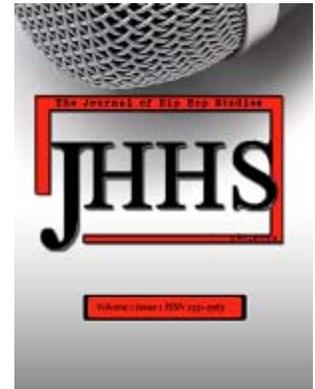


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**Speech is My Hammer, It's Time to Build: Hip Hop,  
Cultural Semiosis and the Africana Intellectual  
Heritage**

**Samuel T. Livingston**

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# Speech is My Hammer, It's Time to Build: Hip Hop, Cultural Semiosis and the Africana Intellectual Heritage

Samuel T. Livingston

## Abstract

The article examines Hip Hop music's relationship with African cultural symbolism and the discipline of Africana Studies. The author maintains that Africana Studies must reclaim the study of cultural semiosis, which may be used to contextualize Hip Hop praxis. Examining semeiotic traces within African and Afrodiasporic primary sources, including Hip Hop lyrics, the article posits that Hip Hop is the latest development in a long tradition of Afro-Kemetite oral artistry, semeiotic systems and the uses of these dual literacies as modes of resistance and affirmations of Black historical and cultural agency. The article adapts Harryette Mullen's literary model of African Spirit Writing and Elaine Richardson's Hip Hop Literacy studies to discuss specific constructs that affirm an African Diasporic worldview and foster resistance to the dominant political-economy that frames Black agency.

Tracing a Du Boisean cultural-racial line, Tricia Rose posits in *Black Noise: Rap music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* that it is the "dynamic and often contentious relationship between... larger social and political forces and (B)lack cultural priorities— that centrally shape and define hip hop."<sup>1</sup> This paper explores the "African" side of Du Bois and Rose's dialectic and challenges Western approaches to the study of Hip Hop (HH) signification and semeiotics by offering a cultural history that synthesizes Africana cultural texts as crucial components lacking in HH cultural studies. I share Harry Allen's desire to know HH's origins; a query he articulates in his essay, "Dreams of a Final Theory," which examines the dawn of the HH cultural universe when its core elements "were united in one never-to-reappear 'superforce.'"<sup>2</sup> The present article pursues the cultural and historical dialectic that programmed HH's impulse toward originality and systems of sign-making. This is a challenge to the Western cultural studies canon, yet I do not seek to dismiss any voices. Instead, I argue for bringing pre-colonial African cultural voices to the table of discussion to enrich the dialog.

The paper synthesizes pre-colonial Africana cultural texts and artistic traditions, which should inform Hip Hop cultural studies, as the artistic culture exhumes, reinvents, and presents its own provocative challenge to semeiotic tradition by claiming that it is among the newest and oldest of signifying art forms. In some regards the present work follows the sociologist Mark Gottdiener as he argues for a historical approach to the study of mass culture:

<sup>1</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994, p.23.

<sup>2</sup> Harry Allen, "Dreams of a Final Theory," in J. Chang, *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip Hop*. Cambridge: Basic Civitas, 2006, p.7-8.

Finally, the study of mass culture as signification involves the identification of those codes that, in structuring the behavior of producers and consumers, thereby explain the meaningful relation of human subjects to objects and, in turn, to each other. Basically, therefore, the semeiotic approach often involves a historical sociological study of codes that have been discovered and identified by the analyst.<sup>3</sup>

Taking up Gottdiener's challenge to uncover mass culture's codes of communication, calls for a framework and context for the study of HH iconography, lyricism, and musical artistry as a part of a suppressed artistic culture of meaning making that resists dismissals of HH cultural agency.

Raising the question of cultural semiosis addresses what are the African sources of HH's oral and aural hieroglyphic traditions that often serve as hidden allegories within hidden transcripts. My objectives in this study are: 1) demonstrating African origins of cultural semiosis, 2) connecting texts, cultural power and the sociology of African oral artists, 3) relating Afro-Kemetite orality to Afro-diasporic culture, 4) suggesting an African-centered interdisciplinary model of HH cultural semiosis.

Africa matters: Hip Hop studies and the missing classical African cultural matrix

What Cheryl Keyes calls "Rap music and its African Nexus" evident in the cultural heritage indicated by Nation-conscious rappers is of particular interest for several reasons. First, it signifies the experiences of African Diasporic cultures that converged in the 1970s Bronx to create HH culture. Second, it indicates resistance by people of color, generally, and African-descended people in particular to Western cultural othering. Third, it draws attention to two significant HH cultural institutions, the Universal Zulu Nation founded by Afrika Bambaataa and the Five Percent Nation. Both institutions base their core beliefs around African-centered themes. Fourth, significant though latent aesthetic practices inspired by the African Nexus suggest the appropriateness of an Africana Studies, if not African-centered cultural philosophy and methodology. That an African-centered semeiotic context pertains to HH culture is consistent with scholarship that argues that Black culture and language are extensions of African agency,<sup>4</sup> especially Hurston's instinct and research as she suggested the

<sup>3</sup> Mark Gottdiener, "Hegemony and Mass Culture: A Semeiotic Approach," *American Journal of Sociology*, 90, no.5, 1985, p.988.

<sup>4</sup> Hurston *Sanctified Church*, 50-53; Herskovitz, Melville J. *The Myth of the Negro Past*. Boston: Beacon Press, [1941] 1958; Turner, Lorenzo D. *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002; Puckett, N. N. (1926) *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*. New York: Dover; *ibid.*, "Names of American Negro slaves" in G. P. Murdock (ed.), *Studies in the Science of Society*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1937; *ibid.*, *Black Names in America*, Murray Heller (ed.). Boston: G. K. Hall, 1975; Sterling Brown, "Negro Folk Expression: Spirituals, Seculars, Ballads and Work Songs," *Phylon*, Vol. 14:No.1 (1953), p.45-61; Holloway, J. E. and Vass, W. K. *The African Heritage of American English*. Bloomington 1997; Salikoko S. Mufwene, (ed.) *Africanisms in Afro-American Language Varieties*. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1993; Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Origins of Black America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987; Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our*

agency of African cultural continuity in establishing African American oral culture. Finally, the growth of HH in Pan-African communities sheds light on the art form as a global phenomenon.

Despite the persistence of these themes, and with notable exceptions discussed below, Africana studies scholars have failed to investigate HH rigorously possibly due to “the predominance of popular culture as opposed to national culture” as Karenga suggests.<sup>5</sup> While African-centered scholars do face social and cultural opposition from the West,<sup>6</sup> this assumed oppositionality, unnecessarily encumbers sustained engagements between African-centered Africana Studies and HH culture.

Accepting Hebdige's assertion that “everybody writes in time,” and his use of Afrodiasporic *dub* or versioning as an aesthetic process, the article addresses how Africana Studies may engage cultural production as a mode of resistance.<sup>7</sup> The present *versioning* of HH's cultural history considers the dialog between present-day cultural work and an ancient, but vivid, Afro-Kemetite<sup>8</sup> civilization and its impulse toward semeiotic oral artistry. In this context, Hip Hop culture (HHC) is viewed as part of a larger sign-oriented epistemology that is a direct response to disruptive fluctuations and ruptures in the flow of African Diasporic cultural history. Bridging the gaps between these ruptures, HH cultural semiosis is a series of signposts for reading the African experience as it considers questions of ontological integrity, the pursuit of meaning and truth, cultural origins, group life-chances, and the nature of oppression and optimal responses to it. Three cultural historiographic propositions frame the present consideration of HHC: First, a Diopian reading of African cultural development, which emphasizes the disciplined study of cultural and linguistic continuities between Nile valley, Niger valley and other civilizations of Africa from ancient times to the present.<sup>9</sup> Second, Afrodiasporic cultures are a part of this history as many captives were taken from African cultural regions with demonstrated cultural continuities with Nile valley civilization. Third, HH develops within a sociopolitical context of struggle, which frames its artistic consciousness. When Nation conscious HH artists access icons from this Afro-Kemetite culture, it may serve as a special set of user

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*Countrymarks*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999; Cheryl Keyes, “At the Crossroads: Hip Hop and Its African Nexus” *Ethnomusicology*, Vol.40 No.2, (Spring/ Summer1996), p. 223-248.

<sup>5</sup> Maulana Karanga, “Society, Culture, and the Problem of Self-Consciousness,” in L. Harris, *Philosophy Born of Struggle: Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917*. Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 2000, p.251.

<sup>6</sup> J. Everett Green, “Is the Afrocentric Movement a Threat to Western Civilization?” in L. Harris, *idem*, pp.357-372.

<sup>7</sup> Zora Neal Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*. Berkeley: Turtle Island Books, 1983, p.49; Dick Hebdige, *Cut 'n' Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music*. London: Routledge, 1987, p. xii.

<sup>8</sup> *Kemet*, “the Black country/state” is the original name for ‘ancient Egypt;’ “Egypt” is a Greek term. See Bernal,

<sup>9</sup> Diopian Africanists include but are not limited to Cheikh A. Diop, *Pre-Colonial Black Africa*, Chicago: Lawrence-Hill Publishers, 1987, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa: The Domains of Patriarchy and Matriarchy in Classical Antiquity*. London: Karnak House, 1989; Theophile Obenga, *Ancient Egypt and Black Africa*. London: Karnak House, 2006; Jacob H. Carruthers, *Mdw Ntr Divine Speech: A Historiographical Reflection of African Deep Thought from the Time of the Pharaohs to the Present*, London: Karnak House, 1995.

codes contextualizing their creative production.<sup>10</sup> Fourth, HH has become a *lieu de memoir* where several Afro-Kemetic icons are employed to construct memory and to “orchestrate identity toward an unadulterated presentation of self.”<sup>11</sup>

### Diggin’ in the crates of history: African origins of cultural semiosis

What are the contours of Afro-Kemetic cultural semiosis? It is a sign tradition that has received scant attention both as a source of cultural semeiotics and relative to Africana studies approaches to HH despite Zora Neal Hurston’s observation that “the Negro thinks in hieroglyphs.”<sup>12</sup> True to her empirical observation and instinct, the historic origins and development of Black oral artistry owe much to Classical and Pre-colonial African sign writing and cultural semiosis. This over-sight is largely due to the history of Western semeiotics, which ignores the African extraction of the discipline. Semeiotic analysis emerged during the first half of the Twentieth century from the parallel efforts of three significant scholars—the American physicist, Charles S. Peirce, the Swiss linguist and Ferdinand de Saussure advanced semiosis using John Locke’s branch of philosophy, “semeiotike.”<sup>13</sup> Both the Enlightenment-era concept and the modern discipline are drawn from the Greek root words *semeion*, “sign,” *semeiotikos*, “observant of signs,” and *semeiousthai*, “to interpret signs.” Following the research of Theophile Obenga, Congolese linguist and historian of African philosophy, who discusses the Kemetic origins of Greek philosophy, these terms likely, derive from an Afro-Kemetic intellectual milieu.<sup>14</sup> Such a borrowing was possible based upon Greek sources suggesting direct contact between Ancient Philosophers like Pythagoras who “received lessons from the (Kemetic) Priest Oinuphis.”<sup>15</sup> Significantly, according to these sources, Plato, who pioneered the theory of forms, ideal and manifest, studied at Memphis with the priest Khnuphis and at Heliopolis with Sekhnuphis.<sup>16</sup> Significantly,

<sup>10</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” in D. L. Lewis (ed.), *W.E.B. DuBois: A Reader*, New York: Henry Holt, 1995, pp. 509-515; Leroi Jones, *Blues People*. New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963, p.65; Hebdige, *Cut*, xi-xii, 8, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” in G. Fabre and R. O’Meally (eds.) *History and Memory in African American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, p.284-300; David Wall Rice, *Balance: Advancing Identity Theory by Engaging the Black Male Adolescent*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008, pp. 12-13, 62-64; *idem*, “Rakim, Ice Cube then Watch the Throne: Engaged Visibility through Identity Orchestration and the Language of Hip-Hop Narratives” Lecture, Morehouse Pan-African Global Education Program, Cape Coast, Ghana, July 17, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Zora Neal Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Folk Expression,” in G. D. Caponi (ed.), *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin’, & Slam Dunking*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999, p.294.

<sup>13</sup> Hugh Silverman, *Cultural Semiosis: Tracing the Signifier*, New York: Routledge, 1998, p. 1-3; John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book IV, Chapter 21, paragraph 5, 1689 ([http://www.ilt.columbia.edu/publications/locke\\_understanding.html](http://www.ilt.columbia.edu/publications/locke_understanding.html), accessed Monday, March 11, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> See Obenga, *Ancient Egypt and Black Africa*, London: Karnak House, 1992, p. 62-63 and Bernal 1991, 124-126 on interactions between an Afro-Kemetic and Greek intellectual community.

<sup>15</sup> Plutarch quoted in Obenga 1992, p. 87.

<sup>16</sup> Obenga 1992, 62-63; see also Bernal 1991, 124-125.

Plato challenged the Sophist position that signs retained a universally held meaning that inhered in their very composition; it is the state's cultural matrix, aspiring to universality, which defines the sign. Perhaps most relevant in discussing the Greek roots of semeiotics is Socrates who constructs his *semeion* in a manner consistent with the Kemetic episteme of signs as messages from God, (*Medu Neter* or "words of God") and their connection to an ethical order that is *Ma'atic*, i.e., true, just, morally right, reciprocal and universal. Socrates' *semeion* is an inner voice of morality pointing to the correct path when in doubt. Thus said, Plato/Socrates posited that meaning inhered in human apperception not the sign itself. Circa 360 BCE, Plato ostensibly recorded the conclusion to the Gadfly's dialogue with his friend Crito on the eve of his impending death,

This is the voice which I seem to hear murmuring in my ears, like the sound of the flute in the ears of the mystic; that voice... prevents me from hearing any other... Yet speak, if you have anything to say.

Cr(ito): I have nothing to say, Socrates.

Soc(rates): Then let me follow the intimations of the will of God."<sup>17</sup>

Plato's Socrates is committed to Justice (*Ma'at*), the will of God as a voice of inspiration and sign/*semeion* indicating proper and correct behavior. Through their introduction of foreign doctrines, Socratic philosophers echoed aspects of Afro-Kemetic language and culture, which grew into the Western intellectual tradition culminating in the poststructuralist cultural-linguistic readings of Lacan, Derrida, Hall and Foucault.

While further research is required, the particular origins of the Greek word, *semeion* may be found in the syncretizing of several synonyms and metonyms for the more ancient Kemetic word *sm3*, (*sema*), a verb meaning, "to unite" or "to associate" as in an analogy. Other Kemetic words that share a similar semantic and homophonic value are *smtr*, *semeter*, "to examine,"<sup>18</sup> *sm3t*, *semat*, "a union", and *sm3ta*, *semata* "a (symbolic) offering."<sup>19</sup> This presaged and possibly influenced the Greek word *semeion*, which is akin to attaching meaning through analogously or symbolically related concepts. Following this line of reasoning, the Greek practice of *semeiousthai*, "interpreting signs" may have emerged from the Kemetic phrase, *sm3 t3wy*, *sema tawy*, "to unite the two lands," a colloquialism for the process of interpreting signs by aligning symbols with their universal archetype. Thus to unite the two lands would be to align the realms of the mundane and that of ideal forms in the Platonic sense.<sup>20</sup> Far from idle speculation, the Kemites are well known for taking a material reality, creating

<sup>17</sup> Plato, *Crito*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. New York: Fordham University (accessed Sept. 17, 2011) <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/plato-crito.txt>.

<sup>18</sup> Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*. Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1991, p. 229.

<sup>19</sup> Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, p.226 and Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Oxford: Griffith Institute, Ashmolean Museum, 1982, p.463, sign F<sub>36</sub>.

<sup>20</sup> Ani, *Yurugu*, p. 35-37.

a sign (ideographic and phonographic), and deriving an intellectual or esoteric construct from it. The *semious Thai* - *sema tawy* connection bears further research; however, there is a much more well-founded and relevant construct related to the African origins of semeiotics or signifying. Again, the Kemetic word, *sema* presents its importance. In its most archaic form, *sema* designated a “wild bull” or *semat*, “wild cow.”<sup>21</sup> According to Martin Bernal, author of *Black Athena*, the Kemites derived the idea that cows were a standard of beauty, wealth, utility, and “offerings” from a prehistoric cattle culture from which the dynastic Egyptian people descend.<sup>22</sup> What Hurston refers to as “the Negro’s greatest contribution to language,” “metaphor and simile, the double descriptive and the use of verbal nouns,” resonates with its Afro-Kemetic sign-oriented linguistic predecessors. The relevance of Kemetic signifying or (*sema*) to Afrodiasporic signifying practice is discussed below relative to specific ancient texts to which serious students of HH must visit in order to apprehend the classical origins and imperatives of its oral sign-based culture.

#### Texts, cultural power and the sociology of African oral artists

Twentieth century Kenyan scholar of oral artistry, Wanjiku M. Kabira suggests that there are two general classes in the sociology of African oral artists—professional and communal—into which all of the occupations (*djeli*, *griot*, *okyeame*, etc.) may be categorized.<sup>23</sup> Kabira’s classification scheme, with modifications, is useful in discussing issues of class, social power and cultural authenticity in ancient and modern oral cultures. Kabira posits that Professional oral artistic institutions originated in feudal societies to sanction the power of rulers while carrying out their proscribed duties. Examples abound. The *Imty* (Vizier) office in Ancient Egypt (Kemet) functioned as spokesperson for the pharaoh. In Mandekan societies, dating back to at least the Eleventh century CE and continuing to this day, the *Djeli faama* is the royal oral historian for the noble families including the Mansa (emperor). The Mandinka *Sundiata* cycle is the product of re-telling primarily by *Djeliu faama*. A regular *Djeli* is defined in Mande as the “blood of the people” and serves as a paid oral historian for common families.<sup>24</sup> In Asante society, an *Okyeame* serves as spokesman for the *hene* (chief) at any level up to the Asantehene. These nobility-oriented societies direct great attention to preserving the historical record and establishing the sanction to rule by maintaining oral artists.

On the other hand, Kabira’s Communal oral artists are defined by their commitment to giving agency to common people in society and are mainly

<sup>21</sup> Faulkner, p.226.

<sup>22</sup> The cattle-culture origin thesis of the Ancient Egyptians is supported by Robert Bauval and Thomas Brophy, *Black Genesis: The Prehistoric Origins of Ancient Egypt*. Rochester: Bear and Company, 2011, pp.13, 66, plates12-15 and Michael Hoffman, *Egypt Before the Pharaohs: The Prehistoric Foundations of Egyptian Civilization*. New York: Knopf, 1979, p.236-237.

<sup>23</sup> W. M. Kabira, *The Oral Artist*. Nairobi, Kampala: East African Educational Publishers, 1983.

<sup>24</sup> See Carruthers, *Mdw Ntr*, p.72-73.

unsanctioned and unpaid storytellers. In their stories, the protagonists are often lowly folk or small animals who face larger adversaries that are more powerful. The stories advocate justice for commoners and masses. Kabira states that, "The oral artist in this (type of) society is the spokesman of the little people. It is as if he is telling the society that it must look after each and every one of its members and consider them as equally important."<sup>25</sup> In North America, the enslaved African reproduced the Greco-Ethiopian Aesop's animal fable cycle through Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, etc. — a particular versioning by enslaved Africans relevant for its forecasting of similar themes and techniques in HH. While both models—communal and professional—are found in HH, the most engaging M.C.s have evoked a communal/grassroots (*drylongso*) perspective to achieve authenticity and to give agency to voices long-silenced by cultural, race and class repression. Mirroring the grassroots earthiness of their cultural patron, James Brown, HH artists like Poor Righteous Teachers, Public Enemy, N.W.A., Boogie Down Productions, Goodie Mob, Outkast, and current artists like Kendrick Lamar achieve a distinct voice by speaking for their hood/nation from outside of socially sanctioned spaces.

#### Afro-Kemetic oral literature and the semeiotic tradition

Hip Hop oral artists trace their lineage to the Kemetic oral tradition, which includes both classes of oral artists while demonstrating the role of *medu nefer* (good speech) in preserving Kemetic historical consciousness, cultural identity and national unity. Two classic narratives document the ethics and orality of Kemetic culture: "Khufu and the Magician (Djedi)," dating between 2000-1800 BCE (Fifteenth Dynasty) and the "Story of the Farmer Whose Speech was Good" from the turbulent First Intermediate period (c.2185 to 2055 BCE).<sup>26</sup> Literal and Semeiotic "dub" versions of each story are presented as HH's classical African archetype.

#### The tale of "Khufu and the Magician"

"Khufu and the Magician" was written in the Middle Kingdom as a part of a collection of stories contained in the Westcar Papyrus. The story is about a storytelling session by Pharaoh Khufu, the Old Kingdom builder of the Great Pyramid and three of his sons.

*Literal version.* At its face value the story is about the character Djedi, whose name, on one level, may be translated "I speak" and through whom the reader gains perspective. A literal version of the story has Khufu sending his son, Prince Hordjedef, to bring Djedi to the royal court to demonstrate his power to restore the dead to life. Khufu's ulterior motive was to find a secret passage to the sanctuary of Djehuty, the god of writing and wisdom. The 110-year-old man complied, bringing his children and

<sup>25</sup> Kabira, *Oral Artist*, 32.

<sup>26</sup> Obenga, *Ancient Egypt and Black Africa*, p. 33-34; Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. I. Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1973, p. 218, 106; Jennifer McKeown, "The Symbolism of the Djed Pillar in the Tale of King Khufu and the Magicians," *Papers on Ancient Egypt*. No.1 (2002), p.55.

“his writings.” When the king called for a prisoner to be the subject of this gruesome experiment, the old man refused, saying, “But not a human being, O king, my lord! Surely, it is not permitted to do such a thing to the noble cattle!”<sup>27</sup> Without being offended, Khufu complied with the old man’s injunction and brought a goose, another bird, and an ox to be beheaded. Djedi spoke words of power, rejoined the heads and brought the animals back to life. This portion of the Westcar Papyrus ends with Djedi being rewarded with a home in the estate of Prince Hordjedef.<sup>28</sup>

*Semeiotic dub version.* A close reading of “Khufu and the Magicians” suggests that the oral tradition, not the written, was the dominant mode of communication in the Kemetic Old Kingdom. The names of the central characters are significant as they demonstrate the power of speech: Prince Hordjedef is rendered, “the God Heru speaks {through} him” or “Heru established him.” This prince proffered the wise sage, Djedi to Pharaoh Khufu as a living wonder. Djedi was gifted with the “wisdom of those who have passed on” referring to the collected ancestral knowledge.<sup>29</sup> Jennifer McKeown offers a penetrating discussion of the Djedi character as symbolic of the deified Djed pillar of Ptah and Osiris. She suggests that when Hordjedef helps Djedi to rise up from his reed mat, he is performing the rising of the djed pillar ceremony, which has at least four layers of meaning. First, from pre-dynastic times, the djed pillar represented a bundle of corn stalks; therefore it symbolically renewed crop fertility. Second, the djed pillar by the 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty was associated with Ptah, thus its resurrection renewed the creativity of artists for whom Ptah was a patron deity. Third, by the 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, the djed was a sign associated with Osiris and the resurrection of all people after death. Fourth, because the Pharaoh was the personification of the son of Osiris, the Djed resurrection, like the Sed festival renewed the endurance of the Pharaoh and the entire state of Kemet. Thus, we can see at least four different ideological systems—horticultural, artisanal, religious, and political—operating within the Djedi mythoform, which may explain why a pharaoh in the turbulent First Intermediate Period would commission its re-inscription and retelling.<sup>30</sup>

### The “Story of the Eloquent Peasant”

The “Story of the Eloquent Peasant”, or the “The Farmer Whose Speech was Good,” dates from Kemet’s Middle Kingdom. Four incomplete copies of the story in the Berlin Papyri collection, held in the British Museum, were translated to form the complete story.<sup>31</sup>

*Literal version.* The Eloquent Peasant” is a story told with a narrative introduction and then nine poetic stanzas that, ostensibly, record the appeals of a

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<sup>27</sup> “Noble cattle” is a euphemism for people as the property of God similarly used in the “Instruction to King Merikare,” “well tended is mankind—God’s cattle” (Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. I, p. 106).

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. I, p.217-20.

<sup>29</sup> Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. I, p.218.

<sup>30</sup> McKeown, “The Symbolism of the Djed Pillar” *Papers on Ancient Egypt*, p.55

<sup>31</sup> Lichtheim, AEL, Vol. I, p. 169.

farmer named Khun Inpu who was on a journey to take herbs and comfort food to his children in the city. After he is robbed at the hands of a greedy countryman, Nemtynakhte, he protested his treatment and was granted retribution based on his *Medu Nefer* or good speech.<sup>32</sup> Nemtynakhte's crime was especially heinous since he violated the first specific affirmation of innocence, "I have not robbed with violence."<sup>33</sup> Khun Inpu (the eloquent farmer) made the following appeal to Nemtynakhte (the strong robber), who had beaten him and stolen his donkey and his goods: You beat me, you steal my goods, and now you take away the complaint from my mouth! O Lord of Silence, give me my things, so that I can stop crying to your dreadedness!"<sup>34</sup>

In his nine appeals, Khun Inpu first beseeched Nemtynakhte, then the High Steward, Rensi, who passed the case on to the council of elders who defer to the Nisw Bity (Pharaoh), Nebkaure. After Khun Inpu made a series of pointed charges, Nebkaure commanded that his scribes record the farmer's words and eventually restored justice by returning his goods.

Semeiotic *dub version*. The Nine Petitions of Khun Inup (K.I.) is a significant part of the Afro-Kemetic canon for two reasons: First, the allegory and its mythofoms contribute to a national ethos of *Ma'at*, *Mdw Nfr* and *Mdw Ntr*. While I accept Carruthers's contention that the story's composition was based on a historical reality, we cannot ignore the narrative's several mythic elements. Carruthers, himself, goes the farthest in unpacking the story's elements as an allegory or *Sema*-system. First, Khun Inup (KI) is a farmer, symbolic of the economic and social base of Kemetic society. As his well-being goes, so goes the nation. In the story, KI was robbed and the social order, consistent with the First Intermediate period, had been partly overturned. Secondly, Khun Inup's origins are symbolic; he is from a region to the West of the Delta called Wadi Natron or "the salt fields." Natron salt was a preservative used in the culturally significant mummification ritual. The West was the final place of judgment or ultimate justice. This relates to the literal meaning of the name "Khun Inpu" : "He who is protected by Anubis." In Kemetic religion, Anubis guided the dead to the final judgment before Osiris. The place where Khun Inpu was robbed, a town called Perfety is symbolic as it is translated as a "Den of vipers." Additionally, he was robbed by a man named Nemtynakhet, "the strong robber," the son of Isri, "the whip." Carruthers clarifies that his brutalization by his father explains, "why Nemtynakht turned out to be a thug." Through the initial exposition of KI's experience, we learn that he was the victim of a crime with three offenses: 1) strong-armed robbery, 2) the denial of a person's freedom of speech, and 3) the perversion of justice.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Carruthers, *Mdw Ntr*, pp.143, 146 and 147.

<sup>33</sup> See E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead (Papyrus of Ani)*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), p. 347.

<sup>34</sup> Lichtheim, *AEL*, Vol. I, p. 171; See also William Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p.35.

<sup>35</sup> Carruthers, *Mdw Ntr*, p.146-52.

A second reason why this story is a part of the Afro-Kemetic canon is the ethical standard that it evokes. The story and its *Medu Nefer* or 'good speech' allegory reaches across the ages to M.C.-centered Hip Hop culture. Khun Inup, as well as Djedi, are grassroots elders who speak out against injustice to restore *Ma'at* for themselves and the whole society. Khun Inpu serves as an exemplar of Kabira's Communal M.C. as his appeals are couched in the third person interrogative form suggesting that he is appealing for a whole class of people or even the nation itself. He implores, "he who should fill for someone else pilfers his belongings, he who should rule according to the laws orders robbery, so who then will redress wrong?"<sup>36</sup> Although it is his plight, which he presents here, his concern is for the common people. His effective use of *Mdw Nfr* provides an example for all grassroots Kemites.

The Eloquent Peasant's aesthetic form also deserves greater attention as it is typical of African orature and resonant with Hip hop culture. The noted Egyptian linguist, Raymond O. Faulkner describes the "Story of the Eloquent Peasant" in a manner that could easily be applied to Rap music, "the peasant's speeches are, to modern taste, unduly repetitive, with high-flown language and constant harping on a few metaphors."<sup>37</sup> Afrodiasporic musical forms, especially HH, are noted for their heavy use of repetition, vivid metaphorical imagery, and improvisation on central themes. The importance of rhythm as an aesthetic canon is suggested by several students of Afrodiasporic cultures. Afrocentric scholar of African dance, Kariamuwelsh-Asante states that African culture presents itself with a polyrhythmic and polycentric character" that makes it "immediately recognizable and distinctive."<sup>38</sup> Dick Hebdige dedicates his book, *Cut 'n' Mix* "to the power and value of repetition. The very structure of the book *insists* on repetition, (which is) the basis of all rhythm and rhythm is at the core of life."<sup>39</sup> M.K. Asante suggests that a major goal of the employment of rhythm within African and Afrodiasporic orature classical orature is the removal of discord and the establishment of harmony, and "equilibrium among the various factors impinging upon communication."<sup>40</sup> While, Asante's discussion is of contemporary African literature and orature, the thrust of his argument holds: African texts (oral, written, danced, et al.) deserving of canonization attempt to articulate suppressed truth, reconcile competing viewpoints and ultimately establish *Ma'at*.

*Africana dub version.* A nuanced reading of both stories reveals a great deal of Kemetic epistemic tradition and presents a pattern of claims relevant to the study of hip hop artistry and culture. First, Afro-Kemetic is an orally-based civilization with constructs that have made their way into other African cultures and languages. Second, Afro-Kemetic orality (AKO) traditionally has a great concern for social justice. Third,

<sup>36</sup> Lichtheim, *AEL*, Vol. I., p.37.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>38</sup> Molefi K. Asante and Kariamuwelsh-Asante, *African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985, p. 71.

<sup>39</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Cut 'n' Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music*, London & New York: Routledge, 1987, p. p.xvii

<sup>40</sup> Molefi Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987, pp.177-78.

one of the defining characteristics of AKO in its communal orientation is the employment of personas that demonstrate a bottom-up perspective toward society. Both Djedi and Khun Anpu serve as archetypes for the African belief in elders as masters of the divine word; they both epitomize the definition of speech, *djed medu*, “to speak words,” , which is closely associated with elders. This is apparent in the presence of the symbol for the walking stick, , in the word *medu*.<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, the *medu* staff is possibly the model for the 1990s Brooklyn-based X-Clan's “Verb Stick” wielded by Professor X (Lumumba Carson, now deceased) who served as the elder of the group. Fourth, Western Sudanic AKO institutions like the *djeli faama* demonstrate a strong emphasis on supporting the power of the royalty/social elite. As we develop our appreciation of the meaning of cultural semiosis in Hip-Hop we must observe the significance of the spoken word in African (Niger-Congo) languages, from which it descends. These stories are significant for their attempts to maintain the *Ma'atic* ethos, the apparent contrast between communal and professional oral artists, and their insights into Kemetic concepts of social power and social contract. Additionally, vivid examples of the Kemetic signifying tradition are evident in the stories.

### Afro-Kemetic orality and Afro-Diasporic culture

Several scholars of African history note a symbiotic relationship that exists between the classical Nile Valley and the Sub-Saharan African traditions.<sup>42</sup> This symbiosis is essential in understanding Afrodiasporic culture and subsequently HH. The significance of the spoken word in Niger-Congo languages is a primary concern, particularly, the themes of the Divine Power of Speech and Speech as a Cultural and Political Force.

### Speech as a divine power

Carruthers directs the student of Afrodiasporic orality to the master oral traditionalist of the Upper Niger valley, Amadou Hampaté Ba, who illustrates the Mande construction of speech as a creative power. The Senegambian people—Mande, Bambara, Wolof, Fula, and Mende-related traditions—made up as many as 14% of the 500,000 enslaved Africans who survived the Middle Passage leg of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade voyage into North America.<sup>43</sup> In his seminal essay, “The Living Tradition,”

<sup>41</sup> Alan Gardiner refers to this symbol noting its importance “for the use as a walking-stick (in the title *mdw i3w*, (*medu yao*), ‘the staff of old age. *Egyptian Grammar*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Oxford: Griffith Institute, Ashmolean Museum, 1982, 510.

<sup>42</sup> Carruthers 1998, p. 87; Diop, *Civilization*, p. 309; Farmo Moumouni, *Aux sources de la connaissance directe: la parenté entre L'Égyptien Ancien et le Songhay*; (*The Sources of Direct Knowledge: the kinship between Ancient Egyptian and Songhay*.) Paris: Menaibuc, 2008, and Ayi Kwei Armah, *Remembering the Dismembered Continent*, Popenguine: Per Ankh, 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Gomez, *Exchanging our Countrymarks*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999, p.65; W. Pollitzer, *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999, p.46 notes that Senegambians represented 19.7% of all enslaved Africans imported into South Carolina between 1716 and 1807.

Ba draws upon the oral traditions of the Upper Niger to describe the cosmology that undergirds Afro-Kemetic Orality in the Niger River Valley region. He introduces the Mande Creator, *Maa Ngala* who created man, *Maa* with three potential powers of ability, willing and knowing. Ba describes human speech as a three-stage process of disseminating divine energy from the Creator to and amongst mankind: first, the creation of ideas, second, the articulation of ideas into words, and lastly the apprehension and sharing of meaning from speech. Ba clarifies that the Bambara *Komo* society teaches that the word or *Kuma* in Bamana, is a fundamental force emanating from the Supreme Being himself. He states, "As they came down from *Maa Ngala* [the Creator] towards man, words were divine... After their contact with corporeity they lost something of their divinity but took on sacredness."<sup>44</sup> In this worldview, speech is a powerful generative force. It is the active agent in African traditional systems, which view the visible as the manifestation of the spiritual, living universe, consisting of forces in perpetual motion. Speech is one medium at the disposal of Maa (Man) as a guardian of harmony. Through the agency of Africans in America practicing the Ring shout, field hollers, Blues and preaching traditions, the development of Hip Hop owes a great deal to the persistence of Senegambian orality.

#### Speech as a cultural and political force

The appropriate genealogy of HH, the cultural setting for numerous verbal battles, is the AKO culture, which reveres the spoken word, and produced significant examples of discourse as the preferred mode of settling disputes. The Sudanic classic, *SonJara*, embodies the power of the spoken word as examples of orality in its spiritual, social, artistic and political (verbal combat). A cursory review demonstrates the critical role of orality in the story's arc. *SonJara* (SJ) received his first praise name at birth;<sup>45</sup> was crippled by an opponent's words<sup>46</sup> and gained his praise names at a sacred baobab tree.<sup>47</sup> Apparently, his ascent connects positively with his association with the Kouyate clan of *Djeliu faama*.<sup>48</sup> *SonJara's* antagonist is *Sumanguru*, the oppressive king of the Susu people who abused the Mandinka people before *SonJara's* reign. According to Mande tradition, *Sumanguru* fought using verbal magic. He ordered that calabashes be used to silence the Mandinka ancestor shrines from which they could receive oracular wisdom.<sup>49</sup> After three failed attacks, *SonJara's* sister *Sogolon* discovered *Sumanguru's* fetish and secret words, which *SonJara* and his *Djeli Fa-Koli* used to defeat the tyrant king. The power of speech is also apparent in prosaic history. The Songhay emperor, *Askia Muhammad Touré*, exemplified the use of the word to maintain justice. With all

<sup>44</sup> Ba, "Living Tradition," p.170;

<sup>45</sup> Fa-digi Sisoko, *The Epic of Son-Jara: A West African Tradition*. Translated by J. W. Johnson. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992, Verse 1123.

<sup>46</sup> Sisoko, *Son-Jara*, verse 1151.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, verse 1460.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, verse 1866.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, verse 1905.

due respect to differences in history, the Mandekan djeli use of word play as verbal battle cannot be overstated in its archetypal connections to HH's history of rap battles.

### Interdisciplinary models of Hip Hop as cultural semiosis

A growing body of scholarship contributes to our understanding of African Diasporic signifying or Semeiotic traditions. Houston Baker is instructive in his injunction that greater emphasis should be placed on cultural history over theory as a primary conditioning force for the construction of African American canonical processes. The present article follows Baker's lead away from excessive theorization and toward history as a primary force for considering HH works among the Africana cultural arts canon.<sup>50</sup> Accepting canonization as a form of cultural semiosis, the ordering of systems of allegories, I approach HH in light of Africana Studies scholarship that clearly points to a sign-oriented epistemic context as appropriate for Black Diasporic culture. By doing so, I hope to achieve a greater "self-conscious perspective on...the active implications and imperatives" of the present historical situation.<sup>51</sup> African Diasporic cultural histories that affirm an Afrodiasporic worldview and foster resistance to the dominant political-economy framing Black agency are offered by several scholars: Errol Henderson's Kimera Theory, Welsh-Asante's *Nzuri* approach, Marimba Ani's *Asili* paradigm, Robert Farris Thompson's treatment of African Diasporic art, Sheila Walker's Afrogenic concept, Haryette Mullen's African Spirit Writing, and Elaine Richardson's HH Literacy.<sup>52</sup> Of these works, the two latter theses force us to address the question of how have African oral traditions been reconfigured within HH and employed as a site of identity reconstruction, resistance against othering, and vehicles of cultural and historical agency for Diasporic Africans? First, the literary scholar, Haryette Mullen in her provocative essay, "African Signs and Spirit Writing," challenges Henry Louis Gates' "erroneous Eurocentric assumption that African cultures developed no indigenous writing or script systems."<sup>53</sup> Her work echoes Stuckey's critique of intellectual integrationists as "spiritually rootless."<sup>54</sup> Central to Mullen's erudite exploration of "connections between African signs and African-American spirit writing" is her association of African Diasporic literacy, spiritual episteme and visual arts, which provides an integrated interdisciplinary

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<sup>50</sup> Houston Baker, "The Promised Body: Reflections on Canon in an Afro-American Context," *Poetics Today*, 9, No.2 (1988), p.340-41; See also, Leroi Jones, *Blues People*. New York: Morrow Quill, 1963, p.65 who discusses the history of the Blues tradition.

<sup>51</sup> Baker, "The Promised Body," p. 340.

<sup>52</sup> Kariamu Welsh-Asante (ed.), *The African Aesthetic: Keeper of the Traditions*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993; Ani, *Yurugu*; Walker, Sheila. (2001) *African Roots, American Cultures*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield; Haryette Mullen, "African Signs and Spirit Writing," in Winston Napier (ed.) *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000, pp.623-642; Elaine Richardson, *Hiphop Literacies*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>53</sup> Mullen, "African Signs," p.624

<sup>54</sup> Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Origins of Black America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, p.231.

approach to Black artistic culture. Coupled with a semeiotic framework and a reconstruction of Afro-Kemetic orality and episteme, Mullen's "African Signs" is an exemplary interpretation of African literacy's evolution of the cultural sign providing a ready-made unit of analysis for HHC. Similar to Mullen, Elaine Richardson's critical discourse analysis of HH amends Walter J. Ong's critical yet Eurocentric thesis on literate and orally-based societies and relocates HHC in the context of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Richardson's approach to "Black Folk's Discourses" examines HH Literacy and insurgency as "a site of cultural production and identity negotiation."<sup>55</sup>

Richardson's application of critical discourse analysis on speech acts of artists such as Outkast suggests a model of semeiotic analysis that exposes class, race and cultural forces relevant in the present study. She asks, "How do rappers display, on the one hand, an orientation toward their situated, public role as performing products, and, on the other, that their performance is connected to discourses of authenticity and resistance?"<sup>56</sup> These discourses position HH as a signifier of the African experience, in significant ways, highly relevant to the Africana Studies scholar's examination of identity formation, the sociology of HH artists, and the diasporic historic dialectic as the culture's primary context. Just as enslaved Africans trace descent from a Pan-African admixture, HH culture's creators and practitioners also reflect a similar demographic formation. HH developed out of the mix of five Africana cultures: Barbadian, Jamaican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, and African American, all of which "shared Kongo qualities of sound and motion," particularly the *rumba abierta* and the breakbeat.<sup>57</sup> These musical tendencies along with a strong oral episteme both have roots that are readily apparent in African languages, from which HHC descends linguistically and culturally.<sup>58</sup> The application of Malian and Congo-Angolan cultural contexts as a template for HH is highly appropriate as Senegambian people brought with them a powerful oral tradition, as we will discuss below. Although HH borrows greatly from African orality, it created a cultural philosophy, unique among world cultures that may be described as a microcosm of the larger African experience. Indeed, Du Bois' observation on slavery era freedom songs pertains to HH songs in that "the dark throb and heat of that Ancient of Days is in and through it."

The question of how does the cultural institution of the Hip Hop M.C. relate to African oral artistry is framed saliently by Harryette Mullen who queries, How, historically, have African-American attitudes toward literacy as well as their own efforts to acquire, use, and interiorize the technologies of literacy been shaped by what art historian Robert Farris Thompson calls "the flash of the spirit of a certain people armed with improvisatory drive and brilliance?"<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Richardson, *Hip Hop Literacies*, p.1.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, p.1.

<sup>57</sup> Robert F. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*. New York: Vintage Books, 1983, p. 213-16.

<sup>58</sup> J. R. Rickford and R. J. Rickford, *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000, p.76-77.

<sup>59</sup> Mullen, "African Spirit Writing," p. 625.

We may address Mullen's question on the history of Black Artistic literacy in America by observing the African Enslavement as a foundation of five themes relative to HH: 1) Ritualistic dance, particularly the Ring Shout (Break dance); 2) powers of the drum (DJing); 3) language consolidation and distinctiveness from other American ethnicities resulting in AAVE; 4) storytelling and the rise of neo-African oral institutions like the Black Christian Priest; 5) the centrality of race as a metaphor within Black art and orality. Presaging the HH interaction between M.C. and D.J., Stuckey (via Herskovitz) processes the Powers of the Drum evident in the Congaree story of Brer Rabbit. Brer Rabbit wields the Senegambian fiddle, using it to: 1) summon the forces, spirits and ancestors to be present in the realm of the living, 2) articulate the messages from ancestral entities in the first power, and 3) send the spirits and ancestors back to their realm at the close of the rite.<sup>60</sup> Stuckey's discussion of the Congaree anecdote may be applied to the powers of the turntable, Breakbeat and sample as HH artists make selective use of the past toward the development of a unique aesthetic frame of reference.

Sema(Ba)oun, Hip Hop orality, and Afro-Kemetic cultural semiosis: A framework for tracing the signifier

Our remaining objective is to present an Africana Studies semeiotic paradigmatic model for the study of HH by stating semeiotic lines of questioning that African cultures pose of HH. If we revisit Socrates' interpretation of Afro-Kemetic sign systems and Ba's discussion of Western Sudanic orality, we observe a generative cultural context of the Hip Hop M.C. This pattern is apparent in Gottdiener's Cultural Semiosis Schema. (See Figure 1) Often, communal/nation conscious Hip Hop artists suggest a symmetry between the African ancient past and present-lived conditions of the oppressed in what Gottdiener terms the second stage of semiosis, or the stage at which the Hip Hop cultural agent (User) defines the sign based upon his/her own user codes<sup>61</sup> (AKO/NOGE worldview & vocabulary). Several M.C.s. construct signs using codes informed by an Afro-Kemetic cultural context. An African-centered semeiotic framework, dubbed *Sema(Ba)oun*, by the present author would draw from Afro-Kemetic intellectual universe, particularly the sema concept and an analysis of signs framed by the Ubuntu cultural grammar to analyze the dialectic within HH...<sup>62</sup> The "(Ba)oun" root and suffix derives from the work of Farmo Moumouni, a historical linguist who demonstrates correlations between Songhay and Ancient Egyptian languages.<sup>63</sup> The

<sup>60</sup> Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, p.19-20.

<sup>61</sup> Gottdiener, "Hegemony and Mass Culture," 994.

<sup>62</sup> The Ubuntu model is construed in the Kinyarwandan grammar of Alexis Kagame in Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: African Art and the Western World*, New York: Grove-Weidenfeld, 1990.

<sup>63</sup> Moumouni, Farmo. *Aux sources de la connaissance directe: la parenté entre L'Égyptien Ancien et le Songhay; The Sources of Direct Knowledge: the kinship between ancient Egyptian and Songhay*. Paris: Menaibuc, 2008; idem, Lecture Notes, "Nile Valley Conference II: From the Nile to the Niger to the Mississippi," September 23, 2011.

Ubuntu model is relevant due to its historic adaptation by the Zulu Nation's Afrika Bambataa and uses by scholars of Afrodiasporic cultural arts including James G. Spady's Mu-word construction and Jahnheinz Jahn's Muntu model.

Sema(Ba)oun/Ubuntu Model

1. Muntu-describe the artist's person: demographic data affecting her/his life work.
2. Hantu - Historiographic context, when and where did/do they live and how do these factors affect the artist's works?
3. Kintu/The Signifier - a concise detailed description of what symbols/signs/images are employed,
  - a. Central Characters?
  - b. Symbolic Settings
  - c. Other symbols
4. Kuntu<sub>1</sub>/ The Signified - what do the signs mean in the context of the song or album?
  - a. Arc of the story as it involves Central Characters -
  - b. Symbolic Settings indicate what ideas/values/ideologies/philosophies
5. Kuntu<sub>2</sub>/Significance - Drawing from Foucault's discussion of power and discourse, how do the signified concepts and ideologies cohere together and speak to the construction of power in the society in which they are created?
  - a. What ideological systems operate within the story or undergird the story?
  - b. What idea(s) does the allegory push back against/attempt to negate?
  - c. Are mythoforms presented by the signs that address the ideological superstructure?
6. Bantu - what does the song mean to the artist's audience?
  - a. Initial Reaction without Semeiotic Transcript
  - b. Audience yields its own semeiotic transcript of the art
  - c. Sample Reactions after Reading Semeiotic Transcript
7. Ubuntu/Ma'at - discuss the work relative to Asante's evaluative ideal: does the work raise contentious issues, reconcile discord and establish harmony, and how well does the author maintain "equilibrium among the various factors impinging upon communication?"<sup>64</sup>

A brief example of Kendrick Lamar as paradigm

Hip Hop represents a profound synergy between oral and written traditions mirroring Afro-Kemetic method of sign composition<sup>65</sup> and use of symbol scripts.

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<sup>64</sup> Molefi Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987, pp.177-78.

<sup>65</sup> Rose 1994,

Examples abound of HH's dialectical drive toward unearthing found sound and ideas to renew the art form. The artist, Kendrick Lamar serves as an exemplar, for now, and will allow us to illustrate the *Sema(Ba)oun* semeiotic model. Lamar is a young Master of Ceremony from Compton, California whose second and third albums powerfully frame problems of dislocation, alienation, and nihilism in the context of the African American struggle for empowerment. Lamar's (K.Dot's) work (*HiiiPower*/2011, *Good Kid m.A.A.d City*/2012) deserves attention as he forces his listeners to, simultaneously, reckon historically with Reagan-era social ideology and policies while examining social forces impinging on young people of color. His attention to his craft indicates an appreciation for the value and uniqueness of HH, particularly in his heuristic employment of Afro-Kemetic imagery on his 2011 album, *Section.80* and anthem of resistance, "HiiiPower."<sup>66</sup>

Hantu. The etiology of Lamar's Afro-Kemetic themes is complex and does not suggest an essentialist instinctual impulse toward symbolic thought. Instead, artists like Eric B. and Rakim, Yasin Bey, Jean Grae, Aceyalone, Talib Kweli, and Lamar indicate the thoughtful and sincere claim to the Nile Valley heritage, which has a clear historic vector through the Black power history of Southern California. Los Angeles has been a primary setting for the Afrocentric movement since, at least, the mid-1960s. The L.A. Black Panthers, US organization and allied community centers and independent schools created a powerful network of Afrocentric cultural agency. Under the leadership of Queen Nzingha Ratibisha Heru, the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations (ASCAC) was headquartered in L.A. beginning in 1984 with its first national meeting at Southwest Community College, L.A.. In the 1980s and 1990s, primary schools like Marcus Garvey Shule and The Extraordinary Place (both on Slauson Ave) taught the Kemetic legacy in its daily curriculum. Most relevant to HH, KDAY in 1984 became America's first all-HH radio station and in subsequent years, the Goodlife Cafe, featured conscious HH groups like Abstract Rude and the Freestyle Fellowship. Growing out of the Goodlife open mic night in 1989, Project BLOWED located in the African village of Leimert Park became a grassroots HH collaborative where Afrocentric voices competed on Thursday nights. One also has to mention the sporadic, but consequential career of Ras Kass, as a predecessor of Lamar. Both artists combine Afrocentric and grassroots/street knowledge in their oral artistry; Ras Kass' *Soul On Ice* is a classic in that regard.

Kintu. Lamar uses discreet examples of Afro-Kemetic semeiotics to challenge his listeners to cultivate a life of the soul and mind that balances multiple competing agendas. Lamar's work facilitates what psychologist, David Wall Rice aptly terms "balance" relative to identity orchestration efforts. We see Lamar's balancing act on the song, "The City," a collaborative effort with fellow Los Angeles M.C., Game. Lamar inveighs to his listeners, "Recognize my life, ridicule my fight... In the midst of the hier-O-GLYPHS, my fingertips start to write." His emphatic use of the word "hieroglyphs,"

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<sup>66</sup> Kendrick Lamar, "HiiiPower," *Section.80*. Los Angeles: Top Dawg Entertainment, 2011; TopDawgEntTDE, "HiiiPower," YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ep0hay4Qw54>.

indicates the persistence of the tactical and strategic use of words that at once indicate the speaker's alienation from the present moment and spatial context (the inscrutability of hieroglyphs), and connection to an alternate, othered, contextual source of meaning (hieroglyphs, like graffiti, as a resistant mode of written and spoken agency). This evokes what Dyson refers to as *africature* or "the practice of people of African descent writing themselves into existence" and giving voice to the misrepresented community from which he comes.<sup>67</sup> "The City" is a song that attempts to place Compton as a paragon of classic HH, but undergirding the ostensive effort is a reference to an Afro-Kemet and Afrodiasporic context that deserves explication.

Combining striking visual symbols and text evoking cultural signifiers: Malcolm X and Tupac Amaru Shakur, his 2011 video for the song, "HiiiPower" begins with a rapid series of apparently random test patterns, including a hieroglyphic image evoking the Kemet (Ancient Egyptian) eye of Heru. This occurs at the tenth framed image, two seconds into the video (See Figure 3A)

Kuntu<sub>1</sub>. This pastiche of the eye of Heru, along with lyrical references to pyramids and hieroglyphs on his album both signify: 1) his awareness of the Black freedom struggle from which he draws the album's three core thematic values: "heart.honor.respect." and 2) his attempt to balance an older heritage—Afro-Kemet culture as a resource and tool to navigate the dystopian Los Angeles megapolitan landscape. Akin to Bay-Area crew, Hieroglyphics' triple eye logo (Fig.3C) and fellow Los Angelinos, Dilated Peoples, which employs a Cyclopean logo (Fig.3B), Lamar's eye is a sign of the complex and productive culture that he challenges his listeners to construct, while also serving as a contextual foil to the violence and oppression in the urban African American condition.

Kuntu<sub>2</sub>. In the video, Lamar, with bowed head leans forward, like a bluesman, silent for the first five seconds. He breaks the silence, after a subtle head and shoulder bob, by flatly speaking a bluesy epigraph in a voice distorted by over-amplification:<sup>68</sup> "The sky is fallin', the wind is callin', stand for somethin' or die in the morning/Section 80 HiiiPower." The song's imagery evokes the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring Protests, all set to a minor key loop that is Blues-laden, ominous, and subtle yet energetic with tones distorted beyond recognition of their original timbre. The distorted bluesy notes evoke the sonic quality of a guitar harmonic and the imperceptible overtone series, which though silenced, give the audible note fidelity. Within the song's musical setting, the harmonic phantasm stands as a signifier of Lamar's transience in America's sociopolitical context. Akin to the blues man's guitar, when the MC speaks, a chorus of constituent ancestral voices also speaks. As Lamar enjoins his listeners on "HiiiPower's" chorus to follow his lead by getting off "the slave ship" and to "build your own pyramids, write your own hieroglyphs," he is not employing passing allusions of little consequence. He is speaking to a local and national Black tradition exemplified by his expressed admiration of Tupac Shakur and Malcolm X.

<sup>67</sup> Dyson, *Born to Use Mics*, p.109.

<sup>68</sup> See Tricia Rose, *Black Noise*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994, p.75 on distortion and 'working in the red,' as sonic signifiers of resistance.

## Conclusion

We have established that Afro-Kemetic orality and semeiotics are both salient in the study of HH. AKO culture's symbols and constructs indicate a generative context for analyzing and synthesizing new information in a Western intellectual culture that, too often, ignores African agency. We have affirmed that a symbiotic relationship exists between the classical Nile Valley and the Sub-Saharan African tradition and that of Greece.<sup>69</sup> While the discipline of Semeiotics gestated in Europe, a tradition of oral semeiotic practice developed in the lived traditions of African cultures, which would culminate in the languages (spoken, aural, visual, and kinesthetic) of Nsibidi, Adinkra, Vèvè, and HH. We have also affirmed that communal and professional elements of an African sociology of oral artistry persist in framing the perspective of HH artists. An African-centered semeiotic would add historical depth to Black Atlantic readings of HH music as a mere counterculture of Western modernity.<sup>70</sup> Finally, HH's origins must be understood in the Africana cultural context where artists like Rakim and Kendrick Lamar are to be placed in conversation with Djedi, Khun Inpu, Djeli Kouyate, and the anonymous slave poets.

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<sup>69</sup> Carruthers 1998, p. 87; Diop, *Civilization*, p. 309.

<sup>70</sup> Henry L. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993.

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