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Olio



Synopsis

Part fact, part fiction, Tyehimba Jess's much anticipated second book weaves sonnet, song, and narrative to examine the lives of mostly unrecorded African American performers directly before and after the Civil War up to World War I. *Olio* is an effort to understand how they met, resisted, complicated, co-opted, and sometimes defeated attempts to minstrelize them. So, while I lead this choir, I still find that I'm being led; I'm a missionary mending my faith in the midst of this flock; I toil in their fields of praise. When folks see these freedmen stand and sing, they hear their Godspeak in tongues. These nine dark mouths sing shelter; they echo a hymn's haven from slavery's weather. Detroit native Tyehimba Jess' first book of poetry, *Leadbelly*, was a winner of the 2004 National Poetry Series. Jess, a Cave Canem and NYU Alumni, has received fellowships from the Whiting Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, Illinois Arts Council, and the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center. Jess is also a veteran of the 2000 and 2001 Green Mill Poetry Slam Team. He exhibited his poetry at the 2011 TEDxNashville Conference. Jess is an Associate Professor of English at College of Staten Island.

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Customer Reviews

Tyehimba Jess has created a masterpiece of historical literature through syncopation and musicality of language that blows the mind! The greatest musicians and vaudevillians: slaves in early 19th century-early 20th century: John William "Blind" Boone, Henry "Box" Brown, Paul Laurence Dunbar, The Fisk Jubilee Singers, Ernest Hogan, Sissieretta Jones, Scott Joplin, Millie and Christine

McKoy, Booker T. Washington (quote: "He who dances language note for note on the industrial soapbox. He who, even still, feels a twist in his dome for his folk who still till fields of poems."), "Blind" Tom Wiggins, Bert Williams and George Walker, Wildfire, or Edmonia Lewis. Olio quote: "Fix your eyes on the flex of these first-generation-freed voices: They coalesce in counterpoint, name nemeses, summon tongue to wit-ness. Weave your own chosen way between these voices....OLIO."The treasure is on each and every tongue that Jess envelops with his fierce beauty that transcends and encompasses all: poetry, music, philosophy, history, dialect, conversation, lists: those lynched by the 100 thousands in the Southern states between 1882-1930 and the reasons given for the black lynchings."I ain't bending over no piano like a plow on a sharecropper's piece.""I'll just play the notes inside my skull alone in the dark where they roam around loose. 'Cause playing like a slave, I'd just step myself straight into a hangman's noose."On Sissieretta Jones, Jess writes: "See, Sissie would know how to let folks into one mask and out through another. She'd even raise a toast to the mask, jokin about whether folk "black and white" really believed that the opera was wearing her as a mask, or if it just tickled them to see her puttin on that white mask of Vivaldi. Was it her voice or someone else's? they'd seem to ask. Well, it was all her. Every note, in whiteface or blackface or in just plain old American, went straight down to her bones. That's what I heard when I truly listened, anyway. She'd pour those opera songs all over her body and then dress herself in the church frock of hymns. She told me one time, that in order to hear her true voice, she'd had to ask herself about her own masks. What kind of mask might I have on? she said. Because let me tell you, most don't even know they're wearing a mask. You've got to know which masks, how many masks you're wearing before you can put it down and see your true self. Those that do, they know just how to slide in and out of it, how to make the world spin inside it and out of it. How to spread their song all over that mask and make it one with the world, no matter how thick or thin the truth in that song might be."Heartwrenching brilliance and there is no outside these people. Jess brings every one to life! This is a book to be read aloud! Again and again and again! (and photos, fold-outs, illustrations: the structure of "Olio" is its own composition of a musical score: exquisite in every way!The ache and reach from the past wrenches the gut as all the masks of today continue to kill and maim under the guise of badges, self-defense, etc. and there's no missing the seething brutality of pulverized flesh in every fisted lie!If you only read one book this year, make it this one! "Olio" is a phenomenon! This is an epic. Thank you, Tyehimba Jess! Not enough stars for this one!

The more I read and reread this book the more my enthusiasm grows. Tyehimba Jess is doing

something truly original and innovative in poetry, explores history to make forgotten voices speak in a language that is both absolutely modern and, like geological strata, a carrier of memory. A dictionary entry that is the epigraph to the volume defines "olio" as "a: a miscellaneous mixture of heterogeneous elements; hodgepodge; b: a miscellaneous collection (as of literary or musical selections). | also: the second part of a minstrel show which featured a variety of performance acts and later evolved into vaudeville." To this set of meanings, the Oxford English Dictionary adds a fourth, "In a theatre: a painted curtain let down to shield the stage from the view of the audience ... in front of which comedy or variety acts are performed; a curtain behind the drops which performs the same function." The polysemy of the word "olio" hints at the ambitious scope of this book (think W.C. Williams' *Paterson* or Robert Duncan's *Groundwork*). OLIO is a book of poetry, a sideshow, an opera in five acts, a masked performance, minstrelsy; sonnet, psalm, aria, ghazal, stichomythic dialog, contrapuntal poem, calligramme, pastiche; news clipping, correspondence, interview, parapoetic exploration, broadside, ballyhoo, proclamation, advertisement; rag, blues, a capella, solo aria, a vocal duo, spiritual, worksong, syncopation, mourning song. The cover already promises a visual performance: OLIO, a near-palindrome, an invitation to multidirectional reading, is a face with its mouth Open wide as in a sOng, two round eyes slightly asquint, and a nose, funnyLI profilLed, perhaps as in a mask, such as corked blackface, or a mask covering a wound or ILIness. When a coiled thread is unwound, laid straight & split into strands, it loses its form, and the meaning that's tied up in its architecture; so to speak of this poem in linear terms is already a misreading, a misaligning. But perhaps you need to unwind it, to hear the rag rhythm slowly grind to the span of a note, to tell the many voices apart, before you can listen to it again and understand the complexity of the composition. It is no coincidence that to speak of it, I have picked musical metaphors. OLIO is a songbook, a ragbook, a history of rag music told in "first-generation freed voices" which "coalesce in counterpoint, name nemeses, summon tongue to wit-ness." Thread 1: Julius Monroe Trotter & newly discovered interviews. One of classic narrative techniques is to introduce the story as a long-lost manuscript of the first-person account recorded by the protagonist, rediscovered and brought to light by the narrator. Tyehimba Jess skillfully appropriates & renews this technique. He also does away with the omniscient narrator of 19th-c novels: it is up to the reader to fill in the blanks, to compose the whole. "Weave your own chosen way between these voices...", we are told. We, the readers, are key actors in the performance that is OLIO, and it's up to us whether we read it page by page, or whether we free ourselves from the imposed order of print, tear the pages out, and improvise! Julius Monroe Trotter (whose name evokes that of William Monroe Trotter, the Boston newspaper man and civil-rights activist) is a World War I veteran, one of those men fortunate

enough to survive but unlucky to have been disfigured by a close encounter with a shrapnel (or as Trotter puts it, to have found himself "at the wrong end of Mauser curiosity"). His face is covered by a mask. On the website of the Smithsonian, Caroline Alexander has an informative article called "Faces of War", where we learn that such face masks were "fashioned of galvanized copper one thirty-second of an inch thick" or ... 'the thinness of a visiting card.' Depending upon whether it covered the entire face, or as was often the case, only the upper or lower half, the mask weighed between four and nine ounces and was generally held on by spectacles. The greatest artistic challenge lay in painting the metallic surface the color of skin." ([...]). Julius Monroe Trotter uses his job as a railroad worker to travel around the country and seek out any people who might have known Scott Joplin. He plans to have the interviews published in W.E.B. Du Bois' *Crisis*, and the set of interviews is prefaced by a letter addressed to the famed historian, editor, and civil-rights activist. Bracketing the book is another piece of correspondence, this time a letter Trotter wrote to his sister, summing his "ragtag wandering across countryside". The interviewees include Joplin's nurse, other musicians who met him, his boarder, and his widow. These fragments not only contain some beautiful descriptions of music but manage to turn the most prosaic gesture into poetry nestled within a homely line of an interview. Listen to the nurse: "I would be wiping him down while he played rags on that invisible piano all slow motion and stiff, all herky jerky like a rusted up gadget. So far gone into his dreams he didn't know much of whoever came to visit, but knew how to find middle C, knew how to grow something in his head nobody else could hear. ... [H]e didn't play much, except when he was all feeble finger-twitching on the air, or on the table, or on the wall, or on his stretched out legs...."

Thread 2: Fisk Jubilee Singers Fisk Jubilee Singers are an African-American a cappella group founded in 1871 at Fisk University. After a rough start, they ended up touring the United States and abroad to great acclaim. In *OLIO*, they are the chorus that, like in a Greek tragedy, appears on stage at intervals: their songs draw on Negro spirituals, on psalms. Sometimes these are choral performances, like the opening Fisk Jubilee Proclamation, sometimes solos by individual members of the group, and have their name as the title: "Jubilee: Isaac Dickerson (1852-1900)", "Jubilee: Maggie Porter (1853-1942)", etc. You can imagine each of these individual voices supported by the powerful hum of the whole choir. Where one voice ends, the next one picks up. The Jubilee songs are all sonnets, nearly all with identical rhyme scheme (abab cdcd efef gg). The rhymes are never identical; mostly near rhymes, eye rhymes, etc. Sometimes the rhyme structure is shifted inward. These variations, along with enjambments, differences in line length, etc., allow for the emergence of individual voices and a domination of rhythm over rhyme. Unlike the Greek chorus, which comments on the action from a

position of all-seeing wisdom (akin perhaps to that of an omniscient narrator in a 19th-c novel), the Jubilee choir singers tell their own heart-wrenching stories, speak of their own struggle to freedom. Listen to "Jubilee: Jennie Jackson (1852–1910)":

Mama and us fled, hands clasped, into the light of a Nashville dawn, running from rogue slavers. Our presidential last name wasn't quite enough to outshine this skin. Was never worth much till Andrew Jackson passed on. Left my Granddaddy George free. Then there was me, Mama, and her washboard legacy. So she bet my future on some university schooling. Had no idea I'd be singin' slave-cabin-kindled songs all 'round the world. I've been educated on European soil, between concerts. I bet I've traveled more than ol' Andrew on this rambling mission to prove how our souls are holy and human. As singers in a choir stand next to one another, or like slaves are bound together, so the Jubilee sonnets in this book are chain-linked by their first and last lines. So, the singer who precedes Jennie Jackson ends his song with "And did she die | dreaming of our flight, hands clasped, into starlight?", and the choral that follows her solo, opens thus: "How do we prove our souls to be wholly human | when the world don't believe we have a soul?". Each sonnet is framed, top and bottom by a list of names of churches that were burned down by arson, or otherwise sites of racial violence. The long litany of church burnings opens and closes with Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC, first torched in 1822, and then in June of 2015, the site of a shooting. The events themselves are not mentioned, only the names of the churches: it's up to the reader to learn more. Like the names of the dead commemorated in a Jewish Memorial Book, the names of the churches turn the page into a stele. But with the mourning comes Jubilee, a song of suffering AND hope.

Thread 3: Rag composers, musicians, "freaks"

Not counting the Fisk Jubilee Singers, the book has eleven sections, each devoted to a rag musician, composer... What they all have in common is that they are first-generation "freed voices". The "Introduction or Cast of Owners of This Olio" at the beginning of the book (just after the Table of Contents) lists these 'dramatis personae' in alphabetical order with short bios. Already here you get a sense of the poetic power unleashed in the pages of this book. Take for example JOHN WILLIAM "BLIND" BOONE (1864–1927): "Sprung from a Yankee bugler and a newly freed mother, his sight was sacrificed to encephalitis at the age of six months. Possessed by a prodigious memory, perfect pitch, and a particular partiality to piano, from which he sees and he sees and he sees...". Hear how his "sight" [SITE] expands in "sacrificed" [S-acrif-ISTe] and then in "encephalitis" [en-S-efal-ITIS], the opening and closing consonants S - T containing more and more world within them even as the disease eats away at the eyes. This little bit of close reader is just a meager foretaste of the depth of this poetry. This is not a parlor trick or gimmick construction. This is poetry that goes down to the bone, reaches to the marrow. The different sections -- for the lack of better

word, let's call them biographical -- tell the life stories of each of the "OLIO cast" members, and each biography takes on a unique poetic form. One of my favorites is the story of HENRY "BOX" BROWN (1816-1891) ("One day, he got carried away--crate-wise. Slipped from slavery by mailing himself free to Philly. Motivated abolitionists and mesmerized the British for 25 years ... returned to amaze America in 1875."). It is a pastiche (pastiche by the way, like OLIO, is defined as "hodgepodge") of John Berryman's Dreamsongs. Each is called a FREEDSONG, and has its own individual title. As an epigraph, there is a newsclipping, an excerpt from H.B. Brown's own writings, a handbill... To understand how Jesse rewrites Berryman here, you have to open your copy of 77 Dreamsongs and read them side by side. So, take Dream Song 71: Spellbound held subtle Henry all his fourhearers in the racket of the market with ancient signs, infamous characters, new rhythms. On the steps he was beloved, hours a day, by all his four, or more, depending. And they paid him. It was not, so, like no one listening but critics fumed & Henry's pals or other tellers at all chiefly in another country. No. He by the heart & brains & tail, because of their love for it, had them. Junk he said to all them open-mouthed. Weather would govern. When the monsoon spread its floods, few came, two. Came a day when none, though he began in his accustomed way on the filthy steps in a crash of waters, came. Excerpt From: John Berryman. 77 Dream Songs: Poems (FSG Classics). And then read, "FREEDSONG: DREAM STRONG Mr. H. Box Brown, The King of All Mesmerisers Handbill, 1864 Spellbound held subtle Henry all his followers with the racket of his sales pitch: his painted signs, his slave panoramas and mesmerism. More, then less, he was beloved for his day. His act was more and more revenging ... still, they paid him. He was not so tied up in befriending his critics. Famous Henry'd railed on Southern slavers that mauled deeply in his mother country. So he'd plied his heart and brains and wail. He was cuffed with love for his freedom. Once, he'd preached to them--all open-mouthed. Prayed that they'd learn. Then war's monsoon spread its blood through and through the States. Freedom won. So, H. began in his accustomed way toward the place he'd left. Across the waters, he came." The Henry Box Brown section also contains one of the original features that recur throughout the book, each time transformed: there is a foldout page to be torn out at the perforation, rolled up, this way or that way so that the printed lines can be read forwards or backwards, together or across. The text is enclosed in "speech bubbles" shaped like human heads, facing each other or away from each other, depending on how you interpret your rolled up scroll. Another section contains Jesse's brilliant take on a ghazal: a poem in dialogic form, where the first two lines end with the same word, which then recurs at the end of the second line of each pair of couplets. Jesse turns this form into a poetic perpetuum mobile: the second couplet, as printed on the page laid flat, actually has the form of the

opening verses, following the classic rules of the rhyme, but when you roll it up, the end flows into the beginning, the lines free of punctuation can be read from left to right or top to bottom, or bottom up, and right to left, diagonally. Or yet, there are different ways you can fold your page, turn it into a mobius strip, or some other shape. Experiment, improvise, or follow the non-prescriptive suggestions at the back of the book. Coda, ... sort of: The three threads I have tried to unwind, just barely scratch the surface. What will you *not* find here! I'd like to see this poem performed, sung, danced, with eyes open and blindfolded, torn to shreds & tossed to the wind & read as it falls. Can the reader be freed through the freed song? That OLIO, besides being a history of rag music and a set of personal histories, is a history of the freedom struggle, of the civil rights struggle, with all the violence, lynchings, church burnings, discrimination, & suffering, is obvious enough. And the timeline established by the historical markers, spanning from 1822 to the time of writing, somewhere in the summer of 2015, indicates that that freedom struggle is far from over. But the true strength of this poem, the energy that explodes the covers of the book, that mocks any generic labels and frustrates the Dewey Decimal Classification, is in the implicit belief in poetry as a power to fashion the world. Everything hinges on ... unhinging the reader, on unsettling the habits of page-turning routine which accepts the world as is, with its predetermined hierarchy of numbered pages, on drawing the reader into the book, turning the pageturner into a composer, the book into a rag, the reading into a performance torn at the perforated lines & wound up into a yet unheard-of shape of a song.

'Olio" by Tyehimba Jess is a remarkable flip on John Berryman's "Dream Songs". It evokes power, empathy and a strong sense of the current racial inequalities in our society. The poems are beautiful. The publisher once again has produced a tangible piece of art with pieces of the poem that can be folded out, ripped out and turned in different directions.

What a great book!

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