Mutha' Is Half A Word
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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Stallings, L.H.
Mutha' Is Half A Word: Intersection of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture.
The Ohio State University Press, 2007.
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Conclusion

Trickster’s Gift

A Language of Sexual Rights through Polymorphous Erotics and Voluptuous Black Women’s Sexualities

How can I attempt to end dialogue about a figure that transcends time and space, when even as this conclusion attempts to conclude what cannot be concluded, new theories of tricksters are waiting to be written? For this reason, I turn to the words of Cheryl Clarke, a poet who has not received the attention she deserves, but who has demonstrated how well she comprehends the workings of a trickster in her poem “Morgan Harris”: “The poetry poured out of her when she cross-dressed. . . . To her, poetry is the smallest thing, her greater depth” (Experimental Love 14). As Cheryl Clarke’s “Morgan Harris” implies, poetry is a suitable temporary epilogue for Mutha Is Half a Word because it is a queer art form based on indiscretions of time, space, categories, and uncontrollable urges. Rather than concluding, Clarke’s poetry enables me to give a final acknowledgement of trickster’s gift to Black female culture.

Twenty years ago African American assessments of trickster tales in Black culture reduced the tales and figures to graphs, mathematics, equations, and charts,1 as if trickster were a formula to be solved. Such theories froze trickster. Joyce A. Joyce bravely attempted to broach this issue in 1987 with much controversy when she said that “it is no accident that the Black post-structuralist methodology has so far been applied to fiction, the trickster tale, and the slave narrative. Black poetry—particularly that written during and after the 1960s—defies both linguistically and ideologically the ‘poststructuralist sensibility’ (295). As if in agreement with Joyce, Cheryl Clarke’s “Morgan Harris” alludes to poetry as a form that is a small space capable of expressing greater depth, and those expressions are tied to transgressions against boundaries, definitions, classifications, and categories. While poststructuralist
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sensibilities may not be able to handle cross-dressing configurations of Black poetry, the polyvocality and multifarious cultural elements of trickster can.

Out of respect for Joyce’s words, I hope that *Mutha’ Is Half a Word* has moved beyond viewing trickster, folklore, and vernacular culture as “linguistic events” or “complex networks of linguistic systems” (Joyce 296). Rather than figuring trickster out, I hope to have made trickster more undecipherable. As opposed to totally dismissing the connection of trickster to language, I hope that I have shown that trickster culture provides African America with discursive strategies on sexual desires and sexual culture that we will need for the remainder of the twenty-first century. *Mutha Is Half a Word* was written with the intent of reinvesting in the radical nature of folklore, broadening the landscape of how we examine gender and sexual desire in African American female culture, and revealing how precarious the categories of race and gender could be in the fulfillment and presentation of those sexual desires. Oddly enough, what led me to this project was the possible destabilization of all those social categories by one particular writer.

In November of 2000, I began conducting research for an essay on Black lesbian pulp fiction. One of the widely known writers in this field was Red Jordan Arobateau. Arobateau’s novels were the focus of my essay because they exhibited a concern with the contradiction of the white bourgeois construct of lesbian as it concerns Black female same-sex desire. During the 1970s, Arobateau was a writer outcast from the mainstream literary community. The Black literary community also dismissed Arobateau’s pop fiction because it was written in Black vernacular and concerned queer people from Black underclass communities. I’d chosen Arobateau because her self-published lesbian dime novels appealed to my purpose of finding a way to discuss the fluidity of Black subjectivity as influenced by sexuality, gender, and especially class. As a lesbian, biracial writer living in the urban ghettos of Oakland and San Francisco, Arobateau seemed to be a comparable fit with my work concerning Black sexual culture.

As I worked to solidify my theory of Arobateau’s work, I had to face how unprepared I was, as was the field of African American studies, for discussing the fluidity of gender and sexuality in Black culture. In a response to an e-mail asking for an interview, Arobateau e-mailed me with the following revelation: “Dear L.H. Stallings, I’d be glad to cooperate with your interview. Some bio: I identify as mixed race heritage of African American/black descent. I no longer identify myself as butch dike but ftm (female to male transexual) a transman” (November 4, 2000). Initially, I proceeded with uncertainty. My reading of the author’s work was being written with the understanding of Arobateau as a (permanent) lesbian writer who wrote about Black lesbians in urban Black female culture. I knew that my project would be a failure if I did not move beyond this
view. Surely I would now have to examine the canon of Arobateau and his work in light of the gender reassignment. But how could I do it? How could I broach the complex dynamics of false societal gender constructs and fluid sexual desire, and still offer a critique on how class and race impacts it all in a way that would do justice to Arobateau’s work?

As I reconsidered my notes for the project, I realized that Arobateau’s use of vernacular culture was the main reason I had come to formulate that there could be a distinguishing feature and culture of lower-class Black female same-sex desire. In the end, I returned to Audre Lorde’s theoretical models of mythology. Myth, folklore, and vernacular culture provided its own theoretical terrain for discussing gender and sexuality, a terrain critically aware of class and race. I simply needed to try to develop Lorde’s theory beyond fixed sexual identities. Arobateau’s e-mail forced me to see the limited span of my early project, and it gave me my initial vision of trickster politics for this venture. I had already begun to lock myself into an established dichotomy of seeing gender as strictly male/female and sexuality as heterosexuality/homosexuality. Such a strategy would have been very antithetical to my current work on trickster-troping in Black female culture. Polyvalence and mutability served as a starting point. In the end, the extended written narratives, stand-up comedy, and music seemed to be a nice beginning and middle, but poetry provides the best way to conclude this study.

Poetry has always been an important part of Black vernacular culture, and in Black female culture it becomes a genre very capable of translating desire through various trickster mechanisms. Pulitzer Prize–winning poet Rita Dove extols the benefits of poetry as a form or genre that offers a way to articulate one’s identity and desires, even when those two things may conflict with each other. Dove asserts, “Poetry connects you to yourself, to the self that doesn’t know how to talk or negotiate. We have emotions that we can’t really talk about, and they’re very strong. . . . I really don’t think of poetry as being an intellectual activity. I think of it as a very visceral activity” (xxvi). Clarke stands as another poet who intuits the benefits of folklore, vernacular, and queerness to discuss her identity as a Black lesbian and her sexual desires. In her collection of poetry, Experimental Love, Clarke’s visceral activity turns to trickster. Clarke’s poems serve as a narrative on how love and desire would form and be represented were individuals able to break the bonds of social categories, rules, and norms. In the process Clarke becomes a trickster who rebels and rescues: “To question everything in society would lead to anarchy; to preserve everything would lead to stagnation; the conflict is presented, and the balance achieved, in the trickster tales which so many societies possess. And in all of them a universal feature of the trickster is his role as both revolutionary and savior” (Street 97). Clarke avoids becoming fixed in the role of savior by rebelling in ways that
contradict dominant ideologies. Her role as trickster is that of revolutionary and minor god who must delicately balance creativity and destructiveness. Clarke’s “Space Invocation” begins the experiment of representing love and desire without categorization. In the poem, trickster and its strategies abound in the title, stanza, and every metaphor connected to space:

I must get to those spaces
black space of throathole
brown space of asshole
red space of cunthole
sex space of no turning back
Stomach
take me to them
and lead me in a good song. (Experimental Love 8)

Clarke’s poem offers a reading of sexual desire embedded with a doubled context that fits the model of many trickster narratives. The first context positions the body as an astronomical innerspace, comparable to the astronomy of outerspace that contains black holes. But the innerspace, which she designates as a sex space, brims with fleshy holes that offer various possibilities for those invested in sexual fluidity. The holes or orifices of the body signify pleasure points which may or may not align with heteronormative desires. Hence, “Space Invocation” observes that experimental love (queer love) must be an expansive and unyielding field that people should boldly explore. The fluttering of desire makes the stomach a metaphorical spaceship that Clarke sees as her guide in exploring and singing the pleasures of the body.

The second context for “Space Invocation” hinges on reading space as either a measurement of time or a positioning within major texts that manages to invoke trickster. As opposed to speaking of trickster and trickster-troping in terms of strictly outside the text, Clarke allows us to perceive of trickster as not physically at the margins, but rather another contextualized minor entity of the text. Clarke’s poem clearly delves in trickster-troping as it uses orality and sexuality to create its poetic narrative. Because trickster (or tricksterism) has been classified as a “state of ambivalence that can create a shift in the value of objects” (Spinks 7), trickster shares a common motivation as that of space in language and culture overall. Whether spoken or written, what fits in between words, notes, or colors are the spaces. These spaces are the beats, pauses, the hesitations, the empty canvases, and the voids. Nevertheless, they are chasms for change. These spaces can alter the meaning of an entire cultural narrative, in any form, to suit individual needs or wants. When Mary Douglass considers trickster as the “category between catego-
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ries” (365), the connection to space cannot be ignored. This second reading observes that experimental love occurs in the spaces of larger narratives. Thus, Clarke’s poem engages trickster in her theories as to what experimental love might look like.

Lee Jacobus explains of poetry that “to some extent it is mysterious, linked as it is in prehistory with religious chants and mystic prayers” (549). In this particular poem, Clarke includes this spiritual connotation of poetry as ceremony. Invocation is “the action or an act of invoking or calling upon (God, a deity, etc.) in prayer or attestation; supplication, or an act or form of supplication, for aid or protection” (OED Online). It has also been “the action or an act of conjuring or summoning a devil or spirit by incantation; an incantation or magical formula used for this or a similar purpose; a charm, spell” (OED Online). Who better represents the spirit of space that Clarke calls upon than trickster? The act of conjuring the space deity by incantation is the poet’s method of trickster-troping. And for this study, space invocation is especially relevant to sexual desire. In Clarke’s case, queer desire can be located in the space invocation.

Clarke creates a ceremony about spaces, but not just any spaces. She invokes spaces of the body associated with waste, filth, and messiness. She creates a physical chant thematically invested in oral cavities designated for sexual and nonsexual activities. The ambivalent meaning behind invoking these cavities stems from the unknown of what spaces can mean at any given time. In this way, Clarke connects orality and sexuality in very physical but metaphorical ways. The use of profanity in this spiritual chant allows Clarke to confuse the sacred and the lewd, as well as move away from the scientific realm of sexuality that embraces ordered classification. In choosing to use profanity in the sacred invocation, the author suggests that the language of the social sciences or the rhetoric of propriety remain incapable of fully exposing the depths of being a Black sexual subject, rather than an object. Hence, vernacular words that are just as messy and controversial must be used.

However, unlike Clarke, the utter insanity produced in the history of sexuality as it concerns Black people has left many mute. Years earlier Clarke made an especially compelling argument as to how this happened:

Like all Americans, black Americans live in a sexually repressive culture. And we have made all manner of compromise regarding our sexuality in order to live here. We have expended much energy trying to debunk the racist mythology which says our sexuality is depraved. Unfortunately, many of us have overcompensated and assimilated the Puritan value that sex is for procreation, occurs only between men and women, and is only valid within the confines of heterosexual marriage. . . . [B]lack folk have to live with the contradictions
of this limited sexual system by repressing or closeting any other sexual/erotic urges, feelings, or desires. ("The Failure to Transform" 199)

Somewhere between being sexual savages and struggling for “normalization,” many Black people lost the ability and language to speak about their own sexuality. As the representative of everyone else’s queer sex, an astounding confusion manifests itself in Black culture about individual sexuality. Hence, the key, as Clarke makes clear, comes through using space instead of language, invoking space gods, and then singing the appropriate song. Only then can we realize our erotic power. Will it be free from influences of assimilation, colonization, and self-hatred? Hardly. But the spaces and the borders are where we can confront the contradictions and conflicts.

What Is an Authentic Black Lesbian?

Where Audre Lorde used her biomythography to establish the lesbian figure in African diasporic literatures, Clarke, as well as Lorde, has often used her essays and poetry to dismiss sexual authenticity in nationalist rhetoric. In concluding “Space Invocation,” Clarke details that spaces and holes have shades and color as they exist in various locations in the body. That the body has spaces solidifies that it is never whole, never fixed, and always mutable. What we choose to fill and not fill those holes with changes the body, subverts gender, fulfills or denies sexual desires. The release of materials from those holes and spaces changes the body. These spaces imply that despite sharp prisms of scientific reasoning, the boundaries of the body are infinite. Where there is space there is infinity. Where there is space there is the possibility of transformation. The spaces, the metaphors, the unspeakable, and the latent take form in trickster and trickster narratives. In those spaces, the things we know become the unknown. For years now, Clarke has been a master at discussing wants and needs that exist in the borders and margins of binary sexual categories. As seen in another poem from the collection, “Living as a Lesbian at Forty-Five,” Clarke notes the lack of control over the force of those spaces of desire:

Oh, it’s a frequent dream:
He (He?) comes home hot
and wanting to.
. . . . even though he knows you’re a lesbian
there are those times
he still loses his crotch
in the part of your ass through your dress. (*Experimental Love* 68)

Clarke’s incredulity, symbolized by the parenthetical “he” followed by a question mark, captures the uncertainty of her object choice as a self-identified lesbian. As with Arobateau, Clarke notes that there really is no intelligible logic of gender or desire. As she continues to consider the complexities of lesbian desire, Clarke highlights the tensions between desire and identity politics in a mode that Jewelle Gomez claims as revolutionary:

For me the erotic tension of being a lesbian lives in that place where expected elements come together: the stone butch woman who knows how to turn a hem, or looks like a little girl when she laughs. Or the high femme with her skirt hiked up as she changes a tire. The tension of when the unexpected comes together is what makes being a lesbian a political act. That spilling over into the categories women are not meant to occupy is the transgressive behavior that can break down the barriers to personal and political liberation. (“Femme Erotic” 106)

Never shy about politically engaging the repression of sexuality in essay or poetic form, Clarke lays bare the foundation of her own poetic mission. Whether she’s prophesizing about experimental love or living as a lesbian, Clarke’s work reminds us that same-sex desire should also exist without boundaries:

Dykes are hard to date.
A dyke wants commitment,
romance without abatement,
and unrelenting virtue. . . .

Dykes should break loose and put off
monogamy, pregnancy, and permanency
Pack your rubber, latex, and leather
And go on the make
I know we’ll hook up somewhere. (*Experimental Love* 66)

“Dykes Are Hard” addresses the way gay/lesbian models of resistance moved too far to the center in terms of seeking to prove, much in the same way that Black political discourse did, the normalcy of gay and lesbians in regards to courting rituals. In her attempts to expose the elaborate nature of a
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nonassimilative queer sexuality, Clarke writes not only in the margins of dominant narratives, but in the spaces of marginalized narratives. Just when it seems that trickster might fit into society, she shifts toward another position. Clarke refuses to defensively object to the notion of homosexuals as promiscuous. She shirks off the notion of politically correct representations of sexual desire. At each movement in the poem, Clarke makes it clear that dykes are hard, as opposed to reductive and simplified models that can easily adhere to superficial categories. The key to navigating those conflicts lies in finding that place to hook up and figure out that most complex problem: what Black lesbians want. How do Black females who desire Black females construct their desires in ways that traverse the waters of racialized sexuality? They ignore everything else and focus on what they want.

Before she became a practitioner of experimental love, Clarke found herself morphing lesbian identity to reflect the fluidity of desire. In another collection of Clarke's poetry, *Living as a Lesbian*, she extols the benefits of trickster multiplicity. Throughout the anthology of poetry, Clarke demonstrates that she identifies specifically as lesbian. However, in an approach that inherently draws from trickster subjectivity, *Living as a Lesbian* testifies that her political identification with the category of lesbian does not fix her desires into a strictly homosexual classification. Trickster plays with cultural categories and highlights “the arbitrary nature of cultural rules and categories by constantly reminding the narrative culture that there is much beyond its own perspective and understanding” (Spinks 8). In her poem “Sexual Preference,” Clarke amuses herself and readers with the lesbian cultural narrative: “I’m a queer lesbian. / Please don’t go down on me yet. / I do not prefer cunnilingus. / (There’s room for me in the movement.)” (*Living as a Lesbian* 68). As lesbian sexual practices have been portrayed to be especially orally/gentially situated, Clarke risks the very stability of lesbian identity with her spoken aversion to oral sex. She uses queer to signify on what the lesbian experience and sex act is supposed to be about. The poetry in the entire collection compels us to really consider what it means to “live” as a lesbian. Since living or life is a process that is not static, then perhaps living as lesbian or a female with same-sex desires is also less static.

Clarke’s focus on living should be reunited with a Black gay vernacular phrase that it is surely meant to invoke, “in the life.” When Joseph Beam used the phrase as the title of his groundbreaking collection on Black gay male identity and culture, *In The Life*, he explained why he chose it with the following statement:

The word-of-mouth, oral tradition of the African American community
often makes it difficult to locate the etymology of a word or phrase. *In the life*, a phrase used to describe “street life” (the lifestyle of pimps, prostitutes, hustlers, and drug dealers) is also the phrase used to describe the “gay life” (the lives of Black homosexual men and women). Street life and gay life, at times, embrace and entwine, yet at other times, are precise opposites. (12)

E. Patrick Johnson explains that “the emergence of gay vernacular into popular discourse challenges the naturalization of the heterosexual sex as ‘representative’ of ‘normal’ sexual citizenship” (77). For Beam, Clarke, and many other Black queer people, these expansions of Black outlaw vernacular culture expose the intersections of racial and sexual discourse. They also challenge the heterosexuality of blackness as representative of real racial citizenship and the naturalization of whiteness as “representative” of “typical” nonheterosexual identity. Being in the life, or living, as Clarke uses it, displaces the sexual closet. As opposed to an epistemology of the closet, African American gay vernacular offers an “in the life epistemology” that submits a view of queer sexual desire as both positional and identity based.

Because a life or living changes human beings, placing emphasis on accepting one permanent identity seems harmful to any process of self-representation. As we have seen, African American women understand this fact. The vernacular “in the life” returns the queer subject to the libertory model of queer liberation, as opposed to the ethnic model.² Using life as a metaphor for queer sexuality adheres to the early liberationist models for gay liberation that sought a complete destruction of binary systems of gender and sexuality. In documenting the transitions in social moments from the liberationist model to the ethnic model, Steven Seidman found that “liberation theory presupposed a notion of an innate polymorphous, androgynous human nature. Liberation politics aimed at freeing individuals from the constraints of a sex/gender system that locked them into mutually exclusive homo/heterosexual roles” (110). Being in the life means existing outside established social orders that insist upon mutually exclusive or oppositional roles. A closet is part of a greater superstructure, and its function is limited by its dependence on the house as a superstructure of order. A life, however bound by time, has so much more possibilities. It exists as its own entity. “In the life” or living as a lesbian has more potential to disrupt heteronormative social order, and avoid assimilationist agendas exemplified by the current ethnic model. In her understanding of the established social order as corrupt, Barbara Smith asserted: “Nobody sane would want any part of the established order. It was the system—white supremacist, misogynistic, capitalistic and homophobic—that had made our lives so hard to begin with. We wanted
something new . . . and more than a few of us . . . were working for a revolution” (“Where’s the Revolution” 180). Clarke offers up trickster’s love for chaos to uproot what has become planted and fixed.

Living as a Lesbian includes five poems that share the collection’s title with minor differences: “living as a lesbian on the make,” “living as a lesbian in the journal,” “living as a lesbian underground: a futuristic fantasy,” “living as a lesbian rambling,” and “living as a lesbian at 35.” The specially titled poems show the shifting of subjectivity and desire for women who identify as lesbian. Clarke creates trickster tales and her poetic lesbian representations act as tricksters created to foil the authentic or real lesbian created by contemporary gay and lesbian discourse. In the poems, Clarke’s agenda is clear: subvert finite homosexuality.

In “living as a lesbian on the make,” the voice is that of a lesbian in a straight bar: “straight bars ain’t so bad/though filled with men” (21). When a woman comes into the bar, the voice declares, “I was lonely and knew she was looking for a woman. . . . I almost followed her out but was too horny to leave the easy man talking loud shit for a seduction I’d have to work at” (21). Being on the make, regardless of sexual orientation, is about the fulfillment of sexual desire through sexual acts. Although it seems that when it comes to fulfillment of same-sex desire, some women are just lazy, Clarke keeps expressing how difficult it is to identify as lesbian and perform that identity through the more explicit practices of fulfilling desire. In other words, desire (horniness as Clarke names it) outweighs identity politics. “living as a lesbian in the journal” and “living as a lesbian rambling” reflect private thoughts, while “living as a lesbian underground: a futuristic fantasy” truly embodies the outsider and insurrectionary nature of trickster, in addition to offering an apocalyptic revolution dictated by sexual identity.

In ways that mainstream Black political nationalists detest, Clarke queers Black civil rights and liberation through Black symbols of revolution and spirit:

in basements
attics
and tents
fugitive slaves
poets and griots
seminoles from songhay
vodun queens—
all in drag . . .
dodging state troopers behind shades (73)
When Clarke imagines a future of queer dissent, she imagines it so that it connects back to African diasporic mythology and orality. Vodun is a derivative practice of Yoruba religions of the Dahomey as practiced in Nigeria, Brazil, and the United States. As we have seen from the beginning of this text, well-known West African trickster gods come from Oyo Dahomey. Like Lorde, Clarke connects to the queer possibilities of those gods and goddesses. Those vodun queens in drag have a cosmological legacy of violating and transgressing social borders. Though tricksters may move from world to world, their assignment remains the same: make and remake worlds through chaos and confusion. Clarke makes it clear that no matter how fluid her desire may be her self-identification as a lesbian is a political action that incites wars against those who would seek to disenfranchise queers. She does not stop at using African and African diasporic references; she contemplates imagery from other people of color who have suffered the pains of imperialism and colonialism. By creating an underground community based on sexuality, Clarke returns to trickster as an interloper of landscapes and borderlands. The fugitive queer slave migrates from one city, state, or country to another’s borders. This experience symbolically resembles trickster’s mythological presence in communities of humans and gods: exile and outsider.

Seven years later, in Experimental Love, Clarke continued to develop the experience of “living as a lesbian underground, ii”:

I was on my way underground when
uniformed children blondish forcing
my door nearly seized my journal

Around the time little Stevie Wonder’s songs
were banned in the Bantustans, a harried editor looked
up at me from my grazed manuscript,
Shaking his head, said:
“Maybe in thirty years we can anthologize an excerpt.” (11)

In addition to pursuing social equality, the revolutionary lesbian poet now must contend with censorship of words and experiences. The role of white supremacy, emphasized by the allusion to Nazism and Adolf Hitler that is personified by uniformed blond children, in erasing the diversity of human life and culture takes center stage. Those who would censor do not differentiate between the public songs, manuscripts, and the personal thoughts of journals. In this lesbian underground, the lesbian poet becomes a different kind of fugitive whose crime is not only escaping master, but writing against master narra-
tives. Words and writing can lead to death in highly politically charged times of sexual colonialism. This could mean a literal death, or a figurative death, of the lesbian writer who is not recognized by mainstream presses, publishers, or critics because of what and how she chooses to write. The poet who lives as a lesbian deliberately violates too many taboos and social mores. She risks enduring the literal and figurative death to declare her sexual desires.

When a prostitute who’d been caught and raped on a daily basis told the poet, “This word can get you violated” (11), she cannot resist her subversive nature. While on the run she encounters a fascist soldier who advises her against writing: “Hey, poeta, hope you have a good memory. Memory is your only redemption” (9). With well-conceived abandon, the lesbian poet ignores the words of both the prostitute and gestapo when she uses the undisclosed word:

\begin{quote}
I wrote the word over and over . . .
I wrote it in my left hand
As well as my right.
I recited it every time I wrote it.
Played with my sex
as I wrote it
over and over.
And said it as I came
Over and over (13)
\end{quote}

Like Legba’s sexual defiance to Mawu’s curse of the erect phallus, or the use of uncensored mode in Black female hip-hop, the poet defiantly writes the word in an act that furthers the inventions of self and fulfils the self’s desire. On the one hand, paper and manuscripts can be censored, erased, burned, and shredded. Since ideas are less susceptible to those acts of destructions, memory might be considered the only redemption. However, what good is memory if it is not passed along in some form? The word must be conveyed in writing, speech, or experienced through intimate bodily contact. Clarke demonstrates that inscriptions of desire occur prominently at the intersection of orality and sexuality. Memory alone is not enough because it is the dissemination of memory that sparks insurrections. Each of the “living as a lesbian underground” poems explores the demarcation of self and national identity and provide witness to figures who are invaded or cast out in the name of nationalists agendas. As much as the poems reflect back to trickster’s subject position between man and god, these futuristic imaginings of revolutionary lesbians embrace sexuality as a vital part of civil and human rights.
Defining sexual rights as not only a civil rights issue, but more globally as a human rights issue, is one of the most important contributions GLBT discourse has made to U.S. society and culture. It is a language that Black female culture has embraced in artistic venues. While some Black poets have used the art form to promote the repression of non-heteronormative sexuality, Clarke sees poetry, a less bourgeois mode of writing, as a way "to imagine a historical Black woman-to-woman eroticism and living—overt, discrete, coded, or latent as it might be. To imagine Black women’s sexuality as a polymorphous erotic that does not exclude desire for men but also does not privilege it. To imagine, without apology, voluptuous Black women’s sexualities" (“Living the Texts Our” 224). Creativity and imagination are the keys to delivering a diversity of mechanisms for trickster-troping. From postnationalist readings of the folk and unnaming to exposing the possibility of sexual fluidity in Queen B(?) narratives and poetry, the implications of trickster-trope readings insist on a refashioning of discussions on Black female sexuality.

Concerned with teenage pregnancy and the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, former surgeon general Joycelyn Elders argued that sex education classes should teach the benefits of masturbation along with abstinence. Elders did what any original outsider would do; she sought to mix the sacred and profane as a viable solution to a real problem. Her suggestion spoke volumes on the sexual rights of teenagers. However, I was more impressed with what it signified for Black females. Elders brought Black female rhetorical models on sexuality full circle. The beginning of the twentieth century may have been about the quiet dignity of womanhood, but the end of the century optimistically leaned toward creating a space for the sexual and political. Elders utilized an approach that ignored the detrimental concerns of normativity to speak of sexual desires in a way that suggested that we all have inalienable sexual rights that should not be infringed upon in any way that might cause irreparable harm or damage to our lives.

I hope that Mutha’ Is Half a Word helps foster an unabashed cultural environment where various discourses of desire in regard to Black female culture can be explored. Discourses of desire lead to languages of sexual rights that Black females need to know and embrace for their own sake. Cultural representations that protect and provide an environment for the discourse of desire should be heralded as significant. These intersections of folklore, vernacular, and queerness illuminate that fact. Mutha Is Half a Word cannot serve as a complete and full analysis of the work to be done on Black culture and Black female desire, but I hope it adds to and continues a conversation that began centuries ago in various trickster tales. In her assessment that argues against the way Western scholars have read trickster, Anne Doueihi notes:
If trickster stories tell us about anything, it is about the difference between, and the undecideability of, discourse and story, referential and rhetorical values, signifier and signified, a conventional mind and one that is open to the sacred. It is only by missing such differences, by taking trickster narratives solely as stories, that scholarly readings have regarded them as “obscene,” “immoral,” and “profane.” (200)

Doueihi’s statement coincides with what I have attempted to suggest about Black women’s culture that has typically been read as immoral, obscene, and profane. By positioning their cultural manuscripts (folklore, novels, short stories, comedy, music, poetry) as trickster stories, I hope that we can be motivated to read wild women and their culture as “inhabiting the space between story and discourse” (Doueihi 193) so that we don’t miss the differences that can further liberate Black women. Instead of disregarding works that might be considered vulgar or profane, we should observe them closely for their strategies of creating radical Black female sexual subjectivity and a discourse for that subjectivity. Trickster-troping throughout the cultural collective of Black female communities suggests that to do so will prove pivotal in our survival and growth.