Signifyin(g)

In 2016, the documentary film *13th* was released to critical acclaim by critics and audiences alike. The film explores the systematic and embedded racism of the American justice system. Themes of mass incarceration, race, class, and poverty color the film's main argument. Even after the 13th amendment was passed, to abolish slavery, the perpetuation of slavery has persisted within American institutions ever since. In this essay, I aim to examine *13th* as an article and a continuation of Black orality. Through the gaze of Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s conceptualization of Signifyin(g), I'll attempt to highlight moments in *13th* as Signifyin(g). Primarily, I would like to frame *13th* as evidence that Black rhetoric has moved into broader sectors and understandings of signifying and Black orality.

Signifying finds its place in rhetoric literature from Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s work *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism,* in which Gates defines Signyfin(g) as

> a trope, which is subsumed several other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the master tropes), and also hyperbole, litotes, and metalepsis. To this list, we could easily add aporia, chiasmus, and catachresis, all of which are used in the ritual of Signifyin(g)…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 (57).

Therefore, Signifyin(g) in practice can take the form of poetic language and as a way to mark Black and subcultural vernacular. Turning to the broader sense of how signifying functions, it serves as a way to subvert the conventions white, middle-class people (the cultural dominant) have created (47). This subversion—of wordplay—works as both defense against foes and

preparation for social interaction. Language turns into a labyrinth--full of both shocks and wonder. Gates compares it to a funhouse of mirrors,

> …the sign itself appears to be doubled, at the very least, and (re)doubled upon even closer examination...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 (50-51).

The most significant discovery from Gate's conception of Signifyin(g) is the notion that there's a parallel discursive universe in the black community to the white one. Gates extends this universe to ontological and political discourses. Even the word Signifyin(g) is an example of this, a term perpendicular to "signifying"—the "English standard." Make no mistake, Signifyin(g) isn't simply a shadow world of the white discursive universe. It's more like a shift in understanding between terms of different identities (between standard English and black vernacular) (55). The space between Signifyin(g) and signifying is in close proximity with Gates' conception of Jacques Derrida's différence. The semantic reasoning for Signfyin(g), follows Derrida in the repetition and alteration of one letter and sound of the word "difference" to "diference" (a deliberate misspelling). That is, while the words are spoken identically, they communicate two different things. Difference is a gesture towards the *difference* in how words only signify towards what they actually are. Meaning, words have to depend on other words or signifiers endlessly to garner meaning. While diference relates to the differences between words in which meaning of words is created (Jacques, 1479-80).

Finding Signifyin(g) in black culture is not difficult; even as the subject matter seems difficult to pin down, examples are everywhere. Gates partly places the origins of Signifyin(g) in Jazz—in the celebratory imitation and repetition of the past. These language games that Signifyin(g) relies upon, prevail quite spectacularly in Afro-American literature and poetry, as

well. Gates provides a close reading of many works in the second half of *The Signifying Monkey.*

For example, Gates examines Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* as an

intertextual revision of Frederick Douglass's *Apostrophe to the White Sails* through epigraphs of

the chapter.

> Our house stood within a few rods of the Chesapeake Bay, whose broad bosom was ever white with sails from every quarter of the habitable globe. Those beautiful vessels, robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition. I have often, in the deep stillness of a summer's Sabbath, stood all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay, and traced, with saddened heart and tearful eye, the countless number of sails moving off to the mighty ocean. The sight of these always affected me powerfully. My thoughts would compel utterance; and there, with no audience but the Almighty, I would pour out my soul's complaint, in my rude way, with an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships:--
>
> You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom's swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free! –Frederick Douglass
>
> Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.
>
> Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.— Zora Neale Hurston (184).

Douglass's major contribution from *Apostrophe* is using revision and repetition to define the

genre of slave narration. Hurston—according to Gates, Signifys through another revision and a

reversal. Admittedly, Douglass and Hurston diverge greatly in thematic intentions of their

works. Still, we can understand Hurston's work as a revision through her clear demarcation of

men and women. Desire for men is manifested into an object, in Gates' reading men then

become the Watchers of Hurston's work. Gates argues that women in *Their Eyes* control desire

metaphorically through the process of remembering and (re)remembering (186). Signifyin(g)

through the interplay of Douglass and Hurston, can be defined through rhetorical strategies that "call-back" to earlier black works.

Signifyin(g) is oftentimes found in artistic forms such as Jazz, poetry, rapping, even poetic discourse. This may paint the act of Signifyin(g) as more direct than it is. Especially, if we truly consider Gates' understanding that complex language games and identity shifts are occurring within the discourse. As Thurmon Garner and Carolyn Calloway-Thomas point out in *Understanding African American Rhetoric: Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations,*

> Rhetorically, for the African American community, the strategy behind indirection suggests that confrontation in everyday discourse is to be avoided when possible. . . . Normally, indirection has been treated as a function of the speech acts and not as a rhetorical strategy in oral discourse. Boasting, bragging, loud talking, rapping, signifying, and, to a degree, playing the dozens have elements of indirection. . . .While signifying is a way of encoding a message, one's shared cultural knowledge is the basis on which any reinterpretation of the message is made. Theoretically, signifying (Black) as a concept can be used to give meaning to rhetorical acts of African Americans and indicate a Black presence. Rhetorically, one can also explore texts for how the themes or worldviews of other texts are repeated and revised with a signal difference, but based on shared knowledge (50)

To surmise what Signifyin(g) will mean for the rest of this essay, we can understand it as a mode of commentary that can express identity, styles, and opinions through indirect shared cultural knowledge. Moving forward in mapping this conception onto *13th,* the linkage may seem nearly non-sensical. While Signifyin(g) has been applied to artistic and political discursive events in the black community, a documentary-like *13th* is a clear departure from these rhetorical events. Signifyin(g) is usually found in improv, rapid-pace and more emotionally based spaces. We may think of Black Twitter, rap, the passionate prose of Zora Neale Hurston, the everyday conversational vernacular of black communities.

Practically by definition then, a standard documentary is the very opposite of Signifyin(g) in practices. The conventions of the genre demand directness, fact-based narration,

and a clearly defined script. At this point in explaining my application of Signifyin(g), it may

seem impossible, especially because the soul of the art rests in language. However, there's an

opportunity to understand *13th* as Signifyin(g) through its theoretical understandings as Garner

and Calloway-Thomas define it. To clarify: I would like to map Signifyin(g) onto *13th* through

understanding it as an exploration of the 13th Amendment through the shared knowledge and

signal difference of the black community.

The 13th Film

<u>The 13th Amendment</u>
Section 1.
Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party
shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their
jurisdiction.

Section 2.
Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.
Passed by Congress January 31, 1865. Ratified December 6, 1865.

While the 13th Amendment abolished slavery, *13th* bases its argument on the loophole

left in the 13th Amendment that leaves blacks vulnerable to the justice system. That is, the

clause that slavery will be illegal *unless* it's a punishment for a crime. Leaving whites—

particularly Southerners who had heavily relied on slavery to fuel their economy, to find plenty

of crimes for blacks to be punished for. While the 13th Amendment's unfortunate wording is far

from Signifyin(g), (it does not come from Black discourse, it is not perpendicular to a standard

English term), in a way DuVernay's unraveling it as a loophole is. While the discourse around it

that the film presents is far from improv and does not employ complex rhetorical devices in

speech, DuVernay is employing a doubling of sorts. She's is also doing an inverse of what

Signifyin(g) usually does, in that it plays word-games, it indirectly insults and implies. Which is

what the 13th Amendment is doing, by creating a clause in the amendment, it signaled to the white dominant that they *did* have a way to keep blacks controlled. Yet, DuVernay is also signaling a doubling of understanding. While in the white discourse the 13th Amendment meant freedom for slaves, for the black community it meant a perpetuation of their circumstances.

Henry Gates Jr. makes an appearance in the documentary, to discuss the Civil Rights Movement, perhaps unintentionally he applies his theory to the event,

> I think that one of the most brilliant tactics of the civil rights movement was this transformation of the notion of criminality. Because for the first time, being arrested was a noble thing. Being arrested by white people was your worst nightmare. Still is, for many African Americans. So what did they do? They voluntarily defined a movement around getting arrested. They turned it on its head. (*13th*)

While Signifyin(g) doesn't function as a reversal of action, as a cursory reading of Gates' commentary provides, I have to once again point out the specific word choice that Gates uses. A usage that I think tracks with the purpose of Signifyin(g). Notice how Gates says that African-Americans *transformed* the notion of criminality, they *defined* the movement around getting arrested. To Gates' conception of Signifyin(g) in Black discourse, standard English is transformed into new meanings and signals for the black community to share. In the case of the meaning of criminality, the meaning's connotation was transformed. They defined movement and the act of getting arrested into a perpendicular to the white universes' meaning.

Infamously, activists and supporters of the Civil Rights Movement peacefully protested Jim Crow laws. The act of sitting of simply sitting in a different part of the bus, or restaurant, illuminated the ludicrous and fundamentally unequal nature of such laws. The proof of such inequality lies within local and federal government's disproportional use of violence against activists. The narrative of equality and justice of the state to the majority of white Americans

was fundamentally transformed. If whites were determined to understand the United States'

justice system as fair and equal, they would then have to contend with its actions during the

Civil Rights Era.

Throughout the documentary, there's strong evidence of both transformation on the

side of black communities and unraveling of white law and discourse through Signifyin(g)

beyond rhetoric has shaped Black history. Beyond Black vernacular and discourse, the African-

American community has used Signifyin(g) as a way to empower themselves against white

discourse and law. While, it may seem uncommon to understand Black history—especially the

events depicted in *13th*, I hope that it may contribute to understanding the film as a milestone

in the Black oral tradition.

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