



Olio

Tyehimba Jess

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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 God
speak 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.

Olio Details

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Author : Tyehimba Jess

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From Reader Review *Olio* for online ebook

Weston Richey says

Olio is a marvel of contemporary American poetry. It's extraordinarily hard to say more than that in a way that faithfully and comprehensively covers all that there is in this book.

Before even thinking of the content in any substantive way, *Olio* marks itself in its form as an extremely ambitious, meticulously crafted work. It's difficult to settle on any particular description of its form when we use our traditional array of terms. I'm reticent to call it an out-and-out poetry collection because it includes passages that are defiantly prosaic, such as letters and interviews. The book dwells in the realm of nonfiction, too, but not wholly. The very subject matter Tyehimba Jess takes up—the erasure of black art in all its forms and modalities—necessitates that there are holes in the history to be given (or restored) life by him.

The only term we might use is the one the book provides for us from its title and definition-as-epigraph: an olio. And through this term, this way of framing the book, I might be able to offer even a short description of the power that *Olio* contains.

From the introduction (or Cast or Owners of This Olio) to the end matter, Jess works tirelessly to have his *Olio* embody that word. He presents us, as the first two definitions state, with a hodgepodge, an assortment of literary and musical selections that chart this history. And, from that Introduction to that end matter, Jess adopts an overarching voice of the performer, the advertiser of the minstrel show (and its successor, the vaudeville show)—we are invited intermittently by that external, authorial voice to step right up! and to bear witness to the history (and the attempts to erase it and the attempts to chase it down and reconstruct it) that unfolds throughout the work. The people Jess focuses on, explores in sections throughout the book, are almost all not only artists but also performers of their art, forced to mediate between the talents and visions they sought to express and the, in many cases, white audiences that sought to not only see the work but consume it, either erase the art itself or erase the artist (as is the case at one juncture in the work, when Jess explores Irving Berlin stealing music from Scott Joplin's opera *Treemonisha*). As such, with *Olio*, Jess adopts and adapts the performative nature of The Show and utilizes it to, with shockingly powerful effect, reveal the emotional lives of all of the artists he brings to life, all of the passion and love and turmoil and pain they experienced not only with their art, but with the people in their lives (the interviews with Lottie Joplin especially enliven that second sort of relationship).

This doesn't even begin to touch on the formalistic qualities of the individual pieces in *Olio* themselves. Jess is an extraordinarily inventive poet, and there are many poems within the book that exhibit this strongly. In nearly every section featuring poetry, there was one or several poems that consisted, in a sense, of two poems, side-by-side. These poems could be read either as the entire left side followed by the right, or the right followed by the left, *or* one could jump the small gap, the caesura between the two on each line and read it as a unified poem. In each case, the poem takes on an entirely new life with an entirely new voice. It's a wonder to behold. What's more, there are a handful of foldout pages in the book (perforated such that if you own the book you could tear them out and fold them in different ways) with poems that can, quite literally, be read in almost any direction—left column, right column, left line, right line, diagonal down to the left, down to the right, backwards, etc...

The level of craft, in short, that Jess puts into these pieces and into the work as a whole alone marks it as an extraordinary work. That, combined with the profoundly ambitious, important subject matter I've only briefly discussed earlier, marks it as one of the most important creative and literary works in recent years.

I am so glad to have read it.

Samantha says

Hhhhhhhhholy crap, this is an ambitious and complex book. Couple things - I recommend reading Olio in as few sittings as possible, for maximum immersion in the history, characters, story. I also highly recommend listening to Tyehimba Jess's appearance on the Commonplace podcast (<https://www.commonpodcast.com/home/20...>) in close proximity to your reading of the book - it helps you take a deeper look at the construction of the book and format of the writing, if you're into that kind of thing.

Olio is an epic collection of writing - poems, interviews, lists, drawings, and photos - about minstrelsy and African American performers' roles in and against it and Scott Joplin and pre-recording industry musicality and a lot of other things. Jess's writing makes these figures larger than life. The contrapuntal pieces are my favorite, and that's not a form I typically love in poetry. The book itself is a work of art, larger than a standard paperback, employing a variety of typefaces, pullout pieces that work as Mobius strips....serious props to Jess for creating this beautiful monster, and also props to Wave Books for taking on a big poetry project and going all out in turning it into a physical object. The result is a collection that's overwhelming in the best way.

David says

*"What part of me is mine that was
not mined from the mind of poets,
artists rewriting the past blow
by blow till it's pulverized past
the barely recognizable?
I was born when I was written,
then hammered out of a mountain."*

This is one of the best books I have ever read. Apart from being one of the most ambitious volumes of poetry probably ever, it is also consistently surprising—and never becomes less so over the course of its hefty 230 oversized pages. Jess's project here is a big one: how have narratives of Black artists been erased throughout American history, and what does it mean to imagine them back into existence?

But Jess doesn't stop by writing conventional poems about these subjects, with each new cycle about each member of the "cast" outlined in the volume's introduction taking on, to a degree, new formal challenges: prose poetry, interpolation of later texts (most notably John Berryman's *The Dream Songs*), and the ridiculously ambitious "syncopated poems" that really belie description. These are poems that can be read forwards, backwards, diagonally, etc. They really need to be seen to be believed. I didn't even realize just how extensively they could be creatively read until I reached the appendix, wherein Jess demonstrates the poems versatility—among other surprises that I'll leave for other readers to discover.

There's also a gripping series of sonnets narrated by members of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, each of which is bracketed by the names of Black churches targeted in hate crimes—burning, bombings, and other acts of violence—beginning with the Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, burnt down in 1822... and

ending with that same church, where nine black churchgoers were killed during a prayer group meeting in 2015. Bracketing the collection in this way, Jess draws a direct line of persecution from the era of slavery to the present day, implicitly reminding us that the very issues his cast of characters face, i.e., overt violence and erasure, not to mention the stifling and diminishing of Black voices, are things that never went away, but were rather transmuted into different forms. It's brilliant.

This is now a book I will get to live with for the rest of my life, in all the pain and joy it captures. It's a book that shattered and remade my concept of what literature can do, maybe not unlike another of my favorite volumes of poetry (coincidentally also by an NYU alum), *Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems*. Truly astonishing work.

Brina says

Olio can signify a mishmash of elements or variety of musical performance acts. In the case of Tyehimba Jess' ambitious volume of poetry which has won him the 2017 Pulitzer, Olio is miscellaneous recollections, which Jess has pieced together to give a voice to the early African American performers of Tin Pan Alley who had to take a back seat to their white counterparts. In a collection that is indeed a hodge podge of interviews, poems, minstrel songs, letters, and brief essays, Jess has brought the performers of Tin Pan Alley to life.

As the volume opens, pianist Julius Trotter is writing to W.E.B. DuBois, imploring him to publish Scott Joplin's life story in his Crisis magazine. The king of African American jazz and ragtime, even Joplin was not immune to having his voice taken away by more privileged whites. Irving Berlin's Alexander's Ragtime Band had been allegedly taken from Joplin's opus opera Treemonisha which is an homage to his deceased wife and daughter. As both a World War I veteran who first hand experienced discrimination and an accomplished pianist in his own right, Trotter set off to find those who knew Joplin and piece together his life story. Through the interviews in these pages, including the poignant one with Joplin's wife Lottie, Jess gives both Trotter and Joplin their due.

In between the interviews are poems, essays, minstrels, and church choir songs, which pay homage to a generation of African American performers who would have otherwise been lost to Jim Crow. We meet colorful characters such as John "Blind" Boone, Sissieretta Jones known as The Black Patti, and conjoined twins Millie and Christine McKoy who were treated as spectacles at traveling shows. This group of performers were not taken seriously as this was the era of Jim Crow and slavery still existed in all but the name. Whatever wages African Americans earned through their varieties of performances had to be turned over to the white owners of the troupes. In the course of his interviews, Trotter discovers not only Joplin's life but those of these other gifted performers as well.

A few artists depicted in these pages did escape Jim Crow but at a cost to themselves. Henry "Box" Brown escaped the south by smuggling himself out inside a wooden box. Arriving in Philadelphia twenty hours later, Brown had won his freedom; however, he lived as a wanted man for the rest of his life. Likewise, Edmonia Lewis, who was half African American and half Ojibwe, gained notoriety as an artist in Greece, which she most likely would not have done had she remained in Ohio. Likewise, Trotter was forced to flee from his Cairo, Illinois home where he saw his cousin hung by a lynch mob, and gained employment working on Pullman railcars. After escaping the near south, Trotter had no desire to return there.

Jess' poetry flows like the jazz and music he depicted on his pages. At many points in the volume, it was

hard to tell which words were Jess' original prose and which could be attributed to the artists depicted in these pages. This project required much research into the lives of African American Tin Pan Alley performers and is truly a labor of love worthy of the Pulitzer. Tyehimba Jess is truly as gifted of a poet as the artists he writes about in his award winning work. His first volume of poetry *Leadbelly* also garnered awards, and Jess has become a leading African American poet of this current generation. *Olio* deserves the accolades it has received; it is a work of art and merits 5 stars.

Steven Felicelli says

This is an overwhelming book. Blind Boone & Edmonia Lewis are two of the most powerful figures in narrative prose or poetry of the last hundred years.

Boone's inability to play Joplin's final outpouring note for note is a gut-wrenching conceit for the inability to fully empathize with another's personal anguish and seems to imply the sin of Slavery (Jim Crow, lynchings, burning churches, et al.) will not and cannot ever be atoned (note for note).

Absolutely blown away by this work. It ranks among my favorite Modern Poetry Epics (Paterson, *The Cantos*, Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, *Four Quartets*, *The Dream Songs*--which Jess references/ deconstructs), but while the above all feel like self-indulgent guilty pleasures, *Olio* is an edifying, must read masterpiece for anyone interested in the history of humanity. The music of the work alone is worthwhile.

Peter Landau says

History is important, but it takes poetry to bring the facts to life, especially when there are few details and no recordings. How do you revive the musical birth of a nation when even wax cylinders weren't wasted in preserving the songs of the black musicians? All we have are ministerial shows and Irving Berlin, who was accused of stealing "Alexander's Ragtime Band" from the King of Ragtime himself, Scott Joplin.

Joplin appears in the ambitious second collection of poetry by Tyehimba Jess, whose first book was about *Leadbelly*, but only in hearsay. A veteran of WWI, now working shoveling coal for the railroad, with a mask hiding terrible facial wounds from the war, pieces together Joplin's life through interviews with friends and relations. Other characters get to speak for themselves, including conjoined twins and a man who escaped slavery by mailing himself north in a box.

They're all entertainers of a sort, hiding behind their own masks, which allows them to speak of things they would otherwise be unable to safely articulate. The double is repeatedly used throughout Jess' mix of fact and fiction, sometimes competing voices in the same poem wrestling for their story to win as history.

The production of the book is also unique, with perforated folded pages that can be removed. There is an appendix in the back that illustrates how to fold them into all manner of shapes, but I thought they were meant to be plastered over the walls of every city in America, like posters reminding us a show is coming back to town, and this time we must not forget.

John says

This is one of the most remarkable books I have ever read. It is almost historical fiction. It is almost an epic of a people. It is a collection of stylistic performances broad in range and consistent in execution. If it suffers from anything, I think putting the historical material at the end hurts it, as there is something wondrous about taking these historical figures and their almost legendary labors and making a music of them. A music about music in many cases. You have a literal phantom of an opera pursued by a figurative phantom of an opera, a masked man haunted by what almost was, unable to let go of a past forgotten by his contemporaries. Magic & myth & history & an accounting overdue. Again and again I was struck by the fact that these legends were real. That these dramatic scenes were not invented. Blind pianists, the Greek tragedy of Scott Joplin, conjoined twins, a magician who mailed himself out of slavery, a sculptress driven from her country but who hears the songs of her country inside the earth: all these mythic heroes interrupted by Jubilee songs from a chorus of burnt-down churches.

There is a section that decrypts John Berryman's Dreamsongs in a brilliant way that brings their stories back to the waking world. It is a great work of classicism transposed to America, modernist in its forms & facades, overdue for footnoting, deserving wider audiences. The whole thing has layers of clever that you would not see if you did not chase them, or read the explanatory material at the end. This is artful as all hell, but it is also a remarkable piece of scholarship about minstrelsy, blackface, the subjugation of a people. Without a whiff of hyperbole I nominate it for poetry of the century. I feel like this must be what it felt like to read *The Waste Land* in 1922, a fledgling century with its masterwork already behind it.

University of Chicago Magazine says

Tyehimba Jess, AB'91

Author

From the editors: "Poet Tyehimba Jess's second collection mixes sonnet, song, and narrative to chronicle the experiences of black performers in America from Reconstruction to World War I. Jess, an associate professor of English at the College of Staten Island, brings these mostly unrecorded voices to life and demonstrates how these performers challenged and transcended conceptions of the minstrel."

Rod-Kelly Hines says

10 Stars!

This book was overwhelmingly brilliant! It is poetry, performance, history, prose, art, witness, confession...I could go on... The sheer amount of care that went into the creation of this beautiful book is evident...it is impeccably researched and rendered; Jess has excavated the unsung black heroes from the period just after emancipation, giving them ownership of their legacies, all told in intoxicating, dazzling, dizzying language. I've never read anything like this in my life and I truly don't think I will again!

Elizabeth? says

When I finally got around to reading this one, I was surprised to find that none of my friends have read it nor have any of them shelved it.

Jess was the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry for this collection of poems and I can totally understand the accolades. This is an amazing, mind-blowing piece of art. I mean I just can't say enough about what a master of words Jess is ... seriously.

The book focuses on the lives of various artists, writers, entertainers from the Antebellum South and beyond. Jess has chosen to play with form and uses something called syncopated sonnets to illustrate the narrative amongst his characters.

He also utilizes actual text pulled from interviews and songs from the time period. This makes what he does with the form even more amazing because he is forced to put words already on the page into his narrative.

There are some pages that are perforated and after reading the entire book, you can find pages in the back that show you how to fold and manipulate these pages to make the words create even more art.

Amazing. Amazing. Amazing.

Cade Miller says

Most of the poems, when experienced individually, aren't anything remarkable; however, the project as a whole is impressive and certainly unique, combining removable foldouts, poems that can be read in several different ways, all sorts of visual poetry, some wonderful drawings and pictures, and faux interviews that are probably my favorite sections. While I honestly think some of the poem-based sections could've been better served by being less simple in their language and straightforward in their message, I understand why Jess wrote them this way and I do think this collection is better viewed as a whole for that reason; he's essentially made the literary equivalent of a concept album that is better listened to as a whole, from front-to-back, then a few songs at a time. In other words, some sections are underwhelming while others are fantastic. I'd recommend this book simply for its ambition and overall structure.

Eugene Pollock says

I must confess that I was slow to understand and appreciate the structure of this book—I was confused by the juxtaposition of interviews, biographical poetry, haiku, artwork, letters, directions for paper-folding, the imagined testimony of sculpture. However, once I “got it”, I was in awe of this literary resurrection of forgotten history. It is a necessary book, long overdue, that illuminates artistic contributions to Americana that were, at best, overlooked or, at worst, suppressed. Bravo to the Pulitzer for putting this book in the spotlight. On a darker note, I wonder how many of those who NEED to read it will actually do so.

Ellie says

This is an amazing work. I had to try twice before I was able to enter into it. A compendium of sonnets and lyrical prose, a history of slavery and oppression and race relations (or the cruelty that blacks have suffered but whose spirit was not broken), a series of interviews about Scott Joplin, and much about art, especially music, its role in the black culture.

I feel physically full from this work, unable to completely digest it. I've been listening to Jess' recordings of sections of the poem and it is a help to hear him. I can hardly write a review. I am overwhelmed. And so glad I kept trying: Jess' mastery of language and rhythm as well as the massive scope of this work is breathtaking.

Jen Austin says

I want to read this book again. I have nothing but good things to say about it. The creativity was so great. This book made me feel emotional. There was never a dull moment. I want to read this book again.

Julian BLOWER says

very ambitious, which is especially commendable considering the state of poetry in 2016.

the poems are okay. they're better in free form. that's where most of Jess's ability is displayed. he manages to work up some unexpected emotion in the stories of real musicians who lived not too long ago. as for the "syncopated sonnets", they almost always read awkwardly, both because of his struggle with iambic pentameter and his struggle with combining two poems. it very rarely adds significant new meaning, and it usually feels more like a gimmick on the level of Mad Fold-Ins.

the "interviews" are obscenely bad, with everyone sounding like the same Hollywood Wise Negro stereotype and rambling in Poetic Ebonics in the exact same way. extravagant similes are worked into every other run-on sentence. unlike poetry, prose demands a lot of space to fill with imagery, so after only a couple of pages, Jess runs out of ways to describe a honky tonk piano and ends up saying "battered upright" about 50 times.

ultimately, it seems like a major purpose of this book was to create an air of authenticity, which would make the commentary on race and slavery more effective. but the one word i would use to describe it -- inauthentic.
