



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Locked in a Room with Jericho Brown

Rob Rudnicki

Mississippi Quarterly, Volume 70/71, Number 2, Spring 2017/2018, pp. 225-242  
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mss.2017.0012>

Mississippi  
Quarterly

The Journal  
of Southern Cultures

1962

Edited by  
William R. Inge, Robert W. O'Neil,  
Theodore D. Brown, Frances O'Connell,  
and F. Anne Higginbotham, and  
in cooperation with Jericho Brown

Vol. 70/71, No. 2 Spring 2017/18

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/747849>

ROB RUDNICKI  
Louisiana Tech University

## Locked in a Room with Jericho Brown

*Poet Jericho Brown worked as a speechwriter for the Mayor of New Orleans before he received his PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Houston. He has an MFA from the University of New Orleans and a BA from Dillard University. He was the recipient of a Whiting Award and fellowships from the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University and the National Endowment for the Arts. While teaching as the Director of the Cropper Center for Creative Writing at the University of San Diego, his first book, Please, won the American Book Award. Brown's second book, The New Testament, won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award and was named one of the best books of the year by Library Journal, Coldfront, and the Academy of American Poets. Brown was awarded both the Cecil Hemley Memorial Award and the Lyric Poetry Award from the Poetry Society of America for his poems "Ganymede" and "As a Human Being." He was also awarded a 2016 Guggenheim Fellowship. Most recently, he published his third book, The Tradition. Brown is currently the director of Emory University's Creative Writing Program.*

KNOWING THAT HE GREW UP IN NEARBY SHREVEPORT, I HAD ADMIRERD Jericho Brown's poetry for some time and watched as his reputation developed. For many years, I had taught a university course on southern literature. I had not taught Brown's work, but knew he was a writer who deserved more sustained critical attention. When I found that I might be able to meet him at a poetry reading sponsored by Centenary College of Louisiana in Shreveport, I jumped at the chance. Through the kindness of Professor Jeanne Hamming, Chair of the English Department at Centenary College, a time was arranged during his campus visit for me to interview him. Dr. Hamming put us in a beautiful study that she explained was used by Ed Norton as a set for a Walt Whitman movie that never made it to production. The study opened in two directions through heavy oak doors. One side led to modern classrooms and professors' offices, while the other opened to a foyer, hallway, and elevator. Because students often used the study as a shortcut on their way to class, Dr. Hamming explained that she was closing the doors so we would not be

interrupted by students. I then found myself locked in a room with Jericho Brown.

**Rob Rudnicki:** Thank you for agreeing to this interview. It's the first chance I've ever had to formally interview a poet, and I can't help but think of all the interviews I've read of writers in books and magazines. Is there anything you would first like to say about the relation of interviews to a writer's work or to your own work?

**Jericho Brown:** I'm a poet who likes to think of myself as very literal and very on the ground when it comes to the dramatic situation of my poems. I think of my poems as having characters and having settings and having quite literal things that happen in them. I write a sentence down because it sounds good to me and then I have to figure out, "well it sounds good, that's why I wrote it down, now I've got to figure out what it says or what it means." Writing and figuring out what something means might not be anything I ever articulate aloud, and once I do articulate that aloud, I have a better idea of who I am and what I do and what I believe, what I think of poetry as being. That's also what happens when I'm in the midst of an interview. What that allows for me is to see what I'm interested in following up on. Once I see what those ways of being are for myself through answering questions, once I understand my ideas, I then have the opportunity to abandon those ideas in the poems that I write in the future. Before we began we talked a little bit about why my first and second book are quite different from each other. Part of the reason why they are different from each other is because I have opportunities like this to answer questions, and answering questions while being interviewed gives me an idea of what terrain I've already discovered and how to create new terrain for myself that I can look at as diligently as possible. Looking at that new terrain is what makes for really new poems, and I'm not talking about new poems as in writing another poem. I mean what seemed to me new ways of defining poems through the poetry that demonstrates those definitions.

**Rudnicki:** Do you have certain rituals before you begin to write, such as make a pot of coffee, go for a run, maybe smoke, or meditate?

**Brown:** They aren't things that I can impose upon the work. For instance, I work late at night. I'm always revising at or two or three in the morning, or I think it is ritualistic that when I get a line I

always write the line down. If I have time in front of me I follow up on the line. If I get a line of poetry and I'm at home and it's 11:50 at night, I write the line down and I push. I try to make something of that line. I try to write sixteen more lines after it. I don't always get a line at 11:50 at night so I wouldn't necessarily call that a ritual. It is a ritual that I write something every day. It is a ritual that I look at whatever poems I have each day and then try to see what's boiling. I try to see if I have any new ideas about drafts that I've created. There's no particular time that I do it and I don't have to do anything before doing it. It's not by happenstance but it is true that I'd like for the day to be completely done before I look at my own work, which is why the next day always starts so late for me. When I'm on trips like these everybody wants to take me to breakfast and I'm always fascinated by the idea—"Breakfast, wow, you want me up at what time?"—because now my clock is totally set in the other direction. I'm working the same number of hours as everybody else in the world, but it's just on the other end of time. For me, it is very important that I can't be interrupted. Even if I do check my email or my Twitter or my Facebook, nothing is there because everybody is asleep. There is no phone call. Nobody is going to call me at 2:00 a.m. If they do, maybe we will have a good time but at least I know it's for that!

**Rudnicki:** Sounds good to me.

**Brown:** There's a way that doing work after midnight and before four allows me an escape. It allows me an opportunity that I otherwise don't have. I can't make the excuse about distractions because there aren't any distractions there. I think it's a ritual that I work so late at night, but it's not a ritual I've set up. Lucie Brock-Broido has these things where she only writes in October, or only writes in November in Massachusetts in a particular room at her court. Some people have things about making coffee or about doing deep breathing first but I just can't imagine that. I work every day but I don't work in the same room of my house. I don't have to work at my house at all. I work a lot on airplanes, at least before they put those TVs in the back of the seat.

**Rudnicki:** While flying? Could that be your ritual?

**Brown:** Yeah, maybe it's a ritual, except if there is a person who insists on talking to me and I decide that they are interesting, then I'd rather talk to the person. I love my work but I have to have something to

fuel it. Conversations make poetry happen, experiences make poetry happen. If I'm tired, I'm going to sleep on the airplane. I'm not going to stay up to work. I've drafted poems and I've revised poems, but I also grade papers. The only thing that I can say is a ritual is when I have a snatch of time to get writing done, I use it, and there is a snatch of time every day of my life. The amount of time changes. Sometimes it's only an hour, but I'm going to do something for at least an hour. Sometimes I get to four hours, which is really nice. I work for about an hour every day on my stuff. Otherwise, I'm working on everybody else's stuff all the other time.

**Rudnicki:** To what extent have you been influenced by the confessional genre and by poets, to take any one of them, such as Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich, or Sharon Olds?

**Brown:** You think of Rich as confessional? That's interesting. I don't think Rich is confessional. I love Adrienne Rich. I'm a big fan of Rich's work, but I also think it's humorless. It has everything except comedy. I'm under the impression that she probably didn't think there was room for it in her poetry, which is very different from my idea of confessional poetry. I have this idea that the confessional poet is a poet who is always trying to get all of his life or her life in the poem, which means you're going to get those times you laughed in the poem. Now some of that does come across in these moments of delight in a poem like "Twenty-One Love Poems." There are moments of delight, but I wouldn't call that exactly humor, either. Anyway, that's not what you asked me, though, but I'm okay with being called a confessional poet so long as no one who calls me that comes under the impression that I am a confessional poet at the exclusion of being a deep image poet or a beat poet or a New York School poet or many other kinds of poet.

**Rudnicki:** I understand.

**Brown:** I was born in '76, and my first book came out in 2008, so I'm a poet who is influenced by all of the movements of the 1950s and the '60s, and they come through at various points in all of my poems. Yes, you see more of some than of others, and when there's a first-person narrative there is the tendency I think among us to say that something is confessional but not necessarily notice that the mode of the poem might include other things. Does that make sense?

**Rudnicki:** It does. You do use first person but you use second person

quite often. You use “you” and “your,” which I don’t encounter often. Do you think there is a particular reason for that? It gives your work an immediacy with the reader. Should I assume you are speaking directly to the reader or is it some other “you” you are addressing?

**Brown:** One of the questions I think that I have about poetry in general and one of the questions I keep trying to ask through my poetry in particular is, what do we mean when we say universal? What are the points at which that begins and what are the points at which that ends? How is that which is universal, literally universal, like a heartbeat? What are the points at which those are useful to the making of a poem? How are there points where the exact opposite is what you need for the making of a poem? Where are the points where you need the very specified experience or something as literal as the name of a street that you lived on when you were twenty-four years old? Where do those needs appear in the poem? This will bring me back to our conversation about the confessionals, but I think the reason I use the word “you” other than the fact that I’ve always fallen in love with certain poems by people like Phil Levine, such as that poem “What Work Is” or that poem “The Simple Truth,” in which “you” shifts and changes but also really just puts the reader in a position where they are told they have had experiences that they may not literally have had. I think this is certain, but it’s not only interesting; I think it is also the life of the reader of color and sometimes the life of women readers. You are expected to have this knowledge of experiences that may not even have anything to do with your life. That is the thing that I want my poems to do with that word “you.” I want the reader to begin to question, “Well, if you do feel locked out from these experiences, why are you locked out?” or “If you do feel inside these experiences, why do you feel as if you have a certain access as if this really is you in spite of the fact that I’m using an experience that might have happened to me, Jericho Brown?” Do you understand what I mean?

**Rudnicki:** I think so.

**Brown:** Those are the kinds of questions that I think poetry can get at that other forms don’t get at, and second person allows for that. I really did love the confessionals, though. They were the first poets that I ever read seriously and because of that I looked closely at how the poems were made. When I was a junior right over here at Byrd High School, the entire junior year at that time in Caddo Parish was

dedicated to the research paper. I wrote mine on the confessional poets Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Those three poets were what I was supposed to do for a year, and I had already read a bunch of poetry growing up. Of course, I didn't know that until I was an adult, so I had already become a poetry reader, which had a lot to do with me being attracted to this topic. I had to read an essay on Lowell by Helen Vendler in order to write this paper. That experience for me helped to build this idea that I had of what poems could do. Now, I have questions about our designations and our taxonomies and our categorizations. I think that my being an African American poet has a lot to do with why I don't see how much use these things are for us. Part of this has to do with the fact that when black poetry was taught in high school and in college, if it got taught at all, it was all taught together. You would read Rita Dove on the same day you read Amiri Baraka. These are poets who are not writing in the same mode at all. Yet, when I first experienced their work, a poem like "Dark Side of the Planet" and "Father" were taught as if they existed within some sort of aesthetic boundary that other people needed.

**Rudnicki:** Right.

**Brown:** So take for instance the idea that Sylvia Plath is a confessional poet, but I don't know that Sylvia Plath often says anything about herself in her poems. People will keep telling me about how "Lady Lazarus" is about Sylvia Plath but it's only about Sylvia Plath because she killed herself. "Tulips" is a poem that has a very definite "I" speaker in it but nothing happens in "Tulips." There's a person lying in a hospital bed observing her surroundings and comparing everything to something else that usually has something to do with water. There is no real confession other than "I'm glad to be in this hospital where I can get away from my husband and my kids." Maybe that's a huge confession at that time, early '60s, right? It just doesn't seem to me to be about a confession. I could see it with Lowell, obviously, because Lowell is like, "When I married you, you were like this, and now you are like that." That seems to me to be a confession.

**Rudnicki:** It's a good point.

**Brown:** So I'm all for being called confessional as long as people look at that aspect as well as other aspects of my work. I feel the same way about being called political. I think I would be much more comfortable with that designation, though, if people understood that there isn't a poetry that isn't political, number one, but number two,

and more important, that all poetry is going to either support or question the status quo. So it's all political. The history of poetry in English is a history of political poetry.

**Rudnicki:** I'd like to get to that, but first, when it comes to something like asking you if you could be considered a certain kind of poet—let's say, in this case, a southern one—I can't help myself. I am a literary critic. Patterns, categories, formations. That's what we do. Do you feel any connection to the literary traditions of the South in general or of Louisiana in particular? I could speak about the larger South or just Louisiana, a place that in many ways is south of the South. We have Kate Chopin, Robert Penn Warren, Walker Percy, John Kennedy Toole, Ernest Gaines, Brenda Marie Osbey, and Yusef Komunyakaa, among others, and now we have Jericho Brown. I don't know how much you have been influenced by these people, and I don't know at what age you read them or what impact they had on you, but I'm sure that they did. Here, though, is what I find timely: in November of 1917, H. L. Mencken published an essay titled "The Sahara of the Bozart" in a New York newspaper. He spelled Bozart, B-O-Z-A-R-T, to ridicule the way a southern illiterate would try to write about the "Beaux Arts" or literature, literally of course the beautiful letters. He described the South as barren of all things cultural, saying that "Down there a poet is now rare as a philosopher or an oboe-player. You could lose France, Germany, and Italy in it, with the British Isles for good measure. And yet it is as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert." As everyone knows, though, the revival known as the Southern Renaissance of the 1920s was just around the corner. John Crowe Ransom, later the founding editor of the *Kenyon Review*, was about to help a group of students with a magazine they called *The Fugitive*. And it wouldn't be long before the freight train known as Faulkner would begin barreling down the track. So, here we are, almost exactly one hundred years later, and a lot of water has run over the literary dam since then. Given that, could something like the Southern Renaissance, or the Harlem Renaissance, happen again? Could a new group of today's poets and novelists ever become as influential in the twenty-first century as they were in the twentieth, or have Twitter, Trump, and reality TV ruined us for good?

**Brown:** I think the writers who influenced me most are southern writers and do live in the South. Terrance Hayes is a writer who lives in the North now, but he is from South Carolina. Natasha Trethewey is a

poet who up until recently seemed to me dedicated to living in the South is from Mississippi, was living in Georgia, my colleague at Emory University. Kevin Young has been living in the South for a very long time. A poet like David Kirby and the way his poems are moving forward seems to me a very southern poet. And Komunyaaka, who hasn't lived in the South in ages, still has the tones and colloquialisms and vernacular of the South even in very recent poems. I would actually venture to say that if that renaissance ever ended it's definitely alive today. The MFA program for instance at Ole Miss is attracting all kinds of students to the South, and I would note those at Emory and LSU. It just doesn't seem to me that we are lacking for poetry. I also want to say that it goes deeper than that and that if we really expand what our idea of poetry is and our idea of what poetry can be, if we think about what are the real influences for the work we do, often those influences come back for me over and over again to the South. One of the reasons why I needed to be here in order to write what I wanted and needed to write, is that I needed to hear the sounds of how people talk here, which isn't like how people talk everywhere else, which is special. The banter you here between people in line at a grocery store in Atlanta, Georgia, in New Orleans, Louisiana, in Shreveport, and even in Houston, Texas, is not the same banter that you hear with people in line in the grocery store in San Diego, California, or in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. I really do believe that literal phrasing, literal vernacular, literal ways of saying things and the ways that my ear is attuned to those things because I grew up here, has a lot to do with how I use these things in my poems. So yes, I think of myself as a southern poet. I also think of myself as a poet who is clearly influenced by the black church, the southern black church and by the Blues, by hymns, by field songs, by work songs, by certain phrasing, by certain ideas of turns of phrase in songs, by certain structures that have to do with the irony that mixes laughter and tears. When I think about poets like Mona Lisa Savoy and Brenda Marie Osbey and Tom Dent, I think of poets who are really capturing what it is to be a Louisianan. I'm particularly lucky because I've always had the best teachers and the best mentors, but I also had them in the best place. So I'm all for these categorizations so long as they do not exclude us from anything else. So it's important that we know the Agrarians, and it's important that we know the Fugitives, but it's also important that we understand them as part of

American literature. What I'm interested in ultimately is a discussion of intersectionality.

**Rudnicki:** On that topic, your work often juxtaposes so-called low and high cultural references, objects, and artifacts. In *The New Testament* you, for example, will blend biblical allusion with references to music, film, and even talk shows. Do you set out to do this? Do you organize your thoughts in this way in a draft, as a series of notes, or is it just part of your process?

**Brown:** Well, it's a desire. How much is it that you do a thing only because you already thought about it? When I was first reading the New York School poets, part of what I was taken by is how the poems could never be completely austere. Frank O'Hara wants to talk about Sexton in the same poem where he wants to talk about Miles Davis. He really wants to mix these cultural things that at first seem not to have anything to do with one another and that this cultural mix can indeed illuminate something about the human condition. He wants to show that there is diversity within any one of us. I love that, I was really turned on by that in O'Hara, and I was turned on by that in Ashbery, and I see some of that even in Ginsberg. I really felt like that was happening in a lot of the work that I was reading and so that seems to me as good a goal as any other for poetry. I decided maybe before I was even writing well that the poems would always mix these things, the sacred and the profane. That's what I want the poem to do that because that's what I do. I teach at a university, you know what I mean, and I see independent films that other people would call boring and I want to go to *la Biennale* in Venice in the summer. I want to do that and at the same time. . .

**Rudnicki:** I'll go with you.

**Brown:** Exactly, and at the same time, I also really just want to go to a Jazmine Sullivan concert. I really just want to hang out and go to the club and dance with my friends. Do you know what I mean?

**Rudnicki:** I do.

**Brown:** There has to be a way that all of those experiences can come together in a poem if that is the life I'm living. I don't think a poem should be a record of our lives. What I mean is that a poem must be a living organism. It must act as people act, which is why poems have to have changes in tonal registers, which is why poems have to have surprises.

**Rudnicki:** I like the notion that poems have to have surprises.

**Brown:** Moments of climax and moments of whatever the opposite of climax is, right? For me when I write a poem, the reason why poems have what seem to be very different images juxtaposing and sliding against each other is because they become a reflection of what it is to live life for any one of us.

**Rudnicki:** Thank you so much. Considering some of your work, I'm especially interested about this next question, even though I dislike the topic of politics.

**Brown:** You mean like "The World Is Too Much With Us," political? You mean political like that or do you mean political like John Clare, or maybe political like John Keats? Is that what you mean, or I don't know, do you mean like writing in the middle of the Civil War, like Emily Dickinson political?

**Rudnicki:** Or Ezra Pound?

**Brown:** Well that's definitely political, right? Yeah, sure, let's talk about that.

**Rudnicki:** Okay, here goes. In your poems, "The Interrogation," "Homeland," "Hustle," and "Found Messiah," you talk about police coming in steel boots, chains still being chains, even when they are around your neck as necklaces, going to jail, and being imprisoned. You even describe a dream you had of a black president having to break into the White House, which is wonderful by the way. More recently, in "Bullet Points," which appeared on *BuzzFeed*, you write that

[ . . . ] I promise you that if you hear  
 Of me dead anywhere near  
 A cop, then that cop killed me. He took from  
 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, and more  
 Beautiful than the brand-new shiny bullet  
 Fished from the folds of my brain.

While the poems are all different, all invoke injustice, intolerance, discrimination, and discuss what it means to be black in America today. Can you name specific "bullet points," meaning, to refer to your pun here, of the typographical order in the sense of ink headings rather than gunshot wounds, that solidified your feelings and beliefs

on this subject? For example, did your work as a speechwriter for the mayor of New Orleans influence you, or was this something that developed after events such as Trayvon Martin, or Ferguson, or Freddie Gray? Or was it rather earlier childhood events?

**Brown:** Well, first was growing up black in the United States and particularly growing up black in Shreveport, Louisiana. The day before the first day of high school the Ku Klux Klan had a rally at the flagpole in front of Byrd High School. That's what I was walking into. I remember that every time I would leave the house, or a friend would come pick me up, or I was going to meet a friend somewhere, or going to a party, or going to the prom, my mother would tell me that I was black. Every time I left the house, like I didn't have a mirror, like we didn't have mirrors, like I couldn't see shit or that my daddy wasn't black. She would remind me that I was a black boy. "Don't forget you are a black boy out there, you be careful." "Tray," you know my mom calls me Tray, "Tray you are a black boy." I'm opening the door trying to leave and before I leave my mom has to remind me that I'm a black boy.

**Rudnicki:** Did your mother ever explain what that meant or what the consequences might be?

**Brown:** I knew what it meant. I remember one day my dad came home and I was getting ready. This is when I was much younger. I was probably ten years old, maybe eleven, fifth or sixth grade. I was getting ready to go ride my bike down the street and my dad said, "Where are you going?" I was like, "I'm about to go ride my bike." He said, "Well ride that way because there's police the other way." I was a ten-year-old kid and so I had this understanding about being black and avoiding the police, knowing I hadn't done anything wrong. I'm a kid, I don't steal, I don't own a gun, I'm not shooting nobody, but I'm supposed to avoid the police because anything could happen, right? This is something my dad had told me when I was in the second grade. I was in the second grade when I was told this by my father: "Anything can happen with the cops." You don't know, they'll do one thing, and then they'll say they did another thing and we don't have any way around that. Just be careful and always be respectful. Just be overly respectful with police. All of that sounds to me like Jim Crow segregation. Like, oh, that is crazy, like that is crazy that every time you leave the house you are a 14-, 15-, 16-, 17-year-old kid and every time you leave the house somebody's got

to tell you you're black. I always thought that was about me and it wasn't until this Black Lives Matter movement and these recent shootings that have been recorded in these ways that it wasn't just about me. It was plastered all over social media and television, and it wasn't until then that I understood that it was also about my mother. My mother's fear, my mother's real 100 percent fear every time I left my house when I was a kid was that I would not come back, that I could end up in jail, that I could end up dead, that I could have done something and had the best intentions and gotten myself into some trouble. Trouble that I would not have gotten into if I were not, as she said, a black boy.

**Rudnicki:** So all these events validated her henpecking.

**Brown:** Exactly, and that there would be nothing she could do about it. That I could be murdered by a police officer or that I could be wrongfully arrested by a police officer and that my blackness, her blackness, would stop her from doing anything to right what could have been a wrong perpetrated by the state. It's hard enough having kids leave the house. I imagine that the hardest part of being a parent is knowing a child is leaving soon, that my kid is sixteen, and things are changing.

**Rudnicki:** As a father of two boys, I know exactly what that feels like.

**Brown:** Then it gets compounded. My mother was from a very, very small country town in Northeast Louisiana. She was from outside of Bastrop in a place called Mer Rouge, Louisiana. Her experiences with people who were not black, who were white people, were limited. All she ever heard about people's experiences with white people is that it always ended up in some danger. When I moved to New Orleans it was a total shift for me, and I remember the first time I came back home. You go down there in late August and you come back for maybe Thanksgiving. You are there a pretty long time and you are hanging out. I remember driving back up to the house and at some point you suddenly see Confederate flags, but when you are in far South Louisiana you just never see them.

**Rudnicki:** Not as many. Now you see bumper stickers and rear window decals. Actually, the phrase that I see nowadays is "heritage not hate." I don't know how you would respond to that, but that seems to be the phrase that is often on cars below the flag.

**Brown:** Which is a lie. People just don't want to accept what the war

was about. I don't know why it's so important that people deny that. Yeah, that was the second thing, dealings that I had when I was with police officers when I was a kid that I would never tell my mother about. She had told me I was a black kid right before leaving and then I had police pull me over for nothing. I couldn't tell my mama that because she wouldn't let me leave the house again. Her failsafe wasn't working. Then later I moved to a subdivision called North Druid Valley in Atlanta, bought a house there, and I twice had police officers follow me onto my street and one time into my driveway to ask me if everything was okay. In the driveway of my house, is everything okay? They couldn't assume that I live there, right? Then he tells me, "Well I just wanted to check to see if it was true." He wanted to let me know that there had been all these break-ins and he just wanted to make sure everything was okay. Of course, I want to ask him, "Do you make sure everything is okay with everybody when they're sitting in their driveway or was that just special for me?" I want to get smart with the guy, but I can't do that. I don't have the privilege because I've got to go to work the next day, I want to write another poem, I'd like to live. So there's no way around what you are passionate about, what you obsess over. Those are the things that emerge in our poems.

**Rudnicki:** Thank you. I have given this a lot of thought before, and if the roles were reversed I would be probably incredibly militant. Let me read this next related question to you please. Is interpretation always an ideological act as much as it is an aesthetic act? Keats, for instance, famously objected to poetry that has a "palpable design" on us. And the New Critical establishment, so dominant in the twentieth-century classroom, insisted on the separateness of art and politics. And in 1965, Eudora Welty wrote an essay titled "Must the Novelist Crusade," in which she was making the distinction between the writer as artist and the writer as what she called editorialist, just as the era in which art was understood as comfortably detached from ideology was vanishing for good. For example, a provocative example might be Amiri Baraka's "Black Art" poem in which he writes, "we want 'poems that kill.' / Assassin poems, Poems that shoot / guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys / and take their weapons leaving them dead / with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland." I'd like to compare this to an interview in which you said,

Every Harriet Beecher Stowe—bless her heart—needs a John Brown and a Nat Turner. If there were a really strong “Kill Cops, Destroy Property” organized movement that existed and saw itself as diametrically opposed to Black Lives Matter, then more folks would get real interested in ending unnecessary police brutality and the confidence with which police officers commit crimes of violence against black folk. (Jetté)

As a creative writing professor, how do you handle the issue of interpretation as an ideological act versus interpretation as an aesthetic act?

**Brown:** This is an interesting question, and I have to say that I don't know how much I've thought about it in terms of interpretation. I do know that those people that you quote, that quote from Keats about designs on us, the thing from Eudora Welty, the thing we know about the New Critics, these are the things that I was taught, and in many ways these are the things that I teach my students. They are the things that I believe in when I make my poems. At the same time, I understand that nothing about any of those sayings outlaws subject matter of any kind. So that if I want to write about race, if I want to write about blackness, if I want to write about police brutality, if I want to write about domestic violence, I get to write about these things. My job is to do it well, and the way I think you do that well is if they are actually the things that you care about and you find representation or find images for. A poem like “Bullet Points,” which you mentioned earlier, is a poem not born out of a sense of protest from me. It's a poem born out of a sense of desperation that comes from a fact of my life. I don't want anybody saying that I killed myself if I'm ever in police custody. That's a desperation from a fact of my life. That's very different from sitting down to write a poem about these supposed disappearances and the supposed suicides that are happening while people are in police custody. I would never sit down to write that poem. I don't sit down to write poems about anything let alone poems about some political way of life. I just don't. I sit down to write my heart. Do you understand?

**Rudnicki:** I do.

**Brown:** That which is political will emerge but that's not my job, I don't make it emerge. I don't know these people who don't live politicized lives. Mary Oliver always says that she gets frustrated with environmentalists and naturalists and these people who are interested in saving the planet because of our natural resources. Because what

she believes is that we should have this reverence for our planet not because of resources but because the earth is holy. Even that seems to be a political statement. There's a way in which I think she believes that she's found her way around the political by saying these things. That when she writes about a tree, she's somehow writing about God and therefore not writing that which is political. The right to write about God seems to be very political. I don't know that I'm even capable of seeing the difference.

**Rudnicki:** So when you talk to your students you don't make a distinction ever between ideology and aestheticism?

**Brown:** No, I don't talk about ideology with my students. I only talk about aestheticism. I don't make the distinction because I think my students are going to write whatever they believe ideologically and I can't do anything about it.

**Rudnicki:** Would answer two final questions?

**Brown:** I've got time.

**Rudnicki:** Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* is known for its auto- and homoeroticism. In section 47, Whitman made readers of his day uncomfortable by addressing them directly when he writes that "Is it you talking just as much as myself, I act as the tongue of you, tied in your mouth, in mine it begins to be loosen'd."

**Brown:** He's good.

**Rudnicki:** In one of your final poems in *The New Testament*, "Heart Condition," you conclude with the following elliptical line: "I'm here to love you uncomfortable." It's a love poem and addresses a lover but also seems to be a poem about family, about America's history of miscegenation, and about contemporary African American identity. Simeon Kronenberg writes that

Younger poets like Richard Siken, Jericho Brown and Eduardo C. Corral . . . have distinguished themselves through determined and politically aware rage, relevant still because the conditions that determine homophobia abound. . . . Nonetheless, the sexual explicitness and imaginative bravado, that emanates from the very intensity and meaning of gay sexual practice . . . is reflected in the poetry of the younger generation who enact, describe and promulgate radical imperatives. This attitude is undeniably attractive to readers of poetry because of its very thorniness and its transgressive dramatic energy.

In what ways, if any, is your poetry imperative, thorny and transgressive, or to put this in perhaps different terms, if I may

borrow from your poem, how does your poetry “love the reader uncomfortable”?

**Brown:** Well, in what ways that it’s thorny, imperative, and transgressive, I think is in every way and that’s because those are the poems I want to read and so those are the poems I want to write. I visited a class just last night and somebody asked me that age old question about my writing process. The truth is if you actually saw me writing a poem you would think I was insane because most of it is either me walking around my house chanting to myself in my underwear at 2:30 in the morning or . . .

**Rudnicki:** It’s a ritual.

**Brown:** . . . or it’s me screaming at my computer, talking to my computer saying stuff like, “Who are you?” “What do you mean by that?” “You don’t really think that!” That’s what I want from my art, period, that’s what I want from my film, that’s what I want from my dance, that’s what I want from my sculpture and painting, and that’s what I want from my poetry. I want it from the poetry I read and I want it from the poetry I write. We haven’t done anything unless that which we have been seeing, that which we know or believe we know, we have to now see through a new lens. The best poets change the color of what we thought we knew. To see it brand new. That invention, using the world that we live in to create a brand new world for our reader, that only happens if you are willing to make the reader uncomfortable. I am here to love you uncomfortable because this is what has saved my life. People are uncomfortable with their own lives and with the possibilities of their own lives. For example, I am ever fascinated by people’s trouble, supposed trouble, with homosexuality. People’s supposed trouble with Muslims. The people who are angriest at Muslims don’t know any Muslims. The people who are most afraid of black people haven’t spent any real time with any black folk. Everybody has these ideas about homosexuality and about gay and lesbian sex, but all of these people who have these negative ideas about these things clearly haven’t had any gay sex. Or maybe they have, right? I’m confused. I’m thinking, how are you making this decision? Those are the things that I know. For example, think of these laws they have in North Carolina now, and I think they had them in Indiana, maybe they still do.

**Rudnicki:** Do you mean about the bathrooms?

**Brown:** Well, it’s the bathrooms, but it’s also the idea that we don’t have

to serve people because of religious beliefs. Those seem so horrendously insane because here is the truth about our lives: You could go to an establishment and someone could tell you, "I can't serve you because you are gay." First of all, that's magic. How did you know that? That's the first layer of magic, but then the second layer of magic is, I can't serve you because of the Bible. I know the Bible, for better or worse. I grew up in the Mount Canaan Missionary Baptist Church in Allendale, Louisiana, in Shreveport. You are welcome to make this decision about not serving gay folk in your restaurant. That would then mean that you are also not going to serve atheists, you are not going to serve Buddhists, you are not going to serve people who don't go to church at all. That also in the end means you don't want to make money. People are sitting next to folk all day at work, all day, laughing with them, talking with them, going out and getting their lunch for them. Eating with them and never asking them anything about who they sleep with and everybody goes home at five o'clock just fine.

**Rudnicki:** You know, Jericho, the other layer of that is discriminating in that way just seems like so much work, you know? Who wants to go to the work to do anything like that? Don't people have better things to do?

**Brown:** Rob, also remember that we are in a place that once insisted on four bathrooms on every floor. Then someone said, "Wait, why don't we just all use two bathrooms?" Folk were ready to kill people in the street. There was a real fear about black people and white people using the same restroom. This was real, black people and white people using the same water fountains, black people sitting next to white people on a bus. Who wants to be on a bus, anyway? The thing about these fears, and this is what I mean, the thing about these fears and the reason why it's I think my job to ask these questions, is because these fears exist in me too. I can't pretend that I am a person without prejudice because I am a person but my job as a person is to figure out what those prejudices are. My job as a poet is to question why the fuck do I have them? So yeah, I'm here to love you uncomfortable, yeah, I want to be imperative. I don't see the purpose of doing anything else. Do you understand what I mean?

**Rudnicki:** I think so.

**Brown:** Because ultimately your worry about somebody else's business

must be some worry about yourself. I would like for people to figure out what the worry is about themselves when it comes to gay folks and transgender folks and black folks or Muslims or women or whatever. What are you really afraid of? What are you going through?

#### Works Cited

- Baraka, Amiri [LeRoi Jones]. "Black Art." *Black Magic: Sabotage, Target Study, Black Art, Collected Poetry, 1961-1967*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969. 116-17.
- Brown, Jericho. "Bullet Points". *Buzzfeed* 24 March 2018. Web. Accessed 26 March 2018.
- . "Heart Condition." *The New Testament*. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon P, 2014.
- Jetté, Abriana. "A Conversation with Poet Jericho Brown." *Stay Thirsty* Fall 2016. Web. Accessed 26 March 2018.
- Kronenberg, Simeon. "Love in Contemporary Gay Male Poetry in the Works of Richard Siken, Eduardo C. Corral, and Jericho Brown." *Cordite Poetry Review* 1 October 2015. Web. Accessed 26 March 2018.
- Mencken, H. L. "The Sahara of the Bozart." *New York Evening Mail* 13 November 1917. *The Archive of American Journalism*. Web. Accessed 26 March 2018.
- Whitman, Walt. "Song of Myself." *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*. 2nd Rev. Ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2002.