

They were performing before music was recorded and thrived as artists. "Olio" includes poems about John William "Blind" Boone, who had his eyes removed when he was six and became an incredible piano player; Sissieretta Jones who became the first "Black Diva" at Carnegie Hall; the conjoined McKoy sisters who were born into slavery, toured with freak shows and eventually bought their old plantation; Ernest Hogan, creator of the Coon Song genre and one of the originators of Ragtime; Scott Joplin the "King of Ragtime Writers"; and the sculptor Wildfire, or Edmonia Lewis. In "O patria mia," a poem about Jones, Jess writes, "Let the curtain rise/upon the hidden face... I am multitudes of broken chains... I am a wave reaching beyond this shore... Let the curtain rise." And he really does bring a spotlight to these overlooked artists. The overall impression is one of celebration and wonder at the artists' talents, ingenuity and perseverance. Jess did a lot of research in the seven-and-a-half-year process of writing. "The challenge was to present them in an engaging way and to carry forward their spirit of innovation," he says.

"Olio" is innovative. Among his contrapuntal poems, Jess created "syncopated sonnets." In those about the conjoined McKoy sisters, the poems feature two personas, split across the page. The sections can be read up or down, in parts or as a whole—as two separate voices or a single entity, diagonally or in a circular fashion. In others, the African-American voices respond to white voices. Blind Tom counters Mark Twain's reductive and racist view on the left side, with his own perception of his rich talents on the right—"When/land and tree sing to me. I hear/notes/wildly/blooming inside—a spirit/shadows across my face./breaking free/unloosed. I play the wind/ in my blood." The two viewpoints can be read separately or interstitially.

The musicality of the poems reflects Jess' deep appreciation of African-American literature and music. "Chicago played a big part," he says. "I grew up as a poet here." The Detroit native lived here full-time for eighteen years and studied at the University of Chicago. He received his MFA at the University of New York, then taught at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. Currently associate professor of English at the College of Staten Island and poetry and fiction editor of "African American Review," he spent the past year on sabbatical in Chicago with his wife, who resides here. He is a Cave Canem alumnus and was part of the Green Mill Poetry Slam team. He won an Illinois Arts Council fellowship in poetry and a Chicago Sun-Times poetry award, among various other awards.

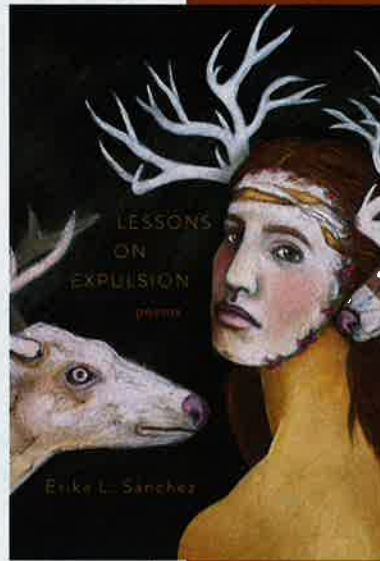
"Being in Chicago allowed me to see the blues up close," he explains. He used to go to Rosa's Lounge, the Artis Lounge, Chicago BLUES and other clubs, along with his mentor Sterling Plumpp. "Music and literature are inseparable," Jess believes. For the first few hundred years, slaves could not write stories down on pain of death. "Music was essential to the passage of stories and remembrances. After emancipation, music became infused into literature. It carried the people's aspirations and hopes." He cites literary examples such as James Weldon Johnson, who wrote the African-American national anthem "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" as well as poetry collections, novels and anthologies of spirituals and poetry; W.E.B Du Bois who in "The Souls of Black Folk" began each chapter with the musical score of a spiritual; and Claude McKay, the Jamaican-American poet and novelist who wrote "Banjo" and other works.

Jess also plays a "little bit of harmonica and guitar," enjoying the physicality and joy of making music. He compares the craft of poetry as similar to a musician's—relying on sound, lyricism and phrasing. In the way that musicians learn by absorbing the music of others, he says, "You study other poets, read and listen until you create your own voice."

It was hard to think past his first book "leadbelly," which was a National Poetry Series winner in 2004. "'Olio' took a while to formulate, even as I was writing it. I understand my habits better now. I have to be patient and firm with myself... shut out all voices from outside and listen to what's within me."

He believes that the Pulitzer Prize will open doors and introduce "Olio" to a wider audience. "I'm now charged with the prospect of living up to the award, with everything I write in the future," Jess says. He has projects that he thinks will be easier to find an audience for. He's conscious of the long line of poets who have been honored before him, which encourages him to stay focused. The challenge will be to stay true to what he wants to write. "As Toni Morrison said, 'Write the book you want to see in the world.'"

"Olio" By Tyejhimba Jess, Wave Books, 235 pages, \$25



LIT TOP 5

1 Erika L. Sánchez. Women and Children First.

Sánchez launches her debut collection "Lessons on Expulsion: Poems." July 14, 7:30pm

2 Marcus Sakey. The Book Cellar.

Marcus Sakey reads from his latest thriller "Afterlife." July 21, 7pm

3 Chris Abani and Kelly Norman Ellis. The Poetry Foundation.

Cave Canem hosts a conversation between poet, screenwriter, novelist, essayist and playwright Chris Abani and Afrilachian poet Kelly Norman Ellis. Moderated by CM Burroughs. July 11, 7pm

4 Searching for *It* in Jack Kerouac's "On the Road."

American Writers Museum. A University of Chicago Writer's Studio Master Series workshop featuring "On the Road." July 13, 6pm

5 Nature and Neighborhoods. Guild Literary Complex.

Matthew Shenoda moderates the Applied Words series. July 11, 6:30pm