure time,' as the anticipated death of the self creates a life that is a 'rhythmic unit,' which can then

subdivide into year, season, week, minute, 'the seven ages of man,' and so on..." (452). This existential creaturely condition is at the core of each of the three essays.

"Lyric" establishes the foundation for how poems get made—by poets and by readers. The ground for poetry is composed of the facts of our creaturely existence. Far from being a system of arbitrary signs, according to Paterson, language in fact has deep roots in us, in the pulse of the heart and our experience of language in our intrauterine state, in which our minds already are hard at what will be their permanent work: deciphering between signal and noise, and telling apart what should be remembered and what forgotten. Though Paterson will note that what he's describing is a broad tendency—counterexamples certainly exist—words are, for him, iconic, embodying a significance beyond their mere denotative meaning (33). Paterson notes, "We hear, somehow, the roundness of *moon*, the ruminativeness of *memory*, the hiss of *sea*, the thinness of *needle*, the littleness of *pin*, the lumpiness of *hump*, the speed of *quick*, the warmth of *mum*" (34). He adds, "Language works in part by sensory analogue: through the brain's automatic habit of synaesthetic mapping ... and this habit is naturally reflected in our speech. Poetry takes this passive linguistic tendency and turns it into an active strategy through its amplification" (34). Such ideas about our natural, creaturely relation to language contribute to a "lyric ground," "the poet's working medium, the canvas, clay or stone from which they make the poem" (56).

However, not only does the poet collaborate with the medium of human, creaturely language, but also "artist and audience collude" (4). Paterson explains that with poetry, "[p]oet and reader enter a bizarre cultural contract where they *agree* to create the poem through the investment of an excess of imaginative energy..." (4). This kind of interaction with the poem is special, it is "one denied to other modes of human speech" (4). Readers are invited into this kind of interaction by the white space around poems, and, in fact, in a way, all poems are concrete poems that look like poems and so demand a specific kind of involved interaction: "The white space around the poem then becomes a potent symbol of the poem's signifying intent," and the silence that white space signifies "is the space in which the poem makes its large echoes" (19). Paterson will go so far as to say there is a "poetic contract" that involves the reader engaging in "*oversignifica-*

tion" (that is, reading into the work); "overattention to the phonosemantic dimension of the language, that is, the interfusion of sound and sense which produces synaesthetic effect"; and "oversensitivity to ... [the] physical properties" of words and language (167–8). The co-created poem becomes a "super-charged semic field" (176). The reader contributes their willingness and sensitivity to engage the poem deeply, feelingly, and in this way, among other things, such readerly collaboration also contributes to the reader's sense of "ownership" in regard to the poem (17).

The Poem's second essay, "Sign," which deals with poetic tropes, also arises out of a feature of human sensemaking. Here, it is the fact that, as Paterson puts it, "[w]e are walking trope-generators"—after all, the "epistemic asymmetry between the inner and outer realms ... has to be leapt somehow" (111). Paterson refers to this as "the human trope, which we can think of as a kind of symbolic accommodation," which "more or less defines the human dream we wake to each morning, and even dream within" (111–12). Tropes are not only central for persons but also for poems; Paterson states, "Any unified theory of poetry would, I believe, be based around the principle of a global shift from denotative to connotative speech" (228). By, as he says, drawing on and adapting "conceptual metaphor and blending theory," Paterson sets out to explore the ways that metaphors work and how poems exude their significance (105). As Paterson states, "[W]e shouldn't talk about what the poem or line or metaphor or image means so much as what meaning it generates: the truest value of 'poetic meaning' accrues within the dynamic flux of our reading and rereading..." (108).

For Paterson, as with everything else, there's never anything intrinsic in any given trope but rather a trope's function is all about relation, context. So Paterson defines trope as "a name for the means by which one concept's rules and definitions finds fluid connection with, or within[,] another concept's rules and definitions, and so produces *meaning*" (113). Tropes—by which Paterson means mainly metonymy and metaphor (Paterson swiftly, and correctly, dispenses with the idea that synecdoche and irony are additional master tropes (133–5))—always need management, engineering, and he describes in great detail how tropes have a "core" component but that there also are "secondary" attributes which need to be handled so that the significance, the relevant details, of the trope comes through (119). For

Paterson, tropes do maximal work when delivering fitting surprise, offering a jolt or a shock but also fitting the poem so well that it could not, say, be lifted and put into another poem (161).

In "Metre," Paterson examines the music of poetry so that it appears as "*both a simple and a complex matter*": he will describe "a relationship between metre and sensemaking" in order to generate a metrical system "which *includes* ... subjectivity as integral to it" (343). According to Paterson, "The grievous mistake of many prosodic systems ... is to treat poetic language as if it were *any* language that happened to find itself versified, and merely 'thrown up against' metre, rather than having been born directly from it" (350). Meter isn't just a grid for poems, but rather, it helps to generate verse. But this generation largely occurs by encouraging poets to attend to the natural significance of stress and rhythm in language. As Paterson notes, "[S]tress is an inseparable performative aspect of meaning" (349). Among the many phenomena of human speech that Paterson reminds his readers of is isochrony: "inherent rhythm of spoken language, and the tendency strong stresses have to distribute themselves at roughly even intervals," an effect that becomes "significantly stronger ... in 'urgent speech,' i.e. speech delivered with a high degree of emotional or rhetorical emphasis," including, of course, poetry (352). (To hear isochrony in action, one need only consider the three strong stresses of "OMG") The poet creates the poem in the metrical flux between what is willed and what the rhythm of feeling language calls out for.

Readers—the co-creating performers of the poem, even if playing it silently, internally—Paterson reminds us, will project themselves onto a poem, and they always have the option of choosing "*a metre-strong or speech-strong performance*" (606). Still, Paterson offers his own simultaneously complex and simple method for scansion, called "Interpretive Scansion." Though Paterson goes into some detail on this method—he gives seven steps for the process (621–29)—he notes that it is in fact relatively simple: "[A]ny intelligent reader knows exactly how to do this already," Paterson states, "They read aloud, or to themselves, with some awareness of the underlying metre, and with some understanding of the line—and allow the agreement and tension between the two to direct their performance" (620). Or, to put it another way, the significant steps are to get a feel for the stresses that don't have to do with emotionality—centrally, recognizing "the

metrical template” and “lexical stress” (621–22)—and then combine that analysis with “sense-stress analysis,” that is, “accenting or de-accenting material according to our performance of its understood sense” (626). This is I think the geekiest thing I’ve ever written, but it really is thrilling to see Paterson apply this method and to see how much insight he can wring from it. Paterson rightly notes that “[a] poem fundamentally is a blueprint for its own performance” (595). This material begs to be operationalized so that educators might offer a way to bring performance more fully back into the poetry classroom.

The Poem is in many ways a great book. It outstrips so many recent books on the topics it covers, including, especially, prosody. After having read *The Poem*, I feel much better attuned to language and to poems. Even after over thirty years of focusing on poetry—as a student and a teacher—it has refreshed my sense of poetry, and my senses for poetry. It has given me new language for my teaching, and new ideas about how I teach. I must admit that, occasionally, I also was glad to see that some of my own predilections were seconded. For example, Paterson generally dislikes the art song tradition, seeing in it a disregard for and replacement of the poem’s own music, its own performance features (10). I couldn’t agree more. Additionally, I agree with Paterson’s understanding of what doesn’t quite work in many early attempts at poems: “Most apprentice poems are bad because they are about four or five things, not one or two, and the poet has refused to cut them out” (24). I was amazed—and not a little terrified—to see my largely intuitive advice to my mostly free verse poets about how to lineate their poems turned by Paterson into “a simple algorithm [that] could probably be written for breaking any prose passage ‘effectively’ into poetic lines” (412). In short, in many ways, I identified with this book.

Part of what is so great—and a sign of how great it is—about *The Poem* is how it manages to be simultaneously immense and intimate. As simple page number reveals, the book is a tome—and it’s filled with technical language, detailed processes, and taxonomies of all sorts. Still, in so many ways it really is a thrilling read, and this is because the book is replete with amazing moments. Besides being a poet, Paterson also is an aphorist, and *The Poem* is threaded through with them:

What we call ‘poetry’ is really only a cultural salience. Language has poetry wired through it, like the body has the endocrine system. (22)

The text is always airborne, and any interpretation is a mere snapshot of that flight. (109)

This is the position occupied by human art, whose principal function is to join us to what we are not, and in doing so accomplish two beautifully contrastive things: restore something of the mystery of the wider world to our narrow human perception, and bring some of its hidden connections to light. (112)

Included in *The Poem's* immensity and intimacy is the idiosyncrasy of its author. The ideas in this book are generated via Paterson's work as poet, editor, and teacher, and as many of the above quotes reveal, readers can see the close connections between Paterson's engaged work and the more theoretical undertaking of *The Poem*. Overall, Paterson comes across as incredibly smart, bright, and witty. He's personable, revealing a number of details from his own life. He even admits many of his own difficulties and insecurities. He's self-deprecating, and, so, seems self-aware.

Paterson also seems aware of the fact that the kind of poetry is in fact a specific kind of poetry: his kind, the kind he writes—that is, generally, a relatively short lyric poem composed by a single author, containing the right kind of difficulty. In a discussion of “‘what makes poetry poetry,’” Paterson reveals one aspect of the difficulty he seeks in poems, stating:

Usually the thematic domain (effectively the “intentionality” of the poem, what the poem is “about,” “saying,” “up to”) is not explicitly given. It's rarely wholly revealed in, say, the title (which may even be deliberately misleading) or stated in neatly expository lines which “tell not show.” (225)

Rather, the poem's significance will come about through the whole poem, which “to some extent operates as a microlanguage, and circularly forms its own definition of ‘what it means’” (226). However, though the poem does not give up its meaning easily, nor does it dissolve into mere obscurantism. For Paterson, the poet presses one ear hard to the lyric ground and attunes the other to the music of the spheres and then tries to translate those and turn it into a poem.

This is excellent, so far as it goes—that is, for Paterson's single, narrow frequency of poetry. But of course Paterson's frequency tunes a lot out, including surrealist poetry and “‘difficult poets’ and avant-

gardistas" (332). Paterson is pretty clear about his disagreements with those kinds of poets, personified, mainly, in the figure of Jeremy Prynne. However, things get tricky when Paterson differentiates the kind of poetry he's discussing from spoken word poetry. Though Paterson describes the "spoken word scene" as "energetic," and though he recognizes it to be "hugely popular," its revival of "the Romantic idea of the 'uniquely sensitive artist' in whom the audience can believe"—necessitated by the fact that "much of their poetry is taken up with moral and political exhortation"—indicates that its practitioners "regard it as a different art form" from the kind of poetry that Paterson thinks of as poetry (335).

Wait. What?

Of course, it's not clear that spoken word practitioners conceive of what they're doing as different from poetry. However, it is clear that Paterson thinks this, and this is where things start to get really problematic. While avant-garde poets still get the honor of being—however misguided—poets, spoken word artists do not, even though the skillful performance of poetry is truly important to Paterson's project. While Paterson takes the time to look into the work of difficult poet Jeremy Prynne, he does not seem to extend to any spoken word poets the same courtesy. What gives? Why cordon off so much poetry in such an extreme way?

I think there are many ways to answer this question, but here I'll pursue only one, one which, alas, bears itself out in relation to other aspects of the book: it is *The Poem's* privileging of whiteness. Though it's clear that a big part of Paterson's beef with spoken word poetry is that it really isn't the kind of poetry he's interested in, and it could even be that he's threatened by its popularity, it also is possible to believe that spoken word may be shorthand for a more inclusive poetry community, especially given other features of *The Poem*. For all its immensity, *The Poem*—beyond a few, brief passing references—contains virtually zero reference to work by poets of color.

It gets worse. Though Paterson does cite a verse from Kanye West's "Gold Digger" in order to employ it as a useful example of how a performance of written text could "achieve accentual regularity," the verse ends with a footnote in which Paterson offers, essentially, a white translation of the verse, informing readers that "[h]is baby mama car and crib is bigger than his" can be understood as saying "the mother

of his child has a car and a house that are bigger than his" (511–12). While Kanye's song has some references that perhaps could use some explaining for particular readers, including some white readers, they all could have been looked up, and none of them is more obtuse than, say, the references to "South Armagh" and "Robert Nairac" in Paul Muldoon's "Mink," which, Paterson determines, requires no footnote (60). Though he does recognize that "[r]ap ... provides a song-strong performance model that may have a great deal to teach 'page poets' about re-engaging a general readership," and that "[t]here is, of course, no good reason why 'page poets' could not return to the Anglo-Saxon model," Paterson also states, "but its rough, war-drum, incantatory music is just not what we do round here these days" (514).

War-drum? WE?!

Paterson, I trust, isn't intentionally doing what he's doing. But there's a pattern here, and that pattern creates an effect. I can detect and detest this pattern, but when I attend to it using Jones's and Harris's perspectives, I can see how *The Poem* can—and perhaps should, and needs to—be seen as yet another racist commodity, another act of aggression, an outcome all the more problematic because it just need not have been so. This is a shame. In the preface, Paterson initially struggles to identify who the book is written for, and he reveals that it "was written primarily for [him]" (xiii). Paterson will go on to explain that he means by this himself as a working poet, editor/mentor, and scholar/academic (xiv). However, for all his self-awareness, Paterson does not seem to recognize his own or his book's whiteness. One of art's two main principle functions may be to join us to what we are not, but Paterson's thinking about art will not, and as a result, it turns racist.

These tendencies also require that more attention be paid to what Paterson writes about the white space around a poem. Recall that for Paterson, "The white space around the poem ... becomes a potent symbol for the poem's signifying intent" (19). He adds, "Silence—both invoked and symbolized by the white page, and specifically insisted upon by the gaps left by lineation, stanza and poem—underwrites the status of the poem as *significant mark*" (19). But, of course, this is not true—recall the terrifyingly, achingly full spaces between words in Jones's "I See a Smear of Animal..." It also really is not the case that a poem simply is surrounded by silence; rather, a poem is surrounded by contexts, histories, traditions, institutions, modes of engagement and

understanding, the concerns that gave rise to it. Jones's and Harris's poems do not float in silent disinterest—and neither do Paterson's. However, by stating that poems in fact do and then representing what poetry is with reference essentially solely to work by white poets, Paterson has turned the poem's white space into a racially-charged semic field, making the white space a *white* space, a space of privilege, and exclusion.

And, so, *The Poem* is a problem. Earlier, I noted that some parts of *The Poem*, such as Paterson's method of "Interpretive Scansion," should be operationalized, perhaps incorporated into a handbook or textbook. I still hope this might happen—but if anything does come from this, it must be self-consciously restorative, actively anti-racist. It also may be the case that nothing more should come from *The Poem*. Of course, in no way am I, nor should I be, the only or even nearly the most significant arbiter in this matter. I acknowledge my own privilege in suggesting that this might still be considered a possibility. In "Sunken Place Sestina," Jones writes about the "one brother" at a "hipster food hall" built in a gentrified section of town (20). According to a character in the poem, the speaker's sister, the food hall is "a thing to love and to hate" (20)—love, as it offers diverse experience; hate, for its displacements. Perhaps this is the way to respond to *The Poem*, though, again, I really cannot say. Mostly, I grieve, but I'm also grateful—for the poems and for some greater clarity. This is a theme for English, 2020.