The Black Woman and the Trickster Trope of Unnaming

The ordering of black female bodies and the attempt to silence their voices and make absent their desires happens through one specific means: language. While delineating on the position and subjectivity of Black women in the United States, Toni Morrison explains how historical discourses have failed to grasp Black women’s subjectivities:

“True the black woman did the housework, the drudgery; true, she reared the children, often alone, but she did all of that while occupying a place on the job market, a place her mate could not get or which his pride would not let him accept. And she had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may have well invented herself. (“What the Black Woman Thinks” 63)

Despite the resourcefulness of Black women to invent themselves, when confronted with material realities and the absence of an acknowledged discursive model, outsider interference to the process of self-invention remains a problem. In Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston uses protagonist Janey to explore the contradictions of language in the construction of self. After Janey is questioned as to whether she knows her own self, she provides a response that reveals a great deal: “Dey all uster call me Alphabet ’cause so many people had done named me” (9). Both Morrison and Hurston address the multiplicity of being Black and female, and the failure of those classifications with the lived experiences in discussing Black women.

Janey’s situation reflects the condition of many Black females who have erroneously been named by someone other than themselves. If Janey is known
as Alphabet, and the alphabet is comprised of twenty-six letters, it is no won-
der that Janey does not know herself. Depending on the purpose and rules of
any given language, Janey could represent one specific letter of the alphabet
at any given time, the entire alphabet at one time, or select letters from the
alphabet meant to form words at any time. For without an understanding of
the grammar of self, meaning can be imposed on her body using someone
else’s grammar book.¹ If she does not know herself, then she cannot sustain
her own process of self-creation and culture building. However, Black female
culture relies on trickster-troping to circumvent the dislocation of self that
erroneous naming may cause. The tricketer trope mechanism of unnaming
is the key to empowering liminality that can interrupt the logic of Western
gender. In the end, this trickster-troping then allows them to defer gender so
that Black females can continue stating freely their desires.

The central consideration of this chapter argues that for centuries Black
cultural producers in the United States have been promoting an act
of gender unnaming, a process of unranking and challenging gender through
a manipulation of language to elide the troubles and violations of language
in the West. It further expounds that trickster-troping offers numerous and
various means of carrying out the act of unnaming to counter the institution-
ized rejection of difference as propagated by the false assumption that the
biological (physical factors such as ovaries, uterus, and eggs) is more real than
the social factors of gender, race, and sexuality. In Bodies that Matter, gender-
anarchist Judith Butler argues that the biological, like the social, has no real
meaning until humans forcefully provide elements with such meaning: “In
this sense, then, ‘sex’ not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory
practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, what regulatory force is
made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate,
circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls” (1–3). Likewise, Spillers’s
‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” discusses the queer inventions that go into
representations of Black bodies. Spillers particularizes the historical gendering
and degendering of Black females and male bodies. Rather than examining
Western medicine and scientific racism, Spillers examines how the institution
of slavery creates sociocultural mechanisms that make gender. In one of her
chief points, Spillers determines the master’s systematic privilege of naming
as crucial to the pornotroping of African American bodies: “The captivating
party does not only ‘earn’ the right to dispose of the captive body as it sees
fit, but gains, consequently, the right to name and ‘name’ it. . . . the opening
lines of this essay . . . demonstrate the powers of distortion that the dominant
community seizes as its unlawful prerogative” (263). The governing society’s
control, its “ownership” of the captive body, grants it the tools for gendering
and degendering practices withheld from the captive bodies. Together, Butler
and Spillers expose the collusion of the social and the biological as mere fictitious accounts by oppressive communities seeking to maintain reigns of supremacy.

Trickster-troping discloses the nonexistent gap between the social and biological by suggesting desire as the form that interrupts the subjective fictions of skin color, ovaries, uterus, and so on. Thus desire becomes a primary tool in self-invention and the reading of difference. Like the Black female cultural producers to be discussed at length in this text, difference and meaning are at the heart of Black women’s culture. The earlier statements made by Morrison and Hurston make obvious that self-creation and a process of naming (but, more radically, unnaming) are key factors for reading difference, as well as determining meaning for Black female subjectivity and representation of desires. Desire and folklore are connected in a complex matrix that works to counter stereotypes and obsolete approaches to attend to such misrepresentations, but desire and folklore are also necessary for the self-creation and unnaming that occurs before relevant cultural representations can take form. By exploring select slave narratives and neo-slave narratives, this chapter explains that the experience of the Black female slave and her slave narrative genre establish the precedent for negotiations between the rhetoric of sex and the discourse of desire in Black female culture, as well as the need for the metaphorical use of tricksterism and trickster by Black female writers, artists, and performers to articulate that desire without making them deviant through a hierarchy.

If Black females hoped to accomplish these goals in their culture, they would need to find a way to displace what Butler calls the logic of intelligible genders: “Intelligible genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire” (Gender Trouble 23). Fortunately, the historical experiences of Black females show their very subjectivity as one that defied the logic of intelligible genders. It is also what makes them different from other women. Angela Davis’s Women, Race, and Class documents the experience of nonhierarchical values of biological sex in African American communities historically formed during the institution of slavery. She completes a reexamination of the history of Black women in slavery and explores the multidimensional role of Black women within the family and slave community as a whole. Her analysis argues against the works of Daniel Moynihan, E. Franklin Frazier, Herbert Gutman, and Eugene Genovese in order to move beyond much of the negative rhetoric about the Black family as a destructive matrilocal biological structure.1

Davis notes, “The economic arrangements of slavery contradicted the hierarchical sexual roles incorporated in the new ideology. Male-female rela-
tions within the slave community could not, therefore, conform to the dominant ideological pattern” (12). Whereas the work of the other controversial critics suggests that the structure destroys the Black family and contributes to the social and economic problems of Black communities, Davis sees the resulting community as a deconstructive development that potentially dismisses the conventional rhetoric of sex and gender:

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

Davis shows that the Black family structure potentially possesses the qualities of gender fluidity and equality that was not common for white U.S. society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nevertheless, the egalitarian dynamics of Black females and males are consistently displaced by biological and social explanations of men and women as freedom is sought. Prevailing society connects the Western rhetoric of sex with the discourse of race to simplify the complicated subjective positions and experiences of Black females. Black female artists counter this through a complex understanding of gender. They understand that

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

In addition to Butler’s explanation of gender, this text acknowledges that the deferment of gender occurs in culturally specific ways that are influenced by factors such as race and class. In order to create and sustain radical Black female sexual subjectivity, Black female artists promote unnaming to interrupt the intelligible logic of gender, and they continue to defer with trickster-troping.

Although Morrison confirms that the Black female invented herself, Janey from Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God reveals that Black women may have little to do with naming themselves. Self-invention and naming are
major reasons that expression of Black female desire remains so complex. Davis’s, Carby’s, and Morrison’s descriptions of the historical experiences of Black females parallel the typology of trickster as a fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous being, and it also references the Black female as an imitator of gods since she does create herself. Be she trickster or Black female, Jacques Derrida acknowledges that names cannot define or fix the being of God in language (*Margins of Philosophy* 27). Therein lies the problem: fixing Black females’ historical subjectivity in language and attempting to name unnameable beings.

Slave traders pilfered the act of naming away from generations of Black people. Though much has been covered with respect to how important naming is in the African diaspora, the basis for that knowledge inevitably assumes that upon emancipation former slaves and their descendants took back the act of naming by renaming themselves. However, with the enslaving, renaming, and assimilation of Africans into the New World one must wonder if simply renaming was enough to sustain a process of self-invention. Further, analysis of these acts of naming and renaming are based solely upon racial discourse with no assessment of gender and sexuality within scrutiny of naming and unnaming. Historical experiences and current issues about representations of Black women suggest something altogether different. Naming, of course, remains important, but it is the revision of the act by Black women that demonstrates a willingness to carve out radical Black female sexual subjectivity. In terms of broader social categories and implications, the “Black woman” represents an invented character by cultures not of her own making. As the Combahee River Collective implies, the term unsuccessfully attempts to join the narratives of woman (white) with that of Black (man).

The process of naming Black females as “Black women” disturbs the self-invention of the subjects and results in a confining and violent confrontation between the two separate subjects—Black woman and Black female. Though these two subjects/bodies, like race and sex, are social and biological constructs whose meaning is enforced and determined by powerful oppressors, such theoretical meanderings doesn’t make the fissure or conflicts stemming from them any less real. Since, as Butler notes, the body has no meaning until we assign it, I will continue to use Black woman and Black female interchangeably to discuss what really is a subjectivity and body whose meaning is determined by its active will and desire. However, because that meaning is subjugated by other forces, Black women must find a way to deny oppressive regimes. Fortunately, deceptions by slaves attempt to return acts of naming and meaning to the individual. In the case of Black women, one can literally unname herself by acknowledging or claiming, “I’m not what you say I am,” or one can pursue a more metaphorical and symbolic path to unnaming—trickster-trop-
ing. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, we will see how Black women literally unname and trickster-trope to unname. Such trickster-troping, which may never look the same and may occur through several vehicles, allows Black females to defer gender for their own needs and desires.

Unnaming is not necessarily a new term, but it is a revised one. The topos of (un)naming seems to be a prevalent tool in African American culture. After emancipation, one way in which slaves expressed their freedom was to change their given slave names to names of their own selection. In discussing his theory on the topos of (un)naming as it concerns Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Kimberly Benston avers that “the ambiguities he (the invisible man) learns to confront in ‘being’ at once a subjective absence and total self-presence (invisible/man) arise from the comedy of his vain desire to achieve an empowering name” (“I yam what I am” 159). Benston’s theory of (un)naming, through its parenthetical coding, really implies unnaming to rename, an act many Black people condoned. For example, Olaudah Equiano’s, Malcolm X’s, and Amiri Baraka’s decisions to (un)name themselves by replacing their slave names with an X or an African/Afrocentric name have been deemed a defiant act against racial oppression. Since the surnames of many Blacks can be traced back to the owners of their ancestors’ captive bodies, the renaming of one’s last name became a symbol of ownership and self-determination for African Americans. This (un)naming is a personal process on the reflection of self. Yet there has also been a larger process on naming that we should consider in our reflections of race, gender, and sexuality. I am speaking now of unnaming. Unnaming is an act of liminality that seeks to disrupt limited discursive models. This text’s theory of “unnaming,” devoid of any parenthetical coding, hinges on a subject’s willful, infinite, multiple, and continuous process of defying classification/naming.

Unnaming engages the larger identity crisis of an oppressed group of people subordinated because of social differences such as race, gender, and sexual orientation. It also showcases the ideological and institutional apparatuses for resolving said identity crisis. When Sterling Stuckey charts the process of naming for Black people in the New World, he dissects the factors of identity and ideology in what he calls the naming controversy: “If in Freudian terms even simple distortions of name, conscious and unconscious (slips of the tongue), constitute acts of aggression, then the act of language—and only partial names at that—must be regarded as a serious act of aggression, as a reflection of a subordinate state” (198). As Stuckey briefly discusses the personal naming and (un)naming (or renaming) of Douglass, Garnett, Truth, and others, he also dissects the unnaming of Blacks as a group of people. Charting the shifting political climates that call for the use of African, Colored, Negro, Black, African American, or Afro-American in reference to
African descendants in the United States, Stuckey exposes that the naming of Blacks in the New World, as a group, is really a liminal process of unnaming to fit specific social and political situations and climates of various time periods in history. A change in name would certainly mean a different rhetorical strategy was being engaged in agendas of liberation and equality for Black communities. Arguably, this process of unnaming operates in the way I am proposing. Today, the various ways in which Black people refer to themselves and each other varies with meaning derived from markers of class, gender, geographical location, politics, and so on.

Since Stuckey charts the name controversy as it is relevant to race, we can now examine this name controversy in respect to gender. If, as Stuckey, Turner, and Bailey show, a great many of Africans enslaved were stolen from western areas of the Congo-Angola, Nigeria, Dahomey, Togo, the Gold Coast, and Sierra Leone, then we must consider Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí’s argument that discloses how the invention of “woman” begins in the West and through imperialism makes its way into societies whose rendering of gender is more multifaceted:

The usual gloss of Yoruba categories obinrin and okunrin as “female/woman” and “male/man,” respectively, is a mistranslation (of Western influenced thought) . . . these categories are neither binarily opposed nor hierarchical. The word obinrin does not derive etymologically from okunrin, as “wo-man” does from “man.” Rin the common suffix . . . suggests a common humanity; the prefixes obi and okun specify which variety of anatomy. Eniyan is the non-gender specific word for humans. (33)

In her important investigation of three simple words, Oyèwùmí illustrates that in precolonial Yorùbá societies, physical bodies were not necessarily social bodies. If Blacks endured a traumatic experience because of forced changes in personal name and in their renaming from African to Negro, then the mistranslations or distortions of gender naming was a similar act of aggression. Although there is no historical record of Black men and women undergoing a names controversy about gender in the way that they did in terms of race, there has been the simple distortion of names with regard to gender that Black women have been unconsciously engaging for years.

Spillers has already shown how this happens with the captive bodies of those Blacks held in chattel slavery and the descendants thereof:

Even though the captive flesh/body has been “liberated,” and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not matter, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and
valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor histography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is “murdered” over and over again. (“Mama’s Baby” 261)

So while naming and renaming have been very important in the cultural history of African Americans’ racial liberation, the threat of linguistic murder to Black racialized and sexualized bodies had to be attended to through another means—unnaming. The unnaming of gender may not be specific to Black women. Black gay studies and masculinity studies could glean out the specific ways in which unnaming occurs for particular Black male cultures. Indeed, later chapters of this work disclose such knowledge in folklore. However, the focus of this study remains the underengaged phenomenon of trickster-troping in Black female culture that seeks to articulate various sexual desires. Further, because Black women, captive and liberated, do not benefit from the naming and raking of gender in the way that Black men have,⁶ they turn to unnaming as is being defined within these pages.

Malcolm X’s, Amira Baraka’s, and Ellison’s invisible man’s (un)namings is about a shared commonality aside from race—their masculine status. Conceptually and traditionally, it seems easier to discuss (un)namings on a personal level as it concerns race, but it might also be relevant to discuss it in terms of gender. Despite the discussion of the invisible man as a subjective absence; there exists a privilege in being a total self-presence that derives from being a human being, but most notably in the ranking of male over female in Western societies. The invisible man must (un)name to rename so that he might access the power and privilege that comes with the social standing of manhood. It is about accessing power, as opposed to true self-invention. As Benston notes, it is a rather vain desire, and Black females cannot benefit from the act in the same way.

On the other hand, if Toni Cade Bambara’s, Assata Shakur’s, or Ntozake Shange’s name changes were defiant acts against “gender” oppression in addition to racial oppression, then they are more reflective of a type of tricksterism because they stem from the plurality outlined by Morrison and Hurston rather than the absence highlighted by Benston and Ellison. The name changes suggest self-creation and not power plays. If Spillers is correct, and I argue she is, when she claims that “the loss of the indigenous name/land provides a metaphor of displacement for other human and cultural features and relations, including the displacement of genitalia, the female’s and male’s desire that engenders future” (“Mama’s Baby” 268), then unnaming takes center stage. I suggest that, as opposed to mimicking or attempting to align
themselves with dominant models, some Black women—and some Black men—understood the benefits that could come from this displacement and in turn created a process of unnaming for Black women to self-author the narrative of self in ways that allow it to be revised and reread over time.

“How She Came By Her Name” by Toni Cade Bambara demonstrates how one Black woman believes that the process of naming should not result in permanent stations. In detailing the change of her name from Toni Cade to Toni Cade Bambara, Bambara explains that she cannot choose only one name because she is a different person at different times with different people. She also suggests that her choice to unname arises from a feeling that her birth name no longer reflects her current self. Bambara’s experience dictates the definition of unnaming (no parenthesis) in this text. Her unnnaming reflects that there is no true self but many selves. Unnaming is based on liminality and fluctuation in subjectivity and identity. In this sense, unnaming in this text differs from Benston’s (un)naming. Unnaming mimics trickster’s shape-shifting abilities. The freedom afforded to a subject engaged in unnaming stems from the way the liminal procedure allows a subject to shift when the political terrain changes.

Black females have been committed to the process of unnaming themselves for years. For the process of unnaming in Black females’ lives is as much about gender as it is about race, and for that reason their Black cultural experience of unnaming does not seek renaming, but instead a continuous process of unnaming. Though the theoretical concept of (un)naming/unnaming does not evolve until the later part of the twentieth century, the actions of selected historical figures and their experiences reveal a dynamic process of eluding definitions and boundaries for their subjectivity, specifically for African American females. These actions, based in orality, folklore, and vernacular culture, can now be shown as an initial precursor or early attempt by Black females to unname themselves as slaves and as “Black women.”

For example, when Hurston had Nanny proclaim that “de nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (Their Eyes 14), she utilized a timeless strategy of using folk tales and animus parallelism to interrupt the intelligible logic of gender and unname the Black woman through trickster-troping. In African American female culture, unnaming traditionally has been extracted from trickster’s trait of indeterminacy. Before reading slave narratives, close readings of various trickster tails that analyze the presence of gender conflicts may foster a greater sense of why and how Hurston, and writers before her, came to rely on lessons from folklore and trickster tales to begin their tradition of trickster-troping that would counter the discourse of race and the rhetoric of sex’s false naming.
Pedagogy of the Oppressed—Trickster Tales

As Davis previously documented, on the plantation there is no separation of the sexes that would foster an initial separate oral tradition. Patricia Hill Collins's Black Feminist Thought also notes that “Black women’s centrality in Black family networks should not be confused with matriarchal or female dominated female units . . . Rather, African Americans' relationship to the slave political economy made it unlikely that either patriarchal or matriarchal domination could take root” (52). Both Collins’s and Davis’s comments should then be connected to Sylvia Wynter’s thesis in “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation” to comprehend how these facts contribute to folk revolutions. Wynter explains that slaves created a separate social and cultural landscape: “Around the growing of the yam, of food for survival, he created on the plot a folk culture—the basis of a social order—in three hundred years. This culture recreated traditional values—use values. This folk culture became a source of cultural guerilla resistance to the plantation system” (99–100). Wynter’s claim that folk culture possesses its own social order echoes Davis’s theory of egalitarianism in slave culture. Consequently, the egalitarian mode of social organization and the use of folk culture as resistance did not cease to exist once slaves were freed. All ex-slaves needed to be concerned with was survival: if they would live, how they would eat, stay with family, or leave. African American females continued to work in agriculture to help support their families. As the narrative of Sara Brooks recalls, “We never was lazy cause we used to really work. We used to work like mens. Oh, fight sometime, but worked on” (39). Material conditions took precedence over social repression. Some early animal trickster tales reflected these nonhierarchical values.

In one trickster tale, “The Fox and the Goose,” the original configuration of trickster as genderless is restored through a retelling of how Fox tries to trick Goose into being his/her next meal:

Fox said, “You ain’t afraid of me, is you? Haven't you heard of the meeting up at the hall the other night? . . . Why, they passed a law that no animal must hirt any other animal. Come down and le me tell you about it. The hawk musn't catch the chicken, and the dog musn't chase the rabbit, and the lion musn't hurt the lamb.” (Hughes and Bontemps 12)

As Fox works to coax and convince Goose to come out of the tree, a dog barks and causes Fox to assume a hiding position. As the dog’s bark grows louder, Fox sneaks off and this encourages Goose to ask, “Fox, you ain't scared of the Dog, is you? Didn't all the animals pass a law at the meeting not to bother each other” (12). Goose wisely notices Fox’s trickery and the game of wits
ends in a stalemate. Goose does not get eaten and Fox escapes the dog. No clear victorious or heroic figure exists, but both characters survive. Though Fox seems very clever in its imagined suggestion of the passing of a new law, Goose’s keen intelligence to assess Fox’s action at the barking of the dog indicates the figure’s own wiliness. As with some African oral epics and myths, the lack of gendering of animals in this particular tale suggests the original ambiguity of tricksterism.

The pedagogy of the tale also remarks on the notion of difference. Fox attempts to use the notion of a universal and harmonious animal kingdom to fool Goose. As a monolithic nation, under the supposed new law, they must not hurt each other. Goose is not the same species as Fox and is therefore an outsider who can be consumed, but Fox can’t eat or oppress until Goose has released notions of difference. As Audre Lorde argues, “Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people” (“Age, Race, Class” 115). “The Fox and the Goose” provides a powerful analogy of how to avoid the pitfalls of monolithic rhetoric of race, nation, gender, and sexuality.

Black Culture and Black Consciousness formulates that trickster tales told during the institution of slavery function as tools to teach about Black experiences in the New World. The tales, “because of their overwhelmingly paradigmatic character . . . were, of all the narrative of social protest or psychological release, among the easiest to relate both within and especially outside the group” (Levine 102). It comes as no surprise, then, that the trickster figure endures as a pedagogical apparatus for the Black community during slavery. Animal trickster tales reflect a community’s material conditions and social repression. African American slaves had to consider both in their daily lives, and depressed material conditions were the result of social repression. Many times these conditions led slaves to translate or relate trickster tales to their own lives.

Since African American culture lacked the spiritual world of its African mother, where hierarchies were conveyed via deities/trickster-gods, divinities, and humans, the most pivotal way to represent those dichotomies in early African American culture was via gender constructs of the empire during slavery. When stories highlight the ranking of gender in African American folklore it is not necessarily an indication of accepted beliefs in the social construct of gender or the biological rhetoric of sex, as much as it is a strategy to show ranking in a New World way. Traditionally, “the primary trickster figures of animal tales were weak, relatively powerless creatures” who depended on wit and guile, and their counterparts were physically bigger and relied on brute strength (Levine 103). Hare/rabbit, tortoise/turtle, spider, lion, tiger, hyena, and elephant may have been enough to represent battles about
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material conditions, but this work proposes that the doubling of weak versus strong conveyed by traditional characters and gender markers of “sis” or br’er are an attempt to handle the more complicated issues of social repression facing Africans in the New World:

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

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

And so dey went to cote, and when dey got dere, de sheriff, he wus er fox, en de judge, he was er fox, and der toruney, dey wus fox, en all de jurymen, dey was foxes, too. En dey tried ole Sis Goose, en dey victed her and dey scut-ed her, and dey picked her bones. Now my chilluns, listen to me, when all de folks in de cotehouse is foxes, and you is des’ er common goose, der ain’t gwine to much justice for you pore cullud folks. (Hughes and Bontemps 13)

In “Ole Sis Goose,” the woes of the African American community and the U.S. legal system provide a folkloric rendering of how race affects the outcome of justice. Gender status seems to be employed in this animal tale as a way to parallel the superior levels of creativity, ingenuity, and cleverness with those of a given society’s measurements of superiority. In the case of the United States, the ranking of male over female, as well as white over black, is one way to show rank. However, creating oral stories that explicitly evoke the unfair and oppressive realities of slaves through race might have resulted in harsh punishment if white oppressors overheard. Gender became the most viable alternative.

Examination of more tales validates the need for deeper explication of gender and sexuality in folklore. The marker of “sis” in the animal tale suggests gender as the safest way to express the injustices of the world. The superficial lesson to be learned is that justice refers to just-us (white) declared citizens of society. Not every animal judging the case is Sis Goose’s kind. The foxes clearly represent white people and their presence in U.S. courts, while Sis Goose represents the Black race. More subversively, the tale exemplifies how folktales counter any dominant social ideals. As slaves, Blacks are deemed property and the language of ownership that would enable Sis Goose (Blacks) to swim in the lake remains unavailable to her. As Sis Goose learns, only those making the laws can expect to reap the benefits of the privilege they might afford individuals.

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

The proliferation of such tales make obvious that these pedagogical legends use the rhetoric of sex to teach Black people not only how to negotiate the oppressive racial realities of Blacks to whites in the New World, but also how to negotiate the oppressive/repressive status of gender and sexuality in the community and culture of Blacks in the United States. Yet the latter function is dismissed for a focus on race. As Levine demonstrates, critics encounter few problems demonstrating the tales’ connection to issues of race and stature. However, connecting the tales to other conflicts in Black life remains to be done.

Over time, the tradition of animal trickster tales changes to reflect both a concern with material conditions and social repression, especially as it concerns women. In another tale, “Brer Rabbit and Sis Cow,” the issues of gender relations in the Black community are more clear-cut. In this particular tale, Br’er Rabbit tricks Sis Cow for his own means:

Br’er Rabbit see Sis Cow an’ she have a bag plumb full of milk, an’ it’s a hot day an’ he ain’t had nothin’ to drink for a long time. He know ‘tain’t no use askin’ her fur milk ’cause las’ year she done ’fused him onct. . . . he say: “Sis Cow would you do me the favor to hit this persimmon tree with yore head an’ shake a few of dem persimmons.” . . . Sis Cow . . . hits the tree, but no persimmons come down. . . . So den Sis Cow git mad . . . an’ hit dat tree so hard dat her horns go right into the wood so fur she can’t pull ’em out. (Hughes and Bontemps 4)

Once Sis Cow becomes stuck in the tree, Br’er Rabbit brings his family to the tree and they proceed to milk and feast on the milk of Sis Cow.

Br’er Rabbit’s trickery triumphs again. If he had not used it, his family may never have received the milk it needed. The lesson to be learned from this tale suggests that wits win out over brawn every time. However, tales such as Sis Cow and Sis Goose demonstrate a pattern that consistently places animal figures assigned a less powerful status into the gendered position of the Western construction of woman, as well as being the tricked rather than the trickster. Such tales make it difficult to believe these animal trickster tales
hold any of the original genderless qualities of the African trickster figures, or that they could represent various positions in Black subjectivity. However, since trickster tales are about material circumstances and material conditions change over time, so do the tales. It should not be seen as coincidental that these elements begin to change in the same period as talk of emancipation and women’s voting rights begins.

With the goals of freedom in mind for nineteenth-century Blacks, the trickster tradition evolved from animal trickster tales to human trickster tales about a Black male named John who has a hard-work philosophy and superior physical endurance that wins out over machine technology. During the transition of trickster tales, the tradition becomes split along the plots and themes of gender. The tradition of John is merely one trickster in the human trickster cycle. Annie Christmas is another.

Annie Christmas, Female Trickster Figure Countering the Tradition of John

In *Tricksters Make This World*, Lewis Hyde argues that “all the standard tricksters are male” (335). The first question, then, is whose standards guide the research and focus? As discussed in the introduction, if the reading and use of trickster is a recouping of nation, heroism, or masculinity, then the standard would be male. If the community or group that produces trickster is hierarchically arranged along gender divisions, where masculinity is privileged, then the standard will be male. Yet what happens when none of the aforementioned is a consideration. What happens when women’s culture uses and reads trickster as the genderless or multigendered being that it has been referenced as being? Hyde extends his argument by suggesting three perfectly (il)logical reasons for trickster traditions being male no matter what: “First, tricksters belong to patriarchal mythologies, one in which the prime actors are male. Second, there may be a problem with the standard itself; there may be female tricksters who simply have been ignored. Finally, it may be that the trickster stories articulate some distinction between men and women, so that even in a matriarchal setting this figure would be male” (335). Since trickster, based on years of research in various disciplines, is by its very existence and definition an anomaly that should never be referred to in the same breath as standard anything, we must challenge Hyde’s assumption that all tricksters are male. There are matriarchal mythologies where the trickster is female, there is an obvious problem with the standard, and as Hyde’s own words offer, female tricksters have been deliberately ignored just because of their being female.

While the figures themselves may not be Western, the concept of trick-
ster is a Western term and concept that delimits the original possibilities of trickster. In accordance with this belief, William Hynes suggests that more characteristics, in addition to the six manifest trickster traits, might be found: “More characteristics could be chosen, but these six serve as a modest map, heuristic guide . . . thus, these initial six characteristics invite and anticipate not only the intricacies of the careers of particular tricksters, but emendations” (“Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters” 33). In that sense, the figures we classify as tricksters should not be appropriated or changed, but the definition of trickster should be tinkered with at some point through the values of the specific communities and time periods that it remains a part of. Tales of one folk figure reveal how Black women continued evolving trickster strategies in animal tales and slave narratives in their daily lives.

Beyond animal trickster tales, we find one underread human trickster tale, “Annie Christmas,” wreaking havoc on the laws of intelligible gender in Black oral traditions in the early twentieth century. Black diaspora oral and folk traditions are filled with stories of trickster-gods/goddesses and animal and human tricksters. Aside from all the tales of Tar Babies, Signifying Monkeys, Br’er Rabbits, John Henrys, and Stackolees, we should also examine the few tales on Annie Christmas in Black females’ folk and vernacular culture. In the folktales of Annie Christmas, we find the beginning of indeterminacy and the implied complications of gender and sexuality for African Americans and this text’s revision of the trickster figure in Black culture. Annie Christmas, a Black U.S folk figure, is one of the first figures to provide a revision of the masculine trope of the human trickster in Black U.S. culture:

Oldtimers say that the Negro longshoremen and all life on the riverfront are not what they used to be. Its gone soft now, say they. In other days men were really men, yet the toughest of them all was a woman. Her name was Annie Christmas. She was six feet, eight inches tall and she weighed more than two hundred and fifty pounds. She wore a neat mustache and had a voice as loud and as deep as a foghorn on the river. (Hughes and Bontemps 13)

Annie Christmas has been described as the female version of John Henry, the superhuman hero of Black folklore. Yet such a reading of the story, like that of John Henry, would mean accepting the traditional reading of gender and heroic figures. On the other hand, trickster-trooping uncovers the real potential of the tale. The story of Annie Christmas reminds us that issues of gender and sexuality are very much a part of Black vernacular culture. The lore of Annie Christmas remains a part of levee life or riverboat/dockside culture of America. Often described as a life dictated by the river, levee culture expresses “the life of a community within a community,—a society of wanderers who
have haunts but not homes, and who are connected with the static society surrounding them by common bond of State and municipal law” (Hughes and Bontemps 211). Hence, levee habitats facilitate trickster’s liminal or transitory life.

In states dependent on docks and ports for economic subsistence, African Americans once again made up a great deal of the labor force. Referred to as roustabouts, their “pariah existence and wholly sensual enjoyments” provide this author with plenty of trickster material (Hughes and Bontemps 213). These figures epitomize trickster’s ability to be both marginal and central to the community’s culture. Although historians show roustabout life as a male culture, folklore presents alternative narratives. One cannot partake of the rowdy, rambunctious tales of sailing adventures, booze, violence, and women without encountering the tales of Annie Christmas.

Annie Christmas highlights the trickster-like existence of Black females and their culture. The description of Annie takes the contradictions of Black female subjectivity to their greatest heights by exaggerating the socially conceived physical attributes usually ascribed to either men or women and embeds them in one being. Annie, previously undefined as a trickster, reflects Hynes’s six original characteristics of trickster. In addition to the tale itself serving as a signifier of the importance of gender and sexuality in women’s folklore, the recording of the tale exposes the influence of gender and sexuality in the research and study of folklore.

There are two very distinct versions of the Annie Christmas story. The first version, as quoted above, is extracted from Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps’s compilation The Book of Negro Folklore. As we will see, the variations of the story are attributable to the gender of those collecting or telling the stories. The version found in the Hughes and Bontemps collection contains vivid descriptions of Annie Christmas as a drinking woman: “Annie could outdrink any man in the south. She would put down a barrel of beer and chase it with ten quarts of whiskey, without stopping” (13).

In this version, the bio-logic of Annie’s gender runs contradictory to the bio-logic of woman. That Annie’s strength and gendered fluidity seems more male than female comes from the realization that Annie chases beer with whiskey, where typically it would be the reverse—with mortals using beer to chase the stronger and harder liquor of whiskey. Drinking establishes Annie as something not quite man or woman. The focus on drinking hard liquor typically is assigned as a masculine pastime.

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

Another version of Annie Christmas, recorded in Herstories, a collection of folktales compiled by female folklorist Virginia Hamilton, delivers an almost identical version of the story of Annie Christmas, but with some noticeable changes:

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

In this version, Annie gives birth to boys one after the other, and there is no mention of her drinking like a man. The variety in versions of the tale is attributable to the ideologies of gender and the purpose of the collection.

In the Hughes and Bontemps collection, we have a version recorded by two men, collected for a general collection of folklore. In that version, the exaggerations of masculine qualities seem to be reemphasized. The Hamilton version, told by a woman and collected by a woman for inclusion into a collection of Black folklore for girls, focuses less on the masculine attributes. Perhaps Hamilton’s version, while still imbuing Annie with great strength with which to beat many men, does not refer to Annie’s drinking habits because it buys into ideologies of drinking as an activity or vice that should not be promoted. It is, after all, a collection of tales meant for young girls. The Hughes and Bontemps version includes the drinking to defeminize the character for believability of her status as riverboat captain. The possibilities for the inclusion/exclusion of certain factors in this particular context suggest how a tale with a limitless subject figure can be shaped by social creeds. However, the tale and figure itself consistently refute the influence of dominant beliefs that there are only two genders.

In both versions, Annie possesses both masculine and feminine traits, and she has the hypersexuality of trickster, as evidenced by her twelve children. Incidentally, the description of Annie with facial hair disrupts the discreet order of gender. Facial hair has been touted as a masculine trait, but
women also experience facial hair growth. Annie’s moustache, height, and
weight subvert constructed ideas of gender and biological feminine aesthetics.
Conceivably, she is male and female. In addition, her very existence works to
change the community in which she lives. In one adventure, shape-shifting, a
manifest trickster trait, prevails: “I’ll tell you about the time Annie decided to
dress up like a fine lady. She shaved that mustache real close so it wasn’t there.
She piled her raven hair up and stuck peacock feathers in it” (Herstories 85).

The shaving of Annie’s moustache represents an acknowledgment that
femininity is a performance written by the discreet order of gender identi-
ties. Annie’s bionatural state is to have a moustache, and her decision to
shave gives her an unnatural but now normalized physical appearance as
a “woman.” The relegation of biology into familiar gendered categories is
motivated by normative readings that are invested in dominant social gender
constructs. Ironically, as many of Annie’s girlfriends are prettying themselves
for boat rides with male suitors, Annie sets to sail by herself in her keelboat.
Annie Christmas’s story makes it hard to believe that the trickster figure has
contributed to a purely masculine line of folk descendants. The figure con-
sciously moves back and forth between Western constructs of gender, but
Annie never really adheres to the logic of such discourse. The endings of the
separate tales emphasize the possible disruptions.

The endings of the Annie Christmas stories present another primary
inconsistency in the two versions of the tale. Both tales end with Annie com-
mitting suicide because she fell in love with a riverboat captain who did not
want her. However, the reactions and subsequent finality changes from tale
to tale and depends on who is telling or retelling and collecting the story.
In the Hughes and Bontemps version, Annie commits suicide directly after
the rejection: “Finally Annie met a man who could lick her and then she fell
in love for the first time in her life. But the man didn’t want her, so Annie
bedeckered herself in all her finery and her famous necklace and committed
suicide” (223). In this version, Annie simply gives up and dies, while the
captain seems to go on living.

The presentation of this Annie Christmas tale subsequently makes the
captain a victor or a more powerful agent in the life of this Black female.
Where she was once the toughest of all (men), her attempt to capture a
man’s love weakens her. The Hughes and Bontemps version of the tale clearly
indicates an unhappy ending for Black females who do not adhere to model
ideologies of womanhood. It suggests that women can be different, but those
women should be prepared to face the consequences of that difference—man’s
rejection of them and their love. Further, it implies that while Annie had her
independence and freedom, she could not be completely happy unless she
had a man in her life. As someone who unashamedly possesses both "mascu-
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line” and “feminine” qualities simultaneously, Annie exists liminally because she moves back and forth between the social constructs of male and female. In this version, suicide appears to be the only way for Annie to alleviate her anomalous physical fluctuations.

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

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

Hamilton’s version positions Annie as the more active and powerful agent. After the rejection by the captain, Annie is not silent. She speaks before she commits suicide and briefly places herself back into a position of power. Although she still commits suicide, she does not seem to falter at the established norms. In fact, Annie rejects those standards by altering the course of the captain’s life with her curse. Her actions change the outcome of the story; the captain and his crew die, “but he haunts the big devil river. You can hear him cursing the weather, the sky” (86).

In addition to the captain’s death and his angry haunting of the river in New Orleans, Annie’s unhappy predicament in death changes. Ironically, tellers of the story forewarn: “Now you can believe this last, or not. But this what the black folks say” (88). The need to address the believability about the rest of Annie’s tale concretely conveys the importance of who is telling the story, as well as who is listening. It also seeks to prepare the listener for a more provocative ending: “Annie Christmas is still on the big river . . . sitting on her own wood grave, singing a river tune to the thundering sky” (88). The ending of Hamilton’s version enunciates the differing perception of suicide in the two tales. The captain dies and curses everything in his afterlife, while Annie, almost gloating, sings triumphantly on the river. Hamilton’s ending remarks about the gendering of this Black female. It figuratively unnames Annie Christmas as a Black woman. Unmistakably, this Annie is not the weakened, dejected, and dead female of the Hughes and Bontemps version, but something much more.

Annie’s actions mirror Br’er Rabbit, Signifying Monkey, and the tradition of John. She signifies, she tricks, and she possesses a superhuman quality that ensures her survival in lore. As a spirit, she is now free to embrace her trait of indeterminacy in a way she could not have as a human. Characteristics
and elements of magical realism and hoodoo revamp Annie's image and transform the figure into a trickster-god(dess) for the masses. She lives as the strong, indeterminable self that she originally was. Her spirit state suggests the full reality of what was at one time her corporeal experience. She could only maintain this state in an alternate world, and that is what Black folklore suggests for Black people and Black culture—to find other discourses that sustain liminal subjectivity rather than accept false or static options. The complexity of Annie Christmas shows the complication of gender and desire in African American communities. As mythical as human tricksters like John and Annie may have been, human trickster tales were frequently based on some real-life person. Nowhere is this more obvious then in the individual accounts of former slaves who took to presenting their stories in extended written narratives.

Pregeneric Myths of Slave Narratives

Just as folklore becomes evidence in proving that Blacks have a culture in which they can stake their claim in nationalism, so too does the slave narrative. In both their experiences as slaves and as authors of slave narratives, ex-slaves relied as much on tricksterism learned from Black folklore and myths as they did on the Western tradition of writing and discourses of religion and enlightenment. However, it is the slave narrative based on the experiences of males that shapes many discussions about Black culture so that it parallels and benefits the aims of nation building in folklore. In From behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative, Robert Stepto reminds us that African American culture, like all cultures, has “canonical stories” or “pregeneric myths, shared stories or myths that not only exist prior to literary forms, but eventually shape the forms that comprise a given culture’s literary canon” (ix). According to Stepto, the slave narrative shows that freedom and literacy are the pregeneric myths for African American literature. Subsequently, few have questioned this universality of pregeneric myths.

Stepto’s designated pregeneric myths seem to deny the hierarchies that existed in institutions of slavery (field slave/house slave, man/woman, and darkie/mulatto). He totalizes the slave experience, and if the slave experience were universal then we would not have the development of the Black female slave narrative. What are pregeneric myths of the female slave narrative, and how do they shape the tradition of African American women’s literature? These questions have not been fully answered. Clearly, we have analyzed the importance of gender and sex in contexts dealing with history, themes, and the representation of the Black woman, but there has not been a moment of
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recognition of these pregeneric myths, if they exist.

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

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

By asserting that literacy was the way for slaves to prove their humanity, Gates validates Stepto’s pregeneric myths. He relies on a number of male slave narratives to confirm his major argument—the trope of the talking book. Gates is not alone in this theory of writing one’s self into being (*Signifying Monkey* 33–37, 48–49).

Ronald T. Judy’s *(Dis)forming the American Canon: African Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* moves beyond these established assumptions about the vernacular and literacy in African American literary tradition. In reference to both the slave narrative and Black folk and oral traditions, theories of being suggests exactly what Judy claims in his work: “[T]he mute African body is overwritten by the Negro, and the Negro that emerges in the ink flow . . . is that which has overwritten itself and so become the representation of the very body it sits on” (89). Judy challenges the previous statement made by Gates, which proposes that the slave writes himself into being through the narrative and that before the moment of inscription there was no valid being. With his dismissal of theories of slaves writing themselves into being in ways that Western man can understand, Judy attempts to revise the canons of American and African American literature to find a place for African-Arabic slave narratives through a theory of indeterminacy. Judy makes solid claims that a Black narrative tradition exists before Africans in the New World construct it. Rather than relying on traditional slave narrative from the West written in English, Judy refers to Ben Ali’s *Diary*, written in Arabic, as “an augmentation of Afro-American canon formation” (22). Judy’s critique of Ben Ali’s African-Arabic slave narrative and its sense of indeterminacy highlight how issues of authenticity and essentialism have narrowed conceptions of Black experiences and culture.

Interestingly enough, Judy’s work could have offered interesting insights about the issue of gender in the African American literary tradition, but, as indicated by Wahneema Lubiano, Judy chose not to focus on those insights:
Being is a set of terms—a male new set of terms; “making a man” is “being” on male grounds, for neither Kant nor Douglass’s humanness makes “female” humanness possible. And if Ben Ali’s manuscript’s indeterminacy has feminist implications, then their articulation in Judy’s work is sotto voce indeed. Judy not only doesn’t comment on the masculinist language and imaginings of the texts or the discourse of reason, he doesn’t make an argument for why gender does not have to be addressed, and I mean gender not only in terms of what is left out—because apparently it did not occur to Judy to take up gender as something to consider even if only to dismiss its importance (xxii).11

Lubiano masterfully details how recent attempts to rethink blackness still eliminate gender and sexuality from those considerations. These revisions share one commonality. Be it through the articulation of pregeneric myths or metaphors of authentication, the narrative tradition of African Americans is problematically assessed through an ontology of deformity and deficiency. The Negro lacks culture, lacks tradition, lacks history, and therefore lacks identity. So focused on the idea of proving what the Negro lacks and the Negro’s attempts to “be,” we never ask what/who we mean when we say “Negro.” Incidentally, as Lubiano alluded to earlier, the concept of “being” and being Negro is primarily conceived as masculine,12 and as such, critics reach for the most widely perceived masculine forms of the oral and vernacular to continue incorporating Africanism with nationalist agendas. Such representations of blackness mask the distinctions and differences we currently find ourselves trying to account for in the identity of Blacks. Uncovering unnaming and trickster-troping in the female slave narrative moves scholarship beyond conceiving of Black narrative tradition and identity as an ontology of lack, but suggests that identity can emerge through a simultaneous presentation of multiple and fluctuating processes that don’t have to be fixed or limited.

The African American female tradition evolves from a foundation of nonhierarchical roles of gender, an understanding of occupying space that is deemed masculine, feminine, and other. Black females who were once slaves do not attempt to write themselves into being, because they already know they exist. Instead, their works seek to translate their liminal subjectivity to societies or cultures obsessed with finite categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality, while denying dominant society’s classification and naming of their subjectivity. Essentially, Stepto’s concerns over pregeneric myths (freedom and literacy) help to reveal the counternarrative in Black female slave narratives. Freedom acts as a major factor in most slave narratives, but literacy fails to be a significant factor not only because it was a male privilege and priority, but also because literacy, in the sense that Stepto imagines it (writing in English),
connects to Western discourses that mistranslate or misrepresent Black female subjectivity. Slave narratives about female protagonists do incorporate the pregeneric myth of freedom. However, unlike the male slave narrative, that freedom does not hinge on the acquirement of literacy. For female slaves, freedom depends on the disruption of racial and gender categories. In the end, their historical methods of trickster-troping stems from their quests to resist being either Negro or woman. The desire to resist “being” shapes Black women’s goals of freedom and developing culture.

**Signifyin(g) Sojourner Truth and the Historical Figuration of Mythology**

For all their profuse appreciation and support of learning to read and write, critics’ privileging of writing as most important in Black literary tradition must take a back seat when we examine the rhetorical strategies used by most authors of slave narratives. Strategies of trickery learned from folklore traditions, specifically trickster tales, become just as important as literacy. Learning how to write is one thing, understanding how to manipulate that skill to write a pass for freedom is quite another. Even the most skilled writer and follower of Rousseauian ideals of democracy, Frederick Douglass, needed a little Br’er Rabbit to help him (un)name himself and work the antislavery lecture circuit. In the case of Black female slaves, trickster tales provide as many worthy models for their material conditions as Br’er Rabbit did for their male counterparts. While the historical experience of the Black female calls for the act for unnaming, her strategies of unnaming arise from her oral culture and, in this case, animal and human trickster tales. The intersection of rhetorical strategies of animal trickster tales with that of concerns of liberation for Black men and white women erupts in the oral rendering of one female slave’s life into the written narrations of slave tradition, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*.

Truth’s narrative functions very much along the same narrative strategies of folk tradition, with the one exception that it is veritable fact. Still, the forces of divine myths make their way into Truth’s autobiography. When Truth discusses her post-emancipation move to unname herself as Isabella, she states, “An’ so I went to the Lord an’ asked him to give me a new name. And the Lord gave me Sojourner, because I was to travel up an’ down the land, showin’ the people their sins, and bein’ a sign unto them. . . . Afterward I told the Lord I wanted another name [other than Sojourner], cause everybody else had two names . . . the Lord gave me Truth, because I was to declare the truth to the people” (*Narrative of Sojourner Truth* 126–27). Truth’s rhetorical involvement with truth and signs exhibits intellectual strategies that
are trickster-like in nature. Ironically, like a true trickster, the two names the Lord bestows upon her non-hierarchically oppose each other. “Truth” connotes absolutism. While Sojourner Truth claims that her first name represents her function as a sign. Notably, “for any one sign there may be several interpretations.”

Truth engages in a personal (un)naming (renaming herself) to counter the personal subjugation forced on her by the institution of slavery, but in assigning herself opposing names that cancel out the meaning of each other, she also unconsciously unnames to counter the discursive binaries of Western discourse. This unnnaming metaphorically challenges the binaries that comprise ideologies of gender, race, and sexuality. Truth’s unnnaming revelation documents the way Black women used and continue to use myth and metaphor to invent themselves as subjects and express their desires.

Like the tales of Br’er Rabbit told to Joel Chandler Harris by Uncle Remus, Truth’s life story is told to two white women suffrage activists, Olive Gilbert and Frances Gage. Truth’s narrative tends to lack the authority and strength of voice of other narratives, such as Douglass’s, but that doesn’t make the logic of her most famous speech any less valid. Though her story is narrated by Gilbert and Gage, the logic and ideals clearly derive from the point of view of a female slave raised in a world filled with folklore. From Gage’s account, Truth’s famous speech at the 1851 Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, confronts social ideologies of womanhood and the bio-logic of gender:

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

Truth’s rhetorical strategy mirrors that of Br’er Rabbit and Sis Goose in animal trickster tales. She positions herself as the lower and weaker foil, but she uses wit and guile to move herself into a position of power or control. She draws attention to the inconsistencies within the social and biological discourses on gender.

The speech also resonates with the elements associated with the human trickster tale:

Looking back upon the past, the slaves and their descendants painted a picture not of a cowed and timorous black mass but of a people who, how-
ever circumscribed by misfortune and oppressions, were never without their means of resistance and never lacked the inner resources to oppose the master class. (Levine 389)

Truth’s narrative allows her to emphasize her inner resources of strength. Levine explains that the creation of human trickster tales was meant to foster a sense of resistance. Human trickster tales empower African Americans to move from a subjectivity of powerless victim. In the same way that ex-slaves mythologized their ancestors in slavery, Truth makes herself a trickster against her opposing master classes of white men, white women, and Black men. Like the tradition of John Henry, “Ain’t I a Woman?” epitomizes the basic qualities of the human trickster tale.

Rather than assuming a position of victimhood dictated by ideals concerning gender, virtues, and biology, Truth opts for a trickster discourse. Unnaming is a performative tactic of the vernacular similar to José Muñoz’s disidentification. In Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Politics of Performance, Muñoz examines cultural performances by queers of color that “must negotiate between a fixed identity disposition and the socially encoded roles that are available for such subjects” (6). However, where Muñoz’s work speaks of performances that refashion mainstream and heteronormative ideologies as a form of resistance, unnaming is a form of resistance to counter and destroy dominant types and models with myths from the subjects’ culture. 

Unnaming, in the way that Truth does it, is a process of redefining difference as postulated by Audre Lorde where we can use “human difference as a springboard for creative change within our lives” (“Age, Race, Class, and Sex” 116). The effectiveness of Truth’s speech relies on how she understands difference. She brilliantly conceptualizes difference as something that is not deviant. Trickster acts as a subtext to her approach.

As a performer of African American communal discourse, she becomes Gerald Vizenor’s definition of the comic (ironic) holotrope in racial and gender inequities. Biologically, Truth places herself in the arena of females, but socially she explodes the ideologies of “woman” with her position as slave labor. She possesses feminine attributes of female reproduction, but she remains physically capable of manual labor. Her historical line, delivered in her vernacular tongue, signifies on her oppressors in the same way that Monkey signifies on the lion in the well-known African American trickster tale “The Signifying Monkey”:

For up jumped the monkey in the tree one day and laughed
“I guess I’ll start some shit . . .”

... King of the jungle, ain’t you a bitch,
you look like someone with a seven year itch . . .
“Whup! Motherfucker, don’t you roar. (B. Jackson 164–65)

The trickster figure is brash and unapologetic but aware of Lion’s possible reaction. Truth’s rhetorical demeanor and trademark line, “ain’t I a woman,” replicates the repetitious taunting nature of the animal trickster and its plot device of pitting weaker (oppressed) against the stronger animal (oppressor). She dares those with more power to challenge her with each refrain by making use of their own rhetoric of sex and womanhood. Truth’s signifyin(g) exposes the secret intersection between the rhetoric of sex and the discourse of race. The use of her folk tongue serves as a way to unname herself, as opposed to renaming herself woman. As Claudia Mitchell-Kernan assessed early on:

The Black concept of signifying incorporates essentially a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient for interpreting meaning or messages, or that meaning goes beyond such interpretations. Complimentary remarks may be delivered in a left-handed fashion. A particular utterance may be an insult in one context and not another. What pretends to be informative may be persuasive. The hearer is constrained to attend all potential meaning carrying symbolic systems in speech events—the total universe of discourse. (314)

In order for Truth’s signifyin(g) to be successfully understood, her audience has to appreciate and comprehend the cultural foundation that she is mining. Though Truth and the white women she addresses are biologically female, all parties must understand the social discourses denied and available to Truth. The discourse of womanhood is denied to her, but her folk universe gives her trickster’s signifyin(g). Though the logic of Truth’s speech attempts to disrupt the biological determinism that creates the hierarchical ranking of sexes, it is undermined by the intrusion of white females and their suffrage objectives.

Gage and Gilbert could not attend to, and perhaps did not care to, all the meanings of Truth’s signifyin(g) “ain’t I a woman.” She uses the term “woman” in the same way that the monkey uses motherfucker. Her signifyin(g) undoes the intelligible logic of gender because it is a “boast by indirect verbal or gestural means” (Abrahams, Deep Down in the Jungle 264) to suggest that no nineteenth-century language exists to adequately define her subjectivity. Truth’s “Ain’t I A Woman” speech is a trickster narrative, and trickster-scholar Anne Doueihi convincingly argues that trickster narratives are “about the difference between, and the undecideability of, discourse and story, referential and rhetorical values, signer and signified, a conventional mind and one
that is open to the sacred” (200). Signifyin(g) acts as Truth’s method of trickster-troping. She replaces the rhetoric of womanhood with her own culturally specific discourse of desire to be something more than woman, to unname herself as Black woman. The only problem, then, is that audiences (past and present) ignore the reality of Truth’s “trash-talking,” a folk machination. This is after all, a person who is a walking contradiction since she defines herself as a sign and the truth.

As always, it is the transmission from oral to written that begins the problematic use of Truth and the historical figuration of “the Black woman.” Besides Truth’s question of womanhood, we see something else taking precedent in the narrative—Truth’s body. Before Truth bares her unwomanly arms to reveal muscles usually accorded to men, Gage focuses incessantly on Truth’s height. As Truth performs, her narrative relates that she is slouching at first, but then she raises herself to her full height. Gage previously discloses that “the leaders of the movement trembled on seeing a tall, gaunt, black woman” (Narrative of Sojourner Truth 133), and that “Old Sojourner, quiet and reticent as the ‘Libyan Statue’ sat . . . her chin resting upon her broad, hard palm” (134). Gage reveals that Truth’s body commands as much attention as her words.

If the point of Truth’s speech is truly to underscore her subjectivity as woman and connection to sisterhood, then surely we can realize the mockery in her words “ain’t I a woman” in front of the apparently scared-as-hell white “liberal” masses. If white female leaders and social activists saw Truth as Gage does, then what is it they saw, anyway? An unexplainable other! Gage’s attempt to destroy ideologies of womanhood by writing Truth’s narrative appears admirable, but she does so at the cost of Black female subjectivity. Gage, while disclosing Truth’s life, manages to construct early feminist thought and build its very foundation through an othering of the Black female body.

As the text progresses, Gage’s comments become more centered on Truth’s physical presence being antithetical for “woman.” “There were few women in those days that dared to ‘speak in meeting’ . . . every eye was fixed on this almost Amazon form, which stood nearly six feet high” (Narrative of Sojourner Truth 135; emphasis added). After Truth made her speech, Gage recalls, “I have never in my life seen anything like the magical influence that subdued the mobbish spirit” (Narrative of Sojourner Truth 136; emphasis added). Rather than reading Truth’s difference and using it as a springboard for change, Gage makes Truth deviant and other. Throughout Gage’s narrative, Truth becomes object and othered. The text is as much about Truth’s words as it is her body. Even after delivering the powerful words that have made her a preeminent
figure in history, Truth’s othered body would still be an issue with the white masses of her time. At the request of a man, Truth had to bare her breasts to prove that she was a female, which is not necessarily woman, as seen in the narration of Truth’s speech.

Clearly, from Gage’s rendering of Truth’s narrative, the white male was not the only one having trouble grasping the figure of Sojourner Truth. Gage manages to connect Truth to every negative image of Blacks from magical/mystical Negro to all-body-no-intellect stereotypes. Truth’s body elicits fear and trembling, and Gage takes great measures to place Truth outside the sphere of “normal” body aesthetics. Further, instead of describing Truth’s persuasion of the mob as something of great intellectual superiority, Gage manages to reduce Truth’s genius to magical influence. Gage’s narrative of Truth’s life sets up a parameter for judging Black female feminist thought that continues in the work of current feminist criticism. This parameter asserts that feminist criticism should covertly use the historical position of the Black female as its intended goal and theory, but never acknowledge it as the basis of its own white feminist hope. White feminists like Gage can extract the benefits of Truth-like subjectivity, but they might also exceed her subject status as a result of their skin-white privilege. Consequently, this suggests why Black females need to unname themselves in their own lives with discourse distinct from the rhetoric of sex.

Critics such as Denise Riley and Constance Penley inaccurately see Truth’s proclamation as a desire for the construction of womanhood to fit her, but they should also be able to recognize that Truth’s words acknowledge woman as a frame that could never replace her actual being. As this text has shown, Truth did not need a new language, white suffragists and feminists needed a handbook on signifyin(g). In one chapter of The Changing Same, Deborah McDowell uncovers the truth and colors feminist theory in her assessment of the value of Truth. McDowell suggests that “Truth and the knowledge of that name help to construct concerns about Black feminist thinking within the general parameters of feminist discourse,” but she also argues that Truth “as a metonymn for ‘black woman’ is useful in this context both to a singular idea of academic feminism in general, and in particular, to ongoing controversies within that discourse over the often uneasy relations between theory and politics” (158). Other Black female critics support McDowell’s claim, and they prove that the “Black woman” also serves as a metaphor, myth, or historical figuration of myth for white feminist thought.

Karla F. C. Holloway’s Moorings and Metaphors reveals vital information to expose how myth of the historical figurations of Black women might come to be as a result of Truth’s statement. Holloway explains, “Mythologies are not discrete units of structure as much as they are features of a surviving sense of
how language enables the survival and transference of memory” (94). Truth’s statement survives centuries within the machine discourse of feminist theory, and as a result we are able to gather insights from her memory of grappling with her subjectivity as a slave, a female, and an African in America. However, as McDowell and Holloway point out, upon reading these words we must always remember that language, that of white female activists, enables the initial survival, transference, and distortion of Truth’s memory.

Truth’s original trickster-troping of signifyin(g) is displaced in the women’s suffrage machine. Holloway continues: “Because memory is critical to mythologies, then the privilege that memory traditionally represents over myth—that of representation (accuracy) over figuration (metaphor)—is dissolved within the disappearance of the chasm between memory (history) and myth (figuration). What remains are historical figurations of mythologies” (94). Truth’s all-powerful statement serves as a representation (accurate) of her flexible and indefinable subjectivity that then becomes the figuration (metaphor) for an early white feminist movement.

Truth’s words do not create this figuration since she does not exercise authorial control over the publication of her speech. The suffrage movement uses Truth to initiate a cataclysmic call for women’s voting rights that does not apply to her. In reality, she functions as a theory to dispute biological reasoning of why women shouldn’t be allowed to vote because they are physically and emotionally weak and unable to bear children and conduct politics. She becomes a mascot for a (white) women’s rights movement. The radical trickster-troping and unnaming are displaced, and the memory of Truth’s understanding of her subjectivity is dissolved in the chasm between memory (history) and myth (figuration), along with any desires that she may have.

As McDowell and Holloway explain it, Sojourner Truth becomes the theory in feminist theory. What remains with us are historical figurations of Black females still trying to fit into the gendered discourse of womanhood and historical figurations of mythologies—Black Woman, Venus Hottentot, Mammy, Sapphire—the emasculating matriarch, Jezebel—the sexually licentious Black woman, the diva, and the Strong Black Woman. When tied to feminist thought, the discussion of Black female subjectivity fails to move into the realm of creating distinct goals and discourses for her subjectivity. Truth’s narrative reveals the material conditions and social repressions that Black women will experience in the New World. Her mistranslation by white culture, like the human tales of John Henry and Old Massa or Uncle Remus and Br’er Rabbit, exposes the biological, moral, and social discursives that Black females will have to manipulate with folk cunning and wit. As a human trickster of the past, Truth’s example heeds that we accept Anne
Doueihi’s conclusion of trickster: “The joke is on us if we do not realize that the trickster gives us an insight into the way language is used to construct an ultimately incomplete kind of reality” (200). Truth’s strategic use of the vernacular was a way to note the deficiency of gender.

Sojourner Truth should remind critics that in order to fully comprehend and describe Black female subjectivity in any written narrative, we must begin with trickster-troped readings of gender. Like the ontology of Negro for the African, Woman cannot serve as a substitute of the formerly enslaved Black female. Woman can’t become the representation for the African female in the New World. When Truth uttered her famous words, she was speaking from a learned dynamic of folk traditions. Truth’s words become all the more powerful when we remember that Black women and men are working with incomplete kinds of reality.

"Mr. Johnson": The Allegorical Strap-On of Early African American Literature

Truth was not the only ex-slave to emulate the trickster tradition in rhetorical strategies of written narratives. After reading William Wells Brown’s Clotel, how could one ignore the queer trickster implications of his novel? But ignore it we have. Ann DuCille’s “Where in the World Is William Wells Brown? Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings, and the DNA of African-American Literary History” argues that Clotel “remains a book in need of both reading and re-readings, an originary, enabling text in want of analysis and deep theorizing—perhaps in want even of a tradition” (451). Trickster-troping is that tradition. Sara Blair’s “Feeling, Evidence, and the Work of Literary History: Response to DuCille” offers the most convincing case of how and why we should reread Brown’s Clotel:

’T]his work . . . unabashedly conjoins autobiographical narrative, travelogue, political oratory, medical discourse, sentimental lyric, popular song, biography, advertising and book reviews, folklore and urban legend, and proslavery and abolition pamphlets, to say nothing of the intricacies and intimacies of melodrama, vernacular speech, the picaresque, the gothic, and allegory. (463–64)

Clotel’s reliance on many narrative forms and modalities to reveal that authors of slave narratives and fiction were just as keenly aware of the rhetoric of gender as they were of race in their aspirations for liberation and equality.

Although Clotel is written by a man, the novel helps establish a tradition
and early protocol of Black female protagonists who triumph over adversity. *Clotel* is a fictional story that features a female slave trickster, Clotel, reportedly based on Sally Hemmings. Brown employs the trickster trait of shape-shifting to advance his fictional world: “As shape-shifter, the trickster can alter his shape or bodily appearance in order to facilitate deception. Not even the boundaries of species or sexuality are safe, for they can be dissolved by the trickster’s disguises” (Hynes, “Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters” 36). Clotel, the namesake and female protagonist of the novel, escapes slavery through these very measures. She passes as a white man with Brown as her slave.

What is significant about Brown’s novel is the way the text and characters navigate the true cult of womanhood. Brown’s fiction accomplishes what other narratives written by men seldom did. It explores the ramifications of gender on freedom. As a male fiction writer, some would say a satirist, Brown is less inclined to adhere to the ordinances of propriety so vital to early Black women’s autobiographical strategies concerned with womanhood. *Clotel* documents the potential for the vernacular to disrupt socially established boundaries of gender. For Black female culture, Brown’s novel acts as a notable admission by Black males that gender entails trickster strategies of deception and performance.

While Brown’s protagonist is based on the Sally Hemmings controversy, he also turns to other stories about Black women to create his heroic protagonist Clotel. Brown specifically appropriates details from a unique slave narrative *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery*. In this narrative, two slaves successfully elude capture when the wife, Ellen Craft, passes as a disabled white man with her husband pretending to be her slave. Though the story is about the escape of husband and wife William and Ellen Craft, the husband’s voice dominates the narrative:

Knowing that slaveholders have the privilege of taking their slaves to any part of the country they think proper, it occurred to me that, as my wife was nearly white, I might get her to disguise herself as an invalid gentleman, and assume to be my master, while I could attend as his slave, and that in this manner we might effect our escape. After I thought of the plan, I suggested it to my wife, but at first she shrank from the idea. (32)

The radical agency that could be achieved for the Black female slave is displaced by the lack of consciousness on Ellen’s part, as well as her voice, in the subsequent carrying out of the ruse and the telling of the escape on the antislavery circuit. With the exception of being credited with the idea to
feign disability to hide their illiteracy as slaves. Ellen's boldness and cleverness becomes subsumed under her husband's calm demeanor and calculating plan.

Brown's Clotel, however, imagines the full possibility of Ellen Craft's actions as he cleverly emphasizes the instability of the rhetoric of sex as it relates to slaves, and specifically to Black female slaves. For Clotel mimics and opposes Ellen. She is literate where Ellen is illiterate, she is fearless where Ellen is fearful, and she carries out and performs the ruse from every aspect: thinking it up, creating the look, and carrying it out. Most importantly, while Clotel does have a male companion, she does not have to adhere to a husband and all that entails. Omniscient narration ensures the independence and voice of the female protagonist. For example, after Clotel’s former master, Mr. French, cuts her hair very short before selling her to a “kinder” owner, Clotel’s new confidant (Brown) says of her hair: “Yes, . . . you look a good deal like a man with your short hair” (213). Brown records Clotel’s thoughts and responses: “‘Oh, . . . I have often been told that I would make a better looking man than a woman . . . If I had the money I would bid farewell to this place.’ In a moment more she feared that she had said too much, and smilingly remarked, ‘I am always talking nonsense.’” (213). Brown establishes that Clotel’s appearance lends itself to slipping through anatomical destinies, and that should she ever choose she could easily switch her illusionary gender. And in being aware of her words to Brown, Clotel comes across craftier than one of the women she is based upon, Ellen Craft.

Later, as Clotel devises her escape strategy this ability of gender passing becomes a major plot development that was foreshadowed in her earlier remarks to Brown. In addition to dispelling myths about the permanence of gender, Brown also deconstructs racial identity. However, unlike other passing novels, it is not racial passing alone that dictates the novel’s progression. In trying to help Clotel come up with a suitable escape plan, Brown offers: “There Miss Clotel, you said if you had the means you would leave this place; there is money enough to take you to England where you will be free. You are much fairer than the white women of the South, and can easily pass for white” (214). Clotel’s fair skin makes it possible for her to pass as a white woman, but an exchange with Brown divulges that racial passing is not enough to achieve true freedom.

Clotel replies, “I will take the money only on one condition . . . and that is, that I effect your escape as well as my own. . . . I will assume the disguise of a gentleman and you that of a servant” (214). Even as Brown previously says that Clotel, with short hair, looks very much like a man, he deftly uses a vernacular strategy to complement the visual illusion and compel characters and readers alike to continue to see Clotel as a male during their escape. Like
Truth, he has at his disposal two traditions, one written and one oral. Time
and again, persons interested in Black female experiences return to their folk
heritage to counter the rhetoric of sex.

In taking on the ruse, we learn that the masculine dressed Clotel travels
“under the assumed name of ‘Mr. Johnson’” (214) to facilitate her disguise.
There are two possible explanations for the use of “Mr. Johnson,” but both
help signify the same meaning. Brown simply returns to the narrative of
William and Ellen Craft. In the Crafts’ narrative, the name is given to Ellen:

The captain of the steamer, a good-looking jovial fellow, seeing that the
gentleman appeared to know my master, and perhaps not wishing to lose
us as passengers, said in an off-hand sailor-like manner, “I will register the
gentleman’s name, and take the responsibility upon myself.” He asked my
master’s name. He said, “William Johnson.” The names were put down, I
think, “Mr. Johnson and slave.” The captain said, “It’s all right now, Mr.
Johnson.” He thanked him kindly, and the young officer begged my master
to go with him, and have something to drink and a cigar; but as he had not
acquired these accomplishments, he excused himself, and we went on board
and came off to Wilmington, North Carolina. (56)

Brown could have simply reincorporated the Craft’s experience along with
those details into his narrative. Yet that explanation ignores the wiliness of
most slave narratives and the nature of Brown’s use of satire and irony. As
fugitive slaves, the Crafts would not reveal the name they used in their escape
because such references might have led to their recapture. Instead of choosing
Smith, Washington, Doe, or any other vague and general surnames, they
chose one that implicitly aligns with Ellen’s gender passing. Johnson becomes
an allegorical hint at a masculine feature Ellen does not possess, a phallus.
Both the Crafts and Brown employ the vernacular as an aid in their ruse. The
place in which the naming incident occurs is in a levee culture. The Crafts
are boarding a ship in Wilmington, North Carolina. The captain of the ship
is said to provide the naming that connotes male genitals in levee vernacular.
Beginning in the nineteenth century, sailors used “Johnson” to serve as
a common surname, used in low slang to describe the penis (OED Online).
It is not coincidence that the captain supposedly names the fugitives. Given
that the Crafts were clever enough to pull off such an elaborate ruse, it follows
that such intelligence would also make its way into the narrative. Taking up a
name that connotes gonadal masculinity serves as much a vital part of the ruse
as the cutting of hair, the fake arm injury, and the glasses Ellen wears. Further,
most literal and rhetorical trickery in slave narratives arises from concerns of
audience. The very way in which William Craft’s narration consistently apolo-
gizes for his wife’s overstepping the boundaries of gender suggests that placing the responsibility of naming on the captain is a way to placate audience and maintain the artfulness of Ellen’s gender passing.19

However, if the Crafts were not responsible for the namesake of Ellen’s persona, the influence on their gender passing is recognized by others. What solidifies “Mr. Johnson” as an allegorical strap-on is Brown’s act to recoup the name within his own text. If we accept previous critics’ claim that the genius of Brown stems from the satirical and ironic nature of his writing, then a repetition of fact into fiction grossly underreads the use of “Mr. Johnson” in Brown’s Clotel. Before becoming a writer, Brown was a former shipmate familiar with slang of river life, like the Crafts’ steamboat captain. In his novel, he emphasizes and draws attention to the name Mr. Johnson through the use of quotation marks. These markers are both a nod to the Crafts’ story and a play on the vernacular. Clotel’s visual presence allows her to pass as a white man, and her vernacular unnaming provides her with the anatomical piece missing from her act. Brown’s vernacular use of slang acts as an allegorical strap-on to assist Clotel’s attempt to achieve freedom. In this case, the allegorical strap-on is more about the transgression of gender through performance rather than fulfilling sexual desires.

Using the manifest trickster trait of shape-shifting, Brown’s trickster trope joins orality and sexuality together to express Clotel’s desire for freedom. She will perform race and gender in any way that will gain her freedom, even if it means encroaching on the boundaries of virtue and sex. “Mr. Johnson,” a verbal appendage that can be removed and used again at Clotel’s whim, connects more to the liminality of unnaming due to her biological status as anatomically female, but temporarily male. While initially it might seem as if Brown is privileging the penis, we can look to the text to dismiss such an argument. As previously seen, Brown exhibits a deep appreciation for the way that Clotel can shift her identity, a fluidity that stems from being a Black female, nonwoman subject.

Brown’s authorial decision to have Clotel risk her escape in order to free her male companion also says volumes about how folklore and vernacular provide truly revolutionary tactics in dismissing gender. His narrative technique to advance the plot and theme of freedom depends on the tradition of shape-shifting, or some aspect of it, found in animal trickster tales of birds, rabbits, and turtles and vernacular slang.20 Since their freedom depends on Clotel’s ability to pass as a white man, Brown and Clotel have to let go of all the falsehoods and privileges that might come with accepting a fixed gender identity. Complete freedom for Black males and females requires that they let go, even if momentarily, of Western canons of gender and accept the logic of trickster. Truth and Brown used the school of trickster to take on the rhetoric
of sex and cult of womanhood, but Harriet Jacobs attends to the discourse of desire.

**Fooling Master (Narratives)**

In one African American folk song, the slave’s trickery is boldly acknowledged: “I fooled Old Master seven years. / Fooled the overseer three. / Hand me down my banjo. / And I’ll tickle your bel-lee” (Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down* 9). As the song progresses, it states without apology that trickery, a part of the past and present, will also be a part of the future: “Fool my master seven years. Going to fool him seven more” (9). The slave narrative, autobiographical and abolitionist propagandist in nature, adopted the slave’s philosophy of fooling master (narratives) of the United States, which positioned Black people as property and inhuman. Black female culture readily accepted this role of fooling master, fooling master’s discourse, and fooling master narratives of gender by borrowing from its tradition of folklore. While Truth, the Crafts, and Brown offered presentations of literal unnaming and trickster-troping to unname gender, Jacobs engages in trickster-troping to defer gender and unname sexuality for her era.

Typically the subject of tricksterism in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* focuses on Jacobs as deceiver and trick player because she escapes from her master by hiding in his garret. However, this text examines Jacobs’s rhetorical strategy of deploying the manifest trickster traits of deceiver and trick player to interrupt the social constraints of gender. Jacobs establishes her trickster-troping by slyly positioning non-heteronormative socialization as essential to real Black female freedom. The boldness of her act is often disguised by her manipulation of the discourse of womanhood, melodramatic references to virtue, unrequited love, Christian ethics, and an undermining of her own intelligence. When Jacobs deceives and plays tricks, the reasoning behind her actions very often stems from her willingness to submit that she, as a female slave, has desires, both emotional and sexual. Jacobs’s narrative admits that sexual desires cannot be separated from the desire to be free. To act on sexual desire inherently becomes the multifarious articulation of freedom as something more than physically breaking the bonds of chattel slavery. To be truly free means pursuing the object of one’s desire, especially if that object is self.

Because the slave narrative was the first extended written narrative of African American literary tradition written in English, questions about its authenticity, reader reception, and purpose arose. To ensure the success of the narratives and the antislavery movement, the slaves’ narratives became rife
with rhetorical tricks. William L. Andrews’s *To Tell a Story: African American Autobiography* shows that “white America was willing to suspend disbelief and assume the sincerity of an autobiographer it identified as a political peer and a racial equal. However, the knowledge that they (the writers) could not predicate their lives on this racial credulity and trust forced Black autobiographers to invent devices and strategies that would endow their stories with the appearance of authenticity . . . the very reception of the narrative as truth depended on the degree to which the artfulness could hide his art” (224). Writers of these slave narratives and autobiographies employed rhetorical tools that would both authenticate the facts of their bondage and covertly establish their selfhood and identity to an America that did not want to see them as equals. Authorial control exposes the controversy surrounding the facts of slave narratives and beliefs about who wrote them.22 In those machinations of authenticating, placating, persuading, and converting lay distinguishing narrative strategies of an African American literary tradition.

While authenticating documents such as the parenthetical “written by herself” or letters from white editors or abolitionists attested to the truthfulness of the narrative, other techniques were used to persuade readers to see the evils of slavery. Writers from Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass to Mary Prince and Harriet Jacobs cleverly manipulated American ideals of democracy and Christian morals in their texts. They used the Bible and the U.S. Declaration of Independence to make a connection with their readers (Andrews 76).

Christianity serves as one mode of discourse in which Jacobs attempts to critically evaluate the institution of slavery. According to Jacobs, her subjectivity and spirituality is shaped by her mother’s belief in Christianity. She refers to the conflicts of Christianity and slavery without explicitly passing judgment. When her first mistress dies, the conflicts of spirituality and subjectivity become clear:

After a brief period of suspense, the will of my mistress was read, and we learned that she had bequeathed me to her sister’s daughter, a child of five years old. So vanished our hopes. My mistress had taught me the precepts of God’s Word: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” “Whatsoever ye would that me should do unto you, do ye so unto them.” But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as neighbor. (344)

As Andrews claimed, Jacobs manipulates the Bible for her strategic purposes. She manages to use biblical logic to criticize whites who believe that they are practitioners of Christian morals and ethics. Repeatedly, Jacobs describes herself as a good Christian waiting for her prayers to be answered, for prom-
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ises to be upheld, and for the word of owners to be made good by the will of God. So as not to alienate her readers, Jacobs portrays herself as a good and faithful servant who never formally admonishes whites for the institution of slavery. Yet she continues to prove that even in the face of death, the conflicts between subjectivity and spirituality go unresolved and are ignored by those in the business of human bondage.

Due to the artfulness of most slave narratives, we may never know for sure if the authors’ descriptions of such things served as their honest beliefs in the dominant culture’s religion, if they were simply rhetorical strategies to convince their white readers of their likeness to them, or a little of both. The fact that they needed to be concerned about such issues indicates a problem that does not get solved by writing one’s life story. The issue of authorial control divulges the conflict as to how one writes him- or herself into being in the dominant discourse while still being true to that self. Jacobs consistently uses Christianity as a narrative device to convince her readers of antislavery arguments based on morality. Yet to convince them of her humanity and remain true to her developing individual selfhood, she must embrace the cult of womanhood while unnaming herself as a Black woman. In doing so, Jacobs’s cleverly hidden philosophy on desire risks being just as misinterpreted as Truth’s signifyin(g).

The Black female slave narrator’s task was more complicated than that of her male counterpart, and as a result she produced clear moments of trickster-troping. Unlike the male slave narrative that articulates freedom in terms of humanity, but more specifically in terms of manhood, the female slave writer’s argument for freedom essentially was asking for something beyond what the women’s suffrage wanted for white women and the antislavery movement wanted for Black men. Due to their precarious and anomalous status, Black female slaves articulated an autonomy that had yet to exist or be discussed. In addition, their complete freedom might be seen as impeding the freedom of Black men and white women. Though it may not seem as daring as Ellen Craft passing as a white man, Jacobs’s means of expressing and obtaining freedom and self-determination also happens through masking and disguise.

In addition to morality, the themes of feminine virtues and sentimental or romantic love differentiate the female slave narrative from the male narrative. The most proficient way of distinguishing between the two is to explore the virtues of woman and how they do or do not apply to Black female slaves. Jacobs’s early focus on Christianity in the narrative establishes a credible claim that Jacobs represents the essential characteristics for a virtuous female. If slave women have virtue, then they are worthy of being saved from immoral men who attack or rape slave women. This is not to suggest that Jacobs accepts or does not accept the cult of womanhood. Because she remains so aware of
Chapter 1

her audience, she recognizes how vital a strategy the cult of womanhood and its ideologies become in persuading readers. In a recounting of one specific experience that concerns literacy, sexuality, and self-determination for Black women, Jacobs exposes an important pregeneric myth of the slave woman’s narrative, sexual freedom:

One day he caught me teaching myself to write. He frowned, as if he was not well pleased; but I suppose he came to the conclusion that such an accomplishment might help to advance his favorite scheme. Before long, notes were often slipped into my hand . . . I would return them saying, “I can’t read them, sir.”

“Can’t you?” he replied; “then I must read them to you.” (365)

Notably, Jacobs does not resort to trickery to learn to read and write, but she does narrate how she resorts to trickery to maintain control of her bodily rights. She relies on the belief in the illiteracy of slaves to thwart her master’s sexual exploitation. She constantly faces the threat of rape and other sexual violence by her white master, Dr. Flint, and his wife, Mrs. Flint.

At this point in the narrative, Jacobs has already established the threat of sexual rape from her master. She makes it quite obvious that, as a good Christian female, she not only has to worry about the threat of rape, but she must also fear her mistress’s perception of these sexual transgressions. Both the mistress and the master identify their female slave as without morals and humanity. Jacobs’s previous focus on Christianity in her life establishes a record of morals that the readers can see. When Dr. Flint questions her ability to read, the “quest” to read is denied and rejected so that she can ignore the sexual advances of her master. Trickery in reference to literacy in the male narrative attributed to Eshu’s trickery as divine translator and linguist is denied in the female slave narrative. Trickery becomes less of a linguistic referent and more cognizant of gender referents in the female slave narrative.

After conclusively showing how the Flints make unwanted, and sometimes violent, sexual advances toward her, Jacobs moves from discussing the rape of the female slave to positing that the slave has a will to love. In a sentimental gesture, Jacobs asks her readers, “Why does the slave ever love? Why allow the tendrils of the heart to twine around objects which at any moment may be wrenched away by the hand of violence?” (369). Throughout the narrative, Jacobs moves from the virtues and elements of womanhood to notions of romantic love. Jacobs uses the language of sentimental love as a device to emphasize how slavery deprives her of the most basic human freedom—the attempt to love and be loved by one of her own choosing. Dr. Flint denies her every right accorded free persons, be it love or physical freedom. Due to
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the threat of sexual violence, both racial and sexual repression constitutes the way the Black female defines freedom for herself. With this comprehension of freedom, Jacobs comes to believe that to repress her own desire would be as harmful to her humanity as Dr. Flint’s sexual violence upon her body.

When Jacobs “falls in love” with a free man of color, her mistress and master object to the courtship. Their objection stems from the rules of property: An inanimate object as property can’t love. In their eyes, granting Jacobs a marriage ceremony would be akin to calling her human. Once Jacobs asks for permission to marry, Dr. Flint explains, “Well, I’ll soon convince you whether I am your master, or the nigger fellow you honor so highly” (371). Dr. Flint’s statement submits marriage as another institution established to preserve the status of white males. He assumes that the institution of slavery takes precedence over the marriage institution for Blacks in the New World. Jacobs also understands that slaves and free Blacks’ attempt to practice or adhere to the sacraments of marriage seems oxymoronic:

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

In revealing the desire to love, Jacobs can create another bond with readers of the narrative who believe in marriage as the ultimate fulfillment of true love. For Jacobs to pursue a focus on sentimental love versus the idea of marriage as an institution for the exploitation of women would specifically appeal to white women influenced by a Victorian women’s culture that believed wholeheartedly in a redefinition of the concept of marriage as less of a financial and property-based institution. In addition, Jacobs’s assessment of the institutions of marriage and slavery begins the unnaming of her already degendered self.

The earlier devices of romantic love serve only as precursors to the ideologies of (white) womanhood that Jacobs exploits for her purposes in this narrative. Consequently, in discussing her own subjectivity with the ideal attainment of “woman,” Jacobs’s narrative can’t help but document the inconsistency between the two and the failure of Western dominant discourses to translate her:

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

Jacobs caters to her readers by implicitly asking them not to judge her, and she makes the reader aware that she has broken a cardinal moral rule—premarital sex.

Yet she explicitly explores how her legal status as property sets her on an altogether different path of morality. As she formulates it, she isn’t evil personified. The institution of slavery is the monster responsible for whatever beast she becomes. By constantly spotlighting her inclination and pursuit for love, chasteness, purity, innocence, and “self-respect,” Jacob proves all the more the humanity of the slave “woman.” Still, in the midst of her catering to womanhood, is the struggle for Black female subjectivity, and the inconsistencies of Jacobs’s narrative are where the author moves beyond her Northern, white, middle-class readership to assert her own subjectivity.

Jacobs’s trickery and manipulation of her own words make ambiguous her actual belief in the ideologies of white womanhood, virtues, and morals. Can readers believe any of the narrator’s words when her logic about virtue, marriage, and romantic love do not match her actions? Jacobs’s pursuit of marriage with a free Black man and her verbal rejection of and opposition to her master’s desires seem geared toward foreshadowing her prolific discourse on sexual rights. Jacobs’s sexual rights, or her sexual desire, lead to the taboo interracial relationship Jacobs will have with a white male suitor at the age of fifteen. If Jacobs were merely content to argue her virtues and the wrongs of slavery, then editing out this particular relationship would not have hurt. Since, at the time, there is nothing more non-heteronormative than this relationship, Jacobs potentially risks undoing her previous alignment with the cult of womanhood. However, it is instead a trickster-trooping maneuver that seeks to unname the woman she constructs herself to be. It also follows that the unnamning of gender defers gender long enough for her to also unname her sexuality away from otherness or chasteness. As a slave, she is genderless and thus logics of desire and object choice do not apply. As Spillers claimed earlier, she becomes a pansexual subject. As a pansexual subject, Jacobs illuminates the importance of choice, perceptively the freedom to pursue any object choice, as key to considerations of sexuality.

Though she proclaims to strive hard to maintain her virginity, it becomes very clear that she views her sexual desires as a way to exert independence during her time of bondage. In discussing her relationship with her new “lover,” Jacobs speaks forcefully of free will and choice:
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I knew the impassable gulf between us; but to be an object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave, if her miserable situation has left her any pride or sentiment. It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment. A master may treat you as he pleases, and you dare not speak. (385)

This statement is revolutionary not only for a Black female slave, but for any female in the 1800s, when women were still considered property. What school of womanhood is Jacobs from that would compel her to believe that such free will and desire are inalienable rights? Her words bridge the gap between sentimental literary narratives and free-love ideology of the time. This provocative combination would appeal to women readers in ways that biblical allusions might not. Though somewhat akin to the betrothment of white women in marriage, Jacobs’s status as a female slave has decidedly altered her concept of the freedom females should have. If this text is examined as strictly a written narrative, then the retelling of this particular incident in Jacobs’s slave autobiography appears perplexing. How does the slave, Jacobs, perceive that she has any choice or control over which white man may pursue interest in her? Does she, in fact, enjoy free will with this particular white male, or is this simply another narrative device to persuade her readers to the rightness of her argument? No clear answer abounds.

Yet viewing her narrative in terms of an oral tradition comprised of trickster tales, other readings are possible. Authorial control becomes even more complicated when we return to her desire to marry a free Black man. Both marriage and slavery project themselves as institutions dedicated to the maintenance of white patriarchal supremacy systems. Jacobs’s participation in either institution seems susceptible linked to Jacobs’s strategy of appeasing her white female readers and white male abolitionists through moral guises. As is evident from her attempt to marry and her “choice” to take a lover, she quite possibly did not see marriage as anything more than two people of color sharing love and equal status as free Blacks, and her interracial relationship as a mutual agreement to culminate mutual attractions. Jacobs possesses two ideals of her gender status: the one she knows white America believes in, and the one she has received through her status as a Black slave in the New World.

Consequently, in referring to her earlier argument about choosing whom to love, Jacobs understands the complexity of the argument she formulates. To avoid frightening her readers, she explains, “There may be sophistry in all this; but the condition of the slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in
fact renders the practice of them impossible” (385). That simple phrase and Jacobs’s actions in regards to both the Black man and white man in her life returns us to elements of animal and human trickster tales. As almost every folklorist from Roger Abrahams to Lawrence Levine has asserted, “Africans enslaved in America freely and repeatedly testified to the fact that they envisioned the physical control of the slave masters over them as placing them in a situation where the demands of physical survival took precedence over the morality of behavior in the peculiar social environment of slavery” (Roberts 34). In conciliating her readers with apologies and humility, Jacobs returns to the model of trickster to construct her argument and persuade her readers. This strategy allows Jacobs to define herself as woman, to persuade white female abolitionist of the evils of slavery, and then unname herself over and over again.

In order to be free, Jacobs reveals that she must maintain that same model of thought taught through human trickster tales. Like Truth’s book, Jacobs’s narrative manipulates the discourses available by signifyin(g) on those models. In Talking Black, Roger Abrahams observes that signifyin(g) can be used “in recurrent black-white encounters as masking behavior” (33). The slave narrative, with its Black author and its majority white audience, and through its function as an abolitionist tool, exemplifies an author’s use of both masking and indirection in such black-white encounters. As a fugitive Black female slave, Jacobs must simultaneously dismantle the rhetoric of race and gender in as subtle a way as possible. Hence, Jacobs is quick to use dominant society’s misrepresentations and stereotypes to obtain her heart’s desire. With every action, she asserts that she suffers from the slave’s amoral disposition to hide her disturbance of the rhetoric of sex. The radical way that Jacobs envisions man and woman stems from her status as a slave. Jacobs has insights about the status of women that she should not have.

However, instead of forcibly suggesting equality of the sexes, Jacobs excuses herself from the criterion of woman: “Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others” (386). She reduces her multifaceted view of male/female relationships to confusion because she is well aware that her ideals conflict with Christian morals and societal discourses on the treatment of women. In the process, she casts doubt as to whether she really believes in such ideas.

In concluding her narrative, Jacobs supports all of her trickery to elude the rhetoric of sex and exposes how the concepts of woman and gender impede her quest for freedom in one last subtle way: “Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free. We are as free from the power of the slave holders as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a
great deal” (513). There are many implications in this brief passage that closes out Jacobs's trickster-trooping. She does, after all, basically imply that just because she is married, it doesn't mean that she is free. Her comparison of her story ending with freedom through marriage to the experience of Northern whites is purposeful. During Jacobs's time, history has shown that Northern territories were at the political and economic mercy of Southern states that controlled much of the capital that contributed to the early economic growth of the United States. White Northerners had to promote the elimination of slavery for its own peace of mind and vision of the United States. As the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation proved, Jacobs's assessment of how free Northern whites really were from the power of slaveholders was accurate. Her rhetorical comparison alerts savvy readers that just because she ends her story with marriage doesn't mean that freedom has been obtained. With her afterthought about white Northerners, Jacobs closes her text with the Black act of signifyin(g) and rejects all the prioritizing toward cults of domestic womanhood that she has used promotionally throughout her text. Jacobs notes that her race and gender, at this time, in no way allow her to enjoy privileges (limited as they were) that free Black males might receive.

Further, she is not afforded the rights of womanhood because of her race. Jacobs says as much as she can about her liminal state of freedom. At the end of Jacobs's narrative, the authenticator of her narrative, Amy Post, divulges that Jacobs expressed disgust at someone paying the monetary price for her freedom. Jacobs claims that the purchase robs her of any victory. Her reaction fully expresses the failure of language to express her subjectivity beyond that of Negro woman. The payment for her body enables society to define her as first a slave, and then to name her as Negro or Black woman in freedom. However, Jacobs's trickster-trooping allowed her to desire, and briefly express desire, as a part of freedom. Her example would propel twentieth-century Black females to do the same through other trickster traits.

Audre Lorde and the Rebirth of Trickster-Gods: Fabrication of the Erotic

Jacobs's revelations about her interracial relationship allow her to risk presenting a discourse of desire for heterosexual Black females that Zora Neale Hurston would take up in the 1930s, but a deliberate discourse of homosexual desire would not be found until the later part of the twentieth century. The egalitarian dynamics of Black females and males is displaced by biological explanations of men and women, but the tales of Annie Christmas foreshadow a pivotal combination of human trickster figures and divine trickster
figures that one writer would employ in a more succinct way to recover those

dynamics and speak of same-sex desire. No study on the use of trickster fig-

ures in African American female culture would be complete without assessing

the work of Audre Lorde, who, in her own way, worked to redefine the trick-

ster tradition in Black culture: “Recreating in words the women who helped
give me sustenance. . . . Mawu-Lisa, thunder, sky, sun, the great mother of us
all, and Afrekete, her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster,
best beloved, who we all must become” (Zami 255). With the publication

of Zami, Lorde posits that cultural or familial myths allow Black women to

participate in performances of unnaming. Lorde critically engages trickster

in ways that the previously mentioned writers and critics failed to do. And

while she too rarely avoids the characteristic of employing trickster as a tool

of cultural nationalism and nation building,26 she does reveal how uses of

the figure could recognize differences and avoid the pitfalls of Western impe-

rialism. Like the African American male tradition of trickster tropes, Black

female tradition has vacillated between utilizing animal and human trickster

tales and briefly delved into elements of the divine not usually associated with

African American trickster figures. Lorde completely commits to the idea of

a divine-human trickster.

She provides significant insight into the functions of gender and trickster

figures as they relate to the construction of voice and identity by questioning

the representation of woman:

My mother was a very powerful woman. This was so in a time when that

word-combination of woman and powerful was almost unexpressable in

the white American common tongue, except or unless it was accompanied

by some aberrant explaining adjective like blind, or hunchback, or crazy,
or Black. . . . Therefore when I was growing up, powerful women equaled

something else quite different from ordinary women, from simply “woman.”

It certainly did not, on the other hand equal “man.” What then? What was

the third designation? (Zami 15; emphasis added)

The implications of Lorde’s novel title make readers aware of the naming/

unnaming process for Black females. Finding a new spelling of her name may

have been the beginning, but it was not the end. As the passage suggests,

Lorde’s predicament was one wrought with the inadequacy of language and
terminologies as it concerns Black female subjectivity. For someone seeking
to make sense of gender and sexuality as it concerns Black females, there were
few options. In addition to the state of folkloric research, Black feminist criti-
cism on gender and sexuality was too new or too conservative. By creatively
theorizing about a third designation for gender and later tying that designa-
tion to the trickster figure, Lorde creates her own theoretical apparatus—the Zamian model. Instead of turning to a strictly African American tradition of animals and humans, perhaps reflective of her experience as a Black immigrant, Lorde chooses to revise the African trickster figure through a focus on the divine.

The words of Lorde that opened this section imply why this figure was chosen and not another. Before Lorde evoked the figures of Afrekete and Mawu-Lisa, Melville and Frances Herskovits describe the mother, Mawu-Lisa, in *Dahomean Narrative* as Herskovits notes, “[i]s the creator . . . one person but has two faces. The first is that of a woman. . . . The other side is that of a man. . . . Since Mawu is both man and woman, she became pregnant” (125). Herskovits’s general description of Mawu-Lisa lends itself to a debate about Mawu-Lisa as a figurative model for constructing revised readings of gender and sexuality. Herskovits describes Mawu-Lisa as bigendered, rather than genderless. In addition, he hyphenates the name of the being so as to separate the figure into two beings for the purposes of making it more intelligible to Western readers. Even as language attempts to confine the transgression of social boundaries represented by the divinity, the myth of the figure resists.

In another account of Mawu-Lisa pertinent to the issue of gender, sexuality, and language, *Dahomean Narrative* records Mawu as the Fa, “the author of man and destiny” (203), who at one point gives each of her seven children their own language different from her own and each other’s. For her youngest, Legba, Mawu grants the trickster-god the capabilities of understanding all of the languages (126). Gates has already taken this example to its full literal extent with regard to writing and difference in *The Signifying Monkey*. Yet if we incorporate the symbolic meaning of the myth, Fa is the Fon’s discourse on identity and subjectivity. How telling is it, then, that each child has its own individual language, that Mawu could think up seven distinct languages, or that Legba could translate each and every language. The system of subjectivity resists binary or monolithic formations of identity and subjectivity. With the existence of multiple languages or discourses, it would be impossible to become static, fixed, limited, and pornotroped by one discursive model’s oppressive representations. Unnaming would be deemed obsolete. Unfortunately, Black people in the United States are not the Fon, but Lorde posits that such systems may be possible if we want them to be.27

The compelling revelation that within one being two unranked binary oppositions exist provides a welcome distinction from the violently opposed binaries provided by Western orders. We know the binaries are unranked from the detail of Mawu’s self-fertilization. The figure exists as both the man who impregnates and the woman who is impregnated, and this is possible
because neither face dominates. How does one know where male begins and female ends? That cannot be determined, and it does not have to be. Lorde saw that within Dahomean creation myth lay vital strategic devices for self-creation and autonomy in subjectivity pertinent to Black female cultural products and society. She'd found difference without deviation. Lorde's third designation for gender parallels Herskovits's detail of Mawu as a self-reproducing being. Because Lorde comprehends the myth of Mawu-Lisa, she can also develop the underlying philosophies of the myth to counter traditional discourse about the trickster, gender, and sexuality.

Calling upon Dahomean culture, Lorde uses Afrekete and Mawu-Lisa to theoretically attempt to find a space and discourse for Black lesbians’ mutable subjectivity:

Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being black together was not enough. We were different. Being black women together was not enough. We were different. Being black dykes together was not enough. We were different. (Zami 245)

Lorde articulates the necessity for a model that might be close enough to represent the layers of Black lesbian subjectivity and desires. Just as concepts of unranked binaries impact Dahomean culture and language, so too can the use of myths and figures that represent fluidity in gender as figurative models reveal a philosophy of nonhierarchy in African American texts. Mawu-Lisa emblematically signifies the concept of gender undecideability or gender disruption.

In *Margins of Philosophy*, Jacques Derrida explains this potential of undecidability in Western culture with his concept of *différance*:

There is no essence of différance; it is that which could only never be appropriated in the as such of its name or its appearing, but also that which threatens the authority of the as such in general, of the presence of the thing itself in its essence. That there is not a proper essence of différance at this point, implies that there is neither a Being nor truth of the play of writing such as it engages difference. . . . There is no name for it—a proposition to be read in this platitude. This unnameable is not an ineffable Being which no name could approach: God, for example. (27)

The changeable appearance and subjectivity of Annie Christmas and the indeterminacy of Mawu-Lisa as a goddess/trickster figure all represent the gender equivalent of *différance*—a goddess, but most importantly a subject being
both male and female that exists as a play of gender to engage the distinctions without ranking them since there exists no one master truth about gender and sexuality. According to this paradigm, the figures resist the definition and naming that might fix their subjectivities so as to continue their mutability.

More applicable to this discussion than Derrida's theory of *differance* is a strategy derived from a specific (pre-)poststructuralist theoretical logic of gender in Black communities. Toni Cade Bambara's "On the Issues of Roles" assesses the dismissal of gender as a revolutionary tactic that must be completed for true Black liberation:

> In the last few years I have frequently been asked to speak on the topic of the Black woman's role in the Revolution. . . . I'm not altogether sure we agree on the term “revolution” or I wouldn't be having so much difficulty with the phrase “woman's role.” I have always, I think, opposed the stereotypic definitions of “masculine” and “feminine,” not only because I thought it was a lot of merchandising non-sense, but rather because I always found the either/or implicit in those definitions antithetical to . . . what revolution of self is all about—the whole person. (101)

Establishing a praxis for her theory, Bambara contextualizes the importance of destroying gender assumption in Black communities.

She later adds, “Perhaps we need let go of all notions of manhood and femininity and concentrate on Blackhood” (103). Bambara remains aware of the genetic differences between male and female, but she wishes to assassinate the social dictatorship that enforces limited practices of gender and desire. Once all notions of manhood and womanhood are released, what do we call ourselves? As Lorde theorizes, we become trickster-gods like Mawu or Afrekete, ineffable beings that no names can approach. Once the categories of gender are dismissed, sexual desire no longer has to properly align with any particular sex. By being unnameable, we can sustain control over the deferment of gender, explore individual sexual desires, and become equipped with a mother tongue to discuss our subjectivity.

Lorde’s novel connects the subjectivity of trickster figures to alternate considerations of gender and sexuality in African American culture and cultural theory to facilitate unnamming, but this method also keeps in mind the author’s task of desire and expressing desire. Like W.E.B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* in African American culture, Lorde could rarely resist the ethereal in her trickster applications of difference, desire, and gender in configurations for Black women folk. Inevitably, Lorde’s use of trickster in her fiction derived from her theory of desire as defined in her nonfiction. In her gynocentric essay “Uses of the Erotic,” Lorde explores her concept of the erotic as one that
embraces spiritual and physical factors of desire: “There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (53). As we have already seen, trickster has often been deemed a community’s unrecognized or unexpressed feelings, as well as a manifestation of divinity. Within the uses of the erotic we can see the trickster and her actions.

Lorde further attends to how the erotic functions: “The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves” (54). Lorde envisions desire that aids in transformation, desire that simultaneously roots and uproots one’s sense of self, desire that creates rather than destroys from its tensions and differences, and desire that transforms from the inside out. What she depicts as the erotic is trickster. In addition to understanding these values of trickster traditions, Lorde also corroborates with the trickster tradition in her fiction and poetry because of how orality can disrupt the rhetoric of gender and sexuality.

Ineffable sensations and beings that occur because of desire can rarely be configured through concrete and surface mechanisms such as writing alone. Visual representations are surface mechanisms that carry with them the weight of being concrete and real because they can be universally seen with the eye. Visualization is privileged over orality in the West. The exorbitant amount of scholarship spent on dissecting desire includes the ranking of the visual in concerns of difference (Lacan’s mirror, Du Bois’s veil, the gaze, etc). However, throughout her career, Lorde made us aware of other hypothesis of desire that did not rely on the visual, the erotic. In “Uses of the Erotic,” she theorizes concepts of desire and love that interrupt the importance of visualization in Western expressions of desire. She claims, “The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation . . . confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic” (54). Lorde hones in on the way visual mechanisms tend to make static images and freeze objects. The visual makes subjects into objects: Orality and aurality maintain subjects in process. She demands a vital reconsideration of love, desire, and sexuality in ways that seek to resist the pornotroping of female bodies. Thus she chooses trickster for the way it displaces the domination of visual over oral in matters of desire.

Published in 1982, Zami’s use of Mawu-Lisa and Afrekete is significant in that it comes five years before the most significant studies of the trickster and its relation to African American texts, namely, Roberts’s From Trickster to
Badman and Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey*. Lorde stakes a claim to redefining trickster, specifically in terms of gender and sexuality. Initially, Fon and Yorùbá discourse directs Audre Lorde’s conceptualization of Afrekete in her life and work. Lorde’s Zamian model is as much reflective of Dahomean culture as it is of U.S. Black female culture. If we have learned any lesson at all from Lorde’s affection for Mawu-Lisa, it is the lesson Mawu-Lisa’s story offers to her tricksters in terms of language. Unnaming through trickster-troping is the starting point.

Annie Christmas’s trickster flirtation with gender-bending takes us to the next logical step in Black female trickster traditions, that of Black female desire. As Lorde notes, desire is more complicated than gender: “I have always wanted to be both man and woman . . . to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered . . . to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time” (*Zami* 7). Lorde’s choice toward the divine nature of trickster acknowledges the limitations of the animal and human trickster tale in that those figures might never be able to represent the ethereal depths of desire. The divinity of trickster can. In addition, she was haunted by the same nationalistic aims as previous scholars of trickster tradition, with the exception that her nationalistic aims belonged to the developing Black queer nation. Ideologically, the divine trickster as represented by Mawu-Lisa and Afrekete could not be anatomically or sexually pigeonholed in the way animal and human trickster figures had been.

In the end, in the remainder of *Mutha’ Is Half a Word* I hope to continue Lorde’s ingenuity while avoiding the conflicts of appropriation. The remaining chapters provide a glimpse into the way African American female communities adapted and continue to adapt the Black diasporic trickster tradition to their own material and sociopolitical needs. As we will see in remaining chapters, this may mean redefining blackness to incorporate concerns of class and gender, or unfreezing racial and sexual identity to coalesce objects of desire that fundamentally disturb the boundaries of rhetoric on race and sexuality, or accepting the logic of the illogical.