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A Form Of Our Own: An Examination of Black Sonnet-Samplers

LaVonna D. Wright

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A FORM OF OUR OWN: AN EXAMINATION OF BLACK SONNET-SAMPLERS

by

LAVONNA WRIGHT

(Under the Direction of Kendra R. Parker)

ABSTRACT

This study responds to the need for understanding and terminology regarding Black poets' engagement with the sonnet form. Referring to sampling strategies in Hip-Hop to analyze Black sonnets, this study disputes limiting ideas about sonnets as ineffective mediums to portray Black narratives and honors strategies maintained in Hip-Hop culture that define Black narrative expression, resistance to assimilation, and social reflection. Black sonnets are an ever-evolving vehicle of resistance to elitist ideas about traditional forms, Black aesthetics, and the ways that poetic strategies can be defined. This study names past and present Black sonneteers' adherence to, remixing in, and rejection of the sonnet as "sonnet-sampling," to show where the Black sonnet has been, where it is, and where it is going as it comes to depict Black aesthetics. Using sonnet-sampling to discuss formally innovative sonnets between twentieth and twenty-first-century poets Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Brooks, Audre Lorde, and Jericho Brown, this study proposes sonnet-sampling as a framework that disengages with previously held beliefs about the sonnet and Black aesthetics, connecting past, present, and future literary innovations to challenge conversations on what African American poetry is, can, and should be.

INDEX WORDS: African American poetry, Sample, Hip-Hop, Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Brooks, Audre Lorde, Jericho Brown, Duplex, Sonnet, Formalism, Black aesthetics

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LAVONNA WRIGHT

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by

LAVONNA WRIGHT

Major Professor:

Kendra R. Parker

Committee:

Hapsatou Wane

Julia Griffin

Electronic Version Approved:

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CHAPTER 1

A [FORM]AL INTRODUCTION: BLK FOLKS SING LITTLE SONGS TOO

questioning con[form]ity: an overview of the sonnet in Black American Art

A poet writes in her own language. A poet writes of her own people, her own history, her own vision, her own room, her own house where she sits at her own table quietly placing one word after another word until she builds a line and a movement and an image and a meaning that somersaults all of these into the singing, the absolutely individual voice of the poet: at liberty. A poet is somebody free. A poet is someone at home.

How should there be Black poets in America?

(Jordan, *The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America*)

How should there be Black poets in America? As a Black poet, I've found myself frozen, unable to write, paralyzed by the fear of not saying what people expected or wanted to hear. Poetry, regardless of its content or form, is the truth; it is what is said in the proverbial room of one's own.¹ Many poets' oeuvres become the homes of their past selves, cultures, and memories. Home should be a safe space to reveal such truth, but must this home be built a particular way? Holding words in only certain forms? About certain life experiences? This question of "how and what Black poets should write?" is prominent among Black poets, critics, scholars, and readers alike. Thinking of Black poetry, one may think of the strident voices from the Black Arts Movement, also known as BAM. Coined by Larry Neal, BAM was a collective Black nationalist movement comprised of Black artists and intellectuals focused on "the outpouring of politically engaged African American art from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s" (Bracey et al. 1). The movement encompassed a "wide range of ideological and aesthetic stances... generally united by a belief in the need for personal and social transformation of African Americans to determine their own political and cultural destiny" (Bracey et al. 1). As Baraka writes in his article "Black

¹ I borrow this phrase from Virginia Woolf's extended essay "A Room of One's Own," published in September 1929. Woolf comments on the absence of women's fiction and general lack of self-expression due to social expectations.

Art,” BAM was collective “in that it had to express a whole people, that it had to come from a whole people, that it had to speak to a whole people” (24). This collectivism contrasted with that of European art due to its difference in value systems, for Black art was (and is—) “An art that spoke of collectivism, collective work, and responsibility as opposed to individualism...” (25). Baraka, as did most BAM-era writers, asserted that Black art was liberated from European art’s cultural values. Under BAM’s theories, Black art was to be an art that valued *kuumba*² —Black artists were to “be creative, rather than imitative. Creative in the sense that it uses our own resources, our own value system, our own history, our own approach, and attitude toward life, rather than imitating the imitators” (26). In defining what their own art looked like and represented, BAM artists’ work became synonymous with the political, a voice of rage and protest, a metaphor for the “weapon in the arsenal of world revolution” (23). While this expression created breakthroughs for the voices of many Black artists, intellectuals, and writers, those who wrote outside of Black aesthetics upheld by BAM, which alluded to syntax or form that was tied to “Western” values and ideas about art, were doubly oppressed under the monolithic principle of one singular Black aesthetic and the need to appease white readers under western, mainstream desires. Since the Black Arts Movement, many Black writers have found liberation in writing back to themselves, their communities, and cultures under the diaspora. Unfortunately, formal innovations of the Black poetic community that do not fit the racial essentialism maintained in BAM theories have been ill-critiqued under the presumption of not representing *the* Black aesthetic. This leaves little room for Black poets to experiment with subject matter, verse, and form in their poetry — particularly traditional forms that we still know, love, and teach today.

² A Swahili word meaning "creativity."

As a Black poet, I did not consider myself “good” or “skilled” enough to write in traditional forms (as though they were for certain privileged people!). The first class of my Master’s program, Introduction to Graduate Studies, was my first experience with serious interrogation of poetic form. The sonnet was the form that housed our poems throughout the semester. This form became the basis for many questions I had regarding forms, such as: “Who tends to write a particular form,” “What does it mean for a form to be traditional,” and “What implications or assumptions are made when a poem is written in or against a traditional form?” I quickly understood that traditional forms equated to Eurocentric ideas about art, art being as it was originally created: “pure,” and no less. As I began to interrogate the nuances of traditional forms, I began to think about Jericho Brown’s collection, *The Tradition* (2019), which I read during the summer of 2020. I was deeply moved by Brown’s interrogation of that which was labeled “tradition,” both in the content of his poems and the forms he writes them in. Throughout the collection, he merges the traditional European sonnet, understood as a love poem, with elements of jazz, blues, and the ghazal, in the self-created form he names the duplex. In his duplex poems, he disrupts the love traditionally seen in the sonnet by detailing his experiences with Blackness, queerness, violence, and disease. In creating a form of his own, Brown answers June Jordan’s question, “How should there be Black poets in America?” responding through his form, “A poet is somebody free. A poet is someone at home” (252). If the sonnet’s stanzas were rooms in a burning house,³ Brown lets them burn and creates a larger foundation from the ashes, showing his truths inherent through his sonnets and duplex poems. Through innovating the

³ I allude to Malcolm X’s words in John Coltrane, of which he famously inquires: “Do you want to integrate in a burning house?” Coltrane and Malcolm were catalysts to the “political and cultural agendas that made BAM such a potent force in the Black Power and Black Liberation Movements” (Bracey, et al., 1). I suggest that Brown chooses not to assimilate but create a room of his own through his innovations with the sonnet.

sonnet, Brown creates his own space and enlarges canonical understandings of Black aesthetics and how they can be presented in Black poetry.

It was not until my first semester of graduate school that I learned Brown was part of a long lineage of Black poets innovating traditional forms, crafting new poetic homes, and sharing their truths. This innovation precedes BAM; In “The Art of the Sonnet,” Stephanie Burt and David Mikics establish that during the Harlem Renaissance⁴ many Black poets who “sought folk, vernacular, or modernist styles for African American experience (such as Langston Hughes) avoided the form” (22). In contrast, poets during this era like Claude McKay, deliberately adhered to the conventions of the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet forms to illuminate the struggles of his community.⁵ Poets like Gwendolyn Brooks innovated the sonnet with other forms to grieve. Some poets like Audre Lorde use the sonnet against itself, crafting poems that formalists may argue are not sonnets at all. Despite its formal and canonical longevity, the sonnet’s conventions have evolved considerably; those who engage with the sonnet must contend with its rules, whether they choose to follow them or change them as needed. For Black poets, the question of racial authenticity makes their relationship to the sonnet even more complex. How could experiences of Black life possibly reside in the sonnet, a thirteenth-century form originating in Sicily, popularized by men like Francesco Petrarca and Shakespeare, known today as the quintessential love poem?⁶ Black poets who write sonnets may feel urged to justify their reasonings for doing so, as a means of authenticating their race. While some poets avoid the form

⁴ A key predecessor movement to BAM, often regarded “as a cautionary tale as much as a beloved parent. They judged the artists of the Renaissance to be insufficiently political, not actively enough engaged with the concerns of working-class African Americans, too dependent on the support of jaded white patrons, and (with the exception of a relative few such as Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Zora Neale Hurston) distant from the culture of the Black masses” (Bracey, et al. 3).

⁵ I discuss McKay’s adherence by close reading “The Harlem Dancer” at length in Chapter 2.

⁶ Chapter 2 provides more in-depth background on the sonnet and details the innovations of the poets previously listed.

for this reason, others use it in its true conventions as a means of reclamation. However, some poets create entirely new meanings, forms, and homes with sonnets. Surely there are terms to describe the ways that Black poets contend with and write in traditional forms like the sonnet?

Innovations born of contentions in art are nothing new to Black artists. Black poets, like many Black artists, have wrestled with scraps and pieces of art left for them. While various groups have similarly wrestled with the sonnet, I found that Black poets have a uniquely adaptive tradition of doing so, one that connects to innovations maintained in other facets like music, yet there was not a term to identify the ways they adhere, adapt, or rebel against its conventions. As I considered these varying interactions, I became aware of Hip-Hop's⁷ significance within Black culture and the Black Arts Movement. In Amiri Baraka's poem "Black Art," he ties the political urgency of Black poetry during BAM to the emergence of Hip-Hop, a movement he defines as "live words... and live flesh and coursing blood." John Bracey et al., note that BAM

demolish[ed] the distinction between popular culture and "high art." It was a major force in introducing the idea that "high" art can be popular in form and content and popular culture can be socially and artistically serious... This change is perhaps most clearly exemplified in hip hop, where the more "conscious" artists publicly associate themselves with Amiri Baraka, Askia Touré, Sonia Sanchez, and other leading Black Arts poets and vice versa in ways that one could not imagine happening between serious poets and popular musicians to that degree before the 1960s... (9)

⁷ When referring to hip-hop as music, I refer to it in the lowercase. The uppercase "Hip-Hop" refers to its significance as a culture, or model, of "(1) repurposing found objects (including colloquial English), (2) rededicating public space (such as sidewalks as dance floors and alleyways as art galleries), (3) redeploing cut-and-paste methodologies (as with record sampling), and (4) rerouting regular cultural narratives (by articulating alternate accounts)" (Heath).

Hip-Hop, like poetry, is an art, a repurposing of language as a means of liberation and resistance. Though there is little consideration of hip-hop strategies in or as Black poetry in the mainstream conversation, more and more scholars are considering rap music's innovations in African American Oral Tradition.⁸ The terms remixing and sampling make up the key methods of vocality and wordplay that Black Hip-Hop artists and rappers engage with. What would it look like to apply these terms as poetic devices for Black sonnets and even hybrid forms? With this in mind, this study seeks to counteract narratives that dismiss Black sonneteers' poetic innovations in a post-BAM poetic context. This study elevates a microcosm of Black sonneteers who reimagine the scope of Black aesthetics in sonnets using a poetic framework⁹ that engages Hip-Hop strategies previously unconsidered in the academy.

[form]ing a name: why “sonnet-sampling” as a poetic framework for Black sonnets?

This study gives a name to Black poets' engagement with the sonnet that reflects their formal expansions and honors strategies maintained in Hip-Hop that define Black narrative expression, resistance to assimilation, and social reflection. This study disputes reductive ideas about Black sonnets: 1) that when adhered to, they are ineffective mediums for Black writers to articulate Black aesthetics and 2) when innovated (or altered from their conventions,) they are no longer engaging with the sonnet's background (thus, no longer art for art's sake). Throughout this thesis, I suggest “sonnet-sampling” as a valid consideration of the innovations found in 20th and 21st Black sonnets. Sampling and other strategies associated with Hip-Hop culture deserve space in African American literary conversations. Scholars like Richard Shusterman articulate

⁸ See, for example, Regina Bradley's *Chronicling Stankonia: The Rise of the Hip Hop South* (2021), Eduardo Navas' *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling* (2012), and Darren Rhym's *Where Do Rappers Come From?: Hip-Hop as a Remixing of the African American Oral Tradition and How it Engaged Three African American Students* (2018).

⁹ By this, I mean to say that this framework resists analytical framework deeply influenced by dominant Black aesthetic approaches.

Hip-Hop's political undermining due to "abusive critiques, acts of censorship, and commercial cooptation" (459). Hip-hop's academic undermining is a facet of the political. As Shusterman proposes, the "aesthetic reasons that discredit hip hop as a legitimate art form"¹⁰ (459) prevent it from being engaged with on poetic terms. Shusterman offers this very important statement: "Rap [and more specifically, hip-hop]... refutes the dogma that concern for form and formal experimentation cannot be found in popular art" (473). When strategies like sampling are accused of not being formally innovative, particularly in Hip-Hop, it is typically due to the "plausible charge that it is just the stealing or copying of already existing songs" (474). I argue sampling is an innovative narrative and rhetorical technique that goes beyond the dichotomy of original versus copied. Even further, I position sampling as a viable means of discussing how Black poets engage with Black history and narrative in their work. Using sampling strategies to describe how Black poets engage with the sonnet, this study postulates that Black sonnets are an ever-evolving vehicle of resistance toward these limiting ideas that undermine and dismiss Black poets' innovations of aesthetics and narratives in traditional forms.

"Sonnet-sampling" is the term I use to encompass the Hip-Hop poetics at play within the Black sonnets examined in this thesis. Sonnet-sampling refers to the myriad ways Black poets have adhered to, rejected, and remixed in the sonnet, either through its form or in the content it houses. "Sampling" succeeds this compound term because sampling encompasses the sublevel strategies of remixing, adhering, and rejecting. In his essay on "The Culture of Hip Hop," Michael Eric Dyson defines sampling as "the grafting of music, voices, and beats from another

¹⁰ Shusterman outlines how rap songs are not even sung, only spoken or chanted. They typically employ neither live musicians nor original music; the soundtrack is instead composed from various cuts (or "samples") of records already made and often well known. Finally, the lyrics seem to be crude and simple-minded, the diction substandard, the rhymes raucous, repetitive, and frequently raunchy. (459) Most of all, critiques on rap that minimize its cultural impact are often based in anti-Black rhetoric.

sonic source onto a rap record. The practice of sampling expresses the impulse to collage that characterizes the best of black musical traditions, particularly jazz and gospel” (67). Shusterman takes a similar stance, writing that sampling engages intergenerational musical and cultural voices as narrative expression and social reflection. Given its connection to jazz, there is little reason not to engage with sampling as a Black poetic device. Sherry Brennan discusses Baraka’s poem “Black Art” and jazz as a site of resistance, writing that the genre had a “distinctly Black sound” due to this unique adaptation of Western instruments, rhythms, and lyrics to the songs of sorrow from enslaved African Americans (300). She contends that the “‘bitter insistence’ by the dominant culture that African Americans could not be white prevented the assimilation of their music-making into that culture and forced them to create a new sound, a sound reflective of their conflicted movements, migrations, and livings” (300). I consider this an early example of sampling; through the sampling of their songs, lives, and stories, Black folks created music that deserved a new name: jazz. Similarly, these models could be applied to the adaptations of contemporary Black poets who sample the forms, musicality, and/or lines from their poetic lineages and adapt to European forms, creating forms and poetic strategies deserving of their own names.

Remixing is more than a form of sampling; it is a discourse, an aesthetic, and an art. Eduardo Navas declares in *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling* that “Remix came about as the result of a long process of experimentation with diverse forms of mechanical recording and reproduction that reached a meta-level in sampling, which in the past relied on direct copying and pasting” (5). He argues that Remix is,

not an actual movement, but a binder—a cultural glue... Remix is more like a virus that has mutated into different forms according to the needs of particular cultures. Remix,

itself, has no form, but is quick to take on any shape and medium. It needs [a] cultural value to be at play; in this sense Remix is parasitical. Remix is meta—always unoriginal.

At the same time, when implemented effectively, it can become a tool of autonomy. (4)

Considering Remix as discourse allows us to engage with it beyond Hip-Hop; considering remixing in poetry can enable scholars to see the cultural values being articulated, questioned, or subverted in various works. Remixing, being a sampling strategy, “challenges the traditional ideal of originality and uniqueness that has long enslaved our conception of art” (461). Using this approach, this study posits remixing¹¹ as a distinctly Black poetic practice that deliberately juxtaposes Western notions of purity in traditional poetic forms, or “art for art’s sake.” Simply put, remixing as a sonnet-sampling strategy liberates Black sonnets from reductive critiques of elitism and connects Black sonneteers to a larger aesthetic and practice in African American cultural traditions. Viewing Black poets’ innovations with remixing in the sonnet offers a new perspective of the form as a vehicle for autonomy against a monolithic “Black aesthetic.” Remix is “framed by the contention of representation and repetition” (5) just as the sonnet is framed by its repeated form. Can both formal strategies create new ways of engaging with traditional forms in contemporary academia?

Positioning Black poets’ ingenuity through sonnet-sampling as a poetic framework honors a tenet of the Black Arts Movement that Larry Neal outlines in his 1968 essay “The Black Arts Movement.” Sonnet-sampling allows Black poets to refute previously held reductive

¹¹ Navas elaborates on the roots of remixing and how it extends beyond music: “I argue that Remix, starting in the nineteenth century, has a solid foundation in capturing sound, complemented with a strong link to capturing images in photography and film... art is a field in which principles of remix have been at play from the very beginning of mechanical reproduction...During the 1970s the concept of sampling became specifically linked to music, and, towards the end of the ‘90s, all forms of media in remix culture. It is the computer that made the latter shift possible. This does not mean that Remix is not informed or intimately linked with other cultural developments; on the contrary, Remix thrives on the relentless combination of all things possible” (6). This context refutes the argument that remix would be inherently inadequate as a poetic framework.

definitions of Black aesthetics, and in turn, creates room for more voices to be read and studied. As Neal proposes, “The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community” (1). This ingenuity binds a wider range of Black voices together to create a larger “little song.” Sonnet-sampling as a poetic, theoretical framework honors the intertextual, archival nature of Black sonnets, recovering the little songs that make up a larger context of Black aesthetics. As such, this thesis studies four sonnet-samplers — Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Audre Lorde, whose works are from the twentieth century, and Jericho Brown, whose work is from the twenty-first century. I begin here in the introduction by discussing the sonnet’s past, its roots, and its tension with BAM’s values and Black aesthetics, specifically addressing the question of whether Black poets invalidate their narratives if they write in sonnets or other standardized poetic forms. Through a close reading of poems from McKay, Brooks, and Lorde, I then illustrate how these sonnet-samplers have adhered to, remixed, or rejected the sonnet in the twentieth century showing how their innovations with sonnet illuminate underrepresented facets of Black narratives, in the form and their historical context. Next, I focus on Brown’s depiction of sonnets in a twenty-first-century context through his collection, *The Tradition*, showing how he intercepts the sonnet’s lineage, making space for new forms and new traditions to evolve from its roots. Finally, I conclude with thoughts on a new legacy for the sonnet: that the form now functions more as an active landscape for past, present, and future Black poets to tell narratives previously underrepresented and expand the width of Black aesthetics as associated with traditional forms.

entering the [form]al conversation: literature review

In conversations about Black poets’ use of traditional forms, like the sonnet, one controversial issue has been whether such forms invalidate the cultural experiences of Black

poets who use them. On one hand, critics like Stephen Henderson suggest that standard forms invalidate the experiences of Black poets because they were not created with them in mind to use. In *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, one of Henderson's definitions of Black Poetry is: "poetry, which is somehow structurally Black, irrespective of authorship" (7). With this assertion, Henderson suggests that poetic structures authenticate a poet's Blackness. I argue that this assertion is not only outdated but problematic, as defining poetry as "structurally" Black inherently creates further grey areas and limitations for Black poets. On the other hand, scholars like William Kelley Woolfitt articulate how Black poets have reimagined and recentered Black dialogue and identity through traditional forms (231). In "'Oh, Catfish and Turnip Greens: Black Oral Traditions in the Poetry of Marilyn Nelson,'" Woolfitt details Marilyn Nelson's incorporations and adaptations of the Black Oral tradition in her poetry¹². Woolfitt posits that Nelson's use of a standard form does not isolate Black voices from the literary discussion, but "place[s] her culture and family stories in a dialogue that extends across many cultures and generations" (231), thus reclaiming the form. His assertion that Nelson "transforms" and "enlivens" the conventions of formal poetry by "infusing her work with the African American oral tradition" (232), echoes similar sentiments on Black formal traditions by other scholars. Even more, his view on Nelson juxtaposes criticism who find standardized language and traditional poetic forms too constraining to Black poets.¹³ Woolfitt articulates that such poets

¹² Throughout the article, he navigates Nelson's use of traditional form and oral tradition in her works, *The Homeplace* (1990) and *The Fields of Praise* (1997).

¹³ Such criticism has been given to Rita Dove, who has been constantly evaluated for her form and content in her poetry oeuvre. Dove has commented on the aesthetics of her work, controversially commenting in an interview with Therese Steffen, "It's so confusing, so complicated, this notion of Black art. The concept is not pure: the insistence on Black art is just a device, a way of establishing territory or generating publicity. It was necessary at one time to underscore that "otherness" in order to get any kind of respect whatsoever, but the insistence on difference also requires one to erect certain walls or obey certain rules all of which [are] anathema to the artist. (108)." While I agree with Dove's perspective on the restrictive nature of validating "Black art" by certain expectations, I disagree with her notion that Black art is "just a device" or a means of generating publicity. This stance is just as reductive as

who write disconnected from these ideas and forms risk “losing [their] sense of cultural responsibility” (243). I ultimately agree with Woolfitt’s position; while forms can come to represent a particular idea — for example, the sonnet’s association with love — the content evolves with the needs and issues of its current audience. Black poets who sonnet-sample advance this evolution; Sonnet-sampling offers Black poets the ability to reimagine Black aesthetics in the context of a traditional, Eurocentric form.

Another facet of this argument is that Black poets writing in the sonnet can become constrained by its Eurocentric aesthetics. Scholars like David Caplan argue that some poets believe that traditional forms pigeonhole a poet into writing in a particular way or cannot “express contemporary existence” (5). The sonnet became the vehicle for Black Modernist writers to experiment with form and their narratives, as Timo Müller discusses in “The Vernacular Sonnet and the Afro-Modernist Project.” Müller reasserts Burt and Mikics’ definition of the sonnet, positing that the thirteenth-century Italian form has “been associated with Hegelian dialectic argumentation” (76), seemingly standing in direct opposition to Black vernacular speech. Müller describes how New Modernists of the 1930s desired experimental approaches to writing and a “unified tradition to extend or reject” (75). According to Müller, the sonnet allowed for the complications between the individual Black poet’s vernacular and the “European genre tradition” (77) to exist, ultimately reinventing the form altogether. Müller lists Langston Hughes’ success with the form to contain the blues that Hughes knew, not that which fit “expectations of an ethnically mixed, culturally educated audience” (77). This example shows

Henderson’s because it ignores the values of community and political advancement inherent to BAM’s cause. As N.S. Bonne articulates, “. . . her inability to negotiate important political movements from within, as well as her refusal to address current racial/political issues, are significant political drawbacks” (72). Dove unfortunately echoes the sentiments of the hypothetical Black poet in Hughes’ “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” Hughes criticizes the hypothetical Black poet who says, “I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet,” as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world.”

one of many ways that the sonnet form allows Black poets to share their distinctively Black experiences. Hughes, like Nelson, can remix the sonnet form, adapting the formal framework as a vehicle to share his narrative.

When it comes to Black aesthetics, most artists agree that Black aesthetics cannot reflect a monolithic experience, that plural Black aesthetics reflect varying, multifaceted, non-demarcated fusions of outlooks, lived experiences, and perspectives on and about Blackness. Where this agreement usually ends, however, is on considerations of what truths reflect Black aesthetics and how they should be conveyed in art. To engage with this, one must assess the influences of Black artists before BAM that led to the development of a Black aesthetic. The Harlem Renaissance, beginning in the 1920s and ending in the late 1930s, is undeniably one of these influences. Langston Hughes, a prominent leader of the Harlem Renaissance, called attention to the concerns of the movement, its celebration of Black American life, and the conflicting “urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible” (Hughes). This urge towards whiteness is the Racial Mountain referred to in his essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” In this piece, Hughes argues against Black artists' desires for white respectability and urges them to unlearn the racist diminishment of jazz, Black self-portraits, folk and praise songs, and Black self-expression¹⁴. This “racial individuality... heritage of rhythm and warmth, and ... incongruous humor” (Hughes) allude to the Black aesthetic theorized by the Black Arts Movement a few decades later.

¹⁴ Hughes' assertion is a reaction to George S. Schuyler's “The Negro-Art Hokum.” (1926) In this piece, Schuyler asserts, “your American Negro is just plain American. Negroes and whites from the same localities in this country talk, think, and act about the same... the common notion that the black American is so “different” from his white neighbor has gained wide currency.”

BAM leaders considered the Harlem Renaissance a failure due to its lack of political directness. The conception of the Black aesthetic offered a hopeful solution. Following Hughes' essay, the main tenet of the Black aesthetic urges African Americans to define the world on their terms, not influenced by white, Western aesthetics. Etheridge Knight, a poet of the BAM, makes clear the criteria of a Black aesthetic, declaring:

The Black artist must create new forms and new values, sing new songs (or purify old ones); and along with other Black authorities, he must create a new history, new symbols, myths, and legends (and purify old ones by fire). And the Black artist, in creating his own aesthetic, must be accountable for it only to the Black people. (qtd. in Neal 2)

From this statement, there are no set list criteria for a Black aesthetic, only that it is created new, untethered to Western values, by the Black artist for a Black audience. However, the “he/him”¹⁵ pronouns Knight employs bring attention to the chauvinism inherent in the movement.

Regarding the Black aesthetic, Larry Neal called for “an African-American cultural tradition... the destruction of the white thing...” (1). Unfortunately, BAM's values were often sullied by a thread of misogyny and heterosexism that contradicted the very same destruction of the white, Western gaze it called for. Like the Harlem Renaissance, despite its successes in uniting many African American creatives, BAM failed to uplift a Black aesthetic that was inclusive of women and queer voices in Black aesthetics. Evie Shockley fights these singular narratives of Black aesthetics and innovation in her work, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry*. Her text positions the epic poems of Gwendolyn Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, and Harriette Mullen as innovative in their engendering polyvocality, revisionary to the possibilities of the epic form, and useful social critiques. She also considers the work of

¹⁵ We also see this in Hughes' essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.”

Anne Spencer, Ed Roberson, and Will Alexander, focusing on their preoccupation with nature “rather than more ‘recognizably Black’ topics and settings (such as urban neighborhood, street culture, or overt political protest)” (20) as explorations of Black aesthetics beyond racially constricted spaces and European traditions. Evie Shockley denies that Black aesthetic is a single thing, proposing that scholars

think of not [of] “a Black aesthetic or the Black aesthetic” but of “Black aesthetics,” plural: a multifarious, contingent, nondelimited complex of strategies that African American writers may use to negotiate gaps or conflicts between their artistic goals and the operation of race in the production, dissemination, and reception of their writing. (9)

This study operates on Shockley’s proposal, that Black aesthetics include complex strategies that could never be honored by a singular Black aesthetic. Like Shockley, I am interested in the formal experimentation of African American poets that have been excluded from and uninterrogated in the scholarly conversation. Contemporary scholars, critics, writers, and poets now have the responsibility and opportunity to reframe the ways Black aesthetics are understood and engaged with. It is in this regard that this study proposes and investigates sonnet-sampling as a method of engaging with Black aesthetics.

While this scholarship provides much-needed context on the Black Arts Movement, its values that have limited Black poets, and these poets’ subsequent resistance through innovating the sonnet and expanding Black aesthetics, I enter the academic conversation by giving this engagement a name that honors cultural strategies of innovation already inherent to Black culture; engaging with Hip-Hop rhetoric illuminates the omnipresent strategies inherent to Black poets’ innovations in sonnets. Viewing forms as legacies is important in examining their value to Black poetry, especially with the debate that has existed regarding Black Art post-BAM. As the

sonnet's legacy continues to evolve, my interrogation aims to widen the ways it has been known and studied in the academy. This work illuminates the revolutionary methods by which Black poets have expanded narratives of Black aesthetics in designated traditional forms.

plat[forms] and per[form]ances: chapter previews

This study aims to expand the terminology and critical conversation defining innovations to sonnets by Black sonneteers. It does so through the close reading of poems from four Black poets, three from the twentieth and one from the twenty-first century, where I position their engagement as sonnet-sampling. Whether they adhere to formal conventions, are remixed with other forms, made almost unrecognizable, or formally revised, I argue that the sonnet, too, is a valid vehicle for Black narratives and aesthetics.

This introductory chapter, “a [form]al introduction,” offers an overview of the sonnet's history, how Black poets have written in and against it, the question of Black aesthetics, and the context of the Black Arts Movement's influence on Black poets today. As I speculate about the ways Black sonneteers' innovations are critically analyzed and influenced by BAM aesthetics, I move from setting up this term in my introduction to applying it in my second chapter, “plat[form]s and power: a brief lineage of sonnet-samplers.” Chapter two offers a close reading of three Black poets who adhere to, remix, and reject the sonnet. Throughout my reading, I demonstrate how these poets reimagine the sonnet through their representation of Black narratives in the form, expanding BAM-era ideas about a singular Black aesthetic. I provide close readings of Claude McKay's “The Harlem Dancer,” Gwendolyn Brooks' “the sonnet-ballad,” and Audre Lorde's “Now” arguing that they reject, remix, and adhere to the sonnets' conventions in ways that deny notions of the sonnet as inhospitable for Black narrative, aesthetics, and innovation. In short, these poets represent a few of the first sonnet-samplers who

expand canonical understandings of Black sonnets and aesthetics, creating the platform for twenty-first-century poets like Jericho Brown to do the same. Overall, this chapter is designed to tie Brown to a literary ancestry lineage of Black poets reimagining the sonnet, or sonnet-sampling. As I conclude my examination of each poet's sonnet-sampling, I explore how Brown's sonnet-sampling is an evolution of their ingenuity. I explore this at length in my third chapter, "a [form] of his own: sonnet-sampling as the new tradition in Jericho Brown's *The Tradition*." This chapter provides close readings of several sonnets and duplex poems from Brown's collection, demonstrating where the sonnet's legacy is going and what it comes to mean in a present-day Black context. First, I discuss Brown's rejection, adherence, and remixing of the sonnet's conventions in "The Tradition" "The Water Lilies," and "The Card Tables." I contextualize this simultaneous engagement as sonnet-sampling. Then, I move to a discussion of his five duplex poems, positing how he deprioritizes the sonnet and uplifts his narrative and identities via the facets of his form — blues, sonnet, and ghazal. I conclude by synthesizing his poems with those of McKay, Brooks, and Lorde. My fourth and concluding chapter, "a form is a gesture toward home," summarizes the key points of my thesis. This conclusion asserts the need for Black aesthetics to be reimagined and re-details the implications of using remix as a poetic strategy.

Black poets have and continue to expand majority understandings of how form informs aesthetics, stories, and craft. These rhetorical innovations and strategies have not been given their due. Hip-Hop culture's role in how Black poets rhetorically reimagine aesthetics and forms has not been given enough critical discourse. This project postulates the terms desperately needed to articulate how Black contemporary poets receive the sonnet, opening room for further discussion on other traditional forms. This thesis sheds necessary light on the ingenuity of Black poets and how they combat previously held reductive, elitist ideas about the "purity" of traditional forms

and narrow understandings of Black aesthetics. If poets are meant to “tell the truth all the damn time” (Jackson), it is evident that these writers reveal the fullest extent of their truths through their sonnet-sampling.

CHAPTER 2

PLAT[FORM]S AND POWER: EXPLORING A BRIEF LINEAGE OF SONNET-SAMPLERS

Poetic forms carry the burdens of their legacies. Before we even read a sonnet, we assume that it's about love, and more specifically, a man's unrequited love of a woman. The sonnet comes with baggage—legacies of “lover boys” like Francesco Petrarca, more commonly known as Petrarch, the earliest major practitioner of the sonnet, and William Shakespeare, known for his controversial romantic sonnets. These are the writers who are usually thought of and taught when discussing sonnets. While a poetic form's history shapes the way we value it and its writers, it also creates stated or unstated assumptions about the necessary identities of its writers. Particularly, the sonnet's previously held legacy is fraught with such assumptions due to its literary history — that sonnets are usually for and about straight, white men, and that these are the primary narratives it can contain. For Black poets, the sonnet has become an invitation to present new narratives through formal devices, rhyme schemes, and thematic elements. Despite these new legacies, Black sonneteers still contend with narrow ideas about racial authenticity in their poems. What set of standards determines whether one's sonnet remains racially aligned, i.e. “Black enough?” Moreover, Black poets' innovations with formal traditions are often overlooked due to the focus on racial authenticity. Evie Shockley interrogates these notions in *Renegade Poetics*, where she argues that Black poets who write in formal traditions, like the epic, are not regarded as innovative poets due to the critically constrictive emphasis on authenticating Black essentialism in their poems. In other words, due to BAM-esque perspectives that Black poems must signal Blackness (which the sonnet and epic would inherently defy due to their literary backgrounds, subjects, and themes), innovations by poets in traditional forms are not celebrated; instead, they are critiqued for abandoning the cause. Black poets who sonnet-sample use the

form as a platform to empower, transgressing the boundaries of the sonnet and engaging with the new possibilities offered by its constraints.

This chapter examines the adherence to, remixing, and rejection of the sonnet as employed by Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Audre Lorde. I employ the term sonnet-sampling to refer to the sampling strategies that these poets use. This chapter focuses on their poetic remixing while considering their simultaneous adherence and rejection. Sonnet-sampling is the term I use to frame the poetics at play within the sonnets studied. By sonnet-sampling, I refer to the sampling of sonnet conventions — 14 lines, Italian or English rhyme scheme, an unrequited romantic interest, and a volta, for example — to expand, complicate, and change the subject, theme, or narrative traditionally evoked by the sonnet. “Sampling” makes up this compound term because it encompasses the remixing, cutting, and mixing seen in their adherence and rejection¹⁶. Moving chronologically among their works, I will consider Claude McKay’s “The Harlem Dancer” (1922), Gwendolyn Brooks’ “the sonnet ballad” (1972), and Audre Lorde’s “Now” (1974). My examination of these poems offers only a brief range of twentieth-century Black poets’ use of the sonnet; nonetheless, it should affirm the innovations of these poets, often unrecognized in approaches influenced by BAM-era definitions of Black aesthetics.

the literary ancestry

¹⁶ Specifically, I use the term “remixing” in my discussion of Gwendolyn Brooks’ “the sonnet-ballad” to discuss her sonnet-sampling. Throughout my study, I refer to the remixing strategies of cutting and mixing. Shusterman refers to cutting as fragmentation, “dismembering [...] (and rapping over) old works to create new ones, dismantling the prepackaged and wearily familiar into something stimulatingly different” (462). I use “cutting” in the context of dismembering conventions of the sonnet and the ballad in my analysis. Mixing, as I refer to in Brooks’ section stems from the technique “scratch mixing” which refers to the combining, “overlaying or mixing certain sounds from one record with those of another already playing” (462). In my analysis, I use “mixing” to refer to the literal mixing of more subtle conventions with those more canonically apparent in the poem.

The sonnet is undeniably a form of tradition. Scholars and writers alike readily agree that the form inspires poets to question their relationship to formalism. The ever-present question remains: Do the tight form and conventions of the sonnet limit a poet's agency and voice? Perhaps it depends on the poet's background. Surveying the "single consistent method" (61), of several American sonneteers of the 1920s in "The American Sonnet Community in the Early 1920s: The Alternative Evolution," Paul Munn articulates the sonnet as an "open ludic space" (62) for poets to contemplate their perspectives with the sonnet's formal history. The anti-formalist use of the sonnet is an extended tradition of its own, but Munn's study focuses on a created community of sonneteers who confidently used the sonnet's method "to create original personae and perspectives enriched by their relationship to sonnet tradition" (63). The sonnet's popularity at the time was due to its ability to house universal narratives of love or longing. Munn comments that "the early 1920s would add African Americans, women expressing homoerotic longing, and writers committed to disrupting or altering the sonnet form, among others" (60). While the sonnet's formal reputation was disdained by writers like Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, Munn illustrates that modernist sonneteers create more space for possibility in considering their antiformalist sonnets to sonnet traditions. While more comprehensive surveys of sonneteers of various times, races, regions, and more could explore the ways that the sonnet's history and form engage with poets' narratives and identities, I choose to focus on the Black poet's space to situate cultural anxieties about Black aesthetics and its potential resolutions for future Black sonneteers.

Despite the anti-formalist usage of sonnets by several poets across literary milieu, a few scholars maintain that a poet's agency remains imposed on by the sonnet's past voices. William Carlos Williams concludes his essay, "The Poem as a Field of Action," by arguing that the

sonnet is “a form which does not admit of the slightest structural change in its composition” (1954). Williams asserts that the form receives the agency of its user, making them bound to its formal composition. However, it is not the form that does not admit to change, but the exclusionary conventions attributed to certain forms. One’s defiance of these conventions creates space for structural, cultural, and political change. Shockley discusses, for example, the exclusionary norms of the epic, whose hero and poet is often male of European descent, and how Gwendolyn Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, and Harryette Mullen’s structural changes to their epics’ heroes create “polyvocality,” or the “extent to which language, tone, diction, form, and other stylistic choices generate the effect of multiplicity in a single speaker’s voice or create space for a number of different speakers” (17).¹⁷ I find polyvocality connected to Geneva Smitherman’s point of sampling —

As a rhetorical strategy, sampling is a kind of structural signifyin, similar to what Henry Louis Gates (1988) and others have shown that contemporary Black writers, such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and others are doing: They are indirectly commenting on the work of earlier Black writers within the narrative structure of their own literary productions. The sampling of rappers thus represents a conscious preoccupation with artistic continuity and connection to Black cultural roots. (15-6)

Regarding the sonnet, my view is that the form has expanded and become more rooted in this tradition of formal change. Black poets have responded to the past voices of the sonnet by expanding the subject even further¹⁸, centering underrepresented facets of Black aesthetics in

¹⁷ In other words, the choices of Brooks, Sanchez, and Mullen to operate within the epic allow them to speak to various readers of various genders, races, and backgrounds, like how Black women and nonbinary persons must speak “across differences to survive” (18).

¹⁸ Further, because early 19th century poets also contributed formal innovations to the sonnet. Wordsworth’s “On Westminster Bridge” or Shelley’s “Ozymandias” do not center the traditional meditations of love and longing, but instead nature’s generous beauty or power’s ephemerality.

their work. Through chronologically close reading McKay's "The Harlem Dancer," Brooks' "the sonnet ballad," and Lorde's "Now," I present a microcosm of this tradition of Black poets' sonnet-sampling, illuminating facets of the Black experience, widening the parameters of Black aesthetics, and establishing a literary ancestry for poets like Brown to do the same.

I. adhering to the sonnet: Claude McKay's "The Harlem Dancer"

In his essay, "The Negro-Art Hokum," George S. Schuyler posits that Claude McKay, like several other African American writers, "reveals the psychology and culture of [his] environment — their color is incidental." His theory pushed the idea of "Black" art being no more than art that was affected by nationality, arguing that differentiating art because of one's race perpetuated stereotypes about Black Americans.¹⁹ Langston Hughes responded to these reductive claims in his thesis on Black art, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," arguing against respectability—

when he chooses to touch on the relations between Negroes and whites in this country, with their innumerable overtones and undertones, surely, and especially for literature and the drama, there is an inexhaustible supply of themes at hand. To these the Negro artist can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears. (Hughes)

Claude McKay, a Jamaican American poet, writes in the middle of these tensions during the Harlem Renaissance. In his 1917 poem, "The Harlem Dancer," McKay deliberately adheres to

¹⁹ Schuyler writes: "Because a few writers with a paucity of themes have seized upon imbecilities of the Negro rustics and clowns and palmed them off as authentic and characteristic Aframerican behavior, the common notion that the black American is so "different" from his white neighbor has gained wide currency. The mere mention of the word "Negro" conjures up in the average white American's mind a composite stereotype of Bert Williams, Aunt Jemima, Uncle Tom, Jack Johnson, Florian Slappey, and the various monstrosities scrawled by the cartoonists."

the neat and beautiful conciseness of the sonnet to encapsulate a Black woman's performance and the perceptions of the narrator and audience. McKay's poem was among the first of the movement and illustrates the woman receiving the spectatorial gaze of a youthful audience and anonymous narrator. As McKay illustrates a microcosm of Harlem life for a Black female performer, his adherence to sonnet conventions creates a tension between the beauty of her art and the exploitative, dehumanization that she truly feels. This adherence creates a tension mirroring that of Black artists simultaneously creating in and against a white gaze.

The fourteen lines and rhyme scheme of a sonnet are prominent features of the form; McKay's use of the Shakespearean rhyme scheme²⁰ emulates the dancer's performance and reveals a subtle restraint that she must conform to and display. The rhyme scheme at times creates dissonance within the poem, such as that between "prostitutes" and "flutes," which creates a dichotomy between the perceived elegance of the instruments and the perceived profaneness of the dancers. Despite this contrast, the dancer remains able to perform with grace for her audience. This audience of "youths and young prostitutes" is connected through alliteration, /y/, and assonance, /ou/ and /u/, hinting towards the speaker and dancer's alienation from them. Contrast heavily influences the poem, such as the alliterative "blended flutes / Blown by black players." The hard alliteration of "b" and the flowing air sound associated with the flutes juxtapose one another in a way that emphasizes the Blackness of the players; they perform without receiving as much regard as potential white flute players, much like the Harlem dancer.

²⁰ This structure is comprised of three quatrains, four-line stanzas, and a concluding couplet, two-line stanzas, rhyming abab cdcd efef gg. The volta in this form is usually in the couplet, often presenting a sharper conclusion to the end of a poem.

The rich description is initially held by iambic pentameter²¹ becomes disrupted in the last line of the first quatrain:

Applauding youths laughed with young prostitutes
 And watched her perfect, half-clothed body sway;
 Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes
 Blown by Black players upon a picnic day.

The meter disrupted by “laughed with” illuminates the audience’s disruption to the dancer’s art. Her performance, though beautiful, is overshadowed by the atmosphere of lust and commodification. The consonance created by the “s” sounds in “/S/he /s/ang and dan/c/ed on gra/c/efully and calm” emulate the smoothness of her song and dance, softening the hard “b” alliteration from the former line. In the middle of this quatrain, the speaker directly addresses his²² perspective, using the metaphor to compare her to a “proudly-swaying palm / Grown lovelier for passing through a storm.” Alluding to the storm, the speaker ends the second quatrain with a growing tension contained in the perfect abab cdcd rhyme so quintessential to the Shakespearean sonnet. The final quatrain furthers her appearance, as the speaker itemizes her “swarthy neck” and “Black shiny curls” illuminating her Black features that would otherwise not be celebrated. The iambic pentameter is especially disrupted yet again in the rest of the quatrain

black shiny curls
 Luxuriant fell; and tossing coins in praise,
 The wine-flushed, bold-eyed boys, and even the girls,
 Devoured her shape with eager, passionate gaze.

²¹ Pentameter refers to a line made of five feet. An iamb is a metrical foot with an unstressed and stressed syllable. Accordingly, iambic pentameter is a meter in which a line has ten syllables following an unstressed, stressed, unstressed pattern when recited.

²² Because of McKay’s adherence to the traditional sonnet form, a male speaker/gaze is implied here.

This three-syllable interruption, “passionate,” in the sonnet’s meter emphasizes the audience’s commodification. This Harlem dancer becomes their possession; she loses agency of her dance. The dancer feeds her façade to the audience; the narrator alone knows the truth: “But looking at her falsely-smiling face, / I knew herself was not in that strange place” (14). This couplet, metrically correct in terms of the Shakespearean sonnet, blurs the line between the poem’s sense of completion, and the obscure fates and identities of the speaker and performer.

McKay’s portrayal of the unnamed Black performer bears resemblance to Petrarch’s unnamed unrequited love, Laura,²³ famously the muse of his sonnets. In adhering to this sonnet convention, McKay illuminates the dark cultural underbelly and predatorial dehumanization and exploitation of people like the dancer who were Black, women, and artists; those whose narratives were lesser canonized in the Harlem Renaissance. The performer is itemized completely in her “half-clothed body,” voice like “blended flutes / Blown by Black players”, palm-like form, swarthy neck, and “black shiny curls,” before we are given her “falsely-smiling face.” The dancer and her environment clash as the juxtaposition between the alliteration and metaphors within the poem magnify this tension. The dancer’s “perfect, half-clothed body” sways for an audience that objectifies and consumes her, as the speaker observes intoxicated “boys” and “even the girls²⁴” devouring her. The appositive “even the girls” disrupts the iambic pentameter, disrupting the dancer’s balance and nodding to the lack of power she maintains even among female audience members. Through his adherence to the sonnet’s themes, McKay

²³ Speculated to be Laure de Noves (1310-1348), this woman from Avignon was speculated to have already been married to Count Hugues de Sade. Laura “never gave in to Petrarch’s wishes for this reason, and none of Petrarch’s seductions worked on her” (Mohammadi 744). Perhaps, this author could consider that she simply may have not felt the same way.

²⁴ The speaker’s inclusion of “even” implies that the girls’ consumption of the dancer queers the male gaze, or the traditional Petrarch’s gaze on Laura. Now, the Harlem Dancer objectified by a male and female gaze. This syntax comments on a conflict at play that perhaps McKay did not intend; Black women cannot fit into the heteronormative view of Laura.

positions his audience to have a critical eye not only on the Harlem Renaissance culture but the legacy of love in the sonnet. McKay subverts Laura's "mysterious presence" that eternally brought Petrarch into the poetic limelight (none to her benefit) into a story of a woman who is itemized and commodified into many strange places. Though he celebrates the Harlem Dancer's beauty, much as Petrarch does to Laura, McKay presents melancholia typically dismissed in examinations of the Harlem Renaissance. Many Black women artists like the Harlem Dancer were muses for the movement but never given their due. This sonnet offers a rare narrative for these artists. McKay's work advocates for those exploited, dehumanized, and marginalized for the sake of art, all while adhering to the sonnet's form.

In his introduction to "The Poetry of Petrarch," David Young writes that "[Laura] did not choose to become the object of a famous poet's rapturous attention but having been cast in that role she handled it with grace and thoughtfulness" (xxv). McKay's "The Harlem Dancer" calls us to consider all of the "Lauras" of the Harlem Renaissance who handled such roles with falsely smiling faces. McKay's adherence samples the conventions of the sonnet to grant Laura empathy previously unconsidered. More urgently, McKay grants a platform for Black women performers in the Harlem Renaissance to be seen and humanized. In some ways, McKay's adherence to the sonnet remixes the form, reviving it as a vehicle for a new subject and a necessary social commentary. Though less discussed in the canon, Black women poets also played an integral role in evolving the sonnet, remixing it to broaden the subject. The exploration of Gwendolyn Brooks' "the sonnet-ballad" illuminates a prime example of this formal innovation.

II. remixing the sonnet: Gwendolyn Brooks' "the sonnet-ballad"

In an interview with Hannes Liechti and Theresa Beyer, Eduardo Navas defines Remixing as "specific forms of expression using pre-existing sources (sound, image, text) to

develop work that may be considered derivative while also gaining autonomy” (Norient). Abigail De Kosnik asserts that during the second half of the 1980s, groups Public Enemy, Eric B. & Rakim, Boogie Down Productions, N.W.A., the Beastie Boys, De La Soul, and Run-D.M.C. brought the melodies and rhythms constructed from copying, cutting, and mixing to popular aesthetic experience (156-57). Considering these strategies in remixing — copying, cutting, and mixing — Black poetry challenges the platforming of “originality and uniqueness that has long enslaved our conception[s] of art” (Shusterman 461). In “the sonnet-ballad,” from her 1949 book *Annie Allen*, Gwendolyn Brooks remixes conventions of the sonnet and the ballad to portray a woman’s lamentation over her lover lost at war. Her remixing subverts the subjects traditional to the sonnet: the speaker is a Black woman, and her lover, though not unrequited, is male and suddenly lost. This was especially innovative for her time due to BAM-era expectations of Black art’s function. As Barbara Christian in “The Race for Theory” articulates,

the Black Arts Movement tried to create black literary theory and in doing so became prescriptive. My fear is that when theory is not rooted in practice, it becomes prescriptive, exclusive, elitish. An example of this prescriptiveness is the approach the black arts movement took toward language...Writers were told that writing love poems was not being black. (74)

Brooks writes against this prescriptiveness, remixing forms to show that stories of love and loss were just as valuable to BAM’s mission. Her remixing of the sonnet’s subject, casting this Petrarch as Black and woman, represents narratives of love traditionally unassociated with the sonnet and makes room for stories of love and grief to be considered in Black aesthetics during her time.

From the poem's title, "the sonnet-ballad," Brooks' foregrounds her remixing of the sonnet and ballad's conventions as the cornerstone of the poem. In other words, the remixed conventions of the sonnet and the ballad at play complicate and emphasize the poem's content. Most apparent is the mixing of new rhyme schemes. Though Brooks maintains the 14 lines of the sonnet, she follows a rhyme scheme that cuts conventions of Spenserian sonnets. The first two quatrains follow a Spenserian rhyme scheme, abab bcbc:

Oh mother, mother, where is happiness?
 They took my lover's tallness off to war,
 Left me lamenting. Now I cannot guess
 What I can use an empty heart-cup for. (Brooks)

This rhyme scheme thus creates the expectation for the speaker to find the happiness, or maintain the rhyme scheme, she inquires of by the end of the forthcoming sestet. In the second quatrain, the speaker laments:

He won't be coming back here any more.
 Some day the war will end, but, oh, I knew
 When he went walking grandly out that door
 That my sweet love would have to be untrue.

Where the sestet begins, however, at the third quatrain, she cuts the original rhyme and mixes in the new rhymes, dede:

Would have to be untrue. Would have to court
 Coquettish death, whose impudent and strange
 Possessive arms and beauty (of a sort)
 Can make a hard man hesitate — and change.

These rhymes end the speaker's reliance on a previous rhyme to enter the next quatrain, foreshadowing the foreboding presence of "Coquettish death." Conversely, the "d" and "b" end-rhymes carry the assonance of the "o" sound present in the two previous quatrains: "w/a/r, f/o/r, m/o/re, d/oo/r, c/ou/rt," and "s/o/rt." This mimics the incremental repetitions often found in ballad poems. This convention mixed with the sonnet-like rhyme scheme emulates the inconsistency and repetitiveness that the woman has gotten used to. Ending with the couplets traditional to the Shakespearean sonnet and perfectly maintained iambic pentameter, Brooks' speaker grapples for closure that is left unanswered. She finalizes the poem with a Shakespearean couplet, the final line repeating the first. Ending the Spenserian sonnet's conventions with an ambiguous rhyme scheme and a Shakespearean couplet, Brooks mirrors the melancholy longing of Petrarch, whose love went unreceived by Laura. Even more, this unnamed speaker has received reciprocated love. This makes the poem tragic, contrasting Petrarch's unrequited love while echoing experiences expressed in Shakespeare's sonnets²⁵.

In light of the romance in "the sonnet-ballad," we must not overlook how Brooks remixes the romantic narrative throughout the poem, mixing the conventional theme of unrequited love with the familial. The speaker in "the sonnet-ballad" begins the poem with a question to her mother, "Oh mother, mother, where is happiness?" (1) This question functions as an invocation to a muse. Whereas sonnets' muses were traditionally romantic, Brooks expands the romantic muse to one of familial love and security, a theme characteristic of ballads²⁶. As we move into the second line, the speaker moves away from the ambiguous happiness and introduces two new identities: "They" and her lover. The vulnerability established in the beginning is emphasized in

²⁵ See Shakespeare's "Sonnet 87:" Shakespeare's speaker laments of once having one's love, but losing it, just as Brooks' speaker does.

²⁶ See Roger Quilter's "Barbara Allen," Scottish ballad "Edward, Edward," and 17th-century ballad "Lord Randall."

the lack of agency that her lover had, being taken by the anonymous “they.” Brooks’ addition of these two forces, “they” and “Coquettish death” complicates the traditional “fate” that removes Laura from Petrarch’s reach. Even more, she remixes who is traditionally itemized, replacing Laura with her male lover; it is her “lover’s tallness” that is taken to war. This itemization reduces her lover to his appearance, taking away from his agency like the traditional Laura’s. Brooks’ subversion of the typical gender roles calls into question the types of love seen here. While Petrarch grieves a love he never received, Brooks’ speaker grieves a love she’s lost to war, to “Them,” and to “Coquettish death.” Her reader feels sympathy for the speaker that they may not feel for Petrarch, due to her being victimized by war and death. These forces are more complex and more tangible to her intended audience than Laura’s rejection. If we accept Navas’ assertion, that Remix illuminates an autonomy that its pre-existing sources²⁷ may not have revealed, then we can understand Brooks’ remixing in “the sonnet-ballad” offers narrative autonomy to grieving Black women who must grieve their loves lost after the years of World War II.

Brooks’ subversions “parody” the sonnet, “heighten[ing] the original’s chief characteristics or distort[ing] them to deflate the original [form’s] pomposity” (Gery 46), and by deflating the pomposity of the form, Brooks elevates African American women’s narratives typically undiscussed in the sonnet’s portrayals of love and grief, thus remixing, and expanding the form’s traditional romantic narrative subject. Brooks relies on the authority of the sonnet and ballad to inform her allegory; but her remixed form of “the sonnet-ballad” exposes the ideologies associated with unrequited love, spoken poetry, and Black narrativizing. Shusterman presents

²⁷ By this, I mean the sources remixed to create something new — the sources in their original forms. IN this case, Brooks’ remixing of the sonnet and ballad illuminate an autonomy for Black women to share stories of love and loss.

remixing strategies as “the challenging of modernist notions of aesthetic autonomy and artistic purity, and an emphasis on the localized and temporal rather than the putatively universal and eternal” (460). Brooks’ remixing in “the sonnet-ballad” challenges the sonnet’s aesthetic autonomy to provide a space for stories of Black love and grief to be, rejecting their minimization within BAM-era Black aesthetics. Her reconsideration of these localized and temporal stories gives narratives to those narrative-less during the Black Arts Movement.

III. rejecting the sonnet: Audre Lorde’s “Now”

In her essay, “Poetry is Not a Luxury” self-described Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, and poet Audre Lorde famously articulates, “Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (372). Lorde’s ethos concerned rejecting the marginalization of those othered in society, specifically Black, LGBTQ+, and intersecting communities. Though she was known as a key figure in BAM, she was deeply critical of its rigid views of Blackness. While these delineations allowed BAM to be successful as a mobilized political unit, it excluded many Black women who were cast away but wanted to contribute to the cause. Lorde details her experience in *Sister Outsider*,

Over and over again in the 60s, I was asked to justify my existence and my work, because I was a woman, because I was a Lesbian, because I was not a separatist, because some piece of me was not acceptable. Not because of my work, but because of my identity. I had to learn to hold on to all the parts of me that served me, in spite of the pressure to express only one to the exclusion of all others. (143)

Her work called for revolution, and her 1974 poem, “Now” is well known for not only its blatant call for action but the refined concision with which it does so. I find this poem, standing in at 31 words long, one of Lorde’s most concisely powerful poems. Further related to this thesis,

Lorde's "Now" offers perspective on the lengths of poetic innovation celebrated in formal rejection. Her first published poem, "Spring"²⁸ (1951) bears a stark contrast to her 1974, "Now." Unlike her debut sonnet, "Now" blatantly defies the sonnet to the point of being arguably an anti-sonnet. Through her rejection of the sonnet form, Lorde rejects the rigid boundaries of Black aesthetics and Blackness presented by BAM.

Lorde's blatant rejection of a sonnet's traditional rhyme scheme, subject matter, and meter emulate society's, and specifically BAM's, rejection of her being. This poem is about love, though not explicitly. At the core of her identity is the first "quatrain:"

Woman power

is

Black power

Is (121)

"Woman" coming before "Black" seems odd for Lorde, who usually self-describes first and foremost through her Blackness. Here, this move emphasizes her disconnect to the ideologies and community of the BAM. To achieve Black power, one must support and nourish women's empowerment. This quatrain contains no uniform meter, but, interestingly, the first and third lines decrease in syllables while the second and fourth remain constant. One could argue that "Woman power" being a double trochee²⁹ and "Black power" being an antibacchius³⁰ creates

²⁸ Moore quotes Lorde's remarks on the poem in the 1996 documentary, *Litany for Survival: I learned about sonnets by reading Edna St. Vincent Millay's love sonnets and loving them and deciding I was going to try...I was editor of my high school magazine, and I wrote a poem about love. And...the faculty advisor said it was a bad sonnet. And I really knew that it was a good one. But I knew that she didn't like it because of the things that I said in it. So, I sent it off to Seventeen magazine and they bought it. And I made more money from that one poem than I made for the next ten years.*

²⁹ Back-to-back stressed then unstressed metrical feet.

³⁰ Two stressed syllables followed by one unstressed syllable.

more weight and more importance on the former. Lorde's speaker revisits the double trochee in "Human power," recentering that weight between "Black power" in the second quatrain:

Human power
is
always feeling
my heart beats

The speaker's tone changes in the third quatrain, simulating a volta, following "my heart beats / as my eyes open / as my hands move / as my mouth speaks." Suddenly, the speaker's subject is not to the collective but herself, presumably Lorde. These monosyllabic words create a pointedness that completely rejects the traditional poetic language in the sonnet. Lorde is completely unconcerned with the poem being a sonnet thus far; it is only at the poem's end that she somewhat reminds us through a volta. "I am / are you" does not rhyme like a couplet, but Lorde breaks these two lines from those before. Like a couplet, the tone of these lines shifts to a direct address. As the speaker leads us into a question, she suddenly turns declarative, "Ready." Lorde leaves this sonnet-like poem somewhat ambiguous. She rejects tradition entirely. This rejection leaves room for possibility; confidently does this speaker declare that she is ready, itemizing her identities to make all of her being visible. Like "Woman," "Black," "Human," and "I," "Ready" is capitalized, emphasizing its necessity to the present, the "now." In rejecting the sonnet's diction and opting for a more colloquial tone, Lorde asserts that now is not the time for formality but urgency. She challenges the interior of BAM's values by rejecting the sonnet's interior form — its rhyme scheme, meter, and content. Only the 14 lines of the sonnet remain visible, challenging the reader to reconsider what a sonnet has to be, or even what takes urgency to a poem: analyzing its aesthetic or its content and message?

In rejecting what is commonly understood about the sonnet, Lorde subtly calls us to expand our ideas about love. Love exists not only for romantic partnership but in the “now,” in one’s concern for and empowerment of others. In “Now,” Lorde’s rejection uplifts the sonnet’s feminine and queer themes while deprioritizing its formal traditions; Lorde embodies herself, a Black woman, in the poem to call BAM to action. Margaret Kissam Morris posits that “...embodying oneself in a text as means of political critique is a powerful critical tool. Embodying oneself in one's discourse to identify one's subject positions, as Lorde does, empowers those traditionally without a voice to speak” (183). I further Morris’ point and argue that Lorde acknowledges all Black women’s voices; they just have not been listened to. We see voices respond to Lorde through even her most concise sonnets.³¹ Through her poem, Lorde’s message is undeniable: if BAM’s mission is to advance the Black community, it must include *all* Black folks, Black women, Black LGBTQ+ folks, and all intersecting identities in between. Lorde’s rejection of this sonnet’s rhyme scheme, meter, and subject allows readers unfamiliar with its conventions to read it for what it is. If one wanted to prioritize the sonnet’s 14-line presence, then Lorde allows us to consider the speaker’s unrequited love, a promised, present liberation of women and Black folks. All in all, Lorde’s rejection pushes the BAM to deprioritize superficial conceptions of Black aesthetics and consider the blindspots they have toward their community.

IV. conclusion: reclaiming a new sonnet

All the poems analyzed thus far could be interchanged between their sections. These three poets all adhere to the traditional 14 lines of the sonnet. The subjects of each of these three poems are remixed in varying degrees, whether the subjects vary from the white romantic muse

³¹ See adrienne maree brown’s “napowrimo poem 8: rewrite of audre lorde’s now.”

that was Laura or the hopelessly-in-love spectator that was Petrarch or Shakespeare. Each poet rejects the past lineage of the sonnet by writing it in a Black aesthetic. So then, what do we make of this lineage? Anonymous, woman, Black, and made visible? The sonnet is not only a little song sung by Petrarch and Shakespeare. These three twentieth-century poets present a lineage of sonnet-samplers, innovating new little songs through adherence, remixing, and rejection. The poems analyzed this far only serve as a small glimpse of the sonnet-samplers' lineage, as many more explore themes of gender, narrative agency, and invisibility through a form that previously platforms white, male narratives. This is not to say that scholars have not investigated more varied themes or that they do not exist before and after Petrarch and Shakespeare's times. Rather, it is through the work of these poets that we can look back at the sonnet's previous reputation in a new light. It is through the innovations of poets like McKay, Brooks, and Lorde, that contemporary poets like Jericho Brown can illuminate where the sonnet is going.

CHAPTER 3

A [FORM] OF HIS OWN:

SONNET-SAMPLING AS THE NEW TRADITION IN JERICHO BROWN'S *THE TRADITION*

A man trades his son for horses.
 That's the version I prefer. I like
 The safety of it, no one at fault,
 Everyone rewarded.
 (Brown, "Ganymede" 5)

With these lines, Jericho Brown opens his third collection, *The Tradition*, which is a collection of innovation and interruption between free verse, the sonnet, and his self-created form, the duplex. Published in 2019, Brown's work illuminates where the sonnet's legacy is going. His postmodernist techniques subvert the linear, beautiful complacency of tradition with vivid, violent imagery, enjambment, and formal disruption. Through these disruptions, he presents himself at his most innovative through his parodies of the sonnet. Taking the torch from his literary ancestors, Brown does a little bit of everything: reject, adhere, remix, and signify within the sonnet. Jericho Brown's *The Tradition* advances Black poets' use of the sonnet as a site of resistance and revival. As I present in my previous chapter, Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Audre Lorde each set up a lineage of innovation and resistance through their adherence to, remixing of, and rejection of the sonnet — or what I call their sonnet-sampling. Drawing from their innovations, Brown's formal revision and innovation of the sonnet cements him as a sonnet-sampler, in that his adherence, remixing, and rejection of its conventions explicitly challenge the form's traditional subject matter in ways that create entirely new forms. His sonnet-sampling widens the subject of the sonnet even further through the narrativizing of racism, Black trauma, Black joy, and romantic love in co-existing spaces. Brown debuts the

duplex, a combination of the sonnet, ghazal, and the blues, in this collection, signifyin(g) not only to audiences familiar with the elements of the form but to his former selves. Brown's sonnet-sampling is most crafty in his most anti-sonnet poems, complicating written, historical, and personal traditions. If the problem that *The Tradition* addresses is the idea of tradition, then the collection does so by disrupting it at multiple levels, formal and literal. In this chapter, I argue that in *The Tradition*, Brown revises the sonnet through the simultaneous adherence, rejection, and remixing of the sonnet's form, the signification inherent to the duplex, and expansion of the sonnet's subject by instating himself, a queer Black man, in place of Petrarch. Refiguring the sonnet as a testimonial and a warning, Brown dismantles white, racist, and heterosexist constructions of Black art, history, and love and creates new ones, sometimes beautiful but often ending. Ultimately, *The Tradition* unites Brown to a lineage of sonnet-samplers who defy previously held beliefs in the form's limitations and expand narratives considered in African American literary tradition.

in[form]ing one's truth: Brown's evolution of and through the sonnet

As a Black woman, I often find myself opposing most societal defaults and standards, whether it be beauty, gender, race, or class. The strident voices of Sonia Sanchez, Audre Lorde, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Nikki Giovanni introduced me to poetry that allowed me to envision myself as the default. Inevitably, poetic forms prompt me to consider my understanding of "default systems," whether it be default modes of thinking, existing, or participation in the world. Poetic forms prompt Brown to do the same. In a conversation with Michael Dumanis, Brown discusses his position as a Black gay man relative to whiteness and interrogates the subjectivity of whiteness as default, acknowledging that "those defaults allow for a lot of harm that it becomes impossible to confront. Because it's the default, confronting it feels like you're doing

something that is abnormal” (Bennington). Situating the sonnet in this context presents the necessity for scholars to use nuanced frameworks when referring to the way Black poets engage with traditional forms as they expand and complicate the “default” subjects. Sonnet-sampling presents a possible step toward this work.

As previously defined earlier in my thesis, sonnet-sampling refers to the innumerable, innovative ways Black poets have adhered to, remixed, and rejected the sonnet, either through its form or its content. “Sampling” is the term for this because it encompasses the remixing, cutting, and mixing seen in their simultaneous adherence and rejection. Thus, sonnet-sampling refers to the sampling of sonnet conventions, whichever a poet intends to adhere to, and the rejection and remixing of others to innovate the sonnet. In sonnet-sampling, Brown, like McKay, Brooks, and Lorde, can implicitly and explicitly reframe the content associated with sonnets, like unrequited love, in the context of Black life and aesthetics. Through sonnet-sampling, Black poets honor a tradition of formal innovation often invalidated by restrictive definitions of Black aesthetics.

For African American poets, form informs their narratives, their readers’ expectations, and the ever-evolving perceptions of the poem as it lives on paper. In several interviews, Brown acknowledges how his truths, his identities as Black, gay, and Southern, inform how a poem takes shape, as well as how a traditional form’s history impacts a poet. In fact, at the “Jericho Brown, Visiting Writer Zoom Event: A Reading and Q&A” on March 3, 2021, Brown had the following response to my question, “How do you feel about traditional poetic forms, like the sonnet, as a form of inheritance (or antiinheritance) like American land? Would you consider traditional poetic forms to be sites of trauma and care, like American land, to Black American poets?”:

... I think everybody feels this, but I think Black people feel in a particular way, you know, when we're dealing with sonnets because... poets have, whether we like it or not, we have this relationship to the sonnet that is sort of I mean inherently a love-hate relationship. You know we want to be a part of that tradition. We want to get it right, do the thing that is supposedly the highest and the best, the accomplishment of the art form, and yet we want to tell the truth about language and what language has meant for us and what language has done for us. The sonnets are a really good example because it's such an imperial form... You say sonnet and everybody knows you're talking about a poem. And so you have to know how to operate within that. I think my relationship to the sonnet is sort of similar to my relationship to the constitution of the United States of America. I don't have to like what it says. I don't have to agree with how it's decided to handle things. But it's a good idea that I know what it says. And then if I know what it says I know how to operate within it, at least until I can tear the damn thing up... (Brown, Visiting Writer Zoom Event).

The conflict between “get[ting] [the sonnet] right” and telling the truth is the area where Black poets inevitably defy the tradition by expanding the sonnet's subject. By this, I mean replacing the traditional Petrarch with voices usually marginalized by Western society. Paul Munn posits the straightforward use of the sonnet also triggers associations with past and contemporary sonnet practice. The sonnet invites readers to observe variations in typical formal devices, such as the capping couplet of the Elizabethan form and the turn in the ninth line of the Italian form. More importantly, it invites readers to contemplate where the sonnet stands in relation to established varieties of sonnet expression, such as the

hyperbolic praise of the beloved of Petrarchism, the descriptive-meditative response to nature in Wordsworth, or the tortured or rapturous religious utterance of Donne or Hopkins.

Brown adds his sonnet expression through the duplex. Brown's sentiments and love for music show the inevitable tie between Black musical innovations like jazz and sampling and poetic innovation like the duplex. Innovation is a means of survival. Through this study of Brown's sonnets, "The Tradition," "The Water Lilies," and "The Card Tables," I illustrate Brown's sonnet-sampling as an expansion of Black, creative, poetic traditions.

I. sonnet-sampling in *The Tradition*: love, tradition, and violence

Throughout *The Tradition*, Brown employs the sonnet form to elevate multiple conversations about definitions of "tradition," prompting readers to consider the consequences of traditions that remain unchanged and unchallenged. Specifically, Brown does this by sampling what is needed, rejecting what is not, and remixing what he finds useful to the expansion of his sonnets' subjects. By adhering to and rejecting certain conventions of the sonnet, Brown evolves its tradition, reimagining the sonnet as a defiant vehicle for evolving Black aesthetics.

First, Brown uses the sonnet to call attention to our understood meaning of tradition, on a poetic and societal scale, commenting on the violence that has been customarily inflicted on Black men. In this title poem, "The Tradition," the title calls readers to directly engage with the word "tradition" and what it connotes. Merriam-Webster defines tradition as "an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior (such as a religious practice or a social custom)." This definition usually carries a positive connotation. Brown's subject-speakers subvert this established thought by interrogating "black-white" and "good-evil" binaries associated with traditions. In "The Tradition," Brown's speaker laments over a cycle of racial

violence that is almost willed to generation after generation of Black men. The sonnet begins with the taxonomical names of flowers, “Aster. Nasturtium. Delphinium,” each contained in their own sentences before the speaker shifts into enjambment laced with contemplative thought on his collective:

We thought

Fingers in dirt meant it was our dirt, learning

Names in heat, in elements classical (10)

These fragile, fast-blooming, decorative flowers are reminiscent of a pastoral poetic scene, setting up the reader to enter a romantic place of solitude appropriate to the traditional sonnet. Brown remixes the sonnet’s subject, cutting the sonnet’s default white and instating a communal Black voice. A sense of longing is still adhered to, an unrequited sense of ownership or autonomy; the speakers are not able to own the land they tended to. The summer climate also lacks autonomy against the oppressive “will / Of the sun.” The unknown “we” is united with the land, foreshadowing Brown’s speaker’s ultimate parallelism between the flowers at the beginning and the names of Black American men brutally murdered by police, “John Crawford. Eric Garner. Mike Brown.” Brown’s speaker contains each name as a sentence much like the perennials at the poem’s beginning; this creates a parallelism between both the short-lived, fast-blooming flowers and the victims of police brutality as tender objects waiting to be cut down by American violence. This strategy memorializes the men and is furthered by the nine syllables both lines are comprised of, differing from its default meter, iambic pentameter. In this penultimate move, Brown confronts the reader through formal experimentation with a tradition of violence that has remained rigidly persistent in America. In “The Tradition,” Brown

revitalizes the sonnet as a vehicle for a call to action to expand the American form of violence and complicity.

Second, Brown remixes the trope of unrequited love in the sonnet. The sonnet projects the emotional pains of unrequited heteronormative love. Like his literary predecessors, Brown expands this voice by reframing the unattainable from Laura to autonomy, equality, and liberty. The speaker in “The Tradition” commands this authoritative longing through his practice of naming both flowers and men. The flowers’ taxonomical names remind readers of their inherent ownership by the botanists who named them. Through the practice of naming, Brown’s speaker subject replaces romantic longing with a longing for memorialization, not claiming ownership of these men but rooting their memory as more than their murder. The unattainable figure, for this poet, is the “proof [that] we existed,” the ability to be seen as more than decorative flowers, to live beyond the tradition of being cut down. As he does in the collection’s titular poem, Brown also interrogates the sonnet subject’s desire for the unattainable figure, which is in this case, an ahistorical, self-deceptive idea about race, particularly whiteness, and how those operate within or against it in “The Water Lilies.” The poem invites the reader to identify the ever-shifting collective, “they,” throughout the poem, which at first seems to be the water lilies that the sonnet is named for. These, presumably lilies, “open in the day and close at night / They are good at appearances. They are white.” The first line of the poem is in perfect iambic pentameter; the second line’s meter is disrupted by the repeated “they” and “appearances:”

They open in the day and close at night.

They are good at appearances. They are white.

It is at the end of the line, “They are white” that the meter returns. As the speaker studies the “them,” he rejects the assumed longing for them or “the study they make / Of themselves.”

Brown's subversion of the unrequited love takes shape as a condemnation of whiteness, a national centering of oneself and performative identity dependent on their denial of their privilege — "aspirational beings ... Only imagining itself seen." Brown's speaker takes a colloquial voice, asserting that both appearances are "fake / If you ask me. If you ask me." The repeated phrase places emphasis on the hypothetical "if" suggesting that the speaker is rarely asked this question. This emphasis demonstrates a collective societal hesitance to interrogate the study white supremacy makes of itself. As the sonnet moves towards its volta, Brown's subject breaks the physical and metaphorical landscape of the poem, emphasizing the dissonance that the aspirational beings create. The line break after the enjambment of "feed / On light" illustrates the whiteness that the ambiguous subjects make of themselves. The speaker then positions his perspective on Black Americans who imagine themselves as more powerful than their enslaved ancestors, as the speaker scoffs,

They remind

Me of Black people who see the movie
 About slaves and exist saying how they would
 Have fought to whip Legree with his own whip
 And walked away from the plantation,
 Their eyes raised to the sun, without going blind.

For the speaker, Black Americans who imagine themselves as having more agency than their enslaved ancestors are just as ahistorical and self-deceptive as white people who "appear" self-aware and removed from their privilege. As this sestet ends, the final word "blind" brings back the rhyme that it began with, "remind," overtly reminding its reader of the ignorance that occurs when one simply inherits, and not challenges, ideas about the way race functions in American

society. Whiteness becomes a study of itself, a figure as unattainable as Laura. This unknown they, presence of lilies, and volta present in “The Water Lilies” may signify to those familiar with Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 94: They that have power to hurt and will do none,” which also questions the belief in outward appearance as a sign of superiority. Brown uses the sonnet as a social critique. Similarly, Brown’s work preserves key elements of Black Arts writing through alliteration, enjambment, consonance, and other literary devices that escape the constraints imposed on the sonnet.

Third, Brown deliberately rejects most of the rhyme scheme and environment of the traditional sonnet, often writing in free verse and placing his subjects in unexpected landscapes. “The Card Tables” is among one of Brown’s “sonnet-like” poems that are “based in the metonym, rather than the metaphor” as Brown says in “A Talk with Jericho Brown” for Willow Springs Magazine. Some of Brown’s poems, like “The Card Tables,” have very little to do with the sonnet’s form and its history. Like Lorde, Brown deprioritizes the sonnet’s baggage to encourage the reader’s full agency, allowing those with and without background of the form to engage with the poem as spectators, the roles that the earliest poems asked their readers to fulfill. In this defiance is liberation and accessibility, for the readers who can “look at the [poem] for the [poem]” (Engel), there is no required information to bring to the poem. This, when related to the sonnet, reminds those aware of how the sonnet’s conventions may inform the content not to prioritize history over Brown’s present voice. Rather than center on the themes traditional to the sonnet, the speaker of this poem speaks about violence, directly to the reader. The accessibility of Brown’s “The Card Tables” is discussed in The Poetry Magazine Podcast featuring Lindsay Garbutt, Christina Pugh, and Don Share. Pugh praises the accessible language and “loss of space and the feeling of being cramped” (Garbutt et al. 00:43) that all intersect in this conversation on

memory and power. The poem begins with the speaker's retort, "Stop playing. You do remember the card tables." Enjambment³² and simile describe "Slick stick figures like men with low-cut fades, / Short but standing straight" ending with the admission of the reader's now revealed relationship, "Because we bent them into weak display" (15). Brown's violent description in this form rejects the romantic subject usually inherent in the sonnet. In his 2022 lecture given at Georgia Southern University titled "Faith in the Now," Brown warns his audience about the danger of reading poems too formulaically, prioritizing the number of lines or rhyme scheme over the speaker's words, over speaking it aloud. Brown informs us that the poem is a strong enough medium to reform memory because it goes "beyond readers' fears, beyond counting lines, it asks us to reconsider ourselves." With Brown's belief in mind, the speaker's direct approach forces us to grapple with Brown's personal narrative. In other words, Brown maintains the fullest agency as his sonnet's subject by deliberately not prioritizing the sonnet's background over the violence in the poem. This choice creates various points of intersection and connection between Brown and the reader, poets who have written sonnets, and those unaware of its history, evolving and expanding the generational narrative of the sonnet form.

Despite his deliberate rejection of the sonnet's form and conventions, Brown still employs several distinctive conventions of the sonnet within the collection, connecting them to a rich history of sampling and remixing present in Hip-Hop. Brown's connection to music is no secret, as he expresses in an interview that "For me, music is the metaphor" (Farr and Lagana). Given the sonnet's origination from the Italian word, *sonetto* meaning a "little song," tying the anapestic poems of Black contemporary poets like Brown to the rich tradition remixing in American Hip Hop engages readers to challenge reductive, exclusionary ideas about Black

³² The continuation of a sentence or phrase across poetic lines.

poetic innovation. What would happen if we were to look at Black poets' implementation of sonnet conventions as sampling? What if we held Black poets' innovations with the sonnet in high regard as we do the formal innovations of sonneteers like Shakespeare, Milton, and Petrarch? I argue that this connection would force readers, scholars, and instructors to expand their views on sonnets. Sonnets are not singular narratives, they contain vast themes, and are ever-changing with the voices of the present. These changes must be discussed without reference to their predecessors. Sonnet-samplers like Brown challenge the elitist ideas of art inherent to the Western gaze. Just as the Black Arts Movement sought to cultivate art beyond a pure, untouched form, contemporary poets who sample from the sonnet's conventions cultivate a connection between them to their ancestors who created jazz.³³ Nelson George elaborates on the cultural resonance of sampling in his essay, "Sample This," in *That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*. In his piece, Nelson argues against critics and listeners who invalidate sampling as a "tragic break with African-American's creative musical traditions," a way not to "know music" to create it, or "a radical, even transcendental, continuation of them" (438). Through historical background and interviews, Nelson answers that whether sampling offers a continuation of tradition is "straight-forward no and yes" (441), it depends on the definition of tradition being referred to.³⁴ This framework could be applied to Brown's simultaneous adherence and rejection of sonnet conventions. He casts a new subject in the sonnet, positing it as a form where a queer, Black man questions multiple cultural crises, his childhood abuse, and sicknesses in the body. Suddenly, the sonnet's makes room for further generations of Black poets to have access to this

³³ I expound on this idea in my deconstruction of sonnet-sampling in Chapter one.

³⁴ Nelson argues that "If creating new notes, new chords, and harmonies is what the African-American musical tradition is about, then sampling is not doing that. However, if that tradition means embracing new sounds, bending found technology to a creator's will in search of new forms of rhythm made to inspire and please listeners, well then sampling is as black as the blues. Sampling has changed the way a generation hears..." (441). I position Brown's bending of sonnet conventions via adherence, rejection, and remixing as sonnet-sampling.

form. Suddenly, Brown elevates his and other Black poets' work with sonnets against white supremacist beliefs of "pure" art and BAM-era racial essentialist beliefs that exclude and reduce Black poets' innovations with the form. His ability to elevate voices that are directly opposed to the power structures inherent in reductive views of the sonnet and Black aesthetics is what makes Brown a sonnet-sampler.

Brown's sonnet-sampling can be further seen in several poems where he chooses to adhere to several sonnet conventions, like its skeleton and meter. The loosest of his sonnets still take shape in 14 lines, varying between Petrarchan and Shakespearean shapes. Poems like "The Tradition" and "A Young Man" are prime examples, the former not neatly belonging to either, but unexpectedly ending in a Shakespearean couplet: "Where the world ends, everything cut down. / John Crawford. Eric Garner. Mike Brown" (10). Both lines of the couplet conclude in end stops, bringing a dramatic finality to the fatalities of the men. This violence becomes even more subversive with knowledge of Shakespeare's couplets. Bryan Crockett conducted a comparative analysis study on Shakespeare's first 100 sonnets, finding that Shakespeare's tendency to dissimilate the couplets from the main body "provides a sense of closure by allowing for balance, repetition, and emphasis" (608). Brown's couplet in "The Tradition" subverts this tendency by depicting police brutality toward Black men as an act repeated for generations, the closure of lives disrupted by the imbalance of power and liberty in America. The structure of "A Young Man" has the sentiment of Miltonic sonnets, which examine internal conflict, as well as the couplet of completion in a Shakespearean sonnet: "In him lives my black anger made red. / They play. He is not yet incarcerated" (24). The poem is broken into four tercets ending in enjambments up until the couplet. The line breaks between these tercets hide the memory of the sonnet and amplify the subject speaker's despair as a young, Black boy's father. The couplet

asks the reader to consider this violence a tradition. The couplet rejects the sense of closure usually guaranteed. Though a reductive reading of the poem could argue that Brown underplays the daughter's situation, "My daughter;" begins a turn in the poem, the volta, introducing a threat of possession similar between him and his son. There are voltas in each of Brown's sonnets, one of the sonnet's most lasting legacies. In "The Water Lilies," the turn happens on the physical landscape of the sonnet, between the octave and sestet, to literally and metaphorically illustrate the sense of parasitism that performative white people have with their privilege, "To see them yawn their thin mouths and feed / On light, absolute and unmoved" (13). In a conversation with Brown during his visit to Georgia Southern University, he enlightened me that the line break was to represent the light discussed in the poem. This space remixes the sonnet's volta; the space between the octave and sestet becomes parasitical. Even without that knowledge, one could also see the change in the speaker's tone between the octave and sestet. In "The Card Tables," the turn begins with the poem's third question, "And how could any of us get by / With one in the way?" (15) This question serves as the summary of the poem, which complicates the reader's perception of the card tables earlier in the poem and thus, repurposes the volta's tradition of shifting tone and theme in a poem.

Brown's repurposed sonnets become vehicles seeking liberation from static ideas about history, poetic form, and Black aesthetics; an honest assessment of tradition is necessary for survival, and we must see how it fails to serve everyone. Brown uses traditional tropes and elements of the sonnet form in *The Tradition* to critique, complicate, and challenge our understanding of tradition, to further evaluate the violent traditions within American history and broaden the subject matter that Black art can portray in traditional literary forms. *The Tradition* engages with various themes personal and universal, most notably masculinity, trauma,

sexuality, violence, Blackness, and nature. Interlaced in these poems are multiple conversations about traditions, the mundane traditions of growing older or nature cycling among seasons, the violent traditions of racial brutality and sexual violence in America, and literary traditions of poetic forms. Like language, form exists in the past and present, and yet, the sonnet remains most taught by the academy in its canonical fourteen-line, iambic pentametric form with white, male subjects. Brown interrogates all these traditions in his poems, moving towards a theme of identity, resisting the idea that the sonnet's subject must center these qualities. Furthermore, Brown innovates the sonnet's conventions for his subject speakers to have seats at the table — to be the subjects of sonnets too. In these ways, Brown's work in *The Tradition* introduces him as a sonnet-sampler making room for more Black poets to innovate forms that reflect the fullness of their truths.

II. sonnet-sampling through the duplex

In his discussion of “The Card Tables” in The Poetry Foundation Magazine Podcast, Don Share comments that the poem, like many in *The Tradition*, “calls into question the margins that we choose to live on in society. If somebody wants to make us safe by putting people away, you know, sort of violently folding them up and pushing them aside, then the question is, what is left in that space and who occupies it” (07:08). This conversation intersects on two levels: the social and the formal, much like the two levels of a duplex. Brown's subjects question the social margins that white supremacy creates in America. In his duplex poems, Brown's subjects are typically his former selves. Essentially, the form is a response to Share's question; if he is not welcome or reflected in this space considered sonnets, he must make a form of his own. Brown created the earlier drafts of this form in 2007, considering how he could see himself best reflected in the sonnet:

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

Brown's duplex form comes to life in *The Tradition* which features several duplexes that share the name, “Duplex.” As earlier noted, a duplex is a form embodying the sonnet's fourteen lines, separated into juxtaposing couplets like the ghazal, and maintaining the tonal shifts of blues lyrics.³⁵ Tony Bolden in his overview of the blues, *Groove Theory: The Blues Foundation of Funk*, acknowledges, “an aab pattern in which twelve bars are divided into four sections that consist of three lines. The first line is repeated (often with some variation), and the last line rhymes with the first” (39). Each stanza, a word translating to “room” in Italian, becomes a dwelling place for Brown's speakers to be heard, and with the blues tradition functions “as both individual and collective expression” (Shockley 87). *The Tradition* contains five duplex poems. These duplexes are scattered among the three sections: In section one, the duplex appears as the 8th of 10 poems. The second section of *The Tradition* begins with the second duplex. The third section includes three duplexes, one that opens the section, one near the end of the section, and one at the end of the text that weaves lines from all four in the collection. Each poem is titled

³⁵ He outlines the boundaries of the duplex in his blog post, “Invention,” on Poetry Foundation's blog, *Harriet*: Write a ghazal that is also a sonnet that is also a blues poem of 14 lines, giving each line 9 to 11 syllables. The first line is echoed in the last line. The second line of the poem should change our impression of the first line in an unexpected way. The second line is echoed and becomes the third line. The fourth line of the poem should change our impression of the third line in an unexpected way. This continues until the penultimate line becomes the first line of the couplet that leads to the final (and first) line. For the variations of repeated lines, it is useful to think of the aa'b scheme of the blues form.

“Duplex,” The form creates a larger song, an effect of multiplicity in a single speaker’s voice that, aligning with Shockley’s assertion in her introduction to *Renegade Poetics*, “runs counter to (or around) [or sometimes with] the predominant expectation[s]” (17) of sonnets, ghazals, and blues poems. Brown’s formal experimentation reflects his wrangling with love and longing as well as the racial, sexual, and domestic violence inflicted on him as a Black, queer man in America.

The first duplex of the collection centers on domestic violence that Brown experiences, romantic and familial. This poem is mostly divided between the sestet and the octave: each line of the first three couplets has hard end stops, emulating the speaker’s anxiety towards opening these memories of his first love and last love. The brokenness of the 14 lines reflects the wounds the speaker discusses. If broken into the sonnet’s traditional octave and sestet, the volta appears in the metaphor comparing light rain to the sound of his weeping mother. As the speaker enters the fourth couplet, the line is suddenly enjambed: “...my tall father / Hit hard as a hailstorm. He’d leave marks” (18). This enjambment ends with a caesura, which neatly separates the duplex in half between the speaker’s sparse recollections of past lovers and physical abuse. The interplay between the ghazal and blues leaves couplets that alienate each subject, the poem, both lovers, his tall father, and his mother. The final couplet takes the poem from the first person to the third person: “None of the beaten end up how we began,” a reminder of how blues lyrics “often articulate intensely personal” (and typically private) woes” (Shockley 88). Brown’s speaker suddenly merges the collective with the individual, in a form that makes space for the conversation between the two.

The second duplex opens *The Tradition*’s second section with themes of rape, nature, and sickness. The couplets in this poem are full of subversions, following the sentiment, “The

opposite of rape is understanding” (27). This duplex could be considered an anti-pastoral poem, in that the speaker realizes that his landscape is not a place of tranquility. He acknowledges his dependence on the field to face his trauma, declaring his desire “To obliterate my need for the field.” His physical body is described in conflict with the field, “A building of prayer against the grasses.” As this duplex reaches its end, the speaker names this trauma in his body, “a temple in disrepair.”

The final three duplexes dwell in the third section of the collection. These poems depict revealing discussions on love and illness. The opening duplex is most autobiographical, with personal pronouns “I” “me,” and “my” embedded throughout the juxtaposition between love and sickness:

I begin with love, hoping to end there.

I don’t want to leave a messy corpse.

I don’t want to leave a messy corpse

Full of medicines that turn in the sun. (49)

In these couplets, the speaker calls for the reader’s agency in defining the sicknesses he describes, inquiring, “What are the symptoms of your sickness?” Unlike the previous two duplexes, this ends with a hopeful tone as the speaker “grow[s] green with hope” and hopes to end there. To survive is to remain hopeful, locate and name trauma, and love unapologetically in the space of violence; these duplexes give Brown a space to do so, unapologetically. Such is the tone of his fourth duplex, beginning with the speaker’s command, “Don’t accuse me of sleeping with your man / When I didn’t know you had a man” (68). Discussing his relationship with the man, the speaker’s memories become disjointed, challenging his authority. The collection’s final duplex, “Duplex: Cento,” reflects lines from all the previous duplexes:

My last love drove a burgundy car,
 Color of a rash, a symptom of sickness.

We were the symptoms, the road our sickness:

None of our fights ended where they began. (72)

This cento poem houses multiple voices in a form that can provide only so much room for each disjointed memory, only so much separation between the speaker's past and present, and identities disenfranchised under white supremacy, homophobia, and violence.

conclusion: a new tradition; or, Brown's larger song

Brown's duplex poems do everything — adhere to the sonnet's couplet, reject its rhyme scheme, remix it by attaching it to new forms, and signify by speaking to multiple audiences.³⁶ Most often, his sonnets are more like Lorde's narrative, deprioritizing the sonnet's history. His duplexes often subvert the love that is unfound in Petrarch's sonnets. Brown's duplexes cut and mix his Black, queer, and Southern truths, pushing him to confessional. This chapter demonstrates how *The Tradition* exemplifies Black sonnet-sampling, specifically Brown's "duplex"—to do two things: first, to interrogate Black poets' use and revision of standardized forms like the sonnet; second, to show how their revisions have expanded understandings of Black aesthetics. Like his literary ancestors, Brown expands Black aesthetics by rewriting the sonnet's subject. As he tears the sonnet apart, he pieces himself together again as his fullest, creative self, a version he prefers. Following his literary predecessors, Brown's literary innovations lead the way for future Black poets to create forms of their own. Through his sonnet-sampling, Brown sings a larger song of Black American life.

³⁶ His former selves, those who know the conventions, and those who do not.

CHAPTER 4

A FORM IS A GESTURE TOWARD HOME: CONCLUSION

Jericho Brown, Audre Lorde, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Claude McKay demonstrate only a few facets of Black poets' innovations through the sonnet. So what? Reconsidering the functions of traditional forms like the sonnet through the close reading of twentieth and twenty-first Black sonnets allows us to reimagine what Black aesthetics and poetics can mean for writers in the twenty-first century and beyond. I have not argued that Black aesthetics are defined solely by the themes discussed throughout this thesis. The innovations demonstrated by these poets' sonnet-sampling allow sonnets to be what the writer needs them to be — a reconsideration of Laura, a reflection of Harlem Renaissance culture, a call to action for critics, cultural leaders, and writers to reconsider the width of Black aesthetics and poetics in a twenty-first-century context and beyond. Considering Black poetic strategies through the framework of Hip-Hop culture validates both the experimentation of the sonnet in a post-BAM culture and the value of Hip-Hop culture as a pedagogical site of inquiry.

A pedagogical approach examining the intersecting rhetorical strategies in poetry and Hip-Hop could assist in breaking down elitist views of Black art as needing either to “appear” Black through certain ways or adhere to “respectable” — and inherently elitist and racist — academic standards. Karen C. Kennedy provides a glimpse at a possible framework in her curriculum, “Unfettered Genius: The African American Sonnet.” In her rationale for the curriculum, she posits that

students who are familiar with and comfortable with jazz, blues, and hip-hop are less comfortable with sonnets, eclogues, and classically structured poetry written by African

Americans. In many ways, the formalist dilemma that began with Terry and Wheatley continues to this day.

Kennedy's approach only looks at signifyin' to analyze the rich history of Black poets expressing themselves in Eurocentric forms. Adding sampling into this approach could validate Hip-Hop strategies as poetic strategies, removing the binaries between high, academic art and more demotic art when discussing Black poetic rhetorical innovations in traditional forms.

In writing through forms like the sonnet, I have been able to explore the depths of my own intellect and creativity. Through sonnet-sampling, and just sampling in traditional forms in general, I have found myself resisting ingrained ideas about my identities as Black and woman. I am unapologetic about centering myself and my experiences in my poetry. Examining this work that has connected poetic lineages has led me to reach out to poets like Jericho Brown and submit my own duplex poems for publication. As I talk with my close friends who are Black poets and writers, they too create their own modes of writing by sampling traditional forms. I cannot predict when the next poetic revival may be, nor what a future Black creative movement may offer to young Black writers seeking community, liberation, and aesthetic cultivation. However, as I conclude this work a century after the Harlem Renaissance, I return to this question:

How should there be Black poets in America?

This study doesn't seek to answer that question in its entirety. However, this thesis aims to push literary analysis toward more nuanced frameworks when analyzing Black poets' innovations in traditional forms like the sonnet. The sonnet deserves to be honored, taught, and loved for the many ways poets sing in them; Black folks sing little songs, too. As Black poets continue to expand the sonnet's use, the form's legacy may shift to the point of being interrogated more for

the ways it is innovated than adhered to. Perhaps, that is the fate of traditional forms. Perhaps, many new forms will be birthed out of a necessity for larger rooms. Further scholarship could investigate Black poets' adherence, remixing, and rejection in other traditional forms, extending the songs of poets free, at home, in their truths. The growing defiance of rigid rules illuminates an ever-evolving culture; sonnet-sampling creates the cultural spaces for formally innovative Black art to evolve.

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