Henry Louis Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey* is bound to be controversial for what is at stake is the “blackness” of theory. What Gates proposes is a theory of criticism which is inscribed within the black vernacular tradition but also shapes the African American literary tradition. In this project *The Signifying Monkey* has its historical and theoretical origins in a reaction against the Eurocentric dominance of literary theory in the United States and in particular the dominance of the “Yale School” of criticism of a decade ago.

As an essay, “The Signifying Monkey” had its first public presentation in 1980 when Gates, then an untenured assistant professor, lectured to the formidable ranks of the Yale English Department, before whom many had been cowed. The atmosphere was electric because, far from being intimidated, Gates proved to these stuffy and somewhat pompous arbiters of literary critical power not only that there was an entity that could be called black literature but that black scholars could use and manipulate theory. Those of us in the audience who were black offered support and solidarity through our historically recent and all too visible presence in these particular halls of academe. It almost seemed as if the moment could be compared to the escaped slave proving his or her humanity to the abolitionists by demonstrating the skills of literacy. The Civil Rights movement propelled our entry into universities in significant numbers, and Gates’s contention that the vernacular and the theoretical can be combined appears to link the lives of critics with those on whom the doors of integration and upward mobility have been securely slammed shut. The vernacular is embodied in the privileged concept of Signifyin(g). Using Roger D. Abrahams’s definitions, Signifyin(g) is a black figurative mode of language use including “the ability to talk with great innuendo”; “to carp, cajole, needle, and lie”; “the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point”; and it is also “the language of trickery, that set of words achieving Hamlet’s ‘direction through indirection.’” Signifyin(g) is often associated with the everyday practice of the “dozens,” and “coming down” on somebody with words.
Gates's use of the concept depends upon the construction of a link between the frequently esoteric use of a critical discourse and an everyday language practice of the people who live adjacent to but do not enter Yale except to clean and service it.

The political project to imagine a black literary theory and tradition has to define that tradition and set of theoretical premises against both a dominant cultural formation and other subordinate ethnic formations. The impulse toward establishing critical and cultural autonomy rests on the assumption that an aggressive assertion of the existence of a unique tradition is both desirable and necessary. The logic of such an assumption is that in order to confront, effectively, the exclusions of a literary canon, alternative canons should be created. Of course, the function of canons is precisely to exclude, and in African American literary criticism black feminists have been creating alternatives to the dominance of great black male thinkers. The concern to establish a canon or tradition is a conventional literary project, there is nothing inherently black or feminist about it, but the question of whether it is indeed necessary or desirable to create traditions rather than to develop a critique of the process of canon formation remains unasked.

"Signifyin(g)," Gates explains in the Preface, "is not the only theory appropriate to the texts of our tradition. But it is one that I would like to think arises from the black tradition itself." From a close reading of Ralph Ellison's collection of essays *Shadow and Act*, and Ishmael Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, Gates constructs a theory of criticism which he directs toward an "ideal reader" and theorist of the black vernacular, Houston Baker. The emphasis then is on readings of culture and of texts which are internal to the category of "blackness" rather than what Gates calls in his Introduction "literary theories appropriated from without."

In the first half of the book Gates makes a very complex and sophisticated argument that the principles of a black tradition of formal language use and its interpretation have their origins in the Yoruba myths of Esu-Elegbara and Fon myths of Legba. A detailed exposition of this mythological structure reveals an indigenous black hermeneutical principle. This principle, Gates argues convincingly, can be found in the New World transposition of tales of the Signifying Monkey, tales in which a monkey always outwits his physical superior, the Lion, by his extraordinary power to manipulate language, and is also present in the rhetoric and semantics of the practice of Signifyin(g). The Signifying Monkey and its "Pan-African cousin," Esu-Elegbara, Gates situates as functionally equivalent figures of rhetoric and interpretation. The mastery of Signifyin(g), a complex system of rhetoric which is "fundamentally black," creates "homo rhetoricus Africanus," Gates asserts, and this power to manipulate language is what he proposes as enabling black people to move freely across the boundaries between the white and the black discursive universes.

It is possible to be at once dazzled by the insights into the linguistic
complexities of Signifyin(g) and its relation to Yoruba and Fon hermeneutics and at the same time to remain skeptical of the project of establishing an essentially black theory and practice of criticism. Gates himself appropriates from without and is very eclectic in his use of structural, post-structural and even Marxist literary and linguistic theory. The exposition of uniquely black literary strategies is accomplished as much through the work of Geoffrey Hartmann, Harold Bloom, Jacques Lacan and Tzvetan Todorov, readings of Jacques Derrida by Gayatri Spivak and Jonathan Culler, and the insights of Mikhail Bakhtin as it is through the formidable array of critics of African American culture, who include Houston Baker, Amiri Imamu Baraka, Kimberly Benston, Sterling Brown, Ralph Ellison, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, Ishmael Reed, Geneva Smitherman, John Edgar Wideman and Al Young. Gates's insights about the relation between Signifyin(g) as a linguistic form and jazz as a musical form, both of which depend upon complex processes of repetition, revision and reformulation, are not applied to the ways in which African American cultural forms have revised, reinterpreted and rewritten dominant cultural paradigms. Emphasis on the intertextual relations between the narratives and works of fiction that Gates selects frequently discounts the historical conditions that shaped the production of a text. His assertion that there is a simple division between black content and a white-influenced form is inadequate to explain how struggles between social groups with unequal access to power are reproduced on the terrain of culture. Indeed, The Signifying Monkey cannot resolve its contradictory political positions between Gates’s appeal to a Black Nationalist rhetoric with its essentialist understanding of “blackness” and his simultaneous claim that “race” is a trope. The most significant weakness of Gates’s analysis is that the concept of race is not understood as a historically constructed and politically contested category.

Part two of The Signifying Monkey is concerned with reading the tradition and establishing the trope of the “Talking Book” as the central trope that unites a tradition of black texts. Gates produces perceptive and subtle close readings of texts as diverse as four narratives from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, Ishmael Reed’s Mumbo jumbo and Alice Walker’s The Color Purple. But he also reflects his definition of blackness and a black tradition through a North American nationalist lens. The early narratives establish Gates’s subject as being black literature in English; he does not establish paradigms for us that could be traced through narratives in Spanish or Portuguese; neither does he suggest ways in which the theories and practices of Signifyin(g), and thus his theory of blackness itself, could be applied to diasporic writing and writers.

Gates creates an imagined unity of texts and writers which, like all traditions, more effectively establishes imagined continuities than discontinuities. While no critical book that outlines the parameters of a tradition
could, or should, attempt to discuss all texts that would respond to its paradigms, what is always an interesting question is what texts are excluded from that community. Gates peremptorily rejects Richard Wright from inclusion in his community of writers and critics and even from his definition of "blackness." Wright's centrality to black modernism is ignored. In terse phrases of condemnation, Wright is accused of creating "a class of ideal individual black selves" that included only himself, and of achieving his humanity "only at the expense of his fellow blacks." He is expunged as an exception," characterized as "a noble black savage," and expelled in favor of Zora Neale Hurston's wholesome portrayal of the rural folk as an ethically and morally preferable source of twentieth-century African American writing.

The other intriguing absence is embedded in the field of criticism that Gates constructs and with which he is principally engaged. His admirable attention to see women writers as equally significant to his construction of tradition as men is not paralleled by a theoretical engagement with black feminist criticism or black feminist critics. This is not because Gates is sympathetic to feminist criticism -- his dialogue with the work of Barbara Johnson is important and enlightening. But he is silent about the substantial body of black feminist criticism on the work of Hurston, Reed and Walker, and the very significant theoretical interventions by Deborah McDowell, Hortense Spillers, Barbara Smith, Valerie Smith and Mary Helen Washington among others that have constituted a critical field during the last decade. Is it possible that, like Richard Wright, black feminist critics and black feminist criticism must remain on the margins of the formation of blackness?

Ultimately, we have to ask the question: is Gates Signifyin(g) on us all? His book is a complex and frequently dense repetition, revision and reformation of both Eurocentric and African American theoretical paradigms. The Signifying Monkey is still deeply marked by the desire to prove its legitimacy and authenticity to a skeptical audience. The need for a "black" critical theory emanates from the fact that African American Studies in general, and African American literary criticism in particular, has had a significant influence on debates about curriculum. Most English departments in universities in the United States feel that they should employ a Professor of Black Literature. This does not mean that black literature is no longer ghettoized; what it signifies is that many more universities offer effectively ghettoized black literature courses than ten years ago. A black face also "proves" the sincerity of a commitment to minority recruitment, and most English departments feel that they should have "one," making the annual recruitment of recent black Ph.Ds look like a department store rush for the January sales. The conditions for the study of African American literature, then, are not necessarily better but they are different. The Signifying Monkey is symptomatic of the mutually contradictory tendencies in the intellectual struggle to control
the dominant paradigms that will determine the politics of African American literary critical practice.

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