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Liberating Figures in Toni Cade Bambara's Gorilla, My Love

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Published first in 1972, Toni Cade Bambara's Gorilla, My Love has been celebrated for its realistic depiction of the African American community, for its almost musical rendering of Black English, and for the resilience and energy of its first-person narrators. The only study focusing entirely on the humor in these stories is Nancy D. Hargrove's "The Comic Sense in the Short Stories of Toni Cade Bambara"(1985). Hargrove considers the humor that arises unintentionally, noting that much of it depends on the circumstances and the language of the narrators, and concluding that Bambara is "a masterful practitioner of the art of comedy"(140). In addition to the unplanned humor identified by Hargrove, these stories contain intentional humor, much of it the result of word play. The narrators use ambiguous words, phrases, and references to multiply meanings. As an alternative reading emerges, the more accessible view of a fractured community gives way to a portrait of solidarity, affectionate pride supplants conspicuous but unlikely enmities, and, previously incongruous details details become integrated into the narrative.

The subtle and varied strategies used to achieve this double vision include puns and pantomime and is a form of Signifyin(g). 1 In his history of African American humor, Mel Watkins traces this practice to a number of sources, including "wordplay and clever verbal interchange in the oral cultures of the West African societies" and folk ballads and toasts honoring black heroes: "The expressive attributes most highly esteemed in the black folk tradition—the verbal acuity and spontaneous wit displayed in signifying, boasting, and storytelling or 'lying'—also

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characterize black American humor"(63, 472). Double-voiced discourse, Watkins explains, was useful to slaves inscribing escape plans on a seemingly innocuous performance for vigilant masters. Until the sixties, these strategies were designedly unavailable to white audiences, but as part of an expression of racial pride, comedians during the Civil Rights movement revealed some of their strategies on stage, to all audiences. "Not surprisingly," says Watkins of a parallel development in literature, "more black authors began reflecting the comic resonance, uninhibited self-assurance, and assertively impudent tone of those stage wits and clowns"(435). Among these authors, Bambara is one of the most passionate and consistent champions of Signifyiers, and her characters employ the technique in their words and in their gestures. Indeed, the practice is not only a method but a central thematic concern in Gorilla, My Love.

In "Black English," Bambara explains the political reasons for her interest in the language of African Americans, especially as it is used informally, on the street. "To resist acculturation, you hang on to language, because it is the reflection of a people, of a core of ideas and beliefs and values and literature and lore"(81). Activists in this resistance to acculturation are the neighborhood's young people whose ability to entertain with language is legendary. In her short stories, then, Bambara introduces an entire population, men, women, and children, all engaged in Playing the Dozens and other forms of word play. Some use the strategy to entertain, and some use it to teach, and all enjoy themselves. In the first four stories considered in this study, male characters whose neighbors seem to fear them are shown to be popular entertainers, known for their lingistic virtuosity and applauded in figurative language. In the second part group of four stories, the relationships between female characters and their families are discussed to show that foregrounded contention masks affectionate cohesion.

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In "Black English," Bambara describes the relationship between Dozens players and their audiences: "Take an average kid on the corner. . . . He can rap for days on the stoophold; people absolutely enraptured"(82). Manny, the title character in "The Hammer Man" uses this same stage and inspires a similar following when he promises, like many other comedians before him, that his next joke will kill his audience. Manny, however, boasts to the narrator's father. "[H]e was sitting on the stoop like that every night," she says, and "Manny told my father he was going to kill me first chance he got."[2] When the narrator tells one person that Manny has been "on [her] stoop all day and all night," others begin to gather, many engaging in a kind of preliminary performance themselves.

> I had already told Miss Rose that Crazy Manny was after me. And Miss Rose, being who she was, quite naturally went over to Manny's house and said a few harsh words to his mother, who, being who she was, chased Miss Rose out into the street and they commenced to get with it, snatching bottles out of the garbage cans and breaking them on the johnny pumps and stuff like that. . . . . . . They got to rolling in the streets . . . It was something else. (36)

It is possible, of course, that Manny has threatened to do physical violence to the narrator, that Miss Rose complains to Manny's mother, and Manny's mother chases Rose away in defense of Manny. Yet, as the narrator helpfully suggests, "It was something else" as well. For example, these same terms could identify Miss Rose and Manny's mother as engaged in Playing the Dozens, which Bambara describes as "a very hip game" beginning with "some extravagant outrageous insult" and leading to "baroque, excessive metaphors" ("Black English" 82, 84). If Manny is a renowned Signifier, then Miss Rose's "few harsh words" alert his mother to the upcoming performance and, in preparation, the women engage in a routine of their own, perhaps miming their willingness to participate in a riot, to follow Manny's call to action. More likely, they are enacting a scene from another text, perhaps one in which a similar fight alerted audiences for the entrance of someone whose expressive repertoire was as famous as Manny's.

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One part of Manny's undoubtedly multifaceted performance is his claim to have fallen off the roof and his subsequent appearance wrapped in bandages, "like a mummy"(37). Again, it could be that Manny falls accidentally. When she says "It looked phony to me," then, the narrator is merely refusing sympathy to the man who so recently frightened her. Or, since a session of the Dozens almost always includes the suggestion that an opponent consult his or her "mama," it may be that she notes his resemblance to a mummy, a distant homonym to "mama," in an effort to alert observers to consider figurative implications for Manny's appearance. His pantomime and his costume are carefully constructed, so, if she did not say it looked fake, no one but the narrator could enjoy Manny's joke. A clue to the meaning of the rumor Manny circulates is found in an essay by Nikki Giovanni, published in Bambara's The Black Woman: An Anthology. Giovanni discusses falling from the roof as a popular metaphor for growing from childhood into maturity, a development marked, in part, by a deeper appreciation for the educational advantages available from a nurturing community. To the extent that Manny is observing a kind of birthday, a growing into adulthood, he simultaneously grows into his name, bestowed, no doubt, in "the time-honored black tradition of naming people with regard to some essential character trait"(Watkins 22).

Sonny is probably a bit older than Manny, and, as suggested in an onomastic pun, he is bright enough, as it were, to make your day. When "Talkin Bout Sonny" opens, Sonny has already killed his wife. Again, this narrative supports the notion that Sonny has murdered his wife. It also supports a figurative reading. If narrator Betty Butler and her friend Delauney are engaged, not only in talking about Sonny but in a talking bout, they are Signifyin(g) to express their opinion of Sonny's extraordinary ability to find fitting material to amuse his audiences. Asked to explain his most recent success--or murder, Sonny says only,

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"'Something came over me'"(79). Delauney believes him, offering that people are often inspired to act without a specific reason. Butler disagrees and reminds Delauney that Sonny has had much practice. "'I mean he has these fits all the time,'" she says, and suggests, "'Well, he really ought to see a doctor about these seizures'"(81). It may be that Sonny's fits and seizures are symptoms of a psychological problem and Butler hopes a doctor will cure him. It is equally plausible, however, that she admires his ability to recognize fitting material and to seize the right moment to present it. Lest it go unnoticed, she suggests Sonny's performance be studied by a doctor who, having a Ph. D. in literature, might analyze Sonny's comic material, appreciate his expert timing, and reinforce Butler's argument for deliberate artistry.

Another renowned performer, the title character in "Playin with Punjab" is admired for his ability to Signify. Moreover, as his name and Violet's description of him suggest, Punjab is, perhaps even more than Manny, skilled in Signifyin(g), or, as Violet puts it, in "gumming and wearing out the teeth smiling and all"(70). Thus, Punjab becomes an acknowledged leader, not unlike Bambara's model Signifier, whose "ability with language" is so impressive that "they named him 'prophet,'" and who would "sit around with the old folks and run stuff so wild that the old folks would say, may be he is the One"(82). Similarly applauded, Punjab is the community's favorite "to represent [them] on the poverty council and all over the place"(73). Whether or not he receives votes, says Violet, everyone "figured Punjab for a natural, . . . him being the only kind of leader we cold think of"(73).

It would take an expert Signifier to trace all of the external contexts signaled by Punjab's words and actions. As in the case of Manny, however, one example can invite closer scrutiny of Violet's narrative and appreciation for the performative value of Punjab's actions. Violet focuses on Punjab's interaction with Miss Ruby, a white woman,

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who runs the community center. When she arrives, Punjab abandons his usual routines (read: performances), and devotes himself to helping Miss Ruby. Foregoing his "flashy car," he walks alone to see Miss Ruby and is often seen "peeping through the window and grinning up a storm"(72). When he is not elected to represent the neighborhood, Punjab attacks. "I wasn't around when Punjab came to collect, so to speak," says Violet, her parenthetical tag hinting at the figurative subtext in Punjab's collection technique. "I can, of course, describe to you how the office looked," Violet offers, "But, then, anybody could've bust in and messed up the place"(74). Here and elsewhere in "Playin with Punjab," Punjab mimics scenes from King Kong, in which a giant gorilla grins through the window at a white woman, played by Fay Wray and, when she is taken from him, trashes the center of the community, figured in Bambara's story as the "community center." To show his appreciation for Miss Ruby's work in the community and, possibly, his affection for her personally, Punjab creates a charade that simultaneously explains the necessity to keep his distance, for, in the film, when King Kong chases a white woman, he is tranquilized, captured, and eventually destroyed.

Because of Bambara's talent for multiplying meanings, however, it seems that Punjab is simply the town bully. After all, as Violet says, "[Y]ou don't play with Punjab. The man's got no sense of humor"(69). Since humor is crucial to Signifyin(g), Violet emphasizes this generalization by placing it the start of her narrative. Since the lack of a sense of humor appears to accrue to Punjab, this remark might prevent some observers from identifying him as a Signifier and from interpreting his gestures. On the other hand, Miss Ruby will probably know better, for, she has an expert teacher. She has explicitly asked Violet to be her guide: "'I need you right here with me to translate,'" she says, "'cause you know I don't speak negro too tough'"(71). Offering her narrative as a lesson, then, Violet cautions Miss Ruby against playing, Signifyin(g), or

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trying to "talk negro" with Punjab. Subtly, Violet explains that to do so might anger white readers. Her strategy is to juxtapose her hero's name with the phrase "the man," to suggest that Punjab is "the man" who has no sense of humor. It is also possible, however, that "the man" is a slang reference to white people. If it is "the [white] man" who has no sense of humor, Miss Ruby might carefully disguise her affection for Punjab, Violet, and the others in the community. Furthermore, when he apes a gorilla, Punjab jabs powerfully with another pun, and, regardless of their sense of humor, some might be frightened by this newly unmasked, self-Signified guerrilla.

Implicit in Miss Ruby's request for help, however, is the probability that she already recognizes the existence of a different style of language. And, she might be experimenting by trying to Signify herself. As her name suggests, Miss Ruby may be Signifyin(g), too. If she is related to Scarlett O'Hara, from Gone With the Wind, Miss Ruby's request for help from Violet mirrors Scarlett's request that her her black maid, played by Butterfly McQueen, assist her in delivering a baby. When she asks Violet to teach her the language, then, Miss Ruby illuminates a link between giving birth and learning to Signify. A clue to connecting facility with language to rebirth is provided in "On the Issue of Roles": "A new person is born," says Bambara, "when [s]he finds a value to define an actional self and when [s]he can assume autonomy for that self"(109). When she takes an assignment to work in the community center, Miss Ruby signals her readiness to support the empowerment of the black community. When he offers to help her, Punjab indicates a similar interest in helping his neighbors. For a variety of reasons, however, not the least of which is the fact that "the man" might lack a sense of humor, both must learn to Signify before they can assume autonomy, before they are equipped to realize their shared vision for the future.

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Another exceptional Signifier, known for his ability to pass on this skill to young girls, is identified only, and no doubt appreciatively, as "the super" in "Basement," the titular setting indicating the super's association with the underground use of language. The super encourages critical thinking and is especially effective in his ability to encourage the girls to challenge stereotypes found in canonical texts. Some readers believe the super is a danger to the community. It is true that, as discussed in "Basement," he is rumored to have "'got[ten] the Norton girl pg'"(142). Also, according to Patsy, the narrator's friend, "'The super pulled his thing out'"(144). Pressed for details, Patsy adds, "And he put his hand in the side like he reachin for his pocket, and he pulled his thing out. . . . He waved it at me and Ludie and Charlane."(144)

Despite this evidence to support the notion that the super molests children, an alternative, possibly comical subtext is signaled by Aunt Fay's response to Patsy's troubling report. "'Mighty talented man, the super,'" says Fay, "'His thing reach . . .'"(145). Before she is interrupted, Fay hints at the super's reputation for being talented, and her seemingly inappropriate levity suggests that local opinions about the super are favorable. Her astonishment also hints--and Patsy's report does not preclude the possibility--that the super did, indeed, reach into his pocket. Since it is not clear whether Patsy is using a euphemism to describe the super's anatomy or a general term to describe an object, a political tract, perhaps, or some other text, removed from the super's pocket.

If he teaches girls to think critically about canonical texts, moreover, the super might have waved a poem or a story in front of Patsy and her friends, in an effort to encourage them to Signify upon myths about human nature perpetrated in these texts. The educational value of Signifyin(g) is explained by Gates who credits the "mastery of Signifyin(g)" with allowing "the black person to move freely between two

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discursive universes"(75). Teaching children to use "linguistic masking" to move easily between "the white linguistic realm and the black," he explains, is "the challenge of black parenthood"(76). When the super waves texts from the white realm, therefore, he inspires his students to challenge stereotypes in literature. As for his relationship with the Norton girl, the super was probably attracted to her because of her interest in canonical texts, many of them anthologized by the publisher with whose name her literary inclination is acknowledged. Lest she be overly credulous, he got her pregnant in the Shakespearean sense. In Hamlet, Polonius observes that, despite the appearance of insanity, Hamlet's comments are insightful: "How pregnant sometimes his replies are!" (Hamlet 2,2,208).

The super might also be responsible for some of the laughter in this story. Throughout "Basement," despite the gravity of the situation being described, Patsy and the narrator are "takin turns dressin up in the foxtails," using it to stifle their laughter. At one point, says the narrator, Aunt Fay "bury her face in the fox fur and giggle"(143). The fur seems irrelevant, the laughter incongruous, and both invite a search for figurative implications. One explanation is suggested in Bambara's discussion of the negative effects of opinions put forward in literature as facts. In "On the Issue of Roles," she cautions against accepting "the notion of sainthood through martyrdom, submission, and the embrace of death"(105). Since such views discourage resistance to systemic oppression, educators who are super might teach young people to laugh at texts in which death awaits all protesters. Thus, the foxtails provide a visual pun on the classic in this genre, John Foxe's The Book of Martyrs (1563). When they giggle into this prop, the children discount these Foxe tales and prove that, like the Norton girl, they are pregnant with more encouraging ideas about human nature.

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Manny, Punjab, Sonny and the super might seem less dangerous as Signifiers than they do as bullies, killers, and child molesters. Yet, to dismiss them because of the humor implicit in their performances is to underestimate Bambara's art and her frequently-professed commitment to use her writing in the struggle for racial empowerment. "What I enjoy most in my work is the laughter and the outrage and the attention to language. I come from a family of gifted laughers," she admits in "Salvation Is the Issue"(45). Yet, the emphasis on humor does not discount a political agenda. Indeed, the humor is as apt to signal the presence of a serious concern as it is to destabilize a literal reading. "While my heart is a laughing gland and my favorite thing to be doing is laughing so hard I have to lower myself on the wall to keep from falling down," Bambara explains, "near that chamber is a blast furnace where a rifle pokes from the ribs"("Salvation" 46). The resulting juxtaposition of humor and assertiveness is evident in the second group of stories, as several female characters explore the ways in which Signifyin(g) can enable them to resist acculturation.

Even before she embarks on the field trip that is the focus of "The Lesson," the narrator, called Sylvia, takes her role as a community leader seriously. During the trip, under the guidance of Miss Moore, another exemplary Signifier, Sylvia discovers a way to arouse those members of her community who are complacent or compliant in their own oppression. At the F. A. O. Schwarz toy store, Sylvia and her peers discover evidence of economic disparity, evidence Sylvia's cousin Sugar traces to the abuses of democracy and the excesses of capitalism. For Sylvia, however, who is more interested in critiquing Miss Moore's pedagogy than in examining expensive objects on display, the lesson is about methods used to empower others. After studying Miss Moore's techniques, her use of the same tone to express opposing ideas, her repetition of enigmatic metaphors, and her use of gestures to punctuate

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her statements, Sylvia adapts these strategies in her own narrative. A single example, central to Sylvia's meditation on the subway ride home, demonstrates the complexity of this Signifier's imagery. Having viewed several more expensive toys, Sylvia remembers one in particular:

> Me and Sugar at the back of the train . . . I'm thinkin about this tricky toy I saw in the store. A clown that somersaults on a bar then does chin-ups just cause you yank lightly at his leg. . . . I could see me askin my mother for a $35 birthday clown. . . . [She would be] cocking her head to the side to get a better view of the hole in my head.(94)

Doubling in "The Lesson" permits reading Sylvia's dream as evidence of residual selfishness and her mother's gesture as signaling her disapproval.

It also permits reading the dream as a strategic plan. In this reading, while sitting in the back of the train, Sylvia conforms to--but does not accept--residual Jim Crow laws. Instead, she plans to encourage the clowns, those who remain unaware, to do somersaults, or to turn or start revolutions. By gaining Civil Rights, they will turn these revolutions over a color bar. Sylvia will also encourage them to maintain their commitment despite discouraging setbacks, i.e., she will say, in effect, "Keep your chin up." All of this she will accomplish by mastering the art of Signifyin(g), a strategy she announces by almost-saying she will pull the clown's leg, by almost-evoking the slang phrase for teasing. Pleased with this evidence that her daughter has had a life-changing experience, a birthday as Bambara defines it, knowing that she has discovered a way to achieve her goals, Sylvia's mother indicates her approval of the plan. It could be, of course, that Sylvia's mother takes Sylvia's plan literally and, thinking the price too high, pantomimes a familiar slang phrase for insanity, looking for a hole in Sylvia's head. However, as Watkins notes, "traditional black humor is as much physical as it is verbal," a quality both Sylvia and her mother use to advantage (41). For, if Sylvia's mother is also a Signifier, she would appreciate Sylvia's deliberate positioning of herself at the back of the train as well as her decision to Signify her

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intentions to empower others, and she would look at Sylvia's mouth, showing her approval of the lips from which the Signifyin(g) emanates.

Another narrator who recounts her enlistment and training as a Signifier is Hazel, who narrates the title story. Early in "Gorilla, My Love," Hazel explains that, for years, she has called her uncle, Jefferson Winston Vale, Hunca Bubba, "since I couldn't manage Uncle to save my life"(13). At the close of her narrative, she reminds Vale that, when she was a child, he promised to marry her. It may be that, as a child, Hazel did, indeed, have trouble pronouncing the word "uncle." If, however, her continuing affection for Vale is to be appreciated, it is important to consider the phrase "say uncle" as a slang phrase, used to demand the cessation of some form of torment. This reading is supported by an earlier incident in which Hazel could not protest effectively. When she is disappointed by the content of a film, for example, she misdirects her complaints, first to the people in the seats in front of her, then to the projectionist, and finally to the theater manager, none of whom made the film. In both her assertiveness and her powerlessness, Hazel's actions "easily call to mind a group of sixties-style demonstrators"(Willis 147). While Hazel postures as a demonstrator and longs to join the protest movement, until she can Signify, she cannot enlist followers or "say uncle" for her community.

In a series of incidents since she was a child, Hazel has learned to Signify, an excellent way to "say uncle." And, when he recognizes her newfound talent, Vale marries her, not to himself, in the conventional sense of the word, but to the struggle for human rights, a struggle in which it is often necessary to "say uncle" and for which Hazel is now well-equipped. As defined by Bambara, who recommends the model given by Frantz Fannon during Algerian liberation struggle, "Marriages were no longer contract arrangements but freely chosen unions of individuals bound to a corporate future of freedom[,]. . . . extended kinship[s] of

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cellmates and neighbors linked in the business of actualizing a vision of a liberated society"("On the Issue" 108-109). This is the kind of marriage Hazel seeks, and it is the kind Vale achieves. The transformation is marked, as it frequently is in Gorilla, My Love, by a name change. Prior to her "marriage," her penchant for blaming the nearest person for her problems earns Hazel the nickname "Peaches," a name and a problem she disowns when she realizes that her uncle is a "lyin dawg," a tenacious Signifier(20). Then, having grown into her given name by learning to create a haze around her meaning, she announces her new identity as a "married" protestor: "'My name is Hazel'"(19).

In "Raymond's Run," Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker uses straightforward diction to disguise her narrative about a May Day festival in her community. Although she claims to disdain the practice, Hazel is, indeed, a fine player. "I don't play the dozens," she insists, and, if there is a pure sense of that phrase, she does not depend entirely on figurative language. Instead, she depends on multiple denotations and mixing euphemisms with literal phrases. When she boasts of her ability to win every race, moreover, Hazel describes a narrative style as well as a racing style, and that narrative has, indeed, won over many readers, regardless of race. When she says, "I'm the fastest thing on two feet," Hazel boasts not only of her physical prowess but of her intellectual ability. She is also color fast, permanently committed to running and winning races so "everybody on 151st Street can walk tall. . . ."(31). After winning the fifty-yard dash, Hazel considers her future: "And if I bugged my mother, I could get piano lessons and become a star"(32). It may be that Hazel plans to annoy her mother, to "bug" her until she agrees to pay for music lessons. If Hazel Parker's mother is like Sylvia's mother, however, she, too, is an accomplished player, or Signifier. Recognizing this, Hazel plans to eavesdrop, to "bug" her mother by spying to learn the secrets of , not

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only of playing the piano, but of Playing (the Dozens) piano, or quietly, as the Italian term indicates when it is used in musical scores.

An excellent runner himself, Hazel's brother Raymond is also an acknowledged race leader. As Hazel says, he is "not quite right" and some people "walk up to him and get smart, . .. or ask him where he got that great big pumpkin head"(25). Hazel's euphemisms and clinical language suggest that Raymond has mental retardation, is hydrocephalic, and is the victim of cruel teasing. Yet, as Hazel insists, Raymond always keeps up with her, a habit proving him to be fast rather than retarded. This and other references to Raymond's strength and persistence hint that, far from pitying Raymond and giving reasons for teasing him, Hazel respects him and explains why others hope to follow his example. Not quite right, Raymond may have left wing political sympathies. To the extent that they want to learn these views, people approach him, hoping literally to "get smart." Also, astonished by the intensity of his self esteem, they want to emulate him, so they ask him how he became so proud. In slang, those who exhibit personal pride are said to have "a big head," so, to find out the source of Raymond's pride, they ask where he got his big head.

To answer, Raymond, who is "subject to fits of fantasy," fits himself into a fairy tale and pantomimes the part of Cinderella (24). Cinderella is transformed when she rides in a coach, made from a pumpkin and horses, made from mice. Raymond recalls this scene when, running along with his "pumpkin head," he "plays like he's driving a stage coach" and follows his sister, previously nicknamed Squeaky because of her mouselike voice and, as a runner, able to "prance . . . like a rodeo pony"(25). In this elaborate charade, Raymond pantomimes his admiration for Hazel, whose example he follows. When she determines to "keep Raymond on the inside of me," of course, Hazel indicates that he is also her idea of a fine Signifier, so she will keep his image inside her

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mind, where it will inspire and guide her. Sometimes acting as his coach to train and encourage him and sometimes being his student, Hazel Parker plays fairy god mother to Raymond's Cinderella and Cinderella to his fine coachman. At large part, it is their reciprocal affection that endears Hazel and Raymond Parker to readers of all races. As Hazel's mother knows when she assigns Hazel to "mind" Raymond, whenever Hazel and Raymond Signify together, Raymond, or ray-of-the-moon and Hazel, a star, create a stellar performance.

Hazel is also a perceptive critic of Signifyin(g). A firm believer in not wasting time or energy, she knows that, at times, the effort required to encode a message is unnecessary. Consider, for example, her observation about the announcer at the May Day festival. "Raymond is hollering from the swings," she observes,

> cause he knows I'm about to do my thing cause the man on the loudspeaker has just announced the fifty-yard dash, although he might just as well be giving a recipe for angel food cake cause you can hardly make out what he's sayin for the static.(30)

If Hazel can not tell quite what the announcer says, she might articulate her complaint before giving it much thought. In other words, she might just as well choose any kind of recipe to make her point, if the point is that the electronic interference makes it difficult to hear the announcer. If, however, she has heard words that remind her of a recipe for angel food cake, she might be making another point entirely. The one instruction that appears in virtually every recipe for angel food cake and sets that recipe apart from most other cake recipes, is "Beat the whites."

This instruction is appropriate in light of numerous hints that Hazel is also Signifyin(g) on the 1968 Olympic games in Mexico. Like Olympic runners Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who gave the Black Power salute from the victory stand at the 1968 competition, Hazel jumps up and down when she sees her brother Raymond looking "like a gorilla," signalling, figuratively, that she and Raymond are guerrillas, camouflaged

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fighters for racial eqųality. The gesture at the Olympic games emphasized the immediacy of concerns about economic disparity, so Hazel focuses on events taking place on May Day, evoking both a holiday and, in lower case, a distress call asking for for immediate assistance. Smith and Carlos were stocking clad, having removed their shoes to symbolize (or Signify?) the poverty of many African Americans. Although she is "a poor Black girl," Hazel has sneakers, but, when the race begins, she observes that "all of New York didn't turn out in sneakers"(27, 29). If, like Smith and Carlos Hazel wants to enter a major competitive event, then Raymond is correct in thinking that "beating the whites" is Hazel's "thing." And, if Smith, Carlos, Hazel, and Raymond all attribute widespread poverty to economic disparities benefiting white people, then changing that situation is also Hazel's "thing." Yet, as Hazel observes, with her usual directness, they need not bother to engage in such subtleties. Given the pervasiveness of static conditions such as racism and in light of widespread resistance to seeing evidence of racial solidarity, few will be listening for this instruction, so they "might just as well" say it directly- as she would.

Hazel Peoples, the narrator of "My Man Bovanne" provides helpful clues to the presence of Signifyin(g): she makes a "spectacle" of herself, lets her figure show, and, as her last name implies, she provides peep holes, affording glimpses of a comic subtext. Generally seen as a sorrowful outcast, ridiculed by her grown children, Hazel Peoples receives numerous compliments from and expresses her own pride in her grown children, all Black Power activists. It is true that son Task accuses Hazel of "makin a spectacle" of herself and of being "tattooed on the man," presumably Bovanne, a blind man she brings to the Black Power benefit social (5,7). While he dislike her behavior, Task might be thanking Hazel being a spectacle, for guiding the blind man, as it were, making of herself a pair of eyeglasses for her friend. He might also

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appreciate Hazel's ability to clarify a vision for the younger activists. And, while he may consider it unseemly for his mother to dance so close as to seem tattooed, indelibly drawn not only to but onto Bovanne, Task also evokes a military context, in which a tattoo can be a repeated tapping or drumming used to convene soldiers. If so, Task may be approving of Hazel's interest in the drum-like tightness of Bovanne's stomach muscles, or suggesting that the two grass roots activists work--or drum--together to enlist other activists. On the other hand, Task might be interpreting Hazel's actions as Critical Signification, as a way to recall and revise antecedent texts "to achieve occupancy in this desired space"(Gates 124). If so, then Task sees Hazel as tattooed or inscribed on "the man," a punning reference to the canonical literature, written for the most part, by "the [white] man" (Gates 124).

Daughter Elo refers to Bovanne as "'that tom'"(6). She might have in mind Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom, and her tone may be critical. She also describes her mother's appearance in seemingly disdainful images, predicting that Hazel will be "standing there with [her] boobs out and . . . that hem up to [her] ass"(6). Given her description of her mother as a hussy, moreover, even if Bovanne is "that tom" cat, the reference seems to be intended as an insult. If, however, Elo has in mind a tom-tom, it is difficult to determine her sentiment. Since Hazel compares Bovanne's stomach muscles to a drum, Elo could be either ridiculing or affirming that observation. Also, if Elo's multifaceted "that tom" includes a reference to "Peeping Tom," blinded when he tried to look at Lady Godiva, the name could be a compliment. This Tom looked, perhaps because he wanted to see Godiva's naked body, perhaps because she was a political activist. For, although she is remembered for her nakedness, Lady Godiva undertook her ride at the prompting of her husband, the powerful Duke of Coventry. Having petitioned him to reduce the tax burden on the poor, she agreed to his conditions: he

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would lower the taxes if she would ride through town at midday, clad only in her long hair. Since Elo's description of her mother's scanty clothing--with repeated requests that she uncover her hair--links Hazel to Godiva, moreover, the reference to "that tom" places Hazel in the tradition of female activists. Thus, Elo notes Bovanne's admiration of Hazel in order to amplify it and add her own applause for her mother's contributions to Black Power.

Bovanne is clearly a much-admired Signifier. Elo is a fan, calling him "that tom," in part no doubt to identify him with Thomas Greene Bethune, a famous concert pianist, was known as Blind Tom (Watkins 106). Although both are blind, the connection remains tenuous until we recall that, while Bethune was a piano player, Bovanne is a piano Player, metaphorically, an especially subtle wit. Hazel's decision to ask Bovanne to dance, moreover, given "jitterbuggin" is another synonym for Signifyin(g), reinforces the idea that Bovanne is a recognized master of pantomime. In this capacity, he may have launched the Black Power movement for, as Hazel notes, he once fixed skates, but the activists "don't need they skates fixed no more"(9). If Bovanne simply repaired roller skates, the favor seems all but irrelevant, and, as we have seen, seeming irrelevance is often a clue to figurative meanings. If skates are props to suggest mobilization, for example, fixing them is doubly important. When she says the children no longer need their skates fixed, Hazel professes pride in their full mobilization for Black Power. If "fixed" means "made stationery," moreover, Bovanne not only prepared the young people to become mobilized, but he prevented them from moving too quickly, before they were fully prepared to achieve their goals. As Bambara warns, "Ain't no such animal as an instant guerrilla"("On the Issue of Roles" 110). Having earlier prevented premature aggression, Bovanne is no longer needed, either to mobilize or to urge self discipline. Therefore, Bovanne plays a new role. Since Hazel has a tendency to

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allow her figure to show, she needs to disguise her full dedication to Black Power, so she feigns single-minded interest in Bovanne who graciously performs the role as her blind, man.

As if to defend herself against remarks about her age, then, Hazel offers, "I can still wear me some sleeveless dresses with out the meat hangin off my arm"(6). If Hazel is convinced that the tone of her triceps contradicts accusations that she is apolitical, she is not only deluded but likely to become the subject of what Watkins calls "naive comic expression"(29). Because her preoccupation with her physique reinforces rather than counters errors alleged by Elo and Task, Hazel's boast here is self-satire. If, on the other hand, she is using figurative language to lightly veil her boast, not only of her willingness to bare her arms, but of her readiness to bear arms for Black Power, then she engages in "purposeful jest or wit"(Watkins 29). Given the preponderance of figurative language, moreover, it is likely that the blackness whose power Hazel and her children profess is, in addition to racial empowerment, the power of black ink to liberate readers, not only from strictly literal, exclusively denotative readings, but also from stereotypes about race and gender, especially as they recur in literature and films.

The title Gorilla, My Love is probably also figurative. And, again, a crucial clue is found in a major incongruity: Hazel in the title story complains when she finds that a film called Gorilla, My Love is "clearly not about no gorilla"(15). When she insists on honesty--or expresses appreciation for the filmmaker's pun--Hazel sets a protestor's example for readers. Finding that the collection is similarly devoid of gorillas, readers might consider the rhetorical possibilities of that incongruity. Ruth Elizabeth Burks suggests a metaphorical reading if "Bambara wants us to see all males as gorillas, which the incongruousness of this volume's title does suggest"(52). The title also signifies on "common European

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allegations of the propensity of African women to prefer the company of male apes"(Gates 109). It may be that Bambara recalls that allegation to dismantle the stereotype, since some women in some stories appear to be frightened by the posturing and aggressiveness of Manny and Punjab. If these men are Signifyin(g), posing as gorillas to show that they are guerrillas, however, the similarly-camouflaged women probably do, indeed, love them. Thus, it is also possible that she wants us to see both male and female characters as guerrillas, a possibility suggested by the camouflaged assertiveness of individual characters discussed in this study. Yet, to posit subversive activity in place of contention is to repeat an error identified by Watkins: "Even when the mainstream took notice, those exposed to African-American literature in which genuine humor was abundant were often predisposed toward finding angry protest tracts, thereby missing the humor"(401). Thus, it may just be that, like the notion of a black community in disarray, the idea of a militant solidarity must give way to a meta-linguistic reading in which the subject of these narratives is the emancipation of language, of the culture it represents, and of the reader. For, in the process of extricating puns, the reader joins the resistance to acculturation and becomes a [Signifyin(g)] Gorilla, My Love.

In "A Sort of a Preface," Bambara confesses--and boasts--of her ability to Signify. Ostensibly announcing her reason for refusing to include "bits and snatches even of real events and real people" in her fiction, she says, "I lie a lot anyway"(xi-xii). Since her fiction contains both, allusions to real people and a whole lot of Signifyin(g), it would seem that Bambara is, alas, a liar and a truth-teller. More varied in their Signifyin(g) styles than in their commitment to racial empowerment, the characters in Toni Cade Bambara's Gorilla, My Love employ puns and pantomime to celebrate language as it has traditionally been used by African Americans. In creating this "hip game," Bambara finds a way to stoke the blast furnace

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while doing her favorite thing to be doing. Readers, too, might lean on the wall, first to enjoy the performance and then to catch their breath after the exhilirating adventure of transcending familiar perspectives.

NOTES

1 "Signifyin(g)" is the form used by Gates and will be used throughout this essay.

2 Gorilla, My Love. 37 (New York: Random, 1992) All references from the stories are taken from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

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