



The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism

By Henry Louis Gates

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The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism

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Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s original, groundbreaking study explores the relationship between the African and African-American vernacular traditions and black literature, elaborating a new critical approach located *within* this tradition that allows the black voice to speak for itself.

Examining the ancient poetry and myths found in African, Latin American, and Caribbean culture, and particularly the Yoruba trickster figure of Esu-Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey whose myths help articulate the black tradition's theory of its literature, Gates uncovers a unique system for interpretation and a powerful vernacular tradition that black slaves brought with them to the New World. His critical approach relies heavily on the Signifying Monkey--perhaps the most popular figure in African-American folklore--and signification and Signifyin(g).

Exploring signification in black American life and literature by analyzing the transmission and revision of various signifying figures, Gates provides an extended analysis of what he calls the "Talking Book," a central trope in early slave narratives that virtually defines the tradition of black American letters. Gates uses this critical framework to examine several major works of African-American literature--including Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*--revealing how these works signify on the black tradition and on each other. The second volume in an enterprising trilogy on African-American literature, *The Signifying Monkey*--which expands the arguments of *Figures in Black*--makes an important contribution to literary theory, African-American literature, folklore, and literary history.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Apart from suggesting new ways of looking at black literature, this original work is a singular contribution to linguistics, anthropology and rhetoric. Notwithstanding the considerable resources upon which he bases his case, Gates works with a lightness of touch and a style of reasoning that makes the exercise of following the construction of his argument most exciting and provocative."--*The Tribune*

"Copiously researched, re-orientes our understanding of American culture and letters."--Uzoma Esonwanne, *University of Michigan*

"Perhaps the most important critical statement regarding the rhetorical underpinnings of a black narrative discourse. For a general graduate course on cultural theory, I have found no better introduction text on the topic."--David William Foster, *Arizona State University*

"An important book....*The Signifying Monkey* displays an impressive array of scholarship coupled with a wide-ranging knowledge of diverse materials and a visible creative energy which synthesises these into a coherent and convincing thesis....an immensely stimulating work which deserves a wide readership."--Sandra Harris, *Reviews in American Studies*

"Eclectic, exciting, convincing, provocative, challenging....Gates gives black literature room to breathe, invents interpretive frameworks that enable us to experience black writing rather than label it in terms of theme or ideology. From this perspective his book is a generous, long-awaited gift....Like great novels that force us to view the world differently, Mr. Gates' compelling study suggests new ways of seeing."--John Wideman, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Like the African-American trickster figure who circumscribes the shifting center of this most impressive work, Henry Louis Gates resists simplification.... Gates has provided the foundation for a potentially accessible, politically useful, and academically sophisticated discipline of "comparative black literature." He will clearly play an important role in determining whether that discipline realizes its potential." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*

"Brilliantly original. Besides the work of Houston Baker, I cannot think of a more exciting reassessment of black literature that has been published in many years. *The Signifying Monkey* has the feel of a seminal work,

likely to reshape the course of black American literary criticism for years."--*The Washington Post Book World*

"The appearance of *The Signifying Monkey* [is] one of the most significant events in the development of [African-American] studies in the next decade. Bold, ambitious, original....Brilliant...[it] deserves to be read widely."--W.J.T. Mitchell, Editor, *Critical Inquiry*

"The Rosetta Stone of the American multi-cultural renaissance."--Ishmael Reed

"Breath-taking in the scope of its argument and in the energy and insight that it brings to reading individual texts, the matrix of the [African-American] tradition, and the Signifyin(g) practice that binds the 'Afro' to the 'American' in [African-American] writing and speaking."--James Olney, *Louisiana State University*

About the Author

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is Chairman of the Department of Afro-American Studies and W.E.B. Du Bois Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University. He is the author of *Figures in Black*, *Loose Canons*, and *Colored People*; general editor of *The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers*; and general editor of *The W.E.B. Du Bois Institute* series.

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