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TRICKSTER-TROPING ON BLACK CULTURE: REVISED READINGS OF
GENDER AND SEXUALITY

By

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ABSTRACT

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Traditionally, studies on black culture have employed the study of folk figures such as the trickster and their aesthetic cultural productions as a major strategy to define what is distinctive about black culture. However, most of these studies were focused on race and nation. In addition to race, this dissertation seeks to expand conventional readings of oral traditions and folklore in black culture for alternative readings of gender and sexuality in African American texts. This dissertation explores the hermeneutics of hip-hop, black literature, and folk and oral stories to complicate the canons of gender, sexuality, and class. If we critically explore African and African-American models such as goddesses, trickster figures, and African American matrilineal folk figures from myths and oral traditions of the Black Diaspora, critics and readers can begin to explore sexuality and gender ideologies beyond those conceived through Eurocentric western canons of sexuality and gender. These endeavors of trickster-troping help formulate revised readings of complex texts in black culture.

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LAMONDA HORTON-STALLINGS

For
VanessaMattieRaMondaLatashaJasmineEthelFlorencePauletteMaryVictoriaPatriciaJudy

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I acknowledge the ancestors of the past, the ghosts of the present, and the person who I will one day be for allowing me to complete the second phase of my life, and the first step in my career. I thank myself.

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PREFACE

The parenthetical sign in the title of my dissertation—written by herself—refers to a genre of Black literature, the slave narrative, in which the meaning of the slave's words are always impacted, distorted, and hidden by authenticating documents and ill-advised use of dominant discourses of the time. It is as much an indicator of the theoretical concept of the work as it is a personal declaration and validation of the dialogics I have decided to align myself with in the struggle. The struggle continues.

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INTRODUCTION

Whatever is black about Black American literature is to be found in this identifiable black Signifyin(g) difference.

Henry L. Gates—*The Signifying Monkey*¹

However attractive and culturally affirming, the valorization of the vernacular has yielded what I would argue is an inherently exclusionary literary practice that filters a wide range of complex and contradictory impulses and energies into a single modality consisting of the blues and the folk.

Ann Ducille—*The Coupling Convention*²

The form of folk expression is gendered by exclusion, meaning that when we speak of folk culture, we generally speak of *male* folk culture.

Martin Favor—*Authentic Blackness*³

now how you just gon' be playa hatin' on me.
cos i got mad bitches just wantin' me.
And i got mad niggaz just checkin' for me see.
I got more stock than you ever see, i be.
The one that your main squeeze been diggin.
Pull you out your closet, sex on weekends.
It's my business of what i do, him or her, he or she, inside you.

Queen Pen—"Girlfriend"⁴

It does not take a Henry L. Gates to understand that the oral, folk, and vernacular are the basis for a great deal of theory concerning African American culture. Critics of black oral traditions, W.E.B. Dubois, Melville Herskovits, Zora N. Hurston, Langston Hughes, Ruth Finnegan, Roger Abrahams, and many others have assured the place of

¹ *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988).

² Ann Ducille. *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*. (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) 69.

³ Martin J. Favor's *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999) 18.

⁴ Queen Pen's "Girlfriend." *My Melody*. Interscope Records, 1997.

black oral traditions outside of anthropology and into a greater realm of black culture. Nevertheless, as Gates understands it, these traditions help to decipher what makes Black literature distinct from Western texts. Yet, as both Ducille and Favor's criticism of African American literary thought indicate, there exist specific problems of folk and vernacular research partaking in moments of essentialism and exclusion that writers such as Hurston, Toomer, Ellison, and others may have never intended. An examination of the goals of African American culture and Black Studies formation, and the development of African American literature and theory, reveals that traditional use of the vernacular and oral has created dilemmas in representing the fragmentation and multiplicity of subject positions defined as black in readings of cultural productions. These dilemmas have been the basis of the small but vocal anti-vernacular criticism in African American critical and cultural theory.⁵ Instead of dismissing the work of such notable critics, I wish to draw on the conclusions they have made: African American culture and literature evolved from oral traditions, but to date, none of the major proponents of black literary criticism have broached the issues of sexuality and class as they appear in the vernacular. Further, the use of the vernacular as it concerns gender appears to be limited. Years after we have accepted the vernacular as the black difference, we should now move onto discussing the differences in that difference (blackness). Clearly, there are contradictions in the anti-vernacular theories of Favor and Ducille when we examine the product of vernacular artforms through the lyrics of the black female hip-hop artist Queen Pen. If the

⁵ In addition to Ducille, there have been a number of critics who have addressed the negative and essentialist use of vernacular criticism. See Hazel Carby's "Ideologies of the Black Folk: The Historical Novel of Slavery" in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, edited by Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad. (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins UP, 1989), Diana Fuss's *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), and Robin D.G. Kelley's "Notes on Deconstructing the Folk," *American Historical Review* 97, no.5 (December 1992): 1402.

vernacular is limited to the genres of blues and folklore or exclusionary to most of the black female population, how is this particular female artist able to rap so succinctly and unabashedly about *her* fluid or mutable sexual desires in a way that showcases the folk and vernacular's customary values of flexibility and transgressing false social borders as they relate to gender and sexuality?

This dissertation argues that black folk, vernacular, and specific figures of the tradition do not limit discussion of difference in black culture and society. It addresses three major concerns that I deem important to the future of African-American literary and cultural theory: We must make available readings of black texts that take into account the experience of fluid subject position. We should acknowledge that African American cultural theory has not fully explored the implications of its oral and folk tradition by which it purportedly has been influenced. Finally, the most vital argument presented in this study is that black texts aesthetically shaped by black oral and folk traditions reflect discursive and subversive readings of gender and sexuality constructs that traditionally rely on a foundational system of hierarchically opposed binary elements. By using the non-western models of Black Diasporic trickster figures and trickster aesthetics, critics and readers can begin to explore alternative ideologies about gender and sexuality, as opposed to those Western conceived notions of gender and sexuality. Black oral mechanisms work to undermine the very formations of man/woman and heterosexual/homosexual. With the trickster figure, we can recover these readings to demonstrate the distinctions of difference in the construct of blackness and black cultural texts that have vernacular, folk, and oral traditions within their narrative frame. Only

then can we begin fully comprehending and understanding how to see the differences within blackness.

Theoretically, if we are to read differences, then it seems logical to adhere to deconstructive strategies that complete the two-fold project of deconstruction. As Jacques Derrida indicates in *Positions* (1981), the primary goal of a deconstruction strategy should note that: “in a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy. One of the terms dominates the other (axiologically, logically, etc), occupies the commanding position. To deconstruct the opposition is above all, at a particular moment, to reverse the hierarchy” (56-57). Derrida’s notion of deconstruction hinges on a critique of the Western metaphysical categorization process that manifests itself in the dispersal of widely accepted oppositions such as presence/absence, good/evil, truth/error, man/woman, positive/negative, identity/ difference, and so on. Derrida and the field of deconstruction demonstrate that binary oppositions are a pair of contrasted terms, each of which depends on the other for its meaning. Binary oppositions classify and organize the objects, events, and relations of the world. Yet, the most important revelation of Derrida’s critique of binary oppositions is that if we accept any binary logic, then that acceptance establishes conceptual order.⁶ The conceptual order based on binary oppositions impacts everything from race and gender to sexuality and language. Subsequently, one must not only reverse the hierarchy but also avoid making the reversal an established order. The later goal of deconstruction indicates one way as to how the use of folk and vernacular becomes segregated and limited.

⁶ *Positions*, 39-40.

Ironically, the restricted use of the black oral, folk, and vernacular occurs as critics work to find ways to discuss how Black culture and literature differs from White western literature and culture. Such criticism often focuses on language practices of each community, but more specifically on the way those language practices can be seen in written narratives. Rather than focusing on the oral's own theoretical ideas, such criticism has only theorized on the interaction between the oral and the written, rather than the oral itself. The exclusionary literary practice that "filters a wide range of complex and contradictory impulses" is not characteristic of the folk and vernacular. The misuse of post-structuralist thought in black literary criticism has brought stagnation instead of benefits to research of black oral traditions in black culture.

With a focus on Saussurean notions of signification and difference, Henry L. Gates, Houston Baker, and others⁷ have established and revised theoretical beliefs that the very thing that makes black literature different and "black" is its distinguishing vernacular. They employ black vernacular culture to disrupt a foundational system of binary oppositions that privileges whiteness and written texts. Rather than placing at the center white and western aesthetic traditions, critics reverse the hierarchy and place at the center the black community's own aesthetic standards to criticize African American culture. Like Derrida, two major figures—Gates and Baker—are able to successfully disrupt the logocentrism of writing and speech and reverse the hierarchy of white/black in black texts.

⁷ See Hortense Spiller's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" Mae G. Henderson's "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition" in *Changing Our Own Words*. Ed. Cheryl A. Wall, Gate's *Figures in Black: Signs, and the Racial Self*, Ronald T. Judy's *Disforming the American Canon: African Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular*, Carol A. Blackshire-Belay, ed. *Language and Literature in the African American Imagination*.

In *Blues Ideology and Afro-American Literature—A Vernacular Theory* (1987), Houston A. Baker considers the blues as a text and turns it into a tropological investigative model for African -American literature. Baker theorizes that “Afro-American culture is a complex, reflexive enterprise which finds its proper figuration in blues conceived as a matrix...They are the multiplex, enabling script in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed” (3-4). He later envisions the “ blues as a code radically conditioning Afro-Americas cultural signifying....any aspect of the blues stands for something else in virtue of a systematic set of conventional procedures” and that they,” therefore, comprise a mediational site where familiar antinomies are resolved (or dissolved) in the office of adequate cultural understanding” (6). In the end, Baker finds that the vernacular of blacks is shaped by a blues ideology embedded in the culture, and this in turn can be found in many literary texts in African American culture. Baker successfully reverses the hierarchy, but he does so in a way that makes it difficult to conceive of any other differences in black texts, such as gender and sexuality. It becomes difficult to see differences in blackness because the only thing we have done is to reverse the hierarchy.

In further analysis of deconstruction, Derrida suggests how Baker’s project of reversing the hierarchies may be incomplete because it is only one step. He maintains that deconstruction must also, “through a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, put into practice a reversal of the classical opposition and a *general displacement of the system*. It is on this means alone that deconstruction will provide the means of intervening in the field of oppositions it criticizes.”⁸

⁸Jacques Derrida. *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982. 392.

The blues itself may not be a binary opposition, but it is positioned in the opposition of black/white and oral/written in the way that Baker uses it: “The blues matrix is a ‘cultural invention’: a ‘negative symbol’ that generates (or obliges one to invent) its own referents”(9). Baker is able reverse the hierarchy of oppositions. However, Baker posits that the blues matrix is the subordinated and negative term, admitting that he is working within the frame of binary oppositions rather than displacing it. Baker’s theory is essential to African American literature, not because it fully displaces the conceptual order, but because the theory provides a solid example of how such strategies can present new readings of African American culture, and it is for this reason that his work can never be easily dismissed.

Gates’s project with deconstruction and post-structuralism prevails in many of his works. In the introduction to *Black Literature and Literary Theory* (1984), he asserts:

In the case of the writer of African descent, his or her texts occupy two spaces in at least two traditions: a European or American literary tradition, and one of the several related but distinct black traditions. The “heritage” of each black text written in a Western language is, then, a double heritage, two-toned as it were. Its tones are white and black, and its aural tones are standard and vernacular. (4)

Here, Gates admits that there are multiple binary traditions. The very language of divisions he creates to explain black traditions establishes that the basis of his work will be an overturning of binary oppositions, not a displacement of the logos. Hence, the text will become a space for binary oppositions (standard/vernacular, aural/written, and black/white). Gates later claims that “oral literature is of such import because in it is to be

located in what I have called the 'signifyin(g)' black difference, the very difference, in Ngugi's words, ...enables the black writer to transcend 'fixed literary patterns' and what that implies—the preconceived rankings of art forms" (11). Gates's project claims to place more emphasis on the vernacular of a text, than on written forms. Black oral literary forms, in other words, can merge with received (European) literary forms to create new (and distinctly black) genres of literature" (Gates and Ngugi 12).

Gates's *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) completes his most notable deconstruction project by creating from vernacular scholarship a theory of signifyin(g)—“a black trope of tropes, the figure of black rhetorical figures”(51). His theory articulates the notion that “signification/signifyin(g)= rhetorical figures/signifier, black act of redoubling, to engage in certain rhetorical games” (48). The importance of this theory is that rhetoric supplants semantics (signifier/ signified),⁹ and he uses the trickster figure to tie into his notion of signifyin(g). The importance of tricksters to his theory of signifyin(g) is that they and their myths function as focal points for black theories about formal language use, define the role of the figurative, and qualify traditions of indeterminacy and interpretation in African American texts (21-22). Gates disrupts the conceptual order or logocentrism of speech and writing. Yet, his work also makes it difficult to see how the oral tradition can address concerns of gender and sexuality in the production of black texts.

⁹ On p. 9, Gates's theory of signifying relies a great deal on Derrida's work in *Positions*. Derrida notes, “We can extend to the system of the signs in general what Saussure says about language: The linguistic system (langue) is necessary for speech events (parole) to be intelligible and produce their effects, but the latter are necessary for the system to establish itself” (39-40). Likewise, Derrida shows that signifiers do not produce signified, they produce more signifiers. As a less-oral culture, writing becomes privileged in the west. The conceptual order of written over orality is created primarily because of the binary oppositions we have imposed on language, and rather than creating true meaning we create signifiers that must rely on each other to even obtain meaning. Gates theory of signifyin(g) attempts to reverse this order.

Gates and Baker employ a conservative and limited use of black oral and vernacular traditions in their theoretical works. They complete the first step of deconstruction by reversing the hierarchy, but the second part of the strategy seems to be forgotten. Instead of displacing a logos founded on binary oppositions axiologically opposed, mainly stemming from race (the facing terms of black and white), so far they have merely reversed the classical oppositions. Why? Structuralist notions of binary oppositions organize and frame the direction of their African American literary theory relying on a black vernacular. We cannot disrupt the conceptual order of white/black, Western/non-western, or oral/written, when the very theories used to do so are themselves a privileging of the same oppositions we seek to reverse. This is why we cannot articulate a theory of difference in the construct of black as it concerns black oral and folk traditions. Like Derrida's work to overturn binary metaphysics by calling into question the relationship between speech and writing, Gates and Baker use the black vernacular to explore the relationship between speech and writing. It becomes their "différance"¹⁰ in exploring differences in black and white culture. However, it is crucial to note that neither of the aforementioned critics ever really completes the examination of the differences (gender, sexuality, and class) in the signifying black difference. If we want to solve the dilemma of recognizing difference in black vernacular, folk, and oral

¹⁰ Johnathan Culler's *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982) reveals the importance of différance: "The term différance, which Derrida introduces alludes to this undecidable, non-synthetic alteration between the perspectives of structure and event. The verb différance means to differ and to defer. Différance sounds the same as difference, but the ending ance, which is used to produce verbal nouns, makes it a new form meaning "difference-differing-defering". Difference thus designates both a "passive" difference already in place as the condition of signification and an act of differing which produces differences" (97). Derrida uses this particular word to halt and show the rankings of speech and writing, but he is also able to create an undecidable, a tool to disrupt the entire system of logocentrism founded on binary oppositions.

traditions, we must find another way to talk about all differences in which they are not ranked.

Before post-structuralist theories were adopted by the black literati, Ralph Ellison, in his work *Shadow and Act* (1994), repeatedly spoke of black oral traditions and their significance to written texts. Though Ellison preferred to be known as an American writer, rather than a specifically African American writer, he often exemplified the influence of black orality and folklore in his own literature. In a discussion of jazz, he once affirmed the possibility of black oral traditions providing a space and theory for various black subjectivities:

There is a cruel contradiction implicit in the art form itself...Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation represents...a definition of his identity: an individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it. (234)

Ellison's assessment of jazz connects with any discussion of the folk and vernacular, as jazz sprang forth from the foundations of the folk and oral in Black America. Ellison's focus on improvisation suggests a link to liminality and black subjectivity. In the less commercial or commodified performance of the oral, identity is not fixed. The art form allows a continued revision of the self, without fully losing characteristics of the old-new

self. Yet, if the current anti-vernacular criticism is any indicator, it appears very obvious that the uninspired “commercial performance” of post-structuralist thought has lured many critics away from the aesthetics and ideologies that might stem from implicitly “cruel contradictions, improvisation, and defining identities” lost during the moment of conception of the art form itself. Black oral, folk, and vernacular texts are quite capable of representing polyvalent subjectivities and delivering polyphonic discourse for those subjects. If we take the right approach in exploring black oral, folk, and vernacular traditions, they can be very effective in documenting differences within blackness, or serving the needs of black people, as identified by Ducille.

Though the folk and vernacular exist as products of black culture, they already possess their own theoretical strategies on class, race, and gender. In “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” critic Sylvia Wynters notes:

Around the growing of the yam, of food for survival, they created on the plot a folk culture—the basis of a social order—in three hundred years. This culture recreated traditional values—use values. This folk culture became a source of cultural guerilla resistance to the plantation system.¹¹

Throughout this work, Wynters’s claim that folk culture possesses its own social order and use values will resurface repeatedly as an argument against exclusionary uses of folk and vernacular in African America cultural and literary theory. Writers who establish the vernacular as a mechanism in the “novel” or “literature” of black culture understand that those oral mechanisms interrupt any values of class, morality, nationalism, sexuality, or gender that produce the very genre of the novel. As Wynters corroborates, folk culture

¹¹ *Savacour* 5 (June 1971) 99-100.

resists, and in its resistance attempts to destroy certain value systems. Folk's destruction of these values then does displace the general system, as opposed to merely reversing hierarchies. Trickster figures occupy an important part of explaining how the task is possible.

In *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms* (1993), William Hynes offers a brief assessment of manifest trickster traits that can be used as a typology: (1) the fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous personality of the trickster, (2) deceiver/trick-player, (3) shape-shifter, (4) situation-invertor, (5) messenger/imitator of the gods, and (6) sacred/lewd bricoleur (34-36). These traits explicitly deny either/or dichotomies. They are concepts with fluid and unfixed attributes. Tricksters are the very embodiment of difference. To use the trickster as the greatest trope of difference is to revisit and extend the work of critics such as Gerald Vizenor, Henry L. Gates, Harold Scheub, Roger Abrahams, Robert Pelton, and others. As I attempt to revise and move beyond the work of the trickster done by the aforementioned critics, I solidify the basis for my method of tricking the trickster-trope. This dissertation explores how trickster's characteristics disrupt conceptual order by forbidding any notions of axiologically opposed binary oppositions. All of the characteristics of the figure enrich cultural readings with the possibility of deferring social meanings of gender and sexuality, but at the same time taking note of the differences stemming from gender, sexuality, class, and race.

In "*Race, Writing, and Difference*" (1985), Gates asserts, "race is the greatest trope of difference" (7). However, rather than race, symbolically, trickster is the greatest trope of difference. Gates has already proven the importance of the trickster figures Eshu

Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey in locating an origin of difference for writing and race, but the trickster is also an undecideable figure capable of interrupting the logic of order that established the white male phallus as its primary signifier. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999), Judith Butler argues that “the masculine linguistic position undergoes individualization and heterosexualization required by the founding prohibitions of the Symbolic law, the law of the father...both masculine and feminine positions are thus instigated through prohibitive laws that produce culturally intelligible genders, but only through a production of an unconscious sexuality that reemerges in the domain of the imaginary” (37). Butler explores how privileging the phallus shapes discussions of gender and sexuality by asserting that discourses of normative behavior, socially and legally enforced, produce the coherence of man/woman and heterosexual/homosexual. The symbolic law establishes regulatory practices of gender formation, and anything that disrupts these practices are not intelligent or normal. Nevertheless, as suggested by Wynters, if we explore black folklore’s trickster figure as possessing alternate social orders, or as a symbolic “undecideable” to disrupt established constructs of gender and sexuality, then a cultural guerilla resistance—the displacement of the system—becomes possible and allows for polyvalent subjectivity and polyphonic discourse in a way that is culturally specific and mindful of the experience and cultures of black people.

In addition to Hynes and Gates, other critics have examined the figure for its abilities to transgress boundaries. In *Writing Trickster: Mythic Gambols in Ethnic American Literature* (1997), Jean R. Smith explores the importance of tricksters in her assessment of ethnic American literature. Smith asserts, “perhaps trickster’s biggest

contribution to the postmodern is the notion that identity can be multiplicitous and the deconstruction of a falsely unitary language”(3). Trickster’s ability to evolve and move beyond the confines of language stems from its foundation in many bodies (community) versus one (the individual). In *Narrative Chance: Post Modern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures* (1989), Gerald Vizenor writes that “the trickster is a communal sign of a comic narrative; the comic holotrope (the whole figuration) is a consonance in tribal discourse...[whereas] the instrumental language of the social sciences are tragic or hypotragic modes that withhold communal discourse” (9). As demonstrated by Hynes’s list of manifest trickster traits, the trickster is the greatest trope of difference within difference. Yet, Vizenor’s critique of the language of social sciences adheres to earlier statements about the way post-structuralist thought and logics of binaries has limited the infinite possibilities of vernacular subjects and culture. Hence, the study of black culture, where race has traditionally been presented as the centre, we have to assert that the trickster acts as the greatest trope of difference in order to un/recover the trickster traits that can help prefigure a new reading of the intersection of race with sexuality, gender, and class. We must move the trickster figure and the folk and vernacular culture it derives from away from the language of social sciences. By doing so, we can now begin to incorporate with less difficulty, the production of blackness with distinguishing difference based on gender, sexuality, or class.

The title of my dissertation, then, goes to the very core of disrupting the way trickster has been employed for African American literature and culture. We must perform acts of “trick-troping” on the literature and culture. My concept of “trick-troping” reflects back to the words of Ellison and Wynters. It is a continuous process of

revision and improvisation of the narrative of the trickster that allows subjectivity to remain fluid and free from definition, but very open to a goal of self-determination. Any acts in which we revise traditional tropes of the trickster, then, might be called trick-troping. In this case, trick-troping alters/tricks numerous conventional readings of the trickster figure in African American culture to create new and evolving narratives. The trope of the trickster has been read or employed in four very limited ways for black culture and literary theory: as a cultural recovery tool for the black nation within America; as a strictly masculine figure and representation in black vernacular, literary, and cultural theory of African American writings and texts; as a primitive and mythic vulgar taboo—having lost its initial characteristic of sacredness and divinity through the assimilation of Africans in America; and as a trope for black super-heterosexuality.

This work addresses how to overturn and revise these four tropes of the trickster figure at various stages. The previously mentioned manifest trickster traits provide crucial insights to revealing how the trickster can provide the foundation for new models of discourse on sexuality, gender, and class, especially as they pertain to people of color if appropriately utilized. Criticism must alter the already available tropes of the trickster in African American literature. We accomplish the feat by the following: returning to trickster's manifest traits to explore the figure as a critical symbol and declare it as the beginning of a non-western critical discourse on identity, which this introduction has briefly done; moving beyond the use of black oral culture for nationalistic agendas, which chapter one will discuss; employing trickster as a gender referent—chapters two and three work to complete this task; using trickster figures to question the validity of vulgarity and taboos by re-combining or re-connecting the sacred and profane together to

interpret black cultural products, which this work will address in chapters four and five; and exposing how these values displace the logic of Western canons of sexuality. If we complete these four goals, asserting the trickster as the greatest trope of difference, then perhaps we can begin moving beyond essentialist notions of blackness that make it difficult to account for differences of gender, class, or sexuality.

CHAPTER ONE

A Call for a Post-nationalist Reading of Folklore and the Vernacular

“Ole Sis Goose, I’s e got yer now, you’s e been er-sailin’ on der lake er long time, en I’s e got yer now. I’s e gwine to break yer neck and pick yer bones.”

“Hole on der, Brer Fox, hold on, I’s e got jes’ as much right to swim in der lake as you has ter lie in der weeds. Hits des as much my lake as hit is yours, an we is gwine to take dis matter to der cotehouse and see if you has any right to break my neck and pick my bones.”

And so dey went to cote, and when dey got dere, de sheriff, he wus er fox, en de judge, he was er fox, and der toruneys, dey wus fox, en all de jurymen, dey was foxes, too. En dey tried ole Sis Goose, en dey victed her and dey scuted heer, and dey picked her bones. Now my chilluns, listen to me, when all de folks in de cotehouse is foxes, and you is des’ er common goose, der ain’t gwine to much justice for you pore cullud folks.¹²

Before I can utilize the trickster figure as referent for new readings of gender and sexuality in black culture, it is necessary to briefly illustrate why revising tropes of the figure seems so necessary. Oral art forms and figures have to be seen as a complex combination of distinct speech, verbal art, beliefs, music, narrative, and humor influenced by experiences of location, gender, class, and sexuality. Yet, traditional research on Black Diaspora oral traditions and folklore has not reflected the previous statement. The above tale is a lesser-known story in the tradition of animal tales from black folklore. It provides an initial query into the discussion of gender and sexuality in the folk. The major function of this tale is to teach a valuable lesson to Africans in the New World about justice. As Lawrence Levine’s *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: African*

¹² *The Book of Negro Folklore*. eds. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (Dodd, Mead, Co: New York, 1958) 13.

American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom (1977) formulates, trickster tales told in the institution of slavery function as tools to teach about black experience in the New World, and “because of their overwhelmingly paradigmatic character...were, of all the narratives of social protest or psychological release, among the easiest to relate both within and especially outside the group” (102). It comes as no surprise, then, that the trickster figure endures as a pedagogical apparatus for the black community after slavery, as indicated by the above tale. In “Ole Sis Goose,” the woes of the African American community and the United State legal system provide a folkloric rendering of how race affects the outcome of justice. The superficial lesson to be learned is that justice refers to just-us white citizens. Not every animal judging the case is Sis Goose’s kind. The foxes clearly represent white people and their presence in U.S. courts, while Sis-Goose represents the black race. More subversively, the tale exemplifies how folk tales counter any dominant social ideals. As slaves, black are deemed property, and the language of ownership that would enable Sis Goose (blacks) to swim in the lake remains unavailable to her. As Sis Goose learns, only those making the laws can expect to reap the benefits of the privilege they might afford individuals.

The proliferation of tales such as the above make obvious that these pedagogical tales work to teach black people, in addition to how to successfully negotiate the oppressive racial realities faced by blacks in the New World, how to negotiate the oppressive/repressive status of gender and sexuality in the community and culture of blacks in the new world. However, the latter function is dismissed for a focus on race. As Levine demonstrates, critics encounter few problems demonstrating the tales’ connection to issues of race and statue. However, connecting the tales to other conflicts

in black life remains to be fully done. Yet, it is apparent that “Ole Sis Goose” offers a serious critique of gender relations in the African American community.

In animal trickster tales, we have continuously avoided discussing the presentation of gender relations in these tales. Yet, in the Sis-Goose tale, gender emphasizes the overall theme of inequality. Race doesn’t become a primary factor of the tale until the end. From the very beginning, Br’er Fox’s attempted trickery of Sis Goose is positioned as a masculine/ feminine dynamic. If gender were of no account, the qualifier of “sis”—dialect for sister—would be unnecessary. Br’er Fox stands as the stronger and more cunning figure in comparison to the more docile and weak goose. Fox possesses characteristics attributable to masculine qualities, while goose possesses representative traits of femininity.

In another tale, “Brer Rabbit and Sis Cow,” the issues of gender relations in the black community are more clear-cut. In this particular tale, the masculine Brer Rabbit tricks the feminine Sis Cow for his own needs:

Brer Rabbit see Sis Cow an’ she have a bag plumb full of milk, an’ it’s a
Hot day an’ he ain’t had nothin’ to drink for a long time. He know ‘tain’t
no use askin’ her fur milk ‘cause las’ year she done ‘fused him onct....he
say: ‘Sis Cow would you do me the favor to hit this persimmon tree with
yore head an’ shake a few of dem persimmons...Sis Cow...hits the tree,
but no persimmons come down...So den Sis Cow git mad...an’ hit dat tree
so hard dat her horns go right into the wood so fur she can’t pull ‘em out.

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¹³ Hughes and Bontemps, 4.

Once Sis Cow becomes stuck in the tree, Br'er Rabbit brings his family to the tree, and they proceed to milk and feast on the milk of Sis Cow. Br'er Rabbit's trickery triumphs again. The lesson to be learned from this tale suggests that wits win out over brawn every time. However, tales such as Sis Cow and Sis Goose demonstrate a pattern that consistently places animal figures assigned a less powerful status into the gendered position of the Western construction of woman, as well as being the tricked rather than the trickster. Such tales make it difficult to believe these animal trickster tales retain any of the original genderless qualities of the African trickster figures, or that they could represent various positions in black subjectivity. However, more than the tales themselves, past research has made it almost impossible to explore how the tales of Sis Goose and Sis Cow represent an on-going discussion of gender dynamics in black folklore.

The story of Sis Goose may be the most emblematic example of the function of trickster tales in African American tradition, but it also reveals unacknowledged gender conflict in African American folklore. The lesson about justice being extended to one's own kind proposes a valuable lesson for studies of trickster and gender. The projected use and function of folklore is as influenced by gender, as justice is by race. The issue of gender must be confronted before we can deal with issues of sexuality and the trickster. In order to do so, we must ask where the issue of gender comes in or fails to come in on the discussion of trickster figures in black oral traditions. Animal tales with the prefix "sis" before its figurative model indicate how the construction of gender informs, rewrites, or calls attention to the traditions. Why is the Sis Goose tale lesser known, under-quoted, or under researched, what can the tale reveal about reading gender in black

communities, and what has impacted the readings of gender in black folk and oral culture?

Currently, if one attempted a reading of the trickster figure from traditional research on trickster figures, the endeavor would be impeded by the predominant place accorded bourgeois cultural nationalism in research devoted to oral and folk traditions about tricksters. Critics of Black Diasporic oral traditions have consistently sought to explain the function of their forms as a function black cultural nationalism. We must re-evaluate the nationalist agenda that the fields of sociology, history, and anthropology establish in African American culture. Africanism(s) become the primary connection for descendants in the Diaspora and provide the primary tools for constructing culture for the New Negro and the black nation.

The initiative to find Africanisms in the oral culture of New World black people flourished in the work of Lorenzo Dow Turner. In his work, *West African Survivals in the Vocabulary of the Gullah* presented at an MLA meeting in December 1939, which later came to be published as *Africanism in the Gullah Dialect* (1949), Turner conducted extensive studies about Gullah people in South Carolina to ascertain the first of many viable linguistic links between African and African American language use. Similarly, African American female linguist, Beryl Bailey continued such focus by distinguishing her work *Jamaican Creole Syntax* (1966) with a broader non-U.S. context. These works focusing on Africanist linguistic and language presence were only the beginning. The focus on Africanisms in New World culture became more important as comments on its absence or erasure were tied to the great myth of the Negro for the building of a new nation, the United States.

The work of anthropologists of the early-twentieth-century, and particularly Melville J. Herskovits's *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), bears on these issues. Herskovits's study disputes early American thought that black people in the U.S. had no culture, an argument used to assert that U.S. citizens need not afford the primitives (African Americans) the same political rights as their white counterparts. Herskovits's contribution lies in his ability to formulate an argument against the one misconception that undermined studies of African Americans, the myth of no past. As Herskovits concedes, his work is supported by research conducted by the previously mentioned scholars and W.E.B. Dubois. Herskovits astutely recognizes the thesis in the model of the U.S. as a developing nation. His work makes the implicit connection that the "Negro" itself is a Western construct. According to Herskovits's *The Myth of the Negro Past*, the myth of the Negro past is based on five ideological foundations:

1. Negroes are naturally of a childlike character, and adjust easily to the most unsatisfactory social situations, which they accept readily and even happily, in contrast to American Indians, who preferred extinction to slavery;
2. Only the poorer stock of Africa was enslaved, the more intelligent members of the African communities raided having been clever enough to elude the slaver's net;
3. Since the Negroes were brought from all parts of the African continent, spoke diverse languages, represented greatly differing bodies of custom, and as a matter of policy, were distributed in the New World so as to lose tribal identity, no least common denominator

of understanding or behavior could have possibly been worked out by them;

4. Even granting enough Negroes of a given tribe had the opportunity to live together, and that they had the will and ability to continue their customary modes of behavior, the cultures of Africa were so savage and relatively so low in the scale of human civilization that the apparent superiority of European customs as observed in the behavior of their masters, would have caused and actually did cause them to give up such aboriginal traditions as they may otherwise have desired to preserve;

5. The Negro is a man without a past. (1-3)

With this list, Herskovits establishes that the major goal of his work and his search will be to document residual or prevalent African culture in the culture of U.S. blacks. He goes on to present research that contradicts each of the five criteria concerning Black people in the New World. He discusses the importance of recovering and recognizing Africanisms in the endeavor to preserve the connection between Africans and African Americans so that they might appreciate their past and understand themselves in the New World. However, he also warns that using research to find Africanisms is only the beginning of work dedicated to eliminating these myths of an absent past (33). By further discussing tribal origins, African cultural heritage, enslavement and reaction to slave status, and the process of acculturation, Herskovits makes sure that Western civilization will be held accountable for its initiatives to erase an African past, but he also makes it impossible for his critics presently or in the future to

deny the survival of African culture in the cultural artifacts of its New World Blacks. Herskovits does not let his study rest on a focus of traditionalisms, but in what was then considered current, he explores the beginning of black culture's modernity by examining Africanisms in secular life, religious life, language, and the arts of blacks. As Albert J. Raboteau's "African American Religion in American" proclaimed of Herkovitz's validation of black culture, it "turned out to be a powerful heuristic for both scholars and political activists. Some black nationalists defended racial separatism by appealing to cultural differences based on the retention and/or recovery of African culture."¹⁴ Critics and scholars latched onto the defensive strategy of Herkovitz's work to shape black cultural studies, and as a result, critics became locked into fruitless notions of essentialism and authentication of blackness that takes no account of difference. Ironically, Herskovits's work points out the existence of differences based on tribal origins and eventual locations of slaves and their ancestors. Herkovits understood how crucial the distinctions were to the art forms. Unfortunately, separatism of race was not the only drawback of the heuristic influenced by nationalist ideologies. The recovery of culture shapes itself to parallel the black man's demand for full citizenship in his new nation.

The major problem is that the use of nationalism, by any group of people, risks being used as a tool of imperialism. As Cedric Robinson notes in his *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1998), nationalism "a second 'bourgeois' accretion, subverted the socialist creation...a mix of racial sensibility and the economic interests of the national bourgeoisies, was as powerful an ideological impulse as any

¹⁴ *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*. ed. Joseph E. Harris. (Washington, D.C.: Howard UP, 1993) 65-82.

spawned from these strata” (3). Robinson also makes an argument that demonstrates how nationalism as perpetuated by the state is in the interest of western hegemony.¹⁵ Just as nationalism subverts socialism in Europe, cultural nationalism threatens to subvert the cultural guerilla resistance of the folk. The importance of doing a post-nationalist reading of research on black folklore and oral traditions comes in the knowledge that a lower class form of culture has been assigned a function that adheres to middle class values, values which inherently work to undermine the folk group’s own theories of itself.

Robinson is not the only scholar to offer interrogations of nationalism helpful to this reassessment of folk culture. In *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (1985), George L. Mosse focuses on the middle class and their obsession with respectability to expose the flaws of nationalism. Mosse found that “the middle class can only be partially defined by their economic activity...For side by side with their economic activity it was above all the ideal of respectability which came to characterize their style of life” (4). The middle class characterized as frugal, devoted, dutiful, and morally restrained would come to see itself as better than the lazy lower class and the extravagant and amoral aristocracy. In accordance with Robinson, Mosse argues, “but their methods had to be informed by an ideal...to support normality and contain sexual passions...nationalism came to the rescue. It absorbed and sanctioned middle-class manners and morals and played a crucial part in spreading respectability to all classes of the population” (9). Hence, nationalism, as carried out by the bourgeoisie, not only subverts socialism or other economic movements, it also seeks to preserve Western canons of gender and sexuality ordered by

¹⁵ In an especially damning critique of Marxism and national liberation movements, Robinson demonstrates how nationalism becomes conflated with racialism. His argument reveals that periods of nationalism in Europe are really imperialism. (44-68)

axiologically opposed and ranked binaries. To assume black folk and oral traditions as foundational for black cultural nationalism, then, is to also risk the co-opting of those forms by middle class values of the state, rather than the folk's values. Unfortunately, we have rarely avoided the pitfalls of Western nationalism in past research on oral traditions and figures. If researchers claim Black Diaporic folk and oral traditions as functions of cultural nationalism, then the issues of gender and sexuality surely must be addressed in order to maintain the original values of "the people," but it is only recently that critics have attempted to do so.

In *Race Men* (1998), Hazel Carby provides a statement that suggests why African American oral and folk tradition, as it concerns gender, sets up a Sis Goose dynamic that eliminates the possibility of exploring differences based on sexuality and gender in these traditions:

While contemporary black male intellectuals claim to challenge the hegemony of racialized social formation, most fail to challenge the hegemony of their own assumptions about black masculinity and accept the consensus of a dominant society that conceives African American society in terms of a perennial "crisis" of black masculinity whose imagined solution is a proper affirmation of black male authority. (6)

Carby's critique of African American criticism manages to overcome the traditional black patriarchal and ethnocentric agenda that seeks to limit past, present, and future diverse constructions of black cultural production. From its very inception, African American cultural and critical production about the trickster figure and its value as a hermeneutical tool have been influenced by foundational ideologies that perceive black

society as experiencing a perennial crisis of black masculinity. The perceived crisis stems from ideas of normative social ordering and behavior that ranks gender, privileging “masculinity and masculine culture” over “feminine culture.” In research and studies of black oral and folk traditions, the crisis of black masculinity occurs through an agenda of black nationalism and a discourse concerned with nation-building. Historically, a dialogue on black nationalism depends upon a unified front for similar goals and ideals of empowerment.

In *The House That Race Built* (1998), Wahneema Lubiano points out that “black nationalism is plural, flexible, and contested: that its most hegemonic appearances and manifestations have been masculinist and homophobic” (232). Although Lubiano points out the flexibility of black nationalism, she also recognizes the most pervasive effects of presenting a monolithic voice for empowerment. Conflicts of gender, sexuality, or class remain in jeopardy of being dismissed or subordinated by activists for the greater good of the black nation, understood to be the developing black bourgeoisie.¹⁶ These same nationalist hegemonic appearances and manifestations of masculinity and homophobia find themselves embedded in the research and discourse of black folklore and oral traditions to create a limited nationalist reading of folklore culture for Africa America.

As the title of this chapter indicates, what follows in my analysis of folk culture should not be taken as an attack on black nationalist thought that has helped sustain the

¹⁶ Although, I am focused on the more pervasive masculine and homophobic presentations of black nationalism, Lubiano’s assessment can also be corroborated by Huey P. Newton’s “The Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements” in *Black Men on Race, Gender, and Sexuality: A Critical Reader* (New York: New York UP, 1999). While Newton asserts a stance to unite black power movements with women and gay liberation movements, he also acknowledges that “there has been some uncertainty about how to relate to these movements....sometimes our first instinct is to want to hit a homosexual in the mouth, and want a woman to be quiet” (387). Clearly, the founder of black power recognizes how homophobia and sexism has manifested itself in black nationalism, and this recognition further substantiates my claims.

culture and social values of African America. However, considering the importance of folk, vernacular, and oral traditions in African-American literary theory and criticism, we should be articulating a post-nationalist re-reading of the folk that demonstrates how it figures into black subject positions. As Kobena Mercer points out:

Whilst both neo-nationalism and post-nationalism could be said to recognize the ending of black nationalist's narrative of cultural unity—"one aim, one people, one destiny"—the former seeks a nostalgic and conservative way of shoring up a monolithic conception of group identity. Whereas the later offers the alternative of confronting the experience of loss and uncertainty in order to examine what political potential resides in what was repressed in earlier historical narrative of national identity.¹⁷

A post-national reading of major black folklore research and studies demonstrates what was repressed in earlier evaluations of folklore and oral traditions. Black nationalism in folklore is not the problem; rather black nationalism's narrative of cultural unity makes it hard to comprehend the complications of gender and sexuality in vernacular culture. Nationalist readings of black folk and oral traditions use vernacular culture in specific ways: "a narrative of political history—a way to narrate a past in relation to that past's present and the present's politics, as an articulation of what is good and beautiful, as style, as a utopian narrative—a rallying cry, an expression of desire, and as a critical analysis—an on-going, ever-renewed critique of black existence against white racial domination as well as an evaluation of black existence within the group."¹⁸ Mercer's

¹⁷ Kobena Mercer, "Decolonisation and Disappointment: Reading Fanon's Sexual Politics." *The Fact of Blackness*. Ed. Alan Read. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996).

¹⁸ In "Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense" from *The House That Race Built*, Lubiano gives five specific traits of the way black nationalism functions and what it is. I use three of those

articulation of post-nationalism provides significant insight as to why critics such as Ducille wish to be able to discuss varied subject positions in blackness end up negatively reviewing folk, vernacular, and oral traditions. A post-nationalist reading of black folk and oral traditions would argue that these cultures perform the above functions with noticeable differences: it functions as critical analysis of black existence against white domination, but admits the concept of a utopian narrative (fundamentally based on a unitary notion of community) with an evaluation of black existence within the group. Such a reading would also give language to, and join together things that have no necessary link in a way that makes the connection seem inevitable.¹⁹ A post-nationalist reading should be anti-nationalist or internationalist to go against the imperialist nature of state nationalism. These functions would then make it easier to interject discussion about gender and sexuality into studies of black folklore and oral traditions, specifically the trickster figure. As Lubiano and Mercer acknowledge, nationalism can very much be plural and flexible, and its influence on vernacular culture can benefit from that. This becomes particularly important in any assessment of trickster figures in Black Diaspora cultures.

Many critics concerned with issues of Black folklore life, and specifically the trickster figure, have relied on the work of a number of African scholars and their assessment of African oral traditions as the base for their own research. It is for these reasons that this investigation includes issues of power and orality in African research, as

functions in demonstrating how the functions and specifics of black folk and oral culture have been conceived through nationalist thought.

¹⁹ Lubiano's definition makes no distinction between nationalism, neo-nationalism, or post nationalism, but some of the functions are clearly constructed based on the evolving trends and phases of nationalism. Yet, the last function of critical analysis has definite implications for post-nationalist thought that Mercer articulates. I break up these five functions in my assessment of how nationalist and post nationalist readings of the folk differ to reflect those differences in readings of nationalism.

well as African American research. This analysis does not mean to conflate African and African American traditions, merely to show a trend that occurs reflexively in both. In recent years, critics admit that there may be a negative influence of patriarchy affecting the research and scope of the oral tradition. One of the most recent texts, *Power, Marginality, and African Oral Literature* (1995) by Graham Furniss and Liz Gunner, covers the dynamics of power as it concerns nationalism and the power of state. The text examines how power relations are represented in oral forms, the role and power of words in oral societies, the types of prestigious and power positions in oral societies, and finally the question of whether the patriarchal paradigms should be endorsed or subverted in the oral tradition.

Furniss and Gunner's text demonstrates that the issues of power in oral tradition production and analysis need to be reconsidered for the sake of all Black Diasporic studies. Furniss and Gunner acknowledge that there are four factors in exploring the power issues of oral literature: (1) the appropriation of expressive forms by the state, corporate organisations, social groups of using oral forms for particular purposes, (2) the ways in which oral forms articulate and represent to the performer and audience particular visions of existing society, (3) the authority of oral performance in affecting existing power relations, (4) and the relation of gender and genre. The fourth factor uncovers the fact that women redefine the terms by which they are signified in broader social discourses (19). The anthology provides several examples to support their analysis. However, this study is more interested in how to use these four factors as the guiding force to explore how deeply the narrative of unity in nationalism impacts the study of the trickster for African American culture. Perhaps researchers take it for

granted that patriarchy affects all oral traditions in a similar manner and it need not be stated, but if such were the case recent studies on power and marginality would not be burgeoning. While Furniss and Gunner are primarily concerned with how African nations appropriate oral traditions to exercise power over people, their summary admits that issues of power are at stake in the research of oral and folk traditions. Past research on trickster traditions in Africa and the United States has failed to take into consideration the issues of power, as they intersect and relate to nation and gender, when studying oral literature and performance. Researchers must move beyond established boundaries to fully understand how race and gender function in theories about oral literature.

Critics of black diaspora oral and folk culture assert the functions of the forms and ties to agendas of black ethos in various ways, but they do so in a way that limits the functions and uses of folk and oral traditions. For example, the gendering of the trickster figure as male in academic research happens as a direct result of the aims of cultural nationalism in both African and African American communities. In Robert W. Pelton's *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight* (1980), the author records and archives the tales and antics of trickster figures from various West African nations: Anansi, Legba, Esu, and Ogo-Yurugu. Using the research of Melville Herkovits, Marcel Griaule, William Bascom, and R.S. Rattray, he reinterprets the myths, but he also analyzes the theories of the tricksters—the Jungian method, Claude Levi-Strauss's work, the neo-Durkheim approach, and Markarius's thoughts on a theory of the trickster—to come up with his own conclusions of the trickster. Pelton concludes, as those before him did in a similar way, that “Legba, Esu, and Ogo-Yurugu similarly open up the pattern of trickster-transformer-culture-hero...this circularity of the trickster pattern

points to its own deepest meaning: the unveiling of the imaginative process that is able to marry disorder and transformation and social order, foolishness and wisdom, history and timelessness” (227). Such theories have proven useful, and I am in complete agreement with Pelton’s theory of the trickster as it relates to social transformation; however, research reveals that masculine attributes and constructs are thrust into studies positing trickster in the pattern of trickster-transformer-culture-hero. Hero is the most problematic ideological construct offered in studies of the trickster.

Similarly, Harold Scheub’s *A Review of African Oral Traditions and Literature* (1984) acts as a brilliant study and validation of African oral traditions and its evolving connection to the discussion of oral and written dynamics in culture, but it too becomes embroiled in arguments of cultural validation:

To attempt a literary theory without examining the roots of literature in the oral tradition is to begin in the middle....to exclude the oral tradition from any influence on literature except for “residual oralism” ignores the rich interplay (of the written and oral) and the fact that the novel form, for example is prefigured in the oral epic. (23)

Before Scheub can begin to analyze and review the African traditions he has studied, he must first assert his reason for doing so. The study of orality is as important as the study of literary endeavors. While examining the relation between oral and written texts, he has to elevate or make equal the status of oral literature. If he fails to do so, oral literature and the cultural creations of African nations might continue to be deemed primitive and underdeveloped. The presence of ethnocentrism in his field forces him to tie his study to a more acceptable artifact of culture, literature—the heroic epic. While

Scheub is successful in highlighting the importance of orality in literature, his defensive strategy leads him to play into the drama of cultural nationalism, or in the case of Africa, cultural continentalism.

Scheub later suggests that “the oral tale is not the ‘childhood of fiction,’ but the early literary traditions were beneficiaries of oral genres, and there is no doubt that the epic and its hero are the predecessors of the African novel and its central characters” (16). In Scheub’s text, the epic, the hero, myth, and other oral genres and characters are taken apart and examined individually and contextually with each other to show how, despite ethnocentric criticism that depicts African nations as culturally void, the African continent possesses many cultural objects. African nations have oral epics like that of Greek nations; we need only understand the culture to see how. A major part of Scheub’s review dissects the heroic epic: “The heroic epic is the means of revealing the great shifts of a cultural level necessary to the securing of that passage of a whole people...a hero who is composite of all elements of nature and society; these flow through him, he comes to represent them in their interdependence...” (3). However, the key issue of this assessment comes when Scheub connects the African trickster figure and tales to that of the heroic tradition of Western written literature as a way of grounding his defense of African culture. Like other critics, Scheub models African oral epics after heroic models taken from other cultures, choosing to do an assessment based on comparative foundations, rather than relying strictly on the African oral traditions themselves.

Scheub begins briefly gendering the trickster tales and figures by relating to them as oral and heroic epics. Throughout, he employs the excessive use of masculine pronouns. Most of the trickster figures in the oral epics that Scheub investigates are

either animals or divine beings: “Rhinoceros of the Teketoa of Leribe/Down-horned cow confronts Agitator,/...The fierce-starer chopped them into groups,/Buffalo of the Mphaphathi family”; and later in a Yorùbá poem, “It is Wenis who eats men and lives on gods, Lord of porter, who dispatches messages. It is Grasper—of Horns who is in Kehanu.”²⁰ Unlike the Sis Cow and Sis Goose tales in U.S. black folklore, these poems contain no reference to gender, and we should not automatically assign gender constructs to them. There are plenty of figures in African oral traditions and tales that are not gendered masculine as they transform society and culture.

A brief description of the well-known Yorùbá trickster Esu from Adoye Ogundipe’s *Esu Elegbara the Yoruba God of Chance and Uncertainty* (1978) makes clear that, as a trickster figure, Esu “certainly is not restricted to human distinctions of gender or sex” (119). In *Esu Bara Laroye* (1971), critics J.E. and D.M. dos Santos qualify Ogundipe’s statement: “he inherits the nature of all ancestors...male ancestors, the Egun Irunmale, as well as those of the female, the Iyam-mi Aje” (91). The contradictions about gender in research on trickster figure become evident in juxtaposing the work of researchers. In stanzas of the epic poems presented by Scheub, we come to understand the animal figures as tricksters. However, there exists no clear gender construct in the tales. It is only through Scheub’s analysis that we come to know rhinoceros, buffalo, or wenis as a “he” trickster figure. The pronoun usage is only a small indicator of how trickster becomes associated with masculinity. The genderless trickster figure also becomes masculinized in the construction of a cultural continent agenda.

²⁰ Scheub discusses the epics of the Sunjata, Mwindo, Ibonia, Liongo, and Yorùbá. While some of these tales are clearly gender specific, there are many that are not gender specific at all, but that are gendered through Scheub’s use of “he” and “him”.

The research of Scheub makes it difficult to continue to see the trickster as genderless:

The epic carries with it images and experiences of the past, what the society has traditionally stood for in the new world. The hero is a part of both realms, he would not be able to take his people with him if he were not identifiably a part of the cultural past. But he has a vision of the new world...To make the change (from past to present and future), the hero moves to the boundaries of his community, necessarily so; and as he escorts his society into the new world...becomes the original insider. (18)

Two important factors can be taken from Scheub's and other critics' work on the hero and the trickster. Again, the most obvious is the use of masculine pronouns. Heroic traditions establish that the world belongs to and can only be saved by the male in society. Heroics and heroism are solid staples of masculinity, but tricksterism is not. The reason trickster can transform culture stems from the figure's resistance to society's constructs, and this would include any formations of gender and sexuality. By placing trickster in the model of epic, the role of cultural-transformer, is changed to a gendered role of nation that includes rhetoric of nationalism.

Scheub is not the only researcher who misinforms on the place of gender as it concerns African oral traditions and trickster figures. R.S. Rattray's *The Ashanti* (1927) completes an analysis of the Ashanti people's oral traditions. Rattray reveals the Ashanti elders' response to Rattray's surprising discovery of the importance of women in the culture, state, and family of Ashanti affairs: "I have asked the old men and women why I did not know all this....The answer is always the same: 'The white man never asked us

this...we supposed the European considered women of no account, we know that you do not recognize them as we have.' ”²¹ Rattray’s admission points out how the privileging of patriarchy in studies of the African oral tradition pervades the literature, and research on the trickster figure is used in these agendas of power and knowledge.²²

In *The Order of Things* (1970), Michel Foucault expounds on how the tools of knowledge and power are able to accomplish such a feat:

For man, then, origin is by no means the beginning—a sort of dawn of history from which his ulterior acquisitions would have accumulated. Origin, for man, is much more the way in which man in general, any man articulates himself upon the already-begun labor, life, and language; it must be sought for in that fold where man in all simplicity applies his labor to a world that has been worked for thousands of years....and composes into sentences which have never been spoken....words that are older than memory. (330)

Foucault’s assessment reveals why the historical Western motivation to join knowledge and power might influence the culture and study of African nations in the works of scholars like Scheub and Rattray. The discourse of history (precise data and knowledge) and anthropology (an understanding of an “oral civilization” based on observation) will become a way to dominate and conquer through three models that impose themselves as essential paradigms: function and norm, conflict and rule, and signification and system. They constitute and concurrently cover the field and all that can be known about humans. They strictly define what knowledge can offer about human beings (335). These

²¹ *Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927) 84.

²² See R.S. Rattray’s *Akan-Ashanti Folktales* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930)

paradigms, however, work off a system of hierarchy that privileges the philosophies and ideologies of those constructing the discourse of history: generally male and patriarchal, racially dominant, and heterosexual beings. Foucault documents that the discourse of history and anthropology finds its place in the aim of nation building. Traditionally, nation-building becomes the work of those gendered as male. It is an agenda steeped in bourgeois concerns of respectability. These are the primary reasons that issues of gender and sexuality become subordinated in the works of Scheub and Rattray. Heroics and heroes seeking to build nations can only validate ideologies of culture and nation. Genderless figures do not build nations, but heroes, gendered as males, do. Scheub and Rattray struggle to assert the validity of oral culture in various African nations, but to do so they mistakenly foster a defensive strategy in African criticism that disallows multiple and varied perspectives in the use of oral and folk traditions. As indicated earlier, nationalist thought implies the connection of black oral traditions to the articulation of origin, experiences, and existence of black culture where other discourse have failed.

If the study of the African trickster figure has been made masculine in research on African oral traditions, it has also been made masculine in the same way for black culture in the U.S. since a great deal of research on black oral traditions and the trickster figure relies on research about African oral traditions. Despite ethnocentric biases, it was very evident that African nations possessed culture since the beginning of time. However, in the early history of blacks (men) in the New World, their existence as a people without a true nation calls into question the existence of their culture and ontology. The African in the new world is perceived to have no sense of identity, and in the end, (he) becomes a problem.

In *W.E.B. Dubois and American Political Thought* (1997), Adolph Reed provides several implicit comments on how consensualism and the cold war in the 1950s and 1960s uses the “Negro Problem” framework to engage the U.S.’s national character and ideology:

This meant, among other devices, construing “American” to mean white... Of course, the normative consensus merely reasserted the long-standing exclusion of blacks from the main narrative of American history, but it also formalized the intellectual and institutional barriers separating the two areas of inquiry and restricted Afro-Americans to the study and strategies for (what had been called in the early twentieth century) “race adjustment.” (6)

Reed later goes on to say that the popular phrase “ ‘America has a ‘Negro Problem’ not only reproduces itself in the national experience; it also implies that the black experience exists only in so far as it intersects with white American concerns or responds to white initiatives” (7). Clearly, what Reed is criticizing so harshly is how ethnocentrism has shaped the political thought of blacks. Research in sociology and anthropology increases the rhetoric. Even as Reed ties his criticism to the emerging black studies in America during the 1950s, the “Negro Problem” had been ever-present before that time, specifically with Reconstruction in the U.S. Early black cultural studies, sadly as Reed indicates, forms itself in defense against ethnocentrism, and this defensive racial strategy rears its head from the very beginning of black studies to contemporary debates about identity politics. The scientific discourse of history, as the black male in the U.S knows it, has not taken account of him. He must find another viable discourse, and he does so

through the oral and folk traditions, working to eliminate any minor conflicts (gender and sexuality) that might fetter his endeavors. For this reason, a reactionary defensive strategy has contributed to the use of nationalist ideologies in creating an origin and ontology of culture for African Americans by means of the oral, and that action has proven to be dangerously regressive for continued study of oral, folk, and vernacular traditions.

Recent study of African American oral traditions has remained stagnantly the same. In the earliest folklore research, one finds a consuming concern with masculinity. From early folklore studies to recent trickster theories, the dynamics of power and gender in Black American oral tradition have been rarely discussed in oral and literary theory. In a comment that acts as a follow-up to my analysis of Scheub's focus on the heroic epic, Nathan Huggins makes a provocative claim about the hero in African American folklore: "Primitivism is especially a fantasy. It is easier to imagine men as roustabouts, vagabonds, bums, and heroes, harder to draw sympathetic females whose existence is their bodies and instincts" (7). Huggins, obviously not a folklore specialist as indicated by his use of "primitivism," explicitly expresses the problem of the hero and gender. Though we should not agree that bodies and instincts represent the traits of figures in folklore, regardless of gender, Huggins's comment actualizes how embedded stereotypes of gender have hindered the actual possibilities of folk figures. Despite the work of Pelton, Scheub, Levine, and others, trickster should not be seen as similar to heroes because to do so accepts a value system not originally intended for the figure. The primary importance of trickster is that its genderless being becomes a strategy to alter conception of what is primitive, civilized, masculine, or feminine. Figures such as the

trickster represent fluid conceptions of subjectivity, and if research of folkloric figures can be conceived to incorporate this flexibility, then perhaps we would be able to solve the dilemmas of the folk and gender. Huggins's ignorance may be dismissed due to his lack of knowledge in folklore studies; other critics cannot be dismissed as easily.

The most recent research on folklore and oral traditions in Black America still attempts to present oral forms as masculine-centered. John W. Roberts's *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (1989) shows a Scheub-like influence. From the very beginning of the text, Roberts fixates his study on the hero:

We often use the term "hero" as if it denoted a universally recognized character type, and the concept of "heroism" as if it referred to a generally accepted behavioral category. In reality, figures (both real and mythic) and actions dubbed heroic in one context by one group or people may be viewed as ordinary or even criminal in another context by another group. (1)

Roberts actually questions the definitions of hero and heroic. He admits that these terms are subjectively based on specific cultural contexts and social beliefs. Yet, rather than entirely dismissing the notion of hero, Roberts then demonstrates a hybrid Scheub-Herskovits approach to his study:

A hero is the product of a creative process and exists as a symbol of our differential identity....In this regard, heroic creation is very much like culture-building—the means by which a group creates and maintains an image of itselfIn many ways, this approach to folk heroic literature reveals the intimate relationship that folklorists envision between folklore creation and culture-building and reflects the assumption, implicit in

folkloristics, that folklore should support culture-building. (4)

Here again lies the problem of nationhood, gender, and race. Roberts plants the western model of hero right in the middle of black culture. He rightly asks that we consider the individual community's goals and agenda. For Africans in America, culture-building cannot be separated from issues of nation and race. Roberts admits the implicit connection. Roberts, like Scheub and Pelton before him, considers his claims in comparison with western notions of the hero. The first passage indicates that different racialized or non-western communities may find heroes in different places, but he limits his point to the social blocks of national boundaries and race. Further, considering Huggins's comment in relation to the second passage, we realize that his assessment appears vindicated by gendered notions stemming from research on the folk and oral. Therefore, if heroic-creation is very much like culture building, it has to be male culture, called Negro or Black culture, but one that is always gendered masculine, or hypermasculine. The works of Roger Abrahams, Harold Courlander, and, Joel Chandler, and other male scholars of black folklore support the remainder of Roberts's text.²³

Roberts specifically maintains his connection to masculinity by exploring masculine equated functions and aesthetics in animal tales such as Br'er Rabbit, African oral tales, and the slave narrative of Frederick Douglass (19). In the realm of spirituality and religion, he genders black folk and its figures as masculine through an examination of the conjurer (66). Next, Roberts argues "Negro" spirituals are a strictly masculine and heroic form by suggesting its relationship to Christian soldiers and war (111). The final

²³ See Roger Abrahams's *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore in the Streets of Philadelphia* (Chicago: Aldine, 1970); Harold Courlander's *Negro Folk Song U.S.A.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963); and Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (New York: Penguin, 1982).

and most potent display of masculinity occurs as Roberts explores how the (originally) genderless trickster becomes the Badman-as-outlaw-hero (174). The quandary with Roberts's text, as well as those previously mentioned, is that they fail to mention whether their research is specifically concerned with black male culture. For every figure that Roberts expresses as male-gendered, there are counter-examples of tales and figures depicted as genderless. Roberts focuses mainly on the male trickster Br'er Rabbit in his study of trickster figures from slave culture.²⁴ Though this figure fits more readily into Roberts's theory of folk culture as a key tool in the male work of nation-building, other animal tales do not fit so easily.

A juxtaposition of the two tales that opened this chapter, 'Ole Sis Goose' and "Sis Cow," with that of another tale reveals that something much more interesting occurs in the dynamics of black folklore that we can only address through an evaluation of the construct of gender in these tales. In "The Fox and the Goose," the original configuration of trickster as genderless is restored through a retelling of how fox tries to trick goose into being his/her next meal:

Fox said, "You ain't afraid of me, is you? Haven't you heard of the meeting up at the hall the other night?....Why, they passed a law that no animal must hirt any other animal. Come down and le me tell you about it. The hawk musn't catch the chicken, and the dog musn't chase the rabbit, and the lion musn't hurt the lamb." ²⁵

²⁴ Roberts connects the animal tales of Br'er Rabbit to the tales of John and Old Master, John (a slave driver), human possessing all the traits of Br'er Rabbit, but his trickery is more sophisticated and complex. Br'er Rabbit leads to the establishment of a heroic tradition in America.

²⁵ Hughes and Bontemps, 12.

As Fox works to coax and convince Goose to come out of the tree, a dog barks and causes fox to assume a hiding position. As the dog's bark comes closer, fox sneaks off instigates Goose to ask, "Fox, you ain't scared of the Dog, is you? Didn't all the animals pass a law at the meeting not to bother each other" (12). The goose wisely picks up on fox's trickery and the game of wits ends in a stalemate. Goose does not get eaten and fox escapes the dog. No clear victorious/heroic figure exists. Though fox seems very clever in its imagined suggestion of the passing of a new law, goose's keen intelligence to assess fox's action at the barking of the dog indicates the figure's own wiliness. As with the African oral epics, the lack of gendering of animals in this particular tale suggests the original ambiguity of tricksterism. The status of gender seems unnecessary because the tale is not presenting a tale of hierarchies, as was offered in earlier tales of Sis Goose and Sis Cow. Consequently, gender status seems to be employed in some animal tales as a way to parallel the superior levels of creativity, ingenuity, and cleverness with those of a given society's measurements of superiority—in the case of the U.S., the ranking of male over female. Depending upon the tradition, the being perceived as the most cunning becomes recognized through a culture's dynamics of hierarchies. Since, Africa America culture lacks the spiritual world of its African mother, where hierarchies are conveyed via deities/gods, divinities, and humans, the most effective way to represent those dichotomies in African American culture may be via gender constructs of the empire during slavery. The use of gender in African American folktales, then, does not necessarily buy into or accept the notions of gender, or the agendas that come with those constructs. Unlike, the rabbit and fox of previous tales who clearly enjoy a higher status in the tales, the fox and goose of this particular tale can be viewed as equals.

ination of the tale begins our exploration to validate the need for explicating how much into gender and sexuality in this area can prove vitally important.

Previous studies have failed to remember the unfixed gender of trickster, but this will not. In addition to reinvesting into a concept of a genderless trickster, one can that for every figure gendered male, there is a counter figure in black female oral tales, or genderless figures in African American culture. In the following chapters, figures such as Mawu-Lisa, Annie Christmas, healing turtle women, and Queen Bees will be used as comparative figures for Esu, Legba, the signifying monkey, John Henry, and the trickster. This is not to suggest that critics such as Roberts have converted a tradition of female into one that is masculine, but to insist that work be done to expose the possibility that not all of the folk tradition's ties to the trickster are necessarily masculine, or masculine schemas. Critics have done more than ignore female figures in order to deal with male figures: they have created an alternate universe in which black oral traditions that have been attributed to both sexes, such as the conjurer, trickster, and healer, become the product of a strictly masculine tradition. In the past, scholars have indicated that their studies are solely concerned with black male culture because to study black male culture should and does represent black culture.

Sadly, if one buys into the masculine constructed theories of the oral, these traditional assumptions can diminish the work of critics who study oral traditions in African American women's culture. In a response to Kimberly Benston's appraisal of the oral in "Performing Blackness," Cheryl A. Wall falls victim to these ideologies: "Women were, of course, historically denied participation in many of these traditions; for instance, signifying, whether in the pulpit or on the block, has mainly been a male prerogative"

(188). Wall is right to be concerned, but the pulpit and the block are not the only forms of oral performance, and women did and do engage in oral forms that may take place in the kitchen, beauty salon, or elsewhere other than the block. Further, Wall's comments highlight the importance of finding figures to engage criticism of vernacular, oral, and folk traditions.

In returning to questions posed earlier in this chapter, we can now move from the post-nationalist reading folklore criticism to explore another reason as to why gender should serve as a major consideration in present and future study of the trickster. While we can attribute the lack of discussion of gender to critics, we cannot easily explain away hierarchical gender dynamics in the tales so easily. Do these tales do more than teach us to be aware of gender relations in the new world? Each tradition of folklore, oral traditions, and tricksterism needs to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. We can never know the significance of gender in any of these traditions if we ignore or assume, as past researchers have done, the possibility that gender is not relevant. The real work begins in the following chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

The Mawu-Paradigm: Tricking the Trickster-trope/ Revising Gender

Dat's you, Alphabet, don't you know yo' ownself?"
Dey all uster call me Alphabet 'cause so many people had done
named me different names.

Zora Neale Hurston²⁶

Recreating in words the women who helped give me sustenance ...Mawu-Lisa,
thunder, sky, sun, the great mother of us all, and Afrekete, her youngest
daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best beloved, who we all must
become.

Audre Lorde²⁷

In addition to making ourselves aware of masculine agendas of nation building in folk and oral traditions, critics of trickster and vernacular culture must find a model that will provide a blueprint of how to begin fully re-evaluating and assessing folktales, oral traditions, and tricksterisms in terms of gender. Audre Lorde's use of Mawu-Lisa and Afrekete is significant in that it comes five years before the most significant studies of the trickster and its relation to African American texts, Roberts's *From Trickster to Badman* and Gates's *The Signifying Monkey*. Roberts's study of the trickster is tied to specifically masculine culture and the task of culture-building. Gates employs the trickster as a way to define the canonical black discourse of signifyin(g). He sees the trickster figures Esu/Legba as divine linguists, and uses the figures to establish the signifying monkey and the vernacular tradition of signifying as having a close relation to the West African trickster figure's role of indeterminacy and writing. By making the signifying monkey a linguistic referent for African American literature, Gates skips the implications of the trickster figure as a sexual and gender referent for African American literature and

²⁶ *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937; New York: Harper & Row, 1990) 9.

²⁷ *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982; Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1997) 255.

culture. However, he does conclude that such an option is possible in the discourse used to define tricksters: “Metaphysically and hermeneutically, at least, Fon and Yorùbá discourse is truly genderless, offering feminist literary critics a unique opportunity to examine a field of texts, a discursive universe, that escaped the trap of sexism inherent in Western discourse” (30). Initially, Fon and Yorùbá discourse directs Audre Lorde’s conceptualization of Afrekete in her life and work. Though Gates’s and Lorde’s projects are completely different, she seeks the flexibility of the discourse as it pertains to gender so that she can discuss the possibility of third designation. This chapter continues the working strategies of Lorde, takes up work to develop the feminist critique of such trickster traditions, and argues that the goddess/trickster figure Mawu-Lisa acts as a complex figurative model for critiquing gender and sexual relations in the black community, which could quite readily be used alongside the Signifying Monkey and acts of signifyin(g).

In the above quotations, Hurston and Lorde demonstrate an understanding of black female subjectivity as characterized by undefineable and boundless subject position. Although this dissertation does not perform a detailed analysis of their work specifically, it is influenced by their legacy of moving beyond synthetic norms to discuss black females and males in their work. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1935), Hurston chooses to show this indefiniteness by the name Alphabet, to indicate multiple and numerous names for one being. The name Alphabet becomes the signifier of black females’ unfixed identity and experience of being shaped and named by others than themselves. In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Lorde provides significant

insight into the functions of gender and trickster figures as they relate to the construction of voice and identity by questioning the representation of woman:

My mother was a very powerful woman. This was so in a time
'when that word-combination of woman and powerful was almost
unexpressable in the white American common tongue, except or
unless it was accompanied by some aberrant explaining adjective
like blind, or hunchback, or crazy, or Black...Therefore when I
was growing up, powerful women equaled something else quite
different from ordinary women, from simply
"woman." It certainly did not, on the other hand equal "man."
What then? What was the third designation? (15 italics mine)

By theorizing about a third designation for gender and later tying that designation to the trickster figure, Lorde theoretically attempts to find a space and discourse for black females' mutable subjectivity. Lorde's novel connects the subjectivity of trickster figures to alternate considerations of gender and sexuality in African American culture and cultural theory. In doing so, she indicates that the most beneficial discourse for black female subjectivity and revised ideas of Western constructs of gender might be found in philosophies embedded in Black Diasporic oral traditions.

As hinted at by both Hurston and Lorde, to be effective, the model selected must be able to provide a sufficient archetype for the complex subjectivity of black women. It should extend the traditional boundaries of trickster studies and consistently disrupt the traditional construct of gender for black females. Lorde's audacious initial use of the Dahomean figure, Mawu-Lisa, exemplifies the needed prototype. Mawu-Lisa is goddess

and mother to her son, servant, and divine linguists Legba and Afrekete, whom critics have tied to the African American figure, the Signifying Monkey.²⁸

When we disrupt the traditional models of trickster, while at the same time adhering to its ability to change social orders, we can re-implant back into the figure its original characteristics of being polygendered and divine. While Fon and Yorùbá discourse may be genderless, trickster figures often physically display biological evidence of gendering (penis or breasts). In the figure's original cultural context this ideological division might not pose a problem. However, in a cultural context that orders itself around opposing binaries, the actual figure and the discourse used to discuss the figure create a dilemma that restricts trickster's figuration. It seems difficult to fully overturn the foundational ranked binary oppositions of gender located in trickster studies as they exist in the African American community without utilizing another figure to overturn and revise the study of tricksters. For example, if researchers of black folk traditions were to address issues of gender and sexuality by simply relying on existing research for figures such as Esu or Legba, their studies would be forever haunted by the overwhelming attention critics pay to Esu's penis. In trickster studies, it becomes apparent that critics fetishize the penis: "His masculinity is depicted as visually and graphically *overwhelming*, his expressive femininity renders his *enormous sexuality* ambiguous, contrary, and genderless"(italics mine).²⁹ Esu's erect phallus serves as a symbol of the figure's characteristic trait of hypersexuality, but critics have made it a

²⁸ Though Gates's work is the text that connects Legba/Esu to the Signifying Monkey, Lorde's use of Legba's mother and sister also attempts to refer African American trickster tradition back to African origins of subjectivity.

²⁹ Robert Thompson's *Black Gods and Kings* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976) make noted references to Esu's enormous penis. See also Ayodele Ogundipe's *Esu Elegbara* Vol. 1 p.163 and pp172-173.

symbol specifically for hypermasculinity. Even as critics give lip service to Esu/Legba being both male and female, it appears very difficult for any of us to not notice the elephant in the room, or for this matter the big phallus, in order to begin talking about deconstructing notions of gender. The fetishization of the penis has as much to do with masculinity, as it does with heterosexuality. The physicality of the penis acts as a strap on for the straight mind of Western discourse, which is unable to resist imposing its value of the penis onto the multi-gendered trickster.

As demonstrated in the first chapter, there is a privileging of the masculine in studies of this West African trickster figure that scholars use to connect to cultural figures in the Black Diaspora. By employing Mawu-Lisa as another trope of the trickster narrative, we designate Mawu-Lisa as unacknowledged trickster figure. Mawu-Lisa and her/his tentative status as a trickster is important because it opens up underdeveloped discussions of gender and sexuality in tricksterism. In *Tricksters Make This World* (1998), Lewis Hyde argues, “all the standard tricksters are male” (335). My first question, then, is to ask whose standards guide the research and focus. Hyde further extends his argument by suggesting three reasons for this: “first, tricksters belong to patriarchal mythologies, one in which the prime actors, are male. Second, there may be a problem with the standard itself; there may be female tricksters who simply have been ignored. Finally, it may be that the trickster stories articulate some distinction between men and women, so that even in a matriarchal setting this figure would be male” (335). My analysis of Mawu-Lisa will reveal that the figure rebukes the idea of tricksters belonging to a patriarchal mythology, or that even in a matriarchal setting the trickster will be male. Finally, the existence of Mawu-Lisa does indicate a notable problem with

the standard itself. After determining Mawu-Lisa's status as a trickster figure, we can then begin seeing how she provides the initial figurative model for disrupting discourses on gender in the African American cultural texts.

Before Lorde's evoked the figure of Mawu, Herskovits describes Mawu-Lisa in *Dahomean Narrative: A Cross Cultural Narrative* (1998). Mawu-Lisa, as Herskovits notes, "is the creator...one person but has two faces. The first is that of a woman...The other side is that of a man...Since Mawu is both man and woman, she became pregnant" (125). Understanding this general description of Mawu-Lisa, it seems pertinent to discuss Mawu-Lisa as a figurative model for constructing revised readings of gender and sexuality. Herskovits describes Mawu-Lisa as bi-gendered, rather than genderless. Even as language attempts to confine the transgressing of social boundaries represented by the divinity, the myth of the figure resists. The compelling revelation that within one being two unranked binary oppositions exists provides a welcome distinction from the either/or binary provided by Western metaphysics. We know the binaries are unranked from the detail that Mawu becomes pregnant. The figure exists both as the man who impregnates and the woman who is impregnated, and this is possible because neither face dominates. In the Dahomean creation myth lie vital strategic devices for self-creation and autonomy in subjectivity pertinent to black cultural products and society. Herskovits detail of Mawu impregnating herself should remind readers of Lorde's third designation. As the myth of Mawu-Lisa is fully analyzed, one can develop the underlying philosophies of the myth to counter traditional discourse about the trickster, gender and sexuality.

What this work has been discussing is an interruption of the traditional narrative of the trickster as a trope, and this does not happen without an interruption in the

discourse on the logic of language. *Dahomean Narrative* exposes how Dahomean conceptions of language are not always mono-simplistic and universal.

When Mawu said this to the children, she gave the Sagbata twins the language which was to be used on earth, and took away their memory of language of the sky. She gave to Hevioso the language he would speak, and took from him the memory of the parent language. The same was done for Agbe and Maete, for Age and for Gu, but to Djo was given the language of men....Now she said to Legba, "You are my youngest child ...your work shall be to visit all the kingdoms ruled over by your brothers, and to give to me an account of what happens." (126)

Mawu-Lisa is mentioned time and again, but the figure is never analyzed in the way that Esu of Ifa or Legba of the Fon is analyzed. In this account, Mawu is creator of polyphonic discourses for her children that are different from her own. She grants knowledge of all of these languages, including her own, to Legba. Mawu's actions give different meaning to "mother tongue." With the existence of seven languages, seven mother tongues, it becomes impossible to remain static or defined by one limited tongue. No longer trapped into the logic and values of one tongue, the speakers and writers, Mawu and Legba, become able to conceive and think outside the borders of one language. Consequently, providing a separate language to each child, destroys the idea of mother tongue as universal and objective. As Mawu's actions dictate, language remains specific and particular to each individual, and the logic comes from those individuals, rather than some perceived universal and false construction of logic violently or ideologically enforced.

As suggested by Gates, Herskovits, and Pelton, the above example may reveal Legba as a divine linguist, but it also reveals Mawu as a writer and author of man's destiny, according to the Fon people:

We bokono take three things for our Mawu. We take Mawu, or Fa, as the author of man and destiny. We take Legba as the son, brother, and power of Mawu and as Mawu herself....Fa is the writing of Mawu, which was turned over to Legba to make man. Therefore, we say Fa is Mawu and Mawu is Fa. (Herskovits 203)

The text may be Fa, and Legba may be the translator and interpreter of that text, able to impose his own meaning and govern the indeterminacy onto such text, but Mawu is still the author. In addition to Mawu-Lisa's trickery, we need also take into consideration the figure as the author of Fa. Once criticism explicitly defines the trickster figure as creator, as well as transformer of existing elements, we can move beyond seeing the figure and its forms of indeterminacy as mimetic or revisionist actions only. In doing so, we can then recognize that a philosophy or logic of subjectivity exists before Western dynamics of subjectivity. For the purpose of his post-structuralist approach to vernacular culture, Gates clearly assigns the writing of Fon, the Fa, a literal interpretation even as it calls for something more.³⁰ As noted earlier, the Fon take three things as their Mawu, and Fa is one of them. According to Herskovits, Fa is destiny and a system of divination. It is the alphabet of Mawu taught to mankind (172). However, closer analysis of Fa reveals that it might also be considered a discourse on identity and subjectivity: "They said it was necessary that every man have his Fa. The people asked, 'What is this thing you call

³⁰ See p.6-7 of *The Signifying Monkey*. Gates discusses the role of Legba as divine linguist. In an all out attempt to make Legba and Esu rhetorical tropes, he often overlooks the assignment of individuality from Mawu's divination.

Fa?’ The prophets said that Fa is the writing with which Mawu creates each person...it is necessary that a man should know the writing which Mawu has used to create him, so that knowing his Fa, he knows what he may eat and may not eat, what he may do and what he may not so” (173). Fa is very specialized and particular to each individual. No one person will ever have the same Fa. If the Fon are to discuss their destiny, what I am reading as their identity, then they must do so by comprehending the writing of Mawu. It should also be noted that Fa is personified as Gbadu, a figure with sixteen eyes and both male and female like Mawu. Creation of identity, then, acts as a major characteristic of this trickster, and the creation of identity takes shape from the alphabet and language of Mawu-Lisa that reflects these same doubleness and mutability as its creator, Mawu-Lisa. Though Legba may be the divine linguist who determines a system of writing, Mawu-Lisa’s role focuses on assigning subjectivity. Utilizing Mawu as a proto-type reveals both the possibility of liminal subjectivity, and a discourse in which to talk about such a subjectivity

As for Legba’s trickery, we may note that when Esu/Legaba changes or makes some part of a text indeterminate, it is in effect a result of his tumultuous relationship with the author of that text. Thus, the text cannot be fully understood without an examination of the relationship between Legba and Mawu. Mawu serves as a referent for subjectivity and a discourse for that subjectivity, and Legba serves as a referential means of inscription and translation of that discourse into a larger text. Human life and destiny—one’s subject position—will be influenced by this relationship of Mawu and Legba:

Legba did good deeds towards everybody, and he was always with Mawu.

When he did a good deed, people always thanked Mawu...Now, it is said that in those days Legba did nothing without instructions from Mawu. But when there was evil, and the people cried out and went directly to Mawu, Mawu said to them, "It was Legba who did that." All the people begin to hate Legba. (Herskovits 149)

Again, the tale of the Dahomean gods reveals Mawu's actions of trickery and deception. Before Legba can be acknowledged as a trickster, Mawu teaches him the benefits and art of tricking. Legba becomes trickster primarily to get back at Mawu for her trickery that makes him appear evil in the eyes of Fon people. If Mawu had not lied and tricked the people into believing her lies/truth, Legba would never have had reason to begin his life of trickery. Just as the creator god provided him with the seven languages of the other children, she also gives him her own language, and that language encompasses indeterminacy and deception. When one focuses on Legba and language, the significance of Mawu-Lisa's actions is somewhat displaced. In any scrutiny of Legba, the endeavors of translation take precedent. Mawu-Lisa's role and all the possible disruptive strategies of gender constructs are replaced by hypo-tragic modes previously mentioned by Gerald Vizenor as the antithesis of trickster discourse. As Vizenor points out, trickster is a comic holotrope. The importance of this displacing is that we lose what originally could have been a way to disrupt and overturn metaphysical constructs of gender. In order to use of the comic holotrope, we must remember the way Mawu-Lisa tricks Legba, and rather than connecting trickster to a mono-heroic tradition that fosters removing the genderless nature/dual nature of the trickster, we can consistently accept both the treachery and divinity of the figure. The comic trope of trickster allows the original

flexibility of subject position, while the tragic model of hero in an epic tradition fixes the figure in a context alien to the community's cultural text of comic sign.

Analyzing both the trickery and divine elements become crucial in revising the trope of the trickster. If we go back to those manifest trickster traits introduced by Doty and Hynes (ambiguous and anomalous personality, deceiver/trick-player, shape-shifter, situation-invertor, messenger/imitator of the gods, and sacred lewd bricoleur), then we must admit from the examination of Mawu-Lisa, that quite possibly s/he possesses all of these traits. The ability to shape shift and invert situations is a given fact of the being's construction as ultimate creator. As a figure that embodies two supreme beings in one existence, Mawu-Lisa continuously imitates other gods, Lisa and Mawu, since no one can say where one ends and the other begins. Mawu-Lisa reveals all of the elements of deceiver/trick player in that she creates a complex systems of language amongst her seven children, while none but Legba may remember her language. She also tricks mankind by asserting that Legba is the cause of all their mishaps and evil. As a sacred/lewd bricoleur, there is no separation of good and evil in the higher power because Mawu-Lisa contains both, just as Legba does. Mawu-Lisa's embodiment of the majority of trickster characteristics occurs every time she makes man believe that Legba has been the cause of their misfortunes. Further, Erik Davis's "Tricksters at the Crossroads: West Africa's God of Messages, Sex and Deceit" suggests that the fifth element of messenger imitator is problematic when he states, "When we think of tricksters, we generally imagine folk characters and culture heroes, not gods. Tricksters either tend to be associated with animal spirits (such as Coyote), or are Promethean figures, archetypal 'humans' who interact with and upset the world of Gods" (1). Davis's statement appears

valid in revealing the limited vision of trickster configurations in African American culture and literature. I would go even further to say that when we think of tricksters we rarely think of them as gods, or goddesses. Traditionally, notable minor Gods, such as Esu and Legba, are deemed trickster figures and male with ambiguous or feminine characteristics. By proposing Mawu-Lisa as god/trickster we can now demonstrate how his/her deployment as a figurative model might disrupt the discourses on gender and gender relations in the African American community.

A Figurative Model: Why Mawu for African American Culture?

As this critique of gender locates a mechanism that undermines the problems of Western gender constructs, then it “ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to totalizing gestures of feminism” (Butler 18). In order to do so, we must move outside of Western ideologies of gender and ground our analysis in a symbolic connection to an order of thought which undermines the social rankings of gender. Those symbolic connections can be found in West African cosmology and its discussion of gender. The way to disrupt traditional discourses of gender in black communities and culture is to find figures in black culture that parallel the subjectivity of Mawu-Lisa, the symbolic dynamics of Mawu-Lisa’s relationship with Legba, and Mawu-Lisa’s actions as creator of new individual and mutable subjectivities. In doing so, we continue to acknowledge the belief that the interior relations of the trickster tales are as important as the tales. Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (1995) explores resistance narrative ambiguity in black women’s writing. In constructing her argument, McClintock states that “narrative differences are eloquent not of anatomical destiny and

design but the daily difficulties women experience in negotiating their lives around the magisterial forms of male selfhood” (314). In order to create a reading paradigm for African American folkloric culture concerned with gender, we need to take into account the way gender impacts African American culture. We need an example that will simultaneously acknowledge the African American community as a possibility for an indeterminate humanity, but that will also acknowledge that African American culture creates a silence about that unmoored humanity.

Karla F.C. Holloway’s *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women’s Literature* (1992) makes similar attempts to symbolically incorporate the importance of goddesses in her literary theory concerning a comparative analysis of African American and West African women writers. Holloway believes: “the recovered metaphor that articulates the relationship between soul and gender is the metaphor of the goddess/ancestor. I focus on this subjective metaphor to illustrate the importance of cultural, spiritual, and metaphysical places in both African and African American women’s writings” (2). Holloway acknowledges, in choosing the metaphor of the spiritual and the goddess/ancestor analogy, black women writers are trying to recover something that they have lost. She perceptively continues, “I believe that far from being a coincidental selection of metaphor, the ancestral presence in contemporary African American women’s writing reconstructs an imaginative, cultural (re)memberance of a dimension of West African spirituality, and that the spiritual subjective figuration is fixed into the structures of the text’s language” (2). *Moorings and Metaphors* validates on more than one occasion this work’s thesis concerning the use of Mawu-Lisa as a figurative model to disrupt discourses of gender. However, while Holloway is

concerned with using her metaphor to do a comparative analysis of West African and African American women writers, to show the distinction between black male and female writers, and to indicate how “there is a textual place where language and voice are reconstructed by black women writers as categories of cultural and gendered essence” (11), I am concerned about the implications of using and constructing a reading in this way because it risks accepting Western categories of gender. We need to assess the loss of other discourses on gender and the need to recover that loss, and how it impacts not only African American women’s cultural production, but African American culture as a whole. Such an endeavor does not preclude taking into account the historical experiences of black females, but it also does not rely on artificial notions of a gendered essence. This text does not seek to historically tie Mawu-Lisa into any African American vernacular, folk, and oral traditions, but to use the figure as a subjective metaphor for a double reading of gender in African American texts.

In addition to goddesses/tricksters like Mawu-Lisa, Esu, and Legba, there are a number of West African communities that have a system of thought where unranked binaries disrupt Western discourses of gender. Marcel Griaule’s *Conversations with Ogotemelli* (1970) reveals that although binary oppositions exist in Dogon communities, ideally, none of the elements of the binary is subordinated. Ogotemelli states, “Thus it came to be that each human being was endowed with two souls of different sex, or rather with two different principles corresponding to two distinct persons. In the man the female soul was located in the prepuce; in the woman the male soul was in the clitoris” (22). Later, Ogotemelli reiterates:

In the obscure beginnings of the evolution of the world, man had no

knowledge of death, and the eight ancestors...lived on indefinitely. They had eight separate line of descendants, each of them being self-propagating since each was both male and female...The four males and the four females were couples in consequence of their lower, i.e. of their sexual parts. The four males were man and woman, and the four females were woman and man. (25)

Later, in discussing the creation of the second word and weaving, Ogotemelli relates that the second word (the language of man) comes about because of a seventh ancestor, conceivably a trickster who “is thus the completion of the perfect series, symbol of the total union of male and female, that is to say of unity” (26). Clearly, we are presented with the binaries of male/female, but they are not socially constructed or ranked. The distinctions acknowledge biological differences such as the penis and clitoris and the need for reproduction, but penis is not privileged over the clitoris or vice versa. In this presentation of gender in identity formation, we cannot begin to determine where male begins and female ends, and vice versa; and so we are left with the notion that difference exists, but not with any clear identity of where. Even when Ogotemelli discusses the role of initiation and circumcision to provide determinant sexuality, he does not imply that these acts are to make one sex more important or privileged than another sex: “Man’s life was not capable of supporting both beings: each person would have to merge himself in the sex for which he appeared best. The Nommo accordingly circumcised” (22). Ogotemelli later explains the belief of dual-souls and reveals the reasoning behind the controversial circumcisions: “In so far as the child retains the prepuce or the clitoris—characteristics of the sex opposite to its own apparent sex—its masculinity and femininity

are equally potent...If this uncertainty were to continue, ...[s/he] would never have any inclination to procreate (158). The Dogon consistently place values in unranked binaries, but practically they are also concerned with longevity of their people and customs. Reproduction becomes the way to ensure prolonged existence, but it does not displace the original importance of Nommo philosophies.³¹

This order of reason also exists in Ashanti communities of West Africa. As R.S. Rattray notes in his *Ashanti*, the Ashanti people also have concepts of duality and doubleness that remains unranked: "It is the ntoro of the man mingling with the mogya of the woman that, Ashanti believes, forms the child, and just as the woman transmits her mogya or blood, so the man transmits his ntoro; the former inherited from the mother and transmitted by her alone, and the latter received from the father and transmitted by him to his offspring" (37). Both elements are necessary for the child's identity formation, and resist hierarchical status. This duality also manifests itself in creation stories of the Ashanti: "Very long ago one man and woman came down from the sky and one man and woman came up from the earth" (48). In neither cultural belief is there a privileging of male over female. The world and people come into existence through an equilateral beginning. Woman does not come from man, or vice versa. Creation relies on an equal contribution from the binaries. As Pelton notes of Rattray's analysis of the Ashanti: "One can say briefly that Ashanti society is rooted in an awareness of doubleness of life disclosed by maleness and femaleness, not as biological principles, but as ontological poles between which the world comes to be" (65). The ontological poles of these West

³¹ In a discussion of male circumcision, we learn that after circumcision (the Dogon's physical removal of femininity) the prepuce changes to the *nay*. *Nay* means " 'four', the female number and 'Sun,' which is a female being"(22). Despite the initiation rites, the Dogon remain dedicated to being numerous things at once.

African communities are rooted in a sense of variability, rather than fixed and hierarchical oppositions. As with the trickster, the very idea that Mawu-Lisa, as male and female, can become pregnant (self-impregnated), overturns a system based on ranking binary oppositions so that we cannot positively define Mawu-Lisa as anything but what it is. In the case of Mawu Lisa, it seems impossible to legitimately know what is or what is not female/male. What we have here is an older construction of gender dynamics similar to *différance*, and this order of reasoning impacts the constructions of gender in West African communities, as shown in language, culture, and social formations.

In *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourse* (1997), Oyèrónké Oyêwùmí presents compelling arguments to reveal how the oral, folk, and vernacular can reveal different discourses on gender. Specifically, Oyêwùmí works to establish how “Yorùbá language and oral traditions represent major sources of information in constituting world sense, mapping historical changes, and interpreting social structures” (31). She also argues that gender is not the organizing principle of every society, as it is for Western society, and that woman as a social category, as understood in Western terms, in Yorùbá society did not exist prior to colonization by the West (31-32). The most compelling evidence that Oyêwùmí offers stems from her analysis of three words that demonstrate non-hierarchical ranking of gender:

The usual gloss of Yorùbá categories *obinrin* and *okunrin* as “female/woman” and “male/man,” respectively, is a mistranslation (of Western influenced thought)....these categories are neither binarily opposed nor hierarchical. The word *obinrin* does not derive

etymologically from *okunrin*, as “wo-man” does from “man”. *Rin* the common suffix...suggests a common humanity; the prefixes *obi* and *okun* specify which variety of anatomy. There is not conception here of an original human type against which the other had to be measured. *Eniyan* is the non-gender-specific word for humans. In contrast, “man,” the word labeling humans in general in English that supposedly encompasses both males and females actually privileges males. (33)

In her important investigation of three simple words, Oyêwùmí illustrates that in Yorùbá societies physical bodies are not necessarily social bodies. Her terms of “body-reasoning” and “bio-logic”³² compellingly stress that issues of power and social structures are not necessarily dictated by gender, but other factors such as age and descent. In order to enforce her points about biological determinism, Oyêwùmí counters the Western social-defined bodies of sex—gender—by creating terms such as ‘anafemale’ and ‘anamale’ as a way to discuss Yorùbá society before colonialism and emphasize the non-gendered attitude toward the socialization and ranking of human bodies (xii). Oyêwùmí provides evidence of her point by noting that in Dahomean societies the invention of men and kings happens as a result of mistranslation of *aláàfin* (Yorùbá word for rulers). Because western thought perceives that rulers would be associated as King or Queen, King becoming the positive term and Queen the subordinated, when in actuality the two were equal under the term *aláàfin* (84). The cultural mistranslations are simply the beginning of ranked binary oppositions in Oyo-

³² According to Oyêwùmí, bio logic is defined as an “ideology of biological determinism: the conception that biology provides the rationale for the organization of the social world” (ix). and body-reasoning is “the assumption that biology determines social position. Because ‘woman’ is a body-based category, it tends to be privileged over ‘traders’, which is non-body-based...Body reasoning is a cultural approach” (17).

Yorùbá societies. According to Oyêwùmí, these mistranslations occur due to western metaphysics that afford more significance to the visual over the aural. She asserts that western social hierarchies such as gender and race are a function of the privileging of the visual over other senses in Western culture, and that the Yorùbá frame of reference appears based more on “a combination of senses anchored by the auditory”(30). Oyêwùmí’s theory appears consistent with the privileging of tonal articulation in speaking and hearing for obtaining the meaning of a word in Yorùbá language. As Oyêwùmí notes in her analysis of the misrecognitions and mistranslations of Yorùbá words, the language of the people serves as a considerable disruptor of axiological binaries in Western discourse.

Similarly, Ifi Amadiume in her text *African Matriarchal Societies: The Case of Igbo Societies* (1987), addresses similar concerns for Nigerian societies. Amadiume relies on language to express her theories about the existence of matrifocal societies in West Africa. She concedes that while there is a biological gender distinction of male and female, there is not a ranking of them in the language: “*oke* means male, and *nyi* means female. The terms for man and woman are *nwoke* and *nwanyi*...But in the subject pronoun, no distinction is made between male and female. The third person singular, *O*, stands for both male and female, unlike the English gender construction...‘he’ and ‘she’ ” (28). These consistent elements of unranked binaries in the language are significant for any study attempting to disrupt the established discourses of gender, and Amadiume explores one of the results of the Igbo’s social order. Her insights about the logic of gender in Igbo discourse for Nigerian societies allows her to complete a much needed examination of the Nnobi society’s obvious separation of biological sex from gender

constructs: “Two examples of situations in which women played roles ideally or normally occupied by men, that is, what I have called male roles in indigenous Nnobi society, for example were ‘male-daughters’ who have been accorded the status of sons to enable them to continue their father’s line of descent, and ‘female husbands’ women who married other women (29). The terms suggest that lineage matters more so than biologies of the West. Oyêwùmí also notes the existence of similar social orderings in Oyo-Dahomey culture as well (112). The existence of “male daughters” and “female husbands” serve as reminders that sex does not necessarily mean gender.³³ Such terminology also complicates discussions of sexuality. Throughout each text, both Oyêwùmí and Amadiume stress the inadequacy of western bio-logic and order of gender applied to African metaphysics, which can lead critics to misread the society being studied. For these reasons, Black Diasporic culture can benefit from locating the foundation of its resistance by adopting a figurative model, Mawu-Lisa—trickster-god, inside these traditions.

Just as concepts of unranked binaries impact the language use of Nigerian culture and language, so too can using Mawu as a figurative model to reveal a philosophy of non-hierarchy of gender affect the reading of African American texts. Mawu-Lisa emblematically signifies the concept of gender undecideability or gender disruption. In *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida explains how by stating that “there is no essence of *différance*; it is that which could only never be appropriated in the as such of its name or its appearing, but also that which threatens the authority of the as such in general, of the

³³ Amadiume points out that “There is a series of contradiction here, for on the one hand, there is a suggestion of gender asymmetry and not a sexual one. There were for example, women in master or husband roles and men in wifely or domestic role...the master or husband role did not necessitate a male classification” (30).

presence of the thing itself in its essence. That there is not a proper essence of *différance* at this point, implies that there is neither a Being nor truth of the play of writing such as it engages difference...There is no name for it—a proposition to be read in this platitude. This unnameable is not an ineffable Being which no name could approach: God, for example” (27). Mawu-Lisa, as a goddess/trickster figure, represents the gender equivalent of *différance*—a goddess, but most importantly, a subject being both male and female that exists as a play of gender to engage the distinctions without ranking them. According to this paradigm, the figure resists definition and naming that might fix its subjectivity to continue its mutability.

More applicable to the discussion of gender in African Diaspora communities than Derrida’s theory of *différance*, is a strategy derived from a specific (pre)post-structuralist theoretical logic of gender in black communities. Toni Cade Bambara’s “On the Issues of Roles” assesses the dismissal of gender as a revolutionary tactic that must be completed for true black liberation:

In the last few years I have frequently been asked to speak on the topic of the Black woman’s role in the Revolution....I’m not altogether sure we agree on the term “revolution” or I wouldn’t be having so much difficulty with the phrase “woman’s role.” I have always, I think, opposed the stereotypic definitions of “masculine” and “feminine,” not only because I thought it was a lot of merchandising non-sense, but rather because I always found the either/or implicit in those definitions antithetical to....what revolution of self is all about—the whole person.³⁴

³⁴ Toni Cade. “On the Issue of Roles” *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. Ed. Toni Cade Bambara (New York, NY: Signet Press, 1970) 101.

Establishing a praxis for her theory, Bambara contextualizes the importance of destroying gender assumption in black communities. She later states, “Perhaps we need to let go of all notions of manhood and femininity and concentrate on Blackhood”(103). Bambara’s word echoes the sentiments of Oyêwùmí and Amadiume. She remains aware of the genetic differences between male and female, but wishes to assassinate the social dictatorship enforcing ideologies of gender. The most beneficial way of adhering to Bambara’s logic for true revolution means finding a way to re-write subjectivity.

As black is already othered to the signifier white, and woman is othered to man, woman = white positions black female subjectivity as othered three times. Hence, a reading strategy constructed from the Mawu paradigm would reveal a simultaneous presentation of male/female distinctions without privileging one over the other; it would facilitate the creation of a discourse on subjectivity that mirrors the seven particular languages of Mawu, and use that polyphonic discourse—the mother tongue—to create a process of unnameing to continuously disrupt the authority of gender and sexual designations in African American texts. Using Mawu-Lisa as a figurative model is especially useful when we consider that the power to unname one’s self is a repetitive trope in African American culture. In discussing his theory on the topos of (un)nameing as it concerns *Invisible Man*, Kimberly Benston avers that “The ambiguities he (the invisible man) learns to confront in ‘being’ at once a subjective absence and total self-presence (invisible/man) arise from the comedy of his vain desire to achieve an empowering name” (159). However, the process of unnameing based on the figurative model of Mawu-Lisa does not function to achieve an empowering name in traditional gender constructs. Rather its purpose is to evade intelligible gender discourse in African

American cultural texts by remaining unnamed and in a liminal state. In the critical theory, narrative, and fiction of the African American woman writer, there is no comedic vain desire to find an empowering name, simply an ambivalent tragic recognition of the failure by dominant discourse to translate her subjectivity. The existence of male-daughters and female husbands in Nigerian language and social practice is possible because of the fluid distinctions of gender that exist in philosophical and cultural beliefs of the people. As we have now found an alternate paradigm or way to discuss gender through the Mawu-paridigm, we must now use the example of Mawu-Lisa to explore whether any such possibilities exist for African American culture, but before doing so, we must acknowledge one other facet of the Mawu-paradigm.

West African's cosmological construction of difference is not enough to establish Mawu-Lisa as the paradigm for a reading of gender in African American culture; it is the tensions in Mawu's relationship with Legba that configure an appropriate model. The story of Legba and Mawu critically highlights the very reason that Legba becomes the trickster figure. After Mawu has tricked the people into believing that Legba is responsible for the evil that happens to them, Legba is born as trickster. He sets Mawu up for a crime by stealing her sandals to leave evidence of her footprint in the crime against the people. "Mawu was humiliated. She said to all the people, that it was her son who played her this trick" (Herskovits 150). Consequently, because of Mawu's actions, Legba begins a career of trickery. He soon uses tricks to displace Mawu. Mawu, who once lived on the earth, goes to live up in the sky because Legba continued playing tricks on her.

Pelton points out that Legba's shaming of high gods is crucial to his place and identity as an outsider, mediator and divine linguist:

The human world develops through tricks, not tragedy, and thus the myth is not a veiled cosmic matricide, despite its oedipal overtones. Legba succeeds by using the very wiliness Mawu has given him. True, to become a mediator Legba must create a distance that only he can span but in doing so he is carrying out Mawu's original intent. (78)

As Pelton points out, the relationship of Mawu and Esu/Legba is not Oedipal. However, Pelton's claim that the myth is not veiled cosmic matricide is a weak attempt to keep the phallus at the center. If the world comes into being simply because of Legba's trickery, then we must also acknowledge that the world comes into existence because of the reasons for that trickery—Mawu. Legba would not have used tricks and been made trickster and mediator if Mawu had not used him to trick the people. Much in the same way that the internal conflicts between Mawu-Lisa and Legba bring into existence the Fon and writing, so too must we understand how the internal conflicts of gender constructs influence African American culture. As Legba tries to elude the misrepresentation of himself as evil and bad, he displaces Mawu by sending the goddess into the sky, much in the same way as Africans in the New World displace their own distinct discourse on gender often found in their oral, folk, and vernacular traditions.

In the texts of Amadiume and Oyêwùmí, it seems that the language practices analyzed, over concerns for gender, are products of societies whose metaphysical logic of differences of gender are not violently or hierarchically opposed. The conception of male-daughters and female-husbands explains that the fluidity of gender is possible.

These texts are enough to prove that Audre Lorde's initial connection to the trickster occurs as a result of a psychological toning of oral and folk traditions in African and African American cultural traditions, and specifically that the oral, folk, and vernacular tradition begins without the ranking and socialization of gender hierarchies. My claim establishes that we recover the psychological toning of early traditions to understand and further discussions of gender and sexuality in African American culture. Oyêwùmí and Amadiume's texts consistently demonstrate that the task for Yorùbá and Igbo females is not to try to find an unsexed humanity (as it is for Western feminism to move from a gender construct of woman to an unsexed humanity), but they must realize that the unsexed humanity exists, "albeit in a concatenation with the reality of separate and hierarchical sexes imposed during colonial period" (Oyêwùmí 156). African American communities and specifically black females must undertake this same mission. However, projects regarding black female literature and cultural have fallen short of doing so.

The main purpose of Barbara Christian's *The Black Woman Novelist* (1985) is to recover and re-read texts written by black female writers. She describes the origins and traces the development of the novel. In the end, Christian's work addresses how stereotypes of black women affected writings by black women novelists. She discusses images and representations such as the mammy, the mulatta, and the licentious black woman. Christian explains that origins and developments of these stereotypes arise from the historical legacy of slavery, despite glaring contradictions from ideas of womanhood: "Beyond the question of its relationship to truth, the image itself contained contradictions. A lady was expected to be a wife, a mother, and a manager; yet she was expected to be delicate, ornamental, virginal, and timid" (8). She later goes on to say that

“the truly civilized lady did not work, for work, although necessary, is demeaning” (8).

Christian’s reading of gender does not overturn or dismantle the system of gender hierarchies. It works within and adheres to those ideologies precisely because it suggests that the work of early female writers was a way to align the black female body with the rhetoric of womanhood and ladies.

Hazel Carby’s *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987) also investigates the novel tradition of black female writers. From the very beginning, Carby exposes the flaws of Christian’s work: “However, it is necessary to confront Christian’s assertion that the prime motivation for nineteenth century and early twentieth century black writers was to confront the negative images of blacks held by whites” (14). According to Carby, Christian never really talks about white womanhood and black womanhood. She never articulates that the two different subjects involved grapple with one mode of discourse. Carby is right in assessing that Christian’s work is concentrated on explicating stereotypes rather than “engaging theoretical and historical questions raised by the tradition of black women writing” (14).

However, Carby’s own text presents many of the same predicaments. More than once, Carby argues how the institution of slavery makes it difficult for black females to be accepted into the cult of womanhood:

To qualify as a “true woman,” the possession of virtue was an imperative....Overt sexuality, on the other hand, emerged in images of the black woman, where ‘charm’ revealed its relation of the dark forces of evil and magic. The effect of black female sexuality on the white male was represented in an entirely different form from that of the figurative power

of white female sexuality. (25-27)

Carby interprets the possession of virtue, as opposed to biological factors, as one of the major elements in creating the representations of woman and womanhood.

Like Christian before her, Carby's work becomes, first, an examination of stereotypes about black women, and secondly, a monument dedicated to representing the utmost moral character of black females. The black female slave cannot be accepted as a true woman because she functions as a laborer, breeder and concubine: "slave woman, as victim, became defined in terms of a physical exploitation resulting from the lack of assets of white womanhood: no masculine protector or home and family, the locus of the flowering of white womanhood" (35). She is right to identify the horrors of female bondage because the abuse of the black female body makes it impossible to figure black female subjectivity into a discussion of womanhood, but it seems of equal importance to note Carby's lack of discussion on the concepts of virtue and gender. In spite of the fallacies emerging from ideals about virtue, Carby studies the ramifications of stereotypes and how they impact the emerging identities of post-slave women. Carby maintains a commitment to examining how the novels of Frances Ellen Watkins and Paula Hopkins adhere to Victorian morals. She outlined these morals as inaccessible to black women during slavery, but she argues, with her analysis of black female novelists, that black females could and did obtain them during periods of Reconstruction in the U.S. (21- 30). Each of Carby's arguments work to fashion a moral culture of true black womanhood because as she sees it: "ideology of true womanhood attempted to bring coherence and order to the contradictory material circumstances of the lives of women" (24). Instead of a model of black females seeking to define their own subjectivity, Carby positions black

females as desperately pursuing the womanhood (white woman) that will bring order to their lives as victims of physical and sexual abuse stemming from racial exploitation.

Even as Carby mentions the differing material conditions of black females versus those of white females, she undermines her point by implying that there are two separate ideologies of womanhood and motherhood:

The sexual ideology of the period thus confirmed the differing material circumstances of these two groups of women and resolved the contradiction between the two reproductive positions by balancing opposing definitions of womanhood and motherhood, each dependent on each other for its existence. (25)

The two groups of women, one black, and the other white, remained defined by the white patriarchal system. “Womanhood” and “motherhood” depend on each other because they are part of the same gendered lot. As long as we continue to accept these terms, we will never be able to resolve the conflicts. Further, it will take a great deal more than a cult of high moral womanhood to resolve the contradiction of black female slaves and notions of woman.

Carby forgets that just as the phallus becomes the primary signifier of meaning in discussions about what is male and female, so too womanhood has at its most basic foundation whiteness or white female subjectivity. For this reason, to suggest that there are two cults of womanhood, one for black females and one for white females is a problematic argument. As much as the conceptualization of the cult of womanhood is a problem for black female subjectivity, Carby’s conceptualization of the category of “woman” as a “natural” social category, seems even more disturbing for any critic

wishing to find a discourse for black female subjectivity. Initially, Christian and Carby's work are fine for an agenda of recovery and validation. However, they both fail to realize their arguments hinder a true discussion about black female subjectivity. They should not be working to "reconstruct womanhood" but to destroy the discourse of gender that produces the notion of "woman." The Mawu-paradigm allows us to construct readings that will fully disrupt the discourse of gender in African American community.

As in the cosmological ordering of certain West African societies, an unranked sexed humanity exists in black communities outside of Africa. Although it cannot be located as a moment of origin to be found in cosmological tales, for Africans in the U.S., it appears to be an ever-evolving process to be realized. Because African Americans utilize the language of their oppressors as it concerns gender and sexuality, it becomes necessary to locate models outside of the U. S. The figurative model of Mawu allows a fuller reading of gender in African American culture to be explored. Whereas a traditional trickster reading might simply look only at the construction of male and female in one being, we now can assess how the trickster's tension in familial relationships acts as another major element that can reveal moments of disruption or displacement in the discourses on gender. Africa America displaces its philosophies of unranked gender in cultural texts. In the tensions of gender and sexuality in African American texts, we find the Mawu-paradigm, an initial unsexed figure of doubleness displaced by western metaphysics of logocentrism.

Angela Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* (1981) documents the experience of non-hierarchical values of biological sex in African American communities historically formed during the institution of slavery. She completes a reexamination of the history of

black women in slavery and explores the multi-dimensional role of black women within the family and slave community as a whole. Her analysis argues against the works of Daniel Moynihan, E. Franklin Frazier, Herbert Gutman, and Eugene Genovese in order to move beyond much of the negative rhetoric about the black family as a destructive matrilineal biological structure.³⁵ Davis notes, “The economic arrangements of slavery contradicted the hierarchical sexual roles incorporated in the new ideology. Male female relations within the slave community could not, therefore, conform to the dominant ideological pattern” (12). Whereas the work of the other controversial critics suggests the structure destroys the black family and contributes to the social and economic problems of the black community to this patriarchal family structure, Davis sees the resulting community as being empowered:

The salient theme emerging from domestic life in the slave quarters is one of sexual equality. The labor that the slaves performed for their sake and not for the aggrandizement of their masters was carried out on terms of equality. Within the terms of their family and community life, therefore, black people managed to accomplish a magnificent feat. They transformed that negative equality which emanated from the equal oppression they suffered as slaves into a positive equality: the egalitarianism characterizing their social relations. (18)

³⁵ Ideas about the matrilineal structure of the black family can be found in texts concerned with the predicament of black women in slavery. See Paula Giddings’s *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam, 1985); Eugene D. Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); John Blassingame’s *The Slave Community: Plantation life in the Antebellum South* (London and New York: Oxford UP, 1972); Herbert Gutman’s *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), *The Moynihan Report* in Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancy’s *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1967) ;and Herbert Aptheker’s *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1970)

Davis shows that the black family structure potentially possesses the qualities of gender fluidity and equality found in West African societies, although as she shows it is not the result of a spiritual cosmology but enslavement. Likewise, in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), Patricia Hill Collins notes that “black women’s centrality in Black family networks should not be confused with matriarchal or female dominated female units...Rather, African Americans’ relationship to the slave political economy made it unlikely that either patriarchal or matriarchal domination could take root”(52). Consequently, the egalitarian mode did not cease to exist once slaves were freed. African American women continued to work in agriculture to help support their families. As the narrative of Sara Brooks recalls, “we never was lazy cause we used to really work. We used to work like mens. Oh, fight sometime, but worked on.”³⁶ In addition to agriculture work, Collins found that black women also found themselves moving into domestic work, especially during periods of urbanization. This change begins a profound impact on the previous social ordering of black communities: “While racial segregation delimited African American space from white physical space, gender relations ...delimited female from male space. Male space included the streets, barbershops, and pool halls: female arenas consisted of households and churches.”³⁷ Likewise, Higginbotham admits that the move to urbanization and domestic work begins to alter the state of black families by moving black females to the margins in terms of social status and “Women, who blurred the physical boundaries of gender, did so at the jeopardy of

³⁶ Thordis Simonsen. ed., *You may Plow Here: The Narrative of Sara Brooks*. (New York: Touchstone, 1986. 39).

³⁷ Collins, 54-55.

respectability in their communities.”³⁸ Even with black families attempting to move outside the influences of ranking gender, economically and emotionally, it remained difficult to do so. Black females who had to work did so, but that work most often referred them to domestic work as maids and mammies. Again, black female subjectivity garners numerous contradictions to ideals of womanhood. Economically, they are part of the labor force just like men, but their race, work and biological sex subordinates their status.

These historical experiences verify, as Oyêwùmí documents in West African societies, black communities who exist as populations socially ordered by values of unranked sexes, albeit in a reality of separate and hierarchical sexes—grounded in the white supremacy society in the U.S. As Carby articulated in the first chapter, black culture in the New World has been touted as an experience about the perennial crisis of black masculinity, and black cultural criticism proves the instability of black female subjectivity as the source of one of the greatest internal conflicts of black existence in the U.S.³⁹ In *Black Skins, White Masks* (1967), Frantz Fanon wrote, “as long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others” (109). Though Fanon’s major argument was to suggest that in a colonized society theories about ontology fail to fully grasp the historical

³⁸ Higginbotham, Evelyn B. “Beyond the Sound of Silence: Afro-American Women in History.” *Gender and History* 1 (1989): 59

³⁹ “The Crisis of African American Gender Relations” *Transitions*, Volume, Issue 66 (Durham: Duke UP, 1965. 91-175) *All the Women Are White, All the Black Are Men, but Some of us Are Brave*, eds., Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: Feminist Press, 1982); Calvin Hernton’s *Sex and Racism in America* (New York: Grove, 1965); Michelle Wallace *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Warner, 1978); Robert Staples, “The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists,” *The Black Scholar* 10, no. 6-7 (1979): 27; Carol Stacks “Sex Roles and Survival Strategies in the Urban Black Community” in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*. ed. Filomina Chioma Steady. (Rochester, Vt.: Schenkman Books, 1985).

experience of the colonized, the “minor” internal conflicts, gender and sexuality, that Fanon makes mention of are not minor at all. Years later, Hortense Spillers commented on the importance of gender in African American culture: “It’s clear to me that we’ve not done enough work on the internal or interior relations and so it occurred to me that there were reasons why we were avoiding the interior. One of them has to do with gender” (“Black Cultural Studies Interview” 2).

Instead of simply explicitly avoiding the interior as Fanon does, or implicitly avoiding it in the way that Carby does, we should question the very composition:

Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time . An open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure. (Butler 23)

What black cultural criticism has failed to articulate is the deferment of gender. Traditionally, it has accepted the very category, but by incorporating the figurative model of Mawu-Lisa into our readings of African American texts, we form an open coalition to open discussion where there was once silence. We no longer are able to overlook the minor internal conflicts of the African American community once we utilize the alternate dichotomy of gender that the figurative model offers.

Just as specific African metaphysics organize and influence the language, community, and culture of previously discussed African societies, so too does the world of Black Diaspora folk traditions. While African American culture does not share the

complex spiritual figures with those found in African communities, the Black Diasporic folk figures as tricksters parallel those divine figures in the African spiritual world. The oral traditions make it feasible to connect the symbolic with the real to show how alternate philosophies about gender and sexuality occur in folk logic. Though the egalitarian system of gender equality produced under enslavement, and thereafter, fostered ideals of an unsexed community, African American communities faced conflicting views about it.

In one under-read folktale, “Annie Christmas,” the flaws of intelligible gender are revealed via the distinct discourse on gender present in black oral traditions in the New World. Black Diaspora oral and folk traditions are filled with stories of god/goddesses, tricksters. In the midst of all those tales of Tar babies, Signifying Monkeys, Brer-Rabbits, John Henry, and Stackolees we find a few tales on Annie Christmas, and the implied complications of gender and sexuality she signifies for African American vernacular culture. In the folk tale of Annie Christmas, we can see the beginning of a process that Lorde wanted herself: “I have always wanted to be both man and woman...to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered...to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time” (*Zami* 7). Annie Christmas becomes the first Mawunian figure for revising the trope of the trickster in black culture in the U.S.:

Oldtimers say that the Negro longshoremen and all life on the riverfront are not what they used to be. Its gone soft now, say they. In other days men were really men, yet the toughest of them all was a woman. Her name was Annie Christmas. She was six feet, eight inches tall and she

weighted more than two hundred and fifty pounds. She wore a neat mustache and had a voice as loud and as deep as a foghorn on the river.⁴⁰

Annie Christmas has been described as the female version of John Henry. Yet, such a reading of the story, like that of John Henry, would mean accepting the traditional reading of gender and heroic figures. On the other hand, a Mawunian-reading uncovers the real potential of the tale. The story of Annie Christmas reminds us that issues of gender and sexuality are very much a part of black vernacular culture. Annie Christmas highlights the trickster-like existence and disruption of gender constructs. The description of Annie takes the contradictions of black female subjectivity to its greatest heights by exaggerating the socially conceived physicalities, usually ascribed to either men *or* women, embedded in one being. In addition to the tale itself serving as a signifier of the importance of gender and sexuality in the folk, the recording of the tale explores the influence of gender and sexuality in the research and study of folklore.

There are two very distinct versions of the Annie Christmas story. The first version, as quoted above, is extracted from Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps's compilation, *The Book of Negro Folklore*. As we will see, the variations of the story are attributable to the gender of those collecting or telling the stories. The version found in the Hughes and Bontemps collection contains vivid descriptions of Annie Christmas as a drinking woman: "Annie could outdrink any man in the south. She would put down a barrel of beer and chase it with ten quarts of whiskey, without stopping" (13). In this version, the bio-logic of Annie's gender runs contradictory to the bio-logic of woman. That Annie's strength and gendered fluidity is more male than female comes from the realization that Annie chases beer with whisky, where typically it would be the reverse—

⁴⁰ Hughes and Bontemp 13.

with mortals using beer to chase the stronger and harder liquor of whiskey. Drinking establishes Annie as a hard woman. The focus on drinking hard liquor typically is assigned as a masculine pastime.

Nevertheless, when the story implies that Annie is more masculine than feminine, the ideologies of gender constructs are once again interrupted: “Whenever she got ready to have a baby, she drank a quart of whiskey and lay down somewhere. Annie had twelve black sons, each seven feet tall, all born at the same time. She had plenty other babies, too, but these were her favorites” (14). The tale reveals Annie as a biologically fertile female. Yet, Annie’s ability to consume large quantities of alcohol and birth twelve sons at the same time undermines Western bio-logic that positions females as physically and emotionally weak.

In another version of “Annie Christmas,” recorded in *Herstories* (1995), a collection of folktales compiled by Virginia Hamilton, a female storyteller delivers an almost identical version of the story of Annie Christmas with noticeable changes:

Annie Christmas was coal black and tree tall. She stood seven feet barefoot, and she weighed two-hundred and ninety-nine pounds...the strongest (woman) that ever lived...She was a keelboat operator...She had a mustache too. She could make fists hard, and she would fight boatmen by the dozen and beat them down everytime...They say her baby boys were born one right after the other for twelve days. (84)

In this version, Annie had boys right after the other, and there is no mention of her drinking like a man. Could it be the variety in versions of the tale is attributable to the ideologies of gender? In the Hughes/Bontemps collection, we have a version recorded by

two men, and perhaps told by a man. In that version, the exaggerations of masculine qualities seem to be re-emphasized. The Hamilton version, told by a woman and collected by a woman, focuses less on the masculine attributes. Perhaps Hamilton's version, while still according Annie great strength with which to beat down many men, does not refer to Annie's drinking habits because it buys into ideologies of drinking as a masculine activity and that would be unladylike. Maybe, the Hughes/Bontemps version includes it to continuously defeminize the character for believability of her status as riverboat captain. The possibilities for the inclusion/exclusion of certain factors in this particular context suggest how a tale with a limitless subject figure can be shaped by gender ideologies. However, the tale and figure itself consistently refute these ideologies.

In both versions, Annie possesses both masculine and feminine traits, and she has the hypersexuality of trickster, as evidenced by her twelve children. Incidentally, the description of Annie with facial hair disrupts the discreet order of gender. Facial hair has been touted as a masculine trait, but women also experience facial hair growth. Annie's moustache, height, and weight subvert constructed ideas of gender and biological feminine aesthetics. Conceivably, she is male and female. In addition, her very existence works to change the community in which she lives. In one adventure, shape-shifting abilities, a manifest trickster trait, prevail: "I'll tell you about the time Annie decided to dress up like a fine lady. She shaved that mustache real close so it wasn't there. She piled her raven hair up and stuck peacock feathers in it."⁴¹ The shaving of Annie's mustache represents an acknowledgement of the discreet order of gender identities. The relegation of gender understandings into familiar gendered categories is motivated by

⁴¹ Hamilton, 85.

normative readings that are invested in dominant social gender constructs. Ironically, as many of Annie's girlfriends are prettying themselves for boatrides with a male suitor, Annie sets to sail by herself in her keelboat. Annie Christmas's story makes it hard to believe that the trickster figure has contributed to a purely masculine line of folk descendants. The figure consciously moves back and forth between Western constructs of gender, but Annie never really adheres to the logic of such discourse. The endings of the separate tales emphasize the possible disruptions.

The ending of "Annie Christmas" presents another primary inconsistency in the two versions of the tale. Both tales end with Annie committing suicide because she fell in love with a man who did not want her. However, the reactions and subsequent finality to the gestures changes from tale to tale and depends on who is telling/retelling and collecting the story. In the Hughes version, Annie commits suicide directly after the rejection: "Finally Annie met a man who could lick her and then she fell in love for the first time in her life. But the man didn't want her, so Annie bedecked herself in all her finery and her famous necklace and committed suicide" (223). In this version, Annie simply gives up and dies, while the captain seems to go on living. The presentation of Annie Christmas tale, subsequently, makes the captain a victor or a more powerful agent in the life of this black female. Where she was once the toughest of all (men), her attempt to capture a man's love weakens her. This version of the tale clearly indicates an unhappy ending for black females who do not adhere to model ideologies of womanhood. It seems to suggest that one may be different, but should be prepared to face the consequences of that difference, the rejection of a man's love. Further, it implies that while Annie had her independence and freedom, she still could not be happy without a

man. As someone who unashamedly possesses both “masculine” and “feminine” qualities simultaneously, Annie exists liminally because she moves back and forth between the social constructs of male and female. The only way out is to commit suicide.

However, in the Hamilton version, Annie does not simply accept society’s norms and decides to kill herself right away. After the captain rejects Annie, we learn:

Well, that hurt Annie, to be put off like that. She was in love and then out of love in about a minute flat. “I hope some big trouble gets you,” she told the captain. “You’d better watch out this night. Your crew too. For all that’s bad is right with you!” With that Annie Christmas got on her own boat and tore out of there. (86)

Hamilton’s version positions Annie as the more active and powerful agent. After the rejection by the captain, Annie is not silent: She speaks. Before she commits suicide, Annie briefly places herself back into a position of power. Although she still commits suicide, she does not seem to falter at the established norms. In fact, Annie rejects those standards by altering the course of the captain’s life with her words/curse. Her actions change the outcome of the story: the captain and his crew die, “but he haunts the big devil river. You can hear him cursing the weather, the sky...”(86). In addition to the captain’s death and his angry haunting of the rivers in New Orleans, Annie’s unhappy predicament in death changes. Ironically, tellers of the story forewarn: “Now you can believe this last, or not. But this what the black folks say” (88). The need to address the believability about the rest of Annie’s tale concretely conveys the importance of who is telling the story, as well as who is listening. It also seeks to prepare the listener for a more provocative ending: “Annie Christmas is still on the big river...sitting on her own

wood grave, singing a river tune to the thundering sky” (88). The ending of Hamilton’s version enunciates the differing perception of suicide in the two tales. The captain dies and curses everything in his afterlife, while Annie, almost gloating, sings triumphantly on the river. Unmistakably, this Annie is not the weakened, dejected, and dead female of the Hughes/Bontemps version, but something much more. Characteristics and elements of magical realism and hoodoo revamp Annie’s image. She lives as the strong, indeterminable self that she originally was. Her spirit state suggests the full reality of what was at one time her flesh/body experience. She could only maintain this state in an alternate world, and that is what black folklore suggests for black people and black culture—to find other discourses that sustain liminal subjectivity rather than accept falsely fixed options of subjectivity.

The complexity of “Annie Christmas” shows the complication of gender in the African American community. The egalitarian dynamics of black females and males is displaced by bio-logical explanations of men and women, perhaps as a way to construct identity in the New World that is not different and can fit the established norms. I call this dilemma the displacing of Mawu-Lisa and it signifies the embedded foundations of an unsexed humanity in African American culture displaced by the logic of intelligible genders: “Intelligible genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire” (Butler 23). The Mawu- Lisa paradigm symbolically stands for the undefineable subjectivity of beings called Black/African American women, but it also indicates the loss of an egalitarian presence in African American culture. Hence, the Mawu paradigm is not simply a critical reading tool or lens for African American women’s literature and

culture, but African American culture as a whole. Again, this is not a historical claim. I see Mawu-Lisa becoming the figure of undecideability for gender and sexuality in black culture. As the sign, Mawu-Lisa makes it possible to defer and differentiate gender and sexuality without the threat of privileging one element over another. In the end, a reading strategy constructed from the Mawu paradigm would consist of a foundation of gender distinctions without rank, a process of unnamng to continuously disrupt the authority of definitions in African American texts, and an understanding of how to navigate the tensions of these gender constructs.

CHAPTER THREE

The Black Woman and the Trickster Politics of Unnaming

A culture, like an individual, is a more or less a consistent pattern of thought and action. Within each culture there comes into being characteristic purposes not necessarily shared by other types of society. ...Taken up by well-integrated culture, the most ill-assorted acts become characteristic of its particular goals, often by the most unlikely metamorphoses. The form that these acts take we can understand only by understanding first the emotional and intellectual mainsprings of that society.

Ruth Benedict⁴²

True the black woman did the housework, the drudgery; true, she reared the children, often alone, but she did all of that while occupying a place on the job market, a place her mate could not get or which his pride would not let him accept. And she had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may have well invented herself.

Toni Morrison⁴³

Though oral and folk traditions readily offers an alternative philosophy on gender, black female writers have struggled to discuss their subjectivity through the dominant discourse of womanhood for years. Often times the people and characters in these projects emphasize a necessity for Mawu's process of unnameing by their failure to successfully name themselves. In *Talkin' that Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America* (1999), Geneva Smitherman analyzes the opening quotation by Toni Morrison by asking: "What is the nature and the linguistic character of this invented persona? Must everything be cut whole from new cloth today, with no connecting threads to the past" (266). Although Morrison uses the term "woman," she and Smitherman understand that the "black woman" represents an invented character in the narrative of black female subjectivity. Likewise, in a scathing critique of black cultural criticism, "Transferences: Black Feminist Discourse: The: 'Practice' of 'Theory,' "

⁴² Ruth Benedict. *Patterns of Culture*. Sentry Edition. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959).

⁴³ Toni Morrison, "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib," *New York Times Magazine* 22, August. 63

Deborah McDowell asks that, in addition to providing a history of the emergence of black women's literary studies, that "a counter history, a more urgent history, would bring 'theory' and 'practice' into a productive tension that would force a re-evaluation on each side."⁴⁴ In black critical traditions, the conflict of "practice" as opposed to "theory" is a major dilemma, but it is not the only cause of the split. In a sense, this conflict of practice as opposed to theory stems from the practice of self-creation, which in itself exemplifies a theory of unnamming for black women.

In the narrative of black female subjectivity, the goal to name black females as "black women" disturbs the self-invention of the subject, and results in a confining and violent confrontation for the two separate subjects. The consistent cultural practice of unnamming acts as a connecting thread to black females' past. Conceptually, it seems easier to discuss unnamming on a personal level as it concerns race. For example, Malcolm or Amira's decision to unname themselves by replacing their slave names, Malcolm Little and Leroi Jones, with an X or an African name has always been deemed a defiant act against racial oppression. On the other hand, what if Toni Cade Bambara, Assata Shakur, or Ntozake Shanghe's name changes were defiant acts against "gender" oppression, in addition to racial oppression. Black females have been committed to the process of unnamming themselves for years, and, as Benedict notes, this is a characteristic purpose not necessarily shared by other societies or cultures. As cited in chapter two, the topos of (un)namming seems to be a prevalent tool in African American culture. Yet Benston's theory of (un)namming, through its parenthetical coding, really implies unnamming to rename. However, this work asserts that the process of unnamming in black

⁴⁴ Deborah McDowell's *The Changing Same: Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995).

females lives is as much about gender as it is about race, and for that reason the black female cultural experience of unnamng does not seek renaming, but instead a continuous process of unnamng. Though the theoretical concept of (un)namng/unnamng does not evolve until the later part of the twentieth century, the actions of selected historical figures and their experiences reveal a dynamic process of eluding definitions and boundaries for their subjectivity, specifically for African American females, that we can now see as an initial precursor to unname themselves as slaves and as “black women.” This chapter utilizes the Mawu paradigm to corroborate Morrison’s statement about black women self-inventing themselves, answer Smitherman’s question as to the nature and linguistic character of the invented persona, and adhere to McDowell’s concept of a counter history. In doing so, the Mawu paradigm highlights a consistent pattern of thought and action focused on the desire and process of unnamng to disturb gender concepts in texts by African American females.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, female critics utilized ideologies of matrilineage and matrifocality to discuss the significant agenda of African American women writers. In “Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston,” Dianne F. Sadoff analyzes the concepts of the matrilineal on recovery work and continued canon placement for African American women writers. Inevitably, her critique concerns Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston:

Walker’s enthusiastic battle to restore both Hurston and her texts to the African American literary canon, however, masks an underlying anxiety about black women writer’s singularity in white America that emerges, although disguised, in Walker’s fiction....Hurston becomes not only

predecessor but originator; her work, archetypal. Walker's essays on and editorship of Hurston designate the Renaissance writer precursor and obscure the Second Renaissance writer's fear of her cultural marginality, her own deep need for a foremother. (8)

Sadoff's essay poignantly points out the distinction of early feminist criticism, the lost literary matrilineage that must be recovered. Works such as Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South" and Mary Helen Washington's "I Sign My Mother's Name: Alice Walker, Dorothy West, and Paule Marshall" were all important in early recovery work of African American female writers and establishing a black feminist criticism.⁴⁵ However, Sadoff asserts that the black woman writer covers "her ambivalence about matrilineage, her own misreading of precursors, and her links to an oral as well written tradition" (5). She later states, "Female precursors, fearful of overt originality, facilitate misreading by their daughters; as precursor, the black woman writer, doubly culturally jeopardized by gender and race, will necessarily represent herself even more ambiguously than do white women writers" (18). The ambivalence and ambiguity that Sadoff speaks about stems from more than simple fear or strategic masking of that fear, and to argue ambivalence, as Sadoff does, is a misreading of the failure of language to convey a place for black women's subjectivity. Black women are not ambivalent about matrilineage, but they do find the discourse of gender problematic. I bring up the case of matrilineage to suggest that while it may have been important in recovering the work of black women writers and situating black women writers in the canon, we have to move beyond it while still holding onto the

⁴⁵ See Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983) and *Mothering the Mind: Twelve Studies and Their Silent Partners*. eds., Ruth Perry and Martine Watson Brownley's (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984) 142-150.

notions it embraces, meaning the historical identity of black women. The diverse approach of using Mawu finds its justification in the fact that I am not attempting to do recovery work, or justify the place of African American women in the canon. The symbolic referent Mawu-Lisa focuses less on incorporating a heritage slanted towards traditional concepts of matrilineage and more on the metaphysical logic established by the Mawu paradigm to blur the boundaries of gender constructs.

Where critics such as Carby, Ducille, and Wall see oral art forms as strictly masculine, the work of critics such as Trudier Harris and Keith Byerman have shown them to be quite fluid and adaptable, specifically in works of fiction by black female writers.⁴⁶ Most notably, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman's Literary Tradition" presents one way of exploring the discourse of African American women with her trope of glossolalia and heteroglossia, speaking in tongues:

But there is a second connotation to the notion of speaking in tongues, one that suggests not glossolalia, but heteroglossia, the ability to speak in diverse known languages. While the glossolalia refers to the ability to "utter the mysteries of the spirit," heteroglossia describes the ability to speak in the multiple languages of public discourse. If glossolalia suggests private, nonmediated, nondifferentiated univocality, heteroglossia connotes public, differentiated, social mediated, dialogic discourse. (22)

⁴⁶ Two works that offer great insights in to folklore are Trudier Harris's *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993) and Keith Byerman's *Fingering the Jagged Grain: Folklore in Contemporary Black Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987)

Henderson illustrates that black women must speak in a plurality of voices as well as a multitude of discourses. Henderson's theory of how black women speak to and link both hegemonic and non hegemonic discourse utilizes oral traditions of the black sermon and makes them specific to black women's culture. She succinctly puts to rest any doubts that the folk, oral, and vernacular cannot address the intersection of race and gender.

Henderson's text explores how glossolalia (speaking in tongues) is an "ecstatic, rapturous, inspired speech, based on a relation of intimacy and identification between the individual and God" (23).

However, this chapter differs from Henderson's work in that it uses the Mawu-paradigm to explain that black females having a Mawu-like subjectivity—as disturbances to the rhetoric and ideologies of gender—construct their discourses and identity from their relationship to themselves (their own divine identity). Derrida acknowledges that names cannot define or fix the being of God in language: this chapter submits that the same is true of black females. However, we can only see this after we have connected the example of Mawu to our readings of gender in African American culture. Reading through the Mawu-paradigm, there are a number of ways in which we can see the attempts to locate a mutable gendered subjectivity in African American texts. The first occurs in a breakdown of intelligible genders brought about by subjectivity akin to that of Mawu-Lisa, not specifically spiritual or divine, but a continuous and simultaneous occupying of space considered male and female. The second occurs in the technique of unnamming through folklore employed in African American women's text. The attempt to unname is a way to place the black female's subjectivity outside Western discourses of gender constructs, much like the writing and divination of Fa.

African Americans and African American culture as a whole loses its own empowering discourses on gender and sexuality in the New World. This loss becomes most obvious in work of African American women because they are denied their own subjectivity due to the gender hierarchies assumed under patriarchy and sustained through the primary signifier for gender constructs—the biological and constructed phallus. Black males and black male culture are privileged by the Western construct of gender (man/woman). The greatest sustainer to this unequal relationship is the construction and signifier of the “black woman.” Ironically, the subjectivity of the black female serves as the most significant threat to male privilege and the construction of “black woman.” The “black woman” is a myth in itself, but the black female occupies space and subjectivity akin to Mawu, in addition to a tense relationship with language and her community. If we remember the paradigm of Mawu-Lisa as a disruptor, then it is easy to see how the historical experience of the black female proves useful in a general displacement of the phallus as signifier in African American culture. To demonstrate how this is so, I begin with the slave narrative to examine how a Mawunian reading of black female slave narratives reveals the need to disrupt the construct of gender for the sake of African America culture as a whole.

Just as folklore becomes evidence in proving that blacks have a culture in which they can stake their claim in nationalism, so too does the slave narrative. However, again it is the male slave narrative that shapes the discussion of culture so that it parallels and benefits the aims of nation-building. Robert B. Stepto has suggested that the African American literary tradition consisted of two pre-generic myths derived from its first narrative form, the slave narrative. According to Stepto, freedom and literacy serve as

the pre-generic myth for African-American literature. In *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1979), Stepto reminds us that Afro-American culture, like all cultures, has “canonical stories” or...“pregeneric myths, shared stories or myths that not only exist prior to literary forms, but eventually shape the forms that comprise a given culture’s literary canon” (ix). Subsequently, no one has questioned this universality of pregeneric myths. Stepto’s designated pregeneric myths seem to deny the hierarchies that existed in institutions of slavery (field slave/house slave, man/ woman, and darkie/mulatto). He totalizes the slave experience, and if the slave experience were universal then we would not have the development of the black female slave narrative. What are pregeneric myths of the female slave narrative, and how do they shape the tradition of African American women’s literature? These questions have not been fully answered. Clearly, we have analyzed the importance of sex in contexts dealing with history, themes, and the representation of the black woman, but there has not been a moment of recognition of these pregeneric myths, if they exist.

Stepto’s argument later influences the work of Henry L. Gates who bases his theoretical *The Signifying Monkey* on Stepto’s opinion. Later in Gate’s *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (1993), he corroborates Stepto’s earlier opinions:

After Descartes, reason was privileged, or valorized, among other human characteristics. Writing, especially after the printing press became so widespread, was taken to be the visible sign of reason. Blacks were “reasonable,” and hence “men,” if—and only if—they demonstrated mastery of the “arts and sciences,” the eighteenth century’s formula for writing. (54)

Gates then proposes that the slave writes himself into being through the narrative, indicating that the ontology of the enslaved African is replaced by the Negro represented in the text—that before the moment of inscription there was no valid being. He uses the work of a number of male slave narratives to confirm points about the trope of the talking book. Frederick Douglass provides an excellent clue as to how pre-generic myths and metaphors of authenticating black texts are not as efficient in discussing black women's cultural texts. The quest of freedom and literacy is a masculine concern. Douglass, an advocate of women's suffrage had a wife. It has been documented and noted that Douglass's first wife, who helped him purchase his freedom, was illiterate and that Douglass never taught her to read.⁴⁷ The quest for freedom and literacy may have been the pre-generic myths of the male-authored slave narrative, but what were they for his wife?

Further, if we use a more recent text to examine slave narratives and their importance to canon-building, Ronald T. Judy's *(Dis)forming the American Canon: African Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* (1993), we may begin to move beyond the established assumptions about the vernacular. Judy attempts to find a place for African-Arabic slave narratives through a theory of indeterminacy. In so doing, Judy disrupts and calls into question the literary tradition of the slave narrative, and states that a heritage based on nationalistic aims exists. Judy makes solid claims that a black narrative tradition exists before Africans in the New World construct it. In doing his study, Judy takes on works that set the precedence for what will become the foundation for theory concerned with African American culture—a foundation based on an ontology of lack

⁴⁷ See introduction to Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Dover, 1969).

(culture, history, identity) that can seemingly be addressed with the help of structuralist theory.

Rather than relying on traditional slave narrative from the West written in English, Judy refers to Ben Ali's Diary as "an augmentation of Afro-American canon formation" (22). Judy's critique of the Ben Ali's African-Arabic slave narrative possessing a sense of indeterminacy could also reveals interesting insights about the issue of gender in the African American literary tradition, but as indicated by Wahneema Lubiano, Judy chooses not to focus on those insights:

Being is a set of terms—a male new set of terms; "making a man" is "being" on male grounds, for neither Kant nor Douglass's humanness makes "female" humanness possible. And if Ben Ali's manuscript's indeterminacy has feminist implications, then their articulation in Judy's work is sotto voce indeed. Judy not only doesn't comment on the masculinist language and imaginings of the texts or the discourse of reason, he doesn't make an argument for why gender does not have to be addressed, and I mean gender not only in terms of what is left out—because apparently it did not occur to Judy to take up gender as something to consider even if only to dismiss its importance...⁴⁸

Many critics of black literary thought assert in their works the definitive belief that the slave narrative acts as the beginning of a Black literary tradition, and that the genre becomes a way for slaves to construct their identities in the New World, but there has a

⁴⁸ In the forward to *(Dis)forming the American Canon*, Wahneema Lubiano previews a specific problem with Judy's text as it concerns gender (xxii).

minor disagreements on the purpose of these narratives.⁴⁹ As we acknowledge those critics who believe that the slave narrative erects itself as a way to complement its primary objective of fulfilling a necessary identity, a desire to be Negro—to write one's self into being,⁵⁰ we should also then note this commonality to previous insights about how black folk and oral traditions are said to perform similar tasks.

Critics consistently speculate that black narratives are tied to identity construction of the New Negro, but what they fail to acknowledge in such theories is the way nationalist agendas, be they American Enlightenment rhetoric or black power ideologies, can negate and limit the identity process for New World blacks. In reference to both the slave narrative and black folk and oral traditions, being becomes exactly what Judy suggests: "the mute African body is overwritten by the Negro, and the Negro that emerges in the ink flow...is that which has overwritten itself and so become the representation of the very body it sits on" (89). Be it through the articulation of pre-generic myths or metaphors of authentication, the narrative tradition of African Americans and the desire to be a Negro is problematically assessed through an ontology of lack. The Negro lacks culture, lacks tradition, lacks history, and therefore lacks identity. So focused on the idea of proving what the Negro lacks, we never ask what/who

⁴⁹ pp. 33-37, 48-49. There are several works that demonstrate such as belief. I have already acknowledged Stepto's *From Behind the Veil*, Gates's *The Signifying Monkey* and Baker's *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature* (1984); other texts contain the same thematic focus: Gates's critical introduction to *The Slave Narrative* (1985) and *Figures in Black* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987, xxii); William Andrews's *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of African American Autobiography. 1760-1865*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Houston Baker's *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism*. (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1983); and Valerie Smith's *Self-discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991). Judy argues that the theory of the slave narrative as a product committed to Enlightenment and Kantian ideas of being and humanism is debatable, and he presents Arna Bontemps's foreword from *The Slave Narrative* (xx) as a pro-Kant view of being and the slave narrative and offers as a counter-point to such theories Ralph Ellison's belief that "too much has been made of the slave narrative's influence on contemporary writing" from "The Essential Ellison" interview, *Yard Bird Magazine* (1978): 155.

⁵⁰ Judy, 106-110.

we mean when we say “Negro.” The representation masks the distinctions and differences we currently find ourselves trying to account for in the identity of blacks. Incidentally, as Lubiano alluded to earlier, the concept of the Negro is primarily conceived as masculine,⁵¹ and as such, critics reach for the most widely perceived masculine forms of the oral and vernacular to continue incorporating Africanism with nationalist agendas. The Mawu paradigm allows critics to move beyond conceiving of the narrative tradition and identity in an ontology of lack, but suggests that identity can emerge through a simultaneous presentation of multiple and fluctuating processes that don’t have to be fixed or limiting.

In the next few pages, we will see how both Sojourner Truth’s presence and Harriet Jacobs’s narrative elucidate breaks in Stepto’s pre-generic myths, demonstrating that the metaphor of authentication is especially challenging with regard to African American women’s culture. Each work signals that the metaphors of authentication are quests to fill a void and a need through writing. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth century of institutionalized enslavement, literacy is a masculine acquirement. Freedom may be something that all slaves deemed a necessity, but for a female slave was literacy really going to impact her upward mobility? Literacy may have been a significant factor in shaping the freedom of a male ex-slave, both practically and consciously, however other factors take precedent for the enslaved and newly freed black woman. It is for these reasons that I employ the work of notable female writers in my reading of the slave narrative for the black female slaves. The African American women’s slave narrative,

⁵¹ See also Judy’s discussion of Kant: “Kant’s problem is how to think about the Negro, not as a phenomenal appearance, or undetermined object of empirical intuition, but as an intellectual concept, a derivative of the concept of “*Man*” (110-115). It is in this particular discussion that Lubiano feels Judy could have also considered the critique of gender itself as it relates to race or the Negro.

and in the end, black women's literary tradition does not construct itself to help advance **the** ontological existence of Negro, nor are its pre-generic myths literacy and freedom.

According to the Mawu-paradigm, the African American female tradition evolves **from** a foundation of non-hierarchical roles of gender, an understanding of occupying **space** that is deemed both masculine and feminine. In the tradition, a black female writer **does** not attempt to write herself into being, because she already knows she exists; but she **works** to make others understand the writing she has used to create herself so that she will **not** be a mistranslation or misrepresentation. Deborah G. Plant explores how Jacqueline de Weever's work suggests "androgyny, as creator, healer, and medium of transformation, figures significantly in Black women writer's mythic narratives."⁵²

While de Weever and Plant may refer to the traditional model of mythic narratives, I submit that even the slave narrative becomes a mythic narrative when we keep in mind that **always** at the center of the black female's narrative is a "myth," that of the black woman. The "black woman" acts like the grand narrative in Western thought. Henceforth, the black female writing or producing a narrative (orally or visually) **consistently** produces a counter-narrative to subordinate the mythic narrative of the "black woman." Essentially, Stepto's concerns over pre-generic myths (freedom and literacy) help to reveal the counter-narrative in black female slave narratives. As we will see, **freedom** acts as a major factor in most slave narratives, but literacy fails to be a **significant** factor not only because it was a male privilege and priority, but also because **literacy**, in the sense that Stepto imagines it (writing), connects to Western discourses that

⁵² See Plants's analysis of de Weever's work in her text, *Every Tub Must Sit On Its Own: The Philosophy and Politics of Zora Neale Hurston* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999). 179.

mistranslate or misrepresent black female subjectivity. In order to represent herself, the African female in the New World must strive for literacy from forms outside of written narratives.

Reading female slave narratives through Mawu reveals the pre-generic myths of **black female tradition to be liberation from the bio-logic of gender, as well as freedom, as seen in the African American slave narrative; and these myths are revised in literature by African American women writers. When Lorde assesses the existence of a “third designation,” and asserts that the trickster is the one whom we must all become, she quite plainly seeks a discourse for her heritage and subjectivity, with tricksters and goddesses providing the most adequate way of doing so. Further, what Plant and deWeever call androgyny is not necessarily androgyny in the work of black women writers. It is, as it was in West African spirituality and myth, an alternative discourse on gender. The connection between the African goddess and the trickster figure for African American women lies in the exploration of an undefineable subjectivity and in having a discourse to speak of the subjectivity.**

Sojourner Truth and the Historical Figuration of Mythology—“Black Woman”

Just as African American male writers and critics have written over the African **body** and replaced it with Negro, African American female writers and critics have also **been** guilty of performing a similar act. As Hortense Spillers notes, the black female **body** fluctuates between false representations:

Let’s face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name.

“Peaches” and “Brown Sugar,” “Sapphire” and “Earth Mother,” “Auntie,”

“Granny,” God’s “Holy Fool,” a “Miss Ebony First,” or “Black Woman at

the Podium”: I describe a locus of confound identities, a meeting ground of investments...My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.⁵³

Spillers addresses the ways in which language has failed to truly capture and demonstrate **an** understanding of black female subjectivity. The idea of being needed or created to **serve** a purpose and being marked but unnamed is the experience of black females. **However**, more damaging than these false representations is the attempt to name **something** that at one time had been unnameable:

motherhood as a female bloodrite is outraged, is denied, at the very same time that it becomes the founding term of a human and social enactment....only the female stands in the flesh, both mothers and mother dispossessed. This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, out of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject.⁵⁴

The historical experience of slavery obscures the conception of black female identity, **and** hindered by language, her identity becomes stuck somewhere between African, **Negro**, and Woman. Although both quotes from Spillers convey the need for a place for **this** subject, we should note that in making a place we must avoid past mistakes of **attempting** to name her. Naming black female subjectivity results in an acceptance of **problematic** historical figurations. Black female critics have overwritten the African **female** body and replaced it with the “black woman.” In the end, if we are going to make

⁵³ “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” *Diatriacs*. Summer 1987 (65).

⁵⁴ Spillers, 80.

a place for black female subjectivity, we must understand why her subjectivity calls for a process of unnamng, rather than naming.

We see the marker and the necessity for the process of unnamng in black feminist thought in the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1850, 1998), as well as in subsequent analysis of the narrative. Truth's narrative, conveyed by two white women suffrage activists, Olive Gilbert and Frances Grange, at times lacks the authority and strength of voice that other narratives, such as Douglass's may hold, but that doesn't make the logic of her most famous speech any less valid. Though narrated by Gilbert and Grange, the logic and ideals clearly derive from the point of view of a female slave. From Grange's account, Truth's famous speech at the 1851 Women Rights convention in Akron, Ohio confronts social ideologies of womanhood and the bio-logic of gender:

“Dat man ober dar say women needs to be helped into carriages and lifted into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or gives me any best place and raising herself to her full height and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked, and ar'n't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm!” And she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing her tremendous muscular power. “I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ar'n't I a woman?” (133)

Biologically, Truth places herself in the arena of females, but socially she explodes the ideologies of “woman” with her position as slave labor. She possesses feminine attributes of female reproduction, but she remains physically capable of manual labor. Though the logic of Truth's speech attempts to disrupt the biological determinism that creates the hierarchical ranking of sexes, it is undermined by the intrusion of white

females and white womanhood emancipation. Besides Truth's question of womanhood, we see something else taking precedent in the narrative—Truth's body. In the above quotation, before Truth bares her unwomanly arms to reveal muscles usually accorded to men, Gage focuses incessantly on Truth's height. Apparently, as Truth performs she is in some way slouching before raising herself to her full height. Gage previously discloses that "the leaders of the movement trembled on seeing a tall, gaunt, black woman" (133), and that "Old Sojourner, quiet and reticent as the 'Libyan Statue' sat...her chin resting upon her broad, hard palm" (134). Gage's narration reveals that Truth's body obtains as much attention as her words. If the point of Truth's speech was truly to underscore her subjectivity as woman and connection to sisterhood, then surely we can realize the irony in her words "ain't I a woman" in front of the apparently scared-ass-hell white "liberal" masses. If white female leaders and social activists saw Truth as Gage does, then what they see is an other. Gage's attempt to destroy ideologies of womanhood by writing Truth's narrative appears admirable, but she does so at the cost of black female subjectivity. Gage, while disclosing Truth's life, also manages to construct early feminist thought and build its very foundation through an othering of the black female body.

As the text progresses, Gage's comments become even more problematically centered around Truth's physical presence being antithetical for "woman": "there were few women in those days that dared to "speak in meetings" and "every eye was fixed on this almost Amazon form, which stood nearly six feet high"(emphasis mine, 135). After Truth has made her speech, Gage recalls, "I have never in my life seen anything like the magical influence that subdued the mobbish spirit" (emphasis mine, 136). Throughout Gage's narrative Truth becomes object and othered. Even after saying the powerful

words that have made her a preeminent figure in history, Truth's othered body is still an issue with the white masses. At the request of a man, Truth had to bare her breasts to prove that she was a female, which is not necessarily "woman," as seen in the narrative of Truth's speech. From Gage's own narrative, the white male was not the only one having trouble grasping the figure of Sojourner Truth. Gage manages to connect Truth to every negative image of blacks from magical/mystical Negro to all-body-no-intellect stereotypes. Truth's body elicits fear and trembling, and quite readily, Gage places Truth outside the sphere of womanhood even as she speaks in support of women's right. Instead of describing Truth's persuasion of the mob as the result of her great intellect, Gage manages to reduce Truth's rhetorical genius to magical influence. Gage's narrative of Truth's life sets up a parameter for judging black female feminist thought that continues in the work of current feminist criticism. This parameter asserts that feminist criticism should use the black female as its intended goal and theory, but never acknowledge it as the basis of its own white feminist hope. This suggests why black females need to unname themselves in their own lives.

Erroneously, critics such as Denise Riley and Constance Penley see Truth's proclamation as a desire for the construction of womanhood to fit her, but they should also be able to recognize that Truth's words acknowledge woman as a frame that could never be/replace her actual being.⁵⁵ Riley's work attempts to understand Truth's subjectivity by signifying on Truth's famous statement, changing *Ain't I a Woman* to "Ain't I a Fluctuating Identity" (1). Penley asserts that Truth's statement acts as 'two ideas or strategies...important to feminism... 'epistemological' and 'metaphysical'; the

⁵⁵ See Denise Riley's *Am I That Name: Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*. (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1988), pp.158-160 and Constance Penley's *The Future of an Illusion: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: U of Minn. Press, 1989) 179.

other—represented by Truth—is ‘political’ ” (179). Deborah McDowell’s *The Changing Same* provides prudent criticism of these two critiques of Truth’s importance:

Riley’s move to appropriate Sojourner Truth introduces a subtle racial marker that distinguishes between Truth’s original words and Riley’s displacement. A familiar move in contemporary literary-critical discussion, Riley’s “modernization” functions allegorically to make a common, if subtle, insinuation about black feminist thinking in general: It needs a new language....That Truth’s declarative question....might be read as political and epistemological simultaneously seems not to have occurred to Penley, partly because she manipulates both these categories...to conform to an already polarized and preconceived understanding. (159)

McDowell points out the flaws of both Riley and Penley’s critique in her argument of “uncovering the truth: coloring feminist theory.” McDowell positions herself to explore how “Truth and the knowledge of that name help to construct concerns about black feminist thinking within the general parameters of feminist discourse,” but she also argues that Truth “as a metonym for ‘black woman’ is useful in this context both to a singular idea of academic feminism in general, and in particular, to ongoing controversies within that discourse over the often uneasy relations between theory and politics” (158). Other black female critics support McDowell’s claim, and they prove that the “black woman” also serves as a metaphor, myth, or historical figuration of myth for white feminist thought.

Holloway's *Moorings and Metaphors* reveals vital information to expose how the myth of the historical figuration known as the "black woman" might come to be because of Truth's statement. Holloway explains, "mythologies are not discrete units of structure as much as they are features of a surviving sense of how language enables the survival and transference of memory" (94). Truth's statement survives centuries within the machine discourse of feminist theory, and as a result, we are able to gather insights from her memory of grappling with her subjectivity as a slave, a female, and an African in America. However, as McDowell and Holloway point out, upon reading her words we must always remember that it was the language of white female activists that enabled the initial survival and transference of Truth's memory. Holloway continues: "Because memory is critical to mythologies, then the privilege that memory traditionally represents over myth—that of representation (accuracy) over figuration (metaphor)—is dissolved within the disappearance of the chasm between memory (history) and myth (figuration). What remains are historical figurations of mythologies" (94). Truth's all-powerful statement serves as a(n) (accurate) representation of her flexible/indefineable subjectivity that then becomes the (metaphor) figuration for an early white feminist movement. Truth's words do not create this figuration because she does not exercise authorial control over the text. Truth, used to initiate a cataclysmic call for women's vote that does not apply to her, functions as a theory to dispute biological reasoning of why women shouldn't be allowed to vote (physically and emotionally weak and unable to bear children and conduct politics). She becomes a mascot for a (white) women's rights movement, but she still fails to find a place/space for her subjectivity, for it does not exist

in the term woman. We displace or dissolve the memory of Truth's understanding of her subjectivity in the chasm between memory (history) and myth (figuration).

As McDowell and Holloway explain it, Sojourner Truth becomes the theory in feminist theory. Instead of using Sojourner Truth's example to destroy that gendered discourse, critics like Penley and Riley continue to attempt to place black female subjectivity into bi-polar discourses of gender ideologies. What remains with us are historical figurations of black females still trying to fit into the gendered discourse of womanhood and historical figurations of mythologies—"Black Woman," Hottentot Venus, the mammy, the emasculating matriarch, the sexually licentious black woman, the bitch, the diva, and the Strong Black Woman. Truth's subjectivity becomes the goal of white womanhood, which is to be biologically female and capable of doing masculine-defined labor. However, this theory does little to advance black female subjectivity in the New World, and consequently, it never moves black female subjectivity beyond mimicking or desiring the false construction of white womanhood. When tied to feminist thought, the discussion of the black female subjectivity fails to move into the realm of creating distinct goals and discourses for black females, as characteristic of the trickster Mawu-Lisa; it seeks only to fit and shape black female subjectivity into what was already there. A Mawunian connection might have revealed a place for that subjectivity, where black men or women would not have to feel ashamed, dysfunctional, or othered for moving outside the boundaries of Western models of gender in the New World. It is precisely because her subjectivity does not fit into a dominant discourse of gender that critics must continuously work to place her outside of it so that she might avoid being someone else's theory.

The complicated use of Sojourner Truth reminds critics that in order to fully comprehend and describe black female subjectivity in any written narrative we must begin with a Mawu reading of the narrative. According to that paradigm, we know that Truth emerged from an institutionalized system of slavery in which egalitarian roles in labor and family occurred on a daily basis. “Ain’t I a woman” was not an attempt to become a part of womanhood; it was an attempt to destroy the very category of womanhood. White women, unable to accomplish this feat through their own representation, create a mistranslation—a myth. Unlike the ontology of Negro for the African, Woman cannot sit on top of the female ex-slave. Woman can’t become the representation for the African female in the New World. When Truth spoke those words, she was seeking a language of liberation for her body and subjectivity. She never found it. Truth’s well-known retort, “ain’t I a woman,” helps maintain the historical figuration of mythology known as the black woman, and it is the Mawu process of unnamming that delivers black females from this historical figuration of myth that Truth experiences.

It is from rebuking and displacing the historical figuration of “black woman” that a true black female centered discussion—a discussion stylistically defined by liminality—can evolve. It is for these reasons that we return to Derrida’s discussion of unnamming and remember that an important element of the Mawu-Lisa figurative theory is the power that comes from her being something that a name cannot approach:

This unnameable is the play which makes possible nominal effects,
the relatively unitary and atomic structures that are called names,
the chains of substitutions of names in which, for example, the
nominal effect difference is itself enmeshed, carried off,

reinscribed, just as false entry or a false exit is still part of the game, a function of the system. (*Margins of Philosophy* 27)

Black female writers employ a technique reminiscent of Mawu's tricksterism, the process of unnamng as a way to convey their Mawu-Lisa subjectivity, elude mistranslation, and make others understand the narrative techniques and strategies that they use in self-invention. While Truth may not have been able to demonstrate this concept by writing her own narrative, another female slave attempts and fails to do so in her self-authored narrative. Truth's role in the historical figuration of the "black woman" indicates why the process of unnamng is necessary for the formation of identity, but in order to see how black women writers attempt to instigate the process of unnamng in their texts we must turn to Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861, 1987).

Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* informs the reader that literacy and freedom are not the pre-generic myths of the woman's slave narrative. Like *The History of Mary Prince*,⁵⁶ Jacobs's narrative makes known the horrors of the female slave experience. However, Jacobs discusses in greater detail the oppressions visited upon the female slave that make her goals very different from those of the male slave. She presents her marriage, the idea of motherhood, and again the threat of sexual violence as major driving forces in her life. These are the reasons that she needs to be free, and the very notion of "woman" impedes her quest for true freedom in a number of ways. Literacy is less of an issue in both narratives. Jacobs writes, "While I was with her (the first mistress), she taught me to read and spell; and for this privilege...I bless her

⁵⁶ "The History of Mary Prince" in *Classic Slave Narratives*. ed., Henry L. Gates. (New York: Penguin Press, 1989). Prince's narrative was the first slave narrative written by a female. Prince, a slave stolen from Bermuda, is credited for changing the genre of slave narratives to reflect the voice and subjectivity of enslaved females.

memory” (344). It was against the law for slaves to learn to read and write, but house slaves, such as Jacobs, were often presented with the opportunity to learn, and the hierarchies in the institution of slavery played an important and determining role. Jacobs spent her early life as a house slave, which may have given her opportunities at literacy that field slaves did not have. Phyllis Wheatley’s literary endeavors also give credence to the idea that status and quite possibly gender determined the pre-generic quest for literacy, rather than the desire to be Negro associated with the male slave narratives.

The major difference between Truth’s narrative and Jacobs’s narrative is the importance of authorial control in both. William L. Andrews’s *To Tell A Story: African American Autobiography* (1986) shows that “white America was willing to suspend disbelief and assume the sincerity of an autobiographer it identified as a political peer and a racial equal. However, the knowledge that they (the writers) could not predicate their lives on this racial credulity and trust forced black autobiographers to invent devices and strategies that would endow their stories with the appearance of authenticity...the very reception of the narrative as truth depended on the degree to which the artfulness could hide his art” (224). Writers of these slave narratives/ autobiographies employed rhetorical tools that would both authenticate the facts of their bondage and covertly establish their self-hood and identity to an America that did not want to see them as equals. However, this element is missing from Truth’s narrative. Because Gilbert and Gage write, formulate, and control so much of Truth’s narrative, the issue of authorial control is not as complex. Truth has very little authorial control of her slave narrative. The lack of authorial control also corroborates the historical figuration of Truth as the

“black woman” in feminist texts. In the end, authorial control exposes the controversy surrounding the facts of slave narratives and beliefs of who wrote them.⁵⁷

Critics such as John Blassingame may have questioned the authenticity of Jacobs’s narrative, stating, “the work is not credible” because it is “too orderly.” Blassingame finds particularly problematic the instances of “miscegenation and cruelty, outraged virtue, unrequited love” that appear on every page, and refers to these issues in the narrative as “too melodramatic.” Blassingame caps his critique of the credibility of *Incidents* by proclaiming that the ending suggests “they all live happily ever after.”⁵⁸ Blassingame’s critique, read without an understanding of the artifice of the narrative writing, becomes plausible. Instead of feigning outrage at the possibility of these elements being geared towards a fictitious narrative, we should instead be notably critical of how use of such elements risks, as Truth’s narrative does, producing the historical figuration of the “black woman.” Rather than seriously providing a discourse for black female subjectivity, Jacobs’s text, with its narrative devices of Christianity and womanhood, almost does what Gage did for Truth’s narrative, mistranslate the subjectivity of the black female implying an inadequate discourse. As we will see, the only thing that delivers Jacobs’s narrative from the abyss of womanness, which leads to a sphere of womanlessness, is her time in the garret. These elements, dismissed by Blassingame, indicate the ways in which the female slave narrative of the African American tradition established the need for a continuous process of unnamings in the cultural production of black females.

⁵⁷ See introduction to Charles H. Davis and Henry L. Gates Jr., eds. *The Slave’s Narrative* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985).

⁵⁸ See John W. Blassingame’s *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Anti-bellum South* (New York: Oxford UP, 1972) 32- 36.

Unlike Truth, Jacobs, while still adhering to the traditional authenticating documents of slave narratives (letters from white editors or abolitionists attesting to truthfulness of the narrative) constructs her narrative through the artifices described by Andrews. It is the more complicated issue of narrative strategies and authorial control that uncovers why the process of unnamng will become a factor in the narratives of black females. Blassingame's problems with Jacobs's melodramatic references to virtue, unrequited love, and Christian ethics succinctly reveals Jacobs's ability and need to disrupt the logic of intelligible gender, as well as dismantle the logic of institutionalized slavery and racism. Writers from Equiano and Douglass to Williams Wells Brown and Harriet Jacobs cleverly manipulated American ideals and morals in texts, and they used documents such as the bible and the U.S. Declaration of Independence to denounce the horror of slavery.⁵⁹ In those machinations of authenticating, placating, persuading, and converting, lay distinguishing narrative strategies of an African American literary tradition. Critics should always take into consideration the artfulness of narration in exploring how racial and sexual violence is depicted in slave narratives. In understanding how contemporary novelists continued and changed the examination of racial and sexual violence from their forefathers, we must first examine slave narratives with an understanding of authenticating documents and artfulness in mind. While we may never know for sure if an author's descriptions of such things served as rhetorical strategies to convince their white readers of their likeness to them, we can for certain point out that the fact that they needed to be concerned about such things indicates a problem that does not get solved by writing one's self into being. The issue of authorial control divulges the

⁵⁹ Andrews, 76.

conflict as to how one writes him or herself into being in the dominant discourse while still remaining true to that self.

For Jacobs, as a black female slave, the devices and strategies she used to reach her readers were the bible and the false ideologies of womanhood. Jacobs's narrative, though concerned with the reception of narrative, makes considerable reference to the bible and ideologies of womanhood, and in the process, manipulates these same artifacts to expose flaws of dominant discourse concerning the subjectivity of black females. The narrative also demonstrates that authorial control functions differently in female slave narratives versus male slave narratives. These minor plays indicate the need for black female writers to unname their subjectivity because even as the narrative may claim to be "written by herself," it is not free from the influences of a discourse of white supremacy.

Christianity serves as one mode of discourse in which Jacobs attempts to critically evaluate herself while oppressed by the institution of slavery. Jacobs's early subjectivity and spirituality is shaped by her mother's belief in Christianity. Very early in the narrative, we see Jacobs refer to the conflicts of Christianity and slavery without explicitly passing judgment. When her first mistress dies, the conflicts of spirituality and subjectivity become clear:

After a brief period of suspense, the will of my mistress was read, and we learned that she had bequeathed me to her sister's daughter, a child of five years old. So vanished our hopes. My mistress had taught me the precepts of God's Word: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

"Whatsoever ye would that me should do unto you, do ye so unto them."

But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as

neighbor. (344)

As Andrews claimed, Jacobs manipulates the bible for her strategic purposes. She manages to use the rhetoric of the bible to criticize whites that believe that they are practitioners of Christian moral and ethics. Repeatedly, Jacobs describes herself as waiting for her prayers to be answered, for promises to be upheld, and for the word of owners to be made good. She portrays herself as a good and faithful servant who never formally admonishes whites for the institution of slavery, for fear of alienating her readers. Yet, she continues to prove that even in the face of death, the conflicts between subjectivity and spirituality go unresolved and are ignored by those engaged in human bondage. Witnessing the death of a baby during a young slave's child birthing, Jacobs hears an ugly exchange between slave and mistress:

In her agony she cried out, "O Lord, come and take me!" Her mistress stood by, and mocked at her like an incarnate fiend. "You suffer, do you?" she exclaimed. "I am glad of it. You deserve it all, and more too." The girl's mother said, "The baby is dead, thank God; and I hope my poor child will soon be in heaven, too."

"Heaven!" retorted the mistress. There is no such place for the likes of her and her bastard..." (349)

When Jacobs witnesses this exchange, she files it with all the other minor incidents. In this particular incident, Jacobs combines manipulation of religion and womanhood. In most religions, motherhood is a sacred duty, but in bondage, that sacredness disappears. The mistress takes no pity on her slave having lost a child because her "morals" have been corrupted by slavery. Jacobs's use of the reference explores the innocence of the

child with the contempt of the mistress. Again, Jacobs appears not to pass judgment on any of her “superiors.” I bring up these contradictions in Christianity because it acts as the dominant discourse that helps to shape Jacobs’s subjectivity and subsequent lack of language for that subjectivity.

Jacobs uses familial relationships to make judgments of slave-owners that she will not make directly. Through the presentation of her grandmother, she presents the reader with a shared commonality—dignified moral and ethics. For example, Jacobs positions her grandmother as the great maternal believer and teacher of Christian ethics for their “family.” Through the grandmother, Jacobs learns the morals she must appear to agree with to be a good person. After her father’s death Jacobs explains, “My heart rebelled against God, who had taken from me mother, father, mistress, and friend. The good grandmother tried to comfort me. ‘Who knows the ways of God?’ said she, ‘perhaps they had been kindly taken from the evil days to come’ ” (345). Jacobs does not explicitly convey sentiments of opposition to slavery or Christianity, but she juxtaposes her grandmother’s dogmatic devotion to Christianity with the more critical words of her brother to reveal anti-slavery ideas.

As the most critical narrative ploy, the relationship between Jacobs and her uncle and brother (William and Ben), acts as a way to reveal the hypocrisy and fatalism of Christianity in slavery. Jacobs later uses the words of Christian wisdom provided by her grandmother in talking to her brother William, but she finds that he is not as easily persuaded by the “comforting” words of Christianity. Upon noticing her brother looking deathly in his depression over their status of slaves, she offers, “Take courage, Willie;

brighter days will come by and by" (346). The earlier rejection of God is now replaced with a "new" understanding, but her brother reproves her words:

"You don't know anything about it Linda," he replied. "We shall have to stay here all our days; we shall never be free." I argued that we were growing older and stronger, and that perhaps we might, before long, be allowed our own time, and then we could earn the money to buy our freedom. William declared this was much easier to say than to do, moreover, he did not intend to *buy* his freedom. We held daily controversies upon this subject. (346)

Defining their discussions as controversy, Jacobs strategically undervalues the significance of her brother's critique. "Controversy" implies that the subject of assuming that a slave has a right to freedom is inherently wrong. Jacobs seems to always be aware of what her white audience might be thinking concerning the notion that slaves would think or perceive of themselves as worthy of freedom. As William notes in his dismissal of his sister, his freedom is not something that should be bought. Though this idea might make perfect sense to slaves perceiving themselves as humans, Jacobs can't assume that her readers will feel the same. At the same time, her innocent acceptance of the morals of Christianity works to covertly position Jacobs's voice in the narrative. By claiming these beliefs as the words of her brother, she can distance herself from the unwanted accuracy of this view. She can imply a verdict without explicitly passing judgment. Reading beyond the masking, Jacobs positions her early subjectivity as young and ignorant so that her words are the less-threatening words of a young girl uninformed by the ways of the world. She can readily accept the advice of Grandmother because she has

yet to encounter “true” cruelties. Jacobs and her family cannot continue to survive the inconsistencies of Christianity.

In a later elaboration on her family’s status as slaves, Jacobs recalls her grandmother’s way of understanding and resolving their positions as objects: “My grandmother had, as much as possible, been a mother to her orphaned children...Most earnestly did she strive to make us feel the will of God: that he had seen fit to place us under such circumstances, and though it seemed hard, we ought to pray for contentment” (351). Jacobs exhibits no desire for debating her grandmother’s position, but unlike the previous references, Jacobs now reveals an accumulated wisdom about the circumstances of a slave’s life that she had not possessed earlier: “It as a beautiful faith, coming from a mother who could not call her children her own. But I, and Benjamin, her youngest boy, condemned it” (351). Yet, when Jacobs says that she condemns it, it is not in the same way as her brother. As a way to placate or lessen the sting of her comments about condemning Grandmother’s faith, she says, “While I advised him to be good and forgiving I was not unconscious of the beam in my own eye. It was the very knowledge of my own short- comings that urged me to retain, if possible, some sparks of my brother’s God-given nature...The war of my life had begun; and though one of God’s most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered” (353). Not only does Jacobs participate in self-criticism to undermine what some might perceive as her arrogance and rebelliousness, she defines the rebelliousness of her brother as something given by God. Manipulation of the doctrines of free-will in Christianity exposes that Benjamin’s will to be free is a holy right denied by unholy men. Although Jacobs never rejects Christianity,

she does begin to reject the oppressive way slaveholders use it; and in doing so, she begins to critically probe its use in her life as a slave.

It is here again that Jacobs uses her uncle to counter the subservient attitude of her Grandmother's religious dogma. After being caught in an attempt to escape the bondages of slavery in the North, Benjamin is returned to Dr. Flint. The quarrels between Grandmother and Benjamin project Jacobs's own conflict. Jacobs writes about her grandmother's reaction to his trying to escape: "She asked if he did not also think of God. I fancied I saw his face growing fierce in the moonlight. He answered, "No I did not think of him. When a man is hunted like a wild beast he forgets there is a God, a heaven. He forgets everything in his struggle to get beyond the reach of the bloodhounds" (356). Jacobs expresses how blacks who might wish to follow the creeds of Christianity cannot do so as long as they are bonded and considered property. Jacobs's consistent use of Christianity as a narrative device she has to manipulate in order to convince her reader of anti-slavery arguments, and her argument of herself as a human being, is the first indicator as to why the process of unnamng is necessary for black females. The second narrative device, treatment of the ideologies of womanhood, plays a greater role in signifying why black female writers must seek, first and foremost in their texts, an unnamng of the "black woman."

Blassingame's systematic revulsion on the issue of sentimental or romantic love indicates this failure to recognize the significance of these issues as a narrative device used by Jacobs to differentiate the female slave narrative from the male narrative. The most proficient way of doing so is to explore the virtues of woman and how they apply to black female slaves. Of course, Jacobs's early focus on Christianity in the narrative

establishes a credible claim that Jacobs represents the essential characteristics for a virtuous female. If slave women have virtue, then this means immoral men attack or rape the women. This is not to suggest that Jacobs accepts the cult of womanhood. Because she remains so aware of her audience, she recognizes how vital a strategy the cult and its ideologies become in persuading readers. In a recounting of one specific experience, Jacobs exposes the irony of claiming literacy as a goal and pregeneric myth of the slave woman's narrative. Notably, Jacobs does not have to resort to trickery to learn to read and write, but she resorts to trickery to keep intact her "virtuous femininity." She relies on the belief in the illiteracy of slaves to thwart her master's sexual exploitation. She constantly faces the threat of rape by her white master, Dr. Flint:

One day he caught me teaching myself to write. He frowned, as if he was not well pleased; but I suppose he came to the conclusion that such an accomplishment might help to advance his favorite scheme. Before long, notes were often slipped into my hand...I would return them saying, "I can't read them, sir"... "Can't you?" he replied; then I must read them to you." (365)

At this point in the narrative, Jacobs has already established the threat of sexual rape from her master. She makes it quite evident that, as a good Christian female, she not only has to worry about the threat of rape, but she must also fear her mistress's perception of these sexual transgressions. Both the mistress and the master identify their female slave as lacking morals and humanity. Jacobs's previous focus on Christianity in her life establishes a record of morals that the readers can see. When Flint questions her ability to read, the "quest" to read is denied and rejected so that she can ignore the sexual advances

of her master. As presented earlier, Jacobs, a house slave, learns to read because of lessons acquired from her first mistress, and this in turn means that she must use trickery to hide this fact. Therefore, Jacobs's quest concerns itself with sexuality and subjectivity, rather than literacy. Trickery in reference to literacy in the male narrative, related to Eshu's trickery as divine translator/linguist, is denied in the female slave narrative. Jacobs's acts of trickery parallels Mawu's god-acts of self-creation in order to accomplish the human feat of self-determination.

We can best see how the issue of authorial control reveals the failure of dominant discourse to grapple with the subjectivity of black females occurs in Jacobs's manipulative use of the characteristics that dictate womanhood. After conclusively showing how Dr. Flint makes unwanted, sometimes violent, sexual advancement towards her, Jacobs moves from discussing the rape of the female slave to positing that the slave has a will to love. In a sentimental gesture, the kind that infuriates Blassingame, Jacobs asks her reader, "Why does the slave ever love? Why allow the tendrils of the heart to twine around objects which at any moment may be wrenched away by the hand of violence" (369). Throughout the narrative, Jacobs moves from the virtues and elements of womanhood to notions of sentimental and romantic love. Jacobs uses sentimental/romantic love as a device to emphasize how slavery deprives her of the most basic human freedom—the attempt to love and be loved by one of her own choosing. Flint clearly denies her every right to any type of free will, be it love or physical freedom.

When Jacobs "falls in love" with a free man of color, both her mistress and master object to the "courtship." Their objection stems from the rules of property. An inanimate object, property, can't love. In their eyes, to grant Jacobs a marriage ceremony is akin to

calling her human. Once Jacobs asks for permission to marry, Dr. Flint explains, “Well, I’ll soon convince you whether I am your master, or the nigger fellow you honor so highly” (371). Dr. Flint’s statement indicates his view of marriage as another institution established to preserve the status of white males. He assumes that the institution of slavery takes precedence over the marriage institution for blacks. Jacobs herself understands that slaves and free blacks attempting to practice or adhere to the sacraments of marriage seems oxymoronic:

Again and again I revolved in my mind how all this would end. There was no hope that the doctor would consent to sell me on any terms....My lover was an intelligent and religious man. Even if he could have obtained permission to marry me while I was a slave, the marriage would give him no power to protect me from my master...then, if we had children. I knew they “must follow the condition of the mother.” (371)

In revealing the desire to love, Jacobs can create another bond with readers of the narrative who believe in marriage as the ultimate fulfillment of “romantic love.” For Jacobs to pursue a focus on sentimental love, versus the idea of marriage as an institution for the exploitation of women, would specifically appeal to white women of the early women’s movement who believed wholeheartedly in a redefinition of the concept of marriage as a less financial and property based.

The earlier devices of romantic love serve only as precursors to the ideologies of womanhood (white) that Jacobs exploits for her purposes in this narrative. Consequently, in discussing her own subjectivity with respect to the ideal attainment of “woman,”

Jacobs's narrative can't help but document the inconsistency between the two and the failure of Western dominant discourses to translate her:

But, o, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely...I wanted to keep myself pure; and under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon of slavery. (384)

Jacobs caters to her readers by implicitly asking them not to judge her, and she makes the reader aware that she has broken a cardinal moral rule—pre-marital sex. Nonetheless, she explicitly explores how her legal status as property sets her on an altogether different path of morality. As she formulates it, she isn't evil personified, but the institution of slavery is the monster responsible for whatever beast she becomes. By constantly spotlighting her inclination for love, chastity, purity, innocence, and "self-respect," Jacob proves all the more the humanity of the slave "woman." Yet, in the midst of her catering to womanhood is to be located the struggle for black female subjectivity, and the inconsistencies of Jacobs's narrative are where we will find the author moving beyond her white middle class readership to question her own subjectivity.

Again, it is unclear as to whether Jacobs actually buys into these ideologies of white womanhood, virtues, and morals because frankly there are some contradictory actions in the narrative. Can we really believe any of the narrator's words when her reasoning about virtue, marriage, and romantic love does not match her actions? While Jacobs pursues marriage with a free black man, and verbally rejects and opposes her

master's desires, it all seems geared towards foreshadowing the sexual relationship a fifteen-year old Jacobs will have with an older white male suitor. Whether Jacobs actually believes in the cult of womanhood or romantic love is up for debate. Though she proclaims to strive hard to maintain her virginity, it becomes very clear that she views her sexuality as a way to exert independence during her time of bondage. In discussing her relationship with the new lover, Jacobs speaks forcefully of free will and choice:

I knew the impassable gulf between us; but to be an object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave, if her miserable situation has left her any pride or sentiment. It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment. A master may treat you as he pleases, and you dare not speak... (385)

This statement is revolutionary not only for a black female slave, but for any female in the nineteenth century where women (white) were still considered property. To what school of womanhood does Jacobs belong, leading her to believe that such things are rights? Though somewhat akin to the status of white women in marriage, Jacobs's status as a female slave has decidedly shaped her concept of the freedoms a female should enjoy. The retelling of this particular situation in Jacobs's slave autobiography is perplexing. One wonders how Jacobs, a black female slave, perceives that she has any choice or control over any white men who might be interested in her. Does she, in fact,

enjoy free will with this particular white male, or is this simply another narrative device to persuade her readers about the rightness of her argument.

Authorial control becomes even more complicated when we return to her desire to marry a free black man. Both marriage and slavery project themselves as institutions of white patriarchal supremacy systems working to maintain the status of white males. Jacobs's affinity to participate in either institution seems suspiciously linked to her strategy of appeasing her white female readers and white male abolitionists. As evident from her attempt to marry and her "choice" to take a lover, she quite possibly did not see marriage as anything more than two people of color sharing love and equal status as free blacks, and her relationship as a mutual agreement to give in to attractions. It seems that Jacobs has two ideals relating to her female status: the one she knows white America believes in and the one she has conceived through her status as a black slave in the New World. Consequently, in referring to her earlier argument about choosing whom to love, Jacobs understands the complexity of the argument she formulates, and so as not to frighten her readers she explains, "There may be sophistry in all this; but the condition of the slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact renders the practice of them impossible" (385). The radical way that Jacobs envisions man and woman stems from her status as a slave in which, as Davis noted in an earlier discussion, males and females shared the same status/position. Jacobs has insights about the status of women that perhaps she should not have. She reduces her "extremist" view of male/female relationships to confusion because she is well aware that her ideals conflict with Christian moral and principles for women, but also because they conflict with societal discourses on the treatment of women. Jacobs knows about the tenements for womanhood, but she

certainly casts doubt as to whether she really believes in such ideas: “Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others” (386). This particular statement reveals the subjectivity of the black female, and it also implies that other discourses are needed to discuss the subjectivity and status of the black female, enslaved or free.

Further, the one resonant voice for the moral codes for women remains Jacobs’s grandmother, rather than Jacobs herself. Upon learning that her granddaughter has been fornicating, she exclaims, “ ‘O Linda! Has it come to this. I had rather see you dead than to see you as you are now. You are a disgrace to your dead mother.’ She tore away from my fingers my mother’s wedding ring and her silver thimble. ‘Go away...and never come to my house, again’ ” (387). Oddly, Jacobs grandmother seems to be ashamed of her granddaughter, not because she had sexual relations with a white man, but because she did not stick to the established criterion of woman. Though the grandmother shows distinct disappointment in learning of Jacobs’s loss of virginity, the reference to the wedding ring, reminds us of the symbolic importance of the ring, which, as Jacobs has shown, does not apply to slaves. Jacobs’s grandmother, who preaches the doctrines of Christianity, hopes that one day her granddaughter will take part in the institution of marriage, and she could only do that by saving herself for her husband. The wedding ring that the grandmother removes from Jacobs’s finger would never be able to protect the young female slave from the sexual advances of her master. For Jacobs, the ring serves as a symbolic connection to her dead mother, but for the grandmother the ring holds a connection to the ideals and codes of womanhood that both she and her granddaughter must work to attain.

Jacobs's act of writing the narrative is indicative of trickster subjectivity in the black female literary tradition. She is not writing the narrative to become "Negro," but to define her black femaleness. The failure of language to discuss Jacobs's subjectivity can be seen through the reflective analysis of the authorial voice and control, and her awareness of her audience. Jacobs's masked resistance to the discourses of Christianity and womanhood leads to her eventual loophole of retreat, the garret. Like her brother, she must find a way to see herself, her humanity, and her spirit while being threatened with rape and beatings. If Jacob does not wish to be a slave, then she must begin to critically examine the discourse and institutions to which she adheres. Although she does not consciously set out to do this, her actions indicate a need for the space to do so.

In the chapter entitled, "The Loophole of Retreat," readers can experience Jacobs's attempt to examine the restrictive spaces of her black female body during her seven-year confinement to the garret, where she retreats to escape the continuous advances of Dr. Flint and the other horrors of slavery. Jacobs calls the garret a loophole of retreat because she briefly escapes the bondage of slavery, but her retreat also represents a botched maneuvering to unname herself. Critics, Michelle Burnham and Samira Kawash, have debated the significance of the garret to Jacobs's subject status and her narrative. Burnham sees the garret/loophole as "a site of resistance" and a "simultaneous inscription and transgression of the law of slavery (such that) she is able to reverse the master-slave power relation" (102). However, in *Dislocating the Color Line* (1997), Samira Kawash re-reads the chapter of Jacobs's narrative, asserting that "the garret is purchased at the price of loss of the authorized self" (74). Kawash sees no act of resistance in Jacobs's retreat. She asserts:

The elsewhere of the loophole is not an actual place where Jacobs might safely live beyond the reach of slavery. It is at great physical and mental cost that she remains in the garret. Jacobs's descriptions of her experience are punctuated by the progressive atrophy and deterioration of her body. The lack of air, the lack of space, and the ravages of the seasons make her conscious of her body and its continued discomfort. (77)

Jacobs's retreat may not involve an act of resistance or empowerment, but Kawash's evaluation that Jacobs's time in the garret creates the loss of authorized self is contentious. Was it really possible for Jacobs to have an authorized self in the institution of slavery? Jacobs's retreat to the garret signifies the lack of a language for her subjectivity. It is not until she is in the garret that she begins to openly formulate the notion that she is neither slave nor woman. Even as the garret exists outside the realm of the real world, it does become a safe space for Jacobs: "It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light. Yet, I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave" (438), and later when she discusses the garret she acknowledges that "yet, there was no place that existed, that could have afforded me so good a place of concealment" (440). Even before she is legally free, Jacobs understands that escaping Dr. Flint will not necessarily lead her to freedom or an authorized self.

After a few months in the garret, Jacobs no longer sees it as a retreat but as a prison. Nevertheless, as Jacobs reveals, the garret serves to make her aware of her authorized self in a way she could not realize through the dominant language of Christianity: "I tried to be thankful for my little cell... Sometimes I thought God was a compassionate Father, who would forgive my sins... At other times, it seemed to me that

there was no mercy or justice to the divine government...These things took the shape of mystery, which is to this day not so clear to my soul as I trust it will be hereafter" (445). It is in the garret that Jacobs realizes the profound complication of her body and subjectivity. In the garret, the body must reconfigure itself, bend, and manipulate its construction to subject itself to the safe space, and Jacobs sees not only her body doing this but her spirit (subjectivity) as well. Outside of the garret, she could continuously follow Christian dogma like her grandmother, but within the garret she begins to articulate what an authorized self might be like. She learns that if she were truly a subject then she would not need to hide, bend, or reconfigure herself to fit in a space. She understands, rather, that her aim would be to change the space around her. In an earlier description of her choice to become the lover of a white man, Jacobs tries to change the space around her; but that endeavor appears flawed because a black female slave has little freedom of choice when approached by any white man. In the end, the garret seems to offer the best solution to finding a discourse for her trickster subjectivity—one that does not fit into the social constructs of masculine/feminine and man/woman.

While Jacobs's actions of avoidance, retreat, and hiding from Dr. Flint's attacks are very trickster-like, I choose instead to focus on her subjectivity in the garret. Her actions of hiding are illusory, deceptive, and cunning, but her subjectivity is already that of a trickster. Jacobs reveals that the longer she stays in the garret, the more cunning Dr. Flint becomes and the more cunning she has to become to evade him:

Dr. Flint had not given me up. Every now and then he would say to my grandmother that I would yet come back, and voluntarily surrender myself, and that when I did I could be purchased by my relatives or

anyone who wished to buy me....I resolved to match my cunning against his cunning. In order to make him believe that I was in New York, I resolved to write him a letter dated from that place. (448)

Jacobs's narrative reveals that she is capable of trickery, but it also divulges that her person outside the garret is not a person but property, and that inside the garret she is something else. Although she may understand her subjectivity better than she did upon entering the garret, we must acknowledge the justice of Kawash's claim that "if the loophole is an escape, it is not a triumph. Jacobs as a fugitive cannot be reduced to property, but neither can she avail herself to the securities of person" (77). The conflicts of Jacobs securing herself as a person is revealed as Jacobs discusses the laws and Dr. Flint: "Yet the laws allowed *him* to be out in the free air, while I, guiltless of crimes, was pent up here..."(443). Despite that Jacobs has been successful in hiding from Flint, he remains victorious in affecting Jacobs's subjectivity.

Kawash's argument that Jacobs undergoes a loss of authorized self rests on the legal language of property rights, and she buys into ideologies that this language, which does not apply to the female slave, is the only language that can lead Jacobs to freedom and subjectivity. However, we should understand that the law and the language of property rights are ideological state apparatuses. Arguably, as Jacobs constantly mentions the merits of womanhood and Christian morals, it becomes clear that in these discourses she does not have an authorized self outside the garret. Thus, Jacobs does not lose her sanctioned self in the garret for the ISA of property rights never acknowledged her at all. Kawash's analysis may also be challenged since after Jacobs is free from slavery, she is still the property of someone else through the institution of marriage.

Furthermore, when we look beyond Jacobs's enslavement, physical freedom of slavery accords no rights or inclination towards a more authorized self. The intrusive presence of Jacobs's narrative strategies to guide her white readers through their turmoil of consciousness as they read her narrative suggests all the more that an authorized black female self is impossible in any of the dominant discourses of Western cultures. This is why the concept of Jacobs writing herself into being is not applicable, because like Truth, the narrative will always be aware of the white gaze. The self that is authorized is authorized by the white gaze rather than her own.

In concluding her narrative, Jacobs learns that the concepts of woman and gender impede her quests for freedom in a number of ways: "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free. We are as free from the power of the slave holders as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal" (513). There are many implications in this brief passage. If the pre-generic myths and the quests of Jacobs's narrative were the same as Douglass's, why would she end her narrative in such an ambiguous and depressing tone? It seems particularly striking that her story ends with freedom through marriage. By exclaiming her freedom is not obtained in the usual way and tied to marriage, Jacobs implies that her gender, at this time, in no way allows her to enjoy privileges that free black males might receive—she is a wife to serve them. Further, she is not afforded the ideas of womanhood because of her race. Jacobs says as much as she can about her liminal state of freedom. Like a trickster, hiding in the garret permits Jacobs to place herself outside time and space. The garret teaches her that in order to be fully empowered she must exist in liminal spaces, and liminality will

eventually help her to recognize that true freedom is beyond dominant discourses of the West. At the end of Jacobs's work, the authenticator of her narrative, Amy Post, divulges that Jacobs expressed disgust at someone paying the monetary price for her freedom. Jacobs claims that the purchase robs her of any victory. Her reaction fully expresses the failure of language to fully comprehend her subjectivity beyond that of Negro woman. The payment for her body enables society to define her subjectivity as a slave and "black woman."

Black female writers and critics are faced with the same dilemma when it comes to theoretical discourse today. The key is to find a paradigm that will allow us to construct discourse and subjectivity from an empowering state of liminality. Kawash's reading of the loophole uses legal language to read the loophole of retreat; my reading moves beyond the legal rhetoric of the chapter to examine the spiritual rhetoric and symbolic trickster actions of Jacobs in the loophole so as to qualify her subjectivity. As documented by Truth and Jacobs, the experiences of black females slaves defied the traditional logic of gender constructs. Jacobs's time in the garret and her insistence that it is a retreat signifies the future of things to come for black women's texts. The garret symbolizes the need for space outside the subjectivity of the "black woman" myth. The need for the space of the garret becomes a repetitive motif and a tropological revision in black female literature. Ironically, it is not the action of retreat into the loophole that gets revised, but the space of the garret and its influence on subjectivity. Although Jacobs's time in the garret may not be a retreat or an empowering loophole for freedom, it does act as a safe place and provides a way for Jacobs to see that she must find a way to begin unnamings herself.

CHAPTER FOUR

Zora Neale Hurston: A Transition From (Un)Naming to Unnaming

Jes' 'cause women folk ain't got no big muscled arms and
fists lak jugs, folks claim they's weak vessels, but dass uh lie.
dat piece of red flannel she got hung between her joints is equal
tuh all de fists God ever made and man ever seen.

John Pearson—*Mules and Men*⁶⁰

While Jacobs and Truth illustrate how the evolution of black females hinges on foundations of liminality, they could not reveal the most effective ways to maintain that liminality. They could not unname themselves. That endeavor would go to the descendants of Jacobs and Truth, Zora Neale Hurston and specific women of a black female literary renaissance. Despite the publication of nineteenth-century novels, *Medga* (1891) and *Four Girls at Cottage City* (1898) by Emma Dunham Kelley, and Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), the rhetoric of womanhood and the social construct of gender remained undisturbed.⁶¹ During the early twentieth-century, novels such as Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces* (1900), Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929) and *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931) presented female characters who attempted to (un)name themselves, that is unname to rename, by attempting to fit into the models of womanhood prevalent during the time. It is only with the works of Zora Neale Hurston, and those who follow her lead that we begin to notice

⁶⁰ Hurston, 33

⁶¹ These novels presented black female characters engaged in "civil" social-activism and domesticated roles of dutiful wife and mother in prosperous post-slavery black communities. The characters regarded the morals of Christianity as sacred and essential to their obedience to God, man, and their community.

the fabricated block of gender being disassembled by a savvy use of Black Diasporic oral traditions for the process of unnamings.⁶²

This chapter proposes that certain black female writers eventually employ a technique reminiscent of Mawu the trickster, the process of unnamings, as a way to express their Mawu-Lisa subjectivity and make others understand the narrative techniques and strategies that they use in self-invention. In chapter two, I claimed that the tensions about gender in the African American community must be understood in order to adequately evaluate gender, folklore, tricksters, and the vernacular. The need for unnamings in African American texts is a simple way of addressing the issue of subjectivity and gender in the African American community. However, the process of unnamings happens in a number of ways in African American women's texts, and this process is carried out via oral, folk, and vernacular strategies shaped by the experiences of black females based on the tensions of a lost egalitarian community. Once we recognize the need for unnamings in black female texts, it becomes much easier to corroborate Barbara Christian's theory as to whether the African American female community has distinct language practices because of their disconcerting subjectivity.

The work of sociolinguist, Marcyliena H. Morgan, becomes pivotal in re-conceptualizing discussions of black female language. In her essay, "No Woman No Cry: Claiming African American Women's Place," Morgan finds that "because language is a social act, research on language constitutes social and cultural production that is

⁶² All of these novels contemplated the existence of the black females after slavery. The novels addressed issues such as black female representation and identity. Notably, a number of the characters in these novels attempt to escape to a garret-like place in the form of racially passing as white females.

influenced by issues of race, sexuality, class and power.”⁶³ She later continues, “Consequently, African American women’s issues are hypermarginalized and are considered typical neither of all women’s issues (because the women who face them are Black) nor of Black issues (because the blacks who face them are women). It is not surprising, then, that all linguists—whether they include, marginalize, or fetishize Black women—always at some level, take a position.”⁶⁴ The lack of research on black female cultural communities, especially the speech communities and language practices, has hindered the readings of texts by black females.

However, the process of unnamng calls for specific language practices and uses that reflect the subjectivity of black females. In “Indirectness and Interpretation in African American Women’s Discourse,” Morgan contrasts the speech practices of white women and black females as a way to explore the implications of indirectness and interpretation following the affect on African American women’s language. Using Morgan’s work, we can move further and discuss indirectness because of gender, as well as race. More conceivable than Christian’s early claim, Morgan implies how we might come to understand why there might be distinctions in African American women’s language use:

I describe the life of a slave in the U.S. as one where all civil rights were denied as well as the right to demonstrate any of the attributes of responsible adults: grown men and women were treated as children. As

⁶³ “No Woman No Cry: Claiming African American Women’s Place” in *Re-inventing Identities: The Gendered Self in Discourse*. eds., Mary Bucholtz, A.C. Liang, Laurel Sutton. (New York: Oxford UP, 1999). 26-42. Also see Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis’s “Standing up and Speaking Out: African American’s Women’s Narrative Legacy. *Discourse and Society* 2: 425-437, Michelle Foster’s “Are You With Me?: Power and Solidarity in the Discourse of African American Women.” *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self*. eds., Kira Hall and Mary Bulchoz (New York: Routledge, 1995) 329-50.

⁶⁴ Morgan, 28.

part of the resistance to this “slave reality,” an alternate reality developed amongst slaves which allowed them to express a positive self-view as men and women capable of responsibility and control. This hidden, yet, self-affirming belief was a conscious attempt to provide alternatives that could exist and thrive within the confines of social reality. (423)

Though Morgan does not specifically address her analysis to black female language but to the whole of the African American community, the overall logic of her argument carries over into research on black female language culture and practices. Morgan discusses the idea that slaves in the U.S. created a counter-language to overcome the hegemonic discourse of them as simpletons. This counter-language also explains the importance of indirectness and signifying in the African American vernacular. Logically, if an entire slave community could create a counter-language to battle a fictional ideology of themselves, could not African American women do the same. This is the most significant point of Morgan’s article. A counter-language for black females to battle the fictional ideologies of themselves is exactly what Truth and Jacobs wanted and needed but never found.

Black women’s language use and practices are influenced by their historical and daily experiences. Folk and vernacular traditions become the ultimate mechanism of unnamings the black woman and revealing these language practices. In the following close readings, I argue that the distinctness of black female culture comes in the woman’s decision to consistently use the oral, folk, and vernacular to construct her language practices in a way that reflects, as was the case with Mawu-Lisa and Annie Christmas, the tensions stemming from her disruptive subjectivity. Hence, uses of the folk, oral, and

vernacular serve as strategic markers of remembrance of the fact that she is not “the black woman” and a reinstitution of social and aesthetic implications of an unsexed African American community—a liminality that disrupts the dominant norms of society. Similar to Morgan’s account of a counter language, M.K. Halliday’s *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interaction of Language and Meaning* (1978) describes an anti-language occurring in institutions such as that of slavery, noting that anti-language is:

the means of realization of a subjective reality: not merely expressing it, but actively creating and maintaining it. In this respect, it is just another language. But then the reality is a counter-reality, and this has certain special implications. It implies the foregrounding of the social structure and social hierarchy. It implies a special occupation with the definition and defense of identity through the ritual functioning of the social hierarchy. It implies a special conception of information and knowledge.

(172)

In referring back to the Mawu-paradigm, language and the trickery of Legba cannot emerge without the tensions between Mawu and Legba. Likewise, African American forms of signifying develop as a way to keep under wraps the true meaning of blacks’ speech and language, a characteristic of slaves and post-emancipated blacks. Morgan notes that “it was necessary for ex-slaves to continue the expression of the dual reality, long after the formal institution of slavery was dismantled” (423). The predicament of African American women, then, is not just to be evasive with white people but to also use language to evade the tensions of gender and male domination in the black community.

The tensions about gender in the African American community are the reality, but these tensions give rise to a counter-reality.

According to Halliday, counter-reality becomes a communication system sustained by an agreed upon false reality projected by a dominant party over another party.⁶⁵ For example, if slaves were constructed as ignorant and primitive, then this “reality” can support and justify the institution of slavery as a much-needed care-taking of blacks in the New World. The false discourse acts as the counter-reality as opposed to the reality that blacks were not primitive or ignorant. Counter-reality, then, as it applies to gender in the black community, finds its agreed upon false reality in gender constructs that privilege males because they are biologically and socially superior to females. This subjective reality also constructs language practices according to the counter reality. In the black community, Euro-centric gender constructs are revealed to be a subjective reality, hence a counter-reality for blacks in the new world. The special implications that Halliday mentions, for gender, means that language practices would work to defend the identity created by the counter-reality. For black males, that could mean accepting the dominant discourses on gender, or ignoring conflicts resulting from them altogether. However, the task becomes more complicated for the black female.

Reflective of Davis and Collins’s work based on the assumption that the social structure and hierarchy that would be foregrounded is an egalitarian one, tensions emerge for black female subjects engaged in cultural production because they must work from the reality, rather than the counter-reality. Black females must create language practices that subvert the general subjective model of gender. As the counter-reality runs opposite to the reality that biologically, economically, and socially, the construction of gender in

⁶⁵ Halliday, 171.

black culture and society changes due to black female subjectivity, so too do language communities reflect that redistribution. Black females construct their language and discourses aware of the tensions-the counter-reality. This is why the process of unnamings is important; it helps black females to avert the restraints of the counter-reality and take on the tensions of created by it.

In *The Assertive Woman in Zora Neale Hurston's Fiction, Folklore, and Drama*, Pearlie Mae Fisher Peters (1998) sets forth several questions about the way Hurston uses folklore for her women characters: "Can she talk effectively or does she appear to be a mealy-mouth rag doll? What are the detailed and intricate workings of her verbal portrait in encounters with a man, a trusted confidant, or a fierce rival?" (7). In answering these questions, we come to understand all the more that Hurston employs folklore and oral traditions of Black Americans to begin reworking the historical figuration of mythology left by the legacy of Truth, and she takes up the quest of finding a discourse for black female subjectivity in her collection of folklore *Mules and Men* (1935). Hurston, with her understanding and appreciation of folklore, demonstrates the earliest efforts of how to maintain an empowering liminal state, and continuously unname the "black woman" so as to disturb the intelligible logic of gender. Hurston's *Mules and Men*, originally published in 1935, disappeared and was later reprinted in 1978. Its lengthy out-of-print status serves as a testament to the undervalued work of a woman folklorist. Furthermore, Roger Abrahams's "Negotiating Respect: Patterns of Presentation among Black Women," provides ample evidence of how gender has been misunderstood or dismissed. Forty-years after the publication of *Mules and Men*, Abrahams claimed: "...how women assert their image and values is seldom found in folklore literature. We know even less

about the verbal traditions of black women in particular” (58). Perhaps this counter-reality is why he, at one time, deemed black oral artforms such as the dozens and signifying as a specifically male oral form.⁶⁶

However, *Mules and Men*, a collection of folktales, hoodoo rituals and tales, and conjure stories, presents the reader with more than enough knowledge about the verbal traditions of black women. Hurston’s collection is important for two reasons: its awareness of race and its inclusion of gender. Hurston expresses her understanding of how race dynamics can hinder collection of black folklore:

Folk-lore is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best source is where there are the least outside influences...And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive... that is we let the probe enter, but it never gets out. (5)

Hurston takes into consideration race, and she uses her shared racial heritage to gain access and full disclosure of black communal oral culture in a way that other white folklorists could not have done before her. Ironically, Hurston does not explicitly mention the way gender figures into the collection of folklore. Yet, Hurston’s collection reveals that women who have the least outside influences, in this case male influences, can provide a wealth of knowledge about black female verbal tradition. *Mules and Men* expresses several ways of including and thinking about gender and folklore.

Hurston’s collection of folklore provides an ample amount of material focused on women and the needs of women. Hurston explicitly records her collection process. After listening to Charlie deliver a tale about “how the church came to be split up,” Hurston’s text, attentive to detail, documents how black males and females in the early

⁶⁶ Roger Abraham’s *Deep Down in the Jungle* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1970)

1900s enjoyed ritual storytelling together, rather than separated by gender as perceived by Abrahams: “There was a storm of laughter following Charlie’s tale. ‘Zora, you come talkin’ bout puttin’ de two churches together and not havin’ but one in dis town,’ Arnetta said chidingly. ‘You know better’n dat’ ” (31). Arnette’s chiding of Hurston is not a hesitant moment of uncertainty. It fully acknowledges a comfortable space for black female subjects. She does not wait to be asked or given permission to speak by Charlie or any other males. She willingly interjects her voice, and her knowledge of religious culture and folk etiquette (“you know better’n dat”) into the communal conversation.

In a discussion directly following this particular exchange, the language practices of black females become more complex. An argument occurs between a dark-skinned black male, Gene, and a light-skinned black male, Gold: “Then Gold spoke up and said, ‘Now, lemme tell one. Ah know one about a man as black as Gene’ and Gene replies, ‘What you always crackin on me for?...Ah ain’t a bit blacker than you’ ”(31). The men begin a serious engagement with the dozens reflecting the sensitive subject matter of color consciousness in the black community. Gene insults Gold by arguing, “Well, anyhow, Gold, youse blacker than me. If I was as fat as you Ah’d be a yaller man” (31). Before allowing the dozens session to escalate into violence, Hurston notes: “Arnette soothed Gold’s feelings and stopped the war” (31). Arnette has the ability to maintain her voice in the ritual storytelling, but she is also capable of influencing the direction of it.

Hurston’s omission of specifically revealing how Arnette pacifies Gold’s feelings seems strategic in terms of the presence of a counter-reality of gender in the African American community. Hurston, and the women who provide oral tales for the

collection, practice Morgan's two major characteristics of black female language communities: "pointed indirectness—when a speaker says something to someone that is either of no relevance to current or prior contexts, and/or not obvious from the prepositional content and (ii) baited indirectness—when a speaker says something general which is taken by the audience to be specific or addressed to someone because of contextual evidence."⁶⁷ While indirectness of discourse has been a primary element of the black art of signifying, the dozens, and sounding, Morgan's most crucial point to this study is that baited indirectness "focuses on the features and attributes of a referent and implies that those features are also shared by the target who is among hearers and overhearers...baiting is an act (sign) of intentionality."⁶⁸ As signifying may rely on racially motivated understanding of the oral culture to obtain meaning, Morgan's definition of baited indirectness seems significant for an understanding of gendered culture, in addition to race. If African American females use folk and vernacular as strategies of baited indirectness and pointed indirectness, then only other African American females would know it. Hurston indirectly mentions Arnette's pointed indirectness.

If we recall Arnette's light reprimand of Hurston, there is a sense of a specific community informing the collections. Arnette remains aware of the dilemmas of black masculinity, and being aware, she can say something that will soften the verbal blows between the two men. We should wonder, not only how she does it, but if the men, Gold and Gene, are aware of how she kept a game of the dozens from turning into an all out brawl.

⁶⁷ "Indirectness and Interpretation." 440.

⁶⁸ Morgan, 430-431

Hurston's collection provides the remedy for creating a continuous process of unnamings to resist the most dangerous historical figuration of mythology—that of the black woman. *Mules and Mens* documents how black females can create verbal traditions to parallel their liminal subjectivity akin to Mawu-Lisa. Hurston documents how black female awareness of such tensions is to be found in Arnette's discursive practices, as well as that of other women: " 'Oh, yes, womens is got sense too,' Mathilda Mosley jumped in. 'But they got too much sense to go round braggin' bout it like y'all do. De lady folks always got de advantage of mens....' " (33). As indicated earlier, the counter-reality of gender in the black community shapes and privileges the language practices of black males. Mathilda's assessment of this practice as bragging reveals the power and privilege derived from the counter-reality. Mathilda's statement suggests that black females have reason to employ a counter-language in expressing themselves and their culture that are specifically dictated by gendered positions.

Clearly, Mathilda indirectly baits her husband into a response. When B. Moseley responds to his wife's claim that women always have the advantage over men, he quickly makes use of the intelligible logic of gender—the counter reality to thwart her assessment: "Whut ole black advantage is y'all got... We got all de strength and all de law and all de money and you can't git a thing but what we jes take pity on you and give you" (33). Interestingly, B. Moseley accepts the Eurocentric construction of gender, ignoring all the while, that as a black male, he does not have all the money or the law. White supremacist structuring of society denies these items to him on a daily basis. While B. Moseley accepts this reality, his wife accepts another. B. Mosley's subjective reality is not any more valid than his wife's reality steeped in folk traditions. If black

females refuse the subjective reality of themselves as subordinated to males, then they can use the folk as a way to create subversive verbal traditions. Arnette's insistent voice in the communal discourse shows that she does not accept the counter-reality. Mathilda's comment exposes how denying the reality and creating a verbal tradition to reflect the rejection of the subjective model means, for black females, a bragging rejection of gender ideologies. Folklore and oral traditions present an alternate and bold reality in which black females can upset the status quo. B. Mosley's question, "what advantage," as a response to his wife's strategic baited indirectness then allows her to an opportunity to set the record straight and tell the "real" story.

When Mathilda responds to B, Hurston manages to collect stories such as the old folktale from the African American community, "Why Women Always Take Advantage of Men." The opening of the tale immediately informs us of the gender relations in the black community:

You see in de very first days, God made a man and a woman and put 'em in a house to together to live. Way back in them days de woman was just as strong as de man and both of 'em did de same things. They user get to fussin' bout who gointer do this and that and sometime they's fight, but they was even balanced and neither one could whip de other on. (34).

Mathilda's folktale is a ritualistic denial of gender hierarchies. It encourages us to believe that males and females were at one time equal by intruding on the Western narrative of bio-logic, asserting that in the area of strength men and women were once equal. The tale is interesting in that it discloses how conscious the African American community might have been about the similarities between black men and women, and

this seems to coincide with the fact that social status of gender went unclassified during field labor. Oddly, the tale documents strength as a consideration of gender differences when by all accounts of historical experiences it was not, at first, a significant matter of distinction for black men and women in the U.S. Further, Mathilda's relaying of the tale displays the characteristics of black female verbal tradition, a strategic use of the folk as pointed and baited indirectness. Mathilda's tale, through baited indirectness, rejects dominant ideologies of gender and unnames the black female.

After recording the folktale from Mathilda, Hurston includes commentary from Mathilda's husband after she has finished telling the tale. B. Moseley responds to his wife's story: "You just like a hen in de barnyard. You cackle so much you give de rooster de blues" (38). Instead of silencing his wife, B. Moseley attempts to take away the appeal of the story to black female subjectivity. In comparing his wife's tale to the unimportant noise a hen makes, he implies that her tale is less valid than his earlier construction of gender hierarchies. Hurston's recording of the story and the male response to it demonstrates how women's stories and voices are dismissed or denigrated as cackle and gossip. Mosley's response to his wife is no different from those of male folklorists who decide and define what is or is not folklore, always with certain motivations in mind. While males may call it cackle or gossip, through a Mawu-lens, Hurston's recording of the tale suggests a greater importance. The fact that Mathilda tells the story is a great indicator that she was practicing baited indirectness, as discussed by Morgan. Again, the story reiterates that there was a time when men and women were equal. This seems to be an implied reflection on the reality (unsexed humanity), rather than the counter reality (a bio-logic constructed rhetoric privileging the male) of black

females and males in the African American community. The more Mathilda conveys the tale, the less potent B. Mosley's statement becomes until we no longer have to innocently accept the myth of intelligible gender but question it in the way Mathilda does. Morgan notes that in her study black females and white females interpret indirectness and intentionality differently.⁶⁹ As indicated in Hurston's recorded exchange between Mathilda and B. Mosley, it also follows that indirectness might also be interpreted differently by black males on issues as they relate, not to racial experience and culture, but to gendered experience and culture. Mathilda conversates with Hurston using a strategy, that as Mawu-like subjects, they both can understand.

Folkstories in *Mules and Men*, "Eulalia—How To Get A Man Ritual," hoodoo stories of Marie Leveau, and the conjure tales of Kitty Brown challenge the notion that there is no oral tradition of black women or black female folk characters. Eulailia's-how-to-get-a-man-ritual explicitly documents the rituals of indirectness and intentionality in its presentation of the hoodoo doctor, Eulalia. Hurston writes, "So I went to study with Eulalia, who specialized in *Man-and-woman cases*. Everyday somebody came to get Eulalia to tie them up with some man or woman or to loose them from love" (italics mine 198). My use of italics recognizes how Hurston connects man-and-woman cases to document that there seems to be little separation or ranking of the sexes in black folklore. Eulalia does not perform her works for one specific sex. In one precise example of hoodoo, a woman comes to Eulalia because she wants to be with a Jerry Moore, but some other "'oman dat he got she got roots buried" (198).

Hurston's recording of Eulalia's experiences certifies a mechanism of pointed indirectness directed at the intelligible discourse of gender in the black community. In

⁶⁹ Morgan, 440.

Eulalia's response to the woman, we note the pre-conceived notions of Western womanhood: "Course Ah'm a Christian woman and don't believe in parting no husband and wife" (198). However, the remainder of her response indicates intentionality—baited indirectness: "But since she done worked roots on him to hold him, where he don't want to be, it tain't no sin for me to loose him" (198). Eulalie, as a black female conjurer, understands that her persona must be addressed in a way that connects her to the woman coming to be healed. She relies on the mythical cult of Christian womanhood, but the irony of the above statement is that quite possibly, as a conjurer, Eulalia is more than a Christian woman, as her hoodoo practice insists. Yet, she understands the reality, or in this case, the counter-reality that she exists. At first, as discussed by Halliday, she constructs herself and her discourse to defend her identity and the definition of social hierarchies. However, by switching to baited indirectness, she intentionally unnames the identity she set forth in the beginning. Her claim to be a Christian woman is overturned by her presence as someone who can remove roots from a person. "Hoodoo" becomes the discourse for the female conjurer, as well as the folkloric practice of unnameing black female subjectivity. The discourse occurs when the root working begins: " 'Git dat salt-bowl and a lemon,' " she said to me. 'Now write Jerry's name and his wife's nine times on a piece of paper....' "(198). Hurston documents how cleverly folk, oral and vernacular traditions can begin the process of unnameing black females to make way for their subjectivity.

In the end, the title of Hurston's work serves as a mechanism of pointed indirectness. If we examine *Mules and Men* as simply a collection focused on black culture, with no concern of gender hierarchies, then it would appear that the title itself,

Mules and Men, seems to have no context. Prepositional content is absent from the title, and racial relevance seems non-existent. However, *Mules and Men* is pointedly indirect about the gender rankings in the black community. Hurston's collection constantly determines that black women found a way of getting around the mistranslation of their subjectivity by dominant discourse via pointed indirectness as a way to unname themselves. In addition, Hurston also uses pointed indirectness in the title from her collections, *Mules and Men*, and pointed indirectness can be seen in her use and symbolic connection to the mule. In *Their Eyes Are Watching God* (1937), Nanny states: "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (14). *Mules and Men*, written years before *Their Eyes*, most certainly expresses that comment in its title before Hurston gives the statement to Nanny. Hurston significantly claims the metaphor of the mule as pointed indirectness, and this explains why Hurston does not explicitly mention gender and race, for she shows that she is always aware of their presence. The very title of her work, *Mules and Men*, suggests that Hurston wished her collection to serve as a basis for the discussion of gender relations in the community and in the study of folklore. Her title implies a gender concern, with mules serving as a metaphor for women (in this work and her later works), while "men" appears more literal.

In addition to previous folktales documenting black females' use of pointed indirectness in their language practices, the text's collection of stories themselves serves as the continuation of pointed indirectness. In "Why the Sister in Black Works De Hardest," Hurston also explores the function and characteristics of a distinct tradition of black women's discourse. In this particular story that explains God's delegation of labor, one of Hurston's male informants explains:

Ole Missus said to Ole Massa: "Go pick up dat box, Ah want to see whuts in it." Ole Massa looks at de box and it look so heavy da he says to the de nigger, "Go fetch me dat big ole box out dere in de road." De nigger...tell his wife: "'Oman, go git dat box." So de nigger 'oman she runned to git de box....and opened it up and it was full of hard work. Dat's the reason the de sister in black works harder than anybody else in the world. De white man tells de nigger to work and he takes and tells his wife. (81)

Black women in the collection of tales, and Hurston herself, continuously connect the workload and use of the mule to the black female's social station in early twentieth-century U.S. regions of the South. In her depictions, no one sees these female beings as women. Black women represent beasts of burdens for the newly forming United States and its developing black nation. In choosing to use the mule and not make explicit the issue of gender in her work, Hurston employs pointed indirectness and refers back to Black Diasporic animal trickster tales to help her do so. Hurston replaces Sis-Goose and Sis Cow with mules.

In *Mules and Men*, Mawu's process of unnamng takes shape in the use of folklore and the vernacular. While the male informer of this tale doesn't practice baited indirectness, Hurston's inclusion of the tale, like that of Mathilda's tale, dictates how the theme from this tale connects to Hurston's title and text exemplifying baited indirectness. The story entails a distinct cultural function of educating black women about their status in the New World. It is in a sense, baited indirectness is a tale; one knows from the historical experience of black women how much the tale mirrors her life. It is not a complaint, but it is not an acceptance of the false status forced on the black female. The

tale functions to make black females conscious of how the world works, and will expect them to work. By orally telling the tale, black women teach other black women how to discuss this divisive issue in the community. They can suggest to the black male population that they are not happy with their status, while also keeping inline with normative cultural norms of patriarchal hierarchy, privileging the males' needs over their own. Hurston's collection of essays implicitly establishes an agenda to explore gender and folk, and it thematically, structurally, and metaphorically institutes itself as a work pointedly indirect about the complications of intelligible logic of gender in the black community.

In contrast with John W. Roberts who excludes female traditions in his study of folk traditions, Hurston does not exclude masculine folklore and oral traditions. She chooses to juxtapose male-oriented folk with female oriented folk to explore the way culture is being built in the communities of African Americans. Hurston's inclusion of comments made by each gender concerning the other gender's story (e.g. Moseley's earlier response to his wife's story) makes her work conceptually aware of the issues about gender that she does not explicitly mention as shaping her collection. Hurston remains one of the few earlier folklore scholars who seemed aware that race and gender should be remembered in constructing theories about oral literature and performance.

When we examine the historical context of black women's lives, the fixed notion of gender in the oral can be problematic. As we move beyond the use of folklore as a culture-building (read as male nation-building) function, into using folklore according to the Mawu paradigm, gender ceases to be a fixed category in the texts of black females.

CHAPTER FIVE

From Mules To Turtle Women: Evolution of the Black Female Unnaming

I was a turtle before I became a human being, said my grandmother. She was taking a new order of beauty products out of the boxes and restocking the shelves...Then I saw this handsomest young man and took a liking to him, she said as she put the superior beauty products on the shelves. Do you want to know how far I followed him? She chuckled. I followed him until I turned into a human being. Is that far enough for you?

Grandmother Eagleton—*The Healing*⁷⁰

The black unicorn is restless
The black unicorn is unrelenting
The black unicorn is not free.

Audre Lorde—*The Black Unicorn*⁷¹

Just as Hurston conducted her own trickster strategies for the historical experiences and subjectivity of black women through metaphors of animals, Gayl Jones's *The Healing* (1998) serves as the most recent textual embodiment to recall the importance of animal trickster tales for creating a process of unnamings for black females. In *The Healing*, readers are introduced to Harlan Eagleton, a black female jack-of-all-trades, who becomes a faith healer. Yet from the very beginning of the novel's immediate meditation on a tin of "Spirit of Scandinavian Sardines, floating in mustard sauce" (3), the reader comes to understand how Gayl Jones has taken your mama's healing protagonist (the conjurer woman and hoodoo priestess from Chestnutt and Hurston) and made it into a character touched by her own voice and ideologies. The novel manages to reject the historical figurations of the black woman in favor of a more Mawu-archetype of black female subjectivity. Jones's characterization of Harlan Eagleton as a healer, essentially like the hoodoo doctor Eulalia in Hurston's *Mules and*

⁷⁰ Jones, 133.

⁷¹ See title poem from Audre Lorde's collection of poetry, *Black Unicorn*. (New York: Norton, 1978).

Men, suggests beings who cannot be named or defined because of their subjectivity. *The Healing* consistently recreates and revises gender ideologies about black women.

In the canon of African American women's literature, *The Healing* is not the first contemporary novel to make use of conjurers, healers, and magical realism. On the contrary, Bambara's Minnie Ransom and Velma in *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Marshall's Rosalie Parvay and Avery Johnson in *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), and Naylor's Mattie Michaels and Sapphire in *The Women of Brewster's Place* and *Mama Day* (1988) are characters who have all been touched by or bestowed with healing gifts in various ways. While Jones, like each of the aforementioned novelists, does explore healers and healing in a similar and traditional way—to document and examine the psychological ills of African American women—*The Healing* modernizes the concepts of healing in black women's fiction in several ways. As some critics have argued, there are some common variables in the above traditional healing protagonists.⁷² Through her characterization of Harlan, Jones revises and reconstructs the healer character type: where Minnie was an outcast in Bambara's *The Salteaters*, Harlan's ordinariness and ability to shift her stations in life and community are emphasized time and again; where Minnie and Sapphire may have been asexual or non-sexual, Harlan comes to know her healing gift because of her sexual transgressions; and where laying of the hands usually focuses on the healer laying

⁷² See Trudier Harris's "From Exile to Asylum: Religion to Community in the Writings of Contemporary Black Women," in *Black Women's Writing in Exile*. ed., Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram, 1989, pp. 151-169. Trudier Harris, "This Disease Called Strength: Some Observations of the Compensating Construction of Black Female Characters" in *Literature and Medicine* 14:1 (Spring 1995): 109-126, Gay Wilentz's *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Dis-ease* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2000), and Valerie Lee's *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers*. (New York: Routledge, 1996). Each work documents, through historical analysis of critical analysis of the literary character of the healer, society's ideas about black women as healers, the known characteristics attributed to black women healers who are either exiled or outcasts from their communities, asexual and non-threatening women, and all explore the healer's effect on those coming to be healed or being healed.

hands on a body other than her own, Harlan's first experience of laying of the hands puts her in contact with her own body. These divergences from previous healing protagonists exist in Jones's text for a reason—to move the subjectivity of black females outside of traditional discourses of gender.

For more than twenty-five years, Gayl Jones has explored the pain and problematic subjectivity of black women in her writing. Scholarship and criticism have heralded Jones as a creator of the blues-structured novel for her works concerned with pain and oppression, *Corregidora* (1975) and *Eva's Man* (1976). Yet, few critics have assessed her aesthetic ingenuity in demonstrating how to heal that pain and oppression. However, *The Healing* uses a divergent structure based on liminality and an oral narrative structure and discourse defined by gender that differs from Jones's blues aesthetic narratology. Rather than use blues aesthetics, she demonstrates that new aesthetics must be employed to discuss healing. As seen in *Corregidora*, *Eva's Man*, and *Song for Anninho* (1981), Jones shows a specific interest in the use of folk aesthetics, language, and black women's subjectivity. The blues provides a way of dealing with pain, and sadly celebrating its importance in our lives as a teaching and learning tool. In many ways, blues aesthetics symbolize the struggle with and death of horrible experiences of pain and oppression in historical and present life. Whether we are struggling with the pain, or putting it to rest, the blues aesthetic finds at its center a preoccupation with death. The birth of jazz from the blues signifies the need for black expression with life at its musical center. Although Jones's novel is not a jazz structured novel, her aesthetic styling of the narrative, a stream-of-consciousness-novel and the focus on healing, is

about life. Healing symbolizes a gift from the divine, constant rebirth, with a return to life rather than death.

In *The Healing*, aesthetics and metaphors in the text rely on a mythic understanding of faith healing produced by oral traditions and grounded in what cannot be named or defined—divinity. Jones creates a narratology based on divination—the language/discourse of that which is unknown to discuss what is known as the “black woman,” a misrepresentation and flawed symbol. The major indicators of the divination narrative strategy are liminality, soulful raps or flowing usage of words, and indirection through disjointed testimonies, interruption of a rap session, communality, and the presence of omnipresent myth(s). As a rhetorical mode, it may in some way seem akin to the black rhetorical mode of signifyin(g). However, one should note that the characteristics and elements of signifying (indirection, cajoling, punning, playing on words, introduction of the semantically logically unexpected) almost always operate from a knowable referent.⁷³ Since divination presents itself as the writing of the divine, its referent is always unknown. Creating a narrative structure and discourse based on an unknown referent leaves subjectivity in a liminal state, and allows characters to avoid misrepresentation and static symbolism.

Negative images and representations about black women have long endured. Positive images of black females and historical moments of survival and triumph over adversity due to patriarchy and racism have been distorted or eclipsed. The problem of finding a discourse for black women’s subjectivity has been revealed in the works of

⁷³ See Claudia Mitchell Kernan’s “Signifying as a Verbal Art” in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrell: Readings in the Interpretation of Folklore*, ed., Alan Dundes. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1973), Roger Abrahams’s *Talking Black*. (Rawley, Mass: Newbury House, 1979), and Geneva Smitherman’s *Talkin’ and Testafyin’: The Language of Black America*. (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1977).

several critics who approach the issues of healing and the psychological ills of black women. In Trudier Harris's "This Disease Called Strength: Some Observations on the Compensating Construction of Black Female Characters," Harris is concerned with the prevalent type character of the Strong Black Woman (hereafter referred to as SBW) in literary texts by black women. Harris's text adamantly claims that the repetitive manufacturing of the SBW exemplifies a psychological disease/illness, "a disease called strength" (110). Harris asserts that strength is the disease of black female characters. However, Jones's text moves beyond the notion of strength as a disease. The novel reveals that the ideology of the "strong black woman," a myth, is simply another failed attempt to create a discourse for black females.

Jones often mocks the ascribed elements of womanhood (femininity, weakness, and physical beauty) through a concerned examination with the ideas of beauty for her black female characters. The protagonist, Harlan Eagleton, is a former beautician, as was her grandmother. *The Healing* cleverly takes on the dialogue of beauty and the bio-logic of gender to explore existing hierarchies of gendered subjectivity for black women through Turtle Woman tales and Unicorn Women stories. In the quotation that opens this essay, Harlan's grandmother implies that through the love of a man she follows from her carnival existence, whom we later learn abandons her, she too can be a real human woman. Harlan recalls her grandmother's tale: "She say that he could see the genuine woman behind that fake turtle shell" (135). When Harlan's grandmother—a retailer of beauty products—discusses with Harlan her status as a once-upon-a-time-turtle woman—not yet human, we must metaphorically ascertain whether the discourse on gender is so faulty that black females must struggle to see themselves as women as well as human

beings! Coincidentally, Harlan's grandmother sees herself as a woman primarily because someone else sees her as such. This introduction to the Turtle Woman demonstrates that womanhood, specifically notions of black womanhood, are illogically defined by persons who are not black females. The grandmother's story reveals that there is a secondary reading of gender occurring in the text. In characterizing Harlan and her grandmother as beauticians, Jones could simply address the internalization of racist values and an inferiority complex over beauty in black women. However, there is a disruption of gender in the text that stems from Grandmother Eagleton's real subjectivity and her counter-reality as a Turtle woman subject. In returning to the figurative metaphor of trickster-goddess Mawu-Lisa, we must now explore how the internalization of the logic of intelligible gender had, and still has, quite a bit to do with black women's battle to see themselves. The ability of dominant discourse and criticism to distort its subjects has truly lent credence to Audre Lorde's suggestion that "the master's tool will not dismantle the master's house."⁷⁴

While there are a number of ways that Jones could have taken up the question of black female subjectivity, she chooses to refer to the Black Diaspora's cultural appreciation of healing because of the way it can also suggest the importance of language in diagnosing and curing illness. In *Planet Medicine* (1980), Richard Grossinger offers a connection between the practice of healing and language: "We assume we know disease by the feel of internal organs of our body but that is not true...it must first be brought to the surface, as concepts, as language as one's self, and, finally, as language with the society and its doctors" (16). In *The Healing*, Jones utilizes a complex structure of

⁷⁴ *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984) 53-60.

orality and myth in ways that reflects Grossinger's views, merging and intertwining the health and well being of African American women with the use of language. She creates a healing process for African American women that becomes more than a one time medical practice; it becomes revolutionary for its ability to potentially impact the lives of others long after the healer has passed on. Just as Mawu's alphabets, through divination, empower the Fon, so too does the arena of healing enable an empowering state of unnamings that allows black females a liminal discourse for their mutable subjectivity.

As Carole Boyce Davies concedes in *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994), "it is the convergence of multiple places and cultures that renegotiates their identities...once Black women's experience is accounted for, assumptions about identity, community and theory have to be reconsidered" (3). Davies understands the liminal subjectivity of black women and chooses to use the term and tool of "migratory subject" primarily because her text is concerned with the impact of nationalisms and nationalist borders in her deconstruction of black women and black feminist thought. Yet, Davies's term, migratory subjects, while consistently challenging Western discourses of womanhood, still works within the confines of intelligible gender ideologies and the traditional construction of woman. We must complete Davies's assigned tasks to reconsider the theory of gender. Furthermore, early discourse on black females may not have been able to complete the feat of analyzing gender constructs. The beginning of such a discussion is foiled when Sojourner Truth becomes a symbol and a shadow for a movement that was not for her (the early [white] feminist movement). Currently, we must move beyond superficial arguments of womanhood and accept that any relevant attempts to construct black female subjectivities must first tackle the issue of

gender; and one way to do so is to interrupt and dismantle the rhetoric of gender with the subjectivity of black females, and then proceed to unname the “black woman.”

In *The Healing*, unnamings through divine acts such as healing become ways to reject the construction of woman and traditional gender ideologies concerning black women. Again, this unnamings through divination serves as a reflection of my figurative model, Mawu-Lisa. Jones’s uses the phenomenon of faith healing to unname her black female protagonist. She posits that we consider Harlan’s grandmother’s predicament: how far will you go to become human and a woman? She then juxtaposes it with her own question, How far will you go to become your self? Will you, black women, unname yourself?

Juxtaposing quotations from Grandmother Eagleton’s story with Audre Lorde’s “Black Unicorn” provides another way to observe that Jones’s novel metaphorically represents the manifestation of a revolution for black females to rebel against discourses that have been used to shape or define them. Black females will not be free, until, as Lorde has asserted through strategic hermeneutics in her works, they can find new spellings of their name by which she meant new subjectivities for their historical subject and experiences. Ana Louise Keating’s *Women Reading, Women Writing: Self-Invention in Paula Gunn Allen, Gloria Anzaldua, and Audre Lorde* (1996) explores Lorde’s “use of imagination, language, and mythic conversion principles to invent new individual and collective gendered and ethnic identities” (146). As Keating points out, in Lorde’s collection of poems like *Black Unicorn* (1978), the poet uses her work to expressly take on what she had always acknowledged as the lack of language to convey the experiences and subjectivity of black women. The title poem, “Black Unicorn,”

makes significant comments on the subjectivity of black women: “The black unicorn is greedy. /The black unicorn is impatient. /The black unicorn was mistaken/ for a shadow/or symbol/and taken...” (3). In this poem, as with the entire collection, Lorde is concerned with black females being construed as signifiers without meaning, like Sojourner Truth and Grandmother Eagleton. It is no longer the entire being itself that we understand and know but the distinct characteristics divorced from the being itself, and this is the sad historical experience that comes with accepting the term “black woman.” The uniqueness of the black unicorn’s presence becomes a shadow without light and a symbol without a context, but it also possesses the ability to be a floating signifier if it is not “other” in the text. The only way to keep this floating signifier from being othered is to find a discourse in which to speak of the black unicorn—the black female. The Mawu-Lisa paradigm permits this because it already acknowledges that black female subjectivity cannot be fixed.

Like Lorde’s collection of poetry, Jones’s text explores how misrepresentations and distortions can sometimes become mythic influences in our lives; Jones also completes a mythic conversion by exploring how opposing mythic influences exist in our lives to aide us in the struggle to conquer and destroy the distortions. Jones replaces mythic models such as the “black woman” or the SBW with her own Mawunian-models of the Turtle Woman and the Unicorn Woman to create a discourse for Harlan T. Eagleton. In order to recognize the models, we must first realize that an unnamings is taking place.

On the surface, naming appears to play a minor role in the theme and goals of the novel. For example, in discussing her long-lost grandfather, James B. Eagleton, Harlan

reveals that the B. stands for Booker (T. Washington). Grandfather Eagleton's middle name goes to the political type of man that he may have been since we never really see him, only hear of him through Grandmother Eagleton's turtle woman story. James Booker Eagleton, like his namesake, seems to understand the need for racial empowerment in the way he vocally admires Grandmother Eagleton and raises her esteem by saying he could see the real woman in her. However, much like Booker T. Washington's economic empowerment ideologies, his own methods of achieving black female empowerment are flawed because they accept the classification of gender. The Eagleton family follows a trend of bestowing upon themselves the names of influential African Americans. Harlan's own middle initial, T., stands for Truth, but Harlan's namesake acts as a major indicator of the struggle for black female subjectivity.

Upon further examination one realizes that Harlan's full name symbolizes the question of black female subjectivity and a language for that subjectivity:

So my name's Harlan Eagleton. Harlan T. Eagleton, but I do not tell anyone what the T. stands for, because I don't think it's a name that anyone should be given. Well, I'll tell you. It's Harlan Truth Eagleton, named for Sojourner Truth, not Truth itself. (252)

Harlan's desire to softly reject her middle name is significant because embedded in that desire lies the marker that highlights the necessity to unname the black woman. First, Harlan's rejection of her middle name implies that there is no such thing as an absolute Truth (as posited in Enlightenment ideology and aesthetics) but a multiplicity of truths. According to the Mawu-paradigm, Harlan's rejection of her middle name entails an acceptance of the divinity that she will become. Harlan knows the importance of

multiplicity in discussing herself. She cannot allow herself to be defined or fixed as one absolute. By rejecting the notion of an absolute Truth, Harlan makes it possible to accept many truths about her own subjectivity as a black female, rather than a detrimental monologic discourse of truth about woman.

The Mawu-model of reading reveals Jones's demonstration of this belief through her divination strategies in the work. Harlan's name like that of the divine also hints at an unknown being. She is not called God, but her very name itself creates a space of unknowability and liminality for its being. Harlan could be perceived as a male name; Jane, a woman's name; Truth, an ambiguous name (male or female); and Eagleton, her family name. Hence, Harlan might very well be made to acknowledge, "I am that I am," that phrase we attribute to that which we cannot name. She does not fit an either/or dichotomy but a liminal discursive space of multiplicity and polyphonic discourse. Harlan's seems apprehensive about the name because of its sacred place in time and history, but she also intuitively appears to understand the logic and discursive baggage that comes with that name. If there is no absolute truth, then Harlan, like the Sojourner Truth after whom she was named, must ask herself that all important question: Is she a woman? Harlan must decide whether to reject or embrace this question in the shaping of her identity. Does she accept the discourse that comes with the question, or does she, unlike her grandmother, go further past the one absolute truth? Harlan goes further because she allows herself to be unnamed, and her first small step in doing so manifests itself in her desire to reject her middle name.

Harlan's rejection of her middle name is hardly enough to maintain the state of liminality that will empower her to become the healer that she will become. Harlan needs

to find other alternatives and tools in unnamings herself, and she finds them in the communal act of healing, primarily in witnessing and testimony. In this novel, witnessing and testifying replace absolute truths, and they shape the narrative of the novel to explore how the revolution can be achieved. Throughout the novel, Harlan's narration is disjointed, her thoughts never end, and thoughts and testimony by someone else speaking about her gift for healing often interrupt the narrative. The acts of testimony, narration, and oral myths refuse to be structured and bounded. There is no continuous or specific connection from one person's consciousness to another unless a character is actually speaking. Understandably, the need to testify and witness cannot be done in a linear structure; true testifying and true witnessing have to be the result of being moved to speak. The novel's narration is presented in different narrative voices. Yet, the narrative continues, sporadically using quotations, as if the same person were always speaking. Jones narrative technique acts as a testament to the need for multiple truths in healing the discursive ills that can occur for liminal subjects or subjectivities without a discourse. The deeply developed recursive structure (repeated and circular rather than linear) of the novel may initially make it difficult to recognize how Jones is taking up the maladies of black women. However, when we recall the communality that can be achieved from these oral acts, we understand that the author is focused on communal rather than individual healing. Jones emphasized this belief in her previous novels but makes notable changes to it in *The Healing*.⁷⁵ Harlan often gives up narrative control to

⁷⁵ In *Corregidora*, Ursa Corregidora is a blues singer who gives witness through her singing gift. Her witnessing/blues singing acts as a communal way of healing African Americans. Her mythical legacy is "the important thing is making generations. They can burn the papers but they can't burn consciousness" (14). The repetitive and recursiveness of this phrase in the text makes the statement mythical in the life of Ursa and in turn impacts how she will live her life. Although one must wonder, since three of the major concerns of *Corregidora* are gender conflicts, sexual dysfunction and inability to love without

those who witness for her because in ritual and spiritual spheres testimony acts as a learning and teaching tool. Subsequently, because the telling of a story/witnessing is never the same, rebirth and life are always possible through community exchanges of oral traditions.

From the testimony of one witness, we learn that:

Doctors couldn't do nothing or didn't want to. I would go from doctor to doctor and none of them could heal me, or didn't want to...then she looked a me and know my trouble. She said the trouble would end, and touched me, and it did. That's what I mean by she heal by healing...Sometimes she speaks a word and it's done. Other time she got to lay on hands. She don't prescribe none of them herbs and roots and potions, though. She ain't that sorta healing woman. (16)

This particular testimony emphasizes the tradition of laying on of the hands. In "A Laying On of Hands: Black Women Writers Exploring the Roots of Their Folk and Cultural Tradition," Joanne V. Gabbin defines "laying on of hands":

The term signifies the ancient practice of using hands in a symbolic act of blessing, healing, and ordination. By its very act, it appears to bestow

hurting or allowing one's self to be hurt, if Ursa's return to Mutt is the beginning of her healing or a denial of it. In Jones's *Eva's Man*, statements about the gypsy, great-grandmother Medina and the Queen Bee become important factors in shaping how Eva Medina sees herself and guides her life actions. Eva's witnessing to the life and myth of the Queen Bee, and her actions of orally castrating Davis's serve as testimony for the traumatizing abuse black women can experience. In each novel, the endings are so ambiguous as to leave uncertain whether either woman ever heals herself completely; this remains unresolved in criticism of the text. However, unlike Ursa, Eva does not possess the tools to begin a healing process to heal herself or others for she has lost her inability to connect through her community. At least with Ursa, there is always the possibility that healing has or will happen. In both novels, readers only see how witnessing and testifying has negatively impacted the protagonist's lives. We rarely receive brief glimmers of how the communality of oral traditions might positively effect the community and the individual. However, in *The Healing*, Jones finally provides us with that crucial and vital component of the oral, communality.

some gift...Thus it is associated with the healing powers of Christ as he lays hands on sufferers and they are cured. Others see the practice as central to the concept that the African concept that the spirit and body are one. Thus sensuality is essential to the process of healing and rebirth.

(247)

The witness's testimony of Harlan's healing affirms the importance of communal healing: touch, sound, and physical exchanges are emphasized over herbs, roots and potions. Jones suggests that healing is not a solitary process, but it is instead a communal course of action that impacts those coming to be healed and the healer herself. In her previous novels, witnessing and testifying may have been enough to alter the path to healing. However, the inclusion of "laying on of hands" suggests that more needs to be done. Gabbin's analysis refers back to the concepts of unranked binary opposition in African metaphysics. The spirit and body co-exist in one space, and they need not be split, separate, or ranked as they are in Western Christian religious discourse. Gabbin's definition of healing through laying on of the hands, confirms that Jones opts to implant in her protagonist and story, an African concept of body and spirit, rather than the Christian Christ-like elements of healing so as to move away from the healer as otherworldly or unnatural. Jones's concept of faith healings, as indicated earlier, differs than those of other African American women writers in that Harlan is not the exiled freak. Laying on of the hands allows the community to remain linked during what might traditionally be conceived as supernatural acts. Therefore, the healer cannot be othered and outcast, and the healed can physically embrace what they may not know or

understand. Hence, the body and spirit can be one in the construction of Harlan T. Eagleton.

Unnaming in African American females' texts, as Jones demonstrates with *The Healing*, must be about remaining unnamed, rather than finding a name; sustaining a state of liminality. Harlan's second phase of unnaming—the ability to maintain liminality and unnameability is key to understanding the use of Turtle Woman and Unicorn Woman stories. To comprehend the statement that addresses the all-important Turtle Woman myth, "I was a turtle before I became a human being," we must first grasp the meanings of other myths in the novel. The Nicodemus legend has a minor but important place in the plot and theme of the novel. This myth concerns Harlan's sidekick, compadre, and witness, Nicholas. Jones explores the correlation between Harlan's sidekick's name and Nicodemus:

And N'Orleans that ain't my true name, that just his sometimes
name for me.

Then he whispers, He's free.

Who's free? Nicholas?

They freed Nicodemus.

Who's Nicodemus? Nicodemus? Oh, yeah, yeah. Nicodemus.

That's good. (35)

Again, there are moments when the reader may be unsure of who is actually speaking, but in this brief passage Harlan's witness and former bodyguard becomes associated with Nicodemus. The name suggests a number of possibilities for understanding the character but most importantly for understanding myth and ideas of healing. Nicholas could

represent Nicodemus—the righteous Monk of Mt. Athos; Nicodemus—the Runaway slave; Nicodemus—the Jewish King; John 3:11’s Nicodemus (What must I do to be saved?), or the nineteenth-century Negro Exodusters from Kentucky who settled on land in Kansas.⁷⁶ All of the images share a common link to the notion of rebirth, new life, separation from mainstream society; and they have a connection to healers and function as witnesses or legacies to an important moment in a race/nation’s history.

In *The Healing*, Nicholas becomes all of these representations in some way. He serves as the most significant witness to Harlan’s work. Harlan explains, “I thought about hiring me another ‘witness’ but that would be duplicitous and Nicholas the true one witnessed the first healing, and that ain’t the same as a hired witness” (10). Later Harlan expands on the role of the witness: “All I know is Nicholas usedta tell the tale with more fanfare, more flourish, more confabulatoriness. And when he tells about that healing; it don’t sound like no confabulatory tale. Least the way he usedta tell the tale of that healing. Now he tends to be kinda dry” (11). Nicholas serves as a witness to Harlan’s work. As the first person to see Harlan go through her rites of passage into healing, Nicholas lives up to the legend of the monk, runaway slave, Jew, and exoduster by giving up his own life to witness for Harlan. His task is to help make evidence of healing for those in pain.

Holloway’s *Moorings and Metaphors* provides evidence to suggest that Nicholas’s repeated testimony and witnessing construct a myth:

Myth vitalizes language, giving it a presence outside of the interpretive

⁷⁶ See “Nicodemus: Negro Haven on the Solomon” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 34 (1968): 10-31. and “Aquilla the Apostle and Nicodemus the Righteous of Mt. Athos,” *Orthodox Calendar Company*. July 14.

mode and forcing its significance to a level where the community's shared meanings are the basis of its understanding and interactions with both the spiritual and physical worlds; it is both of them. In its ways of recursive signification, it is the perfect vehicle for signification. (25)

Healing is a performative art that depends on more than the actual act itself. Healing depends on the witnessing of the act. It can only work if the healer and those who are coming to be healed believe in the existence of such a thing. What good is the gift if no one is there to recognize the act, to call it, to name it, to give it a language for its very existence? By constantly re-telling the first healing, the story becomes mythical.

Nicholas's tale influences the doctrine of faith, and consequently, the lives of all that come to be healed. Not only does Nicholas's selfless act make it possible for those coming to be healed to have faith in Harlan's gift, but it also provides Harlan with the faith that she needs to believe in herself and sustain her abilities. Harlan, temporarily, becomes the healing woman. Each and every time Nicholas testifies he helps to sustain the process of unnamings Harlan by helping to develop a space that permits her to temporarily misplace or replace the black woman with the healing woman, without her having to choose one over the other.

In another pre-healing testimony, Nicholas revises his dry tone and narration as he speaks of Harlan's first healing, and in the process he creates a space for Harlan's changing subjectivity:

I thought she were some witch at first, says Nicholas. Even she didn't know... Maybe that's who she is. The healing woman healed herself

first... Well I'm here to testify that she healed herself first. I'm here to testify that she healed herself first. I'm here to testify that this healing woman healed herself first. And now she trying to heal everybody that want to be healed. (33)

Nicholas aka Nicodemus is witness to the construction of a space and language for black women's subjectivities. Again, Holloway reminds us that "myths are not discrete units of structure as much as they are features of how a sense of language enables the survival and transference of memory" (94). Nicholas's repetitive testimony helps to create a myth that reveals Harlan and the myths that she carries with her as the "perfect vehicle for methodology" (Holloway 25). Nicholas's testimony of the instability or elusive definability of Harlan's subject being provides a preliminary liminal state of being for Harlan. The testimony of Nicholas and other witnesses removes Harlan from the static subject position of black woman, and it places her into a liminal space where we can now begin questioning the discourse of gender and Harlan's subjectivity as a black woman. If Harlan wishes to avoid the mistake of her grandmother of letting others name her, then she should not accept or become the historical figurations of mythology created by her witnesses. Testimony and witnessing initially launch a process of unnamings for Harlan by providing myths to counter the historical figuration of mythology at the center of the text—the black woman. However, as we saw with Sojourner Truth, such figurations can be costly if we become defined as the figuration itself. Nicholas recognizes the uncertainty of Harlan's identity and subject position. He questions whether she is a witch or something else. Even the subject being does not know, or she does not know how to call her self. Harlan does not need to be unnamed as the black woman only to be named

again as some “other.” She must not fall into the trap of accommodating traditional discourse. Testimony and witnessing build myths, but it is the remaining historical figurations that Harlan must learn to navigate to achieve an empowering subjectivity. The historical figurations are no good to Harlan if they become a fixed identity. Only in the liminal existence of these remaining historical figurations can Harlan begin the important progression of unnamings through her own familial myths.

Jones uses the Turtle Woman story as the beginning of her critique of womanhood. She constantly makes the reader aware of who defines womanhood and for what reasons. In a discussion with her grandmother, Harlan learns how these discourses work in the lives of African Americans:

...and that them other men just thought of her as freakish, as one of them freakish women, whether or not they believed in the reality of that turtle’s shell. She say that he (grandfather Eagleton) could see the genuine woman behind that fake turtle shell. She say he say that she more a genuine woman than any woman he know, a category he say ain’t just limited to colored women, which some mens do. You know how some mens do. They’ll compare you to other colored women, but not to womanhood itself, and refers every other man’s woman to they own. (135)

The above passage focuses on freakish womanhood and carnivalesque atmosphere, and reminds us of how ideologies of the unnamed subject/black womanhood become freakish in the dominant discourse. Harlan’s divulging of her grandmother’s tales about her carnival experience as a Turtle Woman is essential to disrupting ideologies of womanhood and gender.

Turtles and terrapins have long been figures of tricksterism in African American folklore and literature. Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* explains that the turtle and terrapin occupy trickster spaces in African American folklore: "In the popular tales featuring a race between a slow animal and a swifter opponent the former triumphs not through persistence, as does his counterpart in Aseopian fable of the Tortoise and the Hare, but by outwitting and capitalizing on his weakness and shortsightedness. Terrapin defeats Deer by placing relatives along the route with Terrapin himself stationed by the finish line" (115). Levine's reading explores the trickster as involved in strictly human deception. As I indicated before in the analysis of Mawu-Lisa, the divine elements of the trickster figure are displaced. This traditional reading of turtles/tortoises/terrapins would reveal little as to why Jones utilizes the Turtle Woman figure in her myth of healing. However, the Mawu-reading reveals a surprising parallel between Jones's turtle woman and the turtle as trickster in African folktales.

When we return to Herskovits's *Dahomean Narrative*, elements are revealed about the tortoise in African oral stories that become essential in fully understanding the importance of the Turtle Woman in *The Healing* and the connection to Mawu and divination:

All the animals and birds go at sunrise to the fields to eat. Tortoise whose skin is like stone, also goes out. There was a bird called Awele. When he saw Tortoise, he called together all the birds. None of them had ever seen an animal like than, and animal with skin like stone. Awele said to the other birds, "...and today a stone comes to eat with us"...Since Tortoise walks slowly, the birds flew down to see what was inside this thing Awele

said was a stone. But they saw nothing for the Tortoise stopped still. (191)

The tale continues that all the animals were perplexed by the stone who came to eat with them, and they took their concerns to Mawu, asking why a stone ate with them.

Eventually, Mawu reveals turtle as an animal and tells the other animals, “Tortoise is the diviner for birds and animals” (192). In another story, tortoise is told, “You will always be a diviner because you have suffered much” (193). The connection between trickster and the divine is embodied in the tortoise. In many of these tales, the tortoise is also a genderless trickster who is diviner. The significance of subjectivity, identity, and indefinability cannot be overlooked in these Dahomean tortoise tales. Tortoise is an outcast amongst other animals and unlike anything they have ever known or seen. Tortoise’s distinct subjectivity means that the figure will suffer much, but it will be divine. The elements of trickery with divination in the turtle/tortoise are the basis for Jones’s mechanism of unnamings the black woman.

Through the Turtle Woman myth, Jones makes a case that the representation of the shell, the shell being a metaphor for the “black woman,” hides and distorts the actual being that exists. Only through Mawu’s divine intervention—a disruption of the discourse on intelligible gender, can we provide a discourse for black women’s subjectivity. Harlan’s grandfather does not view her grandmother as freakish. The grandfather sees Harlan’s grandmother as a woman, but because he defines womanhood for her grandmother, the change is never really a true self-transformation. Throughout the text, readers must recognize that Harlan’s grandmother, like Sojourner Truth, moves between troubling constructs of womanhood, from turtle woman to human woman, and she never really dismisses any of the false ideologies. Harlan’s name significantly draws

us back to the subjectivity of black woman and how to translate it. In a scene in which Harlan has asked her mother if she ever believed in the grandmother's turtle stories, Harlan's mother replies, "Yeah, I suppose I did. I suppose when I was a little girl I did....I even imagined that I was a turtle woman transforming myself to free myself from the tyranny of others" (277). Harlan's mother may not have had the means to go back to the process of unnamings that the turtle stories convey, but as a healer, Harlan has the means to accomplish such a feat.

Harlan's goal then is to believe the confabulatory tales of her grandmother and see their usefulness in her own life. Understanding that ideologies of womanhood are problematic for black women because of historical discourses of gender available to them, Jones continues to create her own discourse of gender for black women through the oral story of the Unicorn Woman:

A lot of people when they would see that sign advertising the Unicorn woman, they'd think she was a white woman, you know, cause all the unicorns in the storybooks is white, cause that's supposed to be a sign of purity, you know, and even the colored people that come to see the Unicorn woman, they's as surprised as the white people that she ain't a white Unicorn woman, cause even colored people think that white's a sign of purity, and she is a genuine Unicorn woman, but a colored one...I heard someone say that even if she's a real Unicorn woman, she still a fake one, just by virtue of being colored. (136)

Harlan's grandmother repeatedly relays these tales to her as a child, and in their repetitive and recursive orality they become myths for Harlan to process. The Unicorn woman is

bound by the same ideologies of the Turtle woman. People assign hierarchies based on racial and gender discourse that attempt to define individual subjectivity. Carnival goes view the Unicorn Woman as an inferior and fake version of a unicorn simply by virtue of her color.

If readers juxtapose the myth of the Turtle Woman with the Unicorn Woman, then they can envision the choices of womanhood left to Harlan. These myths document how each woman of color lacks a language for her subjectivity and is inclined to choose an inappropriate language so that she might be useful in society, or a part of a community. The idea that these women find themselves working in a carnivalesque-type environment such as the circus, suggests they are seeking a place. In the case of Harlan's grandmother, someone else conceives that there is a failure of language to articulate her subjectivity, and attempts to name her. Although Harlan's grandmother asserts her humanity and womanhood, it is a false one because the discourse does not apply to her. Eventually, someone else renames the grandmother woman. Still failing to perceive the course she must follow, Harlan's grandmother ascertains that she might have remained a Turtle Woman had it not been for her husband. She reaches womanhood because someone else saw her as a woman. She never finds an empowering space for her subjectivity. She follows a man, supposedly until she turns human, but as we learn through Harlan, the man she followed deserts her never to return.

In asking the critical questions, Harlan draws from her grandmother a wealth of wisdom that a young Harlan cannot yet begin to comprehend, and that the grandmother has yet to admit in her own life. In expanding further on the Unicorn Woman, Grandmother Harlan states:

...but it takes a true mythical woman to be the ideal of true womanhood, colored or ain't. Why even the proprietor of the first carnival she was at became obsessed with her, until he found him a woman that he thought the more ideal of womanhood than herself. Then he sold the Unicorn woman to another carnival, cause he didn't want them two competing ideals of womanhood. (138)

It might seem as if Jones is endorsing the use of mythical womanhood as a way of empowerment for black women; however, the mention of competing ideals of womanhood is important because it reveals, once again, that womanhood is not the business of woman but of men. Men created the ideologies and buy and sell these representations of women at will, but never for one moment can there be competing ideals because that would cancel out profits from exploitation of the women. Jones does not wish to replace mythical womanhood with another; she simply wishes to corrupt the discourse of gender with myth. Symbolically, Lorde's conception of the black unicorn as a symbol and shadow mirrors the way in which Jones uses the black unicorn woman in her novel. It is not that Jones draws from Lorde's specific concept of the black unicorn for her text, but Jones's work in many ways demonstrates an appreciation and perhaps a worthy response to *The Black Unicorn*. Like the black unicorn, Harlan must find a way to avoid the false recognitions and mistranslations of her subjectivity.

Harlan recalls another moment when her grandmother ruminated over womanhood by repeating a conversation with a man she'd met after transforming from a Turtle Woman to a human woman. The man exclaims to her grandmother, "The man to woman you. Who'd have the nerve to woman you. Who'd have the nerve to woman a

woman like you?” (253). The implication is that women, especially women of color, can become true women with the help of a strong and courageous man. As man remains the primary signifier, woman can only receive meaning from man. The statement reveals that, yes, men define womanhood, men impose womanhood onto women, and for women of color the imposition often results in black females being unable to define themselves by their own ontological, epistemological, and phenomenological visions.

Grandmother Eagleton’s misconceptions about her subjectivity do not have to be passed onto future generations like Harlan due in large part to a discourse based on tricksterism, liminality, and divination. Harlan acknowledges:

When I grew older, I didn’t believe the Turtle Woman stories, not the magical ones. Not the tales of how when she was a turtle she’d had to play all kinds of tricks to keep from getting caught by humans...I believed the one about the carnival, and even the tales of the confabulatory Unicorn Woman, but not that one. Not the tale of metamorphosis, of how when human beings chased her, like every turtle, she ran so slowly that in order to avoid getting caught she had to transform. (164)

Harlan’s statement reveals that she once believed that such stories were real and significant. Her goal, then, is find a way to believe in the magical turtle stories in order to avoid the mistakes and misrecognition of her grandmother before her, and she soon does. Initially, Harlan does not recognize the significance of these transformation tales as somewhat representative of what she must achieve in order to heal herself and others, but she will.

Even before she acquires her healing gift, we can see that she is different because she defies notions of womanhood with which the world provides her. As Harlan recounts the details leading up to her divorce from her husband, Norvelle, she remembers how uncomfortable she felt during a conversation with Norvelle's sister:

I hope you's a nice girl. I hope you's a nicer girl than you looks like you is.

It depends on what you mean by a nice girl, I said.

I hope you's a nicer girl than you looks like you is what I mean. Cause you don't look like you's a wifeable woman at all to me. (169)

Again, Jones forgoes the use of quotes to help continue the stream of conscious narrative. These references to nice girls, wifeable women, and men that can woman a woman irrefutably deny that standard conceptions of gender contain any empowering moments. Throughout Harlan's life, she constantly confronts the denial of herself in such discourses, and this struggle leads her onto a path to finally accept the magical stories of Unicorn Women and myths of turtles who transform to keep from being caught.

Harlan's failed marriage to the medical anthropologist Norvelle brings her face to face with the necessary non-western discourses of gender, healing, and change that intertwine to influence her life as an African-American woman. Harlan asserts, "Even when I went to Africa with Norvelle and heard African transformation tales which sounded very much like that one (the turtle story), I still didn't believe it or I thought it was just folklore" (164). Here, we must go back to the turtle/tortoise connection to Mawu and divinity. Harlan's denial must be called into question because she implies that she may not have believed them, but now she has reason to. After all, she does leave her

husband in Africa because he chases after a medicine woman. Ironically, Norvelle's work on a Masai medicine woman enables Harlan to choose a myth that will allow and shape her to developing her own subjectivity:

It was only that Masai medicine woman who disoriented me because he wanted to stay with her, because he wanted to keep following her from Korogwe to Morogoro...And I guess I envied her independent life, traveling about, curing folks. I guess the only way she could express her wanderlust even though the Masai are traditionally nomadic people was by being a medicine woman. (228)

Harlan's decision to leave Norvelle in Africa and pursue her own self concerns the Masai medicine woman as much as it does the Unicorn Woman she's heard so much about as a child. Harlan's grandmother states, "There's plenty of mens crazy about her, like I said, crazy in love or infatuation and even follow her from carnival to carnival, her being a mythical-type ideal woman, but she ain't follow none of them....if it's possible for a woman to follow her ownself, it's her. Free and independent" (139). Norvelle's academic pursuit and study of the Masai medicine woman sounds very much like those men who came to see the Unicorn Woman. Harlan's decision to leave Norvelle acts as a critical experiment to see if she, like the Masai woman and the Unicorn woman, can follow herself.

In the process of following herself, Harlan becomes manager to a rock star, Joan the Savage Bitch, and continues to be faced with the importance of her decision to leave her husband to his own dreams and to follow her self. In discussing women with a friend of Joan's who claims not to be a "feminista," Abio tells Harlan, "I only think a

woman should be true to who she believes herself to be. Or who she wants herself to be. I don't know what I mean, or whether I'm true myself, to any of that. I don't think there are many of us who are true to our possibilities (238). Throughout the text, such statements work to address Harlan's courage to accept her subjectivity as a black female, and then as a healer. Harlan acquires the gift of healing, precisely because she began healing herself a long time ago by trying to be true to her possibilities. She could not have come to such a critical consciousness without the stories of turtle and unicorn women that were a part of her childhood.

Ironically, Harlan heals herself after being stabbed by Joan Savage. Harlan is sexually involved with Joan's ex, and Joan, still in love with him, stabs Harlan when she learns of their sexual relationship. Throughout the novel, Harlan's commitment to being "a woman" or honoring the ideology of a woman is made an issue. She divorces her husband because she does not wish to be the dutiful wife and follow him across the African continent. She engages in sex outside of wedlock with other men. Indeed, after she has refused to be a traveler with her husband, she becomes a woman traveling the United States alone to promote musicians. The fact that Harlan is stabbed because of her sexual desires suggests that the way she wants to live her life as woman and the way the world perceives that she should live it are at odds with each other. Joan, a white woman (the model idea of womanhood), represents the reckoning of the world with Harlan's problematic subjectivity. After Joan stabs Harlan and Harlan heals herself, Harlan recalls her client's disbelief: " 'I thought you were a real person,' she says. 'But you're not even a human woman, you're not even a real human woman,' " and Harlan says in response, acknowledging, "This is the truth of it. The knife fell out. I put my hand to the

wound and it healed” (280). After Harlan heals herself, she remains unaware and unprepared for the act of healing in her life. It is only through the continued use of her gift that she will come to know her true self and full possibilities.

Jones does not end Harlan’s life with tragedy, regret, or death; rather she resolves to prolong her life with healing and hope. Her decision suggests that the gift of healing Harlan acquires after the stabbing is to help her find a place for her subjectivity. In the liminal performative space of healing, Harlan can generate a space in which she can invent language for that which the world cannot deal with, her sexuality and independence. In making Harlan a healer, Jones accepts a proclamation that Toni Cade made in *The Black Woman* :

We are involved in a struggle for liberation: liberation from the exploitive and dehumanizing system of racism from the manipulative control of a corporation society; liberation from the constrictive norms of “mainstream” culture, from the synthetic norms that encourage us to fashion ourselves rashly from without (reaction) rather than from within (creation)... (7)

Jones creates a foundation for black women’s revolutionary subjectivity through Turtle Women lessons and Black Unicorn woman philosophies. Jones equips Harlan for the struggle for liberation, and in so doing she returns the healer to its New World setting, for as Cedric Robinson has noted: “Obeah men and women were frequently the source of ideology for the slave rebellion”(136). Just as the obeah could instill fear in whites and empowerment in blacks to rebel, Jones repositions this legacy to explore how the black

female's rebellion depends on the black female healer—Harlan's courageousness to unname herself through various acts of healing.

Jones also wishes to explore how Harlan's sexuality contributes to her continued process of unnamings. The presentation of Harlan as a sexual person moves beyond traditional ideals of healers as asexual persons. Since her first healing act happens because of her sexual relationships, we can be sure that Jones wishes to distinguish Harlan from other literary healers. Further, it also reconnects to the Mawu paradigm of being able to occupy many spaces at once—to be male and female, or sexual and spiritual at the same time. Harlan is able to perform a laying of the hands on her own body to heal herself because she accepted her flesh with her spirit long ago. She accepts her subjectivity despite not having a discourse for it, and this acceptance is a revolutionary act. Revolutionary acts lead to healing and liberation. When Harlan places her hands over the stab wound, she prolongs her life through healing, but the act also enables her to conceive of a space for her subjectivity where she can exist and have a language to define herself. Harlan admits as much: "And when you discover that you can heal yourself, that you can simply put your hand to a wound and it heals, you soon discover that you can heal others. From a horse suffering from a fractured phalange, and then a Turtle Woman" (281). Furthermore, the gift of healing does not come from external forces but from her own being. Harlan has carried her gift of healing with her the whole time; she simply has not recognized it in herself. Her end goal is to continue healing herself as she did that first time. In order to continue healing others, she must face her own fears, despair, pain, and disbelief about herself. Years after she has healed herself, Harlan

recognizes that the words of Joan Savage were incorrect, a failure of language to convey what she is:

I didn't even ask for the spirit gift, I begin softly. I weren't even prepared for the spirit gift. But it came, it came...A lot of y'all looking at me and just seeing an ordinary woman, and asking y'allself how come a ordinary woman like me to be given the gift of the spirit, how come a ordinary woman like me to be given a spirit gift? But that the point of them spirit gifts, the point of them spirit gifts, is that I am just a ordinary woman. I am just a ordinary woman, that is the point of the healing. (34)

Harlan is not freakish, inhuman, or other-wordly. She is ordinary. She admits the truth of it to herself and those coming to be healed. Healing is simply a space whereby she can exist and know herself. In the end, Jones adeptly disrupts the construction of gender in western discourse, specifically the construction of the "black woman" as the primary cause of psychological illness in the lives of black women. Jones utilizes the oral myths of the Turtle Woman and the Unicorn Woman to explore how black women can heal themselves by locating their subjectivity through mythical discourse and metaphors. As I pointed out earlier, testifying and witnessing are only the beginning of the process of Harlan's unnamings; her acceptance of the healing gift and her ordinary existence defy the attempt to name or define her through traditional discourse. She will not be like her grandmother and allow others (her witnesses) to define her. Harlan decides to exist liminally between the historical figuration and her own self. She will not let the myths define or restrict her. She will use them at her leisure to free herself from the prevailing discussions of gender. This liminal state keeps Harlan from being static

and choosing to embrace one subjectivity over another. She does not have to choose to be society's definition of woman and human or the myth's definition; she can navigate between the two worlds.

By making Harlan a healer and a black woman, Jones asks us to reconsider how we conceive of gender for the black female, to use the subjectivity of those we name black women as a way to conceptualize or re-conceptualize gender ideologies, and she demonstrates that it can be accomplished without making the subject other-worldly, mystical, or the other. Jones's narrative structure and her knowledgeable use of mythic structure skillfully navigates this terrain to find a way to discuss black women's subjectivity and empowerment in a way that is not denigrating, dominating, or corrupting. The healer's gift, specifically Harlan's, comes from within the self. These gifts derive from a consciousness of self that has been lost in the translation of language, a subjectivity that exists beyond definition. As Audre Lorde once stated, the black unicorn is not free but it can be. Gayl Jones has always understood the need for new ways of knowing and that's the point of them healing gifts, the extraordinary coming from the ordinary that can find its own language. In assigning to Harlan a transformative subjectivity, the novel provides a methodology that makes it possible for Harlan and other black female subjects to move away from essentialist or totalizing telos that might determine black female subjectivity. Finally, Harlan can be like the turtle she claimed not to believe in. She can live up to her own possibilities, being whatever she wants, all the while defying and eluding those who seek to catch and name her, a sentiment that reclaims the way of the trickster and the construction of Mawu-Lisa.

CHAPTER SIX

Racialized Sexuality and Imagined *Paradise(s)*

Homosexuality doesn't represent an Afro-centric way of life.
Molefi Asante⁷⁷

Racism doesn't go better with a big dick, hot pussy, or a royal image.
Essex Hemphill⁷⁸

As part of the hermeneutical usefulness of tricking the trickster-trope, I indicated earlier that in order to allow for a continued revision of the trickster that can help create new readings of gender and sexuality in black cultural texts, we must not allow the paradigm to stay fixed or focused on one facet of the trickster. For these reasons, we can move beyond the Mawu-paradigm to explore how the broad spectrum of trickster traits and characteristics can help develop readings of sexuality in African American culture. While we have recently accepted and began to theorize about the homosexuality of the Mckays, Baldwins, and Lorde in the writing and activism of African American culture, what critical and theoretical critiques can we offer for the Black bisexual, transsexual, transvestite artist in the 21st century? Revising the trope of the trickster to document or articulate a discourse on sexuality may be one way. In addition, to be certain, discussion of black sexuality must account for racialized sexuality in its articulation. In this and the next chapter, I am specifically concerned with how African American writers utilize trickster traits to create narrative texts to disrupt the logic of racialized sexuality. Most of the texts selected for examination have been the subject of harsh criticism because of their approaches to and presentation of struggling against preconceived representations of

⁷⁷ *Afrocentricity: A Theory of Social Change* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Amulefi, 1980) 66.

⁷⁸ From Shari Frilot's *Black Nation/Queer Nation*. (New York: Third World Newsreel, 1995).

black sexuality in their texts. Before turning to Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1999), John A. Williams's *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967, 1994), and Ann Allen Shockley's *The Black and White of It* (1974) as fictional texts confronting sexuality for Africa America, we need to understand the presence of racialized sexuality that may be encountered in these texts.

It has never been easy to create a critical theory agenda on black sexuality. Asante and Hemphill's words go to the heart of the discussion of sexuality, critical theory, and culture in the African American community. In this chapter's epigraphs, Asante's words seem to suggest tensions of homophobia in Afro-centric thought, while Hemphill's words imply fallacies with Afro-centric thought as it concerns the representation of black sexuality. In order to frame a concrete school of thought about black sexuality, any theoretical critique of black sexuality must acknowledge the presence of racialized sexuality, and then acknowledge the inclination towards the heterosexualization of desire as a response to it. We can further develop the process of trick-trope to complete the aforementioned task by using manifest trickster traits to examine how African American writers suggest the benefits of capricious sexuality in African American community and culture.

In an alternate reading of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, "Sexuality on/of the Racial Border: Foucault, Wright, and the Articulation of 'Racialized Sexuality,'" Abdul R. JanMohamed asserts that racialized sexuality can be defined as "the point where the deployment of sexuality intersects with the deployment of race" (94). Of racialized sexuality, JanMohamed notes, "racialized sexuality, unlike its bourgeois counterpart, links power and knowledge in a negative, inverse relation: the perpetuation of white

patriarchy and the preservation of its self-image require that it deny a 'scientific discursive' knowledge of its sexual violation of the racial border" (103). JanMohamed's discussion of racialized sexuality focuses on white patriarchy's open secret of violating the racial order that suggests slaves are inhuman. The slavemaster's repressed sexuality/sexual desire alters or undermines the race border, and the silencing of this border-crossing inhibits the building of any type of analytic discursivity to discuss the sexuality of the master or the slave who is sexually exploited.

JanMohamed continues his critique of racialized sexuality by suggesting that it differs from white bourgeois sexuality in "its strategic rather than merely tactical, deployment of a peculiar silence... a deployment of silence, wherein those who could speak did not want to and those who did want to speak were prevented from doing so" (105). Here, JanMohammed addresses the issues of slavery and of Jim Crow laws, in which whites who violated the racial border did not speak of transgressing the laws, and blacks who suffered the trauma of violation could not legally give testimony to this violation. As the author explains, "in this dynamic structure, where silence and repression play a strategic role, rather than a tactical or local role, sexuality becomes an even more dense transfer point of power" (105). This silence facilitates the creation of a sexualized and hystericized black body, and it becomes the focal point of racialized sexuality. In the end, racialized sexuality creates an environment in which black people's sexuality is thrown into the public domain.

While JanMohammed explains that the discourse of racialized sexuality most often uses "the oversexualized body of the black male" as its major focus, another work, Sander L. Gillman's *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Race, Sexuality, and*

Madness (1985), also shows evidence that “the black, both male and female, becomes by the eighteenth century an icon for deviant sexuality in general” (81). Her work, as well as that of other critics,⁷⁹ is supported through the analysis of published medical texts on the physiognomy. In one example, Gilman analyzes J.J. Virey’s works on Saartjie Baartman, otherwise known as the Hottentot Venus:

In this essay, Virey summarized his and many of his contemporaries’ view on the sexual nature of black females in terms of accepted medical discourse. Their “voluptuousness” is “developed to a degree of lascivity unknown in our climate, for their sexual organs are much more developed than those of whites.” Virey elsewhere cites the Hottentot woman as the epitome of sexual lasciviousness. (85)

Gilman and JanMohammed make it quite clear that long before the Moynihan report exploited the order of gender in the African American community, racialized sexuality encouraged an intellectual environment that would enable such work to grow. Black men then are assumed to be hypermasculine because their women are sexually licentious.

Subsequently, African America’s conservative/bourgeois defensive posturing against the silence and repression at the core of racialized sexuality often works to counter these elements by favoring a strict adherence to the heterosexualization of desire. Rather than destroying the Western constructs of sexuality that have consistently othered black bodies to set off its “normative” sexual codes and behaviors and the heterosexualization of desire, black critical discourse has often accepted and absorbed the detrimental blanching discourse. The possibility of sexual fluidity that exists because of

⁷⁹ Especially Felicity Nussbaum’s *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Eighteenth century English Narratives*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) and Barbara Omolade’s *The Rising Song of African American Women* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

the flexibility of gender in black communities continues to be displaced by an agenda to present black people as “normal.”

For instance, when Asante claims that homosexuality does not represent Afro-centric thought, the implicit irony of his words cannot be ignored. Asante’s quote was not meant to disrupt the constructs of sexuality, but to suggest, as other black critics⁸⁰ have done, that the desire of all men and women of African descent has always followed the “appropriate” gender construction, and that same-sex desire for African-descended men and women did not exist prior to white contact. The paradox in Asante’s words derives from knowing that the term “homosexuality” is a modern western construct, rather than any actual knowledge that same-sex desire did not exist in Africa.⁸¹ Though Asante may have been correct in saying that the concept of homosexuality does not represent an Afro-centric way of life, we must reconsider this comment in acknowledging that some African Diasporic people’s philosophical values, which address issues of gender as distinct from sex, alters any discussion of sexuality. In addition, Butler reminds us that “when the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent from sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and a feminine body as easily as a female one” (10). We can also note that before Butler, Africanisms offer theoretical ways to dismiss the words of Asante and Cress.

As demonstrated in chapter two, there is evidence that Africanist thought conceives of gender as radically independent from sex in its construction of male-

⁸⁰ See Frances Cress Welsing’s *The Isis (Yssis) Papers* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1991). Cress conceives of black bi-sexuality and homosexuality as a result of slavery, a practice of white men.

⁸¹ For a discussion of the construct, see Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* I. Trans. Robert Hurley. (New York: Vintage Books. 1990)

daughters, female husbands, and hommes-femmes. We have further seen that in New World slave culture, gender becomes a free-floating signifier in early African American communities. Desire, then, in certain black communities might have also been compelled to be as free-floating as gender. Just as the trickster helps us to overturn the discourse of intelligible gender by acknowledging itself as unnameable, so can it enlighten us on how African American culture might construct the status of sexuality (desire) as autonomous from sex, and that like gender it is also fluid.

Asante's words seek to preserve "authentic blackness" by maintaining the heterosexualization of desire:

The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and "masculine," where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female." The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of "identities" cannot "exist"—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not "follow" from either sex or gender.⁸²

This point demonstrates how gender influences discourse on sexuality. In order for the logic of gender constructs to remain logical, sexual desire must follow the same pattern of binary oppositions. If man is to be man, then he must be sexually attracted to his opposite, woman. However, Butler's position needs to be developed a bit more when we take into consideration the experiences of African Americans. Whereas Butler observes that fixed gender constructs and hierarchies have to be sustained through the

⁸² Butler, 23-24.

heterosexualization of desire, I suggest something quite different for African American culture. African American communities in the U.S. base their cultural foundations on the early egalitarian order of gender that is not positioned axiologically because of Africanisms and slavery. This system can consistently upset the logic of intelligible gender through an unnamings of the black woman; but even so, African American writers are left with the heterosexualization of desire. Why? In addition to the fluidity of gender, racialized sexuality has created a separate logic of intelligible gender in African American communities. While gender may be latently fluid, the construction of sexuality in black culture struggles against such liminality. Butler's ahistorical account of gender fails to explain that the heterosexual matrix in black culture is the consequence of a historical pattern. In African American culture, the heterosexualization of desire is not simply a result of the cultural matrix of gender identity, but the result of a complex cultural matrix of the open-secret of this othered sexuality.

In taking JanMohammed's concept further, we should complicate the issue by noting that his theory begins the exploratory work on racialized sexuality by positioning it in a heterosexual matrix. Due in large part to his thoughtful analysis, we can now begin moving beyond that of the heterosexual matrix to explore how his conception of sexuality impacts other black communities, as well as the "heterosexual" African American community. Racialized sexuality, as Kobena Mercer indicates, positions black sexuality as not normal—as othered, or nonheteronormative⁸³--thereby making it a political space for black subjects: therefore, "assumptions about black sexuality lie at the

⁸³ Roderick Antwan Ferguson's manuscript *Specters of the Sexual: Race, Sociology, and the conflicts Over African American Culture* (U of California: San Diego, 2000) provides new insights into the sociological implications of the representation of black families non-heteronormative, as opposed to conventional studies completed by the major critic in this area, Robert Staples.

heart of the ideological view that black households constitute deviant, disorganized and even pathological familial forms that fail to socialize their members into societal norms” (150-151). The societal norms that Mercer speaks about are heteronormative and patriarchal behavior, and as illustrated in chapter two, the patriarchal organization of black families does not serve as the major force of organization in early black populations in the U.S. Hence, critics concerned with rescuing black sexuality from racialized, othered, and non-heteronormative ideologies vehemently cling to the heterosexualization of desire, fostering homophobia in the process. Yet, critical theory concerned with black sexuality cannot discuss the intersection of race and sexuality without addressing sexual orientation, if it truly wishes to move away from racialized ideologies. In this way, any critical theory of black sexuality must first understand how race and sexuality intersect, and force blackness to cross sexual boundaries beyond heterosexuality. Though Asante may wish to preserve the authenticity or sacredness of black culture through the heterosexualization of desire, he cannot do so because the discourse of race and sexuality become one and the same discourse in African American communities and texts.

Asante and other Afro-centric critics rarely employ any type of queer theory to assess their words as this work has done, but the use of such theory in articulations of black sexuality can be beneficial and revealing. As Hemphill notes, when we encourage black people, through black culture, to embrace images of big dicks and hot pussy with a royal image—the oversexualized black body complemented by images of a connection to a royal Egyptian heritage—we allow for the continued dismemberment of black bodies: Such discourse never addresses how to understand the impact of racialized sexuality on the African body. The discursive leap from kings and queens to enslaved pornotrope

bodies fixes black subjectivity into an idealistic ancient past with no mention of body, or to a traumatic more recent past where blacks were all body. There exists no space in which blacks can be racially empowered and sexual. For example, when Molefi Asante asserts that homosexuality does not represent a part of Afro-centric life and thought, he practices the strategic silence and repression of racialized sexuality that others black bodies, and refutes the sexual violation of the racial border. Such collusion with the schema of racialized sexuality makes it impossible for the broader black cultural community to critically address desire and sexuality as it concerns people of the African diaspora. Since he chooses to do so, he closes off any discussion in which we could create critical Afro-centric theory that acknowledges the racialization of sexuality and strategically counters it with a multitude of sexual identities.

In order to disturb Western constructs of sexuality in African American cultural texts, we need to perform three specific tasks: to overturn racialized sexuality, uproot the heterosexualization of desire, and explode the binary of hetero/homo in sexuality. Jan Mohamed reminds us that “sexuality on the border was not a construct that could be administered through analytic discourse” (104-105). His concept of racialized sexuality and his analysis of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* demonstrate how racialized sexuality in this sense finds its way into fiction rather than scientific discourse. Jan Mohamed’s critique expounds on the belief that a less analytic discourse becomes necessary to address the dilemma of racialized sexuality. Seen in the discussion of gender in previous chapters, the connections to oral mechanisms through the trickster provide the most efficient way to circumvent idealized black bodies. For the purposes of this study, the spiritual aesthetics and discourse of the trickster replace the analytic discourse. To fully

allow the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality to be exposed, we need to complete the three assigned tasks. Again, the folk, oral, and vernacular provide the best ways of doing so. However, carrying out these multiple duties requires a different type of trickster hermeneutic than that previously used in the section on gender.

Barbara Omolade's "Heart of Darkness" aptly explains the need for aesthetics that can transgress boundaries and demonstrates its significance to critiques of black sexuality in African American texts:

Sex between black women and black men, between black men and black men, between black women and black women, is meshed within complex cultural, political, and economic circumstances. All black sexuality is underlined by a basic theme: where, when, and under what circumstances could /would black men and women connect with each other intimately and privately when all aspects of their lives were considered in the dominion of the public, white master/lover's power. (363)

The trickster figure is key to seeing how African American culture disrupts the public discourse of racialized sexuality. African American culture utilizes the trickster characteristics of sacred/lewd bricoleur, situation-inverter, and shape-shifter to disrupt the public domain of racialized sexuality that maintains its foundation through silence and repression. Traditionally, tropes of these trickster traits in African American fiction and criticism focus on the idea of shape-shifting as it concerns race. For example, the shape-shifting trope of trickster becomes apparent with issues of passing as white by black characters in James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and the previously cited texts, *Quicksand*, *Passing*, and *Plum Bun*. Shape-shifting has also

included the transgressing of class and racial boundaries in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981). We have already briefly seen how Audre Lorde takes on the gender and sexual implications of shape-shifting in her trickster novel, *Zami*. However, critics rarely apply the tropes of sacred/lewd bricoleur and situation-inverter to explore the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in black texts. Ironically, if we trick the traditional way these tropes have been employed, we can reveal that they are the most powerful disruptors of racialized sexuality.

Other African American writers have utilized trickster strategies in attempting to overturn the effects of racialized sexuality on the African American community. Toni Morrison has examined the impact of racialized sexuality in many of her male characters: Charlie Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Milkman in *Song of Solomon* (1977), Paul D in *Beloved* (1987), and Joe in *Jazz* (1992). In her seventh novel, *Paradise*, Morrison continues her examination of racialized sexuality by using the trickster aesthetic of bricoleur to overcome the difficulties of racialized sexuality. Essentially a bricoleur is a "tinker or fix it person, noted for his ingenuity in transforming anything at hand in order to form a creative solution."⁸⁴ What is most important about the trickster as sacred/lewd bricoleur comes in the way s/he can find the lewd in the sacred and the sacred in the lewd. Such a discrete transformative ability proves necessary in an African American community attempting to move beyond the boundaries of racialized sexuality. In the work of Toni Morrison, the presentation of themes on sexuality depends upon the manifest trickster trait of sacred/lewd bricoleur.

To critique Morrison's narrative and aesthetics as they concern sexuality is to run the risk of being reprimanded by the author herself. Barbara Smith's work was at the

⁸⁴ Hynes, 42.

center of a major controversy when her analysis of Nel and Sula's relationship in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) suggested a lesbian reading of Morrison's novel. Smith recalls:

Some thought my discussion of a lesbian subtext was on the mark and others, including Morrison, thought that I was seeing something that was not there. My perspective about *Sula* was influenced by the bold new ideas of 1970s lesbian feminism. Lesbian feminist activists and theorists pointed out that the dominant heterosexist regime so often obscured actual erotic connections between women that it was important to intuit the possibility of lesbian existence in order to claim our history and our lives.⁸⁵

Although there may never be a consensus between lesbian criticism and the author's own comments, as Morrison herself has attested that Smith's reading was off, we cannot simply dismiss Smith's reading. Although Smith used lesbian theory and criticism to construct her reading, there might be other ways to conceive of the same reading. While Morrison may not have been employing lesbian dynamics in her text, she has markedly referred to her art in ways that are distinctly tied to trickster traditions.⁸⁶ These references to ancestors and trickster figures have also been supported by substantial criticism of a great many of her works.⁸⁷ Since Morrison does create from a veritable

⁸⁵ Barbara Smith, *The Truth that Never Hurts: Writings in Race, Gender, and Freedom* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1998) 3.

⁸⁶ Morrison assesses her work in "Rootedness: The Ancestors as Foundation". Mari Evan's *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*. (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor-Doubleday, 1984. 499-510). Morrison discusses issues of community and individuality, participation and reading at the same time, and many of her conclusions are tied to a metaphysical presence that makes such a link possible, much like that of trickster.

⁸⁷ Two notable articles examine the various connection to West African in two different Morrison novels. See Michele Pessoni's "'She was Laughing at their God': Discovering the Goddess Within in

cornucopia of trickster strategies, her work, even if not intended as such, comes to reveal the distinct and dynamic fluidity of sexuality, especially in culture tied to a folkloric and trickster tradition. The manifest trickster trait of sacred/lewd bricoleur provides the best way of explaining that fluidity. Morrison's writing may rely on heterosexual assumptions, but her trickster strategies consistently work to overcome the construction of racialized sexuality through whatever means necessary, be it hetero/bi/homo/ narrative aesthetics and strategies.

In *Paradise* (1999), Toni Morrison's seventh novel, the author presents readers with a story that attempts to inform us of the legacies of racial and sexual violence in a rural town in Oklahoma called Ruby. The destruction of binary thinking as a way to overcome racialized sexuality is briefly hinted at in the novel's epigraph.

For many are the pleasant forms that exist in/numerous sins,/ and
incontinences, /and disgraceful passions/ and fleeting pleasures, which
(men) embrace until they become /sober/ and go up to their resting place./
And they will find me there,/ and they will live,/ and they will not die
again.(1)

Morrison's words are puzzling and hard to pin down until we have realized the full implications of them. The first page of the novel determines a framework of sacred/lewd bricolage. The most striking tricksterisms in the epigraph are the parenthetical emphasis placed on "men" and the division of lines on the page. The way Morrison physically structures the epigraph dodges fixed meanings. The parenthetical emphasis on men could

Sula". *African American Review*, Vol. 29, No. 3. (Autumn, 1995) pp. 439-451 and Gay Wilentz's "Civilizations Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourse in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*". *African American Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1, Women Writers Issue. (Spring, 1992), pp. 61-76.

refer specifically to human species of “men.” Morrison may simply have done it as a way to show that men embrace numerous sins and disgraceful passions, rather than that those factors embrace each other (fleeting pleasures and numerous sins). Yet, she doesn’t personify any of those elements. In addition, the parenthetical attention to men appears to be an afterthought. While she physically separates sins from incontinences, or disgraceful passions from fleeting pleasures, the afterthought of “men” suggests that all those features will at some point embrace, hence, connect and overlap one another if we are using a frame of opposing binaries. The ominous solitary configuration of “sober” on the page refers to a logical and moral final awareness, although whose is not quite clear. Further, resting place usually symbolizes death, but Morrison rejects the finality of sobriety and juxtaposes it with an unnameable to be found, so that even in death, there is life. Through the ambiguous structure and meaning of this short poem, Morrison provides an example of what lies beneath readings based on binary dichotomies—multiple and unfixed meaning that recycles itself. This is an important condition necessary for overcoming racialized sexuality in the text. It relies not simply on the trickster characteristic of sacred/lewd bricoleur, but situation inverter as well.

Like the epigraph, the rest of the novel interrupts binaries. Initially, *Paradise* presents the reader with two separate places that signify paradise—the all black town of Ruby and the Convent. Ruby is a place to which one goes to escape from racial violence. The convent offers an escape from sexual violence for women. Though the two have co-existed peacefully for some time, the impending influx of change brings these two paradises to a violent confrontation—with the men of Ruby ultimately murdering the women in the convent. This confrontation allows Morrison to comment about the fear

and anger derived from racialized sexuality for both black men and women. Morrison's text confronts the intra-racial conflict that arises from the color-caste system in the black community, and in doing so she changes the original axiologically opposed binaries of white/black that privilege whiteness. The town of Ruby represents a paradise in which blackness outranks whiteness, but Ruby's conflicts reveal that the discourse of race always has as its primary foundation a commitment to white male supremacy. Only the trickster strategy of situation inversion allows an examination of this foundation and a way to counter it with something less volatile.

When Ruby is founded in 1890, it is the direct result of the original eight families being rebuffed by free black towns in the western frontier:

For ten generations they had believed the division they fought to close was free against slave and rich against poor. Usually, but not always, white against black. Now they saw a new separation: light skinned against black. Oh they knew the difference in the minds of whites, but it had not struck them before that it was of consequence, serious consequences, to Negroes themselves....The sign of racial purity they had taken for granted had become a stain. (194)

Morrison reconfigures racial violence in this tale of a black community that uses its black color caste system to reject the "blue-black people" of its own blood. The existence of these lighter-skinned blacks serves as evidence that white patriarchy's violation of the sexual border—the master's rape of the female slave—impacts African American communities long after slavery. As Morrison articulates in her novel, the "open-secret" of crossing racial boundaries fosters an environment in which racial purity of Africans in

the U.S. becomes a negative factor in economic and social progress. Lighter-skinned blacks receive social and psychological benefits over darker-skinned individuals.⁸⁸ Lighter-complexioned blacks dismiss and shame the darker complexioned families so that “their daughters would be shunned as brides; their sons chosen last...that colored men would be embarrassed to be seen socially with their sisters” (194). The original 8-Rock families are driven to locate a place for themselves in the New World (western frontier) due in large part to the ideologies that occur because of racialized sexuality, ideologies that privilege lighter-skinned blacks over whites. In turn, they create a town in their own image, one philosophically conceived through Booker T. Washington’s notions of black self-sufficiency as the basis for their social contract.

Current criticism on *Paradise* has been very adept in exploring this intra-racial and class conflict of the 8-Rock family. Missy Dehn Kubitschek, for example, argues that *Paradise* “investigates the divergence between the social realities of a separatist establishment and an all-black Utopia” (180). However, for my purposes I am concerned with other realities in the text, mainly the reconstructed notions of sexuality. How does this establishment of an all black Utopia refer back to the detrimental consequences of racialized sexuality? The answer can be seen in another significant criticism of *Paradise* that explores the novel as a critique of black masculinity and patriarchy. David Ikard’s “Killing the White Girl First: Understanding the Patriarchy in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*” highlights the significance of the novel’s opening sentence, “they shoot the white girl first,” and recognizes its importance in the novel’s assessment of gender, race, and violence. Ikard suggests that in founding and running the town, “the Ruby men invert the ideology of white supremacy to underscore the superiority of black

⁸⁸ See Kathy Sandler’s film *A Question of Color*. (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1993).

men. Thus, it is the Ruby men's racial *superiority* complex—a complex inextricably and ironically grounded in white supremacist notions of patriarchy—that is under scrutiny in *Paradise*” (9). While Ikard's text is concerned with the construction of black masculinity and patriarchy, this reading of *Paradise* is more concerned with Morrison's presentation of sexuality in the African American community of Ruby. The patriarchal rulers of Ruby must, at all cost, keep the “open-secret” of white male patriarchy if they are to hold onto their established black separatist community.

Morrison explores the color caste oppression of black society, but in doing so, she also demonstrates how racialized sexuality creates an situation in which blacks who were othered by whites, now other their own bodies and sexuality by subtly changing the same standards of normativity from which they originally fled. The sacred/lewd characteristic of trickster enables us to understand how the 8-Rock men reverse the dynamics that result in the viewing of African Americans as othered, primitive, and sensual beings, so that everything that might be sensual, erotic, or sexual becomes associated with racial impurity and whiteness. The mulatto has typically represented the sexual exotic in the imagining of western Eurocentric sexuality, but Morrison reveals how this predicament operates in black communities. This is shown most aptly in Morrison's depiction of Patricia and her daughter Billie Delia. Patricia, in her dairy notes of the 8-Rock men, acknowledges: “they don't hate us because mama was your first customer. They hate us because she looked like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children like me, and although I married Billy Cato, who was an 8-rock like you, like them, I passed the skin to my daughter, as you and everybody knew I would” (196). Patricia records the continued presence of the “open-secret” in a black community without white people,

the initial purveyors of the secret. She notes that no matter how much those in the community work to achieve or maintain racial purity, it is threatened by the transgressing of sexual borders. This is why Roger, Patricia's father and an original member of the 8-rock, is shunned and treated badly after marrying a black woman outside of the Ruby community. As long as the men can maintain the "open-secret" from the practice of slavery, they can hold onto Ruby and their status as the heads of that community.

The 8-Rock men's conservative views on sexuality and gender as it relates to their all black community are informed by the knowledge and fear that crossing the racial border could very well lead them to be exiled and othered again. For if the rudiments of racial and sexual oppression lead the town of Ruby to be born, then it also means that anything or anyone who seeks to diminish those racial and sexual boundaries is a threat. The existence of the convent as a haven is such a threat in Ruby's continued existence as a segregated black community dominated by black patriarchal rule. The convent deviates from the men's ideas of normative behavior and refuses to submit to their code of silence and repression.

The hush and tyranny controlling black communities' sexual identities make it more than difficult to solve this problem of racialized sexuality, specifically in nationalist agendas of the African American community. In Martin R. Delaney's "A Black Nationalist Manifesto," Delaney claims, "No people are elevated above the condition of their females...to know the condition of a people, it is only necessary to know the condition of their females" (82). Delaney's statement adheres to the logic of late nineteenth century and early twentieth century programs for uplifting black communities.

In a brief discussion of black social agendas and gender in Dubois's *Soul of Black Folk* (1903), Omolade provides an excellent analysis of the two-pronged dilemma:

The black man moved toward the black woman, clothing her raped and abused black body with the mantle of respectable womanhood, giving protection and claiming ownership of her....Protecting black womanhood was the most significant measure of black manhood and the central aspect of black male patriarchy. (359)

Omolade discusses how Dubois presents an imagined black community where the control of female sexuality and sexual reproduction configures into the definition of manhood.⁸⁹

The 8-Rock men epitomize this approach to the transgression of racial and sexual boundaries. Their status and power rely upon sexuality being an open secret and its construction as being fixed between notions of sacred and lewd behavior. If black “womanhood” needs protection, this validates the ranked gendering of the black male and black “manhood” in Morrison’s novel. The 8-Rock men’s establishing of the town Ruby offers the opportunity to thwart the consequences of racialized sexuality for blue-black manhood through the rhetoric of black empowerment and social uplift.

Morrison’s social setting and climate for *Paradise* is the beginning of the late twentieth-century Black Power Movement. During this time period, the politicizing of intimacy reached new heights for black communities. In “The Pill: Genocide of Liberation,” Toni Cade Bambara presents the discursive practices formed as a result of racialized sexuality: there is a “tall, lean dude” who suggests that “the sisters ...throw away the pill and hop to the mattresses and breed revolutionaries and mess up the man’s

⁸⁹ Carby’s “The Souls of Black Men” in *Race Men* also discusses how black empowerment “to be determined by the nature of the struggle among men over the bodies of women” (9-10).

genocidal program” (163). Bambara astutely criticizes the weakness of such ideology: “I’ve been made aware of the national call to sisters...It is a noble thing, the rearing of warriors for the revolution...I do, however find fault with the notion that dumping the pill is the way to do it” (164). Bambara also reminds us that in each case the solution to racialized sexuality is a heterosexualization of desire that comes at the expense of true liberation for blacks, especially black females: “It is revolutionary, radical, and righteous to want for your mate what you want for yourself. And we can’t be rhapsodizing about liberation, breeding warriors, and revolution unless we are willing to address ourselves to the women’s liberation movement” (165). As Bambara notes, the national call for sisters to avoid using birth control is deployed so as to deal with racial oppression, but it becomes a hysterical heterosexualization of desire, overtly embedded with sexism, that ignores the way such ideology limits and fixes gender and sexuality in a community that subsists because of its fluid and egalitarian social foundations.

The men of Ruby, then, conceive of their paradise in way that continues the predicament of racialized sexuality and the defensive strategy of heterosexualizing desire. The paradise created by the 8-Rock Men places Ruby’s social order in a black and white binary, which means that the intersection of private and public domains and race and sexuality must be held in place by force and silence. They cannot overcome the white supremacist system they tried to escape because it serves as the primary force in the organization of their paradise. Their problematic political endeavor to overturn the distorted sexuality in black society that made them unacceptable can be observed in their treatment of lighter-skinned blacks who represent the open-secret of racialized sexuality.

Most of the men in Ruby share the belief that sexuality for anything other than reproductive purposes, and outside of the sphere of male control, is lewd and to be associated with whiteness. When Arnette, Billie Delia's best friend, becomes pregnant at the age of fifteen, the 8-rock men call a meeting with the soon-to-be father, K.D., to discuss what they (the men) should do about it. As they discuss the sexuality and body of the darker-skinned more acceptable Arnette, the subject on their minds quickly switches to the lighter-skinned Billy Delia when K.D. attempts to explain his respect for Arnette:

"I always respected her. From when she was that high...Ask anybody. ask her girlfriend, Billie Delia. Bille Delia will tell you."

The effect of the genius stroke was immediate. The Morgan uncles held in their smiles, while the father and son bristled. Billie Delia was the fastest girl in town and speeding up by the second. (59)

Male dominance over women's sexuality in Ruby is evident throughout this passage. Arnette, the young girl who is impregnated by K.D., is not present at this meeting, nor is her mother or any other woman. The men decide what will happen to the young woman and her child. Further, the blue-black men have imposed their constructions of sexuality on Billie Delia, the lighter-skinned daughter of Patricia, and her "cracker-looking" mother. The character of Billie Delia allows Morrison to reveal the 8-Rock men's ideologies of sexuality. To the men of Ruby, sexuality seems to be a sacred thing when associated with the darker-skinned Arnette. Although Arnette is unmarried and pregnant, her darker-skinned self can produce another dark-skinned child for the town of Ruby. Arnette's mistake is acceptable because she "breeds" with K.C., a darker-skinned male. As Ruby's major reason for forming is to mess up the white man's program of black

genocide, Arnette is now a Ruby woman of great worth. She will give the town a baby for the revolution, or for the plan of Ruby's social upliftment—avoiding genocide of their own true-blue blackness. However, quite adeptly, just as Morrison reveals the connection between pure African blood, sexuality, and sacredness, she also demonstrates that the Ruby men especially perceive sexuality as lewd when associated with lighter-skinned blacks such as Billie Delia. The lewdness of sexuality for these men is a direct result of the open-secret of sexuality on the border—racialized sexuality.

The town of Ruby and specifically the men construct a representation of Billie Delia's sexuality long before she can ever have any control over it. As a child, Billie Delia enjoyed riding a racehorse, bareback. Her delight in riding the horse amounts to nothing more than mere childhood play. Yet, Billie Delia, and her mother Patricia for that matter, find out quickly that as marked—light-skinned—women, they can never fully love themselves when seen through the eyes of the townspeople in Ruby:

Billie Delia was three years old—too little still for everyday underwear, and nobody noticed or cared how perfect her skin felt against the wide expanse of rhythmically moving animal flesh. While she struggled to grip Hard Goods with her ankles and endure the rub of his spine, the grown-ups smiled, taking pleasure in her pleasure. (150)

Morrison creatively mixes the sacred innocence of childhood with what the Ruby townspeople might see as the lewd longings of adult sexuality. At first, the citizens of Ruby don't perceive Billie Delia's child-play as anything more than that, and Billie Delia, a mere three years old, does not know the boundaries of sexuality in general, let alone in the town she grows up in. Billie Delia's innocent act of autoeroticism disrupts

the silence around sexuality in Ruby, and she soon learns how unforgiveable her actions are:

Then one day. A Sunday. Hard Goods came loping down the street with Mr. Nathan astride. Billie Delia, who hadn't seen horse or rider for a long time, ran toward them, begging for a lift. Mr. Nathan promised to stop by after service. Still in her Sunday clothes ... when she saw him coming, negotiating space among the after-church crowd....she pulled down her Sunday panties before raising her arms to be lifted onto Hard Good's back. (151)

Billie Delia is not only whipped by her mother, but also teased for years to come by those who witnessed her "offensive" behavior. The townspeople of Ruby brand Billie Delia as a whore or loose female because of this childhood incident. In her role as sacred/lewd bricoleur, Billie Delia forces the reader to be aware of the sexual boundaries established by everyone in Ruby. Billie Delia's acts are not only horrible because she was, as perceived by adults and children alike, receiving sexual pleasure from riding Hard Goods, but also because the three year old has not learned to distinguish between the binaries of sacred and the lewd and the public and the private. Billie Delia's act further moves into the realm of moral lewdness because the incident happens on a Sunday. Morrison's play on the sacredness of Sunday supplanted for lewd sexual pleasure is exacerbated by Billie Delia's removal of her holy panties, which are designated so because they are only worn on Sundays for church. This act in itself, perceived though binary divisions, suggests that Billie Delia chooses the flesh over the spirit.

Even though Billie Delia is a mere three years old when the incident occurs, the town refuses to forgive her. Yet, as demonstrated by the town's continued support of Arnette during her "secret" pregnancy, the scorn Billie Delia receives is due to her youthful public display of her sexuality, as well as her skin color. She carries the burden of being fast, loose, and sexual because she is not of pure blue-black skin descent. She is tainted. The disdain Billie Delia and Patricia receive from the Ruby men derives from the reverse discourse of racialized sexuality. Billie Delia does not understand the importance of established boundaries between the sacred and lewd because her blood and her skin express the notion that boundaries have been trespassed. Regardless of her actions, she cannot adhere to the town's sexual boundaries because her existence is a representation of the fact that the borders between black/white have been crossed.

Billy Delia's mother, Patricia, finally overcome with this orthodoxy, finds herself doubting the sexual purity of her daughter. Unable to understand the complexity of her daughter's capacity to love two men, brothers Apollo and Brood Poole, Patricia is riddled with paranoia, projecting the Ruby men's representations of sexuality onto her daughter: "I didn't mean to hit her so hard...I just meant to stop her lying mouth telling me she didn't do anything. I saw them. All three of them back behind the Oven and she was in the middle. Plus I am the one who washes the sheets around here" (202). Readers, then, must determine what it is Patricia thinks she sees and why. Clearly, Patricia's comments imply that Billie Delia and the Poole boys were engaging in sexual activities together. We can't really ascertain whether Billie Delia's childhood autoeroticism causes Patricia's paranoia, but what we do know is that the town of Ruby creates an environment where women, especially light-skinned women, are seen as lascivious and unnatural because

they are not racially pure. The very notion that her daughter is having sex with two men, at the same time no less, enrages Patricia so that she hits Billie Delia and makes her flee to the convent. Nevertheless, Pat's assumptions are wrong, for Morrison reveals that Billie Delia's virginity remains intact precisely because she is unable to choose between the two brothers she loves (152). In each case, Billie Delia is subjected to trauma because of the way others have constructed her sexuality. Morrison posits that Billie Delia can only find and accept herself, first in the convent, and then later, by removing herself from the town of Ruby. Billie Delia ends up working and living in another town. Interestingly, her refusal to choose one lover indicates that she will not make her life about either/or binaries. She does not make a choice between the two brothers because she understands better than anyone the problems that evolve from setting and fixing standards. She, like the others, comes to understand this after her brief stay in the convent. Ultimately, as Kubitscheck concludes, "*Paradise* shows that opposed, mutually exclusive categories can never be maintained because they deny social complexity" (180). Though Kubitscheck's comments appear directly related to the color caste ideologies in the text, it is also very relevant to the fluidity of sexuality advanced in Morrison's work.

The second paradise constructed in the novel is at a convent that lies seventeen miles outside of Ruby. In this second paradise, Morrison works to reverse the logic of sexuality imposed on women in the town of Ruby. The convent offers the freedom to have a black female/male subjectivity that does not collude with mantles of womanhood and manhood, and this liberty threatens the rule of the 8-Rock. The convent serves as safe space for Mavis, the first to come to the convent, who leaves a tyrannical husband

and abandons two children; Senecca, a foster home refugee; Pallas, a sixteen-year old runaway; and the women from the town of Ruby who come to the convent in times of crisis in their lives. Each of these women experiences some form of physical and mental abuse stemming from their sexuality and gender because of their positions as mothers, wives, daughters, and black women. Abortion, rape, incest, wife battering, and teenage pregnancy are all a part of the women's lives. Though initially the convent seems to provide a safe haven for women because it is an all female space, Morrison indicates that the safety comes not from biological commonalities but from the convent's space of sacred/lewd liminality that connects racial freedom to sexual freedom so as to disturb fixed gender/sexual constructions.

The emerging theme of connecting racial freedom to sexual freedom comes via another woman who takes refuge in the convent. Gigi, a product of Alcorn, Mississippi, leaves her home because of the emotional toll civil rights activism levies on her.⁹⁰ Through her sexuality, Gigi seeks confirmation that her life as a black person will not always be full of grief and racial injustices. Gigi aka Grace comes to town in search of mythical objects that are tied to stories of sexual freedom. Her quest takes her in search of a place she's been told about, a rock formation outside Tuscon, Arizona that looks like two people making love:

A man and woman fucking forever. When the light changes every four hours they do something new. At the desert's edge they fuck to the sky tide of Arizona. Nothing can stop them. Nothing wants to. Moonlight arches his back; sunlight warms her tongue...But they keep on doing it

⁹⁰ Morrison 's briefly glimpse into Gigi's past implies that Gigi's father was an activist involved in the Civil Rights Movement who is now dead. See Gigi's grandfathers's comments, pp.65 and 265.

in the rain—the black couple of Wish—Arizona. (63)

Gigi's need to find this particular rock formation centers on her need to find a sexuality untouched by trauma. The black couple of Wish, Arizona represents this utopia in a number of ways. In that utopia, a black man and woman can come together to love each other emotionally and physically despite whatever else is happening around them. Gigi seeks an escape from the public domain of race to the private domain of sexuality, and the tale imagines a place where such an accomplishment is possible. Yet, Morrison has already implied in Ruby's deliberate practice of color casting, that racialized sexuality makes such a feat almost impossible.

The imagined space Gigi longs to find is created via strategies of rendering the “sacred” and the “lewd” parts of one entity. The consistent variability embodied in the tale connects back to the idea that tricksterisms promote an agenda of not separating the spirit from the flesh, or nature from man. Again, Morrison interweaves the sacred and lewd by joining nature, spirituality, and divinity with images of sexuality, the flesh, and eroticism—a trickster strategy. The strategy of sacred/lewd bricoleur permits us to view the black couple as a metaphor for how we must approach the domain of sexuality in the lives of black people. The couple is a rock formation that produces imagery altered by the changing position of light, sunlight, and moonlight. That the couple can go on forever with no person or thing stopping them is due in large part to the liminality offered by the illumination. The rock formations, set and solid, are never fixed objects. In the end, it seems significant that what Gigi sees as beautiful, others find to be “bold as Gomarrah” and perverse (63). When Gigi finally arrives in Arizona, she is unable to find the rock formation, but she journeys on and soon learns of another phenomenon

produced by nature. On a train ride to nowhere, after asking a man if he'd ever heard of the rock formation, the man laughs and tells her of a tree in the town of Ruby, Oklahoma:

...a lake in the middle of a wheat field. And that near this lake two trees grew in each other's arms. And if you squeezed in between them in just the right way, well you would feel an ecstasy no human could invent or duplicate. (66)

From that moment on, Gigi changes the course for Ruby. Ironically, Roger Best, father of Patricia and grandfather of Billie Delia, brings Gigi to the convent. Because he knows everyone born in Ruby, he immediately assigns her to the convent that takes in drifters. Through the characterization of Gigi, Morrison is able to continue her efforts to blur the lines between sacredness and lewdness. Though the utopia Gigi hopes to find does not exist, she can more fully live her life if she learns from the non-hermeneutical model of the rock formation and the tree in Ruby, the joining of sacred and lewd, of nature and man.

The convent holds the key to understanding how this trickster transformative power uses the combination of the sacred/lewd to provide new life. Initially the convent is the mansion of an embezzler: "He must have planned to have a lot of good-time company in his fortress: eight bedrooms, two-giant baths...His efforts to entertain were no more sophisticated than he was—mostly food, sex, and toys" (71). Morrison emphasizes the excess of the embezzler's mansion in her descriptions by calling it a fortress. She constructs her tale of the embezzler's mansion through sexual and phallic imagery: "shaped like a live cartridge, it curved to a deadly point at the north end...the southern end contained signs of his desire in two rooms....a veranda curved from the

north around the bullet's tip" (71). Our first impression of the mansion's architect is that of a gun and violence, but we also quickly connect it to the phallic imagery of the embezzler's own sexual desire. The mansion, originally conceived as the symbol of male status and sexual desire, is then transformed into a convent.

After the embezzler goes to prison, four sisters purchase the mansion at a low price and turn it into a Catholic school for Native American girls and other women of color. After thirty years, the school closes, but the convent continues to be run by Sister Mary Magna who takes in an orphan, Consolata, who then runs the convent after Mary's death. Soon thereafter, the convent becomes a place for women to escape racial and sexual violence in their lives. However, the four sisters have only superficially altered the original construct of the convent. The signs of western and "masculine" conceptions of sexuality and violence are still present in the midst of this womanist community. While the four sisters were able to convert the living room into a chapel and the dining room into a schoolroom, they were unable to remove all traces of the embezzler's designs. Gigi learns of the sisters' failure to fully transform the convent into a singular sacred place/space. In the convent, there still remained:

The female-torso candleholders in the candelabra hanging from the wall ceiling....The nursing cherubim emerging from the layers of paint. The nipple-topped doorknobs. Layabouts half-naked in old-timey clothes, drinking and fondling each other...A Venus or two among several pieces of nude statuary...She even found the brass male genitalia that had been ripped from the sinks and tubs....Gigi toyed with the fixtures, turning the testicles designed to release water from the penis. (72)

Though the convent is a haven for women, initially its very physical edifice still harbors the production of masculine desires, and objectification of women and their sexuality. Emotionally and spiritually, the convent is haunted by those same desires and objectifications. When women in the novel seek refuge in the convent, they always bring with them the false constructions of their sexuality and the violent fruits of masculine desires. The nuns could not destroy all the masculine constructions of the mansion, and the women who come to the convent cannot completely free themselves from masculine desires and ideologies outside the convent.

The convent exists as a space in which the sacred/lewd dichotomy expresses a philosophy never to separate the spirit and the flesh. Sexuality and spirituality are part and parcel of the same trickster lot. For every sexual item owned by the embezzler, Gigi also finds pieces belonging to the religious convent. She sees, at the same time, a plaque engraved with “Saint Catherine Siena “ next to “brass dicks hidden in a box” and “pudding tits exposed on a plate.” In a narrative designed to promote binary oppositions and western metaphysical logics, the discovery of two artifacts representing ideologically opposed ideas in one space might seem out of kilter. Yet, in true trickster fashion, Morrison notes through Gigi’s perceptions, that “in fact it did not feel funny” (74). If we are conditioned to see and think with the boundaries and restraints of binary oppositions of good and evil, and black and white, it should feel funny or weird to see these things so closely together. We should be uncomfortable with physical representations of the body and sexuality (breasts and penis) in the same place where we see spiritual images (crosses and saints). However, as the trickster trait of sacred/lewd bricoleur makes obvious, it does not have to feel weird for us to join those two things. Trickster commends us to

connect, rather than separate, the two and make them a part of us. Morrison knows the only way to do that is to consistently blur the lines and explore, through the convent's example, the balance of sexuality and spirituality to help overcome racialized sexuality. The embezzler's mansion represents the excesses of pleasure, while the town of Ruby represents the conservative or limitations of moderate views. The convent becomes the symbolic manifestation of balancing the two for those women who seek refuge and who can learn to see, as Consolata has done.

Morrison's development of Consolata reveals the fallibility of the all women convent:

What she knew of them she had mostly forgotten, and it seemed less and less important to remember any of it, because the timbre of each of their voices told the same tale: disorder, deception and drift.... The three d's paved the road to perdition, and the greatest of these was drift. (221)

In referring to the women who came to the retreat and eventually live in the convent with her, Connie judges that like the men of Ruby, the convent women have also forgotten important information in the struggle to overcome racialized sexuality, community and culture. The women conceivably look to take the masculine space of the embezzler's mansion and make it into a strictly feminine space. Yet, the four sisters who originally brought the mansion and made it into a convent dismiss the idea of reverting back to assumptions based on binary opposites when they keep many of the embezzler's items throughout the convent, rather than getting rid of them completely.

Paradise looks at how the convent women build their particular paradise around a philosophy of womanism unfulfilled. To understand what that means, I turn to Alice

Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*. Walker expatiates on how the political, economic, and social restrictions of slavery and racism have historically stunted the creative lives of black women. She also seeks to find a word that reflects black women's community. With both of these goals in mind, Walker constructs "womanism:" "a black feminist or black feminist thought. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children 'You acting womanish'...Generally refers to outrageous, audacious, responsible, courageous, or willful behavior" (23). Womanist thought combines black nationalist ideology with feminist ideology but seeks to overcome the failures of racist and sexist undertones of these movements. According to Walker, womanism seeks to build through love of an all woman community, but not necessarily to the exclusion of the black (male) community (24). The convent fails to be a full womanist community because it is not allowed to be a part of the black town of Ruby, but also because it fears that community.

The goal of the women in Morrison's text then must not mirror the 8-Rock's failed plan of mimetic revision of racial discourse. Rather than a reversal of Western binaries, a simple remaking the masculine and lewd space into a feminine and sacred space, the females must disrupt the rule of binary oppositions that stipulate that the two forces must be axiologically opposed. Morrison allows the women a way to disrupt the logic of binary oppositions through the character Connie/Consolata Sosa. Consolata possesses the gift of healing, and she is also the former lover of the married Deacon Morgan. The significance of Consolata in this tale of sacred and sexual lies in the fact that she has learned the trickster's trait of the need to balance the two throughout one's life. During her affair with Deek, Consolata learns that "being love-struck after thirty years took on an edible quality" (228). Eventually the illicit and adulterous nature of

their lovemaking under a fig-tree every Friday afternoon begins to change Consolata's nature: "His wife might not know it, but Consolata remembered his face. Not when she bit his lip, but when she hummed over the blood she licked from it" (239). Aware that Deek has come to break off their affair, her love and desire for Deek changes from emotional longing and desire to actually consuming what she most loved and enjoyed. Later, in all of her shame, she prays and reveals the reason for her carnivorous reaction: "Dear Lord, I didn't want to eat him. I just wanted to go home" (240). We must refer Consolata's comment back to opening epigram of the novel: "and go up to their resting place..."(1). Consolata, Gigi, and other women in the convent seek a home in which they can find a way to connect their spirit and their flesh—a resting place.

Consolata has learned her lessons from the past and she decides to teach them to the women who have come to the convent:

My child body, hurt and soil, leaps into the arms of a woman who teaches me my body is nothing my spirit everything. I agreed her until I met another. My flesh is so hungry for itself that it ate him. When he fell away the woman rescue me from my body again....So I wondering where is the spirit lost in this...One sweet, one bitter. Where is it lost? Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve. (263)

Though the dogma is Christian, it becomes very clear that Connie cannot reach such an understanding of herself without first realizing that the elements of her identity can co-exist as a whole. Her gift of "seeing in" is the tool that allows her the wisdom to see how.

Before Consolata delivers her speech to the women in the convent, she quite purposely situates them in a circle: “In the beginning the most important thing was the template...they *ringed* the place with candles” (italics mine, 263). All of the convent women then lie in a circle together within that ringed circle of candles. The emphasis on the circle clearly ties into the trickster’s trait of connecting the sacred and the lewd, specifically when we recall the importance of the ring-shout in early southern black culture of the U.S. In discussing the importance of spirituality to early slaves in the United States, Sterling Stuckey’s *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (1987) reveals how Africans were subtly and slowly converted from their indigenous and native religions to Christianity. Yet, Stuckey argues that it was the meaning and importance of the ring shout that allowed and sustained African spirituality and culture for so long before slaves were successfully assimilated:

The majority of Africans brought to North America to be enslaved were from the central and western areas of Africa—from Congo-Angola, Nigeria, Dahomey, Togo, the Gold Coast, and Sierra Leone. In these areas, an integral part of religion culture was movement in a ring during ceremonies honoring the ancestors....The use of the circle for religious purposes in slavery was so consistent and profound that one could argue that it was what gave form and meaning to black religion and art. (11)

Throughout this chapter entitled, “Slavery and the Circle of Culture, Stuckey does an excellent job of proving that the ring shout contributes significantly to Africans’ culture in the New World. Stuckey found that the ring-shout “being a principal means by which physical and spiritual, emotional and rational, needs were fulfilled. This quality of

African religion, its uniting of seeming opposites, was perhaps the principal reason it was considered savage by whites” (24). As Consolata was able to resolve the uniting of seeming opposites, she is able to teach the convent women, but never the men of Ruby, how to do the same.

While the men of the original 8-Rock can envision an empowering community of blue-black people built on strong patriarchal ideas of prosperity, independence, and freedom, they cannot see any type of empowerment developing from the community women held up in the convent:

Bitches. More like Witches....Before those heifers came to town this was a peaceable kingdom. The others before them had some religion. These here sluts out there by themselves never step foot in a church...They don't need men and they don't need God....If they stayed to themselves, that'd be something. But they don't. (276)

Lone, another visitor to the convent, understands how the men of Ruby view the convent women: “So, Lone thought, the fangs and the tail are somewhere else. Out yonder all slithery in a house full of women. Not women locked safely away from men; but worse, women who chose themselves for company, which is to say not a convent but a coven” (276). The Ruby men have lost the ability to recall the benefits the circle. Clearly, these women have been made to be “other.” They are supernatural witches who have the gift of “stepping in” and “seeing in,” but these gifts are not what incite fear and anger into the hearts of men; it is the women’s decision to choose each other’s company. The men of Ruby, frustrated by the intolerable changes occurring in the town, choose to make the women of the convent a scapegoat for their problems. Hence, the killing spree begins.

After the Ruby men complete their reign of terror on the convent and supposedly kill all of the women, Roger Best comes to pick up the bodies so that he can bury them. Yet, when Roger arrives, there are no bodies. The town of Ruby is puzzled with the exception of Billie Delia who, instead of asking where to and how the women disappeared, focuses on when they will return (308). The ending of the novel leaves no resolution for the convent women or the 8-Rock Men, and this, makes perfect sense when we look back to the epigram's allusion for "man" to live and not die again. Though Consolata has finally been able to teach the convent women how to go home—back to themselves, full and whole, rather than restrained and separated, they do not return to Ruby. In addition, the epigram may lead us to think of one omnipresent being, God, but we can see that the ending of the novel conceives of a liminality, like that of Mawu-Lisa, for the convent women. Although Morrison does not explicitly endorse an agenda of heterosexuality, neither does she reject a scheme of homosexuality. The town of Ruby and the convent exist as homo-social spaces. The paradise sought by the men of Ruby and the women of the convent remains elusive, but in remembering the sacred/lewd bricoleur, the closest they may ever come to such utopias is in the destruction of binary oppositions. Morrison's use of the sacred/lewd trickster trait shows that the dilemma of racialized sexuality can be solved when one accepts the trickster tradition of accepting liminality and fluidity rather than choosing between one or the other. Morrison enables a space for sexuality that moves beyond Western constraints, a space in which multiple numbers of options become possible at every sacred/lewd juncture.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Already Queer?: Tricking the Tropes of the Bad Nigger and Queen Bee

Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability—which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect—queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. Institutionally, queer has been associated most prominently with lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. Whether as transvestite performance or academic deconstruction, queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilize heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any “natural” sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as “man” and “woman”.

Annamarie Jagose⁹¹

Though Queer studies has been evolving over the last few years to do exactly as Jagose notes, undermine Western canons of gender and sexuality, it has only recently begun to conceptualize the way that class and race impact the issues of sex, gender, and desire for people of color in Black Diasporic communities.⁹² Yet, the final analysis in this work demonstrates that folk and vernacular traditions maintain theoretical philosophies and discussions to exploit incoherencies of sexuality.

This chapter examines African American trickster figures, the Bad Nigger and Queen Bee, so that through a continued evaluation of trickster traits we can comprehend

⁹¹ Annamarie Jagose. *Queer Theory* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press, 1996) 72-101.

⁹² In addition to the earlier efforts of James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, writers and critics such as Ann Allen Shockley, Red Jordan Arobateau, Essex Hemphill, James Earl Hardy, and E. Lynn Harris interrogate notions of gender and sexual constructs for black peoples. See also a special edition of *Callaloo* “Black Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Literature and Culture” Vol. 23, Number 1 (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 2000); Charles I Nero’s “Toward a Black Gay Aesthetic: Signifying in Contemporary Black Gay Literature,” *African America Literary Theory: A Reader*. ed., Winston Napier (New York and London: NYU Press, 2000) 399-420 ; *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender Anthology*. eds. Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason. (New York : New York University Press, 1996) 241-261; Oscar Montero, “Latino and National Identity,” *Radical America*. Vol. 24, no. 4 (April 1993): 16-17; and Merl Stor’s “The Sexual Reproduction of ‘Race’: Bisexuality, History and Racialization” in *The Bisexual Imaginary: Representation, Identity, and Desire*. ed., Phoebe Davidson. (London ; Washington: Cassell, 1997).

variant sexualities in African American texts. The Bad Nigger and the Queen Bee possess subjectivities parallel to that of Mawu-Lisa. In the end, I argue that John A. Williams and Ann Allen Shockley utilize manifest trickster traits to revise ideologies of black sexuality. The two writers' use of folkloric tales and figures related to the Bad Nigger and the Queen Bee in African American folklore exhibits sexual fluidity that can disrupt the constructs of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Since these characters draw their heroic appeal from breaking and crossing boundaries, it follows that the more boundaries they cross, the badder (more heroic) they might be seen. These two figures, the Bad Nigger and the Queen Bee, set up aesthetics in the texts of Williams and Shockley that counter racialized sexuality and the heterosexualization of desire in Black America.

In *From Trickster to Badman*, Roberts discusses how the badman or bad nigger tradition in black folklore serves as the “transformation of the trickster tradition or the trickster as proto-outlaw” (185). I do not intend to argue against that point or prove further Robert’s conclusions that “trickster-like behavior became associated with black badmen” who “could offer individuals adaptive behavioral advantages in retaliating for their economic exploitation and persecution” (198). Roberts’s text acknowledges how trickster-like activities deemed illegal create economic advantages that might not be possible otherwise.⁹³ This chapter agrees with his conclusion and moves on to discuss

⁹³ For example, Roberts moves from discussing a slave’s theft from his master (199) and a conjurer named Railroad Bill (200) to Stackolee and John Hardy (203-209). These figures serve as outlaw heroes who employ their lack of citizenship in the U.S. to ignore the prescribed social morals of their time. Though they often break white society’s laws, they enhance the quality of life for themselves or other blacks through their trickster actions (214-215).

how Roberts's belief allows us to trick the traditional trope of the badman/bad nigger as it relates to sexuality.

Although trickster actions of the Bad Nigger enhance the material values for black individuals through outlaw behavior, the figure also creates a socio-cultural environment in which sexual activities and expression become less shaped by the society's moral standards and conceptions of sexuality. Some critics account for the trickster's sexuality in black folkloric figures by implying that the sexual bravado and hypersexuality of these figures remain symbolic of the trickster's original variant sexuality.⁹⁴ One of Roberts's major point in the configuration of the bad-man as trickster demonstrates why the Bad Nigger and Queen Bee, potential disruptors of sexual boundaries in black communities, is understudied in black culture:

...in transforming their conception of the trickster to create a folk hero whose actions unfolded primarily in the black community, African Americans had to be concerned with the consequences of condoning behaviors that potentially threatened both their communal values and the well-being of its communities. (199)

Since the very notion of folk figures derives from the folk (lower-class), Roberts's statement acknowledges that the well-being of the community acts as a significant force in the potential destruction of sexual borders. We must ask what African Americans and who defines the communal values and well-beings? Clearly, the issue of class becomes a marker of these values, and so, in a way that has not been previously included, we must

⁹⁴ See Laura Makarius's "The Myth of the Trickster: The Necessary Taboo Breaker" in *Mythical Trickster Figures* for a discussion of the body and tricksterism (66-86) and *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (332-334). Levine briefly explores sexual stereotypes of black sexual superiority in black comedy and laughter derived from slave culture (racialized sexuality).

consider the black bourgeoisie and the black lower-classes. Tricksterisms only threaten the well-being, i.e. the actual or potential material wealth and social status, of black communities who embrace the values of the white supremacy system of imperialism and capitalism. This possible threat to communal values explains why the existence of sexual mutability in theories of such tricksters as Eshu and the signifying monkey remains largely unaccounted for in studies of black culture. It is imperative to ascertain how specific figures expose the flaws of these communal values in terms of the broader African American community. One major benefit of re-reading the Bad Nigger and the Queen Bee tropes in black culture texts may consist in locating a cultural mechanism that moves black texts away from the desire to appear heteronormative to other communities. As outsiders, the figures allow black communities to question concepts of sexuality in a culturally specific manner

Daryl Dance Cumber's collection, *Shuckin' and Jivin': Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans*, (1987) contains numerous accounts of sexual fluidity in black folklore, especially in the section entitled "Are You Ready for This? Miscellaneous Tales."⁹⁵ Some of these tales are very ribald, making heterosexual assumptions, and containing noticeable homophobic sentiments. A number of the tales present a wide range of sexual behaviors and bodily functions. The specific title of the chapter in Cumber's collection warns the reader not to make any heterosexual or sexually moralistic assumptions. In one tale, we find a satirical less-judgmental tone about sodomy in the narrative. Three men are in court and a judge looks at one and says, "Well, what you here for? " One replies, "For eatin' PEACHES!" The judge then asks the second man what he's in for, and the second man gives the same reply as the first. The judge then

⁹⁵ *Shuckin' and Jivin'*, 274.

asks the third man, “Well, who are you?,” and the third man, replies, “I’m Peaches” (274). The tale plays on the knowledge that the reader will not make the necessary assumptions about the three men presented at the beginning. Eating peaches could refer to eating fruit; or if we are making heterosexual assumptions, it could very well refer to the male’s performing oral sex on a female named Peaches. Yet, those assumptions are destroyed by the third male who reveals that same-sex desire exists in the black community. Though these men are clearly in court on sodomy charges, no qualms exist about the presentation of three black men as partaking in homosexual activity. The tale implies that the only crime comes with being caught. It is ribald tale of humor; the punch-line and release of tension through laughter arise from the heterosexual norm that is reinforced by the revelation that the three men do not meet the expectation of heterosexual normativity

In another tale, the idea of sexual fluidity is further explored through the evocation of homophobia in the black community. “I’ll Show You How Straight I Am” parodies how far some black men will go to prove their heterosexuality. When two males are drinking one night, and one man sexually touches the other on the buttocks, the offended party argues, “I don’t go for that!” The other man then replies, “Look, I’m a all-right guy cause, look, I’m married and got three kids. I’ll tell you what I’ll do. Sunday you come by my house, and I’ll show you how straight I am.”⁹⁶ This particular tale also exposes the fatalistic flaws of heterosexual assumptions. When the offended party goes to the man’s house, trickery abounds. Upon arriving at the house, the offended man is left alone with the man’s wife who pretends to seduce him:

⁹⁶ *Shuckin’ and Jivin’*, 275

She say, "Come on." She went into the bedroom. She took off all her clothes. She say, "Look don't worry about 'im. Don't worry bout im. You come on. We kin get a quick one in before he ever get back."⁹⁷

At this point in the narrative, if the reader is making heterosexual assumptions, s/he is not prepared for the ending of the tale, in which the man goes from proving how straight he is to using his wife as part of a trickster strategy to allow him to have sex with the male:

So he say, "okay, okay." He took off his clothes and got in there [on top of her]. She put her arms around him like that [very tight embrace around his neck; legs around im like that [she locks her legs tightly around his waist, holding him firmly in a position with his posterior up in the air], and then she hollered, "Okay, George—I got im! Come on an get him!" (276)

As stated earlier, these tales may reveal the ever-present existence of homophobia in the black community. Yet, a close reading of the tale also underlines several flaws with the presentation of desire in the African American community. The man positioned as the homosexual may be seen as the stereotypical homosexual who is always attempting to trap the "normal" and "straight" man. However, the character should also be seen as destroying the stereotype of the homosexual as highly effeminate and limp-wristed, or to go further destroying the very canon of Western homosexuality. This particular man, who attempts to seduce another man, is married to a "nice, fine wife" and has "nice kids....three o' them" (276). The story's presentation of trickery for sexual conquest destroys preconceived notions of homosexuality and heterosexuality. The binaries are further disrupted by a wife who knows of her husband's fluid sexuality and

⁹⁷ *Shuckin' and Jivin'*, 276.

helps him trick the man whom her husband desires. It seems important to note that these tales are presented in folklore, rather than in the analytical works of the African American community. The folk, oral, and vernacular provide a much needed and distinct commentary on a representation of the community. However, many tales demonstrate that poly-sexuality has long been a theme in African American folklore, especially because of the way the discourse of sexuality and race need each other. Thus, black folklore acknowledges the racialization of sexuality and sexualization of race in ways that many Western texts cannot. As JanMohammed disclosed earlier, analytical texts, especially as they concern African Americans, could never conceive of sexuality on the border. Clearly, the vernacular offers revised readings of sexuality. As Cumber's chapter title suggests, we need only be ready for them.

In returning to the trickster figure's form as male, female, and sexually ambiguous, we must appreciate the central figures in African American folklore who still possess those qualities of sexual fluidity. One of the most crucial ways to do so comes in tricking the established heterosexual trope of the trickster in African American folk narrative, the Bad Nigger—Stackolee, Billy, or Benny. Daryl Dance Cumber notes: "That the term Bad Nigger from its beginning had positive connotations to certain black people and negative connotations to white people suggests its early meaning as a Black man who fought against the system" (224). Cumber's assessment points the racial implications of the Bad Nigger. Our exploration of the sexual implications suggests that the heterosexual trope of the Bad Nigger exists because critics tie it to a heroic tradition of the black male defeating the white power structure. In addition to violent actions taken by this character, his hyper-masculinity is consistently evident. The Bad Nigger's

hypermasculinization deflects representations of the black male as emasculated and feminized because of racial oppression:

Whereas prevailing definitions of black masculinity imply power, control and authority, these attributes have been historically denied to black men since slavery. The centrally dominant role of the white male slave master in eighteenth and nineteenth century plantation societies barred black males from patriarchal privileges ascribed to masculinity....Shaped by history, black masculinity is a highly contradictory formation of identity, as it is a subordinated identity.⁹⁸

The super prowess of the black male in Bad Nigger tales consistently seeks to move beyond the subordinated identity, which is still highly contradictory. As Cumber notes, Bad Niggers “are sexual supermen, but their women are enemies to be conquered, humiliated, and controlled rather than loved.”⁹⁹ The hostility and sexual aggression toward black women presented in these tales works to highlight the heteronormative pattern of behavior of black males. We have already encountered this specific heterosexual trope of Bad Niggers in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*.

Morrison’s work provides a perfect representation of the ways in which Bad Niggers deal with racial oppression. In Morrison’s text, we can see how the 8-Rock Men, in their settlement and running of the town of Ruby, epitomize the most basic function of Bad Niggers. The 8-Rock Men, in their gruesome killing of the convent women, confirm both Cumber’s explanation of male/female relationships and Roberts’s theory about the

⁹⁸ Kobena Mercer’s *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*. (New York: Routledge, 1994) 150-151.

⁹⁹ *Shuckin’ and Jivin’*, 225.

function of the Badman/Bad Nigger: “trickster-like activities” and “the relative absence of the ‘law’ in black neighborhoods allowed for the creation of a socio-cultural environment” (198). The 8-Rock Men, as bad niggers, dictate the social values of the Ruby community. Oddly enough, they use Victorian morality to counter racialized sexuality and a color-caste system to establish social hierarchies. In *Paradise*, the 8-Rock Men become tricksters/proto-outlaws based solely on their disruption of white social and economic values that denigrate blackness. Though Morrison’s depiction of the 8-Rock Men adheres to traditional definitions of the Bad Nigger, that portrayal seems devoid of the other basic characteristics of that figure, ambiguous and anomalous sexuality. We must remember that the Bad Nigger exists as a trickster figure, and seriously re-read him in terms of the crossing of racial and sexual boundaries by Bad Nigger figures in black cultural texts.

Traditionally, critics assert that the system the bad nigger fights against is simply a racist or white supremacist system of oppression. However, if we delve deeper into these tales, we realize that the Bad Nigger cannot disrupt systems of white supremacy without disrupting other ideologies within those systems. Consequently, the Bad Nigger, without purposely being constructed to do so, disrupts the boundaries and borders of sexuality in order to disturb the oppressive racist ideologies detrimental to his community.

In “Stackolee” tales, homoerotic and homosexual behavior surface the “badder” Stackolee tries to become. In one version of the tale, Benny Long confronts Stackolee: “I’m that bad-ass-so-and-so they call Stackolee/ He said, ‘I heard of you, Stack from the

tales of old, But you know/You tore your ass when you fucked my hole.”¹⁰⁰ Benny seeks revenge on Stackolee for shooting his brother in the head, and though Stackolee’s masculinity is asserted by his having sex with one of the women in the bar, the homosexual symbolics within the above lines should not be ignored.

Even in death, the Bad Nigger’s badness ignores the established borders/boundaries of sexuality. After being killed by Stackolee, Billy dies and goes to hell. In hell, he has intercourse with the devil’s wife, daughter, and niece, and finally when he comes back to the devil’s wife again, she proclaims, “Devil, get him down....Get that motherfucker before he fucks us all.”¹⁰¹ In another version, Stackolee pushes the boundaries of heterosexual assumptions even more, when confronted by Billy Lyons. Billy exclaims, “You know, you bad motherfucker, I know your name is Stackolee,” and Stackolee answers back, “And by the way, what’s your name, look so fine?”¹⁰² Stackolee’s comments about Billy’s physical appearance cannot be dismissed. He makes such statements to provoke his competitor, but he also does it because he knows the provocativeness and tabooess of such criticism. He uses these elements to weaken, or disarm his adversary.

In other tales that blacks tell about anonymous Bad Niggers, it becomes very obvious that the sexual prowess and superiority of the Bad Nigger reveals how racialized sexuality produces the shift of blackness beyond boundaries of heterosexuality:

A white man promised his daughter when she turned sixteen he would

¹⁰⁰ Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle*. 141.

¹⁰¹ Abrahams, 112.

¹⁰² Abrahams, 142.

have her satisfied. After sending her several men who proved unsatisfactory, he finally sent up a black man who stayed and stayed. At midnight, while the father waited anxiously on the corner, his little son came down and cried out, “daddy, daddy, you know that black man you sent home, well he done satisfied sister, sister sue, mary lou, he done packed me [had anal intercourse] and he waitin’ on you, so get yo’ ass down there.”¹⁰³

Criticism of this tale has explicitly focused on the black male’s super sexuality, while ignoring the homosexual implications.¹⁰⁴ A reading of the traditional heterosexual characteristic of the Bad Nigger and the way we read him in African American culture acknowledges these implications precisely because they demonstrate the transgressing of sexual boundaries and the complications created from the intersections of race and sexuality. Black folk figures epitomize such knowledge. Yet, critical reflections of this fact in African American texts have gone unnoticed until now. Though the folk tales and figures stop short of offering serious critiques and criticism of the constructs of sexuality, African American writers who draw from black folklore and oral traditions use their skills to manipulate such figures and tales to disrupt racialized sexuality and the heterosexualization of desire in their fictional texts. Manifest trickster traits allow them to do so. As a mechanism of “cultural guerilla resistance,” these forms and their figures were black people’s “queer” discourse before “queer” could even be defined by the academic establishment.

¹⁰³ Lawrence Levine’s *Black Culture and Consciousness*, 333.

¹⁰⁴ Levine who records this tale from North Carolina does not make an attempt to explain or explore the significance of homosexuality in this text.

According to Hynes, the trickster's trait of messenger and imitator of the Gods stems from its uncertain or impure birth between humans and gods or gods and Gods. Subsequently, the trickster has "both divine and human traits...,can slip back and forth across the border between the sacred and the profane...He may bring something across the line from the gods to humans—be it a message, punishment, and essential cultural power, or even life itself" (40). In John A. Williams's novel, *The Man Who Cried I Am*, the author utilizes the trickster trait of imitating godly acts of re-creation to rebirth the black male. The novel's plot takes into consideration black male sexuality and identity during the Black Power movement of the 1960s, a period of exaggerated black masculinity in which the defining of voice and body for black males took shape. The theme and plot are relayed through historical, surreal, and naturalistic forums.

The protagonist of the novel, Max Reddick, a successful black writer, travels to Holland to bury a friend and make amends with his ex-wife. Aside from a reckoning with the past, Max's motivation for all that he does in the present is due in large part to the fact that he is dying from cancer. Like any human being faced with the dilemma of leaving this earth, Max seeks to make sense of his actions, his life, and his existence. The novel utilizes flashbacks as devices permitting Williams to examine Max's struggle to consistently re-create black masculinity and himself as a black man. Eventually, Max is provided with an unusual opportunity to really do something for his fellow brethren to validate his existence. In Holland, Max discovers a government plan to eradicate the existence of Blacks in the United States.

Although *The Man Who Cried I Am* has enjoyed tremendous critical acclaim, most of it focused on the use of the "King Alfred" plot and the parallel connections

between characters and real historical figures.¹⁰⁵ In a 1971 interview conducted by John O'Brien, William himself acknowledges, "I can't say that it pleases me too much....The acclaim has been political. I wouldn't mind so much if it was both political and literary. But the literary acclaim has been missing" (235). Undeniably critics do Williams, and the novel, a great injustice when they ignore the literary skill and depth that pulsates through the work. The very heart and mind of the novel are about the struggle for identity through cultural liberation. For the purposes of this dissertation, we are particularly concerned with how Williams explores the oral culture and folk tradition of African Americans to disrupt racialized sexuality, and in particular with his revision of the trope of the Bad Nigger.

In Williams's novel, the presence and overturning of racialized sexuality happens through the presentation of Max Reddick's sexual identity, in the exploration of interracial relations, and the character of Moses Boatwright. Max Reddick may not be a slave, but as a descendent, he must find a way to own himself, to exist beyond false representations. In order for Max to do so, Williams makes it pertinent that these discoveries take place in a distinctively African-American tradition of empowerment with the oral tradition. What eventually packs the punch, delivers the historical, surreal, and naturalistic feel is the vehicle of sexuality in the novel's oral structures.

As a descendant of an enslaved people, the protagonist Maxwell Reddick is confronted with the racist mentality and distorted representations of black and white people derived from slavery. The core of the text's rhetoric about black male identity

¹⁰⁵ Critics have speculated that the characters who are writers represent the black male literati of Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and even Williams himself. There has also been speculation of the political figures and who they might represent historically. See Earl Cash's *John A. Williams's: Evolution of a Black Writer* (New York: Third Press, 1975).

involves racialized sexuality in the construction of black masculinity through oral and folk means. One clear indicator of this rhetoric derives from William's interruption of the Bad Nigger type. Daryl Dance Cumber notes:

The term Bad Nigger from its beginning had positive connotations to certain black people and negative connotations to white people... The Bad Nigger is and always has been bad (that is villainous) to whites because he violates their laws and he violates their moral codes. He is bad (that is heroic) to the Black people who relish his exploits for exactly the same reasons.¹⁰⁶

Max's attempt to thwart the King-Alfred plot (eradication of black people in the U.S.) positions him in the role of a Bad Motherfucker/Bad Nigger. As we will later see, his relationships with black and white women will violate white moral codes. Although the Bad Nigger type and mentality may be briefly empowering for the black male alone, Williams suggest that it becomes less empowering for the African American community as a whole. Further, it fails to serve as a tenable identity for black males precisely because it allows identity to be formed from ideologies grounded in a racialized sexuality.

Cumber continues her analysis of the Bad Nigger by explaining that the Bad Nigger "asserts manhood through his physical destruction of men and through his sexual victimization of women."¹⁰⁷ These perceptions of the Bad Nigger produce many contradictions. On the one hand, the bourgeois perception, that is, the ideas that hold the

¹⁰⁶ *Shuckin' and Jivin'*, 224.

¹⁰⁷ *Shuckin' and Jivin'*, 225.

figure as a threat to communal values and well-being, produces a notable collusion with the discourse of racialized sexuality by accepting the black male as exaggerated and hypersexual brute. However, read as an under-class satire on the issue of othering the black body, the figure can subvert those stereotypes by calling attention to the “performance” of the figure.¹⁰⁸ The greatest feat of subversion of those stereotypes consists of dodging the discussion of “manhood” and the fixed trope of heterosexuality. Williams uses the folkloric beginnings of the Bad Nigger and tricks the established trope of the figure.

The fusion of orality with issues of sexuality takes place in the text to make the reading a physical, as well as intellectual, process. Max’s use of black slang to his white ex-wife, Margarit, also reveals the underlying importance of vernacular culture to the recreation of black males and sexuality, as we see in Max’s and Margarit’s exchanges:

“Roger? Roger is still Roger, what else?”

“Still macking in his own intellectual way?”

“Still what--?”

“Macking. Macking. Oh, Margarit, you know what macking is.”

“But no I don’t.” (18)

In one word, “macking,” Williams finds another way of making the reader aware of Max’s body, the self-gaze, and the oral tradition. The fact that the slang term causes miscommunication and that there is a relation of the word to the phonetic association of Max’s name, is an example of the subtle way in which the incorporated sexuality works in the oral tradition. It creates an awareness of physical and emotional differences. Max could have easily used “playboy,” “womanizer,” or any other typical and standardized

¹⁰⁸ See Mark Reid’s *Re-defining Black Film*.

word, but he chose macking. “Macking” or “mack” is not located in any SAE dictionary. The very meaning and existence of the word “macking” depends upon the culture.¹⁰⁹ Macks are found in some of the earliest blues and jazz works. Its origin is at once sexual, oral, and mythical. In African America culture, macking is a masculine process of finessing and finagling into a woman’s bed or coaxing financial support from women through sexual charisma and good looks.¹¹⁰ Hence, the mack stands as the baddest Bad Nigger. In the novel’s time period, macking symbolizes abundant black masculinity. Williams could have used another word; but to do so would have changed the direction of the conversation, and the image of the mack would not have been introduced and revealed to the reader in order to be later dismissed. The ideology of the macker as the low class pimp, rolling in a Cadillac, top down, with a gangster lean grooving is disrupted when used in conjunction with “intellectual.” Only in African-American literature would we find macking and intellectual in the same sentence: Sexualized black men are not supposed to be simultaneously worldly and intelligent. However, as Max explains the intellectual finesse of Roger in his mack- mode, the reader begins to see the developing struggle of Max’s identity.

As Williams illustrates through a phonological pun on Max’s full name, Maxwell Reddick, the mack is one image or gaze he must internally address. Williams re-examines the idea of naming in the oral tradition by stressing not only the meaning, but also the sound of that name to ascertain the specific meaning. The intonation of Max’s name becomes an issue when pronounced by Max’s ex-wife, the foreign, un-American,

¹⁰⁹ In French, a “maquereau” is a pimp—and in slang a “mac”.

¹¹⁰ Geneva Smitherman’s *Black Talk* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2000) 197. This text lists several definitions for mack 1) a man who can sweet-talk women. 2) A man who has lots of women; a PLAYA. 3) A man who manipulates women for money; a PIMP.

white Margarit who says “Mox” instead of Max, or “Macks” as Max phonetically corrects her later in the text (279). The effect of sound, that Williams highlights so insistently, makes the reader aware of the physical process of aural and oral communication rather than one that is purely intellectual. For the phonological syntax, the pronunciation of the name Macks Red-dick introduces the implied characteristics of Max’s personality while simultaneously hinting at the importance of sexuality to the novel and to the character. Max “macks well” with his heightened masculinity that is represented via his excited “red-dick.”

Conventional readings of the text might simply see Williams’s text as propaganda in favor of racialized sexuality, an excessive othered super sexuality of the black male. For example, Chester Hedgepeth Jr.’s *Theories of Social Action in Black Literature* (1986) attempts to prove that a Samson theory exists in *The Man Who Cried I Am*. In pleading his case, Hedgepeth states, “The tragedy of Williams’s novel lies...in the hero’s concept as a sexual athlete...Williams equates manhood with sexual prowess, a concept which reinforces the mythic supersexuality and predominantly biological nature of blacks” (31). Hedgepeth takes issue with an underlying myth at the center of Williams’s text, that of the Bad Nigger. While Hedgepeth’s critique may be correct in designating Williams’s presentation of Max’s sexuality as overt, we should question why this is purported to be a problem. Hedgepeth clearly feels that the open presentation of Max’s sexual escapades is tragic simply because any presentation of black male sexuality is viewed as either submitting to or contradicting the Bad Nigger façade. In this way, Hedgepeth’s criticism demonstrates the force of racialized sexuality and its corresponding representation of black male sexuality.

However, Williams's text suggests that a sexuality constructed in resistance to the "other" can still be co-opted and impacted by the dominating Western canon of sexuality. Instead of presenting a defensive alternative, Williams conveys the flexibility of blackness and sexuality revealed through a non-traditional view of the Bad Nigger. Max's name becomes important to understanding how the disruption of racialized sexuality must work in the novel with the Bad Nigger figure. Underscoring the importance of sound as indicated by the play on Max's name, Williams proposes that we must first endure a verbalization of racialized sexuality as a way to reduce the power of the open-secret. "Macks well" "Red-dick's" performance as the Bad Nigger—a hypermasculine and overwhelming sexual being—allows Maxwell Reddick to negotiate his individual identity while upsetting the white supremacist structure. Instead of silence and repression, Williams chooses sound, candor, and satire. A literal vocal expression, as presented in the pronunciation of Max's name, subtly counters the strategic silence and repression of the discourse of racialized sexuality.

Contrary to Hedgepeth's argument, Williams's writing works to topple these great myths, not by denying or ignoring them but in allowing them to consume Max. William utilizes bold representations of sexuality, rather than avoidance and shame in evoking Max's sexual prowess. Hedgepeth's argument works on the assumption that sexual prowess or aggressiveness in the black male is tragic and wrong simply because it fits a stereotype. However, the overt presentation of sexuality offers a connection between the trickster's imitating God and the act of creation, and the Bad Nigger figure. Williams employs the Bad Nigger's actions of transgressing racial, sexual, and gendered boundaries as a manifest trickster trait, that of the messenger/imitator of God, to assert

that Max's immersion into sexual liaisons is less about sexual prowess and more about what he learns about himself, what he can change about society, and the new creations that might evolve from his lessons.

As *Bad Nigger*, Max's sexual relationships with women demonstrate the way in which he reacts against or in collusion with the politics of a racialized sexuality in order to create himself. When Max's first love and fiancée, a black woman named Lillian, becomes pregnant, we are introduced to the complications of othered sexuality as it relates to black male-female relationships. The public domain of black sexuality is made even clearer as Max and Lillian disagree about whether to have the child or to abort it. Max wants to have the child and marry, but Lillian wants to have an abortion. Both Max and Lillian are forced to consider more than their individual wants to focus on the social impacts of their decision. Lillian thinks to herself of their argument: "What was that he was saying, that Negro women had the proud tradition of keeping their children, no matter what....What does this man understand?...Doesn't he know that Mister Charlie knew what he was doing when he took away everything except the ability to make love" (112). Lillian's comments politicize black intercourse and sexuality from a woman's point of view. Here again it seems important to remember that some black nationalists used the rhetoric of genocide to politicize black women's reproductivity. Here, rather than politicizing sexual reproduction and sexuality to counter genocide, Lillian claims that the sexuality of black communities becomes a tool of the white power structure to undermine the economic and social progress of the black community. After Lillian dies from complications of a botched abortion, Max asks in anger, "Baby didn't you understand? You overwhelmed with your blackness...Lillian see what the desire for old

American security got you, baby” (117). Max accuses Lillian of being the only one overwhelmed by her blackness, and his statement suggests that if they could have simply been two people in love, rather than two black people trying to love, they might have had a more successful relationship. However, as the text makes known, both Lillian and Max are overwhelmed with their blackness—even, and especially, during their acts of lovemaking:

And they knew each of them, the reality and the fantasy of what they were doing and their movements were gentle, as if with great sorrow.....After they held each other, and their orgasms were long and sweet as if to signify that the narrow place between what was real and what was not was the best place after all. (102)

The space between reality and false realities is a liminal orgasmic space for Max, where he need not worry about the conflicts of his real self and society’s construct of the black male. He consistently attempts to remake himself in his sexual relationships with women primarily because he knows that if he can disrupt his otherness/racialized sexuality, then he might be able to reinvent himself. The throes of orgasm briefly afford Max and Lillian a narrow space where they don’t have to think about their act of lovemaking as becoming politicized for both of them. During Max’s lovemaking with Lillian, in what should be an experience of pleasure, jubilation, and passion, sorrow intrudes. This sorrow arises from the way sexuality between black men and women has become a part of the public domain. The reality and fantasy of sexuality between black men and women makes it difficult for them to separate the politics and power of racialized sexuality from their most intimate connections.

Another crucial disruptive moment caused by the trickster's need to imitate god through acts of creation occurs in Max's relationship with the white woman, that is, his ex-wife Margarit. The relationship of Margarit and Max in the text delicately disrupts racialized sexuality, remaking the black male by forcing readers to examine the black male/white woman taboo. Once slaves were free, the images and gazes blacks endured, stemming from pre-slavery ideals (images of the black body as animalistic, evil, abnormally sexually aggressive) remained with them. Such misrepresentations continued and were reinforced during slavery because slaves were used as objects, breeders, and chattels. Emancipation heightened the images; freedom enforced a new myth, that of black men as rapists. Emancipation threatened to legally eliminate the racial border established by Jim Crow Laws. The myth of the black man as rapist permitted white men to promote a continual agenda of patriarchy in the name of protecting white womanhood, thus playing on the fear that once free, black men would now sexually force themselves on white women.¹¹¹ Deploying these representations and discourse, white males in power promoted fear and violence through their campaigns for lynching. Just as Jim Crow laws and the one-eighth blood rule created racialized sexuality of black women during and after slavery, the black male/white woman taboo became part of the post-emancipation discourse of racialized sexuality. As the case of Emmitt Till suggests, it was a successfully enforced discourse.¹¹² The mission then becomes one of getting over the destruction, replacing the otherness, stopping the pornotrope, and assuming a subject position in life and in literature.

¹¹¹ One need only read Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* or view D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* to understand the white representations of blackness being promoted in the U.S.

¹¹² See Stephen J. Whitefield's *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmitt Till* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

Williams doesn't simply create an opposite of the stereotype, he re-casts the representation with the knowledge that the myth has been shaping the representation and discourse of black masculinity and sexuality all along. The most obvious indicator of this feat comes from Max's marriage with Margarit, who becomes the wife that Lillian could never be to Max. In a vivid description mirroring the earlier significance of Max and Lillian having intercourse, Max sees his relationship with Margarit as another way to rebuke racialized sexuality:

Now he would do it, he would become recreated as a Negro in the process. The black anonymity would be gone. The old myths would be gone. The old myths goaded by old hatreds would make him highly visible, more dangerous. (339)

The old myths that Max refers to call attention to such folk idioms as "the only thing that a black woman can do is lead me to a white woman."¹¹³ Max engages himself with the representations of othered black sexuality, but he does not consume them. Of course, we might readily accept a Fanon-like reading of this moment for Max. In *Black Skin/White Masks*, Fanon suggests that the relationship of the black man and white woman is about the desire to be white: "by loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man" (63). Subsequently, a more sexualized description ensues: "When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine" (63). According to Fanon, the black man reaches for the white woman to validate his existence as a human being. While this might very well be a valid reading for some inter-racial relationships, Fanon's psychoanalytical discourse in

¹¹³ *Shuckin' and Jivin'*, 214

Black Skin/White Masks articulates a sobbing school of black male victimhood that can only be rescued via white women.

Yet, Williams shows that Max's marrying Margarit does not provide him with the fictional validation and stability that Fanon suggests occurs with the affliction of internalized racism. As Max explains his decision, he knows "his possible vulnerability, with Margarit at his side, would be publicized, his manhood put on the line as never before, for now it would always be challenged. The *boyhood* that came with being Negro was over" (339). Max's claim undermines all traditional discourses of race and gender. As he sees it, the very construction of black manhood does not hinge on taking the white woman because, in Max's case, manhood becomes equal to that of an authentic blackness that embraces black over all that is white. This is why Williams makes the italic distinction between manhood and boyhood. "Boyhood" very aptly connects to the white Kantian social construction of the black male as Negro¹¹⁴ that helps to establish the racial discourse about black males and white women, and Max knows it. He remarks of the situation:

Somewhere it was all a lie, what the white man said black men should not do, and what black men deep within their own hearts came to believe themselves. It was a lie because no black man anywhere in the world where newspapers, magazines, television and film existed could do anything *but* move unconsciously throughout his life toward whitey Aphrodite, the love and sex object, raping it when he could, loving it when he was allowed to and marrying it when he dared to. (340)

¹¹⁴ See previous discussion of overwriting the African body with that of the Negro in Chapter Three.

Representations of white females as the ultimate ideal or goal of beauty and validation bombard all people of color on a daily basis. Max ponders whether there is a way to separate the subliminal messages of white female superiority and internalized racism from a black male's choice to be involved with a woman of another race. The reader must ascertain if Max is with Margarit because he has internalized the discourse of racialized sexuality or because he has rejected it. For Max, manhood hinges on how authentically black he can be. His marriage to a white woman places his blackness, hence his version of maleness, in jeopardy. To accept a Fanonian reading is to accept the rhetoric of black male victimization, of the Negro, instead of the African or the Black who exists before white influence. Max is not like the those still engaged in Negro boyhood:

Too many times,...he had been approached by black men, his sleeve tugged and the question asked: "That chick got a *friend*?" Or: "Max, now you know I like ice cream *too*." Or the crude passes were made, the ones that revealed that many black men, whatever they said to the contrary, had not yet jettisoned what the white man had said about them and the white women. (340)

Max does not accept that his "black masculinity" be tied to bedding a white woman because he knows that to do so conspires with the problematic excessive bodying of the black male. The Negro accepts the rhetoric of white values, but the black (male or female) rejects them. In Williams's characterization of Max, the folk becomes a way to move Max from racial victimhood to angry rejection. Max's relationship with Margarit serves as the ultimate Bad Nigger act, a rejection of white supremacist values of

blackness and womanhood. His act of marrying Margarit is less about internalized racism and more about moving from Negro to black Bad Nigger. In doing so, he upsets the logic of white supremacy and the established codes. As Max points out, the old myths now situate him as dangerous. He will not fear but be feared because he has stepped out of established boundaries by marrying Margarit.

Furthermore, Max's relationship with Margarit does not follow the psychological pattern that Fanon suggests for black men who have relationships with white women because Max had already attempted to re-create himself through his relationship with his first and black fiancée, Lillian. At one point Max asks, "If there had been no Lillian would there be a Margarit?" (339). Clearly, if we went with a Fanonian reading of the Max/Margarit relationship, the conquest of the white woman to validate existence would not be subordinated to Max's preoccupation with the black female, Lillian. Years after Lillian's death, Max, more involved in the King Alfred Plot and closer to death himself, realizes the connection between the two most significant women in his life: "Margarit looked so much like Lillian. True, a bleached Lillian. Strange after all these years. Have I been looking for Lillian all this time?" (281). Lillian, before Margarit, teaches Max everything he needed to know about the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality. He simply did not realize it at the time. Before she aborts the baby and as she contemplates marrying Max, Lillian rehashes the damaging results of racial discourse: "...and she loved Max. But he was black. Of course he was black, but Negro men, they had a way of starting out with a bang with the long, long dream, but ending with a whisper, so beaten were they simply because they had dared to dream in the first place" (103). Lillian's repetitive focus on Max being black is very telling. Her words reveal

that despite the fact that they are both of the same race, their relationship of black female-male relationships remains locked in a public domain, and that their relationship was just as socially and politically torrid as his relationship with Margarit. If Max had been the Bad Nigger that he had been with Margarit, both she and Max might have made it through the complications of politicized black love. As the Bad Nigger, Max could have ignored or exploded the boundaries established for them by a white supremacist system. Margarit may serve as the vehicle for Max to assume the Bad Nigger persona, but Max's relationship with Lillian teaches him how.

In each relationship, Max attempts to move away from racialized sexuality to re-create himself, rather than simply trying to become a white man as Fanon has posited. These two women of different races serve as mechanisms for Max's desire to create a space in which he can move outside the previously designated space of an othered sexuality. Williams is very aware of the implications of Max's act for his attempt at self-creation. Though initially Max may be able to confront himself and those old myths of racialized sexuality in his relationship with Margarit, he cannot overturn the Western canons of sexuality through his relationships with her or Lillian because each is compromised by the white patriarchal legacy of heterosexual intercourse and desire. Nevertheless, these relationships afford him the opportunity to navigate through racial and gendered discourse to self-create his purpose and being. Further, William's text subversively offers ways for Max to overturn racialized sexuality by dismissing the ideologies of heterosexual discourse.

The *Man Who Cried I Am* is not explicitly concerned with articulating an agenda of homosocial relationships and homosexual desires, but through the characterization of

Ganor Byron¹¹⁵ and Max's comments on love, the heterosexualization of desire is dismissed in small ways throughout the text. Max's initial comments on marriage indicate a critique of the heterosexualization of desire and love: "Love. Marriage. A thing for the poor (natives also) to keep them happy, while kings screwed themselves to death or got screwed to death...But is the bible concerned with man-woman love? No" (100). Further, Max questions the very idea of "man-woman love." In a later discussion race and love, the narrator explains, "most white people fell in love (?) and married because of proximity to each other. Most black people fell in love (?) and married because of proximity to each other" (340). The reality or existence of love, as the narrator notes, is questionable in any context, but the depth of Max's cynicism stems from his understanding that romantic love cannot possibly exist in the revolution and liberation of black people. Though he doesn't explicitly state it, he does suggest that some other love exists. In the case of Max, racialized sexuality makes the heterosexualization of desire a political and public solution for black liberation and empowerment, but it does not allow him something more individual and personal. William's most striking dismissal of the heterosexualization of desire and racialized sexuality can be seen in a minor but notable character, Moses Boatwright.

Moses Boatwright presents readers with the vision of how a continuous tricking of the Bad Nigger trope can disrupt traditional ideologies. In the forms of the grotesque and the surreal, the reader learns the importance of finding a new space of sexuality when Max meets the killer/prophet Moses Boatwright. Moses, an Ivy-league educated black man, sits in prison for killing and eating an anonymous white male. Boatwright's act

¹¹⁵ In the novel, Byron, a gay male, tells Max the story of an alien race of men who needed women only to procreate. See p. 189.

significantly centers around the “orgasmic” joy he attains in relating to Max his murderous experience and in conveying the taste of eating the white male, implicitly finding specific pleasure in eating the penis. Boatwright becomes the quintessential bad nigger breaking laws and taking care of the white man through physical violence. The cause of Moses’s act seems to lie deep-seated in the myth of the supersexuality of the black male, and of the black male as brute and rapist. In “Sex in Black and White,” an excerpt from Williams’s *Flashbacks: A Twenty Year Diary of Writing* (1973), he reveals historical facts to review the complications behind the taboo of interracial love and sex:

Note these reports, the first from the *Washington Eagle* for July 16, 1921 of a lynching in Moultrie, Georgia, and the second from the *Baltimore Afro-American* from March 16, 1935, of a lynching in Florida: “They tore the Negro’s clothing off before he was placed in a waiting automobile.... The Negro was unsexed and made to eat a portion of his anatomy which had been cut away.... In the case of Claude Neal, a mob...dismembered his genitals and stuffed them into his mouth to compel him to eat his own flesh.” (26)

Although the issue of lynching never directly enters into the text, it is there in the underlying myths, in the forbidden tone of Max’s relationship with the white Margarit, and especially in the interest Boatwright’s psychiatrist has as to why his victim was a white male. Williams revises the grotesqueness of Africa America’s lynching past for a reason. Through his act of murder, Boatwright reverses the past, shifting the white male power position of lynch mob who lynches, mutilates, and dismembers to that of the lynched and dismembered. Boatwright’s act symbolically recognizes the white male as

the brute and rapist, and to that end exposes “the open-secret” of racialized. Through Boatwright, Williams can also dislocate the myth of the black male’s hypersexuality and his ill-defined psychosocial reasoning for desiring/raping the white female.

The racial and psychoanalytical implications of castration in Boatwright’s act are in no way underplayed in the text:

Boatwright said...“The psychiatrist asked me if I liked to eat it.”

Max scribbled hastily. Boatwright was looking at him with a sly expression. “Eat What?”

Boatwright shifted his cigarette into his other hand. His eyes lit up, then clouded. “Cunnilingus, fellatio—” He smiled to the floor.... “And he asked if I’d ever done those things and I gave him my answer. I knew where he was going, to Freud, naturally, and he had been reading psychiatric studies of Negro life, he told me. Why was it a white man, not a black man I ate, don’t you see?” (57)

With the mention of Freud, the psychiatrist wished to place Boatwright’s act in the narrative of the Oedipal complex that suggests in order for the black male (child) to achieve his sexual or gendered subjectivity, he must displace the white male (father). In adapting the Oedipal complex to African American criticism critics imply that the model of the Oedipal complex articulates that the black male is the powerless son of the white Oedipal father, the white woman is the mother and wife to the white Oedipal father.¹¹⁶ In order to realize or be accorded power, the black male must not act on his incestuous

¹¹⁶ In “Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance.” Screen 29. 4 (Autumn 1988): 66-70 Manthia Diawara asserts that “the narrative of miscegenation...links isomorphically with the Oedipal narrative of incestuous desire, an assault on the Symbolic Order of the father which merits the most serious punishment.”

desires for the mother. He must always work to please his father by accepting the legacy of patriarchy. If he displeases the father in any way, he can be reprimanded through castration, a loss of power.¹¹⁷ Whereas, we may have been inclined to see Max's relationship with Margarit taking on the tones of an Oedipal argument, Boatwright's reference to Freud and the black male places the reader directly into a conversation concerned with rejecting Freud's Oedipal complex as it concerns the black male, and hence, a rejection of racialized sexuality.

In his representation of the intersection of race and subjectivity, Williams reveals an ironic play on this racial Oedipal myth. He revises the claim that for the black male to construct himself he must kill and replace the father so that he can be with the white mother. Though Boatwright's murder of the white male adheres to the suggestion that the black male kills the white father to take his place, he does not do it simply to be with the white mother. Williams revises this part of the myth as it relates to interracial relationships simply because the Oedipal complex is compromised by racialized sexuality. The Oedipal complex, as it relates to black male subjectivity, assumes that the object of desire is always the white woman/mother. The emphasis placed on the relation between Boatwright's act of eating the penis and the act of fellatio undermines the heterosexualization of desire derived from wanting the white mother. Boatwright does not desire any woman, let alone a white woman. Disturbing the heterosexualization of desire in this way allows Williams to conceive of blacks gendered male as separate from the brute/rapist representation.

¹¹⁷ In addition to Diawara, Arthur Flanigan Saint-Aubin's "Testeria: The Dis-ease of Black Men in White Supremacist, Patriarchal Culture." *Callaloo* 17.4 (1994) 1054-1073.

Through the character of Moses Boatwright, Williams upsets the continuity of these models by implying that Boatwright's comments and actions are not about buying into notions of white society, wanting acceptance by the white father and patriarchal structure, or an incestuous desire for the white woman, but, it is instead a rejection of those presumed ideals. In order to cut himself off from that space in which race is sexualized and sexuality is racialized, he bites off the primary signifier of the discourse of racialized sexuality, the white phallus. In a sense, he is able to subvert what would be the symbolic order grounded in the father's punishment for his incestuous desires—castration. As Boatwright does not fear castration, he becomes a threat to the symbolic order of the father and the heterosexualization of desire. Since Boatwright is now free from the heterosexualization of desire and racialized sexuality, he can move beyond the representation of black brute.

Williams uses Boatwright as an introduction to the myth of the black male as brute. Aesthetically, he employs Boatwright as the messenger and imitator of God. Williams conceives of Boatwright's act as creative and a form of text that Max should read for his own subjectivity as a black man. Evident from his name, Moses Lincoln Boatwright, he is the messenger and key to freedom from the white gaze and racialized sexuality. Boatwright's purpose seems to be to reflect back Max's own confusion about himself. Boatwright's endeavor to become a philosopher echoes Harry's statement about being a black writer. He asks Max, "Ever heard of a Negro philosopher?" (56). It's as if the existence of the myths of the black man negates other possibilities of being. Like the earlier juxtaposition that comes with Roger being an intellectual macker, we can understand the complications that arise with Boatwright. Intellectual personas of black

males are replaced and dislocated when the body, a fictionalized representation of the black brute, dominates the male's existence.

The fact that Moses Boatwright, a thinking man—the Negro philosopher—has an orgasm each time he reveals his story, serves as evidence that his enjoyment comes not simply from killing, but also from devouring (physically, orally) what consumed him throughout his entire life – mythologizing it for Max. The reality of Boatwright killing and eating a white man suggests that he wanted to devour the very thing that made him ugly and abominable, white America's propagation of degrading and destructive images of the black man. Boatwright wanted to eat away at the myths and their creators just as they'd done to black men for so long. He takes the heart and genitals because "isn't that what life is all about, clawing the heart and balls out of the other guy?" (65). Williams fashions Boatwright as a metaphor for black male existence in white America. The killing of white persons and Western tradition isn't at hand, but the ingesting of white gazes and Western cultural traditions, which work to negate and destroy black existence, is an issue.

As a Harvard educated intellectual, Moses has a grotesque image of himself before he commits murder because his existence as a Negro philosopher is not possible. Moses sees himself as evil, not because he killed a man and ate him, but because he is:

...an abomination. Ugly, black, cutting back my thoughts so I
wouldn't embarrass people, being superbly brilliant for the right
people....But those acts (killing and cannibalism) had more in them,
This world is an illusion, Mr. Reddick, but it can be real. (58)

Illusion is precisely what hinders Moses from being the person he knows himself to be. As long as white supremacy maintains its power through delusionary ideologies (racial discourse/racism) over the black masses, he will never be able to move outside those apparitions. Moses's statement about illusion and reality echoes the sentiments of the love-making scene between Max and Lillian, but Moses's act is more radical. It gives him god-like power—the ability to take and give life. When Moses eats the heart and genitalia of the white male, he is able to destroy the phallic impaired constructs of gender and sexuality by destroying its primary signifier. In the process, he is able to create himself. The act of killing and cannibalization turns on observation and creation so that he can remake himself from what he sees. As a racialized black male, Moses recognizes that his existence does not matter in the human structure and logic of the U.S. He opts for another structure closer to his own subjectivity—that of trickster.

It is clear that Williams depends upon the Baad Nigger figure and its trickster foundations of messenger and imitator of God for a wholistic identity for Max, one that does not fragment identity based on gender, sexuality, and race. In place of the violent acts of Morrison's 8-Rock Men and Boatwright, Williams composes Max Reddick as a trickster and god by making the character a professional writer. The brilliance of making Max a professional writer lies in the fact that he can use his art to counter the continuous fictions of black males as he attempts to become not simply a writer, but a black writer. Max's occupation as a writer will allow him to confront issues of race, sexuality, and language in one fell swoop, simply because it involves both observation and creation.

Williams's secondary character, Harry Ames—friend and writing mentor of Max—suggests why it is so important to vocally challenge myths when he says:

In our society which is white—we are intruders they say—there has got to be something inherently horrible about having the sickness and weakness of society described by a person who is the victim of them; for if he, the victim, is capable of describing what they have believed non-existent, then they, the members of the majority, must choose between living the truth...and the lie. (49)

As writers, Harry and Max possess the ability to change representations of black peoples, specifically black males. Harry's comments document the otherness associated with black males. His words seem to echo Jan Mahommed's thesis of the open-secret discussed in the previous chapter. In this way, writing also positions Max and Harry as Bad Niggers going against systems of white oppression. They ensure that they will examine white society's choice to live the truth or the lie.

Max challenges his otherness in writing. Honest and passionate writing allows him to observe his place in the world and to create from that point. In the text, there are certain eruptions of mumbo-jumbo, non-standard words used by Max and his friend Harry Ames:

“Streevus mone on the reevus cone,” Max said enjoying the poolhall, jitterbug, non-sensical word game, a game whose meaning was conveyed not by the words, because they had no meaning, but by the tone of the voice, the inflection....Ames closed his eyes and said “Weeby on the streeby and a dit-dit-datty-dit.” (43)

The use of words and language are crucial elements to these two writers. Obviously, as Max points out, it is a rhythm-based word game, but Harry understands Max and Max understands Harry. There is no misunderstanding as there was with Margarit. However, what happens when the world is full of Margarit-like miscommunications and less Harry-like understandings of language? What happens, as Max says, to “words and ways of using them that no newspaper” can ever use? (47). What happens to the meanings derived from tone and inflection of those words?

Like Roger, intellectual macker, the black male writer positioned very much as Bad Nigger, overturns and reworks his culture to find the dislocated body and lost words for his subjectivity through vernacular culture. Max’s anger and confusion cause him to question himself as a writer: is he a freak? Harry makes the question rhetorical, another sign of orality in the text, marked by its open-ended and ambiguous nature: “Harry laughed. ‘Well, you’re colored and you wonder how come you’re a writer because there is no tradition of colored writers. Are we related to some ancient Yoruba folklorist, to Phyllis Wheatley?’” (48). In this discussion of why they are writers, Max and Harry speculate on the lack of tradition for colored writers, specifically novelists, but they come to understand, with references to Yoruba peoples, folklore, and Wheatley, that oral forms help provide them with a foundation. Much later in the novel, Max discovers a way, a vehicle, and a body—bee-bop.¹¹⁸ He finds himself “wanting to get away to write...to do with the novel what Charlie Parker was doing to music, tearing it up and remaking it; basing it on nasty, nasty blues” (209). The connection between writing, identity, and

¹¹⁸ Jazz Bee-bop has proven to be a worthy strategic tool for exonerating jazz and blues from the “Al Jolson-Pat Boone- tin-pan alley” cultural appropriation of jazz by the white mainstream, positioning those creating and performing the art as Bad Niggers. Many of the male artists associated with jazz bee-bop, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, epitomized most of the folk-heroic social and sexual character traits of bad niggers. Also note Carby’s discussion of Miles Davis in *Race Men* (135-168).

existence is clear. Williams's aesthetic in the novel then is birthing into existence the black male with black art, and there is no better way to do so than to challenge the things that those in power have always utilized to push black people into nonexistence—language and sexuality. The character Maxwell Reddick becomes a trickster figure, a god, who can create and recreate the world through words. The question that Williams answers in his texts as to whether those same techniques can be used to recreate ideologies about black males and their sexuality is a resounding yes. The foundations of Max's new identity as a black male will be delivered through a continuous interruption of racialized sexuality in the book with a text of his own design or from his own culture—vernacular and folk.

II

While Toni Morrison and John A. Williams were each concerned about male-female relationships and racialized sexuality in their works, neither completely divorces their tropes of Bad Niggers from heterosexual assumptions. In *Paradise*, the very establishing of the town of Ruby hinges on the 8-Rock Men's ability to "bad nigger" their way into a town of their own by upsetting white supremacist beliefs and the violent exploitation or suppression of the black female. In addition, though Boatwright's cannibalistic ingestion of the white penis mocks heterosexual assumptions, Max as a Bad Nigger stays well within the heterosexual trope for the figure. In order to view an absolute inversion of heterosexual tropes in folk figures and tricksterism, we must go to Ann Allen Shockley's *The Black and White of It*. The collection of short stories destroys heterosexual assumptions in racial and sexual discourse in a variety of ways. Previous discussion shows that, in addition to the detrimental effects on racial identity, the sexualization of race impacts the formation of sexual identity. However, JanMohammed's theory about the deployment of race and sexuality very often appears to make heterosexual assumptions. The considerations of how racialized sexuality focuses on the crossing of racial boundaries by white men with black women does not take us far enough into the concerns of sexual discourse. While authors of Black Literature have been able to use trickster aesthetics in their writings to help overcome the fundamental problems of a racialized sexuality, very few authors can overturn racialized sexuality without submitting to the heterosexualization of desire. By revising the Queen B figure and engaging trickster elements of shape-shifting and situation inversion to do so, Shockley avoids the trap of the heterosexualization of desire.

While the Bad Nigger focuses specifically on the male in black culture, we can also find several complements to this figure that essentially are derivative of one major figure, the Queen B, for black females. As this chapter will fully discuss, there are three intersecting tropes of the Queen B figure. The initialization of Queen B allows “B” to serve as a representation of Queen Bee, Queen Bulldagger, or Queen Bitch, or all of these at once. As with the black rhetorical tradition, the explicit meaning of Queen B can only be obtained via the context in which the word is used, rather than the sound.

Understanding the mutability of the figure, rather than fixing it in a specific heterosexual frame, allows us to understand how it complicates the issue of racialized sexuality. As indicated in chapter five, “excluding the African American family from the heterosexual nuclear family form identifies African American sexuality as the locus of anxieties about the stability of a white heteronormative social order... African American culture has always been deemed contrary to the norms of heterosexuality and patriarchy.”¹¹⁹ Any use of the Queen B figure, as the Queen Bee, Queen Bulldagger, or Queen Bitch, emphasizes and embraces the destruction of the white heteronormative social order, and the dismissal of it for its binary canons of sexuality. The Queen Bee myth alludes to “badness” (heroicness) for black females. The folk myth presents female heroism through sexual desire, sexual freedom and independence, and violence

The first figuration of Queen B, the Queen Bee myth, draws from ideas on insect mating behavior.¹²⁰ However, like many of its animal trickster tales, African American

¹¹⁹ Ferguson, 5.

¹²⁰ As is the case in all colonies of social bees, only the sexually mature female honeybee is the queen. When she flies away from the nest to mate, she gives off an odor (a pheromone) that the drones find irresistible, and they follow her. The streamlined queen flies faster and higher than the majority of the short, stocky drones. As she soars upward, many of them give up the pursuit. From the few drones that can

culture quite adeptly adopts the tale of the Queen Bee for its own rationalization of racialized black female sexuality: “You know the Queen Bee kills the male after she finishes with him. That’s right, use him and kill him...Yes, wham, bam, thank you sir.”¹²¹ In this brief folk tale, black women telling the tale switch the tradition of badness from the male to the female. Queen Bee’s badness stems from the violation of moral and legal laws. Whereas the Bad Nigger unleashes his reign of badness upon women and white communities, the Queen Bee releases her reign of badness against men. In Gayl Jones’s *Eva’s Man*, the myth of the Queen Bee, plays an important role in the search for identity of the main character, Eva Medina. Right before orally castrating her male lover to become a Queen B herself, Eva tells him: “There was a woman...called the queen bee. I don’t even know what her real name was, but she was a real good-looking woman, too. People used to say she was marked, because she had three men, and each of them died, you know...I guess she was sure too, because she met this man she was really in love with and killed herself ” (73). One can’t help but notice the similarities between the Queen Bee figure and Annie Christmas. The independence and assertiveness of the figures and their acts of suicide as a solution for their indelible subjectivity positions them as one and the same. However, unlike Annie, Queen Bee’s persona hinges on her ability to get men to make love to her, knowing they would die (53, 142). In any Queen Bee myth, sexuality becomes a weapon to be wielded for protection.

follow her as she continues on a rising, whirling flight, she chooses one to couple with. After mere seconds her mate falls dying to the ground, and she chooses another. *Britannica Online*, vers. 98.2, Apr. 1998, Encyclopedia Britannica, 8 Feb 2002 <http://www.eb.com>.

¹²¹ Daryl Dance Cumber. *Honey Hush* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987) 24.

Queen Bee tales present the continued image of the black female as hypersexual, and in a manner akin to that of the Bad Nigger, we can see the remnants of racialized sexuality in one such Queen Bee folk moment:

LeaElla and Deal were hanging out they daily wash one morning, when Deal was moved to ask LeaElla, a personal question. "Ella, I don't mean to pry. But girl, I been wondering, why did you have seven children by different mens and not marry a one o' them?"

LeaElla snorted, "A man won't gonna make a fool of me twice."¹²²

Folklore entailing Queen Bee imagery reflects the concerns of the black female as a matriarch who has no need for the black male. In its most denigrating critique and evolution, the queen bee becomes the welfare mother who has children by different male partners, although she never marries one. The above tale comically depicts another black woman's profound bewilderment over why another woman has allowed such a thing to take place. The answer given, wrought with dry wit, compels readers to question the morals of the woman. LeaElla's response indicates the need to exercise freedom and to establish the independence of her sexuality and body without worrying about the moral implications. Her response also suggests that the institution of marriage allows men to make fools of women. As we saw with Harriet Jacobs, Annie Christmas, and Harlan Eagleton, black females' suspicion of the social contract of marriage seems very valid. LeaElla's concerns are no different. Apparently, LeaElla was previously married, but as she notes, marriage offers no security or convenience to her or her children. Though LeaElla is the mother of seven children, her dismissal of the validation of marriage

¹²² *Honey Hush*, 349.

indicates the Queen Bee's systematic rejection of heterosexual assumptions about male/female relationships and morals.

In another tale, the trickery and sexual badness of the Queen Bee figure leads to her downfall. In "That's Why I Poisoned Ya , Honey," a woman lies on her death bed confessing her sins to her husband:

She say, "But sumpin' else I want to tell you, honey. I haven't been true to you. I've had other men. Every time you'd go away in the morning, another man would come in, and he'd spend the day with me. And just 'bout time for you to come home, he'd just be leaving"....And the husband said, "Honey, huhn, huhn, I know that's why I poisoned ya!"¹²³

The Queen B representation in the folk seems as ambiguous as that of the Bad Nigger. A positive view of Queen B figures can be ascertained by doing simple feminist readings of these tales. In each tale, the figure works to be economically and sexually independent and free. The act of violently killing the male functions as a defensive mechanism for black females whose independence might be in jeopardy due to the ideologies of patriarchy embraced by males. Like the Bad Nigger, the Queen B's use of the male becomes a way to retaliate for economic exploitation and persecution.

As with the Bad Nigger, the Queen B figure occupies several spaces of sexual possibilities, but the trope of heterosexuality in the figure needs to be tricked and revised in order to use those other spaces to disrupt binaries in non-folk discourses of gender and sexuality. The sexual liminality of the Queen B figure comes from more than the presentation of exaggerated sexual prowess in the black female; it reverberates in the agenda of the Queen B's dismissal or rejection of a consistent male presence in her life.

¹²³ *Shuckin' and Jivin'*, 149.

In any configuration of the Queen B figure, male companionship does not take priority for the woman. While portraying a superficial heterosexual agenda, Queen B implicitly embraces a homosocial organization of community, and its subjectivity flirts with the boundaries of heterosexual/homosexual subjectivities. Interestingly enough, perhaps the aversion to monogamous male-female relationships leads critics to also suggest that the construction of the black lesbian serves as another evolution of the Queen B. in black fiction.

SDiane¹²⁴ Bogus's "Queen B in African American Literature" attempts to draw a unique and constrained connection between "Queen B" and lesbianism. Bogus states, "Queen B is a euphemism for Queen Bulldagger or Bulldyker. Judy Grahn traces the linguistic and historical etymology of the word, to the cunning female warrior of A.D. 61, Boudica (pronounced boo-uh-dikey-ay), a leader/Queen of the Celtic" (275). This particular Queen led an uprising against Roman imperialism. Bogus then goes onto tie this etymology to the black community by suggesting that black cowboy Bill Picket brings the word bulldogger, from his 1923 movie, *The Bulldogger*, into black culture. She asserts, "in time, 'bulldogger' mutated into bulldagger" (275). Bogus's assessment of Queen B appears problematic in two ways: it lacks a strong foundational connection to the community, and it fails to acknowledge other representations of the Queen B figure, not specified as Bulldagger, in black folk culture. As we will see in a later assessment of Shockley's "Sapphic Sisters," Bogus's Queen B etymology is no more valid for black lesbians than the representation of Sapphos is for black lesbians. Further, the Bill Picket connection excludes knowledge that before 1923, there already existed in African

¹²⁴ This is not an error. The author spells her name exactly as I have recorded it.

American folk culture notions of the Queen B that vacillate between heterosexual and homosexual representation.

However, this is not to suggest that Bogus's claim that the Queen B represents lesbian sexuality in the African American community is totally incorrect. While Bogus's etymological frame appears weak, we can accept her representation that Queen B implies bulldagger/lesbianism. It acts as an African American oral mechanism of initializing the names or titles seen as too taboo to speak. Though Bogus's spelling of Queen "B" differs from the folk tale spelling Queen "Bee," it should be noted that in a culture based on orality and aurality, there is no difference in the pronunciations of the two titles. Further, I am suggesting that Queen B and Queen Bee simply operate as two sides of the same coin. A trickster-trope reading of the Queen Bee and Queen B figures in black culture finds that these figures do not represent a fixed sexual identity for African American women, heterosexual or homosexual. According to the trickster aesthetics of shape-shifting, the two figures essentially serve as branches of a Queen B figure that is meant to represent multiple black female sexualities, rather than the fixed definitions of heterosexuality or homosexuality assigned by Bogus and located in long-established heterosexual readings of the figure. In recognition of this fact, further spelling of the figure's title will alternate between Queen Bee (heterosexual), Queen B(ulldagger), or will be represented with Queen B to highlight the fluctuating position of the figure in African American culture. Rather than being a promoter of the binaries, Queen B serves as a designation that other possibilities outside the binary exist. This interpretation of Queen B can be deemed valid once we remember that like the Bad Nigger, the Queen B's power and heroism stems from her rejection of heteronormative patterns of behavior for

“women.” Revoking the term lesbian, the black female with same sex-desires becomes the ultimate evolution of the Queen B. Queen B, like Audre Lorde’s word Zami,¹²⁵ replaces the term lesbian (white female same-sex desire) with a term that can unname and resist fixed definitions for black female same-sex desires. Ann Allen Shockley reveals the complexities of the figure and what it can offer to disturb the continuities of established sexual boundaries. Through trickster machinations, Shockley revises the historical heterosexual images of the Queen Bee and the racially tainted imagery of Queen B(ulldagger) or lesbian through queer politics, and constructs the Queen B.

Through the practice of shape-shifting, trickster “can alter his shape or bodily appearance in order to facilitate deception. Not even the boundaries of species or sexuality are safe, for they can be readily dissolved by the trickster’s disguises and transmorphisms.”¹²⁶ Typically, we might assign shape-shifting to a temporal fluctuation in the construction of gender and race, but Shockley assigns shape-shifting to disrupting the construction of black heterosexuality. Shockley documents that when one is “gay” and black, shape-shifting, aka passing, becomes a necessary art. She complicates the issue by then incorporating the trickster element of situation-invertor—connecting the taboo of interracial sexual relationships to her shape-shifting agenda. In this way, Shockley is able to address racialized heterosexuality, homophobia of the black community, and the less depicted racialization of homosexuality.

¹²⁵ See Sagri Dhairyan’s “Racing the Lesbian, Dodging White Critics” in *The Lesbian Postmodern*. Ed. Aura Dean (New York: Cu Press, 1994) for an insightful discussion of black female same sex desire and the Western and Eurocentric Construction of lesbianism. Like Lorde, Dhairyan questions the category of lesbian and suggests that re-naming it creates controversy among white gay and lesbian critics.

¹²⁶ Hynes, 36.

Reviews of Shockley's texts explain why this particular trickster trope is necessary. In *Black World*, Frank Lamont Phillips begins a critique of Shockley's work that opens the door for more negative, but less critical criticism. Phillips argues that Shockley "should know better" than to write work of this nature. He goes on to assert, "This bullshit should not be encouraged!" (xii). Phillips's comments are not uncommon for black men reviewing black women's writing during the black women writers' literary renaissance of the late twentieth century. Shockley's work has also received negative criticism from lesbian critics such as Jewelle Gomez. In discussing several works by Shockley, Gomez claimed that "Shockley's writing, in addition to trivializing Black Lesbians and their sexuality, paints a picture of an unremittingly irrelevant feminist movement...The main flaw in Shockley's work is not dissimilar from that of her white counterparts: the inability to place a Black Lesbian in a believable cultural context in an artful way."¹²⁷ Gomez, a premier activist for racial and sexual concerns, accuses Shockley's work of not being black enough. Gomez's comments are problematic since they come some three years after the publication of Shockley's *The Black and White of It*. This set of short stories presents counter evidence to Gomez's claims by asking the reader to question what constitutes a *believable cultural context* for black lesbians. Gomez's comments suggest that there exists only one specific context for black lesbians, or that there is a simplistic model or authentic lesbian for black communities. Though others

¹²⁷ "A Cultural Legacy Denied and Discovered: Black Lesbians in Fiction by Women" *HomeGirls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. Ed. Barbara Smith. (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983): 114.

had been quick to address Phillips and Gomez's comments,¹²⁸ Shockley herself, demonstrated that her writing lends itself to and can withstand criticism of this kind.

When asked who she writes for, Shockley responded,

I write for anybody who elects to read my work. I do this with the hope that the message I am trying to impart, for there is always one, will come through clearly, and cause readers to think more perceptively, try to initiate changes, learn to accept different races, as well as individuals within them.¹²⁹

Shockley's aesthetics of shape-shifting and inverting situations is one way in which the author can help readers think more perceptively and initiate changes. The remainder of this chapter proves that, in accordance with Lorde and Dhairyan, Shockley's set of short stories presents itself as not interested in the white social construct of black female same-sex desire—the lesbian (white) darkened to “black lesbian.” Shockley's work positions itself in a Zamian model with its particular twists to the black female folk figure, Queen B.

In reference to Shockley's collection of short stories *The Black and White of It*, Nellie McKay commented that the collection of short stories demonstrates Shockley's “expertise as a good crafts woman,” and that Shockley is an author “who really cares about the conditions of women's lives.”¹³⁰ Though the entire collection of stories attempts to meet head-on the issues of racism, lesbian politics and feminism, three short

¹²⁸ See Rita B Dandridge's “Male Critics/Black Women's Novels” *CLA Journal* 23 (Sept. 1979): 1-11 and Calvin Hernton's *Black Women Writers and the Sexual Mountain* (New York: Doubleday, 1987).

¹²⁹ “Who Do You Write For: A Collage,” *Sinister Wisdom* 13 (Spring 1980): 36.

¹³⁰ McKay's “Ground Breaking for Black Lesbians: *The Black and White of It*,” *Bread and Roses* 2 (Autumn 1980): 43.

stories, “Holly Craft Isn’t Gay,” “The Mistress and the Slave Girl,” and “A Meeting of the Sapphic Daughters” work especially well together to create a continuous narrative regarding the impact of racialized sexuality on black females with same-sex desires. Both “Holly Craft Isn’t Gay” and “A Meeting of the Sapphic Daughters” provide early insight into how to read the most controversial piece in the compilation, “The Mistress and the Slave Girl.” Just as Williams manipulates the Bad Nigger trope to explore hypermasculinity and the trope of heterosexual desire and discourse in regard to black male sexuality, Shockley uses trickster devices to revise the white construct of lesbian to make way for black female same sex-desire in a way that recognizes the politics and interlocking of racial and sexual discourse. Initial negative reactions to Shockley’s collection more than likely stem from the lack of queer theory during the first printings of *The Black and White of It*. Shockley’s work adheres to a major mission of queer theory: “Queerness should challenge and confuse our understanding and uses of sexual categories.”¹³¹ Such endeavors in queer studies must also work to resolve the silence on issues of class, race, and biology that occurred in early feminist, lesbian, and gay studies.

In “the Mistress and the Slave Girl,” Shockley provides readers with a solid exploration of why Queen B and her mutability prove to be so necessary in a re-conceptualization of same sex desire for black female communities. Returning to racialized sexualities’ ideological beginnings, slavery, Shockley announces just how awkward the constructions of homosexuality and heterosexuality are for black peoples by showing how “as its embodiments of whiteness attests, heteronormativity is not simply

¹³¹ Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) xvii.

articulated through inter-gender relations but also through the racialized body.”¹³²

Through her depiction of slavery and lesbianism, Shockley shows why black females with same-sex desires cannot rely on Western canons of sexuality, and that the Queen B figure is the folk solution to creating a discourse for black female subjectivity that will reject both the binary social constructs of gender and sexuality

“The Mistress and the Slave Girl,” set in pre-emancipation South, is a complex short story that elicits initial reactions of surprise, anger, discomfort, confusion, and curiosity. On the surface, the story is simply about a white female slave owner falling in love with a female slave. As we have noted, the transgressing of racial borders promotes ideologies of black women as Queen B figures. Determined by law, the African child’s status as a free black or a slave depends upon the mother’s status. As Davis noted earlier, such a law begins the detrimental myth of the black woman as the emasculating matriarch/Queen Bee. Further, the institution of slavery, in order to benefit from the myth in a commodified form, places the sexuality of black women at the border. Shockley manages to reconfigure the ideologies leading to the configuration of Queen Bee by interrupting the discourse of racialized sexuality with issues of lesbianism.

“The Mistress and the Slave Girl” is a fictional account of Heather, a white woman who returns to the South to take over her father’s plantation, and in the process falls in love with a black female slave, Delia. In order to pursue her “love” for Delia, Heather purchases and “rescues” the slave from the horrors she might receive at hands of male slave owners. Criticism of the short story has been controversial to say the least. Critical response vacillates between taking Shockley to task for presenting an ill-conceived love story that ignores the consequences and impact of slavery and race on the

¹³² Ferguson, 5.

“relationship,” to admiration for the writer for taking a chance on a risqué subject. Either way, the story has been grossly under-read because it is marked by critics’ inability to read the dilemma of intersecting race with issues of sexuality, gender, and sexual culture. Perhaps this is why trickster-trope becomes more than a passing fancy with linguistics.

Though there are no obvious oral aesthetics of black culture in this particular tale, there is the presence of tricksterism. In constructing her story, Shockley inverts every dynamic of slavery and black slave narratives that we have come to know. Ironically, though one of the major characters is the black female slave Delia, we cannot recover Delia’s story as a type of slave narrative. Shockley presents the story through a focus on the white female slave owner, Heather:

After her father passed six months ago, she had come back to Virginia. More liberal minded towards women and slaves than most of the surrounding planters, he sent her to be educated in the north. Years of being away had made her virtually a foreigner to this place where she was born....In a pleading letter, their family lawyer had beseeched her to return, or the plantation would be put up for sale because of mismanagement. (105)

Shockley revises the pattern of black writers who address the institution of slavery by focusing on the slave as the major character by choosing to make her primary character, the slave master, or mistress in this case. Using third-person narration, rather than the traditional first-person account in slave narratives, Shockley presents Heather as the main character and protagonist. Delia merely serves as a secondary character. Why does this

black female “lesbian” writer choose to focus more on the white female character? By making Heather, her thematic focal point, Shockley moves the open-secret (desires of whites) further into the public domain. Because she does so, white practices of secretly fulfilling desire through the racialized body is no longer the slave’s shame and abuse, and Shockley’s strategy becomes a damning critique of, in addition to the institution of slavery, the criterion of “normal” sexuality. Heather is presented as a liberal white southern woman who believes in women’s rights and emancipation. However, as Shockley reveals, there is a contradiction. Heather’s schooling is paid for by the labors of the slave. Her privileges come via the slave economy. Heather’s return to manage or stop the plantation from being sold is in clear conflict with her abolitionist philosophies. Shockley’s tricksterism of situation-inverting enables her to reveal the destruction of self and morals for the slave owner.

A second strategy in the short story involves the reversal of dominance and exploitation. Readers are accustomed to thinking of men abusing women in the institution of slavery. Shockley exposes how white women exploited and dominated black women for their own ends. Traditionally, in tales about slavery and sexual exploitation, writers present readers with white males exploiting black females. The overturning of such models seeks to disrupt ideologies of racialized sexuality. Upon returning home, the libertine and feminist Heather stops at a slave auction, where she witnesses men bidding to purchase Delia. When the auctioneer wants to raise the bids, he makes Delia the sexual specter: “ ‘Come now, surely she is worth two thousand!’ the auctioneer challenged. Abruptly he bared a breast, exposing a perfectly molded mound with a brown tip... ‘See... A fine specimen’ ” (106). The auctioneer’s actions remind us

of another incident in which a black female's breasts (Sojourner Truth) are bared to signify her value as the physical and sexual specter of femaleness. However, this scene is lacking the "feminist" background of the actual historical moment of Truth's incident. Herein lies the incongruity of the tricksterism Shockley practices: Delia is the object and Heather the spectator. Shockley's text acknowledges the position of power white women maintained over black females.

When Heather witnesses the auctioneer's tactics for selling Delia, the author presents to the reader two separate accounts of her reactions, and in these reactions lies the polyphonic discourse that represents the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality. Here is the omniscient narrator's account of Heather's thoughts: "Something about the girl fascinated Heather as she took in the pink silk dress hugging the curves of her body...Heather swallowed hard as she experienced a familiar sharp sensation piercing warmly through her" (106). After those thoughts, we receive the omniscient narrator's account of Heather's actions: "Anger flared within her at the sight. Reaching over, she shook her brother awake. 'Ralph, come!' she ordered, climbing hurriedly out of the carriage, 'I'm going to buy that girl' "(106). Shockley's doubled narrative represents a true trait of the trickster discourse. In one paragraph, Shockley presents the reader with two very distinct reactions. The first focuses on Heather's thoughts, which by no means allude to any type of social/political feminist empowerment or woman-to-woman solidarity. The sharp sensation piercing and warm appears to be a strong pronouncement of desire and Heather's primary and true reaction to Delia. Shockley emphasizes Heather's desire over her rising anger. Heather's thought, then, makes invalid the next part of the narration aimed at showing the moral outrage of Heather. Shockley finds a

subtle way of showing how the open-secret works in less heteronormative ways. This doubled narration allows the reader to see that Heather's motive for purchasing Delia should be viewed as ambiguous. Heather does not buy Delia to rescue her from the clutches of evil men, but for her own wants. Heather's attentions show a transgressing of the racial and gendered order. Even the title of the story comes to remind us of the need to constantly dislocate racialized sexuality. "Mistress" replaces the dominant image of Master. Shockley's presentation reveals that the institution of slavery could further corrupt even those white women who perceived themselves as liberal-minded.

The issue of lesbianism in this slave setting is a pertinent one because it permits Shockley to investigate perhaps one of the most complicated issues in lesbianism and race, the relationship between scientific racism and the homosexual body. In Siobhan Somerville's "Scientific Racism and the Homosexual Body," the author discusses how scientific racism is used to argue that homosexuality is deviant. Somerville demonstrates that biological notions of sexuality and race shift from a focus on the body to psychological theories of desire in the twentieth century: "One way in which they overlapped and perhaps shaped one another was through models of interracial and homosexual desire. Specifically, two tabooed sexualities—miscegenation and homosexuality—became linked in sexological and psychological discourse through the model of 'abnormal' sexual object choice" (251). Somerville argues that physicians and sexologists like Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter conceptualized the emerging models of homosexuality on the black body presented in scientific racism.¹³³ In order to solidify her argument, Somerville includes Margaret Otis's "A Perversion Not Commonly Noted" written in 1913 to record the widespread love-making between the

¹³³ Somerville, 254.

white and black girls in all-girl institutions of reform and boarding schools: "One white girl...admitted that the colored girl she loved seemed the man, and thought it was so in the case of the others...The difference in color, in this case, takes the place of difference in sex" (113). Somerville's analysis of this article found that Otis reverts to "stereotypes established by earlier anatomical models," and that "she used a simple analogy between race and gender in order to understand their desire: black was to white as masculine was to female" (252). Somerville's claim makes it difficult to believe that we can continue to ignore issues of sexuality, specifically homosexuality, in discussing African Diasporic culture.

Perhaps this is why "The Mistress and the Slave Girl" becomes such an important story to re-read. Shockley's portrayal of Heather and Delia does not serve as an exact fictional account of lesbian relationships as expressed by Margaret's Otis's account of interracial relationships in all-girl institutions. Shockley, unlike Otis, does not rely on stereotypical anatomical models but real historical conditions. Heather and whiteness are associated with whiteness's dominant position and blackness's subordinated and "feminine" position. Heather is the "man" and Delia is the "woman." The dynamics in Shockley's story more readily reflect the reality of racialized sexuality.

The reversal of racialized sexuality, moving it outside the domain of heterosexuality, exposes how the racialized black body is used to construct a homosexual identity, not necessarily for Delia the black woman, but for Heather, the white woman. In the story, Heather becomes comfortable with being a lesbian through her ownership rights to Delia's black body. She uses Delia, her legal property, to assert her lesbianism in a society that forbids her to do so in any other way. This is not to say that same-sex

desire does not exist for black females, but that the social construct of lesbian, like that of woman, is inadequate to framing such desires. As the narrator indicates, Heather is familiar with black females. In noting the less subservient personality of Delia, Heather is reminded of them: "The girl was definitely not servile in her speech or appearance. An air of dignity emanated from her in the stately way she stood. Heather was reminded of the Negroes with who she attended private school in Boston, daughters of free black men, and the southern white slave owners whose consciousness pricked them to educate their illegitimate daughters" (107). Heather notices the Sojourner Truth-like qualities of black female subjectivity. Heather has attended all-girl schools with black women, but she still does not consider them as equals, as exhibited in her ownership of Delia. Heather's purchase of Delia allows readers to ascertain that Heather means to use Delia for her own purposes—to assert herself as a lesbian through exploiting the black body.

Ordinarily, in white feminist thought, Heather might be championed as something of a radical and exceptional woman. She proclaims herself to be anti-slavery, she owns land and property, she acknowledges her same-sex desire, and according to the town's people she's "got a mind like a man's for business" (107). However, Shockley concerns herself with a much more complex agenda, the penetration of white Eurocentric discourses into the black female body. In one scene, Shockley convincingly presents how the white woman uses the black body to construct her sexuality:

Turning to Delia, she questioned: "Have you ever cut hair before?" When the girl answered in the negative, Heather handed her a pair of scissors.

"Let's give it a try."

As the cut tresses lay scattered on the floor by the chair, Heather

scrutinized the effect in the mirror. She resembled Ralph more than ever now without his moustache and sideburns...“Don’t cut yours,” she said, reaching up to finger Delia’s hair. (109)

The condition that slavery presents of dominance and submissiveness promptly reveals the irony of interracial relationships and lesbian relationships, and the presentation of both as “deviant” behavior. The institution of slavery fosters an atmosphere in which the social constructs of female same-sex desire, the butch and the femme, must rely on exploitation rather than a true liberatory expression of sexuality. As Shockley shows, these ideologies of role-playing can then expose the collusion of racialized sexuality and scientific racism in constructing ideologies of homosexuality. Heather’s actions mirror the dehumanizing efforts of white, heterosexual men as slave owners. The twist of female on female sexual exploitation reveals that heterosexuality is not any less “deviant” than homosexuality. Going beyond this realization, we note all too quickly that Western canons of sexuality present troubling definitions for sexuality.

Upon seeing Heather’s new hair style, her brother Ralph notes, “So you’ve cut your hair...another link to wearing pants and buying a slave girl....What role are you trying to play, dear sister?” (109). Heather denies playing a role, but clearly she does: She wears pants, she cuts her hair, she thinks like a man, and she desires like a man. Ideally, we might assume that Heather interrupts the discourse on gender, but realistically she enforces it. Heather’s insistence that Delia not cut her hair plays on the roles of butch and femme in lesbian relationships, and it is further altered by the fact the Delia is a slave, and really submissive to Heather. Shockley utilizes the institution of slavery to show the literal representation of the problem with current canons of sexuality. In the

Western canon of sexuality (homosexuality/heterosexuality), gender hierarchies are reinforced all the more in the actualization of the lesbian (white female with same-sex desires). Sexuality becomes fixed and limited as a result of whiteness needing to remain in a dominant position of power.

Heather further asserts her lesbianism during sexual contact (rape) with Delia in which she clearly takes on the dominant role as butch and mistress: "Slowly, Heather began to remove Delia's gown. 'I want to see your beautiful body'...Lightly, Heather caressed Delia's breast and stomach" (112). Throughout the entire scene, readers barely know what Delia is saying, thinking, or wanting. However, when Delia does speak it is at the request of Heather, and a miscommunication ensues that divulges how critical Shockley's narrative is: "Delia, say my name," Heather whispered, nibbling on her earlobe. Delia, in turn, replies, "Mistress--" (112). Though Heather assures Delia that she is not her mistress but her lover, the point is made. Delia, about whom we know little, perceives their affiliation as what it is, a mistress exploiting a slave. The fact that Delia does not call Heather by her name implies that the relationship is far from equal, much less based on love. Only after being prompted for a response does Delia take up the role that her mistress wishes her to play. While Heather may not want to be called mistress because of its intended ties to the institution of slavery she supposedly despises, she doesn't mind using her position as a mistress to find a way to assert herself sexually as a lesbian. Such a reading of the story is not to suggest that lesbianism is deviant. It merely means to surmise that Shockley's short-story is able to disrupt and question discourses on sexuality, race, and their connectedness.

Ordinarily, the ending of the story might imply a romantic happy conclusion since Heather sells the plantation and frees the slaves. Yet, there are some noticeable manipulations of language and narrative strategy in that ending: "Months later, Heather freed the slaves and sold the plantation...moved to Boston, taking Delia with her" (113). The narrator notes that Heather frees the slaves, but Delia's status seems unclear. Why does the narrator choose to say that Heather "takes" Delia? "Take" still implies Delia is the property of Heather. A true happy ending would have resolved this dilemma of mistress and slave girl and noted instead that Delia chose to go with her, or provided some other indication of Delia's free will to go and love Heather. Yet, readers are offered ambiguous narration, rather than details as to whether Heather freed Delia: "No one knew they were lovers, only that the white and black women who lived together, were terribly devoted to each other" (113). If Delia remains a slave, she has no choice but to be devoted to her mistress. Therefore, we understand that, in every way possible, Heather exacts full use from her purchase. She can fulfill her sexual desires and love without the threat of being morally and legally reprimanded. No one will ever persecute the rich white woman as a lesbian involved in a relationship with another woman. She will be able to assert her lesbian identity through the body of that black woman she claims to love. No one will ever question Delia's presence in her life. Delia is her property, and as such is not legally defined as a "woman." Heather commits no crime of sodomy. The open-secret of slave communities continues with a new twist. This ending suggests that Heather still has not seen how she uses Delia's black body to construct her own sexual identity, and until she does so their relationship will not be valid and legitimate, nor will Heather's sexuality. Consequently, as the lesbian uses the black

female body to conceptualize her “homosexuality,” the black female must go in search of another discourse for her same-sex desires.

In “A Meeting of the Sapphic Daughters,” Shockley reveals the dynamics of race and sexuality for black lesbians attempting to form a lesbian-identified community. The story exemplifies how same-sex desire exists for African American women, but the story continues to acknowledge that Western constructs of sexuality very often deny how the discourse of race has shaped such models. When the major characters, two black lesbians Patrice and Lettie, attend a social meeting for lesbians in their community, they become very aware of the politics of race and sexuality. They are the only faces of color in the meeting. They spend the evening listening to Trollope Gaffney, a white woman in her mid-forties speak about building a lesbian community: “We have to assert ourselves—build. Identify ourselves to each other—this great army of lesbian women, because we are all sisters-s-s. We are all one in the beauty of Sapphic love-e-e!” (65). As the meeting progresses, Patrice and Lettie learn that the community Trollope was speaking of is an all-white community. When Trollope asks the more vocal and radical Lettie what she thought of the speech, she replies, “there doesn’t seem to be anything in any lesbian literature on the lesbian movement addressing itself to helping the black lesbian to become free from racism—especially inside the lesbian community” (67). Aside from Trollope being flustered by Lettie’s comment, other white women around them become uncomfortable, even trying to reposition themselves as allies through sexual relationships. After Lettie’s proclamation on the status of black lesbians in lesbian communities, Wendy, another white woman, blurts out, “I had a black lover once,” and Lettie replies, “It’s easy to be liberal between the sheets” (67). Lettie’s comments are crucial to putting

into perspective the ending of "The Mistress and the Slave Girl" and the entire collection of short stories. Through Lettie's words, Shockley convinces readers that thematically she is very concerned with disrupting discourses of feminism, lesbian politics, and race relations. As Lettie makes clear, one can still be a racist and pursue sexual relations with someone of another race. The dilemma of the black "lesbian" articulates the point that sexual freedom without racial freedom offers no true liberty. The setting and the theme in the "Mistress and the Slave Girl" also confirms this claim.

Returning to the disruption of racialized sexuality and the heterosexualization of desire, we now know that Shockley inverts the dominant situation during the institution of slavery. Had she not presented this tale of interracial relationships between mistress and a slave, we would be unable to fully review the discourse of homosexual liberation and sexuality as it concerns race and gender. Unable to do so through analytical accounts, Shockley can consistently critique both the discourse of homosexuality, feminist ideologies, and racialized sexuality through a revision of the Queen B figure and the trickster trait of situation inverter. Only the trickster aesthetic allows such a complicated narrative to form, and Shockley uses it well. Shockley's trickster aesthetic reveals that the binary of homosexuality and heterosexuality constructs itself on the bodies of black women. Heterosexual white women's sexuality has always asserted itself through the imagined otherness of black females, but now we can also see that white homosexual women do the same. Shockley's tale does not deny the existence of same-sex desires, but it does expose the flaws of discourse used to discuss those desires. This is why the Queen B figure becomes an alternative to discussing black female same sex

desire. Shockley continues to emphasize the necessity of the Queen B figure in another short story in *The Black and White of It*.

“Holly Craft isn’t Gay” presents a brief view into the life of a fictional successful R & B singer reordering her sexuality:

It was four a.m. and Holly had just sunk wearily into the custom-made king sized waterbed when the phone mocked her. Upon hearing its sound, she groaned. Her body was worn out from performing to a capacity crowd at Town Hall. Immediately following, there had been a late champagne supper distended with false gaiety to hide her fatigue, a brief appearance on the Tomorrow Show, and finally, home to bed. (69)

From the very beginning of the story, Shockley establishes a way to examine the issues of class, sexuality, and race. Holly lives in elaborate and expensive surrounding, she enjoys a successful career as noted by her appearance on television shows and sold out crowds. She possesses material wealth, but aside from the introduction of masked happiness to hide her fatigue, Holly Craft seems hollow. Upon divulging the intrusion of the phone on Holly’s rest period, we learn several things:

Victor was calling from Washington to find out about the show. New husbands could be a bother sometime... “hello--” she said to an ominous silence meeting her over the wire....

“Hi, babee-ee, it’s me.”

The too familiar husky female voice startled her into full wakefulness. It couldn’t be!...There was only one person in her life who called her baby in that slow, seductive way. “Adrienne!” (69)

As we soon learn, Adrienne is Holly's former lover. Holly's iconic status as a singer, her description of her "new" husband being a bother, and her reaction to her female ex-lover gives meaning to the title, "Holly Craft Isn't Gay." Yet, because the title lacks punctuation of an exclamation point or a question mark, we can never be sure if the main character fully questions, asserts, or denies her same-sex desires, or if she simply denies, accepts, or questions the white construction of lesbianism. The statement's lack of marked punctuation seems open-ended and necessarily ambiguous. Shockley's title manages to mark the narrative strategy of the story, and Holly vacillates between accepting her same-sex desire and rejecting the construct of lesbian. Both the title and the story thematically teeter on examining the politics of closeted homosexuality, but they also seek to move away from fixed notions of homosexuality. This entails a candid exploration of sexuality in the black community based on class and gender divisions.

Shockley depicts the main character, Holly Craft, as a pristine closeted "lesbian" who possesses the potential to be the representation of the Queen B(ulldagger) figure, but who accepts the heterosexual trope of Queen Bee. Bogus defines the Queen B(ulldagger) as one who:

speaks of the generations who have nurtured her image. She is an incarnation of folk history, a carrier of the nascent art of the Blues and a product of black culture....She clearly knows the value of human freedom, for her woman-loving choices compel her to confront life's adversities.

(278)

As defined by Bogus and its use as a folk figure, the Queen B has definite class implications. Its very construction is shaped by lower and underclass values. Holly, a

product of a poor family, whose mother dies from “a heart attack in the white home which she worked so hard to keep spotless,” rejects her Queen B potential at every turn in maneuvering class issues (72). If we accept Bogus’s definition of the Queen B, Holly Craft would be a revolutionary “lesbian” using her career as a singer to change the world. She would be a woman comfortable with her “lesbian” sexuality and choice to love women. However, Holly Craft is not that figure.

Shockley’s characterization of Holly Craft suggests a destructive fluctuation between representations of Queen Bee and Queen B because she is a closet lesbian. In her efforts to fulfill the heteronormative pattern of behavior, we learn that Holly’s manager “promoted her with a vengeance, always parading her in the public’s eyes with notoriously famous and arrogant black stud male escorts to help project her as a sex symbol” (74). The more Holly attempts to escape her class background, the more closeted she becomes. Holly’s image as a sex symbol and her financial success hinges on his promoting her as a heterosexual Queen Bee figure enjoying and using men for her own purposes. Ironically, her same-sex gender desire also positions her as Queen B(ulldagger). Unfortunately, other than this and her career as R & B singer, Holly Craft possesses none of the empowering attributes Bogus assigns to Queen B(ulldagger). Holly is the Queen Bee who fears being the Queen B.

Holly buries lesbian inclinations for the sake of furthering her career until she is reminded of those feelings when Adrienne, an ex-lover, attempts to reconnect by calling her: “Holly, you haven’t forgotten. I’m glad for I would have been terribly disappointed... You were marvelous and beautiful to watch. Your voice is getting better and better all the time. I predicted that you’d be another Nancy Wilson someday” (70).

Clearly, this quote signals a black cultural context that Gomez claims does not exist in Shockley's work. The reference to a jazz singer is significant in exposing the shape-shifting and situation inversion Shockley is capable of creating.

Perceptively, Shockley chooses to compare Holly Craft to a jazz singer, rather than those women usually associated with lesbianism and sexuality, those wild women of the Blues Era. Those black women took the stage, found the modes of a lost oral language, and used it to help articulate their own sexuality. The blues women of the Classic Blues Era definitely fit the profile of Queen B's temporary illustration of female sexual independence and empowerment. They represent the liminal embodiment of the Queen B. Hazel Carby explains that the "Classic Blues Era" confirmed that black women could have an emerging self-identified sexuality, as well as a voice in society:

What has been called the "Classic Blues," the women's blues of the twenties and early thirties, is a discourse that articulates a cultural and political struggle over sexual relations: a struggle that is directed against the objectification of female sexuality within a patriarchal order but which also tries to reclaim women's bodies as the sexual and sensuous objects of song.¹³⁴

Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith in particular made their songs a part of a discourse of societal struggles, as well as a discourse on sexual relations within the black community. Women blues singers deviated from the traditional women roles (servants, wives, mothers) and expressed their wisdom, sensuality, and sexuality to the public world. The

¹³⁴In "It Jus Be's Dat Wat Sometimes: the Sexual Politics of Women's Blues". *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1991) 754-55. Carby discusses the politics of sexuality, themes of sexual independence, and lesbianism in the songs of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith.

triumph of the 1920s and early 1930s was short-lived. The late 1930s and 1940s introduced a “crossing over” of blues singers into white records and films. For legendary singers like Ethel Waters and Hattie McDaniel, the empowering identity found as blues singers was transformed into a set of subordinated, deformed roles presented in films as comedic, but degrading, images portrayed to appeal to white crossover audiences. No longer were they the strong, independent, sensual black women found on the stage in many clubs, but comic minstrel characters.¹³⁵ During the 1960s and 1970s, black female “soul” singers such as Aretha Franklin and Millie Jackson had again found a way to be just as empowering as women of the Classic Blues Era, but the close of the seventies suggested something less empowering.

After Holly has talked with Adrienne about her singing career, she recalls a time when she seemed closer to being that other Queen B: “A long time ago. Yes, when she sang in small supper clubs and on the road with the Garland Trio. They traveled mostly a tri-city circuit, sleeping in cheap motels, eating Kentucky fried chicken and Macdonald hamburgers” (70). In addition to her same-sex desires, Holly’s early career mirrors that of Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and other blues singers who traveled to perform in less than grandiose halls for “the people.” Holly’s early career is not marked by capacity crowd sell-outs and television appearances; she is shaped by what she does and whom she loves. She subscribes only to her thoughts and feelings, and she does not allow herself to be constructed by anyone else:

Adrienne, eleven years older, had taken her under her wing. A nineteen-year-old singer who didn’t even know how to wear her hair, but whose voice has everybody a-mening on Sundays....Emotional dependability

¹³⁵ “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometimes,” 757-758.

developed slowly, step by step, inch by inch into the physical...She ignored the outside warnings about Adrienne from the older ones who frequented the places where she sang. *She's a great gal, but, you know, she's funny.* To her, Adrienne was simply unequivocally the center of her young life. (72)

Just as mainstream success changes the empowering position of blues singers to comic minstrels, Holly Craft's need to succeed usurps her authorized self for continued material gains. She replaces the logic of her own desires with the logic of others. Holly Craft becomes the post "soul" of the female R & B genre, and less radical. The way Shockley juxtaposes a young Holly, one who is similar to the blues women, with the older Holly of cross-over success demonstrates the skill with which she can invert specific tropes and highlight the manifest trickster traits in her texts. By revising the known trope of audacious bisexual/lesbian blues singer in African American women's culture to a timid and closeted pop icon, Shockley simultaneously acknowledges racialized sexuality and exposes her character's closet homosexuality as the struggle for self-determination, which is only obtainable as the Queen B figure.

In addition, the comparison of Holly to a jazz singer places her directly into the discourses of patriarchy and heterosexuality that the Queen Bee and Queen B figures violently struggle against. Throughout the twentieth century, cross-over success for black women in the music industry has hinged on the impact and influence of racialized sexuality. The success of female artists depended on how attractive, feminine, and unthreatening white audiences found these performers. In other words, if they could somehow manage to overcome the "otherness," appear universally the same, and at the

same time remain the spectacted black body for a white audience, they could be economically successful and socially acceptable.

With the story of Holly Craft, Shockley focuses on a period in time when black women singers, again, lose the key to their salvation, the late 1970s and early 1980s. Critic Nelson George has called this particular period "Crossover-the Death of Rhythm and Blues" because of its assimilative agenda.¹³⁶ In describing how Adrienne and Holly's affair ended, Shockley reveals how Holly Craft becomes the representation of the new black female r& b singer, who, unlike Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, cannot present or sing about her true sexuality:

Yes, that was what ended it. Bernie Goldman, forty years old...the Jewish promoter was adept at making stars...he proceeded to deliberately disintegrate their relationship...A gay, black female singer would never make it. The public wanted their black women stars worshipped, loved and fucked only by men. (73-74)

Shockley's characterization of Holly Craft reveals how *far* the African American community has come. Just as white appropriation of jazz changes the artform, so too does the influence of bourgeois class values influence what is seen as acceptable in black culture.¹³⁷ The conversion of the blues singer trope, from its blues roots, to jazz, to pop, reveals how concerns over racialized sexuality not only whitewash the aesthetics and art

¹³⁶ Nelson George. *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Plume, 1988) 147.

¹³⁷ From W.C. Handy to Pat Boone, it is important to remember that jazz is not the only thing changed by white appropriation of black music. Tin Pan Alley is a specific example of how early R & B is changed by white appropriation. Further, during the 50s and 60s, the reception of music produced by labels such as Motown and Stax begins the separation between R&B and Soul music. The R & B of Motown was a diluted pop representation of black soul music. Despite the fact that some groups from the Stax label were integrated, they remained truer to the African aesthetics of their northern counterpart, Motown.

of black music,¹³⁸ they also disturb the construction of identity for a black woman, who, had she had same-sex desires in an earlier time, could have quite possibly been successful and out of the closet. Returning now to Adrienne's description of Holly's voice, we can understand that Nancy Wilson, while representing jazz, represents a specific type of jazz. Wilson, as one of the successful 1970s jazz female vocalists to cross-over,¹³⁹ has a voice and a style that is aesthetically polished for cross-over success. Her tracks are often laced with restrained and ordered piano accompaniments, and even her voice reflects that same restraint when compared to another jazz singer such as Nina Simone. It seems that Shockley chooses Nancy Wilson over other figures for two reasons: to demonstrate the impact of race politics on Holly Craft's status as a singer and woman, and as a way to explore the restraint and polish of her performance as a heterosexual. Holly Craft's positioning as a cross-over artist during this time reveals that her greatest performance happens not on-stage, but in her own life.

After Holly talks with Adrienne on the phone, we learn that:

She was safely married to a man who was considered one of the most promising young black leaders heading a civil rights organization. As a husband, he fulfilled the model role of an attentive and loving spouse...In line with this, she complimented his image, giving him ornamental window dressing of herself, an attractive sultry black star-singer. And he helped her by showing that she had married a man of her own color who

¹³⁸ In comparing the approaches of Stax and Motown, George's work describes Motown Record's "finishing school" for its artists. The school taught artists how to make themselves saleable to a white audience, but at the same time it worked to play down the distinct attributes of black culture: texture of hair, rough and less polished aesthetic musical styles, soulful dancing etc. George, 86-88.

¹³⁹ George, 134 and 177. When CBS record company begins working to compete for and appropriate the black music market, they begin creating strategies for black cross-over success. Wilson represents one of the most successful cases in the genre of jazz.

was idolized by all. (71)

The bourgeois agenda of racial upliftment and “normal” representations of black sexuality in the public domain seems to be underscored by the references to civil rights and black male leadership. Consequently, the more economically or socially successful Holly and Victor become, the more heteronormal they must appear to be for the white masses, all the more since Holly is a black female who desires females. The presentation of the heterosexualization of desire by both Holly’s husband and Holly herself documents the impact of racialized sexuality. It becomes clear that while Holly’s husband may not be gay, that he too buys into the notion that he must put on a performance, and that black people looking to raise their status in society must always strategically perform in public, heteronormative behavioral patterns. Holly’s situation cleverly underscores the complex dynamics for closeted black lesbians. In the folktale, the Queen Bee’s reaction to the finality and fixedness of this discourse of heteronormativity becomes violence. The same pattern continues in Shockley’s short story.

Like the Queen B figure, Holly’s occupation as a singer provides her with the ability to deliver herself from an oppressive position to an empowering reign over almost everyone without dismissing her desires. Holly’s voice could possibly articulate a discourse against the objectification of women’s sexuality within a patriarchal order: “But she sang to women and not to the gaping males...She wanted to touch them with her music, words, make them aware of their woman-ness. Woman singing to women—soul to soul”(74). Yet, these words are not reflected in any of Holly’s actions. She doesn’t use her voice to move her sexuality outside the established order. After performing at a concert, in which she made other women aware of their womaness, Holly continues to

refute her own desires by denying her sexuality. When one of the women she sings to becomes bold enough to sexually pursue her backstage, Holly's stage performance becomes secondary to her sexual performance: "Then the woman moved across the room to make a pass at her and she slapped her hard, hissing in rage: 'I'm not like that!'" (75). Though it is a woman whom Holly hits, her reaction mirrors the violence of the "heterosexual" Queen Bee figure. Further, the narration reveals that Holly is like that: "She had gone back to it, even before rebuking the woman. The urge to have a woman almost stifled her after Adrienne. It was there and she could not throw off the need. Going to bed with the male stud escort didn't help either, only made the desire worse" (75). The Queen Bee's strategy of violence and using men in defense of herself overwhelms Holly's true self, the Queen B. Though she rejects one of her fans and frequently mentions her husband to Adrienne when they finally meet, readers learn that:

Then one night the desire was so overwhelmingly strong in her...she got drunk and went to a gay bar...When she scaled higher the ladder of success and moved to New York permanently, she learned to harness the urge by closing her mind to it and saturating herself in work. (75)

In true Queen Bee fashion, Holly's use of the male escort service takes the Queen Bee's use of men to its logical ending. Holly is powerful and rich enough not to bother with emotional ties. Her career affords her the opportunity to physically project the heterosexualization of desire in her life, but it also allows her to emotionally bury same-sex desires. Her restraint and adept skill at performing as the heterosexual woman becomes a part of her identity. Whereas the blues women may have been using their

singing as a way to express every part of themselves, Holly inverts that strategy and uses it to repress and deny. She stays deep in the closet.

When Adrienne confesses to Holly that she is “way out now...no longer all tight, scared, and pent up inside,” Holly replies, “I’m not *gay*, Adrienne”(76). Even after meeting with Adrienne and realizing that she desires her, Holly manages to return to her performative identity. In the midst of their love-making, Shockley presents to us Holly’s thoughts: “But no one was going to say that she was queer. She wasn’t gay. Then the idea struck her. As soon as she got back, she would get pregnant....Queers can’t have babies. A baby would complete the picture of a straight family circle” (77). Holly Craft’s performance continues stating the title line “Holly Craft Isn’t Gay.” By the end of the story, Shockley has marked the title of her work with an exclamation point. To be certain, Shockley does not position Holly Craft as the liminal Queen B. Holly epitomizes the violently destructive Queen Bee harming herself and others. The shape-shifting performance of Holly goes hand in hand with her identity as a black female and a lesbian. “Holly Craft Isn’t Gay” consistently seeks to alert readers to the ways in which black women, specifically black lesbians, have to present and revise their sexual identities due to this racialized sexuality. Shockley’s tale while being pro-homosexual, anti-homophobic, and anti-closeted lesbian politics suggests that a revised reading of the Queen B, Queen B as exemplified by someone like Bessie Smith, demonstrates how to disrupt traditional ideologies of sexuality. She conveys how much more powerful the liminal Queen B figure could be versus the Queen Bee. With this story, we are able to challenge not only homosexual identities but heterosexual identities of blacks as well. Racialized sexuality, in addition to fostering detrimental discourses on gender concerning the black female as

the emasculating matriarch, creates the excessive heterosexualizing of desire in black communities. While “Holly Craft Isn’t Gay” establishes the benefits of the Queen B. figure in the black community, “The Mistress and the Slave Girl” and “A Meeting of the Sapphic Daughters” help to fully detail why Shockley positions the figure as so vital and necessary to disrupting Western canons of sexuality and gender. The reason that Holly never fully becomes the Queen Bulldagger stems from her inability to embrace another facet of the Queen B figure, the Queen Bitch.

Once we reject established borders of Western sexual and gender categories, we then move from Queen Bee and Queen Bulldagger to the Queen Bitch in black culture. The mutability of the figure and its value of providing a discourse for black female sexuality not only occurs in literary texts by black “lesbian” writers, but also in the productions of values produced in other black cultural forms. Most recently, the popular urban vernacular form of hip-hop has adopted the Queen B figure to deal with black female sexuality. Hip-hop’s, specifically Lil’ Kim’s aka Queen B’s, embrace of the term Queen Bitch (Queen B) has nothing to do with the misogynist contextualization of the term, and everything to do with Queen B’s original folk presence in black culture. In her song, “Suck My Dick,” Lil’ Kim exclaims:

What? I’m loving this shit/ Queen Bitch!/ What bitch you know can thug
like this? Imagine if I was a dude and hittin’ cats from the back/ With no
strings attached/ Yeah nigga, picture that!/ I treat y’all niggas like ya’ll
treat us.¹⁴⁰

Kim’s lyrics emphasize that she is no “bitch,” contextually an attribute ascribed to females who are assertive or aggressive in pursuing what they want. “Bitch” in that

¹⁴⁰ From *The Notorious K.I.M.* Atlantic, 2000.

context is at the same time condemned by bourgeois and feminist critics alike. However, as we have noted quite often in this work, “woman,” or the constructs of white womanhood have never applied to black female subjectivity. In the same way that the Bad Nigger in the folk manipulates his non-citizenship in the U.S. to ignore society’s laws, the Queen B figure works to do the same with the constructs of womanhood. Lil’ Kim is a Queen Bitch. She makes a distinction between the two by asking what ordinary female (“bitch”—assertive females struggling to fit themselves into the model of womanhood) can transgress established boundaries (thug) as she (the Queen Bitch) does. She creates an alternative discourse practice for herself in her proclamation as the Queen Bitch, telling “feminist critics” who reprimand her for her refusal to submit to their standards of what defines revolutionary discourse for black female subjectivity, “You wanna be this Queen B but ya can’t be. That’s why you mad at me.”¹⁴¹

The Queen B figure also allows Kim to position herself on the margins of the binaries of sexuality so that her sexuality does not become fixed or located in the remains of racialized sexuality. Of her sexuality, she boasts: “One that get up in a nigga’s ass quicker than an enema/Make a cat bleed then sprinkle it with vinegar...Kim got him in a zone beating they dicks/ Even got some of these straight chicks rubbing their tits. What? I’m loving this shit.”¹⁴² As with the Bad Nigger, there really is no homophobia present in Lil Kim’s persona of the Queen Bitch because there is no final acceptance of the constructs of gender. An interesting metaphor, the enema is associated with anal

¹⁴¹ “Big Momma Thang” from *HARDCORE*. Atlantic, 1996

¹⁴² “Suck My Dick” From *The Notorious K.I.M.*

penetration of the male body, but Kim also turns towards the traditional penetration of the female body. The cat serves as a reference for female genitalia that bleeds from either rough penetration or breakage of the hymen. Despite the implied roughness of penetration, it appears that she does not wish for the act of penetration to be solely tied to male representations of penetrating—hardness, edges, or phalluses—, and so she also focuses on the fluid aspect of the enema. Furthermore, when she speaks explicitly of sexuality through body parts of “dicks” and “tits,” Kim imagines herself as sexually appealing to both sexes, and dodges the heterosexual trope of the Queen Bee figure. As the Queen B, Lil’ Kim remains not only capable of being entered as a female in the act of sexual intercourse, but in entering from behind, of being male and female at once. Her sexuality is changeable. Continuing a process of unnamings that began with gender, Lil’ Kim’s persona of Queen Bitch harkens back to the folk configuration of the Queen B figure in black culture. Queen B provides the model needed to subvert the misuse of the black body in “The Mistress and the Slave Girl,” counter the limited vision of the “Sapphic Sisters,” eliminate the need for passing in “Holly Craft Isn’t Gay,” and develop a way to construct a black female self in the hip-hop nation. The Queen B figure allows black female subjectivity, in regards to gender and sexuality, to remain indefinable as it evolves from one generation to the next.

Racialized sexuality leaves an indelible print on the production of sexuality in black communities. Finding a way to conceptualize the most personal and intimate moments of black life and identity without the intrusion of problematic public discourses complicates the social and political existence of blacks. However, as artists such as Morrison, Williams, and Shockley have shown, black folk traditions and figures solidify

Sylvia Wynter's theory that the folk is a source of cultural guerilla resistance to the plantation system of commodifying and pornotropeing black bodies.

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