Mutha' Is Half A Word

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Emphasizing queerness as an essential and intersectional component in Black women’s culture is important work, but if one wishes to be more specific and engage representations of Black lesbians within that intersectionality, the outlaw Queen B(?)’s presence and influence must be considered. While previous chapters expanded on trickster-troping as a mechanism that Black female cultural producers came to rely on to overcome silence, erasure, and invisibility, Evelyn Hammonds’s question, “If the sexualities of black women have been shaped by silence, erasure, and invisibility in dominant discourses, then are black lesbian sexualities doubly silenced?” (“Black [W]holes” 303), effectively probes into the dynamics of doubling that would be incurred in attempting to produce distinct lesbian articulations and representations of sexual desire cognizant of race. Still, trickster-troping is the intersection of folklore, vernacular, and queerness, and the creative act makes it possible for queer Black women to resist passive categorizing of their sexuality and culture.

One solution posed by Sarah E. Chinn on the general invisibility of lesbians is to talk about how lesbians have sex with each other. For as Chinn argues, “If sexual connection with other women is at the core of lesbian identity, then accurately representing” lesbian “sexuality in some way is as close to a culture-making activity as we can get” (181). Although Audre Lorde’s *Zami* showed how analysis of this culture-making activity offers irrefutable evidence of trickster-troping to vocalize desires that might be doubly silenced, there was also an earlier text that attempted to address the cultural representations of how lesbians have sex with each other in ways that complicate essentialist and authentic ideals of Black lesbianism or same-sex desire. This chapter examines Ann Allen Shockley’s *The Black and White of It*, originally published in 1980, for the way it employs Queen B(?) figures as representations to...
counter the erasure of race from queerness and the devaluation of queerness in Black communities. I discuss trickster-troping as a folk process of unnaming gender, but further clarify Black lesbians unnaming of their sexuality as defined by Western models. I make use of the vernacular coding of the term “play” to further explore Queen B(?)’s sex as a work/play tactic, and I argue the presence of trickster-troping of situation-inversion and shape-shifting as the techniques used in Shockley’s Queen B(?) tales to unveil the politics of racialized sexuality embedded in white lesbian narratives.

Ann Allen Shockley’s “The Black Lesbian in American Literature” found that “the Black lesbian was a nonentity in imagination and reality” (83), and with her 1979 essay Shockley initiated a recovery of Black lesbian sexuality and culture with her brief analysis of pertinent texts of the time that included lesbian characters or themes. Since the essay was published before Lorde’s *Zami* and only a few years after the pivotal publication of her own lesbian novel, *Loving Her*, in 1974, Shockley was dismayed and disappointed at the representations. She then suggests that African American women poets had done more for lesbian representation than African American women novelists. However, in her review of Black women’s literature (1900–1970), it is apparent that the early representations of Black lesbians were shadowy figures, not simply out of shame and fear, but out of a sense of the lack of language to represent and speak about Black females with same-sex desire. Thus before Lorde finds a new spelling of her name in her biomythography, this failure of language to capture desire creates sketchy silhouettes of Black female same-sex desire. From this silhouette, Black female writers produce Queen B(?) figures, indefinite monikers, as a way to discern the modifications in analytical discourse about racial, sexual, or gendered identity that will occur over time. These figures are meant to call attention to lesbians, but also to the limited models of blackness and woman. As a way to demonstrate sexual freedom and independence, same-sex desire, and the ambiguity Black women may have felt with identifying as lesbian, Black women cultural producers consciously and unconsciously constructed Queen B(?) characters.

For example, how can we ignore the tense narrative of hesitant lesbianism in the works of Gayl Jones, specifically in her representations of Black women of all ages and backgrounds who at some point grapple with their pornotroped bodies, sexual identities, and sexual well-being? Or who could ever forget the maelstrom of controversy that occurred at Barbara Smith’s lesbian reading of Toni Morrison’s *Sula*? For Smith, a queer presence preoccupies that text in a way that the presence of blackness does for Morrison in American literature. Ironically, Morrison’s own confession of aesthetic strategies of orality and tricksterism lends credibility to Smith’s reading.1 Silhouettes of Black lesbians existed not just in texts by so-called heterosexual Black women
writers, but in the works of bold lesbian writers. In a discussion of her experience with and representation of interracial lesbian relationships, lesbian writer Judy Nicholson once noted her own personal experience with this predicament: “I do not know enough to love me, to love my blackness, and to love other black lesbians” (“Dear Sisters” 106). Positive depictions by Black women expressing same-sex desire for other Black women were infrequent. But always the Queen B(?) figure was there, if not as some character, in some idealized and utopian form or idea, like Afrekete or Zami, that writers hoped would reconfigure racial heritage, gender identity, and sexual desire. For if Black women writers were attempting to make the title “Black woman” work despite all the encodings of white womanness implicated in that, then think what a seemingly insurmountable task existed for Black women who wanted to depict and make real and honest Black females with same-sex desires.

After the publication of novels with complex Black queer women—Zami, The Women of Brewster Place, Loving Her, and The Color Purple—the need for figures who ideally allow Black women to embrace the object choice of their own desire does not disappear. The shadow or silhouette of the Black lesbian may be partially due to fear, shame, and homophobia, but it is also about an unwillingness to wholeheartedly accept and name their desires as lesbian—a white female subject with same-sex desire. In her dissection of queer sexualities, Hammonds noted two objectives that must be accomplished for exploring the intersection of queerness with Black female sexuality. The first project demands that “white feminists must refigure (white) female sexualities so that they are not theoretically dependent upon an ever absent yet-ever-present pathologized black female sexuality” (“Black (W)holes” 306). Hammonds’s second point, and most important for Black women, states that “black feminist theorists must reclaim sexuality through the creation of a counternarrative that can reconstitute a present black female subjectivity and that includes an analysis of power relations between white and black women and among different groups of black women” (306). Enter the Queen B(?) as presented in Shockley’s work and in her own writerly performance as Queen B(?). In Shockley’s case, she uses her position as a Queen B(?) to hold white women accountable for creating a sexuality not dependent on pathologized Black female sexuality. Within her narratives, the Queen B(?) figure acts as a mechanism whereby Black women can create counternarratives about same-sex desires and reject the term lesbian. This is more evident in her lesbian collection of short stories, The Black and White of It.

In prefatory material from the short story collection, Shockley makes a statement about her title: “I know there are times when you have to think of the black and white of it” (1). What does that mean? The collection fictionalizes interracial lesbian relationships, but to read the short stories as simply
taking on taboo topics of the time means underreading the text. *The Black and White of It* takes up the complicated interdependency of racial and sexual discourses to complete Hammond’s two-fold project. Its goal is to depict Black women having sexual and loving relationships with other women, and sometimes those relationships might be with other women who are not Black. It compels readers to consider the issues of Black and lesbian authenticity. To dismantle those authenticities, Shockley relies on the characteristics of trickster. The need to avoid copying Western tradition and to present the way race might shape discussion of sexuality seems foremost in her presentations of Black lesbians. In addition to creating Queen B(?) figures who can express the shadowy silhouette of a presence felt, but not seen, writers had to create and use variant tricksterism in their texts. In five short stories, Shockley’s trickster trope of unnaming showcases the importance of the Queen B(?) figure for Black female culture and its representations and depictions of same-sex desire of the past and present. While all of the characters in Shockley’s short stories may not reach Queen B(?) status, it is their struggle to get there that emphasizes the limitations of naming themselves as lesbians which insists upon the need for Queen B(?) figures.

Initially, rereading Shockley’s *The Black and White of It* through queer strategies of the Black trickster, the Queen B(?), demonstrates how vernacular forms become mechanisms of “cultural guerilla resistance” (Wynter 100) against Western discourses on “normative” gender and sexuality. The terms and conditions of race, gender, and sexuality are always shifting with the times. When one considers the number of racial name changes that African Americans have undergone to reflect those shifts, it can be a bit overwhelming. In addition, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Eurocentric discourses on sex, gender, and sexuality have been as confusing as the constructs they spawned: man, woman, female pseudohermaphrodite, male pseudohermaphrodite, true hermaphrodite, hermaphroditic homosexual, homosexual hermaphrodite, homosexual man, lesbian woman, third sex, third gender, psychic hermaphrodites, uranians, intermediate sex, intersex, transsexual, transgendered, transvestite (Dreger 10–11). Queen B(?) encourages shape-shifting the self to keep up with the times. In each tale, Queen B(?) excels at the practice of shape-shifting. The figure follows the pattern of other tricksters who “can alter . . . shape bodily appearance in order to facilitate deception.” (Hynes, “Mapping” 36). In the first edition, Shockley uses the sexual closet as a way to create a border for her trickster Queen B(?’s), and their unnaming of themselves as lesbians and their dismantling of essential blackness and womanhood. Typically, we might assign shape-shifting to a temporal fluctuation in the construction of gender and race, but Shockley assigns shape-shifting to disrupting the construction of heterosexuality in Black America. Shockley documents that when one is
“homosexual” and Black, shape-shifting, a.k.a. passing, becomes a necessary art. I argue that these stories are influenced by the developing Black lesbigay discourse of the early 1980s.

The publication of *The Black and White of It* occurs directly after a concerted effort to politicize sexual and gendered identities from the lesbian/gay and feminist movements of the 1970s, and after the civil rights and Black power struggle of the 1960s (D’Emilio xxvi). At the time, there is no such thing as queer nation rhetoric, but Shockley’s work does engage Black nationalist rhetoric. The intersection of Black nationalist thought with same-sex desire and identity captures the unique experience of Black lesbians. Since there were many race and ethnic divisions within major social movements, queers of color became acutely aware of how the larger movements were not addressing multiple oppressions. Further, the mainstream movements often perpetuated the oppression in much the same fashion as heterosexual social orders. Shockley’s short story collection illustrates that as African Americans were becoming comfortable with expressing racial and sexual politics, the politics of blackness often insinuated itself into the discussion with one repetitive question: Are you Black first, or are you queer?

According to Gregory Conerly, the politics of blackness created two avenues of expression in Black queer culture and communities, Black-identified lesbigays and lesbigay-identified Blacks,\(^3\) the distinction being in whether race would be the primary affiliation of individual of both oppressed groups. The sources of identity conflict occur for three reasons: “cultural, social, and political institutions specifically for black lesbians and gays are rare,” “racism among white lesbigays and heterosexism among straight blacks,” and “lack of overlap between the mostly white lesbigay culture and mostly heterosexual black culture” (Conerly, “Are You Black First” 11). With the publication of *The Black and White of It* in the 1980s, Shockley offered an examination of Black-identified lesbians who have to address these conflicts. Shockley’s *The Black and White of It* provides us with a unique opportunity to uncover the way the shifts in analytical discourse can change representations, but it also allows us to see why Queen B(?)’s unnaming is and will continue to be a method by which Black female writers choose to depict their sexual desires.

**BULLDAGGERS AND SAPPHOS BE DAMNED!**

**The Sex Work of Black Lesbians**

In “A Meeting of the Sapphic Daughters,” from *The Black and White of It*, Shockley addresses the convoluted dynamics of race and sexuality for
Black lesbians attempting to form a lesbian-identified community. Shockley shows the hard work that Black lesbians undertake in locating representations of themselves. The story exemplifies how same-sex desire exists for African American females, but the story continues to acknowledge that Western constructs of sexuality very often deny how the discourse of race has shaped such models. Shockley readily confronts this dilemma by creating Queen B(?) characters in her short story. Because the dilemma calls attention to the paradox of naming desire as a sexual orientation, the issue of naming and unnaming resurfaces.

When the major characters, Black lesbians Patrice and Lettie, attend a social meeting for lesbians in their (geographical) community, they become very aware of the politics of race and sexuality. Before the meeting, Patrice appears excited at the possibility of meeting other Black lesbians, but Lettie tempers her enthusiasm with “how can we when they’re in the closet” (62). The subsequent exchange calls attention to the issue of naming, hypocrisy, and Eve Sedgwick’s epistemology of the closet:

“Well so are we!” Patrice exclaimed in exasperation, turning to face her.

“Have we come out to our colleagues, friends—students?”

“For what? To become ostracized? It’s bad enough being looked upon as lepers by whites, let alone blacks. You know how blacks feel about—bulldaggers.” Lettie spit out the epithet deliberately.

Patrice shuddered. “I hate that word.”

“So do I. But that’s what our people call us,” Lettie said softly. (62)

Shockley masterfully unfolds the differentiations Black people make about their sexuality. Lettie and Patrice clearly identity as Black first, as evidenced by their primary attention to racial oppression followed by sexual oppression. Further, Shockley exposes that her characters’ prime affiliation with blackness happens for different reasons. As a student who integrated 1950s Alabama schools, Lettie goes on to experience her blackness in an isolating sea of white institutions throughout her life (61). Patrice, however, a product of Washington, D.C., has consistently been surrounded and involved with Black communities all her life (62). Despite their different backgrounds, Shockley makes it clear that no matter how much of a construct race is, the lived experience of Black people creates a principal attachment that would be hard to let go, even if so desired. At the same time, each character recognizes how their primary affiliation potentially limits or dismisses their sexual identity. Their use of Black vernacular becomes a chief indicator of how huge a conflict the politics of identity can be.
Lettie and Patrice’s discussion of the term “bulldagger” can be seen as akin to a serious discussion on the uses of the term “nigger” by white and Black people. Both derogatory epithets are imbued with a historical sense of prejudice and hatred. However, for these two characters there is no appropriation of the word, no dropping of the “er” and replacement with “a” or “ah” to express love or solidarity, and no colloquial phrases (“What’s up my Bulldaggah,” “that’s my bulldagga,” or “buldagga please”). Despite the fact that its etymology can be traced to Black culture, these two Black lesbian characters hate the word. Ironically, the vernacular to discuss Black lesbians allows Shockley to expose the limitations of blackness even as she exposes its potential limitless possibilities through Queen B(?). Lettie and Patrice cannot rely solely on Black vernacular’s expressions for lesbian representation, but they can return to the trickster nature of African American culture to help address these identity conflicts. Through the deception and trickery of the closet, Queen B(?) begins constructing her own dimensions of same-sex desire as influenced by race.

When Lettie asserts “we” (Patrice and Lettie) cannot meet other Black lesbians because “they” are in the closet, she reveals a peculiarity of the closet influenced by race. What is the definition of being in the closet? Lettie initially discounts their living arrangements as closeted because they accept and identify as homosexual. However, Patrice’s response parallels Eve Sedgwick’s analysis of “the closet” years later: “Even at an individual level, there are remarkably few of even the most openly gay people who are not deliberately in the closet with someone personally or economically or institutionally important to them” (Epistemology of the Closet 67–68). Yet Lettie and Patrice’s sexual closet is vastly different from the closet of white lesbians. Lettie and Patrice’s skin color suggests a varying organization of ideals in shaping their closet. As two women living together as lovers and partners, they don’t fit the definition of bulldagger in Black America. As once defined by Maya Angelou in her self-assessment of why she was not a lesbian, bulldagger acts as minstrel evocation of Black female same-sex desire: “After a thorough self-examination, in light of all I had read and heard about dykes and bull-daggers, I reasoned that I had none of the obvious traits—I didn’t wear trousers, or have big shoulders or go in for sports, or walk like a man or even want to touch a woman” (272). Such stereotypes suggest that bulldaggers are loners, masculine, and lecherous women, conceivably always on the make. In the end, bulldaggers would not choose to live as they have chosen to live, as two women in love and who express that love in a domestic space that reworks the parameters of gender and sexuality for their era.

Despite the cowardly notions of the closet, as Sedgwick has argued, it does serve a purpose. In the case of Shockley’s Queen B(?) characters, the
The Black and White of Queen B(?)/s Play

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The closet enables the tricksters’ shape-shifting so that they may avoid classification as fixed representations. For trickster’s shape-shifting has been known to involve the occasional need for closets: “Relatively minor shape-shifting through disguise may involve nothing more than changing clothes with another” (Hynes, “Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters” 37). Lettie and Patrice’s closet contains sexual outfits that are outdated, no longer fit, or are no longer useful, but that same closet may hold space for new sexual outfits. In accordance with these closet politics of shape-shifting, Shockley’s story implores that there is a matter of greater concern for Queen B(?): vernacular unnaming. No matter how pro-Black they are, Black lesbians will not be confined to identifying as bulldaggers.

The nature of Black lesbian experience is one that encompasses triple oppressions of race, gender, and sexuality. Given the way SDiane Bogus historicizes the term “bulldagger,” in addition to other stories in Shockley’s collection, where bulldagger is defined as a very tough and masculine, usually butch woman, Lettie and Patrice deplore the word for its derogatory history, but also because it does not seem to represent the way they view themselves. Lettie and Patrice’s unnaming of themselves, a sexual disidentification, provides them with a way to reformat the powerful stereotype into their own considerations of Black female same-sex desire. In the process of creating representations of themselves, we know, from their hatred of the word “bulldagger,” that they wish to dismiss traditional African American readings of their desire. However, their literal unnaming as bulldaggers and their symbolic unnaming through “the closet” exposes how identification “always includes multiple process of identifying with. It also involves identification as against” (Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet 61). As identity is a process, Lettie and Patrice are constantly dealing with the “intensities of incorporation, diminishment, inflation, threat, loss, reparation, and disavowal of various representations to form their identities” (61). Attempts to name that identity with a term that expresses the experience of oppression prove as difficult as overcoming the oppression. Since bulldagger has negative connotations, Patrice and Lettie must locate their sexual community and name for it elsewhere. They both cautiously hope that a meeting of the Sapphic Daughters will provide them with a community and a name.

Yet upon their arrival at the meeting, they are the only women of color. They spend the evening listening to Trollope Gaffney, a white woman in her mid-forties, speak about building a lesbian community: “We have to assert ourselves—build. Identify ourselves to each other—this great army of lesbian women, because we are all sisters-s-s. We are all one in the beauty of Sapphic love-e-e” (Black and White 65). As the meeting progresses, Patrice and Lettie learn that the community Trollope speaks of is an all-white community. The
acknowledgment of the absence of women of color and the goal of building a lesbian community prompts Lettie to muse on forming a separate community: “Who needs one? If I’m going to build a separate community of any kind, it’ll be a black one!” (65). Historically, sapphic love has specific connections to ancient Western culture and whiteness, and it makes absent blackness in present communities of lesbians that adopt the name and culture. Indeed, Shockley plays with the idea as to whether there were any Black lesbians on the island of lesbians when one white lesbian, Wendy, proclaims, “We’ve never had any black lesbians here before” (66). At the time the story is set and written, bulldaggers are a caricature of Black female same-sex in African America, and Black lesbians may be invisible or as mythical as unicorns in lesbian (white) culture and communities. In both racial communities, Lettie and Patrice could potentially cross over into being sideshows or freaks. Yet, each Queen B(?) takes these predicaments in stride and continues to unname herself.

When Trollope asks the more vocal and radical Lettie what she thought of the speech, she replies, “There doesn’t seem to be anything in any lesbian literature on the lesbian movement addressing itself to helping the black lesbian to become free from racism—especially inside the lesbian community” (67). Aside from Trollope being flustered by Lettie’s comment, other white women around them become uncomfortable, even trying to reposition themselves as allies though sexual relationships. After Lettie’s proclamation on the status of Black women in lesbian communities, Wendy blurts out another inappropriate comment, “I had a black lover once,” and Lettie replies, “It’s easy to be liberal between the sheets” (67). Lettie’s comments are crucial to putting into perspective the irony of the title, “A Meeting of the Sapphic Daughters.” The story is concerned with if and how lesbian political and cultural struggles incorporate dimensions of racial oppression into their discourse, movements, and representations. Correspondingly, it is helpful to see how these questions have been broached in queer studies. In a really smart assessment of Sedgwick’s canonical question about sexuality and politics: “What does it mean—what difference does it make—when a social or political relationship is sexualized?” (Between Men 5), Mason Boyd Stokes suggests that we “reshape Sedgwick’s question, then, or more accurately, to provide its antecedent” (Color of Sex 69). Before asking what difference it makes, Stokes proposes that when a social or political relationship is sexualized, we must first ask “what the terms of the ‘social’ and ‘political’ are. And if the answer is that the social and political are defined primarily by race . . . the sexualization of these relationships will depend not so much on relations of gender but on relations of color” (69). Stokes’s comments connect to the way that race is being privileged in Shockley’s text without undermining the importance of sexual politics.
Sexual solidarity does not necessarily erase racial differences and oppression in the same way that racial sameness does not and should not expunge gender and sexual differences. How can the Greek Sappho, the Celtic Boudica, or the Eurocentric lesbian symbolize and be representative of Black females with same-sex desire who endure oppression based on race, as well as sexuality and gender? Through Lettie’s words, Shockley convinces readers that thematically she is very concerned with disrupting discourses of feminism, lesbian politics, and race relations. As Lettie makes clear, one can still be a racist and pursue sexual relations with someone of another race. The dilemma of the Black “lesbian” articulates the point that sexual freedom without racial freedom offers no true liberty, and racial equality without sexual liberations allows the tenets of white supremacy to maintain the inequalities born out of racism.

Historically, the experiences and the representations embedded with the term “lesbian” cannot serve as a comparable substitute. Lettie and Patrice go to the meeting hoping to find a way to name themselves, and in the process realize that they must keep unmaiming themselves. Shockley uses the sexual closet as a way to create a border for her trickster Queen B(?)s, and their unnamning of themselves as lesbians, their dismantling of essential blackness, and their critique of womanhood. They can continuously work and play with their sexual identity and desires until they find a solution that works best for them. Although Shockley does not resolve the political conflicts of the closet, she does ensure that Lettie and Patrice are recognized as Queen B(?)s to help further representations of Black lesbians. At the end of the tale, Lettie and Patrice lie in bed pondering the realizations of the day:

Lettie asked sleepily: “Now, has your curiosity been satisfied about the Sapphic Daughters . . .”

“Maybe someday, we might find that silent legion of black lesbians. But until then . . . we stay in the closet,” Patrice mumbled, moving closer to her.

“It would be nice to know—others.”

“Perhaps we do. And possibly one of these days, they’ll let us know,” Lettie said. (Black and White 68)

Though Lettie sees the existence of Black lesbians as something that could be proved by the breaking of silence, the women’s decision to stay in the closet resists such a notion. For the question is not whether Black women who love other Black women exists, but whether they choose to call themselves Black lesbians. As Lettie notes, they may already know some women who love and share themselves sexually with each other. Their attendance at the meeting and the exasperation that follows showcases why communities of same-sex
loving Black women would unname themselves. By choosing to “stay in the closet” in terms of naming their desire, but still pursue a queer relationship, these Queen B(?s) can shape-shift their way to a self-authored representation of their identity and subjectivity. In accordance with Lorde and Dhaireyan, Shockley presents her story as not particularly interested in the white social construct of Black female same-sex desire—the lesbian (white) darkened to “Black lesbian.” Shockley’s narrative, based on the trickster mechanisms of shape-shifting and situation inversion, stipulates that such fixed models cannot exist in her narratives. And while it attempts to avoid the fatal flaws of creating essentialist or authentic Black lesbian representation, Shockley’s work uses Queen B(?’s potential ability to shape-shift as a tool in other stories to help readers think more perceptively and initiate changes about representations of Black female queer representations.

Homey Don’t Play That: Playing Black, Playing Queer

After asserting that there is virtually no gay person who is not in the closet to at least someone in his or her life, Sedgwick provides us with further perspectives as to how to understand the way Shockley employs the closet as her Queen B(?’s unnamings themselves as lesbians. Segwick argues that “‘the closet’ and ‘coming out,’ now verging on all purpose phrases for the potent crossing and recrossing of almost any politically charged lines of representations, have been the gravest and most magnetic of those figures” (“Epistemology of the Closet” 71). In the context of this work, we could possibly read every closeted gay/lesbian individual as a trickster figure, for Sedgwick is speaking of sexual borders and margins: tricksters live in the margins. Yet the closet still would seem to prohibit the culture transformations that trickster is known for. The remedy for these prohibitions would be for cultural producers to make a show of exaggerating the division between public and private spheres. I am most concerned with what this means for Black lesbian characters in The Black and White of It. Shockley has already exposed the way Black lesbians define and dismiss the epistemology of the closet on the one hand, and advocate its open-secret situation on the other. By creating closeted lesbians, Shockley demonstrates the difficulties of being out, but she also reflects on the limitations of political identities and the infinite possibilities of desire.

The title of the next short story, “Play It, But Don’t Say It” returns me to Queen B(?)’s work/play tactic. The title is a pun on sexual passing deliberated on in African American vernacular. Further, the themes in the story explore race as a performance in the same way that other artists explore gender and sexuality as performance. In the context of this work, playing Black relies on
E. Patrick Johnson’s discussion of the dialogic relationship between blackness and performance that “is not always self-constituting” (2). Playing Black could be appropriating “the theatrical fantasy of the white imaginary that is then projected onto black bodies,” or the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people—the ways in which the “living of blackness becomes a material way of knowing” (8). As we saw with “A Meeting of the Sapphic Daughters,” playing queer entails being in or out of the closet. Simultaneously, playing Black and playing queer means more rigorous work for Queen B(?). In order to fully comprehend the Queen B(?) nature of this story we must acknowledge the various meanings that the word “play” has in African American discourse:

1) To be involved in affairs outside of one’s main relationship. 2) To deceive someone; to put something over on people, to outsmart them. “We all got played” . . . 3) Attention, special favor, signals of interest, in the romantic or sexual sense. “When I first met her, she gave me a lil play, so I decide to call her.” 4) Acknowledgement, endorsement, support. (Smitherman, Black Talk 230)

Furthering the meanings of play is “play like,” defined as to pretend. In “Play It, But Don’t Say It,” Shockley depends upon each Black vernacular meaning of play to allude to performances of sexuality that name and unname Black female same-sex desire, as well as continue the proliferation of trickster’s shape-shifting mechanisms. Although some critics have accused Shockley’s work as lacking in blackness for its lack of vernacular, Shockley, time and again, queerly engages strategies of Black vernacular for her purposes. I don’t say this to authenticate Shockley’s work as authentically Black, but to situate the way in which she invokes both race and queerness as performances. She cleverly relies on performative acts of blackness to queer Black females in a culturally relevant way. The short story’s title lays the foundation for what Judith Butler theorizes as performative power:

Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power. . . . Implicated in a network of authorization and punishment, performatives tend to include legal sentences, baptisms, inaugurations, declarations of ownership, statements which not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed. If the power of discourse to produce that which it names is linked with the question of performativity, then the performative is one domain in which power acts as a discourse. (Bodies That Matter 225)
Naming and unnaming are performative acts. In the case of “Play It, But Don’t Say It,” what the Queen B(?) says (a performative act) and what the Queen B(?) does (a performance) can be in accord with each other or can run counter to each other. The instabilities of these performances grant power as a discourse to Queen B(?). Queen B(?) figures who embrace trickster’s performative power gain access to limitless prospects for representations of self and desire.

In “Play It, But Don’t Say It,” Shockley offers, through her characterization of a passing (sexual) Black lesbian political figure, Mattie B. Brown, and her politically active lover, Alice, the complex negotiations Black women make in reference to same-sex desire and politicizing sexual identity. Mattie and Alice represent Queen B(?)s for very different reasons. As a politician and as a Black woman passing as heterosexual, Mattie is already a trickster figure. Mattie’s actualization as a Queen B(?) figure happens because of the way she insists on unnaming her sexual identity, for her object choice is that of power. She plays dominant society before it can play her. Alice functions as Queen B(?) because of the way she interrupts notions of racial authenticity and sexual identity. Shockley’s characterization of Mattie B. Brown as a congresswoman climbing the political ladder allows her to dissect the ideological effects of binary oppositions of the public and private with regard to sexual identity. What better way to expose the clashes of political identities than to make your protagonist a politician? It also reveals moves necessary for Queen B(?) liberation: “But crucial to a sexually radical movement for social change is the transgression of categorical distinctions between sexuality and politics, with their typically embedded divisions between public, private, and personal concerns” (Berlant and Freeman 154). With Mattie and Alice’s relationship, Shockley offers a glimpse into the transgressions between such categories.

Here, the story uses trickster tropes of unnaming, border transgression, and deceiver/trick player to dissect the distinction some African American women make concerning sexual practice and sexual identity. Identity is political, and practice is behavior dictated by apolitical desire. To name the non-heteronormative behavior is to accept an identity that seems anti-Black. In this story, the main characters’ “mutual constructing/deconstructing, avowing/disavowing, and expanding/delimiting dynamic that occurs in the production of blackness is the very thing that constitutes ‘black culture’” (E. Johnson 2). Yet it is also this dynamic that queers blackness and makes possible representations of Black same-sex desire, that is, the Queen B(?)’s desires, through several depictions. What is said or unsaid is destabilized by a character’s actions and the reversal can also be true.

The protagonist Mattie B. Brown, whose very namesake emphasizes a main link to color/race, is not a Black-identified lesbian, but her lover, Alice,
is a Black-identified lesbian. Early in the narrative, a description of a billboard divulges to readers that Mattie may have successfully won her seat in Congress based on her successful performance of blackness supported by a Black nationalist platform: “Vote for Mattie B. Brown—U.S. Congresswoman, Third District—Voice of the Black People. Two flags surrounded her, one the red, green, and black liberation banner, and the other red, white, and blue” (Black and White 25). Mattie’s very public political ambitions become tangled in nationalist discourses, Black and American, that have at their core foundational concerns of respectability and controlled heteronormative sexual urges. As Wahneema Lubiano expressed earlier, despite nationalist platforms that spoke of eradicating gender and sexual oppression, few ever did so. The Black queer nation was nonexistent.

In addition, in order for Mattie to satisfy her political ambitions, she cannot simply be pro-Black politically, she must appear as authentically Black as possible. Shockley juxtaposes descriptions of Mattie, “short, black hair in tightly curled ringlets peaking above a broad, brown face” (26), with descriptions of Alice: “Alice was lighter in complexion than her mother. . . . Alice reminded her of those supposed-to-be black dolls that she used to get for Christmas as a child—the ones with keen features, straight hair, and painted brown” (27). Mattie is presented as more racially authentic because of her physical features. Alice’s social and political work in various and numerous Black organizations combined with her lack of physical authenticity alerts us to her status as the Queen B(?) trickster figure for the Black community. Her political work comments on essentialist notions of blackness that don’t consider the play of sexuality, while Mattie is the Queen B(?) for dominant culture and Black community for her sexual passing.

Shockley’s narrative presents the opposition of public and private discourse and the gap between the expression of sexual desire and racial identity. After a hard day, Mattie and Alice settle in with each other. Mattie kisses Alice and tells her, “Babes—why don’t you go and get comfortable for me?” (29). While the two dining together had initially been presented as if it could have been two female roommates sitting down to dinner (28), the intimate contact and innuendo highlight Mattie and Alice’s relationship as something other than familial and platonic. Mattie and Alice are lovers. Soon thereafter, a discussion of their first meeting discloses performativity and play of two Queen B(?)s, and how they function in the text. Mattie fondly remembers:

“That was my first formal introduction to the black co-mune-ni-tee-e, as my fired up young black activists call it,” she laughed. “I gave some speech, didn’t I? It was on a Black Woman’s Search for Justice. . . . Later, I got a spread in Ebony—Black Female Lawyer in the Ghetto.” (29)
In terms of appearances, Mattie can’t get any blacker in the above passage. She self-authenticates and aligns with Black nationalist thought with the subject of her speech. The Black (bourgeoisie) press authenticates her. Within the article, the location of the Black female lawyer, the ghetto, authenticates her as ultra-Black, despite what might typically have been perceived as an elitist job for Black people, a lawyer.

However, Mattie and Alice’s relationship disturbs traditional heteronormative presentations of blackness that both are very aware of, and their relationship also enforces the patterns of tricksterism that Queen B(?) figures return to:

Clad in black silk pajamas, Mattie lay on her side, off-handedly stroking Alice’s breast, as she talked in what amounted to a monologue: “I’m going to set that capitol on fire when I get there. Those white male congressmen are goin’ to know who this black woman is inside six months. And the black me-en-n ain’t never gonna see-e-e a more black bitch of a woman than this ole Sapphire.” (30)

In this brief passage alone, Mattie has referenced every facet of Queen B(?) possible. Her physical attentions to Alice mark her as the Queen Bulldagger, her self-reference as a “more black bitch” refers to her Queen Bitch status, and her likening of herself as Sapphire hearkens to the Queen Bee figure. Yet the very fact that Mattie understands the roles she plays or will play, and how her performances can lead to rewards and punishments highlights her as the Queen B(?) who won’t be limited by anyone else’s boundaries. Mattie may be as pro-Black as the next Farrakhan, but her gender and her hidden desires destabilize that blackness. So she can’t merely be racially Black and think like a good Black. Mattie has to play Black. Within that performance, Mattie has to play down (deception and trickery to outsmart) her lesbianism so that she can get a lot of play (support) from Black voters. As a woman seeking political office, it’s not enough for her to physically be Black; she must continuously perform and authenticate blackness.

Mattie understands that as a Black woman in a country ruled by white men, she remains invisible. She also comprehends that, for Black men, she represents a threat of emasculation. She relishes being and manipulating those representations and the power they provide her. Because she plays those roles against each other, she can share a life with Alice and be a “somebody” (27). That play is also what makes her a Queen B(?). However, as Audre Lorde notes of her own life, playing up to those representations entail risks of eliminating other aspects of her self: “With respect to myself specifically, I
feel that not to be open about any of the different ‘people’ within my identity, particularly the ‘mes’ who are challenged by a status quo, is to invite myself and other women, by my example, to live a lie. In other words, I would be giving in to a myth of sameness which I think can destroy us” (“Interview” 100). It is the status quo and the myth of sameness that Alice challenges in her exchanges with Mattie.

Because Mattie has ingested the restrictive views of blackness, she limits herself. Mattie’s repetition of herself as the “evil Black woman” who succeeds where Black men don’t is then coupled with homophobic remarks about her past political opponent, Ike Smith: “I sure beat the hell out of that little fag” (31). When Alice questions how Mattie knows Ike is gay, Mattie provides a description of Ike as “going round all prim and prissy . . . so neat and clean . . . polite as an undertaker” to prove her point (31). Alice then chastises Mattie, “You shouldn’t call him that, Mattie” and later “Suppose . . . somebody called you—” (31). Alice cannot finish the sentence without harsh reprimand: “‘Called me what?’ Mattie stopped her angrily, sitting upright in the bed . . . ‘I dare you to say it!’ she challenged, forgetting the ambiguity of it all embedded in her precious ruinations on genteelness versus speaking your piece” (31). Alice wanted to show Mattie the problems with status quo stereotypes of what it means to be gay or lesbian. Alice’s unfinished point is that if Mattie could see Ike’s mild-mannered approach as a sign of homosexual tendencies, then her balls-to-the-wall approach would implicate Mattie as a lesbian, or bulldagger, to parallel the language Mattie uses to describe Ike. Mattie would not want either term affixed to her image. However, Mattie’s threat to Alice and Alice’s challenge to Mattie reinforces the different interpretations that each woman has with regard to their relationship. Such interpretations are established early in their interactions.

After sleeping with Mattie for the first time, Alice says, “I guessed it all along. That’s why I wanted to meet you, to find somebody in this god awful secret black lesbian world with whom I could at least be myself—” (31–32). Alice’s comment reveals the limitations placed on their love. The secretive community of Black lesbians acknowledges same-sex desire, but it comes with its locks. While Alice can be herself with Mattie, Mattie denies Alice the right to name both of them Black lesbians:

At those words, Mattie had pushed her away hissing: “What are you talking about?”

“About you-me-us,” Alice repeated, a trifle frightened.

“There is nothing to say about us . . . As long as we are together like this—I don’t want to discuss it. In other words, don’t say it.” (32)
Hence, Mattie and Alice can play at being lesbians in love, but the work entailed as politically identifying as a Black lesbian is not something that Mattie will ever say she wishes to do. Mattie’s words are a threat to Alice, an ultimatum meant to eliminate the fear of naming her desire. To name her desire means politicizing it in a way that would open her up to public scrutiny that might end her quest for political power. Though the results are different, unnaming here still acts as a powerful political tool for Mattie in the same way it did for Harriet Jacobs and Sojourner Truth. The distinction about representations of sexual desire that is being made here is typical of the Queen B(?): Once you name something, you accept an identity that may restrict your desires.

Mattie takes “the love that dare not speak its name” to the extreme. Ironically, the silence the phrase implies is not sustained, because their living arrangements say more than words ever could. It is no small feat for two Black women to live as two women in love with each other. If tricksters change societies from the outside in, then these Queen B(?)s, from their closet (a border or margin), do exactly that. Each and every day together forces them and others who know of their love to revise their ideas of blackness and queerness. Even Alice’s statement acknowledges that fact. Finally, when Alice has had enough of Mattie’s denials, she ignores Mattie’s previous warnings and exclaims to her, “You play it; you might as well say it” (32). Alice hones in on Mattie’s simultaneous playful performance of same-sex desire and the work she has done to unname that desire. Mattie strikes back with physical violence. The exchange between Mattie and Alice allows Shockley to focus on an issue of naming in African America that merits more discussion. What barriers or rhetoric must be engaged or disengaged for Black women to identify as lesbians, or Black females with same-sex desire?

When Mattie refuses to name her desire as lesbian, a reminder of the conflict between her political ambitions and her same-sex desire surface at the wrong time. When Cathy Storm of the Gay Free Press asks Mattie if she plans to “support legislation in favor of homosexuals that would be especially beneficial to the triple jeopardy associated with black lesbians,” Mattie offers a response that brings to the forefront the limits of representation of Black female same-sex desire and the conflict with naming: “This is not my concern. You see, there are no such black women” (35). In trying to “play” mainstream society, Mattie gets played by the press. Subsequently, the press uses the statement to mock her. Mattie’s unnaming and Alice’s naming emphasize the tensions of naming and representation in African American culture, but play it, don’t say it is a revision of the open circle that Black gay culture has been using for centuries. As Richard Bruce Nugent once proclaimed of the Harlem Renaissance, “People did what they wanted to do with whom they
wanted to do it. . . . Nobody was in the closet. There wasn’t a closer” (18).

Although Alice preaches the virtues of naming with her insistence of labeling them as lesbians, her understanding of Black female same-sex desire is more complex than that. After Mattie’s faux pas with the gay press, Alice offers her lover this tidbit of wisdom:

Sure, I know some black lesbians and so do you. Only the nice middle-class black women who are won’t admit it. Careers, hiding behind husbands and social status are more important in black life than admitting a same sex preference. . . . Besides, in the long run, what good would it do? Coming out of the closet is more significant to white lesbians. That’s why that white woman asked you the question. (36)

What does Alice mean when she says coming out of the closet is more significant to white lesbians? It doesn’t mean that Black queer people are less in the closet, or that they don’t care about not being oppressed because of their sexuality. Alice’s statement demonstrates the way race marks the experience of gays and lesbians as different from that of their white counterparts. In this case, racial oppression is prioritized over sexual oppression. Because race appears to be a more visible marker for oppression than sexuality, it gets prioritized. And because white gays and lesbians can enjoy certain privileges of whiteness, they can prioritize their sexuality. The Black minority seeks to become a part of the majority, while members of dominant white majority attempt to construct their community as a sexual minority.9 Alice’s point returns to Shockley’s earlier notions of the closet for Black women. Yet, this Queen B(?)’s assessment of closet time is very different than Patrice and Lettie’s theorizing of their closeted sexuality in “A Meeting of the Sapphic Daughters.”

Alice reads Queen B(?)’s shape-shifting in and out of the closet as Black lesbian identity not being politicized:

We black women in our struggle against racism planted the seeds for the white women’s movement. Now, I guess it’s time for them to do us a favor. Liberate the so-called sex crazy black woman from her own hang-ups. Making it so that if she’s a lesbian, she won’t be afraid to say or feel deep within her that it is as good as shouting “black is beautiful.” (36)

In some sense, Alice’s words return to Segwick’s question about social or political relationships being sexualized. And just as we saw with “A Meeting of the Sapphic Daughters,” race matters when posing this question. In this case, it is not a black/white dynamic, but Mattie’s idea of what it means to Black and political versus what it means to Black and political for Alice. Because
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Mattie accepts nationalist formations of blackness based in authenticity, she sees no way to politicize her sexual identity. Alice talks of politicizing her sexual identity, but her considerations of sexual identity are just as problematic as Mattie’s because she views white lesbian models as the correct way to be a Black lesbian. Patrice and Lettie in “A Meeting of the Sapphic Daughters” already expose the flaws of such thinking. Both Alice and Mattie see only binary possibilities (sexually repressed Black woman/liberated white woman, public/private, political/unpolitical). When Mattie asks Alice to stay behind when she moves to D.C., it is an action that Alice sees as the end to their relationship. Shockley’s ending insists that both Queen B(?)s must continue to play the field if they are to evolve beyond rhetorical binaries. Although Shockley uses interracial dynamics to explore the emulation of white lesbian life and culture, impressing matters of race in universal queerness, she also unveils white society’s consumption of the Black female body to create lesbian gender and identity in her short story “The Mistress and the Slave Girl.”

The Performative Racialization of Butch/Femme

The second edition of the Black and White of It includes two new stories, “The Mistress and the Slave Girl” and “Women in a Southern Time,” in addition to the previously published stories that move beyond exploring the predicaments of Black lesbigays. In the new stories, Shockley weaves tales about white mistresses and employers engaging in sexual relationships with Black female slaves and housekeepers. Through situation inversion and shape-shifting she imagines these mistress/employee and slave/housekeeper as racialized butch/femme performances. For the purposes of this text, I will only be exploring the portrayal of butch/femme dichotomies in the “Mistress and the Slave Girl.” Shockley relies on racialized sexuality and the race border to explore the intersection of race with sexual discourse to document the historical limitations of the term “lesbian.” She complicates the issue by then incorporating the trickster element of situation inversion—connecting the taboo of interracial sexual relationships to her shape-shifting agenda. In this way, Shockley can address racialized heterosexuality, homophobia of the Black community, and the less depicted racialization of homosexuality.

The last story to be read through trickster contains moments of unnam- ing, Queen B(?) figures, racialized sexuality, and gender expression and sexual desire through butch/femme performances. As we continue to understand how identity politics figures into Black lesbian relationships, I wish now to return to Chinn’s statement about how lesbians have sex with each other, especially with regard to erotic sex play. As we have seen with animal and
human trickster tales, some tricksters do tend to enjoy a significant amount of erotic play. In addition to using Queen B(?) characters to address identity politics conflicts stemming from race and sexuality, Shockley’s collection also uses Queen B(?) to dabble in desire and identity politics within sexual communities. Attempts to broach all of these issues is no small feat, but Shockley does so by deploying the trickster tropes of shape-shifting and situation inversion with the representation of interracial lesbian erotic play in “The Mistress and the Slave Girl.”

The shape-shifting that happens in this short story looks less like turtle women transforming into real women and more like the emerging shape shifting that occurred in lesbian spaces in the 1950s and 1960s. I am speaking of butch/femme roles and erotic play. African American folklore allows Shockley to make her assessment especially relevant to Black communities. Although African American folklore is filled with heterosexist and homophobic stories of butch women, Shockley relies on the outlaw temperament of human trickster figures to devise her creation of a Queen B(?) who can inscribe Black female desire, especially that which plays with gender and object desire, into African America without being reduced to copying one raced gender over another, or eliminating object choices that don’t align with racial or sexual preference. The most suitable way to do this is through an investigation of gender outlaws who make us inquire as to the possible connection between racial discourse and butch/femme performances.

During the 1890s “butch” referred to a female butcher who was a “hard-fisted woman of the people” (Linton 598). Since sexologists defined lesbianism as a mannish invert, femme identities didn’t receive public representation until the 1950s and 1960s in Black and white lesbian cultures. However, butch women became invisible again during second-wave feminism, which argued the butch/femme polarity as unhealthy and politically useless. The works of queer theorists soon argued for it as a positive part of lesbian erotic expression. In A Lure Knowledge, Judith Roof argues that butch/femme roles are more “complex, contradictory, and diverse” than some queer and feminist theorists have assumed (245). Adding race into theories further complicates erotic expression. Despite Halberstam’s groundbreaking work on race and the drag king scene, how race informs butch/femme expressions has been less discussed.

When Michelle Gibson and Deborah T. Meem edited Femme/Butch: New Considerations of the Way We Want to Go, a collection of essays that delved into the butch/femme phenomenon, they noticed something peculiar. Within the collection that touted various theoretical approaches and perspectives, a discussion of race was missing. The editors of the collection acknowledge the absence of race with the following statement:
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How about the relationship between race and butch-femme? Here a difficulty arose for us.... As two white women, we acknowledge that the problem might well have been some kind of oversight in the call for papers, or perhaps our way of representing the discussion revealed our limitations. We simply don’t know why we were not able to encourage women writing about race to submit articles; what we do know is that it didn’t happen and we regret that—partly because the lack of discussion of race diminishes this collection, but perhaps more important, also because we believe that examination of the relationship between race and lesbian gender is a project that needs to be pursued. (6)

Gibson and Meem wisely preface the absence of coverage on the issue as others before them had done.13 Ironically, the collection does have an essay by Hoz-Sze Leung on lesbian genders in contemporary Chinese culture and features commentary by Karen Williams, an African American woman professing her love for butch/femme roles. We know from Lorde’s biomythography that the examination of the butch/femme in African American lesbian communities existed in the 1950s and 1960s. And anyone who partakes of club nightlife in major metropolitan cities will see how invested Black lesbian communities are in butch/femme play. However, the relationship between race and lesbian gender is a project that has been under pursued by all stretches of the imagination.

However, in her discussion of Harriet Jacobs and the sexual abuse and desires of the Flints, Hortense Spillers intuits the dynamics of one possible relationship between race and lesbian gender that would have proven helpful for Gibson and Meem and that solidify the importance of Shockley’s “The Mistress and the Slave Girl.” Of Jacobs’s unwanted sexual triangle, Spillers found that the triangle of the master as gendered male, mistress as gendered female, and slave as ungendered female “demarcates a sexuality that is neuter-bound. . . . Since the gendered female exists for male, we might suggest that the ungendered female—in an amazing stroke of pansexual potential—might be invaded/raided by another woman or man” (“Mama’s Baby” 273). Thus to pursue the relationship between race and lesbian gender means to disclose the possible function of white patriarchal supremacy within that gender and the limited functions of that gender over time. Though it may not be a positive disclosure, it is one that must be discussed all the same. In an ironic twist, such explication also reveals the potentiality of ungendered females to disrupt and destroy the order of white patriarchal supremacy.

In addition, to discuss the relationship between race and butch/femme means acknowledging politically incorrect and taboo interracial lesbian relationships. Such relationships interrupt Black nationalist rhetoric and factions
of womanhood. Nevertheless, since the trickster Queen B(?) exploits the tensions of taboos and the taboos, she serves as a thoughtful apparatus to dissect the influence of white patriarchy and supremacy in constructions of white female same-sex desire, the possible intrusion and defeat of white supremacy in Black female same-sex desire, and a viable means to explore desires that do not correspond to nationalist agendas. Though substantial gains have been made by Black lesbians in representations of their sexuality, with greater ones to be made, those gains have always been connected to idealized references to representations of Black-on-Black lesbian love. By returning to the site of criminalization or deviation of interracial relationships, slavery, Shockley investigates the relationship between race and butch/femme, as well as returns to how Black women may pursue their object’s desire and its representation outside of Black heteronormative paradigms and Eurocentric homosexual narratives. She then creates and historicizes the Queen B(?) as a representation of Black female same-sex desire and expression.

If Queen B(?) parallels the tradition of the Bad Man/Nigga, then she also manipulates similar taboos. In African American folklore, there exist numerous tales that show that the most transgressive Bad Man is one who pursues and sleeps with white women, since the cost of breaking rules of social segregation and laws was often imprisonment or death. Subsequently, a Black female who engages in an interracial sexual relationship with a white woman poses a threat to a unified Black community based in heteronormativity and a unified Black lesbian community based in racial exclusivity. The outlaw mold continues to transgress against identity politics that threaten to limit one’s options. Further, the writer responsible for representing those transgressions is as much a Queen B(?) as the characters she creates.

“The Mistress and the Slave Girl,” set in the pre-emancipation South, is a complex short story that elicits initial reactions of surprise, anger, discomfort, confusion, and curiosity. “The Mistress and the Slave Girl” is a fictional account of Heather, a white woman who returns to the South to take over her father’s plantation. Upon Heather’s return home she “falls in love” with a Black female slave, Delia. In order to pursue her “love” for Delia, Heather purchases and “rescues” the slave from the horrors she might receive at the hands of male slave owners. On the surface, the story is about a white female slave owner falling in love with a female slave. However, the inversion of situation implied in the title moves readers from dominating models of master and slave to mistress and slave. The inversion signifies subversion of gender and sexuality in haunting narratives of slavery. Shockley’s “The Mistress and the Slave Girl,” through trickster devices, successfully disrupts the constructs of racialized sexuality and the heterosexualization of desire. In Colonial Desire, Robert J. C. Young emphasizes that “nineteenth-century theories of race did
not just consist of essentializing differentiations between self and other: they were also about a fascination with people having sex—interminable, adulterating, aleatory, illicit, inter-racial sex” (181). Shockley uses her trickster revision of the white construct of lesbian to make way for Black female same sex-desire in a way that recognizes imperialist politics and the interlocking of racial and sexual discourses.

Though there are no obvious oral aesthetics of Black culture in this particular tale, there is the presence of tricksterism. Shockley inverts every dynamic of slavery and Black slave narratives that we have come to know. Female-centered politics replace the maleness of plantation-era representations, and mistress displaces the master as the head and owner of land. Ironically, though one of the major characters is the Black female slave, Delia, we cannot recover Delia’s story as a type of slave narrative. Shockley presents the story through a focus on the white female slave owner, Heather:

After her father passed six months ago, she had come back to Virginia. More liberal minded towards women and slaves than most of the surrounding planters, he sent her to be educated in the north. Years of being away had made her virtually a foreigner to this place where she was born. . . . In a pleading letter, their family lawyer had beseeched her to return, or the plantation would be put up for sale because of mismanagement. (105)

Shockley revises the pattern of Black writers who address the institution of slavery using the slave as the major voice or character. Using third-person narration, rather than the traditional first-person account in slave narratives, Shockley presents the mistress, Heather, as the main character and “protagonist.” Delia merely serves as a secondary character, but she is still a Queen B(?) figure.

Why does Shockley, a Black lesbian writer, choose to focus more on the white female character? By making Heather her thematic focal point, Shockley moves the open secret (desires of whites) further into the public domain. Because she does so, white practices of secretly fulfilling desire through the racialized body is no longer the slave’s shame and abuse, and Shockley’s strategy becomes a damning critique of, in addition to the institution of slavery, the criterion of “normal” sexuality. Shockley constructs Heather as a liberal white Southern woman who believes in women’s rights and emancipation. However, as Shockley reveals, there is a contradiction. Heather’s schooling is paid for by the labor of the slaves her family owns. Her privileges come via the slave economy. Heather’s return to manage, or stop the plantation from being sold, is in clear conflict with her abolitionist philosophies. Shockley’s tricksterism of situation inversion enables her to reveal the destruction of self
and morals for the slave owner.

A second strategy in the short story involves the reversal of dominance and exploitation. Readers are accustomed to thinking of men sexually abusing women in the institution of slavery. Shockley exposes how white women sexually exploited and dominated Black females for their own ends. The overturning of such models seeks to disrupt ideologies of racialized sexuality. Upon returning home, the libertine and feminist Heather stops at a slave auction, where she witnesses men bidding to purchase Delia. When the auctioneer wants to raise the bids, he makes Delia the sexual specter: “Come now, surely she is worth two thousand!” the auctioneer challenged. Abruptly he bared a breast, exposing a perfectly molded mound with a brown tip. . . . ‘See . . . A fine specimen’” (106). The auctioneer’s actions remind us of another incident in which a Black female’s breasts (Sojourner Truth’s) are bared to signify her value as the physical and sexual specter of femaleness. However, this scene is lacking the “feminist” background of the actual historical moment of Truth’s incident. Herein lies the incongruity of trickster behavior that Shockley uses as a writerly resource: Delia is the object and Heather the spectator. Shockley’s text acknowledges the position of power white women maintained over Black females.

As previously noted, the transgression of racial borders makes illegal and false any claims of love made between the enslaved and her master/mistress. In addition, racialized sexuality distorts the labor position of the Black female slave. As determined by bondage laws of the time, the African child’s status as a free Black or a slave depends upon the mother’s status. In U.S. patriarchal society, it is clear that this law begins the detrimental myth of Black females as emasculating matriarchs. Further, the institution of slavery, in order to benefit from the myth in a commodified form, places the sexuality of the Black female at the border. Shockley manages to reconfigure these ideologies by inverting the situation. Though both the mistress and the slave girl exist in a patriarchal institution of slavery, the labor and social community established between the two is meant to be matriarchal. Where the tendency has been to expose racialized sexuality by explaining how it makes abnormal the Black family in slavery, either through notions of emasculation or the defilement of Black womanhood by white males, Shockley takes an alternative approach with issues of same-sex desire.

When Heather witnesses the auctioneer’s tactics for selling Delia, the author presents to the reader two separate accounts of her reactions. Within the omniscient narrator’s account of Heather’s thoughts lies the polyphonic discourse that can capture the complex tensions at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality: “Something about the girl fascinated Heather as she took in the pink silk dress hugging the curves of her body. . . . Heather
swallowed hard as she experienced a familiar sharp sensation piercing warmly through her” (106). In addition, Heather’s decides to buy Delia after the auctioneer highlights Delia’s physical attributes by baring her naked breast (106). Shockley’s description of the auction scene and its impact on Heather as shown by her being fascinated, haunted, and physically excited by Delia makes one question, if not invalidate, the omniscient narrator’s account of Heather’s actions thereafter: “Anger flared within her at the sight. Reaching over, she shook her brother awake. ‘Ralph, come!’ she ordered, climbing hurriedly out of the carriage, ‘I’m going to buy that girl’” (106). Shockley’s doubled narrative represents a true trait of trickster discourse: double-voiced-ness. Shockley uses this particular narrative strategy in the way that returns us to Jung’s theory of trickster as a parallel of an individual shadow:

Since this shadow frequently appears in the phenomenology of dreams as a well-defined figure, we can answer this question positively: the shadow, although by definition a negative figure, sometimes has certain clearly discernible traits and associations which point to a quite different background. It is as though he were hiding meaningful contents under an unprepossessing exterior. Experience confirms this; and what is more important, the things that are hidden usually consist of increasingly numinous figures. (*Four Archetypes* 177)

The interiority of Heather’s thoughts are juxtaposed with her actions and voice of indignation. Heather is not the Queen B(?), but Shockley, as the author, takes up the tasks of the Queen B(?). Her narrative strategy exposes the ongoing theatrical fantasy of the white imagination projected onto the Black body. In one paragraph, Shockley presents the reader with two very distinct reactions. The first focuses on Heather’s thoughts, which by no means allude to any type of social/political feminist empowerment or woman-to-woman solidarity. The sharp sensation, piercing and warm, appears to be a strong pronouncement of desire and Heather’s primary and true reaction to Delia. Shockley emphasizes Heather’s desire over her rising anger. Heather’s thoughts, then, make invalid the next part of the narration aimed at showing the moral outrage of Heather. Shockley finds a subtle way of showing how the open secret works in less heteronormative ways. This doubled narration allows the reader to see that Heather’s motive for purchasing Delia should be viewed as ambiguous. Heather does not buy Delia to rescue her from the clutches of evil men; she does so to fulfill her own wants. Heather’s attentions show a transgression of the racial and gendered order. Even the title of the story comes to remind us of the need to constantly dislocate racialized sexuality. “Mistress” replaces the dominant image of “Master” in the representation
of slavery. Shockley’s presentation reveals that the institution of slavery could further corrupt even those white women who perceived themselves as liberal minded.

The introduction of lesbianism into the slave setting is a pertinent one because it permits Shockley to investigate perhaps one of the most complicated issues in lesbianism and race, the relationship between scientific racism and the homosexual body. In *Queering the Color Line*, Siobhan Somerville discusses how scientific racism is used to argue that homosexuality is deviant. Somerville demonstrates that biological notions of sexuality and race shift from a focus on the body to psychological theories of desire in the twentieth century: “One way in which they overlapped and perhaps shaped one another was through models of interracial and homosexual desire. Specifically, two tabooed sexualities—miscegenation and homosexuality—became linked in sexological and psychological discourse through the model of ‘abnormal’ sexual object choice” (251). Somerville argues that physicians and sexologists like Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter conceptualized the emerging models of homosexuality on the Black body presented in scientific racism (254).

In order to solidify her argument, Somerville includes Margaret Otis’s “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted” written in 1913 to record the widespread lovemaking between the white and Black girls in all-girl institutions of reform and boarding schools: “One white girl . . . admitted that the colored girl she loved seemed the man, and thought it was so in the case of the others. . . . The difference in color, in this case, takes the place of difference in sex” (113). Somerville’s analysis of this article found that Otis reverts to “stereotypes established by earlier anatomical models,” and that “she used a simple analogy between race and gender in order to understand their desire: black was to white as masculine was to female” (252). Clearly, the Black body plays an important role in discourses of homosexuality in regard to sexual deviance and queer erotic play. Somerville’s analysis makes it difficult to believe that we can continue to ignore issues of sexuality, specifically homosexuality, in discussing African diasporic culture.

Perhaps this is why “The Mistress and the Slave Girl” becomes such an important story to reread. Shockley’s portrayal of Heather and Delia does not serve as an exact account of lesbian relationships as expressed by Margaret’s Otis’s report on interracial relationships in all-girl institutions. Shockley, unlike Otis, does not rely on stereotypical anatomical models but real historical conditions. However, the performance of butch/femme roles introduced by Otis does occur in “The Mistress and the Slave Girl” with noticeable differences. Otis’s account shows how Black women are usually positioned as butches and white women as femmes in interracial relationships. However, this dynamic hardly subverts dominant ideologies of the gendered positions
of the women based on their races. White women form the very basis of
femininity in the West, with women of color projected as something other
than femme. As Queen B(?), Shockley inverts the racial assignment of butch/
femme based on the actual power dynamics of the time. As Spillers and Gayl
Jones illustrated, white women, like men, could exploit Black female bodies
for domestic labor, as well as consume those bodies for sexual labor.

By setting her story during the period of antebellum slavery, Shockley can
use this issue of consumption and butch/femme play to show the construc-
tions of genders, sexual identities, and expressions within lesbian communi-
ties. After getting Delia home, Heather, in attempting to determine Delia's
position on the plantation, inquires as to her skills. Upon learning that Delia
is educated, can sew well, and is pretty, Heather proposes, “You will be my
personal servant, Delia” (108). As it needed to be enforced any more,
Heather’s naming of Delia as her personal servant serves two purposes. First,
since “gendering takes place within the confines of the domestic, an essential
metaphor that then spreads its tentacles for male and female subjects over a
wider ground of human and social purposes” (Spillers, “Mama’s Baby” 266),
Heather’s choice to place Delia in the house rather than the fields is huge in
the creation of her own white lesbian identity. In the fields or in the house,
as a captive body, Delia’s sexuality remains neuter-bound. However, Heather’s
domestic use of Delia begins the process she needs to gender herself as butch.
Had Delia been assigned to the fields, Heather’s gendering as butch would
be impeded.

Second, in terms of the desire of the gender that is being constructed, the
domestic space reiterates Heather as a top and Delia as a bottom. Because
Delia’s labor will take place in the house as opposed to the field, Shockley
can explore the domestic spheres of women’s interracial relationships. From
here on, Delia’s presence as Queen B(?) becomes prominent. She concurrently
refutes representations as the asexual Mammy and the sexually licentious
Black woman. In addition, the domestic space, while allowing Heather the
performative space to become butch, also brings to the forefront racialized
sexuality’s severing of the captive’s body from her motive will and desire.
According to queer theorists, “Butch” (and femme) are about gender identifi-
cation/presentation and sexual desire (Epstein 51). Shockley’s trickster narra-
tive reveals all of these elements. In a discussion of butch-identified lesbians,
Butler argues, “If butchness requires a strict opposition to femmeness, is that
a refusal of an identification or is this an identification with femmeness that
has already been made, made and disavowed, a disavowed identification that
sustains the butch, without which the butch qua butch cannot exist?” (Bodies
That Matter 115). In “The Mistress and the Slave Girl,” Heather needs to set
up an environment in which her disavowed identification of femmeness can
sustain her. By projecting Delia, her house slave/servant, as the femme, she can continue to disavow femmeness and identify as butch. She literally and figuratively eats her femmeness and keeps butching up herself through Delia’s servitude to her.

The consumption of the Black female body hints at issues of object choice and subjectivity in exchanges of sexual relationships for both Black and white women. In her autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues*, Billie Holiday comments on white women’s consumption of the “other” and reveals how same-sex desire became a taboo and lesbianism a white thing for Black women. Telling of the attentions a rich white woman gave her, she explains:

She came around night after night. She was crazy about my singing and used to wait for me to finish up. I wasn’t blind. . . . It wasn’t long before I knew I had become a thing for this girl. . . . It’s a cinch to see how it all begins. These poor bitches grow up hating their mothers and having the hots for their fathers. And since being in love with our father is taboo, they grow up unable to get any kicks out of anything unless it’s taboo too. (86–87)

Billie Holiday may not have had a degree in psychology, but she was on to something, despite the inflammatory nature of her comment. If little white girls could not have sex with their fathers, as Freud says, or could not have sex with their white mothers, as French feminists claim, then, according to Holiday, Bad Man/Niggas and Queen B(?)s were quite possibly the next best thing. Although African American critics are quick to read Mammy as servile, subservient, and asexual, Black writers have been challenging that myth for years. Shockley’s creation of Delia further probes the sexual possibility of domestic workers as tricksters. With her story of torrid interracial lesbian relationships, Shockley capsizes white women’s childish consumption of the maternal Black woman into the taboo sexual desire it may represent. By pursuing that taboo object choice, white women can then become the lesbians they always dreamed they could be. Yet Shockley does not stop with white women’s sexual subjectivity; she then allows Black females to use that desire to write their subjectivity as Black sexual subjects.

Joan Nestle’s *The Persistent Desire* proposes butch/femme as “a lesbian-specific way of deconstructing gender that radically reclaims women’s erotic energy” (14). The reclamation of erotic energy may be through the same means of butch/femme, but it does not mean that the illustration of the means will appear universal. There are all kinds of erotic play within the butch/femme category distinguished by cultural and personal yearnings: femme top, femme bottom, butch top, butch bottom, stud and lady, Mommy/Daddy, girl and boy, Tomboy and Tomboy-girl, stone-butch/stone-femme, high femme,
power femme, kiki, and so on. The very fact that more terms and categories are being added as this text is being written and published demonstrates the shifts in sexual identity and representations of desire, as well as why Queen B(?) works in reading such demanding erotic play. Since “butch and femme are gender constructions that arise from a sexual definition of lesbianism” (MacCowan 306), then at some point race, ethnicity, or class are going to intrude on those constructions. Thus, “The Mistress and the Slave Girl’ symbolizes another branch of the butch/femme tree of lesbian expression, an S/M expression, no less. Heather certainly qualifies as the butch. Heather and whiteness are associated with whiteness’s dominant position and blackness’s subordinated and “feminine” position. The interesting way that race and sexuality function in the dissemination of same-sex desire and the disfiguration of gender cannot be missed. In a traditional heterosexual trope, Heather would be the weaker sex, but same-sex desire and race allow Shockley to play with gender hierarchies. Like the animal trickster tales that opened this work, this human trickster tale more readily reflects the reality of racialized sexuality.

The reversal of racialized sexuality, moving it outside the domain of heterosexuality, exposes how the racialized Black body is used to construct a homosexual identity, not necessarily for Delia the Black female, but for Heather the white woman. In the story, Heather can explore her lesbian desire through her ownership rights to Delia’s Black body. She uses Delia, her legal property, to assert her lesbianism in a society that forbids her to do so in any other way. This is not to say that same-sex desire does not exist for Black females, but that the social construct of lesbian, like that of woman, is inadequate for framing such desires. As the narrator indicates, Heather has associated with free Black females in the North. In noting the less subservient personality of Delia, Heather is reminded of them: “The girl was definitely not servile in her speech or appearance. An air of dignity emanated from her in the stately way she stood. Heather was reminded of the Negroes with who she attended private school in Boston, daughters of free Black men, and the southern white slave owners whose consciousness pricked them to educate their illegitimate daughters” (107). Heather notices the Sojourner Truth–like qualities of Black female subjectivity, but like real-life women suffragists, she uses that Black female subjectivity to validate and create her own identity. Heather attended all-girl schools with Black females, but she still does not consider them as equals, as exhibited in her ownership of Delia. Heather’s purchase of Delia allows readers to ascertain that Heather means to use Delia for her own purposes—to assert herself as a lesbian, butch, through exploiting the Black body. Shockley exposes white women’s participation in white supremacy, even as they attempt to dismantle white patriarchy through fulfillment and expressions of their queer sexual desires.
As Heather and Delia continue to learn about each other, Delia reveals that her mother was a free woman. Heather, understanding the significance of this detail, exclaims, “Then, you were free” (110). Despite learning that Delia was a free woman who was kidnapped and sold into slavery (110), Heather maintains the mistress/slave dynamic of their relationship. Ordinarily, in white feminist thought, Heather might be championed as something of a radical and exceptional woman. She seems very liberal minded when she proclaims, “What I would really like to be is an abolitionist. Free the slaves, sell the plantation, and go back to the north to live” (109). She owns land and property, she acknowledges her same-sex desire, and according to the townspeople, she’s “got a mind like a man’s for business” (107). However, Shockley concerns herself with a much more complex agenda, the penetration of white Eurocentric discourses into the Black female body. In one scene, Shockley convincingly presents how the white woman uses the Black body to construct her sexuality:

Turning to Delia, she questioned: “Have you ever cut hair before?” When the girl answered in the negative, Heather handed her a pair of scissors. “Let’s give it a try.”

As the cut tresses lay scattered on the floor by the chair, Heather scrutinized the effect in the mirror. She resembled Ralph more than ever now without his moustache and sideburns. . . . “Don’t cut yours,” she said, reaching up to finger Delia’s hair. (109)

Hair has consistently been a way to mark or articulate one’s queerness in various queer communities. In Heather’s private world of the plantation, she can transgress borders. The cutting of her hair symbolically captures the character’s cutting off societal constraints of gender and desire.

The environment of dominance and submissiveness that slavery presents promptly reveals the irony of interracial relationships and lesbian relationships, and the presentation of both as “deviant” behavior. The institution of slavery fosters an atmosphere in which the social constructs of female same-sex desire, the butch and the femme, must rely on exploitation rather than free expression of sexuality. As Shockley shows, these ideologies of role-playing can then expose the collusion of racialized sexuality and scientific racism in constructing ideologies of homosexuality. Heather’s actions mirror the dehumanizing efforts of white heterosexual men as slave owners. The twist of female-on-female sexual exploitation reveals that heterosexuality is not any less “deviant” than homosexuality. Going beyond this realization, we note all too quickly that Western canons of sexuality present troubling definitions for sexuality.
Upon seeing Heather’s new hairstyle, her brother Ralph notes, “So you’ve cut your hair . . . another link to wearing pants and buying a slave girl. . . . What role are you trying to play, dear sister?” (109). Heather denies playing a role, but clearly she does: She wears pants, she cuts her hair, she thinks like a man, and she desires like a “natural man,” according to the logic of intelligible gender and the antebellum South. Yet butch/femme, as Roof observes, produces “a systematic challenge to the necessary connection between gender and sexuality while appearing to reaffirm heterosexuality” (Roof, “A Lure of Knowledge” 245). At the outset, it might seem that Heather’s performance as butch interrupts the discourse on gender of man/woman, but Shockley’s trickeration goes even further in that interruption because she implements the break through race. Because whiteness is personified as femininity, the only way Heather can engage her masculine play is to align femininity with blackness.

Hair, traditionally a pivotal physical feature in considerations of the feminine for Black and white women, is the first way that she can butch up her white body and femme Delia in the process. While Delia remains less vocal, she participates in Heather’s performance by cutting the hair. She understands the role she is playing. Heather’s insistence that Delia not cut her hair signifies the roles of butch and femme in some lesbian relationships, and it is further altered by the fact the Delia is a slave who is legally bound to be submissive to Heather. Shockley utilizes the institution of slavery to show the literal representation of the problem with current canons of sexuality. Critic Jill Dolan suggests that without critical queries, the Western canon of sexuality (homosexuality/heterosexuality) and gender hierarchies are reinforced all the more in the actualization of the lesbian (white female with same-sex desires):

Reconstructing a variable lesbian subject position that will not rise like a phoenix in a blaze of essentialism from the ashes of deconstruction requires emptying lesbian references of imposed truths, whether those of the dominant culture or those of lesbian radical feminist communities which hold their own versions of truth. The remaining, complex, different referent, without truth, remains dependent on the materiality of actual lesbians who move in and out of dominant discourse in very different ways because of their positions within race, class, and variant expressions of their sexuality—dragging at the margins of structure and ideology. (53)

Sexuality becomes fixed and limited as a result of whiteness needing to remain in a dominant position of power. When we ignore the way race shapes the construction of lesbian, we limit both white and Black female same-sex desire. The Black subject continues to be object and fetishized, while the white
female remains locked in heteronormative genders. Because butch/femme has been touted as a third gender, Shockley provides readers with lesbians who have conflicted relationships with dominant ideologies of race and sexuality. Historically, implicit in white women’s nineteenth-century gender liberation and twentieth-century sexual liberation is the way it consumes Black female bodies for its own agenda. In ways that we might ignore in representations of butch/femme in white-only or Black-only same-sex relationships, the tensions from the taboos of interracial butch/femme lesbian relationships embolden us to keep revising and altering our perceptions of lesbian identity and butch/femme desires away from essentialist models.

For instance, when Heather further asserts her lesbianism during sexual contact (rape) with Delia, several factors are revealed. When Delia comes to Heather’s room, she is invited to sleep in the bed with Heather. In bed Heather informs Delia: “You know, some women can feel about one another the way men and women do” (112). Delia’s response is an admission of same-sex desire, not necessarily hers: “I know now” (112). As Shockley did with Mattie and Alice or Patrice and Lettie, she positions the white lesbian as a type of lesbian archetype that needs to be broached and then disavowed for some women. Why? Because of race. Delia’s same-sex desire is problematized by her status as slave/servant. Even if Delia freely desires Heather, she is not free, and Heather continues to use their unequal status as a way to create her sexual identity.

As Heather lies in bed with Delia, she clearly takes on the dominant role as butch and mistress: “Slowly, Heather began to remove Delia’s gown. ‘I want to see your beautiful body.’ . . . Lightly, Heather caressed Delia’s breast and stomach” (112). Throughout the entire scene, readers barely know what Delia is saying, thinking, or wanting. Despite her silence, Delia remains the Queen B(?) trickster figure of the text, specifically when we take into account the descriptive nature of trickster in Brian Streete’s reflections on Zande tricksters: “Although he has not himself developed a model of the ‘meaningful’ to the audience and shown how it developed and is continually being developed out of the meaningless, the amorphous. By acting at the boundaries of order the trickster gives definition to that order” (101). As previously outlined with attention to the way Delia’s presence allows Heather to be butch, Delia’s silence continues to establish a distinct order by acting at the boundaries of the governing order of race and sexuality. Her silence signals her acceptance of their lovemaking as an act about the fulfillment of their same-sex desire. However, when Delia does speak it is at the request of Heather, and a miscommunication ensues that divulges more situation inversion from the writer-as-trickster, Shockley: “Delia, say my name,” Heather whispered, nibbling on her earlobe. Delia, in turn, replies, “Mistress—” (112). The function
of any trickster is to create chaos so as to disrupt conceptual orders. Shockley’s use of the “say my name” sex play might be comical were it not a reiteration of the way vernacular naming and unaming functions.

“Say my name” is vernacular play or sex game. In the context of Shockley’s story, the phrase functions in two ways that explore the ramifications of race and sex identities. The phrase enjoys a coded meaning in sexual relations that signifies issues of power, submission, pleasure, responsibility, and authority. Who is giving you this pleasure, who is making you surrender, who else can make you feel this way? Or the reversed position: I know who is giving pleasure, I choose this particular person, and I acknowledge that fact by naming them. Despite the position of power that Heather enjoys as mistress, she needs Delia to unname her as mistress so that she can become lesbian and validate her desires. Halberstam reminds us that the butch’s transgression of gender is “often filled with fear, danger, and shame rather than heroic satisfaction” (“Between Butches” 59). Images of butch women are further revised when we consider the way race functions here. As a white woman who seeks to make herself butch through the privilege of white supremacy, it seems ironic that she cannot reach the third gender state she longs for as long as she continues to participate in the order of white supremacy instituted through chattel slavery. If Delia says Heather’s name instead of acknowledging her status, she may alleviate the butch’s fear and shame, as well as disentangle her from the detrimental influence of white supremacy.

I am not implying some ridiculous Hegelian notion of slaves as empowered. Delia is not all powerful because she is still a slave. However, as Hammonds has argued, the historical white constructions of lesbian needs the Black female body. Shockley’s work suggests that in order to find less problematic models of sexuality, women must move away from Western categories of gender and sexuality. They must open themselves up to the chaos and disorder of the trickster. If lesbians (white) need Black female bodies to construct lesbian identity, what does that mean for Black females with same-sex desire? It is as if “The Mistress and the Slave Girl” were a fictional tale concocted to answer a probing question asked by Hammonds, “How does the structure of what is visible, namely white female sexualities, shape those not-absent-though-not-present sexualities that . . . cannot be separated or understood in isolation from one another” (306). Obviously, the existence of Mattism in African nations offers that the white female body isn’t as essential to same-sex relationships and desire in the African diaspora. But in African America, the exploration of homosexuality as a political identity, not as a sexual practice or behavior, does entail white women in the way that Shockley’s collection, including “The Mistress and the Slave Girl,” has
been implying all along. Shockley’s work adheres to a major mission of queer theory: “Queerness should challenge and confuse our understanding and uses of sexual categories” (Doty, Perfectly Queer xvii). She continues to work on resolving the silence on issues of class, race, and biology that occurred in early Black lesbian fiction.

Whereas Heather seeks to construct her lesbian self through her consumption of the Black female body, Delia constructs herself as the Queen B(?) by participating in Heather’s desires. If Elizabeth Grosz is correct when she says, “Desire is a fundamental lack, a hole in being that can be satisfied only by one ‘thing’—another(s) desire. Each self-conscious subject desires the desire of the other as its object. Its desire is to be desired by the other” (64), then Delia’s silence and actions throughout the story can be read as a way to create subjectivity. Because society defines her as an inanimate piece of property, Delia’s fundamental lack can be read as the need to be seen as a human subject. However, if and when Delia desires the desire of the other as its object, in this case Heather, she controls the writing of her subjectivity. Shockley writes Delia as a trickster operating between two discursive worlds. For the mythical tricksters, those two worlds were divine and human, but for the Queen B(?) in Shockley’s time the two worlds are discourse communities ordered by race and sexuality. Because Delia has been free and educated, she perceives the world differently than those born into slavery, but she also realizes her limitations as a house slave. In Delia’s case her lack arises from what she once had, as opposed to what she wishes she could have. This minor detail informs the way she will go about obtaining the object of her desire, herself. Delia’s actions showcase her performance as trickster writing radical Black female subjectivity by manipulating white woman’s lack.

Though not summoned to, Delia comes into Heather’s room, and she places herself as equal to Heather by revealing her status as formerly free. For Delia to name or unname Heather as Mistress influences her very subject position, as well as Heather’s. For if Heather is Mistress, then Delia will always be slave. If and when Delia decides to call Heather by her name, rather than her status and position, we will know that Delia has become a lover and not a sex slave. We will know that Delia has made herself into a subject as opposed to the object. Despite the bonds of slavery, Shockley, like Truth and Jacobs, uses unnaming to imply that Black women must accept responsibility in creating their subjectivity through willful or imagined acts of desire. Delia’s insistence on calling Heather Mistress is Shockley’s way of reminding readers that she is aware of the othering that occurs in interracial lesbian relationships. Though Heather assures Delia that she is not her mistress but her lover, the point is made. Delia, about whom we know little, perceives their affiliation as what
it is, a mistress exploiting a slave. The fact that Delia does not call Heather by her name signals Delia’s comprehension that their relationship is far from equal, much less based on love.

While Heather may not want to be called Mistress because of its intended ties to the institution of slavery she supposedly despises, she doesn’t mind using her position as a mistress to find a way to assert herself sexually as a lesbian. Such a reading of the story is not to suggest that lesbianism is deviant. It means to surmise that Shockley’s short story is able to disrupt and question discourses on sexuality, race, and their connectedness. Shockley completes her turn as trickster, for as D. Alan Aycock has argued: “The ‘trick’ played is to transcend ordinary reality by violating it in such a way . . . that society is simultaneously disrupted and renewed” (124). The story truly depicts Abdul JanMohamed’s concept of racialized sexuality, while at the same time avoiding a strictly heterosexual matrix. Shockley’s appraisal of sexual desires locates other open secrets, beyond the white male desiring the Black female, within the institution of slavery. Western groupings of gender and sexuality made it so that the wretchedly violent and disgusting institution of slavery serves as the secret space where nonmonogamous relationships, interracial sexual relations, homosexuality, sadomasochism, bondage, role-playing and other nonheteronormative sex could be practiced. Shockley’s trickster tale reveals that, in addition to economic benefits for white people in the United States, slavery afforded them other benefits. Shockley, as the situation inverter, demonstrates that sexuality remains more than a binary construct. She also demonstrates the impact of these open secrets toward any future relationships within and between the races. Yet the rest of the narrative suggests ways around that.

Shockley’s story submits that the Black woman’s genderless position and potential pansexuality can destroy the foundations of racism and patriarchy in the West. In the end, as Shockley writes it, Delia does become subject by unnamning her slave status when she says, “Lover, Heather,” at her mistress’ prompting (112). In doing so, she enables Heather to become butch and herself femme. Following the unnamning, Delia’s sexual climax assures her surrender to Heather. Yet the subversions of gender that happen as a result are not the end of the way butch/femme roles interrupts logics of gender. Ann Cvetkovich points out the irony of butch sexuality: “That the butch who ‘takes erotic responsibility’ for her partner’s sexual pleasure could, in her eagerness to tend to another’s desires, as easily be considered feminine as masculine” (159). In shape-shifting the roles assigned to them by society, Heather and Delia revise and remake gender and sexuality.

Shockley’s narrative is clearly controversial given the historical importance of rape in African American history and narrative. However, “reconfiguring gender requires reconfiguring the institutional and discursive conditions
that structure and are structured by regulatory norms, but also reconfiguring interiorities, and, in particular, distributions of power, autonomy, attachment, and vulnerability” (Martin 74). The story forces us to return to Harriet Jacobs’s reading of her decision to sleep with a white man who is not her master. Jacobs saw that act as one of humanizing liberation. Could she realistically say no to any white man who desired her during slavery? Perhaps not, but the illusion that she could pivotally shapes how she sees herself and impacts her decision to pursue freedom. Likewise, as a slave, Delia was never classified as a woman, and that position enables a transition into a possible third gender situation. Delia’s sexual subjectivity isn’t reached because she surrenders to and accepts a white woman’s demands on her. She reaches sexual subjectivity because she attempts to control the sexual construction and identity of herself and her white mistress.

The question that the text invokes is how much of a surrender this is for Delia, who is a slave. As a piece of property, she has no real free will. Is the subjectivity obtained through the unnaming process valid if Delia is still a slave? Shockley attempts to resolve those contradictions with a romantic happy ending: “Months later, Heather freed the slaves and sold the plantation . . . moved to Boston, taking Delia with her” (113). The narrator notes that Heather frees the slaves, and the implication is that Delia is included. Hence, as a free woman Delia moves to Boston with Heather and lives with her as a lover. The story’s ending implies that once we move beyond systems of captive bodies and limited rhetoric of genders, new models of liberation may be possible. Whether readers accept this ending at face value depends on whether we accept the trickster-troping of Shockley and her presentation of Delia as Queen B(?). If readers reject the ending based on the historical implication implied in racial discourses, then we also erase the lesbian history Shockley is fictionalizing. We discount the way lesbianism has been constructed through race. We ignore the viability of Black female same-sex desire: same-sex desire that could be butch or femme. And that is the tricky nature of Shockley’s Queen B(?) tale.

Inevitably, Shockley’s short story reveals how racialized sexuality should be taken into account for the fulfillment of Black sexual desires in post-emancipated eras. In “The Mistress and the Slave Girl,” Shockley provides readers with a solid exploration of why Queen B(?) and her mutability proves to be so necessary in a reconceptualization of same-sex desire for Black female communities. Returning to racialized sexuality’s ideological beginnings—slavery—Shockley announces just how awkward the constructions of homosexuality and heterosexuality are for Black peoples by showing how “as its embodiments of whiteness attests, heteronormativity is not simply articulated through inter-gender relations but also through the racialized
body” (Ferguson 5). Through her depiction of slavery and lesbianism in “The Mistress and the Slave Girl,” Shockley shows why Black females with same-sex desires cannot simply rely on Eurocentric classifications of sexuality used in her other stories. Finally, Shockley’s entire text offers readers a Queen B(?) who can “reconstruct a tenable lesbian subject position . . . somewhere between deconstruction and essentialism” (Dolan 53).