

genre, disappeared. Spirituals were replaced by pseudo-spirituals and Euro-peanized versions in which the sincere emotional quality of the former was presented as mere sentimentality. Some of the most vital qualities of black folk music were lost or suppressed, and the real thing remained outside the commercially profitable, far-reaching cultural marketplace.

Meanwhile, the songsters, "musicians," and "physicians" of the late nineteenth century kept secular folk music alive in Afro-America, as they performed functions similar to those of the Senegambian *gewel*, singing and playing blues, ballads, and social, comic, and rhyme songs for dances and other functions (Small 1987, 195). The itinerant bluesmen and other folk singers, the rag and barrelhouse pianists, the banjo and mouth-harp players, and the jug- and string-band musicians were giving early shape to African-American secular song and were playing a large role in determining the directions African-American music would take.

CHAPTER 4

African-American Modernism, Signifyin(g), and Black Music

Watch the Chameleon: it treads ever so carefully, and it can make itself hard to see.
South African Proverb

Rationalism in order to save the truth, renounces life.

José Ortega y Gasset

In *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), literature scholar Houston Baker marks September 18, 1895, as the beginning of African-American modernism, and he takes as its triggering event Booker T. Washington's opening address at the Negro exhibit of the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition. He bases his attribution on Washington's adroitness with the minstrel mask in announcing a plan of action, acceptable to both whites and blacks, that would ensure that a large portion of the nation's black citizens would get an industrial education. Baker defines the actual minstrel mask as "a space of habitation" in which resides, among other things, the denial of the humanity of Africans and their descendants. He views the minstrel mask as a "governing object" in a ritual of *non-sense*, which mandates that blacks "meld with minstrel's contours"; it is a mask of selective memory, misappropriating from the core culture elements of common use and "fashioning them into a comic array" (20, 21). The original, actual minstrel mask was used to remind

whites of African Americans' ostensible lack of humanity, their supposed irresponsibility, and their willingness to accept ill treatment. Baker contends that it was necessary for any African American who would be heard and taken seriously by whites in the 1890s to communicate through a discursive, verbally rhetorical manifestation of the mask. Hence, Booker T. Washington's stance and his success at Tuskegee.

According to Baker (1987) the "wearers" of this metaphorical mask manipulated its figures in order to turn it and its sounds into negotiable discursive currency. For behind this discursive version of the mask, black users of it made power plays; this use of the mask was their only intellectual recourse at the time. It was a "liberating manipulation of masks" that allowed Washington to succeed, "his mind [always] fixed on some intended gain, on a [rhetorical] mastery . . . that leads to Afro-American advancement" (25, 31-32). In this way, he achieved "an effective modernity" (36), and his behavior was liberating. It was this mastery of the mask by Washington, Charles Waddell Chesnut, and other turn-of-the-century black leaders that constituted "a primary move in Afro-American discursive modernism" (17).

Against the mastery of the mask, Baker (1987) sets "the deformation of mastery," a technique used by spokespersons whose entirely different rhetoric found an entirely different kind of economic support and created a different kind of liberation. Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Richard Wright are the examples here. Their primary tool was phaneric display¹—in this case, "the coding of African, tribal, or social sounds as active, outgoing resistance and response to oppressive ignorance and silencing" (104). A statement such as "Don't never let nobody hit you more than once" (Sonya Sanchez, quoted in Baker, 103) is a guerrilla tactic, a liberating strategy designed to "ameliorate desire or to secure material advantage" (105). This phaneric approach does not mask, in the sense of concealing; it displays, advertises, secures advantage, and enhances survival. It *deforms* the mask and its mastery by displaying distinguishing and subversive codes, refusing and defusing the non-sense of the minstrel mask. According to Baker, Washington's mastery was based on the fictions of minstrelsy, while Du Bois's deformation, for example, was an authentic folk exposition.

In my view, from the 1890s onward African Americans employed both strategies, using masking and deformation equally in their quest for liberation. This was the African-American modernist field of discourse. The modernist sensibility required the rejection of many of the values, techniques, and procedures of the past and the embracing of new ones, for modernism brought with it a spiritual apostasy symbolized by a new rationalism and a desire for the conspicuous consumption of art and entertainment, a rejection of myth, and a re-

1. Phaneric display is described as "allaesthetic" by zoologist H. B. Cott and taken up by Baker to refer to masks that advertise rather than conceal.

putation of the cosmic vision of African culture and cultural memory. Generally, neither the assumptions and trappings nor the cultural behaviors of African-derived ritual were acceptable to modernists; on one level, the mysteries of myth languished and rational explanations replaced them, with little immediate improvement in the black social circumstance. This demythicizing of black culture, together with the increasing separation of blacks from rural America, resulted in new tensions for African Americans who were seeking new roots and comforts. Furthermore, modernism accelerated the process of social differentiation among African Americans and brought new processes in which economic, social, and artistic success could be obtained only on the basis of skills marketable in the urban setting, through the artificial values of materialism, and through forms of creativity that were acceptable to white society. Since comparatively few blacks could meet these criteria, a cultural and social abyss was created, to be filled in part by the individual social commentary of the blues and the coping behaviors of frustrated and disillusioned African Americans.

Washington, Du Bois, and other leaders of the period did not create African-American modernism; it was a product of the social and cultural developments of the era. Emerging in urban communities in the 1890s was a small black middle class that included railroad porters, barbers, tailors, and a variety of skilled workers. The first decade of the twentieth century saw the beginnings of a black elite consisting of physicians, dentists, lawyers, publishers, morticians, preachers, and other businessmen. But the black population was still largely made up of the unskilled working class, whose social values and behaviors embarrassed many among the black elite and the emerging middle class. By 1915, both of these groups were contending that black youths should begin to "devote more of their time to literary societies, musical clubs, debating societies, and sewing circles, . . . and less to pool playing, dancing . . . and other virtue-robbing pleasures" (quoted in Landry 1987, 35). What really existed, in fact, was a three-way schism within the black community. The middle class aspired to the values of the elite, which was already embracing white culture and had separated itself from blacks of the lowest class. The elite established high-status organizations that excluded working-class blacks, even including churches in which there was to be "no shouting, emotionalism, or 'Amen's'" (34). Cotillions were held for the organized entertainment of elite youths, while dance parties served the working class (171). As one eighty-four-year-old black fiddler from Tennessee remarked in the 1950s to Terry Zwigoff (1987),

When we played for the black people it would all depend on what element we played for. Because there were the upper class, or elite, black people. We would call them "siddy," which is black chat for highfalutin', high strung, or elite. That means high brow. And you couldn't play no low-down funky blues for

them neither. We'd have to play basically what we had to play for high-brow white people. (17)

Such attitudes had begun to spread across the South as elite blacks from among the Creoles of color, as well as blacks of the emerging middle class, took on what they viewed as white values and behaviors. In Memphis, for example, Furry Lewis, referring to the practice of bands marching and playing jazz in funeral parades, told Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall (1981),

They don't have music like they do at funerals in New Orleans. . . . We all just goes to see him for the last time. . . . I don't think that no one—me or other musicians—are 'sposed to take a church song and make the blues out of it. I call it playing' with God. . . . You ain't got no business singing "Old Ragged Cross" and all like that in no blues fashion and no jazz fashion and no mess such as that. (113)

Musically, the spirit of modernism is effectively summed up, I think, in a single work of the first decade of the twentieth century: Scott Joplin's folk opera *Treemonisha* (1911). Set in 1884 in rural Arkansas near the Red River, the work rejects "ignorance and superstition" and looks forward to the "raising of the race" through education. Its music aspires to the proportions of grand opera and includes an overture, instrumental act preludes, arias and recitatives, duets, quartets, instrumental and choral ensembles, choreography, and strong choral writing. Joplin's ambitions were aligned with black intellectual thought of the period, consonant with modernism and with the black nationalist thought then fueling the prevailing renaissance spirit. Joplin's primary characters are Treemonisha herself and Zdzetrick, one of the three conjurers; Treemonisha represents the forces of education and light, and Zdzetrick and his companions symbolize those of superstition and darkness. Education triumphs, of course, with the libretto making the point that the intellect can lead the race away from the fetters of ignorance and to the personal and community freedoms and rewards that all Americans deserve. It is interesting that *Treemonisha* was written years before Esu would visit Robert Johnson (b. 1912) at the crossroads. Joplin, a modernist, apostatized African-American mythology, Johnson later celebrated it.

Another modernist work of the period is N. Clark Smith's *Negro Folk Suite* (1902), which signals, in part at least, the direction that African-American musical nationalism would take in subsequent years. Like *Treemonisha*, this descriptive work illustrates the possibilities of wedding European and African-American traditions. The "Orange Dance" has embedded within it the "Stevedore's Song" and is based on rhythms from British Guiana. The "Pineapple Lament," reflecting the composer's perception of the mood of Martinique, was composed in memory of the pineapple groves that were lost in the volcanic eruption of Martinique's Mount Pelé in 1902. The "Banana Walk" is a

highly rhythmic piece that makes use of melodies from St. Helena Island, one of the sea islands off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina, where African and early African-American cultures remained almost intact until the middle of the twentieth century. This entire movement, written long before James P. Johnson's popular "Charleston," is marked "tempo di Charleston" in memory of the fact that "boys from the banana farms danced the Charleston for us" during the composer's return from a trip to the North in 1902 (Smith 1925, 7).

Another work by Smith, *Negro Choral Symphony*, was published by the composer in 1917, in Kansas City, Missouri, where he was then living and teaching. My search for the work has turned up only one movement, "Prayer," for soprano solo and chorus, with piano accompaniment (cues for harp, however, suggest a more elaborate orchestration). This movement is reminiscent of the spiritual, in that it is musically a kind of lament and its text is an appeal to God for deliverance, suggesting the Old Negro rather than the New.

In sum, Smith's two works and Joplin's *Treemonisha* pay tribute to black culture while, in Joplin's case, rejecting and, in Smith's, ignoring its mythical underpinnings.

During the years between Emancipation and the rise of African-American modernism, a large part of Afro-America made a more or less gradual shift from a cosmos controlled by black mythology and African-American community to one dominated by individual determinism. While many were able to successfully make that shift, many others were not, and few were allowed to determine their own social and political status and future. At the same time, for some of those on the urban landscape particularly, the ideal of community no longer determined most of their associations, values, and judgments. This psychological alienation from cultural roots, on the one hand, and the rejection by white society, on the other, resulted for many black Southerners in a dismal gloom that was both evoked and lifted partially by turn-of-the-century bluesmen. These factors, together with the social schisms I outlined earlier, the disintegration of spiritual and communal life, and an inhospitable general environment, created in many rootless African Americans a need for belonging. This need was met somewhat by the outbreak of World War I, when the opportunity to move north to jobs and new associations in urban America brought relief. But with the beginnings of the Great Migration, a new manifestation of an older conflict arose: the very idea of hundreds of thousands of southern blacks moving north between 1917 and 1919 spurred white resentment and worsened the existing conflict. And when black participation in World War I did not bring African Americans the freedoms they expected—

the attainment of which blacks had justified to themselves partially on the basis on modernist rationality—they developed a level of cynicism that would have a significant consequence: a renewed and intensified mistrust of white society. African Americans resented the refusal of white society to grant them the rights they had earned in slavery, had been granted by Emancipation, and had proved themselves worthy of by fighting for democracy in World War I. But far from conceding these claims, white people had resisted all along—through passive resistance, segregation, social aggression, and violence.² The resulting black cynicism was accompanied by psychological self-defense and self-empowering strategies, one of which was Signifyin(g).³ Signifyin(g) became the tool of the human, urban trickster, whose general behavior is symbolized in the toast of the Signifying Monkey:

Said the signifyin' monkey to the lion one day:
 "Hey, dere's a great big elephant down th' way
 Goin' 'roun' talkin', I'm sorry t' say,
 About yo' momma in a scandalous way!"

"Yea, he's talkin' 'bout yo' momma an' yo' grandma, too;
 And he don' show too much respect fo' you.
 Now, you weren't there an' I sho' am glad
 'Cause what he said about yo' momma made me mad!"

Signifyin' Monkey, stay up in yo' tree
 You are always lyin' and signifyin'
 But you better not monkey wit' me.

The lion said, "Yea? Well, I'll fix him;
 I'll tear that elephant limb from limb."
 Then he shook the jungle with a mighty roar
 Took off like a shot from a forty-four.

He found the elephant where the tall grass grows
 And said, "I come to punch you in your long nose."
 The elephant looked at the lion in surprise
 And said, "Boy, you better go pick on somebody your size."
 But the lion wouldn't listen; he made a pass;
 The elephant slapped him down in the grass.
 The lion roared and sprung from the ground
 And that's when that elephant really went to town.

2. For a good account of the vicious, crusading racism during the years 1890 to 1917, see Carroll and Noble (1988, 254, 255-256, 274-277).

3. "Signifyin(g)" with the bracketed "g" is Gates's (1988) form of the term, coined to distin-

I mean he whupped that lion for the rest of the day
 And I still don't see how the lion got away
 But he dragged on off, more dead than alive,
 And that's when that monkey started his signifyin' jive.

The monkey looked down and said, "Ooooh weel!
 What is this beat-up mess I see?
 Is that you, Lion? Ha, ha! Do tell!
 Man, he whupped yo' head to a fare-thee-well!"

"Give you a beatin' that was rough enough;
 You s'posed to be the king of the jungle, ain't dat some stuff?
 You big overgrown pussycat! Don' choo roar
 Or I'll hop down there an' whip you some more."

The monkey got to laughing and a' jumpin' up and down,
 But his foot missed the limb and he plunged to ground,
 The lion was on him with all four feet
 Gonna grind that monkey to hamburger meat.

The monkey looked up with tears in his eyes
 And said, "Please Mr. Lion, I apologize,
 I meant no harm, please, let me go
 And I'll tell you something you really need to know."

The lion stepped back to hear what he'd say,
 And that monkey scampered up the tree and got away.
 "What I wanted to tell you," the monkey hollered then,
 "Is if you fool with me, I'll sic the elephant on you again!"

The lion just shook his head, and said, "You jive . . .
 If you and yo' monkey children wanna say alive,
 Up in them trees is where you better stay."
 And that's where they are to this very day.

Signifyin' Monkey, stay up in yo' tree
 You are always lyin' and signifyin'
 But you better not monkey wit' me⁴

(Oscar Brown, Jr., "Signifyin' Monkey," in Goss and Barnes 1989, 456-457)

For urban blacks, the strategy of this toast became a means of coping symbolically with the whites' suppression and denial of their freedoms. In coping with white resistance to racial progress, and with the hostilities then preva-

4. I do not know when this toast was collected or when it was first told, but I believe that the toast of the Signifying Monkey is an urban version of the African folk tale "Why Monkeys Live in Trees" (chapter 1), and it is probable that it became popular in urban Afro-America af-

lent within the African-American community itself, African Americans did not, in the period following World War I, retreat to the solace of the Negro spiritual, which had already served its purpose and was no longer relevant to the times; nor did they become self-destructively aggressive. They *signified*, using the toast of the Signifying Monkey as their model.

The toast itself is a metaphor, a symbol for the state of things—for the American condition as seen and experienced by sophisticated urban African Americans, the new city slickers—and the Monkey's strategy is symbolic of a way of coping with that condition through trickery. In the Signifying Monkey we have a new trickster on the African-American landscape, cultivating a new language (Gates 1988, 7) in order to help neutralize the forces of oppression and exploitation. For city dwellers, the Signifying Monkey is a key mythological figure in the African American's struggle for adjustment, dignity, and equality: a trickster who will baffle, circumvent, and even subdue agents of oppression with the same wit, cunning, and guile as tricksters past. It is as if, after giving birth to the bluesmen on the eve of the Great Migration, Esu—a victim of the apostasies of modernism—perished and was reborn as a new and "cited" trickster. Esu's demise had been caused by the modernists' rejection of myth, but in his place came the more rational and acceptable slickster—the Signifying Monkey. When the virtue of rural plainness came to be seen as urban naïveté, African Americans at first used the talents and skills of the trickster as a substitute for the knowledge and sophistication they would need to negotiate the urban landscape. They began to master and to deform the minstrel mask with the disingenuousness of fronting and the phaneric display of Signifyin(g).

The device of Signifyin(g) is clearly of African origin. Recall the tale in which Esu wears a suit of black and red in order to trick two friends and destroy their relationship. This was silent, but active, Signifyin(g). The notion of Signifyin(g) is a survival and elaboration of a technique used in several animal-trickster tales of Afro-America: "Why Monkeys Live in Trees," "Why the Dog Always Chases Other Animals," "Cutting the Elephant's Hips," "How Squirrel Robbed Rabbit of His Tail," and numerous others that were collected and published in the 1880s by Joel Chandler Harris and other writers. But the term "signifying" itself—as an African-American vernacular technique—first appeared in print, I believe, in the title of the tale "The Signifying Monkey." In keeping with the prevailing spirit of renaissance, urban African Americans, I believe, resurrected the African tale "Why Monkeys Live in Trees" and transformed it into armament in a new battle for dignity and freedom.

In the trickster figure, Stuckey's (1987) hypothesis and Gates's (1988) theory converge. For Gates, Esu and the Signifying Monkey are ascendant; for Stuckey,

it is Br'er Rabbit, "keeper of the faith of the ancestors, mediator of their claims on the living" (18). In the tale "Buh Rabbit in Red Hill Churchyard," as we have seen, Br'er Mockingbird joins Br'er Rabbit in a ceremony in which

dey had chunes floatin' all 'round on de night air. Dey could stand a chune on end, grab it up an' throw it away an' ketch it an' bring it back an' hold it; an' make dem chunes sound like dey was strugglin' to get away one minute, an' de' next dey sound like sumpin' gittin' up close an' 'whisperin'.

I quote this passage again because it vividly suggests the tropes of the ring and their inclusion in the music making of an African-derived burial ceremony. In the tale, Br'er Rabbit is interpreting the music of the rite through what is obviously improvisation. The imagery and symbolism in the churchyard are provocative: the trickster is at the burial ground, venerating the spirits and interpreting the culture through music; the instrument he plays is the fiddle, prominent in Africa, ubiquitous in slave culture, sometimes played by Esu, and profane among some Christians; Br'er Rabbit even dances on a tombstone—something Esu probably would do. Most significant, though, Br'er Rabbit is Signifyin(g), and so is Mockingbird.

In the black vernacular, Signifyin(g) is figurative, implicative speech. It makes use of vernacular tropings such as "marking, loud-talking, testifying, calling out, sounding, rapping, playing the dozens" (Gates 1988, 52), and other rhetorical devices. Signifyin(g) is a way of saying one thing and meaning another; it is a reinterpretation, a metaphor for the revision of previous texts and figures; it is tropological thought, repetition with difference, the obscuring of meaning (53, 88)—all to achieve or reverse power, to improve situations, and to achieve pleasing results for the signifier. For in Signifyin(g), the emphasis is on the signifier, not the signified. In African-American music, musical figures Signify by commenting on other musical figures, on themselves, on performances of other music, on other performances of the same piece, and on completely new works of music. Moreover, genres Signify on other genres—ragtime on European and early European and American dance music; blues on the ballad; the spiritual on the hymn; jazz on blues and ragtime; gospel on the hymn, the spiritual, and blues; soul on rhythm and blues, rock 'n' roll, and rock music; bebop on swing, ragtime rhythms, and blues; funk on soul; rap on funk; and so on. Call-Response, the master trope, the musical trope of tropes, implies the presence within it of Signifyin(g) figures (calls) and Signifyin(g) revisions (responses, in various guises) that can be one or the other, depending on their context.⁵ For example, when pendular thirds are used in an original melodic statement, they may constitute a "call"; when they are

5. I am grateful to Bruce Tucker for putting me onto this idea early in the development of my ideas, when he stated that something like the Afro-American musical process of call-and-response, metaphorically speaking, might be considered as the musical trope of tropes.

used to comment on, or "trope," a preexisting use of such thirds, they can be said to constitute a "response," a Signifyin(g) revision.

A twelve-bar blues in which a two-measure instrumental "response" answers a two-measure vocal "call" is a classic example of Signifyin(g). Here, the instrument performs a kind of sonic mimicry that creates the illusion of speech or narrative conversation. When performers of gospel music, for example, begin a new phrase while the other musicians are only completing the first, they may be Signifyin(g) on what is occurring and on what is to come, through implication and anticipation. The implication is "I'm already there." And when soloists hang back, hesitating for a moment to claim their rightful place in the flow of things, they are saying, silently and metaphorically, "But I wasn't, really." This kind of Signifyin(g) allows the performer to be in two places at once; it is sheer, willful play—a dynamic interplay of music and aesthetic power, the power to control and manipulate the musical circumstance. In this way, performers combine the ritual teasing and critical insinuations of Signifyin(g) with the wit, cunning, and guile of the trickster in a self-empowering aesthetic and communicational device.

Musical Signifyin(g) refers to the rhetorical use of the musical tropes subsumed under the master trope of Call-Response: calls, cries, whoops, and hollers; call-and-response, elision, pendular and blue thirds, musical expressions, vocal imitations by instruments, and parlando; multimeter, cross-rhythms, and interlocking rhythms; and all the rest. Musical Signifyin(g) carries with it a nonverbal semantic value, a "telling effect" that "asserts, alleges, requests, and implies . . . mocks, groans, concurs, and signifies misgivings and suspicions" (Murray 1973, 86). In Signifyin(g), the vernacular is used to read black formal products. In this way, Signifyin(g) is also criticism, since it validates and invalidates musical narrative through respectful, ironic, satirizing imitation and manipulation. Derived from the Signifying Monkey tales, with Esu-Elegbara as its interpreter and connector to African mythology, Signifyin(g) connects its user with the roots of black culture; for in all of Africa, Zahan (1970, 1979) reminds us, "the use of implication, euphemism, symbol, allegory, and secret" is a normal "part of . . . oral expression" (114).

Gates (1988) makes the point that Signifyin(g), by redirecting attention from the signified to the signifier, places the stress of the experience on the materiality of the latter: "the importance of the Signifying Monkey poems is their repeated stress on the sheer materiality . . . of the signifier itself" (59). If I interpret Gates correctly, the material signifiers in Dance, Drum, and Song, aside from the musicians' trappings, can also be the body movements of the dancers and musicians—the performers' physical play as they perform their respective roles. These movements, together with the signifier's willful play, are "the dominant mode of discourse" (58) in the ring. This is why, in contrast to the European musical orientation, the *how* of a performance is more important than

African-American Modernism, Signifyin(g), and Black Music the *what*. Certainly, African Americans have their favorite tunes, but it is *what* is done with and inside those tunes that the listeners look forward to, not *what* they are playing of them. The hearing of an old or a favorite tune may carry pleasant memories, but those memories and their quality—absent inquiry—based in preference and nostalgia. With the *musical* experience, the expectation is that something musical will *happen* in the playing of the music, and it is the *something* that fascinates, that elevates the expectation and places the hearer in a critical mode. The "something" that is expected might relate not only to the sounds that will be heard, but also to the players' movements: they perform. The movements of the instruments, the movements of an individual's limbs, torso, shoulders, head, neck, and eyes—even the wrinkling of the forehead—accompany the sonic gestures made by the musicians, the musical troping they perform on or within the tune or figure, in whole or in part as they make the performance. These movements are the physical signifier that are part and parcel of the black musical experience. They prevailed and still prevail in traditional Africa; they prevailed in eighteenth-century slave balls and still do in urban black America. When dancers are dancing, it is how they relate to what the musicians play and how the musicians react to the movements, gestures, and urgings that make the dance a success, for it is the dancers' physical Signifyin(g) that excites other dancers and musicians alike: a bump here, a grind there, a nod here, a dip there. Within black life, it is culturally, socially, and artistically significant—something fraught with cultural memory and, in that sense, quite meaningful to actual and potential signifier. It is this manifestation of *materiality*, this physical realization of the Signifyin(g) mode, inside and outside the ring, that creates and makes possible in tracultural, interdisciplinary aesthetic communication. It is to this materiality that we must attend if we are fundamentally to understand the music, for it is in the material manifestations of Signifyin(g) that reside many of the clues and cues to the perception of black music and its evaluation.

In "Buh Rabbit in Red Hill Churchyard," Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Mockingbird re-create the ritual with which Africans and early African Americans worshipped God and venerated the ancestors, recognized and celebrated the cycle of Being (deceased ancestors being reborn in new babies in a never-ending cycle), and paid tribute to life's nourishments through sacrifice (re-turning to the earth some form of human or animal residue). In the African ontology, Being was a never-ending cycle of give-and-take that involved the living, the living-dead, the spirits, the gods, and God. And it was this Being or existence, that was symbolized in African ritual. The churchyard tale is an imaginative telling of this tradition. Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Mockingbird, in "basing" the dancing "little beasts," are playing the typical role of musicians:

in African-American ring ritual, expressing through their music the struggles and fulfillments of existence. The Signifyin(g) imitation and revision, induction, figures, and metaphors involved in and implied by this musical performance by Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Mockingbird symbolize life, existence, being, they thereby constitute a musical symbol—a Signifyin(g) musical symbol.

In chapter 3, I pointed out that black composers in the United States have been writing and publishing music since the late eighteenth century. For my purposes, this notated music and all that followed will be viewed as "texts," candidates for Signifyin(g) revision; and since recorded performances can be heard again and again, without change, they also will be treated as formal "texts," to be "read," studied, and revised. Any text, black or white, can be read by the vernacular, by the signifier, as evidenced by the black musical "discourse" on the white social-dance music of the nineteenth century in which power relations were significantly reversed, turning white texts into black as black musicians applied African-American rhetorical strategies to European forms. In these events, European and American dance music was trifled with, teased, and censured as it never had been before—infused with the semantic tropes and values of Call-Response. The "willful play" of the black signifiers became more important than the given melodies they played as they created call-and-response figures, cross-rhythms, elisions, smears, breaks, and stop-time figures, "telling a story" with musically dialogical, rhetorical tropes that asserted, assented, implied, mocked, and critically evaluated the possibilities of the new music with which they had made contact.

I believe that Signifyin(g) was developed in response to the black cultural apostasy that resulted from the onset of modernism, which itself was fed by factors such as the prohibitions instituted by exclusionary lawmaking after Reconstruction, the loss of the communal ethos of black culture, and the continued ill-treatment of African Americans throughout the United States. But another and different response to—or perhaps even a cause of—this apostasy was the determination of elite and middle-class African Americans to "elevate the race" by producing within it the artistic and intellectual resources and excellence that would prove them to be the intellectual and social equals of white Americans. They would accomplish this not by denying the value of their racial heritage, but by reaffirming and asserting it. This spirit of "renaissancism" (Baker's [1987] good term) was pervasive all across the United States, the Caribbean, and the Atlantic world at the time. But in New York City, renaissancism sank its roots early and deep and flowered as the Harlem Renaissance; later, a Chicago flowering would develop.

Booker T. Washington's plan of action and its acceptance by whites had raised expectations among the black populace, perhaps even helping to bring about this spirit of "renaissancism," this "spirit of nationalistic engagement that [began] with intellectuals, artists, and spokespersons at the turn of the

century and [received] extensive definition and expression during the 1920s" (Baker 1987, 91). From the context of Baker's discussion, it is clear that he believes, as do many scholars, that although this spirit flowered and flourished in Harlem in the 1920s, it transcended both place and period, engaging the entire African diaspora for more than four decades between around 1910 and 1950. During the Negro Renaissance, spirituals, ragtime, blues, jazz, and gospel music would undergo significant development, and Signifyin(g) would play a role: the musicians would become signifiers par excellence—musical tricksters who would help define the music and the culture of the United States.