A provocative difference one notices on the cover of the two editions of Henry Louis Gates’s groundbreaking book *The Signifying Monkey* is the change in the subtitle from “A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism” to “A Theory of African American Literary Criticism,” a change that the book helped to enact. In the twenty-five years since its original publication, *The Signifying Monkey* has earned its place as a classic work of literary criticism and theory. As with any lasting scholarly work, moreover, it did not merely produce clones of its theory and method but enabled scholars in a host of disciplines in the arts and humanities and beyond to critique and push beyond its original borders. I still have my original copy from 1988, with the light blue (though frayed by now) book cover. In 1988, I had just learned that there was a difference between “literary criticism” and “literary theory” and, its subtitle notwithstanding, *The Signifying Monkey* established that not all theory emanated from Europe, even as it framed my scholarly coming-of-age-in-the-academy story. To open the text and to realize that Africa had theory was revolutionary and it is good to have an occasion to reflect on how revolutionary it was. While the study of early African American literature today has expanded—necessarily and rightly—to encompass archival discovery, biography, and print culture, it began, I think, with Gates’s concept of “signifyin(g).” First, two autobiographical digressions.

My journey with early African American literature began with absence. The one black literature course at Wake Forest University in 1979 began with Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The prevailing sense was that there was nothing “back there”—really. J. Saunders Redding in *To Make a Poet Black* (1939) had lumped everything before the Harlem Renaissance under the finely wrought phrase “literature of ne-
cessity.” What writing might have existed was utilitarian, functional, certain nothing to put on college syllabi or inspire literary analysis. I didn’t question this at age twenty because it resonated with my own truncated family history growing up in the South. There was simply a point where there was “nothing back there” and you learned to be content with absence and silence. In 1988, the year of the first edition of The Signifying Monkey, upon entering the Rutgers University library to do research for a paper on Spenser’s Fairie Queene (1590), I encountered an entire wall of books on Spenser. On the way out of the library I stopped by the Afro-American literature section and saw two shelves, half full or half empty depending on one’s temperament, the books held in place by metal bookends. My subject had found me. I walked out of the library, into Murray Hall and Cheryl Wall’s office, and announced that I wanted to write my dissertation on early black American literature. Of course, declaring “Afro-American literature before 1865” as an orals area was also problematic, and I was told by the graduate director that there was no such thing. After much reading and many visits to the Rutgers and Princeton libraries, I produced a five-page, single-spaced bibliography of slave narratives, poetry, novels, and essays by black writers before Emancipation and I was able to begin reading for orals.

I use these two autobiographical touchstones as a way to reflect for a few moments on the significance of The Signifying Monkey to the creation of early African American (meaning pre-Harlem Renaissance) literary study. Gates’s vernacular theory as an organizing principle within which to sketch—sometimes more successfully than others—an Afro/African American literary tradition reconfigured black texts away from biographical and sociological contexts to a consideration of the formal properties of African American intertextuality. Often accused by poststructuralists of creating a canon at the very juncture of the demise of the notion of canonicity, Gates did not achieve a construction of an undeconstructable canon so much as he precipitated a move that posited both an African American authorship and readership in one discursive swoop. The assertion that black writers read and revised each other’s texts helped to wrest the study of black writers in general, and early African American writers in particular, away from unexamined comparatist impulses that supported the notion that black writers were always already mere imitators (and poor ones at that) of white writers and toward a black literary tradition with in-
ternal formal coherence and historical movement. That there were ellipses and gaps in any such “tradition” was self-evident to early African American theorists. However, the concept of both black readership and black authorship working in tandem to create a sense of intertextuality on the basis of textual practice rather than the writer’s racial experience shifted the focus from the biographical person to the rhetorical strategies, tropes, figures, and emplotment used to represent blackness for the purpose of laying claim to racial (and gendered) equality.

Gates’s theory in *The Signifying Monkey* turned on an implicit analogy. Just as early black writers wrote within the context of white racial ideologies that subjugated black bodies on the pretext of a perceived lack of literature (written language), so contemporary literary critics perceived the lack of a black literary “tradition” as cause to view African American writing as inferior. Moreover, the application of European-based poststructuralist theories (and their American derivatives), while opening up the “canon,” were based on Western cultural and textual normativity and had no way to account for difference, not only in the racial identity of the writers but in the different sociopolitical contexts within which black literary production occurs. Gates outlined in his project in the introduction to the 1988 edition:

> The book attempts to identify a theory of criticism that is inscribed within the black vernacular tradition and that in turn informs the shape of the Afro-American literary tradition. My desire has been to allow the black tradition to speak for itself about its nature and various functions, rather than to read it, or analyze it, in terms of literary theories borrowed whole from other traditions, appropriated from without. (xix)

As early black writers wrote themselves into humanity by appropriating the written word, so Gates hoped to theorize early African American writing into scholarly significance via vernacular inscriptions.

The iconic chapter of this iconic book is, for me, chapter 4, “The Trope of the Talking Book.”! The chapter proper begins with the words “the literature of the slave,” shocking for the positing of a congruence between literature and enslaved subjects. A riff on Robert Stepto’s structuralist paradigm in *From behind the Veil* (1979), Gates’s readings follow the re-claiming of the slave narrative as objects of scholarly inquiry by historians including John W. Blassingame, Deborah Gray White, Eugene D. Geno-
verse, Marion Wilson Starling, and others. In literature, this restoration had begun with Gates’s own anthology of Olaudah Equiano, Prince Hall, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs, *The Classic Slave Narratives* (1987), and William Andrews’s thorough study *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography* (1986), along with black feminist critics like Hazel Carby, Frances Smith Foster, Hortense Spillers, Joanne Braxton, Deborah McDowell, and others who brought to bear a gendered critique of the male slave narrative paradigm, an issue raised but by no means completed in *Signifying Monkey*. By the 1990s, slave narratives were standard components of university curricula, appearing on syllabi in American and African American literature, history and gender studies courses.

Gates dubbed the talking book the “ur-trope of the Anglo-African tradition,” and he used it as evidence that “even the earliest writers of the Anglo-African tradition read each other’s texts and grounded these texts in what soon became a tradition” (143). While my graduate student scribbles in my 1988 edition show that I had issues with the execution of some of the readings in this chapter (indeed, I still have issues twenty-five years later), the gesture, the intervention that Gates enacts, not only directed me to my orals area but established the credibility of early African American literary study.

Of course as with any classic, *The Signifying Monkey* has ushered in vocabulary and theories that, while still relevant, have fallen under critique as surely as “Afro-American” has given way to “African American.” In his long essay “The Talking Book and the Talking Book Historian,” Leon Jackson refigures the trope as the “nontalking book” in order to represent the lack of communication between African American literary scholars and “those who study books as economic or material artifacts” (252):

the nontalking book has been supplemented by the nontalking book historian. The result is that while we know a great deal about the talking book as a *trope*, we know very little about the production, dissemination, or consumption of the books that deployed that trope, and still less of the books that were begged, borrowed, stolen, owned, or encountered by the authors who wrote them. (252)

Jackson goes on to catalog what he calls “poorly chosen editions that are poorly edited, spottily or inaccurately documented, and occasionally misattributed” as among the sins committed by early African Americanists
who failed to take into account the work of book historians (253). In those
heady days of the recovery (and in some cases discovery) of early Afri-
can American texts, the sheer volume of them (pun intended) often stood
in for analysis of their production. We were, indeed, impressed (and em-
powered strangely enough) by the thereeness of it all. That a conversation
has begun between those invested in signifying and those interested in the
object of signification is welcome news. Archival discovery has been a hall-
mark of research in early African American literature from the beginning
and more recent (re)turns to the archives have been invigorated, in part, by
the increased accessibility of documents through digital databases. How-
ever, the use of archives as the arbiters over the texts of black writers leads
to gestures of reauthentication that subject early black texts to twenty-first-
century versions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century practices.
Perhaps more concerning, in missing the significance of signifying,
book history and print culture methodologies are often predicated on a
separation between the textual and the political, a dichotomy that African
American studies methodology rejects. As Kate Eichhorn asserts in her
recent book *The Archival Turn in Feminism* (2013), “The archive is where
academic and activist work frequently converge. Indeed, the creation of
archives has become integral to how knowledges are produced and legiti-
mized and how feminist activists, artists, and scholars make their voices
audible.” Thus early African Americanists have always practiced an ar-
chival activism in piecing together highly mediated (and thus politicized)
fragments of the past. We proceed with the awareness that the intertextu-
ality created between black literary texts and archival documents is mutu-
ally constituting and dynamic and that the pursuit of the archived past is a
highly political act.

But how early is early? To those who would truncate early African
American literature by moving the beginnings of the tradition to the late
nineteenth century, *The Signifying Monkey*’s insistence on an Africanist
presence for vernacular theory argues for a long (and diasporic) history of
African American history. As Gates writes,

The African, after all, was a traveler, albeit an abrupt, ironic traveler,
through space and time; and like every traveler, the African ‘read’ a new
environment within a received framework of meaning and belief. The
notion that the Middle Passage was so traumatic that it functioned to
create in the African a tabula rasa of consciousness is as odd as it as a fiction, a fiction that has served several economic orders and their attendant ideologies. (4)

By globalizing signifying via the diaspora, Gates ultimately creates a theory that redeploy the coordinates of space and time away from a Eurocentric model of linguistics. Perhaps early is not early enough.

NOTES

1. I deliberately “signified” on this chapter in my book chapter “The Trope of the Talking Mule” as a way of theorizing a tradition of African American women writers’ biblical appropriations, referencing Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. See *Transforming Scriptures*.

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