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Connection and Disconnection: The Aporia of Belonging in Jericho Brown's *The Tradition*

Khaled Besbes

Department of Foreign Languages, The University of Sharjah, Sharjah, UAE
Email: khbesbes@sharjah.ac.ae

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Abstract

This paper addresses the themes of connection and disconnection in Jericho Brown's poetry, with a special emphasis on the aporia of belonging. Brown's poems reflect a dialectic of emotions oscillating between the profound sense of connection to origins and the excruciating pain of separation, particularly in association with race and sexual identity. The paper explores how Brown's poetry expresses a paradoxical sense of belonging, in which case home, family, and community are at once sources of consolation and spaces of alienation. Using close textual analysis as a critical method, this paper seeks to demonstrate how Brown poeticizes the dichotomy of union and separation in selected poems from *The Tradition*, while foregrounding the aporia of belonging in its personal and sociohistorical dimensions. It also argues that Brown's resourceful use of tailored poetic forms, including the *duplex*, furnishes a poetic structure through which identity and self-worth, endurance and resilience, love and intimacy, family relationships, as well as faith and religion are subtly expressed.

Keywords

Jericho Brown, *The Tradition*, Aporia, Belonging, Close Reading

1. Introduction

The concept of belonging has always been a leitmotif in world literature, particularly in the writings of authors concerned with issues of loyalty, ethnicity, and gender identity, confirming the primordial human need for connection, understanding, and acceptance. It is also a pervasive theme in the works of Jericho Brown, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 2023. In modern and contemporary African American literature, the question of belonging and its aporia (s) have traversed the works of poetry, fiction, and drama by African American writers in various ways and to varying degrees of expression. The oscillation between recogniz-

ing and denying the African American heritage, celebrating the virtues of the past and admitting the ills or contradictions of the present, as well as glorifying blackness and admitting its weaknesses have generated several aspects and layers of textual tensions in African American literature. Acute and high-pitched as they are, these tensions often amount to a state or states of aporia (from ancient Greek ἄπορία), which means, in philosophical description, getting trapped in an impasse or being at loss as to how to proceed. Emily Frisella (2017) defines aporia as a figurative device where a speaker expresses pretended uncertainty or doubt' about something. She also gives examples of real aporia and philosophical aporia. Jacques Derrida (1993) defines aporia as a logical impasse or contradiction within a text that cannot be resolved, while Paul De Man (1986) argues that texts tend to include irreconcilable strains, incongruities, and aporias that render meaning undecidable. Certainly, we cannot survey all definitions of "aporia" by philosophers and literary critics, but we can at least note that they all converge on the original meaning of the Greek word, which indicates impasse, loss, and the near impossibility of resolution. It has to be stated, however, that unlike philosophical aporia, which denotes total intellectual impasse or absolute insolubility, literary aporia stands for the intricacy of assigning a final or conclusive denotation to a given word due to the freeplay of signification, and in Brown's poetry, uncertainty about the true meaning of "belonging" is the very condition that yields aporia.

In the poetry of Jericho Brown, the aporia of belonging and its complex disarrays, including the feeling of loss and the difficulty of reconciling opposites in relation to oneself and one's identity, have informed much of his early and later poetry published in his collection *The Tradition* (Brown, 2019). Although Brown previously published two other collections, namely *Please* (Brown, 2008) and *The New Testament* (Brown, 2014), it was *The Tradition* that earned him the Pulitzer Prize in 2020. Unlike the previous collections, which were more concerned with personal and religious issues, *The Tradition* became a landmark in the poet's career and in the whole corpus of African American Poetry, as it meticulously engaged with the universal leitmotifs, such as the theme of identity, in the context of shifting and conflicting values that marked the American society in the first two decades of the third millennium. This is the reason why the emphasis in this article is almost exclusively placed on *The Tradition*. Indeed, many of Brown's poems in this collection typify his refined handling of the predicament of belonging and the discrepancies associated with it in relation to race, identity, community, intimacy, love, and self-knowledge, reflecting rich personal and collective experiences in a social environment that is manifestly replete with inconsistencies. These poems include: "Crossing" "As a Human Being", "Ganymede", "Bullet Points", "The Tradition", "Hero", "Fore Day in the Morning", "Turn You Over", "On My Fury", "Dark" "Duplex", "Another Elegy", and "Nativity". They are specifically relevant to the present discussion as they distinctively show how the poet explores the personal, cultural, and sociopolitical dimensions of identity more profoundly than in other lyrics in the same collection. The selected poems, as shall be explained in

this article, also include hints at the relentless struggle of African American writers to contain the unsettling perils of disconnection, including exclusion, segregation, prejudice, and marginalization, while seeking refuge in the heartening virtues of familial, societal, and cultural connection, including closeness, intimacy, shared feeling, shared identification, and belonging to a rich sociocultural heritage, at large. By adopting Close Reading as an analytical strategy that is not strictly Formalist, we shall place special emphasis on the dichotomy of connection and disconnection in these poems, with particular focus on their lexical, syntactic, phonological, structural, and rhetorical properties, while discussing the themes they address, including, as we stated above, self-worth, endurance and resilience, love and intimacy, family relationships, as well as faith and religion. Close inspection of the formal and thematic dimensions of the selected poems will eventually help us understand the complex psychological and social landscapes that mark Brown's exploration of the notion of belonging, its implications, and the challenges it poses for him and the African American community as a whole.

2. Importance of the Discussion

Discussing the aporia of belonging in relation to connection and disconnection in selected poems of Jericho Brown is significant in many ways. First, the term "aporia" was formerly used by deconstructionists like Derrida to denote textual indeterminacy and the impossibility of assigning definite and conclusive meanings to words. However, the present study uses the term aporia to capture the theme of ontological loss and the near impossibility of overcoming the contradictions and inconsistencies that have often informed Brown's poems. Second, the study will illuminate several distinctive aspects that mark his lyrical works, including the tensions, intricacies, and uncertainties around the themes we have just outlined. Brown's poems reflect intense inner struggles due to the stumping experience of seeking connection while encountering moral and social hurdles that can only perpetuate disconnection, particularly as they relate to sexual identity, race, cultural legacy, and historically inherited traumas. Third, given the limited number of critical studies on a contemporary poet who rose to prominence only in the first two decades of the third millennium, this study will not only enrich new readers' engagement with Jericho Brown's poetics, but also help them understand his unique way of handling the complex interactions of race, identity, family, sexuality, trauma, and resilience in his works. Finally, this paper will hopefully help readers grasp and appreciate Brown's inventive use of the "duplex" (a combination of ghazal, sonnet, and blues) as well as his allusions to African traditions, other African American poets, and religious images in depicting the complexity of non-heteronormative black identity.

3. Review of the Literature

Recent years have seen a growing corpus of review essays and articles on Jericho

Brown, particularly in the first and second decades of the current millennium. A brief survey of the literature shows that most reviewers and commentators agree on the innovative contribution of Brown to contemporary American literature in tackling the intersecting themes of race, identity, belonging, sexuality, trauma, and resilience. It also shows that the reviewers of Brown's collection "*The Tradition*", mostly writers of magazine articles and interviews, share a common emphasis on Brown's engagement with the theme of love or intimacy in many of his early and later poems. Bruno Ríos, for instance, explains that "Brown makes *The Tradition* not only a pertinent but a necessary work of art, exploring a politics of intimacy" (Ríos, 2019, p. 278). Ríos also considers that the theme of intimacy in Brown's poem is a kind of a confession of emotions that is made public and that can apply to many individuals sharing a comparable experience. Similarly, in an article entitled "The Architecture of Love in the Poetic Thinking of James Baldwin and Jericho Brown" (2023), Joanna Mąkowska contends that the theme of love in the works of these two poets is a mixture of feeling and knowledge that is rooted in bodily intensity and infused with sociohistorical and political meanings (Mąkowska, 2023). She also notes that no matter how subjective it is, Brown's love poetics cannot be dissociated from the critique of the historical and present racial politics of America. Regarding the critique of racial politics and the orthodoxies backing it, Simeon Kronenberg (2015) argues that Jericho Brown, like many of his non-heteronormative black fellow poets, engages with many themes that challenge the dominant orthodoxies in the American society, namely those related to love, sexuality, identity, and belonging. Kronenberg equally emphasizes that Brown's poetry, as in the works of other non-heteronormative black writers, questions these orthodoxies and the way they are perpetuated in a heterosexist environment (Kronenberg, 2015). Similar reflections on love and sexuality in Brown's poetry are found in Jordan Charlton (2019) who asserts that the poet has a history of underscoring the intimate and erotic facets of private life in a context that celebrates blackness, masculinity, and their misfortunate relationship with offense and rejection. Charlton adds that Brown considers the intimate and erotic important spaces for aesthetic expression.

In addition to the themes of intimacy and love, the theme of resistance to white American hegemony and the stereotyping of black Americans has been a focal point for several reviewers and critics who identified Brown's poetry as a site of resistance and antiracist confrontation. Ramli (2021) studied three poems by Jericho, namely "*The Tradition*", "At the End of Hell", and "Langstone Blue" and found out that the themes of racial discrimination, dehumanization, humiliation, along with their impact on the psychology of black people largely inform the three poems (Ramli, 2021). Wright (2022) also argues that Brown's sonnet-sampling not only address the pains resulting from racial discrimination and traumatic experiences, but also the themes of Black joy and romantic love that coexist with such pains. Similarly, Tomás Miriti Pacheco (2023) states that Brown's creative compression of the sonnet crown as a response to the racial, sexual, and domestic abuse his poems are replete with is an outstanding experiment in integrating blues

poetry while challenging the role of race in the traditional sonnet crown form.

Despite the depth and intellectual vigor of the reviewed literature in terms of exploration of the above-mentioned themes, the study of the impasse or aporia of belonging has scarcely been a focal line of argument in the surveyed works. It is precisely this gap that the present paper seeks to fill.

4. Methodology

This study uses close reading as its principal methodological approach to investigate the dialectic of connection and disconnection in Jericho Brown's poetry that seems to travel like a conducting wire in many of his early and later poems. As a tool of literary analysis, close reading allows for a thorough and focused understanding of the literary text through close inspection of its linguistic, structural, and rhetorical properties. Close Reading is often loosely defined as the detailed and attentive examination or analysis of a written work with particular emphasis on its linguistic and formal properties. As a method of literary analysis, close reading was fundamental to the reading strategies of twentieth-century critics like I. A. Richards and William Empson, as well as the American New Critics John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and W. K. Wimsatt (Newton, 1997). But unlike the tendency of these critics to focus exclusively on the formal properties of poetry, this paper will use close reading as a strategy that pays close attention to form in relation to content, a strategy that recognizes the inseparability of the formal properties of Brown's poems from the psychological and sociohistorical dimensions that inform them. Close reading is utilized here to demonstrate how Brown's poetry reveals the intricacies of the questions of identity, love, belonging, and resistance against the backdrop of racial and social displacement. As stated above, the paper will explore selected poems from *The Tradition*, with a view to demonstrating how the poet expresses the dichotomy of connection and disconnection in relation to the Black American experience and the complex interaction of race, gender, sexuality, love, culture, and history. Equal emphasis will be placed on poetic diction, imagery, rhetorical maneuvers, and structural properties, with special attention to the Duplex form Brown invented to express the tensions of struggling between the dualities of past and present, self and other, love and hatred, inclusion and exclusion, as well as freedom and confinement involved in his disconcerting quest for belonging. As it explores the formal and stylistic properties of Brown's poems, this discussion will demonstrate how these poems reflect a distressed subjectivity that is desperately searching for true love and belonging in an environment that is plagued with bias, marginalization, violence, and contradictions. It will also demonstrate that this aporetic quest for belonging is all the more perplexing and mystifying when situated within the historical context of the rejection of otherness *as difference*.

5. Analysis and Discussion

Jericho Brown's poetic oeuvres abound in the complex and unsettling exploration

of identity, a thematic concern that brings him in line with a prolific tradition of African American voices. But unlike many Black American writers, whose works mostly address the historical aspects of belonging in connection with race, and racial prejudice, Brown drives the debate even further by emphasizing the elements of sexuality, love, vulnerability, and the body in markedly inventive ways. Brown skillfully explores the intricate layers and coatings of identity in association with the themes of race, love, sexuality, religion, and familial bonds. His poems typically engage with the idea of belonging to oneself, to the black American community, and to large sections of the American society that would not truthfully embrace the African American identity. This idea and its textual as well as thematic resonances will be analyzed through close reading of the relevant poems from *The Tradition*.

To begin with, identity and self-worth is, beyond any doubt, a pivotal topic for a profound understanding and appreciation of Brown's works. Many poems in the above collection invoke the internal struggle of the poet for self-acceptance as a queer black man in an environment that does not easily accept alternative sexualities. They explicitly and implicitly replicate the tension between his identity and the way it is viewed by people of his community, including his family, which explains the near impossibility of coming to terms with belonging in contexts where an integral part of individual identity is rejected or marginalized, to say the least. In an interview with Lewis Howes, a *New York Times* author, Jericho Brown relates the brief story about changing his name, which was once Nelson Demery III. In response to Howes's comment that Brown changed his name to fully love himself and follow his dreams, the latter said that changing his name was an opportunity to fully reinvent himself and that he wanted one hundred percent transformation to be able to become what he really is and aspires to be. But the changing of his name was just the beginning of his aporetic journey in search of belonging and self-worth, a journey that is overwhelmed with uncertainty and suffering.

In a poem, entitled "Crossing", Jericho Brown addresses the theme of self-worth using the metaphor of the journey (crossing), in so complex and inventive a manner. He tactfully associates self-worth with belonging, by showing that one can embrace one's true self and attain self-worth if one can be "different" in crossing far beyond boundaries. The speaker uses deontic modalities, such as "walk it early" and "walk it back", urging the interlocutor to start the journey to and back from work, which is the daily routine and survival mechanism of black Americans. He uses the plural deictic "we" to emphasize collectivity and connection. However, as the poem progresses, the speaker gradually dissociates himself from constricting bonds of collectivity and announces disconnection as *difference* by using the first-person singular "I", as in the following lines:

> I'm different. I've figured and counted. I'm not crossing To cross back. I'm set
> On something vast. It reaches
> Long as the sea. I'm more than a conqueror, bigger Than bravery. I don't

march. I'm the one who leaps.

The speaker, who is clearly identified as the poet, emphasizes disconnection because he thinks that his journey or quest is different from those of others: he will not "cross back" as people routinely do; he will not "march", he is "the one who leaps"; and his journey "reaches long as the sea". The poet uses the evocative metaphor of "crossing", conventionally suggesting change and transcendence, to stress the long journey to self-assertion and the sense of self-worth it brings with it. Although the speaker claims that he knows his identity as a "different" individual, and although he claims unmatched "bravery", his exaggerated challenging tone hides the vulnerability, tension, and loss he grapples with. The reader who is acquainted with the poet's experiences of marginalization and rejection owing to his racial and sexual belonging will no doubt capture the underlying weakness that such an exaggerated tone puts forward. As in many other poems by Brown, the struggle to find acceptance and belonging in a world that is hostile to the African American other seems to be a long-drawn, persistent, and markedly aporetic dilemma. "Crossing" equally shows how complex the quest for self-understanding and identity can be in defiance of societal expectations and biases.

In another poem entitled "As a Human Being" from *The Tradition*, Brown ends his lyric with a very significant reflection on self-understanding and freedom:

No matter how sore the injury
Has left you, you sit understanding Yourself as a human being finally
Free now that nobody's got to love you.

The lines "No matter how sore the injury/Has left you" clearly invoke the traumatic experiences the poet has undergone in search for self-worth and freedom from the dependence on other people's love. The words "injury" and "finally" suggest that the journey is long and excruciating, and that the outcome is the realization that self-worth is a stage that is attained after protracted exertion and pain, particularly the pain caused by discrimination, social rejection, or perhaps failed love. Besides, the line "free now that nobody's got to love you" suggests that the poet has finally become free by "understanding" that being "human" does not necessarily require external love, and that self-love or self-worth is enough to grant the individual the attribute of "humanness". We also notice that the accurate choice of words, namely the expression "sit understanding" is in tune with the theme of reflection on the intricacy of identity that runs like an undercurrent beneath the four lines, as "sitting" to understand in this context implies loss or aporia and the desire to figure out what it is to be oneself. Similarly, in a poem entitled "Ganymede", explicitly alluding to the Greek myth, the notions of self-affirmation and self-understanding are obliquely articulated through a nexus of concurrent references to the themes of desire, sexuality, submission, and vulnerability. The poet uses rhetorical devices, specifically allusion and metaphor, not only to add an aesthetic touch to the text, but also to convey the pivotal idea that self-understanding is possible through awareness of one's desires, strengths, and weaknesses.

However, determining one's real identity is not always certain, particularly for an individual whose lineage and sexual orientation have pushed him into the margin. Clearly, the myth of Ganymede is used as a rhetorical framework, or better still a curtain behind which the poet stands portraying and negotiating his own experiences of masculinity, desire, intimacy, submission, and vulnerability. In the last three lines of the poem, the speaker fuses individual self-understanding with collective awareness of communal proneness as a result of reification through the use of the plural deixis "us" and "we": "No one has to convince us/The people of my country believe/We can't be hurt if we can be bought". The speaker ironically criticizes submission to the dehumanizing practices of capitalism, as "people of [his] country" mistakenly believe that being bought and sold as utilities or commodities might shield them from the risk of being economically worthless. The speaker also mockingly describes "the master" who "comes for our children" as a rotten creature smelling "Like the men who own stables". However, despite the criticism addressed to those in power and the belief in the impossibility of being "hurt" when commodified, the speaker delivers an explicit message that there will always be a potential of resistance/resilience "if" [being] "bought" entails survival, a recurrent theme in Brown that shall be dealt with in the following section.

At the very heart of the aporia of belonging and the struggle for self-worth is the theme of endurance and resilience. In several poems from *The Tradition*, Jericho Brown expresses the seminal idea that struggle against, and defiance of exclusion together enable an enduring value, not so much by embracing the inevitability of struggle itself as by demonstrating that in every struggle, there is the potential of endurance and "difference". The poetic personae in these poems are given both subjective and intersubjective articulations. Sometimes the speaker is identified as the poet himself, as in "Men like me", and sometimes as a spokesman for the African American community, as in "me and my brothers". Starting with the poem's title "The Tradition" certainly provides a relevant line of discussion. "The Tradition" is one of the poems Jericho Brown chose to use as a title for the collection. The term "tradition" is undoubtedly a comprehensive term and is highly evocative of history and culture. In the context of Brown's poetry, tradition recalls the long history and persistent cycles of systematic violence against black people, be they in the former colonies of Africa or on the American territories. The poem refers to tradition not only as a cultural inheritance, but also as a legacy of suffering and resilience, an expression of the traumatic experiences the blacks have suffered at the hands of racist white people and the quest for survival. The opening of the poem with the reference to the three flowers "Aster. Nasturtium. Delphinium" is highly proleptic. It anticipates the major theme that governs the whole poem, particularly the theme of resilience. These three flowers are perennials, which means that they do not die off after one season and that they are as enduring as the people of the speaker's community, referred to as "My brothers". Immediately after mentioning these flowers, the poetic persona explains how "philosophers", the perpetuators, or teachers of racist ideology, have always tried to ma-

nipulate black people, both in the past and the present, to make them believe that they are born with "dirt" and so they are inferior:

> *Aster. Nasturtium. Delphinium*. We thought Fingers in dirt meant it was our dirt, learning Names in heat, in elements classical.
> Philosophers said could change us. *Star Gazer*.

The use of flower symbolism, mainly the "*Aster*" flower, which stands for faith and wisdom, as well as the "*Star Gazer*" which stands for hope and persistence clearly adds poignancy to the poem's diction by emphasizing the values of hope and endurance despite the systematic violence, the exclusion, and the historical trauma the African American community was/is subjected to. The allusion to the three victims of racial violence, John Crawford, Eric Garner, and Mike Brown, is very significant in the sense that it immortalizes them as symbols of resistance and dignity. Here, it should be noted that the typographic choices of the poet splendidly serve the themes of immortalization and endurance. Instead of using commas to separate the names of the victims, the poet uses dots, which allow longer pauses for reflection and remembrance. Besides, the use of italics is meant for emphasis, emphasis means insistence, and insistence is a quintessential form of resilience. It should also be noted that resilience and the aporia of belonging are tightly correlated. The unresolved status of belonging, as a result of marginalization and exclusion, is the very condition that makes resilience not only inevitable, but also necessary for self-affirmation and self-worth. On the other hand, the resilient struggle for belonging is so complex that it often involves contradictory or ambivalent feelings, which, in turn, deepen the aporia of identity further. Besides, the paradox of desiring to be "included" (being the same), and insisting on "difference", as stated in the poem "Crossing", will keep the quest for belonging unresolved. The complexity of finding a conclusive solution to identity is ubiquitous in Brown's poetry, and it will likely continue to be.

Another poem where Jericho Brown addresses the theme of endurance and resilience is "Bullet Points". In this free-verse poem, Brown explores the theme of violence against black communities, with a special focus on the necessity of struggle and endurance to thrive in the face of adversity. "Bullet Points" exposes the current practices of police brutality against Black Americans and alludes to the consequent social movements that seek to resist and unmask these practices. It also recalls the past events of slavery and their traumatizing impact on the Black psyche and how such events are being recycled or replicated in present-day racist offenses. A close reading of the poem shows that its formal characteristics are in perfect consonance with its themes, once more putting form in the service of content. The use of the plural form in the poem's title "Bullet Points" suggests the repeated/recycled acts of violence that have historically "punctuated" the lives of black people throughout the years or centuries. The language is predominantly conversational and the images the poet uses are familiar to the average reader, which gives the poem's content realistic attributes that allow for identification and

responsiveness on the part of its recipients. Besides, the repeated use of enjambment accentuates the sound and language flow rhythms in a way that beautifully matches the rising tension generated by the evocation of the brutal moments of normalized violence against black victims. The instances of caesura are also in perfect tune with the speaker's expressed desire to engage the reader's empathy. They are absorbing pauses that allow for reflection, meditation, and remembrance, to commemorate the lost souls. Moreover, the irregular and sudden occurrences of pauses mimic the unpredictable ways traumatizing assaults can afflict black people's lives, leaving persistent impacts. To this are added the series of insistent negations in the first five lines of the poem:

> 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 trash bag, and if I do,
> I promise you, I will not do it

The speaker promises that he will not kill himself 'In a 'police car' or 'in jail', because death in custody is often a planned murder rather than a suicidal act". The speaker also uses assertive and commissive language to express his beliefs unswervingly to the interlocutor: "… I promise if you hear/Of me dead anywhere near/A cop, then that cop killed me", proclaiming his condemnation of the corrupted police officers. As the poem gradually comes to a close, the reprimanding language culminates in an outright declaration of resilience and glorification of the surviving black "body" despite the traumatizing violence:

> A cop, then that cop killed me. He took Me from us and left my body, which
> is, No matter what we've been taught, Greater than the settlement

The poem ends with the lines "And more beautiful than the new bullet /Fished from the folds of my brain", suggesting that the assault will always resume, the bullet list will never end, and racist America will continue to abuse and use black bodies for its survival (this is also expressed in the last line of the poem "Hero": "Black as a hero returning from war to a country that/banked on his death"). The metaphorical expression "the folds of my brain" signifies the complexity of thinking about and figuring out the reason behind offending black people though they are American citizens. Despite the sense of resilience and adaptation to pain pervading the last lines, the poem does not solve the riddle of the true identity of African Americans: are they half-citizens? Are they more African than American? Are they excluded and aggressed because of their belonging? Neither in this poem, nor in any other poem in *The Tradition* do Brown's poetic personae give conclusive answers. It seems that the aporia of belonging will continue to infuse Brown's poetry indefinitely.

In this context, it is worth noting that in several poems from the above-mentioned collection, Brown's grieved and disconnected personae seem to be looking for a connective space where pain is attenuated and acceptance offsets exclusion: it is the space of love and intimacy. Quite prevalent as it is, the word "love" is

omnipresent in Brown's poetry. But the love experiences portrayed in many of the poet's works are never quite heartening: they are mixed with a profound sense of loss, ambivalence, and uncertainty. Love and intimacy are intertwined concepts in Brown's lyrics, and they represent a governing theme in many of his early, middle, and later poems. But as with self-worth and resilience, the experiences of love and intimacy are scarcely devoid of the insistent question of belonging. This is precisely what the following section will address.

It must be stated from the outset that the theme of love in Jericho Brown's *The Tradition* is imbued with complexities. It is intricately bound up with belonging, blackness, sexuality, longing, vulnerability, and distress. In a poem entitled "I know what I Love", the speaker presents love as a complex, evasive, and unpredictable phenomenon that has a logic of its own: "Sometimes what I love/Shows up at three" and sometimes "what I love just/Doesn't show up at all". He also uses color symbolism, namely the green color, to emphasize the deceitful nature of love: "It comes from the earth/It is green with deceit". But despite the unpredictability of love, the speaker claims that he has certain control or autonomy over it, suggesting that whether it comes or goes, he [know]s what he loves, as literally expressed in the title. However, as often conveyed in Brown's poetry, love, sexuality, belonging, and societal pressure cannot be awkwardly dissociated, particularly in the context of marginalized black and queer identities. As we closely read Brown's works in *The Tradition* and other collections, we readily notice the pervasiveness of the theme of love, which can roughly be categorized into three types: self-love, versatile love, and love associated with sexuality. Regarding the first category, we have indicated earlier that Brown's speakers are relentlessly in search for self-affirmation, which leads to self-worth when fulfilled. But self-worth in Brown's poetry is often inextricably bound up with self-love, a concept that runs like a leitmotif in many of his poems. Although he does not say explicitly "I love myself", in several interviews with journalists and writers, Brown admits that he loves what *he is* (emphasis added). Indeed, many poems in *The Tradition* relate to love in one way or another (Jackson, 2020).

The second type of love which I termed "versatile love" is quite prevalent in the collection: it includes the love of God, parents, grandparents, friends, common people, blackness, and African American culture. Perhaps, the most remarkable among these is the love of the mother, the love of blackness, and the love of God. In an interview with Honorée Fanonne Jeffers (2019), Jericho Brown clearly asserted what he liked most about his collection: "one of the things I love most about this new book [*The Tradition*] is that my mama takes center stage in the first section". About his favorite line in the book, he chose the one saying: "I love my mother. I love black women" (Fanonne Jeffers, 2019). Brown's relationship with his mother is very special, and his love for her blackness is incredible. On including her in his collection, brown said to Jeffers that he was pleased to have managed to include her in poems like "As a Human Being", "Hero", "Fore Day in the Morning" and other poems. The poems where Brown expresses his love for blackness

are also numerous in this collection. In "Monotheism", for instance, the speaker equates the love of blackness with religion: "Some people need religion. Me?/I've got my long black hair. I twist'/The roots and braid it tight…" In a poem entitled "Dark", the last two lines distinctly resonate with the love of blackness: "Just as cracked. Everyone you love is/As dark, or at least as black". Also, the celebration of blackness in "Hero" is a prevalent theme in the poem, as confirmed in the lines: "…Gratitude is black—/Black as a hero returning from war to a country that banked on his death/Thank God. It can't get much darker than that".

The third type of love and the most problematic or challenging, so to speak, is love associated with sexuality and non-heteronormative black identity. Many of Brown's poems in *The Tradition* reflect a poet who is torn between different sensations and attitudes regarding queer love, sexuality, and societal expectations. These sensations and attitudes show how vulnerable he often feels due to his choice to be a queer black man. In many of his interviews and poems, Brown emphasizes his self-worth and expresses his conviction that he has made the right choice despite its being at odds with societal and moral expectations. But he also expresses the fear of losing his identity as a result of betraying those expectations. In an interview with Jona Colson (2020), Brown talks about how queer black men in America, including him, are anxious about being rejected due their belonging to this category of African Americans. "Their identity", he says, "is wrapped up in sexuality, and they don't want their identity to collapse because of desire". Love associated with sexuality in Brown's poetry is entrenched in dichotomies: it is challenging and cautious, explicit and implicit, romantic and erotic, decisive and ambivalent, as well as resilient and vulnerable, as intimated in poems like "Turn You Over", "On My Fury", "Dark", and others.

It is worth noting, too, that the poet's vulnerability is attributed to many reasons. Some are familial, including his father's rejection of his sexual orientation and his career as a poet. Some are personal, such as his failed love affairs and the disillusionment they bring about. Others are historical and societal, such as the marginalization of African Americans and the exclusion of queer black men. To mitigate his fears and lessen the stress they cause, Brown resorts to sublimation, in psychoanalytic terms, to turn vulnerability into strength, by writing poetry and defending the same-gender sexuality. In many of his lyrical works, as in the above-mentioned poems, Brown presents queer sexuality as a form of self-affirmation and overmastering of the idea of exclusion. He considers love and intimacy as a form of resilience, survival, and challenge to a society that rejects queer sexuality. Therefore, we encounter frequent references to the body, frequent references to intimate love that amounts to eroticism, and frequent allusions to violence, particularly in relation to the black body. Brown's poetry is a locus where love, intimacy, desire, sexuality, violence, strength, and vulnerability connect and disconnect unpredictably with no explanation, except for the recurrent instances of caesura that mark this aporetic inexplicability. In this regard, it is important to note that the black body, which has historically been subject to violence and sexual

abuse, has become in Brown's poetry a site of resistance, self-affirmation, and survival. In "Duplex", Brown says that "a poem is a gesture toward home". The body in Brown's poetry is the poet's "home", a respite that frequently but not always tethers him, just as his family bonds and religious faith often but not constantly do, which will be discussed in the sections ahead.

What most commentators and writers about Jericho Brown agree on is that the poet's relationship with his family is ambivalent. It is marked by tenderness and tension, as well as love and pain. It is a relationship that constantly reminds him of his black identity and the cultural inheritance it carries with it, but at the same time, it alienates him and makes belonging to origins and to queer black men a real predicament, a real aporia. His relationship with his father, for instance, combines closeness and detachment, connection and disconnection, as well as love and frustration. In "Duplex", the speaker says:

> 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.

As they combine memory, love, and underlying caution, these lines show how Brown cherishes the quality of masculinity his father is endowed with, but that masculinity is overwhelming and visibly irritating, as it would "leave marks". The poet uses very suggestive epithets to compare his "first love" with his father. While the word "fast" suggests impulsiveness or perhaps transience, the word "steadfast" conveys stability, strength, and unbending presence. However, both epithets are coupled with the adjective "awful", which emphasizes the unpredictable, violent, and complex nature of the father figure. As is often the case, violent behavior always causes traumatic effects on people, and Brown's memory is scarcely free of such effects. Again, the close attention to the formal choices by the poet shows how form seamlessly aligns with content. The use of imagery and the alliteration on the letter "h" (Hit hard as a hailstorm) typically reinforce the idea of the traumatic effects caused by the father's violent behavior. The vivid imagery produced by the descriptive adjectives is strong enough to suggest the emotional and physical trauma whose traces or scars are left behind on the speaker. The glottal fricative consonant "h" is made by the friction of breath in a narrow passage, which produces a turbulent air flow, and turbulence is the very condition that characterizes both the speaker's relationship with his father and the frequent violence he encounters as a non-heteronormative black man living in America. Moreover, the use of the *duplex* form (the combination of the sonnet, the Ghazal, and the blues invented by Jericho Brown), with its refrains and binary nature, is perfectly tailored to the oscillation of the poet between the extremities of love and pain, serenity and fear, strength and vulnerability, hope and despair, as well as freedom and confinement. In a poem dubbed "Like Father" from his collection *Please*, Brown describes his father using the word "squeezes" to allude to his masculinity and

strength, but he also expresses the emotional gap and the sense of disconnection between them saying: "Daddy squeezes me close, 'like father'/But I cannot feel his heartbeat/And he cannot hear mine—". We clearly notice that the poet has placed the phrase "like father" between inverted commas, which suggests that the father's affection is perhaps mechanical or emotionless rather than profound and genuine. Besides, the lines "But I cannot feel his heartbeat" and "And he cannot hear mine—" point to the emotional disconnection and the absence of the real affection the speaker craves. It is also essential to remember that amid pain, alienation, void, and violence, Brown always finds himself looking for belonging somewhere, searching for a space or force that can offer him peace, solace, love, tolerance, and understanding. It seems that the only true space or force that can offer comfort to the poet is faith and religion, particularly Christianity.

In Brown's poetry, the theme of faith and religion is steeped in uncertainty and indecision. Faith is at once a source of solace and unease, a locus of connection and disconnection. It connects the poet to his cultural heritage as a black American with African origins, but also disconnects him due to its condemning views on queer sexuality. In a magazine article entitled "One Whole Voice", published online by Poetry Foundation, Brown recognizes that religion connects him with his ancestors: "I will never understand the spirit of my ancestors, but I know it. I know it lives in me. And though fear insists on itself, I intend to acknowledge this spirit as one that overcomes us". The expression "lives in me" shows the lingering presence of religion as a heritage and voice in the poet's mind and psyche. It is always influentially there, and it "overcomes" him due to its irrevocability. Brown also says that it was in the black church, which he describes as "very theatrical", that he started to understand and appreciate the spoken discourse as an "artful thing". But at the same time, religion scares the poet, because it is not as tolerant to queer men as it is to straight people. In the same article, Brown expresses his ambivalent and aporetic attitude vis-à-vis religion explicitly: "I love the church now, and it scares me…I am afraid that someone behind the pulpit will at any moment attempt to erase or degrade my existence as a man who loves men. It is not a comfortable feeling, not a feeling with which to enter a house of worship" (ibid). Again, the poet's swinging between the extremes of ease and discomfort, connection and disconnection, as well as engagement and disengagement in relation to faith shows that his quest for spiritual belonging is also characterized by loss and insolvability. The aporia of belonging to a community that is predominantly hostile to queer black men is as intense as the aporia of belonging to a religion that is categorically intimidating to sexually dissidents. Brown often asserts that he writes poetry because writing gives him clarity on his "thoughts and emotions" (Peña, 2022). He writes about the intriguing issues of identity, family, love, and faith despite the tension that characterizes his relationship to them.

In a poem titled "Another Elegy", Brown blatantly associates faith with love and loss, suggesting that the quest for secure belonging in the spiritual and emotional realms is uncertain, due to the ineluctable potential of loss. The two opening lines

of the poem read as follows:

To believe in God is to love
What none can see. Let a lover go,

Marked with a salient aphoristic tone, these lines plainly convey the idea that faith, love, and loss or sacrifice are inseparable, and it is this inseparability that adds intricacy to the relationship. The speaker equates the belief in God with loving the invisible, the inscrutable, and the transcendent, all of which are attributes of divinity. But when the speaker says: "let the lover go", the allusion to sacrifice becomes the focal point in the lines, because true love, as implied, does not mean possession, but rather giving the lover the space to be free or independent. The poet draws a figurative parallel between faith and personal love, as both involve sacrifice in addition to loving the unseen. God is also referred to as "one spot", which points both to the singularity or oneness of divinity and to the fact that God is unbound by the constraints of time and space. Besides, God can be present anywhere: in a place of worship, in nature, in the soul, or in a particular state of mind connecting the worshipper with his/her Lord. The reader is encouraged to understand from the beginning that the search for redemption in the spiritual world is as thorny as it is in the physical or social world, because it always involves concession, confession, and willingness to give up parts of the self to please God or people. It is precisely in this way that belonging to the spiritual realm, as a refuge, can be seen as an expression of the complexity of finding a resting space within faith and can fittingly be described as painful and incredulous as the complexity of belonging to the social realm.

In the poem "Nativity", whose title carries reference to the birth of Christ, Brown expresses the same anxiety about securing a religious identity and a comforting space in the spiritual world of faith, emphasizing the tension between the need to connect to that world and the desire to maintain a lifestyle that is at odds with religious connection.

The poem starts with an allegorical identification with the Virgin Mary who was given something she had no control over but had to carry:

I was Mary once.
Somebody big as a beginning Gave me trouble
I was too young to carry, so I ran Off with a man who claimed not To care.
Each year,

A reader who is acquainted with Brown's profile will certainly capture the evoked analogy. The "trouble" that had afflicted the Virgin Mary is very much similar to the trouble that had afflicted the speaker at some point of time. The close observation of the lines, particularly word choice, shows that the poetic persona is reluctant to disclose the nature of the trouble and the identity of the one responsible for it. Using the indefinite pronoun "somebody" conceals the agent's identity and confers an aspect of universality on the lived experience. What had

once happened to the Virgin Mary may happen to any person, including the speaker who was given some "trouble" to carry and had to ran off "with a man". Although the speaker does not reveal what this trouble was, the reader's knowledge of the poet's personal experiences as a queer man makes it easy to identify the trouble as the speaker's "sinful" sexuality. Again, it is important to note that the birth symbolism in the poem's title "Nativity" has its echo in the birth of the trouble that has afflicted the speaker. Although the birth of Christ was a moment of joy and hope, promising salvation, it signaled the onset of a journey into suffering and sacrifice. Similarly, the birth of trouble for the speaker is the beginning of a journey into suffering, a journey that does not seem to lead to salvation. The speaker recognizes the presence of sin in himself and pleads with God for forgiveness: [I] "Pray. Lord, let even me/And what the saints say is sin within/My blood, which certainly shall see/Death—see to it I mean—". These lines reflect the tension between Brown's belonging as a queer man and the established as well as internalized moral judgements, "what the saints say", that seem to be inherent and inevitable. The expression "even me", while expressing humility and yearning, is typically suggestive of Brown's inner struggle, latent vulnerability, and perceived unworthiness of God's grace. The sense of guilt that seems to "trouble" the poet's conscience also accounts for his oscillation between searching for refuge in faith and acknowledging the difficulty of truly belonging to it. It must be stated in this regard that the allusions to faith and religion are frequent in Brown's other collections, namely *Please* and *The New Testament*. However, what makes the question of faith unsettling in the poet's works and life is his split self. His yearning to belong to faith on the one hand, and his belief in his right to be a queer man on the other, are each making intense claims on him. Each is requesting some sort of recognition and belonging: two individualities struggling within one soul seem to have led the poet to the tormenting labyrinths of aporia.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I used Close Reading, roughly adapted from formalist and new formalist critics, to throw into relief the depth and vibrancy of Jericho Brown's poetry in terms of thematics and aesthetics. Using selected poems, chiefly from *The Tradition* as a primary data for analysis, I sought to reveal the aporia of belonging arising from the poet's oscillation between connection and disconnection that seems to traverse many of his lyrical works. The main line of contention in this paper was to bring several themes that have been discussed by critics and reviewers of Brown's poetry to converge on the aporia of belonging. The themes of identity and self-worth, endurance and resilience, love and intimacy, as well as faith and religion were explored to show how the poet struggles with the complexities of belonging to himself, his origins, his family, and a faith that rejects queer sexuality, along with the uncertainty of overcoming such rejection. It is worth noting, as a final remark, that close reading has made analysis forcefully attentive to the superb functionality of formal features in Brown's poetry, not only in serving con-

tent, but also in engaging the reader's imagination and thought. The poet's adept use of enjambment, allusion, metaphor, symbolism, and caesura, as well as the spontaneity with which he voices his concerns and confessions seem to catch the reader's imagination and magnify his/her sense of empathy with an artist who has valiantly chosen "to be" what he is. No less captivating is his use of the duplex form which wonderfully captures the haunting dualities and pervasive dichotomies informing much of his works.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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