"A poem is a gesture toward home": Formal Plurality and Black/Queer Critical Hope in Jericho Brown's The Tradition

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“A poem is a gesture toward home”: Formal Plurality and Black/Queer Critical Hope in Jericho Brown’s *The Tradition*

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

“A poem is a gesture toward home”: Formal Plurality and Black/Queer Critical Hope in Jericho Brown’s *The Tradition*

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Jericho Brown’s *The Tradition* (2019), which won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, includes four duplexes, a poetic form of Brown’s own invention that combines the sonnet and the blues. Made of fourteen lines separated into seven couplets, the duplex is a complex structure comprised of sets of indents and repeated lines. Brown’s use of disparate source forms to create a new form altogether challenges the supremacy of a singular, white American literary tradition, putting it into conversation with other traditions in order to critique its historically racist and heterosexist boundaries. As he does so, Brown works not to abolish “the tradition” or canon, but to expand it beyond reductive ideas of who and what is allowed into this historically exclusive space. The complexity of Brown’s formal project mirrors the nuanced and critical hope the duplex form expresses and evokes in readers; in contrast to queer theory’s long focus on negativity, Brown’s duplexes align themselves with the work of José Muñoz and Mari Ruti, who assert that hope is equally as important as negativity, as they hold the positive and negative together in both form and content. The duplex seeks to expand emotional experience as well as the canon, ultimately attempting to change the way readers feel and act.

Keywords: Jericho Brown, Black poetry, queer poetry, sonnets, blues, queer negativity, critical hope
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Jericho Brown’s *The Tradition* (2019), which won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, is a book that asserts itself in multiple “traditions” at once. From the very title, readers are drawn to ask themselves in which tradition Brown is working. Poems including “Ganymede,” “Trojan,” and “Of the Swan” draw on classical allusion, marking conventional Western literary history as one tradition in which the book takes part. At the same time, the book’s title can be read as a reference to Amiri Baraka’s poem “In the Tradition,” which itself references Arthur Blythe’s 1978 jazz album of the same name (Jackson 358), thus situating itself within a long tradition of Black music and poetry more broadly. Furthermore, Brown’s book includes the kind of social and cultural critique that is characteristic of a tradition within Black and queer poetry, aligning *The Tradition* with poets like Danez Smith and Nikky Finney. Poems such as “Bullet Points” and “Of My Fury” forcefully condemn racist police brutality and violence against queer people. Brown participates in each of these traditions not only through subject but also through formal innovation. *The Tradition* includes four duplexes, a poetic form of Brown’s own invention which he describes as “a combination of the sonnet, the ghazal, and the blues” (Anthony et al. 119-20). Made of fourteen lines separated into seven couplets, the duplex is a complex structure comprised of sets of indents and repeated lines. Brown’s use of disparate source forms to create a new form altogether challenges the supremacy of a singular, white American literary tradition, putting it into conversation with other traditions in order to critique its historically racist and heterosexist boundaries. As he does so, Brown works not to abolish “the tradition” or canon, but to expand it beyond reductive ideas of who and what is allowed into this historically exclusive space. The complexity of Brown’s formal project mirrors the nuanced and critical hope the duplex form expresses and evokes in readers; the duplex seeks to expand emotional experience as well as the canon, ultimately attempting to change the way readers feel and act.
In both form and content, the duplex is “Black/queer,” a term Mecca Jamilah Sullivan uses in *The Poetics of Difference: Queer Feminist Forms in the African Diaspora* (2021) as both indicators of identity and “to suggest the shared significatory function of the terms ‘black’ and ‘queer’ as indicators of nonnormativity” (24). I follow Sullivan in using “Black/queer” throughout this paper; the terms both describe Brown himself, and thus speak to the particular perspective from which the duplex works. While Blackness and queerness are not the same thing, and the specific intersections of race and sexuality vary, the term “Black/queer” also illustrates the shared non-dominant social space that Blackness and queerness both occupy as well as the double marginalization of Black and queer people, making it a useful term.

In addition to “Black/queer,” I will use the term “the traditional canon” or “the established canon” in order to refer to the exclusive ideas that have historically maintained the American canon as white, straight, and male. Many literary scholars, including Walton Muyumba, Tony Bolden, Timo Müller, Hollis Robbins, and Evie Shockley argue that the American literary canon has historically excluded Black/queer poets and forms, including sonnets written by Black poets, Black forms like the blues, and works that address Black/queer subjects, instead constructing “high” literary culture as implicitly white and thus participating in larger heterosexist and white supremacist systems that violently marginalize such people. While much work has been done to expand the canon since the 1980s and students of American literature no longer solely study straight white men, conceptions of canon still often exclude Black/queer artists. Thus I will refer to “the canon” when describing an exclusive and elite American tradition as both a less clunky, albeit less nuanced, shorthand and as a reminder that, despite improvements, exclusion from the canon remains a problem.
In the face of such exclusion, Black/queer poets use poetic form to critique and complicate a historically racist, heterosexist, and exclusive American literary canon in ways that are well-documented in literary scholarship. Some studies, such as Müller’s *The African American Sonnet: A Literary History* (2018) and Robbins’ *Forms of Contention: Influence and the African American Sonnet Tradition* (2020), focus on Black poets’ use of the sonnet to assert themselves in traditions from which they have been excluded and to question those traditions. Others, including Bolden’s *Afro-Blue: Improvisations in African American Poetry and Culture* (2004) and Shockley’s *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (2011), take the opposite approach, investigating the ways in which Black poets embrace Black forms like the blues despite their lack of canonical status. As Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez assert in the introduction to *Queer Form*, a special issue of *ASAP/Journal*, “aesthetic form is crucial to the work of queer artists, artists of color, and, more broadly, artists concerned with the structural conditions of social violences. …Aesthetic form offers resources of resistance” (227). Poetic form provides a wealth of opportunities for Black/queer poets to assert themselves as artists and subjects and to condemn the oppressive structures that refuse to see them as such.

Brown’s work certainly speaks to this well-established conversation, but his creation of a new form called the duplex, which entangles a variety of traditions, extends the power of formal critique while moving beyond critique toward creation. By mixing the sonnet with the blues, Brown queers not only the use of poetic form, but form itself, refusing to adhere to a single category. Sullivan identifies this queering of form as a common, though understudied, technique that she terms the “poetics of difference.” The poetics of difference “uses multiplicities of form” to “express experiences of multiplicity, complexity, and simultaneity” (Sullivan 1, 13). The
duplex is a form full of “multiplicity, complexity, and simultaneity”; it participates in an often-exclusive white poetic tradition because of its sonnet-like features while also celebrating a Black literary tradition that is generally positioned outside of the literary canon in its use of the blues. Additionally, as a form in its own right, the duplex resists simple binaries, instead underscoring its own complexity. The duplex thus asserts the complex overlap between traditions, working within this overlap to create a new form and expand the boundaries of canons.

The duplex’s formal complexity and plurality also moves beyond critique toward complex emotional expression that challenges the supremacy of negativity in queer theory. Understanding the function of particular affects—shame, exuberance, desire, frustration, and more—in Black/queer literature has been a subject of many recent studies. However, rather than emphasizing a single feeling, the duplex’s complexity creates a space to explore the ambivalence of life as a Black queer man in a white, heteronormative nation—ambivalence that acknowledges despair and negativity but also yearns for hope. The form evokes this ambivalence physically on the page in its back-and-forth structure of couplets, indents, and repeated ideas as well as in its source forms and content, which addresses both despair and hope as interlocking experiences. Scholars often disagree about the roles negativity and futurity should play in Black/queer affect theory, and the duplex adds what I call Black/queer critical hope—a hope that recognizes the reality of structural oppressions but uses negativity to fuel hope in the future—to these debates, complicating binary oppositions of critical despair versus naive hope. Brown’s queering of form also invites readers to partake in the complex emotional experience the duplex creates. Black/queer forms require a level of engagement from readers that more conventional forms often do not because they require “readers to navigate difference in the material, intellectual, and affective dynamics of the reading experience” (Sullivan 13). This kind of reading demands
emotional as well as intellectual labor from readers, thus pulling readers into the tension between negativity and hope created by the duplex’s source forms, structure, and content. As it does so, the duplex asks readers to feel Black/queer critical hope and develop empathy for Black/queer people, ultimately demonstrating the way that literature can be a tool for social justice.

**Critiquing the canon**

While scholars such as Rita Felski have rightly pointed out the limits of critique as an axiomatic and all-encompassing enterprise, critique remains important because society remains unjust. Black/queer writers and thinkers do not have the privilege to move away from critique entirely. Black/queer use of poetic forms, both those accepted as canon and those rejected as “low” art, can function as tools of critique, and the duplex incorporates both the sonnet and the blues in order to critique the historical exclusivity of the American canon. The very fact that Brown is a Black/queer poet addressing Black/queer subjects in a sonnet-adjacent form draws attention to the ways that Black/queer representation has been excluded from the traditional canon. Additionally, Brown’s use of blues forms allows him to critique the limitations of the American canon by showcasing the artistic excellence of Black/queer forms themselves. Brown troubles exclusive ideas about who can produce and what can be seen as “high” art, critiquing the systems of power that have worked to exclude Black/queer people, subjects, and forms from the established American literary tradition.

The sonnet’s formal influence on the duplex is clear; each duplex has fourteen lines, and the duplex’s meter is loose iambic pentameter. Some lines follow the traditional iambic pentameter nearly perfectly, especially those that begin and end the poems, as in “Duplex (The opposite…),” which starts, “The ópposíte of rápe is únderstándíng” (T 27), and “Duplex (A poem…),” which begins, “A póem ís a gésture tóward hóme” (T 18). Even lines that do not
strictly conform to iambic pentameter still generally have five feet and retain an iambic flow
despite their frequent metrical substitutions. Lines such as “I wánt to oblitéräte the flówered
fiéld” (T 27), “Nóne of the béaten end úp how wé begán” (T 18), and “Dón’t accúse me of
sléeping with your mán” (T 68), which each have five stressed syllables separated by unstressed
syllables, demonstrate the iambic undercurrent that accompanies even lines that are not quite
iambic. Throughout Brown’s duplexes, all the lines have nine, ten, or eleven syllables that can be
arranged into five feet. Many have five stressed syllables, though extra unstressed syllables are
common. The duplex form overall holds to a loosely iambic pentameter meter and to the sonnet’s
overall fourteen-line structure, demonstrating what Houston Baker, Jr. called Black art’s
“mastery of form” and “deformation of mastery” (50-51, 56). Brown demonstrates his mastery of
conventional poetic forms even as he deforms them, asserting Black/queer belonging in the
traditional canon while also underscoring the limitations of that canon.

The sonnet has a rich history in the Black poetic tradition as a way to assert belonging in
exclusive literary traditions and critique their boundaries. The first African American sonnet,
titled “Sonnet: The Montenegrin,” was published in 1877 by Albery Allson Whitman, who was a
formerly-enslaved minister (Müller 3). While the sonnet was by no means a new form at that
time, Whitman’s piece was controversial because

An ethnic group that had largely been excluded from intellectual life was beginning to
appropriate one of the most venerable traditions in Western literature. A group whose
capabilities had widely been disparaged was demonstrating its mastery of one of the
most complex poetic forms in the language. …It was a development few were prepared
to acknowledge or accept. (3)
From this point on, the sonnet was a definite part of the Black poetic tradition, from the genteel praises of abolitionist figures written by poets like H. Cordelia Ray and Paul Laurence Dunbar, Claude McKay and Countee Cullen’s Harlem Renaissance protest poems, to the Afro-modernist experiments of Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks. In *Forms of Contention*, Robbins notes that the sonnet is a form “through which black poets contend with the broader poetic tradition. The sonnet might be seen as particularly effective against white bourgeois culture that might see the sonnet as ‘its own’” (19). The sonnet as wielded by Black poets has been a “troubling space” in Black American literary history, a place to question “a number of American traditions—literature, poetry, high culture—that had not only excluded them [Black writers] but sometimes defined themselves in opposition to them” as well as the larger social and historical boundaries that shaped such literary exclusion (Müller 5, 8, 10-11). Literary critic Keith D. Leonard argues that by participating in the traditional canon, “African American poetic formalism *interprets* it,” reading and revealing its historical racism (22-23). That sonnets can be written by Black poets and about Black experiences demonstrates the artificiality of the established literary canon’s racial restrictions, thus opening those boundaries to critique.

Brown’s use of the sonnet form to discuss queer love further critiques the exclusionary limits of the traditional canon, since the sonnet’s quintessential subject is love. As David Caplan notes, contemporary queer poets have revitalized the love sonnet, finding that “the form’s Petrarchan conventions uncannily echo the complex cultural, psychic, and material conditions of contemporary gay and lesbian life” and that “‘traditional’ forms need not advance reactionary politics” (62-63, 72). While many now read Shakespeare’s sonnets as queer, until recently, his sonnets written to a man have been explained away as a moral failing or simply as presentist misunderstanding (Caplan 72). Brown uses male pronouns to refer to relationships and openly
discusses “men who love me” (T 49) and “sleeping with a man” (T 68). Centering queer love in one of the most famous and canonical literary forms makes visible the significant absence or erasure of openly queer texts in the canon. The historical and current treatment of Black/queer people in America has made the Black/queer body into, in the words of “Duplex (The opposite),” “a temple in disrepair” (T 27), and the duplex’s use of the sonnet is clearly cognizant of this systemic violence. To appropriate the sonnet, then, as a Black/queer poet like Brown, is to make clear the structures of oppression that have shaped whose sonnets, and which subjects, are recognized as part of the traditional canon, critiquing the contingent boundaries of that canon.

Brown’s use of the blues in the duplex reveals the marginalization of Black literary forms and reaffirms them as aesthetically important. Black poetics have “been consistently marginalized by the dominant institutions of this society” (Bolden 49) because of white supremacist disdain for its use of vernacular, oral, and musical techniques. Indeed, in “Black and Blues Configurations: Contemporary African American Poetics,” Walton Muyumba asserts, “for much of the twentieth century, critics, scholars, writers, and readers often set American literature’s parameters to exclude African American literary artists” (1048). A Black musical genre that has also become a written form, the blues often focus on “emotional/social adversity” (Thompson 9). Brown’s duplexes have a blues-y, mournful feel, discussing difficult issues such as rape, domestic violence, homophobia, death, and despair. For example, in “Duplex (A poem…),” Brown writes, “my tall father / Hit hard as a hailstorm. He’d leave marks” (T 18), and “Duplex (I begin…)” includes the lines “I don’t want to leave a messy corpse. I don’t want to leave a messy corpse … / Here is one symptom of my sickness” (T 49). Brown is unafraid to address painful examples of social issues, despite the fact that Black art has been criticized as being too “social” to be “true art” (Hansberry 4).
The standard blues form is “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,” though there are other common stanza patterns (Bolden 39). While contemporary blues poetry does not always follow a strict blues stanza form, a common marker of a blues stanza is repetition with slight variation, “riffig and the changing same” (Bolden 54). Brown draws on the repetition-with-variation of the blues to structure the duplex, asserting the artistic value of forms that have not historically been recognized as “high” art by the literary establishment. The second line of each duplex couplet is repeated as the first line of the following couplet; the line is sometimes repeated exactly, but often changed in small or large ways. Lines such as “Like the sound of a mother weeping again,” which becomes “Like the sound of my mother weeping again” (T 18, emphasis added) and “I want to obliterate that flowered field,” which repeats as “To obliterate my need for the field” (T 27, emphasis added) deploy this technique to create subtle subversions of meaning that mimic the sound and feel of a blues song. Incorporating the blues into the duplex affirms Black forms as aesthetically useful and valuable, implicitly criticizing the boundaries of the American literary tradition that have excluded Black art and artists.

The blues repetitions that structure the duplex have the added effect of disrupting the meter of the poem. For example, in “Duplex (I begin…), the line, “Full of médicínes that túrn in the sún,” which is fairly iambic, repeats as “Sóme of my médicines túrn in the sún” (T 49), in which the meter becomes dactylic tetrameter. This is not an isolated example; by changing the words in a line, adding or subtracting words, or requiring a different emphasis on certain words, the duplex’s repetition-with-variation necessarily disrupts metrical regularity. Robbins notes that Black poets have sometimes avoided iambic pentameter as a white rhythm, arguing that Black
ways of speaking and Black musical rhythms do not fit into iambic pentameter (21). However, Brown does not eschew iambic pentameter altogether, but instead formally critiques its limitations, using a Black form to disrupt a white meter within the poems themselves. To include the blues alongside the sonnet, formally entangling the two forms and thus the two traditions for which they stand, is a way to elevate Black/queer forms and poets by making them commensurate with a highly respected, indisputably canonical form. It is also a way to “signify,” to use Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s term, on the sonnet, challenging its supremacy by changing its rules (124). Tracing the history of the Black sonnet, Müller notes that Black poets often experiment with the form, suggesting that “the political import of formal experimentation [is] in its transgression of boundaries,” because such transgressions “make the boundaries of the sonnet stand in for those of conventional ideas, meanings, and worldviews” (Müller 112). Alexandra Gold similarly contends that formal experimentation in queer sonnets “venture[s] toward a more systemic critique” and is also “an act of cultural or political reformation” (91). Breaking the rules of the sonnet is a transgressive and expansive literary tool for Black/queer poets, and Brown’s use of the blues augments the work done by his use of the sonnet, critiquing the exclusionary nature of the established American canon and asserting Black/queer belonging in that canon.

**Expanding the canon**

As important as critique clearly is for a Black/queer poet like Brown, it does not take over the duplex form entirely. Similarly to Felski’s arguments against the often all-encompassing nature of critique, in *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (2012), Kevin Everod Quashie reminds readers that there is more to Blackness than resistance, and that to assume that Black life is only about protest “is to disregard the richness of life” (8-9). While the duplex critiques the limitations of the traditional literary canon, it does so not to abolish it but
to expand and re-create the canon. While some Black artists and critics, notably the leaders of the Black Arts Movement, have decried the American canon as too tainted by white supremacy to be salvageable (Müller 92-94), Brown, in using the sonnet form, seems to see some possibility in it. Indeed, many Black poets working today combine Anglo-European influences with Black forms and culture (Muyumba 1067-72). The duplex recognizes that while it is easy to think of poetics as a binary—Black versus white, queer versus straight, “high” art versus “low”—the reality is that seemingly-opposed canons, cultures, and races are entangled. Robbins notes that “the sonnet has clearly become a black poetic form” (8), and similarly, Black forms have influenced white poetics for centuries. Bolden suggests that combining white American influences with Black “interpret[s] the Western concept of literature within the context of African American vernacular culture, thereby extending both traditions while simultaneously redefining notions of poetry and artifact” (53). Rather than being perpetually opposed, these two traditions can also work together.

Placing the sonnet, an undeniably canonical form, alongside the blues implicitly argues that the blues, and the Black artists who use it, should be part of a broad and inclusive American canon, insisting that, as “Duplex (A poem…)” begins and ends, “A poem is a gesture toward home” for the marginalized (T 18). However, as a form in its own right, the duplex ultimately does not align itself completely with any of the single forms that were its inspiration, instead choosing to meld them in service of a new form entirely. The duplex breaks the rules of the sonnet form, physically breaking open the sonnet to prioritize formal innovation that invites canonical pluralism. Additionally, the shifting blues repetition enacts a fluidity that mimics a more inclusive canon. The complexity of the duplex’s formal and cultural influences creates a
new form entirely and thus suggests the need to embrace complexity in the ways in which canons are created and maintained.

While the duplex works partly within the traditional canon, it also moves beyond that canon in service of creating something new. A particularly suggestive aspect of the duplex’s refusal to wholly accept the sonnet, and the broader tradition for which it stands, is the way Brown changes the typical sonnet structure from fourteen lines arranged into either a single stanza or two stanzas of eight and six lines to fourteen lines arranged into seven couplets, every other one of which is indented on the page. For example, the final three couplets of “Duplex (A poem…)” are:

Light rain hits easy but leaves its own mark
Like the sound of a mother weeping again.

Like the sound of my mother weeping again,
No sound beating ends where it began.

None of the beaten end up how we began.
A poem is a gesture toward home. (T 18)

The duplex breaks the rules of the sonnet in many ways, metaphorically transgressing the boundaries of the form and, by extension, the traditional literary canon, but the physical way the poems are set on the page is especially important; it illustrates a literal breaking open of the sonnet form. Brown’s duplexes literally expand the amount of page they take up, creating more white space between couplets and between the edge of the page and the start of each line. Rather than being placed right next to one another, as they would be in a traditional sonnet, the lines of the duplex are spaced out into couplets. This physical breaking open of tradition and increase of space on the page creates a formal fracturing of borders and a visually new form that mimics an expansion of the established canon. Combining the sonnet and the blues reveals the aesthetic
potential that comes working within multiple traditions simultaneously; such formal choices create rather than simply critique. The sonnet and the blues are made new in their combination, working to make the canon anew as well.

The blues repetition-with-variation that structures the duplex also prioritizes change, illustrating the creative possibilities found in fluidity. Malcolm Woodland, writing about poetic repetition, notes that the refrain of the ghazal tradition can be read as a formal marker of a fluidity, creativity, and transformation (37). Even when words are repeated exactly, Woodland writes, it is impossible to have “total recurrence” in a refrain, because “a refrain’s second (or later) iteration can never replicate the exact semantic force of its previous iteration(s)” (36-37). Repetition, no matter the poetic form, can be an expression of the tension between sameness and change. Brown’s blues refrains often choose fluidity over stability—subjects and stories change throughout the poem as a function of the repetition across couplets—demonstrating a concern for change. “Duplex (A poem)” is the most extreme example of the duplex’s shifting repetition; the subjects of each repeated line change, even as some of the other words stay the same, often changing the meaning of the line entirely. “A poem” changes to “memory,” “my last love” to “my first love,” “a mother” to “my mother,” and a “sound beating” to “the beaten” (T 18). This pattern of shifting repetition holds true across the other duplexes; even when the repeated lines remain similar, there are almost always subtle changes in words, temporality, or punctuation that evoke a sense of change. For example, “Duplex (The opposite…)” includes the lines “And raise a building of prayer above the grasses // A building of prayer against the grasses” (T 27), “Duplex (Don’t accuse…)” reads “When I didn’t know you had a man. // Back when I didn’t know you had a man” (T 68), and “Duplex (I begin…)” asks, “What are the symptoms of your sickness? // Here is one symptom of my sickness:” (T 49, emphasis original). The duplex’s ever-
shifting repetitions—changing “above” to “against,” “when” to “back when,” and a question mark to a colon—are a formal embodiment of fluidity and change and thus an affirmation of transformation over stability. Choosing change over complete fidelity to the original models the benefits of and calls for a more fluid and inclusive literary canon.

The duplex’s formal pluralism and shifting complexity recognizes that “None of the beaten end up how we began” (T 18) and thus American poetry, even by those who have historically been marginalized by American society, is inevitably shaped by the tradition in which it was written. However, the duplex does not see this as a bad thing, but emphasizes the potential for transformation and newness, formally underscoring change and fluidity at every turn. The form’s plural nature is reflected in the name “duplex,” which denotes a single house split into two (or more) residences. Further, “duplex” comes from the Latin “duo,” or two, and “plicare,” meaning to fold. Brown’s diverse use of source forms results in a form full of doubles being folded together—white and Black poetics, queer and straight traditions, “high” and “low” art. A sense of tension and folding together pervades not only the different forms that make up the duplex, but also its own unique formal properties. The duplex’s couplets establish discrete pairs that break up the poem, and the duplex’s form on the page uses alternating indents to set each couplet off from each other, reinforcing the feeling of going back and forth between two things. The blues repetition, which make sets of two that carry across stanzas, are another instance of formal tension and complexity in the duplex. The duplex’s formal properties seem to create the sense of being stretched in two directions, but such stretching does not reach a breaking point; rather, it is generative. The duplex, as it creates new versions of the sonnet and the blues as well as a new poetic form altogether, asks us to see and create a broader American
canon, one that does not belong to any one race or culture but that reflects the complex reality of contemporary American poetics.

**The duplex form and Black/queer critical hope**

The duplex’s complexity also speaks to an ongoing debate in Black and queer affect studies about the place of negativity and futurity as Black/queer affects. Some scholars, in what has been variously termed the negative, antisocial, or anti-relational strand of queer theory, argue that negativity is the true queer feeling and the only ethical affective posture for queer politics, rejecting any belief in the future. Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), often cited as the quintessential example of queer negativity, asserts that a focus on happiness, optimism, or futurity can only ever be a heteronormative and neoliberal worship of children and delayed gratification (9, 13). Edelman insists on a self-shattering—which he locates in jouissance, or moments of queer sexual pleasure that dissolve the boundaries of the self—that says, “fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized … the future stops here” (25-31). While Edelman is an extreme example of this trend, and most theorists of queer negativity do not reject the future in quite such strong terms, many other scholars also focus on negative emotion as essential to queerness and queer theory. Brown’s duplexes could be seen as embracing negativity; their formal critique of white supremacist and heterosexist canons can be read as a rejection of the social order. Additionally, each of Brown’s duplexes acknowledge negativity in content, discussing “messy corpse[s]” and “men who leave” (*T* 49), “embalming fluid” (*T* 68), “rape” (*T* 27), and “my tall father / [who] hit hard as a hailstorm” (*T* 18). It is undeniably important to investigate the negative feelings that often accompany queer experience both individual and collective; as the queer theorist Heather Love notes, these feelings help us “do justice to the difficulties of queer experience” and “see the
persistencies of the past in the present… [The] material and structural continuities” of oppression (19-21).

While Brown’s duplex addresses negativity, its complexity and plurality belies an easy reading of queer negativity in the form. The duplex, in both content and form, insists on complicating negativity’s simple narratives of despair, pessimism, and self-destruction. Just as the duplex adds complexity to simple conceptions of literary canons, the form provides a more nuanced perspective on the role of negative affect to Black/queer politics. Some queer scholars, such as James Bliss, José Muñoz, and Mari Ruti, have noted that embracing negativity wholesale in the kind of “opting out” that Edelman proposes is a privilege available to white gay men that is not necessarily available to other members of the queer community. Additionally, self-destruction is not a very pragmatic option. In The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory’s Defiant Subjects (2017), Mari Ruti writes, “I do not think that the celebration of negativity for its own sake that characterizes some versions of queer theory amounts to much (besides explosive rhetoric). I prefer to work with negativity, to see what negativity can do for us” (38). Negative affect can be informative and useful rather than inviting despair or self-shattering.

Instead, the duplex promotes a more nuanced idea of negativity, one that I term “Black/queer critical hope.” The content of each duplex expresses Black/queer critical hope by balancing realist awareness of negativity with pleasure in the present and hope for the future. One of the best examples of this complex and critical hope is “Duplex (I begin…).” The poem opens “I begin with love, hoping to end there. / I don’t want to leave a messy corpse” and finishes, “I grow green with hope. I’d like to end there” (T 49); these lines recognize that while the violence of the current social order is always possible, making a “messy corpse” one potential outcome, love and hope are also still possible. José Muñoz, in Cruising Utopia: The
Then and There of Queer Futurity (2009) demonstrates a different response to negativity, making use of negative affect in order to identify what is wrong with our current world and imagine a better future, contending that different worlds are possible (Muñoz 9, 12, 18). 17 Muñoz asserts that “from shared critical dissatisfaction we arrive at collective potentiality” (189)—it is precisely the negative that points us to an optimistic future, or, in Brown’s words, it is the looming possibility of “a messy corpse” that leads us to assert, “I begin with love, hoping to end there” (T 49).

In contrast to queer negativity’s defeatist attitude, the duplex’s content expresses a Black/queer critical hope that recognizes negative realities but refuses to give up hope. “Duplex (I begin…)” is cognizant of real-world problems, but also asserts, “I grow green with hope. I’d like to end there” (T 49). This line is especially important, since using the phrase “I’d like” rather than more definitive verbiage such as “I will” explicitly reveals a desire for hope but also lacks a certainty in the future. The speaker of “Duplex (I begin…)” is clearly aware that their hope may not give them the results they want, but they still venture towards hope, wanting to “end there.”

Black ideas of utopia are similar to Muñoz’s queer critical utopia; Alex Zamalin, in Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism (2019), notes that in contrast to European ideas of utopia, which have been rightly criticized as excessively idealistic, Black utopia has been wary of easy solutions, focusing on re-examining the current world to imagine better futures rather than on realizing any specific utopian society (10, 13-14). Thus, the Black/queer critical hope that Brown’s duplexes convey is one that recognizes current problems, but uses that recognition to spur potential change. The Black/queer critical hope of Brown’s duplexes gives us, in Zamalin’s words, “a world that has a future with a horizon, not only a past with a long shadow” (78).
The duplex also enacts this critical hope in its physical structure. While the form appears binary in its couplets, indents, and double sets of ideas, these many doubles are entangled, complicating a simple binary. For example, “Duplex (I begin…)” ends,

Here is one symptom of my sickness:
Men who love me are men who miss me.

Men who leave me are men who miss me
In the dream where I am an island.

In the dream where I am an island,
I grow green with hope. I’d like to end there. (T 49)

In this example, it is clear that these couplets and ideas, rather than being opposed to each other, are interconnected. The repetition of ideas disrupts the separation of the couplets by spreading the repeated lines across stanzas breaks, connecting otherwise disparate stanzas. Conversely, the sets of couplets suspend the would-be binary of the repeated lines by splitting them up in different stanzas. Throughout each duplex, even the individual couplets speak to complexity and nuance rather than simplicity or singularity. For example, “Duplex (Don’t accuse…)” includes the couplet “He’d dip our weed in embalming fluid. / We’d make love on trains and in dressing rooms” (T 68). The poem’s reference to embalming fluid acknowledges the precarity of Black/queer life, but these lines also emphasize positive feelings of love and pleasure even in the face of omnipresent oppression. Similarly, “Duplex (A poem…)” ends, “None of the beaten end up how we began. / A poem is a gesture toward home” (T 18), placing physical violence alongside movement toward the safety of home. Each of these stanzas, because they physically connect expressions of negativity with those of hope by putting the two lines together into a couplet, model a way to hold multiple feelings at once through Black/queer critical hope.
The duplex form expresses the complexity of Black/queer critical hope through its pluralistic form, and in so doing, it invites readers, regardless of their race or sexual orientation, into that experience. The duplex’s attempt to create an emotional response in readers starts with the engagement it asks of them. Brown’s request for reader engagement is especially clear in “Duplex (Don’t accuse…);” the entire poem is framed as a conversation in second person, opening, “Don’t accuse me of sleeping with your man / When I didn’t know you had a man” (T 68). The choice of second-person pronouns means that the reader is implicated in the poem not just as a passive viewer, but as an active participant in creating the meaning of the poem. While not all the duplexes are written as conversations in second person, each asks readers to be active participants in constructing the poem’s meaning, because each is complex mix of formal properties from disparate traditions and holds both positive and negative content in tension. The work the duplex demands potentially limits the efficacy of the work the poems hope to do, but also ensures that readers grapple with the poems enough to feel the Black/queer critical hope the duplex hopes to instill in readers.

Additionally, the duplex’s couplets, indents, and blues repetition that break open the sonnet call forth a feeling of ambivalence, thus working to evoke Black/queer critical hope in readers. “Duplex (Don’t accuse…)” includes the lines

I walked home by moonlight through the blackout.
I was too young to be reasonable.

He was so young, so unreasonable.
He dipped weed in embalming fluid.

He’d dip our weed in embalming fluid.
We’d make love on trains and in dressing rooms. (T 68)
The couplets separated by indents create the feeling of going back and forth between something, since the poem moves physically back and forth, both on the page and between the blues and the sonnet’s influence. The ever-shifting repetition that consistently changes the meaning of the repeated line intensifies this feeling, creating a fluid uncertainty that never settles. Even when the poem ends, its ambivalence does not, since the last line of the poem riffs on the first, enclosing the duplex in a loop that continually circles. Sullivan argues that Black/queer writers who use the formal plurality that she terms the poetics of difference require “readers to navigate multiple forms of difference in the formal properties of their texts” (13), thus “asking for an attentiveness to a complex rubric of difference as a requisite for engaging their texts” (11). Using the blues to constantly interrupt the meter, structure, and subject of the duplex’s sonnet base asks readers to slow down and engage deeply with the “multiple forms of difference” of Black/queer experience. Neither form triumphs, just as the ambivalence of the poem is not resolved; rather, the duplex sustains tension in order to lead readers toward Black/queer critical hope, which requires such ambivalence.

The tense ambivalence of the duplex’s source forms and formal properties is given an object through the content of the poems. As we see in the above example, which juxtaposes the positive connotations of words like “moonlight,” “youth, and “love” against the negatively-associated words such as “blackout,” irrationality, and “embalming fluid,” the duplex represents both positive and negative emotions without privileging either. The experience of these poems, then, asks readers to do the same, to sit with positivity and negativity simultaneously. Reading such complex content through the lens of an ambivalent form leads readers to a critical hope recognizes problems but remains hopeful for the future. Readers who involve themselves in co-
constructing the poem’s meaning by engaging with the duplex’s ambivalent formal properties and content can then feel the Black/queer critical hope that the poems themselves express.

The duplex must be read as a form that insists on complexity and plurality rather than binary duality. By refusing simple binaries and instead relying on a structure that formally entangles traditions, stanzas, repeated lines, and expressions of positivity and negativity themselves that could otherwise be opposed, Brown’s duplexes enact a critical understanding of hope, one that recognizes pressing problems but still believes that better things are possible, that provides a future horizon without ignoring the shadows of the past.

**Conclusion: Critical hope and justice**

For readers, both Black/queer and not, the complex emotion elicited in them through this reading experience has the potential to be a transformative experience. In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), affect theorist Sara Ahmed argues that emotions are “a way of apprehending the world” and thus are both cultural and relational rather than purely psychological or physiological (7-8). Ahmed asserts that through the repetition of certain emotional experiences over time, societies and people “get twisted into shapes that enable some action only insofar as they restrict capacity for other kinds of action” (145). Because emotions shape and are shaped by societies—are historically contingent—our experiences and interpretations of pain, disgust, or love create and maintain sociocultural boundaries, and those boundaries then reify certain emotional experiences and interpretations (28). For white and/or straight people, this can mean that their emotions are shaped through social structures such that they see Black/queer people as fundamentally other and act accordingly. Additionally, when Black/queer people have their experiences of pain or despair reified by sociocultural boundaries, the future becomes an impossible horizon, one that is no longer visible. Emotions are certainly
individual experiences, but they are also cultural productions that limit or allow who we see as “other” and what we see as possible (191).

Literature is an important vehicle through which both individual and cultural emotions are developed, maintained, and changed. Muñoz asserts that art is essential to changing beliefs and actions because it can help people see reality as “potentially changeable” and thus “spark new ways of perceiving and acting” (135). Cognitive/affective accounts of children’s and young adult fiction make similar claims about literature’s use for empathy and social justice. Marek C. Oziewicz, in *Justice in YA Speculative Fiction: A Cognitive Reading* (2018), argues that “our brains’ cognitive circuits react to factual and fictional events in the same way. … Narrative simulations that go beyond our experiences are a unique form of learning that connects with our real-life, actable knowledge” (10), emphasizing in particular literature-based learning about justice. Maria Nikolajeva similarly notes that “our brains can, through mirror neurons, simulate other people’s goals in the same manner as it can simulate our own goals, irrespective of whether these ‘others’ are real or fictional” (83), arguing that reading “allows us to penetrate other people’s minds” and develop empathy (86). Moreover, according to Oziewicz, literature “enables us to see the world as open to our shaping rather than closed and prearranged” (64). While not focused on Black/queer poetry in particular, these findings are doubtless relevant to any reading experience, since all reading asks readers to inhabit another’s mind through the author’s words. Thus, to read and feel alongside the Black/queer speaker of Brown’s duplexes expresses is to potentially change the way readers see Blackness and queerness, as well as the way they act.

The duplex emphasizes specifics, rather than generalities, to help readers identify with the poem and thus potentially change their beliefs and actions. Brown writes specifically of queer experiences—phrases like “sleeping with your man” (*T* 68) and “men who love me” (*T* 49)
mark these experiences as queer, and lines like “my tall father / Hit hard as a hailstorm” (T 18) and “men roam shirtless as if none ever hurt me. / … In truth, one hurt me” (T 27) speak to the violences Black/queer people often face. Seeing familiar experiences represented in the duplex draws Black/queer readers in, letting them identify with the speaker. To identify with the speaker is also to begin to identify with the Black/queer critical hope of the poems, or at least to see it as possible position. The specific details of the duplex make it clear that the poems are speaking from Black/queer experience and thus that the critical hope of the duplex is not a naive platitude, but a pragmatic and sustainable belief in the future. Emphasizing specifics also helps white and/or straight readers identify with the duplexes and develop empathy for Black/queer people. While white and/or straight readers may not have experience with queer relationships, but they might have experience with violence. The less significant details of the poems extend the possibility of identification beyond only Black/queer readers; phrases like “a burgundy car” (T 18), “a field of flowers called paintbrushes” (T 27), “the city’s blackout” (T 68) allow white and/or straight readers to find smaller areas of common experience as well as to better imagine those experiences to which they cannot relate. By encouraging readers to identify with the experiences and details of the poems, Brown’s duplexes make critical hope seem possible for Black/queer readers as well as white and/or straight readers and move white and/or straight readers into relationship with those they might initially deem other.

While the duplex encourages identification, its complex form and content also asks white and/or straight readers in particular to reach outside their own experiences, which increases the possibility that they will see and act toward Black/queer people differently. The sonnet expectations that the duplex sets up because of its fourteen lines and loose iambic pentameter are subverted through its physical structure of couplets and indents, and the duplex’s forward
movement is constantly interrupted by blues repetition, creating a feeling of circling rather than linear direction. Sullivan notes that queered form and content can create feelings of frustration, exclusion, and powerlessness as readers attempt to work through it, thus “replicat[ing] on a formal level a range of psychic experiences” that echo queer Black/queer experiences of oppression (14). Further frustrating white and/or straight readers’ expectations of easy progress and idealistic hope, instead emphasizing frustration and ambivalence, Brown refuses to end the duplexes on solely hopeful notes. For example, “Duplex (Don’t accuse...)” ends, “You can’t accuse me of sleeping with a man” (T 68), which can be read as a triumphant assertion of queer rights—that homosexuality can no longer be a criminal accusation in the United States—but which is still rooted in homophobia, since it implicitly asks what about “sleeping with a man” could constitute an accusation.

Through Brown’s duplexes, white and/or straight readers are taught that, in the words of “Duplex (Don’t accuse...),” “What’s yours at home is a wolf in my city” (T 68), or that their places of comfort can be dangerous for Black/queer people, by being put into an experience where they are the ones excluded and frustrated. Because emotional experiences structure and are structured by social boundaries, new emotional experiences, ones that challenge boundaries and common ways of thinking, have the potential to change a person’s conception of social boundaries and realities, moving “the subject into a relationship with this other” (Ahmed 192). After connecting emotionally with a Black/queer experience, white and/or straight readers may be less likely to see Black/queer people as fundamentally other and more likely to spend their energy and privilege working toward justice for all people.

Many past and current leaders in Black/queer movements, including bell hooks, the Combahee River Collective, Charlene Carruthers, and Patrisse Khan-Cullors, underscore the
importance of hope and empathy in sustained, long-term justice work. The duplex form clearly understands the need to engage both Black/queer people and white and/or straight people emotionally in social justice movements; its formal complexity, expressing ambivalent tension, and critically hopeful content, which exhibits both positive and negative experiences, both work to draw readers into an emotional experience of critical hope and empathy. In order to move toward a more just society, we have to care, deep down, about each other, across boundaries of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ability, religion, and more. While justice is usually framed in terms of affect like anger, pain, and resolve, empathy is what creates the utility of these affects—they are more effective when we care about each others’ anger, pain, and resolve. Ahmed asserts the need to keep ourselves open to “being affected by others” (188), to witness each others’ pain and hope, anger and joy. This does not mean that we claim others’ feelings and experiences as our own, but rather that we recognize “that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground” (Ahmed 189).

We also have to believe that change is possible. Through the duplex, readers are opened to each other’s experiences as well as hope in the future. We cannot assume that any one reader will have this specific emotional response to the duplex as a form, nor that if they do, they will be change their beliefs and behavior. However, this kind of emotion-led change in readers is certainly a potential outcome of the duplex, even if it cannot be guaranteed.

Brown’s duplexes illustrate that literature in general and poetry more specifically is one way to cultivate care for those that are different from us, to realize that they are not so fundamentally different that we do not live “on common ground.” In an article about Ta-Nehisi Coates’ memoir *Between the World and Me* (2015), literary critic Tobias Skiveren argues that literature can be “a technology for getting a *feel* for the Other” (219). The duplex form—as it
enacts the entanglement between a multitude of literary traditions, expresses a queer complexity and critical hope that both critique the failures of unjust systems while holding out hope that we might do better in the future, and enlists readers to feel this hope themselves—is a powerful example of what literature can do when it is used as affective technology. In the words of Brown himself, “we look to literature to see what we hide from” (“Love the Masters” 234). While it is important to remember that justice is not simply a matter of “having the right kind of feelings” (Ahmed 195), the “right” feelings might be a generative place to begin.
1 The final poem of the collection, “Duplex (Cento),” is both the fifth duplex and a cento, a poetic form that takes lines from other poems. In order to trace the duplex as a form itself rather than as it interacts with another form, I will focus here on the first four duplexes in *The Tradition*.


4 Lots of other scholarship takes up the question of the influence of the blues and other Black musical traditions on Black poetry in ways that are outside the scope of this paper. See, for

5 Many other contemporary Black and queer poets use and alter received poetic forms in interesting ways. An incredible number of contemporary Black poets write sonnets, including Tyehimba Jess, Marilyn Nelson, Elizabeth Alexander, Nikky Finney, Natasha Trethewey, and Camille Dungy. Many other poets include the blues in their work, such as Kevin Young, Harryette Mullen, and Tony Medina. Finally, there is a growing contingent of contemporary Black and/or queer poets who change and twist received forms. For example, see Terrance Hayes’s *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (2018), t’ai freedom ford’s *& more black* (2019) and Danez Smith’s “summer, somewhere,” all of which bend the sonnet form, including extra lines, omitting lines, and eschewing meter in order to critique American racism.

See, for example, “Queer Exuberance: The Politics of Affect in Jeanette Winterson’s Visceral Fiction” by Tyler Bradway, “The Erotics of a Livable Life: Colonial Power and the Affective Work of Queer Desire in Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt*” by Meg Wesling, “Queering Shame and the Wound of Ethnicity” by Dennitza Gabrakova, and “Reading Affect in Harryette Mullen’s *S*PeRM**K*T” by Bronwen Tate.


The unstressed extra syllable of the line’s feminine ending is a common addition throughout the sonnet’s history, making it a negligible departure from strict iambic pentameter.

For a detailed history of the sonnet in Black poetic tradition, see Müller’s *The African American Sonnet: A Literary History* (2018), especially pages 30-31, 39, 49-53, and 77-82.

Of course, there have always been queer poets, from Sappho and Shakespeare to Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes, but the queerness of even canonized Black/queer poets is often disregarded in favor of other critical conversations.
For example, Askia Touré *Juju: Magic Songs for the Black Nation* (1970) by asserting the need for the “cancelling out” of “the western literary ‘negro’ poet” (9), Ishmael Reed, in “Can A Metronome Know the Thunder or Summon a God?”, dismissively notes that “some slaves excelled at ‘Sonnets,’ ‘Odes,’ and ‘Couplets,’ the feeble plucking of musky Gentlemen and slaves of the metronome” (*The Black Aesthetic* 406), and Amiri Baraka’s poetic statement “How You Sound?” states, “I’m not interested in writing sonnets… We can get nothing from England” (*The New American Poetry, 1945-1960* 425). Even Gwendolyn Brooks eventually gave up her sonnets, writing, “we must chase out Western measure, rules, models” including “all lovely little villanelles and sonnets” (*A Capsule Course in Black Poetry Writing* 5-7).

Though beyond the scope of this paper, Edelman’s sees jouissance, or queer sexual pleasure, as the self-shattering moment because of the way that penetration and orgasm dissolve the boundaries of the self and, in the case of queer sex specifically, because it does not have the potential for reproduction. However, many scholars, myself included, disagree with this position. Ruti addresses the over-dramatic and sexist results of a masculinist view that sees sex as inherently shattering in chapter four of *The Ethics of Opting Out*, and, though they do not respond to Edelman directly, Amber Jamilla Musser’s *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (2018) and Audre Lorde’s “The Uses of the Erotic” add Black, female, and lesbian perspectives to the idea of queer jouissance.
For example, Heather Love’s *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007) emphasizes the importance of interrogating the negative events and feelings of queer history, including isolation, social trauma, degradation, shame, failure, and impossibility, as do books like Ann Cvetkovitch’s *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003), Sianne Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings* (2005), and Judith/Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011).

See especially Bliss 85, Muñoz 11, and Ruti 38, 131.

I use the term “hope” rather than following Muñoz and Zamalin in using “utopia” because of the connotations that associate “utopia” with a specific plan for a society, separatist fringe groups, and previous failed experiments. I want to emphasize the amorphous quality of such hope; it is not a twelve-step plan of individual change but a commitment to slowly building communities of care and justice.

Sara Ahmed, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), makes a similar argument about feminist affect, writing that “women's experiences of violence, injury, and discrimination have been crucial to feminist politics” (172) and thus feminism is tied to pain and anger, but that “to express hope for another kind of world, one that is unimaginable at present, is a political action” (186). Ahmed argues that “politics without hope is impossible, and hope without politics is a reification of possibility (and becomes merely religious)” (184), articulating a feminist
connection between negativity and hope that mirrors the Black/queer ideas expressed by Ruti, Muñoz, and Zamalin.

Works Cited


