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.

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Badd-Nasty

Tricking the Tropes of the Bad Man/Nigga and Queen B(?)

What is bad, carnal, nasty, freaky, tawdry, and taboo remains subjective, but the intangible tensions of anyone’s “love bizarre” also stem from the variant possibilities of choice available for the object of one’s desire. Preceding chapters revealed how trickster-trooping permits Black women to use non-heteronormative means to express their heterosexual desires in opposition to white femininity, but those divisions only briefly assessed how trickster-trooping might occur if Black females’ desires were not heterosexual or supported by communal discourses of race and class. The work of exploring trickster-trooping for the expression of queer desires begins in this chapter with the words of queer theorist Eve Sedgwick:

It is a rather amazing fact that, of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another (dimensions that include preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants, etc. etc. etc.), precisely one, the gender of the object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as the dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of “sexual orientation.” (Epistemology of the Closet 8)

Sedgwick offers an imperative analysis of gender as the advantaged object choice of desire that establishes the logic of sexual orientation. Though Sedgwick may be correct about how Western science has theorized gender of the object choice as the foremost marker of sexual orientation, Black female culture has been sing-
ing a different song about object choices all together, in less Eurocentric validated spaces. Whether it’s Nina Simone’s “See-line Woman” or Adina Howard’s “Freak Like Me,” gender has not always been represented as the object choice of desire in Black females’ culture. These are the queer facts.

While we have recently accepted and began to theorize about the homosexuality of a Bruce Nugent, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, or Samuel Delany in the writing and activism of African American culture, what critical and theoretical analysis can we offer for the Black bisexual, transsexual, transvestite artist and her/his work in the twenty-first century? As we will see in this chapter, human trickster tales in African American culture had already initiated this discussion, which Black formal analytical discourse had not been ready to broach with any real complexity until recently. Black folklore offers a realm of expression for queerness that is loving and monogamous; queerness that is masochistic and sadomasochistic; queerness that is transgendered and transsexual; queerness that is pornography and sex toys; queerness that is orgiastic and polymorphous; queerness that may be incestuous; queerness that is not reactionary, conservative, or defensive about itself because it is Black. Because “Black” is still trying to belong and find a place in the norm, rather than being abnormal, these folkloric machinations may be controversial in that they potentially threaten political objectives of Black nationalism. Yet trickster figures and their vernacular tendencies offer artists a way of explicating on the argument that object choice(s) for sexual desire need not be universal or coherent to gender or racial identities/identity politics.

As we’ve already seen throughout the first part of this work, dominant culture has offered a consistent characterization of Black female characters as outside the norm, while their own historical experiences tend to disrupt the logic of gender anyway. In the remaining chapters we will see how object choice(s) of Black women’s sexual desire can lead to some Black women, in the register of the Black nation and the cult of womanhood, being labeled as wild women, nasty girls, freaks, jezebels, bad girls, and a host of other stereotypes when those object choices contradict with the political aims of the nation. Sedgwick, as well as other critics,¹ began criticizing the early nature of sexual identity politics to dismantle the very binaries that created inequalities based on sexual orientation. Because object choice is such a major factor in one’s sexual orientation, any forms of culture that depart from normalized object choices adherent to gender logic (man & woman, woman & man), as well as race, class, and national boundaries, deserve to be examined for their radical rhetoric and representations of sexual desire.

The remainder of this book insists that Black females’ cultural tendency to explore sexual desires outside of traditional heterosexual tropes of womanhood occurs through Black outlaw culture and illegal bodies presented...
in Black folklore and figures. The use of illegal Black bodies and outlaw culture in Black folk and oral aesthetics and figures forms a queer collective consciousness. In the works of Black female cultural producers, this queer collective consciousness is personified in the trope of a Queen B(?) figure. The Queen (B?) is this text’s encompassing revision of three cultural folk and urban figures in Black women’s communities: Queen Bee, Queen Bitch, and Queen Bulldagger. As this chapter argues, the Queen (B?) figure allows Back women to represent their non-heteronormative sexual desires so as to resist the negation of normality construed by mainstream ideologies and policies. Black female cultural producers embrace folklore’s acceptance of shifting object choice to express sexual desires in an unlimited but coherent manner.

This chapter begins with an essential examination of why outlaw tricksters are necessary as a parallel discursive model to analytical formulations of sexuality and sexual representation. I then examine African American folklore stories about two trickster figures, the Bad Man/Nigga and Queen B(?), to understand, through a continued evaluation of manifest trickster traits, how we can comprehend variant sexualities in African American texts that are typically read as mono and heterosexual representations. Black female culture devises a theoretical framework for the trickery of a Queen B(?) figure, as opposed to the dominance of Queen Bee in Black female folklore. The Bad Man/Nigga and the Queen B(?) possess the wily guile of Br’er Rabbit, the brash outspokenness of the Signifying Monkey, and outsider subjectivities parallel to that of Annie Christmas.

However, as illegal pariahs of specific communities, the Bad Man/Nigga and Queen B(?) characters draw their appeal from breaking and crossing boundaries. Traditionally, the boundary crossing is represented as breaking the law, but this work delves into the figures’ breaking and crossing of established sexual boundaries of heteronormativity. As Huey Newton once said, “And maybe now I’m now injecting some of my prejudice by saying even a homosexual can be revolutionary. Quite the contrary, maybe a homosexual could be the most revolutionary” (“A Letter from Huey” 282). Consequently, the more sexual boundaries the Bad Man/Nigga and Queen B(?) cross, the badder (more transgressive and revolutionary) they become. The Bad Man/Nigga and the Queen B(?) set up folkloric sexual values and aesthetics in real life and cultural texts of Black lower-class culture that counter racialized sexuality and the heterosexualization of desire found in critical theoretical discourses of Black America. Despite that this text is primarily concerned with African American female culture, reconsiderations of the Bad Man/Nigga’s gender and sexuality are also crucial to considerations of the Black female, since those reconsiderations destabilize binary gender conceptions. Yet folklore and vernacular traditions are not typically seen as referential models of
discourse African Americans turn to for discussions of sexuality. Before Black folkloric analysis of sexuality can be discussed, other discourses in Africa America that have been used to disseminate information of sexuality, analytical models, need some explication.

Racialized Sexuality and the Heterosexualization of Desire

It has never been easy to create a critical agenda on Black sexuality, specifically queer sexuality. Mutua’s introduction explored the ramifications of nationalism on the study of African American folklore. In the case of sexuality, certain versions of nationalist rhetoric have hindered discussions of queerness and race. Object choices for sexual desire are often the conflicting foundations of these restrictions in nationalism. Afrocentric critics such as Molefi Asante and Frances Cress Welsing have demonstrated how uncritical African American critics would like to remain on the issue. Asante’s most notorious claim was that “homosexuality doesn’t represent an Afro-centric way of life” (66). Asante’s words suggest tensions of homophobia in Afrocentric thought. Since Afrocentric thought has been defined as “literally, placing African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior” (2), Asante basically asserts that a group of people connected through historical experiences of race and cultural lineage would all have similar sexual desires, no, similar object choices for their sexual desires. Not alone in his assessment of homosexuality and the African diaposra, Welsing was once lambasted by Essex Hemphill for her theory on Black male homosexuality as genocide introduced by white Western society (Hemphill, Ceremonies 57). Though Asante’s and Welsing’s concepts are continental in theme, their approach is nationalist. Sadly, a model of rhetoric created to liberate one faction of people often time lapses into a type of policing of the same group.

In “Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense,” Wahneema Lubiano argues that “black nationalism is plural, flexible, and contested: that its most hegemonic appearances and manifestations have been masculinist and homophobic; that its circulation has acted both as a bulwark against racism and as a disciplinary activity within the group” (232). Though Lubiano classifies nationalism as a complicated and reactionary force that has supported (white) male supremacy, she also notes it as dangerously effective in mobilizing specific groups of Black people. Nationalism has the potential to unfetter oppressed people by organizing them around a common goal and a utopian narrative, but neither the goal nor narrative can be sustained if it becomes limited by one particular facet of a group’s identity. As seen from Asante’s comments
on homosexuality, conflicts of gender, sexuality, or class remain in jeopardy of being dismissed or subordinated by activists for the greater good of “the Black nation,” understood to be the developing heteronormative Black family. The major problem with this approach is that the use of nationalism, by any group of people, risks becoming a tool of imperialism. Cedric Robinson notes in *Black Marxism* that nationalism “a second ‘bourgeois’ accretion, subverted the socialist creation . . . a mix of racial sensibility and the economic interests of the national bourgeoisies, was as powerful an ideological impulse as any spawned from these strata” (3). Robinson, in exploring why Marxism was so influential for key African diasporic leaders, makes an argument that demonstrates how nationalism, as perpetuated by the state, is in the interest of Western hegemony. Robinson is not the only scholar to offer interrogations of nationalism helpful to this reassessment of sexuality.

In *Nationalism and Sexuality*, George L. Mosse focuses on the middle class and their obsession with respectability to expose the flaws of nationalism. Mosse found that “the middle class can only be partially defined by their economic activity. . . . For side by side with their economic activity it was above all the ideal of respectability which came to characterize their style of life” (4). The middle class constructs itself based on its moral values and the maintenance of its economic assets, but it is the quest for respectability that makes their performances of class, gender, sexuality, and race different from the rich or upper class. Yet lower-class communities, which have little or no access to money, erect communities around that which cannot be initially controlled by economics—cultural assets. And as long as lower-class people can maintain control over their culture, they establish values and morals based on their own practical needs, none of which is respectability as defined by the bourgeoisie. Mosse’s historical claim reveals that the middle class, characterized as frugal, devoted, dutiful, and morally restrained, would come to see itself as better than the “lazy” lower class and the “extravagant and amoral” aristocracy. As Cedric Robinson uncovered in his analysis of Black Marxism, these claims are just as relevant and applicable to Black people.

From 1920 to 1960 in Black America, Carter G. Woodson and E. Franklin Frazier also demonstrated that these concerns of respectability and normality existed in Black communities as well as modern Europe. “Lifting as we climb” and “talented-tenth” rhetoric and platitudes often fostered and encouraged ideals that supported aims of respectability and normality meant to contain the chaos of sexual passion. In the still relevant masterpiece *Black Bourgeoisie*, Frazier speaks on the mission of respectability ingrained in formal higher education agendas for the “Negro”: 

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The young men, but more especially the young women, were to live chaste lives. To be detected in immoral sex behavior, especially if the guilty person was a woman, meant expulsion. . . . The graduates of these schools were to go forth and become the heads of conventional families. Was this not the best proof of respectability in the eyes of the white man, who had constantly argued that the Negro’s “savage instincts” prevented him from conforming to puritanical standards of sex behavior. (71)

In accordance with Robinson and Mosse, Frazier argues that the Black middle class’s quest for respectability stems from a need to alleviate a “deep-seated inferiority complex” caused by their disidentification with and rejection of Black lower-class culture and society, as well as from their alienation endured because of the contempt of white America (27). Though Black people in the United States are denied full citizenship participation for centuries, it is the separate and developing Black nation situated on the margins that embraces nationalism with its penchant for respectability.

For African Americans, then, nationalism does not contain a readily available and different discourse about sexual desire than other Western schools of thought. The clamor for the Black nation is also projected onto the flesh in ways that demonstrate the connection between nation and family. Since nation is a macrocosm of family situated around geography rather than blood, sex, as an act solely for procreation, functions as a huge factor in historical and contemporary nationalist ideologies. Family, as understood within nationalist models, could grant Blacks their desired access to respectability. As critic Roderick A. Ferguson recently found, “African Americans’ fitness for citizenship was measured in terms of how much their sexual, familial, and gender relations deviated from a bourgeois nuclear family model historically embodied by whites” (20). Subsequently, it is the Western nuclear family model that replaces a non-Western, communal family model and prohibits broad ideologies of gender, sexual desire, and identity in Black America.

The preservation of the nuclear family model, according to Jon D’Emilio, influences how individuals construct sexualities and communities:

Only when individuals began to make their living through wage labor, instead of as parts of an interdependent family unit, was it possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity—an identity based on the ability to remain outside the heterosexual family and to construct a personal life based on attraction to one’s own sex. (8)
Although industrialism and urbanization in the age of capitalism may have been responsible for the changes the Western family undergoes, it seems evident that variations in family models, especially those that don't prioritize procreation, allow for certain queer communities. For Black communities, critics such as Ifi Amadiume, Stephen O. Murray, and Will Roscoe initiated studies of families and societies in African nations that opened the door to queer perspectives.\(^4\) Essays by Eugene J. Patron, Cary Alan Johnson, and Gloria Wekker soon followed to offer methodologies that were African diasporic and queer.\(^5\) Traditional nationalist rhetoric was absent from these endeavors. Hence, nationalism not only subverts socialism or other economic movements, it also seeks to preserve Western canons of gender and sexuality ordered by axiologically opposed and ranked binaries. None of this is mentioned to suggest that Black cultural nationalism be abandoned, but to remind us to be aware of the inherent risks to formation of sexuality in Western cultures. On the other hand, critical inquiries that take into account nonprocreative object choices of desire as well as nationalist concerns can lead to a wealth of new insights.

Bourgeois sexuality is not the only discursive framework influencing expressions of sexual desire in African America. In an alternate reading of Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, “Sexuality on/of the Racial Border,” Abdul R. JanMohamed establishes his theory of “racialized sexuality,” which can be defined as “the point where the deployment of sexuality intersects with the deployment of race” (94). Of racialized sexuality, JanMohamed claims, “Racialized sexuality, unlike its bourgeois counterpart, links power and knowledge in a negative, inverse relation: the perpetuation of white patriarchy and the preservation of its self-image require that it deny a ‘scientific discursive’ knowledge of its sexual violation of the racial border” (103). JanMohamed’s definition of racialized sexuality does not shut down conversation on sexual desire in the way bourgeois sexuality does, but it instead focuses on early interracial sexual relationships viewed as illegal and immoral. White patriarchy’s open secret of violating the racial order, which suggests slaves as inhuman, influences developing sexual discourses. The slave master’s repressed sexual desire thrust upon Black bodies alters or undermines the race border, and the silencing of this border crossing inhibits the building of any type of positive analytic discursive models with regards to sexuality. In addition to undermining the race border, the slave master’s desire also trespasses against the border of nation building. These transgressions make null and void any claims of moral superiority in the machine of U.S. imperialism and colonization: In that regard, the desires put in jeopardy capital and cultural gains of the developing United States. The open secret must be maintained at all cost.
Incidentally, any form of Black nationalism that ignores sexuality in its rhetorical framework helps maintain the open secret of sexual transgression of the racial border. White supremacy and imperialism gain ground, even in a discourse created to destroy it, such as Black nationalist rhetoric. In addition, as sexual customs and behavior in African America evolve, open-secret logistics also make deviant and abnormal any type of sexual desire that does not uphold the values of a bourgeois nuclear mold. Subsequently, African America’s reliance on monolithic nationalism creates a defensive posturing against the silence and repression at the core of racialized sexuality. The leaning toward unitary nationalism often works to counter the problems of racialized sexuality by favoring a strict adherence to the heterosexualization of desire as delineated by Judith Butler:

The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between “feminine” and “masculine,” where these are understood as expressive attributes of “male” and “female.” The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of “identities” cannot “exist”—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not “follow” from either sex or gender. (Gender Trouble 23–24)

Butler’s point demonstrates how gender influences discourse on sexuality. In order for the logic of gender constructs to remain logical, sexual desire must follow the same pattern of binary oppositions. If man is to be man, then he must be sexually attracted to his opposite, woman. However, Butler’s position needs to be developed a bit more when we take into consideration the experiences of African Americans. Whereas Butler observes that fixed gender constructs and hierarchies have to be sustained through the heterosexualization of desire, something quite different occurs for African American culture. While gender may be latently fluid, the construction of sexuality in Black culture struggles against such liminality. In African American culture, the heterosexualization of desire is not simply a result of the cultural matrix of gender identity. It is the result of a complex cultural matrix of the open secret of this othered sexuality.

Racialized sexuality has created a separate logic of intelligible gender in African American communities. Rather than destroying the Western constructs of sexuality that have consistently othered Black bodies to set off its “normative” sexual codes and behaviors and the heterosexualization of desire, Black critical discourse has often accepted and absorbed the detrimental blanching discourse. The possibility of sexual fluidity that exists because of the flexibility of gender in Black communities continues to be displaced by
an agenda to present Black people as “normal” and respectable. For instance, when Asante claims that homosexuality does not represent Afrocentric thought, he attempts to preserve “authentic blackness” by maintaining the heterosexualization of desire. Such tactics revert back to the strategic silences of racialized sexuality. In taking JanMohammed’s concept further, we should complicate the issue by noting that his theory begins the exploratory work on racialized sexuality by positioning it in a heterosexual matrix. Due in large part to his thoughtful analysis, we can now extend his theory to a queer matrix to explore how his conception of sexuality impacts other Black communities, as well as “heterosexual” African American communities. In the end, racialized sexuality creates an environment in which Black people’s sexuality cannot evolve as a healthy and positive aspect of Black life as long as its existence rests on foundations of normality and respectability.

When we give in to the open-secret dynamics of racialized sexuality, we blind ourselves to the reason for such logic and maintain an order of gender and sexuality that oppresses. Of analytical discourse, Ferguson has proven with his queer of color analysis that “an ideology has gathered in the silences pertaining to the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class” (5). Arguing historical materialism and liberal ideology as the culprit, Ferguson notes that the distinctions between normative heterosexuality and nonnormative gender and sexual practices emerge from the field of racialized discourse. As a result of such binaries, as long as Black family and sexual relations remain abnormal white heteronormativity can flourish. To eliminate these ideologies, we must speak about what was once made silent. Allowing sexual desires to continuously occupy a private and intimate space, rather than a public and political space, has done more harm than good for African Americans. Here, it becomes crucial to admit the difference between public desires versus stereotypes and representations. They are not the same. Critics concerned with respectability and nation building “rescue” Black sexuality from racialized, othered, and non-heteronormative ideologies by vehemently clinging to the puritanical or the open-secret approach to sexuality and the heterosexualization of desire, which then fosters homophobia in the process.  

Any critique on the presentation of Black sexuality must acknowledge the presence of racialized sexuality, and then acknowledge the inclination toward the heterosexualization of desire as a response to it. In order to disturb Western constructs of sexuality in African American cultural texts, cultural producers have to perform three specific tasks: overturn racialized sexuality, uproot the heterosexualization of desire, and explode the binary of hetero/homo in sexuality. The remainder of this chapter asserts that the comprehension and use of Black folklore culture allow Black female cultural producers
to complete these three tasks to address the sexual desires of a wide range of Black female communities.

JanMohamed reminds us that “sexuality on the border was not a construct that could be administered through analytic discourse” (104–105). While JanMohamed’s analysis of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* demonstrates how one Black writer found a way to discuss racialized sexuality through less analytical and scientific discourse such as fiction, this work returns to trickster’s narrative as “cosmic shit” (Vizenor 7). Vulgarity, profanity, and uncensored mode of a sexual theme characteristically return this study to the trickster as bad, bedeviled, and communal id. There is no better way to destroy the detrimental elements of racialized and bourgeois sexuality on Black female desire than to corrupt it through the very vein which it attempts to control and repress sexual desire, culture. Fiction is one discursive method African American communities use to deconstruct racialized sexuality, but African American writers all too often return to folklore traditions of trickster to do so.\(^7\) Nationalist rhetoric may be a way of policing ourselves in regard to gender and sexuality, but folklore and vernacular have consistently provided those willing to break the social laws with a public rhetoric to call our own. For what can’t be whispered of in uplifting Black culture can be shouted about to the tin roof of outlaw culture.

In African American trickster tradition, graphic and explicit sexuality is saved for the most formidable tricksters, Bad Man/Nigga and the Queen B(?). Part and parcel of the same genres of folk ballads, songs, and myths, the male tradition of the Bad Man/Nigga is better known due to the works of critics such as Roger Abrahams, John W. Roberts, Daryl C. Dance, and Robert Levine. But both these folk outlaws gained their notoriety in outlaw society and cultural venues. Toasts and trickster tales about figures such as Queen Bee and Pimpin’ Sam become iconic and gain notoriety from a communal embrace toward the absence of privacy. Zora Neale Hurston’s analysis of Black folk expression also rejects the terms of open-secret sexuality: “Likewise lovemaking is a biological necessity and an art among Negroes. So that a man or woman who is proficient sees no reason why the fact should be moot. He swaggers. She struts happily about. . . . Then if all his world is seeking a great lover, why should he not speak right out loud” (“Characteristics of Negro Expression” 39). Hurston’s statement does not assign this boisterous attitude about sexuality to the male gender alone. Black lower-class communities refuse to exhibit the clamor for respectability, and they will not engage in the detrimental silence surrounding sexuality. This proclivity for the absence of privacy makes those who practice the art outsiders or outlaws to the overall goals of a community or nation concerned with respectability.
Still, as newly freed men and women, early twentieth-century working- and lower-class Blacks understood how silence or prudishness could be another type of bondage. Rather than reiterate sexual stereotypes about Black sexual prowess, Hurston focuses on the rhetorical modes surrounding sexual discussion in Black folk communities for good reason. The sexual bravado created from the absence of privacy counters models of sexuality explicitly derived from enslavement, particularly open-secret models. In this way, Black sexuality resists being the repressed open secret of the evolving Black nation or the taboo of white America. The folk outlaws demonstrate how sexual variation is encouraged by illegal daring in the face of nationalist policing.

**Tricking the Tropes of the Bad Nigga and the Queen(B?)**

Hurston’s attention to public declarations of sexual prowess should not be taken lightly. It is these declarations that connect orality to issues of performance that are significant to many discussions of queerness. Annamarie Jagose’s *Queer Theory* provides a discussion of queerness that enlightens the roles folk outlaw figures may play in sexually destabilizing heterosexuality in Black America:

Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability—which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect—queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. Institutionally, queer has been associated most prominently with lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. Whether as transvestite performance or academic deconstruction, queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilize heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any “natural” sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as “man” and “woman.” (74–75)

Jagose’s focus on model stability, performance, incoherencies, mismatches, and analytic frameworks occurs in institutional discourses as well as popular discourses. Though queer studies have been evolving over the last few years to do exactly as Jagose notes, to undermine Western principles of gender and sexuality, the field has only recently begun to conceptualize the way that class and race impact the issues of sex, gender, and desire for people of color. Even so, we should not be completely satisfied with these efforts and continue to
seek cultural artifacts that possess an agenda similar to that of queerness, but one with strong connections to Black cultural input. As Barbara Omolade acknowledges,

Sex between black women and black men, between black men and black men, between black women and black women, is meshed within complex cultural, political, and economic circumstances. All black sexuality is underlined by a basic theme: where, when, and under what circumstances could / would black men and women connect with each other intimately and privately when all aspects of their lives were considered in the dominion of the public, white master/lover's power. (*Rising Song* 57)

These tensions of public versus private realms also shift any discussion of African American sexuality into discursive realms of queerness. Yet before the articulation of queerness, Black folklore and myth offered similar functions. By analyzing Bad Man and Queen B(?) myths, we can learn how Black America deliberately chooses to use folklore and myth, as opposed to the analytical models associated with queerness, to exaggerate incoherencies in the presumed established connection between biology, gender, and sexual desire. For Black people, the private and personal performance of race, gender, and desire remain influenced by numerous dominant public discourses. Nevertheless, African American folklore countered with its own logic meant to call into question the logic of “man” and “woman.”

Animal tales once again show how to reject oppressive influences over sexual desires. For example, in “Shoot the Habit,” Black America revisits its favorite animal character:

Papa rabbit, you know, he got kinda tired. He won't for no stuff, you know. And so Papa Rabbit told Mama rabbit, he say, “Look here, honey, Screwing ain't nothin' but a habit!” She say, [very sexy, seductive tone] “Well, shoot the habit to me, Rabbit” (*Dance, Shuckin' and Jivin’* 116)

Clearly, this is not the beloved and family-oriented Br’er Rabbit tale informing Blacks on how to get over on master during slavery. However, considering the numerous intercourse euphemisms associated with rabbits and reproduction, it is very surprising to note that there is little investigation that connects such euphemisms to Black folklore tales of Br’er Rabbit.

As we have already observed in other chapters, critics are quick to point out how Br’er Rabbit and other animal tales in African American folk communities teach about everything from race and class, with no mention of gender and sexuality. Yet the short tale “Shoot the Habit,” like any other
animal trickster tale, offers a lesson. It stresses sexual desires of both male and females as equally important. When Papa Rabbit attempts to deflate and put off the sexual needs of Mama Rabbit, she coyly uses his own words to show that she will not be deterred. Regardless of the aims of Black political rhetoric, Black folklore records radical sexuality and its discursive mechanisms in Black communities.

Daryl C. Dance’s collection *Shuckin’ and Jivin’: Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans* contains numerous accounts of sexual fluidity in Black folklore, especially in the section entitled “Are You Ready for This? Miscellaneous Tales” (274). Dance’s well-known collection is important for preserving Black folklore that will yield a wealth of possibilities for future scholars. While Dance’s collection contains dates mostly from the 1970s, the fact that some of the tales have been recorded in other folklore collections dating back to the 1910s reveals the repetitious tendency of oral culture, even in its revisions for contemporary culture. The tales are also told by male and female informants of all ages. In addition, the idioms and slang also date many of the tales in very obvious linguistic registers assigned to certain decades.

The tales in “Are You Ready for This?” are very ribald, make heterosexual assumptions, and contain noticeable homophobic sentiments. Despite some of the problematic characteristics, a number of the tales present a wide range of sexual desires and bodily functions. The specific title of the chapter in Dance’s collection warns the reader not to make any sexual or moral assumptions. In one tale, we find a satirical, less judgmental tone about homosexuality and sodomy. Three men are in court and a judge looks at the first man and asks, “Well, what you here for?” The man replies, “For eatin’ PEACHES!” The judge then asks the second man what he’s in for, and the second man gives the same reply as the first. The judge then asks the third man, “Well, who are you?” and the third man replies, “I’m Peaches” (274). The tale operates on the basis that the reader will not make the necessary assumptions about the three men presented at the beginning. Eating peaches could refer to eating fruit, or, if we are making heterosexual assumptions, it could very well refer to the male’s performing oral sex on a female whose name is Peaches. Yet those assumptions are destroyed by the third male, who reveals that he is Peaches and that same-sex desire exists in Black communities.9

In either case, this African American folk tale represents sexual desires that might be considered outside the norm in an illegal and outlaw domain, but it does not reprimand or negate those desires. In the language of dominant society, conveyed through laws, statues, arrests, and court cases, oral sex, and especially same-sex oral sex, are morally wrong and criminally punishable. However, Black folklore culture manages to acknowledge individual desires and community aspirations at once while avoiding the repression of sexual
desire. Though these men are clearly in court on sodomy charges, no qualms exist about the presentation of three Black men as partaking in homosexual activity. The tale implies that the only crime committed comes with being caught. It is a bawdy tale of humor; the punchline and release of tension through laughter arise from the inclination to heterosexualize desire, not homophobia. The three men do not meet the expectation of heteronormativity, and that is a laugh of resistance in the face of dominant racialized and bourgeois sexual discourses. It is also interesting to note that Dance collects the oral stories without making judgments about the object choices of sexual desire exhibited by characters.

Another tale from the Dance collection reveals the idea of sexual fluidity and the evocation of homophobia in the Black communities. Ironically, “I’ll Show You How Straight I Am” parodies the vain and comical inclination toward the heterosexualization of desire in African American communities. When two males are drinking one night, and one man sexually touches the other on the buttocks, the offended man argues, “I don’t go for that!” The other man then replies, “Look, I’m a all-right guy cause, look, I’m married and got three kids. I’ll tell you what I’ll do. Sunday you come by my house, and I’ll show you how straight I am” (275). This particular tale also exposes the fatalistic flaws of bourgeois assumptions about heteronormativity. The “all-right guy” really means respectable, connoting heterosexual, man. The intelligible logic behind the biological aims (breeding) and social formations (marriage) and performance of gender are supposed to align sexual desires in their appropriate boxes. When the offended party goes to the married man's house, trickery abounds. Upon arriving at the house, the single man is left alone with the man’s wife, who pretends to seduce him: “She say, ‘Come on.’ She went into the bedroom. She took off all her clothes. She say, ‘Look don't worry about 'im. Don’t worry bout im. You come on. We kin get a quick one in before he ever get back’” (276).

At this point in the narrative, if the listener/reader is making any moral or heterosexual assumptions, she is not prepared for the ending of the tale, in which the “all-right guy” goes from proving how straight he is to using his wife as a strategy to appease the desires of his indeterminate sexual subjectivity. In order to prove himself, he convinces the male who proclaimed his heterosexuality to have intercourse with his wife:

So he say, “Okay, okay.” He took off his clothes and got in there [on top of her]. She put her arms around him like that [very tight embrace around his neck]; legs aroundim like that [she locks her legs tightly around his waist, holding him firmly in a position with his posterior up in the air], and then she hollered, “Okay, George—I got im! Come on an get him!” (276)
With the wife’s act, the heterosexual jig is up. From the beginning of the story, the moral implications of both men might be considered flawed in mainstream society or culture. The bisexual male has an open marriage, and the heterosexual male doesn’t seem to have any moral dilemmas about forsaking the sacred bonds of the stranger’s marriage for his own sexual gratification. The wife’s sexuality is also not clearly heterosexual or homosexual. None of this behavior would be definitively described to be heteronormative, but the tale itself serves as a welcome discourse away from Black sexuality obsessed with respectability and representations of normativity. Folklore and vernacular tradition present fewer restrictions for desire and also demonstrate society’s reactions to those liberties.

However, folktales and toasts do sometimes reveal the ever-present existence of homophobia in Black communities. If the intent of their telling is to shame non-heteronormative actions, does that contradict the importance of how their very existence historicizes and explicates on queerness in communities that typically withhold such discussion in political discourses? A close reading of the previous tale also underlines several flaws with the recognized and acceptable presentation of desire and sexual orientation in African American communities. The character educates its audience about the way some men in Black America conceptualize masculinity and same-sex desire as distinctly different from sexual orientation or identity. Nevertheless, if placed in terms of orientation, the man positioned as homosexual may be seen as the stereotypical homosexual who is always attempting to trap the “normal” and “straight” man. Yet he destroys dominant stereotypes of homosexuals as highly effeminate and limp-wristed. He also destabilizes the nuclear family model of the respectable bourgeoisie. After all, marriage and family are supposed to contain any sexual desires, especially queer ones, and allow Black men and women to get their due. Yet the joke is that it does not restrain sexual desires. The real sly man on the make, who will do anything to seduce another man, is married to a “nice, fine wife” and has “nice kids. . . . three o’ them” (276). The story’s presentation of trickery for sexual conquest destroys preconceived notions of homosexuality and heterosexuality. The binaries are further disrupted by a wife who knows of her husband’s fluid sexuality and helps him trick the man whom her husband desires. With no aspirations to achieve nuclear family modality, this married couple reconfigures its marriages to incorporate polymorphous sexual desires.

It seems important to note that these tales are presented in folklore, rather than in the analytical works of the African American community. The folk, oral, and vernacular provide a much needed and distinct commentary on sexuality and the representation of sexuality in Black communities. However, many more tales demonstrate that polysexuality has long been a theme in African American folklore, especially because of the way the discourse of
sexuality and race intersect with each other. Thus, Black folklore acknowledges the racialization of sexuality and sexualization of race in ways that many written texts cannot. As JanMohammed disclosed earlier, analytical texts, especially as they concern African Americans, could never conceive of sexuality on the border. Clearly, the vernacular offers revised readings of sexuality. As Dance’s chapter title suggests, we need only be ready for them.

In returning to the trickster figure’s form as male and female and sexually ambiguous, we must appreciate the central figures in African American folklore that still possess those qualities of sexual fluidity. In addition to risqué animal tales, interracial sex, and tales about everyday people, stories about cultural icons such as the Bad Man/Nigga and Queen B(?) prominently figure into presentations about variation in object choices of desire for Black people. In *From Trickster to Badman*, John W. Roberts discusses how the Bad Man/Nigga tradition in Black folklore serves as the “transformation of the trickster tradition or the trickster as proto-outlaw” (185). I do not intend to argue against that point or prove further Roberts’s conclusions that “trickster-like behavior became associated with black badmen” who “could offer individuals adaptive behavioral advantages in retaliating for their economic exploitation and persecution” (198). Roberts’s text acknowledges how trickster-like activities deemed illegal create economic advantages that might not be possible otherwise. This chapter agrees with his conclusion and moves on to discuss how Roberts’s belief allows us to trick the traditional trope of the Bad Man/Nigga as it relates to sexuality.

It may seem inappropriate to include the role of the Bad Man/Nigga in this assessment of Black female culture, but it is a warranted inclusion. The Bad Man/Nigga influences the culture and lives of Black women of various genders and sexualities. Further, given the recent interest and work being done on female masculinity, if there is to be more work done on Black female masculinity, then the Bad Man/Nigga figure has to be broached. Its inclusion also allows this text to not make the mistakes of previous studies. Although trickster actions of the Bad Man/Nigga enhance the material values for Black individuals through outlaw behavior, the figure also creates a sociocultural environment in which sexual activities and expression become less shaped by the society’s moral standards and conceptions of sexuality. Some critics account for the trickster’s sexuality in Black folkloric figures by implying that the sexual bravado and hypersexuality of these figures remain symbolic of the trickster’s original variant sexuality. One of Roberts’s major points in the configuration of the Bad Man as trickster demonstrates why the Bad Man/Nigga and Queen B(?) as potential disruptors of sexual boundaries in Black communities are understudied in Black culture:
In transforming their conception of the trickster to create a folk hero whose actions unfolded primarily in the black community, African Americans had to be concerned with the consequences of condoning behaviors that potentially threatened both their communal values and the well-being of its communities. (199)

Since the very notion of folk figures derives from the folk (lower class), Roberts’s statement concedes that the well-being of the community acts as a significant force in the potential destruction of sexual borders. We must ask what African Americans and who defines the communal values and well-beings?

Tricksterisms only threaten the well-being, that is, the actual or potential material wealth and social status, of Black communities who embrace the values embedded in white supremacy systems of imperialism and capitalism. This possible threat to communal values explains why the existence of sexual mutability in theories of such tricksters as Eshu and the signifying monkey remains largely unaccounted for in studies of Black culture. It is imperative to ascertain how specific figures expose the flaws of these communal values in terms of broader African American communities. One major benefit of rereading the Bad Man/Nigga and the Queen B(?) tropes in Black cultural texts is the location of a cultural mechanism that moves Black art away from an agenda to represent Black people as heteronormative to other communities. As outsiders, the figures allow Black communities to question concepts of sexuality in a culturally specific manner.

One of the most crucial ways to do so comes in tricking the established heterosexual trope of the trickster in African American folk narrative, the Bad Man/Nigga—John, Stackolee, Billy, or Benny. Daryl Dance notes: “That the term Bad Nigger from its beginning had positive connotations to certain Black people and negative connotations to white people suggests its early meaning as a Black man who fought against the system” (Shuckin’ and Jivin’ 224). Dance’s assessment discusses the racial implications of the Bad Nigga. Our exploration of the sexual inferences suggests that the heterosexual trope of the Bad Nigga exists because critics tie it to a heroic tradition of Black males defeating the white power structure. In addition to violent actions taken by this character, his hypermasculinity is consistently evident. The super prowess of the Black male in Bad Man/Nigga tales consistently seeks to move beyond the subordinated male identity that might come with racial oppression, which is still highly contradictory. As Dance notes, Bad Niggas “are sexual supermen, but their women are enemies to be conquered, humiliated, and controlled rather than loved” (225). The hostility and sexual aggression toward Black women presented in these tales work to highlight the heteronormative pattern of behavior by Black males. Yet many Bad Man/Nigga
figures adhere to traditional definitions of trickster’s polysexuality, even if the tales seems superficially devoid of the other basic characteristics, ambiguous and anomalous sexuality. We must remember that the Bad Man/Nigga exists as a trickster figure, and seriously reread him in terms of the crossing of racial and sexual boundaries by other Bad Man/Nigga figures in Black cultural texts.

Traditionally, critics assert that the system the Bad Man/Nigga fights against is simply a racist or white supremacist system of oppression. However, if we delve deeper into these tales, we realize that the Bad Man/Nigga cannot disrupt systems of white supremacy without disrupting other ideologies within those systems. Consequently, the Bad Man/Nigga, without purposely being constructed to do so, disrupts the boundaries and borders of sexuality in order to disturb the oppressive racist ideologies detrimental to his community. When the notorious Dolemite proclaims himself the Bad Man, white supremacy is not the only system running scared:

I got a job in Africa kicking lions in the asshole to stay in shape. . . . I fucked a she elephant till she broke down in tears. . . . I could look up a bull’s ass and tell you the price of butter. . . . Even fucked the same damn cow that jumped over the motherfucking moon. (Shuckin’ and Jivin’ 231)

We can be sure that wreaking havoc on bourgeois sexual values and disturbing those dominant ideologies of sexuality are other goals of Dolemite’s rant. His physical strength and bravery surmount the king of the jungle. But he is not all prowess and sexual charm; he is also intelligent enough to accomplish deep scientific and logistical information. His sexual baddness moves beyond gender into species. The trickster figure Dolemite uses bestiality, over the top at that, to accentuate how badd he is, and in doing so proves that folklore incorporates an agenda of queerness into its tales. Dolemite may not appear sexually ambiguous, but he is sexually anomalous.

In “Stackolee” or “Stag-O-Lee” tales, homoerotic and homosexual behavior surface the “badder” Stackolee tries to become. Even in death, the Bad Man/Nigga’s baddness ignores the established binary boundaries of sexuality. After being killed by Billy, Stackolee dies and goes to hell. In hell, he has intercourse with the devil’s wife, daughter, and niece, and finally when he comes back to the devil’s wife again, she proclaims, “Devil, get him down. . . . Get that motherfucker before he fucks us all” (Abrahams, Deep Down in the Jungle 112). Stackolee copulates with out-of-this-world, in human demons. He trumps Dolemite as the Baddest Man. The implication is that Stackolee is so badd (transgressive) that he would move beyond the established boundaries of sexuality, which suggest that he has sexual intercourse with women only,
and move onto his same gender, or in the case of the devil, a being who is not even of this world. It is a credit to the power of nationalism and folklore research that this gender outlaw becomes emblematic of Black hypermasculinity and not transgenderism since the figure’s actions remove it from male and female gender altogether.

In another version, Stackolee pushes the boundaries of heterosexual assumptions even more, when confronted by Billy Lyons. Billy exclaims, “You know, you bad motherfucker, I know your name is Stackolee,” and Stackolee answers back, “And by the way, what’s your name, look so fine?” (Abrahams, Deep Down in the Jungle 142). Stackolee’s comments about Billy’s physical appearance cannot be dismissed. In tales about two Bad Men fighting it out, the implications is that the winner becomes the ultimate Bad Man, but the loser becomes his lesser, his subordinated woman (sweetheart). Stackolee makes such statements to provoke his competitor because he knows the provocative and taboo nature of such criticism. He uses these elements to weaken or disarm his adversary.

In other tales that Blacks tell about anonymous Bad Men/Niggas, it becomes very obvious that the sexual prowess and superiority of the Bad Man/Nigga reveals how racialized sexuality combined with the trickster’s trait of hypersexuality shifts Black sexual desire beyond the borders of heterosexuality:

A white man promised his daughter when she turned sixteen he would have her satisfied. After sending her several men who proved unsatisfactory, he finally sent up a black man who stayed and stayed. At midnight, while the father waited anxiously on the corner, his little son came down and cried out, “Daddy, daddy, you know that black man you sent home, well he done satisfied sister, sister sue, mary lou, he done packed me [had anal intercourse] and he waitin’ on you, so get yo’ ass down there.” (Levine 333)

Criticism of this tale has explicitly focused on the Black male’s supersexual stamina, while ignoring the queer implications. Sexual stamina has little to do with sexual preference. Despite the othering that takes place in the tale, there is something quite compelling about the homosexual implications in the tale.

While the exaggerated sexuality of the Black male in this tale is stereotypically problematic, one cannot ignore how transgressing binary sexual boundaries attributes to the badness in the construction of Bad Man/Nigga figures. Reexamining the heterosexual troping of the Bad Man/Nigga in African American culture acknowledges these implications and the complications created from the intersections of race and sexuality. Black folk figures
epitomize such knowledge. Because the Bad Man/Nigga’s masculinity is a conscious performance of masculinity, hyped up as it is, the tales uncover a folkloric male gender to counter Western biological gender. This folk male gender does not adhere to the intelligible logic of gender that seeks to match object choice with “normative” models of gender. One might even argue that this folk male gender, like trickster, could easily switch to perform female gender in the same exaggerated manner it performs masculinity. Yet critical reflections of this fact in African American research have not been remarked upon. Rereading the Bad Man/Nigga in this way ensures that models of Black masculinity based on badd (good in a transgressive way) men can somehow acknowledge that gender and sexual hierarchies figure into evolving models of Bad Man/Nigga. Sylvester and RuPaul were/are some Bad Men for the way they expose gender as an illusion. Subsequently, Black drag kings can now also be figured into these discussions of Bad Man/Nigga. A female Bad Man/Nigga would certainly continue tropes established by Stag-O-Lee with noticeable revisions. After all, Black drag kings perform not only masculinity, but by virtue of their skin color offer references of hypermasculinity based on Black male bodies. Likewise, if one moved beyond the biological, one could also argue Black male drag queens as Queen B(?) figures. Remember, trickster’s shape-shifting ignores gender. Though the folk tales and figures stop short of offering serious critique and criticism of the constructs of sexuality, African American writers who draw from Black folklore and oral traditions use their skills to manipulate such figures and tales to disrupt racialized sexuality and the heterosexualization of desire in their fictional texts. Manifest trickster traits allow them to do so. As a mechanism of “cultural guerilla resistance,” these forms and their figures are Black people’s “queer” discourse before “queer” can even be defined by the white academic masses.

According to Hynes, the trickster’s trait of messenger and imitator of the Gods stems from its uncertain or impure birth between humans and gods, or gods and Gods. Subsequently, the trickster has “both divine and human traits . . . , can slip back and forth across the border between the sacred and the profane. . . . He may bring something across the line from the gods to humans—be it a message, punishment, and essential cultural power, or even life itself” (“Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters” 40). While the Bad Man/Nigga focuses specifically on the masculinity in Black culture, this study locates its symbolic figure of folk queerness in several complementary models to the Bad Man/Nigga figure. The outlaw and illegal human tricksters in Black female culture are derivative of one major figure, the Queen B(?), for Black females.

The namesake Queen B(?) does not appear as a figure in African American culture, but the presence of Queen B(?) exists as a theoretical means of trick-
ster-troping for Black women in many cultural contexts. Whether it’s hip-hop’s Lil’ Kim, Gayl Jones’s *Eva’s Man*, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Kasi Lemmon’s *Eve’s Bayou*, or Rudy Ray Moore’s *Dolemite*, the Queen B(?) figure has been a part of African American communities for decades. However, sociological and popular discourses have named her everything from Sapphire and emasculating matriarch to welfare queen and chickenhead. Yet what these titles fail to encompass is a very specific class dynamic necessary for examining the issues of race, gender, and sexual desire. Although the Queen B(?) figure has its definitive roots in Black folklore and vernacular culture, its values and aims date back to and evolve from the historical trickery of Harriet Jacobs’s designs for fulfilling and representing her own sexual desires. Where Bad Man/Nigga figures represent a revolutionary and boundary-breaking masculine tradition, the Queen B(?) serves as a parallel female tradition that exceeds the goals of the Bad Nigga tradition.

I propose that there are three intersecting tropes of the Queen B(?) figure that appear in African American culture, and these three tropes of the same figure are what differentiates Queen B(?) figures from other communities concepts of Queen Bees. The initialization of Queen B(?) allows “B” to serve as a representation of Queen Bee, Queen Bulldagger, Queen Bitch, all at once. As with the Black rhetorical tradition, the explicit meaning of Queen B(?) can only be obtained via the context in which the word is used, rather than the sound. Any use of the Queen B(?) figure as the Queen B(ee), Queen B(ulldagger), or Queen B(itch) emphasizes and embraces the destruction of white heteronormative social orders, and the dismissal of false bilateral ordering of sexuality. In recognition of this fact, spelling of the figure’s title will be Queen B(?) to highlight the fluctuating position of this outlaw figure in African American culture. Before looking closely at each trope of the Queen B(?), it seems necessary to state the purpose of the Queen B(?) as I have theorized its existence in Black women’s culture.

The purpose of the Queen B(?) in Black female culture is nuanced. First, Queen B(?) proposes sexuality as a work/play tactic. Yes, it’s a binary, but not one with a conceptual order of ranking. Sexuality as a work/play tactic is the ideological balance of sexuality as an act of pleasure and joy and sexuality as an act of labor. Since sexuality, as Carole Vance claims, is “simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency” (1), Queen B(?)’s exploration of sex as a work/play tactic is purposeful. If it suits their needs, then Queen B(?) figures can tip the balance of work/play in favor of one realm more than the other based on the particular domain she may be located in. Despite the empowering uses of the erotic and female sexuality as discussed by Lorde and exemplified by the symbolic healing of the body in Gayl Jones’s *The Healing*, Black women
understand that self-love and philosophical gains don’t pay the bills. Thus the creation of Queen B(?) figures allows Black female cultural producers to provide a discursive constitution and improvisation of gender and sexuality to inform or change the oppressive material realities of their existence, as well as the metaphysical. Only shifts in power can do that. Understanding how sex can shift the dynamics of power within the interior of self and the exterior of society, Queen B(?) suggests that women theorize sexuality as work and play.

Even before Labelle sang the story of how a man “met Marmalade down in old New Orleans, strutting her stuff in the street” (“Lady Marmalade”), Black women were already theorizing sex as hard work! But . . . Sex is work. Period. Cynically, such statements remove all the joy and pleasure we tend to imagine sexual acts giving us. Yet from the various academics who have taken on the stereotypes of sexually wanton Black woman to the preacher’s wife to sex workers on the ho-stroll, Black women have all been engrossed in sexuality as labor at some point in their lives. Our historical experiences as slaves and third-class citizens suggest that whether we are engaged in the production and distribution of sexual ideas and discursive practices, the distribution and production of sexual acts in the institution of marriage (hetero or homo), or as a form of self-employment, sex is work. With the politicization of sexual identity, sexual desire also becomes labor. With the marketing of sexual acts, sex becomes work. Queen B(?) figures exemplify that if Black women remember the shifting between sex as work and sex as play, they can create sustaining representations of the self that won’t limit metaphysical and material possibilities. Queen B(?)’s use of the work/play tactic blurs the line between the two endeavors and dismantles the division between public and private discourse, an act that benefits many representation of Black female sexuality. To comprehend her sexuality as a tactic can mean unheralded opportunities, as explained by Michel de Creteau’s formulation of a “tactic”:

The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus, it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. It does not have the means to keep to itself, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection. . . . It takes advantage of “opportunities” and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build its own positions, and plan raids. . . . It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the propriety powers. It poaches them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is guileful ruse. (37)

As we will see, Queen B(?)’s construction of sex as a work/play tactic uses the cracks and poaches the borders organized by “the law of foreign power”—in
this case, the terrain imposed on it and the foreign powers are racialized sexuality, the heterosexualization of desire, and the binaries of hetero/homo in sexuality. Hence, Queen B(?)’s other purpose in Black female culture.

Rather than being a promoter of strict binaries, Queen B(?) serves as a designation that other possibilities exist. Understanding the mutability of the figure, rather than fixing it in a specific heterosexual frame, allows us to understand how African American female cultural producers use it to portray various Black female sexual desires. My consideration of Queen B(?) can be deemed valid once we remember that like the Bad Man/Nigga, the Queen B(?)’s power stems from her rejection of heteronormative patterns of behavior for “women.” The Queen B(?) myth alludes to baddness (imitating omnipotence and desecrating established sexual values) for Black females. The Queen B(?) folk myth presents female omnipotence through sexual desire, sexual freedom and independence, and violence carried out by deception and trickery.

The first figuration of Queen B(?), the Queen Bee myth, draws from ideas on insect mating behavior. However, like many of its animal trickster tales, African American culture quite adeptly adopts the tale of the Queen Bee for its own rationalization of racialized Black female sexuality: “You know the Queen Bee kills the male after she finishes with him. That’s right, use him and kill him . . . Yes, wham, bam, thank you sir” (Dance, Honey, Hush). In this brief folk tale, Black women telling the tale switch the tradition of baddness from the male to the female. The Queen Bee figure surfaces in early twentieth-century Black Harlem Renaissance social life and folk culture. Those tales relied on real-life versions of Black females. Queen Bee’s baddness stems from the violation of moral and legal laws. Whereas the Bad Man/Nigga unleashes his reign of illegality upon women and white communities, the Queen Bee releases her reign of baddness against all men and white power structures.

African American writers often incorporate such tales into their own fiction to further develop the mythology of the Queen Bee figure. In Gayl Jones’s psychological novel, Eva’s Man, the myth of the Queen Bee plays an important role in the search for identity of main character Eva Medina. Right before orally castrating her male lover to become a Queen Bee herself, Eva tells him: “There was a woman . . . called the queen bee. I don’t even know what her real name was, but she was a real good-looking woman, too. People used to say she was marked, because she had three men, and each of them died, you know. . . . I guess she was sure too, because she met this man she was really in love with and killed herself” (73). Eva’s revelation that she does not know the name of the woman called the Queen Bee supports the notion that mythical icons, while often based on real persons, displace the real with the myth over time.
Jones's Queen Bee may sound like a Black version of the Black widow, but sexual desires and the figures own end to her life differentiate it. One can't help but notice the similarities between the Queen Bee figure and Annie Christmas. The independence and assertiveness of the figures, and their acts of suicide as a solution for their indefinite subjectivity, position the two characters as one and the same. However, unlike Annie, Queen Bee's persona hinges on her ability to get many men to make love to her, knowing they would die (Jones, *Eva's Man* 53, 142). In any Queen Bee myth, sexuality becomes power to be wielded for protection, a door to independence and pleasure, and a marker of criminality and outlaw status. The potency of her sexual desire, perceived as abnormal by mainstream society, makes her murderer seductress. For Jones, the illegal act of oral sex places Eva Medina in a position to become Queen Bee. The act of sexual violence, the castration of her lover during oral sex, solidifies Eva's status with that of the mythical Queen Bee she discusses earlier.

Outside of literature, the Queen Bee figure is present in a number of Bad Man tales, though she is not always referred to as Queen Bee. She might be a prostitute, a barmaid, or a wise-cracking working domestic. Take for example the words of one Queen Bee figure in the toast “Pimpin Sam”: “When you pimp me you thought you could fill me full o bull. But you can’t look up a mule's asshole and see how big a load she can pull” (Dance, *Shuckin’ and Jivin’* 235). Obviously, the utterance of the last sentence specifically signifies on an earlier Dolemite toast, in which that Bad Nigga figure boasted of being able to give the price of butter from looking up a bull’s rear. While Bad Man/Nigga tales are filled with sexual violence and exploitation of Black females, they are also filled with Black female figures who give as good as they get. This includes sexual and violent retribution.

Queen Bee tales do tend to present the continued image of the Black female as hypersexual, and in a manner akin to that of the Bad Man/Nigga, we can see the remnants of bourgeois and racialized sexuality in one such Queen Bee folk moment:

LeaElla and Deal were hanging out they daily wash one morning, when Deal was moved to ask LeaElla, a personal question. “Ella, I don’t mean to pry. But girl, I been wondering, why did you have seven children by different mens and not marry a one o’ them?” LeaElla snorted, “A man won’t gonna make a fool of me twice.” (Dance, *Honey, Hush* 349)

Folklore entailing Queen Bee imagery reflects the concerns of the Black female as a matriarch who has no need for the Black male. Like Annie Christmas, LeaElla seems very fertile. However, Annie Christmas’s birthing of twelve
sons does not contain any implications of moral judgment. For all we know, Annie could be the mother of sons fathered by the same man. Not so with Queen Bee figures. In its most denigrating critique and evolution, the Queen Bee becomes the depiction of two stereotypes: the lascivious Black woman and the welfare mother who has children by different male partners, although she never marries one.

The above tale comically depicts another Black woman’s profound bewilderment over why another woman engages in such behavior. For Deal, marriage would put a stop to LeaElla’s foolishness. The answer given, wrought with dry wit, compels readers to question the morals of LeaElla. Yet when we move beyond discourses of morality and heteronormativity, LeaElla’s response corresponds to a discussion also initiated by Hortense Spillers in critical commentary on the canonical discourses of gender: “Because black American women do not participate, as a category of social and cultural agents, in the legacies of symbolic power, they maintain no allegiances to strategic formation of texts, or ways of talking about sexual experience, that even remotely resemble the paradigm of symbolic domination, except that such a paradigm has been their concrete disaster” (“Interstices” 80). The discourse of marriage and womanhood that deems LeaElla’s behavior as wrong and immoral matters little to the life of LeaElla, primarily because of her race and class.

LeaElla’s response indicates the need to exercise freedom and to establish the independence of her sexuality and body without worrying about propriety and respectability. LeaElla’s response also suggests that the institution of marriage allows men to make fools of women. Men can pursue their dreams and desire within marriage, but women who do so are seen as bad wives or mothers. As we saw with Harriet Jacobs, Annie Christmas, and Harlan Eagleton, Black females’ suspicion of the social contract of marriage appear very valid. LeaElla’s concerns are no different. Although LeaElla was not previously married, her actions to avoid the institution offers that marriage hold no security or convenience to LeaElla or her children. Though she is the mother of seven children, LeaElla’s dismissal of the validation of marriage indicates the Queen Bee’s systematic rejection of heteronormative assumptions about male/female relationships and morals. Marriage for middle-class women might hold some sort of financial security, but for a poor Black woman it in no way guarantees such security. Selection of mates may be limited by a number of factors and, hardly invested in the idea of romantic love, LeaElla adheres to a Queen Bee belief that it is better to remain independent and broke rather than coupled and imprisoned. Further, if the goal is something other than financial security, such as autonomy, then a rich mate of any race might not necessarily mean true freedom.

Nevertheless, a certain amount of violence and death surrounds the Queen
Badd-Nasty

Bee figure. In another tale, the trickery and sexual baddness of the Queen Bee figure lead to her downfall. In “That’s Why I Poisoned Ya, Honey,” a woman lies on her deathbed confessing her sins to her husband:

She say, “But sumpin’ else I want to tell you, honey. I haven’t been true to you. I’ve had other men. Every time you’d go away in the morning, another man would come in, and he’d spend the day with me. And just ‘bout time for you to come home, he’d just be leaving.” . . . And the husband said, “Honey, huhn, huhn, I know that’s why I poisoned ya!” (Dance, Shuckin’ and Jivin’ 149)

While the lesson of this Queen Bee tale suggests a lesson of adhering to marriage vows since the female figure dies because of her nonmonogamous lifestyle, the element of law breaking lingers. The Queen Bee representation in the folk seems as ambiguous as that of the Bad Man/Nigga. A positive view of Queen Bee figures can be ascertained by doing simple feminist readings of these tales. In each tale, the figure works to be economically and sexually independent and free. The case of violently killing the male acts as a defensive mechanism for Black females whose independence might be in jeopardy due to the ideologies of patriarchy embraced by males. Like the Bad Man/Nigga, the Queen Bee’s use of the male becomes a way to retaliate for economic exploitation and persecution. As a result of the Queen Bee myth, polyamory, loving or desiring more than one husband or mate at a time, remains an underlying sexual theme in every Queen B(?) tale. Free from moral dogma ascribed by certain sects, Queen B(?) preserves trickster’s variant sexuality, often defined as “excessive sexuality,” for a female population. Loving and desiring without boundaries embraces a range of sexuality found to be unacceptable in some societies. Asserting a culture of polyamory allows the figure to set up a use value for sexuality that benefits the figure in every way.

The second configuration of the Queen B(?) figure is the Queen Bitch. Queen Bitch, a late-twentieth-century revision of the Queen Bee figure, mirrors characteristics of Queen Bee figures—with one exception. In most tales, Queen Bee has been either extremely comedic or perversely tragic. Queen Bee as presented in Annie Christmas tales and Gayl Jones’s Eva’s Man represents the classic tradition of a tragic Queen Bee figure. Even as such characters move from a state of victimization to empowering acts of violence to save themselves, neither is allowed to exist as outsiders in mainstream society. Annie Christmas dies, Eva Medina goes to an insane asylum, and LeaElla is represented as ignorant. On the other hand, the tale of LeaElla and the adulterous wife in “Tales about Women” found in Shuckin’ and Jivin’ represent the comical and unapologetic. Such characters remain in the Queen Bee trope,
and never transition into other possibilities of the figure such as the Queen Bitch. Queen Bitch is as assertive, skeptical of monogamy, and economically independent as Queen Bee.

However, Queen Bitch does not come off as tragic or funny, but she does appear cognizantly militant and violent:

I’m the one who can trick so fast
Before you can wink your eye
I pat and beat your ass
Your know me Queen Bee
Chicken-shit holders
Come and get advice from me (Lady Reed, “Queen’s Philosophy” album)

Queen Bitch boasts about her violent nature. The element of militancy stems from the trickster’s perpetual nature of trickery. One need simply understand why trickster plays tricks to comprehend the concept of militancy in trickster tradition. As an outsider, trickster has the options of conforming or existing as a figure consistently on the defensive about its subjectivity and behavior. However, if trickster decides to avoid being placed in a position where it must prove itself to society or consistently seek approval of a specific community, the figure must combatively approach his existence. The art of trickery and deception, another manifest trickster trait, exists as a war strategy that allows trickster to always remain on the offense, rather than the defense. Playing tricks permits the figure to usurp the hierarchy of power in society on its own terms. When trickery in African American tradition is not submissive to dominant white society’s regulations, like Br’er Rabbit’s initial reaction to Tar Baby, it becomes militant. When it seeks to establish its own order, like the Bad Man/Nigga it militantly places the marginalized outsider at an advantage.

The Queen Bitch figure harnesses the aggressive tendencies of the Queen Bee and works to create its own social universe with it sexual desires in mind. Queen Bitch avoids being cast as the emasculating matriarch by incorporating an appreciation and understanding of male culture into her systematic dismissal and critique of that same culture. At the same time, Queen Bitch avoids the downfall of being too concerned with the constructs of womanhood and femininity: romance, dependency, chasteness, decorum, and fragility. As indicated earlier, Queen Bee, as seen in a film such as Rudy Ray Moore’s Dolemite, serves as the comical Queen Bee. Although the figure is strong and physically overpowering, the combination of that with the comic absurdity of Dolemite’s exploitation aesthetics removes, or at the least inhibits, the understanding of political and social messages in such films. In addition,
Queen Bee was never the focal point of that film. As Joy James once said of blaxploitation's depoliticizing of the Black female revolutionary icon: “The image of Angela Davis as fugitive (we might also add former Panther leaders Kathleen Cleaver and Elaine Brown) became commercialized and sexualized in the Coffy/Cleopatra Jones blaxploitation films of the 1970s—the armed, revolutionary black woman as embodied by stereotypes (and phenotypes)” (124). James offers one valuable reading of how a Black feminist politic came to be negated in some of the blaxploitation films, but within some of those films we might argue that additional Black politics were offered as opposed to one limited replica.

Despite valid claims about commercialization, the sexualized revolutionary needs to be reexamined in the context of Queen B(?) myths and culture. Although Coffy was the construct of a male filmmaker, Pam Grier's performance as Queen Bitch is what made Coffy different than Black female characters in other blaxploitation films. Even as some critics lambaste the presentation of sexuality with regard to these Black female characters, Coffy's dedication to her mission mixed with Grier's then revolutionary, unabashed love of her body and sexuality, signifies the very articulation of an evolving Queen Bitch figure with a work/play strategy. Again Creteau reminds us of the importance of tactic in the surveillance of the propriety powers: “It poaches them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is guileful ruse” (37). Grier's acceptance of the role and her performance sets aside a space to create a Black feminist politics that considers the play of desire as much as the political work of controlling images of that sexual desire. It also shifts Queen B(?) imagery from comical and tragic Queen Bee to militant Queen Bitch. Grier's Coffy moves beyond the Queen Bee figure to that of Queen Bitch precisely because the characters are not tragic or comic due in large part to their political mission. They are characters concerned with armed revolution in the hands of Black females. Although the characters may have been phenotypes, Grier's acceptance of the role does become an act of transgression. In the decades that preceded Coffy, Black women were asexual maids and mammies, sexual tragic mulattas, but because Grier performs the Black sexualized radical the mythical Queen Bee icon can evolve into the complex Queen Bitch persona.

Grier’s roles never aligned with the conservative communal values of Black people at the time. However white America might have used the sexualized Black female revolutionary to further racial stereotypes, less conservative Black female culture intuited how this new fictional figure could impact its own culture. Grier's acceptance of her historical blaxploitation roles and her performance reveal a real-life dilemma for Black females who want to be both revolutionary and sexually open and assertive: how can these women dismiss
the boundaries of private and public to fulfill and articulate their wants? As Bayard Rustin and other gay/lesbian civil rights activist showed, African American communities could not address this issue in real life, but Grier’s decision to play Coffy, however monetarily motivated, forces us to. The fictional manufacturing and mythical configuration of blaxploitation Queen Bitches ask if Black females can be politically oriented and communicate sexual desires and use values of those desires outside of the heteronormative aims of nationalism. The Queen Bitch figure offers a post–civil rights view of sexual freedom that was no longer on the defense, one that suggested pursuing your own individual sexual desires, whatever they may be, is political and sometimes revolutionary. As we will see in chapters 6 and 7 on contemporary Black women’s music, that view carried over into the culture of another generation of young Black females in hip-hop.

As with the Bad Man/Nigga, the Queen B(?) figure occupies several spaces of sexual possibilities, but the trope of heterosexuality in the figure needs to be tricked and revised in order to use those other spaces to disrupt binaries in nonfolk discourses of gender and sexuality. The sexual liminality of the Queen B(?) figure comes from more than the presentation of exaggerated sexual prowess of Black females; it reverberates in the agenda of the Queen B(?)’s dismissal of a consistent male presence in her life to validate her existence. In any configuration of the Queen B(?) figure, male companionship does not take priority for the woman. While portraying a superficial heterosexual agenda, Queen Bee implicitly embraces a homosocial organization of community, and its subjectivity flirts with the boundaries of heterosexual/homosexual subjectivities. Further, Queen Bitch’s militancy reformulates the use value of sexuality according to her material circumstances, in which the figure uses its sexuality to obtain something other than marriage or offspring.

Lucille Bogan was one of many blues women who performed this facet of Queen B(?)’s persona. In “Tricks Ain’t Walking No More,” Bogan sings about the streetwalker: “Times is done got hard, money’s done got scarce,/Stealin’ and robbin’, is goin’ to take place./’Cause tricks ain’t walkin’, tricks ain’t walkin’ no more.” The Queen Bitch can easily resort to violence and sexual labor to support herself. Badd women always have options. Queen Bitch uses its sexuality for economic and political gain. Interestingly enough, perhaps these aversions to monogamous male-female relationships lead critics to also suggest that the construction of the Black lesbian serves as another evolution of the Queen B(?) in Black culture.

In another tale of a Queen B(?) figure, “At the Whorehouse,” the tactic of sex as work/play expresses the morphing possibilities of Queen B(?): “Back in forty two when the poor man had nothing to do,/All the hoes had made plans/To fuck each other like a natural man” (Dance, Shuckin’ and Jivin’
The phrase “fuck each other like a natural man” is a remark founded in the simplistic idea that lesbians are masculine women who desire other women. In response to possible unemployment of men, the sex workers within the tale have chosen to engage in same-sex acts for sex as play or pleasure to fulfill sexual desires. Further, ever cognizant of their financial needs they will not lower their monetary standards that men pay for sex to get the sexual play they desire. When a potential customer suggests paying “two bucks” for sexual intercourse, one sex worker exclaims, “Nigger, befo’ I fuck for ten or less,/I'll cut my cock from under my dress/Hang it up on bamboo wire/Say, 'Stay there, pussy, till cock get higher’” (234). As it concerns her income, the sex worker will not lower her prices, for to do so means to compromise the power and independence she has gained from her current career. Elaborating on her sex as power, the sex worker makes a distinction between her genitalia (pussy) and her sexuality as commodity (cock). If her money-maker can’t get the higher price it deserves, then her sex will not come down. The power the women enjoy comes in the knowledge that there are many opportunities made available by the tactic of sex. And lesbianism is pitched as a priceless one.

Bogus’s “Queen B in African American Literature” uncovers a unique and culturally relevant connection between “Queen B” and lesbianism. Bogus states, “Queen B is a euphemism for Queen Bulldagger or Bulldyker. Judy Grahn traces the linguistic and historical etymology of the word to the cunning female warrior of A.D. 61, Boudica (pronounced boo-uh-die-key-ay), a leader/Queen of the Celtic” (275). This particular queen led an uprising against Roman imperialism. Bogus then goes on to tie this etymology to the Black community by suggesting that Black cowboy Bill Picket brings the word “bulldogger,” from his 1923 movie The Bulldogger, into Black culture. She asserts, ‘In time, ‘bulldogger’ mutated into bulldagger” (275). Queen B(ulldagger), like Audre Lorde’s use of the Carriou word *zami,* replaces the term “lesbian” (white female same-sex desire) with a term culturally situated in African America; one that can account for the historical experience of racism and heterosexism experienced by Black females with same-sex desires.

Bogus’s research on the etymology of bulldagger in Black America is especially illuminating, but her assessment of Queen B(?) appears shortsighted because it fails to acknowledge other representations of the Queen B figure, not specified as Bulldagger, in Black folk culture. The Picket reference excludes knowledge that before 1923, there already existed in African American folk culture notions of the Queen B(?) that vacillate between heterosexual and homosexual representation. In this case, I’m specifically thinking of the Queen Bee that also surfaces during this same time. As we will see...
in a later assessment of Shockley’s “A Meeting of the Sapphic Daughters,” Bogus’s Queen B etymology is a much-needed attempt to assign historical value to the representation of same-sex desire in Black female culture so as to avoid Western configurations such as Sappho or lesbian. However, as Bogus’s work provides a racial framework, it still includes a Greek reference point.

This is not to suggest that Bogus’s claim that the Queen B represents lesbian sexuality in the African American community is incorrect. As a matter of fact, Bogus attends to real historical Queen Bulldaggers like Bessie Smith and Gladys Bentley to explicate on her examination of Queen Bs in African American literature. Noticeably, all of these figures are singers (279–81) who disrupt the binary of sexuality. Therein lies the space to extend Bogus’s analysis of Queen B—Bulldagger. Queen B(?), as this text defines her, a trickster figure who cannot be bound by career borders. While we should accept Bogus’s representation that Queen B—implies bulldagger/lesbianism, we must broaden our understanding of this particular figure outside of blues women and outside of the sexual binary of heterosexual and homosexual. We must also remember the Queen B(?’s) potential to deploy the sex as work/play tactic. Queen B acts as an African American oral mechanism of initializing the names or titles seen as too taboo to speak. Though Bogus’s spelling of Queen “B” differs from the folk tale spelling Queen “Bee,” it should be noted that in a culture based on orality and aurality, there is no difference in the pronunciations of the two titles. The sexual desires and meaning of the figure cannot be ascertained from its pronunciation; we must look toward the social context in which the figure might be located.

This text’s revised reading of Queen Bee, Queen Bulldagger, and Queen Bitch figures in Black culture finds that these tricksters do not represent a fixed sexual identity for African American females. According to the trickster aesthetics of shape-shifting, the figures essentially serve as branches of a Queen B(?) figure that is meant to represent multiple Black female genders and sexualities, rather than the fixed definitions assigned by historians and located in long-established heterosexual readings of the figure. In addition, Queen B(?) remembers sexuality as a work/play tactic that can influence her material and ideological needs. Becoming the Queen B(?) means following one’s object’s desire even when it does not meet a society’s or community’s prerequisites of gender, race, or nation. Ironically, these Queen B(?) figures will disrupt racial constructs and rhetoric, in addition to sexuality and gender. For this reason, as we will see in the next chapter, Queen B(?) will consistently be deemed a race traitor, inauthentically Black, not Black enough, and the ever-popular “discredit to the race.” Queen Bee, Queen Bulldagger, and Queen Bitch are three dominant militant myths and figures that operate in African American
female culture. However, I suggest that they are merely factions of one huge looming trickster figure, Queen B(?) that acts as a Jungian-Radinian collective queer subconscious of Black female cultural producers who wish to remain unnameable and unclassifiable so that they might continue to self-author their own subjectivity and sexual desires. Jung postulated of trickster’s psychological function in communities:

The figure works, because secretly it participates in the observer’s psyche and appears as its reflection, though it is not recognized as such. It is split off from his consciousness and consequently behaves like an autonomous personality. The trickster is a collective shadow figure. . . . And since the individual shadow is never absent as a component of personality, the collective figure can construct itself out of it continually. Not always, of course, as a mythological figure, but, in consequence of the increasing repression and neglect of the original mythologems, as a corresponding projection on other social groups and nations. (Four Archetypes 177)

The existence of the three mythical figures is Black women’s psyche, very conscious attempts to deal with issues of sexuality, race, and gender. As Bogus expounded, the benefits of examining blues women provides early evidence of how some Black women projected the three tropes of Queen B(?). However, the Queen B(?) figure is a reflection that notes the limitations of those single motifs due to increased repression and neglect by dominant white society and their own Black communities.

Queen B(?) serves as the in-between spaces of the representations and stereotypes of Black women. She is the trope where myth and fact meet, the shadowy existence and subconscious, and a figure meant to blur the lines between the private and public, as well as the personal and the communal. If Queen B(?)’s philosophy had to be translated from its myths and vernacular into a brief analytical philosophy situated in the language of wider communication, it might encompass the words of Luce Irigaray:

You don’t have to raise your impulses to the lofty status of categorical imperatives: neither for your own benefit nor for anybody else’s. Your impulses may change; they may or may not coincide with those of some other, man or woman. Today, not tomorrow. Don’t force yourselves to repeat, don’t congeal your dreams or desires in unique and definitive representations. You have so many continents to explore that if you set up the borders for yourselves you won’t be able to “enjoy” all of your own “nature.” (This Sex Which Is Not One 204)
Because Queen B(?) is an outlaw she refuses to set up borders or adhere to any borders established by a majority. Queen B(?) serves as a trickster figure specifically invested in the radical play of gender expression and sexual desire. The mythological being exists to teach Black women how to enjoy all of their own nature. Queen B(?) symbolizes Black women's folkloric take on queerness. As David Halperin's *Saint Foucault* explains, “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. ‘Queer’ then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative. . . . [Queer] describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance” (62). Halperin stresses positionality as opposed to identity politics. Such representations move beyond the notion of thinking of the figures’ sexual desires simply in terms of hetero or homo, but in the various ways that sexual desire can be expressed. Queen B(?)’s functional positionality makes it a perfect tool of trickster-troping for Black female cultural producers who wish to interrogate the terms and limits of binary sexual desires and create additional representations of Black females with same-sex desires.

Although this will be covered more in the next two chapters, a brief assessment of the Queen B(?) figure as a collective queer id can be gleaned by returning to the presentation of Queen B(?) in Gayl Jones’s *Eva’s Man*. To be certain *Eva’s Man* is a psychosexual novel about the sexual abuse and emotional silences that occur in Black women’s lives. The very meaning of the novel is still being debated today.\(^{19}\) Set in a psychiatric prison, the institutionalized Eva Medina recounts the mythological status of the heterosexual Queen Bee figure in her childhood neighborhood. Yet in addition to the presence of that Queen Bee is the Queen Bulldagger, as made evident by Eva's cellmate, Elvira. If, as Jones postulates, through the voice of Eva, “The Queen Bee. Men had to die for loving her,” then might we ascertain from the very vocal ending of Jones novel that with reference to Queen Bulldagger: Women had to live for loving her? Black women’s liberating sexual representations hinge on how willing they are to integrate elements of Queen Bee, Queen Bulldagger, and Queen Bitch into their psyche and culture?

Since readers are privy to both the heterosexual and homosexual encounters that Eva has from a young girl into adulthood, and the sexual advances of Elvira throughout the text, the novel’s ending with Eva’s sexual submission to Elvira: “Tell me when it feels sweet, Eva. Tell me when it feels sweet, honey’ . . . I leaned back, squeezing her face between my legs. And told her, ‘Now’” (177) bespeaks not a silence, but a vocal ambivalent presence that had been constructing itself throughout the text, the Queen B(?). In her mental embrace of Queen Bee and her eventual physical embrace of Queen Bulldagger, Eva
embraces Queen B(?) and what the figure represents: sexual choice and freedom without abuse. Queen B(?) is the stressing of positionality over fixed identity. As a Black female, and one who was sexually abused, Eva’s sexual identity was never fixed. The ambiguous narrative strategy of Jones’s ending signals that Eva has not come to some finalized and essential identity while still maintaining her subjectivity. Eva’s Man leaves Queen B(?)’s imprint.

In the end, Black women’s culture hopes to continue the ultimate legacy of Queen B(?) that was left in the early twentieth century by Lucille Bogan. I turn now to Bogan not because of her career as a blues singer, but because Lucille Bogan explored this text’s conception of Queen B(?) as a disruptor of the heterosexual/homosexual binary and as a facilitator of a sex as work/play tactic in many of her blues lyrics. She queered Black women’s experience and captured the dynamic of their sexuality as engaged in sex as work/play tactic. In “Groceries on the Shelf,” Bogan attends to sexuality as a commodity, by claiming, “My name is Piggly Wiggly, and I swear you can help yourself. . . . And you’ve got to have your greenback, and it don’t take nothin’ else.” Rather than compare her body to a temple, Bogan likens it to a Piggly Wiggly, a popular grocery store chain in the twentieth century. Her body remains ripe with sexual possibilities, but only if one has the monetary funds to go shopping.

Another song, “Reckless Woman,” emphasizes the adventurous sexual nature of Queen B(?)—“A woman gets tired, of one man all the time, Lord-Lord-Lord. . . . And don’t care what you give her, you can’t change her ramblin’ mind.” Here, reckless negates the polyamorous woman who would seek to enjoy new opportunities from time to time. Still, the classification of the woman as reckless can’t take away the important belief in the freedom to love who or how many one wants to. Finally, Bogan’s “B.D. Blues” laments the pejorative bulldagger’s blues: “B.D. women, they all done learnt their plan. . . . They can lay their jive, just like a natural man.” In a type of bluesy praise song, Bogan chooses to admire the smooth approach of certain lesbians in love games. Bogan embraced all of the tropes of Queen B(?) and helped create an archetype that other Black female cultural producers would discover for themselves.

In order to fully comprehend the trope of this figure in Black women’s culture, this text’s spelling and use of Queen B(?) acknowledge the initial uncertainty that comes with Black folklore’s oral manufacturing of signifyin(g) through context. It also embraces Butler’s “radical democratic notion of futurity,” which allows the subject to remain open to rearticulations of any given identity that would shift with new political and personal contexts (Bodies that Matter 191). Queen B(?) seems emblematic of Black female culture’s tendency to elude Western categories of gender and sexuality.