ENG257 African American Lit
Weekly Reading and Writing #1

CONCEPTS: Slavery, Tradition, Race, Vernacular, Spiritual
TROPES: Talking Book, Signifying, Attestation (Black Message / White Envelope)

SKILLS: Please use your critical reading strategies. While these strategies may vary, successful reading is always linked to actively participating: 1) annotating your text, 2) asking yourself summary questions (restating the main points of what you’ve just read), 3) asking yourself how what you’ve just read relates to previous material as well as the knowledge you brought to the reading, 4) making connections between the reading and the tradition, the tropes, your own course interests and focus. Each week, I’ll provide this Guided Reading so that you’re not overwhelmed with the material. Read all well, of course, but focus your thinking with these Guided Reading suggestions. Also, before you begin the reading assignment, read through the questions for our discussion. Class discussions will be more meaningful if you use the same critical thinking strategies in class. Listen actively, take notes, respect what others offer and consider how their ideas connect with your own, be generous in sharing your own ideas.

GUIDED READING
Browse the Table of Contents. Note the major sections / time periods and authors. Whom do you recognize? Are there favorite writers? Note your own initial areas of interest.

Read “Introduction: Talking Books” pages xxxvii – xlvii. Pay special attention to the opening discussion on origins (page xxxvii), Gronniosaw’s trope of the “talking book” (xxxviii), the outlawing of literacy and drumming (xxxix), Phyllis Wheatley’s attestation (xli).


Questions for Discussion and Choices for Weekly Writing – choose one from the following:

1. As we begin our study, please consider and write about the issues that complicate our study of the African American literary tradition. Identify the issues (e.g. the naming language that we use, the history that we’ve grown up on, the diversity (or lack of) in our contemporary lives, literature, communities,

2. Gates writes that the trope of the talking book provides “the formal links of repetition and revision that, in part, define any literary tradition” (xxxviii). Explain this trope, then discuss why Gates might consider this trope central to the African American tradition. Looking back from our perspective, do you recognize this trope in more recent Black literature?

3. We’ll begin to understand signifying right away with Gates’ explanation: “the often competitively figurative, subversively parodying speech of tales and of less formalized talk as well as of various forms of music – as an impulse that operates not only between contesting tale tellers but between writers” (7). Can you begin to explain signifying in your own terms, with your own examples (from literature or any arts in the tradition)?

4. What were the origins, conditions, and experiences of the Negro Spirituals? Why do we call them spirituals? In what ways do Negro Spirituals deal with issues of physical, psychological, and spiritual bondage as well as freedom from this bondage? Draw from the spirituals on the cd – be specific by using lyrics.

Format: word process, write one FULL page single-spaced, include a header (your name, date, ENG257 Weekly Writing #1)