Mutha' Is Half A Word
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Introduction

Mutha’ Is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture is about the uncensoring of Black women who laugh out loud, curse, sit with their legs open, and selfishly act on their desires. It is about tomboys, not-so-nice girls, and unwifeable women. It looks at the constructions of Black female subjectivities cognizant of autonomous sexual desires. How do Black women use culture to explore sexual desire that is spiritual, intellectual, physical, emotional, and fluid so as to avoid splits or binaries that can freeze Black women’s radical sexual subjectivities? It is not easy. In the words of both real and fictional people who have theorized on the predicament of Black women’s bodies and desires, a master narrative of otherness works in conjunction with a self-imposed politics of sexuality. As Evelyn Hammonds notes, at the end of the twentieth century Black women were still dealing with their otherness and the politics of sexuality in very specific ways:

Black feminist theorists, historians, literary critics, sociologists, lawyers, and cultural critics have drawn up a specific historical narrative that purportedly describes the factors that have produced and maintained perceptions of Black women’s sexuality (including their own). Three themes emerge in this history: first, the construction of the Black female as the embodiment of sex and the attendant invisibility of Black women as the unvoiced . . . second, the resistance of Black women both to negative stereotypes of their sexuality and to the material effects of those stereotypes on their lives and, finally, the evolution of a “culture of dissemblance” and a “politics of silence” by black women on the issue of their sexuality. (“Black [W]holes” 303)

Taking on what W. E. B. Dubois called the “Damnation of Women” during the early twentieth century, Hammonds notices three very particular histori-
cal master narratives that engaged Black women’s gender and sexuality. Hammonds remarks on how deciphering and challenging the dominant master narrative of otherness has required multiple tactics: resistance to stereotypes, cultural dissemblance, and a politics of silence. Yet the last two tactics evolve as a result of the historical move to resist stereotypes. Since medical and cultural research continue to expose that there are more than two genders and many sexualities, the most glaring cause of concern within acts of resisting stereotypes surfaces when we do not acknowledge the complexities of having numerous genders and sexualities. Someone’s invalidated gender may be someone else’s stereotype. One person’s indefinable sexuality could be another’s promiscuous sexuality. As Black cultural studies continue to address gender and sexuality, we must reconsider who gets to say what is and is not a valid form of resistance to the stereotypes, and why.

The culture of dissemblance and a politics of silence have created what June Jordan might call a politics of sexuality that has persistently hindered resistance to stereotypes and the formation of Black women’s radical sexual subjectivity. Jordan observes that “the politics of sexuality therefore subsumes all of the different ways in which some of us seek to dictate to others of us what we should do, what we should desire, what we should dream about, and how we should behave ourselves” (“A New Politics of Sexuality” 132). In regards to gender and sexuality then, dissemblance and silence allows a policing of sexuality that is supported through social and political rhetoric of a group of people. In response to this politics of sexuality in African America, Black women could be rescued by their Black men or ideologically stoned with the markers of Jezebel, Sapphire, or Mammy. The choices given appear to be simple: be the stereotype or be the antistereotype dependent upon patriarchy and heterosexuality. Historically, any other options would be seen as causing more harm than good. But what about radical Black female sexual subjectivities? As Velma of Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Saltteaters* once voiced: “What good did wild do you, since there was always some low-life gruesome gang bang raping lawless careless pesty last straw nasty thing ready to pounce, put your total shit under arrest and crack your back—but couldn’t” (278). Throughout her novel, Bambara works with metaphors and symbols of hunting and wildness to discuss her protagonist’s pursuit to be well. At first, oppressive regimes seem overpowering in keeping subverted “the hunt for self” (267), but it is the search, the desire to look at what is not caged (classified and grouped), that allows for continued resistance against that which threatens to crack Black women’s backs. Real resistance to negative stereotypes would entail more than simply reversing the binary logic of stereotypes about Black women’s sexuality: it would mean destroying systems of gender and sexuality that make the stereotypes possible. Such action would aid in the initial construction of radical
Black female sexual subjectivities.

At times, the twenty-first century echoes the previous century’s proposition for Black women. For this reason, and in response to Velma’s question, despite the misogynistic, sexist, racist, and homophobic representations of Black female body parts being displayed in (male- and female-oriented, mainstream/Black-stream) magazines, music videos, mainstream movies, and pornography, I may seem a little out of fashion when I say this book offers varied suggestions on how to read wild sexual women in Black literature and popular culture and not the stereotypes of wild women. It is a dissection of wild women that bell hooks momentarily ruminates on in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*: “Wild is the metaphoric expression of that inner will to rebel, to move against the grain, to be out of one’s place. It is the expression of radical black female subjectivity” (49). Wildness is radical Black female subjectivity that consciously celebrates autonomy and self-assertion in the invention process of self. The stereotypes of wild women are caricatures of women who appear to rebel, but there is no context for that rebellion. This text is interested in self-authored sexual desire and radical Black female sexual subjectivity that purposely incorporates that desire as the context for rebellion from the beginning, as opposed to its presence as an afterthought. Such moments provide the required foundation for a new politics of sexuality for Black women and their culture.

With the continued infractions on Black female bodies worldwide by medical institutions and media conglomerates, the increase of human trafficking using women of color, the rapid rate of HIV infection among Black women, the domestic physical and mental abuse endured by Black women, the encroaching conservative threat to lesbian-bi-trans women, the increasing number of incarcerated Black women for performing sex work, the forced sterilization of Black women, and the danger of *Roe v. Wade* being overturned, I’m not ready to throw out the “nasty” girl, that “bad” girl, and dress her up in her Sunday best, take her to church, and make her sit all prim and proper with her legs tightly crossed and closed like Vanity and Donna Summer on a Sunday morning. I shudder to think what the world would be like without her. I refuse to let male supremacists, white, Black, and other, continue to get rich from their version of Black female sexuality that they lord over me. Meanwhile, open, unabashed, non-heteronormative, and celebrated versions of Black female sexuality personified in the depictions of and efforts by wild women get mistaken for that other, placed in the closet, put out of house and home, go to jail, get beaten, are violated, or are destroyed altogether. I owe it to the legacies of Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Zora Neale Hurston, Ma Rainey, Gladys Bentley, Storme Delavarié, Bessie Smith, Josephine Baker, Moms Mabley, Lucille Bogan, Toni Cade Bambara, Billie Delia, Sula, and
a whole heap of other real and mythical Black women to read wild women outside of the caricatures and stereotypes and in an uncensored fashion that eliminates the risk of replacing them with an antithetical Victorian model of womanhood that emphasizes chaste and virtuous decorum.

As the twenty-first century arrived, scholars of African American women’s culture were fortunate enough to reconsider the predicament of Black women’s gender and sexuality. In “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” Evelyn Hammonds continues to write about Black women’s sexuality in general, and Black queer female sexuality in particular. In doing so, she notes that recent theories about Black women’s gender and sexuality have revolved around issues of invisibility and silence. Whether it is Evelyn Higginbotham’s “politics of silence” or Darlene Clark Hine’s “culture of dissemblance,” the historically politicized quiet has made it very difficult to fully discuss Black women’s sexual desires beyond the presentation of their existence, even as critics have been able to delve into the issues of representation and stereotypes. Hammond’s consideration of Black women’s sexuality reminds us that there is a great deal more work to be done.

Tricia Rose’s *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk about Sexuality and Intimacy* moves thoughtful discussion on African diasporic gender and sexuality studies into new territory. Early on she divulges the premise for her premier oral history collection on Black women’s sexuality: “This book began as an attempt to answer a scholarly question: How has the history of race, class, and gender inequality affected the way black women talk about their sexual lives? It also began as an effort to take on the call made by many black feminists for more reflection on black women’s sexuality in modern America” (foreword, ix). With her proclamation for intimate justice, Rose’s work successfully answers the call and continues to lead us in the right direction. One of the most promising aspects of *Longing to Tell* is that its author consciously refuses to classify or separate the women’s stories about their sexuality in traditional ways that cement heteronormativity as a master narrative of sexuality. There is no separation of the bisexual from the lesbian, no division of the college educated from the working class, and no judgment passed on the sexual experienced and adventurer versus the lesser experienced. Rose’s book manages to convey differences of class, age, geography, and blackness in the expressions of sexual desires in ways that clearly show Black women grappling with the notion that there are many genders and sexualities, but too few existing narratives for the multitude of them.

Yet what remains clear is that century after century Black women’s discussions about sexuality in critical and creative efforts, as well as real life and fiction, have been marred by the notion of silence, secrecy, and whispers. Some Black women may have been longing to tell, but there were those
Black women who have been telling, and in the telling they have been bawdy, explicit, and downright shameless in their expressions of sexual desires, despite reprimands they may have received. It is those voices that we still have trouble celebrating. As we will see later in this introduction, recent scholarship underlines the values of these women’s contributions. Still, Black women continue to wage an internal battle over the damnation of women, fulfilling desires, and expressing individual sexual desire and representations of those desires. Arguably, if it continues to be a one-image-over-another battle, all Black women will lose. We must continue changing the terrain and the foundations of these arguments.

Stereotypes and misrepresentations of Black women occur because of the way we are taught to read differences. According to Audre Lorde’s “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” “we have all been programmed to respond to human difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion” (115). Lorde’s words expose the way dominant society uses difference as a way to oppress and maintain supremacy over subordinated groups, but it also heightens awareness of the way the oppressed counter stereotypes and misrepresentations. Historically, Black women have ignored, copied, or attempted to destroy difference to fit a “normative” model of womanhood, as well as an authentic notion of blackness. And while race, class, and gender are huge differences, the way sexual desire functions within those differences is the subject of this work.

It behooves women to continuously work to redefine difference while avoiding hierarchies of such differences. As if to illuminate the urgency of such work for Black women, Hortense Spillers’s wonderfully verbose style of writing becomes dramatically simple when she chooses to discuss sexual desire and Black women in feminist and cultural studies, stating, “The sexual realities of black American women across the spectrum of sexual preference and widened sexual styles tend to be a missing dialectical feature of the entire discussion” (“Interstices” 91). What Hammonds, Rose, and Spillers command with their words is that we realize that the missing dialectical in our reflections of Black women’s sexuality is a redefining of difference, as opposed to deviation.

Arguably escaping the damnation of women, deciding when and where we enter, and revising the historical precepts of Black women’s sexual desires hinge on one major consideration: how we read difference. Accordingly, Lorde theorizes that “certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is
rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation. . . . We speak not of human difference, but of human deviance” (115–16). The distinction that Lorde makes between difference and deviation is an essential one for Black women articulating and representing their sexual desires. In order to convey desires without incorporating deviance, critical understanding of this distinction must be reached. How does difference become deviance in the way that Lorde has suggested?

Jacques Derrida indicates in *Positions* 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 a commanding position. To deconstruct the opposition is to above all, at a particular moment, to reverse the hierarchy” (56–57). Derrida’s assessment of the Western metaphysical categorization process is exactly what Lorde alludes to in her discussion of difference and deviance. The dispersal of widely accepted oppositions such as presence/absence, good/evil, truth/error, man/woman, positive/negative, and so on demonstrate that binary oppositions are a pair of ranked and contrasted terms, each of which depends on the other for meaning. They classify and organize the objects, events, and relations of the world. The most important revelation of Lorde’s and Derrida’s critiques is that if we accept any binary logic, then that acceptance establishes conceptual order (39–40). As the field of deconstruction has shown, the conceptual order affects every discourse, from race and class to gender and sexuality. Subsequently, one must not only reverse the hierarchy but also avoid making the reversal an established order. Black female cultural producers, in order to create and sustain radical Black female sexual subjectivity, must embrace difference as a foundation without simply reversing the established order that fosters readings of difference as deviance. The stripper, prostitute, video vixen, gold digger, and sexual exhibitionist cannot continue to be the deviant polarity to the working woman, wife, mother, lady, and virgin. We must locate the differences without ranking them and destroy the conceptual order of Western metaphysics, and in turn dismantle Western ideologies of gender and sexuality. To expose nontraditional desires and sexuality in ways that resist deviance entails some hard work that insists upon locating unique models. Doing so may mean the difference between mimicking misrepresentations or claiming and reclaiming wildness.

However, Lorde misspoke when she suggested that we have no way of relating to human differences as equals. She found the means in her own considerations of tricksters. As opposed to continuing to consider the silences or invisibilities, *Mutha*’ *Is Half a Word* proposes the examination of unacknowledged techniques for uncovering the spaces of the vocal and visible
where Black female sexuality is not defensive or concerned with the uplifting of the race, but radical and ever aware of its survival and evolution—folklore and vernacular culture. Currently, a scholarly turn to folklore could be seen as a romantic nod to authenticity and essentialism. However, *Mutha’ Is Half a Word* argues that folklore and vernacular undo such predictable moves. Some scholars have already expanded on the unyielding ways that folklore and vernacular traditions have been read by critics. Ann DuCille’s *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women’s Fiction* notes: “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” (69). DuCille is not alone in her discussion of how folklore has been read as a male tradition; *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* by J. Martin Favor dissects the phenomenon of making folklore a predeterminate factor in authenticating blackness. His work refuses to explicitly agree with critics like DuCille who regard folk culture as masculine, but he does suggest an impetus of change in how folklore is used: “The form of folk expression is gendered by exclusion, meaning that when we speak of folk culture, we generally speak of *male* folk culture . . . it points toward how we need to examine more closely the way gender is manipulated to arrive at a notion of authenticity” (18).

Although Zora Neale Hurston, at the beginning of the twentieth century, and her followers during the Black women’s renaissance of the 1970s might have embraced folklore and vernacular to achieve voice in documenting their gendered experiences, this approach has recently been under fire. Like DuCille and Favor, many other contemporary critics of Black culture seem to believe that uses of folklore and vernacular culture have been exhausted, and that the forms themselves have been read as limited in their use for considerations of a wide spectrum of Black culture based on distinctions of class, gender, and sexuality. Hazel Carby, in “The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston,” criticizes the way that Hurston’s work is rescued from the abyss of forgotten Black women writers. Carby takes issue with what happens as a result of that cultural recovery: essentialized folkisms. For Carby, the fault lies with scholars who have used Black folklore to authenticate one depiction of Black culture communities over others. She also classifies critics’ elevation of Hurston’s depiction of Black southern life as “not only a discursive displacement of the historical and cultural transformation of migration, but also . . . a creation of a folk who are outside history” (77). Together, these dilemmas of romanticizing folklore and authenticating blackness through folklore and vernacular potentially form the basis of the small but vocal antivernacular criticism in recent
African American critical and cultural theory. They are all very valid points, especially in motivating us to broaden our perceptions of blackness.

If we read Black folklore as merely a means of authenticity, in the way that DuCille, Favor, and Carby have accused critics of doing, then folklore is limited and obsolete as an introspective model into Black culture today. However, if we consider folklore, myth, and vernacular in the way that Robin D. G. Kelley does in *Yo Mama’s Disfunktional: Fighting the Cultural Wars in Urban America*, then perhaps we may be ready to open up another line of consideration for the folk:

Black music, creativity and experimentation in language, that walk, that talk, that style must also be understood as sources of visceral and psychic pleasure. Though they may also reflect and speak to the political and social world of inner city communities, expressive cultures are not simply mirrors of social life of expressions of conflicts, pathos, and anxieties. (41)

*Mutha’ Is Half a Word* relies on orality, folklore, and vernacular to examine Black females’ cultural representation of sexual desire because they are sources of visceral and psychic pleasures that can allow for the reading of differences in desires, as opposed to deviating desires. Once we revise the way we read these traditions, we learn that they are not exclusionary. Rose’s *Longing to Tell* is so successful at showing differences within sexual desires without making them deviant because it is an oral collection. It does not have to adhere to the model of logocentric thought, and it remains cognizant of visceral and psychic pleasure. Likewise, instead of turning to trickster, folklore, and vernacular to authenticate Black women’s culture, *Mutha’ Is Half a Word* argues that these cultural forms offer Black women alternative methods to express their sexual desires and expand blackness in the process.

In addition to concerns of difference being capitulated into deviance, Black women also have to ponder issues of inauthenticity, especially when their desires do not align with aims of authentic blackness or the goals of dignified womanhood. What has mired discussions about Black women’s sexuality and expressions of sexual desires is the commitment to a particular type of blackness, one that inherently privileges masculinity, heteronormative womanhood, and heterosexuality. G. T. Hull, P. B. Scott, and B. Smith’s collection, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: But Some of Us Are Brave*, bravely questions the role of Black women in developing arguments against inequality in social and political representation. With proclamations such as “we struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism” (16) and “we reject the stance of lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us” (17), the
editors force us to reconceptualize how we define Black political struggles so that they may account for issues of sexism and homophobia. Such work is pivotal in wrestling difference away from deviation so that desire can be freely pursued and expressed. For what happens when the object choice of a Black woman’s desire is not Black, is not male, is plural rather than singular, and so on and so forth? bell hooks explains that “when this diversity is ignored, it is easy to see black folks as falling into two categories: nationalist or assimilationist, black-identified or white-identified” (Yearning 29). Likewise, in Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity, E. Patrick Johnson suggests, “When black Americans have employed the rhetoric of authenticity, the outcome has been a political agenda that has excluded more voices than it has included” (3). In order to resist reading such women as a lesser model of woman or as not Black (enough), we should seek out what bell hooks theorizes as a postmodern blackness to counter such thinking. In the end, differences of sexual desire can undo and threaten the essential and authentic notions of all those other social categories. How much we desire, how little we desire, who or what we desire, the way we express that desire, and the way we choose to fulfill desire inevitably threatens the rationale, logic, and organization of political identities organized by race, class, and gender. Thus, having and comprehending means, metaphors, or myths to represent those desires are vital for maintaining radical Black female sexual subjectivities. Fortunately, finding metaphors and symbols for both desire and difference as discussed within these pages may not have to be an arduous task if critics remain open to rereading Black folklore and vernacular in less exclusionary terms.

Trickster and Trickster-Troping

Trickster, a dynamic model of oral traditions, serves as the best way for exploring radical Black female sexual subjectivity. Although trickster might seem to be a relic of the past because of its ties to myth and folklore, it is very much a metaphor for futuristic possibilities of identity. As we will see, tricksters are difference and desire personified. In arguing trickster as a minor god, Erik Davis’s “Tricksters at the Crossroads: West Africa’s God of Messages, Sex and Deceit” asserts, “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” (37). In addition to his own theory of trickster as a minor god, Davis’s description provides some traditional archetypes of tricksters. In referring to African, Native American,
and Greek mythological tricksters, Davis shows that in cultures across the world tricksters assume many forms. Davis also delves into the roles tricksters may play in transforming worlds or societies from the margins. Although derivate of many different societies, the figures tend to share similar commonalities across cultures.

“Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters” by William Hynes offers a brief assessment of manifest trickster traits that can be used as a typology: the fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous personality of the trickster, deceiver/trick-player, shape-shifter, situation-invertor, messenger/imitator of the gods, and sacred/lewd bricoleur (34–36). These traits explicitly deny dichotomies that might exclude or limit the development of cultural and social impulses and energies. The traits are concepts of fluid and unfixed attributes. Trickster, through its inability to rank differences, takes difference and makes *différance*. Derrida uses this term to halt and show the rankings of speech and writing, but his theory also creates an undecidable, a tool to disrupt the entire system of logocentrism founded on binary oppositions. Each characteristic of trickster enables various acts of creation that could alter time, place, or person. With such traits, trickster allows difference to be read equally and without classifying elements of difference as deviance. Due to these attributes, trickster symbolizes the meeting point for folklore, myth, vernacular, and queerness, and in Black female culture that intersection often forms a discourse of desire figuratively embodied as various types of tricksters and trickster traits in Black women’s texts. In many cases, the strategic use of these elements form a repetition and revision of previous tropes as well as the birth of new tricksters and traits that we might note as “trickster-troping.”

Trickster has already been defined as a “taboo breaker,” “messenger of sex, deceit, and lies,” “baad muthafucka,” “minor god,” and “cultural transformer” by critics. Troping is the figurative or metaphorical speech or conversation. . . The composition or use of tropes” (*OED Online*). Trickster-troping, as I am defining in this text, will connote several definitions. Trickster-troping means the deployment and recognition of differences through an equilateral order. Trickster-troping defers the privileging of one difference over another. Trickster-troping is acts of undecidability. The composition or deliberate use of taboo breakers, minor gods, cultural transformers, and baad muthafuckas as metaphorical signs of difference and desire signifies trickster-troping. When writers, performers, and artists utilize a creative technique of constructing anomos narratives, characters, settings, or culture through multiple and simultaneous manifest traits of the trickster, that is trickster-troping. It is also any non-heteronormative act of tactically joining orality and sexuality via one or more of the manifest trickster traits to create a folk-based discourse of desire.
Trickster-troping allows Black women to resist being dominant society’s “beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb” (Spillers, “Interstices” 74). It enables Black women to continuously strive for radical Black female sexual subjectivities that are just right for them. In summing up trickster, Carl Jung offers insight as to why trickster-troping derived from trickster works so well: “Anyone who belongs to a sphere of culture that seeks the perfect state . . . must feel very queerly indeed when confronted by the figure of the trickster” (Four Archetypes 169). The binaries that Black women in the West are confronted with seek to create a utopia by erasing difference or subordinating difference. Trickster-troping captures Black female writers’ and performers’ deliberate narrative intersection of folklore, vernacular, myth, and queerness within their texts to interrupt social binaries and express sexual desires.

*Mutha’ Is Half a Word* argues that Black folklore, vernacular, and specific figures of oral traditions do not limit discussions of difference in Black culture and society. On the contrary, these forms and figures make it all the more plausible to articulate difference, outside of race, in a less homogeneous manner than that of nonfolk theories. Within this work, I’ve kept in mind two goals. First, I create a revised and sharp definition of trickster, especially as it involves the experiences of Black females, and then I show the implications of those revisions in various expressive cultural sites. Next, the primary goal of *Mutha’ Is a Half a Word* is to use trickster to broaden the direction of Black female criticism from a limited focus on the rhetoric of sex to a discourse of desire that is more invested in a foundational understanding of the broad spectrum of sexuality in African American female culture. As long as Black female criticism continues to rely solely on the rhetoric of sex, which is foundationally based on Western binary metaphysics such as male/female, homosexual/heterosexual, and man/woman, the radical ideologies of desire present in cultural texts by Black women will be misunderstood or lost.

To this end, *Mutha’ Is Half a Word* offers close readings of sexual desire in select texts by Black women. These cultural narratives recommend constructions of sexual desire that consider spiritual, corporeal, emotional, mental, and political destinies of radical Black female sexual subjectivity. Desire marks the female slave’s acceptance or rejection of gender, as well as her measurement of freedom, in the slave narrative. Desire leads a woman to her gift as a healer in Gayl Jones’s *The Healing*. Desire disturbs conformist performances of gender and beauty in the comedy of LaWanda Page and other Black female comedienesses. Desire reveals the rejection of racialized performances of sexuality in Ann Allen Shockley’s collection of lesbian short fiction, *The Black and White of It*. Desire acts as a radical ideological weapon against sexual fear and paranoia in music by Meshell Ndegeocello and Lil’ Kim. Finally, desire
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gives rise to a language of sexual rights and polymorphous erotics in the poetry of Cheryl Clarke. However, for readers and consumers to appreciate the empowering use of desire by such artists, they must first understand the rhetorical trickery that goes into the presentations of desire. These women use folk machinations to dramatically enter into singing natural desires of their bodies, as opposed to basking in the quiet dignity of their womanhood.\footnote{13} Trickster-troping, the intersection of folklore, vernacular, myth, and queerness, becomes one alternative practice that Black female writers and performers exploit to represent and convey their desires without the damaging repercussions and impediments from the rhetoric of sex or the discourse of race.

My choices of cultural producers and narratives are deliberate. Each author or performer examined within this text commits her cultural narrative to cherishing Black folklore and oral hermeneutics. Each work makes its reader question the rationality and logic of representing gender and desire with simple binary models of gender and sexuality by juxtaposing the rhetoric of sex with some individual form of trickster-troping (the creator’s self-devised discourse of desire). And all of the works inevitably offer a race-conscious analysis of gender and sexuality. Finally, Mutha’ Is Half a Word aspires to examine cultural producers who, like the trickster figure, would live up to or could carry the burden of being an “original outsider.” Both personally and artistically, Gayl Jones, Cheryl Clarke, the Queens of Comedy (past and present), Ann Allen Shockley, Meshell Ndegeocello, and Lil’ Kim seem emblematic of the trickster title. Since their works often blur the line between the profane and the sacred, their efforts and cultural forms remain underexamined in scholarship on Black female culture, but trickster strategies allow readers to understand the complexity of these women’s work. A reassessment of how we define and understand trickster serves as the first step to doing so.

Reexamining the Trickster Trope for Gender and Sexuality

Despite the traditional staging of folk culture as male culture, we must retool such thinking when it comes to the trickster figure and its use in Black cultural sites. For “the trickster is neither a god nor a man, neither human nor animal; he is all of them” (Geertz, “Deep Play” 29). If he, trickster, could be all of them, then he could also be she. The concern that many critics would want addressed is whether or not there are female trickster figures in African American culture and if so what happened to them? Mutha’ Is Half a Word asserts that there are female and genderless/dual-gendered trickster figures in African American culture, but scholars have not been motivated to locate or use them.
Though many societies perceive of tricksters as genderless, we must remember that trickster represents the cultural and social values of its producers. Hence, more gender-neutral or egalitarian societies would create genderless figures. In contrast, communities based on a history of racial and gender segregation and ranking would produce trickster figures to reflect those dynamics. If the social fabrications of gender hierarchies exist in a society, then more than likely the tricksters and the trickster tales reflect those hierarchies or challenges to such hierarchies. Consequently, in reference to inquiries as to whether a Black female tradition of trickster exists in the culture of Black Americans in the United States, the answer is an unequivocal yes, but locating it means pursuing a postnationalist reading of folklore, myth, and vernacular.

The difficulty in seeing how crucial folklore and trickster figures can be to revealing the layers of blackness in regard to sexuality and gender stems from the adherence to traditional research and tropes about the trickster. In African American culture, scholars utilize folklore and the trope of the trickster as a heroic figure assigned to concerns of race and nation building. The historical use of the trickster trope in Black cultural analysis and its two concerns eventually result, with few exceptions, in folklore and vernacular (especially trickster) traditions being gendered masculine and hyper-heterosexual. Problematic issues of gender and sexuality within cultural research have not been acknowledged, and comprehension of how gender and sexuality influence research methods and analysis of data has rarely been discussed. Most studies on trickster figures in African American culture base their theories on historical Africanisms and evolved models of oral traditions in Black America.

Africanisms become a chief lineage connection for descendants of the African diaspora, and they serve as the primary way to begin authenticating culture for Black people in the New World and a Black nation within the United States. The initiative to find Africanisms in the oral culture of New World Blacks 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 and later published as *Africanism in the Gullah Dialect*, Turner conducted extensive studies about Gullah people in South Carolina to ascertain the first of many viable linguistic links between West African and African American language use. Similarly, linguist Beryl Bailey continued this focus by distinguishing her work *Jamaican Creole Syntax* with a broader non-U.S. context. These texts’ focus on Africanist linguistic and language presence were only the beginning. Africanisms in Black culture became more important as critics sought to eliminate sociological and scientific work influenced by white supremacy agendas.

The work of anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, completes an important task concerning this dilemma. Herskovits's
study disputes early American thought that Black people in the United States had no past (or culture), an argument used to assert that U.S. citizens need not afford the primitives (African Americans) emancipation or the same political rights as their white counterparts. Herskovits’s work was supported with research conducted by the previously mentioned linguists and W.E.B. Du Bois. Herskovits provides evidence for the developing field of Black studies, which would later help activists and critics theorize that the “Negro” (one who has no culture or past) is a Western construct meant to replace the African (who has a history and culture that predate Western society). According to Herskovits, the myth is based on five false ideological foundations, the last three of which are relevant for this work’s assessment:

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)

Herskovits then goes on to present research that contradicts and belies each of the criteria of Black people in the New World. However, he also forewarns that using research to find Africanisms is merely a start to any work dedicated to eliminating these myths of an absent past (33). Herskovits’s work ensures that Western civilization will be held accountable for its initiatives to erase an African past, and he explores the beginning of Black culture’s modernity by examining Africanisms in secular life, religious life, language, and the arts of Black people. As Albert J. Raboteau’s “African American Religion in America” proclaimed of Herskovits’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” (65–82).

Years later Sterling Stuckey’s Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America uses the ring-shout (a communal and spiritual dance ceremony) to make explicit what Herskovits implies—descendants of
slaves came from a rich cultural background that survived a forced trip from Africa and evolved in the United States. Stuckey does an excellent job of proving what elements from the ring-shout contribute significantly to Africans’ culture in the New World. Stuckey insists that the ring-shout was “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). Even as whites might have viewed the ring-shout as primitive, Stuckey proves that Black people in the United States revised and adapted the ring-shout’s uniting of seeming opposites in various facets of African American life to help them survive slavery and apartheid in the United States.

Stuckey sees the ring-shout as a circle of culture that unites African people from various tribes in the New World, despite distinct tribal origins, the horrors of enslavement, and the process of acculturation. In doing so, he connects folklore and vernacular culture to an agenda of nationhood so as to evolve Herskovits’s theories. As Stuckey explains, armed with language, spiritual traditions, and cultural artifacts, slave culture served as the foundation for a growing Black population seeking to be a nation within a nation. The ring-shout is only one cultural practice that allowed and sustained African concepts about capricious corporeality. Incorporating similar theories about unified opposites, the trickster figure endures as a remaining influence on African American traditions and culture in the United States. Like those early Africanisms, tricksters and trickster traditions also helped scholars establish a base of cultural nationalism. Consequently, the aims of cultural nationalism lead to unintentional and intentional gendering of the trickster figure as male in academic research in both African and African American scholarly communities. This is not meant to conflate the two traditions, but several texts on African oral traditions have been widely utilized in African American folklore and trickster research.

In *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight*, Robert W. Pelton records and archives the tales and antics of trickster figures from various West African nations: Anansi, Legba, Esu, and Ogo-Yurugu. Pelton concludes 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). According to Pelton, trickster becomes many things at once and in doing so deconstructs accepted logics of social order. Such theories have proven useful, and it is easy to agree with Pelton’s theory of the trickster as it relates to social transformation; however, hero is the most problematic and widely used ideology offered
in studies on the trickster. The classifying of trickster as hero assumes that trickster exists to perform the act of rescuing someone or something in need. However, one of trickster’s primary agendas is to resist the act of rescuing so that individuals or societies at large may learn from the chaos. In addition, hero speciously imposes masculine attributes into studies that examine trickster in the pattern of trickster-transformer-culture-hero.

Appositionally, Legba and Esu have both been deemed genderless figures. A brief description of the Yorùbá trickster Esu from Adoye Ogundipe’s “Esu Elegbara the Yoruba God of Chance and Uncertainty” makes clear that, as a trickster figure, Esu “certainly is not restricted to human distinctions of gender or sex” (119). In Esu Bara Laroye: A Comparative Study, 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). Language becomes a common barrier in representing trickster. For even as dos Santos attempts to write about the non-Western figure, English pronoun usage betrays the implicit cultural values of trickster’s gender possibilities.

Beyond language usage, early criticism imposed Western European principles onto studies of tricksters. First, tricksters such as Legba and Esu are often referred to as devils within their own West African cultural context, and to label them as heroic changes the cultural context. More specifically, 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 haunted by the overwhelming attention critics pay to Esu’s penis. In trickster studies, it becomes apparent that critics fetishize Esu’s penis: “His masculinity is depicted as visually and graphically overwhelming, his expressive femininity renders his enormous sexuality ambiguous, contrary, and genderless” (Ogundipe 172–73; italics added). To reflect the true nature of trickster, a more revolutionary statement might play with language and identity: Her massive phallus is depicted as visually and graphically overwhelming.

Alas, academe has not been so adventurous. Esu’s erect phallus symbolically represents the figure’s characteristic trait of hypersexuality, but critics have made it a symbol exclusively for hypermasculinity and heterosexuality. Even as critics give lip service to Esu/Legba as 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 huge phallus, in order to begin talking about deconstructing notions of gender. The fetishization of the erect penis has as much to do with masculinity as it does with heterosexuality. In numerous tales of these two West African figures, listeners or readers learn of their ability to take on different species and forms. The figures’ trickeration in this regard often mean
that the tricksters discombobulate the usual heterosexual readings trickster research yields. From Greek mythology to West African mythology, tricksters moodily shift from autoeroticism to bisexuality to homosexuality to bestiality to necrophilia and so on. Focus on the physicality of the phallus acts as a tool for the straight mind of Western discourse to eliminate the complications that might arise in a discussion of the polygender and polysexuality of trickster. Such cultural impositions happen too often.

One study of the trickster Anansi (who transforms to Aunt Nancy in Black diasporic trickster tales), R. S. Rattray’s *The Ashanti*, reveals the Ashanti elders’ response to Rattray’s surprising discovery concerning 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’” (84). Rattray’s cultural ignorance points out how the privileging of patriarchy in studies of the African oral tradition pervades literature and research on the trickster figure. These contradictions about gender in research on trickster figures become evident in contrasting the work of researchers. Ironically, Herskovits’s and Stuckey’s work noted the existence of differences based on tribal origins and eventual locations of slaves and their ancestors. Their acknowledgment of these distinguishing features suggests the importance of acknowledging other social variations that exist or develop in Black oral culture.

Nevertheless, the scholastic inconsistencies regarding gender and sexuality in folklore and trickster studies persist. If the study of the African trickster figure has been made masculine in research on African oral traditions, it has been made equally masculine in African American culture since a great deal of research on Black oral traditions and the trickster figure relies on studies of African oral traditions. In a comment that acts as a follow-up to the analysis of Pelton’s use of hero to define trickster, Nathan Huggins makes a provocative comment regarding masculinity in African American folklore: “It is easier to imagine men as roustabouts, vagabonds, bums, and heroes, and harder to draw sympathetic females whose existence is their bodies and instincts . . . women, whose freedom has natural limitations—they have babies—are essentially conservative” (*Harlem Renaissance* 188). Huggins explicitly expresses the problem of the hero and the masculine gendering of Black folklore. Though we should disagree that bodies and instincts represent the traits of figures in folklore, regardless of gender, Huggins’s comments actualize how embedded assumptions of gender have hindered the actual possibilities of folklore and vernacular traditions. The birthing of a child and the caring-for of that child are heroic acts, but Huggins’s reading of gender denies that fact. As we will
see in chapter 1, the “natural limitations” (childbearing) of freedom presented in Huggins’s vision of Black women’s folklore is a figment of some male and female critics’ imaginations, and it is their ideals, rather than folklore itself, that imperils the development of nonconservative radical Black female sexual subjectivity in Black women’s culture. Despite the work of Pelton, Levine, and others, trickster should not be seen as similar to heroes because to do so may assign a gender value system not originally intended for the figure. Huggins’s comments may be dismissed due to his lack of knowledge in folklore studies; other critics cannot be dismissed as easily.

While African American literary and cultural studies remain aware of the theoretical gender and sexual implications of the figure, the fields do not make full use of such knowledge. To date, the most notable works dedicated to the study of trickster figures in the African American community comes from Henry L. Gates and John W. Roberts. Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey* metaphorically utilizes trickster to establish a Black literary theory model. Gates’s work is a notable deconstruction project influenced by race and nation: “Whatever is black about Black American literature is to be found in this identifiable black signifying difference” (20). Gates samples vernacular scholarship from the likes of Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, Geneva Smitherman, and Roger Abrahams to define his theory of signifying(g) as “a black trope of tropes, the figure of black rhetorical figures” (51). The importance of his theory is that rhetoric supplants semantics (signifier/ signified), and Gates applies the trickster figure as a cultural corroboration of his notion of signifying(g) as a distinct Black aesthetic. Trickster traditions found in vernacular culture 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).

However, what cannot be ascertained from the text is how to locate difference within the distinction of blackness. Notably, while investigating the tricksters of West Africa for his own study, Gates broaches the subject of gender with one statement: “Metaphysically and hermeneutically, at least, Fon and Yoruba 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). In the end, Gates dismisses taking on the issue by suggesting that feminist literary critics take advantage of the unique opportunity. Oddly enough, Gates examines texts by women writers to explicate on how the act of signifying(g) disrupts the conceptual order or logocentrism of speech and writing, but he does not contextualize his trickster-dependent theory, as affected by gender or sexuality, in the production of the Black women’s texts that he reads.

Conversely, Roberts’s pioneering and still relevant study *From Trickster to
Bad Man: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom reflexively depicts concerns of gender (masculinity) even as it may not have been written to do so. Although Roberts's study does situate itself as thematically about folk heroic traditions, he expands on theories of African American trickster traditions as reflective of, and connected to, an evolving Black consciousness of survival and resistance episodically examined in Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*. Like those of Levine and Gates, Roberts's study was monumental. 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 perceptively questions the Western definitions of hero and heroic. He admits that these terms are subjectively based on specific cultural contexts and social beliefs. What is heroic in Black culture may not be seen heroic in white culture. This seems rather obvious today, but at the time Roberts raises a point that challenges the notion of universal values. Since Roberts is concerned only with race, his argument prepares the way for him to establish the trickster tradition and figure as heroic in Black America.

Despite Roberts’s thesis that we examine African American cultural values for their definition of heroic and hero, rather than Eurocentric definitions, Roberts plants the Western model of hero precisely in the middle of Black culture when he accepts the premise of trickster as a hero tied to cultural nationalism:

> 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 itself. . . . In 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)

Roberts rightly asks that we consider the hero as a product of an individual community’s goals and agenda. In the case of Black America in Roberts’s work, one major goal of culture building means nation building. Yet heroes are inherently connected to patriarchal nationalism. For Africans in America,
culture building cannot be separated from issues of nation and race. Roberts admits the implicit connection. Roberts, like Pelton before him, considers his claims in comparison to 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. Therefore, if hero 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.

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). The final and most potent display of masculinity occurs as Roberts explores how the human trickster morphs into the Bad Man-as-outlaw-hero (174). The works of Roger Abrahams, Harold Courlander, Joel Chandler, and other male scholars of Black folklore support the remainder of Roberts’s text. The quandary with Roberts’s examination, as well as those previously mentioned, is that they fail to mention whether their research is expressly concerned with Black male culture. They also assume that the human trickster tradition becomes a male tradition. While Roberts and Gates cannot be expected to cover the whole of Black culture in single texts, we must now recognize these omissions and move the tradition forward lest it continue to be categorized as inherently male and exclusionary. This project embraces Roberts’s assessment of folklore as culture building, but it broadens that use so that it is not monolithic to the point of exclusion.

This is not to suggest that critics such as Gates and Roberts have made feminine a tradition that is masculine, but to insist that not all of the folk tradition’s ties to the trickster have masculine schemas. If one buys into conventional phallocentric theories of folklore and vernacular, these general 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, speechifying, 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, front porch, or elsewhere other than the block. Many critics have simply chosen to privilege those other forms. In addition to examining the way we research trickster, folklore, and vernacular traditions to reflect the gender and sexual values of Black women, we must also participate in aggressive and jarring shifts in Black women’s cultural studies.
A Necessary Rhetorical Shift in Cultural Studies

For decades, Black critics have debated about if, how, and when Black women’s sexual desires might be represented or discussed. Solutions have been limited by the regulations of the rhetoric of sex (biological), the manifestos of womanhood (social), and the monosimplistic voice of nationhood (political). This work aims to offer a rhetorical shift. Major works, written by Black women and men, in Black women’s cultural studies made tremendous strides in the 1980s and 1990s in contemplations of feminism and race. Calvin Hernton’s *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers* and Michael Awkward’s *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* primarily address gender as opposed to sexual desire. Patricia Hill Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* contextualizes gender and feminism in ways specific to Black females that draw from contemporary debates and models and the historical legacy. And while many other texts by Black female critics were published, two major texts by Barbara Christian and Hazel Carby forged new ground on race, gender, and cultural production and also touched briefly upon desire in the context of racial and sexual violence in Black women’s lives.

The main purpose of Barbara Christian’s *Black Woman Novelists* is to recover and reread texts written by Black female writers. Christian’s work addresses how stereotypes of Black women (Mammy and licentious Black woman) and ideologies of womanhood informed Black women’s early literary tradition. Of womanhood, Christian outlined the implicit contradictions Black female writers faced when they accepted the social discourse of gender as a way to counter stereotypes: “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). Christian observes that society deemed female slaves as incapable of possessing any of those traits. She concludes that Black women novelists used the medium of literature to counter negative stereotypes and representations by aligning their subjectivity with the cult of womanhood.

Expanding Christian’s study, Hazel Carby’s *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* investigates the novel tradition of Black female writers. Like Christian’s study, Carby’s work becomes, first, an examination of stereotypes about Black women, and second, a monument dedicated to representing the utmost moral character of Black females. Carby’s view on the cult of womanhood and the female slave refers to the slave’s status as laborer, breeder, and sexual 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). Carby declares that an ideology of womanhood provides the Black woman novelist with a way to counter misrepresentations formed from her historical experience of sexual exploitation. Carby’s arguments work to fashion a moral culture of true Black womanhood because the “ideology of true womanhood attempted to bring coherence and order to the contradictory material circumstances of the lives of women” (24). Sexuality, then, becomes a site of oppression, not liberation.18

Both Christian and Carby are 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. Prior to these initial queries there were no substantial discussions about the function race plays in cultural representations concerned with virtues and gender, but the work to locate a self-defined ontology of sexuality for Black females that exists outside roles of slave, wife, and mother is just beginning. Since technology has influenced the rhetoric of sex (biological intents to procreate can be manipulated), should not critical inquiries reflect such changes? As Hammonds claims, “we know more about the elision of sexuality by black women than we do about the possible expression of sexual desires” (309). By continuously engaging the discourse of womanhood and the rhetoric of sex, which by their very nature seek to prohibit any discussion of independent and autonomous female sexual desire, critical inquiries of Black female culture have been incomplete. Carby’s text comes close to broaching the importance of this issue: “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). Carby’s statement provides a wonderful foundation from which to move forward.

First, we must ascertain the sexual ideology of our current period and reassess the material circumstances of Black women. In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers details the historical and material experiences of Black women and their bodies: “First of all, their New-World, diasporic plight marked a theft of body—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least gender difference in the outcome, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender specific” (259). As captive bodies during chattel slavery New World Blacks, like tricksters, remain genderless. Yet what happens when bodies are no
longer captive in chattel slavery differs for Black men and women. What do we make of Black female bodies’ motive wills and active desires upon their emancipation? As this text will explore in greater detail in the next chapter, some Black women, those past and present invested in radical Black female sexual subjectivity, choose to work from the knowledge of their bodies as a territory of cultural and political maneuvering rather than accept false gender ideologies of whatever time period they exist in. *Mutha’ Is Half a Word* argues that this is their way of ascertaining the sexual ideology and reassessing the material circumstances of their era.

The second way to effectively balance the rhetoric of sex with discourses of desire entails resisting thinking of female corporeality solely in terms of sexless or asexual reproductive positions. When Spillers deconstructs New World mothering for Black women, she formulates that “we might guess that the ‘reproduction of mothering’ in this historic instance carries few of the benefits of patriarchalized female gender, which, from one point of view, is the only gender there is” (“Mama’s Baby” 268). Yet if we complicate the belief that there was only one female gender, that of patriarchalized female gender, then the discursive practices of speaking of many genders and then many desires become wholly possible. Such a move offers one way to resolve the age-old contradiction between womanhood and motherhood that still influences Black women’s critical and practical lives. In Western societies, “womanhood” and “motherhood” depend on each other because they are part of the same gendered construction that seeks to reinforce a white patriarchal system. As long as we continue to accept these terms, the manifestations of alternative Black female genders and desires will always seem to either deviate or mimic and aspire to be within the two patriarchal positions, as well as motivate Black women to ignore more liberating possibilities.¹⁹

Thanks to lesbian writers such as Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde, Black feminist scholarship now works to establish a platform to engage issues of gender, race, sexuality, and desire in new and exciting ways. With its queer reading of Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, Barbara Smith’s “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism” creates a minor shift from a strict adherence to gender oppression, and, as we will see in the next chapter, Audre Lorde’s poetry, fiction, and critical essays also changed the terrain by using African mythology to discuss same-sex desire. The work of these Black lesbian writers forced others to reconsider the role of sexual desire in their own works. Always one for dissecting the intersectionality of race, class, and gender, Patricia Hill Collins recently included sexuality in her work on Black women, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism*.

In addition to Tricia Rose’s work on oral histories and Black women’s sexuality, in recent years other intellectuals have relied on folklore, vernacular,
and oral traditions to examine gender and desire in Black women’s culture. Critics such as Trudier Harris prove that Black folklore and desire is important to the writings by Black female writers. Notably, the introduction from Harris’s *Saints, Sinners, and Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* questions the model of asexuality in texts featuring strong Black women as protagonists. In search of other methods to illuminate Black females, editors of the collection *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, and Feminism* discuss “whether the academy acknowledged only methodologies that fell within the Western intellectual tradition” to discuss Black female subjectivity (3). Angela Davis’s *Blues Legacies and Black Feminisms* examines domesticity and sexuality in the music of female blues and jazz artists. Like Carby before her, Davis’s work covers heterosexual and homosexual desire in cultural forms of blues and jazz. More recently, Gwendolyn D. Pough’s exceptional book *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* looks at the way Black women deploy the rhetoric of wreck in hip-hop as an exploration of gender and sexuality in their recent and varied cultural manifestations. Valerie Lee delves into the differences of Western science and folk medicine in one chapter from her *Granny Midwives & Black Women Writers: Double-Dutched Readings*. Lee’s narrative positions folk traditions as relevant material to base her theory of Black female literary tradition, but it also explains the benefits of folk traditions over Western science, specifically the use of folk medicine as an alternative to Western medicine in examinations of Black female bodies and reproductive health care.

Finally, in *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women’s Literature*, Karla F. C. Holloway explores the manner in which folklore and myth act as lenses to critique discourses of gender and sexuality in West African and African American women’s culture. In an approach that pays homage to the folk belief in ancestors, Holloway argues a symbolic connection between the goddess and ancestral presence: “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). As Holloway demonstrates, African American women’s appreciation of West African spirituality consistently manages to include issues of sexuality (the body) into its spiritual manifestations.

All of these texts validate this work’s thesis concerning the use of trickster as a figurative model to create discourses of desire for the representation of Black women’s genders and sexual desires. Holloway’s book engages her meta-
phor 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). *Mutha' Is Half a Word* shifts in a more contested direction to assert that there is not a single gendered essence, but a shared experience of liminality stemming from the inability of Western discourses on race, gender, and sexuality to discern fully the subjectivity of New World Black females. This project seeks out the uncomfortable spaces between constructions of gender and sexuality. Such an endeavor does not preclude taking into account the historical experiences of Black females, but it also does not rely on artificial and finite categories of gender and sexuality. Folklore, vernacular, and myth have a way of interrupting dominant master narratives that can be illuminating.

A brief deliberation on the phrase embedded in this text’s title affords further insight as to why trickster might apply as a metaphorical sign of difference and desire in Black female culture. It is obvious by now that, despite its title, this book is not about mothering or motherhood. The phrase “mutha’ is half a word” is excerpted from comedienne and actress LaWanda Page’s 1970 comedy album, *Mutha' Is Half a Word*. When Page spoke the elegiac words, she did so to signify on that old guttural street slang “muthafucka” and her own trickster nature. Trickster is sacred and profane. Muthafucka is a sacredly profane word, and one that, according to sociolinguists and the OED, has its origins in Black America. The use of the term is usually discussed in reference to Black men’s culture. However, Page made it poetic, the great actress S. Epetha Merkerson proclaimed it as her favorite cuss word, and most importantly poet Carolyn Rodgers wrote a poem, “The Last M.F.,” that depicts the way the word can discombobulate people and their discourses of nation, gender, sexuality, race, and class. If trickster had a favorite word, this might be it since it is used with some frequency in animal and human trickster tales. Sexual vernacular, when used strategically by Black women, has literally been a disruption of master narratives on Black womanhood and motherhood.

Language should always be a key consideration in any discussion of Black women’s cultures, bodies, and desires. Capable of expressing linguistic parameters of function and structure, as well as denoting corporeal expressions of thought, language’s connection to the body cannot be disentangled from conversations about subjectivity, identity, and forms of culture. Analysis of the importance of mother tongues in the social, economic, and sexual colonization and decolonization of people of color proves this fact. Muthafucka blurs the line that separates the sacred and the profane, and its usage in African America does the same with the binary of good and bad, since its meaning
can have either positive or negative connotations. In correlation to the usage and meanings of the term and Page’s phrase, this text’s title seeks to consistently remind readers of the sometimes censored, politically incorrect, taboo, and non-heteronormative desires of Black women everywhere.

Page’s signifyin(g) phrase signifies on notions of silence and all the revered expectations of motherhood as they conflict with the hushed implications of female desire signified with the slang term “fucka.” Though the phrase has never denoted one who has sex with a mother, the implications of the phrase do imply removing the mother from a sacred and domestic space and placing the figure into a public realm where the purpose of sexuality is something other than reproduction and false intimacy. If the two words “mutha” and “fucka” are ever placed together (explicitly or in censored code), then the unmentionable and private is exposed. Page’s “mutha’ is half a word” dismisses the culture of dissemblance, the politics of silence, and the politics of sexuality historically incorporated into studies on Black women’s sexual desire. Embedded within Black vernacular is an understanding that desire has the tendency to trample established boundaries and codes of morals, gender, race, and sexuality.

In discussing the purpose of British sexual vernacular “getting a bit of the other,” bell hooks explains how vernacular might be transgressive: “Contemporary working-class British slang playfully converges the discourse of desire, sexuality, and the other . . . as a way to speak about sexual encounter” (Black Looks 22). What is most useful in hooks’ analysis for this text is what she says about “fucking” and otherness: “Fucking is the Other. Displacing the notion of Otherness from race, ethnicity, skin-color, the body emerges as a site of contestation where sexuality is the metaphoric Other that threatens to take over, consume, transform via the experience of pleasure” (22). That’s right, pleasure, the other benefit of sexuality that hooks and other Black women cultural producers have insisted that we not forget. If we extend hooks’s theory, we can de-essentialize blackness, explode binary models of gender and sexuality, and remain aware of class differences, but to do so we must insist upon an analysis of pleasure in the representation of sexuality and the discourses of sexuality. For every one’s pleasure will not feel or arise from a fountain of universalisms.

Mutha’ Is Half a Word argues that oral traditions have been allowing producers of Black female culture to dismiss the rhetoric of sex and constructs of gender for centuries.

Yet, to date, a number of critics continue to engage the tradition of Black female culture in ways that center on motherhood and womanhood with little regard for the function of sexual desire in each category, perhaps out of legitimate concerns over sexual stereotyping, exoticness, and primitiveness. However, folklore and vernacular comprise a wealth of Black female culture
that considers the sexual self as separate from the philosophical designs of patriarchal gender. These traditions are not solely wrapped up in the reproductive concerns of the body (sex-biology), and the social network of womanhood (gender—the social) serves as a secondary issue. *Mutha’ Is Half a Word* takes on the subject of these alternatives by returning to the very core or individuality and difference within a community—as Spillers calls it, the body’s motive will and active desire—and then explains how these oral mechanisms of desire shape Black female communities.

**Trickster-Troping, a Culturally Relevant Discourse of Desire**

For Black women who produce cultural texts invested in depicting sexual encounters and representations of their desire materialized, trickster converges the discourse of desire, gender, and the other as a way to speak about sexual encounter. While trickster may seem like a relic of the past, Jung noted its influence on past, present, and future when he claimed, “In many cultures his figure seems like an old river-bed in which the water still flows. One can see this best of all from the fact that the trickster motif does not crop up only in its mythical form but appears just as naively and authentically in the unsuspecting modern man” (*Four Archetypes* 167). Or modern woman. Trickster plays a key role in postmodern blackness because it recognizes differences without ranking them, but also because it signifies desire. Desire is overwhelming, and it can elicit change in various facets of life. Intrinsically, desire opposes values of deviant and normative values. Jacques Lacan’s concept of desire suggests it as the *difference* or gap separating need from demand: “Desire is produced in the beyond of the demand. . . . But desire is also hollowed within the demand, in that, as an unconstitutional demand of presence and absence, demand evokes the want-to-be” (*Ecrits* 265).

To read Black female culture through a discourse of desire, as well as the rhetoric of sex, would allow us to examine individual and cultural representations of what is wanted and yearned for without regard for societal restraints or policing. As Samuel Delany explains, “Power is what distinguishes the psychic discourse of desire from the social rhetoric of sex . . . desire, to the extent that it is a material and social discourse, commands power enough to found and destroy cities, to reform the very shape of the city itself (“Rhetoric of Sex” 20). For this reason, the progression away from Western traditions of gender and sexual desire focuses this work toward consideration of the trickster figure. Since *Mutha’* seeks to destroy those models with unacknowledged alternative models of gender and sexuality, desire is the revolutionary tool to do so.
Delany’s clarification of desire sounds remarkably similar to the purpose of trickster in Black communities. John Roberts found that “Africans created and re-created tales of the animal trickster to serve as a model of behavior” and to counter “conditions of destructive material shortages and control of a socio-political system they did not accept as legitimate” (34). Trickster and desire are both designed to handle material and social elements of a community. Some might even say trickster is desire. If desire “is a movement, a trajectory that asymptotically approaches it object but never attains it” (Grosz 188) and it “is concerned only with its own processes, pleasures, and internal logic, a logic of the signifier” (65), then trickster acts as a trope of desire. In reference to desire’s logic of the signifier, “while such a logic can support social laws and values, it is also able to subvert or betray them, based as it is on expelled, socially inappropriate, repressed wishes” (65). Trickster and desire create and destroy systems but not without replacing those with temporary ones that can also be changed and adapted based on needs of the communities. Since trickster symbolizes undecideability, it follows the path of desire: “An element necessarily lacking, unsatisfied, impossible, misconstrued, an element that is called desire” (Lacan, The Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 154). For nonacademics, desire simply exists and springs forth without rationality or boundaries. This is why an analysis of Black women’s popular culture is a vital part of this text. If part of the work of radical Black female subjects entails crossing boundaries of public and private space to share their awareness of radical Black female sexual subjectivity with others, then there have to be comprehensible ways to transfer these notions of desire in less abstract ways than previously discussed. Such issues are not only the problem of Black women. In Judith Butler’s essay “Desire,” the author asserts, “It seems that language is bound up with desire in such a way that no exposition of desire can escape becoming ‘implicated’ in that which it seeks to clarify. This means that language is less than ‘clarifying’ when it comes to desire” (369). Consequently, there is already a gap when it comes to language and desire in general, but the gap increases once we turn to the detrimental historical assault on Black people’s languages and bodies by white supremacy across the globe. Thus representations of Black female sexuality must intuit the conflicts that stem from language and experiences of desire and overcome them. When Black women cultural producers engage in trickster-troping, they do equalize difference and lessen the fissure between desire and language.

After all, Sarah E. Chinn argues that “sexual desire and sensation of sexual contact seem part of that subterranean world, outside of our abilities to express ourselves” (181). Trickster rules the subterranean world Chinn speaks of, and since it is the gap that makes some Black women hesitate in their
presentation of radical Black female sexual subjectivity, we must turn to it for expressing sexual desire and sensation. And though Elizabeth Grosz is correct when she devises that “the most intense moments of pleasure and force of their materiality cannot be reduced to terms that capture their force and intensity” (65), the trope of the trickster can signify that force and intensity once it is placed in the appropriate perspective. Further, if we return to bell hooks consideration of sexual acts or encounters, trickster-troping simplifies the complexities of desire with action.

But this is not the only meaning. Butler observes of desire’s historical precedents, “Desire has been thought of in many ways: in terms of its origins in the body or in a more expansive set of passions; in terms of its ends, those that are considered more sensuous, those considered more spiritual, and an ambiguous range in between” (“Desire” 369). In the following chapters, we will see how Black female cultural producers rely on trickster’s trait of sacred/lewd bricoleur to cover the many ways that desire has been understood. Cultural narratives embedded with a discourse of desire, based on trickster, enable a social discourse that could adapt and change as material conditions of Black women’s communities change. Tricksters are the very embodiment of difference and allow us to move beyond a system of biological-based binaries. As perfect models of indeterminacy, they mirror desire as “lack and repetition” (Samuel Delany 19), but because they are communally conceived in different societies across the globe they enable us to locate culturally specific references for the representation of such desire. In the end, trickster-troping often results in a shift of desire from the margins of a text to its very center so that readers can value and reevaluate varied genders or fluid sexuality in cultural products.

In addition to creating a greater rhetorical shift from gender to desire in Black women’s cultural criticism, trickster-troping hopes to document class influence on the representation of Black women’s desire in culture. Currently, cultural studies on Black women, Black queer studies, and Black feminism seem wholly invested in bourgeois models of Black culture and Black cultural production in those designated fields. In doing so, critics have excluded philosophies on desire presented in culture produced by lower-class masses. Such a narrow scope is another major reason that trickster serves as the figurative model for this study. John Roberts concludes that because Africans endured a loss of control over other aspects of their lives, they “placed a high value on native intelligence as a way of dealing with situations that disadvantage the individual” (28). Since trickster is the discourse of the disadvantaged lower echelons of a social community, and Black women are ranked at the lower echelon of Black political and social communities, the use of trickster as a trope for gender and sexuality in Black culture automatically challenges
bourgeois notions of gender and sexuality by placing value on Black women’s genius.

Despite trickster’s outside status, *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures* by Gerald Vizenor submits 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). Vizenor’s criterion of trickster demonstrates why trickster might be an effective alternative configuration for Black female desire. Viewed as an absence of whiteness, man-ness and woman-ness, Black female subjectivity, identity, and desire will always appear tragic in Western social scientific language. However, in the world of folklore, myth, and vernacular, tragic interpretations become one of many ways to view Black females and their culture.

The proliferation of tricksters in Black oral traditions poses an alternative space in regards to gender and sexuality, the folklore sphere versus the scientific sphere. The existence of the trickster serves as a community’s subconscious belief in the myriad possibilities in regards to gender, sexuality, and desire. In the same way that man and woman are the personification of Western constructs of gender, trickster is the personification of varied genders and many desires. The former may be more corporeal and institutionally supported, but the latter is no less real or true than its physical form. Vizenor’s critique on the language of social sciences addresses the way poststructuralist thought and the logic of binaries have narrowed the infinite possibilities of vernacular subjects and culture.

In *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in Ethnic American Literature*, Jeanne R. Smith explores the importance of tricksters in her assessment of ethnic American literature. Smith declares, “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 proves that it is the greatest trope of difference within difference. The following chapters explore how Black women use trickster (troping) to move desire away from the tragic language of social sciences.

*Mutha’ Is Half a Word* does not purport to create a Black feminist reading of trickster or a Black womanist tradition of trickster. The aims of the work do not include representing the wide continuum of Black female folklore experiences in the way that Roberts’s *From Trickster to Bad Man* does. The goals of *Mutha’* are less dedicated to authentication and linear connections of the tradition found in Gates’s text. The objective of this study is to reveal vital
ways of reading folk and oral traditions into queer, race, and gender theory, and then assert these readings as one of the most productive ways to engage Black female culture that thematically addresses sexual desire. It exposes how trickster-troping allows Black women to reclaim and represent their rights to desire and be desired without fear of reprisal from the problematic codes of normativity and Western morality.

In chapters 1 and 2, this work defines and explicates on the trickster trope of unnaming, a method which supplants the rhetoric of sex in presentations of Black female identity and culture. Chapter 1 provides a revision of the trickster in African American culture. It also surveys important trickster tropes in Black female culture, from slavery to the present, that produced alternative models of trickster to serve the needs of Black female communities. From there, *Mutha' Is Half a Word* delves into more specific monikers of trickster as a sign of desire. Chapter 2 includes a reading of Gayl Jones's *The Healing* to demonstrate how writers build on the trickster tropes established in their particular cultural site. In the case of Jones, I show that she returns to literary models established by Zora Neale Hurston and Audre Lorde to explore the spiritual and ambiguous nature of sexual desire.

The last four chapters move away from a rigid focus on extended written narratives and become more concerned with the way trickster-troping shapes ideologies of gender and sexuality in Black female popular culture. Chapter 3 investigates the intersection of visual and oral performances of the trickster tradition through a queer lens. It symbolically incorporates Tar Baby tales and criticism of Tar Baby folklore to argue that Black comediennes utilize orality to interrupt a socially influenced drag performance aimed at conforming to the illusion of gender so that they can represent their real subjectivity and desires.

Chapter 4 covers racialized sexuality, folklore, and two central trickster figures, the Bad Man/Nigga and the Queen B(?), to disturb the production of heterosexuality in Black folklore studies. It offers a theory that Black male and female communities create these figures to counter racialized sexuality, and in the process create a folk philosophy of sexuality where queerness and blackness can occupy the same space with little or no conflict. The Queen B(?) figure will take center stage and remain pivotal for the rest of the chapters. Having established the relevance of the Queen B(?) as a trickster figure, chapter 5 examines the significance of the Queen B(?) figure as a way to comprehend the presentation of Black lesbian desire in Ann Allen Shockley's controversial collection of short stories, *The Black and White of It*.

Chapters 6 and 7 explore the depiction of a more radical Queen B(?) figure that exists outside the realm of literary production. Critics have rarely
examined the divine sexuality and sexual violence contained in some of the more adult trickster tales. In documenting the Queen B(?) figure in Black women’s music, the text uncovers how the trait of sexual militancy within trickster figures has gone unnoticed in any previous analysis of trickster culture. Meshell Ndegeocello and Lil’ Kim serve as my primary models. The study concludes with an assertion that if we accept trickster-troping as a discourse of desire, then students and scholars will be better equipped to comprehend and appreciate future texts produced by and about the wide range of Black queer peoples and cultures like Cheryl Clarke and Red Jordan Arobateau. *Mutha’ Is Half a Word* reminds readers that Black women’s desires allow them to exist and represent themselves outside of prescribed social bodies of nationalist thought, racial discourse, and limited gender constructs.