

African American Canon and Criticism: Henry Louis Gates's *The Signifying Monkey*

Jung-Suk Hwang*

I

Canon formation, or tradition building, is a process of selection and inevitably entails exclusion. According to John Guillory, this exclusion is not merely related to the division of canonical or noncanonical authors by eras, tropes, or themes, but a larger social exclusion in terms of race, gender, or class. He emphasizes that “the process of canonical selection is always also a process of social exclusion, specifically the exclusion of female, black, ethnic, or working-class authors from the literary canon” (7). That is, it reflects and results from “the exclusion of socially defined minorities from power” (8). However, a study of canon formation in

* Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Sungkyunkwan University. e-mail: ddory@skku.edu

African American literature reveals that this process of exclusion is innate even in the canon-making of the excluded Black Other.

African American literature has been actively canonized since the early twentieth century, affected by the Harlem Renaissance (1918-1937) and the Black Arts Movement (1965-1975) which sought to establish a unique Black aesthetic.¹⁾ As Beauty Bragg points out, many scholars had examined “a catalog of themes and archetypes” in order to “demonstrate the coherence and particularity of African American literary aesthetics” (5), and the Black Arts Movement served to realize such an attempt. The movement “laid the foundation for legitimating the presence of vernacular culture” mainly in music and African American literary forms, while specifying “a ‘pure’ black artistic lineage” that was “safe from the contamination of Euro-American aesthetic norms” (Bragg 3). Consequently, the movement was definitively “away from the usual method of literary periodization” (Bragg 3) which privileged the past. By contrast, it privileged “contemporary writers” who were “(re)negotiating the meanings of blackness in the wake of the civil rights movement” and whose works reflected the interests and the realities of contemporary audiences and readers (Bragg 4).

However, converged with and influenced by coexisting and popular European literary theories in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly structuralism and post-structuralism, scholars’ attempt to theorize the *distinctive* and *coherent* themes of African American literature, ironically, “re-centered the written tradition that the Black Arts Movement had

1) For more on the anthologies of African American literature published from 1845 to 1994, see Kinnamon. He selects *The Negro Caravan* (1941) as the work that “has had greater influence in establishing the canon of African-American literature, uncensored by pedagogical prudery” and whose editors “firmly reject the concept of ‘Negro literature,’ believing instead that ‘Negro writers [are] American writers, and literature by American Negroes [is] a segment of American literature’” (462).

rejected" (Bragg 5). Emphasizing intertextuality regarding common forms shared within African American literature and its unique symbols, images, mythology, or tropes, many critics "tended to look to the past rather than the present [even] when identifying [the] vernacular influences" (Bragg 5). As Joyce A. Joyce puts in, poststructuralist methodology thus serves to "widen the chasm" between the African American canon and Black people (339); its elitist approach results in the estrangement of the African American canon from readers' realities, and, in turn, African American readers are estranged from the canon that supposedly represents their culture and experience.

Moreover, by emphasizing the uniqueness of African American literature and culture, the movement created the Other regarding gender. As Angelyn Mitchell points out, critics who supported the Black aesthetic movement viewed literature as "an instrument of separatism and a means of disengaging African Americans from Western culture," and "gender issues were (often) subsumed by racial matters" (11). Deborah E. McDowell similarly criticizes that Black women writers were "frequently excised from [. . .] the Afro-American literary tradition by Black scholars, most of whom are males" (153).² Critics also have problematized how common themes of African American literature—racial issues—serve to exclude and uncanonize certain African American literary works in the canon-making process. Gene Andrew Jarrett, for instance, points out that anthologies often "[allow] race to *overdetermine* the idea of African American literature" and tend to select "the canon, or the 'best,' of African American literature [which] only portrays the realities of black

2) African American women writers and critics adopted "their own agenda of creating space for black women within the canon of African American literature" (Bragg 2) dominated by the white and the male. They also paid attention to the "intra-racial ideologies of (hetero)sexism as an aspect of internalized racism" (Bragg 5) and struggled to read and represent African American women's experiences *right*.

life" (2). However, this "ideological consistency" can be only achieved through "the exclusion of unconventional or anomalous texts from African American literary anthologies" (Jarrett 2). According to Jarrett,

the effort of African American anthologization [. . .] has resorted to problematic essentialist paradigms of canon and tradition that prioritize the authenticity of African American literature without recognizing the various and frequent ways in which African American writers themselves were working *beyond* this paradigm. (5-6)

The race-oriented canon-making process further affects how African American literature is read.

Quoting Tony Morrison's question, "Other than my own ethnicity – what is going on in my work that makes me believe it is demonstrably inseparable from a cultural specificity that is Afro-American?" (qtd. in Jarrett 7), Jarrett criticizes that current readings of African American literature, including Morrison's works, have focused on racial issues and neglected "the complexity of human identity, relations, and culture" (6) that it simultaneously deals with (6). Jarrett further criticizes that by "presume[ing] and promo[ting] an 'authentic' version of ethnic literature" (5), critics have excluded African American authors' experiential and *canonical* works dealing with issues *beyond* or regardless of racial matters, or restricted and overdetermined them to issues of race.

Henry Louis Gates's *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988) has been hailed as one of the most original and groundbreaking works on the African American literary tradition. Critics' responses in its twenty-fifth-anniversary edition show its continuing impact.³⁾ However, it also reveals how much the issues –

3) Xiomara Santamarina, for instance, comments that Gates "challenged the omission of nineteenth-century texts from discussions of black literature by

the selection/exclusion among African American literary works, the focus on the past and racial issues, elitism, the emphasis on certain tropes, and the reproduction of the existing black/white binary—are persistent and infused in the canon-formation process. Focusing on the trope of the talking book through which Gates examines distinctive characteristics of African American literature, I will explore how his theory and related contentions reveal critical issues in the African American literary tradition and the problems of canon formation.

II

In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates traces the origin of the African American literary tradition to Africa. He first examines the significance of the Signifying Monkey, Esu-Elegbara—a trickster figure and an interpreter between God and man—who often appears in African folklore and whose manner of speaking produces uncertainty and double meanings. Gates argues that this figure, its rhetorical strategy, and its “double-voiced utterance” (SM 88) not only survived the trans-Atlantic slave trade but also developed during slavery, because, as Jeanne Rosier Smith puts it, “living with whites in daily power-based relationships, African American trickster tales strongly reflect the necessity for the trickster’s subversive, masking, signifying skills” (113).⁴ This signifying was required for slaves to express and hide their rebellious themes at the same time.

Gates subsequently examines how the specific language usage of the

putting these in conversation with twentieth-century African-American literature and theory” (855). Katy Chiles similarly points out that Gates’s book is an important text on the “field of early African-American literary study and early American literary study more broadly” (874).

4) SM refers to *The Signifying Monkey* in this article.

Signifying Monkey and the lineage of signifying in African oral tradition were altered and presented in African American texts by analyzing the trope of the talking book. The trope depicts illiterate slaves placing their ears on the books that remain silent to them. Later, the slaves learn the master's language and make books *speak* to them; they even write their autobiographical stories in the same language, for a wider readership. According to Gates, the trope suggests how African Americans made "the white written text speak with a black voice" (SM 131) and how their "oral black culture was transforming itself into a written culture" (132). Tracing the black literary tradition back to early captivity or slave narratives, he examines five autobiographies of African American writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Olaudah Equiano, John Jea, John Marrant, and Ottobah Cugoana. Gates also explores how "specific uses of literary language that are shared, repeated, critiqued and revised" (121) have persisted in the contemporary African-American works of Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and Ishmael Reed, and shows how each writer *signifies* upon the others.

Critics, such as Wahneema Lubiano, have commented that "Gates re-historicizes the African literary presence in the New World and broadens our appreciation of the cultural practices that survived the diaspora" (567). However, the words, like "diaspora" and "the New World," neutralize the uncomfortable process and preconditions for the trope and gloss over the reason for "the African literary presence" in America—the Middle Passage and slavery. Likewise, Gates's work can be apolitical by ignoring how the trope was initiated in the first place. In fact, without taking the historical and social contexts into account, the trope of the talking book can be regarded as a description of African-American religious conversion to Christianity.

Jea, for instance, wrote in his book that he took the Bible and held it

up to his ears “to try whether the book would talk with [him] or not, but it proved to be all in vain” (SM 160). He prayed and prayed, and, at the end of six weeks, he saw in his dream the Lord and an angel who taught him how to read. When Jea woke up, he could read and understand the Bible. Jea’s masters “believed that it was the Lord’s work” (162). Gates views that the literacy of slaves challenges the European perception of Africans as “the lowest of the human races or as the first cousin to the ape” that lack the ability to write (167). However, in Jea’s narrative, the trope of the talking book seems to highlight God’s miracle rather than the slave’s deliberate effort to master the white master’s language. Moreover, although Gates sees the slaves’ stronger “desire to resemble [the white], to imbibe their spirit and imitate their manner” (154) as a form of political action to challenge the white/black binary that placed them in the category of the non-human and inferior Other, they seem to accept the white master’s *higher* written culture, its values, and its categorization of them as the inferior Black Other. Gronniosaw, for instance, wrote that “everybody and everything despised me because I was black” (SM 136), and he was glad when he became “no longer pure cultural African” (138) but more like his master by learning the master’s language, which seems to demonstrate that he embraces the white/black binary, consolidating and justifying the existing social order.

Dwight Conquergood’s study on antislavery lecture circuits suggests the reason for the conflicts within the slave narratives, by revealing an important aspect overlooked in Gates’s reading of the trope of the talking book—the material reality of the publication process. Conquergood examines how slaves, fugitives, or former slaves talked to the audience in public to deliver their messages about abolition of slavery on the lecture circuits. Their speeches might embody what Gates wishes to prove through his analysis of the trope—African-American resistance with/through the master’s language. However, as Conquergood points out, the

elocutionary tradition is largely excluded from the discussion of the African American canon. More problematically, Black speakers could have a chance to speak in public only when their speeches could attract a white audience and when their criticism of slavery was sanctioned or tolerated by the white groups and individuals with power and money that organized the lecture circuits. The fact that “elocution, an art of the spoken word” was controlled by white people suggests that “printed books and literature [. . .] were more apt to be controlled by the privileged white” (Conquergood 327) who determined the value of the stories and sanctioned their release.

Gates himself acknowledged the white-centered publication process. In 1988, the same year in which he published *The Signifying Monkey*, he wrote a forward for *Collected Black Women's Narratives*, entitled “In Her Own Write.” He claimed that the “birth of Afro-American literature occurred in 1773, when Phillis Wheatley published a book of poetry” (vii). However, despite the “remarkable amount of attention” Wheatley received, her “journey to the printer had been a most arduous one” (vii). She was thoroughly examined by eighteen of Boston’s most influential white male citizens who determined whether she, an African-American girl, could write poetry. These white men composed and signed “a two-paragraph ‘Attestation’” in order to secure a publisher (viii). However, this was not enough. She and “her master’s son [. . .] sailed for England,” and her poems were finally published in London “with the aid of the Countess of Huntington and the Earl of Dartmouth” (ix). Wheatley’s publisher claimed that without the attestation, “few would believe that an African could possibly write poetry all by herself” (ix). Gates’s description of the complicated publication process of Wheatley’s work—which involved an “Attestation” by powerful white men, assistance from the master’s son, and the approval of the Earl of Dartmouth and the Countess of Huntington (the only female patron but

also upper and ruling class)—suggests social and historical realities beyond Gates’s intertextual readings of the five slave narratives, such as the approval and aids of privileged white individuals involved in the publication process.

Gates’s comments on Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig: Sketches in the Life of a Free Black* (1859) also reflect this reality. Her novel “never received even one review or comments at a time when virtually *all* works written by black people were heralded by abolitionists” (Gates, “In Her Own Write” xii). John Ernest suggests a reason for the marginalization of her novel: “it offers an aggressively unsanctioned story that not only focuses on northern racism but also criticizes abolitionists” (424). Wilson represents unbearable hardships of labor, exploitative working conditions, low wages, poverty, and abject living conditions that African Americans experienced, which challenged the myth that they could live better as free, equal, paid workers in the North under capitalism than those who lived in the South under slavery. This highlights invisible but omnipresent powers—in various forms, such as patronage, sponsors, or readers—involved in the publication process of African American narratives in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and how they served to maintain the existing social order and ideology even through slave narratives. However, in emphasizing the intertextuality of the trope of the talking book, Gates not only overlooks the reality in *The Signifying Monkey* but also excludes an important voice—the voice of African American female slaves.⁵⁾

Examining how many African American female writers have been

5) For more on the criticism of Gates’s intertextuality, see Warren. He criticizes that Gates’s book abstracts political and social realities and collective experiences of African Americans by “reifying patterns of allusion, parody, and revision employed by certain black writers into a spectral skeletal structure for writing by all blacks” (846).

lost in the annals of history, Hortense J. Spillers criticizes the almost non-existent tradition of African American female writers.

With the exception of a handful of autobiographical narratives from the nineteenth century, the black woman's realities are virtually suppressed until the period of the Harlem Renaissance and later. Essentially, the black woman as artist, as intellectual spokesperson for her own cultural apprenticeship, has not existed before, for anyone. At the source of her own symbol-making task, [the community of black women writers] confronts, therefore, a tradition of work that is quite recent, its continuities broken and sporadic. (297)

Echoing Spillers' words, Gates states that "it has been extraordinarily difficult to establish formal connections between the early women's writing and that of the present, precisely because our knowledge of their work has been broken and sporadic" ("In Her Own Write" xi). However, Gates excludes African American women writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in *The Signifying Monkey*.

Gates in "In Her Own Write" argues that Wheatley's role was so central to shape the Afro-American literary tradition and that "the history of the reception of [her] poetry is the history of Afro-American literary criticism" (xi). Nevertheless, she is not included in his book. Even Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), regarded as the first African American female slave narrative in oral or written form and one of the most popular slave narratives, was not mentioned. The exclusion of female slave narratives leads to a very predictable result. The experiences of female slaves, such as sexual violence as women and exploitation as mothers, and their resistance, are not included in Gates's theory of the slave narratives. Consequently, his theory of early slave narratives becomes part of an African American *male* literary tradition.

Moreover, as William E. Cain points out, African American writers do not merely signify upon each other but “so frequently make fertile use of multiple traditions, black as well as white, Afro-American as well as white Western” (662). For instance,

Ellison’s *[Invisible Man]* implicitly, or explicitly, signifies upon numerous texts from the Afro-American tradition, including Douglass’s *Narrative*, Washington’s *Up From Slavery*, Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, and Wright’s *Native Son*. Yet it also is saturated in texts from the white Western tradition. It begins with epigraphs from Melville’s *Benito Cereno* and Eliot’s *The Family Reunion*, and its final sentence—“Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”—ominously amends the final lines of Whitman’s *Song of Myself*. (661)

Owing to the intertextuality beyond African American literature, or even beyond race, it is uncertain “[w]hat makes the trope distinctively black” (Myers 63), even when African American writers use the trope of signifying.

Conquergood’s explanation of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) exemplifies the complexity and exclusivity of Gates’s study. Stowe, a white female American author, presents in her novel a slave trader, Haley, as the one who “was not a remarkably fluent reader and was in the habit of reading in a sort of recitative half-aloud” (101) and a mulatto slave girl, Cassy, as the one who “read aloud, in a soft voice, and with a beauty of intonation” (313). Stowe does not merely repeat and revise the trope but subverts the hierarchal white/black binary by juxtaposing the “half-loud,” inarticulate white speaker (slave trader) and the loud, well-spoken black female speaker (slave). Stowe further presents the fictional female speaker to audiences in the real world and visualizes the subversion through theatrical adaptations of her novel. She

“dramatized the novel as an elocutionary platform reading for the anti-slavery lecture circuit,” entitled *The Christian Slave*, and employed an elocutionist named Mary E. Webb, “a woman of color, daughter of an escaped slave” for the role of Cassy (Conquergood 332). As Conquergood points out, Webb’s reading of *The Christian Slave*, in which “a black woman entered the public sphere,” is “the literal embodiment of the trope of the talking book” and a great example of how “the text did speak to and through a black voice and body” (333). This all casts doubt on the feasibility of Gates’s project to theorize a coherent and essentially unique African American literary tradition.

Gates states in the preface to *The Signifying Monkey* that his project is to “locate and identify how the ‘black tradition’ had theorized about itself” (ix) and “lift the discourse of Signify[ing] from the vernacular to the discourse of literary criticism” (xi). However, as William J. Spurlin points out, Gates does not sufficiently criticize “the canons of criticism” – European and *American* literary theories, such as post-structuralism (732) – on which he establishes his theory of African American literary tradition. Gates’s theory thus reproduces the exclusivity embedded in the process of making canons or literary tradition: it constructs “the boundaries,” and it is indeed constructed through such exclusivity (Spurlin 732). The exclusivity of Gates’s work seems inevitable, given that his theory of fundamental differences in African American literature, ironically, depends on a Western theory, post-structuralism, which challenges such binaries and essentialism. However, the limitation of his project is not a personal one. It is related to and reveals how much literary criticism and history have been overwhelmingly *white* and how insufficient literary theory is for reading and interpreting African American literary traditions, reiterating the continuing need to build an aesthetic perception of African American literature and critically examine existing literary criticism.

III

According to Robert Elliot Fox, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997), edited by Gates and Nellie Y. McKay, “contains the work of 120 writers, of whom 52 are women.” The Norton anthology, which is the most successful and popular canon of African American literature, seems to contain numerous Black women writers; however, it is still exclusive.⁶⁾ In the Norton preface, Gates stated that the anthology was composed by mostly “poststructuralist colleagues” (183) who “wanted to help students see how these texts ‘speak to,’ or signify upon, each other, just as they had ‘spoken’ to each other across time, space, and genre” (184). This suggests that the anthology was based on intertextuality and might have issues similar to *The Signifying Monkey*. Moreover, critics’ commentary on the Norton anthology – which criticizes its reproduction of a “dominant perception and expectation of black writing” (Fox) by selecting a “politically combative” text and “a documentary of suffering and resistance” – suggests that African American authors’ works that do not deal with racial issues are more likely to be excluded from this canon-making process. As Fox points out, there is also an exclusion/disconnection of the African American canon from a larger Black literature, despite “the historical trajectory of the black experience, from Africa to the Caribbean to the United States” and the presence of “authors across the African continuum.”⁷⁾

The Norton anthology’s exceeding popularity over other collections of African American literature further reveals an important factor in the

6) According to Fox, “30,000 copies of the Norton anthology sold in one month” and 50,000 copies were in print by early 1998.

7) Fox exemplifies Wole Soyinka (Nigeria, the 1986 Nobel Prize winner in Literature), Derek Walcott (St. Lucia, the 1992 Nobel Prize winner in Literature), and Toni Morrison (United States, the 1993 Nobel Prize winner in Literature) as the “authors across the African continuum.”

canon-making process: the popularity of an anthology, depending on the fame of editors or publishers, affects how certain works are recognized and accepted as canonical works more easily and quickly. Gates's words in the Norton anthology also point to the power to shape canon production. He states in its preface that the anthology was made by "scholars, chosen for their leadership in the field" and accompanied by "M. H. Abrams, the 'father' of Norton Anthologies, and Hoh Benedict, vice president and editor at Norton, both of whom had championed [the] project [. . .] from proposal to approval" (182). This suggests a more fundamental racial issue that W. Lawrence Hogue problematizes, regarding the publication process and the canonization of African American literature.

The universality of aesthetic perception was restricted to certain hegemonic individuals and social groups. Within mainstream American and African American criticisms, those groups or individuals with power and cultural capital determined the community's aesthetic perception and values. They also determined which literary texts would receive cultural capital, which would stay in print. (5)

Hogue's words reveal the material conditions and power dynamics of the society underlying the production and circulation of literary works and readership which can (re)produce and fix African American writing as *African American* literature with familiar and stereotyped characteristics and relegate it to the margin. The ongoing and controversial debate on African American literary canon formation not only reflects its exclusivity but also reveals a larger structure of producing knowledge and the continuing centrality of whiteness underlying the *universal* aesthetic perception and criticism to judge *great* literary works. It thus calls for "a polycentric approach" that enables envisioning "an American/African American literature, criticism, and history that possess differences,"

without prioritizing “elite/middle-class Christian African Americans” (Hogue 3) and neglecting the diverse and complicated experiences of marginalized African Americans.

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African American Canon and Criticism: Henry Louis Gates's *The Signifying Monkey*

Abstract

Jung-Suk Hwang

Henry Louis Gates in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (1988) examines the significance of the Signifying Monkey, a trickster figure in African folklore, and whose manner of speaking produces uncertainty and double meanings. He examines how the specific language usage of the Signifying Monkey is altered and appears in African American texts by analyzing the trope of the talking book in early slave narratives and contemporary African American literary works. Gates's book is hailed as one of the most original and groundbreaking works, and critics' responses in its twenty-fifth-anniversary edition show its continuing impact. However, it has also been criticized for an intertextual and apolitical reading of slave narratives and for reproducing essentialism of Black literature. Focusing on the trope of the talking book, I examine how Gate's theory and related contentions reveal critical issues of the African American literary tradition and problems of canon formation, regarding the concept of distinctive and coherent African American aesthetics, elitism, and its relationship with African American readers.

Key Words: African American canon, Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, the talking book, post-structuralism

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