

## Life and Culture

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# 'Olio', a Pulitzer book that challenges the form of poetry

The award-winning work of author Tyehimba Jess (Detroit, United States) uses contrapuntal poetry to capture the sense of freedom embodied by the interpreters of the history of black music before there was the technology to record it



JOHN MIDGLEY

None of the characters in 'Olio' was recorded, with the exception of artist and musician Bert Williams.

The poet Tyehimba Jess, currently an associate professor of English at the College of Staten Island, located in New York, where he resides, recalls that when he started writing *Olio*, his second book published and winner of the Pulitzer Prize 2017, he was not clear about what it was going to be or who would be there.

Sitting in a cafeteria of the University of Panama, the author of the *leadbelly* (2005) collection also recognizes his initial fascination: the history of black music before technology was invented to be recorded.

When he moved his concern to a timeline, he was able to define the period he was going to explore. The phonographs would not arrive until after the First World War, so this must be the end point. The beginning? The Civil War of the United States.

Who were the black musicians of this time? What did they do? Jess arranges her glasses to describe one of the characters that inhabit her poems: Siamese Millie and Christine McKoy.

"When writing about the McKoy twins, I did it through contrapuntal sonnets and Shakespearean sonnets that are read in multiple directions, so they had to be written in a very particular way," says the poet. He adds: "These poems also preserve the real story of the McKoy twins. The poem has the shape of the protagonists'.

The poem 'McKoy Twins Syncopated Star' is a page that unfolds and reveals five stanzas diagrammed so that the two superiors look like two heads, the two lower two bases or legs and the center, a trunk. It is a form that breaks with the traditional to give us multiple abstractions: the poem can be read in any direction.

There are many poems like this one in the book, a copy that between research and writing took seven years of production to the author.

'All the characters took a lot of time and somehow lean on each other. The theme of the book is an *olio*, which was the intermission of a minstrel show and consisted of a variety of acts that supported each other,' explains Jess, who visited Panama for the first time during the Africa in America Festival 2019.

The first memory he has with these poetic forms takes us to the work Herbert Woodward Martin, to whom he dedicated one of his books. Jess prefers to call them 'puzzle poems', which were written around the sixties and seventies.

'I was also inspired by WEB Du Bois, who talks about the idea of double consciousness. So, you have the idea of walking between the awareness of being in a white community and the awareness of being in a black community and having to light and shut yourself between consciences', he says.

The minstrel shows belonged to a genre of American theater where English opera was fused with black music from the southern plantations. A peculiar element of these acts is that it was generally played by white actors who painted their faces to sing and dance like blacks in a sardonic and denigrating way.

It was not until after the Civil War - the period in which *Olio* focuses - that African-Americans were recruited for the minstrel of 'all colors'. However, they were required to wear the stigma of their faces painted black and to replicate the stereotype built up until then.

Only by entering in that wild context, the poet Tyehimba Jess found a moment of freedom: the moment in which the characters interpreted their acts. This double consciousness is

personified by his verses, which are sometimes dialogues between two and up to three people, giving light to the feeling of play and to a certain extent giving the reader the opportunity to be a mediator or the owner of the direction that each story will take. .

'The book is about responding to the story. So they are all characters that have conversations, back and forth, "the poet adds.

At the moment of deepening in this poetic technique that "takes the form and doubles it so that it fits in its narrative needs", the author lands examples that embody the contribution of the Afro-descendants to the world culture.

'It's like taking an instrument like the saxophone, which was not designed to be played like Charlie Parker did; or take a turntable, which was never meant to be used and make music as if it were a musical instrument, but in hip-hop it became one. '

The limits that Olio mocks can also be seen very close to the end of the book. It is a section with instructions for the reader. Some pages have dotted lines to be cut, others to be folded and read the poem from a paper that can have the shape of a 'möbius' band, a figure that represents the infinite and that -in turn- the author perceives as 'a paradox': 'like the one lived by the actors of a minstrel show'.

'It's not origami, it's paper engineering', says the author.

'The form is the constriction. With the form, you can not just write what you want, you must follow the rules. But in this case it is to follow the rules in a way that takes you out of this and even beyond, "he concludes.