

The Tradition

by Jericho Brown

One Book, One Philadelphia Discussion Guide

1. What American traditions do you see reflected in the book's titular poem (p. 10)? In the book as a whole? Does the book expand your idea about what a "tradition" is or how it's formed? What is an example of a personal, familial, or national tradition you would like to break or to continue?
2. *Blk is not a country, but I live there* ("After Avery R. Young," p.22). How does this poem play with the idea of a country, of a place of belonging? Do you have parts of your identity that are not countries, but you feel like you "live there?" Do you live in more than one "country" or identity? When does one identity dominate the rest? When do you feel freest to be your whole self?
3. "We do not know the history of this nation in ourselves" ("Riddle," p. 28). After reading the poem, who do you think is the "we" here? What is the difference between knowing history and knowing history "in ourselves"? In what ways do you know the history of our nation in yourself? In what ways could you better understand history within yourself?
4. After reading "Riddle" (p. 28), read "Bullet Points" (p. 16). How does Brown explore power and systemic violence differently in each of these poems? There's a very different speaker in the two poems. How would you identify the speakers, and how does this difference affect how you experience the poems?
5. Pastoral describes a literary genre that idealizes the natural world, landscapes, and rural life. How does Brown use the pastoral in "The Water Lilies" (p. 13), "Foreday in the Morning" (p. 14), and "The Trees" (p. 19) to explore themes of power and love? Which other poems in the book have images of the natural world? What do the images of nature make you think of or reflect on?

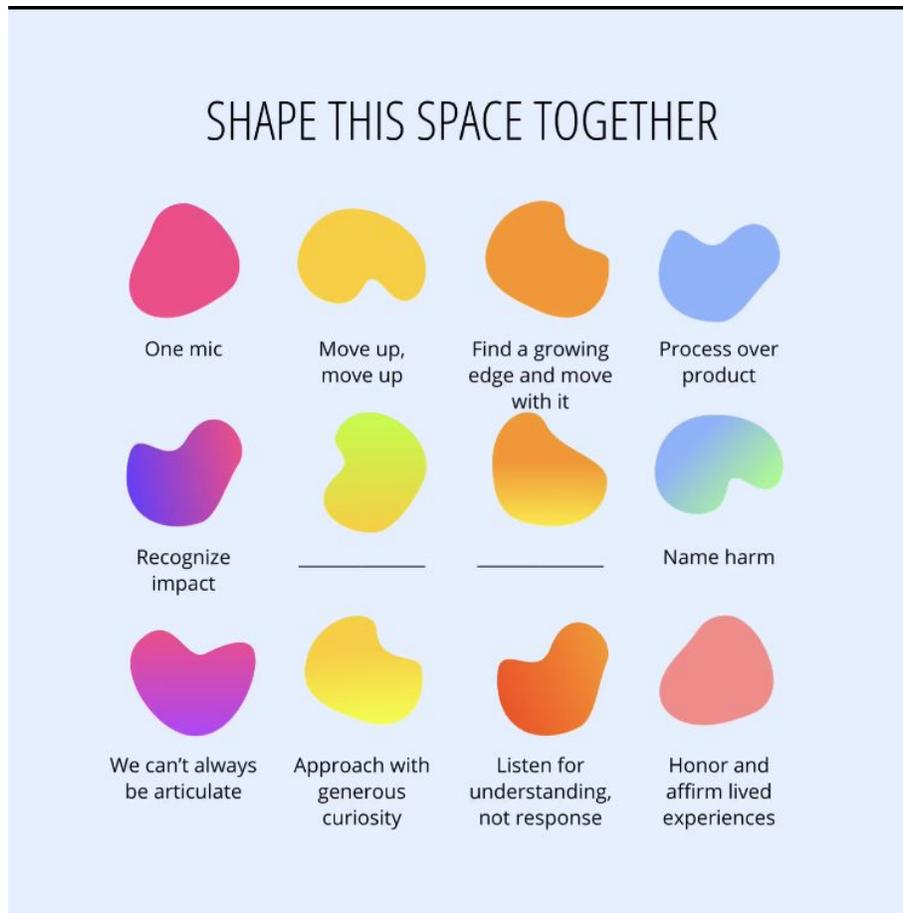
6. Read one of the “Duplex” poems. How does Brown explore different ways humans experience memory--physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, etc. -- in the “Duplex” poem you chose? How do recollections of pain and joy co-exist in this and other “Duplex” poems? How do you feel when you encounter them within yourself?
7. Choose a poem to read out loud. Where can you find rhythmic sound or music in Jericho Brown’s lines? What music or musical traditions does that remind you of? Where does that association take you?
8. Writing in the second person point of view (you) can create distance for the writer and intimacy for the reader. Read “As a Human Being” (p. 6). How does the use of “you” affect your relationship to the poem and its events? Do you think there is a connection between the choice to use “you” and the subject matter of painful family dynamics?
9. In “Dear Whiteness” (p. 40) the speaker personifies and addresses whiteness as a person. What are its traits and behaviors? What are the lies that whiteness tells, and how do they impact the speaker? How do you relate to this poem? How do you think your own racial identity informs how you relate to the poem?
10. Jericho Brown writes as a gay, Black man, and many of the poems in *The Tradition* address experiences of queerness. See, for example, “Duplex” (p. 49), “Trojan” (p. 31), “After Essex Hemphill” (p. 51). Is there a line or poem that expands or complicates how you think about queerness? How does queerness intersect with other themes throughout the collection, such as love, the body, family, violence, etc.?
11. Brown addresses masculinity and social expectations for Black men. Read “The Microscopes” (p.8), “A Young Man” (p. 24), or “The Card Tables” (p. 15). How is masculinity presented in the poem you chose? How do social expectations affect your own gender identity and expression?
12. How do Brown’s poems challenge traditional religious ideas and institutions? Brown has said that writing poems is a way of being closer to God, a form of prayer or worship. Have you had a similar experience with creativity or artistic expression?

13. Read the first poem, "Ganymede" (p.5), a re-telling of the Greek myth where a young prince is abducted from his home by the god Zeus. What do you think the speaker is saying about myth and narrative in this poem? How does a story change based on who is telling it? Why might "rape" not be said when telling the Ganymede myth? Brown writes, "I like the safety" of his version of Ganymede. What stories or myths in U.S. history have made you feel safe when you've heard or told them?
14. Read "Stake" (p. 43). What does the speaker mean by "Someone planted an idea of me"? In what ways does that idea-planting perpetuate anti-Blackness? How do the poem's images of growth complicate this negative "planting"? How does this book, and poetry more broadly, play a role in the movement for Black lives?
15. "Dark" (p. 67) is a poem in which the poet speaks directly to himself. How does the poet seem to feel about himself in this poem? If you were to write a poem speaking to yourself, what would you say?
16. Read the epigraph at the beginning of the book, a quote by poet Mari Evans. What does wholeness mean to you? What do you need to feel whole?
17. Read "Crossing" (p. 62). How do you interpret the journey being described here? When in your life might you relate more to "rising just to find a way towards rest again," and when might you relate more to "more than a conqueror, bigger / than bravery"?
18. Jericho Brown has said that "a poem is a poem because it asks us to reconsider ourselves—what we hold dear, and what we despise. We cannot return to the world unbothered." How do the poems in this book ask you to reconsider your own beliefs? How do they affirm them? What does it mean to live in the world "bothered" or "unbothered"?

Community Agreements

As we read and discuss *The Tradition*, we have the opportunity to listen intently to one another's thoughts and experiences, and it is possible that discussions of trauma might arise. Making collective agreements on how we want to engage in a discussion space can help support every member in a group discussion to feel recognized, heard, and safe to share. Below is a template with ideas for a community agreement created by the Free Library. Before beginning your group discussion, you can tailor this or create your own agreements for shared values, visions for the discussion space, and for how members of the group want to be in relationship with one another.

For more ideas for community agreements and other considerations regarding how to share, listen, and take care of ourselves and each other in spaces of dialogue, take a look at the Anti-Opression Network's "[Safer Space Policy/Community Agreements](#)" resource.



Supplemental Reading, Listening, and Viewing

Fiction:

Another Country by James Baldwin

Speak No Evil by Uzodinma Iweala

Giovanni's Room by James Baldwin

The Color Purple by Alice Walker

The Water Dancer by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi

Song of Solomon by Toni Morrison

Nonfiction - Memoir, Personal Essay, Biography, and Autobiography

Hold Tight Gently: Michael Callen, Essex Hemphill, and the Battlefield of AIDS by Martin Duberman

How We Fight for Our Lives by Saeed Jones

Breathe: A Letter to My Sons by Imani Perry

No Ashes in the Fire: Coming of Age Black and Free in America by Darnell Moore

Heavy: An American Memoir by Kiese Laymon

The Book of Delights by Ross Gay

When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir by Patrisse Khan-Cullors

Nonfiction - Reported/Scholarly:

All About Love by bell hooks

Black Futures by Kimberly Drew and Jenna Wortham

No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Queer Black Studies by E. Patrick Johnson

Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity by C. Riley Snorton

Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective by Kelly Brown Douglas

The Cross and the Lynching Tree by James H. Cone

Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents by Isabel Wilkerson

In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens by Alice Walker

Poetry:

African American Poetry: 250 Years of Struggle and Song, a Library of America Anthology Edited

by Kevin Young

HoodWitch by Faylita Hicks

A Garden for Black Boys: Between the Stages of Soil and Stardust by W.J. Lofton

Morning Haiku by Sonia Sanchez

Collected Poems by Robert Hayden, edited by Frederick Glaysher

Don't Call us Dead: poems by Danez Smith

Fantasia for the man in blue by Tommye Blount

Love Poems by Nikki Giovanni

Revise the Psalm: work celebrating the writing of Gwendolyn Brooks

Just Us: An American Conversation by Claudia Rankine

Postcolonial Love Poem by Natalie Diaz

Native Guard by Natasha Trethewey

When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities by Chen Chen

Directed by Desire by June Jordan

Bestiary by Donika Kelly

Indecency by Justin Phillip Reed

Discipline by Dawn Lundy Martin

Podcasts:

Bookable

The Stacks

Poetry Unbound

On Being with Krista Tippett

1619

The Slowdown with Tracy K. Smith

Strange Fruit: Musings on Politics, Pop Culture, and Black Gay Life

VS with Danez Smith and Franny Choi

Film and Television:

Moonlight

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

Paris is Burning

I Am Not Your Negro

Eyes on the Prize (PBS)

Reconstruction: America After the Civil War (PBS)

Legendary: 30 Years of Philly Ballroom

Tongues Untied

Black is black ain't

Plays:

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom by August Wilson

TopDog/Underdog by Suzan Lori Parks

Appropriate; An Octoroon, Plays by Branden Jacob-Jenkins

Where the Mountain Meets the Sea by Jeff Augustin

The Brother/Sister Plays by Tarell Alvin McCraney

Artists, Works, and Art and Archival Exhibitions:

Titus Kaphar

Kara Walker

Georgia O'Keeffe

Arrested Movement, Anthony Patrick Manieri

Ebony G. Patterson

From Negro Pasts to Afro-Futures: Black Creative Reimaginings, Library Company of Philadelphia

Ralphi Burgess

Jonathan Lyndon Chase: "Big Wash", The Fabric Workshop Museum

Black Joy Archive

avery r. young