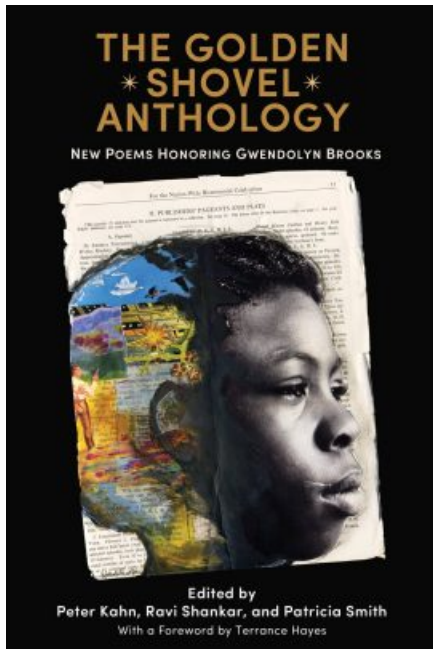




# Honoring Gwendolyn Brooks In Form: An Interview with Peter Kahn

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*In writing about the [formal innovations of Terrance Hayes](#) here on The Kenyon Review blog, I noted the soon-forthcoming [The Golden Shovel Anthology: New Poems Honoring Gwendolyn Brooks](#). This wasn't the first time I'd written about [Hayes](#) or [Brooks](#) here on the blog, as these are two poets whose work is never far from my mind. I know I'm not alone in this admiration, and this is a particularly significant year for all of us to spend time with the work of Brooks; born on June 7, 1917, this year marks the centenary of her birth. One of the editors of the anthology, Peter Kahn, was generous enough to answer some of my questions about the origins and intentions of the volume.*

*Peter Kahn is a founding member of the London poetry collective Malika's Kitchen. His poems have been published internationally in various journals including the Nashville Review, Bellingham Review, The Roanoke Review, Lumina, Make, and The Fourth River. He is a commended poet in the Poetry Society's National Poetry Competition (UK) and was a finalist in the Fugue Poetry Contest and Atlanta Review International Poetry Competition, among others. A high school teacher at Oak Park/River Forest High School since 1994, Peter was a Featured Speaker at the National Council of Teachers of English annual convention. As a Visiting Fellow at Goldsmiths-University of London, he founded the Spoken Word Education Training Programme. Peter holds an MA in English Education from The Ohio State University and recently earned his MFA in Creative Writing from Fairfield University.*

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**As the publication of *The Golden Shovel Anthology: New Poems Honoring Gwendolyn Brooks* corresponds with the centenary of Brooks's birth, could you begin by talking about your own relationship with Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry and why you believe Brooks endures as such a vital and influential literary voice?**

I was introduced to both the work and spirit of Ms. Brooks by Quraysh Ali Lansana when I was a social worker in the early 1990s. He shared her work and told stories of her encouragement and generosity. I sat behind Ms. Brooks at Quraysh's wedding and had the honor of hosting her for a day at the NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) Annual Convention in 1996. She was humble, kind, and brilliant. After hearing her read and discuss her seminal poem, "We Real Cool," I started using it to teach enjambment to my students. Her generosity both in terms of finances and spirit is no secret in Chicago, where she helped launch and/or influenced many poetry careers by writers I greatly respect, including my co-editor Patricia Smith.

**Do you remember when you first encountered Terrance Hayes's poem "The Golden Shovel"? Can you talk us through the form itself and what you see as the relationship between Hayes's work and Brooks's work?**

I picked up Terrance's book, *Lighthouse*, prior to being a participant in his workshop at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center. When I encountered "The Golden Shovel," I kept coming back to the familiarity of the enjambment. Given that, as I mentioned, I used "We Real Cool" to teach enjambment, it clicked that Ms. Brooks's poem was running down the right margin of Terrance's poem. I felt some satisfaction in "figuring out" a puzzle of sorts. I loved how Ms. Brooks both inspired Terrance's new poem, was imbedded in it, and seemed to drive it both structurally and thematically.

The Golden Shovel "form" takes a poem or a line by Ms. Brooks (and potentially any other writer) and imbeds it as the last word of each line of a

new poem. It's an acrostic of sorts.

One of my mentors—Roger Robinson—talks about how we don't initially notice the best formal "form" poems as such; that the form should be subtle. I felt like Terrance achieved this with "The Golden Shovel" and created an exciting new form that pays homage to someone, while creating vibrant new work.

### **Why do you think that this new form has such broad appeal?**

I think we inherently want to honor those who have influenced us and this form is built to do just that. It's also perfect for less accomplished writers to feel like they're on a relatively even "playing field" with more accomplished writers because it's a new form that doesn't have the intimidating weight of history and the years of practice that come with more traditional forms. It also seems to tap into one's imagination in unique ways that allows "flow" to occur more easily than usual. It's a terrific form if one is experiencing writer's block, as the poem somewhat "writes itself" with the borrowed line driving the poem forward.

### **In what ways do you see the Golden Shovel form as uniquely linked to Brooks's work, and in what ways is it (or could it be) adapted to or in conversation with other poets?**

I think the Golden Shovel form is uniquely linked to Ms. Brooks in large part because Terrance Hayes, its creator, was initially inspired by Ms. Brooks and was adamant that the anthology be a celebration of her (not him, nor really the form itself). Given that Ms. Brooks was such a ground-breaker and given how influential she was as a writer and a mentor, it seems like the form was indeed created because of her and for her. The beauty of the form, though, is that it is transferable to the work of other poets, which is shown in another poem by Terrance in *Lighthouse* (borrowing from Elizabeth Alexander) and by a handful of poems in the anthology that draw from writers other than Ms. Brooks. Really, the form can draw from writers of *any form* of literature, including novels and song lyrics (which Bob Dylan's Nobel Prize certainly illustrates can be considered literature). Students can search for what I call "striking lines" in whatever they're reading in class or in their favorite songs. This makes it a very "teachable" form for younger writers.

### **Can you talk about the logistical genesis of this anthology project? How did the initial idea for the anthology come about? How did the editors find each other and work together?**

When I was studying with Terrance at Provincetown, I started writing Golden Shovel poems inspired by a variety of literary sources. I shared one in a student reading and Terrance was quite complimentary of it. I later asked him if he would mind if I created my own collection just riffing off of the form. He said, "sure." That autumn, also after getting Terrance's blessing, I decided to teach the form to all of the sophomores in our school (about 750 students). Some students who were normally reticent to write, were proud of their Golden Shovel poems, which was really heartening to see. The following summer, I got to work with Mark Doty at the Southampton Writers Conference. I came up with the concept for the anthology, for its educational value as much as for its literary merit, and Mark said he'd be willing to try to write a Golden Shovel poem and potentially contribute it to the anthology. I also talked with the conference director, Julie Sheehan, who was really helpful and who recommended I reach out to Ravi Shankar as a potential co-editor. I then reached out to Terrance to see if he was ok with the concept of the anthology. He was quite encouraging and re-directed my focus to ensure it would honor Ms. Brooks and, again, not put the focus on Terrance. I had become friendly with Steve Young at the Poetry Foundation, so I set up a meeting with him when I returned to Chicago. He was extremely helpful in assisting me to get in contact with potential authors, such as Philip Levine. Thankfully, Ravi agreed to co-edit. His experience with and understanding of the publishing world, and his hard work and insights, have been absolutely essential pretty much every step of the way. Then I got the nerve up to ask perhaps my favorite poet in the world—Patricia Smith—to be the other editor. I met Patricia through Quraysh in the early '90s and she was the first poet I brought in to work with my students back in 1995. Much to my excitement, she agreed to be a co-editor and when we were able to share her incredible Golden Shovel poem with potential contributors, we were absolutely off to the races.

I am quite fortunate to work in a school—Oak Park/River Forest High School—that has embraced what I do with poetry in the classroom. In 1999, I was encouraged to create a Spoken Word (poetry) Club and to bring in poets—such as avery r. young and Duriel Harris—to work with our students. Then, after a two-year sabbatical/leave of absence developing poetry projects with young people in London, England, I was able to create a new position as full-time Spoken Word Educator. In this role, along with an alumni assistant (three of whom, Langston Kerman, David Gilmer, and Adam Levin, are Golden Shovel contributors), I spend five to ten days in every freshmen and sophomore English class cultivating students to write and share their original work. Additionally, I've been provided a budget to bring in visiting poets, including one annually for a Master Writing Workshop. I've been able to bring in Roger Robinson from London, and American poets such as A. Van Jordan, Kwame Dawes, Adrian Matejka, Franny Choi and Terrance. I started asking each of them to contribute Golden Shovel poems and for suggestions of people to approach. My British-based mentor Malika Booker introduced me to a bunch of people in the UK and to Poetry magazine editor, Don Share, who was instrumental in helping me get the word out. Thanks to the aforementioned people and the Gwendolyn Brooks-like E. Ethelbert Miller and Kwame Dames, along and Ravi and Patricia's contacts, we had a snowball effect. I was simultaneously reaching out to some of my most talented former students, too,

which was really gratifying. The gracious Nora Brooks Blakely and Cynthia Walls from the Brooks Estate gave their blessing and gave us a special offer so that we could include five Gwendolyn Brooks poems in the anthology. I could take up an entire issue of the *Kenyon Review* just thanking the many people who helped make this anthology a reality.

**At what point did the University of Arkansas commit to the project? Besides Hayes's poem, did you find other Golden Shovel pieces already written, or did you seek specific authors out to write new pieces in the new form? How did you select authors for the anthology? Did you have a vision for how the anthology is arranged?**

A couple of summers ago, Ravi and I reached out to various presses to find a home for the anthology. Ravi contacted The University of Arkansas Press and Patricia, Ravi and I were impressed with their enthusiasm and vision (praise to David Cunningham). The University of Arkansas authors David Baker and Billy Collins both spoke highly of the press, so we felt good in going ahead with it.

Hayes had written the only Golden Shovel poems until we started soliciting work for the anthology, which made the project especially exciting: we knew we were inspiring new work, with a new form, and encouraging people to visit/re-visit the work of Terrance and Ms. Brooks.

Ravi, Patricia, and I approached writers whose work we liked from a range of genres. There was no other real rhyme nor reason to it. Unfortunately, in the end, we had to cut over one hundred Golden Shovel poems we liked due to page restrictions (and a bunch of rookie mistakes I made along the way). That, by far, was the most onerous part of the process and I still feel sick about it.

In terms of organizing the anthology, we debated several approaches, but settled on the one that best honored Ms. Brooks's inspiration and legacy by making her poems the main organizing tool.

**Contributors to this anthology will come together at this year's AWP Conference; can you talk about the experience of putting that event together, and let us know what attendees can look forward to? Are there other anthology events planned?**

With the help of Golden Shovel contributor Sandra Beasley, Golden Shovel associate editor Maura Snell, Charlie Shields at The University of Arkansas Press, and Guild Literary Complex Executive Director Lisa Wagner, Ravi coordinated an off-site event for Thursday evening, February 9<sup>th</sup> that will feature Terrance Hayes, Kwame Dawes, Dottie Lasky, Meena Alexander, Dorianne Laux, Camille Dungy and Adrian Matejka. Maura, who has been absolutely invaluable during the latter end of the anthology process, is also chairing a panel the morning of Friday, February 10<sup>th</sup> that will feature Marilyn Nelson, Major Jackson, Sandra Beasley and my former student, Natalie Richardson. Finally, there will be a book signing after the panel.

Steve Young has organized a launch that will be hosted on April 12<sup>th</sup> at the Poetry Foundation featuring Terrance, Patricia, Ravi and an all-star cast of Chicago-area contributors.

We're also in the process of setting up launches in London, England (at the British Library with Speaking Volumes producing), NYC (at the Bowery Poetry Club), Philadelphia (hopefully at the Kelly Writers House) and Columbus, Ohio (at Gramercy Books). I'm sure other events will pop up headed by Golden Shovel contributors.

***Poetry Magazine* will feature a portfolio of anthology contributors in its February 2017 issue; how did that connection come about?**

As I mentioned, I've been fortunate enough to get to know the wonderful Don Share. Early on, we talked it being a possibility and he made it happen just in time for the release of the anthology as a way to promote the book and another way to promote Ms. Brooks during her centennial celebration.

**Do you have personal favorite contributions to the anthology, and why are those poems important to you?**

It's sort of like asking me to name my favorite students, but I'll say the poems of Maxine Kumin, Jake Adam York, Philip Dacey and Philip Levine stand out given that each poet has since passed away. I feel particularly honored that we have their poems in this collection and am grateful to their family members for signing off on it. Needless to say, it feels incredible seeing my former students' work and the poem of my best friend's daughter in print alongside so many poets I have long admired.

**In what ways does this anthology connect with your work as an influential educator, and can you tell us a bit about that ongoing work?**

I've talked a bit about the work I've been fortunate enough to do in schools. My over-arching mission is to have someone doing my role in every school in the world, especially the most under-served in London and Chicago. I'm hopeful that the anthology will be used in classrooms around the

world, bringing recognition to Ms. Brooks and to Terrance, and that the recognition the anthology receives will help get the word out about the importance of poetry in schools.

Finally, here's a story that Terrance wouldn't want me to share (he's too humble) but which speaks to his Brooks-like character. Terrance had agreed to come to Oak Park/River Forest High School prior to winning the National Book Award. I anticipated that the award and the subsequent new opportunities it would entail could mean that Terrance would have to cancel. Not only did he still come to work with my students, afterwards I received an email asking for the names of the thirty or so students with whom he worked. A week later, we received a box of thirty signed books of Terrance's first collection, *Muscular Music*. "Signed" is actually an understatement, as he wrote individualized notes to most of the students. Who does that, especially after winning the National Book Award?? Again, that's something that Gwendolyn Brooks would have done and that's part of why I so admire and respect Terrance.

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*Kahn pointed me toward five Golden Shovels you can currently find online:*

*Elise Paschen's: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/division-street>*

*Camille Dungy's: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/because-it-looked-hotter-way>*

*Dexter L. Booth's: <http://southeastreview.org/raising-our-voices-claiming-our-words/>*

*Evie Shockley's: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/song-backyard-golden-shovel-rihanna-audio-only>*

*Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie's: [https://issuu.com/hystericalfeminisms/docs/issue5\\_reconstructed\\_with\\_color](https://issuu.com/hystericalfeminisms/docs/issue5_reconstructed_with_color)*

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