

dedicated to the virtues and deeds of their heroes. These ballads bear their names: "John Hardy," "John Henry," "Casey Jones," "Railroad Bill," "Stagolee," and "Frankie and Johnny," among others. Aware of English, Irish, Scottish, and French ballad styles, Black balladeers adopted the classic ballad form which tells a story in a series of stanzas, usually in a progressive, chronologically developed narrative with or without a refrain.

At the close of the century, blues developed as a form out of the hollers of the solitary farmers who worked the rows of Southern fields. Often they sang their hollers, repeating the lines until new lines came to mind that completed the thought and expressed the emotion.

With the introduction of the guitar, capable of producing the moaning, whining, flattened sounds of the human voice, blues took shape. Though the early blues had the eight-bar or sixteen-bar stanzaic structure like the ballads, with the experimentation with the "blues notes" and the African pentatonic scale, the "twelve-bar blues" evolved. The most common but by no means the only structure consisted of three lines of four bars each.

Within this structure, the blues singer improvises his music, and in the act of creation he draws from a stock of favorite verses and familiar rhythmic patterns, and combines them with new lines extemporized out of his melancholy experience. He sings of love and infidelity, poverty and economic uncertainty, lonely travel and dislocation, drinking and drugs, and disasters and death. Unlike the balladeer who extols the virtues of a distant hero, the blues singer is the central character in this song. Therefore, the blues singers themselves become heroes to their hearers. Brownie McGhee, Blind Willie McTell, Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, Clara Smith, Mamie Smith, Ida Cox—the names are legion—look on their personal calamities and are not destroyed.

Clearly in this cultural tradition, Brown, with a conscious artistry, combines the intensely personal music of the blues singer with the heroic tales and epic scope of the balladeer. The genius of this invention is apparent in "Ma Rainey." Brown takes the explicit, chronological, and narrative elements of the ballad to tell how the people flock in to hear "Ma Rainey do her stuff." And though the ballad form functions well to spotlight this magnificent woman with the "gold-toofed smiles," it cannot accommodate the intimacy, the immediacy, and the emotional intensity that Brown intends for the poem. He needs the blues ethos to suggest the massive concentration of emotion present among the folk in Ma's audience—the work-weary soul, the laughing to keep from crying, the unspeakable sorrow, the needful catharsis. . . .

Suggested Readings with Similar Theme:

Henderson, Stephen E. "The Heavy Blues of Sterling Brown: A Study of Craft and Tradition." *Black American Literature Forum* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 32–49.
 Rampersad, Arnold. "Langston Hughes' *Fine Clothes To The Jew*." *Callaloo* 9, no. 1 (Winter 1986): 144–58.

HENRY LOUIS GATES JR.

Signifyin(g): Definitions [and Theory] (1988)

What makes signifyin(g) "so fundamentally black"? Identify the numerous rhetorical modes of signifyin(g). According to Gates, Smitherman, Henderson, Williams, Andrews, and Hubbard, how is black speech a poetic reference? Define the following terms: encoded vernacular, revision, indirection, double-voiced, intertextuality, embedded trope, free-indirect discourse, trope of Talking Book.

One of the most sustained attempts to define Signifyin(g) is that of Roger D. Abrahams, a well-known and highly regarded literary critic, linguist, and anthropologist. Abrahams published several significant studies of Signifyin(g). To tract Abrahams's interpretative evolution helps us to understand the complexities of this rhetorical strategy but is outside the scope of this book.

Abrahams in 1962 brilliantly defines Signifyin(g) in terms that he and other subsequent scholars shall repeat:

The name "Signifying Monkey" shows [the hero] to be a trickster, "signifying" being the language of trickery, that set of words or gestures which arrives at "direction through indirection."

Signifyin(g), Abrahams argues implicitly, is the black person's use of figurative modes of language use. The word indirection hereafter recurs in the literature with great, if often unacknowledged, frequency. Abrahams explained on his theory of Signifyin(g) in two editions of *Deep Down in the Jungle* (1964, 1970). It is useful to list the signal aspects of his extensive definitions:

1. Signifyin(g) "can mean any number of things."
2. It is a black term and a black rhetorical device.
3. It can mean the "ability to talk with great innuendo."
4. It can mean "to carp, cajole, needle, and lie."
5. It can mean "the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point."
6. It can mean "making fun of a person or situation."
7. It can "also denote speaking with the hands and eyes."
8. It is "the language of trickery, that set of words achieving Hamlet's 'direction through indirection.'"
9. The Monkey "is a 'signifier,' and the Lion, therefore, is the signified."

Finally, in his appended glossary of "Unusual Terms and Expressions," Abrahams defines "Signify" as "To imply, goad, beg, boast by indirect verbal or gestural means. A language of implication."

These definitions are exemplary insofar as they emphasize "indirection" and "implication," which we read as synonyms of figurative. Abrahams was the first scholar, to my knowledge, to define Signifyin(g) as a language, by which he means a particular rhetorical strategy. Whereas he writes that the Monkey is a master of this technique, it is even more accurate to write that he is technique, the literariness of language, the ultimate source for black people of the figures of signification. If we think of rhetoric as the "writing" of spoken discourse, then the Monkey's role as the source and encoded keeper of Signifyin(g) helps to reveal his functional equivalency with his Pan-African cousin, Esu-Ellegbara, the figure of writing of Ifa. . . .

When a black person speaks of Signifyin(g), he or she means a "style-focused message . . . styling which is foregrounded, of course, is the signified itself, as we have seen in the rhyme scheme of the Monkey tales. The Monkey is called the signifier because he foregrounds the signifier in his use of language. Signifyin(g), in other words, turns on the sheer play of the signifier. It does not refer primarily to the signified; rather, it refers to the style of language, to that which transforms ordinary discourse into literature. Again, one does not Signify some thing; one Signifies in some way. . . .

While several other scholars have discussed the nature and function of Signifyin(g), the theories of Claudia-Mitchell-Kernan and Geneva Smitherman are especially useful for the theory or revision that I am outlining in this chapter. Mitchell-Kernan's theory of Signifyin(g) is among the most thorough and the most subtle in the linguistic literature, while Smitherman's work connects linguistic analysis with the Afro-American literary tradition.

Mitchell-Kernan is quick to demonstrate that Signifyin(g) has received most scholarly attention as "a tactic employed in game activity—verbal dueling—which is engaged in as an end in itself," as if this one aspect of the rhetorical concept amounted to its whole. In fact, however, "Signifying . . . also refers to a way of encoding messages or meanings which involves, in most cases, an element of indirection." This alternative definition amounts to nothing less than a polite critique of the linguistic studies of Signifyin(g), since the subtleties of this rhetorical strategy somehow escaped most other scholars before Mitchell-Kernan. As she expands her definition, "This kind of signifying is not focal to the linguistic interaction in the sense that it does not define the entire speech event."

I cannot stress too much the importance of this definition, for it shows that Signifyin(g) is a pervasive mode of language use rather than merely one specific verbal game, an observation that somehow escaped the notice of every other scholar before Mitchell-Kernan. This definition alone serves as a

corrective to what I think of as the tendency among linguists who have fixed their gaze upon the aggressive ritual part and thereby avoided seeing the concept as a whole. What's more, Mitchell-Kernan's definition points to the implicit parallels between Signifyin(g) and the use of language that we broadly define to be figurative, by which I mean in this context an intentional deviation from the ordinary form of syntactical relation of words.

Signifyin(g), in other words, is synonymous with figuration. Mitchell-Kernan's work is so rich because she studied the language behavior of adults as well as adolescents, and of women as well as men. Whereas her colleagues studied lower-class male language use, then generalized from this strictly limited sample, Mitchell-Kernan's data are derived from a sample more representative of the black speech community. Hers is a sample that does not undermine her data because it accounts for the role of age and sex as variables in language use. In addition, Mitchell-Kernan refused to be captivated by the verbal insult rituals, such as sounding, playing the dozens, and Signifyin(g), as ritual speech events, unlike other linguists whose work suffers from an undue attention to the use of words such as motherfucker, to insults that turn on sexual assertions about someone's mama, and to supposed Oedipal complexes that arise in the literature only because the linguist is reading the figurative as a literal statement, like our friend, the Signified Lion.

These scholars, unlike Mitchell-Kernan, have mistaken the language games of adolescents as an end rather than as the drills common to classical rhetorical study as suggested in Lanham's hypothetical synopsis quoted earlier in this chapter. As Mitchell-Kernan concludes, both the sex and the age of the linguist's informants "may slant interpretation, particularly because the insult dimension [of Signifyin(g)] looms large in contexts where verbal dueling is focal." In the neighborhood in which she was raised, she argues, whereas "Sounding and Playing the Dozens categorically involved verbal insult (typically joking behavior); signifying did not." Mitchell-Kernan is declaring, most unobtrusively, that, for whatever reasons, linguists have misunderstood what Signifyin(g) means to black people who practice it. While she admits that one relatively minor aspect of this rhetorical principle involves the ritual of insult, the concept is much more profound than merely this. Indeed, Signifyin(g) alone serves to underscore the uniqueness of the black community's use of language: "the terminological use of signifying to refer to a particular kind of language specialization defines the Black community as a speech community in contrast to non-Black communities." Mitchell-Kernan here both critiques the work of other linguists who have wrestled unsuccessfully with this difficult concept (specifically Abraham and Kochman) and provides an urgently needed corrective by defining Signifyin(g) as a way of figuring language. Mitchell-Kernan's penetrating work enables Signifyin(g) to be even further elaborated upon for use in literary theory.

Because it is difficult to arrive at a consensus of definitions of Signifyin(g), as this chapter already has made clear, Mitchell-Kernan proceeds "by

way of analogy to inform the reader of its various meanings as applied in interpretation." This difficulty of definition is a direct result of the fact that Signifyin(g) is the black term for what in classical European rhetoric are called the figures of signification. Because to Signify is to be figurative, to define it in practice is to define it through any number of its embedded tropes. No wonder even Mitchell-Kernan could not arrive at a consensus among her informants—except for what turns out to be the most crucial shared aspects of all figures of speech, an indirect use of words that changes the meaning of a word or words. Or, as Quintilian put it, figuration turns on some sort of "change in signification." While linguists who disagree about what it means to Signify all repeat the role of indirection in this rhetorical strategy, none of them seems to have understood that the ensuing alteration or deviation of meaning makes Signifyin(g) the black trope for all other tropes, the trope of tropes, the figure of figures. Signifyin(g) is troping.

Mitchell-Kernan begins her elaboration of the concept by pointing to the unique usage of the word in black discourse:

What is unique in Black English usage is the way in which signifying is extended to cover a range of meanings and events which are not covered in its Standard English usage. In the Black community it is possible to say, "He is signifying" and "Stop signifying"—sentences which would be anomalous elsewhere.

Because in standard English signification denotes meaning and in the black tradition it denotes ways of meaning, Mitchell-Kernan argues for discrepancies between meanings of the same term in two distinct discourses:

The Black concept of signifying incorporates essentially a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient for interpreting meanings or messages, or that meaning goes beyond such interpretations. Complimentary remarks may be delivered in a left-handed fashion. A particular utterance may be an insult in one context and not another. What pretends to be informative may intend to be persuasive. The hearer is thus constrained to attend to all potential meaning carrying symbolic systems in speech events—the total universe of discourse.

Signifyin(g), in other words, is the figurative difference between the literal and the metaphorical, between surface and latent meaning. Mitchell-Kernan calls this feature of discourse an "implicit content or function, which is potentially obscured by the surface content or function." Finally, Signifyin(g) presupposes an "encoded" intention to say one thing but to mean quite another.

Mitchell-Kernan presents several examples of Signifyin(g), as she is defining it. Her first example is a conversation among three women about the meal to be served at dinner. One woman asks the other two to join her for dinner, that is, if they are willing to eat "chir'lins." She ends her invitation with a pointed rhetorical question: "Or are you one of those Negroes who

don't eat chir'lins?" The third person, the woman not addressed, responds with a long defense of why she prefers "prime-rib and T-bone" to "chir'lins," ending with a traditional ultimate appeal to special pleading, a call to unity within the ranks to defeat racism. Then she leaves. After she has gone, the initial speaker replies to her original addressee in this fashion: "Well, I wasn't signifying at her, but like I always say, if the shoe fits wear it." Mitchell-Kernan concludes that while the manifest subject of this exchange was dinner, the latent subject was the political orientation of two black people vis-à-vis cultural assimilation or cultural nationalism, since many middle-class blacks refuse to eat this item from the traditional black cuisine. Mitchell-Kernan labels this form of Signifyin(g) "allegory," because "the significance or meaning of the words must be derived from known symbolic values."

This mode of Signifyin(g) is commonly practiced by Afro-American adults. It is functionally equivalent to one of its embedded tropes, often called louding or loud-talking, which as we might expect connotes exactly the opposite of that which it denotes: one successfully loud-talks by speaking to a second person remarks in fact directed to a third person, at a level just audible to the third person. A sign of the success of this practice is an indignant "What?" from the third person, to which the speaker responds, "I wasn't talking to you." Of course, the speaker was, yet simultaneously was not. Loud-talking is related to Mitchell-Kernan's second figure of Signification, which she calls "obscuring the addressee" and which I shall call naming. Her example is one commonly used in the tradition, in which "the remark is, on the surface, directed toward no one in particular":

I saw a woman the other day in a pair of stretch pants, she must have weighed 300 pounds. If she knew how she looked she would burn those things.

If a member of the speaker's audience is overweight and frequently wears stretch pants, then this message could well be intended for her. If she protests, the speaker is free to maintain that she was speaking about someone else and to ask why her auditor is so paranoid. Alternatively, the speaker can say, "if the shoe fits. . . ." Mitchell-Kernan says that a characteristic of this form of Signifyin(g) is the selection of a subject that is "selectively relevant to the speaker's audience." I once heard a black minister name the illicit behavior of specific members of his congregation by performing a magnificent reading of "The Text of the Dry Bones," which is a reading or gloss upon Ezekiel 37:1-14. Following this sermon, a prayer was offered by Lin Allen. As "Mr. Lin," as we called him, said, "Dear Lord, go with the gambling man . . . not forgetting the gambling woman," the little church's eerie silence was shattered by the loud-talking voice of one of my father's friends (Ben Fisher, rest his soul), whom the congregation "overheard" saying, "Got you that time, Gates, got you that time, Newtsy!" My father and one of our neighbors, Miss Newtsy, had been Signified upon.

Mitchell-Kernan presents several examples of Signifyin(g) that elaborate on its subtypes. Her conclusion is crucial to the place of her research in the literature on Signification. "Signifying," she declares as conclusion, "does not . . . always have negative valuations attached to it; it is clearly thought of as a kind of art—a clever way of conveying messages." A literary critic might call this troping, an interpretation or mis-taking of meaning, to paraphrase Harold Bloom, because, as Mitchell-Kernan maintains, "signifying . . . alludes to and implies things which are never made explicit." Let me cite two brief examples. In the first, "Grace," introduces the exchange by defining its context:

(After I had my little boy, I swore I was not having any more babies. I thought four kids was a nice-sized family. But it didn't turn out that way. I was a little bit disgusted and didn't tell anybody when I discovered I was pregnant. My sister came over one day and I had started to show by that time.) . . .
 Rochelle: Girl, you sure to need to join the Metrecal for lunch bunch.
 Grace: (non-committally) Yes, I guess I am putting on a little weight.
 Rochelle: Now look here, girl, we both standing here soaking wet and you still trying to tell me it ain't raining!

This form of Signifyin(g) is obviously a long way from the sort usually defined by scholars. One final example of the amusing, troping exchange follows, again cited by Mitchell-Kernan:

I: Man, when you gon pay me my five dollars?
 II: Soon as I get it.
 I: (to audience) Anybody want to buy a five dollar nigger? I got one to sell.
 II: Man, if I gave you your five dollars, you wouldn't have nothing to signify about.
 I: Nigger, long as you don't change, I'll always have me a subject.

This sort of exchange is common in the black community and represents Signifyin(g) as its more evolved levels than the more obvious examples (characterized by confrontation and insult) discussed by linguists other than Mitchell-Kernan. . . .

II.

The black tradition is double-voiced. The trope of the Talking Book, of double-voiced text that talks to other texts, is the unifying metaphor within this book. Signifyin(g) is the figure of the double-voiced, epitomized by Esu's depictions in sculpture as possessing two mouths. There are four sorts of double-voiced textual relations that I wish to define.

1 Tropological Revision

By tropological revision I mean the manner in which a specific trope is repeated, with differences, between two or more texts. The revision of specific tropes recurs with surprising frequency in the Afro-American literary tradition. The descent underground, the vertical "ascent" from South to North, myriad figures of the double, and especially double consciousness all come readily to mind. But there are other tropes that would seem to preoccupy the texts of the black tradition. The first trope shared in the black narrative tradition is what I shall call the Talking Book. This compelling trope appears in James Gronniosaw's 1770 slave narrative, and then is revised in at least four other texts published between 1785 and 1815. We might think of this as the ur-trope of the tradition. The form that repetition and difference take among these texts is the first example of Signifyin(g) as repetition and difference in the Anglo-African narrative tradition.

2 The Speakerly Text

The second mode of Signifyin(g) that I have chosen to represent in this text is exemplified in the peculiar play of "voices" at work in the use of "free indirect discourse" in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Above all else, Hurston's narrative strategy seems to concern itself with the possibilities of representation of the speaking black voice in writing. Hurston's text, I shall claim, seems to aspire to the status of what she and, later, Ishmael Reed call the Talking Book. It is striking that this figure echoes the first figure repeated and revised in the tradition. Hurston's use is remarkably complex, and accomplished. Free indirect discourse is represented in this canonical text as if it were a dynamic character, with shifts in its level of diction drawn upon to reflect a certain development of self-consciousness in a hybrid character, a character who is neither the novel's protagonist nor the text's disembodied narrator, but a blend of both, an emergent and merging moment of consciousness. The direct discourse of the novel's black speech community and the initial standard English of the narrator come together to form a third term, a truly double-voiced narrative mode. That element of narration that the Russian Formalists called *skaz*—when a text seems to be aspiring to the status of oral narration—is most clearly the closest analogue of Hurston's rhetorical strategy. The attendant ramifications of this device upon received modes of mimesis and diegesis occupy my attention in this chapter. Finally, I shall use Hurston's own theory of Signifyin(g) to analyze her narrative strategy, including the identification of Signifyin(g) rituals in the body of her text.

Talking Texts

Chapter 5 explores one instance of a black form of intertextuality. Within the limits of the metaphor of the double-voiced that I am tracing from Esu-Elegbara

to Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, I have chosen to explicate Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo* to show how black texts "talk" to other black texts. Since *Mumbo Jumbo* would seem to be a signal text of revision and critique, cast in a so-called postmodern narrative, the implicit relation among modernism, realism, and postmodernism comes to bear here in the texts of *Invisible Man*, *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, and *Mumbo Jumbo*. Again, the relation of mimesis to diegesis shall occupy my attention in *Mumbo Jumbo*'s foregrounded double voices.

4 Rewriting the Speakerly

If Hurston's novel seems to have been designed to declare that, indeed, a text could be written in black dialect, then it seems to me that Walker's *The Color Purple* aims to do just that, as a direct revision of Hurston's explicit and implicit strategies of narration. Walker, whose preoccupation with Hurston as a deeply admired antecedent has been the subject of several of her critical comments, revises and echoes Hurston in a number of ways. Her use of the epistolary form to write a novel in the language seemingly spoken by Hurston's protagonist is perhaps the most stunning instance of revision in the tradition of the black novel. Here, let me introduce a distinction: Reed's use of parody would seem to be fittingly described as motivated Signifyin(g), in which the text Signifies upon other black texts, in the manner of the vernacular ritual of "close reading." Walker's use of pastiche, on the other hand, corresponds to unmotivated Signifyin(g), by which I mean to suggest not the absence of a profound intention but the absence of a negative critique. The relation between parody and pastiche is that between motivated and unmotivated Signifyin(g).

Whereas Reed seems to be about the clearing of a space of narration, Walker seems to be intent on underscoring the relation of her text to Hurston's, in a joyous proclamation of antecedent and descendant texts. The most salient analogue for this unmotivated mode of revision in the broader black cultural tradition might be that between black jazz musicians who perform each other's standards on a joint album, not to critique these but to engage in refiguration as an act of homage. Such an instance, one of hundreds, is the relationship between two jazz greats on the album they made together, Duke Ellington and John Coltrane. This form of the double-voiced implies unity and resemblance rather than critique and difference. The premise of this book is that the literary discourse that is most consistently "black," as read against our tradition's own theory of itself, is the most figurative, and that the modes of interpretation most in accord with the vernacular tradition's theory of criticism are those that direct attention to the manner in which language is used. Black texts Signify upon other black texts in the tradition by engaging in what Ellison has defined as implicit formal critiques of

language use, of rhetorical strategy. Literary Signification, then, is similar to parody and pastiche, wherein parody corresponds to what I am calling motivated Signification while pastiche would correspond roughly to unmotivated Signification. By motivation I do not mean to suggest the lack of intention, for parody and pastiche imply intention, ranging from severe critique to acknowledgement and placement within a literary tradition. Pastiche can imply either homage to an antecedent text or futility in the face of a seemingly indomitable mode of representation. Black writers Signify on each other's texts for all of these reasons, and the relations of Signification that obtain between and among black texts serve as a basis for a theory of formal revision in the Afro-American tradition. Literary echoes, or pastiche, as found in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, of signal tropes found in Emerson, Eliot, Joyce, Crane, or Melville (among others) constitute one mode of Signifyin(g).

But so does Ellison's implicit rhetorical critique of the conventions of realism found in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, *The Man Who Lived Underground*, and *Black Boy*. Reed's parodies of Wright and Ellison constitute a Signification of a profoundly motivated order, especially as found in the text of *Mumbo Jumbo*. Hurston's multileveled use of voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* represents a Signification upon the entire tradition of dialect poetry as well as a brilliant and subtle critique of received notions of voice in the realistic novel, amounting to a remarkably novel critique and extension of Henry James's use of point-of-view as point-of-consciousness. Hurston's novel, like Sterling A. Brown's *Southern Road*, amounts to a refutation of critics such as James Welton [sic] Johnson who argued just six years before the publication of *Their Eyes* that the passing of dialect as a literary device among black authors was complete. Moreover, by representing her protagonist as a mulatto, who eschews the bourgeois life and marries a dark-complexioned migrant worker, Hurston Signifies upon the female novel of passing, an ironic form of fantasy that she inherited from Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset. Finally, Walker's decision to place *The Color Purple* in a line of descent that runs directly from *Their Eyes* by engaging in a narrative strategy that tropes Hurston's concept of voice (by shifting it into the form of the epistolary novel and a written rather than a spoken vernacular) both extends dramatically the modes of revision available to writers in the tradition and reveals that acts of formal revision can be loving acts of bonding rather than ritual slayings at Esau's crossroads.

Suggested Reading with Similar Theme:

Mitchell-Kernan, Claudia. "Signifying." In *Mauber Writ from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*, 310–28, edited by Alan Dundes. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1973. Reprint, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990.