

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
and the Theory of "Signifyin(g)"

BRAD BUCKNELL

RECENT CRITICISMS OF THE English canon continue to challenge deeply held notions about literature: its worth, its history, indeed perhaps its very "literariness." But it is especially the dissenting voices of feminists and people of colour (and those who cross the boundaries between these two diverse groups) who raise old questions about literary history, questions which traditional scholarship has never really been able to answer. I speak here of the difficulty in reconciling what could loosely be called "formalist" or text-centred theories of literature (Russian formalism, New Criticism, mythic criticism, and most recently in North America, various forms of post-structuralism) with those branches of research which maintain that the "world" (of nature, of the "self," of class) can be, and is, represented in literary works. Jerome J. McGann points out that the conflict between text-centred criticism and more sociohistorical kinds of studies is focused upon issues of language and the problematics of reference. From a sociohistorical perspective, text-centred critics may be taken to task for their lack of attention to matters of reference. As McGann puts it (perhaps a bit in the extreme),

referentiality appears as "a problem" in formalist and text-centered studies precisely by its absence. Though everyone knows and agrees that literary works have sociohistorical dimensions, theories and practices generated in text-centered critical traditions bracket out these matters from consideration. . . . (McGann 3)

On the other hand, sociohistorical research has been unable to counter effectively the criticism which suggests

that language and language structures (including perforce, literary works) are modeling rather than mirroring forms. They do not point to a prior authorizing reality (whether “realist” or “idealist”), they themselves *constitute* — in both the active and passive sense — what must be considered reality. . . . (3-4)

Each “side” of the critical debate lacks what the other could supply. But those who are critical of the techniques of making and sustaining the canon of English literature might take umbrage with either camp, especially on issues concerning power and evaluation.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith, in a gesture similar to McGann’s, defines a polarization in the Anglo-American critical tradition between “scholarship,” which assembles the philological and historical facts necessary for editing and annotating works, and “criticism” (6), which assigns literary merit or value to works. She points out that the emphasis in Anglo-American studies has for the last fifty years been upon criticism. Using I. A. Richards and Northrop Frye as her examples, Smith states that the criticism of the greater part of the century has been

[b]eguil[ed] by the humanist’s fantasy of transcendence, endurance and universality . . . [a]nd at the same time, magnetized by the goals and ideology of a naive scientism . . . [and] has foreclosed from its own domain the possibility of investigating the dynamics of [literary] mutability and understanding the nature of [literary] diversity. (14)¹

It seems to me that her words about the essential evaluative narrowness of this dominant trend could apply to traditional methods of sociohistorical scholarship as well. The collecting and organizing of facts may be no less subject to “invisible” cultural standards of the “‘natural,’ ‘objective,’ and ‘real’” (Said 9) than are the less palpable criteria of the critics. The givenness of the texts of the tradition implies that the fact-finders and the critics both have had a hidden, if also at times unconscious, agenda which has ensured that the English canon has continued to be predominantly white and male.

Those who challenge “the” tradition are themselves by no means unified on issues concerning language, history, and methods of critical evaluation. But many agree that any critique of the canon must be both political and historical. It must question the implicit

and explicit ideological presuppositions that have gone into the founding of that order. Even revisionary critiques which might be more "text-centered" than specifically historical must be aware of the exclusivity that is part of the normative premises of the literary institution's formation. Thus, a unique and complex sense of history and especially literary history often pervades critiques of the canon, even among those who might be considered "text-centered" critics.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. could probably be considered a "text-centered" Afro-American critic, and what I want to explore in this paper are some of the complexities of his thought as he re-addresses problems, not only of the canon, but of reconciling theory and history as well. Gates is well known in the Afro-American critical world as both a critic and an editor, and I will focus first upon one of his earliest editorial endeavours, a collection of essays by the black American critic, Charles T. Davis. A discussion of Davis will, in a sense, historicize Gates, and also help to expose some of the problems Afro-American critics face in general as they struggle to make a place for their own literary and critical past(s) in the face of the dominant culture's ideals of literary art. With this as background, I will then attempt to explicate Gates's notion of "signifyin(g)" which is his critical metaphor intended to bear the mark of the potential exploration of language and history, not from a place of irreconcilability, but rather from one of necessary relationship. Though Gates has recently released a new and more in-depth rendering of his theory in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, for the purposes of this paper I will focus on the earlier, concise essay version of "signifyin(g)" found in "The blackness of blackness: a critique of the sign and the Signifying Monkey."² For Gates, "signifyin(g)" is an attempt to find a distinctively black method of reconciling history and form, textuality and experience, at least in part through a reappropriation of contemporary critical theory. The issues that such an endeavour raise are complex, not least because of the problems in finding a distinctive critical method that is not already inhabited by dominant Western values. Some Afro-American critics disagree with Gates's methods, and later in the paper I will bring some of their concerns into the discussion. The interplay

between Gates and his critics will help to illustrate further the difficulties faced by those who attempt to come to terms with their literary and historical marginalization.

* * *

Henry Louis Gates's editing of *Black is the Color of the Cosmos: Essays on Afro-American Literature and Culture, 1942-1981*, a collection of essays by one of his former teachers, the critic Charles T. Davis, is significant in a couple of ways: as a gesture of respect and elucidative evaluation, the book is a kind of historical document, consolidating and giving shape to the work of an eminent black critic. This historical gesture of preservation and acknowledgement is, however, given to one who, in Gates's words, "trained a generation of critics and scholars of Afro-American literature whose central concerns are matters of language" (Gates, Preface xi). The preservation of one who was so interested in criticism from the point of view of language serves to emphasize how important a connection between language and history can be for the Afro-American critic, since however much Davis and indeed Gates choose to focus upon language, the shadow of history remains ever present.

History for the black critic, male or female, is a kind of nightmare from which it is difficult to awaken; and it is so for some very complex reasons. The reality of hundreds of years of overt and covert enslavement, exploitation, and degradation of black people does not necessarily — at least for Davis and Gates — establish a unified Afro-American "experience" that can be straightforwardly discerned in Afro-American literature. Gates points out that Davis taught his students to "eschew the expressive realism of literary theories which see the text essentially as a complex vehicle by which the critic arrives at some place *anterior* to the text . . . [such as] at his or her sense of a supposedly transcendent 'racial conscious,' a literary sense of blackness in Western culture . . ." (Gates, Preface xi). It is true that Davis does describe a shifting sense of the idea of "blackness." The history that he outlines in "Black is the Color of the Cosmos" is one of the changing nature of the concept of blackness in Afro-American writing, a consideration

which, ironically (for Davis) changes from being "regarded as a handicap socially and culturally" into "an artistic strength" (Davis, "Cosmos" 3). The central figure in the twentieth century who marks the most profound change in the conception of blackness is Richard Wright, whom Davis claimed "made blackness a metaphysical state, a condition of alienation so profound that old values no longer applied" (19).³

But at the same time, Davis also states that all "writers arrive at a reconciliation of a sense of tradition and a sense of difference. For nearly all black writers in America that sense of difference was the recognition of blackness" (3).⁴ If blackness is something that changes in definition and importance over time, it is also something that remains a constant and significant difference for the Afro-American writer. This complex sense of blackness is an important element in the "double-history" of "every black work" ("Critic" 51). Davis sees this double history as consisting of the "tradition of American letters," apparently meaning predominantly white letters, and beyond this,

the rich and changing store of folk forms and folk materials, the advantages of a dialectical tongue, with a separate music of its own . . . that grew from a community given an amount of homogeneity through isolation and oppression. (51)

These comments occur in the first section of the book which Gates organizes under the heading "Theories of Black Literature and Culture," a section in which Davis, in an essay called "The American Scholar, the Black Arts, and/or Black Power," takes aim at the Black Arts movement that had developed in the late sixties. Davis takes particular issue with such writers as Larry Neal who proclaimed that the "dead forms taught most writers in the white man's schools will have to be destroyed, or at best, radically altered. We can learn more about what poetry is by listening to the cadences in Malcolm's speeches, than from most of Western poets" (Neal 653). For Davis, who had no wish to lose Aristotle ("Critic" 63), such comments showed a profound lack of historical sensibility: "It is as if history and aesthetic criticism were erased by the sweep of a damp rag across a blackboard" ("Scholar" 30).⁵ But for Neal and others, these sentiments were the only way of

overcoming the "double consciousness" of the American black that W. E. B. Dubois had elaborated much earlier in the century: "One ever feels this twoness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body . . ." (Dubois 215).

The conflict between those who feel the need to establish a more definitive black tradition in history and writing and those who desire to take into consideration the influence of white literature and history does not begin or end with Davis and Neal. But this issue, along with several others I have raised in this discussion of Davis are very pertinent to a reading of Gates. Gates will speak of a "double-voiced" or "two-toned" *critical* method; he will go further than Davis in working against the idea of a unified pre-textual "racial identity"; and, as we will see somewhat later, he will suffer criticism for his use of white critical techniques. But it is also important to note that in editing the book on Davis, Gates, a critic with definite text-centred predilections, has historicized himself, located himself, and his critical concerns within the context of the conflict of the difficult historical/critical/social conditions that confront the Afro-American scholar. Admittedly, his method is "text-centered," and much of it is influenced by contemporary white, male theorists. But, at the same time, his concern is to construct a history of black literature upon the "difference" of being black, though not upon a transcendent evaluation of "blackness." History and what this means to issues of black language are central to his concerns.

Gates is by no means unaware of the problem of "twoness." The issue arises most crucially when Gates is attempting to elaborate his own critical approach. In "Criticism in the Jungle," his introductory essay to *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, Gates asks, among other things:

Can the methods of explication developed in Western criticism be "translated" into the black idiom? How "text-specific" is literary theory, and how "universal" are rhetorical strategies? If every black canonical text is, as I shall argue, "two-toned" or "double-voiced", how do we explicate the signifyin(g) black difference that makes black literature "black"? (Gates, "Jungle" 3)

And in the Introduction to his *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and*

the "Racial" Self, he puts it even more baldly: "Can it be a legitimate exercise to translate theories drawn from a literary tradition that has often been perpetuated by white males who represent blacks in their fictions as barely human, if they deem it necessary to figure blacks at all?" (Gates, Introduction xviii).

Gates's answer to the last question is both simple and complex. On the one hand, he says that "*any* tool that enables the critic to explain the language of a text is an appropriate tool. For it is language, the black language of the black text, that expresses the distinctive quality of our literary tradition" (Introduction xxi). This is his straightforward answer. More complex motivations stem from his feeling that "the structure of the black text has been *repressed* and treated as if it were transparent . . . as if it were invisible, or literal, or a one-dimensional document" ("Jungle" 5-6). The reasons for this repression are also complex. Gates sees the problem as being in part the result of what he calls the "'anthropology' fallacy" which, as a kind of grid for viewing black art, "include[s] all sorts of concerns with the possible *functions* of black texts in 'non-literary' arenas . . ." ("Jungle" 5). This kind of attitude marks the reception of the first slave narratives that appeared in the eighteenth century ("Literary Theory" 3-4). Joined with this fallacy are the "'perfectibility' fallacy" ("Jungle" 5) and the "'sociology' fallacy" (5): that is, "that blacks create literature primarily to demonstrate their intellectual equality with whites, or else to repudiate racism . . ." (5). The complexities here are immense since, according to Gates, "the black tradition's own concern with winning the war against racism" (Introduction xxiv) has in the past led it to accept "black literature as evidence of the humanity of blacks . . ." (xxiii).⁶ Concomitant with these "arbitrary suppositions" (xxiv) comes the belief that Afro-American literature existed primarily "to contain Black experience" (xxiv), which also meant that "a myth of familiarity obtained when the black critic read a black text" (xxiv). Hence, in the tradition of Afro-American criticism since the early nineteenth century, texts were analyzed in terms of content, "as if a literary form were a vacant enclosure that could be filled with this or that matter" (xxii), this "matter" being some more or less creditable version of the "Black Experience" (xxii).

Gates suggests that a kind of formal history is requisite for critics of black texts. His emphasis is on the black tradition of figuration, the ability of "saying one thing to mean something quite other" ("Jungle" 6), which has been essential "to black survival in oppressive Western cultures" (6). In this way Gates hopes to resist the irony of positing "a 'black self' in the very Western languages in which blackness itself is a figure of absence, a negation" (7).⁷ Thus, while claims to an "essence called 'blackness'" (7) may be in ways politically healthy, they also raise the ideal of "a transcendent signified, of a full and sufficient presence" (7), which is to "take the terms of one's assertion [of a free 'self'] from a discourse determined by an Other. Even the terms of one's so-called 'spontaneous' desire have been presupposed by the Other" (7).

"Twoness," it is clear, is a difficult business. One can understand Gates's resistance to a literary criticism based on content, where the creator of a black text or a black criticism immediately "buys in" to the racist metaphysical presuppositions implicit in the images of the oppressor — whether the images are meant to be "good" or "bad." Yet, the move toward the study of a black tradition of figuration, and Gates's concomitant challenge to the notion of a transcendent "black" experiencing self, raises the dilemma of defining one's resistance to transcendent signifieds on the basis of the Other's critique of transcendent signifieds — the Other in the second case being (at least) Derrida and Lacan. Gates is aware of the problem and attempts to resist colonization by contemporary theory through reappropriation, a playing off of contemporary critiques of language, the intertext, and the self against the "difference" of the black tradition of "signifyin(g)."

Gates feels the need to resist the unifying *trope* of "the Black Experience," and instead

to derive principles of literary criticism from the black tradition itself, as defined in the idiom of critical theory but also in the idiom which constitutes the "language of blackness", the signifyin(g) difference which makes the black tradition our very own.

("Jungle" 8)

The "signifyin(g) difference" is then not merely the repetition of contemporary critical theory, but rather a means of "explicat[ing]

a black text [which] changes both the received theory and received ideas about the text" (9).

"Signifyin (g)," in the sense that Gates uses the term, is crucial to the method of "critical bricolage" (Introduction xxx) he applies in revising the method of formal examination of black literature. In "The blackness of blackness: a critique of the sign and the Signifying Monkey,"⁸ Gates offers his most extensive revision of contemporary theory in the service of black texts. His first move is to reappropriate the Saussurean neologism of "signifying" by pointing out that it is (curiously) "a homonym of a term in the black vernacular tradition that is approximately two centuries old" ("Monkey" 285). Stories of the Signifying Monkey go back before the time of slavery and constitute an ongoing tradition which carries on through black music, literature, and oral traditions right up to the present (285-86). "Signifyin (g)" in Gates's sense, is a theory of interpretation which is culled from the "black cultural matrix" (285); it is "a theory of formal revision; it is tropological; it is often characterized by pastiche; and, most crucially, it turns on repetition of formal structures, and their difference" (285-86). Similar to the notion of the "master trope" as variously outlined by Vico, Nietzsche, de Man, Bloom, and Burke, signifying is the "slave's trope of tropes" (286), which can be seen to subsume the traditional Western rhetorical categories: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony, and several others. It is actually composed of a collection of black rhetorical tropes of its own, such as "'marking', 'loud-talking', 'specifying', 'testifying', 'calling out' (of one's name), 'sounding', 'rapping', and 'playing the dozens'" (286).⁹ Gates is of course "signifying" on the Western critical tradition here, repeating and revising, if not attempting, through inverting historical precedent, to out-do Western tropological history by showing the difference between it and the black cultural matrix he is trying to explicate.

He continues the revision with a history of the mythic figure of the Signifying Monkey itself, a figure which populates, in different forms, the mythology of Africa, the Caribbean, and both South and North America. The various figures are "mediators, and their mediations are tricks" (286).¹⁰ The monkey "invariably 'repeats' to his friend the Lion, some insult generated by their mutual friend,

the Elephant" (288). The Lion's mistake is to take the monkey literally, and he goes off to address the puzzled Elephant, who "invariably" (288) trounces him. The rhetorical practice of the Monkey, like all "signifying," is "unengaged in information-giving" (287), and instead, focuses (if that is the right term) on "the chain of signifiers, and not on some transcendent signified" (287). As such, the Monkey is not just "'a master of technique', . . . he *is* technique, or style, or the *literariness* of literary language" (288) itself.¹¹

In more recent black vernacular, signifying plays upon the ironic variability of language, the play between definition and contextual variation. Gates cites a passage from Claudia Mitchell-Kernan which he considers a particularly accurate version of the nature of signifying. Mitchell-Kernan suggests that in signifying, dictionary definitions are not always sufficient because meaning may go "beyond such interpretation" (Mitchell-Kernan 317).

Complimentary remarks may be delivered in a left-hand fashion. A particular utterance may be an insult in one context and not another. . . . The hearer is thus constrained to attend to all potential meaning-carrying symbolic systems — the total universe of discourse. (Mitchell-Kernan 317)¹²

Gates sees this indirect means of rhetorical play as the foundation of the black tradition: "Our literary tradition exists because of these precisely chartable formal literary relationships, relationships of signifying" (Gates, "Monkey" 290).

Gates wishes to adopt this vernacular rhetorical procedure to create a kind of black intertextual literary history. But this is not the intertext of Barthes and Kristeva which can never be "reduced to a problem of sources or influences" (Barthes 39). Rather, Gates seems to desire a very precise method of intertextual relationship, one in which the signifying connections between black texts may be clearly delineated. Gates cites Bakhtin in order to indicate the particular kind of "double-voiced" "hidden polemic" of the black intertext:

In hidden polemic the author's discourse is oriented toward its referential object . . . but at the same time each assertion about the subject is constructed in such a way that besides its referential

meaning, the author's discourse brings a polemical attack to bear against another speech act, another assertion on the same topic.
(Gates, "Monkey" 295; Bakhtin 187)

For Gates, "parodic narration and the hidden or internal polemic" are the two double-voiced components of "critical parody" which he calls "critical" and/or "formal signifying" (294). And formal signifying is Gates's metaphor for literary history.

Critical parody is a process whereby one author repeats and revises the formal structures of another author. Gates points, for example, to Ralph Ellison's signifying on the titles of Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy* with his own *Invisible Man*. Wright's titles suggest "race, self and presence," to which Ellison answers with an "ironic response . . . of absence" in the suggestion of invisibility, and also with a stronger sense of mature status with "man," as opposed to "son" or "boy." This is all part of Ellison's complex method of signifying on Wright through the use of "a complex rendering of modernism" as opposed to Wright's "distinctive version of naturalism" (293).¹³

The idea of critical parody is, of course, not unknown outside of the black tradition. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a kind of critical parody of *Jane Eyre*; Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew* parodies *Ulysses* which is itself a compendium of critical parodic inversions. But Gates's idea of critical parody in Afro-American writing has to do with the particular way that writers in the black tradition read and critique each other, not just formally, but also in terms of the specific "hidden polemic" of "blackness." The "hidden polemic" focuses on the concerns that successive writers have had in attempting to represent the "recurring referent of Afro-American literature — the so-called black experience." Here, however, Gates is less precise than we might hope, saying only that the hidden polemic may be seen in reading "the relation of Sterling Brown's regionalism to Toomer's lyricism, Hurston's lyricism to Wright's naturalism, and, equally, Ellison's modernism to Wright's naturalism" (295).¹⁴ These relations are not as completely elaborated as is the book that signifies on all of these others: Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Gates's explication of *Mumbo Jumbo* is lengthy and detailed. He sees Reed's work generally, and *Mumbo Jumbo* specifically,

as being concerned with the preceding texts of Ellison, Hurston, Wright, Baldwin, and others. More important, however, is Reed's concern with "the process of willing into being a rhetorical structure, a literary language" which allows him to "posit a structure of feeling that simultaneously critiques both the metaphysical presuppositions inherent in Western ideas and forms of writing, and the metaphorical system" in which "'blackness'" is a figure of "'natural' absence." At the same time, Reed also takes on the "Afro-American idealism of a transcendent black subject, integral and whole" (297).

As one example of many, Gates points out how Reed's title parodically signifies on the titles of both Wright and Ellison. Where Ellison troped Wright's titles of presence with his own suggestion of invisibility, Reed tropes both these *and* "ethnocentric Western designation[s] for the rituals of black religions . . . and languages. . . ." "Mumbo jumbo" is the "English-language parody of *black language itself*." Mumbo jumbo, as "any Swahili speaker knows . . . derives from the common greeting of *jambo* and its plural, *mambo*, which loosely translated mean 'What's happening?'" In this double manner, Reed proposes to signify upon Western notions of blackness, while also acknowledging and deflating an Afro-American tradition which is "as rife with hardened convention and presupposition as is the rest of the Western tradition" (299).

Mumbo Jumbo, the book, is a varied collection of "texts," including photographs, footnotes, a handwritten letter, reproductions of signs (really) from Harlem Renaissance clubs, advertisements for parties, and drawings, as well as a "Partial Bibliography" which, according to Gates, "mimics the fictions of documentation and history which claim to order the ways society lives" ("Monkey" 302).¹⁵ In this book of multiple texts, two main strands of narration play-off against each other. One line is given in the "present" of Harlem in the 1920s. The focus here is upon several mysterious conflicts taking place in New York and the United States at large, especially the strange outburst of "Jes Grew," a "psychic epidemic" (Reed 5) which "unlike physical plagues . . . enlivened the hosts" (6).¹⁶ The "Atonists" and their militant wing the "Wallflower Order" are those in every facet of the white estab-

lished order attempting to resist the "plague." They are intent on thwarting Jes Grew's bid to find its "*text*" (6). PaPa LaBas, proprietor of Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral, and one who "carries Jes Grew in him like most other folk carry genes" (23) is, in his way, resisting the Wallflower Order so that Jes Grew may fulfil itself. The second narrative line is discontinuous and contains all the "motley subtexts" (Gates, "Monkey" 310) of the book. It is, for Gates, an "anti" narrative, moving "freely through space and time, between myth and 'history.'" It is "not linear like its counterpart;" it contains "all the text's abstractions" (310). If the first line of narration can be seen as an allegory of the 1960s Black Arts movement set in 1920s Harlem, then the second "antithetical" narrative may be viewed as an allegory "on the history and nature of writing itself, especially that of the Afro-American literary tradition." The second text parodies the continuity of the first; and like Jes Grew, which is searching for its text, "so too is the search for a text replicated and referred to throughout the second, signifying narration" (311).

For Gates, the parodic playing-off of texts is an indictment against closure, an emphatic gesture of "the indeterminacy in interpretation itself" (312). Jes Grew does not find its definitive text; at the moment it is to be revealed it is found missing (Reed 196). For Gates, Reed's point is to show that Jes Grew, like "blackness," "is not a transcendent signified but must be *produced* in a dynamic process and manifested in discrete forms, as in black music and black speech acts" (314). Reed's purpose is to signify on ideas of blackness as both presence and/or absence, and this is for Gates, the most important polemical point of his own theory of signifying in black literature:

In literature, blackness is *produced* in the text only through a complex process of signification. There can be no transcendent blackness, for it cannot and does not exist beyond manifestations of it in specific figures. . . . Blackness exists, but "only" as a function of its signifiers. (316)

One of the difficulties I have with Gates's lengthy discussion of Reed is part of a problem that occurs in much criticism of post-modern texts. Phrases about the "indeterminacy of interpretation *itself*" or "a discourse on the history and nature of writing *itself*"

begin to sound too much like rather standard generalizing critical terminology. No doubt *Mumbo Jumbo* and much other postmodern literature involves the critique of writing and its various claims to some kind of authenticity or "truth," and critics are right to describe the nature of such literary analyses. Often, however, it seems that another kind of essentialism is unwittingly implied when critics say that history, or writing, or anything "itself" is critiqued or exposed or undone. Surely what they mean — and it is clearer in Gates than in most — is that the *ideology* of history or writing is called into question, that the relationship between ideas, words, and things is shown to be difficult, untrustworthy, and yet powerful, and in some sense, even real.

There is also the problem of a certain vagueness in some of Gates's terminology. I have already mentioned the way Gates marks the relations between authors using such terms as "modernism," "lyricism," "naturalism," and "regionalism." But though the connections Gates demonstrates between texts are convincing, it is difficult to know precisely what "lyricism" or "modernism" might mean in terms of these relationships. For instance, in another example of how Ellison's "modernism" signifies upon Wright's "naturalism," Gates compares each author's symbolic treatment of a descent into the underworld of the city sewer system. He points to the "heavy-handed" ("Monkey" 294) symbolism of Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground," saying that the moment at which Fred Daniel stumbles upon a dead baby as he flees through the sewer (Wright, "Underground" 24) "is precisely [the] point in the narrative that we know Fred Daniels to be 'dead, baby'" ("Monkey" 294).¹⁷ In contrast to this supposedly awkward symbolism, Gates notes Ellison's play upon this underground scene in *Invisible Man*. In Ellison's book, the narrator/protagonist burns "the bits of paper [high school diploma, a doll, letters, etc.] (Ellison 554-56) through which he ha[s] allowed himself to be defined by others" ("Monkey" 294). According to Gates, Ellison, by "explicitly repeating and reversing key figures of Wright's fictions . . . exposed naturalism as merely a hardened convention of representation of 'the Negro problem', and perhaps part of 'the Negro problem' itself" (294).

The connection Gates is drawing between the two texts is undeniable, and one could probably agree on Gates's general point about Wright's "naturalism" and Ellison's "modernism." But to do so, more context is necessary in order to bring the point more fully to light. What, one might ask, is the precise nature of the "reversal" that Ellison is performing that makes it "modernist" as opposed to simply parodic or revisionary? Taken as incidents in themselves, and without a broader idea of what "modernism" or "naturalism" might mean in Ellison and Wright generally, or in the Afro-American tradition as a whole, there is no particular reason that either descent should be seen as more or less "naturalistic" or "modernist" than the other. Of course, Gates can hardly be expected to explicate completely terms which perhaps no one in any critical community has satisfactorily defined. But it seems likely, or at least possible, that Afro-American "regionalism" or "modernism" would have similarities to, and differences from, other such classifications outside the Afro-American community. Some elaboration on these similarities and differences, and perhaps some provisional definitions of these terms would be very useful.

Some in the Afro-American critical community take more serious issue with the potential narrowness of Gates's theory. Deborah E. McDowell is one who suggests that Gates's analysis of the black intertext "characterizes the formal relations between [Wright, Ellison, and Reed] as largely adversarial and parodic" (McDowell 295). McDowell's own concern is with comparing representations of the black female "self" in the nineteenth-century novel *Iola Leroy* by Frances E. W. Harper to those found in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Despite "current critical fashion," she maintains that for black women writers "imaging the black woman as a 'whole' character or 'self' has been a consistent preoccupation" (McDowell 283). Thus, while there is much to parody in Harper's earlier and more "outwardly" (288) determined *Iola Leroy*, Walker does not take advantage of this with her "inwardly" (289) directed *Celie*. McDowell maintains that this sort of lack of intertextual aggression is the "fundamental distinction between Afro-American male and female literary relations" (295).

McDowell's criticism raises the problem that Gates, perhaps unintentionally, has made a particularly *male* theory of Afro-

American intertextuality. He does credit Zora Neale Hurston with being the "first author of the tradition to represent signifying itself" as a means of female liberation, and as "a rhetorical strategy in the narration of fiction" ("Monkey" 290).¹⁸ He also points out that both Hurston and Reed seem to "relish the play of the tradition." But it is clear from the amount of space given to Reed that for Gates, what is more important is Reed's "magnificently conceived play *on* the tradition" (296). The sense of who is "stronger," to borrow from Harold Bloom, is quite clear.¹⁹

Joyce A. Joyce goes even further than McDowell in criticizing Gates. Like McDowell, she also feels that the idea of a black "self" cannot be done away with. She says that the "Black creative writer has continuously struggled to assert his or her real self and to establish a connection between the self and the people outside that self" (341). For Joyce, the move in Afro-American criticism away from "polemical, biographical criticism" and toward post-structuralism is a movement towards operating in a "historical vacuum" (343). Black post-structuralism is an acceptance of "elitist American values," which widen the gap between intellectuals and "those masses of Blacks whose lives are still stifled by oppressive environmental, intellectual phenomena" (339). Worst of all is that for the critic to conceive of blackness as an arbitrary "sign" as Gates does is to negate "his [Gates's] blackness" (341).

It is probably true that Gates has not closed any "gaps" between the tower and the street. But it is also true that he has been consistently aware of the dangers in trying to make the experience of Afro-Americans in either place a mere given. Gates has not been co-opted by the white contemporary critical world; rather, he has used some of its tools to point out that "blackness" — Gates's own, or that of others in the Afro-American community — is a complex issue. He has not tried to deny blackness, but instead, he has attempted to point out that to consider the experience of blackness as any *one* thing is to accept a kind of unifying principle which Gates sees as being *historically* used against Afro-Americans. To make blackness a "unity" (a "presence" of "self" or community) is to risk a "oneness" which immediately posits an "other," thus repeating a divisive and dangerous set of metaphysical presuppositions. As Gates says in his response to Joyce: "Who can

doubt that *Black Fire*, the splendid anthology of the Black Arts . . . has sold *vastly* more copies to black intellectuals than to 'our people'?" ("Black Idiom" 357). The assumption that "our people" are "one" is a dismissal of the diversity of experience that cannot and, for Gates, must not be subsumed under any easy sign of categorical completeness.

Gates has pointed out in a recent article that issues of "theory, tradition, and integrity within the black literary tradition [have] not been, and perhaps cannot be . . . straightforward matter[s]" ("Authority" 331). But with the theory of "signifyin(g)," Gates has begun the difficult work of reconciling the opposing voices and influences that affect the Afro-American critic. His work is not mere mimicry of white critical theory, but instead a subtle and insightful revision and reappropriation of many aspects of many theories brought together in order to acknowledge and help in the establishment of an Afro-American literary and critical tradition. As such, Gates alerts us to the possibility of a theory in the black idiom in which "*black people theorize about their art and their lives in the black vernacular*" (338). As one gesture of resistance to the silence which has historically been imposed upon non-canonical literatures and theories of those literatures, "signifyin(g)" stands as a complex and important theoretical model.

NOTES

- 1 Smith outlines the ways in which Richards, especially in the chapter on "Badness in Poetry" in *Principles* 199-206, "consistently puts his psycho-neurological account of value in the service of canonical judgements and repeatedly translated it into versions of evaluative absolutism and objectivism" (8). Smith also points out how Frye, in reaction to the potential subjectivism of Richards's approach, "could speak almost in one breath of the need to 'get rid of . . . all casual, sentimental, and prejudiced value judgements' (Frye 18)" (Smith 11), and also of "the masterpieces of literature which are 'the materials of literary criticism' (Frye 15)" (Smith 11) without any sense that such masterpieces may be anything other than unquestionable givens. See Frye, *Anatomy* 18, 15.
- 2 The theory and the authors Gates discusses in his essay are given fuller treatment in the book. Anyone desiring greater explication of certain points should see the appropriate chapter in *The Signifying Monkey*. The fundamentals of Gates's approach, however, remain fairly consistent from essay to book.
- 3 The book Davis is concerned with is Wright's *Black Boy*: "Wright provided a new definition for blackness, and every subsequent writer who turned to older, simpler definitions did so with reluctance or embarrassment

or from a questionable nostalgia" ("Cosmos" 19). The other important writers for Davis are Ralph Ellison, who "thinks of blackness as a state of the soul accessible to all" (23), and James Baldwin, for whom blackness is a "mark of pain" (23), as well as the "sign of admission to a rich, ancient, and elemental tradition . . ." (19).

- ⁴ Davis says "nearly all" because, as he points out, being "black was less important for Charles Chestnutt than it was for James Baldwin" ("Cosmos" 3).
- ⁵ But Davis also says that it is wrong to dismiss the Black Arts movement since it has given the black community an "emotional energy that has gone into the formulation of programs and into the commitment of serious artists to the black aesthetic" ("Critic" 41).
- ⁶ Such beliefs were born in the white community as early as the seventeenth century. Black identification with such fallacies, according to Gates, continues from the eighteenth century to the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s (xxiii-xxiv). For his extended discussion of this phenomenon, see "Literary Theory and the Black Tradition," 3-60, in *Figures in Black*. See also the first section of "Authority, (White) Power, and the (Black) Critic; or, It's All Greek to Me," 324-30.
- ⁷ Gates traces the association of blackness and negation back to Plato's *Phaedrus* ("Jungle" 7).
- ⁸ I will use the version in *Black Literature and Literary Theory* 285-321, which is slightly longer than the one reprinted in *Figures in Black* 235-76.
- ⁹ Definitions for many of these terms may be found in two sources which Gates often mentions: Abrahams, especially 257-65; and Mitchell-Kernan, "Signifying, Loud-Talking, and Marking," in Kochman 315-35, 317.
- ¹⁰ For an example of such a theory, see "The Signifying Monkey," Hughes and Bontemps 363-66.
- ¹¹ Gates, "Monkey" (qtd. in Abrahams 51).
- ¹² Gates takes the passage from a collection edited by Alan Dundes called *Mother Wit and the Laughing Barrel*. I cite the same passage here from Mitchell-Kernan 317.
- ¹³ Gates's meaning may come clearer if we compare the presentation of the murder of Mary Dalton by Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* to the story of incest that Jim Trueblood relates to Mr. Norton in *Invisible Man*. Trueblood knows how to construct his story and is subsequently paid rather well for his efforts as "native informant." Bigger, who seems only able to react from a base of fear and degradation, lives out the contingencies of murder and panic. See Ellison, ch. 2, esp. 67-69; and Wright, *Native Son*, esp. 82-92.
- ¹⁴ Gates elaborates upon some of these relationships at greater length in *The Signifying Monkey*. See esp. ch. 3, "Figures of Signification" 89-124, and ch. 4, "The Trope of the Talking Book" 127-69. For a more complete discussion of Hurston, see ch. 5, 170-216. I will take up the problem of Gates's lack of definition of such terms as "modernism," "lyricism," etc., later in this paper.
- ¹⁵ See Reed, esp. 219-23.
- ¹⁶ As an epigraph for his book, Reed cites the following on page 11: "The earliest Ragtime songs, like Topsy, 'jes' grew.'" This is followed by a quote from Johnson: ". . . we appropriated about the last one of the 'jes' songs. . . The words were unprintable, but the tune was irresistible, and belonged

- to nobody." Gates feels that Reed is signifying upon the notion that "black creativity is anonymous" ("Monkey" 299), and this makes sense in many ways, especially when one considers Reed's penchant for footnoting those he uses.
- ¹⁷ The scene describing the dead baby is given thus: "Water blossomed about the tiny legs, and tiny arms, the tiny head, and rushed onward. . . the mouth gaped in a soundless cry" (Wright, "Underground" 24). The language of Fred Daniels's death in the sewer closely parallels the description of the baby: "The water flowed past him blossoming in foam about his arms, his legs, and his head. His jaw sagged and his mouth gaped soundless" (68).
- ¹⁸ Gates says that Janie "kills" her second husband through signifying ("Monkey" 290). See Hurston 122-35. For a more humorous example of signifying, see 81-97.
- ¹⁹ I should note here, however, that in his recent book, *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates has given a whole chapter to Hurston ("Hurston"), and one to Walker ("Color Me Zora"). The careful attention he gives to these authors in the book may mitigate his lack of attention to these and other women writers in his earlier writing on "signifyin(g)."

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