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# *Reading Jericho Brown: Between Legacy and Innovation*

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## ABSTRACT

This B.A. thesis focuses on contemporary American poet Jericho Brown and a close reading of his three poetry collections with a particular focus on the latter and its introduction of the Duplex form. More precisely, the research aims at highlighting the key elements of the author's poetic, both thematic and formal, in order to provide a critical reading of his literary works, furnishing the reader the tools for a clear and complete understanding of them.

To begin with, the first chapter presents a brief introduction to Jericho Brown's biography, focusing on the most relevant stages of his life that will later mark his poetic production; further, in the second part of the chapter, the analysis of his first two collections is provided, paying particular attention to the principal themes addressed in the poems – race, sexuality and violence – through the analysis of some examples.

The second chapter is entirely dedicated to the third and last collection *The Tradition*, giving it a closer and deeper reading in order to allow the reader to understand more clearly Jericho Brown's poetic and its value within the US cultural context.

Finally, in the third chapter the focus will be shifted to the author's innovative form called Duplex, with a description of its structure, the process that brought Brown to its creation and presenting an example.



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## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary world everything is changing fast. The development of technological devices, like cellphones and computers, constantly put us in close contact with one another, while distancing us at the same time from a direct confrontation with the reality that surrounds us; we are so used being repeatedly bombarded by new information that we are not able to distinguish what is important and what is not anymore. Social networks have become the primary instrument of identification and classification of people into labels, where everyone occupies a precise position; everything must be at its right place, there is no space for ambiguity and no errors are allowed. Models that society proposes are not only unattainable, but also tend to the superhuman, while human fragilities and vulnerabilities are hidden and stigmatized. It is therefore in these times, when reality is hard to decipher, that art gives us a vivid depiction of it, encouraging us to reflect on how our world has changed and what can we do as individuals to make it better; the representation of reality that art gives is sometimes pitiless, it is like a slap in the face of the spectator, but which results necessary to make them become aware of what is happening around them, and, at the same time, to reconnect them with their interiority. More specifically, the role of poetry is something that should not be put in the background within the contemporary society since it carries out a fundamental function both of condemnation of injustices and celebration of human fragilities and virtues.

It is for this reason that I choose the contemporary American poet Jericho Brown's poetry as research study for this B.A. thesis: from his personal experience as a black, queer man living in the South of the US, he acted through his lines as a spokesman against different issues that afflict the nation, both concerning the black minority and the LGBTQ+ minority, but also focusing on the value of humanity, and the celebration of what makes us humans: his poems are an exploration into themes like love, sex, identity, bodies and violence. In particular, my research concentrates on the analysis of how the author deals with these themes in his three collections, *Please* (New Issues, 2008), *The New Testament* (Copper Canyon 2014), and *The Tradition* (Copper Canyon 2019) which earned him the Pulitzer Prize in 2020; I dedicated particular

attention on demonstrating how, in Brown's poetry, a close relationship between form and content is present, analyzing how the author masterfully plays with traditional forms, revolutionizing them and giving them a new meaning; in this regard, the reader will be introduced to his innovative form called "Duplex".

In order to give a clear understanding of Brown's poetic, I structured my thesis in three different chapters: in the first one, I included some significant information regarding the author's biography. To begin with, I concentrated this first part on the description of the familiar context in which Brown grew up, especially focusing on the figures of the parents, Nelson Demery Jr. and Neomia Lenoir Demery, and how the values they believe in have consequently influenced their son's attitude towards the world; in particular, what I thought was important to highlight was the religious oriented education and the constant will of the mother to bring up her children in a direct experience of reality, even in its cruelest facets. Further, another crucial element to underline was the relationship between Brown and his father, a relationship based on fear and violence, which will cause him an indelible trauma. Two other stages in his life that I considered to be relevant are his youth and his adult life: during the former he gets into closer contact with his passion for literature, reading authors such as Emily Dickinson, Langston Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Walt Whitman, while the latter marks the beginning of his career as a professor at Emory University, and as a poet, which will be crowned with the Pulitzer Prize. In order to find reliable information to write Brown's biography, I conducted my research starting directly from his voice, reading his interviews - like Abriana Jetté's for the *Stay Thirsty Magazine* - and quoting them to allow the reader to have a direct access to the author's words, and consequently a better understanding of his thoughts.

The second part of the first chapter is dedicated to the analysis of his two first collections. The very first one is called *Please* and it was published in 2008; I underlined how music plays a key role, analyzing how Brown structured this collection following a musical project, in which poems become different tracks of an album, citing artists as Marvin Gaye, and Donny Hathaway; in addition, I examined the way these lyrics reflect the African American blues tradition, both in rhythms and beats and dealing with themes as loneliness, loss and addiction, but also exploring themes that are dear to Brown's poetry, such as sexuality, blackness, identity and abuse. In this regard, I



provided a close reading of some poems from the collection, analyzing “Lunch”, “Detailing the Nape”, “Again” and “Track 1:Lush Life”, and enriching it with some considerations from Stephen Henderson and Simeon Kronenberg’s research “Love in contemporary American gay male poetry”.

Finally, the last part of the chapter is dedicated to Brown’s the second collection *The New Testament*, published by Copper Canyon Press in 2014. I highlighted the thematic continuity which binds this collection to the previous one, with the intention to make the reader notice how, here, the author faces and expands the same themes following a different approach. The most interesting element consists in the relationship established between Brown’s homosexual experience and the religious experience, which is a subject of particular interest within the culture of the LGBTQ+ community. Moreover, the author does not only reflect on his sexual identity, but also on his identity as a black man living in the US, referring back to the traditional African American poetry, and its use of religious elements; in this regard, I decided to include an example of Langston Hughes’ poem “Christ in Alabama”. In addition to biblical references present in poems such as “Another Elegy”, “Cain” or “The Ten Commandments”, I also wanted to focus the attention on Brown’s perception and conception of the body a key element within his poetry together with its connection to eros, but also to its exposition to violence and abuse, addressed in “Romans 12:1” and “Colosseum”. The chapter ends with a brief note on Brown’s expressive modality in this collection, which is characterized by the reflection of the harshness of reality in the form, obtaining of a direct and cold tone, with short lines related by the use of enjambments.

The second chapter is entirely focused on Brown’s third and last collection called *The Tradition*, published by Copper Canyon Press in 2019 and winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 2020. I started with a brief introduction to the principle characteristics of the collection, describing how the poems that Brown included reveal his will to open up to the reader, establishing a sincere dialogue with them; in addition, I thought it was fundamental to explain what Jericho Brown means when talking about tradition: a culture of violence, racism and ignorance that was nourished by US society, which is responsible for the brutality experienced by minorities. Brown, here, talks as a poet but most importantly as a black, queer man who cannot be free in the country he lives in.

Again, the subject of vulnerability takes center stage in relation to the main themes of *The Tradition*, that represent the different parts through which the chapter is divided.

The first one is dedicated to the author's relationship with queerness, taking into account Brown's individual experience while assimilating it to the wider context of LGBTQ+ community's struggle for the achievement of civil rights, and giving the reader a socio-cultural overview by quoting considerations of scholars as Robert K. Martin, Michael J. Murphy and Megan E. Springate. For this reason, I decided to select the poem "After Essex Hemphill", as it carries and expresses the meaning of this fight, a fight which belongs not only to the LGBTQ+ community, but also to all the individuals who are considered to be wrong and different by society.

The first section is connected to the following one that I entitled "Body and Mind", which explores deeper the way Jericho Brown lives the relationship with his body, in particular towards HIV disease he suffers from, through the analysis of poem "The Virus".

The last two sections are equally interrelated, as they deal with race and white power. They are therefore dedicated to show the tradition of violence and hate and how Jericho Brown address it in his poems. In my research study, I wanted to include an overall framework of how systemic racism has developed within the US, and what have been the most important ventures that opposed it, naturally referring to #BlackLivesMatter movement, and to one of the most famous poems written by Brown: "Bullet Points". Bound to the subject of racism is the ancient ideology of supremacy of whiteness, addressed by the author in poem "Dear Whiteness", a letter of denunciation against a mentality which still permeates much of the US population and is enacted through police brutality or the control of the black population of the hyperghetto system.

To conclude, the last chapter of my thesis focuses on the Duplex, Brown's innovative poetic form in which the author combines elements of traditional poetry, the ghazal and the sonnet, with the use of original poetic features. As this composition comes after a deep reflection of the author on his past trauma, I decided to introduce the reader to the creative process that led to the birth of the Duplex, providing, finally, an example.





## CHAPTER I

### **Jericho Brown, an introduction to his life and early works**

#### **1.1. Life**

Jericho Brown, born Nelson Demery III, is an American poet and author of three collections of poetry: *Please* (New Issues, 2008), *The New Testament* (Copper Canyon 2014), and *The Tradition* (Copper Canyon 2019). He was born on April 14, 1976, in Shreveport, Louisiana. Cedar Grove was, more specifically, the name of the community in which he lived with his family: his father, Nelson Demery Jr., his mother, Neomia Lenoir Demery, and his younger sister Nequella. As mentioned in several interviews, the familiar environment in which he grew up has deeply influenced his childhood and, consequently, his future life as an adult.

The parents were two strong figures: two hard workers with a solid faith in God who built their future by themselves. The father, Nelson Demery Jr., spent most of his childhood in Cedar Grove with his mother, the daughter of a sharecropper, who divorced his biological father and raised her six children on her own until she married another man years later. Growing up without a male role model was hard, and forced Nelson Demery Jr. to learn how to take care of himself from a very young age. He had the possibility to attend the Grambling State University, a historical black college, from which he graduated with a business degree that gave him the possibility to create and build his own landscaping business. Jericho's mother, Neomia, graduated like her husband from Grambling and worked all her life to make a living for her family: as a cleaning lady, teaching in school or occasionally helping her husband with the business. Brown describes her as a good mother, who was very close to her children, especially when it came to their upbringing: she did not want to tell them lies to sugarcoat her kids' inevitable encounter with racism, poverty and death, as they represent a concrete part of their lives within the black community. To make an example, Brown remembers

an open casket funeral where the mother encouraged him and his sister to look inside: her purpose was to show them directly the true face of death, to make them witnesses of its presence and be able to remember it in their future.

These values of memory and bearing witness have been therefore fundamental, playing a key role in the future narrative of his poetry.

The family was therefore a standard southern middle-class black family, with a strong dedication to work as to religion. The regular attendance of the family to the Baptist Church can be considered a fundamental experience for little Nelson Demery III as it represented one of the earliest forms of contact with the use of the word and the power it could gain through musicality. Furthermore, it taught him to feel comfortable with vulnerability, it instilled him the courage to face some of his weak points, as to deliver speeches to large audiences in his church. However, if during his childhood the church symbolized a sort of shelter and a place that made him feel safe, it is also true that, while growing up, that same shelter brought about some difficulties that he had to face, especially for what concerned his sexuality. Once he became aware of his homosexuality, he started feeling suffocated by his religion and, consequently, by his own parents who, committed to their strong beliefs, were not able to understand and accept that side of their son, which they deemed an act against the will of God.

Another factor to take into consideration is the traumatic experience during his childhood of domestic violence on the part of his father to which he was both witness and victim. Even if both parents have often denied that, not always has Nelson Demery Jr. been a tender husband and father; his violent behavior especially towards the wife made little Jericho Brown feel powerless and incapable to intervene. Therefore, multiple flashbacks and memories will emerge in his adulthood and will appear later in his poetry, where the figure of the father holds an important role.

As a young boy, Brown developed a deep interest in arts, especially in poetry, spending most of his time at the Morningside Branch local public library. As he told the Ubuntu Biography Project, his love of the language can be traced back to all the hours spent in this place, where his sister and him were dropped off by their mother whenever she had errands to run. Here, all that they could do was to read, and by reading he encountered poets as Emily Dickinson, Langston Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Walt Whitman. Not only was this experience significant because it established

Brown's earliest contact with poetry, but also because it taught him in first place to learn how to be a poetry reader. In an interview with Abriana Jetté for the *Stay Thirsty Magazine* he declares: "When you're a poetry reader, you sort of begin to understand that there is something that happens at the end of the line break, and the end of the stanza, and in all of the empty space that poems allow." (Jetté 2016)

Because of his behavior, he was expelled several times and attended five different grade schools and two middle schools. In 1994, Brown graduated from C.E. Byrd High School moving to New Orleans, Louisiana, to enroll in Dillard University, a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). He was initiated as a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. through the Beta Phi Chapter during the fall of 1995 and he graduated magna cum laude with his Bachelor of Arts Degree in English. Later, he also graduated from the University of New Orleans with a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing and earned his Doctorate in Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Houston. In addition, during his time in New Orleans, Brown became a member of the NOMMO Literary Society, a writing workshop conceived especially for black writers led by Kalamu ya Salaam, subsequently joining the Cave Canem Retreat.

After his career as an undergraduate, he worked as a speechwriter for the Mayor of New Orleans, Marc Morial. This job turned out to be a precious opportunity for Brown as it gave him the possibility to practice his writing every day and to work with tight deadlines. He also became a member of the English teaching department at the University of Houston from 2002 to 2007 and worked at San Diego State University as a visiting professor for the MFA program in spring 2009 and later as an assistant professor.

At the end of his term in 2008, he moved to Houston where he managed to finish his first book of poetry named *Please* (New Issues, 2008), a book that mainly concentrates on one's understanding of sexual identity and on the wounds that domestic violence can provoke, winner of the American Book Award. The publication of this first collection officially marks the beginning of Brown's career as a poet, giving birth in the following years to other two collections: *The New Testament* (Copper Canyon Press, 2014), winner of the 2015 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, and *The Tradition* (Copper Canyon Press 2020), winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2020 and a finalist for the 2019 National Book Award. As a consequence of Brown's remarkable success, his

poems have been published by several renowned periodicals as the *Bennington Review*, *BuzzFeed*, *Fence*, *jubilat*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*, *The Paris Review*, *The New Yorker*, *TIME*, and in different volumes of *The Best American Poetry*.

Furthermore, he became an official fellow of the Guggenheim Foundation, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Today, Brown is an associate professor at Emory University, where he teaches English and works as director of the Creative Writing Program.

As mentioned before, the issues related to race and to the color line are pivotal points within his poetical production. For this reason, it is interesting to underline how Jericho Brown not only has engaged to express the injustices that affect the black community through his art: during the autumn of 2014 he has also tried to join the voices of other black poets creating the hashtag #blackpoetspeakout with Jonterri Gadson, Amanda Johnston, and Mahogany L. Browne. Through the hashtag, a large number of poets from different parts of the United States were invited to record themselves while reading poems that protested against the police violent acts towards unarmed black men, women and children.

## 1.2. *Please*

*Please* is the name of the first collection of poetry written by Jericho Brown. It was published by New Issues in 2008 and won the American Book Award one year later. The collection shows how love and violence coexist and how the two sometimes can blend. It appears as a musical journey which, page after page, guides the reader to access the author's personal vision of the world. It is divided into four different sections named after the buttons of a stereo system: Repeat, Pause, Power, Stop.

The first three sections concentrate on self-scrutiny, the capacity of the speaker to find his psychological and sexual identity. Furthermore, these sections explore the author's relationship with the father, the mother, and with his partners.

The core role of music appears both directly and indirectly: it appears directly through a series of paratextual elements as some explicit musical references and



anecdotes that pop up in titles and stanzas. The titles of the poems are preceded by the name “Track” followed by a number, such as “Track 1: Lush Life”, as if we were listening to different songs of a musical album. This clear reference to music and to the idea of an album creates a more cohesive relationship between the texts. In addition, throughout the whole collection the reader can hear the echo of the voices of artists as Pink Floyd, Marvin Gaye, and Donny Hathaway, artists who deal with themes such as loneliness, loss, addiction. Music also appears indirectly: writing these poems, Jericho Brown brilliantly manages to build rhythms and beats which are typical of the blues, creating a connection to this historical African-American tradition, and recreating what literary theorist Stephen Henderson defines the “blues mood”. (Henderson 1982: 28)

In the collection, the history of the African American male identity and sexuality is narrated poem by poem, “track” by “track” as in a musical album. It is significant to underline that, even if the main themes deal indeed with the author’s experience as a queer, black man living in the South, the collection is conceived to address to all human beings and to their human experience.

For this reason, the concept of identity plays a key role within the collection, with a particular attention on the part of the author for the concept of masculinity related to his sexual identity. For instance, in the poem “Lunch”, while the speaker is sitting at a table of a fast-food, he is unintentionally involved in a homophobic act: the guy who works as a cashier assumes from a customer’s gestures that the customer is probably gay and, looking at the speaker, totally misunderstands his attitude. The speaker says that the boy:

[...] takes my jealous  
Stare for one of disapproval  
And shakes his head at me  
To say, *I hate faggots*  
*Too.* [...] (Brown 2008: 38)

Homophobia is here depicted as a safe place where cisgender individuals can recognize their “normal” nature of human beings and share their pride with each other, as a disease to which they are immune. Furthermore, what turns out to be the most terrifying element is the fact that, in this situation, no words are necessary to explain this unjustified hate, just one look is enough to understand. The masterful pen of Jericho Brown manages to leak all this through formal and linguistic elements, such as brief

lines, often cut in two hemistiches by a comma, and the use of the present tense that gives the scene a cold and detached atmosphere.

Even if the theme of homophobia occupies a central role, it is not the only one the collection refers to: the reader can indeed explore other issues which are always related to the author's experience, such as blackness. In poem "Detailing the Nape", for instance, the speaker narrates the scene of a grandmother who literally tries to scrub the blackness off the neck his sister. Words in italics report what the old woman is telling her granddaughter:

[...] *You're not cleaning right. We've got to get that dirt off you.* (Brown 2008: 18)

In the final lines, we see the poor young's neck covered with blood and read the regret of the old lady, who admits:

[...] *I'm sorry, baby, I didn't know you were that black* (Brown 2008:18)

Blackness is here depicted, from the point of view of the old lady, as a negative element, a stain, some dirt that need to be scrubbed off to be acceptable. From her words, the reader understands that racism is not only a concept widely rooted in white society, but something which has been internalized by part of the older generations within the black community.

What is significant to notice in the work of Brown is how the idea of violence is framed around different levels and perspectives. In this regard, the research conducted in 2015 by Simeon Kronenberg in his thesis entitled "Love in contemporary American gay male poetry" the figure of the father has been highlighted to represent the first instance of violence in the mind of the speaker, "occupying an ambiguous but vital space in the work. It is as if Brown's father and the poet's ambivalent feelings towards him is the ever-present ghost in the machine." (Kronenberg 2015: 55) The speaker, to involve the reader in this psychological drama, addresses him directly in the poem "Again" where he complains writing:

[...] I'm so sick of it -  
Another awful father  
Scarring this page too – (Brown 2008: 16)

He feels exhausted, he is sick of the regularity of these abuses which provoked his internal weakness and, at the same time, he refers to “another awful father” as to denounce his anguish in finding these father figures as common types in literature.

Furthermore, the collection portrays the thin line that divides love from violence, making the reader understand that sometimes a sentimental relationship could turn into a dangerous, and sometimes fatal, vortex from which the partner struggles to escape. For example, the opening poem “Track 1: Lush Life” describes this ambivalent situation, where sentimental and physical abuse seems to border on sex and love. The speaker affirms:

[...]You can't tell the difference between a leather belt and a lover's  
Tongue. A lover's tongue might call you *bitch* (Brown 2008: 7)

Here, the leather belt has an ambivalent sense: it can be a belt used by a father to beat his child and a metaphorical belt which corresponds to his lover's tongue, to the fact that words can also hurt sometimes. In any case, concretely or metaphorically, both of these belts represent the origin of a pain that comes from someone who, on the contrary, is supposed to love.

It is significant to underline that the ambivalence is also one of the main elements which characterizes black music, especially blues music, where there seems to be no connection between the happy tone of the melody and the lyrics describing rancorous circumstances.

From a formal point of view, Jericho Brown does not stick to a single type of form but decides instead to use the free verse and play with it, introducing a wide variety of forms through the collection. To make an example, in the first part “Repeat”, the previously analyzed poem “Track 1: Lush Life” is composed by one single block of seventeen verses, while the poem, “Scarecrow”, is segmented into five different sections. In addition, in the second part “Pause”, we can find “Open” which is composed by a single line and “Tin Man”, the most interesting composition of all from the formal point of view: it is divided into three sections that can be read both vertically and horizontally, giving the reader the possibility to make a very personal interpretation of the text.

To conclude, despite being the first collection published, it must be said that, with *Please*, Jericho Brown immediately enters and explores several thorny experiences that are part of some social tensions, and how these experiences can reverberate in one's personal life, such as prejudices based on outdated stereotypes which can affect one's personal perception and have the power to distort it.

### **1.3. *The New Testament***

*The New Testament* is the second collection written by Jericho Brown. It was published by Copper Canyon Press in 2014 and won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award the next year.

The collection consists of sixty-nine poems divided into three different sections, including a final section named "Apocrypha" in which the author gives some relevant information about specific poems, such as references to other literary works which served as source of inspiration, or the explanation of elements related to the author's private life.

To make a comparison with the previous work, the themes of race, violence, masculinity, and sexuality happen to be a common thread, creating a relationship of interrelation with the previous collection and expanding these main concepts at the same time. Starting from the title, a reference to religion is evident: the New Testament is originally the book of the Bible dedicated to the narration of Jesus Christ's life, while here the narration is different: the religious education given by his parents during the childhood years is not denied, but reinterpreted and relived from a different perspective, the perspective of a black queer man who lives in the South who analyzes the Bible through the lens of the poet. The author manages to use the Bible and its stories in a subversive way, as a starting point and inspiration to address the homosexual experience, both from a personal and a political point of view within the contemporary American society. For instance, it is significant to underline how the gay culture often refers to sacred figures: St. Sebastian hit by arrows (clearly a phallic symbol) represents an icon for the gay community; there is a denied form of love and pleasure that can be

found in violence and sufferance. In this regard, Lisa Isherwood writes about how the queer community is interested in the “transgressive politics” (Isherwood 2001: 252) and religious rebellion, which goes against the narrow vision of sexuality of the Church that placed restrictions on the body and controlled it, but expressing themselves freely and publicly without fear. The structure of patriarchy has managed to maintain the status quo for a long time, and now the politics of transgression represent a menace: “neither activity challenges the status quo in the way that same-sex love does”. (Isherwood 2001: 251)

In addition, the use of the religious imaginary in relation to subjects which are not part of it refers also to the African American culture, which finds one of its most powerful expressions in the poetry of Langston Hughes. As a member of the *New Negro Movement* generation, Hughes believed in the power of blackness and in the value of black artists, as David Chinitz affirms: “For Hughes, a distinction between racial authenticity and a universalist inauthenticity [...] is crucial. Authenticity, for Hughes, resides in the black masses, whom he depicts as uniquely unashamed of their true, racial selves.” (Chinitz 2014: 67). To make an example, in the poem “Christ in Alabama”, the powerful image of Jesus Christ on the cross is compared to the figure of a black man; Hughes does not wait to reveal this truth at the end of the poem but decides to declare it to the reader at the very beginning of it. The first line says: “Christ is a nigger”, a statement which may sound like a blasphemy but, in fact, it is as both Jesus Christ and black people are ostracized and punished just because they are different.

The Bible echoes throughout the whole collection on account of several devices, such as religious references that are possible to find in the titles of several poems (for instance, “Romans 12:1”, “Cain” or “The Ten Commandments”), which gives the work a coherent and complete appearance. One specific element that Jericho Brown borrows from the holy writings are the familiar relationships: in the collection we find two figures holding the role of protagonists: the speaker and his brother, whose relationship is based on rivalry; this kind of relationship recalls biblical siblings such as Cain and Abel or Rachel and Leah. To make an example, in poem “Another Elegy” contained in the first section the speaker says:

Besides, your brother is much  
Bigger than you [...]

[...] Expect to lose  
Again as you stand for nothing  
Over his body, witness  
Or reporter, murderer or kin. (Brown 2014: 8)

It is significant to underline how, through the words of the speaker, the reader understands the author's deep and intimate relation to the body, a body which constantly changes shape and belonging, such as a brother, a lover, or a black man. One of the main features in Brown's poetry, the *leitmotiv* that will be carried forward in his Pulitzer-Prize winning collection *The Tradition*, is indeed the constant craving and pursuit of a connection to the body; his lines are the depiction of bodies enraptured by love and sex, or bodies mishandled and devastated just because their skin is black. Through these poems we understand that blackness, in the contemporary society, is still a sort of sin. It is the "same sin" which allowed and justified the slavery system, when the passages of the Bible were used to make slaves understand that they were inferior by the will of God. In general, bodies here are not vague but take a concrete shape directly through the words of the poet. To make an example, the poem "Romans 12:1" refers to a Biblical passage of the body as a living sacrifice: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship." (Romans 12:1). In particular, it refers to the phenomenon of the transubstantiation as we can read in the passage:

I let a man touch me until I bled,  
Until my blood met his hunger  
And so was changed, was given  
A new name" (Brown 2014: 6)

From a lexical point of view, it is possible to underline a constant use of words that do not belong to the classical poetic register, but of terms linked to a more concrete dimension instead, such as "blood", "hunger", "hate" or "smell" (ibid.). Furthermore, it is significant to notice how the lexicon refers to different parts of the body or to emotions, for instance the same word "body", which appears in the first line, but also "love-wracked", "touch", "legs", "smell" and "muscle".

As mentioned before, *The New Testament* takes into account the relationship between the author, his homosexuality and his body as, for instance, in the poem

“Colosseum”. Here, the Roman amphitheater used for demonstration and fights between gladiators turns into a metaphor to indicate the internal battlefield of the speaker’s mind. Although the speaker is not able to locate the exact origin of his pain because, as he says, it lasted long enough “To lose the wound that invented it” (Brown 2014: 5), this is not what really matters to him; even if the “wound” and the “slaughter” do not have a precise beginning, what is significant is to use the pain, to “live with it / and sometimes use it / to get the living done” (ibid.). In this poem Brown reconnects to the poetic tradition through the classical metaphor of love as a fight, a fight which is connected to his homosexuality and the constant struggle to find the possibility of loving another man.

In this depiction of reality in its whole concreteness, the tone of the poems is generally harsh and direct, having a great impact on the reader; the words and images follow one another, line after line, according to a logical relationship and giving to the compositions a somber and cold tone and casting an ice-cold light upon the main themes addressed in the collection. This is what, for example, it is possible to encounter in “Another Elegy” where the subject of death is mirrored in the mode of expression of the speaker who coldly asserts that: “Death is a metaphor that stands / for nothing” (Brown 2014: 8). Here, the biblical verse and rhythm echoes through the short lines which are often linked with each other by means of the enjambement, reducing the composition to its essence and obtaining elegance and clarity. To make another example, this time talking about race, in the poem “N’em” where we read: “Then another century came. / People like me forgot their names.” (Brown 2014: 24). In only two lines, Brown here manages to express a vivid commentary on identity and the condition of isolation. As Natasha Trethewey explains in her review of the poem for the New York Times Magazine, the poem refers to “n’em”, a colloquial form which corresponds to “them”, to indicate the members of the older generations, of “elders and distant ancestors whose way of being was rooted in the wisdom of folk knowledge, a generation now all but gone”. (Trethewey 2015)

Another significant aspect to underline is the reference on the part of Jericho Brown to the thought and the poetic imaginary of James Baldwin. At the very beginning of the collection, we find the quote: “One’s lover – or one’s brother, or one’s enemy – sees the face you wear, and this face can elicit the most extraordinary reactions.”, taken

from “The Creative Process”, the essay written in 1962 where Baldwin analyzes the artistic life and responsibilities of what an artist decides to express, dedicating himself particularly to offer the public a faithful witness of all the issues that the society hides. In the final section of the essay Baldwin affirms that the self is the last part of the invisible; the quote refers to the author’s idea that a lover or a brother or an enemy can actually see the face that we wear, while it is impossible for us to see our own.

This is exactly how *The New Testament* reveals itself: as a manifestation of a vulnerability, the vulnerability of the body and the mind. It is a testament, as Lucas Jacob affirms: “a series of documents putting into words contracts or agreements of immeasurable importance. More than anything else, Brown’s new collection concerns itself with the idea of the power of the word” (Jacob 2016)

In reporting the words of James Baldwin, Jericho Brown therefore refers to the legacy of the African American community, a tradition that will be widely celebrated in its latest collection.



## Chapter II

### 2. *The Tradition: Between Legacy and Innovation*

#### 2.1. *The Tradition, a brief Introduction*

In 2019, Jericho Brown released his third and last collection, *The Tradition*, published by Copper Canyon Press, which the next year would earn him the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. As described in the official website, the author presents “a collection of masterful lyrics that combine delicacy with historical urgency in their loving evocation of bodies vulnerable to hostility and violence” (The Pulitzer Prizes 2020). It could be in fact defined as the representative work of his poetic imaginary, presenting a deeper research and discovery into the themes of racial injustice, sexuality, and love in its double facet: violence and affection.

Between the poet and the reader, a direct dialogue emerges, which sometimes proves to be raw demonstrating his intention to “get naked”, to totally expose himself and declare the truth. In addition, the poems of the collection attest the definite proof of his formal expertise, that combine the musicality of the blues to, above all, the introduction of a new form: the Duplex.

The title of the collection directs the reader’s attention to a legacy which, in this case, is used as a form of expression of the speaker’s internal tensions; therefore, poetry can here be considered a liberating act, a momentary relief of the spirit. The word “tradition” is here referred not only to a culture related to the past, but also to the American contemporary socio-cultural context, as Leah Silvieus underlines in her review: “the poems examine the other traditions that this country has nourished and sustained: racism, police brutality, mass shootings, sexual violence.” (Silvieus 2019), a tradition that left indelible marks on the speaker’s body and subconscious, which the lyrics explore in the three different sections that make up the collection.

Jericho Brown therefore inscribes himself within a tradition while simultaneously rewriting it both from a thematic and a formal point of view. In his poems a relationship between past and present is established, as it is possible to notice

in the opening poem of the collection ,Ganymede, Where the classical myth is inscribed with a contemporary vision. In particular, the poem refers to a story of stolen youth: a young boy is abducted by Zeus and brought on Mount Olympus to become his servant. The event can be considered good fortune and a unique opportunity to have the access to the house of gods on the one hand, but a form of slavery and sexual abuse on the other. Below the surface of the classical imaginary Brown builds a subtle reference to the contemporary dynamics, creating a structure based on parallelism: “someone with wings” (Brown 2019: 5) may represent the embodiment of a salvific entity capable of freeing the speaker, but looking behind this image it is possible to recognize the power-elites of a country which make his citizens believe they are free to decide, while building a cage around them just like it happened in the history of black people. The speaker suggests looking at what surrounds us from a different perspective, to detach ourselves from the idea of “The safety of it, no one at fault, / Everyone rewarded” (ibid.), inviting the reader to adopt a discerning look, to be able to intercept the discriminatory mechanisms of society and reject the myth that it imposes.

As Brown explains during the interview for the French Quarter Journal (Jackson, 2020) he chose “Ganymede” as the opening poem of *The Tradition* because, in its lines, contains all the themes that will be approached in the other lyrics, as the relationship between white people and black people, police brutality, but also the trauma of rape.

In this chapter the principal themes of the collection are going to be presented, showing how they are perceived by Jericho Brown with the intention to give the reader a close reading of his poetic imaginary; therefore, the themes will be combined with some examples of the most significant poems in order offer a complete analysis of the collection. In this regard, a distinction will be made between the traditional poetic features which are maintained by Brown and the innovative elements, especially from a formal point of view, introduced in *The Tradition* which have contributed to its Pulitzer-Prize designation.

### **2.1.1. *The Tradition* and Traditions**

In the analysis of the principal subject matters addressed in the collection, one significant factor to take into consideration is that, as previously anticipated in the

introduction to the chapter, for Jericho Brown the tradition does not only represent what belongs to the legacy, a culture he is bound to: as he affirms, his poetry is inspired from the voices of poets as Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sylvia Plath and Walt Whitman, whose works gave him the possibility to establish a closer relationship to his body and his sexuality, enabling him to open himself, to discover and express it. At the same time, the tradition assumes a second meaning that takes shapes in his poems, which is associated to the white American society: a tradition of blood, violence, racism, and abuse. For this reason, what must be included in order to provide a complete presentation of the collection is the analysis of the title-poem, in which Jericho Brown masterfully manages to make these two traditions merge together into one, perfectly balanced lyric.

Before being included in the collection, “The Tradition” was published in 2015 in the “Poem-a-day” series by the Academy of American Poets, including the author’s observation:

The poet’s relationship to language and form is an addiction where what’s past is present, a video on loop. Not watching won’t make what that video says about our future go away. (Brown, 2015)

Through this statement, we can understand how the poem could be considered a celebration of poetry itself, and a celebration of the role it plays within the society as the bearer of a memory that must not be forgotten.

The first feature to be highlighted, which is also the most evident one, is bound to the formal aspect: Brown decides to build the poem relying on the structure of the sonnet by writing a fourteen-line composition but, at the same time, revolutionizing the traditional Shakespearean rules of rhythm and rhyme. The result is a hybrid form that combines past and present, a completely new and personal form, which allows Brown to find his maximum expression without boundaries. Furthermore, as form and content are deeply linked to each other, as “they’re having a conversation” (Brown 2018), the subject presented in the poem will also be detached from the classical thematic approach, surprising the reader’s expectation.

The first line of the poem presents a natural element: we read the names of three flowers: “*Aster. Nasturtium. Delphinium. [...]*”. It is well-known that natural references are not unknown to the classical poetry, in particular, here the author inscribes himself

into the pastoral tradition, but overturning its original approach to make this natural landscape become the background of the United States social and political situation. The names of these plants build, in fact, a relationship with the names that we read at the end of the poem: “[...] *John Crawford. Eric Garner. Mike Brown.*”: three black people, three victims whose unfair death was caused by police violence. Here, the poet names them, he recalls their presence, demonstrating that their lives matter; the three flowers are perennials that are cut during the winter months so that they can grow stronger to bloom again, as the death of these people will bring, one day, to a renaissance of the black community. It is therefore clear to the reader that the author wants to make his purpose explicit from the very beginning, using this symbolism to unveil the injustices that every day African Americans are forced to face.

Further, we understand that the voice of the speaker belongs to a black man who establishes a bond with the reader through the use of an inclusive language as, for instance, “we” and “me and my brothers” (Brown 2019). He says:

[...] We thought  
Fingers in dirt meant it was our dirt, learning  
Names in heat, elements classical  
Philosophers said could change us.[...] (ibid.)

In these first lines, a reference is made towards the manipulating behavior to black people on the part of white people, who are here embodied in the figures of the philosophers. The latter are blamed for filling the African Americans’ minds with philosophical theories, with empty words and thoughts without any basis, preventing them from learning the truth. These words remind us, in particular, to the slavery system and how that was enabled through some knowledge and theories, which were founded during the Enlightenment era, and which wanted to prove that black people were inferior and naïve, a characteristic which is symbolized through “*Star Gazer*”, the flower of innocence. These new sciences helped in the shaping a culture of racism, which has been internalized in time, not only by the white community but also by the black one.

In the following lines, the speaker shows the consequences provoked by a manipulation, which apparently did not stop with the end of slavery:

[...] Summer seemed to bloom against the will

Of the sun, which news reports claimed flamed hotter  
On this planet than when our dead fathers  
Wiped sweat from their necks. [...] (ibid.)

The speaker builds a line of continuity between the past times and the contemporary times, depicting how notions that the philosophers provided on racism to the previous generations had an impact on the younger ones, as people living today have to deal concretely with the disinterest on the part of society for the past climate changes. Further, we find other two symbolic flowers that underline the bond between past and present: “*Cosmos*”, which is linked to descendants, and “*Baby’s breath*”, linked to the present, to the newborns on this planet.

[...] Men like me and my brothers filmed what we  
Planted for proof we existed before  
Too late, sped the video to see blossoms  
Brought in seconds, colors you expect in poems  
Where the world ends, everything cut down. [...] (ibid.)

In the second part of the composition, the speaker imagines filming the suffering of the African American community as a “proof” to the fact that what they have experienced in the past is true, that men really died, and are still dying, because of racism. However, as the speaker affirms it is “too late”, people are not willing to pay attention to the video but are avoiding it instead; here, Brown gives us a depiction of the contemporary situation within the United States’ society.

The very last lines sound somber and serious. The evocation of the victims denotes a tone of hope for a future in which the suffering of the entire African American community will be recognized, a time in which their lives will be celebrated and respected.

## **2.2. Themes in *The Tradition***

### **2.2.1. Love and Sexuality: How does it feel to be a black, queer poet?**

#### **A note on LGBTQ+ movement and Brown's relationship with queerness**

A theme that contributes to the success of *The Tradition* is love, which is presented by the author in different forms and shades. The first factor that needs to be taken into consideration is related to the author's sexual orientation, analyzing the relationship with his sexuality.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the familiar context in which Brown grew up based itself on Christian values, which made it difficult for him to face and accept his own identity: the parents were not fully in agreement with him being gay, generating a situation of distress. In response to this, Jericho Brown decided to change his previous name, Nelson Demery III, creating himself a brand-new identity. In his collection, he writes as a black queer man, dedicating several of his lyrics to the experience of queerness, which stands for individuals who do not recognize themselves as homosexual nor as cisgender.

It is a well-known fact that the gay experience is unfortunately still object of stigmatization within the contemporary society, which projects itself in values that belong to a heteronormative conception of reality. Therefore, it is becoming more and more difficult, if not impossible, for these people to recognize themselves in these values and make their identity be accepted by the society, ending up implementing a process of adaptation which forces them to hide or abandon specific traits of their own individuality.

For what concerns arts, the presence of gay figures is not unknown in the cultural and artistic American panorama; however, artists of the previous generations have always prevented themselves from showing explicitly their sexual identity within their works, respecting socially imposed canons. Over time many things have changed, until, in the contemporary era, artists have started to lift the veil and finally show their true self; it is important to emphasize that this does not mean they have been totally

accepted, as they still must reckon with some orthodox beliefs, as Robert K. Martin wrote:

Heterosexual assumptions are presumed to be universal ...  
[F]or the homosexual man, who must repeatedly observe the differences  
between his own sexuality and the prevailing assumptions about 'everyman',  
sexual definition is a matter of individual struggle and personal decision. (Martin  
1998: xv-xvi)

For this reason, the life of many people is based on this continuous confrontation: they try to affirm their identity, but, at the same time, are in a way too weak for this achievement. In this regard, the LGBTQ+ community, acronym that stands for lesbian (L), gay (G), bisexual (B), transgender (T), queer (Q), and questioning, fluid, or non-conforming to define identities (+) (Dinkins, Englert, 175), has been fighting for a long time for the recognition and integration of these individuals within the society. The homophile movements that started in the 1950s developed during the following decade, starting to aim at the achievement of social recognition and civil rights; in particular, the new homophile generations began to refuse the common belief of homosexuality as an abnormal and pathological condition which affected certain individuals. When talking about gay studies, from a historical point of view particular attention should be reserved to the rebellion of June 1969 that took place in Stonewall Inn, a male gay bar situated in Greenwich Village, New York. During a police intervention intended to "prevent" some behaviors that did not conform to the social norms of the time, a riot exploded: people rebelled against the arrests throwing bottle and other random objects towards the officers; this event marked the beginning, in the following days, of a series of other protests in which also women, lesbians and transgenders were involved. However, scholars insist on underlying that this should not be considered the official beginning of the future LGBTQ+ movement, but a symbolic event instead, as Armstrong and Cragge write:

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Despite these, and other, earlier examples of LGBTQ resistance, the Stonewall riots have become iconic because they occurred in a major metropolitan area with a critical mass of lesbian and gay people who worked to memorialize and commemorate the events of June 1969 (Armstrong & Cragge 2006)

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Instead of addressing to a specific moment in which the movement was “created”, we should refer to a series of acts and protests that 1980’s and are still going on today. Among the most significant years is 1987, when the second march on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights was organized, lasting six days and involving more than a half million people. Moreover, 1990s marks a significant decade concerning the obtaining of more civil recognition and public awareness towards violence against the minority: after the murdering of the transgender Brandon Teena and the gay student Matthew Shepard, sexual orientation was included as a category covered by federal definition of hate crime. Finally, during the 2000s other developments were achieved within the political sphere, especially during President Barack Obama’s mandate as the long-awaited decision on the part of the Supreme Court to legalize same-sex marriage in all the fifty states (Gadd 2019). Great changes have been made within a few decades, leading to a more tolerant *Weltanschauung* on the part of younger generations, nevertheless, it must be reminded how the struggle for full equality and acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community is not over yet. It must also be reminded that, when talking about LGBTQ+, we are not only referring to a sexual minority, but to a more complicated structure. To clarify this subject, we should focus on the concept of intersectionality. This could be recognized as a key concept of the LGBTQ+ community, according to Springate’s definition:

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Intersectionality is the recognition that categories of difference (sometimes also referred to as axes of identity) including—but not limited to—race, ethnicity, gender, religion/creed, generation, geographic location, sexuality, age, ability/disability, and class intersect to shape the experiences of individuals; that identity is multidimensional (Springate 2016, 07-1)

We should in fact talk about a group made of multiple layers that are not mutually exclusive; moreover, these “axes of difference” can affect people’s lives, creating a disparity due to gender and sexual orientation which makes more difficult for these individuals to draw the same incomes of “normal” people.

As race and gender are two interrelated aspects, it must be underlined how the mainstream narration of the black male has affected the African American community, especially the LGBTQ+ black community to which Jericho Brown belongs. In the book *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, bell hooks argues the negative depiction



of black masculinity, affirming that it represented a risk of appropriation of this idea by the mainstream racist white imagination. The depiction of the black male provided by mass media is bound to different stereotypes: many of them have a very long tradition that dates back to the slavery era, like the figure of the black rapist; what mass media provide are black men who, compared to white men, appear more violent and physically more masculine; these images have the power to charm and fascinate white audiences, but, at the same time, to provoke them a sense of fear just as popular black figures created by the Minstrel Show did in the past. Further, Hooks reminds us how these politics of representation and their potential danger should not be ignored and belittled: narratives proposed by mass media, specifically television, have the power to influence the public's opinion towards black men, especially if proposed by TV programs renowned at international level. To make an example, Oprah Winfrey's show was criticized for portraying black males negatively, suggesting that they are dominating and sexist. To this regard Hooks writes:

Until black men can face the reality that sexism empowers them despite the impact of racism in their lives, it will be difficult to engage in meaningful dialogue about gender. Listening to black men talk about their social reality, one often hears narratives of victimization. Even very successful black men will talk about their lives as though racism is denying them access to forms of power they cannot even describe, that seem almost mythic. Seeing themselves solely as victims, or potential victims, they be blind to all that they have accomplished. (Hooks 1999: 75)

If this is the standard depiction of black masculinity proposed by society, it is therefore easy to understand that no place for vulnerability is considered, a stereotype with which is hard to live with especially for black men who are part of the LGBTQ+ community and which is hard to accept.

To this regard, Jericho Brown's lyrics follow the purpose to accompany the reader in the discovery and exploration of this vulnerability, to embrace and celebrate it. A poem which is important to consider is called "After Essex Hemphill", contained in the third part of the collection. The title clearly refers to one of the most influential figures both for the African American community and for the gay community, Essex Hemphill (1957-1995). As Sarah Kaplan wrote for The Washington Post: "When Essex Hemphill spoke, people listened". (Kaplan 2014). He can be therefore recognized as an artist who managed to express the insecurities and the weak points of the minorities through his

voice, writing open and confrontational articles and poems, opening what people at that time called a second Harlem Renaissance; in particular, in his career, which lasted from 1981 to 1995 when he died from AIDS, he lashed out against the silence and the taboos towards homosexuality, encouraging the country to face this topic.

Here, the speaker defines himself as illegal, and feels forced to organize the encounter with his partner at night, a time which is traditionally reserved to something that is forbidden and that cannot belong to the reality of daylight. Then, the poem shifts from the sensual image of the two lovers with their “mouths / full of each other” (Brown 2019: 51) to an impulsive feeling of desire of the speaker:

[...] No one  
Hungry as me against this  
Tree. This tree, if we push  
Too hard, will fall. [...] (ibid)

He is hungry and wants to push this tree. It must be underlined here, as previously encountered in Jericho Brown’s poetic imagery, the presence of a religious symbolism which builds a parallel between homoerotic relationships and Christianity. In the very first lines of the poem the reader can find a special reference, a park, a place reserved to secret homosexual encounters, which can also correspond to the biblical image of the Garden of Eden, the seat of the original sin; in this context, the speaker can be compared to Adam: a character divided between the necessity to follow the rules imposed by God, and the deep desire to act driven by human impulses, in the same way that men are supposed to love women to follow the rules of nature, breaking the patterns to follow their heart, to eat the forbidden apple. The tree here stands for something which has the function to maintain a balance, a balance which risks being broken if the reader pushes too hard; in this case, the falling of the tree assumes an ambivalent meaning: it can be a symbol which represents the danger of being lost and abandoned, but at the same time a symbol of hope for a new beginning. In the same way, by breaking the rules imposed by society, the gay minority risks between being put aside or earning a place in the world. Therefore, the tree could be seen as a symbol of life, as the reader says:

[...] Somebody ahead  
Of me seeded the fruit-  
Bearing forest. [...] (ibid.)

Past activities have been carried out in order to turn the single tree into a forest, someone before the speaker, as Essex Hemphill did, laid the foundation to ensure future generations to grow stronger.

### 2.2.2. Body and mind

In the lyrics of the collection, the theme of identity and sexuality is deeply intertwined with the theme of the body. Our body is exposed to the outside world, to the erosion of time which can represent both our home, as a shell which protects our mind and soul, and our prison.

In *The Tradition* we see the body in different facets: we see it, for example, the celebration of the body for its sensuality, a celebration of blackness but also as a body at risk, as infected or bearer of different traumas and wounds from the past. As previously mentioned, Jericho Brown tests positive for HIV, a disease that not only has affected his body, but also his mind: Brown grew up in a society in which people who suffered from HIV or AIDS were deeply stigmatized, creating them a situation of unease through the construction of stereotypes as Christianne Anastasia Gadd underlines:

[...]Media coverage often suggested that gay men were promiscuous, prone to anonymous sex, diseased, possibly drug-addicted, morally corrupt, and therefore deserving of the disease. Positioning gay men as the “carriers” of this terrible virus meant that they—and gayness itself—was perceived as a threat to “innocent” heterosexuals. (Gadd 2019: 35)

Transforming this status of uneasiness into poetry, the collection presents this theme in various lyrics, such as in “The Virus”. In the poem, the relationship between the individual and the disease he suffers from is described, a disease with which many individuals are forced to live for life. The nervous and paranoid thought that arise from this health condition leads those who are afflicted with it to a profound suffering and to the fear of being able to represent a danger to people around them. As many other poems of *The Tradition*, this is a persona poem, a dramatic monologue in which the voice of the speaker does not correspond to the voice of the author; as Brown explains

during the interview for the Bennington Review: “It’s interesting for me to make the choice of speaking through people that we cannot see or, in this case, through something that is not actually a person.” (Dumanis 2018); moreover, the voice of a persona poem can also embody the voice of the author’s subconscious, building an inward-oriented dialogue.

In “The Virus” we see that the speaker is the virus itself, the HIV disease talking in first person and expressing its point of view. To write this poem, Brown was inspired by the memories of his father’s job, who did lawn care, after spending a lot of time observing and learning from him; after moving to his new home he had, again, the possibility to look at flowers outside the window. In the poem, the virus is allowed to speak, to look at the same flowers planted by its victim and describe its point of view, which reveals a strong inclination to destruction. The virus wants to kill the flowers because it wants to remind the victim of his presence; it constantly reminds the author that it is still there, no matter how many efforts he did to silence it, no matter how mentally healthy and stable he is, as it affirms:

[...] I want you  
To heed that I’m still here,  
Just beneath your skin and in  
Each organ [...] (Brown 2019: 55)

The virus admits he is too weak to kill his victim. Therefore, it does not renounce to its project of destruction and tries to cause distress by preventing him from enjoying even the smallest things in life, as looking at the pansies outside his window:

[...] If I can’t leave you  
Dead, I’ll have  
You vexed. Look. Look  
Again: show me the color  
Of your flowers now. (ibid.)

Referring again to what Brown states during the interview with Michael Dumanis, he defines this poem as the description of the history of the HIV more than the present situation of the HIV; although it is a well-known fact that the disease becomes not contagious once medicated, “the history of the disease will always overshadow its present tense”. People suffering from HIV are therefore not only victims

of the disease itself, but also of a general ignorance due to a poor information provided by society.

It is also interesting to emphasize how, even if the poem is dedicated to a particular disease, it can also assume a different meaning if we think about the present times: the situation related to the pandemic that the world is living right now makes this poem become relevant for the entire population; it enables us to understand what it means to live in the constant threat of a virus, something invisible and ungraspable which has the power to put the human being at his feet.

### 2.2.3. Race

The racial issue has never been as significant as it is now. In a historical moment in which the politically correct is said to be the dominant trend, racism and racial prejudice turn out to be still rampant. Even if racial segregation has been abolished long time ago, this does not necessarily mean it is over: it is important to remind that another form of segregation exists, a more subtle form of segregation which, even if not ratified by law, provokes concrete consequences on the lives of people who experience it. In this regard, the French sociologist Loïc Wacquant has analyzed in his book *Urban Outcasts* a new form of ghetto within the context of the post-industrial city: the hyperghetto. The term “hyperghetto” refers to a conjunction between the institutions of the ghetto and the prison, a system of control no longer confined to the black city, as the author argues: “*generic* macroeconomic forces have interacted with the *particular* race/class structures of cities and national state strategies to produce various modalities of advanced marginality in post-industrial societies” (Nicholls 2009: 2239).

However, this kind of segregation is not the only phenomenon of oppression linked to the past which has been maintained: despite the end of the Minstrel Show era and its use of blackness as a form of entertainment, the African American community has, again, to come to terms with old stereotypes and prejudices, being prevented from the possibility of a full integration within the US society. The latter, behind the values of equality and opportunity, still vents the internalized racism and the white

suprematism ideology through acts of violence without justification. In this regard, younger generations receive, from a very early age, an education which basically teaches them how to behave and what are the sides of them that they can or cannot show; to make an example, some young adult literature writers decided to deal with this process of “splitting” of one’s identity, which turns out to be difficult particularly during adolescence. To make an example, Angie Thomas’ best-seller *The Hate You Give* manages to make its teenager readership become aware of the fact that emancipation of black people is unfinished because, despite all victories, they are still occupying a position of unfreedom. The author manages to address both black and white readers, describing through the eyes of the protagonist, Starr, what it means to live this code-switching between black neighborhood and the school’s walls.

The African American community is therefore still forced to submit to some unwritten rules that have been imposed by the white American society so much that in many cases they have been internalized. Faced with this situation, black people decided to react, to find a voice to express their discontent and continue what the protagonists of the Civil Rights Movement started: a new revolution. After the murder of the seventeen-year-old boy Trayvon Martin on February 26, 2012, and the acquittance in 2015 of his murderer George Zimmermann, Alicia Garza, Patrice Khan-Cullors and Opal Tomating created the Black Lives Matter hashtag; in July 2014 Eric Garner was killed in broad daylight by a police officer, his last words “I can’t breathe” would have become a symbol used during manifestations across the United States. That same year, a policeman shot eighteen-year-old Mike Brown while unarmed in Ferguson, Missouri; after his body was left to desecration in the heat of August, black people decided that time had come to stop sitting back but watch and act instead: in that moment, Black Lives Matter became an international movement to protest against the unfair treatment of African Americans and celebrate their value as citizens and human beings, in his work dedicated to #BlackLivesMatter, Christopher J. Lebron defines these three words as a “touchstone” (Lebron, 2017: xii) for African Americans, which represent “the struggle to insist that black lives are [...] not candidates for cursory or careless or hateful or negligible elimination” (ivi) - It is important to emphasize that the movement does not recognize its aims and purposes in a leader but acts adopting a multi-voice

perspective instead: activists work both “fieldwork” in the streets and online, using the hashtag as a means of communication.

Besides these forms of protest, literature naturally plays an important role: it attests the value of the word and the power of expression. The National Book Award winner Jesmyn Ward decided to testify this by collecting the most important writings on the topic by many contemporary authors in her book *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race*, a title which clearly refers to James Baldwin’s masterpiece. In the preface, the author expresses her feeling of weariness just because of being an African American in the United States society, “we’re tired of feeling futile” (Ward 2017: 9) she writes, further stating:

I believe there is power in words, power in asserting our existence, our experience, our lives, through words. That sharing our stories confirms our humanity. That it creates community, both within our own community and beyond it. (ibid.)

The word and its deepest meaning find their most elevated point of representation in poetry, a language that expresses human values in a very compressive way, a “verbally intensive” language, according to Terry Eagleton’s definition. Therefore, poetry plays a crucial role especially in this contemporary era, a time during which words have lost their meaning. Part of this new generation that “speaks about race” (ibid.) is Jericho Brown and the lyrics of *The Tradition*, which constitute one of the greatest contributions to the celebration of the memory of the past, the testament of the present and an encouragement to fight for the future.

To make an example, one of the most representative poems of the collection which deals with race and the racist society of the United States is “Bullet Points”. In particular, in its 33 verses the poem explores the theme of police brutality against innocent black people, representing a significant opportunity for the reader to observe the dynamics of violence from the point of view of the victim; here, the author wants to reveal the standard perspective offered by mass media, where the culprit is stripped from every human trait and the crime he committed becomes the only characteristic of his identity. Therefore, the voice of the speaker may be the single embodiment of a multitude of voices, the voices of every African American who has experienced this

kind of violence. We understand that the tone is determined and austere from the very first verses:

I will not shoot myself  
In the head, and I will not shoot myself  
In the back, and I will not hang myself  
With a trashbag [...] (Brown 2019: 16)

The repetition of the verb “will” for three times underlines that the intention is clear and firm, it seems as if the speaker is writing a list in his mind to remind himself of what to do or, as in this case, of what not to do; in this regard, the title itself is a play of words: “Bullet Points” refers both to the list and, at the same time, to the bullets of the guns used by the police to kill. Especially through the element of the back the author wants to refer to the stories told to the public by the media in which someone shoots them from behind, an expedient to bury a truth of murder and negligence.

Later, the speaker addresses directly to the reader making him a promise: he assures his intention to avoid committing suicide under the custody of the police; the promise manages to build a relationship between the speaker and the reader and is intensified using the caesura which breaks the flow of words, splitting the verse in two parts and creating a moment of silence. However, this deep connection collides with the enormous distance between the poet and the figure of the policeman which is almost brought to the hyperbole: the poet considers these figures as less than human beings, he does not reserve them any confidence, worms and parasites have more value:

[...] I trust the maggots  
Who live beneath the floorboards  
Of my house to do what they must  
To any carcass more than I trust  
An officer [...] (ibid.)

Again, the poet wants to underline the fact that this is a general condition of the country by using the indefinite article. Furthermore, the speaker shifts his focus to other



issues of the United States: it seems as if one is not shot by a policeman because he is black then there are other ways the country can kill: capitalism slowly poisons every consumer through “cigarette smoke / Or a piece of meat on which I choke” (ibid).

In the conclusion, Brown concentrates on the impact that one single death can cause to the community, pointing out how the life of a human being cannot be given back by money:

[...] He took  
Me from us and left my body, which is,  
No matter what we've been taught,  
Greater than the settlement  
A city can pay a mother to stop crying [...] (ibid.)

The pronouns “us” and “we” finally bind together the poet and the reader revealing a sense of belonging which is expressed also through the language. In addition, the image of the mother can be defined as the very symbol of life which clashes with the final image of the bullet extracted from the head of the speaker.

The end represents therefore the nth unfair death, which provokes a sense of desperation caused by the impossibility to react in front of a repetition that seems never-ending.

To conclude, “Bullet Points” and its intense meaning have inspired a lot of people to manifest their anger against a life spent in fear; in particular, after the killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, the poem has been widely shared on social networks, becoming an act of protest which, in pain, managed to bring together a community and encouraged these people to resist, testifying once again the potential that words can have.

#### **2.2.4. White Power**

As previously discussed above, the racial issue is closely related to the concept of white supremacy, a type of mentality which is deeply connected to the slavery system, the biggest wound of the African American community. Despite all the attempts on the part of activists to eradicate it, the idea of a superior white power has survived: to

make an example, it is sufficient to think about the fact that ex-president Trump's government has fed this vision, nourishing the hopes of ultra-conservative citizens. White suprematism is based on gaps, on values that are the opposite to those recognized as Americans. However, the work that activism has carried out for so many years is now starting to bear its fruit, marking the beginning of what journalist Adam Serwer in his article for the Atlantic has defined "The New Reconstruction" (Serwer 2020)

In particular, the author compares this historical period to the civil-rights era, when several American cities started to be occupied by riots and rebellions; at that moment, President Richard Nixon decided to oppose and suppress these forces by implementing a policy of "law and order" to restore the balance of the country. In the face of protests during 2020, ex-President Trump decided to follow the footsteps of his predecessor, trying to give the United States the impression of being able to hold the reins of government but ending up doing the opposite. Trump's initial political project was focused on restoring the past aristocracy of race, his aim was returning to the golden age of prosperity, but what his mandate actually did restore and also radicalized was the phenomenon of systemic racism, when previously a consistent part of white Americans was starting to consider the idea of racism and discrimination as an obsolete behavior that needed to be overcome.

During 2020, more and more black killings occupied the pages of newspapers and television news: Ahmaud Arbery was shot only because he was considered to be suspicious, Breonna Taylor was killed by some police officers who were looking for drugs that were not even there and, finally, George Floyd's death, after begging in vain policeman Derek Chauvin to stop torturing and choking him with his knee. After Floyd's killing the nation exploded, demonstrating that it was enough: 23 million people were involved in the participation in anti-police brutality protests. White conservative Americans started to realize the fact that activism was not a dream, a fantasy of black people, but that movements existed and had real consequences on society: according to a poll carried out by the Monmouth University in June 2020, the 76 percent of Americans considered racism and discrimination a big problem, frustrating Trump's expectations that Americans were predominantly conservative racists.

However, it must be reminded that if on the one hand, Black Lives Matter movement is having a concrete impact on people and is leading to changes, on the other

hand the path to reach equality is still long. Many acts of violence by police officers have been recorded on cellphones, so to let the images speak directly to the white public and make them become aware of the outrageous treatment to African Americans; according to Patrisse Cullors, one of the co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement, the recording of these acts is something related to a common white American's thought of black people exaggerating and exalting these situations of police harassment. At this point, the significant question to take into consideration is who is protected by the police, the victim, or the perpetrator?

*The Tradition* tries to put the reader directly in front of these problems and make them seriously reflect on the possible answers. Among the lyrics of the collection, a persistent theme which can be detected is an interrogation of whiteness, a sort of study carried out by Jericho Brown as a way of response to several questions related both to his private life and his public life as an African American citizen, questions like: Is there any chance to face white violence? Is it possible for the United States to reach a level of balance, to reach equality? In the attempt to find an answer, the author accompanies the reader in his reflection concerning his relationship with whiteness.

It is interesting to highlight how sentimental traits are attributed to this relationship in the poem "Dear Whiteness". Here, the speaker personalizes it by addressing it directly as if he were writing a love letter to his partner:

Come, love, come lie down, love with me  
In this king-size bed where we go numb  
For each other letting sleep take us into  
Ease [...] (Brown 2019: 40)

The poet gently invites his "love" to come with him to bed and join him tenderly, suggesting a possibility of intimacy.

In the second stanza, the gentle tone becomes more and more accusatory: the speaker describes his struggle in making efforts to make the relationship work:

[...] That's how I fight to win you, to gain  
Ground you are welcome to divide  
And name. [...] (ibid.)

The space between him and whiteness becomes the arena of a continuous clash between different tensions; this is emphasized by the poet with a reference to the traditional poetic imaginary of love as a battle using terms as “war hero”, “fight”, “win”, “ground”. (ibid.)

In the third and final stanza the poem reveals the deception played by whiteness, there is no space for the lover:

[...] When you look in that mirror, it  
Will be clean. You'll be content  
Seeing only yourself. Was I ever there? [...] (ibid.)

The mirror represents our identity and subconscious, an object that allows us to see our face through its surface; here the reflection of whiteness is “clean”, there is no stain, no space left for blackness that can soil the immaculate image. The lover is also erased from the temporal dimension, he wonders if there was really a time that he lived with whiteness or if it was all a figment of his imagination. Through the open question at the end, the speaker is both addressing himself and the reader, the answer remains unclear and suspended, giving the idea of something ungraspable, impossible to achieve, as it seems impossible for African Americans to feel part of the United States.

Besides the speaker, it is important to underline how, in the poem, another voice participates: the three stanzas are in fact separated each time by some italicized words that refer to a Fleetwood Mac song called “Little Lies”. More precisely, the first two lines quoted are: “*Tell me lies. Tell me sweet little lies*”, while the last one says: “*Tell me lies. Tell me. Tell me lies*” referring to a toxic relationship in which the lover is willing to live in falsehood rather than abandon his partner. The connection between this popular song and the reference to the oppression by white people on black people is not casual: in an interview for the “French Quarter Journal”, Brown explains how this decision came from him feeling mesmerized by this traditional idea in love songs of being in love despite the other person treats us badly, in the same way he is mesmerized by the idea of the relationship that black people have with the American society. He affirms:

It's very difficult to be a citizen in a capitalist system that will never be of use to you or your people on the whole.

What I was doing was thinking of my relationship, and of black people's relationship to America, and how that relationship is like a really bad love relationship. (Jackson 2020)

Another poem in which Brown portrays white power is "Riddle". Here, Brown changes perspective: the voice of the speaker does not belong to the point of view of an African American individual as is directly the white community to speak. The standard white American vision of the world is depicted as fully ignorant, materialist, and destructive; the anaphora of the pronoun "we" denotes the sense of supremacy, an obsessive desire of being situated at the top of everything, a sort of sick urge which leaves no room for anyone else. Violence and suffering provoked to the African American community has for them no value to be respected:

We do not recognize the body  
Of Emmett Till. We do not know  
The boy's name nor the sound  
Of his mother wailing. We have  
Never heard a mother wailing. [...] (Brown 2019: 28)

Emmett Till's body is not part of their memory, and neither is his mother's cry, just like the tears of every black person, important. The whole white society does not even know the reasons behind their actions, what is that pushes them to make decisions and act; the main purpose of their actions seems to rotate around the need of occupying, governing, and controlling:

[...]We see  
A sea so cross it. We see a moon  
So land there. [...] (ibid.)

At the end, this confidence relying on the constant accentuation of what they managed to achieve falls into doubt and insecurity. It seems that all they have conquered, even the moon, prevents them finding their own identity, some values in which to recognize. White people can afford everything they want, exploit it, and then throw it away, but what about their identity? What does it mean to be an American citizen? The

impossibility to take possession of an identity makes the speaker's tone grow paranoid, as we read in the final lines:

[...] Wait. Wait. What are we? What?  
What on Earth are we? What? (ibid.)

Another element to emphasize is that they address themselves as “what” instead of “who”, they do not recognize even themselves as people but as objects without a soul, demonstrating once again the superficiality of the white community.

## CHAPTER III

### **The innovation: the Duplex**

If the meaning of poetry lies in the reflection of the poet's real true self by the means of a formal and linguistic essence, this is exactly what Jericho Brown aimed at, while creating his own poetic form, the Duplex. In this chapter, the reader will be introduced to the analysis of this innovative form, focusing on a first definition of Duplex, followed by the formal and expressive necessities that brought the author to its creation, and finally presenting an example from *The Tradition*. Therefore, in this final chapter it will be possible to prove the reader the result obtained at Brown's maximum point of expressive ability, giving them the possibility to understand his artistic value within the US cultural context.

#### **3.1. An Introduction to the Duplex**

A Duplex is a fourteen-line composition divided into seven stanzas, which combines the form of the sonnet to the form of the ghazal, a romantic composition consisting of syntactically and grammatically complete couplets with an intricate rhyme scheme, where each couplet ends with the same word. Moreover, the Duplex could also remind of the originally Malaysian verse of pantoum, where the lexical evocation between the lines is the central characteristic of the composition. To continue, a particular feature of the Duplex is the repetition, which was inspired by the traditional crown structure: a cycle of sonnets that are linked to each other through the repetition at the beginning of each poem of the last line of the previous one. Furthermore, this composition presents another interesting feature: the stanzas are divided into couplets, as if the poet's intention was to deconstruct the poem, to underline the division and the blank space left. As Jericho Brown writes in his article for "The Telegraph", the Duplex could be defined as a form "with something murdered between each line" (Brown 2020), just as if, through these divisions, he aimed at emphasizing what is non written, and how sufferance can come without making a sound, in the empty moments of our

life. Silence is another invisible but essential feature of the Duplex, which largely constitutes its meaning, as the same Jericho Brown states:

When you're a poetry reader, you sort of begin to understand that there is something that happens at the end of the line break, and the end of the stanza, and in all of the empty space that poems allow (Brown 2016)

This relationship based on a continuous recalling and contrast between one verse and the other emphasizes the inner struggle of the poet towards the possibility to find a permanent balance and stability; the formal structure of the composition mirrors the psyche of the author, revealing and visually representing the division of his subconscious. Moreover, the consistency of the structure could be linked to the recurrence of violent acts in the author's everyday life dimension, portraying it as a constant loop of terror from which it is not possible to escape.

Brown connects the artistic necessity to communicate his inner discomforts to an expressive modality which has the power to make him feel free, which does not imprison him in previously established rules. As he explains during an interview for "The Rumpus":

I feel completely in love with and oppressed by the sonnet. You know, because I'm a poet. I can conjecture about my obsession with the sonnet. I mean, I'm educated in the sonnet. It's been pushed down my throat the entirety of my life. There is something in me that doesn't like that, and doesn't trust that, because I'm a rebellious human being. I need to be a rebellious human being because I'm black and gay in this nation and in this world which has not been good to me or anybody like me. (Brown 2019)

The pression exerted by the traditional form of the sonnet does not allow the author to be consistent towards his individuality but imprisons him instead within a structure of different types of rules that are not part of him. The Duplex becomes the symbol of his rebellion against a higher system to which he does not feel to belong, a way to break the mold of a past tradition for a creation of a brand new one; in addition, the Duplex represents a personal achievement for Jericho Brown: as a poet, for having managed to shape this form, but also as a black, queer individual whose voice has been officially recognized and awarded within the US cultural context.



### 3.2. The Creative Process

It is significant to underline that, unlike what the reader could expect, the creation of this innovative form is not the result of a previously conscious decision, but of a process that brought Brown to dig inside himself and his idea of poetry. In this regard, a significant source is “The Invention”, a brief essay in which the voice of Jericho Brown guides the reader into the exploration of his creative process, a process which led to the writing of great part of the poems of *The Tradition*, focusing in particular on Duplexes. Brown starts his essay with the narration of a dark period of his life, between 2017 and 2018, when he was struck by a severe form of flu. During this period, the fever, aches and pains managed to increase the perception of his body, to build a deeper dialogue with it and understand its signals. At that point, Brown was sure that he did not have much time left, but then his recovery fortunately started; however, this experience was not indifferent to him.

The aches and pains and weight loss and fevers have a lot to do with that panic, yes. But I think what adds to it is consciousness. I became aware that I was surviving these severe pains, and that awareness made it clear that there was a large chance I might not survive. (Brown 2019)

If, on the one hand, this was one of the worst periods of his life, on the other hand this deep pain managed to raise his awareness towards his own corporeality and mortality, a central theme in his poetry that he had never touched concretely before that moment. In particular, this awareness led him to look at himself from a different perspective: as a mortal human being made of flesh and bones. After this experience, Brown re-discovers the gift of being a poet, the gift of the word that can give him the possibility to access immortality. It is at this point that the creative process started: when Brown understood he felt both the mental and physical necessity to write poems, no more time had to be wasted, as he writes:

I all the more wanted to use the time which now felt more precious to sit my ass down somewhere and write the poems of my life. (ibid.)

The very first idea of what would have later become the Duplex form was very vague and ungraspable: all that he had, the continuous thought that had been occupying

his mind for years turned around the idea of a sonnet crown that only included some repeated lines and the traditional ghazal structure which involved the juxtaposition of two of them. However, at some point, this meditation on the construction of the form began to merge with the meditation on himself and his identity as an individual, as he writes:

I was asking myself: What does a sonnet have to do with anybody's content? And if the presumed content of a sonnet is that it's a love poem, how do I—a believer in love—subvert that. What is a Jericho Brown sonnet? Though I may not be, I do feel like a bit of a mutt in the world. I feel like a person who is hard to understand, given our clichés and stereotypes about people. So I wanted a form that in my head was black and queer and Southern. Since I am carrying these truths in this body as one, how do I get a form that is many forms? (ibid.)

Thus, Brown's intention was to achieve a form that could fully reflect his ambiguity as a human being, and that could work as a thread, holding his "truths" together and celebrating them. While working on this project, Brown was aware that the path to get to the final result was still long, but, at the same time, he was fascinated by the fact that this process of creation of a brand-new form started "with the form itself" (ibid.)

We could say that Brown began by physically building his composition: he started printing every line that he had written until that moment, a huge number of scattered verses that he had been putting aside over the years, cutting them into slivers and positioning them in every part of his house. Poetry was literally everywhere, there was no space left, and that was how he came to make the first decision: the new form had to be composed from nine to eleven syllables. Therefore, from a structural point of view, the Duplex resulted to be a hybrid, merging the traditional length of the blank verse together with the ghazal and the crown sonnet with an innovative purpose.

After some experiments, Brown included a feature, which this time had been inspired from the blues tradition: a tonal shift starting from the fourth verse, at which the composition is charged with an ambiguous atmosphere that destabilizes and confounds the reader, giving more personality to the composition; in addition, this effect is intensified by the constant repetition of words, which seems to imprison the reader and make him feel even more asphyxiated from the situation of daily terror lived

by the speaker. In her review for *The New York Times*, Maya Phillips describes the Duplex as a form “that showcases his particular strengths, in linking phrases and images, repeating words in a kind of transactional exchange of distance between the speaker and the reader.” (Phillips 2019)

Once Jericho Brown shaped his new form, he had to give it a name. The repetitions and the couplets that confer a duplicity to the composition made him think about the duplex, a word which refers to a house with two addresses, a single structure split in two; the author was inspired by this image because it reminded him of most of the people living in the US especially those members of minorities, who are split between their real identity and the identity that society imposes them to show. What separates the two zones of a duplex is just a wall, something which takes therefore a symbolic value in Brown’s poetry, where he tries to understand what happens if that wall disappeared.

### 3.3. Duplex, an example

Across the three sections, *The Tradition* presents five Duplexes, of which the last is a cento, as composed of different lines that are part of the previous Duplexes in the collection. The final part of this chapter will be focused on a close reading and analysis of the first Duplex, in order to give the reader the possibility to have a full and complete understanding of this form.

A poem is a gesture toward home.  
It makes dark demands I call my own.

Memory makes demands darker than my own:  
My last love drove a burgundy car.

My first love drove a burgundy car.  
He was fast and awful, tall as my father.

Steadfast and awful, my tall father  
Hit hard as a hailstorm. He’d leave marks.

Light rain hits easy but leaves its own mark  
Like the sound of a mother weeping again.

Like the sound of my mother weeping again,

No sound beating ends where it began.

None of the beaten end up how we began.

A poem is a gesture toward home. (Brown 2019: 18)

As previously anticipated, from a thematic point of view Duplexes generally deal with abuse and the trauma that derives from it, a burden that the author is forced to carry with him in his mind and which cannot be erased from his memory. Besides, as proved by most of the poems of the collection, the abuse is embodied in different male figures: first of all, the father and, later in his life, the speaker's lovers; it seems as the poet has always been emotionally bonded to violent figures, and that, despite his will, he unconsciously seeks the reflection of his father's violent behavior in all his partners. This pattern is emphasized here through the repetition of the word "marks", that represent the physical evidence of abuse both on his body and on his mind: as he suggests at line 13, this experience changed him by provoking him an indelible trauma from which it is impossible to escape. Here, another relevant theme, which is typical of Duplexes: memory. The poet lives in a continuous bustle between the present time and flashbacks from the past, shards of memory that hit his brain like bullets, and that keep coming back to him making "dark demands" (ibid.), repeating themselves and pushing him every time at the beginning of this never-ending loop of terror; again, the repetition works as a mirror of the tormented consciousness of the poet, rhetorically imprisoning the reader, who finds himself, at the end of the poem, at the exact same point from which he started.

The only possibility for the speaker to find some peace is embodied by poetry, as he states in the first verse "a poem is a gesture toward home" (ibid.), something that makes him feel safe and protects him from the threat of memories. However, this statement results ambiguous, as the safety represented by poetry is defined as a "gesture" (ibid.), something that gives him only the impression of being home and supports him emotionally, but that does not exist. From the very beginning, the author reveals to the reader the truth about himself: the lack of possibilities for the achievement of a balance in his life and mind, there is no hope for him to be saved. Furthermore, the relationship between author and poetry takes on the traits of a toxic relationship, foreshadowing the

narration of the experiences of abuse: the poem is personified as someone who “makes dark demands” (ibid.), projecting once again his will of control on the speaker.

In the following three stanzas, verses enter in dialogue with each other through the repetition of words, giving shape to the expression of the different violent experiences that the author lived; starting with his last partner (line 4), then followed by his first (line 5), we finally come to encounter the father (line 6), the man who gave him life, but, at the same time, someone who is recognized as the origin of his trauma. Most of these verses end with a dot, short and simple statements that the speaker quietly narrates but that create a huge contrast with the permanent and devastating effects caused by trauma. The flashbacks, the shards again damage the poet’s brain, making his memories become more and more blurred: these three figures cannot be distinguished by the reader, who binds together through elements as the “burgundy car” (line 4-5) and being “awful” (line 6-7), building one, great image of horror. Furthermore, the natural image of the hailstorm manages to give the reader a more vivid image of the father hitting the son, making him perceive the length and the repeated violence; in addition, the poet places emphasis on this element through the use of a *caesura* that breaks the flow of the poem previously built on enjambments.

Brown keeps water as an element of continuity to bind the first stanzas to the second part of the composition. Here, the poet explores the impacts of abuse: water is not something which is randomly included, but a symbol, revealing how the mechanism of how trauma works: as water slowly erodes even the highest of the mountains, also the trauma, day by day, eats through the brain of the person who lived it, and shaping his mind to unconsciously come back to it again and again; as Cathy Carut explains in her masterful *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*:

The pathology [of trauma] cannot be defined either by the event itself [...], nor it can it be defined in terms of a *distortion* of the event, achieving its haunting power as a result of distorting personal significances attached to it. The pathology consists, rather, solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. (Carut 1995: 4)

The hailstorm turns then into a “light rain” (line 9) that, even if moderately, constantly falls down the speaker, representing moments of everyday life; the

continuous sound of rain is compared to the sound of his mother's cry, with tears digging her face to finally fall on the floor.

In the final stanza, Brown manages to summarize his reflection on the effects provoked on him by abuse, by stating "none of the beaten end up how we began" (line 12); here, he admits that what he experienced changed him permanently and that memories of the horror cannot be deleted. However, a positive side can be identified: the poet in fact addresses to a "we", meaning that there is a possibility to recover from the trauma, which has to be found in the support of people, of a community. It can be supposed that Brown is talking as a poet to his readers, people who are willing to welcome him and listen to him; further, another positive aspect this violence is his development towards a higher sensibility, which managed to make him see reality from a different perspective and eventually to become a poet. Poetry is a space where he is allowed to express himself, to show his vulnerability and feel free, as repeated in the final line "poetry is a gesture toward home" (line 14).

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of Jericho Brown's literary works *Please*, *The New Testament* and *The Tradition*, allows to recognize how the author's poetics has evolved, and how his poems cope with the principal themes that have been highlighted in the thesis. Having examined this, it is therefore possible to affirm that Brown is a poet of the body, of its vulnerability, but at the same time a poet who sheds light on the strength that the body can find to react against injustices caused by society; his poems do not only address minorities, but the individuals as human beings. As a contemporary poet, Brown establishes himself as spokesperson for all people who feel marginalized, he is the voice of a victim: victim of being a black, queer citizen of a country which is still tied to a culture of hate, but also a victim of abuse, who carries the wounds of trauma. In this regard, the Duplex is a fundamental element in the study of his poetics, representing his greatest achievement as it contains in one, single, structure all the truths that belong to him as a human being and as a poet, establishing a connection between past and present related to his personal memories, but also to the merging of traditional and innovative poetic features.

To conclude, the research conducted on Jericho Brown proves that poetry maintains a great meaning even today, in a contemporary era in which the value of language has been lost and forgotten, demonstrating how the figure of the poet manages to charge words with spirit and power, and that his role is still incisive, necessary and timeless.

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## SUMMARY IN ITALIAN

Questa tesi si focalizza sul poeta americano contemporaneo Jericho Brown, proponendosi di fornire un'analisi della sua poetica tramite l'approfondimento delle tre collezioni, *Please* (New Issues, 2008), *The New Testament* (Copper Canyon 2014), e *The Tradition* (Copper Canyon 2019); a quest'ultima, in particolare, verrà riservata maggiore attenzione, concentrandosi soprattutto sulle principali tematiche e sulle innovazioni formali introdotte nella forma originale del Duplex. La ricerca mira, dunque, a introdurre il lettore all'immaginario e allo stile che fanno parte della produzione di Brown, fornendo gli strumenti per una comprensione la più chiara e completa possibile. Nello specifico, la scelta di Jericho Brown deriva dalla volontà di voler dimostrare come, anche in età contemporanea, la poesia e il ruolo del poeta si rivelino ancora fondamentali nel loro approccio di smascheramento della realtà e nel loro atto di denuncia.

Il primo capitolo presenta, nella prima parte, una breve introduzione alla biografia dell'autore, soffermandosi sulle figure e sugli avvenimenti più significativi che hanno segnato le diverse tappe della sua vita, dei quali sarà possibile ritrovarne l'eco tra i versi delle sue liriche: ad esempio, come l'essere cresciuto da genitori con una solida fede in Dio abbia avuto delle ripercussioni sul futuro rapporto di Brown con la sua sessualità, e di come gli abusi da parte del padre continuino a perseguire la sua mente. Gran parte delle informazioni fornite si basa su interviste rilasciate dall'autore, delle quali vengono riportate alcune citazioni in modo tale da permettere al lettore di entrare direttamente a contatto con la voce di Brown. Proseguendo, la seconda sezione del capitolo si focalizza nella presentazione delle prime due collezioni poetiche, mettendo in evidenza le principali tematiche, come razza, sessualità e abuso, fornendo degli esempi che possano inoltre chiarire al lettore gli aspetti più rappresentativi, come il rapporto con la musica in *Please*, e con la religione in *The New Testament*.

Il secondo capitolo è interamente dedicato alla terza e ultima collezione intitolata *The Tradition*, pubblicata nel 2019 che valse all'autore la vittoria del Premio Pulitzer

nell'anno seguente. La particolare attenzione riservata a quest'opera deriva dal fatto che essa può essere definita un'opera rappresentativa della poetica di Brown, in cui l'autore instaura un dialogo aperto con il lettore, mettendosi a nudo come individuo, ma allo stesso tempo facendosi portavoce della denuncia contro le ingiustizie inflitte dalla società statunitense, soprattutto nei confronti delle minoranze. A questo proposito, la prima parte del capitolo si focalizza sul significato del concetto di tradizione del poeta, che fa riferimento non solo a una cultura passata da non dimenticare, ma anche, e soprattutto, tradizione intesa come insieme di ideologie, come una cultura della violenza e dell'intolleranza nei confronti della diversità che ha radici antiche nella società statunitense, ma che nonostante tutto sopravvive tuttora. Nelle sue liriche Brown riflette come cittadino, come uomo di colore e queer, ma anche come essere umano al quale non è permesso esprimere la propria identità; il tema della vulnerabilità presente nelle opere precedenti riveste nuovamente un ruolo centrale come tratto umano da celebrare, normalizzare ma non da nascondere. Le varie sezioni del capitolo analizzano più nel dettaglio i temi cardine della collezione, inserendoli nel contesto socio-culturale statunitense tramite il confronto con le considerazioni di alcuni studiosi come Robert K. Martin, Michael J. Murphy e Megan E. Springate, proponendo l'analisi delle poesie considerate più rappresentative in merito.

Infine, l'ultimo capitolo si focalizza nello specifico sulla forma poetica originale partorita dal genio di Brown chiamata Duplex, e di come essa possa essere definita una forma ibrida che unisce elementi della tradizione poetica passata, come il ghazal e il sonetto, a tecniche formali ed espressive del tutto innovative. Essendo il Duplex profondamente legato all'esperienze di abuso vissute direttamente dal poeta, nella prima parte del capitolo il lettore viene introdotto al processo creativo che ha portato alla nascita di questa forma, un processo di auto-analisi delle conseguenze che il trauma della violenza ha provocato in lui, nella sua identità, e di come esse lo perseguitino nella vita quotidiana; Brown riesce a fondere tutte queste verità e a farle riflettere in una sola, unica forma. La collezione contiene cinque diversi Duplex, dei quali un Duplex cento, che riprende e unisce i versi dei quattro precedenti; tra questi, per rendere chiaro questo tipo di composizione, la parte finale del capitolo presenta l'analisi del primo Duplex che appare nella collezione.

Per concludere, la ricerca condotta su Jericho Brown non solo mira a dimostrare quanto la poesia risulti ancora fondamentale come atto di denuncia nei confronti delle ingiustizie, ma come allo stesso modo si riveli necessaria nella celebrazione delle fragilità e debolezze dell'essere umano, tratti che sembrano voler essere nascosti e stigmatizzati dalla società contemporanea.

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