Mutha' Is Half A Word
Stallings, L.H.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Stallings, L.H.
Mutha' Is Half A Word: Intersection of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture.
The Ohio State University Press, 2007.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/27978.

→ For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27978

🔗 For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1149756
“Mutha’ Is Half a Word!”

Tar Baby Trope and Blue Material in Black Female Comedy

All of this talk of gender and sexual desire in Black women’s culture, serious as it may be, does not always have to be so heavy and metaphoric. The very real complexities of Black women’s subjectivities and locating figurations to translate them can also be presented in a less serious light. At least that’s what one trickster said some time ago: “I love myself when I am laughing... And then again when I am looking mean and impressive” (Hurston, *I Love Myself i*). Impressive has already been broached, mean will come later, but the importance of laughter and humor in destroying restrictive gender and sexual traditions is the subject of this chapter. Even after locating that mother tongue, the vernacular organ that makes speech possible, we may need additional means to help us construct and love our own subjectivity and resist damaging representations to the self. Performance of comedy, with its play between public and private spaces, becomes one such means in which Black females’ self-invention and desire can flourish.

In this chapter, the performance of vernacular and gender will be scrutinized to reveal another route of trickster-troping in Black women’s culture, campy spaces and drag performances. In a move akin to Marlon Ross’s examination of queer resources in the nationalist invective,1 I’d like to discuss the camp aesthetics of Black female stand-up comedy and its importance in Black women’s performativity of their sexual desires. Consequently, in a return to nineteenth-century Black writers’ clever use of vernacular slang, and Annie Christmas’s performance of femininity, this chapter presents an argument that some Black stand-up comedienne engage in trickster-troping through elements of cross-dressing vernacular performances and drag to explore other venues for unnamning their false gender status, promote expressions of desire,
and evolve radical Black female subjectivity. No longer inhibited by concerns over propriety, Black females’ comedic performances of “blue stuff” or “blue material” (raunchy and oftentimes sexually explicit subject matter) continue a Black female trickster tradition dedicated to creating oral cultures, divergent language practices, and initiatives to change definitions and boundaries of gender and sexuality in society.

The existence of vernacular and its possible uses are already transgressive, but as LaWanda Page forecasts with her prophetic reminder that “mutha’ is half a word,” witty performance of vernacular can be more transgressive. In returning now to the title of this book and chapter, Page’s Black taboo lingua franca phrase previews the raw and raunchy subject matter of Page’s recordings. As previous analysis in this text’s introduction showed, Page’s signifyin(g) performance of the vernacular, “muthafucka,” relies on the messiness of desire to discredit and disprove the so-called truths of womanhood, motherhood, feminism, and gender roles. Historian Darlene Clark Hine has suggested that by practicing secrecy and “achieving a self-imposed invisibility . . . ordinary Black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own” (915). Yet the bold disturbance of gender by Page’s “mutha’ is half a word” offers another space attuned to the difference of women based on certain class connotations. “Mutha’ is half a word” is both censored and uncensored because of the way it omits the “vulgarity” while at the same time mocking self-imposed silence and invisibilities. Page does not speak the entire word, but she pointedly refuses to remain quiet about the sex act implied with the word. Since performance is a public action that denies the domestic privatized destiny of “woman,” it incorporates considerations of class. The function of the female field slave or the post-emancipated Black female who cannot choose or afford to work solely in the house/domestic sphere is a public one. Therefore, a more empowering discourse for women not included in the occult of womanhood would be visible and not silent. Page’s phrase and this chapter continue to explore how some Black women opt for, and rightly so, a cultural practice less based in silence and invisibility. While vernacular is encoded with cultural codings of desire, performance of vernacular and desire potentially circumvents performance of gender. Even if it is not defined as so, the provocative nature of the phrase, “muthafucka” derives from the fact that it vocally connects sexual desires to the female systematically positioned as mother. Coincidentally, Page seemed remarkably aware of how much more she could transgress the boundaries of her slated roles (wife or mother) as a woman if she spoke in her class-based vernacular tongue, which does not have to adhere to the cult of womanhood. The phrase allows her to separate herself from the rhetoric of sex and social contract of gender so as to express her individual desires. Like a three-piece suit and top hat for Gladys Bentley,
or a sequined evening gown and wig for RuPaul, vernacular becomes Page’s drag. Ironically, Black stand-up comedy is not a traditionally female space or cultural form. Yet this chapter proposes that it is an unacknowledged queer space that African American women have been manipulating for their own drag performances meant to annihilate heteronormative prescriptions of gender and sexuality.

For years now, performances of Black men in drag have garnered more attention than that of African American women in drag. Without the work of critics like Judith Halberstam or filmmakers like Michelle Parkerson, we might assume that Black women in drag were a thing of the past. Further, recent work on Black women in drag focuses on the drag ball/hall spaces and performances of masculinity. During an interview with ColorLines magazine, Judah Dorrington, the musical director for DKSG (Drag Kings, Sluts & Goddesses, a Boston-based theatre production run by lesbian/bi women of color), explains how drag can be empowering for Black women in such spaces: “For many African-American performers, DKSG is an unique opportunity. To sing in church, I’m expected to put on a dress. With DKSG, I was able to wear a suit and tie and croon. I even learned how to apply a beard. It has become more than a theater company; it has really affected the community by bringing GLBT women of color together to explore ideas from our own lives” (Katz 3). But outside of balls, clubs, and theater halls, are we to assume that drag performances cease to exist for Black women? We shouldn’t. Black women have been in drag performing masculine, feminine, and indefinable and untranslatable genders for more than a century in spaces that White America has not deemed queer. Stand-up comedy is one unacknowledged field.

If we reconsider the historical position of the Black woman as both a break in the rhetoric of Black as male and woman as white, then Black females exist in a liminal space. In discussions formed more by the social than the biological, they might be considered genderless, multigendered, or transgendered. Kate Bornstein, in her book Gender Outlaw, notes the benefits of humor in the gender wars when she writes, “It’s frightening to be genderless. What makes it easier is a sense of humor, and that’s where camp comes in... It’s a sense of humor developed in response to oppression based on a unique gender identity, and a minority sexual orientation” (135). Although for some Black people it may not seem politically astute to place Black females in such a queer sphere, the reality of Black females’ experiences, past and present, suggests that they do have unique gender identities and minority sexual orientations. As I am arguing, blue material in Black women’s stand-up comedy develops in response to systematic oppression based on their racialized gendered identity and minority sexual orientation as asexual and hypersexual
representational others. Consequently, camp elements can often punctuate the performances by these Black female comics.

Black female stand-up comedy has historically, purposely and coincidentally, deferred gender and opened up the possibilities for sexuality and expressions of sexual desires through its own visual and verbal performances. Though an examination of performances by LaWanda Page, Jackie Moms Mabley, Laura Hayes, and Adele Givens, this chapter reveals queer dynamics that allow comic performers to teach other women how to avoid the abyss of universal womanhood, dominating spaces of masculinities, and an absolute nothing of blacklessness. It argues that these female comics exist as perfect modern-day tricksters because they offer a visual drag parody of gender and sexuality, which they then subvert with their oral vernacular presentation. Black comediennes employ techniques such as Arthur Spears’s “uncensored mode” and the trickster trait of sacred/lewd bricoleur in their blue material to serve as verbal cross-dressing techniques to defer their drag performance as woman. Once the verbal performance happens, they can translate their sexual desires without fear of mistranslation from prevailing discourses of gender and sexuality.

In her appreciation of trickster, Jeanne R. Smith revels in how “trickster challenges culture from both within and without, strengthening and renewing it with outrageous laughter” (3). Desire and the sex act itself provide humanity with many funny moments and myths, but in the representation of Black female experiences and desires there have been few moments of laughter. Hortense Spillers captures the predicament when she writes:

> Let’s face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. “Peaches” and “Brown Sugar,” “Sapphire” and “Earth Mother,” “Aunty,” “Granny,” God’s “Holy Fool,” a “Miss Ebony First,” or “Black Woman at the Podium”: I describe a locus of confound identities, a meeting ground of investments. . . . My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented. (“Mama’s Baby” 257)

If we continue to commit to the rhetoric of sex alone, then certainly Spillers’s words will forever haunt Black females and their cultural production. The violent physical, emotional, and visual abuses of Black women’s bodies and sexualities are regarded as staid matters that have been taken up time and again, but what of the beauty, ordinary, foolishness, and the downright obvious missing focal point of pleasure derived from the act of sex? Do Black women not need or seek it for themselves, or attempt to represent it in their lives? Though Black women’s sexual desires can be divine and transformative, they can also be bawdy and funny. Black women’s blue material is an impor-
tant consideration because it reminds us of pleasure in the sex act, and because it provides us with pleasure. It challenges us to see what is possible after the historical pain delivered onto Black women’s bodies.

Yet if we never move beyond bourgeois forms of culture such as the novel, then it will be difficult to comprehend how lower-class folk communities and their tricksters laugh at social inventions not of their own making before transforming them at will. Discussions of literary tricksterism tend to focus on characters being trickster-like or narrative strategies as resembling patterns of trickster, but similar readings are possible in other cultural forms. The dotted lines of myth can more readily be connected on the written page. When we move away from the written text, connecting the dots becomes a more rigorous undertaking. We must pay attention to more than plot and theme of trickster. We must also return to the greatest elements contributing to trickster’s ability to be critic and creator—performance and masquerade. These arenas allow trickster to serve as Gerald Vizenor’s comic holotrope and representative of communal discourse. Clowns and jesters have traditionally been labeled as comic tricksters. In modern times comedians have also been assigned the classification of trickster. Yet William Hynes insists that while “there are various real-life, twentieth-century tricksters, more often than not the tenor of their character tends not to be as rich, multivocal, or polychronic as that of mythic tricksters” (“Inconclusive Conclusions” 204). Black female comics who perform stand-up challenge Hynes’s theory on the death of trickster.

In order to recognize the humor of any comic, the public audience must be privy to the personal and private identity and subjectivity of the performer as well as the hermeneutics the comic may be using. The audience must feel some sameness or connection to the comic performer. As seen in the previous two chapters, mainstream society’s propensity to make incomprehensible Black female subjectivity hinders such a possibility, and the scholarship on Black female comedy that might help remedy this is virtually nonexistent. With the exception of Mel Watkins’s On the Real and Elsie A. Williams’s The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley, Black female comedic tradition continues to be undervalued, understudied, and misunderstood by mainstream critics and Black popular culture studies.²

Yet, the innovative use of blue material by Black female comedienennes to disturb their own complicit visual performances of gender offers a needed critique on both the social construction of the Black woman and the representation of Black female desire that should be valued and underscored as innovative. Their trickster-troping makes these real-life tricksters every bit as rich, multivocal, and polychronic as their mythic ancestors. Before completing close readings of these comedienennes, a brief examination of the common
goals of comedy for African American women and camp for white gay culture would benefit any readings.

When Black drag queen RuPaul Charles teamed up with comedienne LaWanda Page for his music singles and videos “Supermodel” and “Back to My Roots,” the connection between folklore and vernacular culture with queer culture was confirmed before the entire country. RuPaul’s male subjectivity seems not as important as the way his reading of Black female culture allows him to bend gender constraints. For his performance as a drag queen is only possible because he recognizes the queer spaces within Black female culture, moments that this text intends to explore more queerly so that we might see the constructivist nature of woman making. African American women's stand-up tradition and Black drag culture share common aims and techniques to help accomplish the dismantling of binary systems of sex. RuPaul, Page, and the Queens of Comedy are all performative tricksters who challenge the illusion of gender and form distinct discourses of desire. Although chapter 2 briefly touched on the elements of physical beauty that configures models of normative womanhood in literature, attention to the criteria of physicality in other forms of Black culture should also be examined. In her pioneering study of drag artists, *Mother Camp*, Esther Newton offers three elements that are always present in camp: incongruity, theatricality, and humor (109). Notably, these are all traits and tropes of all tricksters. Each element exists in Black female stand-up tradition. As we will see, the interaction between Black female stand-up comedy and camp arise from the aforementioned elements.

However, camp inevitably is attributable to white gay male culture in the early twentieth century in that it seeks to unseat the models of masculine and feminine through purposeful drag performances. Of drag queens, Newton claims that “the clever drag queen possesses skills that are widely distributed and prized in the gay world: verbal facility and wit, a sense of ‘camp’ (homosexual humor and taste), and the ability to do both ‘glamorous’ and comic drag” (3). On the other hand, Susan Sontag’s “Notes on ’Camp’” establishes very early on that camp is indefinable, and as such camp is not necessarily sheltered in the confines of homosexual culture (63). Still, she does note, “Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization” (54). Camp, then, seems somewhat influenced by non-Western traditions of orality. It is a less pigmented version of signifyin(g). It uses the visual and oral side by side without ranking one over the other. In Black female stand-up comedy tradition, the aesthetic phenomenon, the degree of artifice, and stylization stem from oral traditions. Sociolinguists have already exposed the priority of oral stylization in Black talk.

Both Black women and gay men have historically been oppressed within
the United States, and they have produced cultures from this particular position. Each group forced Western societies to reconsider their axiological categorization of gender and sexuality. The methods for culturally assessing and thwarting oppressive regimes and representations coincide or intersect based on models of how governing communities read or imagine the subordinated groups. Both are read through a rigid fabrication of white masculinity. In reference to Black women's language practices, sociolinguist Marcyliena H. Morgan concedes that the social and scientific pattern has been to approach Black women's language practices, and in the end their cultural items, from concerns of normativity based on white masculinity: “African American women’s issues are hypermarginalized and are considered typical neither of all women’s issues (because the women who face them are not black) nor of black issues (because the blacks who face them are not women). It is not surprising, then, that all linguists—whether they include, marginalize, or fetishize black women—always at some level, take a position” (“No Woman No Cry” 28). Whatever position linguists take doesn't matter since “language is a social act,” and the study and research of it “constitutes social and cultural production that is influenced by issues” of power (26). Therefore, if dominant society could comprehend the magnanimous historically fluid subjectivity of the Black female, then that knowledge would inevitably result in the dismantling of categories of gender and sexuality that would make less powerful those social communities in power. Since this is not in the interest of the oppressor, governing society attempts to regulate the economical and social successes of racial minorities through language policies that privilege standard English.

Fortunately, Black female comedy's application of vernacular resists these stipulations of society. Lawrence Levine speculates that Black people use laughter as a hermeneutical tool in battling their oppressive social position during slavery, in the Jim Crow era, and during our present era of Neo-colonialism. In Honey, Hush, Daryl C. Dance compiles a welcomed and serious collection on the rich tradition of Black female oral tradition and community of laughter. Dance describes the humor in Black female communities as healing:

We (African American women) have had our share of tragedy and pain, and often even in the midst of that pain, we have found the relieving balm of humor. Humor hasn’t been for us so much the cute, the whimsical, and the delightfully funny. Humor for us has been a means of surviving as we struggled. (xxii)

Dance includes humorous statements from notable Black female figures, folk sayings and traditions, jokes, mimeographs, poetry, and short fiction by and about Black female communities dating back to the 1900s. However, with
the exception of a few excerpts from Jackie Moms Mabley’s comedy routines, Whoopi Goldberg’s Fontaine, and Butterbeans and Susie, there are few inclusions of Black female comedy/stand-up performance. The omissions signify that the means of resistance against oppressive dominant discourse may be influenced by concerns for respectability. In words that run parallel to sentiments of camp in gay culture, *Honey, Hush* evokes a closeted culture. Dance’s collection showcases an internal conflict of humor, class, and gender that influences the revolutionary potential of African American female communities when she observes:

African American women’s humor has been an *in-house* affair... [The] reason for the concealment of African American women’s humor is that it was not considered ladylike to tell jokes or even to laugh too loud publicly... One wonders if this could possibly have anything to do with the popularity of an almost formulaic responses to jokes, witty remarks, signifying comments—“Honey, hush!” It really isn’t a suggestion that the person stop talking, but rather a friendly encouragement... or a suggestion that one is telling truths that are prohibited. (xxiii)

Dance’s comments expose the reality that some Black women chose to separate their humor into spheres of public and private to be mindful of attributes that would qualify them as part of the occult of true womanhood. Blue performance, like camp, develops in secret. Dance’s collection rests on the foundation that humor by African American females can be liberating even without the inclusion of blue material. Yet Dance’s assumption appears to correlate to the tenuous position of African American females in the majority of African American communities.

Black feminist critics such as Barbara Christian, Hazel Carby, Angela Davis, and Patricia Collins have outlined the conflicts and tensions that enunciate the historical experiences of Black females in the New World. Therefore, as Dance points out, “honey, hush” becomes the tricksters’ signifyin(g) to indicate the way Black females cloak their culture of comedy and laughter from the outside world that seeks to control and contain their presence. Though Dance attests that “honey, hush” is not prohibitive signifying, Dance later acknowledges key observations in her research on Black female humor: “No obscene language or sexual innuendos entered these conversations, perhaps because even when they let their hair down in the privacy of their own home they were ever aware of their images as college educated descendants” (xxiv). Dance’s comments reveal why she may have omitted stand-up comedy
in her collection, and they acknowledge class distinctions. Once the need to censor self-expression persists, Black females’ initial representations of desire pause. Radical Black female subjectivity freezes. Such censoring, as opposed to signifyin(g), prohibits the unnaming of gender position that would lead to an uncensored pronunciation of sexual desires.

Dance’s descriptive focus on the females as descendants of college-educated families implies a certain economic status not enjoyed by all Black females. The introduction unintentionally informs its reader how Black middle-class females remain mindful of colluding with or representing any of the stereotypes that project Black females as loud, rambunctious, licentious, or unfeminine, even as they create humor meant to resist those images. In this case, Black female humor always runs the risk of censoring itself or deliberately masking its language practices for the sake of propriety. If this masking was not tactically used to connect Black female subjectivity to false ideologies of womanhood, then it could be seen as empowering. Despite Dance’s inclusion of humor with sexual themes, she, like her respondents, shares concerns over propriety that run counter to trickster traditions because trickster “myths of several nations include comic figures, even stories of sexual improprieties, although they are usually suppressed as formal religious traditions are developed” (Doty and Hynes 58). In the case of Black females, formal religious traditions and the rhetoric of sex unsuccessfully attempt to suppress Black female sexual desire. Dance’s commentary proves how model womanhood and middle-class economic prosperity hinge on ideals of respectability.

On the other hand, lower-class communities must upset the status quo to prosper. Blue material in Black female stand-up comedy is really a lower-class phenomenon in that the public performance of taboo subjects shows no concern with issues of respectability. Whereas the middle class has more to lose in making public its private matters, the folk class has more to gain in that their voice might finally be heard and impel change to their social status. Black female stand-up comics’ language practices draw from the historical well of comedy and tricksterism to exert control over their so-called anatomical destinies. Tricksterism offers a fundamental understanding of the foundations for Black female comedy. Although the folk tales may be long forgotten, the hermeneutics from them thrive in contemporary Black female culture. In the context of Black female stand-up comedy, the elements of a camp culture, argumentatively shaped by race, exists in African American folklore and vernacular culture. Its earliest beginnings can be gleaned from the trickster tales involving Tar Baby and Br’er Rabbit as they offer symbolic models of signifying or camp aesthetics that recent comic performers emulate.
Getting Down and Dirty with the Tar Baby Drag

Tar Baby tales illustrate the folk’s more radical solution to problems of language, race, gender, and desire. Because “Tar Baby” is a tale that “warns against accepting illusion for reality” (J. Roberts 42), it stands as a satirical tale about drag performances. In addition, since “Tar Baby” also implies that “one should not forget one’s cultural roots” (42), it contains valuable lessons relevant for Black female subjectivity, corporeality, and desire. In human-animal versions of the tale, a white master creates Tar Baby to get the better of Br’er Rabbit. In animal-only versions of the tale, Br’er Fox or a community of animals replaces the white master and attempts to exact revenge on Br’er Rabbit for his past trickery. In both versions, Tar Baby symbolizes an illusion constructed by those subjects in power to undermine the less powerful beings’ attempt to move beyond oppressive circumstances:

One day after Br’er Rabbit fooled him with that calamus root, Br’er Fox went ter wuk en got ’im some tar, en mix it wid some turkentime, en fix up a contrapshun w’at he call a Tar Baby, en he tuck dish yer Tar-Baby en he sot ’er in de big road, en den he lay off in de bushes fer to see what de news wuz gwine ter be. En he didn’t hatter wait long, nudder, kaze bimeby here come Br’er Rabbit pacin’ down de road—lippity-clippity, clippity—dez ez sassy ez a jay-bird. Br’er Fox, he lay low. Br’er Rabbit come prancin’ ’long twel he spy de Tar-Baby, en den he fotch up on his behime legs like he wuz ’stonished. De Tar Baby, she sot dar, she did, en Br’er Fox, he lay low. (Harris, *Uncle Remus* 17)

Supposedly recorded in the slave’s (Uncle Remus’s) speech pattern, Tar Baby’s tale emerges. In this tale, the trickery of Br’er Fox works, to an extent, when Br’er Rabbit attempts to talk to Tar Baby. Tar Baby does not respond.

When Tar Baby does not speak to Br’er Rabbit, he loses his wits. As Br’er Rabbit arrogantly tries to physically bully an unresponsive Tar Baby into speaking, he becomes stuck in the tar. Br’er Rabbit’s arrogance leads him to become displaced in the illusion of the Tar Baby. He frees himself from Br’er Fox’s trap by delivering a performance of humility and helplessness: “‘I don’t care what you do with me, Br’er Fox,’ says he, ‘Just so you don’t fling me in that briar patch. Roast me, Br’er Fox,’ says he, ‘But don’t fling me in that briar patch’” (Lester, *Uncle Remus* 14). Br’er Rabbit uses his wits to convince Br’er Fox that the briar patch would be the worst punishment, when it is really his home and saving grace. He triumphs and gets the last laugh at the expense of Br’er Fox. Traditionally, the story has been read as an allegorical tale about power in race relations on the slave plantation. It suggests that Blacks must
remember their roots if they are to survive in the New World.

Yet to comprehend the tale’s meaning to the representation of Black females’ sexual desires, it should also be read as a metaphorical tale about power in gender and race relations. In the tale Tar Baby is gendered female, while Br’er Fox and Br’er Rabbit are gendered male. Theoretically, if we remember that the “Black woman” is as much of a false construct as the Negro, then Tar Baby serves as a symbolic reference to false configurations created by a more powerful subject meant to trick the disenfranchised. The story forewarns African Americans to see beyond illusion, a strategy necessary for Black females overcoming the debilitating limitations of the rhetoric of sex. Further, Br’er Rabbit’s tale underlines the aesthetic deployment of verbal camp, signifyin(g), and dragging: “To camp is a mode of seduction—one which employs flamboyant mannerism susceptible of a double interpretation; gestures full of duplicity” (Sontag 56). Br’er Rabbit greatly exaggerates his fear of the briar patch. He uses indirection, a element of signifyin(g), to save himself. His flamboyancy at indirection comes across in the detail that he would prefer the fiery fires of roasting to the dense bushes of the briar patch. His verbosity seduces. Likewise, the degree to which the Tar Baby ruse fools Br’er Rabbit offers a type of campiness in the tale. For “all camp objects, and persons, contain a large element of artifice. . . . camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp.’ . . . To perceive camp in objects is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role” (55). Notions of being and role-playing, artifice and illusion, remain at the heart of the Tar Baby tales.

In addition, in less Western models of the Tar Baby tales, gender becomes all the more a prevalent factor. In another interpretation of “Tar Baby,” one which returns Tar Baby tales to West African mythology of the Tar Lady, Toni Morrison once said of her modification to Tar Baby: “Tar Baby is also a name, like ‘nigger,’ that white people call black children, black girls, as I recall. . . . At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things. . . . For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together. The story was a point of departure to history and prophecy. That’s what I mean by dusting off the myth, looking closely at it to see what it might conceal” (LeClair 102). Morrison’s statement and her revision of the Tar Baby in her literary work Tar Baby position Tar Baby as an active being, less constructed by other individuals or beings but still caught in between roles and representations and one’s own self.

In either case (if we position Black females as Br’er Rabbit, or as a revisionist Tar Baby who is active rather than passive), the tales’ important demonstrations of the tensions and interplay of orality versus visual are crucial to African American female culture. The plot and lesson of the tale hinge on visual trickery and the use of oral wit and guile to overcome the visual tricks.
Though the story has only been applied to literary texts, Tar Baby tales serve as a significant component to see how truly trickster-like Black female stand-up comics might be. The visual drag of Black women reflects Br’er Rabbit’s performance of humbleness and subordination to greater society symbolized by Tar Baby and the creator of Tar Baby. However, oral wit, conveyed in blue material, allows Black females to land in their own cultural briar patch so that they might better express themselves.

Drag culture encompasses many elements for various groups. Women who perform as men are drag kings, and men who perform as women are drag queens (Newton, Mother Camp 3). However, drag also has broader implications. In one of the greatest versions of “If You Don’t Know Me by Now,” Patti LaBelle makes a speech in the middle of her live cover performance: “So you fasten your clothes, you check your speech, and you check out your drag and everything else, your face and you find out that you’re still in trouble.” In appropriating “drag” from gay culture, LaBelle attributes drag to makeup, wigs, and whatever else, aside from anatomy that goes into making women “woman.” She suggests drag is something that all women, straight or gay, perform at some point. Years later, queer theory formally articulated how drag utilizes and manipulates many physical attributes and masking techniques to create a unified picture of “woman.” In Gender Trouble, Judith Butler writes that the performance of drag is an art form of parody that plays “upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed” (175).

Like many other women, Black women invest heavily in drag techniques to create a unified picture of “woman” and femininity. For Black females, white supremacy foundations of feminine beauty make their performance as subversive as the male who would perform woman. The financial success of Madame C. J. Walker, gained from her empire of hair-straightening products, and the profits enjoyed by cosmetic companies peddling makeup and skin-lightening products to Black women, demonstrate how racially influenced categories of femininity are, as well as how willing Black females are to submit to those versions of femininity. Some women oppose complete submission to these versions of femininity so that they can avoid a restriction of their sexual desires that may not align with prescriptions and object choices for those versions. Various drag performances, specifically the “glamorous” and comical, possess the tendency to blur the Western coherence of desire with prescribed social roles of gender. Despite some of the best work done on Black vernacular traditions, little has been done to investigate the strong queer dynamics operating within the performative space of the comedy stage. I’m not asserting that anyone from Moms Mabley to Sommore “Diva of Comedy” is a les-
bian. Black comedy has sporadically been a prime haven for homophobia and misogyny, but there have been obvious instances of Black comedic tradition revealing its queer space. Black female comics remain aware of and embrace camp’s attention to glamour and comic performances of woman. In occupying a trickster-like subjectivity and the performative arena of the stage, Black female comics have engaged those queer spaces through an unintended nod to drag culture.

Black comedy has been fearless in its critical appreciation of how race influences its drag illusions. In African American culture one need only recall the chitlin’ circuit act of Freddie and E., an entire act that consisted of two men impersonating women; or Flip Wilson’s Geraldine character and persona; or the implied queer associations from Whoopi Goldberg’s one-woman show *Fontaine... Why Am I Straight?* to observe how the homophobic takes a backseat to boundary-breaking performances established by tricksters such as Eshu, Annie Christmas, and Afrekete. Gender ambiguity and androgyny have survived and thrived in Black lower-class culture of blue material in Black comedy, just as intentional exaggeration of gender and sexuality remains. Blue-Black comedy and queer aesthetics derive from one and the same Tar Baby trickster root: the goal of remaining aware of false social illusions and remembrance of cultural roots as an empowering way to manipulate the dominant society for one’s own need. Since camp is “the triumph of epicene style (the convertibility of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ . . . )” (Sontag 56), Black female stand-up comedy and gay drag culture share similar aims. RuPaul and LaWanda Page proved that individually and cooperatively.

In RuPaul’s autobiography, *Lettin’ It All Hang Out*, he admits that as a child he was uncomfortable with his masculine side, but he also admits how subjective gender can be. As RuPaul extols the benefits of drag, he discloses how gender stability can be as temporal as a full moon:

> Just as I have explored different female looks—black hooker, gender fuck, and supermodel—now I am exploring different drag male looks—J. Crew, preppy, sexy homeboy, and executive realness. Just as when I am in drag, I feel totally at ease with my feminine side, now for the first time in my life, I feel totally at ease with my masculine side. (xi)

RuPaul astutely explains the metalevels of performance involved in the act of gender. Individualist considerations take priority over universal discourses about when or how people, especially people of color, should accept or reject fixed identities of gender. In the successive years of 1992 and 1993, music lovers across the video-viewing world were treated to two RuPaul videos fea-
turing LaWanda Page. Page, the bluest of all female comics and a regular on the Black sitcom hit *Sanford and Son*, portrayed a maternal figure in RuPaul’s “Supermodel” and “Back to My Roots” tracks and videos. Here, it is necessary to move beyond RuPaul’s drag performance and delve into the way Page represents queerness. Page’s liminal position as a Black woman posits her as queer; it is this queerness that RuPaul recognizes, uses to access his own queerness and perform it in empowering ways that might not be possible otherwise. Further, RuPaul’s admission, through his incorporation of Page, allows Page to also perform and embrace her queerness as a trickster in a form other than comedy.

“Supermodel” is a catwalking ode to the production of gender by models and drag queens around the world, and “Back to My Roots” considers Black hair, culture, and heritage. The inclusion of Page in the vocal and visual aspects of these products conveys how revolutionary comic performances can be in regards to the representation of Black female desire. It is RuPaul’s turn to Black female culture that showcases the influence of Black women’s trickster-trooping in the lives of Black men and women. In “Supermodel,” Page recounts, in her inimitable oral delivery, the inspiring story of Supermodel’s (RuPaul’s persona) rise from the projects of Detroit to the runways of Paris. The decision of these two artists to collaborate with each other emphasizes the negotiations that producers of Black culture make and understand concerning gender and queerness.

Of why he desired Page for his work, RuPaul proclaims, “I always loved her—her voice and delivery. I had a wish list for the album and LaWanda Page was at the top.” RuPaul’s statement attends to another aspect of successful drag performance completes its visual fantasy with complementing oral and aural work. As we saw with *Clotel*, successful drag performance completes its visual fantasy with complementing oral and aural work. As seen in Page’s well-known lines “watch it sucka” and “mutha’ is half a word,” Page’s voice and delivery receives its aesthetic appeal from Black folklore tradition and vernacular culture. Black female stand-up comics pit visual and verbal against each other to articulate their sexual desires away from the social handicap of gender logic.

Superficially, the Page and RuPaul pairing may have seemed innovatively odd because of the age gap and the different arenas of performance. RuPaul enjoys success as a drag queen that exceeds previous queens, and LaWanda Page, at her career peak, performed as one of the most shockingly funny comedienes. RuPaul acknowledges the opposing appreciation and love he had as a little boy for Page, as well as Diana Ross and other Black performance divas. Ross and Page exemplify the opposing factions of femininity in Black America. Where Ross had long hair, light skin, and keen facial features associated with white women, Page had short, coarse hair or a wig, dark skin,
and broader facial features. In a sense, RuPaul’s drag performance allows him to be within Ross’s same range, but his affinity for Page also underlines the need for culturally specific versions of the feminine and supports the belief that people find beauty in the woman or performer who doesn’t perform gender in the way that he does. RuPaul’s appreciation of Page’s style and vice versa points to the shared commonality—disturbing any socially prescribed notions of gender. While RuPaul’s technique would typically be grouped under camp delineated by white gay culture, Page’s technique of unnamning and expressing sexual desires was acquired from her early days as a performer on the chitlin’ circuit.

Perhaps it was the no-holds-barred environment of the chitlin’ circuit, but Black comedy performances have surely been queer longer than they have been homophobic. The chitlin’ circuit reconfigures elements associated with camp to include issues of race. Though the chitlin’ circuit and its sister avenues, traveling tent shows and the TOBA (Theater Owners Booking Association), did not explicitly perform for sexually queer audiences, they did address the needs of Black people consistently ascribed to the realms of non-heteronormativity. The chitlin’ circuit, a direct descendant of the traveling tent shows of Black vaudeville and burlesque in the early 1900s, epitomizes Black camp (Watkins 372). These nightclubs and hall venues existed on the margins of communities alienated for their racial and class differences. As Mel Watkins notes of the clubs on the circuit, “You usually needed a ghetto guide to find them” (373).

The birth of Black stand-up can be linked to the TOBA and the chitlin’ circuit (380). In these performance arenas, incongruity, performance, and humor flourished. Black female stand-up comedy that unnames gender and articulates its sexual desires reverts to the modes of camping found in the chitlin’ circuit or the traveling tent shows. Symbolically and performatively, the chitlin’ circuit could be said to do exactly as camp does for white gay culture: “Camp is a practice of suturing different lives, of reanimating, through repetition with a difference, a lost country or moment that is relished and loved. Although not innately politically valenced, it is a strategy that can do positive identity—and community—affirming work” (Muñoz 128). Akin to the practice of camp’s function to suture and reanimate through repetitions with a difference, the chitlin’ circuit, and its namesake chitterlings, represent the gathering of purportedly unusable remains of dominant society’s taste and values and seasoning them with a distinct flavor so that they become a nourishing staple in one’s lives. Black female stand-up comedy exploits the unusable remains of womanhood and the projected excessiveness of their Black bodies to produce intellectual feasts and entertaining critiques of gender, race, sexuality, and class for marginalized audiences. Would that we could create
phrases such as “chitlinfyin(g) drag” (a combination of chiltin’, signifyin(g), and dragging in the margins of the margins) and “chitlinality” (positionality as opposed to identity that considers the performative intersections of class, gender, race, and sexuality and the unusable remains of those discourses) to denote this soul food intersectional exploration of race and class into camp. Auspiciously, the examples of Black female stand-up comedy provide more fruitful analysis than name games.

LaWanda Page’s early career demonstrates that the continued existence of the circuit had a lot more to do with it as an operating space of freedom for Black lower-class mass expression, as opposed to the noble, but bourgeoisie agenda of Broadway or mainstream touring. In Cleveland, Ohio, at the age of fifteen, Page actively pursued a professional dancing career. She later relocated to St. Louis, where she worked as a waitress at Ned Love’s Tavern. Dedicated to her dancing aspirations, she soon began stripping. Since performers on the chitlin’ circuit could avoid the censorship that came with mainstream bookings and TOBA, burlesque traditions flourished. Page was known for stripping in nightclubs predominantly affiliated with the chitlin’ circuit. The environment that she performed in permitted her to construct a type of drag performance of otherness. Page’s eventual incorporation of fire-swallowing into her striptease earned her the title “The Bronze Goddess of Fire.” During the act, Page would fearlessly light cigarettes with her fingertips, swallow the fire, and torch her body with the burning fire sticks. Page’s act reveals an audience and a subculture interested in queer engagement with the body. Moving beyond a binary theory of gender (male and female), Page’s performance as “The Bronze Goddess of Fire” acts as another possible gender performances, the other.

Newton has already explained that drag queens explore the performance of femininity, but other critics of camp and drag offer ways to reread Page that now seem invaluable. In “Mackdaddy, Superfly, Rapper: Gender, Race, and Masculinity in the Drag King Scene,” Judith Halberstam investigates the way race shapes drag king culture for African American women: “I define the drag king as a performer who pinpoints and exploits the (often obscured) theatricality of masculinity. The drag king can be male or female; she can be transgendered” (104). By turning to race, Halberstam documents the production of drag culture in spaces that are not inherently white and gay. Her work locates camp culture in women’s communities of color. Hence, based on the early and now broader implications of drag, Black women, like Page, have several options they may exercise in their drag performances: masculinity, femininity, trans, and othered. In the case of Page, she pinpoints and exploits the theatricality of otherness.

Before Page made a career of making people laugh, she attended to her prescribed role as an othered woman. Page, like RuPaul who follows
Mutha’ Is Half a Word!

her, manipulated the Black body for audiences who remained limited by their own societal boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Likewise, RuPaul’s blonde-haired, blue-eyed Supermodel persona is as much a humorous exaggeration of white femininity as Page’s exaggeration of Black othered femininity. The pairing of RuPaul and Page explores the shared space of sexual and gender drama. They both exploit Page’s chitlinfyin(g) drag beginnings and her performance as the homely and unfeminine Aunt Esther on Sanford and Son to solidify RuPaul’s contemporary violation of gender and sexuality. Given that Page met Redd Foxx, the star of Sanford and Son, when they toured on the chitlin’ circuit, it seems quite possible that Page’s comic genius and the Bronze Goddess othering of herself resulted in her being cast in the ideal antiwoman role of Aunt Esther. In a number of Sanford and Son episodes, Black females’ deferring of gender is highlighted. Page’s flawless performance as the character of Aunt Esther symbolically connects to Tar Baby tales. Like Tar Baby’s unresponsiveness to Br’er Rabbit, Page’s Aunt Esther refuses to perform gender in the way the signifyin(g) Fred Sanford wishes. She unnames herself through vernacular ploys in the same way she employs the visual to other herself as a stripper.

In numerous episodes of Sanford and Son, Fred refers to Esther as “the creature from the black lagoon,” and those comments negate Esther’s “less feminine” (dark, not white or light) looks in comparison to Fred’s divinely feminine Donna or Elizabeth. In a sense, Page’s dark skin color positions her as the Tar Baby to Fred’s Br’er Rabbit. The two participate in the dozens, and Fred’s funniest lines often refer to Esther as a failure in feminine beauty. In addition, the Aunt Esther character moves between silent Tar Baby (actively signifyin[g] through certain looks to Fred) and Morrison’s revisionist strong Black woman Tar Baby (comically throwing up her fists to pummel Fred or vocally proclaiming, “Watch it sucka”). These are the vernacular mechanisms that RuPaul finds so appealing. On Sanford and Son, the two tricksters duke it out time and again, with Fred, like Br’er Rabbit, being the victor. However, years later, all that Esther stands for appears vindicated by the appearance of Page in RuPaul’s work.

What happens when the blackest of the black, Aunt Esther, gets matched with Supermodel—the most glamorously feminine in the whitest Western ways—supplies ample cultural criticism about gender and desire. As the maternal figure in both videos, Page serves as a representation of antiwoman through her voice and appearance, but the subversion occurs when viewers realize it is the anti-woman who gives the world the ultrafeminine Supermodel. Page’s comedic presence allows RuPaul, even as he engages in the theater of gender, to ironically mock it in a way that calls attention to the way that race influences that exhibition.
Of drag performance Butler asserts: “But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance” (Gender Trouble 175). Butler’s assessment remains markedly powerful except when we take into consideration issues of class and race; except when we are dealing anatomically with third sex/intersex/hermaphrodites; except when we take into consideration those corporeal moments of not only the performer but the audience as well; and except when drag, a mainly visual artform, intersects with vernacular culture. Fortunately, Halberstam rectifies the absence of race and vernacular culture within such discussions. For example, in her study of race and masculinity in the drag king scene, Halberstam returns to male impersonation by Black blues women of the early twentieth century to serve as historical evidence of a tradition of male impersonation in African America. When she states that “the image of the blues woman in drag singing to another woman also guards against what Ann DuCille has called the ‘feminization of the blues,’ which she describes as the mass production ‘of the black female as sexual subject’” (“Mackdaddy” 114), the symbiotic relationship between drag and verbal cross-dressing remains clear. In the case of blues women, who more readily dispersed sexual themes within their music, visual drag lessens the risk of Black female performers being seen solely as sexual subjects. In a way that Judith Butler had failed to do but Halberstam does, Page’s decision to participate in RuPaul’s music and videos offers an assessment of race and drag. In the case of Black female stand-up comedy, the orality of Black vernacular culture, signified by Page’s presence, interrupts the privileging of the visual epitomized by RuPaul’s exaggerated performance of Western white woman. This play between orality and the visual creates formulations of Black females as radical sexual subjects who can control and manipulate their markers of agency without becoming sexual objects.

In order for gender to be subverted, it must be exaggerated, imitated, repudiated, and rejected. During her portrayal as Aunt Esther, Page refuted and rejected gender roles. She fetishistically and comically unnamed herself. As a stripper, Page exaggerated her role of woman, not simply through a bold sexual performative display of her body, but in an othering of that already alien Black body, one in which she projects herself as spewing fire from her body. Just as RuPaul’s performance as woman has the potential to be othered if he does not tuck (the technique of making less visible the penis), Page’s fire stunt submits her as monstrous other. Page’s decision to pursue stand-up comedy and later participate in RuPaul’s videos hints at her own understanding of how visual tactics undermine attempts at radical Black female subjectivity, but blue material in Black female comedy empowers her by serving as a disruption of the visuality of drag performance.
Drag and Vernacular Cross-Dressing

In Debra J. Robinson’s now dated documentary I Be Done Been Was Is, viewers are treated to one of the few female interpretations of Black female comedy. Rather than assume a fictional or less critical film genre, Robinson allows the documentary to speak on the role of gender and sexuality in Black female stand-up comedy. The title of the film communicates the numerous subject positions Black females occupy, and it uses Ebonics’ invariant “be” to signal its answer to discussing that liminal subjectivity outside of the language of wider communication. It is a brief, clever comment on the failure of European languages and Western metaphysics. The title foreshadows Robinson’s documentary of Black female comedy as a trickster narrative or a narrative about trickster. The documentary contains clips and interviews of four, at the time, up-and-coming comics: Marsha Warfield, Rhonda Hansome, June Galvin-Lewis, and Alice Arthur. Warfield, a regular on the 1980s sitcom Night Court, was the most successful and recognizable to mainstream audiences. Because it was a low-budget, independently made documentary, I Be Done Been lacks the glitz and glamour of the most recent film on Black female comics, Walter Latham’s Queens of Comedy. Although I Be Done Been Was Is and Queens of Comedy differ in presentation and purpose, both films verify that blue material in Black female comedy allows comics to interrupt their drag so that they may better present their sexual desires without worrying over matters of decorum. Queens of Comedy may have made more money, but I Be Done Been historicizes Black female comedic tradition in a way that deepens Queens of Comedy’s value beyond that of entertainment.

Robinson readily conceived of a project that should historically contextualize itself in the world of Black cinema and comedy. Robinson shoots the film in various locations. She cinematically moves from the dark and barely lit venues of comedy and night clubs to interaction between comics and camera and director in various uncontrolled environments. The camera and the director always hold as its subject the Black female comic speaking or performing. In the nightclubs, we barely see or hear the audience. Our sole focus stands on stage, a nondomestic space.

The film opens with short clips of each female’s routine. Warfield, Arthur, and Hansome are in makeup, while Galvin-Lewis performs sans makeup. After the last clip of performances, the film’s title streams across the screen. As it streams, audiences are aurally treated to Moms Mabley’s well-known Klan routine about her performance in a southern nightclub. Robinson establishes the context in which we should view I Be Done Been. The film addresses Black female comedy as the liberatory practice from racial and gender oppression:
Visual illusions coupled with biting comic voices serve as the strategy to freedom.

By beginning with Moms Mabley, if only in a snippet, Robinson implies the mechanisms of drag utilized by early Black female stand-up comics. As Watkins notes, during her performances Moms Mabley appeared in “oversized clodhoppers, tattered gingham dresses, and odd-ball hats, and affecting the persona of a sage, down-to-earth, older woman” (390). Moms’s character or personae isn’t the Bronze Goddess act of Page, but it clearly serves as the basis of Page’s Aunt Esther character. Both implicity perform another gender. The beginning of the documentary offers evidence for this text’s consideration of unnaming and drag. In the past, Black women comics took up comic drag to serve as their method of unnaming through performance. For Robinson, these purposeful visual transformations of oddball hats and clodhoppers connect to the issue of gender. As the filmmaker records the answers to questions such as “Why are you a comic?” or “How’d you get into the business?” the answers seem no different than the response might be for a male comic: “Because I’m funny . . . because humor is wonderful . . . because I thought I could.” Despite such generic answers, Robinson lets her film provide more detailed retorts. In a beautiful montage on the history of Black female comics, the camera pans on photographs, posters, and pictures of previous female performers while audio commentary narrates and explains the subjects before the camera. Moving away from the universal assumptions of her two opening questions, Robinson reveals that Black female comedy didn’t necessarily begin as a separate and open field. Black female entertainers served as either chorus girls or waitresses in early twentieth-century show business. In an epigrammatic assessment of minstrel and vaudeville shows, Robinson completes a roll call of Black female comedic performers, some known, but most unknown: Princess Pee Wee—a singing comedian in Barnum and Bailey, Ladle Thompson of the Ziegfield Follies, Ada Overton, Landi Williams, Anita Bush, and Mae Barn. In a moment of historical analysis that compels us again to understand the queerness of Black performance of comedy, Robinson remarks on the prominence of male/female comedy teams in vaudeville and the chitlin’ circuits. Clearly, the teaming of Butterbeans and Susie and Vivian Harris and Pigmeat Markham provide an early peek at blue material that knew nothing of the boundaries of gender etiquette and sexual decency.6

Robinson’s emphasis on the outrageousness of these performances transitions the documentary into a very valid examination about the public comedy performance on stage and the public performance of woman, and each one’s role in the interruption of gender binaries and hushing of desire. In words that explore this text’s theory of blue-Black performance as queer, an oral cross-dressing to counter their drag performance of woman, Robinson
asks, “What if Ada Overton hadn’t been beautiful, couldn’t sing, act, or cake walk, would being funny have been enough?” And she later explains, “Even Pearl Bailey . . . had to play down her looks and to settle for the ordinary chatting, wise cracking lady.” In recalling Sontag’s criteria of camp as performing comic or glamorous drag, it seems clear that Black women on stage had to move back and forth between the two options. Robinson’s comments show that there is no such thing as a universal comedic stage presence working for Black female comics, even if they don’t admit it. In order to succeed, Black female performers had to manipulate oral and visual elements to both defer gender and refer to their sexual desires.

Early Black female comics had to intuit what audiences wanted from them and subversively give it in a way that seemed nonthreatening. Well versed in the role of trickster as an outsider who changes the community as it engages communal discourses, Black female comics realized that in order to be successful on the circuit or stage, Black female performances had to play within and exceed the boundaries of gender performance at a schizophrenic pace. Even as Robinson notes that “today’s Black female comedians approach the industry through a direct route of comedy,” it seems very obvious that in 1984, those comics being studied still had to worry about the politics of gender and the art of drag:

Comediennes have no groupies. You know (to the director), men are intimidated. It seems from the time you walk on the stage . . . you know, you’ve done something women don’t do . . . so you’ve automatically taken yourself out of the realm of desirable women. (Marsha Warfield)

Makeup, jewelry, certain hairstyles, and clothing help place the Black females on stage closer to the desirable realm of woman. However, as Warfield argues, the stage presence of these female comics seems to somehow defer the performance of woman because it is an undomesticated space. Rather than simply submitting to a logic of universal womanhood, some Black comedians revel in their dislocation as desirable woman and emphasize it through sexually explicit routines. While audiences may remove these women from the realm of desirable womanhood, their response or reaction to the women on stage doesn’t alter the fact that the performers have desires of their own that might be hushed to partake in the privileges of womanhood. Consequently, once these comedians are projected as undesirable, a liminal space is opened up in which they can express their own desires without the inclination of censorship that might occur when one is attempting to maintain an image of desirability for dominant audiences or communities. Like the blues singers who represented liminal figures who explored sexual potential (Halberstam,
“Mackdaddy” 114), the stage and the vernacular degender the Black female comedienne, and these Black comedienes become exemplary figures of sexual agency who can do and say what other women simply dream about doing.

If these women really are performing gender, doing drag, then how can they showcase that fact so that it does not seem as if they are imitating woman or buying into the fabrication of gender? Blue-material lengthens the subversion of gender and sexuality that begins with drag. In one scene, Warfield observes of her comedy, “All of my material is XXX rated . . . but my material never seems vulgar . . . or offensive.” In response to negative reactions to her blue material, she counters such rhetoric and emphasizes that she works “nightclubs where people are drinking and smoking.” Warfield sharpens the camp sensibilities of Black female stand-up. Blue material is for a specific audience who shares the sensibilities of the comic performing. The liminality of Black women’s subjectivity allows them to operate in spaces that do not align with representations of “woman.” Blue material continues to defiantly interrupt the visual performance of woman. Blue material becomes both the greatest defense to drag performance as woman and the greatest example of drag’s subversive potential.

Later in the film, Hansome compares her use of blue material to Black male comics doing blue material: “Even though it was not true about Richard Pryor, Redd Foxx, or about Eddie Murphy, the one thing that was stressed to me by the showcase club was that if you do blue material you won’t be accepted . . . I don’t like that.” Despite the freedom the stage allows in terms of performance, that stage is still owned by persons who may wish to adhere to prevailing discursive models. Warfield and Hansome’s comments demonstrate why Black female stand-up relies on the tensions of drag performance and the politics of vernacular and trickster culture to unname and desire. In mainstream environments, the showcases, the pontification of desire cannot occur without an unning process that defers gender. As opposed to alienating the audience, which leads to a loss of profits, Black females must consciously play with/ up representations that audiences are comfortable with before they can ensue the contravention of language and moral values.

As indicated by Page and Mabley’s routines, they must offer either excessive otherness or gender neutrality. Since the comedienes of the film are performing during the 1980s, clownish and buffoonish appearances are sub-stituted for the androgynous aesthetics of funk and punk. For Warfield that means the wearing of pants, a natural afro, and a less-than-soft demeanor coupled with a polished and made-up face. She conveys soft butch. Hansome wears her hair dyed and spiked, and flamboyantly colored wardrobe and bright makeup complete her image. Both comics’ stage presence releases each comic from the confines of womanhood in a nontthreatening manner. Their
attention to drag gets them on the stage, while their use of blue material, the vernacular, allows them to deconstruct their own performances of “woman” and “othered.” Like signifyin(g), the successful practice of blue material depends on similar shared cultural values between audience and performer. Without this understanding, “honey, hush” might become a permanent marker of Black female culture. Nowhere is this more evident than in the production of Latham’s *Queens of Comedy*.

The Black stand-up comics in *Queens of Comedy* choose to draw in their audience with drag acts that highlight the appearance of glamour, while still deploying the verbal cross-dressing of blue material. Though *Queens of Comedy* is originally intended for entertainment purposes mainly, it offers an education on the material lives of its performers. The film’s narrative technique reiterates and strengthens the main theme and nature of the females’ comic performances—for gender to be altered through a process of unnamning and Black females to express desire. The filming of *Queens* occurs in a semicontrolled setting. The special was shot at the Orpheus in Memphis, Tennessee, and televised on the cable network Showtime. The audiences, both the live participants in the film and the cable-paying spectators, are at the heart of *Queens of Comedy*. Where Robinson’s *I Be Done Been* wishes to reveal as much as possible about the role of gender in comedy performance, *Queens* attempts to represent female desire and meet the voyeuristic demands of their audiences. Audiences who are set on having their need for sexual satire and gender performance satisfied can use the stage or television to separate them from whatever unexpected social criticism the comedy acts may produce.

The stage consists of an Egyptian-themed set with pyramids and hieroglyphics meant to correspond to African royalty, but these attempts to authenticate the Blackness of the women, as well as their connection to legitimate lines of royalty that exalt Black femininity where it has typically been denigrated, are dismissed by the clever way camp shapes their acts. *Queens’s* opening scene shows four women: Adele Givens, Laura Hayes, Sommore, and Monique driving to their concert destination. As the film opens, we hear Givens say, “I’m such a fuckin lady.” The women pose for photographs. With the exception of Sommore, everyone is casually dressed and sans makeup. The director and producer team of Steve Purcell and Walter Latham make a point of dispersing segments about Black female corporeality throughout the filmed performances of these women. The juxtaposition of the comedy routines with the random but deliberately themed clips expose how much of a drag competition blue-Black comedy can be.

Once the routines in the film are under way, the camera focuses on the first comic, Laura Hayes. She enters the stage wearing a flowing and flattering pants ensemble. Her long, colored hair and nails are extravagantly done.
This comic clearly exists in the realm of desirable woman. Everything from her hair, clothes, and nails project the soft and delicate nature of “woman.” After Hayes finishes one segment of her routine, the film interjects a clip of the four females having their hair and makeup done before the show. Again, the ordinary and barefaced women are a far cry from the polished queens we see on stage, and they good-naturedly joke about the differences. However, the clips are jarring not because the women look so horrible without makeup, but because it aesthetically does not seem to connect with Hayes’s routine before or directly after the clip in the stage delivery of her comic monologue. Yet Hayes’s closing and her introduction of the next comedienne cue astute home viewers to comprehend the thematic connection between the beauty salon clips and the concert scenes, for there is an underwhelming connection to the performance of gender and the representation of desire.

Latham’s cinematic narrative zooms in on the tensions of the vernacular performance in opposition to visual performance. In the absence of the filmmaker’s narrative context that Latham constructs in the editing and filming of the show, the live audience must turn toward those frictions alone. Hayes relies on trickster skills of exaggeration and mimicry to ensure that the audience acknowledges the role race plays in the representation of gender and female desire. In a segment on how Black females move from ladies to bitches when one of their own is harmed, Hayes begins pantomiming a boxer getting ready to fight a man who has abused her sister. The climax of the routine comes when, in preparation for the fight, she begins removing her drag—rings, earrings, and finally the long flowing, colorful wig that adorned her head are thrown to the floor. The audience erupts in laughter because the soft, feminine lady has been replaced by a “thugged-out bitch.” In this case, Hayes’s Tar Baby disguise is gone, and she now becomes Br’er Rabbit in the briar patch. Because she remembers her mutable subjectivity as a Black woman and her class roots, she can protect her own by any means necessary.

Hayes’s routine works because she was able to emphasize the decorum and motives of performing woman, motives that seek to adhere to audience perceptions. Makhail Bakhtin’s exploration of masks affords a way to explain how Hayes’s comic timing serves as indicator of herself as a trickster, as opposed to just another woman: “[T]hese masks take on extraordinary significance. They grant the right not to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life; the right to parody others while talking, the right to not be taken literally, not ‘to be oneself’” (Bakhtin 163). To be sure, I am not conflating dragging and masking. What is most useful about Bakhtin’s statement as it relates to Hayes’s performance comes in how it draws our attention to the campiness of Hayess’s routine: “Camp in this context clearly refers to a somewhat ironic gender practice within which gender traits are
exaggerated for theatrical and often comic effect” (Sontag 58). In drag, Hayes can accomplish all of the assignments that Bakhtin outlines because Haye's comedy mirrors the previously mentioned camp mechanisms of Br'er Rabbit in the Tar Baby stories. When she undresses before the audience, she signifies woman as a performance and not as being. A female who accepts the parameters of gender would not be as willing to unveil the smoke and mirrors that go into the illusion of femininity. All of the items that Hayes removes threaten to undermine Black female subjectivity and replace it with a performance of white femininity. However, her willingness to comically showcase the visual reveals Black females’ defiance to mirroring white womanhood. Whereas maintaining drag composure, the artifice, is essential for drag kings and queens, for the Black stand-up comic to expose the flaws of gender performance, she has to publicly dismantle the drag artifice. Keeping it on is not as subversive as publicly removing it. Again, the division between the public and private serves as a means to an end.

In addition, Hayes’s routine draws on camp’s glorification of character and the unity and the force of the person (Sontag 58). In the beginning of Hayes’s act she glorifies woman as a character. Hayes walks in ways that emphasize her feminine appeal. Her hips sway, she speaks in demure, flirtatious tones with her audience, and she giggles like a girl. Yet she also engages us in another character, the thugged-out bitch. The way she walks and talks changes. Hayes’s performance of this character becomes as much a performance of dragging as her depiction of a lady. Hayes plays with stereotypes of Black women, essentialized woman, and issues of authentic Blackness. In each instance, Hayes’s work demonstrates a distinctive drag performance. Take, for example, Halberstam’s discussion of Gladys Bentley and Storme DeLaverie as Black women doing male impersonation. In her assessment of the two entertainers, she locates what separates male impersonation from drag kinging: “The ability of the drag king to make a show out of male impersonation. The theatricality, or lack thereof, in the drag king performance depends, for example, on whether the performer is attempting to reproduce dominant or minority masculinity, whether she relies totally on impersonation, or whether her own masculinity flavors the act” (“Mackdaddy” 115). Although Hayes is not interested in drag kinging or male impersonating, she relies on drag’s theatricality for her act. She makes a show of both female impersonation and bitch impersonation. As I will argue in another chapter, perhaps bitch becomes a separate marker of gender in and of itself, making desire more polysexual for some Black women.

Notably, after this particular scene, Hayes introduces Adele Givens via Givens’s signature line: “She's such a fuckin' lady.” Givens, upon entering the stage, asks the audience, “Do I look like a fuckin' lady or what?” As seen in
the close of Hayes’s performance and in Givens’s line, the question that these women and the comic film pose is: What does it mean to look like a lady? Givens returns to a verbal cross-dressing, as opposed to Hayes’s visual unveiling. Because Givens revises her signature line in a way that draws attention to her physical appearance, we consistently see the importance of appearances and performances in this particular film concert. Visually, these Black females, with the assistance of wigs, extensions, and makeup, can temporarily emulate the model of woman (white) just as RuPaul could, but it is their blatant disregard (Hayes’s throwing off her wig or Givens’s “fuckin’ lady”) toward the mainstream idea of concealing how much of a performance gender is that destabilizes the construct.

In her essay “Stripping, Starving, and the Politics of Ambiguous Pleasure,” Katherine Frank suggests of gender that “more ‘legitimate’ performances carry privilege. . . . Working-class women and Black women, then, cannot play with gender as freely as white middle-class women” (196). In addition, RuPaul also notes that “you’re born naked, and the rest is drag” (iii). Many females dress in drag to perform woman. As exemplified by Hayes’s routine, “others” simply have to work harder at it. Drag displays depend on visual chimera and vocal or verbal disguise. Black female comedy epitomizes the idea that what you say and how you say it is just as pivotal as how you look. Blue material serves as a strategy that allows Black females to resist the commodification and sexual exploitation so regularly imposed on the Black female body. Given the examples from LaWanda Page and I Be Done Been, it is important to remember that subversion of gender must occur differently for Black females than for white females. It must be an aural or oral subversion as well as a visual one because any corporeal reference makes more monstrous what is already perceived to be so.

Letting Go of Gender to Vocalize Sexual Desire

Instead of adhering to ideals of womanhood, Black female comedienne’s performances often reflect the dissident practices of trickster in their performative language customs. Tricksterism becomes a way to change society. Taken from the vernacular and folk culture of Black America, as a way to avoid bourgeois assumptions about gender, the most dominant trickster trait found in the humor of Black females is that of sacred/lewd bricoleur. This is where the crossing of boundaries and violation of taboos can become a major factor in language practices of Black female humor. William Hynes believes that one of the major characteristics of the trickster figure is that of sacred/lewd bricoleur:
The bricoleur is a tinker or fix it person, noted for his ingenuity in transforming anything at hand in order to form a creative solution. Because the established definition or usage categories previously attached to tools or materials are suspended/transcended for the bricoleur, these items can be put to whatever inventive purpose is necessary. . . . The trickster manifests a distinctive transformative ability: . . . can find the lewd in the sacred and the sacred in the lewd, and new life from both . . . seems impelled to violate all taboos, especially those which are sexual, gastronomic, or scatological. (“Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters” 42).

Though some people might be hesitant to find the lewd in the sacred and vice versa, doing so enables a sense of freedom from restrictive and oppressive societal boundaries. To disrupt the constructed axiologically opposed binaries of Western aesthetics reveals how deeply detrimental flawed ideologies based on simple either/or and wrong/right dynamics can be. In this way, if a female comic wishes to dismiss the problematic constructions of gender and sexuality, she has to do so through language. She must become the sacred/lewd bricoleur.

As the sacred/lewd bricoleur, the Black female stand-up comic configures blue material so that it becomes a verbal cross-dressing to counter her performance as woman. Because language can be an accessory to an outfit, a prop, or an effect in a performance, the disturbance of the rules and regulations of language etiquette, situated by race, class, gender, or nation, can also reveal the triumph of Sontag’s epicene style. As we saw with Clotel, language figures into the convertibility of man and woman. Stand-up comedy provides the best way for Black female comics to become sacred and lewd bricoleur. The tensions between public humor and private matters help exaggerate the taboo-ness of blue material in Black female comedy. The presence of blue material in African American female comedy prevails throughout several generations. Many critics would argue that Jackie Moms Mabley was one of the most successful to complete the task of sacred/lewd bricoleur. However, this work continues its focus on LaWanda Page’s antifemale model. In Page’s canon of comedy, Mutha’ Is Half a Word, Watch it Sucker! and Pipe Laying Dan, she consistently discusses moral hypocrisy and female desire. Page’s expression of her sexual desires surely served as another possible reason for RuPaul’s admiration of Page. Though both figures engage in drag performances, Page seemed better able to express her sexual desires through Black vernacular culture. As a part of commercial drag, RuPaul represents, as José Muñoz notes, a “sanitized and desexualized queer subject for mass consumption” (99). However, Page opposes RuPaul’s desexualized queer subject. Page’s knack for remaining uncensored and sexual stems from her ingenious use of
Black vernacular styles.

Since Page possesses gender liminality she can revert to the most artful form of expressing desire and critiquing gender, the sacred/lewd bricoleur. On *Watch It Sucka!* Page leaves behind the visual trickery of the Bronze Goddess to elevate herself as a sacred/lewd bricoleur in vernacular art during her routine entitled “Whores in Church”:

Yeah, honey . . . the whores in such bad shape. One whore said to the other whore, she said “Honey, it ain’t no money on these streets no mo. Hell I’mma join the church.” So the other whore, she didn’t really believe she was gone join the church you know, so she say, “Well bitch if you gone join the church I’m going that Sunday to see you join.” So that Sunday, the damn bitch join the church honey. So the preacher came down out of the pulpit and he says, “We know you a whore.” He say “But I want you to tell your determination!” The bitch got up and she say, “Well brothers, sisters, members, and friends.” She says, “I wanna speak my determination.” Yes honey, she talked to em’ a while baby. She say, “You know I’mma whore out on the streets.” This other whore, her friend, she sittin’ in the back listenin’. She say, “And the money got bad out there, but the money didn’t mean nothing to me. One night I was laying in the arms of a sailor, the next night I was laying in the arms of a soldier.” She say, “But tonight, I’m laying in the arms of Je-esus!” And the other whore she jumped out of her seat and said, “That’s right bitch, fuck ’em all!”

Robert Pelton suggests that tricksters unite “‘high’ and ‘low’ in a language of sacred ribaldry” (“West African Tricksters” 130). A number of Page’s recordings concern subject matters on religion and sexuality that typically contain philosophies that undervalue female desire. Page’s “Whores in Church” is an act filled with profanity, sexually explicit references, and a critical assessment of Christian devised representations of women—sacred ribaldry. Her voice never falters or hesitates over intertwining the sacred, secular, and so-called lewd. This play between sacred and lewd is exactly what formulates Page’s blue material as verbal dragging.

In drag, binary and fixed assumptions about gender are highlighted and dismissed. Sade Huron, self-proclaimed “lesbian drag queen with a dick,” estimates what the process of drag does for her in a way that coincides with the way sacred/lewd performances work in blue material:

So I stood up and sang a few Shirley Bassey songs—that’s how it all started. . . . I remember feeling like a drag queen. It was the way I wanted to express myself. I wasn’t dressing up trying to be Shirley Bassey, rather I was dressing
up as a caricature of a woman. An ultra-feminine woman—something that I’ve never felt, even though I feel 100% woman. It’s that kind of over-the-topness; more of a woman than a woman could ever be. It was very exciting taking on that persona of a drag queen. (Atherton 228)

Huron’s performance complicates ideologies of gender and sexuality. That she defines herself as a lesbian drag queen observes lesbian as a type of third gender, and as a third gender the way she places her performance of femininity in the realm of queen rather than drag king further corrupts the intelligible logic of gender and sexuality. In many ways this is how the transformative sacred/lewd bricoleur trait works within LaWanda Page’s blue material. In its use of profanity and its juxtaposition of sacred representations with lewdness, Page’s routine makes a caricature of the binary models of heteronormative womanhood and non-heteronormative womanhood. Her repeated use of “bitch” and “whore” in the already tabooed themes of whores in church delivers an over the topness of other womaness, and the final use of “fuck” with regards to Jesus then makes the other women all the more othered. Additionally, Page, who recounts the story, becomes more non-heteronormative than the sex workers in church and her trickster-troping of desire is complete. Central to this verbal cross-dressing is the analytical understanding of “woman” that Page brings to her act.

Epitomized through the Virgin Mary’s Immaculate Conception, mothers and virginal women are viewed as sacred entities. The prostitutes represent society’s idea of lewd people. The irony Page reveals, through her mixing of the sacred and lewd, is that prostitutes perceived as morally bankrupt and unredeemable people are as conscious of morality and redemption as the next person on the pew. Like other parishioners coming to be saved, the prostitutes come to the church when they have nowhere else to go. Page’s introduction of the prostitutes into this sacred institution mocks the hypocrisy that may be present in Black church venues. Though all persons seeking redemption should be welcomed into the church, quite often those who have sinned are the subjects of many negative criticisms. The reverend’s public outing of the prostitute’s lifestyle in front of the congregation leaves him and the congregation open to whatever may come from the prostitutes’ testimony.

Page reworks the Black testimonial call-and-response tradition that usually occurs in both church (sacred) and club (lewd or secular) spaces. She uses it to uncover repressed sexuality. Unlike the signifyin(g) honey hush, Page’s humor is street humor and trickster in nature. Its comedy derives from breaking taboos. Taboos can’t be broken if one veils the criticism or the transgression. The stage allows her to take sexuality out of the bedroom. The sacred and spiritual testimony of the first prostitute is remade and reenvisioned by
the witnessing and subsequent “lewd” response of the second prostitute. The idea of Jesus Christ fornicating with a prostitute clearly draws from a controversial theory of Christ—the savior and Magdelena—the prostitute. Page’s routine suggests that the depiction of an asexual Jesus and Mary may have a lot to do with man’s repression of sexuality.

Beyond religion, Page’s act suggests that money, or lack thereof, influences issues of morality. The second prostitute’s initial doubts about the first prostitute’s commitment to being saved refer to trickster’s task of overcoming pitiful material circumstances. Consequently, Page’s use of profanity to describe the women’s actions hints at the duplicitous nature of her tale on human morals. The testimony ritual used by Page equalizes the first prostitute’s repentance of her sexual behavior with the second prostitute’s ecstatic and admiring response of the first prostitute’s testimony. Where some people will hear redemption, others will hear sexual mastery. However, since they take place in a sacred space, they are both valuable testimonies. Page’s point is made. The use value of female sexuality is subjective and individual, and it deserves visible and vocal social institutions and discourses that reflect that. She uses the stage and her performance to do so.

Though Page’s jokes violate a number of taboos for some people, they reveal a lesson about practicing forgiveness and compassion being extended to all. Page’s routine divulges how, as a trickster, she “both exposes and transforms that dirty bottom” and “invites humans to contemplate what they will become and to hope for what they already are—a world large in its intricacy, spiritual in its crude bodiliness” (Pelton, “West African Tricksters” 135).

Page’s monologue reveals that Black females have to be particularly adept at finding the sacred and the lewd, and use it to destroy problematic social configurations that would make deviant individuals’ sexual desires. If they were not able to critique, as Page convincingly does, established boundaries, borders, and definitions in their own version of a mother tongue, then they could not sustain an empowering radical subjectivity. Camp reviewer Pamela Robertson’s discussion of lesbian camp exposes how Page’s function as sacred/lewd bricoleur connects once again to drag sensibilities:

Camp as a structural activity has an affinity with feminist discussions of gender construction, performance, and enactment; and that, as such, we can examine a form of camp as a feminist practice. In taking on camp for women, I reclaim a form of female aestheticism, related to female masquerade, that articulates and subverts the image- and culture-making process of which women have traditionally been given access. (57)

In this routine, Page does not risk othering herself in the way her chitlin’ circuit act does. She uses the uncensored mode to subvert the typical image-
and culture-making process that woman has access to. This discursive trickster practice of finding the sacred in the lewd and vice versa serves as a language strategy to criticize and take society to task for its oppressive and limiting system of binary divisions. Laced with profanity and sexually explicit subject matter, Page’s blue comedy material offers an initial transformative query into Western fabrications of gender and desire.

Aside from Page’s exercise in sacred irony, Trudier Harris once classified a classic Moms Mabley’s routine as a “refusal to believe that human beings should compartmentalize their sexuality to the early years of their lives” ("Moms Mabley" 768); Mabley also utilized the language practice of the sacred and the lewd in her performance. Playing on the ideas of wisdom and old age, Mabley contends:

“I never will forget my granny,” Moms quipped; “You know who hipped me, my great grandmother. . . . This is the truth! She lived to be 118 years old. . . . One day she sittin on the porch and I said, ‘Granny, how old does a, does a woman get before she don't want no more boyfriends?’ She was around 106 then. She said, ‘I don't know, honey, you'll have to ask somebody older than me.’” (“Grandma” routine)

Mabley knows that women are traditionally taught that they shouldn’t openly discuss sexuality, and such wisdom also lessens the importance of sexuality in identity formation of those in advanced age. However, in this particular bit, the wisdom pertains explicitly to sexual desire, and sexuality remains a factor for Mabley’s elderly granny. It does not become less of an issue for females: they simply become wiser about discourses surrounding it.

Mabley’s strategy of preparing the audience or making them feel comfortable with discussing sexuality and aging becomes possible through the language strategy of the sacred/lewd bricoleur and her own appearance. She explodes established ideals to make her point. Her stage name elicits a maternal connection, and her nonthreatening, comical appearance desexualizes her. She is not overtly feminine or glamorous. Often dressed to look like a domestic worker or bag lady, she appears asexual. The visual desexualization does not prohibit expression of sexual desire, it merely unnames Mabley as woman. It allows for a bold show of sexuality through its deferring of gender. Whenever audiences might assume they are being provided with less taboo subjects, such as family or the sacredness of a grandmother, Mabley refers back to less comfortable discussions of sexuality and age. She never allows the audience to separate sexuality from gender, age, or race. Her strategy makes it impossible for anyone to establish fixed boundaries or “norms,” and because it takes place in the arena of comedy people can accept what they otherwise might not.
The sacred/lewd trope of the familial is a verbal edifice of drag performance in African American female stand-up comedy. Adele Givens, one of the most recent comediennes to leave a lasting impression for Black females in the twenty-first century, provides a tribute to her grandmother that mirrors the earlier Mabley tribute to her great-grandmother and the continuation of the trope. Givens was the first female to perform on the male-dominated Russell Simmons’s *Def Comedy Jam*, an after-midnight weekly comedy show on HBO in the mid-1990s. Though proclaimed by other, elder comedians as “a black minstrel show,” *Def Comedy Jam* enjoyed years of critical and commercial success. While Moms Mabley and LaWanda Page turned to chitlinality at certain times in their career, Givens, from her initial start on *Def Comedy Jam*, resorts to Page’s attention to excessive otherness. Much later she turns to the *Queens*’ affinity for glamour drag to clear a space for herself. In her most notable *Def Comedy Jam* routines, Givens plays up the sexual theatricality of Black women with full lips. Givens incorporates the physical distinctions of some Black women’s features versus that of white women, saying, “I know by now that y’all then noticed that I got some big-ass lips. Yeah, I know they some big muthafuckas. Hey, I know they some big muthafuckas. Yeah, all my lips are big” (*Def Comedy Jam* 1992). Though it is not as exotic as the incorporation of fire into a striptease, Givens’s attention to her wide-painted facial lips accomplishes what it needs to.

First and foremost, the statement acknowledges, through its explicit reference to her facial lips and her implicit reference to her vaginal lips, representations of Black women as sexually excessive, and rather than defend herself against such statements she pinpoints the theatricality of her performance as other on a stage dominated by Black male comics. This rhetorical wink to sexual representation mimics camp strategies. Kate Davy’s “Fe/Male Impersonation” offers some clues as to how the subversive wink works in gay culture: “But instead of realizing the promise and threat of its subversive potential for imagining and inscribing an ‘elsewhere’ for alternative social and sexual realities, the wink of Camp (re)assures its audiences of the ultimate harmlessness of play” (142).

In opposition to camp, Black female stand-up comedy winks, but it also enforces the threat of subversive potential with its own cultural signifyin(g) that insists upon playing with purpose. In one joke about her lips, a tic-tac, and a whale, Givens plays up the threat of her sexuality swallowing men whole. Givens’s attention to and then dismissal of sexual representations of Black women enables her to subvert gender, express sexual desires, and get paid. Givens’s success on *Def Comedy Jam* is one of the reasons that she is showcased in the concert and touring show *The Queens of Comedy*. Like Hayes before her, Givens chooses an outfit that adheres to mainstream aesthetics
of feminine wear. Though she does not wear a dress or skirt, Givens dons a sheer-flowing duster outfit with open-toed heels to accentuate her femininity. This Queen of Comedy knows the tightrope of Black female representation that she walks. Caught in between hypersexual other and asexual Mammy, Givens adjusts her performance to the times. Givens’s visual performance of a ladylike woman is interrupted when a male audience member yells at her to do her notorious tic-tac routine. Givens refuses and tells the audience:

No, cuz I’m on my grandma. I need to tribute to her. I love my grandma. In fact, she’s the reason I’m still standing here doing comedy. Cuz you know I had got discouraged. I said I wasn’t gone do it. Cuz I had did a show and gave it my all . . . and I gave a great show one night and a lady came up to me and said, “Adele, we loved you, you was funny as shit,” she said. “But you have a filthy mouth” . . . When somebody tell you how you should talk, that’s a muthafucka that want to control you. . . . My grandmother talked to me and she said, “Look bitch you don’t quit unless you want to quit. The next time somebody tell you you got a filthy mouth, you let ’em know: It ain’t what come out of your mouth that makes it filthy, it’s what you put in there. And you tell them you wash all the dicks you suck, here.” (Queens of Comedy)

In the past, Givens’s comic routines have focused on her sexual prowess, but she refuses to become a sexual object at the whim of her male audience members. At her discretion she can pontificate on sexual excessiveness or ignore it all together. Her choice to do so, or not do so, is what moves her into radical Black female sexual subjectivity. The stage and her theatrical performance of woman enable her to maintain control over her self-representation.

Beyond her refusal to follow the audiences’ prescribed notions of her comedy, the story she relates about her grandmother teems with solid examinations of language, audience, and gender. Be it the dozens or some form of signifying, her verbal performance rescues her time and again from models of womanhood that dominant masculine society wishes her to perform at its request. While Sade Huron subverts her drag queen act with a false phallus, Givens depends on blue material to subvert her drag. Another drag artist, Valerie Mason-John, offers some insight into how the performance of gender affects her female audiences: “Women enjoy me but they’re scared. I act out some of their secret fantasies; I do break boundaries. When I was performing at the Fridge, Venus Rising, one night, I wore a top hat and tails, Victorian bloomers and a strap-on dildo. Women really did enjoy it” (216). Parallel to Huron and Mason-John, when Givens becomes the sacred/lewd bricoleur by performing blue material, she frightens and breaks boundaries. That she emphasizes a glamour version of the feminine while doing so explains how
her female audience could laugh at her hilarious antics and then later reprimand her. She acts out their fantasies to boldly exclaim their desires to the world while appearing as feminine as her audience. Her blue material and her appearance devour the division between the heteronormative and non-heteronormative, and she queers herself and her desires in the process. This manifestation of queerness unnames and self-represents her desires so that even as she embellishes her femininity, her exoticness, or her otherness, her verbosity will not allow anyone to reduce her to the performance of “woman” or othered object.

Initially, Givens’s refusal to do the tic-tac routine assumes to take a turn to the serious and sentimental, and though she does tribute to her grandmother to express her love and appreciation for her grandmother, she never allows her comedy to forget its foundations in sacred/lewd maneuvering so as to represent bold, Black female desire. Like Mabley, she understands that sexuality remains a topic for the ageless that should be explored without regard for language or decorum. If wise elderly women can talk about sexually explicit subject matter, then society’s preoccupation with what women should talk about and how they should talk about it is an issue that needs to be investigated. Givens’s confession about almost quitting comedy because someone didn’t like the language she used is the second issue that needs to be discussed in reference to African American female comics doing blue material. As demonstrated by Moms Mabley, LaWanda Page, and now Adele Givens, the use of profanity becomes a marker of blue material that very much exposes the conflicts of language and ideologies of womanhood. Like the sacred/lewd hermeneutics, profanity in the comedy of Black female stand-up comics occurs for a reason. In order to deconstruct binary oppositions of gender, race, sexuality, and class, blue material has to be laced or articulated via a mix of normative discourse and the uncensored mode.

According to Arthur Spears, uncensored mode recognizes that “individuals operate effectively within different evaluative language norm contexts—which is true of language users world wide” (227) Most importantly, Spears notes that “[t]he labeling of expressions as profane varies socially, regionally, and temporally. If profanity is considered with regard to its essence, we are really talking about what is considered, by some people on some occasions, as unacceptable speech, which covers not only expressions, but also topics, tropes, and aspects of grammar” (227). Convincingly, Spears draws our attention to how language reflects relations of power and dominance. Consequently, when Black female comics perform comedy, blue or otherwise, they might be viewed as profane regardless of what they say or the subject matter they discuss because they are not typically in dominant positions of power. It all depends on the audience interpreting the material. Black female
audiences, then, might react differently to blue material based not only on
gender, but on class status as well.10

On *Def Comedy Jam*, Givens’s routine often began with her trademark
line, “I’m such a fuckin’ lady,” and perhaps it was the very cleverness of this
phrase that held the door open for other Black female comedienne to per-
form on the male-dominated show and be successful: “Hey! What’s Upppp!!!
Do I look like a fuckin’ lady or what? Ladies in the house tonight! I like bein’
a fuckin’ lady, especially in the 90s. We get to say what the fuck we want
to. Don’t we girls?” Givens’s signature line immediately makes the audience
aware of the false ideologies of womanhood that stipulate that she should not
be partaking in this particular comic venue.

However, by devising her speech with the uncensored mode, Givens can
signify11 all over the constructions of gender and sexual ideologies that do
not apply to her. In *Black Talk*, Geneva Smitherman notes that “fuck” in
the language community of African America is “used in reference to vari-
ous non-sexual events to show emphasis or indicate disapproval . . . used to
dismiss something or someone as irrelevant or unimportant; in the sense of
‘forget that’” (139). In a sense, each time Givens speaks the phrase, she is
saying, “Forget that assigned gender subjectivity, I’m creating this new one
for myself.” In the same way that queer critics have theorized butch lesbian
as a possible third gender, “fuckin’ lady” could be read as a separate gender
category. As it did with Craft’s and Brown’s use of “Mr. Johnson,” the ver-
nacular becomes an artifice in the drag performance. In its uncensored mode,
it propels further the transgressive properties of drag.

In the struggle against conventions, the drag apparatus takes on special
significance and allows trickster to rip apart visual masks and “betray to the
public a personal life, down to its most private and prurient little secrets”
(Bakhtin 163). As “fuck” appears as an adjective before the noun “lady,”
it becomes clear that Givens wants to dismiss Western, bourgeois societal
notions of what’s feminine or ladylike as irrelevant. Only then can the audi-
ence move beyond partaking in those ideologies and on to more relevant
discussions of Black female subjectivity—voicing one’s desires: “Cause you
know in the old days they couldn’t say the shit they wanted to say. . . . They
had to fake orgasms and shit. Today we can tell men. I wanna come mother-
father” (*Def Comedy Jam All Stars* 2001). LaWanda Page and Moms Mabley
demonstrated that Black females before Givens’s time have been very vocal
about discussing issues of sexuality, roles of women, and the like in front of
audiences. She continues that tradition with a revision from comic or chitlin’
drag to glamour drag.

Since the uncensored mode subverts the visual of drag, Givens can fulfill
a trickster task of demonstrating the metalevels of experience. This trickster
Chapter 3

goal seeks to “destabilize absolute perspectives and essentializing definitions” (Smith, Writing Tricksters 143). Once she has done that, Givens can then move into her routine of bringing to light her experiences and sexual desires as a Black female subject moving from a Victorian-modeled past to the present:

That’s right I learned to appreciate that pap smear. Talkin’ bout once a year. Bull-shit I’ll see you tomorrow motherfucker. Ten inches—of iron, hard, safe shit. When he finish, I smoke a fuckin’ cigarette. . . . And some women like foreplay you know, if you creative enough you can get foreplay with that fuckin’ pap smears. Oh yeah all you got to do is say some shit like “Ah doc, can I get a breast exam before the pap smear. There may be a knot in this muthafucka (rubbing breast) why don’t you check it out.” I know I know, I know what you saying, “She’s so fuckin’ feminine and lady like. She’s such a fuckin’ lady.” (Def Comedy Jam 1992)

Noticeably, before changing subjects in her act, Givens consistently goes back to her mark phrase—“fuckin’ lady.” When she struts across the stage or touches her breasts, she further removes herself from the realm of desirable woman and virtuous lady (white), but that is the point. She reminds the audience that she knows that boundaries are being trespassed. Consequently, she seeks to remake the definitions of gender and sexuality defining Black females.

Esther Iverem’s review of Queens of Comedy understands that the subject matter and strategies of Black female comedy are dictated by trickster subjectivity and historical experiences of Black females too often ignored and repudiated by mainstream society:

There is a particular sista thang. It’s hard to describe other than we know it when we hear it. . . . At its best, it’s speaking truth to power. On its coarser level, it’s speaking truth about our raw humanity, which usually involves beatdowns, jail, sex, physical imperfection and the comedy of oppression. How else can we laugh HARD at someone being called an illiterate mother-f*$#&? It is the coarser sista thang, the salacious tradition of Moms Mabley and Millie Jackson that fuel the often hilarious “Queens of Comedy” special.

Iverem’s ability to understand the language practices and traditions of Black females’ blue material in comedy alters her perception and enjoyment of the concert film. Unlike the previous criticism by male critics, she delves
into aesthetics of the show that are particular to Black females.

When African American female communities can throw off the shackles of language that seek to control and fix them in limited positions, they can move beyond oppressive situations. The performative ability to manipulate visual illusions, use the uncensored mode and the sacred/lewd trickster trait provides a systematic folk rejection of present canons of gender and sexuality. Symbolic lessons of Tar Baby and Br’er Rabbit exist in the comedy of African American female communities. Blue material acts as a cultural root meant to continuously evolve the communities, rather than demean them. These mechanisms provide African American females with trickster-troping measures to construe representations of their sexual desires and gendered identity in ways that are less traditional, and less limited, than mainstream feminist discourse practices.