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The Signifying Monkey and the Language of Signifyin(g): Rhetorical Difference and the Orders of Meaning

Some of the best dozens players were girls. . . . before you can signify you got to be able to rap. . . . Signifying allowed you a choice—you could either make a cat feel good or bad. If you had just destroyed someone or if they were down already, signifying could help them over. Signifying was also a way of expressing your own feelings. . . . Signifying at its best can be heard when the brothers are exchanging tales.

H. Rap Brown

And they asked me right at Christmas
If my blackness, would it rub off?
I said, ask your Mama.

Langston Hughes

I

If Esu-Elegbara stands as the central figure of the Ifa system of interpretation, then his Afro-American relative, the Signifying Monkey, stands as the rhetorical principle in Afro-American vernacular discourse. Whereas my concern in Chapter 1 was with the elaboration of an indigenous black hermeneutical principle, my concern in this chapter is to define a carefully structured system of rhetoric, traditional Afro-American figures of signification, and then to show how a curious figure becomes the trope of literary revision itself. My movement, then, is from hermeneutics to rhetoric and semantics, only to return to hermeneutics once again.

Thinking about the black concept of Signifyin(g) is a bit like stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors: the sign itself appears to be doubled, at the very least, and (re)doubled upon ever closer examination. It is not the sign itself, however, which has multiplied. If orientation prevails over madness, we soon realize that only the signifier has been doubled and (re)doubled, a signifier in this instance that is silent, a "sound-image" as Saussure defines the signifier, but a "sound-image" *sans* the sound. The difficulty that we experience when thinking about the nature of the visual (re)doubling at work in a hall of mirrors is analogous to the difficulty we shall encounter in relating the

black linguistic sign, "Signification," to the standard English sign, "signification." This level of conceptual difficulty stems from—indeed, seems to have been intentionally inscribed within—the selection of the signifier "Signification" to represent a concept remarkably distinct from that concept represented by the standard English signifier, "signification." For the standard English word is a homonym of the Afro-American vernacular word. And, to compound the dizziness and the giddiness that we must experience in the vertiginous movement between these two "identical" signifiers, these two homonyms have everything to do with each other and, then again, absolutely nothing.[1]

In the extraordinarily complex relationship between the two homonyms, we both enact and recapitulate the received, classic confrontation between Afro-American culture and American culture. This confrontation is both political and metaphysical. We might profit somewhat by thinking of the curiously ironic relationship between these signifiers as a confrontation defined by the politics of semantics, semantics here defined as the study of the classification of changes in the signification of words, and more especially the relationships between theories of denotation and naming, as well as connotation and ambiguity. The relationship that black "Signification" bears to the English "signification" is, paradoxically, a relation of difference inscribed within a relation of identity. That, it seems to me, is inherent in the nature of metaphorical substitution and the pun, particularly those rhetorical tropes dependent on the repetition of a word with a change denoted by a difference in sound or in a letter (agnominatio), and in homonymic puns (antanaclasis). These tropes luxuriate in the chaos of ambiguity that repetition and difference (be that apparent difference centered in the signifier or in the signified, in the "sound-image" or in the concept) yield in either an aural or a visual pun.

This dreaded, if playful, condition of ambiguity would, of course, disappear in the instance at hand if the two signs under examination did not bear the same signifier. If the two signs were designated by two different signifiers, we could escape our sense of vertigo handily. We cannot, however, precisely because the antanaclasis that I am describing turns upon the very identity of these signifiers, and the play of differences generated by the unrelated concepts (the signifieds) for which they stand.

What we are privileged to witness here is the (political, semantic) confrontation between two parallel discursive universes: the black American linguistic circle and the white. We see here the most subtle and perhaps the most profound trace of an extended engagement between two separate and distinct yet profoundly—even inextricably—related orders of meaning dependent precisely as much for their confrontation on relations of identity, manifested in the signifier, as on their relations of difference, manifested at the level of the signified. We bear witness here to a protracted argument over the nature of the sign itself, with the black vernacular discourse proffering its critique of the sign as the difference that blackness makes within the larger political culture and its historical unconscious.

"Signification" and "signification" create a noisy disturbance in silence, at

the level of the signifier. Derrida's neologism, "differance," in its relation to "difference," is a marvelous example of agnominatio, or repetition of a word with an alteration of both one letter and a sound. In this clever manner, Derrida's term resists reduction to self-identical meaning. The curiously suspended relationship between the French verbs *to differ* and *to defer* both defines Derrida's revision of Saussure's notion of language as a relation of differences and embodies his revision which "in its own unstable meaning [is] a graphic example of the process at work."[2]

I have encountered great difficulty in arriving at a suitably similar gesture. I have decided to signify the difference between these two signifiers by writing the black signifier in upper case ("Signification") and the white signifier in lower case ("signification"). Similarly, I have selected to write the black term with a bracketed final g ("Signifyin(g)") and the white term as "signifying." The bracketed g enables me to connote the fact that this word is, more often than not, spoken by black people without the final g as "signifyin'." This arbitrary and idiosyncratic convention also enables me to recall the fact that whatever historical community of Afro-Americans coined this usage did so in the vernacular as spoken, in contradistinction to the literate written usages of the standard English "shadowed" term. The bracketed or aurally erased g, like the discourse of black English and dialect poetry generally, stands as the trace of black difference in a remarkably sophisticated and fascinating (re)naming ritual graphically in evidence here. Perhaps replacing with a visual sign the g erased in the black vernacular shall, like Derrida's neologism, serve both to avoid confusion and the reduction of these two distinct sets of homonyms to a false identity and to stand as the sign of a (black) Signifyin(g) difference itself. The absent g is a figure for the Signifyin(g) black difference.

Let me attempt to account for the complexities of this (re)naming ritual, which apparently took place anonymously and unrecorded in antebellum America. Some black genius or a community of witty and sensitive speakers emptied the signifier "signification" of its received concepts and filled this empty signifier with their own concepts. By doing so, by supplanting the received, standard English concept associated by (white) convention with this particular signifier, they (un)wittingly disrupted the nature of the sign = *signified/signifier* equation itself. I bracket *wittingly* with a negation precisely because origins are always occasions for speculation. Nevertheless, I tend to think, or I wish to believe, that this guerrilla action occurred intentionally on this term, because of the very concept with which it is associated in standard English.

"Signification," in standard English, denotes the meaning that a term conveys, or is intended to convey. It is a fundamental term in the standard English semantic order. Since Saussure, at least, the three terms *signification, signifier, signified* have been fundamental to our thinking about general linguistics and, of late, about criticism specifically. These neologisms in the academic-critical community are homonyms of terms in the black vernacular tradition perhaps two centuries old. By supplanting the received term's as-

sociated concept, the black vernacular tradition created a homonymic pun of the profoundest sort, thereby marking its sense of difference from the rest of the English community of speakers. Their complex act of language Signifies upon both formal language use and its conventions, conventions established, at least officially, by middle-class white people.

This political offensive could have been mounted against all sorts of standard English terms—and, indeed, it was. I am thinking here of terms such as *down, nigger, baby,* and *cool,* which snobbishly tend to be written about as "dialect" words or "slang." There are scores of such revised words. But to revise the term *signification* is to select a term that represents the nature of the process of meaning-creation and its representation. Few other selections could have been so dramatic, or so meaningful. We are witnessing here a profound disruption at the level of the signifier, precisely because of the relationship of identity that obtains between the two apparently equivalent terms. This disturbance, of course, has been effected at the level of the conceptual, or the signified. How accidental, unconscious, or unintentional (or any other code-word substitution for the absence of reason) could such a brilliant challenge at the semantic level be? To revise the received sign (quotient) literally accounted for in the relation represented by *signified/signifier* at its most apparently denotative level is to critique the nature of (white) meaning itself, to challenge through a literal critique of the sign the meaning of meaning. What did/do black people signify in a society in which they were intentionally introduced as the subjugated, as the enslaved cipher? Nothing on the x axis of white signification, and everything on the y axis of blackness.[3]

It is not sufficient merely to reveal that black people colonized a white sign. A level of meta-discourse is at work in this process. If the signifier stands disrupted by the shift in concepts denoted and connoted, then we are engaged at the level of meaning itself, at the semantic register. Black people vacated this signifier, then—incredibly—substituted as its concept a signified that stands for the system of rhetorical strategies peculiar to their own vernacular tradition. Rhetoric, then, has supplanted semantics in this most literal meta-confrontation within the structure of the sign. Some historical black community of speakers most certainly struck directly at the heart of the matter, on the ground of the referent itself, thereby demonstrating that even (or especially) the concepts signified by the signifier are themselves arbitrary. By an act of will, some historically nameless community of remarkably self-conscious speakers of English defined their ontological status as one of profound difference vis-à-vis the rest of society. What's more, they undertook this act of self-definition, implicit in a (re)naming ritual, within the process of signification that the English language had inscribed for itself. Contrary to an assertion that Saussure makes in his *Course,* "the masses" did indeed "have [a] voice in the matter" and replaced the sign "chosen by language." We shall return to Saussure's discussion of the "Immutability and Mutability of the Sign" below.[4]

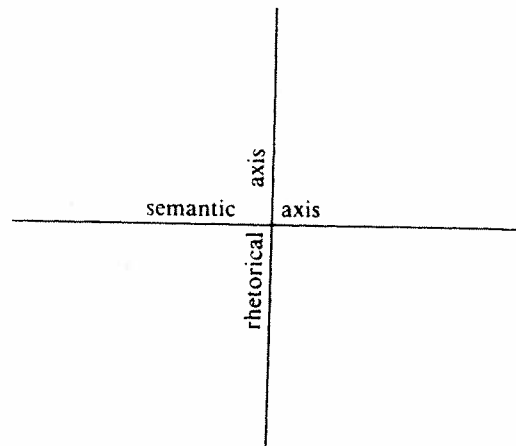Before critiquing Saussure's discussion of signification, however, perhaps

Chart 1. The Sign, "Signification"

Chart 2. Black and Standard English

I can help to clarify an inherently confusing discussion by representing the black critique of the sign, the replacement of the semantic register by the rhetorical, in Chart 1.

Whereas in standard English usage signification can be represented *signified/signifier* and that which is signified is a concept, or concepts, in the black homonym, this relation of semantics has been supplanted by a relation of rhetoric, wherein the signifier "Signification" is associated with a concept that stands for the rhetorical structures of the black vernacular, the trope of tropes that is Signifyin(g). Accordingly, if in standard English

$$signification = \frac{signified}{signifier} = \frac{concept}{sound\text{-}image,}$$

then in the black vernacular,

$$Signification = \frac{rhetorical\ figures}{signifier}.$$

In other words, the relation of signification itself has been critiqued by a black act of (re)doubling. The black term of *Signifyin(g)* has as its associated concept all of the rhetorical figures subsumed in the term *Signify*. To Signify, in other words, is to engage in certain rhetorical games, which I shall define and then compare to standard Western figures below, in Chart 4.

It would be erroneous even to suggest that a concept can be erased from its relation to a signifier. A signifier is never, ultimately, able to escape its received meanings, or concepts, no matter how dramatically such concepts might change through time. In fact, homonymic puns, antanaclasis, turn precisely upon received meanings and their deferral by a vertical substitution. All homonyms depend on the absent presence of received concepts associated with a signifier.
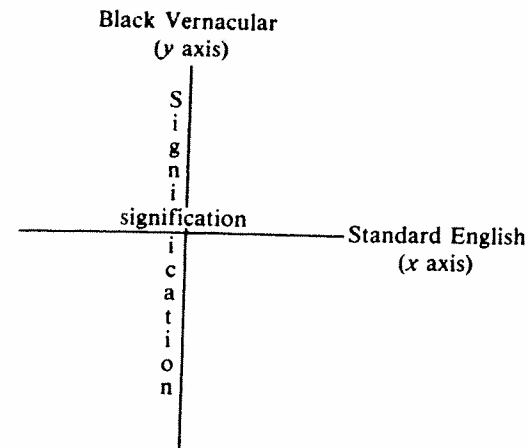
What does this mean in the instance of the black homonym *Signifyin(g)*, the shadowy revision of the white term? It means, it seems to me, that the signifier "Signification" has remained identical in spelling to its white counterpart to demonstrate, first, that a simultaneous, but negated, parallel discursive (ontological, political) universe exists within the larger white discursive universe, like the matter-and-antimatter fabulations so common to science fiction. It also seems apparent that retaining the identical signifier argues strongly that the most poignant level of black-white differences is that of meaning, of "signification" in the most literal sense. The play of doubles here occurs precisely on the axes, on the threshold or at Esu's crossroads, where black and white semantic fields collide. We can imagine the relationship of these two discursive universes as depicted in Chart 2. Parallel universes, then, is an inappropriate metaphor; *perpendicular* universes is perhaps a more accurate visual description.

The English-language use of *signification* refers to the chain of signifiers that configure horizontally, on the syntagmatic axis. Whereas signification operates and can be represented on a syntagmatic or horizontal axis, Signifyin(g) operates and can be represented on a paradigmatic or vertical axis. Signifyin(g) concerns itself with that which is suspended, vertically: the chaos of what Saussure calls "associative relations," which we can represent as the playful puns on a word that occupy the paradigmatic axis of language and which a speaker draws on for figurative substitutions. These substitutions in Signifyin(g) tend to be humorous, or function to name a person or a situation in a telling manner. Whereas signification depends for order and coherence on the exclusion of unconscious associations which any given word yields at any given time, Signification luxuriates in the inclusion of the free play of these associative rhetorical and semantic relations. Jacques Lacan calls these vertically suspended associations "a whole articulation of relevant contexts," by

which he means all of the associations that a signifier carries from other contexts, which must be deleted, ignored, or censored "for this signifier to be lined up with a signified to produce a specific meaning."[5] Everything that must be excluded for meaning to remain coherent and linear comes to bear in the process of Signifyin(g). As Anthony Easthope puts the matter in *Poetry as Discourse,*

> All of these absences and dependencies which have to be barred in order for meaning to take place constitute what Lacan designates as the *Other.* The presence of meaning along the syntagmatic chain necessarily depends upon the absence of the Other, the rest of language, from the syntagmatic chain.[6]

Signifyin(g), in Lacan's sense, is the Other of discourse; but it also constitutes the black Other's discourse as its rhetoric. Ironically, rather than a proclamation of emancipation from the white person's standard English, the symbiotic relationship between the black and white, between the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes, between black vernacular discourse and standard English discourse, is underscored here, and signified, by the vertiginous relationship between the terms *signification* and *Signification,* each of which is dependent on the other. We can, then, think of American discourse as both the opposition between and the ironic identity of the movement, the very vertigo, that we encounter in a mental shift between the two terms.

The process of semantic appropriation in evidence in the relation of Signification to signification has been aptly described by Mikhail Bakhtin as a double-voiced word, that is, a word or utterance, in this context, decolonized for the black's purposes "by inserting a new semantic orientation into a word which already has—and retains—its own orientation." Although I shall return later in this chapter to a fuller consideration of this notion of double-voiced words and double-voiced discourse, Gary Saul Morson's elaboration on Bakhtin's concept helps to clarify what Bakhtin implies:

> The audience of a double-voiced word is therefore meant to hear both a version of the original utterance as the embodiment of its speaker's point of view (or "semantic position") *and* the second speaker's evaluation of that utterance from a different point of view. I find it helpful to picture a double-voiced word as a special sort of palimpsest in which the uppermost inscription is a commentary on the one beneath it, which the reader (or audience) can know only by reading through the commentary that obscures in the very process of evaluating.[7]

The motivated troping effect of the disruption of the semantic orientation of signification by the black vernacular depends on the homonymic relation of the white term to the black. The sign, in other words, has been demonstrated to be mutable.

Bakhtin's notion, then, implicitly critiques Saussure's position that

> the signifier . . . is fixed, not free, with respect to the linguistic community that uses it. The masses have no voice in the matter, and the sig-

> nifier chosen by language could be replaced by no other. . . . [The] community itself cannot control so much as a single word; it is bound to the existing language.[8]

Saussure, of course, proceeds to account for "shift(s) in the relationship between the signified and the signifier," shifts in time that result directly from "the arbitrary nature of the sign." But, simultaneously, Saussure denies what he terms to be "arbitrary substitution": "A particular language-state is always the product of historical forces, and these forces explain why the sign is unchangeable, i.e. why it resists any arbitrary substitution." The double-voiced relation of the two terms under analysis here argues forcefully that "the masses," especially in a multiethnic society, draw on "arbitrary substitution" freely, to disrupt the signifier by displacing its signified in an intentional act of will. Signifyin(g) is black double-voicedness; because it always entails formal revision and an intertextual relation, and because of Esu's double-voiced representation in art, I find it an ideal metaphor for black literary criticism, for the formal manner in which texts seem concerned to address their antecedents. Repetition, with a signal difference, is fundamental to the nature of Signifying(g), as we shall see.[9]

II

The Poetry of Signification

The literature or tales of the Signifying Monkey and his peculiar language, Signifyin(g), is both extensive and polemical, involving as it does assertions and counterassertions about the relationship that Signifyin(g) bears to several other black tropes. I am not interested in either recapitulating or contributing to this highly specialized debate over whether or not speech act x is an example of this black trope or that. On the contrary, I wish to argue that Signifyin(g) is the black trope of tropes, the figure for black rhetorical figures. I wish to do so because this represents my understanding of the value assigned to Signifyin(g) by the members of the Afro-American speech community, of which I have been a signifier for quite some time. While the role of a certain aspect of linguistics study is to discern the shape and function of each tree that stands in the verbal terrain, my role as a critic, in this book at least, is to define the contours of the discursive forest or, perhaps more appropriately, of the jungle.[10]

Tales of the Signifying Monkey seem to have had their origins in slavery. Hundreds of these have been recorded since the early twentieth century. In black music, Jazz Gillum, Count Basie, Oscar Peterson, the Big Three Trio, Oscar Brown, Jr., Little Willie Dixon, Snatch and the Poontangs, Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, Smokey Joe Whitfield, and Johnny Otis—among others—have recorded songs about either the Signifying Monkey or, simply, Signifyin(g). The theory of Signifyin(g) is arrived at by explicating these black

cultural forms. Signifyin(g) in jazz performances and in the play of black language games is a mode of formal revision, it depends for its effects on troping, it is often characterized by pastiche, and, most crucially, it turns on repetition of formal structures and their differences. Learning how to Signify is often part of our adolescent education.

Of the many colorful figures that appear in black vernacular tales, perhaps only Tar Baby is as enigmatic and compelling as is that oxymoron, the Signifying Monkey.[11] The ironic reversal of a received racist image of the black as simianlike, the Signifying Monkey, he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language, is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed our trope of chiasmus, repeating and reversing simultaneously as he does in one deft discursive act. If Vico and Burke, or Nietzsche, de Man, and Bloom, are correct in identifying four and six "master tropes," then we might think of these as the "master's tropes," and of Signifyin(g) as the slave's trope, the trope of tropes, as Bloom characterizes metalepsis, "a trope-reversing trope, a figure of a figure." Signifyin(g) is a trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the master tropes), and also hyperbole, litotes, and metalepsis (Bloom's supplement to Burke). To this list we could easily add aporia, chiasmus, and catechresis, all of which are used in the ritual of Signifyin(g).

Signifyin(g), it is clear, means in black discourse modes of figuration themselves. When one Signifies, as Kimberly W. Benston puns, one "tropes-a-dope." Indeed, the black tradition itself has its own subdivisions of Signifyin(g), which we could readily identify with the figures of signification received from classical and medieval rhetoric, as Bloom has done with his "map of misprision" and which we could, appropriately enough, label a "rap of misprision." The black rhetorical tropes, subsumed under Signifyin(g), would include marking, loud-talking, testifying, calling out (of one's name), sounding, rapping, playing the dozens, and so on.[12] [See Chart 4.]

The Esu figures, among the Yoruba systems of thought in Benin and Nigeria, Brazil and Cuba, Haiti and New Orleans, are divine: they are gods who function in sacred myths, as do characters in a narrative. Esu's functional equivalent in Afro-American profane discourse is the Signifying Monkey, a figure who would seem to be distinctly Afro-American, probably derived from Cuban mythology which generally depicts Echu-Elegua with a monkey at his side. Unlike his Pan-African Esu cousins, the Signifying Monkey exists not primarily as a character in a narrative but rather as a vehicle for narration itself. Like Esu, however, the Signifying Monkey stands as the figure of an oral writing within black vernacular language rituals. It is from the corpus of mythological narratives that Signifyin(g) derives. The Afro-American rhetorical strategy of Signifyin(g) is a rhetorical practice that is not engaged in the game of information-giving, as Wittgenstein said of poetry. Signifyin(g) turns on the play and chain of signifiers, and not on some supposedly transcendent signified. As anthropologists demonstrate, the Signifying Monkey is often called the Signifier, he who wreaks havoc upon the Signified. One is sig-

nified upon by the signifier. He is indeed the "signifier as such," in Kristeva's phrase, "a presence that precedes the signification of object or emotion."

Alan Dundes's suggestion that the origins of Signifyin(g) could "lie in African rhetoric" is not as far-fetched as one might think. I have argued for a consideration of a line of descent for the Signifying Monkey from his Pan-African cousin, Esu-Elegbara. I have done so not because I have unearthed archeological evidence of a transmission process, but because of their functional equivalency as figures of rhetorical strategies and of interpretation. Esu, as I have attempted to show in Chapter 1, is the Yoruba figure of writing within an oral system. Like Esu, the Signifying Monkey exists, or is figured, in a densely structured discursive universe, one absolutely dependent on the play of differences. The poetry in which the Monkey's antics unfold is a signifying system: in marked contrast to the supposed transparency of normal speech, the poetry of these tales turns upon the free play of language itself, upon the displacement of meanings, precisely because it draws attention to its rhetorical structures and strategies and thereby draws attention to the force of the signifier.[13]

In opposition to the apparent transparency of speech, this poetry calls attention to itself as an extended linguistic sign, one composed of various forms of the signifiers peculiar to the black vernacular. Meaning, in these poems, is not proffered; it is deferred, and it is deferred because the relationship between intent and meaning, between the speech act and its comprehension, is skewed by the figures of rhetoric or signification of which these poems consist. This set of skewed relationships creates a measure of undecidability within the discourse, such that it must be interpreted or decoded by careful attention to its play of differences. Never can this interpretation be definitive, given the ambiguity at work in its rhetorical structures. The speech of the Monkey exists as a sequence of signifiers, effecting meanings through their differential relation and calling attention to itself by rhyming, repetition, and several of the rhetorical figures used in larger cultural language games. Signifyin(g) epitomizes all of the rhetorical play in the black vernacular. Its self-consciously open rhetorical status, then, functions as a kind of writing, wherein rhetoric is the writing of speech, of oral discourse. If Esu is the figure of writing in Ifa, the Signifying Monkey is the figure of a black rhetoric in the Afro-American speech community. He exists to embody the figures of speech characteristic to the black vernacular. He is the principle of self-consciousness in the black vernacular, the meta-figure itself. Given the play of doubles at work in the black appropriation of the English-language term that denotes relations of meaning, the Signifying Monkey and his language of Signifyin(g) are extraordinary conventions, with Signification standing as the term for black rhetoric, the obscuring of apparent meaning.

Scholars have for some time commented on the peculiar use of the word Signifyin(g) in black discourse. Though sharing some connotations with the standard English-language word, Signifyin(g) has rather unique definitions in black discourse. While we shall consider these definitions later in this chapter, it is useful to look briefly at one suggested by Roger D. Abrahams·

Signifying seems to be a Negro term, in use if not in origin. It can mean any of a number of things; in the case of the toast about the signifying monkey, it certainly refers to the trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. It can mean making fun of a person or situation. Also it can denote speaking with the hands and eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures. Thus it is signifying to stir up a fight between neighbors by telling stories; it is signifying to make fun of a policeman by parodying his motions behind his back; it is signifying to ask for a piece of cake by saying, "my brother needs a piece a cake."[14]

Essentially, Abrahams continues, Signifyin(g) is a *"technique* of indirect argument or persuasion," "a language of implication," "to imply, goad, beg, boast, by *indirect* verbal or gestural means." "The name 'signifying,'" he concludes, "shows the monkey to be a trickster, signifying being the language of trickery, that set of words or gestures achieving Hamlet's 'direction through indirection.'" The Monkey, in short, is not only a master of technique, as Abrahams concludes; he *is* technique, or style, or the literariness of literary language; he is the great Signifier. In this sense, one does not signify something; rather, one signifies in *some way.*[15]

The Signifying Monkey poems, like the *ese* of the Yoruba *Odu,* reward careful explication; this sort of extensive practical criticism, however, is outside the scope of this book, as fascinating as it might be. The stanzaic form of this poetry can vary a great deal, as is readily apparent from the selections listed in this book's appendix. The most common structure is the rhyming couplet in an a-a-b-b pattern. Even within the same poem, however, this pattern can be modified, as in the stanzas cited below, where an a-a-b-c-b and an a-b-c-b pattern obtain (followed in the latter example by an a-b-a concluding "moral"). Rhyming is extraordinarily important in the production of the humorous effect that these poems have and has become the signal indication of expertise among the street poets who narrate them. The rhythm of the poems is also crucial to the desired effect, an effect in part reinforced by their quasi-musical nature of delivery.

The Monkey tales generally have been recorded from male poets, in predominantly male settings such as barrooms, pool halls, and street corners. Accordingly, given their nature as rituals of insult and naming, recorded versions have a phallocentric bias. As we shall see below, however, Signifyin(g) itself can be, and is, undertaken with equal facility and effect by women as well as men.* Whereas only a relatively small number of people are accomplished narrators of Signifying Monkey tales, a remarkably large number of Afro-Americans are familiar with, and practice, modes of Signifyin(g), defined in this instance as the rubric for various sorts of playful language games, some aimed at reconstituting the subject while others are aimed at demystifying a

* Gloria Hall is a well-known professional storyteller, and she includes in her repertoire the Signifying Monkey poems.

subject. The poems are of interest to my argument primarily in three ways: as the source of the rhetorical act of Signification, as examples of the black tropes subsumed within the trope of Signifyin(g), and, crucially, as evidence for the valorization of the signifier. One of these subsumed tropes is concerned with repetition and difference; it is this trope, that of naming, which I have drawn upon as a metaphor for black intertextuality and, therefore, for formal literary history. Before discussing this process of revision, however, it is useful to demonstrate the formulaic structure of the Monkey tales and then to compare several attempts by linguists to define the nature and function of Signifyin(g). While other scholars have interpreted the Monkey tales against the binary opposition between black and white in American society, to do so is to ignore the *trinary* forces of the Monkey, the Lion, and the Elephant. To read the Monkey tales as a simple allegory of the black's political oppression is to ignore the hulking presence of the Elephant, the crucial third term of the depicted action. To note this is not to argue that the tales are not allegorical or that their import is not political. Rather, this is to note that to reduce such complex structures of meaning to a simple two-term opposition (white versus black) is to fail to account for the strength of the Elephant.

There are many versions of the toasts of the Signifying Monkey, most of which commence with a variant of the following formulaic lines:

> Deep down in the jungle so they say
> There's a signifying monkey down the way
> There hadn't been no disturbin' in the jungle for quite a bit,
> For up jumped the monkey in the tree one day and laughed
> "I guess I'll start some shit."[16]

Endings, too, tend toward the formulaic, as in the following:

> "Monkey," said the Lion,
> Beat to his unbooted knees,
> "You and your signifying children
> Better stay up in the trees."
> Which is why today
> Monkey does his signifying
> *A-way-up* out of the way.[17]

In the narrative poems, the Signifying Monkey invariably repeats to his friend, the Lion, some insult purportedly generated by their mutual friend, the Elephant. The Monkey, however, speaks figuratively. The Lion, indignant and outraged, demands an apology of the Elephant, who refuses and then trounces the Lion. The Lion, realizing that his mistake was to take the Monkey literally, returns to trounce the Monkey. It is this relationship between the literal and the figurative, and the dire consequences of their confusion, which is the most striking repeated element of these tales. The Monkey's trick depends on the Lion's inability to mediate between these two poles of signification, of meaning. There is a profound lesson about reading here. While we cannot undertake a full reading of the poetry of the Signifying Monkey, we can, how-

ever, identify the implications for black vernacular discourse that are encoded in this poetic diction.

Signifyin(g) as a rhetorical strategy emanates directly from the Signifying Monkey tales. The relationship between these poems and the related, but independent, mode of formal language use must be made clear. The action represented in Monkey tales turns upon the action of three stock characters—the Monkey, the Lion, and the Elephant—who are bound together in a trinary relationship. The Monkey—a trickster figure, like Esu, who is full of guile, who tells lies,* and who is a rhetorical genius—is intent on demystifying the Lion's self-imposed status as King of the Jungle. The Monkey, clearly, is no match for the Lion's physical prowess; the Elephant is, however. The Monkey's task, then, is to trick the Lion into tangling with the Elephant, who is the true King of the Jungle for everyone else in the animal kingdom. This the Monkey does with a rhetorical trick, a trick of mediation. Indeed, the Monkey is a term of (anti)mediation, as are all trickster figures, between two forces he seeks to oppose for his own contentious purposes, and then to reconcile.

The Monkey's trick of mediation—or, more properly, antimediation—is a play on language use. He succeeds in reversing the Lion's status by supposedly repeating a series of insults purportedly uttered by the Elephant about the Lion's closest relatives (his wife, his "mama," his "grandmama, too!"). These intimations of sexual use, abuse, and violation constitute one well-known and commonly used mode of Signifyin(g).† The Lion, who perceives his shaky, self-imposed status as having been challenged, rushes off in outrage to find the Elephant so that he might redress his grievances and preserve appearances. The self-confident but unassuming Elephant, after politely suggesting to the Lion that he must be mistaken, proceeds to trounce the Lion firmly. The Lion, clearly defeated and dethroned from his self-claimed title, returns to find the Monkey so that he can at the very least exact some sort of physical satisfaction and thereby restore his image somehat as the impregnable fortress-in-waiting that he so urgently wishes to be. The Monkey, absolutely ecstatic at the success of his deception, commences to Signify upon the Lion, as in the following exchange:

Now the Lion come back more dead than alive,
that's when the Monkey started some more of his old signifying.
He said, "King of the Jungles, ain't you a bitch,
you look like someone with the seven-year itch."
He said, "When you left [me earlier in the narrative] the lightnin'
    flashed and the bells rung,
you look like something been damn near hung."
He said, "Whup! Motherfucker, don't you roar,
I'll jump down on the ground and beat your funky ass some more."
Say, "While I'm swinging around in my tree,"
say, "I ought to swing over your chickenshit head and pee."

* *Lies* is a traditional Afro-American word for figurative discourse, tales, or stories.
† Also known as "the dozens."

Say, "Everytime me and my old lady be tryin' to get a little bit,
here you come down through the jungle with that old 'Hi Ho' shit."[18]

This is a salient example of Signifying(g), wherein a verbal fusilade of insults spews forth in a structure of ritual rhetorical exchanges.

What happens next is also fascinating. The Monkey, at this point in the discourse deliriously pleased with himself, slips and falls to the ground:

Now the little old Monkey was dancing all around
his feet slipped and his ass must have hit the ground.

The startled Monkey, now vulnerable, seeks to repair his relationship with the Lion in the most urgent manner. So he begs initially:

Like a streak of lightning and a bolt of white heat,
the Lion was on the Monkey with all four feet.
Monkey looks up with tears in his eyes,
he says, "I'm sorry, brother Lion," say, "I apologize."
The Lion says, "Apologize, shit," say, "I'm gonna stop you from your
    signifyin'." (p. 165)

The Lion now turns on the Monkey (only, incidentally, to be tricked rhetorically again), not because he has been severely beaten but because he has been beaten, then Signified upon. Another text substitutes the following direct speech of the Lion for that quoted immediately above:

[The Lion say], "I'm not gonna whip your ass 'cause that Elephant
    whipped mine,
I'm gonna whip your ass for signifyin'." (p. 168)

The Monkey's trick of Signification has been to convince the hapless Lion that he has spoken literally, when all along he has spoken figuratively. The Lion, though slow-witted enough to repeat his misreading through the eternity of discourse, realizes that his status has been deflated, not because of the Elephant's brutal self-defense but because he fundamentally misunderstood the status of the Monkey's statements. As still another poem represents this moment of clarity:

Said, "Monkey, I'm not kicking your ass for lyin',
I'm kicking your hairy ass for *signifyin'*." (p. 172)[19]

The black term *to lie*, as J. L. Dillard, Sterling A. Brown, and Zora Neale Hurston amply demonstrate, signifies tale-telling and constitutes a signal form of Signifyin(g).[20] But it is the naming ritual, in which the Monkey speaks aloud his editorial recapitulation of the previous events and their import, which even the dense Lion recognizes to be his most crucial threat, and against which he must defend himself, especially since the Lion returns to the Monkey's tree initially, at least, to impose *his* interpretation on his interchange with the Elephant:

Now the Lion looked up to the Monkey, "You know I didn't get beat."
He said, "You're a lyin' motherfucker, I had a ringside seat."

The Lion looked up out of his one good eye, said, "Lord, let that skinny bastard fall out of that tree before I die." (p. 172)

Which he, of course, does, only (in most cases) to escape once again, to return to Signify on another day:

> He said, "You might as well stop, there ain't no use tryin'
> because no motherfucker is gonna stop me from signifyin'." (p. 163)

While the insult aspect of the Monkey's discourse is important to the tales, linguists have often failed to recognize that insult is not at all central to the nature of Signifyin(g); it is merely one mode of a rhetorical strategy that has several other modes, all of which share the use of troping. They have, in other words, mistaken the trees for the forest. For Signifyin(g) constitutes all of the language games, the figurative substitutions, the free associations held in abeyance by Lacan's or Saussure's paradigmatic axis, which disturb the seemingly coherent linearity of the syntagmatic chain of signifiers, in a way analogous to Freud's notion of how the unconscious relates to the conscious. The black vernacular trope of Signifyin(g) exists on this vertical axis, wherein the materiality of the signifier (the use of words as things, in Freud's terms of the discourse of the unconscious) not only ceases to be disguised but comes to bear prominently as the dominant mode of discourse.

I do not cite Freud idly here. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* and *The Interpretation of Dreams* have informed my reading of Signifyin(g), just as have Lacan's reading of Freud and Saussure, and Derrida's emphasis on the "graphematic" aspect of even oral discourse. Just as jokes often draw upon the sounds of words rather than their meanings, so do the poetry of the Signifying Monkey and his language of Signifyin(g). Directing, or redirecting, attention from the semantic to the rhetorical level defines the relationship, as we have seen, between signification and Signification. It is this redirection that allows us to bring the repressed meanings of a word, the meanings that lie in wait on the paradigmatic axis of discourse, to bear upon the syntagmatic axis. This redirection toward sound, without regard for the scrambling of sense that it entails, defines what is meant by the materiality of the signifier, its thingness. As Freud explained, there is nothing necessarily infantile about this, although infants, of course, engage in such paradigmatic substitutions gleefully. Similarly, there is absolutely nothing infantile about Signifyin(g) either, except perhaps that we learn to use language in this way in adolescence, despite the strangely compulsive repetition of this adjective as a pejorative in the writings of linguists about Signifyin(g).

If Freud's analysis of the joke mechanism is a useful analogue for Signifyin(g), then so too is his analysis of the "dream-work," which by now is so familiar as not to warrant summary here. The Signifying Monkey poems can usefully be thought of as quasi-dreams, or daydreams, dream narratives in which monkeys, lions, and elephants manifest their feelings in direct speech. Animals, of course, do not speak, except in dreams or in mythological discourse. As Freud puts it in *The Interpretation of Dreams,*

this symbolism is not peculiar to dreams, but is characteristic of unconscious ideation, in particular among the people, and it is to be found in *folklore,* and in popular myths, legends, *linguistic idioms,* proverbial wisdom and current jokes, to a *more complete extent* than in dreams.[21] (emphasis added)

The Signifying Monkey tales, in this sense, can be thought of as versions of daydreams, the Daydream of the Black Other, chiastic fantasies of reversal of power relationships. One of the traditional Signifying poems names this relationship explicitly:

> The Monkey laid up in a tree and he thought up a scheme,
> and thought he'd try one of his fantastic dreams. (p. 167)

To dream the fantastic is to dream the dream of the Other.

Because these tales originated in slavery, we do not have to seek very far to find typological analogues for these three terms of an allegorical structure. Since to do so, inescapably, is to be reductive, is to redirect attention away from the materiality of the signifier toward its supposed signified, I shall avoid repeating what other scholars have done at such great length. For the importance of the Signifying Monkey poems is their repeated stress on the sheer materiality, and the willful play, of the signifier itself.

While I wrote earlier in this chapter that a close reading of the Monkey tales is outside the scope of a book whose intention is to define an indigenous black metaphor for intertextuality as configured in Afro-American formal literary discourse, I am tempted to write that, like this signal trickster, I have lied! While I am forced by the demands of this book to defer such a series of readings to another text, it is necessary for me to turn to the poems, if briefly, to explain what I mean about their emphasis on the signifier and its materiality. To do so, I have drawn upon William K. Wimsatt's well-known essay, "Rhyme and Reason," printed in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (1970), and Anthony Easthope's equally perceptive but less well-known essay, "The Feudal Ballad," printed in his *Poetry as Discourse* (1983). Easthope's analysis of the structure of the English ballad dovetails nicely with my analysis of the structure of the Signifying Monkey tales. Because Easthope's crucial point of departure is a passage from Albert B. Lord's *The Singer of Tales,* let me repeat it here:

> The method of language is like that of oral poetry, substituting in the framework of the grammar. Without the metrical restrictions of verse, language substitutes one subject for another in the nominative case, keeping the same verb, or keeping the same noun, it substitutes one verb for another.[22]

Lord defines "substitutions," as Easthope explains, similarly to what Saussure identified as the paradigmatic axis, while Lord's "framework of the grammar" corresponds to the syntagmatic axis. Easthope's summary of the defining features of the "discourse examplified in the ballad" reveals an identity with those of the discourse of the Monkey tales:

[The] syntagmatic chain does not aim for tight closure and rigid subordination of elements in a linear development; rather it works through juxtaposition, addition and parallel, typically . . . in binary and trinary patterns.

[Disruption] in the syntagmatic chain means that the discourse of the ballad does not offer transparent access to the enounced [*énoncé*, the narrated event, as opposed to enunciation (*enonciation*), the speech event], and so no fixed position is offered to the reader as subject of the enounced.[23]

Like the ballad, "vocabulary and phrasing" of the Monkey poems is "colloquial, monosyllabic and everyday." Even more important to our discussion of language use in the Monkey poems, however, are the three aspects that Easthope locates in the operation of the ballad's syntagmatic chain. These are intertextuality, stanzaic units, and incremental repetition.[24]

Intertextuality

As is apparent from even a cursory reading of the Signifying Monkey poems that I have listed in the appendix, each poem refers to other poems of the same genre. The artistry of the oral narrator of these poems does not depend on his or her capacity to dream up new characters or events that define the actions depicted; rather, it depends on his or her display of the ability to group together two lines that end in words that sound alike, that bear a phonetic similarity to each other. This challenge is greater when key terms are fixed, such as the three characters' identities and their received relationship to each other. Accordingly, all sorts of formulaic phrases recur across these poems, but (re)placed in distinct parts of a discrete poem.

One example demonstrates this clearly, especially if we recall that intertextuality represents a process of repetition and revision, by definition. A number of shared structural elements are repeated, with differences that suggest familiarity with other texts of the Monkey. For example, the placement of the figure "forty-four" is an instance of a formulaic phrase being repeated from poem to poem—because it has achieved a formulaic insistency—but repeated in distinct ways. For instance, the following lines in one poem:

> The Lion jumped back with a mighty roar,
> his tail stuck out like a forty-four,
> he breezed down through the jungle in a hell of a breeze,
> knockin' giraffes to their knees. (p. 162)

are refigured in another poem in this way:

> And the Lion knew that he didn't play the Dozens
> and he knew the Elephant wasn't none of his cousins,
> so he went through the jungle with a mighty roar,
> poppin' his tail like a forty-four,
> knockin' giraffes to their knees
> and knockin' coconuts from the trees. (p. 164)

and in another poem in this way:

> The Lion got so mad he jump up trimmin' the trees,
> chopped baby giraffes, monkeys down on their knees.
> He went on down the jungle way a jumpin' and pawin'
> poppin' his tail worse in' a forty-four. (p. 166)

It is as if a received structure of crucial elements provides a base for poeisis, and the narrator's technique, his or her craft, is to be gauged by the creative (re)placement of these expected or anticipated formulaic phrases and formulaic events, rendered anew in unexpected ways. Precisely because the concepts represented in the poem are shared, repeated, and familiar to the poet's audience, meaning is devalued while the signifier is valorized. Value, in this art of poeisis, lies in its foregrounding rather than in the invention of a novel signified. We shall see how the nature of the rhyme scheme also stresses the materiality and the priority of the signifier. Let me add first, however, that all other common structural elements are repeated with variations across the texts that, together, comprise the text of the Monkey. In other words, there is no fixed text of these poems; they exist as a play of differences.

Stanzaic Units

Every Signifying Monkey poem is characterized by at least two predominant features of stanzaic structure: an introductory formulaic frame and a concluding formulaic frame, as well as a progression of rhyming couplets, each of which usually relates to the next in a binary pattern of a-a-b-b rhyme, although occasionally a pattern of a-a-b-c or a-a-b-c-c appears, especially to include a particularly vivid (visual) or startling (aural) combination of signifiers. The frame consists of a variation of the following:

> Say deep down in the jungle in the coconut grove
> lay the Signifying Monkey in his one-button roll.
> Now the hat he wore was on the Esquire fold,
> his shoes was on a triple-A last.
> You could tell that he was a pimping motherfucker
> by the way his hair was gassed. (p. 162)

He said, "Well, Brother Lion, the day have come at last,
that I have found a limb to fit your ass."
He said, "You might as well stop, there ain't no use tryin',
because no motherfucker is gonna stop me from signifyin." (p. 163)

I shall turn to the nature of the rhyme scheme and its import below.

Incremental Repetition

Incremental repetition in these poems assumes the form of the repeated binary structure of rhyming couplets, which function as narrative units in isolation or with a second or third set of couplets, and as larger narrative units in a tertiary relation that is contained within the binary frame described above.

The frame defines a problem, the Monkey's irritation at the Lion's roaring, which disturbs the Monkey's connubial habits, and ends with some sort of resolution of that problem. The tertiary relation of the intervening narrative units turns upon the repetition of confrontation and engagement: the Monkey engages the Lion by repeating insults purportedly said by the Elephant; next, the Lion rushes off helter-skelter and challenges the Elephant to a confrontation that the Lion loses; finally, the Lion returns to the scene of the crime, the Monkey's tree, and engages the Monkey, who insults the Lion, slips from his protective branch, then usually escapes certain defeat by tricking the Lion again with a Signifyin(g) challenge, such as the following:

> The Monkey said, "I know you think you raisin' hell,
> but everybody seen me when I slipped and fell.
> But if you let me get my nuts up out of this sand
> I'll fight you just like a natural man."

This tertiary repetition of confrontation-engagement-resolution occurs in representations of direct speech. The Lion's combat with the Elephant is balanced by the Lion's combat with the Monkey. Stasis is relieved by the Monkey's trick of mediation, his rhetorical play on the Lion's incapacity to read his utterance, a flaw that enables the Monkey to scramble back to his protective limb, only to continue to Signify.

The most important aspect of language use in these poems, however, is the nature of its rhymes. Here we can draw upon Wimsatt's analysis of the rhymes of Pope and Easthope's analysis of the feudal ballad to elucidate the import of the rhyme in the Monkey tales.

Wimsatt points out perceptively that Pope's rhyming words tend to be different parts of speech, while Chaucer's depend on the coincidence of parts of speech.

> Pope's rhymes are characterized by difference in parts of speech or in function of the same parts of speech, the difference in each case being accentuated by the tendency of his couplets to parallel structure.[25]

Easthope argues that "Such rhyming works to throw a stress upon the meaning so that meaning dominates sound and the rhyme is subordinated." Such a rhyme scheme, he continues, implicitly emphasizes the crucial role of the phonetic in the production of meaning: "Relative to subordination, coincidence in rhyme emphasizes the phonetic, so acknowledging the dependence of signified [on] signifier." "Coincident rhyme," on the other hand, "foregrounds the signifier."[26]

While both coincidence and subordination occur in the Monkey tales, coincidence tends to occur more frequently, especially in the use of nouns to end a line. "Phonetic similarity," as Easthope maintains, links two words "at the level of the signifier." When rhymes of the same parts of speech coincide, as in Chaucer's poetry, the signifier and the signified are "in a relationship of equality" rather than subordination, such that "meaning is allowed to follow sound *as much as* sound does meaning." The dominance of rhymes of the

same parts of speech in the Monkey poems, then, serves to italicize the role of the signifier, and its materiality, by flaunting, as it were, "the dependence of the signified on the signifier." As anyone who has heard these poems recited fully appreciates, they take their received meaning for granted and depend for their marvelous effect on the sheer play of the signifier.[27]

What does such a foregrounding of the signifier imply for black vernacular discourse? We must remember that the Signifying Monkey tales are the repositories of the black vernacular tradition's rhetorical principles, coded dictionaries of black tropes. First, the Monkey "tropes-a-dope," the Lion, by representing a figurative statement as a literal statement, depending on the Lion's thickness to misread the difference. Second, the ensuing depiction of action depends on the stress of phonetic similarity between signifiers. These poems flaunt the role of the signifier in relation to the signified, allowing it its full status as an equal in their relationship, if not the superior partner. Where meaning is constant, the (re)production of this fixed meaning, by definition, foregrounds the play of the signifier. Signifyin(g), then, is the sign of rule in the kingdom of Signification: neither the Lion nor the Elephant—both Signifieds, those Signified upon—is the King of the Jungle; rather, the Monkey is King, the Monkey as Signifier.

If the rhyme pattern of the poems depends on coincidence more often than subordination, then the Monkey's process of Signifyin(g) turns upon repetition and difference, or repetition and reversal. There are so many examples of Signifyin(g) in jazz that one could write a formal history of its development on this basis alone. One early example is relatively familiar: Jelly Roll Morton's 1938 recording entitled "Maple Leaf Rag (A Transformation)" Signifies upon Scott Joplin's signature composition, "Maple Leaf Rag," recorded in 1916. Whereas Joplin played its contrasting themes and their repetitions in the form of AABBACCDD, Morton "embellishes the piece two-handedly, with a swinging introduction (borrowed from the ending to A), followed by ABACCD (a hint of the tango here) D (a real New Orleans 'stomp' variation)," as Martin Williams observes. Morton's piano imitates "a trumpet-clarinet right hand and a trombone-rhythm left hand."* Morton's composition does not "surpass" or "destroy" Joplin's; it complexly *extends* and tropes figures present in the original. Morton's Signification is a gesture of admiration and respect. It is this aspect of Signifyin(g) that is inscribed in the black musical tradition in jazz compositions such as Oscar Peterson's "Signify" and Count Basie's "Signifyin'."

In these compositions, the formal history of solo piano styles in jazz is recapitulated, delightfully, whereby one piano style follows its chronological predecessor in the composition itself, so that boogie-woogie, stride, and blues piano styles—and so on—are represented in one composition as histories of the solo jazz piano, histories of its internal repetition and revision process. Improvisation, of course, so fundamental to the very idea of jazz, is "nothing more"

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* Martin Williams, *The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1973), p. 16.

than repetition and revision. In this sort of revision, again where meaning is fixed, it is the realignment of the signifier that is the signal trait of expressive genius. The more mundane the fixed text ("April in Paris" by Charlie Parker, "My Favorite Things" by John Coltrane), the more dramatic is the Signifyin(g) revision. It is this principle of repetition and difference, this practice of intertextuality, which has been so crucial to the black vernacular forms of Signifyin(g), jazz—and even its antecedents, the blues, the spirituals, and ragtime—and which is the source of my trope for black intertextuality in the Afro-American formal literary tradition. I shall return to this idea at the end of Chapter 3.

III

Signifyin(g): Definitions

Signifyin(g) is so fundamentally black, that is, it is such a familiar rhetorical practice, that one encounters the great resistance of inertia when writing about it. By inertia I am thinking here of the difficulty of rendering the implications of a concept that is so shared in one's culture as to have long ago become second nature to its users. The critic is bound to encounter Ralph Ellison's "Little Man at Chehaw Station."*

Who is he? Ellison tells a marvelous story about himself when he was a student of music at Tuskegee. Having failed at an attempt to compensate for a lack of practice with a virtuoso style of performance, Ellison had sought some solace from the brilliant Hazel Harrison, one of his professors, with whom he had a sustained personal relationship. Instead of solace, however, his friend and mentor greeted his solicitation with a riddle. The exchange is relevant here:

> "All right," she said, "you must *always* play your best, even if it's only in the waiting room at Chehaw Station, because in this country there'll always be a little man hidden behind the stove."
>
> "A what?"
>
> She nodded. "That's right," she said, "there'll always be the little man whom you don't expect, and he'll know the *music*, and the *tradition*, and the standards of *musicianship* required for whatever you set out to perform!"[28]

This little man, who appears at such out-of-the-way places as the Chehaw Railroad Station, is, of course, a trickster figure surfacing when we least expect him, at a crossroads of destiny. This particular little man evokes Esu, the little man whose earthly dwelling place is the crossroads, as indicated in the following excerpts from a Yoruba poem:

* Houston A. Baker's reading of Ellison's essay suggested the alternative reading that I am giving it here. See Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, pp. 12–13, 64, 66.

Latopa, Esu little man
Latopa, Esu little man

Short, diminutive man
Tiny, little man.
He uses both hands to sniffle!
We call him master
He who sacrifices without inviting the manumitter
Will find his sacrifice unacceptable
Manumitter, I call on you.
Man by the roadside, bear our sacrifice to heaven directly
Master, and son of the owner of Idere
Who came from Idere to found the town,
The son of the energetic small fellow
The little man who cleans the gates for the masquerade.
Elderly spirit deity![29]

The "little man" or woman is bound to surface when the literary critic begins to translate a signal concept from the black vernacular milieu into the discourse of critical theory. While critics write for writers and other critics, they also write—in this instance—for "little" men and women who dwell at the crossroads.

The critic of comparative black literature also dwells at a sort of crossroads, a discursive crossroads at which two languages meet, be these languages Yoruba and English, or Spanish and French, or even (perhaps especially) the black vernacular and standard English. This sort of critic would seem, like Esu, to live at the intersection of these crossroads. When writing a book that lifts one concept from two discrete discursive realms, only to compare them, the role of the critic as the trickster of discourse seems obvious. The concept of Signification is such an instance.

What Ellison's professor did to him was a salient example of Signifyin(g). His professor, subtle and loving as she must have been, Signified upon her young protégé so that he would never allow himself to succumb to the lure of the temptation to skip the necessary gates placed in the apprentice's path, gates which must somehow be opened or hurdled. Ellison was Signified upon because his dilemma was resolved through an allegory. This mode of rhetorical indirection, as Roger D. Abrahams and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan have defined it, is a signal aspect of Signifyin(g). Despite its highly motivated, often phallocentric orientation, then, Signifyin(g), it is clear, can mean any number of modes of rhetorical play.

An article printed in the *New York Times* on April 17, 1983, entitled "Test on Street Language Says It's Not Grant in That Tomb," affords an opportunity to expand somewhat on received definitions of Signifyin(g). The test referred to in the story's title is one created by "some high school students" in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, "who were dismayed at [McGraw-Hill's] own standardized tests." The examination, a multiple-choice intelligence test, is entitled "The In Your Face Test of No Certain Skills." It was created shortly after the students told their teacher, Rob Slater, that "they had trouble relating to a standardized achievement test." As Slater explains,

"They were taking one of these tests one day and one of my students looked up and asked what the reason for the test was, because all it did to him was make him feel academically inferior. After the test was over," Slater concludes, "I asked them if they wanted to get even. They took it from there."[30]

The students devised a test to measure vocabulary mastery in street language. They sent ten copies to McGraw-Hill, where eight employees took the test, only to score C's and D's. One of the test's questions, to which the *Times*'s article title refers, is an example of the most familiar mode of Signifyin(g). The question reads, "Who is buried in Grant's tomb?" The proper response to this question is, "Your mama." It is difficult to explain why this response is so funny and why it is an example of Signifyin(g). "Your mama" jokes abound in black discourse, all the way from the field and the street to Langston Hughes's highly accomplished volume of poems, *Ask Your Mama*, from which an epigraph to this chapter has been taken. The presence in the students' test of this centuries-old black joke represents an inscription of the test's Signifyin(g) nature, because it serves as an echo of the significance of the test's title, "The In Your Face Test of No Certain Skills." The title Signifies in two ways. First, "In your face" is a standard Signifyin(g) retort, meaning that by which you intended to confine (or define) me I shall return to you squarely in your face. And second, the title is a parody (repetition motivated to underscore irony) of test titles such as "The Iowa Test of Basic Skills," which my generation was made to suffer through from the fourth grade through high school. The test itself, then, is an extended Signifyin(g) sign of repetition and reversal, a chiastic slaying at the crossroads where two discursive units meet. As the *Times* article observes, "The students' point was that they did not look at things in the same way as the people at McGraw-Hill. The results of the 'In Your Face' test clearly show that McGraw-Hill and the ninth-graders at Hill High *do not speak the same language*."[31]

The language of blackness encodes and names its sense of independence through a rhetorical process that we might think of as the Signifyin(g) black difference. As early as the eighteenth century, commentators recorded black usages of Signification. Nicholas Cresswell, writing between 1774 and 1777, made the following entry in his journal: "In [the blacks'] songs they generally relate the usage they have received from their Masters or Mistresses in a very satirical stile [sic] and manner."[32] Cresswell strikes at the heart of the matter when he makes explicit "the usage" that the black slaves "have received," for black people frequently "enounce" their sense of difference by repetition with a signal difference. The eighteenth century abounds in comments from philosophers such as David Hume in "Of National Characters" and statesmen such as Thomas Jefferson in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, who argued that blacks were "imitative" rather than "creative." All along, however, black people were merely Signifyin(g) through a motivated repetition.

Frederick Douglass, a masterful Signifier himself, discusses this use of troping in his *Narrative* of 1845. Douglass, writing some seventy years after Cresswell, was an even more acute observer. Writing about the genesis of the

lyrics of black song, Douglass noted the crucial role of the signifier in the determination of meaning:

> [The slaves] would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—if not in the *word*, in the *sound*;—and as frequently in the one as in the other . . . they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many seem *unmeaning jargon*, but which, nevertheless, were *full of meaning* to themselves.[33]

Meaning, Douglass writes, was as determined by sound as by sense, whereby phonetic substitutions determined the shape of the songs. Moreover, the neologisms that Douglass's friends created, "unmeaning jargon" to standard English speakers, were "full of meaning" to the blacks, who were literally defining themselves in language, just as did Douglass and hundreds of other slave narrators. This, of course, is an example of both sorts of signification, black vernacular and standard English. Douglass continues his discussion by maintaining that his fellow slaves "would sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone," a set of oppositions which led to the song's misreading by nonslaves. As Douglass admits,

> I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake.[34]

This great mistake of interpretation occurred because the blacks were using antiphonal structures to reverse their apparent meaning, as a mode of encoding for self-preservation. Whereas black people under Cresswell's gaze Signified openly, those Douglass knew Signified protectively, leading to the misreading against which Douglass rails. As Douglass writes in his second autobiography, however, blacks often Signified directly, as in the following lyrics:

> We raise de wheat,
> Dey gib us de corn;
> We bake de bread,
> Dey gib us de cruss;
> We sif de meal,
> Dey gib us de huss;
> We peal de meat,
> Dey gib us de skin
> And dat's de way
> Dey takes us in.[35]

As William Faux wrote in 1819, slaves commonly used lyrics to Signify upon their oppressors: "Their verse was their own, and abounding either in praise or satire intended for kind and unkind masters."[36]

I cite these early references to motivated language use only to emphasize

that black people have been Signifyin(g), without explicitly calling it that, since slavery, as we might expect. One ex-slave, Wash Wilson, in an interview he granted a member of the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s, implies that "sig'fication" was an especial term and practice for the slaves:

> When de niggers go round singin' "Steal Away to Jesus," dat mean dere gwine be a 'ligious meetin' dat night. Dat de *sig'fication* of a meetin'. De masters 'fore and after freedom didn't like dem 'ligious meetin's, so us natcherly slips off at night, down in de bottoms or somewheres. Sometimes us sing and pray all night.[37]

This usage, while close to its standard English shadow, recalls the sense of Signification as an indirect form of communication, as a troping. The report of Wilson's usage overlaps with Zora Neale Hurston's definition of *signify* in *Mules and Men*, published in 1935. These two usages of the words are among the earliest recorded; Wilson's usage argues for an origin of "sig'fication" in slavery, as does the allegorical structure of the Monkey poems and the nature of their figuration, both of which suggest a nineteenth-century provenance. I shall defer a fuller examination of Hurston's sense of Signification to Chapter 5. I wish to explore, in the remainder of this section of this chapter, received definitions of Signifyin(g) before elaborating my own use of this practice in literary criticism.

We can gain some appreciation of the complexity of Signifyin(g) by examining various definitions of the concept. Dictionary definitions give us an idea of how unstable the concepts are that can be signified by Signifyin(g). Clarence Major's *Dictionary of Afro-American Slang* says that "Signify" is the "same as the *Dirty Dozens;* to censure in 12 or fewer statements," and advises the reader to see "Cap on." The "Dirty Dozens" he defines as "a very elaborate game traditionally played by black boys, in which the participants insult each other's relatives, especially their mothers. The object of the game is to test emotional strength. The first person to give in to anger is the loser." To "Cap on" is "to censure," in the manner of the dozens. For Major, then, to Signify is to be engaged in a highly motivated rhetorical act, aimed at figurative, ritual insult.[38]

Hermese E. Roberts, writing in *The Third Ear: A Black Glossary*, combines Major's emphasis on insult and Roger D. Abrahams's emphasis on implication. Roberts defines "signifying," or "siggin(g)," as "language behavior that makes direct or indirect implications of baiting or boasting, the essence of which is making fun of another's appearance, relatives, or situation." For Roberts, then, a signal aspect of Signifyin(g) is "making fun of" as a mode of "baiting" or "boasting." It is curious to me how very many definitions of Signifyin(g) share this stress on what we might think of as the black person's symbolic aggression, enacted in language, rather than upon the play of language itself, the meta-rhetorical structures in evidence. "Making fun of" is a long way from "making fun," and it is the latter that defines Signifyin(g).[39]

Roberts lists as subcategories of Signifyin(g) the following figures: "joning, playing the dozens, screaming on, sounding." Under "joning" and "sound-

ing," Roberts asks the reader to "See signifying." "Screaming on" is defined as "telling someone off; i.e. to get on someone's case," "case" meaning among other things "an imaginary region of the mind in which is centered one's vulnerable points, eccentricities, and sensitivities." "Screaming on" also means "embarrassing someone publicly." "Playing the dozens" Roberts defines as "making derogatory, often obscene, remarks about another's mother, parents, or family members. ('Yo' mama' is an expression used as retribution for previous vituperation.)" Roberts, in other words, consistently groups Signifyin(g) under those tropes of contention wherein aggression and conflict predominate. Despite this refusal to transcend surface meaning to define its latent meaning, Roberts's decision to group joning, playing the dozens, screaming on, and sounding as synonyms of Signifyin(g) is exemplary for suggesting that Signifyin(g) is the trope of tropes in the black vernacular.

Mezz Mezzrow, the well-known jazz musician, defines "Signify" in the glossary of his autobiography, *Really the Blues,* as "hint, to put on an act, boast, make a gesture." In the body of his text, however, Mezzrow implicitly defines signifying as the homonymic pun. In an episode in which some black people in a bar let some white gangsters know that their identity as murderers is common knowledge, the blacks, apparently describing a musical performance, use homonyms such as "killer" and "murder" to Signify upon the criminals. As Mezzrow describes the event:

> He could have been talking about the music, but everybody in the room knew different. Right quick another cat spoke up real loud, saying, "That's *murder* man, really murder," and his eyes were *signifying* too. All these gunmen began to shift from foot to foot, fixing their ties and scratching their noses, faces red and Adam's apples jumping. Before we knew it they had gulped their drinks and beat it out the door, saying good-bye to the bartender with their hats way down over their eyebrows and their eyes gunning the ground. That's what Harlem thought of the white underworld.[40]

Signifying here connotes the play of language—both spoken and body language—drawn upon to name something figuratively.

Mezzrow's definitions are both perceptive and subtle. Signifyin(g) for him is one mode of "verbal horseplay," designed to train the subject "to think faster and be more nimble-witted." Mezzrow, then, is able to penetrate the content of this black verbal horseplay to analyze the significance of the rhetorical structures that transcend any fixed form of Signifyin(g), such as the verbal insult rituals called the dozens. Indeed, Mezzrow was one of the first commentators to recognize that Signifyin(g) as a structure of performance could apply equally to verbal texts and musical texts. As he summarizes:

> Through all these friendly but lively competitions you could see the Negro's appreciation of real talent and merit, his demand for fair play, and his ardor for the best man wins and don't you come around here with no jive. Boasting doesn't cut any ice; if you think you've got some-

thing, don't waste time talking yourself up, go to work and prove it. If you have the stuff the other cats will recognize it frankly, with solid admiration. That's especially true in the field of music, which has a double importance to the Negro because that's where he really shines, where his inventiveness and artistry come through in full force. The colored boys prove their musical talents in those competitions called cutting contests, and there it really is the best man wins, because the Negro audience is extra critical when it comes to music and won't accept anything second-rate. These cutting contests are just a musical version of the verbal duels. They're staged to see which performer can snag and cap all the others *musically*. And by the way, these battles have helped to produce some of the race's greatest musicians.[41]

Signifyin(g) for Mezzrow is not what is played or said; it is rather a form of rhetorical training, an on-the-streets exercise in the use of troping, in which the play is the thing—not specifically what is said, but how. All definitions of Signifyin(g) that do not distinguish between manner and matter succumb, like the Lion, to serious misreading.

Malachi Andrews and Paul T. Owens, in *Black Language,* acutely recognize two crucial aspects of Signifyin(g): first, that the signifier invents a myth to commence the ritual and, second, that in the Monkey tales at least, trinary structure prevails over binary structure. "To Signify," they write,

> is to tease, to provoke into anger. The *signifier* creates a myth about someone and tells him a *third* person started it. The *signified* person is aroused and seeks that person. . . . Signifying is completely successful when the *signifier* convinces the chump he is working on, that what he is saying is true and that it gets him angered to wrath.[42]

Andrews and Owen's definition sticks fairly closely to the action of the Signifying Monkey tales. While Signifyin(g) can, and indeed does, occur between two people, the three terms of the traditional mythic structure serve to dispel a simple relation of identity between the allegorical figures of the poem and the binary political relationship, outside the text, between black and white. The third term both critiques the idea of the binary opposition and demonstrates that Signifyin(g) itself encompasses a larger domain than merely the political. It is a game of language, independent of reaction to white racism or even to collective black wish-fulfillment vis-à-vis white racism. I cannot stress too much the import of the presence of this third term, or in Hermese E. Roberts's extraordinarily suggestive phrase, "The Third Ear," an intraracial ear through which encoded vernacular language is deciphered.

J. L. Dillard, who along with William Labov and William A. Stewart is one of the most sensitive observers of black language use, defines Signifyin(g) as "a familiar discourse device from the inner city, [which] tends to mean 'communicating (often an obscene or ridiculing message) by indirection.' "[43] Dillard here is elaborating somewhat upon Zora Neale Hurston's gloss printed in *Mules and Men,* where she writes that to signify is to "show off."[44] This definition seems to be an anomalous one, unless we supply Hurston's missing, or implied, terms: to show off *with language use.* Dillard, how-

ever, is more concerned with the dozens than he is with Signifyin(g). In an especially perceptive chapter entitled "Discourse Distribution and Semantic Difference in Homophonous Items," Dillard ignores the homophone *signify* but suggests that so-called inner-city verbal rituals, such as the dozens, could well be contemporary revisions of "the 'lies' told by Florida Blacks studied by Hurston and the Anansi stories of the southern plantations," sans the "sex and scatology." "Put those elements back," Dillard continues, "and you have something like the rhymed 'toasts' of the inner city."[45] The "toasts," as Bruce Jackson has shown, include among their types the Signifying Monkey tales.[46] There can be little doubt that Signifyin(g) was found by linguists in the black urban neighborhoods in the fifties and sixties because black people from the South migrated there and passed the tradition along to subsequent generations.

We can see the extremes of dictionary and glossary definitions of *Signify* in two final examples, one taken from *The Psychology of Black Language,* by Jim Haskins and Hugh F. Butts, and the other from the *Dictionary of American Slang,* compiled by Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner. Haskins and Butts, in a glossary appended to their text, define "to signify" as "To berate, degrade."[47] In their text, however, they define "signifying" as "a more humane form of verbal bantering" than the dozens, admitting, however, that Signifyin(g) "has many meanings," including meanings that contradict their own glossary listing: "It is, again, the clever and humorous use of words, but it can be used for many purposes—'putting down' another person, making another person feel better, or simply expressing one's feelings."[48] Haskins and Butts's longer definition seems to contradict their glossary listing—unless we recall that Signifyin(g) can mean all of these meanings, and more, precisely because so many black tropes are subsumed within it. Signifyin(g) does not, on the other hand, mean "To pretend to have knowledge; to pretend to be hip, esp. when such pretentions cause one to trifle with an important matter," as Wentworth and Flexner would have it.[49] Indeed, this definition sounds like a classic black Signification, in which a black informant, as it were, Signified upon either Wentworth or Flexner, or lexicographers in general who "pretend to have knowledge."

There are several other dictionary definitions that I could cite here. My intention, however, has been to suggest the various ways in which Signifyin(g) is (mis)understood, primarily because few scholars have succeeded in defining it as a full concept. Rather, they often have taken the part—one of its several tropes—as its whole. The delightfully "dirty" lines of the dozens seem to have generated far more interest from scholars than has Signifyin(g), and perhaps far more heat than light. The dozens are an especially compelling subset of Signifyin(g), and its name quite probably derives from an eighteenth-century meaning of the verb *dozen,* "to stun, stupefy, daze," in the black sense, through language.[50] Let us examine more substantive definitions of Signifyin(g) by H. Rap Brown, Roger D. Abrahams, Thomas Kochman, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, Geneva Smitherman, and Ralph Ellison, before exploring examples of the definition of Signifyin(g) that I shall employ in the remainder of this book.

H. Rap Brown earned his byname because he was a master of black vernacular rhetorical games and their attendant well-defined rhetorical strategies. Brown's understanding of Signifyin(g) is unsurpassed by that of any scholar. In the second chapter of his autobiography, *Die Nigger Die!*, Brown represents the scenes of instruction by which he received his byname. "I learned to talk in the street," he writes, "not from reading about Dick and Jane going to the zoo and all that simple shit." Rather, Brown continues, "we exercised our minds," not by studying arithmetic but "by playing the Dozens":

> I fucked your mama
> Till she went blind.
> Her breath smells bad,
> But she sure can grind.
>
> I fucked your mama
> For a solid hour.
> Baby came out
> Screaming, Black Power.
>
> Elephant and the Baboon
> Learning to screw.
> Baby came out looking
> Like Spiro Agnew.

Brown argues that his teachers sought to teach him "poetry," meaning poems from the Western tradition, when he and his fellows were *making* poetry in the streets. "If anybody needed to study poetry," he maintains, "my teacher needed to study mine. We played the Dozens," he concludes, "like white folks play Scrabble." "[They] call me Rap," he writes humorously if tautologically, " 'cause I could rap." To rap is to use the vernacular with great dexterity. Brown, judging from his poetry printed in this chapter of his autobiography, most certainly earned his byname.[51]

Brown's definitions and examples are as witty as they are telling. He insists, as does Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, that both men and women can play the dozens and Signify: "Some of the best Dozens players," he writes, "were girls." Whereas the dozens were an unrelentingly "mean game because what you try to do is totally destroy somebody else with words," Signifyin(g) was "more humane": "Instead of coming down on somebody's mother, you come down on them." Brown's account of the process of Signifyin(g) is especially accurate:

> A session would start maybe by a brother
> saying, "Man, before you mess with me
> you'd rather run rabbits, eat shit and
> bark at the moon." Then, if he was talking
> to me, I'd tell him:
>
> Man, you must don't know who I am.
> I'm sweet peeter jeeter the womb beater
> The baby maker the cradle shaker
> The deerslayer the buckbinder the women finder

> Known from the Gold Coast to the rocky shores of Maine
> Rap is my name and love is my game.
> I'm the bed tucker the cock plucker the motherfucker
> The milkshaker the record breaker the population maker
> The gun-slinger the baby bringer
> The hum-dinger the pussy ringer
> The man with the terrible middle finger.
> The hard hitter the bullshitter the poly-nussy getter
> The beast from the East the Judge the sludge
> The women's pet the men's fret and the punks' pin-up boy.
> They call me Rap the dicker the ass kicker
> The cherry picker the city slicker the titty licker
> And I ain't giving up nothing but bubble gum and hard times and I'm
>   fresh out of bubble gum.
> I'm giving up wooden nickles 'cause I know they won't spend
> And I got a pocketful of splinter change.
> I'm a member of the bathtub club: I'm seeing a whole lot of ass but I
>   ain't taking no shit.
> I'm the man who walked the water and tied the whale's tail in a knot
> Taught the little fishes how to swim
> Crossed the burning sands and shook the devil's hand
> Rode round the world on the back of a snail carrying a sack saying AIR
>   MAIL.
> Walked 49 miles of barbwire and used a Cobra snake for a necktie
> And got a brand new house on the roadside made from a cracker's hide,
> Got a brand new chimney setting on top made from the cracker's skull
> Took a hammer and nail and built the world and calls it "THE
>   BUCKET OF BLOOD."
> Yes, I'm hemp the demp the women's pimp
> Women fight for my delight.
> I'm a bad motherfucker. Rap the rip-saw the devil's brother'n law.
> I roam the world I'm known to wander and this .45 is where I get my
>   thunder.
> I'm the only man in the world who knows why white milk makes yellow
>   butter.
> I know where the lights go when you cut the switch off.
> I might not be the best in the world, but I'm in the top two and my
> brother's getting old.
> And ain't nothing bad 'bout you but your breath.

Whereas the dozens were structured to make one's subject feel bad, "Signifying allowed you a choice—you could either make a cat feel good or bad. If you had just destroyed someone [verbally] or if they were just down already, signifying could help them over."[52]

Few scholars have recognized this level of complexity in Signifyin(g), which Brown argues implicitly to be the rhetorical structures at work in the discourse, rather than a specific content uttered. In addition to making "a cat feel good or bad," Brown continues, "Signifying was also a way of expressing your own feelings," as in the following example:

Man, I can't win for losing.
If it wasn't for bad luck, I wouldn't have no luck at all.
I been having buzzard luck
Can't kill nothing and won't nothing die
I'm living on the welfare and things is stormy
They borrowing their shit from the Salvation Army
But things bound to get better 'cause they can't get no worse
I'm just like the blind man, standing by a broken window
I don't feel no pain.
But it's your world
You the man I pay rent to
If I had you hands I'd give 'way both my arms.
Cause I could do without them
I'm the man but you the main man
I read the books you write
You set the pace in the race I run
Why, you always in good form
You got more foam than Alka Seltzer . . .[53]

Signifyin(g), then, for Brown, is an especially expressive mode of discourse that turns upon forms of figuration rather than intent or content. Signifyin(g), to cite Brown, is "what the white folks call verbal skills. We learn how to throw them words together." Signifying, "at its best," Brown concludes, "can be heard when brothers are exchanging tales." It is this sense of storytelling, repeated and often shared (almost communal canonical stories, or on-the-spot recountings of current events) in which Signifyin(g) as a rhetorical strategy can most clearly be seen. We shall return to Brown's definition in the next section of this chapter.[54]

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's work in this area is seminal, as defined here as a work against which subsequent works must, in some way, react. Between 1962 and 1976, 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.[55]

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."[56]

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 expanded on this 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."[57]

These definitions are exemplary insofar as they emphasize "indirection" and "implication," which we can 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-Elegbara*, the figure of writing in Ifa.

Abrahams's work helps us to understand that Signifyin(g) is an adult ritual, which black people learn as adolescents, almost exactly like children learned the traditional figures of signification in classically structured Western primary and secondard schools, training one hopes shall be returned to contemporary education. As we shall see below, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, an anthropologist-linguist, shares an anecdote that demonstrates, first, how Signifyin(g) truly is a conscious rhetorical strategy and, second, how adult black people implicitly instruct a mature child in its most profound and subtle uses by an indirect mode of narration only implicitly related in form to the Monkey tales, perhaps as extract relates to the vanilla bean, or as sand relates to the pearl, or, as Esu might add, as palm wine relates to the palm tree. Black adults teach their children this exceptionally complex system of rhetoric, almost exactly like Richard A. Lanham describes a generic portrait of the teaching of the rhetorical *paideia* to Western schoolchildren. The mastery of Signifyin(g) creates *homo rhetoricus Africanus*, allowing—through the manipulation of these classic black figures of Signification—the black person to move freely between two discursive universes. This is an excellent example of what I call linguistic masking, the verbal sign of the mask of blackness that demarcates the boundary between the white linguistic realm and the black, two domains that exist side by side in a homonymic relation signified by the

very concept of Signification. To learn to manipulate language in such a way as to facilitate the smooth navigation between these two realms has been the challenge of black parenthood, and remains so even today. Teaching one's children the fine art of Signifyin(g) is to teach them about this mode of linguistic circumnavigation, to teach them a second language that they can share with other black people.[58] Black adolescents engaged in the dozens and in Signifyin(g) rituals to learn the classic black figures of Signification. As H. Rap Brown declares passionately, his true school was the street. Richard Lanham's wonderful depiction of the student passing through the rhetorical *paideia* reads like a description of vernacular black language training:

> Start your student young. Teach him a minute concentration on the word, how to write it, speak it, remember it. . . . From the beginning, stress behavior as performance, reading aloud, speaking with gesture, a full range of histrionic adornment. . . . Develop elaborate memory schemes to keep them readily at hand. Teach, as theory of personality, a corresponding set of accepted personality types, a taxonomy of impersonation. . . . Nourish an acute sense of social situation. . . . Stress, too, the need for improvisation, ad-lib quickness, the coaxing of chance. Hold always before the student rhetoric's practical purpose: to win, to persuade. But train for this purpose with continual verbal play, rehearsal for the sake of rehearsal.
>
> Use the "case" method. . . . Practice this re-creation always in an agonistic context. The aim is scoring. Urge the student to go into the world and observe its doings from this perspective. And urge him to continue his rehearsal method all his life, forever rehearsing a spontaneous real life. . . . Training in the word thus becomes a badge, as well as a diversion, of the leisure class.[59]

This reads very much like a black person's training in Signifyin(g). Lanham's key words—among which are "a taxonomy of impersonation, "improvisation," "ad-lib quickness," "to win," "to persuade," "continual verbal play," "the 'case' method," "the aim is scoring"—echo exactly the training of blacks to Signify. Even Lanham's concept of a "leisure" class applies ironically here, since blacks tend in capitalist societies to occupy a disproportionate part of the "idle" unemployed, a leisure-class with a difference. To Signify, then, is to master the figures of black Signification.

Few black adults can recite an entire Monkey tale; black adults, on the other hand, can—and do—Signify. The mastering of the Monkey tales corresponds to this early part of Lanham's account of Western rhetorical training. Words are looked at in the Monkey tales because the test of this form of *poeisis* is to arrive at a phonetic coincidence of similar parts of speech, as I have shown above. The splendid example of Signifyin(g) that I have cited in Ralph Ellison's anecdote about Hazel Harrison, and the anecdote of Claudia Mitchell-Kernan's that I shall discuss below, conform to Lanham's apt description of the mature capacity to look through words for their full meaning. Learning the Monkey tales, then, is somewhat akin to attending troping school, where one learns to "trope-a-dope."

The Monkey is a hero of black myth, a sign of the triumph of wit and reason, his language of Signifyin(g) standing as the linguistic sign of the ultimate triumph of self-consciously formal language use. The black person's capacity to create this rich poetry and to derive from these rituals a complex attitude toward attempts at domination, which can be transcended in and through language, is a sign of their originality, of their extreme consciousness of the metaphysical. Abrahams makes these matters clear.

In *Talking Black,* published in 1976, Abrahams's analysis of Signifyin(g) as an act of language is even more subtle than his earlier interpretations. Abrahams repeats his insightful definition that Signifyin(g) turns upon indirection. Black women, he maintains, and "to a certain extent children," utilize "more indirect methods of signifying." His examples are relevant ones:

> These range from the most obvious kinds of indirection, like using an unexpected pronoun in discourse ("Didn't *we* come to shine, today?" or "Who thinks his drawers don't stink?"), to the more subtle technique, of *louding* or *loud-talking* in a different sense from the one above. A person is loud-talking when he says something of someone just loud enough for that person to hear, but indirectly, so he cannot properly respond (Mitchell-Kernan). Another technique of signifying through indirection is making reference to a person or group not present, in order to start trouble between someone present and the ones who are not. An example of this technique is the famous toast, "The Signifying Monkey."[60]

These examples are salient for two reasons: first, because he has understood that adults use the modes of signification commonly, even if they cannot recite even one couplet from the Monkey tales, and, second, because he has realized that other tropes, such as loud-talking, are subtropes of Signifyin(g). His emphasis on the mature forms of Signifyin(g)—that is, the indirect modes—as more common among women and children does not agree with my observations. Indeed, I have found that black men and women use indirection with each other to the same degree.

Next, Abrahams states that Signifyin(g) can also be used "in recurrent black-white encounters as masking behavior." Since the full effectiveness of Signifyin(g) turns upon all speakers possessing the mastery of reading, what Abrahams calls "intergroup" Signifyin(g) is difficult to effect, if only because the inherent irony of discourse most probably will not be understood. Still, Signifyin(g) is one significant mode of verbal masking or troping.[61]

Abrahams's most important contribution to the literature on Signifyin(g) is his discovery that Signifyin(g) is primarily a term for rhetorical strategies, which often is called by other names depending on which of its several forms it takes. As he concludes, "with *signifying* we have a term not only for a way of speaking but for a rhetorical strategy that may be characteristic of a number of other designated events."[62] I would add to this statement that, for black adults, Signifyin(g) is the name for the figures of rhetoric themselves, the figure of the figure. Abrahams lists the following terms as synonyms of Signifyin(g), as derived from several other scholars, and which I am defining to be black tropes as subsumed within the trope of Signifyin(g): *talking shit,*

woofing, spouting, muckty muck, boogerbang, beating your gums, talking smart, putting down, putting on, playing, sounding, telling lies, shag-lag, marking, shucking, jiving, jitterbugging, bugging, mounting, charging, crack-ing, harping, rapping, bookooing, low-rating, hoorawing, sweet-talking, smart-talking, and no doubt a few others that I have omitted.[63] This is a crucial contribution to our understanding of this figure because it transcends the dis-agreements, among linguists, about whether trope *x* or *y* is evidenced by speech act *a* or *b*. What's more, Abrahams reveals, by listing its synonyms, that black people can mean at least twenty-eight figures when they call some-thing Signifyin(g). He represents a few of the figures embedded in Signify-in(g) in Chart 3:

Chart 3. Roger D. Abrahams's Figure 1 in *Talking Black*, p. 46.

	conversation on the streets; ways of speaking between equals		
informational; content focus *running it down*	aggressive, witty performance talk *signifying*		
	serious, clever conflict talk "me-and-you and no one else" focus *talking smart*	nonserious contest talk "any of us here" focus *talking shit*	
	overtly aggressive talk *putting down*	covertly aggressive, manipulative talk *putting on*	nondirective *playing*	directive *sounding*
conversational (apparently spontaneous)	arises within conversational context, yet judged in performance (stylistic) terms	performance interaction, yet built on model of conver-sational back-and-forth	

(going deep; talking bad)

He could have listed several others. When black people say that "Signification is the Nigger's occupation," we can readily see what they mean, since mas-tering all of these figures of Signification is a lifetime's work!

When a black person speaks of Signifyin(g), he or she means a "style-focused message . . . styling which is *foregrounded* by the devices of making a point by indirection and wit." What is foregrounded, of course, is the sig-nifier 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 sig-nifier. 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*.[64]

The import of this observation for the study of black literature is mani-fold. When I wrote earlier that the black tradition theorized about itself in

the vernacular, this is what I meant in part. Signifyin(g) is the black rhetori-cal difference that negotiates the language user through several orders of meaning. In formal literature, what we commonly call figuration corresponds to Signification. Again, the originality of so much of the black tradition em-phasizes refiguration, or repetition and difference, or troping, underscoring the foregrounding of the chain of signifiers, rather than the mimetic representa-tion of a novel content. Critics of Afro-American, Caribbean, and African literatures, however, have far more often than not directed their attention to the signified, often at the expense of the signifier, as if the latter were trans-parent. This functions contrary to the principles of criticism inherent in the concept of Signifyin(g).

Thomas Kochman's contribution to the literature on Signifyin(g) is the recognition that the Monkey is the Signifier, and that one common form of this rhetorical practice turns upon repetition and difference. Kochman also draws an important distinction between directive and expressive modes of Signification. Directive Signifyin(g), paradoxically, turns upon an indirective strategy:

> . . . when the function of signifying is *directive*, and the *tactic* which is employed is one of *indirection*—i.e., the signifier reports or repeats what someone has said about the listener; the "report" is couched in plausible language designed to compel belief and arouse feelings of anger and hos-tility.[65]

Kochman argues that the function of this sort of claim to repetition is to challenge and reverse the status quo:

> There is also the implication that if the listener fails to do anything about it—what has to be "done" is usually quite clear—his status will be seri-ously compromised. Thus the lion is compelled to vindicate the honor of his family by fighting or else leave the impression that he is afraid, and that he is not "king of the jungle." When used to direct action, signify-ing is like shucking in also being deceptive and subtle in approach and depending for success on the naïveté or gullibility of the person being put on.[66]

Kochman's definition of expressive Signifyin(g), while useful, is less inclusive than that proposed by H. Rap Brown, including as it does only negative in-tentions: "to arouse feelings of embarrassment, shame, frustration, or futility, for the purpose of diminishing someone's status, but without directive im-plication." Expressive Signifyin(g), Kochman continues, employs "direct" speech tactics "in the form of a taunt, as in the . . . example where the monkey is making fun of the lion." For Kochman, Signifyin(g) implies an aggressive mode of rhetoric, a form of symbolic action that yields catharsis.[67]

While several other scholars have discussed the nature and function of Signifyin(g), the theories of Claudia Mitchell-Kernan and Geneva Smither-man are especially useful for the theory of revision that I am outlining in this chapter.[68] 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. I shall examine Mitchell-Kernan's work first and then discuss Smitherman's work in Chapter 3.

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 might be best viewed as an alternative message form, selected for its artistic merit, and may occur embedded in a variety of discourse. Such signifying is not focal to the linguistic interaction in the sense that it does not define the entire speech event."[69]

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 or syntactical relation of words.[70]

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 Abrahams 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.[71]

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.[72]

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.[73]

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.[74]

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.[75]

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 "chit'lins." She ends her invitation with a pointed rhetorical question: "Or are you one of those Negroes who don't eat chit'lins?" The third person, the woman not addressed, responds with a long defense of why she prefers "prime rib and T-bone" to "chit'lins," ending with a traditional ultimate appeal to special pleading, a call to unity within the ranks to defeat white 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."[76]

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.[77]

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 pro-

tests, 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."[78] 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.[78]

Mitchell-Kernan presents several examples of Signifyin(g) that elaborate on its subtypes.[79] 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."[80] 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."[81] 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 do 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.[82]

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.[83]

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

The highly evolved form of Signifyin(g) that H. Rap Brown defines and that Ralph Ellison's anecdote about Hazel Harrison epitomizes is represented in a wonderful anecdote that Mitchell-Kernan narrates. This tale bears repeating to demonstrate how black adults teach their children to "hold a conversation":

> At the age of seven or eight I encountered what I believe was a version of the tale of the "Signifying Monkey." In this story a monkey reports to a lion·that an elephant has been maligning the lion and his family. This stirs the lion into attempting to impose sanctions against the elephant. A battle ensues in which the elephant is victor and the lion returns extremely chafed at the monkey. In this instance, the recounting of this story is a case of signifying for directive purposes. I was sitting on the stoop of a neighbor who was telling me about his adventures as a big game hunter in Africa, a favorite tall-tale topic, unrecognized by me as tall-tale at the time. A neighboring woman called to me from her porch and asked me to go to the store for her. I refused, saying that my mother had told me not to, a lie which Mr. Waters recognized and asked me about. Rather than simply saying I wanted to listen to his stories, I replied that I had refused to go because I hated the woman. Being pressured for a reason for my dislike, and sensing Mr. Water's disapproval, I countered with another lie, "I hate her because she say you were lazy," attempting, I suppose, to regain his favor by arousing ire toward someone else. Although I had heard someone say that he was lazy, it had not been this woman. He explained to me that he was not lazy and that he didn't work because he had been laid-off from his job and couldn't find work elsewhere, and that if the lady had said what I reported, she had not done so out of meanness but because she didn't understand. Guilt-ridden, I went to fetch the can of Milnot milk. Upon returning, the tale of the "Signifying Monkey" was told to me, a censored prose version in which the monkey is rather brutally beaten by the lion after having suffered a similar fate in the hands of the elephant. I liked the story very much and righteously approved of its ending, not realizing at the time that he was *signifying* at me. Mr. Waters reacted to my response with a great deal of amusement. It was several days later in the context of retelling the tale to another child that I understood its timely telling. My apology and admission of lying were met by affectionate humor, and I was told that I was finally getting to the age where I could "hold a conversation," i.e., understand and appreciate implications.[84]

Black people call this kind of lesson "schooling," and this label denotes its function. The child must learn to hold a conversation. We cannot but recall Richard Lanham's ideal presentation of rhetorical training and conclude that what Mr. Waters says to the child, Claudia, is analogous to an adult teacher of rhetoric attempting to show his pupils how to employ the tropes

that they have memorized in an act of communication and its interpretation. This subtle process of instruction in the levels of Signification is related to, but far removed from, adolescent males insulting each other with the Signifying Monkey tales. The language of Signifyin(g), in other words, is a strategy of black figurative language use.

I have been drawing a distinction between the ritual of Signifyin(g), epitomized in the Monkey tales, and the language of Signifyin(g), which is the vernacular term for the figurative use of language. These terms correspond to what Mitchell-Kernan calls "third-party signifying" and "metaphorical signifying." Mitchell-Kernan defines their distinction as follows:

> In the metaphorical type of *signifying*, the speaker attempts to transmit his message indirectly and it is only by virtue of the hearers defining the utterance as *signifying* that the speaker's intent (to convey a particular message) is realized. In third-party signifying, the speaker may realize his aim only when the converse is true, that is, if the addressee fails to recognize the speech act as *signifying*. In [the Signifying Monkey toast] the monkey succeeds in goading the lion into a rash act because the lion does not define the monkey's message as *signifying*.[85]

In other words, these two dominant modes of Signification function conversely, another sign of the maturation process demanded to move, as it were, from the repetition of tropes to their application.

The Monkey tales inscribe a dictum about interpretation, whereas the language of Signifyin(g) addresses the nature and application of rhetoric. The import of the Monkey tales for the interpretation of literature is that the Monkey dethrones the Lion only because the Lion cannot read the nature of his discourse. As Mitchell-Kernan argues cogently, "There seems something of symbolic relevance from the perspective of language in this poem. The monkey and lion do not speak the same language; the lion is not able to interpret the monkey's use of language, he is an outsider, un-hip, in a word." In other words, the Monkey speaks figuratively, while the Lion reads his discourse literally. For his act of misinterpretation, he suffers grave consequences. This valorization of the figurative is perhaps the most important moral of these poems, although the Monkey's mastery of figuration has made him one of the canonical heroes in the Afro-American mythic tradition, a point underscored by Mitchell-Kernan.[86]

Mitchell-Kernan's summary of the defining characteristics of "Signifying as a Form of Verbal Art" helps to clarify this most difficult, and elusive, mode of rhetoric. We can outline these characteristics for convenience. The most important defining features of Signifyin(g) are "indirect intent" and "metaphorical reference." This aspect of indirection is a formal device, and "appears to be almost purely stylistic"; moreover, "its art characteristics remain in the forefront." Signifyin(g), in other words, turns upon the foregrounding of the Signifier. By "indirection" Mitchell-Kernan means

> that the correct semantic (referential interpretation) or signification of the utterance cannot be arrived at by a consideration of the dictionary

meaning of the lexical items involved and the syntactic rules for their combination alone. The apparent significance of the message differs from its real significance. *The apparent meaning of the sentence signifies its actual meaning.*[87]

The relationship between latent and manifest meaning is a curious one, as determined by the formal properties of the Signifyin(g) utterance. In one of several ways, manifest meaning directs attention away from itself to another, latent level of meaning. We might compare this relationship to that which obtains between the two parts of a metaphor, tenor (the inner meaning) and vehicle (the outer meaning).

Signifyin(g), according to Mitchell-Kernan, operates so delightfully because "apparent meaning serves as a key which directs hearers to some shared knowledge, attitudes, and values or signals that reference must be produced metaphorically." The decoding of the figurative, she continues, depends "upon shared knowledge . . . and this shared knowledge operates on two levels." One of these two levels is that the speaker and his audience realize that *"signifying* is occurring and that the dictionary-syntactical meaning of the utterance is to be ignored." In addition, a silent second text, as it were, which corresponds rightly to what Mitchell-Kernan is calling "shared knowledge," must be brought to bear upon the manifest content of the speech act and "employed in the reinterpretation of the utterance." Indeed, this element is of the utmost importance in the esthetics of Signifyin(g), for "it is the cleverness used in directing the attention of the hearer and audience to this shared knowledge upon which a speaker's artistic talent is judged." Signifyin(g), in other words, depends on the success of the signifier at invoking an absent meaning ambiguously "present" in a carefully wrought statement.[88]

As I have attempted to show, there is much confusion and disagreement among linguists about the names and functions of the classical black tropes. While the specific terminology may vary from scholar to scholar, city to city, or generation to generation, however, the rhetorical functions of these tropes remain consistent. It is a fairly straightforward exercise to compare the black slave tropes to the master tropes identified by Vico, Nietzsche, Burke, and Bloom, and to map a black speech act, such as Signifyin(g), into its component Western tropes. Chart 4 is intended to Signify upon Harold Bloom's "map of misprision."[89] I echo the essence of this map here, adding columns that list the Yoruba and Afro-American tropes that correspond to their Western counterparts.

We can, furthermore, chart our own map, in which we graph the separate lines of a "Signifyin(g) Riff," as follows:[90]

Slave Trope of Tropes, Signifyin(g)

Your mama's a man	(metaphor)
Your daddy's one too	(irony)
They live in a tin can	(metonymy)
That smells like a zoo	(synecdoche)

Chart 4. The Figures of Signification

Rhetorical Trope	Bloom's Revisionary Ratio	Afro-American Signifyin(g) Trope	Classical Yoruba	Lexically Borrowed Yoruba
Irony	Clinamen	Signifyin(g) ("Nigger business" in the West Indies)	Rìràn (èràn)	Airóni
Synecdoche	Tessera	Calling out of one's name		
Metonymy	Kenosis			Mètónìmi
Hyperbole, litotes	Daemonization	Stylin' or woofing ("Flash" in the West Indies)	Ìhàlè (Èpón)	
Metaphor	Askesis	Naming	Àfiwé (eléÌòó) / Àfiwé gaan	Metáfò (indirect "naming")* / Sìmìlì (direct "naming")*
Metalepsis	Apophrades	Capping	Afikún; Àjámò; Èni	

* N.B. "Naming" is an especially rich trope in Yoruba. Positive naming is called *Oríkì,* while negative naming is called *Ìnàgije.* Naming is also an especially luxurious (if potentially volatile) trope in the Afro-American vernacular tradition. "Naming" someone and "Calling [someone] Out of [his] name" are among the most commonly used tropes in Afro-American vernacular discourse. Scores of proverbs and epigrams in the black tradition turn upon figures for naming.

The fact that the street rhymes of blacks and their received rhetorical tropes configure into the categories of classical Western rhetoric should come as no surprise. Indeed, this aspect of black language use recalls Montaigne's statement, in "Of the Vanity of Words," that "When you hear people talk about metonymy, metaphor, allegory, and other such names in grammar, doesn't it seem that they mean some rare and exotic form of language?" Rather, Montaigne concludes, "They are terms that apply to the babble of your chambermaid."[91] We can add that these terms also apply to the rapping of black kids on street corners, who recite and thereby preserve the classical black rhetorical structures.

Signification is a complex rhetorical device that has elicited various, even contradictory, definitions from linguists, as should be apparent from this summary of its various definitions. While many of its manifestations and possibilities are figured in the tales of the Signifying Monkey, most people who Signify do not engage in the narration of these tales. Rather, the Monkey tales stand as the canonical poems from which what I am calling the language of Signifyin(g) extends. The degree to which the figure of the Monkey is anthropologically related to the figure of the Pan-African trickster, Esu-Elegbara, shall most probably remain a matter of speculation.

Nevertheless, the two figures are related as functional equivalents because each in its own way stands as a moment of consciousness of black formal language use, of rhetorical structures and their appropriate modes of interpretation. As I have argued, both figures connote what we might think of as the writing implicit in an oral literature, and both figures function as repositories for a tradition's declarations about how and why formal literary language departs from ordinary language use. The metaphor of a double-voiced Esu-Elegbara corresponds to the double-voiced nature of the Signifyin(g) utterance. When one text Signifies upon another text, by tropological revision or repetition and difference, the double-voiced utterance allows us to chart discrete formal relationships in Afro-American literary history. Signifyin(g), then, is a metaphor for textual revision.

3

Figures of Signification

He was unwrapping the object now and I watched his old man's hands.

"I'd like to pass it on to you, son. There," he said, handing it to me. "Funny thing to give somebody, but I think it's got a heap of signifying wrapped up in it and it might help you remember what we're really fighting against. I don't think of it in terms of but two words, *yes* and *no;* but it signifies a heap more . . ."

I saw him place his hand on the desk. "Brother," he said, calling me "Brother" for the first time, "I want you to take it. I guess it's a kind of luck piece. Anyway, it's the one I filed to get away."

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

There is in effect no signifying chain that does not have, as if attached to the punctuation of each of its units, a whole articulation of relevant contexts suspended "vertically," as it were, from that point.

Jacques Lacan

Jacques Lacan's elaboration upon the signifier's function produces more than a simple tilting within the sign, since as soon as the question is one of signification, the relevant unit is no longer the sign itself (for example, the word in the dictionary), but the signifying chain, which generates a meaning effect at the moment when it turns back upon itself, its end allowing the retroactive interpretation of its beginning.

Oswald Ducrot and Tzvetan Todorov

The end is the beginning and lies far ahead.

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

I

How does Signifyin(g) manifest itself in Afro-American literature? This colorful, often amusing trope occurs in black texts as explicit theme, as implicit rhetorical strategy, and as a principle of literary history. Before elab-